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*This book is dedicated to the Avett Brothers, for giving me the
motivation to “decide what to be, and go be it.”*

part one

1.

*I'm as nowhere as I can be,
Could you add some somewhere to me?*

—THE AVETT BROTHERS, “SALINA”

KEL AND I LOAD THE LAST TWO BOXES INTO THE U-HAUL. I slide the door down and pull the latch shut, locking up eighteen years of memories, all of which include my dad.

It's been six months since he passed away. Long enough that my nine-year-old brother, Kel, doesn't cry every time we talk about him, but recent enough that we're being forced to accept the financial aftermath that comes to a newly single-parented household. A household that can't afford to remain in Texas and in the only home I've ever known.

“Lake, stop being such a downer,” my mom says, handing me the keys to the house. “I think you'll love Michigan.”

She never calls me by the name she legally gave me. She and my dad argued for nine months over what I would be named. She loved the name Layla, after the Eric Clapton song. Dad loved the name Kennedy, after a Kennedy. “It doesn’t matter which Kennedy,” he would say. “I love them all!”

I was almost three days old before the hospital forced them to decide. They agreed to take the first three letters of both names and compromised on Layken, but neither of them has ever once referred to me as such.

I mimic my mother’s tone, “Mom, stop being such an *upper*! I’m going to *hate* Michigan.”

My mother has always had an ability to deliver an entire lecture with a single glance. I get the glance.

I walk up the porch steps and head inside the house to make a walk-through before the final turn of the key. All of the rooms are eerily empty. It doesn’t seem as though I’m walking through the house where I’ve lived since the day I was born. These last six months have been a whirlwind of emotions, all of them bad. Moving out of this home was inevitable—I realize that. I just expected it to happen after the *end* of my senior year.

I’m standing in what is no longer our kitchen when I catch a glimpse of a purple plastic hair clip under the cabinet in the space where the refrigerator once stood. I pick it up, wipe the dust off of it, and run it back and forth between my fingers.

“It’ll grow back,” Dad said.

I was five years old, and my mother had left her trimming scissors on the bathroom counter. Apparently, I had done what most kids of that age do. I cut my own hair.

“Mommy’s going to be so mad at me,” I cried. I thought that if I cut my hair, it would immediately grow back, and no one would notice. I cut a pretty wide chunk out of my bangs and sat in front of the mirror for probably an hour, waiting for the hair to grow back. I picked the straight brown strands up off the floor and held them in my hand, contemplating how I could secure them back to my head, when I began to cry.

When Dad walked into the bathroom and saw what I had done, he just laughed and scooped me up, then positioned me on the countertop. “Mommy’s not going to notice, Lake,” he promised as he removed something out of the bathroom cabinet. “I just happen to have a piece of magic right here.” He opened up his palm and revealed the purple clip. “As long as you have this in your hair, Mommy will never know.” He brushed the remaining strands of hair across and secured the clip in place. He then turned me around to face the mirror. “See? Good as new!”

I looked at our reflection in the mirror and felt like the luckiest girl in the world. I didn’t know of any other dad who had magic clips.

I wore that clip in my hair every day for two months, and my mother never once mentioned it. Now that I look back on it, I realize he probably told her what I had done. But when I was five, I believed in his magic.

I look more like my mother than like him. Mom and I are both of average height. After having two kids, she can't really fit into my jeans, but we're pretty good at sharing everything else. We both have brown hair that, depending on the weather, is either straight or wavy. Her eyes are a deeper emerald than mine, although it could be that the paleness of her skin just makes them more prominent.

I favor my dad in all the ways that count. We had the same dry sense of humor, the same personality, the same love of music, the same laugh. Kel is a different story. He takes after our dad physically with his dirty-blond hair and soft features. He's on the small side for nine years old, but his personality makes up for what he lacks in size.

I walk to the sink and turn it on, rubbing my thumb over the thirteen years of grime collected on the hair clip. Kel walks backward into the kitchen just as I'm drying my hands on my jeans. He's a strange kid, but I couldn't love him more. He has a game he likes to play that he calls "backward day," in which he spends most of the time walking everywhere backward, talking backward, and even requesting dessert first. I guess with such a big age difference between him and me and no other siblings, he has to find a way to entertain himself somehow.

"Hurry to say Mom Layken!" he says, backward.

I place the hair clip in the pocket of my jeans and head back out the door, locking up my home for the very last time.

* * *

OVER THE NEXT few days, my mother and I alternate driving my Jeep and the U-Haul, stopping only twice at hotels to sleep. Kel switches between Mom and me, riding the final day with me in the U-Haul. We complete the last exhausting nine-hour stretch through the night, only stopping once for a short break. As we close in on our new town of Ypsilanti, I take in my surroundings and the fact that it's September but my heater is on. I'll definitely need a new wardrobe.

As I make a final right-hand turn onto our street, my GPS informs me that I've "reached my destination."

"My destination," I laugh aloud to myself. My GPS doesn't know squat.

The cul-de-sac is not very long, lined with about eight single-story brick houses on each side of the street. There's a basketball goal in one of the driveways, which gives me hope that Kel might have someone to play with. Honestly, it looks like a decent neighborhood. The lawns are manicured, the sidewalks are clean, but there's too much concrete. Way too much concrete. I already miss home.

Our new landlord emailed us pictures of the house, so I immediately spot which one is ours. It's small. It's *really* small. We had a ranch-style home on several acres of land in Texas. The minuscule amount of land surrounding *this* home is almost nothing but concrete and garden gnomes. The front door is propped open, and I see an older man who I assume is our new landlord come outside and wave.

I drive about fifty yards past the house so that I can

back into the driveway, where the rear of the U-Haul will face the front door. Before I put the gearshift in reverse, I reach over and shake Kel awake. He's been passed out since Indiana.

"Kel, wake up," I whisper. "We've reached our *destination*."

He stretches his legs out and yawns, then leans his forehead against the window to get a look at our new house. "Hey, there's a kid in the yard!" Kel says. "Do you think he lives in our house, too?"

"He better not," I reply. "But he's probably a neighbor. Hop out and go introduce yourself while I back up."

When the U-Haul is successfully backed in, I put the gearshift in park, roll down the windows, and kill the engine. My mother pulls in beside me in my Jeep and I watch as she gets out and greets the landlord. I crouch down a few inches in the seat and prop my foot against the dash, watching Kel and his new friend sword fight with imaginary swords in the street. I'm jealous of him. Jealous of the fact that he can accept the move so easily, and I'm stuck being the angry, bitter child.

He was upset when Mom first decided on the move. Mostly because he was in the middle of his Little League season. He had friends he would miss, but at the age of nine your best friend is usually imaginary, and transatlantic. Mom subdued him pretty easily by promising he could sign up for hockey, something he wanted to do in Texas. It was a hard sport to come by in the rural south. After she

agreed to that, he was pretty upbeat, if not stoked, about Michigan.

I understand why we had to move. Dad had made a respectable living managing a paint store. Mom worked PRN as a nurse when she needed to, but mostly tended to the house and to us. About a month after he died, she was able to find a full-time job. I could see the stress of my father's death taking its toll on her, along with being the new head of household.

One night over dinner, she explained to us that she wasn't left with enough income to continue paying all the bills and the mortgage. She said there was a job that could pay her more, but we would have to move. She was offered a job by her old high-school friend Brenda. They grew up together in my mother's hometown of Ypsilanti, right outside of Detroit. It paid more than anything she could find in Texas, so she had no choice but to accept. I don't blame her for the move. My grandparents are deceased, and she has no one to help her. I understand why we had to do it, but understanding a situation doesn't always make it easier.

"Layken, you're dead!" Kel shouts through the open window, thrusting his imaginary sword into my neck. He waits for me to slump over, but I just roll my eyes at him. "I stabbed you. You're supposed to die!" he says.

"Believe me, I'm already dead," I mumble as I open the door and climb out. Kel's shoulders are slumped forward and he's staring down at the concrete, his imaginary

sword limp by his side. Kel's new friend stands behind him looking just as defeated, causing me immediately to regret the transference of my bad mood.

"I'm already dead," I say in my best monster voice, "because I'm a *zombie*!"

They start screaming as I stretch my arms out in front of me, cock my head to the side, and make a gurgling sound. "Brains!" I grumble, walking stiff-legged after them around the U-Haul. "Brains!"

I slowly round the front of the U-Haul, holding my arms out in front of me, when I notice someone grasping my brother and his new friend by the collars of their shirts.

"Get 'em!" The stranger yells as he holds the two screaming boys.

He looks a couple of years older than me and quite a bit taller. "Hot" would be how most girls would describe him, but I'm not most girls. The boys are flailing around, and his muscles flex under his shirt as he tries hard to maintain his grip on them.

Unlike Kel and me, these two are unmistakably siblings. Aside from the obvious age difference, they're identical. They both have the same smooth olive skin, the same jet-black hair, even the same cropped hairstyle. He's laughing as Kel breaks free and starts slicing at him with his "sword." He looks up at me and mouths "Help," when I realize I'm still frozen in my zombie pose.

My first instinct is to crawl back inside the U-Haul and hide on the floorboard for the remainder of my life.

Instead, I yell “Brains” once more and lunge forward, pretending to bite the younger boy on top of his head. I grab Kel and his new friend and start tickling them until they melt into heaps on the concrete driveway.

As I straighten up, the older brother extends his hand. “Hey, I’m Will. We live across the street,” he says, pointing to the house directly across from ours.

I reciprocate his handshake. “I’m Layken. I guess I live here,” I say as I glance toward the house behind me.

He smiles. Our handshake lingers as neither one of us says anything. I hate awkward moments.

“Well, welcome to Ypsilanti,” he says. He pulls his hand from mine and puts it in his jacket pocket. “Where are you guys moving here from?”

“Texas?” I reply. I’m not sure why the tail end of my reply comes out like a question. I’m not sure why I’m even analyzing why it came out like a question. I’m not sure why I’m analyzing the reason why I’m analyzing—I’m flustered. It must be the lack of sleep I’ve gotten over the past three days.

“Texas, huh?” he says. He’s rocking back and forth on his heels. The awkwardness intensifies when I fail to respond. He glances down at his brother and bends over, grabbing him by the ankles. “I’ve got to get this little guy to school,” he says as he swings his brother up and over his shoulders. “There’s a cold front coming through tonight. You should try to get as much unloaded today as you can. It’s supposed to last a few days, so if you guys

need help unloading this afternoon, let me know. We should be home around four.”

“Sure, thanks,” I say. They head across the street, and I’m still watching them when Kel stabs me in my lower back. I drop to my knees and clutch at my stomach, crouching forward as Kel climbs on top of me and finishes me off. I glance across the street again and see Will watching us. He shuts his brother’s car door, walks around to the driver’s-side door, and waves goodbye.

IT TAKES US most of the day to unload all of the boxes and furniture. Our landlord helps move the larger items that Mom and I can’t lift on our own. We’re too tired to get to the boxes inside the Jeep and agree to put it off until tomorrow. I’m a little disappointed when the U-Haul is finally empty; I no longer have an excuse to solicit Will’s help.

As soon as my bed is put together, I start grabbing boxes with my name on them from the hallway. I get most of them unpacked and my bed made, when I notice the furniture in my bedroom casting shadows across the walls. I look out my window, and the sun is setting. Either the days are a lot shorter here, or I’ve lost track of time.

In the kitchen, I find Mom and Kel unloading dishes into the cabinets. I climb into one of the six tall chairs at the bar, which also doubles as the dining room table because of the lack of dining room. There isn’t much to this

house. When you walk through the front door, there's a small entryway followed by the living room. The living room is separated from the kitchen by nothing more than a hallway to the left and a window to the right. The living room's beige carpet is edged by hardwood that leads throughout the rest of the house.

"Everything is so clean here," my mother says as she continues putting away dishes. "I haven't seen a single insect."

Texas has more insects than blades of grass. If you aren't swatting flies, you're killing wasps.

"That's one good thing about Michigan, I guess," I reply. I open up a box of pizza in front of me and eye the selection.

"*One* good thing?" She winks at me as she leans across the bar, grabs a pepperoni, and pops it into her mouth. "I'd think that would be at least *two* good things."

I pretend I'm not following.

"I saw you talking to that boy this morning," she says with a smile.

"Oh, please, Mom," I reply as indifferently as I can get away with. "I'm pretty positive we'll find it no surprise that Texas isn't the only state inhabited by the male species." I walk to the refrigerator and grab a soda.

"What's inhabited?" Kel asks.

"Inhabited," I correct him. "It means to occupy, dwell, reside, populate, squat, *live*." My SAT prep courses are paying off.

“Oh, kinda like how we anabited Ypsilanti?” he says.

“Inhabited,” I correct him again. I finish my slice of pizza and take another sip of the soda. “I’m beat, guys. I’m going to bed.”

“You mean you’re going to *inhabit* your bedroom?” Kel says.

“You’re a quick learner, young grasshopper.” I bend and kiss the top of his head and retreat to my room.

It feels so good to crawl under the covers. At least my bed is familiar. I close my eyes and try to imagine that I’m in my old bedroom. My old, *warm* bedroom. My sheets and pillow are ice cold, so I pull the covers over my head to generate some heat. Note to self: Locate the thermostat first thing in the morning.

AND THAT’S EXACTLY what I set out to do as soon as I crawl out of bed and my bare feet meet the ice-cold floor beneath them. I grab a sweater out of my closet and throw it on over my pajamas while I search for socks. It’s a futile attempt. I quietly tiptoe down the hallway, trying not to wake anyone while at the same time attempting to expose the least possible amount of foot to the coldness of the hardwood. As I pass Kel’s room, I spot his Darth Vader house shoes on the floor. I sneak in and slip them on, finally finding some relief as I head into the kitchen.

I look around for the coffeepot but don’t find it. I remember packing it in the Jeep, which is unfortunate since

the Jeep is parked outside. Outside in this absurdly cold weather.

The jackets are nowhere to be found. Septembers in Texas rarely call for jackets. I grab the keys and decide I'll just have to make a mad dash to the Jeep. I open the front door and some sort of white substance is all over the yard. It takes me a second to realize what it is. Snow? In September? I bend down and scoop some up in my hands and examine it. It doesn't snow that often in Texas, but when it does it isn't *this* kind of snow. Texas snow is more like minuscule pieces of rock-hard hail. Michigan snow is just how I imagined real snow would be: fluffy, soft, and *cold*! I quickly drop the snow and dry my hands on my sweatshirt as I head toward the Jeep.

I don't make it far. The second those Darth Vader house shoes meet the snow-dusted concrete, I'm no longer looking at the Jeep in front of me. I'm flat on my back, staring up at the clear blue sky. I immediately feel the pain in my right shoulder and realize I've landed on something hard. I reach around and pull a concrete garden gnome out from beneath me, half of his red hat broken off and shattered into pieces. He's smirking at me. I groan and raise the gnome with my good arm and pull it back, preparing to chuck the thing, when someone stops me.

"That's not a good idea!"

I immediately recognize Will's voice. The sound of it is smooth and soothing like my father's was, but at the

same time has an authoritative edge to it. I sit upright and see him walking up the driveway toward me.

"Are you okay?" he laughs.

"I'll feel a lot better after I bust this damn thing," I say, trying to pull myself up with no success.

"You don't want to do that: Gnomes are good luck," he says as he reaches me. He takes the gnome out of my hands and gently places it on the snow-covered grass.

"Yeah," I reply, taking in the gash on my shoulder that has now formed a bright red circle on my sweater sleeve. "*Real* good luck."

Will stops laughing when he sees the blood on my shirt. "Oh my god, I'm so sorry. I wouldn't have laughed if I knew you were hurt." He bends over and takes my uninjured arm and pulls me up. "You need to get a bandage on that."

"I wouldn't have a clue where to find one at this point," I reply, referring to the mounds of unopened boxes we have yet to unpack.

"You'll have to walk with me. There's some in our kitchen."

He removes his jacket and wraps it around my shoulders, holding on to my arm as he walks me across the street. I feel a little pathetic with him assisting me—I can walk on my own. I don't object though, and I feel like a hypocrite to the entire feminist movement. I've regressed to the damsel in distress.

I remove his jacket and lay it across the back of the

couch, then follow him into the kitchen. It's still dark inside, so I assume everyone is still asleep. His house is more spacious than ours. The open floor plans are similar, but the living room seems to be a few feet larger. A large bay window with a sitting bench and large pillows looks out over the backyard.

Several family pictures hang along the wall opposite the kitchen. Most of them are of Will and his little brother, with a few pictures that include his parents. I walk over to inspect the pictures while Will looks for a bandage. They must have gotten their genes from their dad. In one picture, which seems like the most recent but still looks a few years dated, his dad has his arms around the two boys, and he's squeezing them together for an impromptu photo. His jet-black hair is speckled with gray, and a thick black moustache outlines his huge smile. His features are identical to Will's. They both have eyes that smile when they laugh, exposing perfect white teeth.

Will's mother is breathtaking. She has long blond hair and, from the pictures at least, looks tall. I can't pick out any facial features of hers that were passed on to her boys. Maybe Will has her personality. All of the pictures on the wall prove one big difference between our houses—this one is a *home*.

I walk into the kitchen and take a seat at the bar.

"It needs to be cleaned before you put the bandage on it," he says as he rolls up his shirtsleeves and turns on the faucet. He's wearing a pale-yellow button-down collared

shirt that is slightly transparent under the kitchen lights, revealing the outline of his undershirt. He has broad shoulders, and his sleeves are snug around the muscles in his arms. The top of his head meets the cabinet above him, and I estimate from the similarities in our kitchens that he stands about six inches taller than me. I'm staring at the pattern on his black tie, which is flipped over his shoulder to avoid getting it wet, when he turns the water off and walks back to the bar. I feel my face flush as I grab the wet napkin out of his hands, not proud of the amount of attention his physique is getting from me.

"It's fine," I say, pulling my sleeve down over my shoulder. "I can get it."

He opens a bandage as I wipe the blood off the wound. "So, what were you doing outside in your pajamas at seven o'clock in the morning?" he asks. "Are you guys still unloading?"

I shake my head and toss the napkin into the trash can. "Coffee."

"Oh. I guess you aren't a morning person." Will says this as more of a statement than a question.

As he moves in closer to place the bandage on my shoulder, I feel his breath on my neck. I rub my arms to hide the chills that are creeping up them. He adheres it to my shoulder and pats it.

"There. Good as new," he says.

"Thanks. And I *am* a morning person," I say. "*After* I get my coffee." I stand up and look over my shoulder,

pretending to inspect the bandage as I plot my next move. I already thanked him. I could turn and walk out now, but that would seem rude after he just helped me. If I just stand here waiting on him to make more small talk, I might look stupid for *not* leaving. I don't understand why I'm even contemplating basic actions around him. He's just another inhabitant!

When I turn around, he's at the counter, pouring a cup of coffee. He walks toward me and sets it on the bar in front of me. "You want cream or sugar?"

I shake my head. "Black is fine. Thanks."

He's leaning across the bar watching me as I drink the coffee. His eyes are the exact same hue of deep green as his mother's are in the picture. I guess he did get a feature from her. He smiles and breaks our gaze by looking down at his watch. "I need to go: My brother's waiting in the car, and I've got to get to work," he says. "I'll walk you back. You can keep the cup."

I look at the cup before taking another sip and notice the big letters emblazoned on the side. World's Greatest Dad. It's exactly the same as the cup my father used to drink coffee from. "I'll be okay," I say as I head toward the front door. "I think I've got the whole walking-erect thing down now."

He follows me outside and shuts his front door behind him, insisting I take his jacket with me. I pull it on over my shoulders, thank him again, and head across the street.

“Layken!” he yells just as I’m about to walk back inside my house. I turn back toward him and he’s standing in his driveway.

“May the force be with you!” He laughs and hops into his car as I stand there, staring down at the Darth Vader house shoes I’m still sporting. Classic.

THE COFFEE HELPS. I locate the thermostat, and by lunch the house has finally started to warm up. Mom and Kel have gone to the utility company to get everything switched into her name, and I’m left with the last of the boxes, if you don’t count what’s still in the Jeep. I get a few more things unpacked and decide it’s high time for a shower. I’m pretty sure I’m closing in on day three of my granola-girl look.

I get out of the shower and wrap myself in a towel, flipping my hair forward as I brush it out and blow-dry it. When it’s dry, I point the blow-dryer at the fogged up mirror, forming a clear circular area so that I can apply a little makeup. I notice my tan has started to fade. There won’t be much lying-out here, so I might as well get used to a slightly paler complexion.

I brush my hair and pull it back into a ponytail and put on some lip gloss and mascara. I forgo the blush, since there no longer seems to be a need for it. Between the weather and my brief encounters with Will, my cheeks seem to stay red.

Mom and Kel have already returned and gone again while I was in the shower. There is a note from her informing me she and Kel are following her friend Brenda into the city to return the U-Haul. Three twenty-dollar bills are on the counter next to the car keys and a grocery list. I snatch them up and head to the Jeep, reaching it successfully this time.

I realize as I'm putting the car into reverse that I have absolutely no idea where I'm going. I know nothing about this town, much less whether I need to turn left or right off of my own street. Will's little brother is in their front yard, so I pull the car up parallel to their curb and roll down my passenger window.

"Hey, come here for a sec!" I yell at him.

He looks at me and hesitates. Maybe he thinks I'm going to bust out in zombie mode again. He walks toward the car, but stops three feet short of the window.

"How do I get to the closest grocery store?" I ask him.

He rolls his eyes. "Seriously? I'm nine."

Okay. So the resemblance to his brother is only skin deep.

"Well, thanks for nothing," I say. "What's your name anyway?"

He smiles at me mischievously and yells, "Darth Vader!" He's laughing as he runs in the opposite direction of the car.

Darth Vader? I realize the significance of his response. He's making a crack about the house shoes I had

on this morning. Not a big deal. The big deal is that Will must have been talking about me to him. I can't help but try to imagine the conversation between them and what Will thinks about me. *If* he even thinks about me. For some reason, I've been thinking about him more than I'm comfortable with. I keep wondering how old he is, what his major is, whether he's *single*.

Luckily, I didn't leave any boyfriends behind in Texas. I haven't dated anyone in almost a year. Between high school, my part-time job, and helping out with Kel's sports, I hadn't had much time for boys. I realize it's going to be an adjustment, going from a person with absolutely no free time to a person with absolutely nothing to do.

I reach into the glove box to retrieve my GPS.

"That's not a good idea," Will says.

I look up to see him walking toward the car. I make my best attempt to stifle the smile that is trying to take over my face. "What's not a good idea?" I say as I insert the GPS into its holder and power it on.

He crosses his arms and leans in the window of the car. "There's quite a bit of construction going on right now. That thing will get you lost."

I'm about to respond when Brenda pulls up alongside me with my mother. Brenda rolls down her driver's-side window and my mother leans across the seat. "Don't forget laundry detergent—I can't remember if I put it on the list."

And cough syrup. I think I'm coming down with something," she says through the window.

Kel jumps out of the backseat, runs to Will's brother, and invites him inside to look at our house.

"Can I?" Will's brother asks him.

"Sure," Will says as he opens my passenger door. "I'll be back in a little while, Caulder. I'm riding with Layken to the store."

He is? I shoot a look in his direction and he's buckling his seat belt.

"I don't give very good verbal directions. Mind if I go with you?"

"I guess not," I laugh.

I look back toward Brenda and my mother, but they have already pulled forward into the driveway. I put the car in drive and listen as Will gives me directions out of the neighborhood. "So, Caulder is your little brother's name?" I say, making a halfhearted attempt at small talk.

"One and only. My parents tried for years to have another baby after me. They eventually had Caulder when names like 'Will' weren't that cool anymore."

"I like your name," I say. I regret saying it as soon as it comes out of my mouth. It sounds like a lame attempt at flirting.

He laughs. I like his laugh. I hate that I like his laugh.

It startles me when I feel him brush the hair off my shoulder and touch my neck. His fingers slip under the

collar of my shirt and he pulls it slightly down over my shoulder. “You’re going to need a new bandage soon.” He pulls my shirt back up and gives it a pat. His fingers leave a streak of heat across my neck.

“Remind me to grab some at the store,” I say, trying to prove that his actions and his presence have no effect on me whatsoever.

“So, Layken.” He pauses as he glances past me at the boxes still piled high in the backseat. “Tell me about yourself.”

“Um, no. That’s so cliché,” I say.

He laughs. “Fine. I’ll figure you out myself.” He leans forward and hits eject on my CD player. His movements are so fluid, like he’s been rehearsing them for years. I envy this about him. I’ve never been known for my grace.

“You know, you can tell a lot about a person by their taste in music.” He pulls the CD out and examines the label. “‘Layken’s shit?’” he says aloud and laughs. “Is *shit* descriptive here, or possessive?”

“I don’t like Kel touching my shit, okay?” I grab the CD out of his hands and insert it back into the player.

When the banjo pours out of the speakers at full volume, I’m immediately embarrassed. I’m from Texas, but I don’t want him mistaking this for country music. If there’s one thing I *don’t* miss about Texas, it’s the country music. I reach over and turn down the volume, when he grabs my hand in objection.

“Turn it back up, I know this,” he says. His hand remains clasped on top of mine.

My fingers are still on the volume so I turn it back up. There’s no *way* he knows this. I realize he’s bluffing—his own lame attempt at flirting.

“Oh yeah?” I say. I’ll call his bluff. “What’s it called?”

“It’s the Avett Brothers,” he says. “I call it ‘Gabriella,’ but I think it’s the end to one of their ‘Pretty Girl’ songs. I love the end of this one when they break out with the electric guitars.”

His response to my question startles me. He really does know this. “You like the Avett Brothers?”

“I *love* them. They played in Detroit last year. Best live show I’ve ever seen.”

A rush of adrenaline shoots through my body as I look down at his hand, still holding on to mine, still holding on to the volume button. I like it, but I’m mad at myself for liking it. Boys have given me the butterflies before, but I usually have more control over my susceptibility to such mundane movements.

He notices me noticing our hands and he lets go, rubbing his palms on his pant legs. It seems like a nervous gesture and I’m curious whether he shares my uneasiness.

I tend to listen to music that isn’t mainstream. It’s rare when I meet someone that has even heard of half the bands I love. The Avett Brothers are my all-time favorite.

My father and I would stay up at night and sing some of the songs together as he attempted to work out the chords on his guitar. He described them to me once. He said, “Lake, you know a band has true talent when their *imperfections* define *perfection*.”

I eventually understood what he meant when I started really *listening* to them. Broken banjo strings, momentary passionate lapses of harmony, voices that go from smooth to gravelly to all-out screaming in a single verse. All these things add substance, character, and believability to their music.

After my father died, my mother gave me an early present he had intended to give me for my eighteenth birthday: a pair of Avett Brothers concert tickets. I cried when she gave them to me, thinking about how much my father was probably looking forward to giving me the gift himself. I knew he would have wanted me to use them, but I couldn’t. The concert was just weeks after his death, and I knew I wouldn’t be able to enjoy it. Not like I would have if he were with me.

“I love them, too,” I say unsteadily.

“Have you ever seen them play live?” Will asks.

I’m not sure why, but as we talk, I tell him the entire story about my dad. He listens intently, interrupting only to instruct me when and where to turn. I tell him all about our passion for music. I tell him about how my father died suddenly and extremely unexpectedly of a heart attack. I tell him about my birthday present and the concert we

never made it to. I don't know why I keep talking, but I can't seem to shut myself up. I never divulge information so freely, especially to people I barely know. Especially to *guys* I barely know. I'm still talking when I realize we've come to a stop in a grocery store parking lot.

"Wow," I say as I take in the time on the clock. "Is that the quickest way to the store? That drive took twenty minutes."

He winks at me and opens his door. "No, actually it's not."

That's *definitely* flirting. And I definitely have butterflies.

The snow flurries start to mix with sleet as we're making our way through the parking lot. "Run," he says. He takes my hand in his and pulls me faster toward the entrance.

We're out of breath and laughing when we make it inside the store, shaking the wetness from our clothes. I take my jacket off and shake it out, when his hand brushes against my face, wiping away a strand of wet hair that's stuck to my cheek. His hand is cold, but the moment his fingers graze my skin, I forget about the frigid temperature as my face grows warm. His smile fades as we both stare at each other. I'm still trying to become accustomed to the reactions I have around him. The slightest touch and simplest gestures have such an intense effect on my senses.

I clear my throat and break our stare as I grab an available cart next to us. I hand him the grocery list. "Does

it always snow in September?” I ask in an attempt to appear unfazed by his touch.

“No, it won’t last more than a few days, maybe a week. Most of the time the snow doesn’t start until late October,” he says. “You’re lucky.”

“Lucky?”

“Yeah. It’s a pretty rare cold front. You got here right in time.”

“Huh. I assumed most of y’all would hate the snow. Doesn’t it snow here most of the year?”

He laughs. “*Y’all*?”

“What?”

“Nothing,” he says with a smile. “I’ve just never heard anyone say ‘y’all’ in real life before. It’s cute. So southern belle.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I say. “From now on I’ll do like you Yankees and waste my breath by saying ‘all you guys.’”

He laughs and nudges my shoulder. “Don’t. I like your accent; it’s perfect.”

I can’t believe I’ve actually turned into a girl who swoons over a guy. I detest it so much; I start to inspect his features more intently, trying to find a flaw. I can’t. Everything about him so far is perfect.

We get the items on our list and head to the check-out. He refuses to let me put anything on the conveyor belt, so I just stand back and watch as he unloads the items from the buggy. The last item he places on the line is a box of bandages. I never even saw him grab them.

When we pull out of the grocery store, Will tells me to turn in the direction opposite to the one from which we came. We drive maybe two whole blocks when he instructs me to turn left—onto our street. The drive that took us twenty minutes on the way there takes us less than a minute on the way back.

“Nice,” I say when I pull in my driveway. I realize what he’s done and that the flirtation on his end is blatantly obvious.

Will has already rounded to the back of the Jeep, so I press the trunk lever for him. I get out and walk to where he is, expecting him to have an armload of groceries. Instead, he’s just standing there holding the trunk up, watching me.

With my best southern belle impression, I place my hand across my chest and say, “Why! I never would have been able to find the store without your help. Thank you so much for your hospitality, kind sir.”

I sort of expect him to laugh, but he just stands there, staring at me.

“*What?*” I say nervously.

He takes a step toward me and softly cups my chin with his free hand. I’m shocked by my own reaction, the fact that I allow it. He studies my face for a few seconds as my heart races within my chest. I think he’s about to kiss me.

I attempt to calm my breathing as I stare up at him. He steps in even closer and removes his hand from my