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THE WAY THEY SHOULD GO

by

Benjamin Larry Marshall

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

The University of Memphis

December 2012

## ABSTRACT

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The Way They Should Go. Major Professor: Cary Holladay.

This thesis is a novel in 28 chapters, an original work of fiction that explores the perspective of a young woman's coming of age in a family whose values she grows to reject. Set in contemporary Alabama, the story includes elements of boar hunting, a mission trip to Cairo, and a few morally ambiguous decisions from people she loves and respects.

## PROLOGUE

Abby-Claire looked ahead, hoping she would see the Pyramids, or the Sphinx, or really anything to break the monotony of the desert. If it weren't for the constant bouncing, she would have fallen back to sleep. The sun wasn't up yet. That was the point. Her aunt had had the brilliant plan of booking a sunrise camel ride past the pyramids. This meant being dressed and ready for the day at 5 AM. She hadn't really slept the night before either.

Their camels were all tied together in a train, the guide at the front, her aunt in the middle, Abby-Claire at the back. They had ridden for almost half an hour now, and she thought she would get used to the bouncing, but didn't. The wooden seat, covered with only a thin blanket, didn't help. Every step the camel took rammed the hard wood into her tailbone then sent her flying a few inches into the air. The guide didn't seem to have the same problem, and her aunt poorly covered her discomfort with smiles and constantly scoured the horizon. She could tell her aunt wanted something to point at and talk about, but they were in the desert. She could see the Cairo skyline only if she turned her head all the way around but that made the bouncing even more painful.

Just ahead, off to her left, she saw a shadow on the sand. An animal of some sort; too small to be a camel, too large to be a dog. The sun hadn't broken the horizon yet, but some light had begun to seep over the sand. As they got closer, she realized it was a horse, or used to be. Now just a carcass. When they were right next to it, she could see the skin and bones were still intact; the skin made brittle by the desert sun. The flesh had either rotted away, or been eaten.

A dog lazily trotted out of the horse, black with a long snout and pointy ears. He had apparently slept inside of the horse. He leaned down and stretched, then shook himself. He stared up at Abby-Claire and waved his long thin tail above his hind legs. He looked familiar, but Abby-Claire couldn't figure out why. They had passed a group of dogs at the edge of the desert, but this one was alone.

## CHAPTER I

The sound of glass shattering normally causes alarm, but in the midst of a hurricane, it's expected. Only seventeen-year-old Abby-Claire really reacted to the sound when a high-speed pinecone crashed through the kitchen window at her grandparents' big white plantation house near Mobile. With twenty people in the house, ten of them technically children, the noise got lost in the fray.

As she got to the kitchen, her grandmother, Virginia, walked in from the other side. She made a sweep of the room and her gaze landed on the two large sinks filled with water that the pinecone, and all of the shattered glass, had landed in. Abby-Claire said, "What should I do to help?"

As Virginia looked up at Abby-Claire, she swept a stray lock of her thin grey hair behind her ear. "These sinks take so long to fill up again."

"The water's still on. We can do it real quick."

Her grandmother looked unconvinced.

"We have to drain it. Water with a pinecone and pieces of glass in it won't do anybody any good if the water goes out."

Abby-Claire's six-year old cousin, Whitney came into the kitchen. As Abby-Claire wiped the sink, Whitney looked anxious. She bobbed up and down and started to speak several times. Virginia said, "Whitney, do you have something to say, or do you need to go to the bathroom?"

“Well,” she took a deep breath. “Do you have any pennies or nickels or dimes or quarters or anything that you maybe want to give to me to give to the children’s offering at church so they can buy Muslim Bibles?”

Abby-Claire had several questions when she heard the term ‘Muslim Bibles’, and before her grandmother could respond, she said, “Muslim Bibles?”

Whitney laughed. “No, no, no. Don’t worry. Not the Koran. The real Bible, printed in the Muslim Language.”

“The Muslim Lan—“

“Whitney! Are you cheating?” Another six-year-old cousin named Steven yelled from the doorway. “Jesus doesn’t like cheaters.”

Two more cousins and a few dogs appeared in the doorway behind Steven.

An older cousin corrected him. “Jesus doesn’t like *cheating*. He still loves *you*.”

Steven didn’t take his eyes off of Whitney who took a sudden interest in her right toes.

Steven said, “Grandma, that’s not fair. How come the girls get to get your change? I was going to ask. I just didn’t get to do it yet.”

“She didn’t say yes,” Whitney said.

“You’re still cheating.”

Virginia held out both hands and said, “Y’all quit it. I’ll look on my dresser and see how much change I have, and then we’ll split it up between the boys and the girls.”

That night, Whitney crawled into bed with Abby-Claire, stared up at the ceiling with a worried look, and then whimpered. Abby-Claire hated her cousin’s passive-

aggressive ploys for attention, so she ignored it. Whitney whimpered again, and then again. “Is there something wrong, Whitney?” Abby-Claire asked curtly.

“Is my mama going to be all right?”

“Why wouldn’t she be?”

“You know how we’re buying all those Bibles in the Muslim language?”

Abby-Claire resisted the urge to educate her cousin on the realities of the “Muslim Language.” Now didn’t seem like a good time, so she just nodded.

“She said she’s going on the mission trip to The Muslim World to deliver the Bibles. Isn’t it dangerous over there?”

Abby-Claire huffed out a frustrated laugh. “The Muslim World isn’t an actual place. It’s just something people say because they don’t know how else to describe it. Did your mom say the name of the place she’s going to?”

“She said it’s where Moses lived. Where the plagues were.”

“Egypt. She’s going to Egypt.”

“That’s not where Osama Bin-Laden lives is it?”

“No.”

“But they speak the Muslim Language there?”

“No. They speak Arabic.”

“Well, then why is my mama taking Bibles printed in the Muslim Language if they don’t speak it there?”

Eight-year-old Mary, chimed in from her air mattress on the floor, “Arabic *is* the Muslim Language. Dummy.”

“No it isn’t. There’s no such thing,” Abby-Claire snapped.

Her cousins tensed. They'd never seen her get impatient with them. Since she had their attention, she just went with it. "There is no such thing as the Muslim Language. And the Muslim World isn't really a place. Yes, a lot of Muslims speak Arabic, but not all Muslims speak Arabic, and not all people who speak Arabic are Muslim."

Her cousins sat in stunned silence. Abby-Claire added, "There are even Muslims in America who speak English."

Whitney looked scared. Abby-Claire was a little scared too. She had four cousins in front of her, all probably practicing what to say to their mothers about this conversation the next morning. Abby-Claire would get some sort of lecture from one of the adults for scaring the younger ones, and then a scolding from one of her own parents for "making trouble." The truth in what she'd just said wouldn't matter.

After a long silence, her twelve-year-old cousin, Hope, said, "I think we should all go to bed now."

Abby-Claire didn't sleep well that night, and got up early the next morning. She found her grandpa downstairs on the couch reading the Bible by lamplight. Despite the fact that it was barely 6:00, he had already dressed and shaved. She curled up next to him on the couch. He didn't say anything, but put an arm around her. She looked down at the yellowed pages of his big Bible with notes scribbled all over the margins in a handwriting she couldn't read. Before she could note what passage he was reading, she fell asleep. She woke up later when Whitney's mother, aunt Jenny's, Pomeranian (one of nine dogs in the house) pounced on her stomach. It was dark outside, but she could tell the sun was up. Aunt Jenny glared at her from across the room.

Abby-Claire kept quiet, and busied herself in the kitchen for most of the morning. She dreaded the second day of a hurricane more than any other. Day one, spirits were still a little bit high, not even tempered with fear. If a storm wasn't bad enough to warrant a real evacuation, it often came as a welcome break. By afternoon the second day, however the gloom from outside spilled in, and cabin fever started to take over.

After lunch, Whitney's fifteen-year-old brother, Will, came down to the kitchen and said, "The adults took away the Playstation and the TV. They said it makes us fight too much and we should learn to use our imaginations like they used to have to do. You've got to come help me, I can't handle all the little cousins by myself."

Abby-Claire huffed, and scratched her temple. "Let's go up to the attic. We'll grab all those old clothes in the trunks, and I'll take the girls back down to the parlor to play dress up. You and the boys can stay upstairs in the attic and wrestle, or chase each other, or something since that's the only place we're allowed to run."

By now, the other cousins had congregated behind Will. Whitney yelled, "I get the big hat with the flowers!"

Mary yelled, "Nuh uh. You can't call dibs until you can see it."

Abby-Claire cut them off. "Rock-paper-scissors after we get the clothes into the parlor."

Abby-Claire sat on a couch and looked out the window while the girls played. The trees bent over farther than she had ever seen them bend before. Around two o'clock, all at once, she saw sunlight—the eye. She left the girls and ran up to the attic. "Will, the eye's right over us. Go see if your dad'll take everyone down to the creek. We've only

got a couple of hours at best until it passes, and I think we could all stand to get out of this house.”

Abby-Claire ran out the back door and took in the faint smell of saltwater that hurricanes sometimes drag inland. She was so excited to be out of the house, and away from the children, that she hadn't thought of exactly what she wanted to do. She stood there for a minute and heard almost nothing. Still air. Perfect for target practice.

After she strung her bow, she grabbed a foam model of a deer with a target painted over the part where the vital organs would be. She frowned when she came out of the shed just in time to see her father, Jackson, with a rifle. She had hoped to be alone. They headed down a trail into a clearing where they could shoot in the direction facing away from the rest of the family at the creek.

Jackson pulled a few shells out of his pocket and loaded the rifle while Abby-Claire walked to the other side of the clearing to set up the target. As soon as she got out of the way, he fired. Angel and Bear, their dogs, had followed, and ran around behind them. Both dogs knew not to get in front of people shooting. Abby-Claire slid a leather finger tab on, then nocked an arrow and shot. The arrow hit almost on top of the hole where her father's bullet had gone in. They continued for a few more rounds then walked together to the target to retrieve Abby-Claire's arrows. As they pulled them out, Jackson said, “So your aunt Jenny tells me you had an interesting conversation with Whitney last night.”

Abby-Claire shrugged. “I guess.”

They started walking back and Jackson said, “She seems to think you don’t approve of sending Bibles to Muslims.”

“I never said that.”

“Abby-Claire.” His voice was suddenly gruff and condescending.

“I didn’t—I don’t—.”

Her father raised his rifle up again and they went back to the routine from earlier.

He asked, “Do you have an issue with the children’s offering? You used to get excited about sending Bibles to China. You always talked about going to deliver them yourself.”

“That was different.”

“How?”

She fired another arrow and thought about it. “Well, weren’t those going to *churches* in China? People who wanted the Bible and were going to use it?”

“Yes they were. And Bibles are illegal in China. Folks were risking getting arrested.”

“But the people getting them were Chinese Christians?”

“Some of them. Some of them didn’t know the gospel yet and the Bible taught them. This is the same thing, except they’re printed in whatever language the people speak where they’re going.”

“Maybe that’s it.”

He took another shot. “What’s it?”

“It just—the whole thing sounds so ignorant. First they called them Muslim Bibles then they think they’re clearing things up when they call them Bibles printed in the Muslim Language. There’s no such thing as the Muslim Language.”

“What did you tell Whitney and your other cousins?”

“I told them that.” She paused, and his face told her she needed to be more specific. “That there’s no such thing as the Muslim Language and the Muslim World isn’t a real place.”

“But your aunt Jenny already told Whitney that’s where she was going.”

“Why can’t she just tell her she’s going to Egypt?”

“She’s too young to understand all that.”

“Understand that there’s a place called Egypt where a lot of Muslims live?”

“You have to teach children in ways they can understand. They don’t know what Egypt is, but they can understand why you would want to share Jesus in a place like the Muslim World.”

She shot another arrow then looked at him. “So when are they old enough to understand?”

“Not yet. And it’s none of your business. This is between her, and her mama, and God.” His tone was final.

“Yes sir.”

Jackson shook his head, and took another shot at the target. “We should’ve never let you go to that public school.”

She rolled her eyes. He didn't say anything. They both knew it was a prestigious program, and plenty of kids went to the Christian school because they didn't get into the magnet school. They had had this conversation before.

Abby-Claire had one more arrow and knew they would have to head in after this round; she heard thunder not far off. She spotted a squirrel on a branch about halfway down the edge of the clearing. She had never eaten squirrel before, but a fresh kill would give her an excuse to spend a little longer away from everyone else, cleaning it in her grandfather's shop. She aimed carefully and took her shot. The arrow went straight in and impaled the squirrel, and knocked it to the ground.

Jackson pointed his rifle to the ground and said, "Good shot."

They walked to the squirrel carcass. It didn't move. The arrow had gone in diagonally through its chest and come out the other side about a third of the way down its back. No way any vital organs hadn't been damaged. It hadn't suffered. She breathed a sigh of relief. She liked hunting, but only when the odds were in favor of a painless death. She picked it up by the end of the arrow without blood on it. Her father shifted his weight to one leg as he slid his free hand into his pocket and asked, "You know how to dress a squirrel?"

"I'll get grandpa to show me."

He shifted his weight to the other leg. "I see. You plan on eating it?"

"I'll taste it. If I don't like it, Grandpa might eat it. If not, there's nine dogs at the house." She looked up at him. "It'll get eaten."

She widened her stance to prove a point. When she put her foot down, she felt something wiggle, then give way and squish. She picked up her foot, and saw a pair of

tiny grey baby squirrels. One was squirming, and the other was now flattened, the pattern from the bottom of her shoe outlined in red against the grey skin, the skull still intact, but the eyes dangling out of the sockets. She accidentally kicked the other one when she pulled her foot off the first one. She felt her skin burning red. She was angry, but she knew it couldn't really be about these baby squirrels. She almost cried. "I killed him! He was just a baby."

Her father looked down at the squirrels and said, "Must've got knocked out of the nest during the hurricane."

She picked up the one she'd kicked. Two of its legs looked broken, and its breathing was labored. "I hurt him. I killed the other one, and I might as well have killed this one. He's going to die now." She felt sick.

Her father took it, and said, "You probably don't want to watch this."

She again wanted to cry, but wouldn't let her father see her as weak. She watched as he snapped the squirrel's neck, and it stopped moving. She knelt down, and started to dig a hole with her hands.

"Abby-Claire, we need to go. Just toss it into the woods" Jackson looked around as the wind started to pick up. He huffed in frustration, then knelt down and helped her. "Hurry up. We need to get inside."

She placed both of the squirrels in the hole, and scraped the dirt back over it. Her father pulled her up by the arm, and dragged her back toward the house. She could feel bits of baby squirrel stuck to the bottom of her shoe, so she scraped it along the ground all the way back to the house.

They found her grandparents on the porch. Virginia clutched her chest and said, “Thank the Lord,” when they walked up. Jackson looked at his father, and said, “Daddy, Abby-Claire wants you to show her how to clean a squirrel. I guess it’ll be her dinner tonight.”

Her grandfather took her out to his shop and pulled the arrow out of the squirrel. He handed her his pocketknife. “All right, now. Hold him by the tail and make a slit between his tail and his butthole. Careful you don’t cut the butthole, believe you me, you do not want to cut the butthole.”

Abby-Claire laughed for the first time in several days. She made the slit then looked up for more instruction.

“Good, good. Now take the slit down his back just a little, you don’t need to go too far, you just want to break the tailbone, but don’t cut the tail off. Good. All right, now grab hold of him by the back legs and stand on his tail.”

Abby-Claire thought he was joking at first, but he waited. She bent down and put the tail beneath one of her shoes.

“All right, now pull.”

She pulled upward and the skin tore on the front side under its legs, and the whole skin slid off in almost one piece, turned inside out, the flesh glossy and pink. Abby-Claire tried to picture what it would be like if she stepped on a squirrel this size. Even if it didn’t escape before her foot came down, it would have a better chance than the babies did.

Her grandfather said, “Give him here, I’ll lop off the legs and the head for you.” He paused and then looked at her. “So you going to tell me why your Daddy and your aunts are so upset, or do I have to wait and ask them?”

“I just... don’t understand the way they’re explaining some of the stuff to the kids at church.” She decided it might be best to not mention her aunt specifically.

Her grandfather cut the squirrel’s feet and head off, and stood with the skinless carcass in his hand. “You going to be a little more specific, or am I going to have to drag this out of you?”

“Why do they have to teach the kids that all Muslims live in a place called the Muslim World and everyone there speaks the Muslim Language and Osama Bin-Laden is their king?”

He turned his head and looked at her sideways then scanned her up and down. He handed her the knife and the squirrel carcass and said, “Start your knife down next to the butthole again. Remember; be careful not to cut it. Make a slit all the way up his belly to the hole where his neck used to be. Be sure you break all the way through the rib cage.”

She made the incision and exposed all the organs. The arrow had passed through both the heart and lungs. Blood started to drip.

“Careful, hold him over—Well shoot. Hold him over the sink. We’ll have to drain it and refill it.”

He pulled the drain plug and the swirls of pink and red slowly drifted into a spiral at the center as the blood dripped into the water.

He said, “Start with your hands, most of the guts ain’t attached to nothing so they’ll just sort of plop out on their own then use your knife to scrape out the stubborn ones. All right, you’re good to go. Grab the guts. Dogs’ll eat the heart and lungs and liver and you can toss the rest in the creek after the storm. Fish like them.”

She didn't want him to bring the conversation back to Muslims, so she asked, "Why is grandma so paranoid about running out of water during a hurricane? She always just says they had some bad luck with the water with one hurricane."

He looked at her for a second, like he couldn't decide whether or not he wanted to answer her question, then said, "When she was about your age, they lost the water to their pump during a storm. Her great-grandmamma was real sick before the hurricane, and she didn't make it. Your grandmamma somehow got it in her head that it's because she was dehydrated. Everybody else says she was halfway to Heaven before the storm, or the business with the water, but your grandmamma can't be convinced. Now she just tries to protect everybody."

Abby-Claire didn't know how to respond. She had always found her grandmother's paranoia annoying, and never understood it. She opened her mouth to speak, but couldn't think of anything to say.

Her grandfather said, "You don't always have to say something. Sometimes it's ok to just nod."

Her face lightened. She held up the cleaned squirrel. "Do we cook this thing whole?" she asked.

"Your daddy was pulling your leg. You can't cook no squirrel without soaking him overnight. Too much blood."

He looked at her for a second, and said, "It's ok if you're starting to wonder what kind of stuff we made up when you were little. It's all right to question. Just be sure you always come back to the right place for the answers."

“Yes, sir.” She knew he meant the Bible. She stared at him for a second, and knew she probably shouldn’t ask the question she wanted to.

“What you thinking?” he asked.

“Aunt Jenny never let her kids believe in Santa Clause because she didn’t want them to think she made up Jesus just to make them behave. How’s this any different?”

“Muslims weren’t a issue when you were little. It’ not something your mama and daddy had to fuss with. Your aunt’s doing the best she can. Raising them the way they should go.”

As they were cleaning up, the wind howled and she saw aunt Jenny in the doorway. “Daddy, I’ll help Abby-Claire clean up. You can go on inside.”

He nodded then rinsed his hands off, and left.

For something to do, Abby-Claire started to rinse off the squirrel’s organs. It didn’t seem necessary, but she needed to keep her hands busy. She filled the heart with water then squeezed it out. The water ran red, so she decided to repeat the process until it ran clear. Aunt Jenny grabbed something from the sink and started to put it under the water. Abby-Claire glanced over. “Those are the kidneys. You might not like what comes out if you rinse them.”

She dropped them back into the sink. “Why are you even rinsing off the guts. Did he tell you to?”

She just shrugged.

Aunt Jenny looked nervous as she said, “I wanted to talk to you.”

“I would’ve never guessed.”

Her aunt’s face showed displeasure, but she didn’t say anything.

Abby-Claire said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you had told Whitney all that stuff on purpose. I was just telling her what I know. She asked.”

“Abby-Claire. I’m worried about you. I think you’re starting to show some signs of rebellion.”

Abby-Claire could feel her face burning red. That word: Rebellion. It never led to anything good. The accusation alone meant her life was about to change drastically. The adults had lost faith in her.

“I’ve been talking to your mama about some of the doubts you’ve been having, and we think it might be good for you to come with me, and see what it’s like.”

“Doubts? I haven’t been doubting. I just don’t understand why we can’t tell the kids the—wait. Go with you? To Egypt?”

“Uh huh. Isn’t that exciting?”

Abby-Claire stared, mouth agape. She pictured herself standing outside a mosque in Cairo trying to hand Bibles to people with no interest in them. Everyone hurrying past her, ignoring her.

“You need to pray about this, Abby-Claire. God’s giving you an opportunity to do his work in the field. Not everyone gets to do that. You should ask him to change your heart. He can do that, you know?”

Abby-Claire just nodded.

The door opened, and the wind howled again as her mother, Charlene, walked in, yelling into her cell phone. “Hold on, I’m almost in.” The silence returned when she closed the door and said, “Well all right then. We’ll see you Sunday, bright and early. All right. Bye-bye.” She closed her phone and looked up. “I was just checking in on my

black friend. Long as the weather clears up, she's going to come to church with us on Sunday. You might finally get to meet her, Abby-Claire."

Charlene became "friends" with this woman over a year ago when she met her through an adopt-a-prisoner ministry called Wings of Hope. Abby-Claire had yet to learn this woman's actual name since her mother just called her "my black friend."

Her mother said, "So, Abby-Claire, I guess aunt Jenny told you the good news?"

She nodded.

"Well aren't you excited? You're going on an international mission trip!"

Aunt Jenny added, "We might even get to squeeze in a little sight seeing on the last day."

Abby-Claire, too overwhelmed to handle both her mother and her aunt said, "I think I'm going to go pray about it for a little while. Will y'all fill the sink back up?"

Aunt Jenny's face fell from excitement to concern; Charlene's to disappointment. On her way out, Abby-Claire glanced back over her shoulder, and saw aunt Jenny put her arm around Charlene. She was pretty sure they were about to pray for her.

She went out onto the porch where the wind whipped her hair across her face, and briefly knocked her off balance. The wind had also picked up droplets of mud, so her entire left side was brown by the time she got inside. After she cleaned up, she still had some time left before dinner, so she went to the bedroom, thankfully void of cousins, and opened her computer to see if her brother, Tim, was online. No luck. She sent him a Facebook message: "Guess Ive finally become a rebellious teenager..."

Tim was 20 and lived in Paris and had just moved in with a Swiss art dealer named Baptiste, nine years his senior. He rarely spoke to their parents. Before Abby-

Claire could finish reading a Weather Chanel report on the hurricane, she heard the chat noise from Facebook. A message from Tim said:

*Mom catch you with a Harry Potter book?*

Lol. I wish. I told whitney the Muslim World isn't a real place.

*Now why would you go and do a thing like that?*

Good question.

Duty to uphold the truth?

*Ha! It didn't take with me. You finally coming around?*

IM STILL A CHRISTIAN TIM!

*Ok. Then why are you talking to ME about this?*

How did you deal with them when they started asking about you and Louis-Arnaut?

*I was converting him. Remember? Can't really play that card whwn youre corrupting a little cousin.*

## CHAPTER II

Just before Abby-Claire started high school, a new family moved into the house next door. One Friday morning, she walked with Charlene and Tim to the new neighbors' front door. As they approached, she saw a shadow leap in front of a window, plié, then leap out of the frame again. A few steps closer, she heard a suite from *Swan Lake* playing. When they got to the door, she and her brother flanked their mother in the manner they had been trained to as soon as they were both old enough to walk.

“All right y'all,” their mother said. “We're the first ones to meet them. We don't know if they're Christians or not yet, so we don't know what we're dealing with here.” She looked up and said, “Ok, Lord, whatever you've brought us, we're ready for it.”

Charlene applied the broad smile reserved for these occasions as she held up a loaf of bread she had baked that morning. She extended it like an offering while Tim rang the doorbell. Abby-Claire watched the window until the music stopped and the door opened. A tall boy about her brother's age, with brown curly hair, stood there in a pair of shorts and nothing else. Abby-Claire spotted the logo for a dance apparel company on his undergarments, just visible above his waistband.

He seemed flummoxed as he took in the scene: the bread, the grin, the blushing schoolgirl. Abby-Claire had never been on the receiving end of a friendly-welcome-to-the-neighborhood and could only imagine what it must look like from the other side so she smiled to try to ease him. He smiled back, and smiled at Charlene then at Tim. The boy blushed when he looked at Tim. Tim blushed too. They both looked at the ground

and everyone stood in awkward silence until a woman's voice yelled from inside the house. Abby-Claire couldn't understand what the woman said.

The boy looked into the house and yelled something in French. He turned back and looked at them. He pointed to the bread and asked Charlene, "This is bread, no?"

"Yep, sure is. Homemade. Just baked it this morning."

The boy turned back and started to yell, but a tall woman in a long black dress with dark straight hair appeared and took in the scene the same way the boy had. As the woman seemed to search for words, Charlene chimed in, "Hi there, we're y'all's new neighbors." She told her their names then said, "We just wanted to come say 'hi' and 'welcome to the neighborhood.' This is for y'all." She held the bread up higher and the woman stared at it for a second, then took it and studied it while she turned it over in her hands a few times. She handed it to her son, and said something in French.

The boy left. Without thinking, Abby-Claire craned her neck to get a look at the boy as he walked away. Her mother elbowed her and the woman said, "How rude of me. Please, come in?"

They walked into a large empty wood-floored room where a chandelier hung from a high vaulted ceiling. The woman explained, "Louis-Arnaut, saw the floor in this room and could not bear to see us fill it with furniture so we left it empty. To rehearse."

Abby-Claire couldn't help but let out a, "Wow."

Her mother elbowed her again.

"I used to dance myself. My daughter, Genevieve, she dances as well," the woman explained.

She invited them into the next room, furnished like a living room, but without a TV, and invited them to sit in a cluster of antique-looking damask-upholstered furniture arranged around a coffee table. Abby-Claire and Tim both sat on a love seat and Louis-Arnaut sat in a chair across from them. She caught herself looking up his shorts. They were just loose enough that she could see almost to the top of his thigh. She felt a small wave of heat pass over her whole body. He didn't seem to notice. He was talking to Tim about something. She didn't hear what. She snapped back into the moment when her mother asked, "So what brings y'all to Mobile? Y'all sound like y'all might be French, are y'all French? And what's your name, by the way? I forgot to ask. Oh my goodness, I am so rude."

The woman looked overwhelmed by all the questions, but she never broke her stiff posture, hands neatly folded in her lap. After she took a moment to organize her thoughts, she said, "My name is Clémence Strong, and yes, I am French. I am from Paris. My husband is from here. We met when he studied business in Paris and he stayed behind to marry me. He has an old friend here who offered him a very good job. We also thought it might be good for the children to live somewhere new." She paused and stared off into her back yard. "This is very new." She paused again then looked back at Charlene, "My husband warned me people might bring food."

"Well, we're real friendly here in the South. We just want our neighbors to feel welcome."

A pale-skinned brunette in all black who looked older than fourteen walked into the room. She wore no make-up at all so she wasn't quite Goth, but Abby-Claire could have sworn the room got colder.

“This is Genevieve,” she said before turning to the girl to say something in French.

Abby-Claire didn’t speak French, but she knew the word ‘bizarre’ sounded the same in both languages.

Charlene said, “You know, Tim here speaks French.”

Clémence, Genevieve, and Louis-Arnaut exchanged nervous embarrassed glances.

“He wants to go to Paris for school next year,” Charlene added.

Tim smiled and said something in French that also had the word ‘bizarre’ in it.

Tim and the three French people laughed. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that everyone in the room had just called her and her mother bizarre. Abby-Claire seethed a bit, but stopped when Louis-Arnaut looked at her and smiled.

After they left, they were barely to the sidewalk when Charlene started, “Ok, what did we learn? They’re French, which means if they go to church at all, they’re probably Catholic. So...?”

“So they’re probably not saved,” Tim recited, looking over his shoulder at the house.

Abby-Claire’s heart sank. She had been so caught up in lusting over the new neighbor boy; she had completely forgotten to find out whether or not he was a Christian. As her mother continued the rundown about the new family and worked out a game plan for witnessing to them, a term popped into Abby-Claire’s mind: Missionary Dating. It was when a non-believer dated a believer and tried to win over their soul for Christ. It was controversial, and dating non-believers was usually frowned upon and considered

playing with fire, but she had heard success stories. Especially when the believer was a girl. The bigger problem, as she saw it, was getting Louis-Arnaut's attention and convincing him she was mature enough to go out with him. And she thought Genevieve seemed to like Tim; maybe they would both have luck with this one. Abby-Claire didn't hear the rest of her mother's spiel, but she knew the contents, so she just gave her mother a dutiful nod.

Louis-Arnaut came over that night. It was after nine o'clock. Charlene looked at the clock and asked of no one in particular, "Who in the world is that ringing my doorbell after nine o'clock?" When she saw it was Louis-Arnaut, she was less upset. He asked to see Tim who quickly went to the porch and shut the door behind him. He watched through the glass and waited for his mother to walk away.

Abby-Claire lost interest and went up to her room. A few minutes later, Tim came in, and said Louis-Arnaut had invited them to the mall the next day. "They didn't bring much with them clothing-wise and they want some help picking out stuff so they don't look foreign in school."

Abby-Claire responded, "I guess that means I get to babysit Genevieve while you're off with your new friend?"

Tim just smiled and said, "We're leaving at eleven."

She came downstairs the next morning to find their mother had fixed bacon, eggs, sausage, biscuits, grits, and a few other things. Abby-Claire went to the refrigerator for yogurt. Charlene looked upset and said, "But, y'all've got a big day today, I don't want you to be hungry."

“Mom, we’re just going to the mall.”

“With a pair of prospects. If everything goes right we could convert an entire family. They could all be in Heaven together someday because of you. You need your strength.”

Abby-Claire didn’t see the point in arguing so she said, “I’ll eat some eggs.”

“Fine. Tim, you eat up.”

Tim obliged. Just before they finished eating, their dad walked in from mowing the lawn.

“Oh good,” Charlene said. “You’re just in time. I hoped we’d all get to pray together before y’all headed out.”

Their father removed his cap, and sat down then they all joined hands around the table as he prayed, “Father God I just want thank you, once again, for blessing me and my wife with these two precious gifts from you. I thank you for giving them the desire to follow you and to do your will. I pray for guidance for them today as they do your bidding and spread the light of your Word. I also pray that you’ll open the hearts and minds of this new family you’ve brought into our lives and that you would use us as instruments for your will. It’s in the most precious Name of your beloved Son Jesus that we pray. Amen.”

They all repeated, “Amen.”

On the way to the mall, Louis-Arnaut and Tim sat in the front seat speaking mostly in French. Tim wasn’t fluent, but Louis-Arnaut seemed more than willing to accommodate. At the mall, they split off and Abby-Claire wound up showing Genevieve around, although Genevieve’s coldness had started to grate against her. Abby-Claire

knew she should be trying to witness, and would need some sort of story to tell her mother that night, but she just couldn't muster up the courage to ask her any questions about her faith. Genevieve had some sort of strange power over her; she wanted her to like her. She knew Genevieve would be popular. She was French.

They didn't have much luck, but Genevieve didn't seem to have anything to worry about. Her clothes were fine. Louis-Arnaut, on the other hand, would be laughed out of the building if he showed up wearing a tight black t-shirt and thin scarf. That might fly in big cities up north, but not in Alabama.

She sent Tim a text telling him to meet them in the food court. She couldn't be alone with Genevieve much longer. She and Genevieve got frozen coffee drinks and sat down at a table to wait. She suddenly had butterflies in her stomach. It was the feeling she always got when she felt led to witness to someone, but somehow worse, more intense. It dawned on her that the butterflies were for Louis-Arnaut, not Genevieve. And they had nothing to do with his salvation. She knew she should repent, so she changed her plan. What better way to win over a boy than by dating him? Then he would have to at least go to church with her. And seniors dated freshmen all the time. Or sometimes. She knew she'd at least heard of it happening.

She had never had a boyfriend before. Tim had never had a girlfriend either. Their parents had never talked to them about it. It was sort of a taboo subject, but they didn't really seem to like the idea of either of their children dating. Abby-Claire prayed that her parents would make an exception to their unwritten rule since it was, after all, for Kingdom purposes.

Tim and Louis-Arnaut came into view walking close together. Their arms touched for a bit longer than dictated by the mere flow of their strides. Tim looked down at their arms for a second and smiled, then just as quickly pulled away. As they approached the table, Tim asked, “Any luck?”

Abby-Claire shrugged. “Her clothes are fine. The girls at school will probably all be trying to copy her.”

Genevieve looked back and forth between Tim and Louis-Arnaut. She said something in French that started with “Awe.”

“Genevieve!” her brother yelled, anger on his face.

Tim blushed, but not in a coy, bashful kind of way. Abby-Claire could tell he was humiliated.

Genevieve said something else with a shrug.

Tim said, “I’m going to go to the bathroom,” and left.

Genevieve laughed. Louis-Arnaut looked upset at first, but then he laughed too, and sat down at the table as if nothing had happened.

Louis-Arnaut said to Abby-Claire, “He will be fine. It was just a little joke. Genevieve can be mean sometimes, but it is always in jest.”

When they got home, Charlene told Genevieve and Louis-Arnaut that she was making dinner for all of them, and their parents would be over soon.

At dinner, Abby-Claire and Genevieve sat across from each other. They stared and didn’t really speak. Charlene and Clémence did the same. The fathers found some sort of common ground, business probably. Tim and Louis-Arnaut didn’t stop talking the whole time. In French. Abby-Claire spent most of the meal making shapes out of her

mashed potatoes. In silence. After Charlene cleared the plates, Louis-Arnaut suggested Tim should come back to their house to work on his French a bit more.

“And he can just stay the night,” Genevieve added.

Tim and Louis-Arnaut both squirmed, but to Abby-Claire’s surprise, Tim agreed. This move had her downright dumbfounded, it wasn’t like he would be miles away and need to drive home in the middle of the night. Why wouldn’t he just come back home?

“Well that’s a great idea,” Charlene said. “And you know what, Genevieve can come spend the night over here and help Abby-Claire. She has to start learning French at school soon, too. And then she can just go to church with us in the morning.”

Abby-Claire wasn’t sure why she hadn’t seen that move coming- a pre-church sleepover. Those happened all the time. That was an easy way to get someone to come to church with you. Take care of the logistics so they didn’t have an excuse. It was one of Charlene’s favorite moves.

“And Tim can come to mass with us,” Mr. Strong added.

Charlene’s smile faltered, but she said, “Well of course. Won’t that be fun?”

Abby-Claire knew her mother well enough to know that she would play this card again next week with the boys at church and the girls at mass. That would be interesting.

As soon as they were upstairs in Abby-Claire’s room with the door shut, Genevieve said, “You suppose I am actually going to teach you French, don’t you?”

“That’s what you’re here for. But we can just talk if you want. Or listen to some music. Have you ever heard of David Crowder?” She had spent the entire day blowing

opportunities with this girl and knew she would never forgive herself if she didn't at least try at this point.

Genevieve wrinkled her face and said, "You really don't know do you?"

"Know what? About David Crowder?"

"Why your brother is suddenly interested in learning French."

"He's just trying to get closer to Louis-Arnaut."

"Oh, so you do know?"

"Well, they're probably doing a French lesson. He wants to live there someday.

Tim already speaks French some though, so your brother doesn't have as much work cut out for him as you do."

Genevieve looked a bit shocked. "Oh. You don't know then."

"Know what? What do you keep talking about?"

"Your brother likes my brother."

Abby-Claire stopped breathing for a second, and she felt her face turn red, this time with anger. She had heard those rumors about her brother ever since she was old enough to know what it meant. Things had gotten especially tense the summer before after something happened at youth camp with lotion and a Jew. She had defended him every single time. Her brother was saved.

"Tim's not gay. He's just cultured."

Genevieve raised one eyebrow.

"Tim is a Christian. Homosexuality is a sin and he knows that. He would never decide to be gay. Why would he?"

“When we were drinking the coffee things,” she said “coffee things” with disdain. “I said they made a cute couple.” She leaned closer to Abby-Claire to say, “Your brother got embarrassed and left.”

“That’s ‘cause it was rude, he didn’t know how to act. People make fun of him for that all the time. You probably hurt his feelings.”

“I hurt his feelings, so he goes to sleep with my brother?”

“French lessons,” Abby-Claire said as she crossed her arms. She heard herself say it. Even she didn’t believe it. It all started to come together. It still didn’t make sense. Why would Tim choose that? But he clearly had. The incident with the lotion suddenly made sense too.

Genevieve shook her head then said she was tired. The girls changed in silence then went to bed. Genevieve fell asleep within minutes, but Abby-Claire lay awake and watched the ceiling fan. She started to cry. This was one battle she was tired of fighting. And Tim wasn’t helping. Boys don’t have sleepovers. At least not when they’re both seventeen. Abby-Claire knew that. She rolled over and looked at the French girl asleep in the bed next to her. She seemed so certain about Tim. And she had no reason to spread a rumor about him. She had just met him. Abby-Claire rolled back onto her back. For a split second, she entertained the thought that her brother might be next door fornicating with another boy. She wasn’t prepared for what she felt: relief. In that split second, her brother finally made sense to her. She hated feeling this way. She knew she wasn’t supposed to, but she relished in the moment. She could finally let go of her fear that the rumors might be true. They were. The thought of her mother ever finding out gave her a chill, but she was still somehow elated. Tim was gay. There was nothing to be done about

it. She rolled over and glanced at Genevieve once more, and whispered “Thank you” before she went to sleep.

### CHAPTER III

*Millstone Abby-Claire. Millstone.*

*Whats your punishment?*

I corrupted a child. Millstone around the neck then cast into the sea.

I wish

Mission trip to the Muslim World to deliver Muslim Bibles.

*Bahahahahahahahahahhhahahahahahaah!*

Thanks for the sympathy

*What does that mean in normal people talk?*

Egypt

bibles in arabic

*You're going to Egypt? Not fair.*

You LIVE in France

*Touche little sister.*

*Touche*

Neither of them wrote anything for several seconds. Abby-Claire had her hands over the keyboard when Tim wrote back.

*Just lay low and do what they say*

*and don't fight it*

*and keep it Baptist.*

Keep it Baptist?

*None of that public school tomfoolery you been learnin*

She heard Whitney running down the hall yelling "Dinner time!"

I have to go

dinner

*I'm here if you need to talk.*

Bye.

## CHAPTER IV

When her parents went back into town after the storm, Abby-Claire stayed behind to help with clean up. She and her grandfather set out on four-wheelers and headed down to the creek. The sun was barely above the horizon and shone through the trees in bright, broken up beams. A few dead limbs had fallen, but nothing looked severe. They did have to stop to move one bigger log off of the trail.

He said, “Looks like we fared pretty good, but let’s get on down to the creek to make sure it didn’t wash away too much.”

When they got to the creek, they rode along for almost half a mile when her grandfather stopped at a shallow point and looked at the bank. He got off his four-wheeler and went down to study some marks in the mud along the bank. She had never seen anything like it. There was a set of animal tracks she didn’t recognize trailing away into the woods. She looked across to the other side of the creek and saw a similar set of markings. Her grandfather sighed.

She heard the dampened thud of horse hooves on moist soil. A silhouette on horseback rode towards them out of a beam of sunlight. The palomino horse came to a stop next to the markings on the other side of the creek. She still couldn’t see anything but a silhouette as the rider coaxed his horse to ford the creek. Once he got across, he dismounted, and Abby-Claire got a better look at him. He was about her age. He wore brown boots with jeans and a Dixie Outfitters t-shirt and baseball cap with a large fishhook bent around the front of the brim. He was thin, but broad shouldered, and Abby-

Claire noticed several veins visible across his forearms. He smiled. She felt her heart beat a little faster.

Her grandfather got off his four-wheeler, and went to shake the boy's hand. "I'm guessing you work for Rod?"

"I'm his nephew."

Her grandfather's face fell a little, and he studied the boy for a second before saying, "Oh, so you work for free? Just like Abby-Claire here." He motioned for her to come over.

She got off her four-wheeler, and the boy took his hat off then extended his hand as he made his way toward her. He tripped, and dropped his hat then accidentally let go of the horse's reigns as he bent to pick it up. The horse started to wander and he started to blush as he fumbled to get his hat, and the reigns into the same hand so he could shake Abby-Claire's. "Sorry. I'm a klutz more days than I'm not. Nice to meet you. My name's Hawthorn. This is Zoe." He rubbed his horse's neck. Abby-Claire noticed that he had deep dimples. She normally didn't notice these kinds of details, but his seemed somehow perfect. She blushed as she shook his hand and felt her blood rushing downward as things started to get... tingly.

Hawthorn looked down at the marks. Large patches of mud had been swept into the creek by something large that had rolled around or something. The tracks looked like a cloven hoof, but had two small toes at the back. It looked like more than one set of tracks. Hawthorn asked her grandfather, "Y'all had problems wild boars here before?"

He shook his head. "We see them every once in a while, but they never been a problem."

“Used to hunt them with my dad.” He pointed at the tracks. “Looks like two or three were wallowing here. Maybe more.”

Abby-Claire asked, “Is that bad?”

“Means there’s probably a sounder living here now,” he said.

“A sounder?” she asked.

“A group of them. A herd.”

Her grandfather sucked in a loud deep breath, then said, “Well shoot. That’s just what I need.”

She looked to her grandfather for explanation, but Hawthorn said, “They dig up crops.” He pointed down. “And tear up creek beds.”

Her grandfather added, “And every farmer I got renting land from me is going to expect me to keep that from happening.”

Abby-Claire tried not to look excited. A wild boar infestation seemed like a perfect excuse to spend most of her summer here, instead of home. And maybe instead of Egypt. “So are we going to need to go hunting every day then?” she asked.

Her grandfather looked away, worried. Hawthorn said, “That’s the best way to do it. Once we kill a few, the rest’ll move on.”

She felt something wet on her ankle. She looked down and realized she’d sunken into the mud. She pulled her feet out one at a time, and Hawthorn put his hand on the small of her back, and grabbed one arm, and the downward rush of blood happened again. This time faster. She didn’t need help balancing, but didn’t complain. They all went back uphill to the four-wheelers on firmer ground. No one in particular decided, but they followed the tracks that veered on and off of the path.

As they entered a clearing, several things happened at once. Hawthorn's whole demeanor changed. He tensed. Abby-Claire could almost feel it. She heard a deep grunting a split second before Zoe neighed and reared back. Abby-Claire realized the grunting was from an enormous black boar standing on the other side of the clearing. It had to have been five feet long with bristled hair standing up on its back. Hawthorn yelled, "Whoa, Zoe. Whoa." He never lost his seat. He backed Zoe to the edge of the clearing opposite the boar. He looked at Abby-Claire and her grandfather and yelled, "He's about to charge."

She looked down at the indicator lights on her four-wheeler to see if she was in reverse yet, she had lost count of what gear she was in. Her grandfather yelled something indistinguishable and she looked up and saw the boar charging toward her. It stopped inches in front of the four-wheeler. She screamed.

Hawthorn came charging on Zoe and she reared up on her hind legs and neighed a few feet from the boar. Abby-Claire could tell Zoe was scared, and trying to get away, but the boar ran to the edge of the clearing and disappeared into the woods. Abby-Claire sat in shock and Hawthorn tugged on her upper arm. "Climb up. You can come back for the four-wheeler later. There's probably more." He started to help her up onto Zoe's back, but her grandfather rode up and said, "Thank you, young man, but I think she's capable of driving herself back. Her four wheeler still works."

Hawthorn said, "We need to get out of here. She's probably got piglets somewhere nearby. I'll come see y'all tomorrow."

## CHAPTER V

Abby-Claire's grandfather informed her parents that night that she would be staying at his house for the time being. Will talked him into letting him stay too. It had been years since he killed his first deer, and they had become mundane by now so he wanted a new challenge. The next morning, She drove them back to Mobile so they could pack for a longer stay. Charlene asked them to stay for lunch, but Will was eager to get back and start hunting. Abby-Claire was just eager to get away from her mother again.

When they pulled up at the plantation house early that afternoon, their grandfather and Hawthorn were sitting in rocking chairs on the porch, Zoe tied to the porch railing. A silver tray with a pitcher of lemonade and two glasses sat on a small table between them, no doubt fresh-squeezed. They both stood when the car pulled up. Hawthorn actually tipped his hat when he said, "Hello Abby-Claire. Nice to see you again." He had to shake his long swoopy bangs, "Bama Bangs" as Tim would've called them, out of the way a few times before he could put his hat back on. It annoyed her when the boys at school flipped her hair like that, but for some reason she didn't mind when he did it. When he got his hat back on, he extended a hand to Will. "You must be Will? Your granddad said you'd be helping us too?" They shook hands, and Will nodded.

Mr. Campbell said, "Well since you all seem to be so eager to get started how 'bout you let Will take y'all's bags up and you can follow Hawthorn back to his uncle's place on the four-wheeler?"

"Are we not taking Zoe?" she asked.

"She might scare the boars. Too noisy," Hawthorn explained.

The ride over was quick, but Abby-Claire took her time on the ride back. Even though she knew she wasn't supposed to, she quite enjoyed sitting between Hawthorn's legs, his hands resting on her hips, occasionally squeezing her when they hit bumps or tilted a bit with the sway of the ground.

"How did you know it was a girl yesterday? The one in the clearing," she asked.

"Males have tusks."

"How'd you know she has piglets?"

"Females aren't aggressive unless they're being protective. Why are you driving so slow?"

She pretended to have just noticed then apologized and sped up.

Will met them outside their grandfather's shed on the other four-wheeler.

"How's this different from tracking a deer?" Will asked.

"They're not nocturnal, they scrounge around at dawn and dusk and sleep at night and during the day."

"Then why are we out here at three o'clock in the afternoon?" she asked.

"Because we're going to go look for their bathroom."

"Come again," she said.

"They're foragers and they eat off the ground and they have bad eyesight so they all use the bathroom in the same spot so they don't accidentally eat their own shit."

Abby-Claire and Will exchanged a glance of shock and discomfort. Hawthorn apologized and corrected himself. "Poop, I mean."

Their grandmother stuck her head out the back door and yelled, “Abby-Claire! I’m sure that nice young man would be more comfortable driving a four-wheeler by himself. Why don’t you switch over and ride with Will?”

Will looked down at Abby-Claire’s hips where Hawthorn’s hands rested and snickered. Hawthorn jerked his hands away and she climbed onto the four-wheeler with Will. She shoved him to the back; there was no question who would drive.

Hawthorn said, “Let’s head on back to the clearing where we saw that sow yesterday. Her piglets were probably nearby; that’s why she charged. We might have even been between her and them.”

Will, ever the diligent student asked, “Does anything hunt the boars? Besides us?”

Hawthorn shrugged. “Tigers.”

Will laughed. “Anything else?”

“Wolves.”

Abby-Claire asked, “Anything you might find in the state of Alabama?”

“Nope.”

Will asked, “So what happens when we find this giant pile of poop?”

“If we find it then we’re in good shape. Might be able to wipe them out, or make them move on before mating season.”

She considered this for a moment. “Wouldn’t they be easier to take out if they’ve just had piglets?”

“They’re pregnant for almost four months. And mating season means the males come around. You don’t want to mess with them.”

“Well they can’t be much worse than that female that attacked Abby-Claire yesterday,” Will said.

“That one fake charged. The males don’t do that as much. And they have big ol’ sharp tusks.”

“So they would rip your thighs to shreds?” Abby-Claire asked sarcastically.

“Laugh all you want. They’re dangerous.”

Will changed the subject. “Will a shotgun take them out?”

“Yeah, buck shot or deer slugs’ll do it.”

Abby-Claire asked, “What about a bow?”

Hawthorn stopped and turned to look at her.

“I’m serious,” she said.

“If you don’t mind using a whole quiver of broad heads.”

“Is it like a deer? Shoot it in the heart?”

“Yeah, but a boar’s not built like a deer, so it’s harder to get it right between the neck and shoulder.”

“I can manage.”

“What do you use?” Will asked.

Hawthorn turned away from them and drove ahead as he said, “A spear.”

They hunted pretty much every night. They intended to hunt in the mornings, but none of them ever actually woke up in time. They occasionally took meals at one another’s houses. Their grandmother seemed particularly wary of Abby-Claire spending too much unsupervised time with Hawthorn.

They found tracks most days, but it was almost two weeks before they saw another boar. A little before sunset, they set out on foot to look around in the woods close to the Campbell's house. They had explored most of the other areas between their houses. Abby-Claire and Will were both a little overwhelmed trying to keep up with where they had been. They had both hunted this land their entire lives, but were used to keeping strict boundaries between their grandfather's land and Hawthorn's uncle's. They'd drawn out a makeshift map based on their memory, Hawthorn's guesses, and their collective intuition. Pretty much as soon as they got into the woods, Will spotted a set of tracks. Fresh tracks. They followed them for a few hundred yards then Hawthorn stopped suddenly. He put a hand to his ear. It was more a signal for Will and Abby-Claire to listen than an attempt to hear better. They heard a low grunting sound and something rustling through the underbrush. A hundred feet or so ahead, there was a dark mass of black bristles visible between two bushes. One bush completely covered the boar's head as it rustled around, probably eating berries.

Hawthorn motioned for Will to walk ahead of him then mimed taking a shot. While Will lowered his shotgun and took the stance to aim, Hawthorn motioned for Abby-Claire to nock an arrow. Hawthorn had already shown Will where to aim, square into the skull. Will fired and hit the boar at the top of the shoulder. It charged immediately. Hawthorne shouted, "Will! Get out of the way so Abby-Claire can shoot."

He dove sideways and she sunk an arrow between the neck and shoulder just like Hawthorne had told her, but the boar kept coming, a little slower, but still coming.

"Shoot him again!" Hawthorn shouted.

She reached into her quiver, but before she could even get the arrow out, Hawthorn darted past her and yelled as he rammed the spear into the boar right where her arrow had hit.

The boar let out a shrill squeal and somehow kept running. Once the spearhead sunk all the way in, the spikes sticking out from the base of the head kept it from going in any further. Hawthorn kept his footing, but the boar slid him backwards and his feet dug into the ground. The boar had shoved him back a full foot before its squeal slowly waned and it collapsed. He put a foot on the boar's snout and the boar let out a gurgling grunt as Hawthorn used what looked like all of his bodyweight to pull the spear out. A geyser of blood followed and gushed onto Hawthorn's jeans.

He turned to Abby-Claire, grinning ear to ear, covered in blood from the waist down with spatters everywhere else, including his face. "That's how it's done," he said.

Will started a slow clap. Abby-Claire panted, and smiled at Hawthorn. He pulled the arrow out of the boar and handed it to her as he panted and said, "Good aim. But I told you it might take the whole quiver."

She inspected the arrow. The head was ruined; she must've hit a bone. Will watched as the blood continued to trickle out of the boar. Hawthorn stood with his hands on his hips, slightly bent forward, trying to catch his breath. As he lifted his shirttail to wipe his face, Abby-Claire suddenly noticed she was wet.

She felt guilty for thinking of Hawthorn that way so she left under the guise of getting her grandfather. On the way back to the house, she cooled herself down and thought about the dead baby squirrels to get her mind off of Hawthorn's abs. Her grandfather had heard the shot and was waiting for her at the edge of the woods on a

four-wheeler. She hopped on behind him, and they rode to where they had taken down the boar.

“Nice one?” he asked.

“I guess. I don’t know what makes a wild boar nice.”

“Big tusks?”

She shrugged. “Didn’t get a good look.”

“I heard the shotgun. Will take it down?”

She considered her answer carefully. Her grandfather wouldn’t want to hear that Will had missed. “Group effort.”

When they drove up, they saw Hawthorn elbows deep inside the boar. He pulled out a huge mass of organs that splashed onto the ground. The stomach landed on top then slid off the pile and rolled downhill a bit, the intestines uncoiling, stand by strand, to follow after it.

Her grandfather’s face was blank. He looked at the blood all over Hawthorn, and then at his spear, leaning against a tree, also covered in blood. He turned to Abby-Claire, “Group effort?”

“She got a pretty clean shot in. He was just too close to get in another shot, so I took him out.”

Her grandfather replied, “Boy, that sure looks like a hassle to butcher.”

Hawthorn shrugged. “We could just finish dressing it and cook it whole. Make it a party.”

Within two hours they had dragged the carcass to the house and Hawthorn and Will had finished skinning it. They packed it in ice for the night.

The next day the boys built a fire, while Abby-Claire was inside with her grandmother making the rest of dinner: potato salad, mixed green salad, pimento cheese, deviled eggs, coleslaw, hamburger buns, barbecue sauce. Her grandmother made the sauce herself, the recipe a solemn secret that Campbell women were given on their wedding day. Abby-Claire was charged with making four pies. “Whatever fruit you can find in the pantry,” her grandmother said, “You know what you’re doing.”

She tossed the crust together in the food processor; she knew the recipe by heart. When she put the dough in the refrigerator to chill, her grandmother handed her a large bowl of the sauce. “Here. Take this to your granddaddy. And you might want to see if he wants a particular pie. You know how he gets when he doesn’t get the dessert he wants.” She actually had no idea what her grandmother meant, but didn’t press the issue.

In the yard, Hawthorn had rigged up a spit and had the boar sizzling over the fire. A man and a woman were out there talking to him. Abby-Claire recognized them as Hawthorn’s aunt and uncle. She had never seen Rod on her grandfather’s land before. She had only met him when she went to church with her grandparents. They were rival land barons. Friendly rivals, but rivals nonetheless. Between the two of them, they basically owned the entire county. They’re houses sat near the center, facing opposite directions with about two miles of woods in between, the creek at the center separating their land.

The county had at one time been just the two plantations. No one in living memory from either family had actually farmed on the land that they owned. They leased their land to farmers. Some of them lived on the land; others had their own houses at the

edge of the county. Even the leases themselves predated most of the farmers, passed down for several generations since the War of Northern Aggression, when both families had freed their slaves and replaced them with poor white people. Abby-Claire could never determine exactly how much her grandfather was or wasn't joking when he called it the War of Northern Aggression. She was in second grade before she realized that the Civil War and the War of Northern Aggression were the same thing. It was an embarrassing day at school.

“Hey Mr. Rod, Mrs. Anderson.” She realized as she said it that she didn't know the woman's first name.

“Hey there Abby-Claire.” The woman hugged her. “Thank you so much for being so sweet to Hawthorn. I'm glad he's making some friends.” It was an odd thing to say in front of Hawthorn, and Abby-Claire wasn't sure how to respond, so she just smiled and nodded. It created an awkward silence so she handed her grandfather the sauce and said, “Here you go. Also, I'm making pie for dessert. Any requests?”

“Pie? Well shoot, I was hoping for a cobbler. The Westons are coming and their little girl brought us all those blackberries the other day.” The Westons were one of the families that leased farmland from him.

“I can make a blackberry pie.”

Her grandfather's tone got a bit more condescending, “It's an awful lot of blackberries. Cobbler'll use more of them.”

She saw no point in arguing. And cobbler wasn't that difficult. “Ok. I can make a cobbler. Cherry pie all right?”

“Whatever's fine. I just wanted to make sure you use the blackberries.”

Her parents drove out from town. And so did Will's, along with all three of his sisters. Once their families arrived, the segregation of the sexes became absolute. Women and girls in the kitchen; men and boys outside. It was one thing for Abby-Claire to go hunting with the boys, or shoot with them during the day, but when it came time for meal preparation, her place was in the kitchen. With the exception of that quick trip outside to ask about dessert, she never even saw the fire. The next time she saw the boar, it was a giant pile of shredded meat on a platter. The porch was neutral ground. The boys set up tables for the food and the women laid the tablecloths.

Her mother and aunt were prone to correcting her for the sake of correcting her. They couldn't keep their hands out of things when she was cooking. She did her best to get the pies ready before they arrived. Since she was making cobbler, she only made two pies. She had finished the apple pie and was weaving the lattice for the top of the cherry when they arrived. Aunt Jenny walked in and immediately sprinkled a handful of flour onto the board Abby-Claire was working on. "Here, it'll go faster if it's not sticking so much."

She tensed for a second then calmed herself and said, "Oh good. Y'all are here. You mind finishing this while get started on the cobbler?" Her aunt donned an apron and took over. Abby-Claire threw the blackberries in a bowl and sprinkled some sugar over them. When she turned around, the kitchen was full. Hawthorn's aunt had come in, and so had Mrs. Weston and another woman she assumed must be one of the Anderson's tenants. She recognized the lady from her grandparents' church, but didn't know a name. Charlene walked over to her and said, "Abby-Claire, why are you cooking before your ready to greet company? Go upstairs and clean up."

“Can you do the cobbler while I go wash up?” Her mother answered the question by shoos her out of the kitchen. “Oh. And I haven’t started the ice cream yet. Aunt Jenny?”

“I got it. Go put on some decent clothes and do something with your hair.”

Abby-Claire had on a t-shirt and jeans, and her hair was in a ponytail. It’s what she had worn all day. Her mother didn’t consider it appropriate attire for a barbecue. She would also have to let her hair down. Abby-Claire changed into jeans without holes and a shirt with a collar. She didn’t have time to deal with the crease in her hair from the ponytail, so she braided it to one side.

Will and Hawthorn came out of the room across the hall, both with recently combed hair. Hawthorn was wearing some of Will’s clothes, a too-small shirt stretched tight across his chest and shoulders. The three of them walked downstairs together. Virginia was in the back doorway, and everyone else had gone outside. She motioned for them to come join her and their grandfather got everyone’s attention. “I want to thank everybody for coming out tonight and helping us eat this big ol’ hunk of wild hog. But let’s have a hand the three youngins that got him.” He pointed toward the door and everyone looked at them and cheered. Abby-Claire looked around and smiled nervously. She didn’t like being the center of attention. Will took a bow. Hawthorn leaned against the doorframe, unfazed. “All right, let’s all bow our heads and ask God to bless the food.”

Caps were removed. Heads were bowed.

“Father God, we just thank you for bringing us all together today to fellowship with one another in love. We thank you for bringing Hawthorn to us safely, and for

keeping him safe today. We pray that you would continue to guide and watch over him in this new chapter in his life.”

Abby-Claire didn't hear the rest of the prayer. She looked over at Hawthorn who bowed his head deeper, scrunched his eyes, and turned away from her. She spent the rest of the night trying to get him alone long enough to ask what her grandfather meant, but he avoided her. She even cornered him while he was cranking the ice cream maker, but he just asked her to take over and left.

## CHAPTER VI

By early July, between the three of them, they had taken out six more boars, the biggest over two hundred pounds. After Will left for football camp, her grandfather had shamelessly chaperoned them. But the last day, before Abby-Claire had to go back to Mobile to get ready to go to Egypt, her grandparents had a wake to go to in town, so it was just she and Hawthorn.

They walked along next to the creek making poor attempts at conversation. They didn't see any signs of boars. Not that either of them was looking very hard. Right at sunset, Hawthorn suggested they rest for a minute and pointed to a poplar near the bank. They sat, leaning against the trunk, facing away from each other a little bit. After a minute of awkward silence, Hawthorn said, "Weird being just the two of us. Strange not having Will."

She said, "Yeah," and turned her head to look at him. He had turned his head too. Their faces were almost touching. She felt the urge to kiss him and just went for it. Her forehead knocked his hat off. Neither of them seemed to know what they were doing, so they just sat there with their mouths pressed against each other until she did what she saw in the movies and turned her head. He opened his mouth and so did she, but then their teeth clanked together and they both pulled back. Her heart raced and Hawthorn was panting. They turned back to face in opposite directions again and he took her hand. They sat like that and didn't speak.

A little while later, Hawthorn squeezed her hand then pointed toward a clearing across the creek at two sows and a few piglets. They stood up quietly and she grabbed an

arrow and drew. She aimed for one of the sows. It was facing her directly, so she had a clear shot at the shoulder, which she had figured out was the best place for the first arrow since it caused so much blood loss. If she couldn't hit it again, Hawthorn could take it out with his spear. As she released, the sow turned. The arrow went into her side, much higher than Abby-Claire had anticipated. She thought she had maybe hit it in the lungs, and it would run away, but it turned on its side squealing and kicked its legs, spinning itself in a circle. It looked like some form of slow, bloody, break dancing.

The piglets scattered but the other sow charged. Hawthorn took off running and cleared the creek in one leap. The sow charged with her head up and bit Hawthorn's spearhead. He thrust it into her throat and twisted. She didn't squeal. He jerked the spear back out and let the momentum spin him in a circle, blood slung off the spear in a big arch. He barely broke his stride as he ran to the clearing. The break dancing sow continued to squeal. Higher pitched and more tortured than any Abby-Claire had heard. As soon as Hawthorne reached it, he shoved the spear in through the chest and she stopped moving. The other sow had hobbled to the edge of the creek before she collapsed. The water turned red as her blood flowed downstream. Abby-Claire walked over to Hawthorn and took his spear then went back to the sow at the creek, still struggling to breath, and shoved the spear into her heart.

They looked at each other; both them were panting. At first Abby-Claire thought it was sweat, but Hawthorn was unmistakably crying. So was she.

"You spined her," he said coarsely. "Their spine goes lower than you'd think just looking at them."

"She moved. It's not like I did it on *purpose*."

Hawthorn caught his breath and wiped his face. “I know. It’s just hard watching something suffer like that.”

Abby-Claire felt guilty. She knew on some level that it was absurd to think that God was punishing her for kissing Hawthorn, but at the same time, it was the first, and only, explanation that would come to her. “We should have been paying closer attention,” she said, still panting.

Hawthorn looked away from her, back toward the sow in the clearing. “Why don’t you go on back to your grandparents’ house? I’ll burn the bodies.”

As much as she wanted to get as far away from Hawthorn as she could, she refused to let him see her as weak. She rammed his spear into the ground where she stood then grabbed the hind legs of the sow she’d just finished off. She only managed to move it a foot or so before she had to drop it. Hawthorn was standing next to her by that point. He didn’t say anything; he just grabbed one of the sow’s legs and waited for her to grab the other. Together, they drug her up to the other one and then both set out to gather brush for kindling. Once they had covered the sows, he handed her a box of matches. She lit it, and they both stood next to the fire until the flames built up and the heat was too much to bear. They backed away a few feet, and Abby-Claire said, “You can go. I’ll watch the fire.”

He didn’t respond, but didn’t move. She looked over her shoulder and found a tree that would be too small for both of them to lean against and sat down at the bottom with her hands folded across her chest. Hawthorn stood where he was for a bit. Once the flames peaked, he started towards Abby-Claire. He never looked at her then walked straight past her. She did her best to resist turning to see where he was going, but her

curiosity won out when she heard splashing. He had no reason to go back across the stream; they were on his uncle's side. He had pulled his spear out of the ground to rinse it in the creek. He walked back, spear in hand and stopped next to her, but kept his gaze on the fire. "Never shove a blade in the dirt. It dulls it."

"I know that."

Hawthorn let out something between a laugh and a sigh then shook his head.

"Bitch."

She pictured several ways she could injure him, but decided not to give him the reaction he was obviously looking for. He stood there in silence for a minute longer, then sheathed his spear as he walked to a tree a few feet away and sat down with the spear across his legs, hands on his knees.

Abby-Claire woke up when Hawthorn kicked her. The moon was high in the sky and the fire had burned down to embers. He said, "I'm walking you home." It wasn't an offer, or a request. She got up and took off toward her grandparents' house a few paces ahead of him. She kept her pace brisk to stay ahead, but he was never more than a step or two behind. When they got to the edge of the yard, he stopped. She crossed the yard and climbed the steps to the porch. Her grandfather was asleep in a rocking chair on the porch facing directly into the woods. Hawthorn was still at the edge of them; she hadn't heard footsteps. Somehow just putting that distance between them had calmed her, though. She opened the door then turned back toward the woods. His face was blank, but he tipped his hat, then disappeared. They never spoke of that night again.

## CHAPTER VII

Abby-Claire went back to Mobile for a few days to pack and get ready to go to Egypt. She couldn't decide if she was excited or not. She was getting to go to Egypt, but she also had to hand out Bibles to people who had no interest in reading it, and persuade them to be interested.

She was supposed to go to lunch with her parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc. before heading to the airport, but when she came downstairs, she saw her father standing in the entryway with Hawthorn and his uncle. They all looked somber. She immediately assumed the worst and asked, panicked, if something had happened to her grandfather. Her father held up his hands to calm her said, "Everything's all right, Hawthorn here's just got some things he needs to tell you, show you. They're going to take to the airport after. Don't worry about lunch. We'll all be at the airport to see you off, and we'll get you something to eat there if you're hungry. And we'll bring your bags. You just go on with Hawthorn."

Hawthorn didn't look at her the entire time. He just stared at the ground.

Abby-Claire had learned not to ask questions, or protest, when a group of men made a decision for her. She wasn't sure if she was still mad at him or not. He had called her something awful, but she had kind of asked for it. In the car, Hawthorn sat in the back with his arms crossed and still didn't look at her. His uncle explained, "Since you and Hawthorn have been getting so close, we decided it might be time for you to learn a little bit more about why he moved here."

This explained her grandfather's prayer the night they killed the first boar. "I thought he was just here for the summer?" She suddenly remembered that Hawthorn was in the car. "You said you were just here for the summer."

He spoke for the first time. "I was."

Uncle Rod took over. "His daddy moved here first. We been trying to get his grandmamma, my mama, to let him move here."

She turned to Hawthorn again. "Your parents are divorced?"

"Never married. Never met my mother. Raised by my daddy."

"And your grandmamma," his uncle added.

Hawthorn snapped, "She only came out of her room to eat the food that we cooked. That doesn't count as raising."

They pulled into a nursing home. Rod said, "If you got any keys, or a pocketknife, or anything like that that might could be used as a weapon, leave it in the car."

She turned to look back at Hawthorn for explanation, but he had already bolted from the car and was headed to the entrance. Rod pulled out his pocketknife and a small pistol and put them in the glove box. "All right kiddo, let's go."

He left his keys with a nurse at the desk then walked to a door with a keypad next to it and entered a code. There was a buzzing sound and the door unlatched itself. He motioned for her to go through, and took her to a small sitting room full of cheap-looking couches that turned out to be even less comfortable than they looked. Hawthorn sat across the room from her and continued to avoid her gaze. Rod came back a minute later with a man in white. He had shoulder-length brown hair and a full beard. When he entered, Hawthorn completely changed. The sullenness replaced with a broad smile she

had only seen on him after a kill. He practically ran across the room to hug the man, obviously his father. The man smiled and said, “Hawthorn, so good to see you. I hope you are well, my child.”

Abby-Claire’s confusion only grew as she took in the scene. The man looked exactly like Rod, but 20 years younger. They were definitely brothers. Hawthorn must’ve taken after his mother, though. When the man looked at her directly, she suddenly became aware of the fact that he wasn’t just dressed in white; he was wearing a tunic, a tunic clearly fashioned from a bed sheet. The man had a broad, open, and warm smile that somehow comforted her. He walked over to her and grabbed her hand and forcefully twirled her around as he took her in and asked, “So Hawthorn, who is this lovely child of mine that you’ve brought to me?”

“Dad, this is Abby-Claire. She’s the new friend I was telling you about. The one I’ve been hunting the boars with.”

The man was still holding her hand when he turned back to her and stiffened his fingers, then moved his hand toward her face, still not letting her hand go. He bobbed it in front of her a few times, and she didn’t know what he wanted. Suddenly Hawthorn and his uncle both tensed and Rod moved toward the man from behind. The man’s eyes narrowed toward Abby-Claire and he scowled at her as he yelled, “Stay back, brother!”

Rod stopped moving and the man’s grip on her hand tightened. He was distracted for a second when a middle-aged woman walked in with her head tilted all the way sideways, resting on her left shoulder. There were knots on her neck like it had been that way for years. A white line of dried spit ran down her cheek and she made some gurgled moaning noises. The man kept his eyes locked on Abby-Claire, but yelled, “Tallulah! My

child, I've told you not to bother me when I'm with my progeny." His tone softened when he said my child, but he was yelling again by the end. The woman walked over to him and took the hand that wasn't holding Abby-Claire's and she kissed it, then left. As the man watched Tallulah leave, Hawthorn said, "Abby-Claire, kiss his hand. That's all he wants."

The man forced his hand to her lips, and as soon as she kissed it, he let her hand go and walked away. As soon as he turned away, Hawthorn rushed over and put one arm around her, and grabbed the hand his father had been holding and inspected it for injuries. "Are you ok?" he asked. "Did he hurt you?"

Abby-Claire went from terrified to comforted to angry faster than any single emotion could fully register. She pulled away from Hawthorn and said, "I'm fine."

He looked at his father who had nestled at the center of one of the couches. He spread his arms out and said, "Come my children. Sit with me. Have rest in my bosom."

Abby-Claire's eyes widened and she looked toward Hawthorn in disbelief.

"He just means sit next to him. It's a different, older meaning of the word."

"I don't care what he means. He's creepy. I'm leaving. I'll meet you at the car."

She walked out into the hallway but to the door with the keypad was locked on this side too. She pushed on it just to be sure. She turned around and jumped when she saw all three of them standing a foot away. The man said, "I'm The Only Begotten Son, Which Is In The Bosom Of The Father. O.B. for short."

"Obie?" she asked.

“O.B. For Only Begotten. It’s simpler than saying The Only Begotten Son, Which Is In The Bosom Of The Father. Like when people refer to El Pueblo de Nuestra Senora la Reina de los Angeles del Rio de Porciuncula as simply, L.A.”

Normally, Abby-Claire wouldn’t hang her jaw in disbelief, not even involuntarily, but it seemed the only appropriate response to this particular revelation. “Will someone open this door, please?”

Rod entered the code, and she bolted to the parking lot. Abby-Claire didn’t know what she was feeling. She didn’t know why it mattered that Hawthorn’s dad thought he was Jesus. But just thinking about it was a difficult concept. This was too much to take in. She could barely fully form a thought. She somehow wound up at the car. Rod walked up behind her and said, “Hawthorn’s going to stay to visit with his daddy some more. I’ll take you to the airport.”

She wasn’t certain she wanted to get back into a vehicle with this man, but she didn’t see any other option. She stared out her window the entire drive and neither of them spoke.

How could they drop a bombshell like that just before she went to the other side of the planet for two weeks? Not only that, she now had a twelve-hour plane flight during which she was certain not to get any sleep. She would be playing through scenarios of Hawthorn’s incredibly warped childhood, pondering exactly how crazy he might be. What does it do to a person when his dad thinks he’s Jesus?

## CHAPTER VIII

As they arrived at the airport, Rod said, “It wasn’t his idea to tell you that way. He wanted to wait. Your granddaddy made him. Said Hawthorn couldn’t see you any more if he didn’t introduce you to his daddy.”

Abby-Claire just stared in disbelief. She felt the urge to slap him, but knew it was only because he was the one in front of her at the moment. The slap should be reserved for her grandfather. Or father. Or mother, there was no way Charlene didn’t have a hand in this.

She found her entire family just inside the door. Aunt Jenny greeted her, and swept her into the check-in line before anyone else had a chance to get within arm’s reach. Abby-Claire was shocked by how firm her aunt’s grip was. She turned Abby-Claire’s back to everyone else and said, “I’m sorry, sweetie. They just filled me in. I can’t believe they did that to you. I already gave them an earful. You don’t have to talk to anybody if you don’t want to.” She hugged her, and Abby-Claire relaxed for the first time since O.B. had grabbed her hand.

“Why did they do it? Do they hate Hawthorn that much? What the heck did he do? Why do they want me to hate him? We were just hunting together.”

Her aunt’s demeanor changed. She went from caring aunt back to her usual condescending self. “Abby-Claire, sweetheart, nobody spends that much time with a boy who looks like that and doesn’t have some kind of... stirrings.”

Abby-Claire’s anger flared again. She covered her face with both hands and looked away as she ran her fingers through her hair and pulled until it hurt. She looked

back at her aunt, then scowled and moved in front of her in the line. She wouldn't have been so angry if her aunt had been wrong.

When she finished checking in, she knew she had two choices, go through security and have to deal with not just Aunt Jenny, but the entire group that was going on the trip, or wait to go through security, and face her entire family. She couldn't decide yet, but her grandfather was standing next to her right now, so she decided she might as well yell at him now while they walked to the gate. She scowled up at him. "Happy now?"

"Y'all were starting to get close, I just thought you needed to see the truth about that boy."

"That he's got crazy people in his family?" She glanced behind her. "He can join the club."

He stepped in front of her and stopped her. "Abby-Claire, you don't know what might be wrong with that boy. His daddy thinks he's Jesus."

"Exactly. His dad, not him."

"We just thought you should know the whole story."

"I have no clue what the whole story is. All you did was raise eight million questions that I was too panicked to ask." As soon as she'd said it, she realized that she had in fact had the exact reaction her grandfather wanted. She had panicked and run; wondering how messed-up-in-the-head Hawthorn must be. "You had no right to force him. That was his secret to tell, not yours."

"Y'all were getting too close for you to not know the whole story."

"Wait, how long have *you* known?"

Her grandfather's face fell. He didn't say anything.

"Grandpa, how long have you known?"

"I helped Rod find the nursing home to put him in."

"When?"

"Last summer."

"So you knew when I met Hawthorn? If you were so scared of his dad's crazy rubbing off on me then why didn't you just keep me away from him at the get go?"

"I thought I was ok with it at first. He seemed like a nice young man."

"But?" she couldn't think of any reason her grandfather wouldn't still consider him a nice young man.

"But then y'all started getting so close, and I started wondering if there might be something deeper going on, so I thought you should know the whole story before you got involved?"

"Little late for that."

"If he's going to be here and be going to church and school with you and living right around the corner, you need to know the truth."

"Wait wait wait wait. Go back. Here here? Mobile? Not out by y'all?"

"That old widow at your church, the one that adopted them black babies, she's his aunt, his daddy and uncle's sister. He's going to be living with her."

"Ms. Dorothy is his aunt?"

"That's what I just said."

Will grabbed Abby-Claire's arm and dragged her away from the line of family members waiting to say goodbye. He stopped when they were out of earshot and they

stood next to the wall between two bathroom entrances. “Abby-Claire. What the hell just happened?” He whispered the word ‘hell’.

She couldn’t help but laugh. She would have scolded a younger cousin, but Will was grown up enough to know better. And obviously knew better. On him, this tiny act of rebellion was actually kind of cute. When she didn’t answer he said, “They won’t tell me. They said you have to. I’m not waiting two weeks. Tell me. Now.”

“I met Hawthorn’s dad.”

“Why is he here?”

“He lives here. In Mobile. In a nursing home. He thinks he’s Jesus.”

Will’s eyebrows came together, almost touching. He moved his mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

“You heard me right.”

“Jesus?”

“Jesus.”

Will looked away then back at her. His face still scrunched.

She said, “I would explain, but that’s all I know.”

She went and hugged her way down the line of aunts and uncles and cousins who had come to see her off then glared at her parents. The sight of them standing there smiling like nothing had happened set her over the boiling point. Had she been the type of person who knew how to express emotion, she might have flown off the handle and caused a scene, but Abby-Claire was raised to keep her emotions in check, hidden, stifled, ignored. When they did well up in situations like this, her instinct was to stuff them back down. She may have gotten angry with her grandfather, but her parents were a

different story. She made several attempts to go off on her parents, but eventually just shook her head at them. She left without hugging them. Somewhere on the inside, she was hoping her mother would run after her and cause a scene, but she knew that wouldn't happen. That's where she had learned her nonexistent communication skills.

When they boarded, Aunt Jenny pointed to their seats in first class and said, "Surprise! I thought you could use a little comfort after the day you had."

Abby-Claire wasn't sure what her aunt thought she was up to, but she quickly shot her down. "Grandma told me she upgraded our seats a week after you told me I was coming."

Her aunt suddenly looked like a toddler caught in the act.

The flight from Mobile to Atlanta was too brief to even bother getting out an iPod so Abby-Claire pretended to sleep. Aunt Jenny elbowed her and poked her several times while huffing in an attempt to wake her up. In Atlanta, Abby-Claire sought out the only other teenager on the trip, Robby, an overweight, freckled, redhead who wanted to write the world's first best-selling Christian graphic novel. At church he would show her his latest draft anytime he could get her cornered. She asked to see what he was working on since she knew it would take the whole layover.

When they boarded again, Aunt Jenny looked at her and shook her head as she huffed and sat down. "Well I can see you don't want to talk, so I guess I'll make it easier on you." She pulled a pill out of her bag and held it out for her.

Abby-Claire was floored. "Aunt Jenny—."

Aunt Jenny interrupted her. "I don't know what it is. One of the other moms from Whitney's dance class gave it to me. It was supposed to be for me, but I think you need it more. She said it makes a long flight easier."

The coach people hadn't boarded yet, so she knew none of the other people on the trip could see her take it.

Aunt Jenny said, "All better. Have a good flight." Then she buried her face in a Beth Moore book.

Abby-Claire woke up next to the creek. The hurricane had just passed. The markings along the bank where the boars had wallowed were fresh again. Hawthorn was there, but her grandfather wasn't. Instead, O.B. was sort of hovering in the background watching her. Hawthorn was still on horseback and he crossed the creek to greet her. He introduced himself then immediately added, "And this is my dad, The Only Begotten Son, Which Is In The Bosom Of The Father. O.B. for short."

He turned to motion towards his father, but O.B. had disappeared. Suddenly there was a burst of light and O.B. slowly descended down from the trees above. He had wings. She hadn't noticed them earlier when he was just hovering. Or maybe he didn't have them then. He extended a hand and said, "My child, pleased to make your earthly acquaintance."

She kissed his hand immediately. He didn't let go. Instead, he also took Hawthorn's hand and led them down the path, following the tracks. When Abby-Claire turned back, the horse and four-wheeler were gone. When they reached the clearing, the boar that had charged her was standing where it had been, but this time it was among all the other boars they had killed. They were bleeding from the wounds that had killed

them, but they were still alive, milling around and nuzzling each other. They suddenly all turned at once and charged. O.B. slowly walked forward and they trampled him. When the first boar hit him, his wings flew off. One attached itself to Abby-Claire's back, and the other to Hawthorn's. The boars had stopped charging when they ran into O.B. and were now just trampling around on top of him. He yelled from beneath them, "I can only hold them off for so long. You have to flee. My wings will save you, but they only work as a pair. You have to flee together. Into the air. Into skys. Flee! Fly!"

Hawthorn grabbed Abby-Claire's hand and the wings suddenly started flapping. They flew back to her grandparents' house and landed in the back yard. Her grandmother greeted them, and led them inside to the living room. She pulled the wings off of their backs, and fastened them together, then they set them on the mantle, just beneath a cross that hung on the wall. Then she knelt down in front of it and pulled them down with her. She bowed her head and said, "Thank the Lord for sending his son."

Abby-Claire and Hawthorn sat in silence, but then her grandmother squeezed their hands, and they repeated her.

## CHAPTER IX

Aunt Jenny shook Abby-Claire. “Time to eat.”

She shook her head and rubbed her eyes. “What the heck did you give me?”

“I told you sweetie, I don’t know. Were you having funny dreams? You sure were squirming.”

Abby-Claire looked around, wide-eyed, attempting to take in her actual surroundings. “I don’t know that funny is the right word for what I just saw.”

“Was it a nightmare?”

“Something like that.”

“Well here. Eat something. It’ll make you feel better.”

“How much longer do we have?”

“Four more hours. You were out for eight.”

After the meal, Abby-Claire got up to take a walk. Her legs were stiff, and she wanted to avoid talking to Aunt Jenny about her dream. Or anything pertaining to Hawthorn. She went to the bathroom then wandered back to coach to find Robby. He was leafing through a graphic novel. She knelt in the aisle next to him and asked what he was reading.

“It’s the book of Genesis presented as a graphic novel.” There was both excitement and disappointment in his voice.

“It’s not a bestseller is it?” she asked.

“No. Not really.”

“Well then this guy didn’t beat you to it.”

“Actually, I’m not sure if this really counts as Christian.” He pointed to a small bubble on the cover that said, “Adult Supervision Recommended For Minors.” He glanced over his shoulder to see who was watching then put a finger over his lips and waited for Abby-Claire to nod before he opened the book and showed her a panel with Adam and Eve, fully nude, in full detail, no one hiding behind a bush like in the cartoons they watched as children.

She wasn’t sure what to say. “Wow. That is... accurate.”

“It’s the whole book of Genesis. All of it. It’s all in there. All illustrated.” He frowned.

“I don’t know that this really counts as a Christian graphic novel, Robby. Besides, you like to write your own stories, right? Not just illustrate other peoples’ stuff?”

“I guess so. But the Bible’s so cool all of a sudden. There might be a revival all over America, or even the world, and then everybody’ll be writing and reading Christian graphic novels. Where will I be then?”

She studied Robby’s face. He sounded so earnest, but he was one of the most dedicated Christians she knew. He would never consider a worldwide revival a bad thing. Besides, the Bible said there would never truly be peace on earth. Or at least Abby-Claire had heard that the Bible said that. “That doesn’t mean you can’t still be the first. And no, this definitely doesn’t count. No book that shows a man’s—” she pointed to the penis in the illustration “can count as a Christian book.”

Robby didn’t smile, but his expression lightened.

Abby-Claire wasn't certain if she was doing him a favor, or indulging her own curiosity, but she asked, "Mind if I borrow this and look through it? Just on the plane. I'll give it back before we land."

Robby looked back and forth between Abby-Claire and the book several times then shrugged and breathed a sigh of relief as he handed it over.

She checked to make sure Aunt Jenny was asleep before she flipped to Genesis nineteen—the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Her family liked to read from this chapter any time her brother visited. Her dad liked to read it at the dining room table at the beginning of dinner. Reading scripture before dinner had been a tradition when Tim and Abby-Claire were little. Their dad picked it back up after Tim moved to France. Her mother liked to leave every bible in the house open to the passage about brimstone and fire raining down on the cities because of their sins. Despite blatant reality, she had never heard anyone in her family call him gay out loud. As far as she knew, he had never actually told them.

Abby-Claire looked down at the drawings in the book. She flipped to the part where the men of Sodom asked Lot about the sexy angels. When she was little, Sunday school teachers told this story in vague terms, and it was a lesson in obedience. The focus was always on Lot's wife turning into a pillar of salt for looking back. She had seen that rendered in dozens of cartoons and live-action biblical films, the special effects always terrible. One time the whole class laughed when it happened because the actress made a ridiculous face, and the teacher put them all in time out. It was only in the last few years that Abby-Claire learned what the men of Sodom actually wanted to do to the angels. There was some sort of unwritten rule that you weren't supposed to teach what the

scripture actually says until high school when the students are mature enough to process what it means to “know” someone in the biblical sense. Even then the boys and girls were in separate groups when they taught this lesson.

She looked at the panel where the men of Sodom come to Lot’s door; she stared at the man who asked, “Where are the men who came to you tonight?” He held both hands in front of his shoulders, blatantly limp-wristed. She pictured her brother standing like that. It didn’t fit. Neither did the beard or the sword. The bejeweled sash, maybe. But Tim would make it subtler.

She flipped over a few more pages, looking for the pillar of salt, but instead her eyes fell to a picture of one of Lot’s daughters straddling her father. She covered her mouth to stifle a laugh. She blushed and looked around then held the book upright to try and hide it from any passers-by. The daughter was hideous and gap-toothed, with a big round butt and thick thighs.

“Abby-Claire! What on God’s Green Earth are you reading?” Aunt Jenny asked.

She jolted and suddenly realized she had gotten warm while reading. She felt herself blushing and got a chill at the same time. She couldn’t focus enough to answer her aunt’s question. Aunt Jenny took the book from her and looked at the cover.

“Who’s this R. Crumb character, and why doesn’t he have a whole first name? Seems questionable to me.”

“He does comic books. And he did the whole book of Genesis. Illustrated. Just like it says on the cover.”

Aunt Jenny eyed her up and down suspiciously.

“It’s Robby’s.”

“Well I think I might better hold onto it.” She started to slip it into her bag.

“You can’t take Robby’s book. His mom gave it to him. She knows he’s reading it. Just let me give it back to him.”

“I’ll go give it to him. And make sure doesn’t get passed around anymore. His mama may not mind it, but this looks like filth to me. Plain old liberal smut.”

Abby-Claire was truly taken aback. “It’s the bible,” she said, half question, half declaration.

“Just because it’s the bible doesn’t mean it’s appropriate.”

Abby-Claire furrowed her brow. She could barely make sense of what her aunt was saying, much less argue with her. “Will you just go give it back to Robby, please? He’s about halfway back, aisle seat.”

“He’s that chubby red-head, right?”

“Aunt Jenny!”

“I’m just asking. Sure as heck don’t want to give this to the wrong person.” She held it away from her then quickly pulled it back to her and covered it with her cardigan. Then she crouched down and tiptoed back toward coach.

## CHAPTER X

The runways in Cairo had stretches of sand between them, not the manicured grass Abby-Claire had expected. More sand rippled across the runways in gentle dusty waves. As she looked up further, she saw a sand-colored city full of buildings that may or may not have been under construction. She didn't know if the exposed rebar jutting from the roofs was decorative, or a sign of work in progress. Out the other window, sand stretched into the abyss, heat radiated from it in giant waves that stretched further than she ever thought possible.

The stewardess announced that local time was 6:15 AM and the temperature 98 degrees Fahrenheit. Abby-Claire groaned, and Aunt Jenny gasped. Almost a hundred degrees and the sun barely broke the horizon. "Well, at least it's dry heat," Aunt Jenny said with no certainty in her voice.

In the terminal, she stood with Robby while they waited to claim their luggage. The carousel was in the terminal, right by the gate. "I'm sorry I got you in trouble."

"It's not your fault my aunt's scared of a drawing of a naked lady having sex with her father." As soon as she heard herself say it, her eyes widened.

Robby snickered. "Bet that's a sentence you never thought you'd say."

He retrieved his suitcase from the carousel and came back to stand with Abby-Claire. "How are the bibles getting here, did the leaders pack them in their luggage, or did they ship them?" she asked.

One of the leaders, Brother Steve, walked by and harshly shushed her. “You can’t be talking about why we’re here. We’re breaking the law, and people’s lives are at risk. I’ll explain it all later.”

Abby-Claire brushed him off and went to the carousel. She hadn’t seen her bag yet, she just didn’t like being reprimanded for a simple question. Robby followed her quickly. “Which ones yours? I’ll get it for you.”

“It’s ok. I can get it.”

She saw her bag and leaned to get it, but Robby grabbed it out of her hand. He brushed one of her boobs in the process, and she couldn’t tell how accidental the move had been. He also hit her with the bag a little as he heaved it off of the carousel and onto a luggage cart. He tossed his own bag onto the cart then rather forcefully pulled her backpack from her shoulder and put it on the cart too. He motioned towards the customs line and said, “After you.”

Abby-Claire smirked. “I hope you’re not expecting a tip for handling my baggage.”

Robby blushed and laughed nervously. He turned away from her a little and fiddled with his waistband. It took her a second to register what was going on, but she made a mental note to be a little more careful in her interactions with him. She didn’t want to lead him on. She headed toward the customs line without looking at him again.

Brother Steve walked down the line and handed each of the missionaries fifteen dollars in US currency. “This is for your entry visa. If they ask, we’re here on holiday, or for pleasure, not business.”

Robby was in line behind her with the luggage cart between them. The line moved with an odd stop-and-go rhythm. The officials thoroughly searched the Egyptian couple in front of her, and made them open their bags. When Abby-Claire walked up, she held out her passport and the fifteen dollars. The official took the money, then opened her passport straight to the visa pages and never checked her identity. He put in a sticker, then stamped it and waved her through.

After everyone got through customs, Brother Steve corralled everyone near a door and announced, “Our transport should be here to pick us up any minute. I just called them to let them know we landed. Go ahead and break into groups of six so we can load up as soon as they get here.”

Robby scooted closer to Abby-Claire. She eyed him up and down then rolled her eyes. This little crush had passed the endearing stage; he was starting to annoy her. But he was the closet one to her in age. The next youngest was a twenty-one-year-old college student named Brad.

## CHAPTER XI

Abby-Claire had an odd relationship with Brad. Brad was hot by any definitions, so he always made her blush, and she had trouble speaking around him. Tim had an even more odd relationship with Brad. Brad had been Tim's best friend, Christie's, high school boyfriend. Tim and Christie had been inseparable since they were in diapers. Brad and Tim were never exactly friends, but they tolerated each other because of Christie.

At the beginning of Tim's junior year, after the debacle with the lotion and the Jew, Charlene had made Tim quit playing lacrosse, which is where he met the Jewish boy. To fill the spare time this created; she got him a job as an unpaid youth intern. His duties were varied and involved a lot of grunt work, but he emerged as a more than adequate event coordinator. He had watched Charlene do the same thing for the women's and married couple's ministries his entire life. Within a year, he was in charge of all youth banquets and parties, and sometimes concerts when the church booked big-name contemporary Christian bands. He decorated and usually planned the menus. He handled logistics like booking blocks of hotel rooms or arranging transportation to and from the airport for the important guests. It occupied most of his time, but he didn't seem to mind.

The church held a banquet every year for the graduating seniors and their families. When Tim graduated, since he had done so much for the youth ministry in his time there, the church leaders decided to really let him go all out for this final event and doubled his budget. They even moved it from the gym to the fellowship hall. Tim still considered that room ugly, but it was a step up from the gym.

The morning of the banquet, Abby-Claire and Charlene both went up to the church with Tim to help with set up. Around lunchtime, Brad came in. Tim was up on a scaffold draping tulle down from the ceiling so Brad had to yell, “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

“I’m a little busy,” Tim yelled back. Brad’s appearance confused everyone since Brad and Tim never hung out without Christie.

“It’s important. It’s about tonight,” Brad yelled.

Tim huffed and motioned for Charlene to climb the scaffold and take over. They were covering the ceiling and the walls with tulle in different colored panels to represent each of the students’ schools, backed by Christmas lights.

“Thanks, Mom. Go ahead and finish the navy then start on the periwinkle, but wait for me on the grey; it’s tricky.” Charlene nodded and ascended the scaffold.

Tim turned to Brad, question on his face, and Brad said, “Can we go somewhere private?”

Tim looked around the room then said, “There’s no one in the kitchen yet; that crew shouldn’t be here ‘til after 3.”

Abby-Claire was untangling Christmas lights and decided to continue her work outside the kitchen door. She couldn’t really make out what they were saying, but she could sort of see Brad. She liked looking at Brad. He looked uncomfortable. She wasn’t sure if it was because they were talking about something uncomfortable, or if it was just weird for him to be alone with Tim. Brad put his hands on top of his head and pulled all of his hair back then blurted something out.

Abby-Claire heard a loud clang against the tile floor. The sound reverberated off all of the steel surfaces in the big industrial kitchen. After a few seconds of silence, she heard her brother laughing.

Abby-Claire took this as an opportunity to investigate and walked in just as Tim said, “I heard you. Don’t speak. I’m just... taking it in.”

He picked up a bowl; it had miraculously remained upright, and the frosting inside it was so thick that almost none of it had splashed out. He scooped a big dollop of frosting onto a sheet cake on the counter.

Brad asked, “Do you want me to go?”

“No. Stay. Just... don’t speak. Yet.”

Abby-Claire stood in the doorway and watched as Tim used the spatula to spread the frosting in a thin even layer across the top then started going down the sides. A few minutes later, when he’d finished, and there was nothing else he could do to the cake until it dried; he looked up. He took a few more deep breaths, and asked, “I’m sorry, what do I have to do with this?”

“Well, her dad’s dead.”

Without looking at her, Tim shooed Abby-Claire out the door then said, “I know. As you just pointed out, I was there.”

Brad said, “So there’s no one for me to ask—.”

Tim slammed the door to the kitchen shut, and Abby-Claire didn’t hear the rest of the conversation.

Brad came out a minute later looking disappointed. He said hello to Abby-Claire and Charlene and told them they were doing a good job, then left.

Tim walked out a minute later, clearly elsewhere. His face was blank as he picked up the grey tulle and meticulously gathered it, so he could get the swags spaced just right. He told his mother to hold on while he rolled the scaffolding to where he wanted the grey to hang from, then locked the wheels in place and climbed up.

Later that afternoon, Tim had just finished icing the cake, and instead of “Congrats Grads,” the cake said, “Congrats Brad.” Abby-Claire pointed it out and laughed. “I thought this party was for everybody?”

Tim looked up from the cake and bit one side of his lower lip, clearly wracking his brain for an answer. Instead of answering, he just squirted Abby-Clair with the frosting in his hand. It landed in her hair, and she screamed. She reached for the spatula in the bowl of frosting, but Tim pulled it away from her and gave her that forbidding look that only older brothers have. Abby-Clair could tell he was serious, so she used the only weapon left in her arsenal, she yelled, “Mom!” as she ran out the door.

That night, as people trickled in, all the moms sought out Tim to tell him what a wonderful job he had done putting everything together. The cake was perfect, error corrected. When Brad walked in with Christie, they came straight over to say ‘Hi.’ Tim hugged Christie, then shook Brad’s hand. Christie had gone to hug Charlene so Tim leaned a little closer to Brad and whispered something. Brad tensed his shoulders and shivered, then turned red. Abby-Claire had never seen Brad nervous before. He was confidence personified.

Since they were all respected leaders in the youth group, Brad, Christie, and Tim, along with their families, were seated together at the table at the front. As a graduation

present, the church gave each graduate a copy of their cap and gown portraits framed with one of their graduation announcements. The seniors walked across the stage one by one where they received the frame as Brother Pete read their name and future plans.

Tim was going to the American University of Paris to study art history, Brad, to Alabama pre-med, and Christie was staying in town to go to community college, undecided. The youth choir sang, and then Brother Pete asked all of the seniors to come back down to the front and kneel, so the parents could come lay hands on them.

When he finished praying, he said there was one more order of business and turned the microphone over to Brad. Everyone went back to the tables, and Christie looked at Tim suspiciously. He gave an unconvincing shrug, and she tightened her gaze, but still smiled.

Brad said, "I'm sure I speak for everyone when I say thank y'all for coming out tonight. I've known most of y'all my whole life, and y'all've prayed for me and supported me and encouraged me every step of the way. That's why I wanted y'all to be here to witness this. Um, Christie, could you come up here?"

Every eye in the room shot to Christie, as a few girls started screaming. She blushed and slouched down in her chair. She looked at Tim and seemed to find some sort of solace in his smile. "Get up there," Tim said with a laugh.

When she got to the podium, Brad grabbed her hand and turned back to the audience, "As most of you know, me and Christie have been dating for almost five years now. We've kept ourselves pure and kept God at the center of our relationship. I love Christie with all my heart, and that's why," he paused and reached into his pocket. He pulled out a small black velvet box. The squealing grew louder. Brad dropped to one

knee and the squealing became unbearable. Abby-Claire couldn't help but roll her eyes as she took in the room. Charlene looked at Tim, her face indicating that she knew he knew and couldn't believe he kept it a secret from her. Then she grabbed Abby-Claire's hand and squealed. Tim smiled, although not quite as broadly as everyone else.

"Christie, you know I love you with all my heart." Christie was bawling. "It would mean the world to me if you'd become my wife." She hesitated for a split-second. No one else seemed to notice it, but Abby-Claire definitely did. Christie looked at Tim. He was in her line of vision, so she only had to lift her eyes a bit, but she still did it. Brad didn't seem to notice.

She said yes, or at least Abby-Claire assumed she did. She somehow missed it. She was busy trying to figure out why Christie needed Tim's approval to answer a marriage proposal. Most of the crowd rushed the stage to congratulate them. A few people, mostly the dads, remained seated, but there was a general lack of opposition toward a marriage between two teenagers.

Charlene grabbed Tim by the shirt collar and said, "You knew about this. I can tell. I can't believe you didn't tell me! Oh, well, I would have cried anyway, but just look at my mascara."

"I was sworn to secrecy," Tim replied.

Charlene smiled and linked arms with Tim then dragged him toward the stage. Abby-Clair followed behind.

Brad was beaming and could barely stop smiling long enough to thank anyone. He looked at Tim and grinned even more broadly. He pulled Tim in for a hug, clearly oblivious to the fact that he was now hugging the man his fiancé looked at before

answering the proposal. Tim looked at Christie whose smile broke for a second before she said, “Brad, I need to get some air, all this excitement. I’ll be back. Tim?” They went outside together and didn’t come back in until Brad went outside to get them.

Abby-Claire had to pester Tim for days before he finally told her that Brad had asked him for Christie’s hand in marriage. He considered Tim her surrogate father after hers died.

Brad and Christie got married a month later, as soon as she was old enough to sign the paperwork. Tim did the wedding which meant it was the most hectic month of Abby-Claire’s life. Abby-Claire was torn as she stood at the back of the auditorium to watch two people she cared about rushing into what should have been the most well thought out decision in their lives.

After the reception, but before they left, Charlene and Abby-Claire helped Christie out of her dress behind a changing screen while Tim waited on the other side. When Christie came out from behind the screen, Charlene handed Tim a velvet box, then took the dress from Christie and excused herself; Abby-Claire followed.

When they came out, Christie was wearing the pearls that belonged to Tim and Abby-Claire’s grandmother. The ones meant for Tim’s wife.

Tim hugged her one last time and she said, “I’ll see you at camp.”

Abby-Claire scoffed, she had almost forgotten that Christie and Brad were still considered high schoolers for church purposes, so they were still going to youth camp as usual. Tim laughed too then said, “Go find your husband. People are waiting.”

He shoved her down the hallway and she ran around the corner to where Brad had gone to change. Tim put his arms around Charlene and Abby-Claire, still in the hallway with the dress, and they started to make their way down the hall.

“I’m proud of you,” Charlene said.

Abby-Claire didn’t know what else to do with this awkward moment so she just said, “Me too.”

Tim said, “I still cannot believe we ran out of chicken. But the hall was gorgeous if I do say so myself.”

“I’m not talking about the reception and you know it,” she looked up at him and smiled, but he looked straight ahead.

“I want her to be happy,” he said.

“But you don’t think she will be.”

It wasn’t a question.

“So is Brad staying here?” she asked.

“For at least a year. They’re both going to try to transfer somewhere else, maybe Alabama, next fall.”

“Well, praise the Lord Christie married into money. Ever since her daddy died, they’ve been living paycheck to paycheck. Maybe she can afford a decent education now.”

“Yeah, I guess it all works out— more or less.”

They got to the doorway and Tim grabbed a small bottle of bubbles from a basket on a pedestal just inside the doorway. Brad and Christie came around the corner and Christie pulled Tim in for one more lingering hug. Brad didn’t flinch. He seemed to be

expecting this one. When Christie let go of Tim and went to hug and thank Charlene and Abby-Claire, Brad shook Tim's hand. He held it in both of his and looked Tim directly in the eye to say, "Thank you. For everything." Before Tim could respond, Christie grabbed Brad and dragged him out the door into a cloud of bubbles the crowd had created just outside the door.

Abby-Claire didn't make it out in time to blow bubbles on them as they left, so she just watched from inside the door. She didn't see Tim at first, but then she saw him sauntering down the hall smiling as he blew bubbles on his way back to the kitchen to clean up.

## CHAPTER XII

As they stood outside, waiting for the vans to arrive, Brad walked over to Abby-Claire. He smiled, and said, “Hi Abby-Claire. Robby. Mind if I join y’all’s group?”

Abby-Claire nervously shook her head, but didn’t speak. She still rarely managed to actually speak to him. The simple fact that he knew her name usually made her blush. He was actually taller than she, an automatic plus, and also had impossibly high cheekbones and silky hair that framed a face that could only be described as beautiful.

In the van, she wound up between Robby and Brad. Brad turned to her and started to put his arm around her. She jumped and got excited until she realized he was just putting it on the seat behind her. He said, “Brother Jeff asked me to catch you since you got added to the team so late and missed all the training sessions.” Abby-Claire realized her mouth was open so she shut it, then nodded for him to proceed. “We’re just here to be stewards. We’re here to make sure these bibles get safely to the people who need them. The bibles were printed here, in Cairo, at a secret location, and it’s our job to go get them and deliver them to the vocational missionaries that are stationed here. We’ll leave each morning and go pick up the bibles we’ll be delivering that day, and we’ll go in teams to take them to the different locations. And then we’ll be doing prayer walks each afternoon in different parts of the city. That’s the gist of it. Any questions?”

Abby-Claire shook her head. She was only half-listening by that point anyway. She scanned the horizon, looking for the Sphinx or the Pyramids, or anything Egyptian. All she saw was sand and sand-colored building, and thousands upon thousands of

people; all dressed alike, shuffling around on foot. Robby added, "Sightseeing is on the last day."

## CHAPTER XIII

They pulled up in front of a building on a busy street that looked exactly like every other building on every other street. Abby-Claire prayed she wouldn't be expected to remember this place on her own. Brother Steve got out of the first van and motioned for everyone else to follow suit. He headed into an alley that was full of people selling shoes and trinkets and souvenirs on either side, tourists bustling around among the vendors. Brother Steve went through an archway about halfway down the alley. The whole group followed, all lugging their baggage as quickly as they could. The archway opened into an atrium that resembled a shopping mall, but it was much calmer there than in the crowded alley.

Abbey-Claire noticed a store with a bunch of sewing machines in pieces strewn all over work tables in one of the shops. An old man sat outside the shop, asleep. He wore the ankle-length tunic and round hat that most of the men she had seen were also wearing. A boy, about ten years old, came out of the store that she had guessed was a sewing machine repair shop, and yelled, "Welcome, welcome. Welcome to Egypt." He ran directly to Abbey-Claire and stared up at her for an uncomfortably long time. She smiled at him and he blushed. He stared for a while longer and then the old man yelled at him from his chair, and the boy ran back into the store.

"Looks like someone's stealing hearts already. We just landed. Give these poor Egyptian boys a chance," Aunt Jenny said.

Abby-Claire had all but forgotten her aunt's presence. Brad had provided a nice temporary distraction. Brother Steve was a few feet away next to a rickety-looking old-

fashioned elevator with a manually operated door, loading people in two at a time with their luggage. “Fifth floor,” he yelled. By this point, most of the group was still pretty tired from the flight, so they mostly stood in silence. After a set of awkward exchanges among the four of them, Abby-Claire lost the battle with her aunt for the right to ride the elevator with Brad, and she went up with Robby.

“Are you excited to be here? Now that you’re here? I know you didn’t really want to come. Your aunt told us everything. We prayed for you at the last training session. That God would change your heart. Did it work? We’re missionaries, Abby-Claire!”

She stared at him with narrowed eyes as she tried to process everything he had just said. Aunt Jenny was far from Abby-Claire’s favorite person anyway, and she had just dropped further down the list. She wouldn’t have been able to think of responses to all of Robby’s questions even if they hadn’t just soured her mood considerably. “Is it official already? Just because we’re here? Or do we have to make a delivery first? Or maybe it’s not until we make it home?”

“What?” he asked.

“We’re already missionaries? Just for making it through customs?”

He laughed unconvincingly.

The elevator creaked to a stop at a balcony. Abby-Claire looked up. It looked like the atrium on this building went all the way to the top. Brother Steve’s wife, Ms. Brenda, was standing just off the elevator, and pointed them towards a door. “Y’all hurry up. It’s already going to take all day to get everybody up here as is. Grab your stuff and scooch.”

As Robby and Abby-Claire went through the door, Ms. Brenda said, “Girls to the left, boys to the right.” When they got through the door, she dropped her suitcase. She

found herself staring at one large room with a single row of chairs running down the center of the room from the door, ending just beneath a wooden cross hanging on the opposite wall. The thud from her suitcase drew everyone's attention. They looked at her for a second and then seemed to write it off the second they realized it was Abbey-Claire, and continued about their business. The people that had come up first were unpacking—in the room. One lady had already laid out a sleeping bag and fallen asleep.

Robby trotted away and staked a claim in the far corner. Abby-Claire just stood in the doorway staring, dumbfounded. She didn't know how long she stood in the doorway, but she snapped back to reality when she felt Brad's hand on the small of her back. She turned to him, and saw him staring at her bag. "Do you need help with your suitcase?" he asked. He glanced into the room then back to her. With a look on his face that was half smirk, half sympathy he added, "Your aunt didn't tell you we weren't staying in a hotel." He covered his mouth to stifle laughter. He looked at Aunt Jenny and shook his head, shaming her, but still smirking.

Aunt Jenny shoved her in and towards the girls' side then pointed to the chairs and said; "You are not to cross that line at any time for any reason. Boys over there, girls over here, understand?" Aunt Jenny's question seemed like a scold. Abby-Claire's face scrunched a bit, she didn't understand her aunt's sudden hostility. If anyone needed to have an eye kept on her around Brad, it was Aunt Jenny. She somehow always seemed to know when Tim had invited him and Christie over to swim, and she dropped by with lemonade or baked goods or gossip that simply had to be delivered to Charlene in person.

Abby-Claire looked from her aunt to the room then back to her aunt and said, "A little heads-up would have been nice."

Aunt Jenny patted her on the shoulder and said, “Welcome to the Mission Field, sweetie.”

## CHAPTER XIV

The rest of the day was a blur of prayer meetings and napping and eating packaged junk food Abby-Claire assumed must have been donated. As the sun started to set, Brother Steve called everyone to the front of the room. The women and men stayed on their respective sides of the room, even during these group meetings. Brother Steve said they were going on a prayer walk. He handed out slips of paper to everyone with something written in Arabic. “This is the address for this building. If you get lost and can’t find your way back, just catch a taxi and hand this to the driver. Everybody make sure you always have at least a hundred Egyptian pounds on you, but keep it in a safe place. Not sticking out of your back pocket. After the prayer walk, you’re free to go explore a little while if you want. Dinner’ll be up here waiting for you whenever you want it. Remember, groups of three at all times. No groups of just women. Always have a man with you.”

From the corner of her eye, Abby-Claire saw Robby straighten up and stick his chest out. She looked away and hoped he didn’t see her roll her eyes.

Brother Steve continued, “Ok, everybody, just walk around the neighborhood, around the city. Pray for the people you see, pray for the people inside the buildings you walk past. Just ask God to bless our time here and to help us do his work. Thank Him for allowing you, yes you, the privilege to do his work in the Field.”

Aunt Jenny handed Abby-Claire a roll of colorful bills and said, “This is for a taxi, and any shopping you want to do, and for dinner. I’m already making you sleep on the floor. You don’t have to eat like a missionary too.” She looked toward Robby and

Brad who were waiting by the door and said, “Go on. Go do the Lord’s work then have some fun. You’ll be safe with Brad.”

Brad suggested they head toward the Nile, and pointed down the street. All at once, it sunk in where she was. The circumstances that put her here, and the bombshell her parents dropped right before she left had overshadowed the fact that she was in Egypt. Egypt. She was standing within eyeshot of the Nile. She was in a city thousands of years old. She decided to forget how she got here, and what happened before she left, and just enjoy herself. She knew she was supposed to be praying. Robby and Brad were walking slowly, so she assumed that must be what they were doing. Robby kept touching things, edges of buildings, doorframes, tables where people were selling things. He must’ve been blessing them. Abby-Claire didn’t start praying, but she did start thinking about why she was there. Why she was *supposed* to be there.

She kept seeing figurines of a black dog with pointy ears. The dog was always lying on its stomach, but with its head erect. She stopped at one of the tables and two different men rushed up to her. One of them was speaking in a guttural language that she knew wasn’t Arabic, but that she didn’t recognize. The other spoke English. “Madame, This is your first time in Egypt? You like the statues of Anubis I see. Come, come with me to my shop, I show you beautiful statues of Anubis. Not these cheap shits.”

Several other men, not selling anything walked up to her and leaned in extremely close, whispering in her ear. She couldn’t understand any of them. Most of them touched her. When one full on squeezed her butt, she turned and stared. She was too shocked to do anything about it.

She suddenly felt a hand around her waist. She almost screamed, but realized it was Brad. He pulled her along toward the river and said, “Prayer walk, Abby-Claire. Not shopping trip.”

Some of the men who had been touching her walked away, holding hands. She looked around and noticed that almost no men were walking alone. They were all with someone. Holding hands. She had heard before that that was a sign of friendship in the Middle East, but it was still hard to take in.

Brad kept his hand on the small of her back. When they got to the river, they walked out onto a bridge and stopped in the center. Boats with tall narrow orange sails glided lazily around the areas between the bridges. Abby-Claire looked out at the city that was congested and polluted, with mostly uninspired architecture that still somehow had a strange beauty to it. Or perhaps she just thought it was beautiful because she thought it should be. This city was too ancient and important to be ugly.

Brad stood with his hand still on Abby-Claire’s back then pulled Robby to his side and put his arm around his shoulders. Robby glared up at Brad for a second, then gracelessly swung himself around so they were all facing each other, and he put his arm around her too. His backpack, full of who knows what, hit several people in the process, and then he wound up shoving Brad and Abby-Claire both away from the railing since he couldn’t quite fit because of the backpack. As Brad prayed, a couple of men walked by so closely that they brushed against Abby-Claire. At this point she wondered if she would ever go anywhere in Cairo without being groped.

As they got back to the building where the church was, Abby-Claire saw a sign across the street that said, "Internet Air-Condition." She asked Brad, "We don't have to be back at a certain time, do we?"

"No, but we probably shouldn't stay out too late."

"Can we go there for a minute?" she pointed at the sign.

Robby said, "I do need to update my Facebook status. Let everyone know we made it here all right."

Brad looked at his digital watch with a Velcro strap. "I think we should be all right taking in some air conditioning for a bit.

Abby-Claire logged into Facebook praying that Tim would be online. He was. She opened a chat with him.

Will tell you about O.B. yet?

*O.B.?*

I met Hawthorn's dad.

*Hawthorn?*

The Andersons nephew

The one weve been hunting with

*Oh Bama Bangs*

Is that what will calls him

*Yeah*

Accurate

*And his dad is a lady doctor?*

Haha. Just noticed that.

No it stands for only begotten something or other

*I'm lost.*

Hes in a nursing home.

*how old is he?*

30 something. Hes just crazy

he thinks hes jesus

*not following*

he thinks he is Jesus. He introduced himself as the only begotten something or other. He thinks hes Jesus

*And Bama Bangs wanted you to meet him?*

*Him\**

Uh no. I don't think he had anything to do with it

They took me to meet him on the way to the airport.

*That sounds like our mother's doing.*

Haven't figured it all out yet, but I'm sure she had something to do with it

*Wait. Are you in Egypt now?*

Yes. At an internet café on an ancient computer

The monitor is glass

Beveled

*They have internet there?*

Apparently

“Talking to your mom?” Brad asked.

“Uh no. Tim, actually.”

“Oh. Tell him I said ‘Hi’.”

Brad says hi

*Brad's there?*

Yep

Christie didn't tell you?

No

*Weird*

*But they've kind of been having issues*

*time apart might do them some good*

*Or at least it might do Christie some good*

*He's been driving her nuts lately*

Didn't seem like it

She came to the airport

and cried

and\*

*That makes sense*

Why

*She thinks he might be cheating on her*

*Or at least losing interest*

*Least\**

*They haven't had sex in like three months*

Abby-Claire looked at Brad sitting at the computer across from her. She couldn't imagine being allowed to have sex with him and not doing it.

How?

*Hes hot but he can be an ass*

*And I think the seven year itch comes early*

*when you get married as teenagers*

Whats that?

*They say most couples start to cheat on each*

*other or at least wonder about it*

*after seven years of marriage*

*They get an itch*

I get it

*But back to this jesus business*

Yeah.....

*Whats he like?*

Crazy

*I gathered*

*I mean does he walk around in a white robe changing*

*water into lightly fermented but still low-proof grape juice?*

I don't know if he's magic but he does wear a white tunic made out of a bed sheet

And I think he has the other inmates convinced hes jesus because one of the other crazy people who lives there came in and kissed his hand

*Inmates?*

What do you call crazy people who live in a nursing home?

*Mental patients or mentally impaired or something  
maybe residents?*

*Better figure it out*

*wouldn't want to offend your suitor*

My suitor?

*He's the only one I've ever seen make you bat your eyelashes*

*At least since Louis-Arnaut*

And we all know how that worked out

*This one doesn't play for my team*

*Will would have noticed*

Does he always spy on me for you

Yep

*Hes been doing it for years*

*Even when I still lived there*

How are things with the new roommate

*Lovely*

*We're quite happy*

No early onset seven year itch?

*It's barely been a year*

*And we're not teenagers*

*And were not married*

Brad came over and put his hand on Abby-Claire's shoulder. "We should head back."

I have to go

I'll talk to you later

Might not be until I get back home though

*Be safe*

*Tell brad I'm holding him personally responsible if you get martyred*

“Tim says he's holding you personally responsible if I'm martyred.”

Brad laughed uncomfortably.

## CHAPTER XV

Most of the trip was uneventful. They left early every morning to go pick up the bibles from an undisclosed location. They were blindfolded during the van ride for their own safety. The leaders said it was best if they didn't know where they were. Abby-Claire wondered exactly how real the danger was. Most of the churches they took the bibles to had signs out front with crosses on them. Abby-Claire was glad there was no wandering around handing bibles to strangers. The leaders had planned daily prayer walks, but when they realized the women couldn't venture more than a few feet away from the men without getting accosted, it got changed to prayer meetings for the women. She usually said she wanted to go pray alone and looked through Robby's Genesis book.

The introduction enthralled her most. The illustrator wasn't a Christian. At all. He said he didn't believe the Bible was "The Word of God." But he also claimed to be more faithful than the other comic book versions of the bible where people who did believe had taken far more liberties with the text, even made stuff up. He says the bible was compiled by priests during the Babylonian Exile and declared sacred. Abby-Claire couldn't understand most of what the introduction said. She did know some of the words. "Patriarchy" and "matriarchy." She knew vaguely what they meant, but the sentences they were in just didn't come together. But she knew exactly what he meant when he said, "Much has been lost in the mists of time."

After they passed by the dog that lived in the horse, she spotted one of the Pyramids peaking over a sand dune. Abby-Claire let herself go and just enjoyed the

scenery. She looked at the Pyramids as the light grew brighter and they came into clearer view. She couldn't help but smile as the sun broke over the horizon coming from the other side of the city. She decided the city was truly beautiful, not just because she wanted it to be.

She had a bit of a fright when the guide offered to take a picture of her in front of the Pyramids on her camel. She didn't realize he would be untying her camel. She prayed it wouldn't get spooked and run off. She had no clue how to stop a camel.

When they got back from the early-morning camel ride, the room was silent. This was the only day they had been allowed to sleep in, so most people took advantage. Abby-Claire grabbed her things and headed for the shower. She had assumed it would be empty, but she found Brad in there. He was toweling his hair dry. Abby-Claire could've told herself she was too shocked to react, but in fact she stared. He had already toweled off his torso, but there was still water dripping down his legs, droplets collecting in the pale hair on his thighs. He had a thick tuft of dark hair around his penis. Abby-Claire knew in theory that it would be there. She had learned about pubic hair in health class, but for some reason it surprised her. The first time she had seen Brad naked he had caught the towel, and she hadn't been able to tell what he had going on hair-wise.

Brad pulled the towel away from his head and shook his hair out. He was holding the towel in both hands in front of his chest, so it covered nothing of consequence. When he opened his eyes, he didn't start, he just said, "Abby-Claire." He said it calmly. No fear, no embarrassment, no chastisement. He never looked away from her. By this point it

was visibly growing and starting to point up. Abby-Claire looked up at his face, then back down. He said her name again. She smirked, then left.

## CHAPTER XVI

The summer after Abby-Claire finished seventh grade was her first time going to youth camp with church. She could barely contain her excitement. Since Tim was a tenth grader, he had already been several times and always came home with the coolest stories. The week before camp, after “Trail Blazing,” the Wednesday night youth service, was over, the youth minister, Brother Pete, asked everyone going to camp to stay after for a last-minute prayer meeting. He asked everyone who was staying to move to the front so they could hear him without the microphone. Abby-Claire thought it was weird because there were still over 200 people in the room and they would be hard-pressed to hear him without the mic.

Brother Pete was a tall prematurely balding man in his early thirties who thought he was much cooler than he actually was, but the students liked him anyway. After going over a few practical details about departure times and prohibited items, Brother Pete said, “Now that we got the practical stuff dealt with, I want to shift gears a little and make sure we’re spiritually prepared for this coming week. God’s going to be doing some amazing things. He’s going to be doing a lot work in a lot of your lives. This is a time for rededication. A chance for you to get away from everything and take a good look at your life and see if your living it the way God wants you to. God’s also going to need some of y’all to do his work next week. Well, he doesn’t need you, he’s God, but he’ll give some of y’all the privilege of doing his work if you’ll let him. I know several of y’all are bringing friends who are lost, and we want to do everything we can to help the Holy Spirit move in their lives. Tim, why don’t you come on up here and join me?”

Abby-Claire felt herself blush for a second. She knew the people around her were looking at her. She had no idea what Brother Pete wanted from him. Tim reluctantly made his way to the front. He was bright red, and staring at the ground. Abby-Claire felt embarrassed for him, and also for herself. She scooted down in her chair; she could feel other people looking at her. Brother Pete put his hand on Tim's shoulder and explained, "The reason I've got Tim up here with me is he's bringing a special friend and I want y'all to be aware of the situation ahead of time. Tim, do you want to go ahead and tell everybody about your friend?"

Tim opened his mouth, but his voice cracked. He cleared his throat and was about to start when Brother Pete interrupted him, "Don't be shy."

Abby-Claire wasn't sure if anyone else saw the quick scowl that Tim shot toward Brother Pete. He would've gotten started on his own if Brother Pete hadn't interrupted, but now he had to start over and clear his throat again. He did it quickly before Brother Pete could interrupt again. "His name's Jacob. He's on my lacrosse team."

Brother Pete broke in, "And why did you ask him to come to camp with you?"

"He's not saved. He's a Jew."

A stir of anticipation went around the room again and the red in Tim's cheeks faded as he smiled. As far as Abby-Claire knew, no one from this youth group had ever converted a Jew before and the excitement in the room was palpable. Brother Pete quieted the chatter that this news had started and said, "All right, is anybody else bringing a lost friend?"

Several hands went up and Brother Pete called them to the front and asked them who they were bringing. Several said lost neighbors, one a lost cousin, others just friends.

Not close friends, of course, because it's unwise to be close friends with lost people. They could be bad influences and they won't build you up the way Christian brothers and sisters do. Brother Pete asked Tim and the others to kneel and said anyone who felt lead to do so to come lay hands on them.

Brother Pete put one hand on Tim's head, and held the other one up, reaching toward Heaven. "Father God, we just come before you today to ask for strength for everyone in this room, but especially these young people right here, who have stepped out of their comfort zones and made themselves vessels for your work. You've called us all to be a light for you in the darkness. We pray that you would just make us instruments to carry out your will this week and that the Spirit would just work through all of us to win the lost for you. It's in the most precious Name of your beloved Son that we pray. Amen."

Jacob enjoyed himself at camp from what Abby-Claire could see. He liked the crazy made-up water sports and the ropes course; he was the tall brawny type who excelled at these activities. She wondered if he was asking any of the right questions, though. It took her most of the week to get Tim alone long enough to find out. She cornered him in the cafeteria one day while Jacob was still getting his food.

"He doesn't seem to care," Tim said. "He's not rejecting the gospel outright, but he's not interested at all. When we're bible study with our family-group every morning, he's basically still asleep."

She heard a catch in his voice. She thought she saw tears welling in the corner of his eyes. They weren't the closest of siblings, so she didn't feel inclined to hug him, but

she did pat him on the shoulder and say, “Just keep doing what God tells you. We’re all praying for you.” The words were automatic. She didn’t think about them before she said them. She just knew that’s what she was supposed to say in this situation.

For the first time she actually pondered what she meant. She knew she had never heard God’s voice, and she had always assumed she would know it if she ever did. But she wondered if Tim could hear God speaking. It was no secret that her brother wasn’t the best Christian ever. Inviting Jacob was probably the most obedient thing he had ever done, spiritually speaking. When Jacob caught up with Tim, a senior girl was following him and talking to him and he wasn’t listening. When he reached Tim, they walked away together. Tim never looked back to Abby-Claire. The senior girl yelled after them, “I’m here if you need to talk.”

For a split second, Abby-Claire felt sorry for Jacob. Everyone must’ve been bombarding him all week. Everyone wanted to be able to say they had led a Jew to Christ.

That night, after the big worship service where everyone rededicated their lives to Jesus and most people cried, Jacob looked downright irritated. Abby-Claire was sitting across the aisle from him. People kept looking back to see if he was going to go down to the altar, and Jacob noticed. In the lobby, she caught Tim’s attention. She asked how things were going by looking at Jacob then raising her eyebrows. Tim responded with a semi-hopeful shrug. He and Jacob walked outside, ignoring the torrential rain. Jacob clearly had no interest in sticking around to be witnessed to more.

Abby-Claire toweled her hair dry then put on pajamas and went out into the common area between the girls' and boys' sides of the dorms. A group of mostly girls sat in a cluster of uncomfortable grey dorm furniture. Brad sat in a chair at the end of the cluster with his guitar, playing a praise song the worship leader had introduced to them earlier in the week. Some of the girls sang, most of them just watched. Christie, sat on the floor next to his chair, singing the harmony. There were a couple of other boys in the room, but they were playing foosball with a half-hearted attempt to be quiet. Brad played one more song then said he needed to go take a shower. Abby-Claire suddenly found herself picturing him naked. She started to chastise herself but then just blushed when he looked at her and said, "Night, Abby-Claire."

Christie moved up into the chair then looked at Abby-Claire. "So what's God been doing in your life?"

She felt herself go pale. She wasn't prepared for that question. This was her first time at camp. She knew that most people came home with stories of life-changing mountaintop encounters with God. People always came home sharing these amazing testimonies. She also knew that it usually wore off after a couple of weeks and the people who had rededicated their lives to God stopped reading their Bibles again. She didn't want to be one of those hypocrites. Christie shifted uncomfortably and Abby-Claire realized that she had just been staring at her in silence for kind of a long time. Christie put a hand on Abby-Claire's shoulder and said, "It's ok if this week hasn't been some grand dramatic thing for you. Has he at least taught you something about yourself?"

Abby-Claire started to cry. She didn't know why. She didn't know what was moving her. She wasn't sad, but for some reason that question stirred up a well of

emotions that just sort of spilled out on their own in the form of tears. She tried to hide her face. Christie put an arm around her then pulled her close. She raised her other hand and started praying. “God, I just lift Abby-Claire up to you right now. I don’t know what you’re doing in her life, and she may not either. But we know it’s not our place to know, but it is our duty to follow. She’s ready and willing. I can see it in her eyes. Show her the way, Lord. Just show her the way.” She dropped her hand back down and pulled Abby-Claire even closer and hugged her. They sat that way for a while. She wasn’t sure how long. Other people were praying in some of the corners, but most people had gone back to their rooms.

Everyone in the room jumped when they heard someone yelling through the wall. It was muffled, but there was no mistaking what the voice said. “Holy shit! Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit. Dude. I’m so sorry.”

Abby-Claire couldn’t be certain, but it sounded like it might be Jacob’s voice. She also couldn’t think of anyone else who would yell swear words at church camp. Then she heard Tim’s voice. “Dude! My ear. Seriously? You got it in my ear! Gross. It’s all goeey and...”

Jacob’s voice interrupted, “Don’t put your finger in there, you’ll force it deeper. Hold... hold on. Let me get a Q-tip.”

They must’ve been in the room right on the other side of the wall because she heard them both pretty clearly. Everyone crowded around the door to the boys’ hallway. Girls weren’t allowed to go in there, but a boy opened the door and she saw Brad in nothing but a towel standing outside the door to the first room. Several other boys were in the hallway in towels or boxers. Almost none of them had shirts on. Everyone blushed,

and some of the girls looked away, but Abby-Claire was too interested in whatever was happening in her brother's room.

Brad opened the door and asked, "What are you guys—." He stopped mid-sentence and just stared with his mouth hanging open. A few other guys crowded behind him and looked in. Some started laughing, but most were just shocked. Abby-Claire saw Jacob's hand shove Brad out of the door and then it slammed. Brad staggered backward, and his towel started to fall off. It came unwound. Brad caught the towel in front of his privates, but she still got a full side view of the rest of his body. She felt another wave of intense emotions, but she definitely didn't want to cry this time. She smiled. Christie scowled at her for a second, but then just laughed. Then she got serious again and said, "Let's go to my room and pray for your brother's friend." Abby-Claire couldn't even imagine what had just happened in that room, but she was fairly certain that Jacob hadn't been praying the sinner's prayer when he squirted something into her brother's ear.

## CHAPTER XVII

Aunt Jenny had hired an Egyptologist to take them around the rest of the day. Brad joined them on the tour. Aunt Jenny said she didn't feel safe spending the whole day without a man. She had asked him to come on the camel ride, but he said he wasn't a morning person. Robby volunteered, but Aunt Jenny said she felt safer with Brad. Because he was older. Abby-Claire asked if Robby could come too, but Aunt Jenny said only if he paid for himself. She couldn't decide who she dreaded spending the day with more, her crazy aunt, or her long-time crush who she had seen naked that morning.

They whisked through everything so fast, they barely had time to take it in. As the day passed, Aunt Jenny grew more and more frustrated with the speed of the tours. They were scheduled for the Egyptian Museum, plus three other stops on the outskirts of the city. Abby-Claire started to realize that Aunt Jenny had only come to Egypt because she wanted to see Egypt. She had been mostly detached the whole week. She kept to herself and stared out windows. She seemed on the verge of tears every time they blindfolded her for the drive to the printer. She wanted to see the city, and wasn't getting to.

At the Egyptian Museum, Abby-Claire made her slow down. Aunt Jenny walked into the room with the artifacts from Tutankhamen's burial chamber, took it all in with one grand sweep of the room, then left. Abby-Claire stayed. She stood in front of the burial mask and stared at it, taking in each stripe of blue and gold, the vulture and the cobra at the top, the pointed beard. She stared for several seconds before she realized she wasn't breathing. She sucked in a sharp breath, then realized Brad was standing right

behind her. He put his hand on the small of her back. That seemed to be his signature move, the only way he knew to react to women.

“Pretty,” he said, pointing at the mask.

Abby-Claire had to laugh. One of the most famous and important historical artifacts in the world, and all he has to say about it is “Pretty.”

“What’s so funny?” he asked.

She laughed again, shook her head, and just said, “I can’t.” She ignored him and went back to looking at the mask until Aunt Jenny came back into the room and pulled her out.

Their guide took them to the mummies next. She explained to them that they could see the animal mummies for free, but would have to pay to see the pharaohs. Aunt Jenny scoffed at the idea, but Abby-Claire didn’t even consider not going in. They looked at the crocodile that had to be at least eleven feet long. There were baboons and dogs too. One dog sat near the entrance, head perched like all the statues of Anubis. Before Aunt Jenny could urge her out the door, Abby-Claire handed some money to the attendant and went into the chamber with the pharaohs.

She didn’t recognize most of the names, but she did see Ramses II. She had seen statues of him everywhere. Even the square outside of the church where they stayed was named after him. The statues all made him look like a large powerful man, but his mummy was slight, to say the least. She knew he probably shrank some in the mummification process, but he was still probably shorter than she when he was alive. She glanced at the dates of his rule. He predated Jesus. She wondered if he was in Heaven. No one had ever given her a good answer about how people before Jesus did or didn’t get

into Heaven. He obviously thought he would go there. He had gone to all of this trouble to make sure that he would make it, but she wondered where he was really. Before she could really wrestle through what she was thinking, Aunt Jenny yelled at her from outside. A guard came and asked her to leave so her aunt would stop yelling.

They continued to be whisked all over the area around Cairo. They saw several other museums and a pyramid that looked like a staircase that was probably significant somehow, but Abby-Claire was too tired and hot to listen to the guide. When they got back in the van, the guide said, “And now we will go to the carpet school where you will see the local children making carpets with their own fingers.”

Brad, Aunt Jenny, and Abby-Claire all turned to look at him. He went on, “They’re parents cannot afford to send them to school, so they send them to the carpet school where they make carpets to pay for their schooling.”

“Oh well that’s interesting,” said Aunt Jenny.

Abby-Claire and Brad stared at each other in shock.

The “school” was a large open space with large looms against the walls. Each loom had a row of four children sitting at it, working. Their hands were moving so quickly; she couldn’t even see what they were doing.

“Lady, you take picture,” one little boy said.

Abby-Claire had forgotten her camera was around her neck. The boy slowed down what he was doing, and showed her the steps. She was torn. She felt like she was somehow dignifying this place by taking pictures, but the little boy was so earnest, and she didn’t want to insult him, or his work. She took the pictures of what he showed her then went back to the van. She sat alone for a while. This was the one place where Aunt

Jenny seemed ready to linger. Brad came out looking for her. “Are you all right?” he asked. “You seemed pretty upset in there.”

“It’s a sweatshop. No, I’m not all right.”

Brad seemed to be choosing his words carefully. “It’s just how they do things here. At least these kids can get an education and make something of themselves and maybe not have to send their kids here.”

His gentleness and empathy caught her off guard. She just shrugged. When Aunt Jenny finally came out, she announced that she had bought an 8x12 foot silk area rug for thirty thousand dollars. When Abby-Claire stared at her, wide-eyed, she said, “Education is important. We all have to do our part. These kids cant keep going to school if nobody buys their rugs.” She looked straight at Abby-Claire, “Your uncle might need some convincing, though, so be sure to back me up when it gets there.”

## CHAPTER XVIII

The day after Abby-Claire got back from Egypt was promotion Sunday, the day when all the children and youth promote to the next grade in Sunday school. She saw Hawthorn there. As soon as she walked in, he came over to the door and said, "I hoped I'd see you here."

She looked at him, wide-eyed. He'd caught her off guard.

"Abby-Claire! You're back. I'm y so glad y'all all made it back safe and sound." Abby-Claire turned just in time to see the source of the voice, Ms. Sandra, their teacher, before she smothered her between her enormous breasts. "You'll have to tell us all about it."

When Abby-Claire could breathe again, she mustered some fake enthusiasm and said, "Can't wait."

"Well good. And Today's lesson is about mission work. Isn't the Lord's timing always so perfect? You can give your testimony." Ms. Sandra started scurrying around the room for no apparent reason. "We won't even split into boys' and girls' groups today, I think everybody should hear both your stories."

"Both?" she asked.

Brad put his arm around her and spoke to everyone. "She means me. I'm the boys' teacher this year." He lowered his voice and spoke directly to Abby-Claire, "Sleep well?"

The truth was she hadn't truly slept since she saw him in the shower. Apart from being restless on the plane, even when she got to her own bed, every time she closed her

eyes, she saw his penis. The times when she did manage to fall asleep, she had weird dreams about Brad dripping with alfredo sauce and wrapped in giant fettuccini noodles. She was too scared to try and figure out the associations her brain was making.

She wanted to sit with Hawthorn. She wanted to talk to him. She'd had time to calm down since she got the news about his dad. Besides, she was mostly just angry about the way they had decided to tell her, and from what she could tell; he had nothing to do with that. But that clearly wouldn't happen until later. Ms. Sandra made Abby-Claire and Brad sit in chairs at the front while she read the Great Commission, the passage in the bible where Jesus commands his followers to teach all nations about him and baptize them. But she had recently begun to wonder if that's what Jesus meant. Then Ms. Sandra turned the floor over to Brad who had no trouble talking about himself. He occasionally asked for input from Abby-Claire, but she mostly just sat there and nodded.

As Ms. Sandra dismissed them she said, "And everybody remember the back-to-school youth party is this coming Saturday at Ms. Dorothy's house. It's a pool party, so bring your swimsuit and towel.

## CHAPTER XIX

Dorothy Anderson found herself widowed and childless at the age of 48. She had married at 22, late in life by Mobile standards. She had her first and only child, Macy, at the age of twenty-four. Her husband died of kidney failure when Macy was ten and then Macy had a seizure in her sleep and suffocated just before her twenty-fourth birthday. As a rich widow, Dorothy was nothing if not well connected. Although she never showed any interest in leading any of the ministries, she was highly involved with most of the ministries Charlene ran so Abby-Claire had gotten to know her over the years. Because of the age difference, she never thought to actually call Ms. Dorothy a friend, but that really was how she saw her.

Macy was autistic, so taking care of her had been Dorothy's full-time job right up until the day she died. Rich, lonely, and bored, within a year of Macy's death, Dorothy sent shockwaves through the entire church by adopting a pair of black children. Everyone swore they weren't being racist, they just thought it was unfair to the children for a woman her age to adopt them. They wouldn't have their parents for as long as they could have if a nice young couple had adopted them. Not to mention, all children should have a mother and father. Her final insult to the sensibilities of the fine upstanding white people at Golgotha Baptist Church was her decision not to change their names. They were born Cordarius and Carmelita, and she saw no reason to change that.

Since being the single mother of two black children with urban-sounding names wasn't enough to fully anger her friends at church, she had also formed a habit of taking in strays, in particular the disowned children of church members. She just helped them

get back on their feet. It was never a permanent arrangement, and she had strict rules for the ones with drug problems, but she nevertheless stepped in and filled the gap their parents had left.

Abby-Claire knew most of the teens Ms. Dorothy took in and she also regularly babysat Cordarius and Carmelita, but for some reason it surprised her when Ms. Dorothy took in Hawthorn. She wasn't just helping him get back on his feet. He was moving in.

Cordarius and Carmelita of course each had their own rooms. A kid named Jeremiah in Abby-Claire's grade had one room; no one knew why his parents kicked him out, but they all suspected he had come out to them. A pregnant sophomore named Katie had another room. Hawthorn would take the room at the end of the hall, bringing Ms. Dorothy to full capacity. The bedrooms had never been completely full when Dorothy's family was alive.

Ms. Dorothy didn't make any of them go to church. When Abby-Claire asked why not, she said she figured they would come around on their own eventually. Church is the reason they were where they were. Their parents wouldn't have kicked them out if they didn't feel the pressure to have perfect children. "And even if they don't come around on their own, forcing it on them won't do any good anyway."

When Macy started high school, Ms. Dorothy started hosting the back to school parties for the high school group. The tradition had never stopped and although some might have wanted it to when she started taking in strays, no one was about to say anything to piss off a rich widow.

Abby-Claire couldn't think of a worse way to spend her Saturday: facing not one, but two, of the most awkward situations she'd ever been in with a boy, the first to ever cause her to struggle with lust in real-life situations (the Jonas Brothers didn't count), both of them probably shirtless and wet.

Abby-Claire had never in her life arrived at a church function on time. She arrived early. If Her mother hadn't organized it then she helped to execute it. Charlene was at the prison visiting her new black friend that day so Abby-Claire arrived early on her own. Jeremiah answered the door wearing a white linen shirt tucked into crisply pressed khaki Bermuda shorts with neon green flip-flops. He said, "Oh. They're arriving. Guess I'll go hide upstairs now."

"Who are you talking to?" she asked.

Jeremiah looked down his nose at her for a second, and then his expression softened. "Well... I guess you were always one of the nice ones."

"It's good to see you. I've missed you at church. Will I still see you at school?"

"I guess. If we have any classes together."

"You don't have to go hide yet. I'm an hour early."

He studied her for a second then offered his arm. She slipped a hand through it and followed him to the kitchen. "Dorothy, company," he said.

"Thank you Jeremiah. Hey, Abby-Claire."

Abby-Claire asked, "What can I do to help?"

"I think Hawthorn could probably use some help getting the grill lit."

"Care to join?" she asked Jeremiah.

He looked at Ms. Dorothy and they had some sort of unspoken exchange. “I should actually probably go try to get some work done before it gets too noisy down here.”

Abby-Claire didn't move.

Ms. Dorothy looked at her then at the back door.

Abby-Claire said, “Are you sure there's nothing I can help you with in here?”

“Ms. Sandra just went to the store for ice. She'll be back any minute. We've got it covered in here. Now get your rear outside and talk to that boy. He's been on pins and needles for three weeks.”

Abby-Claire's breathing slowed, and her shoulders tensed, but she still didn't speak.

“Rod told me the whole story. I don't know that Hawthorn'll ever speak to his uncle again. But he does want to see you.”

When she got outside, Hawthorne was dumping charcoal from a chimney into the grill. He wore only a wet swimsuit that clung to his legs. His wet hair slicked back over his head. He didn't look up from what he was doing, he just said, “He used to think he was Merlin.”

Abby-Claire said, “Hi. It's good to see you too.”

Hawthorn looked up at her. “You're not easy to pin down these days. I figured I'd cut to the chase.” He didn't give her a chance to say anything before he went on. “Just so we're clear, he doesn't think he's Jesus. He thinks his body is hosting the spirit of Jesus. I don't know if that matters to you, but it makes it easier for some people to stomach.” He scraped the coals out across the bottom of the grill then put the grate on and closed the

lid. He finally looked at Abby-Claire. “Before I was born, he thought he was channeling Merlin. My mother was a woman named Vivien, or at least that’s what he says. There’s a legend that says Merlin met a woman named Vivien, and she tricked him into giving her all of his secrets, then she turned his own spell against him and imprisoned him in a hawthorn tree. In my dad’s world, that means when Vivien got pregnant, she took Merlin’s spirit. That’s why he named me Hawthorn. I’m Merlin now. Or Merlin is trapped inside me. And since he’s not Merlin anymore, that cleared up the space for Jesus to move in. Well actually Moses moved in for a while, but he left, then Jesus moved in and he’s still there.”

“How old was he when he had you?” Abby-Claire asked

Hawthorn cocked his head. “I don’t know exactly what I thought you were going to say, but that’s not it.”

“He looked really young.”

“He is.”

“So he’s been Jesus since when?”

“As long as I can remember. He told me about Moses once when I was little, but he was already Jesus. He was fifteen when he had me, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Why did he just now have to move to the nursing home if he’s been Jesus for so long?”

“We kept it a secret. He’s got medicine. Good medicine that works when he takes it, but sometimes he stops taking it because he thinks he’s better.” He paused and looked at her. “He tried to kill me.”

His face was blank. He wasn't cold, but he also wasn't having any trouble telling this story.

"He said I was harboring evil since wizards are evil. When he read that Draco Malfoy's wand was made from Hawthorn, all Hell broke loose."

"I don't know what that means."

"So you think Harry Potter's the devil too?"

"I don't know. That's just what my mom always said."

Hawthorn laughed and shook his head. "One of the bad guys in the story has a magic wand made out of Hawthorn. When my dad read that, he started chasing me with a knife. I calmed him down, but the neighbors heard the racket and called the police. I made up a story so he got away with it that time, but then he tried again when he read somewhere that Christ's thorns and the cross were both made of hawthorn."

"I've heard that before." Abby-Claire couldn't believe she had just interrupted him. She knew it wasn't really appropriate, but she couldn't handle much more of this story.

"Hawthorn doesn't grow in the middle east." He looked at her for a second, waiting for some sort of response.

"Oh."

"He sharpened the bottom of the cross that used to hang in our living room, and tried to stake me through the heart like a vampire. He gets his mythology mixed up sometimes. His aim sucked." He cracked half a smile and shook his head as he noticed the pun then pointed to a scar on his left side, just above his hip. "Grandma called the police that time."

Abby-Claire studied his face. He was completely sincere.

“I don’t know if I’m crazy. I’ll probably always wonder. Or at least until they make me my dad’s roommate.”

Abby-Claire didn’t know what to say.

“You were thinking it. Wondering it. Everyone does. At least everyone who knows, which is pretty much just my dad’s family, but still.”

“Just because you’re dad’s crazy doesn’t mean you’re crazy.”

He looked at her skeptically.

“You don’t seem crazy. A little old fashioned maybe, but not crazy.”

“Old fashioned?”

“I met you when you rode up on horseback and saved me from a wild beast. And you hunt with a spear.”

“Crazy. I know.”

“I don’t think you’re crazy.”

“But you know that I might be.”

Abby-Claire contemplated his statement. She hated that the only thing she could think to say would sound trite and clichéd, but she meant it. “Everyone might be crazy.” It sounded trite and clichéd so she kept going. “My parents are crazy so that means I could be crazy too. My brother’s at least a little crazy. He lives in France.”

Hawthorn laughed. “All right, well this is ready for the time being.” He pointed to the grill. “I’m going to go for another swim before the pool’s full of other peoples pi—.” He caught himself and said, “Pee.” Without waiting for her to respond, he jumped in and swam the entire length under water then came up for air at the other end and shook his

hair out like he was in a shampoo commercial. Abby-Claire suddenly couldn't care less if he was crazy. He was hot. She took off her cover up and joined him.

## CHAPTER XX

She still had questions, but she had time to ask them later. For now, she just wanted to protect him from the swooning teenage girls about to attack him. She didn't know exactly when he had moved in with Ms. Dorothy, or how many times he had been to church, but the girls were certainly swarming last Sunday. Unfortunately, Brad also took more of an interest than Abby-Claire was comfortable with. He walked in and went straight to Hawthorn. He shook his hand and didn't let it go. Christie came over and whisked Abby-Claire away to the other side of the pool, out of earshot. She made small talk, and Abby-Claire ignored her. She watched Hawthorn as Brad continued to hold his hand while they talked. Hawthorn's smile eventually faded, and he looked down at their hands. He said something to Brad, then laughed. Brad didn't find it funny, but did let his hand go. Hawthorn walked back around the pool to Abby-Claire and said, "I'm going to go up to my room for a bit and..." he paused and searched for words, "not be around that guy."

"You mean my husband?" Christie said snippily

Hawthorn smirked and shrugged, then said, "Guess so," as he turned to walk inside.

Christie said, "Abby-Claire, I don't know that you need to be spending so much time with that boy. He's disrespectful."

Hawthorn was, if anything, a perfect gentleman. More so than Brad, for sure. Charlene or Tim or both had no doubt filled in Christie on everything about Hawthorn since the moment they met. Except for what she just learned, which she definitely

wouldn't tell Charlene. Abby-Claire didn't segue out of her conversation with Christie. She didn't know what it was about anyway since Christie had done all the talking. She just got up and followed Hawthorn inside. "Let's go upstairs and see what Jeremiah's doing," she suggested.

Hawthorn smiled uncomfortably, "I don't know if that's a good idea."

"I haven't really gotten to talk to him in forever. Besides, I want everyone to see us go upstairs together." She grabbed his hand and dragged him up. "Which room is his?"

"The one with the 'Do Not Disturb' sign on it."

Abby-Claire knocked.

"Don't do that. He's working. He doesn't like to be disturbed. That's why he has the sign." He tugged on her hand, pulling her down the hall. She knocked again, louder.

"Abby-Claire, stop. I'm serious. He's busy."

Jeremiah started yelling, his voice got louder as he got closer to the door. For some reason, it sounded like he had a British accent at first. "Katie. I'm in the middle of a show. I've told you not to bother me. Now the guy logged out in the m—." He stopped when he opened the door and saw Abby-Claire. He was wearing a white oxford shirt with a striped tie and a blue blazer. The tie was still tied, but the shirt mostly unbuttoned and he didn't have on pants. Or underwear. He slammed the door. "What the fuck, Hawthorn?"

"I'm sorry. I tried to stop her," he yelled.

Abby-Claire doubled over in laughter. When she caught her breath, she said, "He's working?"

A second later, Jeremiah came out in full prep school attire and grabbed her by both straps of her bathing suit. He was tall enough that he was actually able to lift her up a bit to make her eye-level with him. “If you tell anyone, I swear I’ll—.”

Hawthorn had put his hand on Jeremiah’s chest. He was probably going to shove him backwards, but Jeremiah let her go. He shook his head and pleaded with her, “Just don’t tell Ms. Dorothy. She might kick me out too.” There was a catch in his voice. “I really need the money.”

“What the heck would I tell her? I don’t even know what just happened.”

His eyes lit up and he said, “Good” as he turned and went back in his room. He turned back around to close the door with a flourish, but Hawthorn put his foot in the door. Jeremiah didn’t open it back up, but he did peer through the crack. “Is there something else I can help you with? I have clients waiting.”

“Clients?” Hawthorn asked.

“Clients, customers, cyberjohns. Whatever you want to call them.”

She had no idea what a ‘cyberjohn’ was.

Hawthorn said, “If you don’t tell her, she’ll just drag it out of me.”

Abby-Claire took offense. They may have given themselves over to lust on one occasion, but they weren’t a couple, and even if they were she didn’t like the idea of being treated like a nagging wife. But she really wanted to know what Jeremiah was doing.

Jeremiah looked back and forth between them a few times then opened the door all the way and made a grand slow sweeping gesture toward his bed. There was camera on a tripod set up at the foot of the bed and a laptop sitting on the bed in the middle of a

few short strands of large beads and some fake penises and a few shiny things that Abby-Claire didn't recognize. A leather messenger bag with books spilling out of it sat at the end. "I've seen enough. I won't tell. I'm going downstairs."

As she fled, Jeremiah quickly interjected, "A dollar a minute."

## CHAPTER XXI

A few days later, Ms. Dorothy asked Abby-Claire to babysit. She didn't quite trust Jeremiah or Katie, and apparently Hawthorn had told her not to trust him with kids. Before Ms. Dorothy left, she said, "Abby-Claire, I trust you. I know you're a good girl, but your mamma said I had to give you some rules. I don't remember what they were, but the gist of it was don't have sex with Hawthorn or Jeremiah."

They both laughed at the last bit.

"But we all know about your mamma and denial. Just be smart. Don't put yourself in a situation where you might make a decision you'll regret. You can ask Katie about that if you need some encouragement."

She left money for pizza. Abby-Claire put the kids to bed, then ate with Katie, Jeremiah, and Hawthorn. Katie had always been shy. Abby-Claire had never really talked to her before except in passing. She just ate quietly, then went back upstairs. Jeremiah prattled on about a character on *Glee* while she and Hawthorn pretended to listen. Hawthorn finished and scooted from the table. He looked at her, "I'm going to head upstairs. I have homework. If I don't see you again before you leave, good night. And I'll see you Sunday."

Jeremiah watched Hawthorn walk away, then shook his head and said, "You lucky bitch."

"He's just a friend."

"Honey, you can drop that bit, you're among friends."

Abby-Claire looked around the room.

“God, it’s an expression,” he said.

“I just mean nothing has happened yet. I’m not even sure he’s interested and even if he was, my mom hates him.”

“Your mom hates the thought of you staying here to go to college for some boy.”

“My mom hates the thought of me dating a guy she thinks is crazy.”

“There is that.”

“But he’s not.”

“I know that.”

“So do I.”

“I know you know. You said it.”

“Then what’s my hang up?”

“You don’t have one. He does.”

She put her pizza down forcefully.

“He thinks you think he’s crazy. He’s never going to ask you out. He thinks he’s damaged goods.”

“Well what am I supposed to do about that?”

Jeremiah just shook his head.

“What does that mean?”

“Honey, if you’re that hopeless, I can’t help.” He left.

Abby-Claire attempted to watch TV, but she was too distracted trying to figure out what Jeremiah meant. She went up to his room. There was no sign on the door, but she covered her eyes after knocking, just in case.

“Nothing to worry about. I don’t work after eating.”

Abby-Claire uncovered her eyes and he stood there in a silk bathrobe.

“Are any of those things you were using the other day out?”

“I was doing homework.”

“Am I bothering you?”

“No. Come in. Sit.” He pointed to the bed. His laptop was on it, but nothing else.

“So I always wondered. Did you know your brother deflowered me?”

She took a second to process what he said. It was so far from left field. “I didn’t know that. Didn’t really want to know that either.” Now that she thought about it, Jeremiah had spent a lot of time following Tim around.

“I’m just kidding.”

She breathed a sigh of relief.

“It was Louis-Arnaut. Tim just watched.”

She stared at him wide-eyed.

He smiled and said, “Sit, sit.”

She had no idea if he was kidding or not. He started doing something on his laptop and didn’t say anything or look at her. She stood next to the bed and watched him.

“I know you didn’t come up here just to watch me. And, I usually charge for that, anyway.”

Abby-Claire was too uncomfortable to laugh so she changed the subject. “How am I hopeless? *Why* am I hopeless? What’s so hopeless about me? Why isn’t there hope for me?”

“Oh my god stop talking.” He made a closed mouth with his hands. “Sit down.”  
He patted the bed next to him.

As she sat, she turned to face the doorway for the first time and screamed when she saw someone standing next to it. Then she realized it wasn't a person, but a cardboard cutout of Justin Bieber. Jeremiah stared up at her then patted the bed again. “I thought that was a person,” she said.

“He is a person. He's a human being just like you and me he deserves your respect as a person even if he is kind of tiny and hasn't hit puberty yet.”

Abby-Claire wasn't sure why or how or when she decided that Jeremiah would have this wisdom she needed for this situation with Hawthorn, but she couldn't think of anyone else to ask.

“He thinks he's damaged goods.”

“You said that.”

“He's never going to ask you out.”

“You said that too. Why are you being so mean?”

“Mean? Honey, I'm trying to help.”

“By telling me he doesn't want me?”

“I never said that.”

“Why are you so cryptic?”

“Why are you so slow?”

“Would you just answer my question?”

“I already did.”

“What do you mean?”

He turned his computer towards her. A Youtube video featuring a small blond guy with glasses was pulled up. The title was “How to: Be a bad bitch.” The guy was lip-synching to a rap song. It was full of profanity, and she was mad at him. She wasn’t allowed to watch that sort of thing, and didn’t want to anyway. She couldn’t help but laugh, though. The guy was funny.

“Was that your way of calling me the b-word?”

“No. I just like that video.”

She didn’t dignify that one with a response. She waited for him to continue.

“This is what I wanted to show you.” He clicked into another tab. It was another video by the same guy called, “So You Got Dumped.”

Mildly inspirational piano music played on the background as the guy talked about moving on after getting dumped and not holding grudges and getting revenge by being happy.

“I didn’t get dumped. He hasn’t asked me out yet.”

“Nope. Not yet. Anyway, I just wanted to go ahead and show you that one just in case. It works for people who have gotten rejected to.” He clicked over to another tab with yet another video from this blond guy. This one was called “How to: Make the first move.” The guy spent the first part of the video putting his glasses on then taking them off then putting them back on and complaining about his vision. He eventually settled on a pair of fake ones. Then he started talking about getting his braces tightened and how gorgeous and hunky the twenty-something tightening his braces was and how he knew they were meant to be, even though he was only in seventh grade and he decided to make the first move so he licked the guy’s finger then the guy asked him if he needed to spit

and he just shook his head. He kept talking but Abby-Claire tuned him out and said,  
“Was that supposed to be inspirational?”

“Everyone gets rejected sometimes.”

“So you’re saying I should ask him out?”

“Finally. I thought you’d never get there. I was running out of inspirational videos.”

“I can’t ask him out.”

“Why not? It’s obvious he likes you.”

“I’m the girl.”

Jeremiah huffed and pulled up another video. Someone held a coffee-table book of chicken pictures in front of the camera. A weird squeaky voice narrated the thoughts of the chickens as they contemplated STDs and weave. At one point the speaker pulls the book back and Abby-Claire realized it was the guy from the other three videos.

“What did you just do to my brain?” she asked.

“Made it a better place.”

“Who is that guy?”

“My spirit animal. His name is Tyler Oakley. He lives in Michigan and he is fabulousness personified. Speak ill of him ever, and I will cut you.”

There was an awkward silence as Jeremiah stared daggers at her to drive his point home.

Once she felt it was ok to breathe again, she said, “I’m going to leave your room now.”

As she walked out of Jeremiah's room, Hawthorn came out of his. The timing was a little too perfect to seem happenstance. He poorly acted surprised to see her and said, "Oh! Hey. What were you doing in there?"

She contemplated the question for half a second and said, "I don't know."

Hawthorn looked at the door and then back at her. "Well... what did you do in there?"

She looked at the door too then back at Hawthorn. She shook her head, as she said, "I don't know," confusion in her voice.

He seemed taken aback. "Well you did something. You were in there a while."

The fact that Hawthorn knew exactly how long she had been in there made her smile. But she still didn't really know how to answer the question. "Have you *met* Jeremiah?" she said.

"Touché."

## CHAPTER XXII

Do you remember that kid Jeremiah?

*The one who used to follow me around at church and invited me to his birthday party even though he was 3 years younger and not my friend*

Harsh tim

*So that's the 1?*

Yes

*Why*

He lives with ms Dorothy now

*Came out?*

Yeah

Jeremiah was lying. Or Tim was very embarrassed about what happened with him. Abby-Claire's curiosity got the best of her.

Did he ever meet Louis-Arnaut?

*They never actually spoke, but he was obsessed with him that's why he followed me around*

*He gave me an invitation to give to louis-arnaut for that same party*

Jeremiah was lying.

He says I should ask hawthorn out

*Why*

Because hawthorn thinks he's damaged goods so he'll never ask me out

*Could be*

*Or maybe hawthorn doesn't want to get involved since it's his senior year*

*Or maybe he's intimidated by the thought of dating an older woman*

*Or maybe he's just secretly gay*

TIM!!!!

*Had to be said*

You said he wasn't

*That was before I saw a his Facebook*

*Gay face if there ever was such a thing.*

Just because you and Jeremiah want him to be gay desont mean he is

Doesn't\*

*Either way I agree with Jeremiah*

*He'll never ask you out*

Why do you say that?

*He would have done it by now.*

*I figured that was why he took you upstairs at the pool party*

*But then you never said anything*

Oh yeah!

Did you know Jeremiah was a porn star?

*Jeremiah was a porn star!*

You just broke into song, didn't you?

*How did you not?*

*Joy to the world*

*Aaaaall the boys and girls now*

I heard it as I sent it

What should I do about Hawthorn?

*Get over yourself*

*and don't worry about whether or not you guys are "official"*

*Ask him to hang out and then hang out*

*He'll say yes*

*That's all you really want anyway isn't it?*

I guess

*You know.*

## CHAPTER XXIII

She didn't see Hawthorn again until Sunday school the next week. He walked over to her as soon as she came in. Brad hovered a few feet away. She couldn't figure out exactly what his deal was with Hawthorn. Brad had always been protective of her, but he wasn't being protective. He was just being creepy. Hawthorn joined Abby-Claire in the refreshments line. He had apparently been waiting for her before he went through. "How was your week?" he asked.

"Since Thursday, you mean?" she said.

"Well... yeah. How was your weekend, I guess."

"Not bad. Yours?"

"Um... I guess I've had worse."

"So what are you doing without boars? I kind of miss them."

"Call of Duty helps, but it's not the same thing."

"I guess it's a little different when someone's trying to kill you." She regretted it as soon as she said it.

He didn't look offended or hurt, he mostly just looked embarrassed for her. He kind of laughed. "Completely different."

She wanted to change the subject, and this seemed like the only place she would be guaranteed to see him. They never crossed paths at school, and he didn't come to church on Wednesday nights. She didn't want to wait another week to see him. And Tim and Jeremiah were right; he was never going to ask. She could invite him to church on Wednesday night. That was reasonable. That wasn't coming on strong. That was her

encouraging a potential mate to better his relationship with God and with his church. She was going to go for it.

“So you should start coming to Trail Blazing on Wednesdays. It’s fun.”

“What is that?”

“I can’t believe Ms. Dorothy never told you about it. It’s the youth service we have on Wednesday nights. For high schoolers, it starts at seven. In the Trailhead.”

“The Trailhead.”

“Sorry. Habit. It’s cheesy, I know. That’s what they call the youth room. It’s the old sanctuary. We’ll walk by it on the way to the service, I’ll show you.”

“Cool.”

Abby-Claire was giddy all through the rest of Sunday school and through the service. She tried not to get too excited. It’s not like it was a date, and she’d had to ask him, but still, he said yes.

Her father even asked Ms. Dorothy and Hawthorn and the kids to join them for lunch. It seemed he was accepting the idea that she and Hawthorn would want to spend time together, but it wouldn’t be unsupervised.

On Wednesday, Hawthorn arrived on time, Bible in hand. It looked new. She wondered if it was a gift from Ms. Dorothy, or if he just wanted to look the part for a change. He was usually the only one empty-handed at church.

She hadn’t figured out what she was going to ask him to do, but she wanted to see him that weekend. And not just at church. But Brad had been lingering again, and when

he heard them start to talk about the weekend, he jumped in. “Abby-Claire, Christie wanted to have a few people over on Friday to play board games. Do you want to come?”

She couldn’t believe how rude he was being. Even if he didn’t like Hawthorn, he didn’t have to shun him in person. “Sure.” She turned to Hawthorn. “You should come too. It’ll be fun.”

Brad’s smile only wavered for a second. “Sure. The more the merrier. Pizza’ll be there at six.”

It’s not what she had in mind, but she would at least get to see him. Hawthorn didn’t look enthused.

Abby-Claire knew people said Christians had a low threshold of amusement, were easily entertained, and it was nights like this that made her realize why. Even by Christian standards, this game night was lame. In the movies, people are at least drunk when they have game night.

They lived in a luxury apartment that Brad’s dad paid for. Christie’s sister, Cara, and her husband, James, were also there. After they ate pizza and all played a dull, unenthused, round of Cranium, Brad decided to liven things up a bit. “Let’s do a scavenger hunt!”

“Sweetheart, you have to plan something like that. Hide clues and stuff,” Christie said skeptically.

“Let’s just make one up. With clues that are already hidden.”

No one offered suggestions.

“Two teams. I’ll drive Abby-Claire and Cara. Hawthorn, you go with Christie and James.”

“Or I can go with my sister and her husband, and Abby-Claire’s friend can go with her.” Christie stared at her husband with more skepticism than before.

“Fine. Whatever.”

“Where are we going?” she asked.

Brad leaned in and his voice escalated as he explained. “We drive around to every Starbucks in town and at everybody on the team has to do a shot of espresso at each one. First one team back here wins. Save your receipts to prove you went to all of them.”

Cara and James lit up at the idea. Christie seemed to think it wasn’t a bad idea. Abby-Claire didn’t look at Hawthorn because she was afraid he might be enthused too, and it would change her opinion of him forever.

“Well, that sounds like a plan.” Christie said. She looked at her sister then glanced toward the door. She grabbed her keys and their team ran out the door, giggling.

“Come on. Let’s go,” Brad yelled.

Abby-Claire and Hawthorn both stood slowly.

“Speed up, y’all. They’ve got a head start.”

Hawthorn looked at his watch. “Actually, It’s getting kind of late. I think I’m going to call it a night. Y’all have fun.”

It was 7:15.

Abby-Claire said, “Hawthorn, don’t go yet.”

“I’m tired. You go have fun. I’ll see you Sunday.” His smile was somehow genuine and reassuring.

“Your loss man,” Brad said. “Abby-Claire, come on. We’re going to lose.”

Abby-Claire had known Brad all her life. They had never been close friends, but she still thought she knew him well enough to be blunt with him. “What’s your deal?” she asked.

Brad smiled for a second, probably intending to be coy, but then dropped the act. “I just don’t think he’s good for you.”

“Good for me, or good enough for me?”

“Good for you. Are you even sure if he’s a Christian?”

“Well I haven’t asked him to tell me his salvation story, but he grew up in church just like we did.”

Brad pulled up to the drive through at the first Starbucks and ordered two shots. He didn’t speak again until he had handed her one of them and started to drive away. He started to speak several times, but used his espresso as an excuse not to. Abby-Claire had downed hers all at once and burnt her mouth. Brad finally said, “His dad’s a blasphemer.”

“His father is mentally ill.”

“I just think you can do better.”

“Better than what?”

“I don’t know.”

“What’s wrong with him? Him, not his dad. Him.”

Brad pulled into the next Starbucks. This one didn’t have a drive through. He didn’t answer her question; he just got out of the car. The others were inside clinking glasses and shooting the espresso as Brad and Abby-Claire walked in. They all fanned their mouths and scrunched their faces. James said, “That was a bad idea.”

James and Cara ran past them on their way out the door, yelling taunts. Christie stopped. “Where’s Hawthorn?”

“He decided he didn’t want to play,” Brad said.

“So it’s just you two?” Abby-Claire was suddenly uncomfortable. Being alone with another woman’s husband wasn’t appropriate. She would be talked about if anyone found out and if Abby-Claire’s father ever found out, he would be mad at Brad for disrespecting his daughter that way.

“Just enjoy the game, Christie.”

Abby-Claire had walked a few feet away to try to mind her own business. Brad came over with another espresso and motioned toward the car.

The next few were drive throughs, so she just hoped no one would see her alone with Christie’s husband since it was dark outside. They didn’t speak much anymore. At the last one, he said, “This one’s not a drive through. You don’t have to come in if you don’t want.”

Abby-Claire got out. At this point, it didn’t matter. And the caffeine was making her jittery. She needed to get out of the car.

“I’m sorry, Abby-Claire. It didn’t even dawn on me how this probably looks until Christie said something.”

“Stop trying to keep Hawthorn away from me. It’s annoying and it’s none of your business.” She walked off toward the entrance.

“It is my business, I’ve known you your whole life.”

“You’re my brother’s best friend’s husband. That doesn’t make you my protector.”

Brad yelled from behind her, “Yes it does.”

Abby-Claire turned back to him. “No it doesn’t.”

“Well it gives me a right to care.”

“We go to a mega-church. Everyone has the right to care. That doesn’t mean it’s your place to get in the way.”

He grabbed her and turned her around. “I just worry about you sometimes. Things happened kind of fast with this guy.”

For a second, Abby-Claire was scared he might know about what happened in the woods, but he couldn’t. She hadn’t told anyone, and Hawthorn didn’t have anyone to tell.

“What happened fast? He started going to church with me too fast?”

“I mean over the summer. You were with him every day.”

“You actually talk to Christie about what she talks about with Tim?”

He ordered their last round of espresso and headed back toward the car. He started to pour it out in the parking lot. “I can’t handle anymore of this.”

She stopped him. She kind of liked the jittery feeling it gave her. When he went to pour his out, he spilled most of it on his jeans.

As Brad pulled out of the parking lot, he said, “Tim asked us to look out for you.”

“He spies on me?”

“Not really. You tell him more than we do.”

“But you still spy on me for him?”

“Christie prefers to call it gossip.”

“That’s a sin.”

“So is being gay.” He apologized as soon as he said it. “I just mean we all seem to bend the rules sometimes.”

By now, Abby-Claire had no idea what point he was trying to make.

They somehow beat the other team back to the apartment. Abby-Claire sat down in the living room, and Brad went into the bedroom. He came back out a minute late in a tank top and basketball shorts. She thought it was really rude of him to put on pajamas while he still had company, even if he had spilled something on his jeans. Abby-Claire stood up; she was no longer comfortable with this situation, especially with no sign of Christie. “I think I’m just going to go home, now. Tell everyone else I said good night?”

He walked her to the door. He put one hand on her shoulder and said, “Hey.”

She turned back towards him. He pulled her in for a hug as he said, “Good night.”

The hug lingered. And then it turned. She was scared that she was thrilled. She looked up at him, and he kissed her. She kissed him back. He pushed her to the wall and kissed her neck. She couldn’t believe how strong he was, how rigid the muscles in his arms were. She said his name. It was meant to be in protest, but that’s not how it sounded when it came out. She was breathing too heavily. He picked her up a little bit, and pressed her against the wall. He ground his hips into hers and she could feel every detail. She knew she should ask him to stop, but she didn’t want to. It felt too good. Brad put her down and pulled away when they heard laughter on the porch. They stared at each other for a second then Abby-Claire just went out the door. She didn’t make eye contact with anyone as she passed, she just said, “Bye.” As she walked to her car, she wondered if kissing would ever involve a conscious decision.

## CHAPTER XXIV

*What the fuck did you just do?*

The message was already waiting when she opened Facebook.

Abby-Claire tried to think of an answer, but before she could come up with anything, Tim messaged her again.

*Skype me.*

*Now.*

She opened Skype and immediately got a call from him. When the video popped up, Tim was lying in bed shirtless with his phone to his ear. “Her mascara’s running. I told you. Here’s the better question. What the fuck did your husband do to my sister? I’m going to kill him. He has no idea how lucky he is that I live five thousand miles away. No, she’s not crying right now, but she’s probably been crying since she left your place.”

Abby-Claire started crying again. She had, in fact, been crying since she left. She had snuck upstairs, so her mother wouldn’t see her face and ask questions. Her brother picked up his computer and started pacing briskly through his bedroom. It made the image a little bit nauseating to watch. Tim said, “I am going to kill him. I’m going to kill him. His death is fucking imminent.”

Abby-Claire heard Baptiste say, “*Calmes-toi, chéri.*”

For some reason his admonition calmed her. “Hi, Baptiste.”

“Allo, Abby-Claire.”

Tim looked back at Abby-Claire, then off screen at his boyfriend then said, “She’s exchanging pleasantries with my boyfriend... I don’t know why. Abby-Claire, what the fuck happened?”

She collected herself but before she could answer, he said, “Christie said when she got home you flew out the door looking embarrassed and he was inside half naked with a raging boner.”

“He wasn’t half naked.”

Tim listened to Christie say something.

“Pajamas, sorry. Why did he change clothes?”

“He spilled espresso on his jeans.”

Tim sat back down next to Baptiste who had bed head and was wearing glasses. It would have been 4:00 AM in Paris. Tim put the laptop down on the bed and she could see that they were both in their underwear. Not boxers, the skimpy European kind.

“Can you guys put some clothes on? Or point the camera up?”

Tim turned the camera away from Baptiste and pulled a t-shirt on.

“He kissed me. For kind of a while.”

Tim paused. His eyes got misty, and his jaw quivered a bit. “Of course. I’ll tell her,” he said to Christie. He hung up his phone and looked at Abby-Claire. “Christie’s almost finished packing. She’s going to be staying in my old room for a while. Will you go downstairs and tell dad? Oh and she said she’s not mad at you. She promises. She’s sure it was all Brad’s fault. So will you go tell dad?”

Abby-Claire tried to process everything he’d just said. Tim yawned. “Abby-Claire, go tell dad. I’m tired. I want to go back to bed.”

Abby-Claire nodded.

“Ok. Good night. And for God’s sake, take care of yourself.”

## CHAPTER XXV

Abby-Claire developed a habit of spending most of her spare time at Ms. Dorothy's. As much for Jeremiah as for Hawthorn. She didn't usually associate with non-Christians and he had fully turned from the church. Abby-Claire hoped some day he might come around again, and she prayed for him often. Her mother had protested her spending so much time with him because she was scared he might be a bad influence. Not to mention she probably thought Abby-Claire was really just over there to see Hawthorn. She had taken the same approach that Tim had used with Louis-Arnaut- she was witnessing and being a good Christian influence on him. But the truth was Jeremiah's bitterness and bitchiness and general blatant honesty were a much-needed antidote to Christie's robotic cheer in the face of her crumbling marriage. She and Brad were in marriage counseling and Christie remained optimistic, but Abby-Claire could never get a straight story out of her, and she hadn't seen Brad since that night. The other reason for Abby-Claire's attachment to Jeremiah was her general shunning at church. She didn't know what the rumors were, but she knew people knew she had been a key player in Brad and Christie's separation.

In early October, Abby-Claire came home from school one day to find Christie watching herself in a mirror as she paraded down the stairs with her hand resting lightly on the banister. She was in her pink antebellum hoop dress covered in ruffles with matching gloves, hat, and parasol. She was smiling through tears. She laughed when she saw Abby-Claire. "Oh, Abby-Claire, I can't believe you didn't even try for Azalea Trail."

Abby-Claire choked on a laugh. Not because she tried to stifle it, but because it came so quickly she couldn't let it out properly. The Azalea Trail Maids were a group of high school senior girls who spent most of their lives prepping for a few interviews that would land them the opportunity to be a Trail Maid. The Trail Maids were a sort of official mascot for the city of Mobile. It was a sort of beauty contest, although there was no pageant, just the interviews. Abby-Claire had considered it because they always talk about the scholarship money the girls are eligible for. But then she found out it was a single scholarship of one thousand dollars given to one girl. The ridiculous antebellum gowns the girls bought cost between three and five thousand dollars, and the girls' families were expected to cover the cost. The math didn't make sense. And while she thought it might be fun to wear a gown like that maybe once, just to see what it felt like, but the Maids themselves spent way too much time being poised and ladylike for Abby-Claire's taste.

“Why didn't you go out for Azalea Trail? You would've been perfect?”

“I'm just not that ladylike.”

Christie laughed. “You're so silly. And you're never sure of yourself. I'm sure you would've killed it in the interviews without even trying. Might have even been queen, like me.”

Abby-Claire started to head upstairs. Charlene had had her on a Miss Higgy's waiting list since she was four. The same seamstress who made her dress when she was a Trail Maid. And the one who had made Christie's dress. Inarguably the best. Abby-Claire had considered trying, and intentionally blowing the interviews, but her father called her

bluff. He could tell she wasn't interested and told her she didn't have to bother if she didn't want. He even took care of telling Charlene for her.

There was a long pause in their conversation. Abby-Claire really had nothing to say on the subject. Abby-Claire decided to just drop a not-so-subtle hint. "I'll never be a Maid myself, but it might be cool to see what it feels like."

Christie lit up. "I thought you'd never ask. Come on."

She turned and ran up the stairs, pulling her gloves off on the way.

Abby-Claire yelled after her, "I'll be up in a minute. I'm hungry."

She went to the kitchen and texted Jeremiah, "My house. Now. Don't ask questions."

Abby-Claire grabbed some yogurt. By the time she finished the doorbell rang. Jeremiah stood there panting with Hawthorn.

"Hawthorn?" Abby-Claire said.

Jeremiah said, "He was with me when I got the text. I tried to tell him it probably wasn't an actual emergency, but he wouldn't listen."

"What was so urgent?" Hawthorn asked.

Abby-Claire was pretty certain she didn't want him here for this. "Girl stuff." She heard it as she said it.

Jeremiah said, "Ew. Why did you text me then. Get Christie or your mom or Ms. Dorothy or some kind of actual girl for that sort of thing."

"Not that. Just get in here."

They both came through the door. "Not you, Hawthorn. I'm sorry, but you're not invited."

“He’s my ride,” Jeremiah said.

Hawthorn smirked and shrugged with his hands in his pockets.

“Fine. Watch TV downstairs.”

Christie came out onto the landing and saw Hawthorn and Jeremiah at the door.

“Oh! Yay! We have an audience for the fashion show.”

Jeremiah bolted up the stairs and Hawthorn started laughing. Abby-Claire turned to Hawthorn, angry and said, “Living room. Now. And shut the door.”

Hawthorn obeyed and Abby-Claire yelled up to Jeremiah, “He wasn’t invited. I’m going to kill you.”

Christie led them into her room where she had laid out the dress on the bed.

Jeremiah chirped when he saw it and steadied himself on the doorframe. “Maybe you should sit down,” Abby-Claire said.

Abby-Claire went into the living room to get Hawthorn. She hadn’t changed clothes, and he looked confused. “You should come see this,” she said. She took Hawthorn into the dining room where Christie sat waiting in one of three chairs that had been set up facing the stairs. Abby-Claire couldn’t keep the judgment off of her face. If this were anyone else, she might ridicule him for years to come, but Jeremiah was impervious to ridicule. Christie yelled, “We’re ready.”

Jeremiah opened the door slowly. He was in the dress; the bottom of the skirt must’ve been a foot off the floor. He walked out twirling the parasol in front of him, obscuring his face. As he got to the top of the stairs, he gently swung it over to his shoulder and batted his eyelashes. He opened his mouth several times then blushed a bit

and walked down the stairs without saying anything. When he got to the bottom of the stairs, he sat down and closed the parasol in the same graceful gesture. His face lit up just before he said, “Fiddle-dee-dee. War, war, war. This war talk’s spoiling all the fun at every party this week. I get so bored, I could scream. Besides. There isn’t going to be any war. If either of you boys say ‘war’ just once again, I’ll go in the house and slam the door.”

Hawthorn yelled, “War,” and Jeremiah huffed as he stood and stormed up the stairs, back into Christie’s room and slammed the door.

“Why did you make me watch that?” Hawthorn asked.

“Christie’s idea. Sorry.”

Christie grabbed Abby-Claire by the hand and dragged her up the stairs as she said, “Your turn.”

Abby-Claire’s feelings about trying on the dress had changed completely. She didn’t want Hawthorn to see her this way. So vein, so trivial, so girly.

Hawthorn crossed his arms and sat back in his chair smiling. “Take your time. I’m a patient man.”

When Abby-Claire got up stairs, Jeremiah was wearing only the gloves and hat, and his colorful, patterned briefs. Abby-Claire laughed. Jeremiah laughed too. “You always catch me in the strangest states of undress.” He looked to Christie and said, “Long story.”

“You don’t want to know,” Abby-Claire added.

Jeremiah didn’t finish changing before he started pulling Abby-Claire’s clothes off. She wasn’t sure how she felt about it. Not because he was a boy, but just in general,

she wasn't fond of changing in front of other people. She often hid in the corner of the locker room to change for volleyball. But within seconds she was standing in only her panties as Christie slid the bodice on, then pantaloons. Jeremiah came over with the hoops. Abby-Claire was glad they were both there; she would never be able to put this thing on by herself. She heard the front door open. She thought it might be Hawthorn leaving, but then she heard voices in the dining room. It sounded like her dad, but he was early and she couldn't imagine why he would use the front door. They finished dressing her, and Christie and Jeremiah went out the door. "Well tell you when we're ready," Christie said.

Abby-Claire started to lose her nerve as she stood there waiting for her cue. She looked at herself in the full-length mirror on the door. It was a beautiful dress. Abby-Claire would've liked to have her own made, for a moment, she second-guessed her decision not to at least try for the first interview. The longer she waited, the more she convinced herself that Hawthorn would never see her the same way again once he saw her in this dress. Then she wondered if she would ever see herself in the same way again. While she wasn't exactly a tomboy, she could never be mistaken for a lady. Her mother had not passed on the southern gentility gene, at least not to her, maybe to Tim.

Jeremiah yelled, "We're ready."

Abby-Claire opened the door, faster than Jeremiah had. She didn't know what to do with the parasol. She fiddled with it, trying to open it then realized there were more people in the dining room. Not her father. Tim and Baptiste.

Abby-Claire had never seen Hawthorn so uncomfortable. Or Tim. She had never met Baptiste, but she hoped this wasn't his usual demeanor. The girl in the pink hoop

skirt should not have been the most comfortable person in the room, but it somehow worked out that way. She was too excited to see her brother to feel awkward.

“What are you doing here?” she asked as she ran down the stairs praying she didn’t trip.

Tim got up to hug her. “Happy birthday.”

“It’s not for almost two weeks.”

“Yes, but mine is Thursday. Happy birthday to me.”

“From me,” Baptiste chimed in. He put his arm around Tim and they both stared at her.

She remembered what she was wearing, and felt ridiculous, but there wasn’t much she could do about it. She turned to Baptiste. “It’s nice to finally meet you in person.” She wondered what her parents would say. It was one thing for them to call him Tim’s roommate when they were thousands of miles apart. This was a completely different story. “This is Hawthorn,” she said.

“We met,” Tim said, never breaking eye contact with Abby-Claire. He lowered his voice, but he was still loud enough for everyone to hear when he said, “I apologize, the gay face isn’t as bad in person.”

Everyone else looked around awkwardly, but Tim just grabbed Abby-Claire’s hand and used it to twirl her around. Then he stepped back and looked at her. Christie came up beside him and put her arm around him. He squeezed her. “Thank you. It’s perfect.”

Christie said, “Happy birthday.”

Abby-Claire immediately realized that Christie had planned this whole thing.

Christie added. "You couldn't have had better timing if I'd planned it. I was thinking I'd have to figure out a way to keep her in it all afternoon."

Abby-Claire shook her head. "I guess you did always want to see me as a Trail Maid."

"What big brother doesn't want what's best for his little sister?" He hugged her again.

"Mom and dad know about this trip?"

"Uh, no. We should actually probably head soon. We need to go check in at our hotel. We came straight from the airport."

"Oh. Well, how much will I see you?"

"Why don't you come with us now? We just have to put our things down and then we can go get dinner. We're starving."

"Let me go get changed."

"You're not going to wear that?" Hawthorn asked.

Everyone stared at him, a bit puzzled by this sudden interjection of awkward humor.

"Jeremiah, will you help me get out of this?"

When they came back down Abby-Claire started to say goodbye to Hawthorn and Jeremiah, but then Tim said, "Hawthorn. What are you up to?"

It sounded like an accusation. Hawthorn asked, "Like, right now?" he asked.

Tim nodded.

He spoke slowly, confused by Tim's tone. "I'm about to say goodbye to your sister before I leave."

“No. I mean are you busy. You should join us too.”

Abby-Claire and Hawthorn both cocked their heads.

Tim’s face didn’t waver. Baptiste said, “He wants to see if you are good enough.”

Tim looked to Baptiste, perturbed. “Thank you Baptiste. Now you made it awkward.”

Hawthorn seemed to pass Tim’s test. By the end of the evening, everyone was jovial. Christie had covered for Abby-Claire with Charlene and Jackson. Abby-Claire couldn’t believe she didn’t even get a text. They dropped Hawthorn off first, then Tim walked Abby-Claire in. He left Baptiste in the car. He said he wasn’t ready to open that can of worms. They’re parents hugged him, and their mom faked a smile. Their dad’s was genuine.

He didn’t stay inside long. Not even long enough to sit down. Abby-Claire could tell he was about to cry when he hugged her one more time on his way out the door. “I’ll see you this weekend, if not sooner.”

## CHAPTER XXVI

As Abby-Claire went to bed that night, she found something Jeremiah had posted on Tim's Facebook. She hadn't realized they were friends. It was another video from that blond Tyler guy called "Christianity in a Nutshell." Tim had commented, "Hahahahaha. couldn't have said it better myself."

Abby-Claire clicked on the video. After a sequence of someone putting on a vest and tie with the colors saturated, Tyler explained that he had been doing some "Soul searching online." Abby-Claire was tempted to stop. She knew whatever this guy had to say would be offensive and inaccurate. But the video wasn't even two minutes long and her curiosity had the best of her.

"Basically, what they said Christianity was, tell me if I'm wrong, but the gist of it was, you are worshiping a Cosmic Jewish Zombie who is his own father who can give you eternal life if you symbolically eat his blood and flesh and telepathically tell him that he is your master. And if you do that, he will remove this evil spirit that is deep within your soul that everybody in humanity has within them because this naked woman was convinced by a talking snake to eat the fruit off of a magical tree. Or something like that. So, I don't think Christianity is for me."

Abby-Claire wanted to be angrier than she was after watching the video. But it was pretty much accurate. If she was angry at anything it was Tim's friendship with Jeremiah. He clearly didn't have as strong of feelings about Jeremiah as he let on.

That night, Abby-Claire couldn't sleep. She kept thinking about Tim and Jeremiah and Baptiste and Hawthorn and this whole strange situation compounded by

this video that was making her for some reason reconsider everything she had been taught her entire life.

She dreamed of the dog in the horse in Egypt several times that night.

## CHAPTER XXVII

Abby-Claire went with Tim out to visit their grandparents that weekend. Her grandmother had dinner already on the table when they got there. Their grandparents acted like nothing strange was going on. Abby-Claire didn't ask about Baptiste, but he must've just stayed in the hotel in Mobile. Their grandparents were generous and forgiving, but there was no point in pushing it. Hawthorn and Jeremiah showed up just as they were finishing dinner. She didn't know they would be there. Abby-Claire didn't even realize Hawthorn was back on speaking terms with his uncle after the ordeal with his father.

Tim brought them into the living room, and Hawthorn had his spear. Hawthorn said hello and never broke his stride as he walked toward the back yard with Tim. Jeremiah stayed with Abby-Claire. He started looking around the room. "Is there not a TV in here?" he asked.

"It's upstairs in the play room."

He linked arms with her. "This place looks big enough to get lost in. Why don't you take me?"

"Why are you here?"

"Glad to see you too."

"Why did Hawthorn just take my brother to the yard? With a spear?"

"Tim asked him for hunting lessons."

Tim didn't hunt. He knew how, but he didn't do it. Ever.

She dragged Jeremiah away from the stairs, back toward the yard. When they got out there, she didn't bother to assess the situation or even bother working herself into the conversation. She shouted, "You stab it where you would shoot it." She lowered her voice a bit when she got closer. "Kill zone is in the same place as on a deer, but it's a lot smaller. You just stab it in the kill zone. Biggest difference is working up the balls to walk right up to an animal that weighs as much as you do and has tusks."

Tim smirked. "Hawthorn here tells me you've never done it."

Abby-Claire was getting angry. She didn't like all of the people she trusted going behind her back and ganging up on her. Abby-Claire almost brought up the time she'd had to finish the boar he stabbed in the mouth, but she thought better of it. It would only make Hawthorn look bad for something that was mostly her fault anyway. And she wanted Tim to like Hawthorn. He seemed to in theory, she wasn't sure what had brought this onslaught of questions.

"I've always preferred my bow. And when did you start hunting again?"

Tim took the spear from Hawthorn and started trying different ways to grasp it.

"It's best if you can go under a little, but it's hard to stab like that, so you usually wind up bearing down on it first." Hawthorn looked around the yard. "Do y'all have some Styrofoam or any kind of target?"

Tim headed for the shed. Abby-Claire took Jeremiah back inside. They went upstairs and he grabbed the remote without asking and put the TV on Bravo. "It may look like I have it all, but I want more," said the woman on the screen in an evening gown. "Those women aren't real," Abby-Claire said.

"That's the point," Jeremiah replied.

Abby-Claire got up and went to the window. She saw Hawthorn and Tim just as they disappeared into the woods. It was already pretty much dark, so she couldn't imagine what they thought they'd find at this point. It was probably Tim's idea.

Abby-Claire sat down with Jeremiah and suddenly found herself deeply involved in their lives. She completely forgot what was going on in the woods outside. She pretty much forgot Jeremiah was even sitting with her. When the episode ended, she asked involuntarily, "Is this a marathon?"

"No, that's the only episode. It's a new show. Or new city at least."

An episode of the Atlanta version came on next and she was a little confused since she wasn't starting at the beginning, but she was hooked nonetheless. This particular show hadn't been banned yet, but she was sure her mother wouldn't approve. "We're never allowed to talk about these shows in front of my mother."

"You watch these?"

"I do now."

Abby-Claire and Jeremiah were both absorbed when her grandmother screamed. It took them both a second to register that the sound was real, not the TV. When Abby-Claire stood up, she saw out the window what she must've been screaming about. Tim, hobbling out of the woods, covered in blood. Hawthorn wasn't with him, and neither was the spear.

"Where is he?"

Tim just pointed and Abby-Claire took off into the woods. Her grandfather came behind her yelling something she couldn't hear. She could only imagine what could've

possibly gone wrong; what could possibly still go wrong. There was too much adrenaline coursing through her veins to fully process what emotions she might be feeling, but she knew she was crying. Tears now running down her cheeks and flying off past her into the wind. She used the flashlight app on her phone to spot the places where Tim had left a trail of blood. It almost looked intentional the way he had brushed up against so many trees. She had no trouble following his trail. He may have done it intentionally. Abby-Claire noticed the smell of feces getting stronger as she ran. She got into an area where the trees thinned a bit and the trail stopped. It was brighter here with the extra moonlight. The feces smell was almost overwhelming. She noticed a pile next to her foot, another a few feet away. Clearly they had found the boar's waste area. She stopped and slowed her breathing so she could hear over it. She heard something gurgling and took off to her left. She screamed when she saw it and had to steady herself on a tree. She couldn't move. Hawthorn was lying on the ground, unconscious, his clothing shredded on one side, the flesh underneath covered in blood. His hands still held the spear, jammed into the back of the boar that had collapsed on top of his legs. There were several holes along the boar's back.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

She didn't recall the list of injuries they had to repair, but he was in surgery for eleven hours. Tim for two. Tim recovered quickly enough and went back to France as soon as he could fly. He couldn't tell Abby-Claire what had happened. Just that they found the area the boars used as a bathroom.

Hawthorn was in a medically induced coma for over a week. Something about brain swelling. Abby-Claire went to visit him whenever she could. Jeremiah was usually there. Ms. Dorothy also brought Cordarius and Carmelita a couple of times. Charlene came with her whenever she could spare the time. She still didn't quite trust Hawthorn. Or maybe it was Abby-Claire she didn't trust. Either way, she didn't want them alone. But Abby-Claire never asked permission to go to the hospital. She just went. Charlene couldn't tell her no.

When she was alone, she would pull a chair up next to the bed and sit facing him, while she read. Sometimes reading to him. She was in the room by herself one day when a police officer came in. "Young lady, are you a relative?"

Before she could answer, Hawthorn's uncle came in. "Abby-Claire? Hey. It's all right, she can stay."

O.B. came in next with his hands cuffed in front of him. Another officer followed behind him. O.B. walked over to Hawthorn and stood over him. He stared down at his son. "He knew what he was doing. What happened?"

"I don't know. I wasn't with him."

He turned to Rod. "You told me they were inseparable."

“They were, far as I’m concerned.”

“Why weren’t you with him?”

“He was teaching my brother. They didn’t seem to want me there.”

He looked back down at Hawthorn. “You should have been there to protect him. That bumbling fairy may have killed him.”

Abby-Claire slammed her book shut.

Rod said, “You mean *you* weren’t there to protect him.”

O.B. calmed down. “I can save the immortal soul, but not the body.”

Abby-Claire offered him her chair. He had begun to cry hysterically. “What kind of lame shitty super power is that? I’m the Prince of the Universe, but I can’t protect my son from a fucking pig.”

Abby-Claire had no idea why she decided to indulge him. Perhaps it just seemed cruel not to. “Just because you’re old doesn’t mean you’re obsolete. People still need Jesus. In the long run at least.”

He looked up. The police officers rolled their eyes at each other and Rod rubbed his chin quizzically.

All at once, Abby-Claire realized why the dog in the horse had dominated her subconscious. It looked like Anubis. “Do you know who Anubis is?”

O.B. settled into his chair and said. “Of course I know who Anubis is, he’s a distant cousin of mine. I bet you didn’t know that.”

“Did you know he still guards the pyramids?” Abby-Claire was fairly certain that wasn’t his job, but it seemed like a good thing to say. O.B. leaned in.

“I saw him. In the desert outside Cairo. He lives inside of a dead horse now. No one cares about him anymore.”

“They probably don’t even know who he is.”

“Exactly. But he’s still there. Doing his job.”

“And so am I.” He hopped up. He glanced down at Hawthorn and smiled. “Well. Things are settled here then. His soul was sorted long ago. We can go now.”

The idea that Hawthorn was in a better place, or might be soon, brought no relief. The dog that haunted her dreams wasn’t a god. He didn’t protect anyone. The Cosmic Jewish Zombie idea sounded less absurd in this room next to the empty shell of the man she was finally willing to admit might be her first love.

But his coma was induced, and the doctors were confident he would be fine once the swelling went down. She grabbed his hand and read to him. “The fleeting years glide on unnoticed, and nothing is swifter than time. This baby, so recently enclosed in the tree trunk, born but yesterday, soon grew into a lovely child, soon became a young man, and then a man full-grown, surpassing even himself in handsomeness.” She stopped for a second to look at him. She could almost swear he smiled. She read on, “He now became the darling of Venus.” She squeezed his hand to remind him that she was the goddess in this story. “The goddess of Cythera, captivated by the beauty of a mortal cared no more for her sea shores, ceased to visit the seagirt... places I can’t pronounce... She even stayed away from Heaven, preferring Adonis to the sky.”