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Eight Days in Oak Lake

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EIGHT DAYS IN OAK LAKE

by

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GALE TEMPLE

A THESIS

Submitted to the graduate faculty of The University of Alabama at Birmingham,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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2013

EIGHT DAYS IN OAK LAKE

CYNTHIA EUBANKS

ENGLISH

ABSTRACT

Eight Days in Oak Lake is an incomplete fictional novel about teenage Laine Reardon, who finds her life in turmoil after her family embarks on a trip to Oak Lake, Mississippi, for a family reunion. On the trip, Laine learns a disturbing secret about her father, and she is reunited with her childhood friend, Jake Donnelly.

With sisters she often does not understand and parents who have their own problems, Laine seeks solace in the now-grown boy she grew up with. As she struggles to understand her feelings for Jake and deal with the revelation about her father, Laine is crushed by a secret that Jake has been hiding as well. She puts her feelings of betrayal aside to maintain her family's image by attending the reunion. Laine must decide whether to expose the secrets or to move on and let go of her hurt and anger. The story touches on issues of sibling rivalry, family dynamics, young love and the transition from adolescence to adult-hood.

Keywords: southern, fiction, young-adult, female, romance, family

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CHAPTER 1

I slammed through the iron storm door and hurried toward the lake after supper to get out, just to breathe, defying my emotions, refusing to cry. I'd wept enough the night before. Windy and grey, cooler than normal this time of year for Oak Lake, Mississippi, I untied my green, hooded sweatshirt from my waist and pulled it on as I walked.

The wind stuck my heavy curls to my thick chap-stick, which I slathered on when stressed. Standing still, I let the long, dense strands stick in my mouth, while the ends flapped and tickled my cheek. I could take the annoyance. I did not have to respond to the burden. *I could handle much more, terrible things, probably.* At the edge of the choppy lake, I looked across at the thick, dark woods. I wished I could take off up into the air, then dive down, piercing the water and swim away like a hardy sea creature, pushing past the alligators and other hurtful things with barely a touch.

Some geese struggled up off of the lake with open wings, and flew away from the restless water.

I thought about our drive out there just a few days before. It had been great. I mean it was normal. Just like all the other trips to Gran's. I couldn't remember what I'd thought about on the drive in, whatever it was, but now I was jealous. Jealous from what was forced in its place. Jealous, and confused...and alone.

Maggie's mini, yellow cash register chimed as it hit the floor. I glanced back to see her deceptively angelic, two-year-old face – blanket balled up by her head – being

lulled to sleep by the motion of the car. Toys littered the floor beneath her clown-print car seat. Yawning, I stuck my wrinkled tennis-team picture in *Little Dorrit* to mark the page, and shoved it behind *Journey*, my journal, in the seat-pocket in front of me. I'd given *Journey* her name five years earlier when I started writing, at twelve. With *Journey*, I felt like there was some, real journal-person out there, taking in whatever I wanted to say. Though early attempts of "whatever I wanted to say" in *Journey* were to be put on Daddy's brush burn-pile in the back yard.

Daddy found *Journey* annoying. If I was at home on the back-porch swing, or writing anywhere, and he wanted my help in his workshop or to ride with him to the landfill or hardware store, he'd lecture me on "piddling away" my time. Yet if he was reading in his chair and I sat with *Journey* on the couch, Daddy rarely complained. Mama didn't mind my long stretches with *Journey*, too much, as long as my chores and studying were done.

I pulled out my phone. Still no texts from McKenna.

McKenna was my tough and protective best friend. Beneath the surface, this girl with snow-white legs who wore plaid miniskirts had an enormous heart, though at times questionable and emotionless logic, for helping family and friends.

Just outside of Meridian, Mississippi, we hit a bump in the road and Maggie awoke looking glossy-eyed and stunned. Daddy had cleaned the wooly brown floor mats of the Yukon the day before the trip, and it smelled like carpet cleaner and Mama's pear hand lotion. He'd spent half of the same day lying under the jacked-up car changing the oil, and I had spent a hot hour on the pavement handing him tools and a greasy, red rag. Four daughters, and I was always his helper. Although, at twenty-nine months, Maggie

didn't really count yet. I'd cut grass, planted flower beds and handed Daddy tools – familiar with each one in the rusty, red tool box – in the scorching boat while he repaired the motor. I drove ski and fishing boats as good as anybody I knew.

Kay studied business finance at Vanderbilt much of the year, and her prim, fifties-style clothes hardly invited grease and grass stains. Twelve-year-old Bethany could out-whine anybody, and she always had a “life-and-death” project she was working on, which usually involved a captive neighbor, face paint, and a camera. Helping Daddy didn't bother me too much, though. I'd write or read during the long, assistant-mechanic stretches in the sun, and I liked being able to start the lawn mower by myself, which Kay couldn't do.

“Tractors!”

I jumped as Daddy yelled like a stadium vendor selling hotdogs, alerting us of landmarks we'd passed many times on the drive to Gran's. Her house was in Oak Lake, which was “smack-dab,” as Daddy would say, in the middle of the flat, fertile Mississippi Delta. The ten-foot high, faded word was painted on the side of a short, white hardware store – the fenced side yard housed green and yellow tractors for rent and some large rusty metal machinery. Daddy craned his neck to take in every piece of massive equipment, as though they were show girls and he didn't want to miss any angle of gartered, netted legs, before they passed out of sight.

Daddy mumbled, jerking his big shoulders and straining to see. “Granddaddy used to have a tractor just like that...”

“Papa Rearden?” Mama turned a crisp page in her detective novel.

“Yeah...never did let me drive it. Too precious, I guess.”

“Brrr, Phil.” Mama shivered. “Are you-girls cold?”

“Yes.” Four, frustrated female voices rang out in unison. Three, actually. Maggie’s “yeeees” came after a pause – the routine echo of her three, big sisters.

Pulling her chenille, camel-colored blanket up high on her chest, Mama pushed her black hair behind her shoulder. Her face was striking, almost exotic, and none of us – oldest, three daughters – shared her coloring. Only my baby sister, Maggie, -- the “surprise Rearden” – had the same large, silky, dark waves and eyes.

“I can turn it down.” Daddy gave his offer-to-do-something-in-a grouchy-tone-so-the-other-person-will-decline bit.

Recognizing his tone, Mama adjusted her blanket and returned to her book. “You’re sitting in the sun. We’ll manage.”

Daddy yelled over his shoulder, “Bethany, get me a drink from the cooler – one from the bottom, please.” His voice cut through the car like the sun pushing in the windows. He spoke deliberately, as to avoid the need to repeat himself. Anxious and irritable on trips, he’d relax when we finally arrived at his childhood home. Next to me Bethany unbuckled and moped to the back of the car. I heard ice and water sloshing around behind the back seat, and I knew the freezing feeling on my knuckles well.

Above her dark-red reading glasses, Mama watched Bethany follow orders. If we didn’t make waves then Daddy wouldn’t get aggravated, which meant less waves for Mama, and she caught the most flak when he was disgruntled. Drawn-out lectures, mainly. *If she’d speak her opinion, it might be better. Or, it might be worse.*

With Kay at twenty, me at seventeen, Bethany at twelve and Maggie at two-and-a-half, arguments cropped up at thirty-minute intervals. After graduation, Kay was planning to marry the dashing Tom Westmore, a lanky, fellow-finance major on Vandy's rowing team. "Dashing" always came out first when I spoke Tom's name; there was no other way. My hopes were that college preoccupations would lessen Kay's presence on family trips.

Just then, Kay was a victim of Bethany's drink retrieval. "Bethany, you got water on my laptop – this project is for my investments' class." Kay shooed water droplets off of her blouse and khaki shorts, before running her hands back-and-forth across her short strand of colorless pearls.

"You get it next time, Kay." Bethany made her way up to Daddy before slamming back into her middle-seat next to me again. She went back to tracing a baby panda from the cover of her notebook.

Maggie yelled her ABC's in the back, until Kay reached over and plugged her mouth with a blue sucker. Clinching a plastic, yellow drum stick in one hand and Mama's cell phone in the other – both sprinkled with drips of sticky, blue drool – Maggie kicked her left leg up and down, attempting to throw off her barely clinging sock.

"Give me the blanket, Kay, you have Mom's sweater," I said to Kay who was cooned in the only blanket in the back of the chilly car.

"No, I'm settled in. The blanket's covering my legs. Besides, you have more meat on your body to keep you warm." My older sister's smug satisfaction made me want to smack her.

“We can’t all be snobs like you, Kay.” I kept calm.

Kay started prattling, "What do you mean? I'm not a snob. What does me keeping this blanket on my legs have to do with me being a snob?"

“You don’t need it....”

Shooting us a look, Mama spoke to end our spat. “Girls, be sweet. Thank you for Daddy's drink, Bethany – now be careful and don’t bother your sisters. And girls – watch how you talk to each other.”

I started to dread my sisters’ company at Gran’s over the coming week, and I almost wished I was still at school. My eleventh-grade year had just ended at Riverton, my private high school of about five-hundred students, where I kept busy with tennis and my art club. As I looked out from my cool car seat at the blistering day, I imagined flying away to visit James Herriot’s English countryside without loud and sticky sisters beside me.

Normally at that time of the day, I’d be witnessing David Mills and Chase Carter’s performances in French class. David infused the phrase "je vomir" ("I vomit") every third sentence, and Chase interrupted Ms. Weeks every morning to praise her expertise and inquire about different ways of making declarations of dog love in French. The poor lady was always flustered and losing her place and, admittedly, I was too entertained to stop it.

Just then, Maggie broke her silence. “No sucker.” She flung the candy at Kay, who inhaled half of the car’s air and froze. The sticky candy swung from her neat, blonde bob.

“Nobody move – I can fix this.” Bethany unbuckled and jumped on Kay.

“Phil, pull over, I need to help her.” Mama said.

“I’m not pulling over.” Daddy shot Mama a warning look. “We just stopped in Eutaw for everybody to go to the bathroom. We’re making terrible time, I’m not stopping again.”

Cheap gas in Eutaw made Daddy wake everyone for a mandatory bathroom trip. Maggie had had the pleasure of a diaper change on the side, floorboard of the car, and her screaming could be heard over the hand dryers inside.

“My sucker.” Maggie erupted in tears. “Want sucker back.” She turned purple and tugged at her car-seat straps in the hopes of breaking free and reclaiming the hairy sucker.

“Bethany, get off me. You’re making it worse.” Kay said.

“If you’d let me finish, I could have fixed it” Bethany, the misunderstood genius, pouted in her seat.

Kay glared straight ahead, and dug her fingernails into her thin, pale knees. Thanks to Bethany’s help, her hair was wrapped snugly around the sucker, and the massive clump stuck out from her head like a fat hamster sitting above her right ear.

“Daddy, pull over.” Kay demanded.

Maggie continued to scream.

Mama’s arm slung around in front of me with a new, blue sucker in hand. I unwrapped it and handed it to Maggie, whose screaming stopped at once. She giggled through the words, “Maggie’s sucker,” though tears were still streaming down her cheeks.

“I swanny, you-girls, if it’s not one thing it’s another.” Daddy grunted and shook his head. “If you could just act right for ten minutes, we might get where we’re going.”

Bethany’s expert, sucker-removing skills had gone unappreciated, and she sat with tight arms crossed. Daddy grumbled about getting “no respect,” and Kay fumed, attempting to will the car to stop. I needed to get out of the car. The ride from Birmingham, Alabama to Oak Lake, Mississippi had somehow gotten longer.

CHAPTER 2

In Gran's driveway, Kay flew out and was in the house before I made it out of the car. The rest of us piled out. Standing on the gravel driveway across from the sparkling lake, Daddy's expression had relaxed.

I had just stepped in to the foyer at Gran's, when I saw him standing at the other end of the long hallway that sidles the staircase. Chocolate hardwoods ran straight from my tennis shoes to his worn-out boots, and I found myself staring at him as I reached to hang my bag on the wall. With one hand in his jeans pocket and the other in the back of his wavy hair, he was talking to someone on the other side of the door frame.

It took me a moment to realize that I was looking at Jake Donnelly.

I had heard he'd moved back to Oak Lake, though it'd been a few years since I had seen him. He seemed to have the same pleasant manner, but his dimples were now hidden by stubble, and the tip of a tattoo shown from under the sleeve of his shirt. He didn't look like the chubby friend I'd fished with so many times.

Apparently, in my distraction, I had made several unsuccessful attempts to hang my bag on the wall when Bethany, who was standing behind me and waiting to pass, lost her patience. She spoke in her usual, overblown manner.

"Laine, hang up your bag – it's not that hard." Bethany groaned. As I looked at her I realized that she had defied mom in the car and put on her play-time makeup she'd gotten at Christmas. Her eyes were decorated with sparkly pinks and purples. A leotard

with high, peacock feathers in back would have completed her look for a stage.

“Bethany, please – my eardrum.” I rubbed my ear, and was glad to see that Jake hadn’t turned around to see us bicker.

Bethany clutched her favorite new gadget, a beat-up, old cassette tape recorder that Mama had found while cleaning out boxes in the attic. She took it everywhere she went, and kept it in a bright-green camera bag with a long shoulder-strap, which she wore underneath her blonde side braid. Clutching the device, Bethany hurried into the family room. I glanced again at Jake as I followed her.

Gran, Aunt May, Uncle Red and my cousins, Will and Faith were scattered around the room. They were already chatting about the reunion. Aunt May and others organized the event for every other June, and she’d been calling Mama and Daddy for months to fill them in on the plans: a formal dinner with brunch the next morning. They called it a reunion, but it had grown into more of a fancy party; lots of people from all around Oak Lake came. This year they were holding it at Hinton Manor, a renovated southern mansion turned wedding and event hall.

“Bethany, Laine – hugs!” Gran reached for us with a shaky, jeweled hand. “You girls won’t stop growing, no matter what I say.”

“Have they run out of girls’ shoes at all of the stores?” Gran shot a look at Bethany’s black converse, and glanced big-eyed at Mama. Gran grinned and tilted her head in an attempt to dampen her critique. “Well, no worries, I can see you’re trying to make up for it by distracting us with your face paint.”

Bethany’s chest swelled and her face brightened as she handed her camera to

Aunt May. She wanted her picture, in all of her splendor, with Gran. The flash sputtered and stopped.

“Mama, that old tree house is still up.” Dad’s announcement to Gran was more of a question.

“Yes, Phil. I did talk to Cora Maybree. She’s happy for us to help her take it down. I’ve asked Will to help now that it’s warm weather. The decrepit thing is liable to fall on me and kill me in my rose garden.” Gran reached for me with open arms. “Laine Elizabeth, you movie star. You’re as pretty as ever. Taming your hair now, I see.”

“No Ma’am. It has free reign.” I scooped my wavy mop back in the shape of a ponytail, and it popped back into fullness as I let go.

“I see. Well, maybe these days hairdos aren’t the most important thing to young girls who hope to eventually marry.” Gran patted the underside of her sleek, white hair and stared hard at me with arched eyebrows. Her cold hand squeezed mine and she gave me a softer look before returning to her conversation with Aunt May, who spoke with happy, tired eyes. She worked hard cooking food and desserts before our visits.

“Want some tea, May?” Uncle Red’s low voice rolled out as he worked his way up and off of the couch.

“No thank you, dear.” She thanked him, too, with a smile, and felt for her tiny cross necklace with well-manicured hands. Uncle Red hobbled out, working with every lurch to smooth his stride, with a body rebelling from years of building houses.

Gran scooped up Maggie into her lap, and I looked around the room at the high ceilings and carved wooden fireplace. I used to imagine that the little blue birds would fly

off of the floral china, out of the oversized cabinet and around the room when no one was home. It wasn't at all like our modern, Vestavia, Alabama home. Mama had decorated our house with sparse furnishings—the way Dad liked it.

I plopped down on the sofa next to my cousin, Faith, where cousin Will, Faith's younger brother, sat nearby in an oversized chair. Tall with a blonde mop of hair and always laughing, Will looked older than sixteen. Faith, who was only thirteen months older than me and had just finished high school, was my "other half" at Gran's.

"Laine," Faith said, "Thank goodness you're here. Will won't stop talking about skinning frogs and it's making me sick."

"I'm sorry I missed that." I grinned at Faith.

"Laine, you outta come out with me and Jake." Will threw his arms around in excitement as he spoke. "We go to the lake about ten at night – you can seem them big ol' slick suckers sitting near the edge of the water, loud as everything. There's nothing more fun than frog gigging, I can tell you that right now."

I was so caught up in a mental picture of football-sized, thunder-croaking night frogs that I barely responded. "That fun, huh?" Faith was more repulsed than me, but skinning frogs wasn't my favorite pastime, either.

"Laine – don't ask. Really. He won't stop talking about it if you act interested." Faith said.

"Heck yeah...it's the best." Will got more serious. "Gigging those big ones. My mouth's watering just thinking about fried frog legs..." He laughed. "Remember when y'all were visiting a couple of years back? Me and Rusty Bowman from next door tied

that skinned frog up with fishing line? It hung right outside the front door. It liked to scare Kay half to death. The whole neighborhood heard her scream.” He rocked back on the couch holding his stomach in his hands.

Just then, we hushed. Kay stood in front of us with her pointy bob soaking wet on one side and dry on the other, but brushed perfectly straight. Freedom from Maggie’s blue sucker. Based on her expression, she had heard us laughing about her frog-scare incident.

“Good to see you Will, Faith.” Kay leaned in and touched cheeks with each cousin, patting their shoulders before walking toward Gran.

After a moment I turned to Faith. “What’s going on with Jake?” I glanced, again, at the doorway.

“Mama invited him. He’s like family, you know? He works for Mr. McBride now.” Faith flipped her shiny, silver bracelet around as she spoke.

“Doing what?”

"Mr. McBride is ailing. Rarely leaves his chair. Jake pretty much runs the farm."

"Is it just cotton fields?"

"And soybeans and corn...and I think they have catfish ponds, too. He's got several guys working for him, but Jake is the main one." Faith wiggled her silver-polished toes in her white sandals. She was a fashion "queen," and I always borrowed her clothes when we visited. She'd texted me about how Kay liked Vanderbilt and I knew she'd love to be near Nashville, but something about Kay and Faith going to the same university didn't seem right. Surely such different people needed to study in different realms.

Gran's blue-tick hound, Oxford, stopped inside the farthest hall doorway and surveyed the great room. I said his name so loud that one of his ears got caught over his eyes when he turned his head, and he had to shake it free to see me. Dropping by the fireplace I rubbed his wrinkled head. "Oxford, I was wondering where you were, sweet boy." His hind-quarters slid around on the slick hardwood floor in excitement. I used to pretend that Ox, my long-time confidant, was my hunting dog in the English countryside, and that I could ride with him and hunt better than the boys.

I checked my phone for messages from McKenna. Nothing. She said she had news. I thought she would've called by now. Gran burst out to Aunt May and Mama, and startled me.

"...and that Belle Baker, she prances around town in that sports car her Daddy bought her like she owns the town. I don't care a thing for her."

I sat back down with Faith, looking again at Jake's face, glowing from nearby lamps, as Oxford circled twice beside me, lay down, and lowered his head on my thigh.

"Laine, did you hear me?" Will's voice went up an octave.

"Yes – go on." I nodded, like I knew what he was talking about.

"So, what do you say?"

What are we talking about, again?

"Um...sure?" I was trying to guess the subject when Faith's reaction surprised me.

"Laine." Faith lunged forward on the couch. "Don't do it. It's nasty and it's boring....and it's so disgusting."

Oxford's head flew up and he stared into my face. Even he looked troubled.

Will's face was flushed with excitement. He picked up Granddaddy's old mandolin beside the fireplace and started to strum. He mumbled about how fun – whatever we were going to do – was going to be.

“Do what?” I leaned and mouthed to Faith.

She sighed and relaxed back into the couch. “I knew you didn't want to.”

“To what?”

“Go frog gigging with Will.”

“Great....” I watched Will position his fingers on the mandolin, as he listened to Kay list the courses she was taking at the university for Aunt May.

“...and then there's investment banking, which shouldn't be too hard...” Kay spoke as though she'd worked in the field for thirty years.

Great. Frog stabbing in the middle of the night...

In my seventeen years, I had raised and buried four fish, two turtles, three dogs and five cats – singlehandedly. Life with my family was loud. I looked forward to nights alone with *Journey* and one of my beloved pets. For much of my family, though, framed antlers were artwork and picnic tables were fish-cleaning stations. The only pets they had were hunting dogs. Long gone were my days of watering Daddy's caught-bass in white painter's buckets to help them “breathe.” At some point I realized it was nicer to let the gasping fish suffocate, than to keep them alive until he was ready to clean them. As an occasional, tag-along hunter, I was a traitor to my fellow animal-loving friends. I was knee-deep in a hunting family and, at Riverton, I tried my best to keep it my dirty, little

secret. I welcomed the thought of shooting a gun as good, or better, than the guys, though I wasn't dying to *kill* anything

"You aren't going to go, are you?" Faith looked genuinely afraid. "You didn't know what you'd agreed to."

"Shhhh – Will will hear. I'm going. Look how excited he is." I looked over at the smiling Will, who was about to answer a line of questioning into Bethany's tape recorder.

Faith glanced at Will and looked like she smelled something foul. "So what? He looks like that when he watches wrestling on TV." She could tell by my expression that I didn't want to disappoint him, and she backed down. "Well, you may have lots of time on your hands, anyway. I got a job at a boutique in town, so I can't hang out as much as we normally do."

I groaned in disappointment. Great. This was going to be a boring trip. Faith and I had grown close, even more so after Jake left Oak Lake and my days playing with the boys died away. Next to McKenna, she was my best friend.

"Maggie, no." Bethany's bony legs were spread wide on the rug as she tried to wrestle away her tape recorder.

"My toy," Maggie said.

Mama swooped in and whispered in Maggie's ear, prompting her to release the device. Maggie took Mama's hand and walked with her out of the room to whatever distraction had been conjured.

"Are you coming to see me sing at Gentry's Bar?" Faith's face lit up.

“Can’t wait.” I smiled. Mama had told me all about Faith’s gig at Gentry’s, a restaurant and bar in town. Faith’s band sang mostly bluegrass and gospel, and she’d sung in church all her life. That’s where I’d seen her sing.

Just then, Jake came into the room.

He walked straight to me and smiled, and his good looks surprised me.

“Laine, how are you?”

I didn’t hop up and hug him, instead I stayed seated with my hand on Oxford.

“Hey.” I was flustered by my stunted reaction.

“Well, that’s okay, don’t put yourself out, Laine. It’s not like we’ve seen each other in...three years.” Jake’s low-key voice intensified with a smile.

I smiled back standing briefly to hug him.

“Hey Ox.” Jake squatted to pet the lanky hound, who licked Jake’s scruffy chin, and swatted me with his long, brown tail. The dark-eyed dog turned his droopy face toward me, and paused.

“Yes, Oxford – you’re hitting me.” I said, leaning away from him with my hand at my eye for protection.

He turned back to Jake and continued the face swatting.

I caught myself staring at Jake, but not before he saw me. I turned away, as though he was half-naked and it was the polite thing to do. I felt his gaze lingering, and I felt sure he knew I’d been staring at him. I kept my sights fixed on Gran’s black-and-white, Spaniel vases on the mantle, as my cheeks grew prickly and warm.

Can you, maybe, not be an idiot?

“You’ve been living in Jackson?” I calmed my expression and rubbed Ox.

“I lived with Mama for three years. Just came back in January – been wanting to for a while.” Jake’s smile got lost a little as he looked down into his red, plastic cup of sweet tea and swirled it around. “I’m glad to be back. Got to graduate here and be with old friends.” Jake glanced over at Will. “I’m living and working at McBride’s farm.”

Though Will was sixteen, three years younger than Jake, they were like brothers. Faith’s twin and Will’s older brother, Carter, had died at age four when Will was one. Aunt May had taken Carter and Faith to a friend’s birthday party and Carter was playing outside. He was waiting his turn on a play set while the older kids climbed and swung, and the whole set fell over on him. It landed on his head and he died instantly. Jake was at the party when it happened. He and Carter were buddies at preschool, and Uncle Red was coaching the inseparable boys’ t-ball team.

I was only two at the time of the accident, but I have a few memories of the funeral. I have a vague image in my mind of Mama breaking apart crackers for me to eat on a wooden church pew, and I remember seeing Aunt May sobbing over the small coffin at the front of the church. There was an enlarged picture of blonde-haired Carter, riding and smiling in Uncle Red’s lap on a tractor, on an easel beside the coffin. Once I saw a photo at Aunt May’s of Jake at the funeral in a miniature suit, walking toward the coffin. Aunt May said he brought his dirty baseball to leave with Carter. Aunt May was like a second Mama to Jake, and had been as long as I could remember.

“Mine glasses!” Maggie said. Everyone turned and glanced across the room at the

loud cry. Mama whispered to Maggie and wrestled Gran's glasses out of her clinched fists, but she screamed louder.

Daddy, who was sitting and talking with Uncle Red at the dining table, perked his head up and listened without looking back in Maggie's direction. He reminded me of a deer when it flips its ears and listens for possible predators, before relaxing its head back down to the grass after deeming the sounds unimportant.

"You're running the farm?" I blurted it out, hoping to keep our conversation going. "What do you do?"

Jake looked back at me. "Yeah. Farming – work the ground." He reached out an arm and rubbed a back muscle. "It's cotton, mostly. Mr. McBride's about to buy a new crop duster plane. I want to learn to fly it, one of these days." I looked at his large hands that were tan like mine and, as I looked closer, I could see some traces of dirt in slim, dry cracks. His eyes brightened as he spoke. "We have six tractors, but I mainly use the big one. It's second nature, now."

He smoothed Oxford's slick hair back, over and over. The bony hunting dog lifted his nose and squinted each time just before Jake's hand touched down on his head. I spotted Jake's tattoo, creeping further out from under his shirt sleeve, when he saw me looking at it.

"Had that a long time, since before I left Oak Lake." He tugged down at his shirt sleeve to cover it and got up to leave. My insides were tense, and I wondered at my nervousness.

"Y'all want some punch?" Jake looked directly at me.

Gran's pineapple punch was my favorite drink. She made it every time we came.

"No, thanks." *Seriously, what is wrong with me?* My face flushed with embarrassment.

"Will, Faith – punch?" Jake looked at them as he left for the kitchen, but they declined.

Faith tugged my hair. "Want to follow Jake to the kitchen? You can stare at his arms in there."

"I was trying to see his tattoo," I scowled and watched him walk away.

Dear Journey,

The rose did caper on her cheek,
Her bodice rose and fell,
Her pretty speech, like drunken men,
Did stagger pitiful.

– E.D.

I like your new digs. You're rocking the union jack on your blue, leather cover, Journey-man. I can dig it. I always knew you were British.

So...Jake is back. It was so good to see him. Faith would never let it go if I told her that, so I'm going to steer clear of the subject for now. Please help me NOT turn into a stupid GIRL the next time I see him. That isn't me. I would smear him on the tennis courts – you know I would. Grown-up-farmer man or not – who, some would say, belongs in a drugstore fireman's calendar – doesn't mean I should feel intimidated.

I think it's George Eliot in Middlemarch who says that men know best about everything, except what women know better. The Truth hurts, Journey. Get over it.

Love,
Laine

CHAPTER 3

At Mr. McBride's farm the next morning, I scooted out of Will's truck and flung my arms up like a windmill in the warm, morning sun to stretch my back. The earth grinded beneath Will's tires as he drove away. Daddy, Uncle Red and Kay had gone to the Southeastern Museum of Flight, and Mama, Bethany, and Gran were shopping. I was well schooled in jet-engine mechanics from previous museum trips, and I wasn't up for drudging through high-priced ladies boutiques in half-hour away Daleville, either. My text, asking Will to drop me at Jake's, had reached him just before he headed out to the hunting lodge.

Seeing Jake back in Oak Lake felt fantastic; it made me realize how much I'd missed him. My weird, new-found awkwardness had to go. It was just Jake. We'd grown up together.

I'd once cleaned and doctored his scraped-up, chubby, twelve-year-old side and butt. He'd gotten hurt as we hurried over a barbed-wire fence in back of her property with stolen blueberries. He'd held the fence down for me to cross as we fled from Mrs. Maybree's cries; she'd come running after us, stirring up a cloud of dirt through a bunch of noisy chickens. When it was Jake's turn to cross the fence, he tried to balance the blueberries in his shirt and he let go of the wire too soon. It popped up and gouged him through his clothes. Gran got an earful from Mrs. Maybree, and we got a long lecture from Mama and major dish-washing duty. Wearing Gran's ruffled apron that Mama tied

on him at the sink bothered Jake the most, though his scrapes went pretty deep.

I found Jake in Mr. McBride's largest, house-sized barn. Past the propped-open, red doors, he was standing next to a tractor, leaning in the door and tinkering with something inside. The breeze came in through the back doors and passed over me on its way out the entrance smelling of livestock and magnolia blossoms. Jake saw me and walked over.

"Well, you're a sight for sore eyes. What are you doing here, Laine?"

I shoved my hands deep down into the back pockets of my shorts, and I flushed with excitement at seeing him. *It's just Jake, weirdo.*

"Bored, I guess." I shrugged, returning his grin. "Daddy couldn't coax me into going to the flight museum, again, and the others are shopping, so there weren't really any other options."

"...place is pretty cool..." He wiped his hands as he spoke. "You know they've got a couple of jet engines – "

"Jake, I know. It was interesting the first two times that Daddy explained the ins and outs. He'd go every single trip if he could. If I ever have to build one...I'm good. You should've gone. You'd be a good student."

Jake smiled. He walked over to the static-riddled, paint-spattered radio on the ground and clicked off the twangy song about whiskey.

"I was about to crank up the tractor. Want to ride along?"

"No..."

He looked surprised, shifting his weight in his work boots.

“...But I’ll drive and you can ride along.”

He laughed and hung his head. “Okay. Half a million-dollar piece of equipment. That’s just what I was hoping you’d say.”

I’d ridden in many monstrous tractors over the years with Daddy and his cousin, Uncle Glenn, so I knew a little, and it felt good to let Jake know that. The front tire came up to my nose, and I patted the rubber before climbing up into the glass cab. I sat in the seat and looked out to see that Jake was still standing in the same spot, and he was watching me. I felt free, plucked out of the sardined, family car ride from the day before, and there was no place I’d rather be.

“All right, I can take her out by myself.” I shut the door and pretended to mess with the controls.

Jake hurried in and stood in the cab beside me. “You can’t just drive this thing by yourself. I don’t care if you are an expert –“

“Jake, I’m not an expert. I’m just messing with you. But I have ridden in quite a few tractors. I’m definitely not a tractor virgin.”

Jake grinned. He lifted his ball cap and repositioned it. Clearing his throat and looking down at his dusty, camel-colored boots, he looked like he was blushing. Then it hit me that what I’d just said probably sounded seriously flirty. Like, big time. I hadn’t intended those connotations. I started sweating in the hot cab, and spoke again, louder than I meant to.

“So, are we going to take this big guy out of the barn, or what?”

Jake looked straight at me and was silent.

Seriously, Laine, can you say anything that sounds normal?

He crossed and uncrossed his arms, and he clawed at the back of his neck before breaking the booming silence. “Okay, so you probably know that that screen right there pretty much drives it by itself.”

I didn’t, but I nodded and listened. The warm air was tense in our stalling, and the glass cab was going to fog up if we didn’t start the air soon. I noticed my heart beating, and I decided to keep my eyes fixed on the black control box until the cool air and drive out settled me. I kept still and listened as Jake spoke.

“We’re just going to take her out this way and head over to the field.”

I bounced in the juddering seat and let my ears take in the loud whirring of the engine as we drove. Soon we were riding over the expansive crop, brown rows everywhere, in a tractor that drove itself.

It smelled of hay and fertilizer as we bumped along the panoramic land surrounding our little, glass box. The moving, psychedelic pattern of crop rows was hypnotic. Cotton plants passed steadily beneath us, but the distant line of trees stayed put as we rode beneath the crisp, blue sky. A sand-colored, pick-up truck passed on the highway, and I sensed that Jake had slowed down time a little from his usual day, because I’d dropped in.

I thought about the labor in farming as I looked down at the passing plants. Often, while helping Daddy plow, plant or pick in our lush, backyard garden of tomatoes, squash, cucumbers, beans and corn, I’d thought about living and working that way.

Jake's farm was a different animal. Vast land had to be prepared, not too wet and not too dry, for planting. I'd heard Daddy talk about fertilizers used and how important and expensive they were for farmers. Diesel was costly, too, and it was used to run the big equipment. And then there was irrigation. The weather was a farmer's biggest foe. It haunted him, ruined him, blessed him and never left him alone. Still, it seemed to me like there were worse ways to live. Many times I'd imagined myself grown and running my own organic farm, but it seemed like a hazy dream in a faraway land. I watched Jake look out at the land. I could tell that farming was in his blood, the way it had to be to do that job.

"Were you fixing the tractor when I got here?" I looked up at Jake's far-off gaze.

"Nah. Nothing really wrong with it." He crossed his arms and peered out the front window as he spoke. "Just checking it."

"Did Mr. McBride teach you how?"

"I learned in Jackson. Worked on tractors for almost two years. It's come in handy some, since I moved back."

Far off in the distance I noticed a man working on something on the ground near a pickup that held equipment in the back. "Who's that over there?"

"Beau Moody. He's fixing a busted pipe at the edge of the crop. I've been out there with him half the morning. He's about done. Mr. McBride said the leak cost us around ten thousand dollars in sales and maintenance." He strained his eyes to watch the pipe-man work.

Jake wiped the dust off the face of his worn athletic watch. "I need to check on a

sow later on that may be birthing today. We can ride over to the house and you can meet Aunt Sissy, if you want.”

“I do.” I soaked up the final minutes of wrap-around crops from the mighty machine as we drove back to the barn. Jake killed the engine as we pulled back in.

A moment later I was stood in the noon-time sun, looking at the gun rack in Jake’s truck when I heard him whistle. I turned around to see him patting his thigh.

“Here, girl.” A gray-bearded, chocolate Labrador retriever walked slowly to him from around the barn’s side.

“This is Baby.” He squatted and rubbed her sleepy face.

“Isn’t she a little arthritic to be called, ‘Baby’?” I dropped to pet her smooth head and she sat her plump rump down slowly on the black dirt.

“Don’t say that, she’s sensitive about her age.” Jake patted her back. “Don’t listen to her, Baby, you don’t look a day over five.” She looked up, and slim, white slivers shown in her caramel eyes.

A few minutes later, we walking up onto the McBrides’ long, shaded front porch. The swing at the far end moved slightly in the breeze, and a fat, black cat with mustard-colored speckles lay stretched out on the grey, wood floor. I could hear old-timey gospel music playing from inside, as Jake opened the screened door. It was another of those spots in Oak Lake that seemed like it could’ve looked the same in 1950.

“Shhh,” Jake put his finger to his mouth and pointed toward the far corner of the great room. A plump, white-headed man in overalls unhooked over his plaid, short-sleeved shirt slept in a recliner. There were several bottles of prescription medicine and a

half-eaten sandwich on the table beside him. The weather played quietly on the television nearby.

“Follow me.” Jake whispered and motioned for me to follow him toward the music coming from the kitchen.

“Lead the way.” I studied a large black and white photograph of what appeared to be a young Mr. McBride with army buddies in world war two uniforms as we passed the open dining room. In the kitchen, Jake snuck up behind a short, plump lady with curled, dyed-brown hair and hugged her around the waist.

Startled, she swatted Jake with a dish rag, and he reached for her hands. “May I have this dance?” A rich-voiced harmony of bass and tenors, who “saw the light,” rolled out from the radio.

“You scared the living daylights out of me, Jake Donnelly.” He danced Mrs. McBride alongside the kitchen counter, and her face softened when she saw me. “You didn’t tell me we had company.” Every wrinkle on her face formed a smile as she wiped her hands on her apron before reaching for mine. “Aren’t you going to introduce me to your visitor, Jake?” Her scolding voice sounded wobbly, but cheerful.

“Aunt Sissy, this is Laine Rearden, visiting from Birmingham.” Jake washed his hands, splashing beneath a tiny, blue-floral print valence at the sunny sink. “Laine, this is Mrs. Sissy McBride.”

“Hush that. Call me Aunt Sissy.” I smelled aerosol hair spray and cinnamon as she hugged me tight. “Are you one of Phil’s daughters?”

“Yes ma’am.” I could tell that Aunt Sissy was one of the many wrinkled “mother

hens” in Oak Lake and, though we’d just met, she felt like family and I didn’t want to leave.

“Why, I’ve known your daddy since he was a little bitty thing.” She peered at me with crinkled eyes, as though we shared a secret. “He worked with Jimmy years ago for a couple of summers on the farm. Oh! I’ve got some tomatoes for your Gran.” She hurried to the fridge with a finger in the air to mark her announcement. “Now, I’ve made some fresh pimento cheese spread, and I’ve got chicken soup and cornbread, and there’s a mess of turnip greens on the stove...”

“We’re riding over to the pig pen now.” Jake dried his hands on the dish towel and talked to warn Aunt Sissy of our leaving. I wasn’t in a hurry to leave the happy kitchen, but I knew Jake had things across the farm to check on so I watched them work it out.

“You can’t go on a hungry stomach. Look at Laine. Nobody’s feeding her.” She stuck out pouty lips before chattering, “Though don’t tell your Gran I said that, she’d never forgive me.”

I laughed out loud at Aunt Sissy. I wasn’t fat, but all my jeans were tight on my butt and I definitely worked to keep my thighs under control by running and playing tennis. My waist was smallish, but I was not a “bean pole” like Kay and Bethany. Mama said I was “shapely,” which I found annoying. I glanced over, amused by the big-hearted Aunt Sissy, and noticed that Jake was staring at me. He stood, fixed, with a faint smile. I must have looked surprised, but I didn’t look away from him. He grinned as I turned away.

Okay, so he's looking at you. It doesn't mean anything, don't act weird.

Aunt Sissy hurried around the kitchen and did what I was sure she'd done a thousand times before. She clanked utensils, grabbed bread and slammed doors as she spoke. I could relate to her happy task; I liked creating things, too. Cooking new pasta dishes with Mama was okay, but working in the dirt and growing vegetables in Daddy's garden, and drawing charcoals of plants for art class had made me realize how much I liked to work with my hands. Add fishing trips, hunting, and landscaping 101 with Daddy, and I didn't exactly fit the typical girl-mold at Riverton. Any other hobbies would've made me more normal.

"..And y'all will need spoons for the pie..." Her fingers flew up in the air like an orchestrator's odd directive.

Leaning back against the counter with crossed arms, Jake looked resigned to her task. She handed us a stuffed lunch box of sandwiches, strawberries, chips, a jug of sweet tea with glasses and an oversized piece of chocolate pie.

I wet a napkin and crouched to wipe up some pimento cheese that Aunt Sissy had unknowingly flung on the tile floor in her food-prep whirlwind, and I threw it in the garbage. Aunt Sissy turned around and caught me in the act.

"Is everything okay?" I tried to read through her pensive look.

"Sweetheart – you don't have to clean up in here." She spoke like I'd deep-cleaned the whole kitchen. "What a thoughtful thing for you to do. It's been a long time since someone else took a wet rag to help in my kitchen." She reached out and clasped my hand, and I was moved by the sincerity in her expression.

Laughing, I said, “No ma’am. I didn’t. There was just a drop on the floor and I didn’t want y’all to step in it, that’s all. I guess the guys around here don’t help too much in the kitchen.” I knew I was right and shot my eyes at Jake.

Aunt Sissy glanced back and forth between me and Jake, still holding my hand.

Jake chuckled at her intense reaction. “You going to be all right, Aunt Sissy?”

Jake grabbed a strawberry from the table and popped it in his mouth.

She whispered back, “Jacob Donnelly, you be good to this girl. She’s a keeper.”

“Yes, ma’am. She’s all right, I guess.” Jake dodged another dish-rag swatting as Aunt Sissy prattled.

“...and you’ll learn, Jacob Donnelly, that not every girl is cut out for farm life...”

Jake grabbed the cooler and hurried me to the front door.

“Nice to meet you, Aunt Sissy.” I blurted out the words and took in a final breath of fresh bread as we passed outside. “Jake, why didn’t you tell me about her? I would’ve been in here with her the whole time.”

“That’s why I didn’t tell you.” Jake tried not to smile as we hurried down the porch steps back into the sun.

Baby was planted, panting in the passenger’s side of the truck, so I climbed over and sat between the seatbelt buckles in the middle of the bench seat. When Jake didn’t walk up to the driver’s side, I looked over to see him opening the passenger door with something in his hand. He had a banged up metal tin, sloshing with water as he tried to hold it still for Baby to lap up a drink. I chuckled as I watched his concentration and strong arms balance his pal’s messy drink.

My legs stuck to the seat as we rode past the first two barns, but the warm, hay-scented air felt good through the open windows. Jake's knuckles hit my thigh each time he shifted gears, and each time he apologized. I was glad I'd shaved my legs and they were smooth. Shaving got old, but I couldn't stand the feeling of hair on my legs. Of course, in the South, it was probably good that my preference fell on the "lady-like" side of things. We pulled up to the pig pen, where it smelled of manure and fresh grass as I climbed out into the heat.

"Oh, hell no." Jake was inside the pen before I'd shut the truck door.

"What?" I squinted to see the problem.

He looked down at a large, grunting pig that lay on its side. "She's in trouble." He flung his hat on the ground.

"What's wrong?" My hand shielded my eyes from the sun.

"We've got to go." Jake hurried to the truck.

In an instant we were flying back toward the barns, leaving Baby standing still beside the pen. Jake grabbed a walkie-talkie that hung above his head. He pushed a button that beeped, and spoke into it.

"Travis, you still here?" The device screeched with feedback, and then a voice.

"Yeah. Almost finished running the fence. What's up?" Travis's voice sounded slow and calm.

"Maybelle's farrowing. She's having trouble." Jake gritted his teeth. "I'm getting supplies."

“I’ll head over there now.” Travis’s words sped up.

Another screech and Jake dropped the device in the seat and grabbed the wheel.

“What can I do?” I said, following Jake into the shaded barn.

He handed me a box of latex gloves and a gallon of sanitizer. “Goes in the back of the truck.”

We loaded the supplies and we were off. I squeezed the edge of the car seat as we bounced in the truck back to the pig pen.

Travis, a large, young redhead with dirty jeans and work gloves, climbed out of his truck as we drove up.

Gloves flew out all over the truck bed as Jake ripped open the box. He worked his hands into two, extra-long, latex gloves, pulled them up to his elbows and poured alcohol-scented sanitizing solution over them, spilling some on his jeans and the truck. He dropped to his knees in front of grunting, barely-moving animal.

“You think it’s breech?” Travis lifted his hat and scratched his amber curls.

“Don’t know. May just be the birth canal.” Jake put his hands on her side, and the pig groaned. Her stomach contracted and she moved her legs, but nothing came out.

“Her eyes are all red.” Jake scooted around to the end of the pig and looked at her, and I could see sweat on his face as the sun beat down heavy on the backs of our necks. He put his hand on one leg and slid the other one in the shape of a cone slowly inside the animal. The pig barely squirmed, but she made more noises with her mouth. Jake continued to slide his arm, almost up to his elbow, inside her. A sour odor passed, and I waited.

Jake was gritting his teeth. "I've got it." The sun blazed on my arm as Jake went on. "I think I can get it, I've got my fingers around the head."

"Y'all bring towels?" Travis asked.

"I'll get them." I hurried to the truck, realizing my stomach was queasy. *God, please let them make it.* I wasn't too grossed out to handle it, but I didn't watch pigs-in-trouble being born every day. I ran back with towels in hand to see Jake slowly pull a slimy baby pig out of its mama by the back of the head. I dropped beside him onto my knees. "Do you need this?"

"Thanks." He grabbed a towel, wrapped the piglet and rubbed it gently on its sides.

Just then, the mama grunted and kicked and another pig squeezed out half-way, in some muck.

"Want me to get it?" Travis hovered over us at the base of the pig.

"I got it." I nudged Jake over and caught the pinkish, gooey baby as it plopped out. Wrapping it in a towel I noticed that the color was richer than the first pig. The gunk had a pungent odor, and the sweet, squirming baby's face was many times smaller than its Mama's. I felt my face pull back with a smile. "Jake, is this one okay?"

He was sitting back on his boots with his knees bent, watching me. "That one's good, Laine. Thanks."

Just as the third baby came out, Jake scooped it up. "Color isn't good on this one. It's grey." He rubbed it with a towel.

"Think we need to warm it?" Travis held the first piglet in one arm and wiped the

sweat out of his eye with the other.

“Yeah.”

Travis chewed a freckled lip. “I’ll take it to the warmer in the barn if you want to stay.” He waited for Jake’s guidance.

“Yeah, I want to make sure the rest are okay.” Jake was flushed, and the delicacy of the situation set in. The animals didn’t always make it, and I could tell from Jake’s serious expression that he was much more experienced than me.

“Got it.” Travis scooped up the grayish, towel-wrapped, burrito baby and drove away.

I helped birth three more healthy pigs, and then we were done. Participating in the mucousy, bloody affair made me feel like I’d been through a little bit of labor, too. Soon, all of the babies were nursing their Mama on the ground, and I smiled as I watched them thrive. Later, Jake came over and sat by me on his truck’s tailgate.

“Laine, I’m really sorry you had to see all that.” He was looking down toward his filthy work boots. “I know you probably didn’t want to have to deal with that...”

“What are you talking about?”

“I mean, I know it was gory and you didn’t intend to be in the dirt with a farrowing pig. I’ll understand if you don’t want to come back here.” He massaged circles into his palm with his thumb.

“Yeah, you’re right. You should apologize to me.”

He looked up at me.

“That was way too much for a pretty-little girl, like myself, to have to deal with. I should be home painting my nails, looking pretty, smelling good, all that stuff. Or, Maybe I should go roll my hair with Mama.”

He looked stunned.

“Seriously, Jake, you can drop whatever fifties, female stereotype you have in mind. For your information, I loved being here today. I can see that it’s hard work.”

He had been rubbing his shoulder, but he stopped and listened.

“I’m relieved that the pigs are all okay, and I’m glad I saw them being born. Being here – makes me understand what you do. And why you want to do it.” The words came out before I thought them through, but I meant it.

He looked deep in thought, and his smile widened. “Thanks. I’m really glad you came.” His face was about a foot away, looking me square in the face. We were filthy, but Jake looked beautiful squinting in the western sun.

He rubbed a hand over his face. “I’m sorry if I insulted you. It’s just...”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t see many girls out here, and not many girls I know feel that way about birthing pigs and farming...”

“Well, it does look like a pretty hard life. I’m sure a lot of girls, and guys, aren’t cut out for it.” I hopped down off the truck and patted some dirt off. “Want to go clean up? I’m pretty sure Aunt Sissy packed that pie for me.”

Jake slammed the tailgate shut. “All that blood and guts made you hungry, did

it?” He chuckled and climbed in the truck.

“Doesn’t take much to make me hungry.” Laughing, I slammed my car door shut.

“You couldn’t tell it.” He turned the steering wheel and looked in the side mirror.

I can’t say why but, at that moment, everything around me stopped. Jake had struck a nerve somewhere. It wasn’t about him approving the way I looked. As pig-muck covered as I was sitting in Jake’s hot truck, I wanted to hear him say he liked me. I wanted to hear him say it, because I liked him, too.

I grabbed his lower arm and he stared at me as I spoke. “What did you just say?” I felt his muscle beneath sticky forearm hair in my grip, but I concentrated on his response.

“Oh, I just said you couldn’t tell it, if you like to eat. That’s all.” His voice sounded suddenly softer. He had recognized an odd look on my face and he slowed the truck, before killing the engine and turning towards me.

“What is it, Laine?” His voice was quiet.

I turned and looked out of my window. It felt safer to keep looking away. After a moment in the warm, bright quiet of the car, Jake broke the silence.

“Laine Rearden, you’re perfect. I mean, you can’t get any prettier. And I mean it. I figure there’s a bunch of boys out there who’ve told you that.” His voice was quiet, almost grave, when he spoke, and it caused me to look at him. When I turned, I was surprised to see his head hanging, and he was looking down in his lap at his keys. He looked in my eyes as he finished. “I’ve known that a long time. You’re the prettiest girl I’ve ever seen. And that’s just on your outside.” He wasn’t smiling.

My cheeks got hot and I looked at the starbursts in his grey-blue eyes. He had a

dirt smudge under his eye above his stubble, and I caught myself glancing at his lips. I wanted to kiss him. I was going to kiss him. Then, he sat up and fumbled his keys back into the ignition.

“Still hungry? Let’s clean up and get a bite.” He started the motor. I was wondering whether he’d realized that I was about to kiss him, as we pulled up to the house.

We washed up, sat out on the front-porch steps with the lunch box between us and dug out food as we talked.

“Did you know they kept pigs corralled in Manhattan in the 1700s?” Jake asked.

I had a mouth full of juicy strawberries, and I shook my head. He bit off half of a pimento cheese sandwich in one bite. “Yeah, they had a lot of them. Made a big wall to keep them in.”

He wiped his mouth, took a thirsty drink of sweet tea, and went on.

“People started calling it Wall Street.” He squinted and looked out towards the barns.

We talked and talked, and we laughed about our past fishing trips and four-wheeler escapades. Then, I told him how disappointed I was on the trip I learned he’d left Oak Lake.

“That was the most boring trip to Gran’s I’ve ever had.” I smiled and noticed he’d stopped eating to listen. I felt more comfortable talking to him then, than ever.

Jake sighed and lay back onto the painted porch floor boards, hands crossed behind his head. “Yeah, that was rough. I sure didn’t want to leave Oak Lake. But I was just sixteen and Mama said we were moving to Jackson, where her sister and mama, my Aunt

Carol and Nana, lived. I got used to it...after a while. When I heard that Mr. McBride, he's Mama's second cousin, needed somebody to help run the farm, Mama let me come back. I promised to finish my senior year here, and I did. Jackson's just a few hours away and she calls me a lot. The McBride's have been good to me, letting me stay here. They got me calling them 'Aunt Sissy and Uncle Jimmy.' Now that I finished school, I basically run the farm. I've got some kids that help, though. Mr. McBride's been teaching me the ropes, but he's not real healthy. Though, it's not as big here as Wheaton's or Baker's farm; it's a lot more manageable here..."

A long yawn swallowed up his words, and I watched the pale, underside of his arm as his muscles flexed, before he sat up and looked at me with tired eyes. "And your Aunt May is wonderful. Has been, ever since I was in her third-grade class. Mama used to do her hair, and Aunt May would always give me something when she came: gum or candy...or change. I think she felt sorry for us, after Daddy left. It wouldn't have been the same for me after I moved back, if she hadn't kept up with me."

I listened, and I realized the sun was going down. I checked my phone: three missed calls from Mama. Just then, Will drove up, honking the horn and calling out to me, as he circled in the gravel.

"Laine, your Mama sent me to come get you." Will's arm and head hung out of his truck.

"Coming." Jake and I sprang to our feet on the porch as I answered. I heard Will flipping through radio stations as I looked over at Jake. Wishing I could stay, I grabbed the dishes and put them back in the large lunch cooler.

We'd both run out of words. I gave Jake a side-hug, which was awkward and less familiar than we'd been.

He caught my forearm. "Laine?" His large, warm hand covered much of my arm.

"Yeah?"

"I'm glad you came." He looked like he had more to say, then he relaxed and let go.

I stood still. "Me too."

CHAPTER 4

At Gran's, Kay covered her nose and shrieked in horror as I entered the kitchen, and Mama spat out complaints about me not answering her calls.

"Your clothes are disgusting." Kay leaned away as though I was a rotten tidal wave about to crash down on her. "What is that smell?"

"Pig guts, pig blood, maybe some amniotic fluid..." I felt really good as I took my time to answer. There was a harmony of reactions from Kay, Mama and Gran.

"I'm going to be sick," Kay covered her mouth and walked to the sink.

"What exactly did that boy enlist you to do today?" Gran asked with high brows.

"Go straight upstairs and get bathed," Mama said. "You don't need to have those filthy clothes in the kitchen. Come back down and I'll warm you a plate." Mama shooed me away with her hands.

I took my time up the stairs, and I fought a smile the rest of the evening. Several times, I had a driving desire to sigh, like a silly girl, from an old black-and-white movie. I took a long bubble bath, and I thought about Jake. I went to bed, much later that night, writing in *Journey*, and thinking about Jake.

Dear Journey,

God permits industrious angels
Afternoons to play.

I met one, –forgot my school-mates,
All, for him, straightaway.

– E.D.

You know how you’ve always hung out on top of the big Dickens’s collected-stories book on top of my bedroom book shelf? I just wondered how you felt about that book. Do you feel like you know her pages and stories, yet, you have a fresh excitement at seeing her after you’ve been apart? It’s hard to describe how I felt on the farm today with Jake. Hanging out with Aunty Sissy in her kitchen, driving the tractor, birthing the pigs, just being with Jake – I would’ve taken any one part of it. Altogether, it was incredible.

Love,
Laine

In the middle of the night, someone whispered, “Laine, c’mon.” I felt tugs on my shoulder, and I woke up in the dim light to Will, crouching by my bed and asking me to follow him.

“How on Earth did you get in here, Will? It’s the middle of the night.” I sat up in my tank top and boxer shorts, and tied my hair in a knot on top of my head.

“Whoa, whoa,” Will turned his head and covered his eyes. “I don’t want to see none of that, I’ll wait outside.”

“None of what? I’m wearing clothes, genius. Now tell me what you’re doing here.”

Will whispered with his back still to me. “I’ve been texting you for an hour. You didn’t leave the door unlocked, and I had *a time* finding Gran’s spare key. We’re going frog giggling, remember? You said you wanted to go. You haven’t changed your mind have you?” He sounded desperate, like he was counting on me.

“No, of course not.” It was nearly impossible to scoot my warm legs out of the lumpy, layered covers into the cool, room air, but I did. Daddy set the thermostat to “north pole” on summer nights at Gran’s.

“Just give me a sec to come down, okay? Is it just the two of us?” I yawned and walked toward my clothes in the closet.

“No, Jake is in the truck.”

“Jake?” I spoke louder than I meant to.

“Shhhhh. I don’t want to wake up your Mama and Daddy. I mean, they won’t care too much if we go, but they may get mad if we disturb their sleep.”

“Sorry. I’ll be down in a minute, okay?”

“Stay to the right on the staircase, it creaks less.” Will walked hunched over, as thought that made him quieter, out of the room.

I pulled on jeans and tennis shoes and crept downstairs. The front door squeaked when I went through, but I knew Daddy’s loud bedroom fan would drown out the sound.

In the warm, dim night air, noisy frogs and crickets talked in the damp grass. Jake stood by Will’s truck, holding the door open for me. We all climbed in the car, and we were off.

When we got to Will’s spot, it wasn’t long before he was knee deep in a swampy part of the lake, spearing frogs with a pole gig and a spotlight on his head. Jake and I stood in the wet grass watching Will, when he started to direct me.

“C’mon, Laine, grab that other gig and get one of these big guys. We’ve got to fill

up my nets.

I couldn't bring myself to tell the guys, but I really wasn't dying to stab a giant bull frog. I'd thought about it the whole drive there, and I'd decided I would do it since Will was going to cook them for food. If nobody was going to eat them, I wouldn't have done it. It was now or never.

"Okay, Will, I'll do one. One frog. Then don't ask me to get any more, okay?" I swatted a mosquito away from my face.

Will started whining. "Laine, I thought you'd like this. You're not like most girls. You always liked to fish..."

I jumped in. "I do, Will. I do like to fish. I love to fish. And I've gone hunting with you several times, and I'm better with a gun than Jake."

"Hey." Jake piped up. I wasn't really better, but I liked to say it.

"Look Will, I'll catch a frog, but I'm just never going to like it like fishing, okay?" I was ready to get my single frog gigging experience over with. I didn't want Jake to think I couldn't do it.

I put on my head light and waders, and walked down near Will with the frog gig pole. We tried not to shine our lights in each other's faces, so we wouldn't be temporarily blinded.

"See those big guys on the slope right there. Shine your light right on their glowing eyes and when you get your gig about six to eight inches away, spear him." Will spoke calmly, and worked as he talked.

My legs sloshed a little in the water, then I stood still. I got my light directly on a

huge frog, bigger than a softball, and drew my gig in slow and close. *C'mon Laine, don't be chicken. You can get one frog, just one frog.* Right then, I speared him with the gig and lifted it up in the air. For a second, I shut my eyes tight as I speared him and lifted him up. I was relieved it was all over. Then I found out that it wasn't.

"Laine, you're going to have to kill him. They do that." Will turned around, looking up toward my frog on a stick. When I looked up at the frog, I saw what he meant. Though the creature had a pitchfork of sorts shooting all through his body, he was fighting and struggling to get off, kicking his long legs out as he moved.

I bit my lips and tried not to scream. I couldn't stand the thought of a stabbed frog on a stick, fighting and trying to get off. Besides, he was a mutant-sized thing. *Stay calm Laine, just stay calm.*

"Okay, sling him against a rock or hit him with one, if you want." Will found a large one and handed it to me.

Yes, Will, that is what I want.

I couldn't believe I was doing this. I left my warm bed to bludgeon an innocent toad in the middle of the night. A toad on a stick.

Jake was behind me and I couldn't see his reaction. The toads were croaking loudly, probably asking their fat friend where he'd gone.

"Fine, I'll hit him with the rock and put him out of his misery."

"Careful, he'll come off of the gig and get back in the water." Will stabbed another bull frog.

I climbed my hands up the pole, pulling the squirming frog closer. When I laid the

frog on a stick down on the grass, he continued to squirm but didn't come off. I walked over and turned my head away, closed my eyes and hit him hard with the large rock. I felt something squirt up on my shirt, and I was proud that I managed not to squeal. I felt like jumping up and down and cheering, like I was a gladiator who'd won a horrible fight, but I stayed calm and stood up and looked at the guys as I pulled off my light.

"Well, there you go. There's my frog. Make sure y'all eat him, fried frog legs or whatever, so that his death was not in vain. Okay, Will?" Will pulled the dead creature off of the gig, and my stomach felt weak as he dropped it into his bag-o-frogs.

"Oh, I will. You don't have to worry about that. I'm skinning these guys as soon as I get home." Will positioned his pole near another frog.

I let out a deep breath and walked over to Jake, who started clapping his hands slow and hard.

"You're a natural-born killer, aren't you, Laine?" I could see Jake's big grin clearly in the silver moonlight.

"Where are your spoils, tough guy?" I wiped my hands on my t-shirt.

"Oh no, I don't frog gig. Creeps me out. Don't like to stab frogs. Seems kind of mean." Jake's shoulders shuddered, and he looked back at me, concealing a smile.

You've got to be kidding me. I waited a second before punching his shoulder.

"Yeah, Laine." Will sloshed in the water. "I'm kind of surprised you went through with it. Jake never does."

On the dark ride back, there was a full sack of frogs in Will's truck bed, and one of them was mine.

“Laine, we’ve got to do this again. Faith won’t ever come. I can’t wait to tell Daddy you got one. I’ve never known another girl to do it.” Will sounded thrilled.

Jake looked over at me in the truck as he spoke. “I don’t know Will, Laine is pretty good at fishing, and she’s good with a gun. She may want to stick to that for a while.” Jake winked at me.

“Whatever you say, Jake.” Will was so happy about the frogs that he didn’t care about much else. I was glad Jake and I didn’t share Will’s desire to murder frogs, and the warm, choppy air beat in on us through open windows on the dim rid back to Gran’s.

CHAPTER 5

I was still waiting for McKenna's call, though I wasn't too worried that it was big news. At school, she couldn't wait until first bell to tell me anything. *It was probably nothing.*

Will and I were throwing the football in Gran's front yard, while Faith looked out at geese on the lake from a nearby, creaking swing. A happy bird chirped on a limb between me and the marshmallow blue sky, and I was wondering if I'd keep first seed at senior-year, tennis-team tryouts, when my phone buzzed. I slammed the pigskin down in the grass, feigning a touchdown, and lost a flip flop doing the moon walk before answering. Will laughed as I read the caller: it was McKenna.

"Laine," McKenna said.

"Mack, what took you so long to call?"

She didn't complain about me calling her "Mack." *Weird.*

It was silent. That was my first clue.

"Laine, can I talk to you for a minute?" That was my second.

My hands felt clammy. "What is it?"

Will was trying to spin the football on his finger in the air like a basketball. I turned and walked behind the big oak tree, and watched a green caterpillar inch up the mottled bark.

“Your dad is having an affair with one of his students. Her name is Brandy Casey. I think she might be in one of his business classes, but I’m not sure.” McKenna said

Silence.

“Laine?”

A million tiny beads started to rotate around inside my head, and my stomach felt like a creature would tear out of it at any moment. I sank down against the tree.

“You still throwing, Laine?” Will yelled from behind the tree.

“Resting.” I worked to force the one-word response.

“Laine?” I could barely hear McKenna’s voice from the phone on the grass beside my hand.

With lifeless arms, I slung the phone back up to my ear. “Where did you hear this?”

“L.A. Grimes. And her mom.”

L.A. Grimes – the silly, loud-mouthed volleyball player at school. She was tall with platinum hair and freckles, but there was no dreamy southern-California connection like I imagined when we first met. Her real name was Lyndsey Anne, though no one used it. L.A.’s boisterous personality was like hot mustard on an eggroll, you could only take so much. But I had never known her to lie. Her mom, Ms. Grimes, worked in the Bookstore at the college with Daddy. Mrs. Grimes was nice, she just reeked of smoke and her skin looked like a California raisin.

I watched a black ant crawl up my flip flop and onto my metallic-blue toenail

polish. I let it walk, undisturbed.

Casey? I thought, *Brandy Casey*. Images of what she might look like ran like a crude slide show in my head.

“What did L.A. say, Mckenna?”

“She called me the day you left and asked me to help plan a charity bonfire for the girls’ volleyball team. She asked if your dad was cheating on your mom. I said that I didn’t think so. She said she saw your dad outside her mom’s office, and her mom told her to stay away from him. Her mom said your dad was ‘inappropriate’ with students.”

Inappropriate with students? Gross. I wondered if other people were saying this.

Maybe he was just flirting – not as bad as it sounds.

Mckenna went on. “I wanted to learn more from Ms. Grimes before I called you. I told L.A. I’d go to her house to start planning the bonfire. I made some Irish punch and took it with me – you know how Ms. Grimes is. It worked, too, she was a chatterbox by 10 p.m. I feel bad, though – I told Mom it was virgin. All Mrs. Grimes said about me making it was, “well, well, well, aren’t you a big girl...”

“And?”

“By ten-thirty that night, Ms. Grimes was talking like we were old pals. Ms. Grimes mentioned her friend, a secretary in your dad’s department, who told her that he was seeing a student name Brandy Casey. She’s the one who said he had a reputation for dating his students, and that a student had complained a few years ago learning of your dad’s involvement with a different student.”

A different student?

“Who is Brandy Casey?”

“Ms. Grimes said she’s tramp, a student-worker on-campus who wears too much makeup. That’s all I know.” The warm air felt thick, and it was hard to breathe.

It was too much for me to take in. My brain felt like a broken egg, running down between my ears, and I didn’t want to hear any more.

“Call you later, okay?”

“Are you mad, Laine, that I told you? I thought you should know.”

“No, I’m just tired – talk soon?”

I dropped the phone on the grass, counting on McKenna to hang up for both of us. I sat still, thinking in circles about what McKenna had said about Daddy – about his reputation, about Brandy Casey, about Mama – until the tingling in my lower half forced me to stand. Tree roots were imprinted down the backs of my legs.

The sun was going down.

I walked back to the front door when Faith asked me something from the swing but my brain couldn’t understand her. I made my way inside past Bethany. She was forcing Dad to hold up Gran’s random household objects as she took pictures. He looked ridiculous holding up a small basket of fake flowers as he talked casually with Uncle Red about Old Miss football. His eyes met mine, but I looked away, and I went upstairs to my bedroom. I didn’t expect to mount the monstrous, creaky staircase without being stopped or questioned by someone in the house, but I made it to the bed without interruption.

I heard approaching claws clicking in the hallway, a pause, and a wet, exaggerated sniff beneath the door’s gap.

“Ox.” The weakness in my voice surprised me.

Another loud, wet sniff, followed by an abbreviated whimper.

I tried to feel my way toward the light beam underneath the door. I clutched a mesh bag of smelly rose soaps on the dresser, jammed my toe on the claw-footed bench at the end of the bed, and hopped on one leg to the door. Oxford walked in and sat tall and still as I slumped to hug him, and that seemed to be the reason he came. My tears gushed out. I was mad at myself for crying, and I wanted someone, anyone, to walk in and question me so I could yell at them.

I spent the evening with Ox in Gran’s high, sprawling bed in the darkness, ignoring knocks at the door and the bustle downstairs, protecting my eyes from the light. A plate of foil-wrapped food and dessert was left by my bedroom door, though I left it untouched.

Dear Journey,

She rose to her requirement, dropped
The playthings of her life
To take the honorable work
Of woman and of wife.

- E.D.

Does Mama need Betsey Trotwood to defend her against our Mr. Murdstone? Even if Mama isn’t David’s angelic Clara Copperfield...does anybody deserve cheating???

I wonder if Daddy cares about how it affects us. Even with all the years of lake trips, beach trips, tennis matches, pulling us in our pigtails on refrigerator boxes behind the riding mower...all I can see right now is a dirty, old man.

I’m sorry for the shower, Journey.

Love,
Laine

CHAPTER 6

I was sore all over when I woke up with the sun streaming in the window. I'd tossed and turned with thoughts about Dad before finally falling asleep around three a.m. A wave of nausea hit me as McKenna's words flashed in my head, "your dad is having an affair..."

I switched on the light, and the room's lemony walls flooded bright beside the gleaming white window shears. The smell of biscuits and bacon came in under the door from downstairs, and my stomach growled from skipping supper. The thought of food grossed me out, and that wasn't normal. A car pulled up outside and I went to the window, where I saw Will parking in the yard. I pulled on some black running shorts, twisted my hair up and went downstairs to find Kay sitting at the kitchen table knitting with Gran's needles. Her face contorted when she looked up at me.

"Laine, are those pajamas?" Kay leaned to me. "Don't you think you should brush your hair.....and teeth?"

Ignoring her, I followed the scent of coffee to the counter, and fumbled through Gran's cabinets until I found the sugar. Mama had introduced me to coffee drinking, and I knew I could never repay her.

"What happened to that Catalpa tree?" Daddy was sitting next to Uncle Red on the sitting-room couch looking out the windows at the green backyard. Bethany stood in front of him holding her tape recorder.

Uncle Red crinkled his newspaper down, and spoke in his deep, slow voice over his glasses. “Had to cut it down. Got some disease on it and Gran didn’t want it to ruin her roses.”

“Daddy.” Bethany stomped her foot, jingling her oversized, homemade anklet, before pushing the buttons to rewind her hand-me-down device. “You can’t just blurt out a question about a tree while I’m recording. This is supposed to be a serious interview. I was about to ask what grade you were in when Gran and Papa let you start dating.”

“Oh, sorry.” Daddy was still looking outside the window at the missing tree.

Maybe he made out with somebody under that tree. Maybe he’s reminiscing about her and that’s why he cares about it.

Daddy looked at Uncle Red. “I remember Jimmy Crawford and me getting those fat, green worms off the tree to fish with.”

Okay, so, he’s reminiscing about worms. Doesn’t mean he hasn’t made out with girls in other places around here. Gross.

“Concentrate.” Bethany’s head dropped back as she groaned.

Daddy spotted me in the kitchen. “Well, there’s the tennis girl – joining the land of the living.”

I didn’t look back at him. I didn’t say good morning, and I didn’t even make a lame comment about being on a different schedule than everyone else. I fixed my coffee and sat down at the table.

“Look who’s here, girls.” Mama came in carrying a large, yellow amaryllis cutting from Gran’s garden, and Will followed.

“Morning.” Will held his frayed ball cap in his hands and brushed the hair on his forehead to one side.

“I’ve only got one delivery for Mr. Townsend today. I’ve got to take a part to Jake at Mr. McBride’s farm. Anybody want to go?”

Back to Jake’s...already?

“Thank you, Will, but I’m trying to finish knitting Gran’s blanket today.” Kay could make experimental knitting sound like she was responsible for air-traffic control. “And I’ve got an online finance quiz I have to take today, too.” She looked satisfied with her answer.

“I need to get by.” Frowning, Bethany passed through the kitchen and stopped next to Will. “I’ve got a lot on my mind: Daddy’s interview was a failure, so I may put your daddy on the schedule.” She mumbled something about “losing precious time” as she slammed through the swinging kitchen door.

Mama looked at me pitifully. She obviously wanted someone to take Will up on his offer.

“I’m game.” I didn’t need much prodding to leave. I slurped down my remaining coffee, before heading to the shower. I set the knob on scalding and smelled the soft, Mississippi water coming out of the pipes. I cried, and I let the water hit my face, washing away my tears as they came out. I was trying to figure out how not to think about Daddy every second. I felt calmer afterwards, and pulled on my Jane Goodall t-shirt and shorts before Gran caught me coming down the stairs.

“Don’t be gone too long. We’ll have chicken-salad sandwiches and soup later

on.” At Gran’s, days were measured in countdowns to the next meal, and my appetite was in hiding. It was a relief to get out of the house and get some air, even if it was hot, sticky air.

I stopped in the foyer to slip on my sandals when Mama came up behind me and whispered, “let your hair down and fix it later,” as I headed out the front door. My favorite t-shirt and running shorts were sloppy, in her eyes, for our yearly trip to Gran’s, but there was too much on my mind to care. She kept talking about it as I walked out, but I think Mama mostly cared because she knew Gran did. I loved Gran, but she worked hard at being an opinionated prude, and Mama worked hard to please.

Mama threw questions at me out the door as I left. “Are you feeling alright, Sweetie, you look pale? Laine?”

I waved a silent hand over my shoulder, and the iron storm door slammed behind me. I didn’t want to be mean, but I had to get outside and away from everybody. Especially him. I was starting to have flashes of things that hadn’t felt right, like his being overly protective of a cell phone and computer sessions that ended abruptly when I walked into the room.

Will’s truck smelled like vinyl seats and baseball cleats.

“Where’s Faith?” I asked, looking away.

“At work.” Will’s truck jumped around as he shifted gears. “Heard her tell Mama she’ll be at Gran’s tonight.”

The warm summer wind picked up through the windows as we rode, and my spirit felt lighter the further we got away from the house. Away from Daddy. From everything.

Will turned up an old, southern rock song on the radio, and I was thankful not to have to talk. I closed my eyes and felt the sun and wind on my face. I felt sick of thinking about Daddy all the time, sick of wondering. I wanted him out of my brain.

Twenty minutes later we turned off the highway onto McBride's long, dirt driveway, and we stopped in front of open, wooden barn doors.

"Jake?" Will climbed out of the truck and I followed him up to the barn. Jake was inside wrestling with some kind of metal part on a wooden workspace, and he was covered in dirt and grease.

"I've got the part." Will said.

Jake grabbed a white towel hanging on a ladder and wiped his face. "Great, I can't do much else without it. Got to get it in and see if she'll start..." He glanced over and looked surprised to see me. Walking out of the barn's shadow, he squinted in the sun close to me, and his smile looked bright next to the black mark on his chin. "What are you doing here, Laine? Couldn't stay away, could you?" He shook his head and scratched his unshaven, dimpled cheek with his dirty thumb.

"Will invited me. I needed to get out." My spirits lifted some as soon as I saw Jake.

"Yeah...I know what you mean....Gran's can be brutal." Jake said, still smiling. "...all the cornbread, chocolate turtles, the laying around....how do you people stand it?"

I walked to the oversized tractor. I wasn't in the mood for jokes. I wasn't myself. Jake's presence was comforting, but I also felt lost and distracted. "How's the grey piglet?"

“She’s good. Made it through the night just fine.” I could feel Jake’s eyes on me.

Will handed Jake the part, and he took it slowly, looking confused.

“What?” Will said.

Jake pointed to something across the barn. “That’s the part I’m replacing.” We all looked at the old part, which was twice as big as the one Jake was holding.

“Mr. Townsend said this was it...pretty sure it’s the only one that came in. Let me call and check.” Will jogged out of the barn with his phone to his ear.

Jake grabbed a water bottle from an ancient, white refrigerator and offered one to me, but I shook my head. I was thirsty but, compared to Jake’s sweaty, hard-working self, I felt like I hadn’t earned his water.

“Want to sit out here?” Jake pointed a hand to the bright outdoors.

“Sure.” I followed him out the back to an old metal glider. The cotton fields looked endless from where we sat. The crisp blue expanse above the distant trees made me feel like I could’ve been anywhere in time. I studied the lone oak tree, which sat between us and the cotton rows.

“I might should go clean up. I can’t do much without that part.” Jake sat his empty bottle by his foot. “What are y’all’s plans?”

“Faith is working. They’re fixing chicken salad for lunch.” I looked at the old swing rope hanging from the oak tree. My eyes felt puffy from crying.

“Something wrong, Laine?”

I was quiet for a long time, I’m not sure how long. Then it happened. Tears

started up again like little splinters behind my eyes and they welled up so fast that I couldn't control it. I hated to cry in front of Jake.

He scooted closer to me and put an arm around my back. "Hey, hey, what is it? I'm here if you want to talk." His voice was sweet and made me want to cry more.

Don't be a baby, get some control.

"It's nothing. It's just Daddy. I don't want to get into it."

We sat quietly for a few minutes when I just started talking.

"My best friend called and told me something about Daddy yesterday," I blurted out.

Jake looked at me and waited.

"He apparently is...inappropriate...with his female students." I flicked some dirt off of my knee.

I didn't feel like looking at him when I spoke.

Jake rubbed a hand over my back. "Maybe it's not as bad as you think. I don't think your dad is a bad guy, Laine."

I shot up from the glider.

"What do you know? You don't know him well. I don't even know him well, apparently."

"I'm sorry. I don't know him well. Not like you do. But I have seen him be a good dad to y'all over the years."

"Why are you taking his side?" My voice was getting louder. "Is this some sort of

guy code? The signs were all there with Daddy, and odd things he's done make sense now. Are there any guys who'll love and commit to one woman? Is that too much to ask?"

He stared up at me from his seat, his eyes looked suddenly heavier.

"No, it's not." Jake looked away. He was staring out at the fields, but I could tell that his mind was on something else.

I stared at him, puzzled by his look when Will walked up. "Okay, Mr. Townsend can get you the part, but it'll be a few more days. Sorry, Jake. They sent us the wrong one. We ordered the one you told us."

Jake was staring at me intently. It seemed he hadn't heard Will.

I started walking back to the truck without saying goodbye, and I was relieved that Will hadn't seen me get upset.

I wanted to talk to McKenna again.

Maybe things aren't as bad as I think they are.

I was glad Will didn't seem to sense my emotions; he talked about the hunting club the whole ride back. I looked into the woods, between the pine trees at the marshy land that led toward Oak Lake, and I thought about how much fun it used to be to be at Gran's. Jake and Will and I used to fish and ride four wheelers, and Faith and I'd stay up late watching black-and-white movies. I used to not worry about anything, except mosquitoes. As I looked out at a marshy spot along the highway, I realized the Delta was just as dark as anywhere else. There were alligators in the marsh. I couldn't see them, but they were there. I started to wonder why anybody would go to the lake. There were very

real death traps, lurking around, waiting to attack you, or your dog, or the ducks. *Why does anybody go to the lake, anyway? You think it's good, but it's not worth it.*

Walking back in at Gran's, I saw Mama and Bethany arguing on the porch with the long, thin mailman, who was sitting stiffly in a chair beside them.

"I said now, Bethany Anne." Mama folded her arms.

"But Mama, he agreed to an interview. I need everybody." Bethany's voice got more soprano.

"I don't think he intended to be tied up like a prisoner on Gran's front porch. He has other deliveries to make, now let him go. I am very sorry Mr. Tiddle, thank you for humoring Bethany."

Mr. Tiddle nodded his head once, and sat very still with his long nose pointed high, waiting patiently to be released from the bungee cords. Bethany had apparently retrieved them from under Dad's car seat.

Before I went past them into the house, I watched Daddy and Maggie playing some sort of follow-the-leader game down the sidewalk.

"No, I want follow!" Maggie was behind Daddy, pulling on his pants leg so that she could get in front.

"Okay, okay, you can follow. But I wonder if maybe you don't mean *lead*?"

"No!" Maggie's voice was piercing. She turned around and concentrated to stick out her lips.

"Okay, okay, you can follow." Daddy looked over at us on the porch and grinned

as he walking in slow circles behind Maggie.

I jerked away my gaze and went in. I went upstairs, only coming down briefly to snack on sweet bread and spinach dip with Bethany and Mama at the table. I went back up and fell asleep on top of the bed, where I ended up sleeping all afternoon.

I came down later to the kitchen table, and grabbed a bowl to help Mom string green beans. Gran was standing at the counter beside Aunt May icing a coconut cake and talking about recipes.

“Those pork chops might be good, but the girls might like barbeque Hallie, reckon?”

Mama looked up at Gran. “Either one, Gran, either one.”

“Thanks for helping, sugar.” Mama said. She leaned over and kissed my forehead. She smelled like mint gum and her pear-perfumed hand lotion.

How am I going to tell her about Dad?

“Thanks. My hair’s down so you should be happy.”

I had changed into a short, summer dress. I did like girly clothes – when they were comfortable.

“Where’s Kay and Beth? I asked

“Bethany is on the porch interviewing Daddy again about Gran. Kay is trying to register for next semester’s classes on the computer, and Maggie went down for a late nap.”

My fingers started to smell like green been juice from snapping.

I thought back on the day. I hated how Jake took Daddy's side. And there was something bugging me about the way he'd talked to me at the barn – the way he looked when I asked him about faithfulness.

“Why is it always that only women are in the kitchen around here?” I blurted out, snapping three beans at once. The question brought the room to silence, followed by a lesson from Gran and Mama on a southern woman's role. Aware of the fragile state of my emotions, I held back from arguing. It was going to be different for me, though. I liked to cook, and I understood wanting to do things for people you love, but I didn't understand men never stepping foot in the kitchen, except to eat. Later, I was glad I hadn't taken it further; I'd sensed that I was one step away from becoming a blubbering, emotional side-show in Gran's kitchen. The shower held my tears just fine.

It was close to sunset, and it was grey and windy outside. I stole a quick visit to the lake bank before an unending, wakeful night in bed.

Dear Journey,

In *Little Dorrit*, Dickens describes Amy Dorrit's consideration of her good ol' father as “half admiring him and proud of him, half ashamed for him, all devoted and loving...” What a bunch of cheese whiz. Daddies suck. No more bowing to the Father of the Marshall-sea. Get some balls, Amy.

Maybe they are all narrow fellows in the grass, Journey. What do you think???

Could I but ride indefinite,
As doth the meadow-bee,
And visit only where I liked,
And no man visit me...

– E.D.

Love you,
Laine

CHAPTER 7

I was over keeping a secret: I had to talk to Mama. She was sitting at Gran's old dressing table by the window's bright, morning light putting on her makeup when I went in.

"Are you busy?" I walked in with a knotted stomach, like I had just wrecked the car.

"Hey, sugar." Mama smiled, and her face was washed-out, painted only with foundation and black eye-makeup: her blush and lipstick came last. Her hair was hot-rolled and teased high – a routine she'd had for decades.

"I haven't smoothed out my hair yet, did I scare you?" She winked at me and started combing.

"Your Daddy's going to ride out to some cotton fields in a little while if you want to go with him. I asked him to get me some cotton so I can use it on a wreath when we get home. Maybe you can help me make it. I told Gran about the sculpture you made in art..."

"Mom, can I ask you something?" She must have noticed the wan sound of my voice because she put her comb down on the table and turned to me.

"What is it, baby?"

"I want to talk to you about Daddy." My mouth grew dry.

“What's the matter?”

It was hard to form words. I struggled to make anything come out; nothing seemed right to say.

“McKenna said Daddy might be...dating a student.”

Mom turned back toward the mirror and continued combing her hair.

“Mama, did you hear what I just said?” I wasn't expecting her calm reaction.

“Mama?”

She dropped her arms and turned around in a huff. She stared at the black-and-white photographs above the fireplace mantel, before she spoke. “Is this about that Casey girl?”

“You know?”

“It was nothing. He was just flirting. We've already dealt with it. It's not anything for you to worry about.” She stabbed her flushed cheeks with blush.

“Not anything to worry about? What do you mean by ‘flirting’? What does the word, ‘flirting’ mean to grown-ups? You need to tell me because maybe it's different to you than to everybody else I know.”

“Laine, lower your voice. It was nothing. You don't need to know all the details of adult relationships...”

“This is not ‘adult relationships,’ this is you and Daddy.”

“Hush, Laine, someone will hear you.” She looked down at her powder blue plastic comb and was quiet for a long time. “Your Daddy and I have had some problems

over the years, but we've worked through them and we are alright. Relationships aren't perfect – you will learn this as you get older.” She turned back toward the mirror.

“Mama....has Daddy had an affair?” I rubbed the bottom of my t-shirt tightly around my finger.

She looked in the mirror with a stiff face. “I said we have had some problems, but we are okay.” She walked across the room and turned on the tiny, white plastic fan, and it whirled oh high. I could smell her face powder from where I stood, a few feet away.

Is she saying that he has had an affair? More than one?

Mama seemed like she was being honest but, at the same time, it was like she was on a witness stand and she was trying to tightly control and limit her answers.

“It doesn't sound like everything's okay.” My voice got louder and higher. “Is this your idea of okay? Daddy dating, or sleeping with,” *gross!* “...his students and whoever else?”

Mama tightened her lips in frustration, before holding a finger to her mouth to tell me to be quiet.

I sat down on the bed, trembling, unable to hold my left knee still. I wished I could go back in time. Past the white window sheers outside, I saw Kay standing by Bethany, looking annoyed and talking into the tape recorder. I felt so far away from them, like a convict who just returned home after serving a hard prison sentence. It was like I had had terrible experiences that nobody around me had been through.

Mama sat down on the bed next to me and rubbed my leg. “I was young when your daddy and I married. I was a student worker at the college – not his student – when

we started dating. All the girls thought he was so handsome. He was athletic with a great smile and his Mississippi accent was heavier back then.” The lines wrinkled around her eyes as she smiled.

Then she sighed. “I didn't know that he liked to flirt. We hadn't dated a full year when we got married, and there have been women, over the years, who've...gotten his attention.”

She looked down at her robe and flicked a tiny piece of lint off of her lap. “One time I got so mad at him that I picked up his Eagle's album and threw it at him as hard as I could.” She laughed at herself. “Can you see me doing that?”

I was looking at her in disbelief. “Wow, Mama. You threw a record at him. That was definitely the way to go. I'm pretty sure that is exactly how the marriage counselor would've told you to handle it.”

“Don't get sassy with me, missy, and don't think I haven't handed it to him before. When we lived in the little apartment in Wilkshire, I let him have it. He told me he was going out with a friend and would be back after supper, but he ended up coming back after midnight and he was drunk. ...and he had lipstick on his collar.”

“What? So this has been going on....always?”

“No. *This* has not been going on always. We have just had some ups and downs over the years and we have dealt with it. I told you I did not let him off the hook that time.”

“What did you do?”

“Well, I called him on it, first of all. I asked him about it and he blew it off and

said it was just a group of friends having fun at a bar.”

“So, what did you do?” I was still waiting on the 'letting him have it' part.

“I left. I took our car and went to Mama and Daddy's and spent the night.”

I sat there looking at her, waiting for more. “And?”

“And what?”

“Did you stay at Grand Mama's for a long time? Did you tell him you wouldn't put up with it?”

She was quiet for a minute. “No. I stayed there until lunchtime on Saturday, helping Mama in the house, and then I went home. I had our only car so I figured I needed to go home.”

“What did you say when you got home?”

“We didn't talk about it again.” She looked at the door and not at me.

“That's it?” I couldn't believe she hadn't done more.

“I wouldn't sleep in the bedroom for a week when I got home. I slept in the den on the couch.” She was holding her chin high, but she still wasn't looking at me.

My hands flew up over my eyes. “Mama, how could you do that?”

She stood and huffed. “Do not tell me how to handle a marriage, young lady. I said all I needed to say to him the night before I left, and he apologized.”

“Apologized for what? Cheating on you? Like he was apologizing for forgetting to pick up milk on the way home from work?”

“No. He apologized for flirting. That's what he called it. I don't know exactly what happened, I wasn't there. Look, I had a baby on the way and I did the best I could. Did you expect me to desert him, our family?”

“Oh no, of course not. Never desert Mr. Micawber.” I shut my eyes and took a deep breath.

“What?” Missing my Dickens reference, Mama fell silent, too.

I stood still for a moment, and I was struck with a speechlessness I wasn't accustomed to.

Just then, I heard Will call my name outside the bedroom door.

“Laine,” Mama pushed my hair away from my face. “Your Daddy and I are okay. Every marriage has problems. He loves you girls more than anything. Try to put this out of your mind. I'm so, so sorry, I probably shouldn't have talked to you about it.”

Right. Because not talking about it is best.

“Laine is in here, Will, she'll be right out.” Mama called to the closed door.

I just kept looking at her, and I realized I had been popping my knuckles until they'd gotten sore.

“Laine?” Will said.

Mama tried to kiss me on the forehead but I stepped back. “I can't believe you act like this with him. I would never want you to tell me to act like this with my boyfriend, or husband. Would you want that, Mama?”

She stared past me and her eyes looked heavier, liked they held the weight of a hundred years of burdens. She sighed, walked back to the dressing table and continued

combing her hair in silence, and I turned and left with Will.

Dear Journey,

I think it was Mark Twain who said that the difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug. Why can the truth be such a grey area to married people?

Can you just call it “flirting” when you’re talking about an affair you had with someone else? If that is how you express the truth, it feels like a dark, moldy, crumpled version.

Laine

CHAPTER 8

I was sweating, breathing hard, jogging through the thick, humid, late-afternoon air as I came to the end of my three mile run. My elbow stung from a holly-bush run-in that happened as I cut the corner at the red-brick library. I was crossing over onto Lake Street, close to Gran's. I got a pleasant surprise as I slowed to a walk: Jake's truck was pulling up to the house.

An hour earlier, everyone had left for the farmer's market, except Maggie and her babysitter, Bethany. I was determined to run and not think about anything at all. After talking to Mama and obsessing about Daddy, I had to have a mental break.

As I passed old, twisted crape myrtles, blood-colored azaleas and white, wooden porch after the next, I saw that Bethany and Maggie were still on the quilt in the front yard, playing "tea party" with Gran's dishes and corn-shucked doll collection. Oxford lay passed-out from the heat on his side, and looking dead in the grass.

"Howdy." Jake spoke out of his open truck window, and lifted his fingers above the steering wheel to wave.

"What are you doing here?" I walked up, fanning my chest with my damp shirt.

"Going to see Mr. Townsend about that part. Aunt Sissy sent tomatoes for Gran."

I heard Bethany mutter something from the lawn about going to get water for a teapot.

“Everybody’s at the farmer’s market. I’ll call Mama about the tomatoes, in case they were planning to buy some.” I wiggled a blistered toe in my moist running shoe and pulled up contacts in my phone, when Jake glanced toward the house. I was conscious of my red-faced, sweaty appearance as I started to text Mama. I swatted a mosquito and started to feel hotter as I stood by the truck – the slight breeze I’d had while running was gone. *Everybody sweats when they run. Get over it.*

“I guess I ran your sisters off, huh?”

“No, I think Bethany just went to get...”

I stopped dead. That’s when a heavy horror set in. I couldn’t believe my eyes.

Maggie was climbing to the top of the decayed tree house’s tall, rickety ladder next door to Gran’s.

“Maggie!” I screamed a terrible scream and bolted around Jake’s truck, dropping my phone along the way. I caught a blurred glimpse of Bethany, who stopped on the front porch carrying a tray – as I flew past.

Maggie glanced down at me through her brown ringlets, clinging with chubby hands to the rotten boards, before lifting her tiny, white sandal and continuing her ascent.

I was at the base of the fraying ladder in an instant, and Jake was beside me.

“Maggie – listen to me.” My heart was racing. “Don’t move. It’s not safe up there. You have to stay very still so we can help you down.” I placed an emphasis on every, loud word as I called up to her.

“No!” Maggie yelled. She stomped and pouted across the small porch of the ghostly, grey monster, whose water-stained wood was parched and sagging.

“Maggie!” Jake said. “I know where some fresh, strawberry ice cream is. We can get some now if you want, but you have to do exactly what we tell you.” He gripped the ladder with white knuckles and waited.

I thought for an instant that Jake’s idea might work, and then Maggie answered. “No, I want ice-keem in my chee-house!” She pounded her feet on the wobbly boards. The treetops started to spin above my glare, forcing me to grab hold of the splintered ladder to keep steady.

Above our heads, I watched boards flex downward, an inch or more, as Maggie crossed them. My heartbeat felt outwardly visible on my chest.

“Bouncy!” Maggie giggled and started jumping on the deck.

I started to climb up to grab her, but I knew the ladder wouldn’t hold.

Just then, Will drove up with loud music rolling out of his truck, and he got out. “What are y’all doing? Oh no...” He ran up. “I was going to tear this thing down for Gran, I told her I would...” He had spotted Maggie and his voice strained in desperation.

“What do we do Laine? What do we do?” Bethany was alternately screeching and chewing on her thick strands of hair.

“I’m coming up there to get you!” Bethany went into a wild panic.

“No, Beth, wait...” I grabbed her before she got to the ladder as Maggie reacted.

“No! Not get me Beh-du-nee!” Maggie pounded every syllable with her small, square feet. Her chestnut curls danced around her face as we watched. Then she took off. She ran across the creaking platform to the other end, slamming into the railing as she clinched it.

I sucked in a gallon of air. I was terrified.

We all started to react, but there wasn't any time. It was too late.

The remaining nails that were holding the side railing on to the tree-house porch slid out easily as Maggie ran into it. The entire side railing let go of the structure and Maggie flew down with it off of the platform and onto the ground.

Jake took off behind me as she went over. He'd lunged faster than the rest of us, but he was too late. We were all crouched around Maggie, who lay, cheek-down, with a still, bloody face, on the ground.

Jake dialed 911. "Yes Ma'am, we need an ambulance right away..." He looked down at Maggie as he spoke. "409 Lake Street. A two-year old fell from a tree house. She isn't moving."

"Maggie..." I didn't expect a response, it just rolled out of my mouth; I couldn't stop it. I put my hand on her warm, blood-soaked hair.

Mama. Daddy.

I took off toward the truck so fast that I almost fell, and I found my phone – my half-written text to Mama was still on the screen – on the grass. I fumbled her number, twice, with trembling, blood-stained fingers. *This isn't happening.*

Bethany wailed.

"Pick up, Mama, pick up..." My legs were weak. I made it back to Maggie's side and dropped to my knees. My eyes blurred with tears as I waited and clinched a fistful of dirt and grass.

Will gripped his blonde locks in his fists and stared down at Maggie. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" He covered his mouth and started stepping backwards. "I was going to tear it down...I was about to tear it down..."

Jake sprang after him and caught him by the shoulders.

"Will, it's not your fault. Do you hear me? It's not your fault."

Bethany sobbed, hugging her knees to her chest. She started rocking on the grass.

Will was blubbering. "I'm sorry. I should've torn it down. I'm sorry --"

"It wasn't you. You hear me, man? This was not you..." Jake shook Will's shoulders as he spoke in his face.

"Hello? Laine, are you there?" Mama said. I wasn't sure how long she'd been on the line.

I choked as I tried to speak. "Mama..."

"Laine, are you okay?" She knew something was wrong.

I could hear the ambulance's siren in the distance.

"It's Maggie...she fell."

"What happened? We aren't far from Gran's....we just almost got side swiped by an ambulance..."

She went silent.

"Did one of you call an ambulance?" Mama said.

Before I answered her I heard Mama scream, "Phil, drive!" Kay said something in

the background and Mama went on.

“Laine what happened? What’s going on?”

I slurped my tears. “Mama...she’s hurt real bad.”

The roaring ambulance pulled up fast by Jake, who’d run to the street to flag them down. “We’re coming, Baby, Mama’s coming.”

I looked at my hand on Maggie’s chubby, unmoving arm, and realized I was going to be sick. I threw up once – mostly red sports drink – onto the grass, though some splashed onto my knees. I moved out of the way as the medics and Jake rushed up.

Jake pulled his t-shirt over his head when he saw I’d gotten sick. “Did you get your Mama?” He tossed his shirt to me. “Use this. It’s going to be okay, Laine, let’s go.”

I wiped the sour liquid off of my lap and, before I knew it, the paramedics had Maggie on a stretcher in the ambulance.

Jake was shuffling us into his truck as Mama and Daddy drove up. The siren grew painfully loud again, and Mama and Daddy climbed into the back with Maggie just before they drove off.

CHAPTER 9

We sat in the buzzing, hospital waiting room for what seemed like years. My eyes were tender from crying, and my sweaty pony tail had long dried stiffly around my face. I looked down at the splatters of sports-drink puke and Maggie's blood on my shirt. I was going to go crazy if I didn't get word.

I pulled pony-tail holder out and started braiding my hair to give my arms something to do. I looked at everybody around the room. Bethany was sprawled over Mama's lap with her head on her shoulder. Kay sat on a bench seat between Mama and Uncle Red, staring through the floor with white, pressed lips, and bouncing her crossed leg. Dad stood with his hands in his pockets staring out of the large window. Will and Jake sat on either side of me, both leaning forward in their seats with elbows on their knees. I listened to Aunt May's hushed questions, as she inquired about Maggie from a young, freckled nurse that she knew.

A middle-aged doctor walked in to the waiting room with blood smears on his scrubs and a mask hanging around his neck. He eyes looked heavy as he spoke. "Mr. or Mrs. Rearden?"

Everyone jumped up. Mama and Daddy looked at each other; they were in front of the doctor in an instant. Daddy's hand rubbed Mama's back.

"Maggie is very lucky..." The doctor's words were stalled by an eruption of gasps and cries.

Mama's shaking hands covered her mouth.

"Thank you, Jesus." Aunt May raised a hand in the air as she collapsed in a chair.

The doctor went on, "Maggie has a concussion and a broken arm, so we'll need to talk about fitting her for a cast. She has five stitches on the laceration above her eyebrow, and four stitches on her arm. We need to watch her overnight. It could have been much, much worse. She is awake now if a couple of you would like to see her."

When Mama and Daddy came back from Maggie's room and Kay, Bethany and I went back, I started bawling as soon as I saw her sitting upright on the bed. She was sticking princess stickers all over the belly of her faded hospital gown.

"Look at my stickers, Beh-duh-nee." Maggie held a curled sticker up with her small, dimpled fingers. She smiled, wrinkling the taught skin around the stitches on her forehead.

Maggie looked thoughtful. "I not touch my boo-boos. I fall down. Doctor getting more stickers."

Kay reached down and touched Maggie's sheet covered toes. "That's right, Maggie, you had a very bad fall." Her pointy hair fell forward by her chin as she lowered her head and glared at me and Bethany.

"No, not get my toes!" Maggie kicked her legs beneath the covers, when a tiny nurse reading a machine suggested we let her rest.

That night at Gran's, I hugged my pillow in bed and kissed it, pretending it was Maggie. I wished for Maggie to know that I was sorry – sorry that I hadn't helped watch her and kept her safe. Bethany was snuggled to my back with ice-cold toes against my

legs; she'd asked if she could sleep with me. Kay stopped at my bedroom door and spoke before going to bed.

"You can have a turn with the blanket next." Kay's eyes looked red-rimmed. "On the ride home, I mean. Good night." Her hand clutched the top button of her modest, cotton pajamas before she walked away.

Mama slept at the hospital. Daddy had stayed there late, and he was up early asking us to hurry out the door to visit Maggie.

"Girls, I'm leaving in fifteen minutes. Better get dressed and eat." He yelled from the bottom of the stairs. Kay was dressed and eating cereal at the table when Bethany and I walked in. After some fruit and a biscuit and long hugs from Gran, we were on our way to see Maggie.

I was worried she would be worse, because I knew how sore I got a day or two after playing in a tennis tournament. I was surprised to see Maggie standing in the corner of the room beside Mama when we walked up. Her hospital gown was barely hanging on, and she flashed us with her fat butt cheeks each time she swung herself side to side in front of Mama.

"No, I not go potty." Maggie looked at us, almost grinning. She was enjoying the audience witnessing her independence.

Mama sighed and stood up slowly. "They're coming to do her cast soon, and then they'll discharge her." She pushed her hair back out of her face with both hands and yawned.

We all watched as Maggie's naked back and doughnut thighs as she slung

Mama's purse and a blanket out of a chair and struggled to climb and sit down.

I laughed. "That sling isn't slowing her down is it?"

"Not much." Mama was rubbing her neck with her hand, but her face softened and her eyes crinkled, as she watched and considered Maggie's comeback.

It was a relief to see Maggie so active. I walked over and leaned down to kiss her head, just above her stitches. Her fat feet stuck out from the chair seat, and she let me kiss her.

"You paint my toe nails, Waine?" Maggie could be very still when she awaited a crucial response.

"Okay, Maggie. Let Mama take you to the potty, and I'll paint your toenails at Gran's. You can pick the color." Maggie giggled in glee and made her way to Mama.

Daddy and Mama came in the door carrying Maggie and get-well balloons, mid-morning.

When Maggie saw me across the room, she spread her fingers open and held them out to me, calling out, "Wayne, paint my toe nails." She used the term for fingers and toes.

Mama and Daddy thought, then, that we might not all make it to see Faith sing that evening, and Will and Bethany were already asking if they could stay home with Maggie if some of us went. We spent the rest of the day inside at Gran's alternately playing with Maggie in a tent of white sheets and dining room chairs, and listening to hammering and chainsaws as Daddy, Uncle Red and Will tore down the ghostly tree house

next door. By supper time, because Maggie was doing so well and, with the doctor's permission, Mama decided to let Maggie go with us all to hear Faith.

CHAPTER 10

I sat in the claw-foot tub in Gran's upstairs bathroom and stared at the fused-lead seams of the glass window. The late afternoon sun was starting to fade, and I could hear Bethany shrieking and a motor revving in the front yard as Will instructed her on four-wheeler driving. I was sinking back into the new reality with Daddy; the new, sucky normal.

Staring at my white cotton dress that hung on the tall closet door, I squeezed my hair with a towel. I was thinking that I needed to feel happier to wear it, when Mama called up to me.

"Laine, we're all walking to the lake."

"Not going." I crawled with my damp towels into the bed.

Mama was quiet.

I wouldn't have minded going, normally. I loved feeding the ducks and walking on the pier, but it was having the company that I didn't feel like. There was a heaviness from learning about Daddy that I couldn't shake.

"Okay, Sweetie. But we're going to hear Faith sing tonight, remember?"

"I know. I'll be ready." There was a pause before Mama creaked back down the staircase. She was wondering if I was okay. I started writing in Journey before I got ready to go.

Dear Journey,

Is it George Eliot in *Middlemarch* who says...?

What we call our despair is often the painful eagerness
of unfed hope.

Maybe it's another book – I'll find out.

It is *Middlemarch* – didn't want to leave you hanging, Pal.

**Love,
Laine**

I was tired from crying and worrying, but I decided to fix-up to go to Gentry's to hear Faith sing. I tried to dry my curls with less frizz than normal, and I put on some powder and mascara, dropping my lip gloss in my purse for the car ride over. I was hoping Jake would be there, and wondering what he was thinking after the last time we spoke. Relaxing and focusing on anything other than Daddy was hard, and I was going to let Jake's defense of him go. I knew I'd overreacted. I just wanted to see him.

Jake's truck wasn't there when we got out at Gentry's. Inside the hostess area of the large, glossy-oak restaurant, I announced that I was going to the bar to get a daiquiri. Mama laughed, she may not have known that I was serious, and Daddy's incredulous glare told me he wasn't amused.

"Vir—gin, people." I slipped passed them before they could stop me and headed toward the bar.

"Don't worry Uncle Phil, I'll keep a watch on her." Will spoke to Daddy in his usual light-hearted manner and followed me.

Kay held her mouth open in horror as she watched me walk away. “You can't sit at the bar, Laine, you're under age.”

“You are so right, thanks, Kay.” I spoke over my shoulder as I walked away, and her grumblings faded as I left.

“We'll be seated soon, Laine. I'll come get you.” I was sure Mama was craning her head to watch me walk off. Her voice was muffled by the conversations of all the people I had passed. I was sick of Mama and Daddy's good-on-the-surface, don't-talk-about-the-important-stuff relationship; I didn't want to be a witness to their behavior any more.

There were several middle-aged couples and one scraggly old man seated at the large u-shaped counter. I sat down on a glossy wooden stool. Will sat beside me and watched a ball game on one of the screens mounted above the bar. I pulled out some of the shopping money Mama had given me for the trip, and I ordered a virgin, strawberry daiquiri that came right away.

“You look nice, Laine.” Will said and tapped my arm with his elbow. “You should wear your hair like that; it looks good.”

“Thanks. I just tamed it down a little more than normal.” I didn't look up from the squiggly lines I was making on the outside of the frosty glass drink. The tart, icy sweetness felt good on my tongue. Just then, I heard a familiar voice behind me.

“It's a little early for this, isn't it y'all?” Jake said. “And aren't y'all a little young? I'm a little surprised at your parents for condoning this behavior.”

I turned around to see him standing, trying not to grin ear to ear, behind me.

Wow. He looks.....nice. It felt so good to see him standing there. I wondered if he

thought I looked as good in my worn cowboy boots as he did in his.

“Hey, Jake.” I surprised me how glad I was to see him, and I slipped down off of my stool.

His face got serious. “Laine, you look beaut...”

Before he could finish, I stepped to him and hugged him. It wasn’t planned, I just did it. His arms stayed open for a moment, suspended in the air, like he was frozen and didn’t know what to do, but I didn’t let go; I lay my head on his chest and closed my eyes. He smelled like fresh soap and aftershave. I could feel his heart beating in his chest and, after a second, his arms closed softly around me. I was conscious of the working of his muscles beyond his rolled up shirt sleeves as his hands moved over my back.

“Hey, it’s okay. It’s okay.” Jake normally had a soft-spoken way, but he sounded different. He spoke in a comforting voice, designed for that moment.

I don’t know not how long we’d stood there when Mama walked up. “We’re all sitting down. Is everything okay, Laine?” Her eyebrows went up.

I peeled myself from Jake. Embarrassment poked at me for throwing myself on him when he walked up. Then I noticed he hadn’t looked over at Mama; he was unmoving with his hands still on the backs of my elbows, as if he wanted to make sure I was all right to be let go. He looked hard at me, and I wondered what was going through his mind. For a second I wondered if something was bothering him, if there was something he wasn’t telling me. I didn’t care. And I didn’t want to pull whatever it was out of him. I was tired. Emotionally tired from thinking about Daddy.

Mama cleared her throat.

“We're fine, Mama. We're coming. I've just had a long day and was telling Jake about it.” I dropped my head into my hand, to let her know I got her message. “We'll be right over.”

“Better hurry, the cheese sticks are going fast.” Mama glanced back at me as she left, waiving me toward the table in an exaggerated motion.

If I'd been standing with anybody else she might've been more insistent, but Mama had always liked Jake. Really, she probably would've let a lot of things slide to give me some space since our talk about Daddy.

“What's going on, Laine?” Jake was still focused on me, though people kept passing and a man's noisy laughter turned into loud coughs close by.

I didn't know what to say. I was starting to realize why I'd hugged Jake as soon as he got there. It was because I wanted to. I was chin-deep in Mama and Daddy's mess, and I wanted to cry...with Jake. Just Jake. I wanted to tell him that I was falling in love with him.

“Laine?” He looked nervous, rubbing his finger back and forth over his chin, almost like he knew what I was going to say.

I was quiet for a moment while he waited. “I'm sorry. I just really wanted to hug you. That's all. It's nothing, really.”

He looked like the air left his chest. He scratched the back of his head and looked at the floor.

I knew I needed a better response. “I mean...I'm just really glad you're here, tonight.” I knew, too, that I didn't have the strength to get into all of my feelings. *Just*

because he's asking doesn't mean I have to tell him everything I feel right now.

His hands were on his hips and he was staring through me.

“Laine, there's something I need to talk to you about.” He buried his hands in his jeans pockets.

I stopped him, and I grabbed my drink from the bar. “Let's do it later. I'm really starving.”

“Laine – “

I interrupted him again. *I don't want to do any more right now.* “C'mon Jake. Let's go eat.” I gave a nod toward our long table across the restaurant, and Mama waived her hand up high to make sure we saw her. Kay, always the self-appointed leader, glared and motioned us over. Will was sitting next to Bethany and Aunt May gobbling up onion rings; I hadn't noticed when he left the bar.

Jake and I sat next to each other at the table, but we didn't talk. I ate all of my hushpuppies and, after Will had stolen four or five of my French fries, I gave him the rest. I kept thinking about what had just happened. *What did I keep Jake from telling me? Why did he look disappointed when I said I just needed a hug?* I could've told him that he was the one I wanted to hug, to hug longer, actually, and to be with. That would've been the truth.

Even when I stole one of Jake's hush puppies, he didn't speak or look at me, he just scooted his plate toward me to offer more. My thoughts rambled. *So I like Jake. So what? I like him a lot. More than I've ever liked anyone. Is that a bad thing? It's not like I have to tell him right away.* I picked at my cole-slaw. *Don't let things get weird.*

I wasn't going to feel ashamed or embarrassed. I think I knew on the first day I saw Jake back at Gran's how much I liked him. But Daddy's stuff had torpedoed me.

After Will and I had ravaged my plate, I broke the silence with Jake.

"Wanna dance?"

Jake looked at me, clanking his fork on his plate, he stopped chewing, mid-bite. The unfamiliar band's songs had mellowed and a few people were slow dancing in front of the stage across the room. Faith's band was going to play next.

"Yeah." Jake paused before getting up, as though it took him a second to absorb what we were about to do. He wiped his mouth with his white, cloth napkin, threw it on his plate and pulled my chair back out of the way.

On the dance floor, I felt better than I had in a long time. Better than the recent days dealing with Daddy's mess, and better than I could remember feeling. I felt so good it scared me.

My arms went to Jake's shoulders, and his hands went lightly around my waist. Standing slightly apart, we swayed in rhythm side to side. The hefty banjo player clamped his lips as he picked a soft, blue-grass tune with a hopeful fiddle part.

I was elated to be there. A tingle scurried up my back and made my shoulders twitch, and my cheeks warmed as I wondered if Jake had seen me shiver. His expression confused me. "Everything okay?"

Roused from distraction, he relaxed and smiled. "Yeah."

The look on his face tickled the hair on my arms. A grizzly man on stage played a familiar song on the harmonica, and we swayed. And we swayed. And we swayed.

The song was over. There was clapping and cheering all around us.

“Jake?” I stopped our dancing and stood still, “what did you want to talk about?”

He let go of me.

He scratched his head, and he took a deep breath as he crossed his arms. My hands started to feel clammy.

“I need to talk to you about something, Laine.” His expression was grave.

“What is it?” There was an intrusive flutter in my stomach. “Tell me.”

His pressed lips told me it was serious, and then he spoke.

“I’m engaged,” he said, “...to Belle Baker.”

I took a step back.

“You’re what?”

Who the hell is Belle Baker? Wait, Will had mentioned a Belle...or maybe it was Faith. I couldn’t remember what anyone had said. Is this real? How could I not know?

My insides felt sick and my brain couldn’t think of how to respond. Jake’s face looked tired, older.

“Belle and I dated on and off in high school. Got back together when I moved back my senior year.” His face hung, expressionless, like he was waiting for me to take it all in. At the same time, it seemed like he was explaining something that was slightly dreadful even to himself. Something he couldn’t change even if he wanted to.

The next moment, I felt thrust a million miles away. I couldn’t believe it.

Though we'd been oblivious to the stage, we both heard the announcement.

"Give a warm, southern welcome to Faith Reardon and The Jenkins Boys." The deep voiced, cowboy-announcer lifted his hat to Faith before leaving the stage.

Faith was enchanting. She got blurry and I realized my eyes were filled with tears. I could feel Jake facing me, looking at me. I was watching Faith on stage when she realized that something wasn't right.

Faith frowned and mouthed, "What's wrong?"

I shook my head and feigned excitement. She looked at me a moment longer, while she adjusted the microphone and the band settled in to their instruments. I couldn't fool her.

Jake and I stood on the middle of the crowded dance floor, and I bit my lip until it hurt. The music rang out. The short fiddle player wore a bowtie and black-rimmed glasses, and stood directly in front of us on stage. The blaring, breathy harmonica pricked my raw ears. Faith's voice was high and beautiful, like a sad, country angel. She sang harmony with a big, bearded guy at the other end of the stage, whose fiddle looked tiny beside his frame. I listened as their voices led the music, intertwined in a mournful melody.

I smiled, despite the enormous lump in my throat. I was proud of Faith. She was graceful, a lady, and she wasn't afraid to go after what she loved. But an anger was growing. Jake was standing next to me looking blank, and with tension oozing out.

Guys are all the same; Dad, Jake. No wonder Jake's been acting so weird. He was hiding his engagement from me. Hiding Belle from me.

The crowd roared as the song ended, and the announcer spoke. “Grab a partner and let’s pick it up...”

The song was loud and upbeat and couples danced all around. My chest ached. I didn’t feel like moving, and Jake moved close behind my right shoulder; it seemed he was going to put his arms around me, but he just stood very still.

Then Will danced up, hand-in-hand with Bethany, who was standing on his boots.

“C’mon y’all. Why aren’t you dancing?” Will laughed and Bethany examined us.

“I can show you some moves if you don’t know what to do.” Bethany’s hair sparkled with glitter, and her splotchy, black mascara and uneven red lipstick were good giveaways that she’d gotten into Mom’s makeup bag.

Jake looked to me for a response. His eyes were tentative, like he was scared of how I might respond.

“Not now, y’all.” I said.

“Seriously, Laine, it’s not hard. All you have to do is...” Bethany yelled in excitement.

“I said no, Bethany.” I could tell by her reaction that I’d spoken too sharply.

“C’mon, Beth, we’ll show ‘em later.” Will moved to the music with Bethany still on his feet, away through the crowd.

Snapping at Bethany had fueled my anger, and I turned to Jake.

“You suck, Jake Donnelly.”

His face looked resigned, like he was just going to stand there and listen.

“Where is she, anyway? Why isn’t she here? Are you hiding her from everybody?” My voice got higher and shaky.

“She’s coming back into town tonight.” Jake’s words were quiet and lifeless. He sounded ashamed, or maybe disappointed. “I was so glad to see you. I didn’t know we’d spend so much time together. I didn’t know how to tell you.”

“Shut up, Jake.”

Why do I sound like such a baby?

“I talked to you. I told you about Daddy, Jake. I hadn’t even told Faith. We talked about being faithful. You led me on. Why did you spend so much time with me?”

The lump in my throat was getting more painful and dry. *I’m not going to cry again. Not for another liar.*

Jake leaned his head in close to get me to look at him. “Because I wanted to.” His eyes had welled with tears. “I guess that is a sucky reason but I wanted to be with you. Nobody else.” There was a tenderness in his voice.

“Bull-shit.”

I didn’t know it, but Mama had walked up beside me. She heard my last words loud and clear.

“Laine Elizabeth.” Her eyes were so big they looked scary.

“Not now, Mama.” I answered quickly and spoke as an adult talking to another adult. Her eyes were still wide, but she didn’t say anything else. Mama knew when I was serious and sincere. On rare occasions she stepped back and let me behave as an adult, in

spite of her motherly convictions. I was pretty sure Kay didn't share those moments with Mama.

I turned back to Jake and I thought Mama had left, but she hadn't.

"I said that's bull-shit, Jake." I was louder the second time.

"What did she just say?" Daddy's voice boomed from behind me and I gasped, but Mama stepped in.

"It's a dance, Phil...it's just some kind of dance." Mama's voice was unusually sweet as she grabbed his hands in hers. "Let's dance. We're supposed to be supporting Faith, now, c'mon. You should be ashamed of yourself, Phil, not dancing for Faith's band." She teased and guided them closer to the stage, glancing back at me with a stifled look of concern.

I turned back to Jake. "I trusted you. Why didn't you tell me? Don't you think you should've told me?"

"Yes...I should've told you. At the time, I didn't think it mattered all that much. It's not like..." He stopped short, clenching his mouth shut as he looked at the stage.

"Like what?" His dimple lines shown beneath his stubble, and I was shaking and wanted to scream.

He didn't answer. The fast fiddle player took over; it may have been a Hank Williams, Jr. song.

"Like what, Jake?" This time I was screaming, but the loud music masked my voice.

He blurted out a reply.

“..not like you felt like I do, or anything. That’s all.” His voice got quieter. He waived his hand, as if to give up, and he turned to face the band. “Never mind. I know it was wrong...and I’m more sorry than you can understand.”

I wondered if he was trying to say that he liked me. Considering everything, it felt pathetic and I didn’t want to hear it.

I walked away.

I went toward the nearest door, just beyond the stage and made it out into the warm night air and down onto the wet grass. Out there I could breathe. I looked out under the stars, surrounded by the scent of honeysuckle and the chirping of noisy crickets. The door slammed open behind me as I pulled a jeweled bobby pin out of my hair. Jake had followed me out.

“Laine, please talk to me.” He jogged up to me like football players do when trading out players on the field.

“What could there possibly be left to say?” My arms crossed, and my shoulders shot up with every sentence. “You are getting married and you didn’t tell me about it. You kind of led me on. Now I know. End of story.” I didn’t see the point in talking anymore.

“It’s not what you think.” Jake fingers touched my arm.

I jerked him off so abruptly and my arm almost looked like a fist. Almost. “We’re done.” I turned and moved away. He stepped close but didn’t touch me as I went on.

“Now I know *why* you took up for Daddy – guys are in this together, huh? Now it makes sense why you defended him; you are just like him.”

I didn't fully believe that, but it's what came out. My emotions were still adding to the immature sound of my words.

"Laine, listen to me." He kicked the dirt with his boot and spoke loud and fast. "I broke up with Belle in the fall. At Easter, she asked if we could give it another shot. Deep down, I knew it wasn't going to work, and I should've said no, but I said I'd try. A few weeks ago I knew I had to end it. I didn't love her, not like you're supposed to."

His voice trailed off at the end, and I wasn't sure that he'd finished.

"I don't understand. So, I guess she just persuaded you to marry her after all. Is that what you are saying?" I was trembling and hurt and didn't want to hear about the two of them. "Jake, we're done. I hope you and your on-again, off-again, Belle, will be very happy together." I passed him and walked back toward the door.

The next thing he said slowed me to a stop.

"She's pregnant, Laine."

I turned to comprehend what he'd said.

A tear rolled down his cheek, and he sniffed as he went on. "So I asked her to marry me. I should've told you about her...about everything. Hurting you was the last thing I wanted to do. I was just so glad to see you...to spend time with you. I'm sorry." He looked down at the dirt in front of his boots. More tears fell when he blinked. "I'm not going to let a baby of mine be without a father. Not like I grew up." He wiped his face, and sniffed away his tears. "So that's where we are."

He looked at me for a response.

"Oh." My legs were weak and I couldn't say much. I wanted to hug him, and I

didn't want to. A painful, groaning ache had taken root in my chest.

I should've been glad that he wanted to be a good dad, but a groaning ache had taken root in my chest. He didn't love her. But they were getting married. It was real and there was a baby. We'd gone from teenagers to grown-ups overnight. I'd dated several boys at school and thought I'd loved one, but I'd never felt anything close to what I felt for Jake. And I knew he felt something, too. We stood there, a few feet apart under a million stars, sharing a sadness and a loss for words.

Several minutes later I made it back into Gentry's alone, and sat at our long, empty table amid crumpled napkins and catfish remnants and sipped on my watered-down, sweet tea, while everyone danced. Maggie was up on Dad's shoulders beating her pink cast on his head high above the crowd. Faith's song about walking away tugged at me.

I watched Jake walk inside and all the way to the bar. He leaned back on the counter on his elbows and watched the band. I turned away when he looked at me.

Everything felt wrong. I'd realized how I felt about Jake, and then it was all jerked away. But I didn't hate him...not under all of the circumstances. I felt sorry for him.

A few minutes later, things got worse.

Faith and the band were playing their final song and I was dying to leave, when Belle walked in.

I saw her walk in the front door, and I knew it was her. She was wearing a short, white, strapless dress and her legs were longer than a granddaddy-longlegs spider's. Her

hair was platinum blonde and perfectly straight, and her lips were the color of a plastic, red apple. She reeked of self-confidence; I could smell her from my table.

Will plopped down in the chair beside me. He was out of breath and took a long drink from his tea glass, before he spotted her. “Hey, look, Belle’s back in town.”

I watched him and wondered why he hadn’t talked about her. “I’ve never heard you mention her.”

He shoved half a fat onion ring in his mouth. “I don’t really care for her if you want to know the truth. She’s a little uppity for my taste. Thinks her Daddy runs the town just because they’ve got land and some stores.”

We, and most of the restaurant, watched Belle. She stopped inside the door and flipped her hair back, away from her face and checked her lipstick in a shiny, silver compact before spotting Jake and heading to the bar.

She kissed Jake on the cheek and leaned in to hug him. Her tan shoulders and skinny arms looked as sleek as her legs. Jake looked surprised, then he hugged her back.

My heart started to thump.

I couldn’t believe she was there. I couldn’t look away as she headed toward the bathrooms, leaving Jake alone at the bar.

By this time, Faith had left the stage and Mama and Daddy and the others had made it back to the table.

“Are we ready to go?” I asked Mama who looked up, clearly surprised by my asking.

“Pretty soon, baby, since Faith is done.” She patted my leg and seemed to have forgotten about my language with Jake on the dance floor.

I walked to my original seat at the far end of the table and slipped the long strap of my mini-hobo bag over my head. Jake’s and my plate still sat next to each other. Then I looked up and saw them.

Belle and Jake were standing right across the table.

“Hey y’all, I’m Belle.”

I grabbed my bag and headed for the door, to wait for everyone to leave, and to avoid the couple I never wanted to see. While I stood near the bar by the restaurant’s front door, an enormous friend of Will’s, Rusty Wallace, winked at me from the bar.

I looked back at Jake, who was saying goodbye to my family at the table, though he looked over at me and glanced at Rusty as he shook Daddy’s hand goodbye.

For some reason, that prompted me to form a dialogue with Rusty.

“Good to see you, Rusty, hope you’re doing alright.” I yelled too loud at him at the bar, though he was only about ten feet away. Then my hand shot up and I waved my hand at him, which was awkward at our close range.

Rusty smiled and “shot” me playfully with his hand in the shape of a gun, which I didn’t understand. *Ew, what does that even mean? Why are you waving at this guy, Laine?*

My group was walking toward me and the door, and I saw that Jake was craning his head to watch my and Rusty’s communications. *Bingo!* Then I realized, awkward flirting with Will’s creepy, oversized buddy at the bar, wasn’t exactly the same as being

Belle. Or being with Jake.

CHAPTER 11

I was poor company in my silence on the ride to the reunion with Faith. I thought about the special day I'd spent on McBride's farm. I'd loved everything from the earthy smells of hay and livestock to birthing the sow and the tractors. There was something majestic about those monstrous, earth-stirring machines, and I'd sensed farmers' almost spiritual, solitary reliance on the uncertain machinery and weather.

My heart tugged when I thought about Jake, but it was a waste of time. If he came to the reunion, I'd pretend he didn't exist, maybe not at all – ever.

Faith's voice broke the silence in the car. "I still can't believe what you told me about your Daddy. It doesn't seem like he'd do anything to hurt your Mama." She rubbed her hand over mine as we followed the line of cars that turned onto a long, gravel road off of the highway. The endless driveway sat between thick, green woods and low-lying cotton fields. I could see the grand, white manor sitting back far from the highway, flanked by equally impressive, proud oak trees. "Are you okay?" Faith slowed the car on the popping gravel toward the house.

"Sure." I cracked my window, and the pungent, sticky air flew in from the passing, marshy woods.

"I'm thinking about telling Daddy that I know."

Faith turned and looked at me. "Tonight? At the reunion?" She looked like I'd said I was going to shoot him.

“Yes. Your Mama said there’d be a microphone on the stage during dinner for people to tell stories or memories, or whatever.” I turned to avoid Faith’s eyes, and watched the prickly, passing pines.

“Laine, I don’t think it’s a good idea at all to....” She hit a rut of gravel and swerved to keep us on course.

I was tired of being told what to do and think, and I was tired of finding out that nothing was what I thought it was. I wanted to make some choices. “Look, nobody speaks up in my family. Except maybe Bethany, but she’s annoying most of the time. Anyway, nobody....talks about anything real. Nobody tells the truth.” We sat for a moment in silence, then I went on. “It’s time people know the truth about Daddy.”

“But you don’t even know exactly what the truth is, Laine. You don’t know all of the details and everything that happened. Your Mama said they were working on things...”

“I know enough. I know what I need to know, Faith. And I’m tired of abiding by what we are and aren’t supposed to say. Just trust me, okay?”

Faith turned away and let out a deep breath. I could tell she was trying hard not to say anything else.

We got out to slamming car doors and the burnt, fading sun, and I spotted Mama, Daddy and my sisters getting out of the car. Mama looked stunning with her thick black hair pinned back above one ear, a taupe shift dress and shimmery nude pumps. She and I were the tanned ones of the bunch, her from laying out while reading on Saturdays after housework, and me from tennis. Kay climbed down out of the car wearing a traditional,

ivory skirt suit and black blouse, mumbling something to Bethany, who was still in the car.

“Leave that tape recorder.” Mama’s words were intended for Bethany, though she was bending down, beating the wrinkles out of Maggie’s smocked, lavender dress. Maggie pulled feverously at her matching hair bow.

“Mama, I have to bring it,” Bethany shrieked. It’s the reunion....interviews are the most important thing.”

Bethany had obviously won a clothes argument with Mama. She was wearing a snug, gray Beatles tee shirt, a black ruffle skirt, a silver sequin scarf and converse. Her hair was twisted up in a messy fashion, and covered with sparkly butterfly bobby pins. Her makeup was subdued; she wore only blush and sparkly lip gloss. She stood and fiddled with her tape recorder and batteries.

“Hush, Bethany.” Mama turned around, prompted by Bethany’s volume. “Okay, you can bring it.” She sighed and spoke softly. “But do not have it out all evening.”

I looked over to see Maggie grinding the tip of her white, patent-leather shoe in the moist, black dirt beneath the gravel. Dad came around from the other side of the car. He pulled a cotton handkerchief out of his suit pocket and wiped off his sunglasses.

“You girls look nice.” Mama smiled at Faith and me and kissed our cheeks. I didn’t feel like smiling back.

I wore a strapless, knee-length, coral dress of Faith’s that would fly out wide if I spun around, and I had hoped it might lighten my mood. It was the kind of dress you could wear to a picnic or somewhere formal. I liked that it was comfortable, as were my

cropped, white cowboy boots. As least I had that. I forced back in one of the many bobby pins that Faith had used in my hair; she'd insisted on braiding it in a fancy, wrap around style for the occasion. Like most things Faith did, it turned out pretty.

"Color-coordinated, huh?" Faith smiled and leaned towards me with closed eyes: she was showing me her plum eye shadow. She was elegant, as always, in her sleeveless, plum dress and matching, strappy sandals.

"Looking good." I winked.

Mama opened her large, gold clutch and I saw that she'd converted it into a diaper bag for Maggie. I spied a small plastic bag of crackers, a mini coloring-book with crayons, and some wet wipes. She bent and wiped Maggie's shoe and then took her hand to walk.

Daddy held Mama's other hand and we all followed behind to the manor.

The front, French doors were propped open on the unending porch, and a red-headed girl in a grape dress stood in the airy foyer, handing out programs at the entrance to a grand room on the right. I took the stiff, ivory paper and read that Robert Montgomery, the mayor of Oak Lake, would be giving out a "hundred-year farm" award to a Carson Campbell, and an Oak Lake High School football plaque to Daddy, among other things.

"Dinner is in here." The girl spoke as our group walked toward the dining hall. "They'll be a band in the opposite ball room afterwards. Help yourself to the buffet on the right. There's an open mic throughout dinner if you'd like to share a story or do a toast – just get in line to the right of the stage."

Thinking about the open mic made my hands sweat. I had to tell everyone about Daddy – the real Daddy. No one else in my family was ever going to speak out – ever. If he wasn't going to acknowledge the truth, maybe this would force him to. I tried to keep calm.

In the dining room, I found myself looking for Jake. There were lots of large, round, beautifully decorated tables with many faces of people I'd seen, and more with people I didn't know at all. I saw Mr. Gentry, and Aunt May talking to some ladies I didn't recognize. Faith was talking to a friend from high school I'd met a few times, but she glanced over at me with a concerned look once or twice. I dropped my tiny, crocheted purse at a table and headed toward the buffet line. So much food, and I was starving. I passed on the steak and fish and grabbed fried chicken, two rolls, corn on the cob, and green beans before heading back to the table. Mama and Maggie sat down beside me, and Mama cut up bites on Maggie's plate.

"Cat got your tongue, Laine?" Mama smiled and felt to check whether her brown, rhinestone barrette was still in place, before pushing Maggie's drink away from the edge of the table.

I shrugged.

"Laine," Mama went on, "I've been thinking about our talk, and I wanted to say I'm sorry you had to hear anything. You are really too young to understand how...."

A microphone screeched as a man in a suit fiddled with it on the stage. He looked over our heads to somebody in the back and seemed to get some direction, before returning the mic to the stand and leaving.

“Mama,” I stabbed two green beans with my fork. “I am not too young – I’ll be eighteen in a few months. I understand how relationships work. I understand when someone is a jerk, and when someone cheats. I understand if someone lies. I’m old enough to understand that.”

“Laine, you don’t know the full picture.”

“I know enough.” Picking at my roll, I spoke as I chewed. “I know that someone needs to talk to him. Someone needs to call him out. Someone needs to make him answer, or be accountable for things he’s done. He needs to own up to it and admit it. It seems like y’all are in some kind of denial.” The words shot out of my mouth without any pauses, like chaff tumbling out of a combine.

“We’re working on it, Laine. Things have been worse – they’ll get better.”

I tore at my roll, then tossed it back on my plate and got up.

“Don’t go, baby.”

I walked away chewing a mouth full of bread.

I went out into the foyer and walked across to the sparse, grand dance hall. There was a band in suits and ponytails: one member had tattoos showing on his neck above his shirt collar and hand, and he tuned a guitar while others positioned equipment cords.

Dad stood near the stage.

He was chatting with the base guitar player. He glanced over and saw me in the doorway, and lifted a hand at me as I looked on. I stepped quickly backwards into the hallway. I felt like screaming at him.

People were still streaming in, but the dining hall already looked full. There was a mumbled roar of chatter as people talked and ate. Kay, Bethany and Gran had sat down by Mama, and I looked again for Jake as I went back to my seat. A few minutes later, Daddy returned, bringing a plate to the table beside Maggie.

The mayor was introduced and he started giving out awards. When he got to Daddy's, he talked about how the recent season at Oak Lake High School was the closest they'd come to breaking the football touchdown pass record, but Daddy still held the record. They also held the high school championship record. My stomach knotted as I listened to the accolades.

After the awards ended, a big-haired blonde announced the open mic for the remainder of dinner and dessert. I saw two or three people walk over and wait their turn in line. My stomach flip-flopped.

Dad sat down at the table and returned Mama's smile as she leaned over to read the plaque.

I shot up from my seat. Mama was wiping Maggie's chin and didn't notice me walk away. I got in the end of the line, three people away from the mic, and caught bits and pieces of what was being said.

A stout lady with several chins in a cream, beaded dress spoke at the mic with a gravelly, monotone voice. "...back then, this event was just a picnic in Oak Park..."

The line moved up.

A red-faced man stepped to the mic, and talked about playing with Daddy at Gran's when he was young. "Phil and I threw the football many a Saturday on the lake bank. It never surprised me how good a quarterback he was..."

The line moved up, and past speakers walked back to their tables. I took a deep breath and tried to calm my chest.

The last man had a thick gray mustache and stood hunched over in sports coat. "...and I couldn't have rented land from any nicer people."

There were lots of clapping after the final man's comments. Suddenly, I was at the end of the line, alone, and standing in front of the mic.

The room quieted to a murmur, and I popped my knuckles and looked around. I felt like I could burst, like there were screaming, crying fireworks going off inside my mind. Daddy was eating his food and acting like everything was fine. Mama was looking at me, wondering what I was going to say.

Aunt May's face changed from a sweet smile to an almost worried look, and Faith sat beside her and stared at me intently with a tilted head. I noticed that Faith got out of her chair as I looked to another table.

Jake was there.

He sat by Belle, and some older people I didn't know. Belle's dress and lips were dark red, and her silky blonde hair glistened like corn silk under the dim, gold lights of the chandeliers. Jake was sitting up stiff and straight, watching me.

I wasn't sure how many seconds had passed, but people were starting to whisper. A pointy nosed lady with Cleopatra hair at a table close to me grabbed her water glass and looked with concerned eyes at the short man sitting next to her.

I felt a hand on my arm: it was Faith's. "You don't have to do this, Laine," she whispered, "not like this."

Tears welled up in my eyes. Faith knew I wasn't myself, and she knew why I was up there. I shook her hand off of me. Daddy was not who anyone thought he was. He wasn't who I thought he was. Everything was always in the dark. His family deserved to know the truth. *Why am I having to deal with this quietly and he just gets away with everything? The burden should be shifted to him, so he can deal with it.*

"Laine," Faith whispered. She touched my arm again.

I jerked away. This time more abruptly than I meant to. I grabbed the mic.

"I came up here...." I said. I spoke too closely into the mic and my voice bel-
lowed. The mic squealed. My hands were cold and shaking.

I spoke into the mic again. "...To tell you about my Dad."

The room got quiet. Faces all over, old and young, were staring at me. Other than a few water girls refilling glasses, the room was still.

I went on. "Thomas Hardy said it was better for an offense to come out with the truth than for the truth to be concealed..." I glanced over to see Mama drop her head into her hand at the table as Maggie turned around and stood up in her seat. Daddy looked at Mama, confused, then looked up at me. He sat back in his chair.

My heart was racing.

I didn't know what to say. I was standing there, ready to tell the whole family everybody what Daddy had done. What kind of man he was. No football story. No innocent boy, Sunday school story. I was ready to talk about who he really was. As a grown up. How he hurts the ones he loves. How he lies.

Tears were streaming down my cheeks, and Faith stood still beside me.

Then I saw it.

Daddy pulled his handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped Maggie's hands, then her nose. He quietly cajoled her back into her seat. It was the daddy I knew. The good one.

What I was about to say up there didn't feel right. The hurt was boiling up in me and over and out of me, but I had a bad feeling. I hated Daddy at that moment. I wanted to hurt him. Hurt him like he had hurt me, and Mama. I bit my lip to avoid making a full-out, comedic tragic expression, but my entire face was wet and tears were hitting my dress on my chest.

I sucked up my emotions for a brief moment. It was like I was suddenly frozen and holding my breath. I spoke up once more at the microphone. The servers were frozen, too, watching to see what I would say.

"I think I will just say, that.....that family is important. And, that what we do affects each other, for good or bad." Tears ran into the sides of my mouth as I spoke.

"Whether or not others know about the hurtful things we do, doesn't matter; our behavior makes up our character. We should treat each other the way we would like to be treated. And I never want to forget that." My voice cracked at the very end. "Thank you."

I walked away from the mic and rushed out of the room, down the front porch steps and around the side, flinging open a white wooden gate into a large courtyard and garden. I didn't know where I was going but I was hurrying. Crying and hurrying. I was reaching the point of uncontrollable sobs as I slowed, when Faith made it up beside me. She stopped me and hugged me and I cried on her dress.

Soon Mama and Daddy were beside us.

"Sweetie, are you okay?" Mama said.

"What was all that about, Laine?" Daddy said.

He stood looking at me with his hands on his hips, and he had a tone of aggravation in his voice. I pulled away from Faith, looking at Mama and Daddy through wet, blurry eyes.

"It was not about much of anything. It wasn't about what I planned it to be when I went up there."

"Hush Laine, you don't know what you're talking about." Mama's teeth chattered in spite of the hot, sticky air. She had figured out at some point that I had gone up there to talk about Daddy. To "out" him.

"What is going on here?" Daddy scowled through his words. "Y'all are causing a scene. This is supposed to be a family event." He looked back to see if anyone was looking at us from the window of the dance hall. No one was. The sun was going down. The ground had a hazy glow as the light grew dim. Anger started to grow again, up from inside me.

I kicked my boot in the black dirt between the brick sidewalk and the purple-petaled ground cover. Mama stood next to an over growth of honeysuckle on the fence and the scent was strong and sweet, and white-washed boards were thinning beneath it. Something caught my eye. I looked over and saw Jake and Belle dancing inside through the window.

Another blow.

Jake was very much with Belle. A dull, heavy pain resonated in my chest. I wanted to talk to him, but I knew that was crazy. Besides, the most important thing at that moment was to talk to Mama and Daddy. I knew that if I didn't talk to Daddy right then about what I had learned, I might not ever.

I looked up at them, as they stood still, looking at me.

"I know....I know that you cheated on Mama."

"You, what?" Both of his hands went back to his hips and his coat spread open wide, exposing much of his shirt. He made stuttering sounds of doubt and dismissal. He looked over at Mama.

"Hallie, what is she talking about?" His wrinkled brow demanded an explanation.

"She came to me and...." Mama said. I interrupted her as soon as she started.

"It wasn't Mama who told me. And why does that matter? Is this about Mama? Cause I thought we were talking about you."

"Simmer down, Laine. Now what is this really about?" Daddy said.

I looked at him for a moment.

“Did you cheat on Mama?” I rubbed hard to wipe the tears off my cheeks.

“Now, Laine, this is not the time or the place. We need to get back inside and you...” Daddy started, but I screamed before he could finish.

It was a loud, full, voiced scream. “Did you cheat on Mama?” My intensity shocked us all. Daddy looked around like he was expecting bombs to fall around us, and he knew he had to answer.

He shifted his weight and stared at the ground. He looked up at me and said, “Yes, your Mama and I have had our share of problems.”

Mama sighed. It looked like her upper body deflated and some of her spirit left her, as she walked to a nearby garden bench and sat down.

Faith stood still a few feet away, looking down at the ground.

“How could you do it, Daddy?”

He frowned and threw his hands up in the air. “Now, Baby, you don’t understand everything, and you won’t understand much until you’ve been in a marriage as long as we have.”

“That sucks, Daddy. That’s the lamest excuse I’ve ever heard.” I looked him straight in the face.

Mama’s tired face looked up at me from the bench, and I went on. “And you. How can you let him get away with this? How can you just let him walk all over you...”

Daddy blurted out, “Now wait just a minute. Don’t you act for one minute like you know much of anything that has gone on in our relationship. Frankly, Laine, this is

none of your business. We're not obligated to discuss the intimate details of our marital relationship with you, or any of you girls."

My tears stopped. I looked into Daddy's face and thought about how much he'd hurt me. How much I had trusted him. How much he'd hurt Mama. How much it would hurt Kay and Bethany to know what he'd done. Then I thought about Maggie, and the tears came back. This time they were fast and heavy and I spoke through them. "Y'all don't talk about stuff. Y'all don't deal with stuff. You shouldn't do each other like this. How could you cheat, Daddy? How could you not do something when he did, Mama? I don't understand you. Either of you. I don't know why you do like this." I took a deep breath, working to dry my eyes. "But I do know....I don't want to be like this. I won't be like this."

We stared at each other, without saying anything else. They'd heard what I had to say, and I felt like a coach speaking to immature players. I was realizing that I couldn't fix them. The guarded, difficult reactions from Daddy had surprised me. I empathized with Mama's avoidance. I thought, too, that Daddy was right: I didn't know everything that went on in their relationship and, for the first real time, it crossed my mind that Mama could play a part in their dysfunctional marriage. I didn't think she'd cheated, but I was starting to realize that both partners play a role. Mama didn't make Daddy cheat; I knew that. But not standing up for herself or talking about things that mattered wasn't right either. I didn't have anything else to say. I put my arm around Faith's waist and walked back inside to the bathroom.

CHAPTER 12

I fell back into a chaise by the window in the sitting area in the dressy, first-floor bathroom, and Faith sat down by my feet. With sad eyes, she put her arm on my leg.

“At least your legs look good.” Faith gave me a sweet smile and rubbed her hand over my smooth calf.

I laughed and wiped the remaining dampness from my eyes. “Yeah, at least there’s that.”

She got quiet. No more jokes. Neither of us had anything to say.

A squatty, grey-haired woman wobbled in to the restroom. “Excuse me, ladies.” She smiled and made her way into a stall.

“I’ll be right back.” Faith stood up.” I’ve got some tissues and my makeup bag in the car. Let me touch up your face, you’ll feel better.”

I watched out of the window as Faith leaned in her mustang that sat low in the line of trucks and SUVs. I could see women’s heads beyond a car a few spaces from hers, but I couldn’t see who it was. I watched Faith pull the items from her car. Then, she stood still with the car door still open, and I wondered if she was listening to something. After a moment, she shut her car door gently and tiptoed away.

Faith looked pale when she walked back into the bathroom, passing the squatty women on her way out. “Excuse me.”

“You look like somebody killed your cat.” I said. She was quiet. “I’m sorry you heard all that, with Mama and Daddy.”

“I’m not. I’m glad I was with you.” She sat down beside me and rummaged through the square, brightly colored bag.

“I don’t really need any makeup, do I?” By the look on Faith’s face, I did. I really didn’t mind it; I wanted her company.

Faith wet a paper towel, scooted close to me on the chaise, and started wiping off the mascara from under my eyes. “Laine, I need to tell you something.”

“Look, I’m done with Mama and Daddy right now. I don’t want to think about them anymore. I’m just tired...”

She interrupted. “It’s not about your parents.”

I kept my eyes closed and head still as she cleaned my face. “What then?”

“I just heard Belle and her Mama talking by their car outside.”

My stomach felt a sick flutter. *I don’t want to hear about Belle.*

“I don’t care about them.” I let out a big breath, as if to help push the subject to something else, and kept my eyes closed.

Faith blurted out, “Listen, Laine, you need to hear this --”

Just then, a young mother in her twenties came in with twin two-year old girls. The trio wore blue dresses with chiffon under the lower half that made their gowns stand out like triangular lamp shades. The Mama had one of each child’s fists in hers, up by their heads as she walked them to a large stall.

“Excuse us, we’re trying to avoid accidents in our dresses.” The mom looked at Faith and me with big eyes as she hurried them all in and closed the large stall door.

“Oh, don’t mind us, take your time.” Faith said.

I shifted in my seat, anxious for Faith to tell what she’d started.

One of the little girls started a moaning cry, as the Mama whispered and rustled the crinoline dresses behind the door. The other toddler spoke in a high, cartoonish voice. “I need make stinky Mama.”

We sat still and listened, as the Mama whispered to hurry the crew along, and the happy girl continued.

“I not need make stinky, Mama, I tee-teed!”

I rustled through Faith’s makeup bag and examined some mauve blush, hoping for the group’s quick exit.

The second girl’s moaning cries continued as the Mama heaved each child to the sink, holding them in the air against the countertop to wash hands. They individually moaned and sang through the task. After wiping water spatters off of the small dress fronts, the tiny fists were reclaimed and they were out of the door.

Faith had begun reapplying my mascara.

“Okay, tell me.” I said with still, barely-open eyes.

“Well, Belle and her Mama were outside talking near my car...” She was almost whispering, though we were alone, as she patted my face with powder. “Mrs. Baker was

saying that Ruby Jeffries – that’s Belle’s friend, Ruth Anne’s, Mama – was at the club pool with her, and that Ruth Anne had told her that Belle was not pregnant.”

I sat straight in my seat. “What?”

Faith’s hand, clasping makeup, relaxed in her lap as she went on. “...Mrs. Baker said Mrs. Jeffries told her that Belle had made it up, so that Jake would marry her, and Mrs. Baker was demanding Belle tell her the truth.”

“What did she say?” My brain was trying to fathom what I was hearing.

“It’s true. She admitted it.” Faith stared at me, slightly nodding.

“That she’s pregnant, or that she made it up?” My brow wrinkled in confusion.

“She lied about it, Laine. Belle made it up to get Jake to marry her.”

I dropped my head in my hands. “Wow. She’s a psycho.” I mumbled down at my lap.

“Certifiable.” Makeup clanked as she dropped compacts back into her bag.

But Jake didn’t know she’d made it up while he was with me. He was engaged. And he thought he was having a baby, and he still didn’t tell me about her.

“What happened after that? Did Belle say she was going to tell him?”

Faith sighed. “I just heard Mrs. Baker tell Belle that she needed to work it out. I don’t know what Belle’s going to do...” Faith pursed her lips as she shoved her folded tissues into her bag. She didn’t look like she had much faith in the Bakers.

“Surely she’ll tell him. Now that her Mama knows.” I relaxed a little back on the chaise.

“Who knows what Belle Baker will do...” Faith leaned forward with tense lips as she put coral lip gloss on me. “There, done. Let’s go get some banana pudding.”

Nodding, I walked with Faith back to the dining room.

We took our desserts and sat alone at a table near one of the doors to the grand foyer. With a big bite of creamy banana in my mouth, I looked through the foyer to the far side of the dance hall and froze. Jake and Belle were dancing to the twangy, female singer’s country love song.

Faith noticed my change. “What is it?”

“Nothing.” I slammed my spoon down into the china bowl, scooped a big bite and shoved it in my mouth.

Forget about them, Laine. They can work out their crap on their own. It doesn’t involve you.

I couldn’t stop. I looked back, far across into the ball room. Jake was standing stiff, staring toward the distant wall. Belle snuggled her head on his shoulder and hugged him tighter.

The blood throughout my body felt hot. Faith was holding her spoon, which was stalled at her bowl, as she tried to read me.

“Is Rusty Bowman still here?” I blurted out louder than I’d intended.

“What?” Faith looked like I’d said something crazy.

“The guy who hit on me at Gentry’s. I saw him earlier, he was talking to Will by the buffet. Have you seen him?”

“Um, he’s probably over with the band and everybody else.” Faith leaned back in her chair and squinted her eyes at me.

“Good. I’m going to ask him to dance. Might as well try to have fun, right?” I grabbed the tea glass on the table and took a big swig. Choking and coughing, I whispered. “Ew, that wasn’t tea. Whose glass was that?”

Faith shook her head slowly at me with big eyes. “No idea.”

I grabbed Faith’s makeup bag and stared her in the face as I threw on some lip gloss. “See you in there.” I marched out, along with Faith’s opportunity to stop me. I heard her whine as I left.

“Laine....”

I stopped in the ball room door. Jake spotted me and slowed his dancing. He looked like he was about to say something. Belle readjusted on his shoulder and they kept their embrace.

Will walked up, leaving Rusty and some other guys close by the stage. “There you are, Laine, I haven’t seen you all night.” He flung his blonde locks out of his eyes.

“Do you think Rusty Bowman will dance with me?” I blurted it out.

“Huh?” His mouth fell open.

“I want to dance. Do you think Rusty will dance with me or not?” I hated that I sounded demanding, but I didn’t want to slow down.

“I’ll dance with you, Laine, you don’t want to dance with Rusty...”

I pushed past him and walked to the group of guys he'd left. I looked up at Rusty; he was enormous. Surely he posed for Hulk comic books images. The green guy, not Banner.

"Wanna dance, Rusty?" My request was less than flirty, and I stood and waited for his response with my hands on my hips.

He smirked, handed his drink to a short guy next to him and walked to me. "Hell, yeah, Laine – what are you talking about?" He wrapped a jumbo arm around my back and took us out to the dance floor.

I should've thought this through. There were guys other than Rusty over there...

I walked toward the back, past several couples dancing and folks lined up in chairs against the wall, before I stopped. An upbeat song was roaring, and Rusty twirled me out away from him with a massive grin as we started to dance. My thin, coral dress flew out and around before he pulled me back to him.

I glanced at Jake, who was looking at me past Belle's head, with his lips clamped down on his tongue. I spotted Faith leaning against the door frame with her arms crossed, watching me closely.

Faith motioned, "you're crazy," when our eyes met.

We finished out the song, stopping for applause and cheering, and the next song began with a slow and soulful harmonica. Jake and Belle were closer to us, and I could hear her talking about St. Lucia. Jake's face looked sunburnt as he stared at me.

Rusty pulled me close, his massive hands were around my waist, and I looked up at him. "It's good to dance. I love it, and I don't do it that much."

“I’ll dance with you any time you want, baby.” He hugged me tighter.

Ew. Sorry big guy – you aren’t doing it for me.

Just dance, Laine. You asked him because you wanted to dance.

I saw Mama sitting by the wall, talking to Aunt May. She waved and winked at me. She obviously thought I liked Rusty.

Mama – you haven’t got a clue.

Then everything changed.

It happened fast, and I think my mouth fell open when I stopped and looked at Rusty. He was squeezing my butt with both of his massive hands.

I pushed his chest back; his hulk mitts were still on my butt. I started to tell him that I shouldn’t have asked him to dance. That I shouldn’t have given him the wrong impression. That I was in-no-way interested. That I was probably – okay, *definitely* – using him in front of Jake, but I didn’t get the chance. He leaned down and pushed his big tongue into my mouth.

I shoved him off, wiping his grossness off of my face, and Jake came up mumbling in a fury.

“Oh, hell no...”

I’ve never seen Jake look so mad. His chest was heaving and I could see by his jaw that he was gritting his teeth. I could not believe what was happening. It was my own stupid fault. It was playing out right in front of me, and I couldn’t stop it.

“Now Jake, c’mon. Me and Laine was just having some fun.” Rusty’s head fell back and he grinned.

Jake was fixed on Rusty. His arms were down and stiff by his sides, and he looked like an animal about to pounce.

The band played louder, and couples swirled all around us.

Belle came from behind Jake, looking all of us over. “Jake, what’s going on?”

He cut her off. He was fixed on Rusty. “Not now, Belle.”

She didn’t give up. Huffing, she moved closer. “Jake...”

Rusty spoke out. “Now, Jake, I hate to tell you this, but this pretty little lady wanted me. Didn’t you, baby?” He licked his lips as he looked me over.

That was it. I was *not* his “baby.” It was moronic to ask Rusty to dance, but I was going to knock his lights out.

Unfortunately, I didn’t get that chance. Jake rared back and punched Rusty square in the face. Rusty slid a foot on the glossy floor when he landed on his back side. He stayed down for a moment, and people kept dancing around us to the blaring, blue-grass tune.

One lady nearly tripped over him, and her middle-aged dance partner complained as they danced past. “Get up from there, Rusty, you’re going to make somebody fall.” Rusty moved his jaw around with his hand, before wiping blood off of his lower lip and examining it on his finger. Jake stood above Rusty for a moment with his head hanging, then he spoke.

“I’m sorry I hit you, Rusty. I lost control. You just need to keep your hands off Laine...”

I jumped in. “Jake, you shouldn’t have come over. This is between me and Rusty. I can take care of myself. I don’t need any guy to help me.”

Rusty was slowly working his way to his feet. Jake listened to me, and took a deep breath before speaking to me calmly. “Laine, you’re the size of one of his legs...”

That flew all over me. “So I’m a helpless girl who only a man can protect, right?” I realized I was yelling.

Belle shot a look from me to Jake.

“No, Laine...” Before Jake could finish, Rusty flew on top of Jake and pushed him down onto the floor.

Belle let out a short scream, but it was muffled by clapping and guitar.

“Stop it, Rusty.” I yelled and grabbed his arm

They wrestled around in a half circle on the floor. “That’s for making me rip my shirt.” Rusty spoke as they squirmed, and they grunted and held each other in their grips. Jake clutched Rusty’s arm, and Rusty had Jake by the neck on his back.

I couldn’t take it. I threw a leg over Rusty’s back and sat on him. I started pulling up on his massive shoulder as hard as I could, gripping my thighs around his waist for leverage. “Stop it you idiots. Get up.”

Faith broke through some dancing couples with Mama and Aunt May. “Laine, get off of them. Good heavens, what on Earth are you doing?” Mama said.

Rusty leaned his head out to the side. “You and me can take this back to the house, Laine.” Rusty muttered as they squirmed and held each other. I saw Jake’s face darken as Rusty spoke.

Jake struck Rusty hard on the side of his face, and Rusty started to roll over, away from Jake. I climbed off as he moved away. Jake sat up on his elbow. Both guys were grunting and grimacing as they felt their jaws.

Mrs. Baker ran up and put jeweled fingers on Belle’s shoulders. “Boys, explain to me...”

“Ruby – ” Aunt May held up a hand, shaking her head at Mrs. Baker to stop her.

Will joked and helped Jake and Rusty off of the floor. “I can’t leave you boys alone for five minutes, can I?”

Rusty turned to walk out of the room, and Jake yelled to his back. “I want my hunting gear back.”

Rusty shot a hand up in the air to wave goodbye as he passed through the doorway.

Faith stepped close. “Laine, what happened? I came back from getting lemonade and y’all were piled on the floor. I spotted you when Mama and Aunt Hattie did.”

What a ridiculous situation. Someone could’ve gotten really hurt. Jake stood looking away and quiet.

“It was a misunderstanding, but it’s over.” I said. “Everyone just drop it, please. I’m going to get something to drink.”

Faith followed me out of the room, but I stopped her in the foyer. “Look, I just need a few minutes. I know I was acting like an idiot. I can be really good at that when I want to. I just need to be alone.”

She hugged me, before walking back to the dance room, where a waltz-like tune spilled out. Mama and Aunt May stood watching me from the doorway.

I fixed a cold glass of sweet tea, pulled off my boots, and sat down at a table against the wall. I was alone in the dining hall. My back was to the foyer, and I wondering which of my family was going to come and yell at me for my behavior, when I heard someone approaching.

“Can I join you?” Jake’s voice surprised me.

“You haven’t had enough, Jake?” I swirled my ice with my straw. “I mean, the universe is trying really hard to make trouble whenever we’re around each other. Either that, or it’s me. Maybe we shouldn’t push it.” I listened to the clinking ice in my glass and didn’t look up.

Jake sat down next to me, and looked toward the hall. He rubbed his tongue over the fat, split part of his lip.

“I’m sorry...” We spoke in unison.

“Look, Jake...” I started yanking the tight bobby pins out of my braid. “That was mostly my fault in there. I was jealous of you dancing with Belle, and I wanted someone to dance with.”

“You sure picked a hell of a partner.”

“You don’t have to tell me that. And I didn’t need you to come save me. I can take care of myself. And nobody asked you to punch him.”

“Laine, he had his hands on you.” Jake squirmed in his seat and clinched his fist on the table. “I felt like I was going to kill him.” He looking away as he spoke, as if recalling the event.

I put my hands on his fist. “Look, I was being immature. I shouldn’t have tried to make you jealous. And Rusty Bowman is an idiot. I’m sorry y’all fought and you got your lip busted.”

“Shoot. His was split open wider than mine.” Jake tossed his hand in the air like he wasn’t hurt.

“Right. And that’s what’s important – comparing lip injuries.” I scooped a hand full of ice out of my tea glass and wrapped it in a cloth napkin. “Here, hold this on your mouth a minute.”

Jake grinned and put the make-shift ice pack on his lip, before squeezing my hand. “Thanks.”

I pulled away and sat back in my chair. “Jake, listen, I know you and Faith have to figure out if y’all are going to stay together, and I think it’s good that I’m going back to Birmingham tomorrow...”

He interrupted. “Figure it out? What are you talking about?”

“Belle hasn’t told you?”

He put the ice pack on the table. “Told me what?”

“You should talk to Belle.” I wished I hadn’t said anything. It wasn’t my fight.

He leaned in close, and I smelled his spicy aftershave. “Tell me, Laine.”

I thought for a minute. I’d fumbled into their business, and I felt like I couldn’t back out. “Belle’s not pregnant.” I held my breath.

“What?” Jake stood up. “Why would you say that?” His fingers rubbed his forehead as he looked at me.

“Faith heard her tell her mama. She just told me a little while ago. I thought maybe she’d told you tonight.”

Jake walked away and stopped at a table. He stood there for a moment staring out across the room, and the gold, glowing light of the chandelier fell down over his hair and back. He stood there with his back to me for a long time.

“I’m sorry – for telling you. And for all of it.”

Jake spoke over me. “She’s pregnant, Laine.”

I wasn’t expecting that response. “Jake...”

He interrupted me again. “She is, Laine, she’s pregnant.”

“Okay, whatever, she’s pregnant. None of my damn business anyway.” My hands were up in the air and I started to leave. He didn’t believe me. He should’ve known I would never make something like that up. He knows me better than that.

Belle, who was leaning in the door way, walked in.

Jake walked straight up to meet her. “Belle, did you lie about the baby?”

Belle's mouth dropped, and she looked back and forth between me and Jake. "Is something going on in here I should know about?"

Jake blurted out, "Did you lie about the baby, Belle?"

She huffed and waited, rubbing her ear. "I would've gotten pregnant eventually."

Jake's head fell.

"Can't we talk about this later?" Belle was batting her eyes at Jake.

That's when I left. I didn't look back. Mama and the group were gathering in the hall to leave, and I headed out straight for the car. I shoved on my boots in the warm air outside, and ground gravel under my feet all the way to the car. I waited on Faith beside her mustang, and my tears fell on the hood of her car. I didn't talk on the way home.

Faith knew I couldn't. I did shake my head, recounting events, more than once as we drove the dark highway back to Gran's. The hurt and disappointment in everyone was unbearable. I couldn't believe Jake thought I would lie about Belle. That struck me as much as the rest. The worst part was the persistent ache in my chest for Jake, that wouldn't seem to leave.

CHAPTER 13

We were heading back to Birmingham later in the day. I come downstairs early, as I listened to chatter about directions to the brunch, in my running clothes with head phones over my shoulder. I stopped at the bottom of the stairs to tug at my ankle socks.

“Laine, why are you wearing that?” Kay stopped and scowled at me in the hall.

“Because you usually wear running shorts when you run.”

“We’re going to the brunch. You’re not running. Everyone’s going to the brunch. Hurry and go change.” Kay words flew out without pause.

I put my arm out and pulled my elbow to my chest to stretch it.

“Hurry, we’re about to go.” Kay clapped her hands in the door way, in front of the others who stood in the noisy kitchen.

I scooted around her and into the room. “I’m not going to the brunch. I’m going running.” The room got quiet at my announcement, and Maggie slammed her doll on the table.

“I want run with Wayne.” Maggie crossed her arms high on her chest and looked around with angry eyebrows at everyone in the room.

Mama and Daddy came up behind me as I flew down the front porch steps. “What are you doing, Laine? We are all going to the brunch.” Daddy huffed on the front porch, and Mama stood looking at me. I stopped in the shadows on the walk.

“I don’t want to go to the brunch. I want to run. I feel like I need a run. Y’all go on and have a good time. You don’t need me there.” I turned and started to put my headphones in my ears.

“Laine Elizabeth...” Daddy grumped and started down the stairs, when Mama stopped him.

“Let her go run, Phil. It’ll be good for her. She wants to run.” I was already on the sidewalk as Mama finished. I didn’t hear them say anything else. I jogged for a long time, listening to all kinds of music, when I started to cry. I ran and ran, and I cried. Everything from the week was playing in my head. But my thoughts kept going back to Jake. We were leaving soon, and I wasn’t going to see him again. I jogged four miles, longer than I’d planned. A nervousness kept me going, like I was trying to run away or keep running toward something.

I showered in Gran’s empty house, pulled on my white cotton dress, still hanging on the back of a bedroom chair where I’d left it since Gentry’s, and grabbed a loaf of bread and walked out to the lake. Daddy had loaded the car, and we were leaving after the brunch. At the lake, I sat down in the shade by the glistening water, and looked out at the ducks, floating in the distance.

It wasn’t long before I heard a voice. “There you are.” Jake walked down the green lake bank towards me. “I thought you’d be at the brunch.” He smiled and sat down.

I didn’t feel like sharing his smile, and I wasn’t in the mood for a pleasant goodbye. “Yeah, brawlers like us weren’t really supposed to be there, didn’t you hear?” I

looked out toward the fishy water as I spoke. Numb emotions hadn't stopped my sarcasm.

"Laine, I'm sorry about everything this week. Except for you coming to the farm, and spending time with you."

I was quiet, as I stood up and untied the plastic bag of bread.

Jake stood up, too. "I'm sorry I doubted what you told me."

I ripped a piece of bread and threw it in the water.

Jake went on. "I never thought she'd lie about something like that."

I threw another piece of bread.

"There's no ducks over here. Why do you keep doing that?" Jake chuckled and turned his hands up in the air.

"They'll come." I ripped more pieces and threw them out over the water.

"Easy there, slugger." I wasn't looking, but I could tell he was smiling. He was starting to irritate me.

"Look, Jake, I don't really know why you're here. We're leaving soon and I just wanted a few, peaceful minutes with some ducks before we left." I ripped the bread faster, and four noisy geese flew over from behind the trees and landed on the bank beside us. I threw bread and they honked and ate it as they wobbled on the grass.

I let out a deep breath. "Please tell Aunt Sissy that I loved her cooking, and thank her for everything. I mean it." I turned to walk back up the bank, and I fought back my

tears. I felt like I was saying goodbye to more than just Aunt Sissy. I didn't want to say goodbye to Aunt Sissy, or to McBride's farm, or to Oak Lake...or to Jake.

"Laine, where are you going? You can't just walk off and leave these geese like this, it's cruel."

When I didn't stop, Jake came up after me. "Seriously, Laine, I'm trying to talk to you."

I stopped in the sun and clinched the bread bag in my fist. "I don't want to talk. Not about Belle, not about you and Belle, not about disgusting Rusty Bowman grabbing my backside, not about anything." I turned to start walking and he kept up.

"Hey, I tried my best to stop Rusty, if I could've been there sooner I would've."

"Are you kidding Jake?" I dropped the bread and threw my hands over my eyes. "This is not about you saving me from an ass grabbing."

He stood there quietly, squinting at me in the sun.

"Please leave me alone. I don't feel like making small talk right now."

Jake reached for my arm as I turned to go. "Laine..." His voice was sweet, but it didn't dampen my anger. I flung off his hand and walked faster.

"Laine, would you just hear me out, please?"

"No." I sped up, knowing I sounded juvenile.

"Okay, that's it." Jake ran up behind me and scooped me up around my back and legs. I gasped and kicked as he held me in his arms over the grass.

"Put me down, you idiot." I yelled and pushed at his chest to release me.

“You’re the stubborn idiot. I’m trying to tell you something, Laine.” He spoke louder and struggled to hold me still.

I bucked in his arms, bringing us both down onto the grass, and I grunted as my shoulder beat into the ground.

Jake got up. “Are you okay?”

“I hope you’re happy.” I rubbed my throbbing shoulder and started to sit up, when he climbed on top of me, sitting above me on all fours to keep me in place.

“Get off. And I’d prefer not to be body-slammed into the river bank again, thank you.”

His breathing was slowing down. “Laine, I want to talk to you.”

I looked at him. His face and being so close was nice, but I was angry that he was on top of me. “You don’t get to decide when and how we talk.” I pushed him over hard and he held on to me. We rolled once over each other down the bank before stopping, and I could feel grass clinging to my hair.

He was above me again, and he whispered this time in a plea. “Laine, please.”

“Okay.” I sighed as though I didn’t want to hear, though part of me did.

His face was inches above mine, propping himself on his hands by my shoulders. “I’m done with Belle, Laine. I talked to her. It’s over.” He stared at the grass, before looking back at me. “I love you, Laine.”

I wasn’t expecting to hear that, and I didn’t know what to say. I started to get up as I spoke. “Jake, you don’t know what you’re saying. Yesterday, you were engaged.”

He looked more intent as he spoke. “Hear me out, Laine. I know you don’t know it. But I’ve loved you for a long time. I’ve loved you since we were little. I’ve got an old, clover chain you made me in a drawer at home. I loved you before I left Oak Lake, and I never stopped thinking about you while I was gone. I knew you’d have somebody else and I’d have to settle for somebody here, but after you came to the farm...” He sniffed and waited, and a tear fell from his face and hit mine. “I knew I’d never be happy with anybody else. I love you, Laine. I can’t tell you how much.”

A smile took over my face. “I love you, too.”

He looked at me and laughed out loud, and I leaned up to kiss him. It was a soft, tender kiss and, if tires hadn’t screeched to a stop in the road, I don’t know when we would’ve stopped.

We looked up the bank to see Daddy stepping out of the car. He slammed the door and walked several steps toward the bank with his eyebrows drawn.

I thought I heard Jake curse as he jumped up and pulled me up off of the ground. He dusted off quickly and then started dusting me off, and I shoved his arm away.

“Laine.” Daddy glared at us and yelled my name.

“Sir?” I glared back.

After an uncomfortable few seconds, Daddy answered. “Don’t leave that bag of bread on the bank.” He kept looking at us for a moment, before getting back in the car and pulling in to Gran’s.

I turned back to Jake, relieved Daddy hadn’t caused a scene. “Listen, I’m about to leave.”

“I know. That’s all right, I’ll be here. I’m not going anywhere.” He smiled and touched his fingers to mine.

“Jake, I’ve got my senior year. Then I may go off and play tennis somewhere...”

He stopped smiling. “Laine, you don’t have to worry about me. I’ll be running the farm. I’ve been waiting on you a long time, and I’ll keep waiting. I’m going to keep on loving you, until you come here for good. And I’m going to pray every day for that day to come.”

I hugged him tight on the humid river bank, and felt his breath on my neck for a long time. The honking geese were long gone, and we stood alone in the warm sun.