



SO LONG, BOBBY

LILLAH LAWSON



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BOBBY**

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Lillah Lawson has written a stunning elegy to America's past, its sins, and our constant drive to do better. SO LONG, BOBBY is a love letter not just to finding your home, but what it means to earn love, respect, and community. The secrets of the generational narrative unfold like a flower, pulling the reader in and making them a part of the family. A beautiful novel that never flinches from reality.

-Emily J. Edwards, author of the Girl Friday Mystery series

*“My . . . favorite poet was Aeschylus, and he once wrote:
‘Even in our sleep, pain which cannot beget falls drop by
drop upon the heart
until in our own despair, against our will,
comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.’”*

Senator Robert Francis Kennedy
Indianapolis, 1968
upon announcing the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

For Clark Marion Drake, “Papa” (1936-2022)

You didn't know all those questions I asked you about the sixties were for this book. My love of storytelling is only one of the million things I have to thank you for. You were the best of us. Every time I see the train in Colbert, I'll think of you.

and

To my favorite high school teacher, Mr. Dana Richier, whose 11th grade Vietnam War-era class instilled a lifelong interest in Vietnam—and the intersection of class, music, and political upheaval in history—which undoubtedly helped to lead me down this path.

ONE

BOBBI - ATHENS, GEORGIE - MAY 1961

BARBARA Lynn Newton, known to everyone as Bobbi, sat at her dressing table, carefully brushing through her white-blond hair when the banging on the door started again. “Would you turn that racket down?” Her brother Ed’s voice came through the thin wooden door. “There’s only so many hours in the day I can listen to that warbling goat! If you don’t turn it off, I’m going to break that record in half!”

Bobbi leaned over and turned the knob on the turntable down from nine to eight, then called back, “Like to see you try!”

No answer came, so she resumed brushing, smiling to herself. “Only the Lonely” had been her favorite song for months. She’d driven her family crazy playing it, but Roy Orbison was her favorite and since records were so dear, it was one of only five that she’d bought. *Let Ed try to get his dirty mitts on it*, she thought to herself, running the brush through her hair once more and then setting it back down on the table. *I’ll clean his clock*. She took a dollop of cold cream, running it in circles over the apples of her cheeks, playing at being her mother. It was Mom’s hairbrush and mirror, and Mom’s old cold cream. She wouldn’t be missing it now.

The song ended, and just as she was picking up the needle to

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replay it, Ed's voice came through the door again, angry enough to splinter the wood. "Enough, Bobbi. If you play that damn tune one more time, I swear I'll—"

"You'll what?" she called back defiantly. "Break into my room and take it? If you do that, I might just have to tell Dad that you've been sneaking out to go necking with Pamela Acworth!"

"Turn it *off*, Bobbi. I'm trying to study. If you don't, I won't take you to see your precious Boston boy tomorrow."

Bobbi sat back, and after a moment, switched off the record player. Fine; she'd let Ed win this round. Nothing, and she meant *nothing*, would be stopping her from going to see Robert Kennedy tomorrow. Not even her beloved Roy Orbison was worth the risk. "Suits me fine," she said hotly, getting up from the table and going over to her bed. "I was going to bed, anyway."

"Good. You need your beauty sleep for Ol' Irish Eyes. What if he asks you for a date?" Ed's irritation had given way to bemusement. Bobbi didn't reply, but punched her pillow. "Oh right, he's married. Perhaps he'll bring Ethel along. I hope he doesn't, 'cause you're like to scratch her eyes out!"

Bobbi opened her mouth to retort back that she'd do no such thing, that Bobby Kennedy's wife Ethel was every bit as lovely as Mr. Kennedy himself, and that the charming, laughing young mother reminded her of their own mother, and for that alone she loved her. But she decided against it. Ed would only tease her more mercilessly, and anyway, there was a grain of truth to his ribbing. The sheer volume of black and white, glossy pictures hanging over her school desk gave away the rather large crush she had on John F.

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Kennedy's golden-haired, soft-eyed younger brother, so there was no point in trying to deny it.

"Goodnight, Ed," she called gaily, turning off her bedside lamp. "Don't stay up all night, necking with Pamela. Tomorrow's a big day."

"Yeah, yeah," he answered good-naturedly. She heard his footsteps moving down the hall. "For *you*."

Bobbi smiled, her face against the cool pillow, wondering what color Bobby Kennedy's eyes were up close, the chorus of 'Only the Lonely' drifting through her mind as she fell asleep.



The next afternoon, Bobbi stood with Ed in front of the Arch, the famous sloped wrought-iron entrance to the university, impatiently scratching at a mosquito bite on her temple, trying to pull her carefully coiffed hair over to cover up the large red bump, and cursing the unseasonably warm late-spring weather. How could mosquitoes already be out? Her brother, tall and resplendent in his navy-blue suit, was holding a large scoop of ice cream in a sugar cone, lapping at it casually while chatting with a schoolmate. Bobbi sighed impatiently. Mr. Kennedy wasn't set to speak for another hour, but she was eager to get into the law building and take her seat. Ed, maddeningly, did not share her desire to hurry.

"These speeches are a dime a dozen," he'd explained to her from behind the wheel of his blue 1957 Ford Thunderbird as they'd driven into town. "The only thing different about this one is that Kennedy's a celebrity."

"He isn't," Bobbi had argued, unsure why she found the label

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offensive. “His brother is.”

“The whole family is, sugar pie.” Ed had laughed, turning onto Broad Street. “They’re our version of the Royal Family, you know.”

Bobbi thought about that now, still scratching at the welt on her forehead. She didn’t know much about the Royal Family in England, though she had a passing interest in their young, sharp, blue-eyed Queen Elizabeth. It was a novel, lovely thing to her, being so young and beautiful and in charge of an entire country, though she knew from her studies that the Queen was little more than a figurehead these days. There was a certain glamour to it, but also a rebellious, delicious sort of power, to be female and in charge of everything, even if it were only pretense. She’d read that the cool and beautiful young queen had served in World War II as a mechanic, a detail that had delighted her.

“You can’t tell me you’re in love with Robert F. Kennedy just because he makes nice speeches,” her brother had continued, teasing her as he maneuvered into a parking spot. “I think it has more to do with that ‘aw, shucks’ smile of his and his last name.”

“*Stop* it, Ed,” Bobbi had responded irritably, and her brother had given her a good-natured cuff on the neck and then gone thankfully silent. Her family had indulged her fascination with Kennedy ever since she’d first started following his career, back when he’d been elected Attorney General, though she knew they found it both amusing and perplexing for a twelve-year-old girl to be so enamored with a politician. Daddy, who was very conservative and one of the holdouts who hadn’t denounced former Governor Eugene Talmadge, said that Robert F. Kennedy and all his ilk were “rich, yuppie liberals

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who wouldn't know a hard day's work if it bit 'em on the backside," while her brothers, especially Ed, who was in his second year of law school at UGA, didn't find him liberal *enough*. "I've heard of some of the things going on in Washington," she'd overheard Ed complaining to a law school friend on the phone. "And I'm still not entirely convinced Jack Kennedy is one hundred percent behind the Civil Rights movement. I think it's all tactical." Bobbi didn't fully understand what he'd meant.

It was her secret dream—secret because she hadn't told anyone, not even Ed, or her best friend Amelia, to whom she told everything—to become a lawyer, too. She supposed she'd try for UGA's school of law one day. It was the practical thing to do; she'd be in close proximity to her family and Ed could help her with her studies, since it would be his alma mater—that was, *if* she got in. UGA had desegregated only the year before to allow Black people to join the school, and it wasn't much easier for women to get into certain spaces. Women had been attending UGA since around 1903, but law school was most assuredly considered a 'boys' club.'

"Ed, can't we go in and take our seats?" Bobbi begged her brother, who was still lapping at his vanilla cone, a sly smile on his lips. His friend had departed, but Ed was sneaking a covert glance at a young woman in a tweed skirt that ended just below the knee, seated at the steps in front of the arch, and turning the pages of a textbook with a white-gloved finger. The slit in her skirt revealed a sliver of thigh. Bobbi thumped her brother on the arm. "If you'd stop sneaking inappropriate looks up that girl's skirt."

"Shut up, will you?" Ed hissed, looking at her in irritation. Then

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he smiled benignly. “If we go in too early, you’ll miss seeing Mr. Kennedy enter the building. You want to catch him up close, don’t you?” He tossed the remnants of his ice cream in a metal trash can and took her arm. “Besides, we have assigned seats. I always sit in the back row, second seat to the left.”

“But what about me?” she said. “I don’t have an assigned seat.”

“Professor Edwards has saved the seat beside mine for you. Didn’t you think I’d take care of that?” Her brother had pulled strings to get her into this speech. Mr. Kennedy was visiting UGA for Law Day, and the speech was reserved for students of the law school only. Ed had gone to his professor and appealed to him to let his little sister listen in. Bobbi wasn’t sure how he’d done it, since she’d heard many stories about the old, curmudgeonly professor who made all the students’ lives a living hell, but somehow her older brother had managed it. She supposed it had something to do with his 4.0 average and the fact that he was the golden boy of his class, something she thought of with both pride and irritation. Ed was the golden boy in most things, including their home. He was their dad’s favorite and had been Mom’s, too. He sailed through life on a ship of privilege, and sometimes it galled her. Bobbi and their other brother, Guy, who was in his junior year of high school, had never gotten half the attention or devotion he did. She told herself to mind the ugly jealousy, though, especially on days like this, when Ed had come through for her.

Ed had actually done her two favors without even knowing it. Not only was Bobbi going to see and hear her beloved hero Bobby Kennedy in person, but she was going to visit the law school. She

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would get to see the great hall that would hopefully one day shape her into a lawyer, too. It was all too much—oh, she could hardly stand it.

Bobbi was so happy she didn't even mind when Ed stopped to say hello to the girl in the tweed skirt, putting them another five minutes behind. She stared out onto Broad Street, pretending not to see as her brother smoothly acquired a telephone number, cupping her hand over her eyes, hoping to catch a glimpse of the motorcade carrying the lovely Mr. Robert F. Kennedy. When her brother finally turned to her, extending his suit-clad arm, she took it eagerly, all smiles. "Finally!" Ed had no smart retort for her; he was in a good mood now, too.

As they approached the building, someone called out to them. "Fancy meeting you here!" Bobbi turned and waved to Landrum Walton, who had been her schoolmate since kindergarten. He lived just a few houses down from theirs, on the west side of Athens near Beech Haven. He was a nice boy, with dishwater blond hair that came over his ears and light gray eyes, and a wide, easy-going smile full of slightly crooked white teeth that lit up his whole face.

"Hi, Landrum," she said, pasting on a smile, though she was positively itching with nerves. Her brother held out a hand respectfully for Landrum to shake. "What are you doing here?"

"Came with my mama," Landrum said, gesturing to a tall woman standing over by the trees, holding a fan in front of her face. "She loves Mr. Kennedy and was hoping to catch a glimpse of him before he went inside."

Bobbi began to tell Landrum that she would be attending the

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speech when a loud smattering of applause and excited shrieks filled the air. Bobbi turned to see a smooth black car cruising onto a side street, flanked by several more black cars and the sheriff's cruiser, its lights flashing. The crowd milled as close as they could get to the car, and as they approached, Bobbi noticed with disgust that there were protestors clustered off to the side near the steps. They were holding signs, but she didn't care to read them. Instead, she turned her eyes back to the figure emerging from the sleek black car.

The man inside the fancy car had all the shining brightness of Apollo, with the humble, kind smile of a neighbor: Robert Francis Kennedy, in the flesh. Bobbi's breath caught in her throat as her hero stepped out of the car, full of quiet grace, his smile shy but purposeful. He was a short man, but stood tall, a shock of reddish-blond hair falling over one eye, which he pushed back absently as he touched the shoulder of a security member in thanks. Bobbi watched, riveted, as he adjusted his tapered, dark suit at the collar and glanced over to the crowd of people waiting to see him, gesturing to them with another small, humble wave of hello and a curt nod. He squared his shoulders and centered himself, moving toward the steps and into the law building, seeming to float with a quiet grace. His every movement seemed ornate, genteel, and deliberate; Bobbi now understood why people called the family American royalty. It seemed that sophistication was in his very blood; a second nature. How he managed to appear regal and humble at the same time was nothing short of a magic trick.

A hush came over the crowd as Mr. Kennedy turned one more time, just outside the door, and gave another little wave. "Good

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afternoon,” he called, projecting his reedy, Boston-tinged voice out over the lawn. “Nice to see you all here.” *Heah*, Bobbi repeated to herself inwardly, grinning ear to ear. Mr. Kennedy’s light-colored eyes seemed to fall on each person clustered there, as though he were committing each face to memory, a ghost of a smile playing over his face, a beam of sunlight illuminating his hair into a golden-reddish hue—and then he disappeared inside the hall.

Bobbi grabbed Ed’s arm, her heart fluttering with excitement. “Hurry, let’s go. I don’t want to miss a moment.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m waiting with bated breath.” Ed chuckled, though his bright eyes betrayed his own excitement.

“Oh, hush. Let’s go!” Bobbi turned to say goodbye to Landrum, but they’d gotten separated in the crowd. She’d find him after and say goodbye; right now, Bobby Kennedy was all she could think of.

She followed her brother breathlessly through the hall and up the stairs to their row of seats. She sat down, her heart beating heavily in her chest. She would never, ever forget the moment out on the lawn. How stately, how majestic he had looked!

Then Mr. Kennedy was on the stage, and Bobbi’s breath caught again. As she watched him, his light eyes falling on each person clustered there, she couldn’t help but marvel at the way he seemed to make a point to look and truly see each person. For the briefest moment, his eyes met hers, and time stood still. Bobbi struggled to catch a breath and hold it, her eyes memorizing every wrinkle, every strand of hair. Then Kennedy was nodding to the other side of the room and the moment was over.

But Bobbi would never forget any of it, not ever. The shy smile,

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the way his hair had glowed red in the sunshine outside, the sound of his lovely, unique voice. She knew she would coast on it all her days. She could hardly believe it—she'd stood only feet away from her hero, from American royalty. She, Bobbi Newton!

After a few moments, Mr. Kennedy stood up to the podium to speak, and Bobbi, overwhelmed with joy and pride, covertly wiped a tear from the corner of her eye, ignoring her older brother's snicker.

“For the first time since becoming Attorney General over three months ago, I am making something approaching a formal speech, and I am proud that it is in Georgia,” Mr. Kennedy began. Bobbi sat on the edge of her seat, committing every word from her beloved Bobby to memory. There might never be another chance like this again.



After the speech, Bobbi was breathless and exhilarated as she followed her brother out of the hall. Mr. Kennedy's speech had been a marvel: he had touched on voting rights, the desegregation of UGA, how theirs was a time of change, of equality, with marginalized people all over the globe securing their rights. He had spoken of the future with a fervent hope that was contagious. The speech had invigorated her, and even her opinionated brother had nodded along in agreement several times. They—the young people of Georgia, of the country—had been given their marching orders. She intended to heed them.

When the Attorney General had finished speaking, she wasn't ready to let him go. The crowd had stood, giving him a rousing standing ovation, as Mr. Kennedy stood there, absorbing their energy,

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returning it to them. The sound of their applause had followed the Attorney General long after he'd exited the stage.

"I suppose we'd better get along home now, sugar pie," Ed said to her as they exited the law school building. "I'd take you to Allen's for a milkshake, but Daddy will be expecting us home for supper." Bobbi sighed in disappointment. Ever since Mama had passed, Daddy was a stickler for everyone attending family supper. You didn't miss the dinner table unless it was something very important. Since Bobbi hadn't been there to do the cooking tonight, they'd likely be having meatloaf that resembled hockey pucks and reheated beans from a tin. She should have accepted an ice cream earlier when Ed had offered. At the time she'd been too twitterpated with nerves to eat.

"But Allen's sounds so good. Couldn't we just phone Daddy and get hamburgers from Allen's to take home?"

"He'd only gripe at me about the money," Ed reminded her as they went down the steps. "He complains enough about my tuition. I don't need a lecture on the luxury that is fast food." He smiled down at her. "A burger does sound mighty good, though."

"Hey, Bobbi!" Her eyes fell on Landrum, standing beside his mother on the lawn. The woman was craning her neck toward the row of shiny black cars, likely hoping to get a glimpse of Mr. Kennedy as he exited the building. The protestors were still there, too, Bobbi noticed with a grimace. Oh, well, she wouldn't pay them any mind, and she hoped the Attorney General wouldn't, either.

Landrum held something out to her—a small banner on a stick, emblazoned with the words "RFK is A-OK."

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“Where did you get this?” she asked, admiring it.

“They were selling them for fifty cents apiece in front of Farmer’s Hardware,” he said with a smile, gesturing to his mother, who was also holding one. “That one’s yours. Glad I brought my allowance along so I could snag a couple.”

“You shouldn’t have,” Bobbi said with a smile. “I don’t have any money on me to repay you!”

“Don’t worry about that,” Landrum said good-naturedly, brushing his dirty-blond hair out of his eyes. “I know how much you like him. I don’t know who loves him more, you or my mama.”

Mrs. Walton had finally come out of her trance and smiled at Bobbi and Ed. “How y’all doin’?” she asked by way of greeting, her face pretty and flushed. Bobbi realized she was wearing one of her best dresses, usually reserved for Sundays, and had on rouge and carefully applied lipstick. Her hair, the same dishwater blonde as her son’s, was in a lovely coiffed do. Why, she had done herself up even more than Bobbi had—she really was nuts for Mr. Kennedy! Bobbi wondered what Mr. Walton, who she’d never seen without his signature grimace, must think of all this.

It seemed Bobbi wasn’t the only one who had noticed Landrum’s mother’s altered appearance. Ed leaned forward and pressed his hand into Mrs. Walton’s. “Hello, ma’am,” he said with his charming grin. “Nice to see you somewhere outside of church. And don’t you look pretty as a picture.”

Bobbi wanted to elbow him in the side. It wasn’t proper to talk to someone’s mother that way, and a married woman, to boot, even if they had been neighbors for years. But Mrs. Walton just laughed

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gaily. “What a good brother you are, to bring Bobbi to catch a glimpse of the fine Mr. Kennedy,” she said happily. “Didn’t he look so dashing, coming out of that car? The sun shining on all that lovely hair.” Her voice had taken on the quality of a love-struck teenager.

“He did,” Bobbi agreed excitedly. “I wish you could have heard his speech. It was just wonderful.”

“You heard the speech?” Landrum looked at her in surprise.

“Why, yes,” Bobbi said. “Ed was able to get me in . . .” Landrum’s face fell and she felt guilty. Why had she gone and bragged about that? Of course, Ed wouldn’t have been able to get Landrum and his mama in, but that wasn’t the point. Both she and Ed had heard their father talk, from time to time, about how the Walton family hadn’t had two cents to rub together since Mr. Walton had gotten injured at the sawmill and been forced to take a job as a fry cook at Allen’s. Bobbi had never let on to Landrum that she knew about their money troubles. She felt bad about it, especially now, holding the little flag that Landrum had paid for with his meager allowance, knowing that she’d seen the speech and they hadn’t. She felt her cheeks flush with shame.

“I didn’t realize that’s where you’d gone. I don’t suppose that silly banner means much to you, then,” Landrum said placidly, and her heart gave a little thump.

“Of course it does!” she said with a wide smile. “It’s a memento of the best afternoon I’ve ever had!” Landrum brightened again, and so did his mother, though she did look a bit jealous. “And I’ll pay you back first thing Monday at school. I’ve got a bit of allowance saved up.”

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“It was my treat, Bobbi,” Landrum said. “I won’t hear another word.”

“They record the speeches, you know, for the students to access later. Transcribe them, too,” Ed said to Mrs. Walton with a grin. “Perhaps I can lay my hands on a copy somehow. Bring it by one afternoon for you and Landrum to have a listen.”

Bobbi had no idea how her brother would finagle that, but she could have kissed Ed for offering. “We’d love nothing better, would we, Lando?” Mrs. Walton said, her cheeks flushing a pretty pink. Her eyes sparkled as she looked at Ed. “You and Bobbi should stop by for cookies and sweet tea one afternoon and we’ll make a party of it. Won’t that be nice?”

Gosh, Bobbi thought. She’s coming off a bit desperate, isn’t she?

There was another jeer from the vicinity of Broad Street, and a smattering of applause. Bobbi turned away, hoping to catch another glimpse of Robert F. Kennedy in his resplendent, golden glory.

Landrum Walton, who was wearing his best church suit, took no notice of the flirtation happening between his mother and Bobbi’s brother, who was at least fifteen years her junior. Nor did he notice when Robert F. Kennedy exited the building, flanked by his security detail, to cheers and screams from the crowd clustered on the lawn.

Mr. Robert Kennedy gave another wide, toothy smile and small wave before entering his sleek, expensive black motorcar. As the lights from the sheriff’s cruiser lit up the afternoon in a cascade of blue and red, the shiny black vehicle carried the beloved politician away from UGA, followed by cheers and the trilling laughter of love-struck young ladies and hero-worshipping young men.

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Landrum Walton noticed none of it. He was too busy looking at the pretty flush in Bobbi Newton's cheeks as she watched the motorcade containing her hero drive off down Broad Street, and thinking she was the loveliest girl he'd ever clapped eyes on, even if she *was* the girl next door.



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The bell rang and class was dismissed. Bobbi grabbed her knapsack and books and slid out of her seat, waving at Mr. Clark, her history teacher. "Have a nice weekend," he called to her with a smile, wiping down the blackboard. "We'll see you at homecoming."

Bobbi gave him a bright smile in return and edged out into the hall, not bothering to tell Mr. Clark that she wouldn't be at the dance. There was no point in making the poor man feel bad; it certainly wasn't his fault that she and Todd Tatum had broken up a week ago and now she was without a date. Her girlfriends had suggested she go alone, or the four of them as a group. But, Bobbi thought as she walked the long stretch of hallway toward her locker, she couldn't bear the thought of showing up dressed to the nines only to see the boy that had been hers last week getting pawed by Debra Jenkins, head cheerleader and bane of her existence. It was bad enough that Todd was a no-good, filthy cheater, but with Debra? Debra, who had bullied her and made life at Cedar Shoals High School hell on earth for the past two years? What a cad Todd was to throw Bobbi over for her, of all people. The thought of going dateless to the dance and

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watching them make out all night (and likely be voted in as Prom King and Queen to boot) was too much. So she was planning to stay home with popcorn and the latest Alfred Hitchcock movie with her hair in rollers. To hell with them all.

Bobbi stopped at her locker and turned the dial on the lock absently. It didn't open the first time, because she'd been distracted by thoughts of the dance to the doozy of a fight between Daddy and Ed the night before. It wasn't the first, but this time, it looked like Ed was finally going to move out. It was honestly about time, Bobbi reckoned; Ed was in his mid-twenties and had been a practicing lawyer for almost two years now. He was still the pride and joy of the family, but his popularity with the women of Athens was starting to get tongues wagging, and Ed showed no signs of slowing down. Daddy, who had held his tongue for the past several years, hoping his oldest boy would grow out of his tomcatting, had finally had enough.

"It's bad enough that the folks at church are whispering about what you get up to," he'd seethed to Ed at the dinner table as Bobbi passed the mashed potatoes to her brother Guy, the two of them cutting eyes at each other nervously. "But my boss called me into the office today. Can you guess at why?"

"Can't say I could, Daddy," Ed had said, his eyes respectfully lowered to his roast beef, but Bobbi could see the ghost of a smile at the corner of his lips.

"I think you know good and well what he had to say. And the least you can do is not smile like a tomcat about it," Daddy retorted, slamming his fork down on the table. "'Your son,' he says to me,

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‘your son is representing the wife of one of our clients. Only he reckons that your son is doing more than representing her, or intends to, anyhow.’” He glared at Ed. “What do you say to that, Edward Newton?”

“I don’t say anything to it,” Ed had said, stabbing at a carrot with his fork. “It’s all idle gossip. And anyhow, you know I can’t discuss my work. Client confidentiality. I could lose my job.”

“I’d wager that bedding your client could also lose you your job,” Daddy had barked, and Bobbi gasped.

“Goodness sakes,” Ed had said smoothly, grabbing a roll from the basket in the center of the table. He gave Bobbi a wink. “What an accusation. I’m not stupid, for one, but also, the only female client I currently have is Edith Billings and she’s got to be pushing fifty. I suppose she’s a handsome woman but she’s too old for me, and married, as you say.”

“Older married women have been on the menu for you before,” Daddy argued, his face like stone. “Haven’t they?”

Bobbi stared down at her plate, feeling heat rising to her cheeks. It had been two years since Daddy had gone bowling with his old friend, Mr. Walton, for the last time. Whether that was his doing or Mr. Walton’s, she didn’t know and was afraid to ask. But her brother’s *friendship* with Mrs. Walton was the worst kept secret in Athens. Her handsome, smooth brother was popular with women, to be sure. Too popular. But that Daddy was now saying all this out loud, right in front of her, was shocking. And Bobbi hadn’t failed to notice how her brother had surpassed her father’s question without really answering it.

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“I’ll have a word with Mrs. Billings, Dad,” Ed replied smoothly. “I’ll tell her that her husband is spreading malicious gossip and that if she can’t put a stop to it, I’ll have to cease being her lawyer. Conflict of interest and all. Satisfied?”

“Too little, too late, son,” Daddy had replied, but he’d said no more about it at the dinner table. Bobbi had been wondering all night what would become of the drama. She found out the next morning when, over coffee, Ed announced that he’d be moving out. Dad had already left for work, so he told her and Guy at the kitchen table as he leaned down to tie the laces on his shiny black shoes.

“I’ve been meaning to go for a long spell,” he explained to them, sitting up and tipping his coffee cup to his lips. “Only I get along with both y’all so well, and I wanted to help Daddy raise you. Since Mama’s been gone, it’s been hard on him.” He smiled at them both, reaching out to cuff Guy’s hair, getting a scowl in response. “But it’ll be better for everybody if I shift on out. I’ve had my eye on an apartment downtown for a spell and I think I’ll go put in the deposit today.” He cuffed Guy’s hair again. “With Bobbi heading off to UGA this summer and me moving out, you ought to consider making a move, too, little brother. You’re not a youngin yourself anymore.”

Guy glowered. He had been working as a mechanic on Oak Street ever since graduating, and had made no plans to go to college, which irritated Daddy and Ed to no end. He seemed content to drift through life, doing as little as possible. Bobbi saw no problem with his chosen profession, and sometimes envied him his simple, easy life. Guy did whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted, kept his

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private life private, and didn't nose into anyone's business. He got along with everyone and kept his nose down—and for that reason, everyone loved him. “I've been working since before I graduated,” Guy said, his voice giving no indication of offense. “Just because it's not your type of work doesn't mean it ain't honest work. I help out 'round here just as much as you do.”

“If you'd just apply yourself and apply to college—”

“Not everybody cares about college. College don't teach you about the real world,” Guy continued, stabbing into his eggs. He faced his brother with an easy smile. “All that fancy learnin' and you can't even change a tire. I'd love to see you out with one of your gals and get a flat—why, you'd have to call me to come rescue you. Then who'd look like the real man?”

“I can change a tire just fine, little brother,” Ed grumbled, but his face had turned red. Guy had only grinned wider and continued eating.

For all his vices, Bobbi would miss Ed. He was her doting older brother, and he'd always stepped in to back her up when she needed it. He'd been mentoring her and guiding her all these years, knowing it was her dream to go to law school, giving her every opportunity possible to learn. He had all but raised her himself, given Daddy's long hours, and she would miss going into his bedroom after dinner to talk politics and theory. He was the ideal older brother in *almost* every way; if only he could keep his hands off pretty women.

Ed tousled her hair, reading her thoughts. “I'll still be here for you whenever you need me, little sister. I promise. I'll be just down the road.”

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“I know.” She had a lump in her throat. Now that Ed had decided he was moving out, she suddenly realized she wasn’t ready for him to go. Why couldn’t he have waited until the summer? Why did he have to always be getting in trouble with this gal or the next?

“You’ll do just fine on your own. So will Guy,” Ed said reassuringly. “We’ve all done just fine all these years...since—”

Bobbi waved a hand at him, cutting him off. She didn’t want to talk about Mama now, or ever, really. Their mother had died when Bobbi wasn’t yet a teenager, and though six years had passed, it still felt fresh and painful. She didn’t like to talk about it, preferring to lock the memories of Mama in a box in her mind, shut up tight and safe. When she thought about all the things Mama had missed, the pain in her chest was so great she couldn’t breathe.

The doctors had told Mama that she couldn’t have another child after Bobbi was born, and she hadn’t fallen pregnant again for another ten years. It was only at Bobbi’s eleventh birthday, after the guests had gone home and the mess from the piñata was cleaned up, that Alice Newton had sat down on the piano bench and told her children what she said was “happy” news—that she was expecting her fourth child. She and Daddy had always wanted an even four, she’d told them, her cheeks already beginning to flush with a happy, maternal glow. They were over the moon!

Only Ed, who was nineteen by then and full of confident self-possession, had spoken up. “Mama, the doctors told you you ought not to have another child,” he’d protested. “And you’re close to forty years old!”

Their father had interjected then. “That’s enough, young man.

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Forty isn't old. Besides, it ain't your place to question."

Ed, tight-lipped and white-faced, had left the room without so much as a congratulations, and Bobbi finally found her voice to speak up. "But Ed's right, isn't he? That it'll be a risk?"

"So they say, baby," Mama had answered, cupping her cheek. "But who are we to say what the Lord blesses us with? And that's what this is, Bobbi. A blessing. Now, how is that for a birthday present?" She'd given Bobbi and Guy one of her sweet smiles, then reached out to clasp her husband's hand. "I'm sure it will all turn out just fine."

Instead, Alice Newton had died and her premature baby—a little brother, James—was gone with her. None of them had ever talked about it. But from time-to-time Bobbi thought back to that fateful birthday party, the ashen look on Ed's face, and the way he'd tried to make Mama see sense. What if she had listened?

It wouldn't have mattered, Bobbi knew. She'd heard the hushed stories and knew places existed where a woman in trouble could go, but those places didn't seem to be anywhere she knew of. And what little she *did* know of such things, she knew Mama and Daddy would've *never* considered what was to them a mortal sin.

Daddy did alright for them. But the truth was, without Ed here to keep everyone together, Bobbi feared they might fall apart. She couldn't talk to Daddy or Guy the way she talked to Ed. He gave her rides to school when she needed them, pocket money when she'd exceeded her allowance, and was always there to chat after dinner about law matters, town gossip or any other old thing, even the boys she liked. He'd even taken Bobbi to buy supplies when she'd

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started her first period, telling her to “hush up; it’s perfectly normal” when she’d blushed to the nines and tittered about a boy taking her to purchase sanitary napkins. He never made her feel small or unimportant, or like a nuisance.

Now, he looked at her with a gleam in his eye, and pulled her into a gruff hug. “It’ll take me a few days to get all my stuff packed and to the apartment,” he said into her hair. “So don’t fret. I’ll be here tomorrow night to drive you to the homecoming dance.”

“No need,” Bobbi said, pulling back from him and grabbing her satchel from the chair. “I’m not going.”

“Not going?” Ed sniffed. “Homecoming is the biggest event of the school year, you’ve got to go. It’s your senior year, Bobbi. You won’t have another chance.”

“Go without a date?” she asked incredulously. Ed had already been filled in on the saga that was Todd Tatum and Debra Hawkins, and she’d politely declined his likely fake but well-meaning offer to go rough him up. “I couldn’t bear the embarrassment. Besides, I don’t care about these things as much as you did.”

“I’m sure there’s some boy dying to take you, if only you’d put out a few feelers,” Ed said charitably, grabbing his briefcase. “Pretty girl like you? They’d line up to escort you. I can’t stand watching you just give up like that, staying home in rollers and watching *The Guiding Light*.”

“I wasn’t going to watch *The Guiding Light*,” she said with a phony wink, wanting the conversation to be over. Feeling like a charity case was too humiliating. “I thought I might watch a Hitchcock film. *The Birds* is on tonight.”

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“That movie wasn’t worth the hype, if you ask me,” he said, cuffing her on the ear. “I’m late for work, Bobbi. But you *should* go. It’s your homecoming. A memory that’ll last a lifetime.”



Dinner that night was just Bobbi and Daddy since Guy was putting in a shift at the shop and Ed was staying late at the office—so he said, anyway. Bobbi ate her roasted chicken and potatoes silently, staring at her plate, brooding—on Ed moving out, her lack of a homecoming date, and she was having awful cramps, to boot, which meant her period was coming soon—and she didn’t feel much like talking. Daddy was staring at the newspaper; he didn’t often get time in the mornings to read the headlines with his coffee, being a man who never stopped for breakfast, so he chose to catch up on the news with dinner, occasionally reading out headlines to his family. Bobbi watched as he scanned a page, then flipped it over with a little more force than was necessary. He was brooding, too, likely upset about Ed’s leaving, though he’d never say it.

Bobbi took another bite of chicken and washed it down with sweet tea. The silence in the dining room was thick and she wondered how she and Daddy would endure it, with Ed gone and Guy never around. She worried for her old man, how he’d cope when they were all out of the house. She supposed it’d be easier for him to make ends meet without two grown men to feed, but she knew he’d be lonely, too. And who would cook for him, do the ironing, make his sweet tea? He was capable of all those things, but he wasn’t *good* at them. He’d never had to be. And Bobbi would be damned if she stepped into that role for the foreseeable future, just because she was

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the girl. She had *dreams*.

Seeming to notice that her worrying had shifted to him, Daddy put his paper down and cleared his throat. “What are you getting up to this evening, dear?”

“Just some studying, I guess, Daddy,” she replied, pushing her plate to the side. “Why?”

“Your boy is supposed to be on Merv Griffin’s show tonight. Thought you might want to stay up and watch.”

“My boy?”

“Oh yes, I suppose you have several of them. I didn’t think.” Daddy winked. “Your beloved Bobby Kennedy.”

Bobbi smiled. Daddy hadn’t invited her to stay up and watch Merv Griffin with him in a long time. She was surprised he’d asked her tonight with that particular guest—her father disliked Bobby Kennedy as much as always, if not more so. Ever since the Senator had begun protesting the Vietnam War in earnest, he’d been a bad word in the Newton household. Not to mention that heated debate with Ronald Reagan a few months back—it was one of the few times Bobbi had seen her father curse at a TV screen. Ed and Guy had bitten back laughter, Ed hiding his expression behind a cupped hand, but Bobbi had been horrified by the ever-widening political gulf between her father, who she still wanted to idolize, and herself.

She wasn’t sure she wanted to watch Bobby Kennedy with Daddy. Discussing political matters with him was liable to start a disagreement, and there had been enough of those at home of late. She tried to avoid hot-button topics with him as much as possible to keep the peace. Still, it was Bobby Kennedy, and she didn’t want

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to miss it; she probably would have snuck back down after bed to watch it anyhow. After all this time, the young, handsome senator was still her hero. And Daddy was clearly making an effort.

Bobbi smiled. “I’d like that a lot. I’ll just run up and finish my homework now.”

“Good girl. I’ll make us a treat to enjoy while we watch if you’ll take out the trash when you come back down. Popcorn or ginger snaps?”

“Popcorn,” she said with a grin. Daddy’s ginger snaps were awful.

Bobbi went upstairs and worked on her math and science assignments, her mind on everything but her work. There were too many thoughts doing battle for her attention, and she couldn’t concentrate. Her older brother leaving, her first real relationship ending—how was she supposed to focus on math when her entire world seemed to be turning upside down? Bobbi felt totally lost. If only things would be calm for a time, if only...

After fifteen minutes, she slammed her math textbook shut in frustration, pulled on her jacket, and headed back downstairs and out the kitchen door to take out the trash. She threw the bag into the metal can, slamming the lid a little harder than she had to. She was angry—angry at Ed for not behaving better, for leaving their family in the lurch. Angry at him for not behaving as an upstanding man should, for not caring more about his family, for being irresponsible and unappreciative when he’d had so many opportunities and privileges. Most of all, she was angry at herself for continuing to make excuses for her older brother when she shouldn’t. He’d always

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been good to her, but how much did that count for when he treated everyone else so carelessly? He was no better than Todd Tatum, a thoughtless, sexist cad who didn't care how many hearts he broke.

Sighing, Bobbi started back toward the house, going the long way to the front door, taking a moment to stop at the mailbox and look up at the stars, a habit she'd had since she was a little girl. When she was small, she'd go out every night after dark to say goodnight to the sky, counting as many stars as she could before tiring and going back in the house. Sometimes, she would lie right down in the grass, looking up into the vast blackness. "You'll catch your death out there," Mama had often called to her from the stoop in winters past, and she'd eventually brush the grass off her pajamas and come inside, feeling weightless and renewed. Bobbi hadn't done that in a long time, but she still loved the stars. They were hidden tonight by a pale wisp of fog that seemed to cover the whole sky, as if cloaked in pale white cotton candy. It was early October, but the seasons hadn't fully clicked over yet; this time of year in Georgia, one never knew if they should take a light jacket or wear short pants. Bobbi wrapped her arms around herself, watching her small puff of breath release into the night air, remembering her childhood, when they had all been happy.

A door slammed across the street, breaking her reverie. Bobbi glanced over to see Landrum Walton emerging from his own house, stomping down the front steps, the glowering expression on his face visible even from a distance. He grabbed a lawn chair from the yard and pulled it over to the side of the house, just out of view of the porch light, his sharp features full of anger. Bobbi watched as he sat

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down roughly in the chair, pulling something small from his pocket. He pushed a cigarette into his mouth, cupping his hands around it, the blue flame shining brightly in the darkness as he lit it and took a long, slow drag. As he blew the smoke out in a perfect ring, Bobbi made her way down the street.

“Landrum!” she called as she got to his yard, and he looked up in surprise.

“Bobbi,” he said, his glowering expression turning to a smile. “Evenin’.”

“I didn’t know you *smoked*,” she said, looking pointedly at his cigarette. “Or is that reefer you’ve got there?”

“Keep your voice down, Bobbi,” he said in a hot whisper, though he didn’t look angry. She realized he was laughing. “No, it ain’t weed. Wish it was, though.”

“You do not,” she said, cuffing him on the arm. “Do you?”

He made no reply to this, but his face held the hint of a smirk. “What you all up to tonight?” he asked, gesturing toward her house. “Everybody doin’ good?”

“I guess,” she answered. “Ed and Guy aren’t home. Daddy and I are getting ready to watch Bobby on Merv Griffin.”

“Oh, yeah,” he said. “Ma told me about that. I reckon she’ll make me watch it with her. The old man’s already in bed, thank the Lord.” A shadow passed over his face, then was gone in a flash. “I suppose you’re excited for homecoming tomorrow night.”

“Not really.”

He looked at her in surprise. “Why not? I thought all you girls couldn’t wait. Every afternoon at basketball practice, all I hear you

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cheerleaders yammering on about is homecoming. What dress, what shoes, what corsage—”

“Todd and I broke up.” She blinked, not wanting to cry in front of Landrum. “He cheated on me.”

“Damn, Bobbi.” Landrum’s face filled with genuine sympathy. “That stinks. Who with?”

“Debra Hawkins.”

Landrum snorted. “Deb Hawkins has dated just about every guy on the football team and half the guys on the basketball team. I bet she won’t be with him for more than a few days.” He looked at her, his gaze softening. “Don’t sweat it, Bobbi. It’s his loss. He’ll realize that in short order.”

Bobbi smiled at his effort to make her feel better, even though she knew Landrum had been out on a few dates with Debra himself last year. “Even so, I’m not taking him back.”

“Good for you,” he said, standing up and stubbing out his cigarette with his foot. “You can do a lot better than that joker. Trust me.”

“It’s just... I can’t see going without a date, it’s too pathetic for words. But you’re right—I was looking forward to it. I just feel so stupid. I used some of my college savings to buy my dress,” Bobbi said, embarrassed, not sure why she was telling him. “And now I don’t dare go and show my face, and I’m not sure the store will take it back. I already took the tag off.”

“Don’t take it back,” Landrum said. “It’s your homecoming, like you said. Why should you miss out because of some jerk? In twenty years, you’ll look back and remember a fun time, not that

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stupid yahoo.”

“People keep saying that, but going alone is humiliating. If I see the two of them together, I’m likely to scratch their eyes out.” Bobbi shook her head furiously.

“Well, I wouldn’t blame you one bit if you did,” Landrum said, putting a hand on her shoulder and giving it a squeeze. “But you should go, Bobbi. And you don’t have to go alone.”

“What, are you offering to be my date?” she asked with a laugh.

“Don’t see what’s so funny about it,” Landrum said in a low voice, playing absently with his Zippo lighter with his other hand. Bobbi watched, surprised, as he flicked the lid up and down, up and down with his thumb. His face was cast in shadow, but she could see a hint of a smile. “I’ll take you, if you want.”

“I thought you had a date,” Bobbi said, puzzled. “Aren’t you taking Millie?” Millicent Brown was a cheerleader at their rival high school, Clarke Central, and her cousin Thomas was one of Landrum’s friends. Landrum had been going with her for the past several months; Bobbi’d often seen them out on double dates with Thomas and his girlfriend, Liz. Millie was tall and glamorous, with long, dark, flowing hair, and a curvaceous figure that Bobbi secretly envied.

“She’s going to her own homecoming,” Landrum said by way of reply. It wasn’t really an answer, but Bobbi decided not to pry further. He was offering her a chance to go to homecoming, and not alone! Todd could eat his heart out. She gave Landrum a bright smile.

“Well, I’d really like that, Landrum...if you’re sure you don’t

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mind.”

“Mind?” He grinned, his face lighting up. “The lady asks if I mind taking one of the prettiest girls in my class to a dance.”

“Oh, you.” She cuffed him on the arm again. “Liar.” But her mind was already on everything she had to do. She’d need to put her hair in rollers, iron her dress, go to the store for fresh nylons... She bit her lip excitedly, formulating a plan. “Will you come by the house tomorrow night to pick me up? Do you want to come a little early, so we can take photos? I can ask my brother to use his good camera.” Excitement fluttered in her belly, all the forlorn feelings from minutes before now gone.

“I sure will. Let’s say 6:30?” He smiled down at her, his gray eyes flashing. “I can’t wait to see your dress. You always have something nice on.”

“Oh, stop it, Landrum,” she admonished him, but she couldn’t help the grin on her face. “You’ve cheered me right up. Thank you so much.” She rushed forward and gave him a clumsy hug. He smelled like cigarette smoke and freshly baked bread; his mother must have been baking that afternoon. He bent down to return the hug—he had to, because he was so tall. His cheek was rough with stubble, his hair smelling clean and fresh, and Bobbi felt an odd sensation go through her. It seemed like just yesterday that Landrum was a nine-year-old boy, teaching her to skip rocks. Now he was almost a grown man, his arms around her waist, holding her loosely but somehow tightly at the same time, giving her the strangest feelings. A low hum began in her belly, rushing to her extremities and giving her goosebumps. She pulled away, fixing him with her brightest smile.

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“Thank you so much, Landrum. I can’t wait till tomorrow.”

“Me either, Bobbi,” he said, his lips curving upwards. “We’ll have a groovy time.”

They stared at each other for a few moments under the glow of the streetlamp, and Bobbi felt her cheeks grow hot. “Well. I’d better get back to Daddy. Merv Griffin will be coming on.”

“Can’t miss that RFK,” he said with another grin. “He’s A-OK.”

She turned and headed back to the house, knowing without having to turn around that Landrum would watch until she got up her porch and safely back inside. Just as she reached the door, he called out.

“Hey, Bobbi? Don’t tell my Ma you saw me smoking, okay? Daddy knows, but she don’t. It would only upset her.”

“Don’t blame her,” she called back. “It’s an awful, nasty habit and I hope you quit.” But as she ventured inside and shut the door, hearing him laugh behind her, she thought of how cool, how *dangerous* he had looked putting that cigarette to his mouth, the perfectly formed ‘o’ as he’d blown the smoke from his lips into the night air. It was as if, in the span of a moment, he’d become a different person from the blond-haired, good-natured boy next door she’d known all her life. Something mysterious, possibly dangerous; something *risky*. All it had taken was one invitation and a cigarette in the moonlight. Bobbi smiled to herself, locking the door behind her. Yes, Landrum Walton would make a mighty fine date to homecoming.



“Our next guest...” Merv Griffin began.

Bobbi sat with her father in the quiet living room in her

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nightgown, her hair hastily fixed in rollers, her feet tucked under her on the scratchy brown couch. Normally she'd already be in bed, but she intended to listen to every word the senator had to say tonight. She clutched a throw pillow to her chest and sighed; Bobby Kennedy looked polished and handsome as ever this evening, resplendent in a fitted gray suit and dark tie, his plentiful golden hair slicked to one side. His eyes were calm as he thought for a moment, then responded, his voice thoughtful and measured as he talked about how the war, combined with increasing violence in various parts of the world, and the divide between teens and their parents with their very different worldviews, all combined to make for an apathetic group of young people with no real hope for the future. Robert Kennedy's voice was cool and gentle, like a lapping stream.

"Bah," said Daddy from his easy chair, holding a fistful of popcorn. "There's always been wars. I fought in World War II, and I sure didn't—"

"Daddy. Shhh! I want to hear!" Bobbi whispered hotly.

Kennedy went on to explain that for young people, everything had become impersonal, with youth all over the country, and even the world, feeling powerless to invoke real change without drastic measures; how that feeling of being a small cog in a big, ugly machine, could lead to all sorts of prejudice, violence, and suffering. He explained to Merv Griffin that adults, especially those in positions of power, had a responsibility to make young people feel better about the state of the world. That only then might young people feel some sense of self, which would then lead to positive changes. Bobby listened in rapt attention.

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“This joker,” Daddy said through another mouthful of popcorn. “Talking and talking and saying nothing. Justifying the dang hippies. Listen to him!”

Bobbi jumped up and turned the TV’s volume knob, fixing her father with a “shush.” She smiled as she settled back on the couch, watching Mr. Kennedy, who seemed to glow as he sat behind the small, dark desk, looking fresh and fine as always, if a bit tired. She marveled at how soft and calm his voice was, how carefully he chose his words, even when he was chewing over an idea. He was practiced at this, and very, very good. She couldn’t help but wonder if even his clumsiness, his boyishness, were part of the effort he made to be likeable, agreeable. She hoped it was genuine.

Merv Griffin tried to interrupt Bobby Kennedy, bringing up booming populations as a counterargument that individualism couldn’t possibly be to blame. Bobby, unruffled, continued his thought unabated, not allowing himself to be interrupted so rudely.

“Not this again,” her father said with a snort as Kennedy brought up the Civil Rights Movement. “He’s already mentioned Black folks twice. I suppose he means to make them his target demographic when he finally admits he’s running for president. How fast RFK forgets that he was against our boy Martin less than a decade ago.”

“He wasn’t *against* him,” Bobbi said, knowing she shouldn’t rise to the argument, but unable to help herself—and where did Daddy get off calling Martin Luther King, Jr. “our boy,” when he’d never supported the man in his life? And besides, it had been years since the Kennedy administration had been outed for wiretapping Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. “Kennedy was Attorney General at

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the time; that was his *job*. He's gone on record since then, saying he regrets the wiretapping of Dr. King. And he and Martin have become friends."

"Ain't no politician friends with no other politician," Daddy said, turning in his chair to crane at her. He offered her the popcorn bowl, and she shook her head no.

"Daddy, Martin Luther King, Jr. is not a politician," Bobbi scolded. "He's a man of the Lord. I suppose you could call him an activist, but I think he'd take high offense at someone suggesting he's only—"

"You're a smart gal, you ought to know how all this works by now," Daddy interrupted her, wagging a finger. "It's just business, dear. You'll see when you're older. MLK is as political as the rest of them; more so probably. Why, the man has published entire books. And as for 'Bobby' Kennedy, he's realized the hard-lined, mobster persona isn't serving him anymore. He's shrewd—he knows if he comes across as loveable and naïve, working for the underdog, smelling of roses, that it'll appeal to the young folk. He knows folks like me ain't buying what he's selling. We ain't falling for the liberal nonsense. No more than we fell for his brother."

"I believe he really did have a change of heart, Daddy," Bobbi said, knowing it would do no good. She wanted to retort that she knew Mama had voted for John Kennedy—she'd told her so when Bobbi had asked. Daddy surely knew this, though she'd never heard them discuss politics when Mama had been alive. "After his brother was murdered, it changed him. And then when he went down to Mississippi last year and saw the squalor and hunger"—she ignored

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Daddy's snort, feeling color rushing to her face—"he began to see injustice for what it was. I think that's when it became about really helping people and not just doing a job. I believe that's when he learned the difference between being a moral person and being truly 'good.' I think he wanted his brother's legacy and death to mean something, for his own life to—to *really* mean something." She felt tears well in her eyes and blinked them back, embarrassed. "I believe that's what he's trying to do."

"You go on believing it then, honey," Daddy replied, grabbing another fistful of popcorn, his voice softer now. "It's admirable to see the best in folks. But when you get older, you'll see, darlin'. Nobody does anything selflessly. Least of all some rich Catholic boy born with a silver spoon on his tongue."

"Privileged or not, you don't believe losing his brother changed him?" Bobbi challenged. "You don't believe grief can touch anyone, regardless of their station?"

Daddy shrugged.

Bobbi's cheeks burned. "I can't believe you'd be so heartless, considering how you lost Mama." Mama and Daddy had made their choice to go through with the pregnancy, and Mama had died for it. Even though she'd known the risks, it hadn't made her death any less heartbreaking.

Still, Bobbi regretted the words as soon as they came out of her mouth. Now she was in for it.

"What's that got to do with a damn thing?" Daddy retorted, his own face a little red. "You can't tell me that I have a thing in common with that...that...rich boy politician, just because—hell,

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Bobbi, everybody dies. We ain't all gonna be best buddies just because we lost someone."

Bobbi looked down at the floor, feeling the blood rush to her ears. She was so angry at Daddy, but she felt sorry for him, too.

"I reckon losing her changed all of us," Daddy said, sitting the bowl of popcorn down on the side table. He leveled his gaze at her, his face serious. "I do feel sympathy for Mr. Kennedy. Losing two brothers the way he has. Maybe he's even a nice fella in person. But it doesn't mean I agree with his politics. And it sure don't mean I think he's qualified to lead the country. If anything, the opposite. Grief distracts a person, gets their motives all muddled up. Country needs a man who can lead from a place of rational thinkin', somebody who doesn't blow back and forth with the wind. And I'm not sure I agree with your theory, anyhow. Grief doesn't soften...it hardens. Makes a person double down, become blind."

"Is that what happened to you?" Bobbi pushed, and this time Daddy did get mad.

"You just watch your mouth, young miss," he said, his face going redder. "I'm not going to stand for you sassing me like that in my own house. You'll talk to me with respect. You understand?"

"I'm sorry, Daddy." Her face burned, and she looked down at her lap.

After a few moments of uncomfortable silence, Daddy said, "Show me a politician and I'll show you a crook," wiggling his eyebrows at her the way he had when she was a small child. It used to charm Bobbi, make her giggle. She supposed he felt bad for admonishing her so harshly. She tried to smile, but she'd gone and

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gotten all upset.

“We’re all in for a world of hurt if politics get you this riled up,” Daddy said with a chuckle, throwing a piece of popcorn at her. “Next thing you’ll be out marching with the women’s libbers, burning all those expensive brassieres I shell out for.”

“Stop patronizing me,” Bobbi said hotly, rising from the couch. Bobby Kennedy was still talking to Merv Griffin, his soft Boston-tinged voice almost too quiet to hear. “Why won’t you ever take me serious? Bobby Kennedy’s been my hero for years, and—”

“—your hero.” Daddy laughed, not unkindly, but it stung all the same. “When you get—”

“Yes, yes, when I get older. That’s what you always say. In case you hadn’t noticed, I *am* older,” she said angrily. “I’m almost eighteen. I’m leaving in the fall to go to college. To become a lawyer, just like Ed. You trust me enough to let me do the washing and the cooking and tend your house when you need help, but then you treat me like a child when it comes to the things I care about. You talk about respect, but shouldn’t it go both ways? As if it isn’t bad enough that you’ve run Ed out of here, now you’re sporting with me, too. Why did you even want to watch this with me, Daddy? Just so you could poke fun? Make a mockery of my dreams?” Hot tears pricked at her eyelids. She knew she was going too far, was getting bent out of shape for nothing, but she couldn’t stop herself.

“Bobbi.” Daddy looked down at his lap, his voice pained, rubbing his hands absently on his lounge pants, the popcorn long forgotten. “I invited you to watch the show because I wanted to spend time with you. That’s all.”

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“But all you do is criticize and make a joke of me,” she said in a small, angry voice.

“That’s just what we do, isn’t it? What we’ve always done.” He was right. He had always teased her. They’d always debated and argued good-naturedly about things; it was just their dynamic. Bobbi wasn’t sure when that had changed, when she’d stopped finding Daddy charming and started resenting his open, unapologetic airing of his views. When it had stopped being a joke to her: politics, current events, and hell, life in general—and started being a serious matter. Was it because she was a girl, or because she was no longer a child? Was it both? She wiped at her cheeks, shamed but still angry. There was nothing to be done for it—it was different now.

She stood there for a moment, unsure of what to do. Her anger was abating, and she was standing in front of the couch, trying not to look at the father she’d just given a dressing down to, who suddenly looked very thin and sad in his worn lounge pants, the half-eaten bowl of popcorn sitting pitifully beside him. He had stayed up late to watch a politician he disagreed with for her. Even if she disagreed with him a million times over, she could not be mad at Daddy. He was lonely, edging ever closer to alone, and Bobbi was almost all he had left. Yes, she was older now, and that meant being the bigger person. *So this is growing up.*

She cleared her throat, then said, “They’ve gone to commercial. Bobby’s part is probably over. She looked at her father. “I think *Bewitched* is on. Want to watch that?”

“You don’t have to, Bobbi,” Daddy said, still staring at his lap. “I know you don’t care for that show.”

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“But you do. Come on, don’t you want to make eyes at Elizabeth Montgomery?” she said. “Anyway, I wouldn’t mind some of that popcorn now.”

Daddy passed her the bowl and managed a smile, though he still looked stung. “Sit down, then,” he said. “I’ll be on my best behavior. Not one comment about hippies, hand to God.” She sat back down on the couch, taking the bowl, and tried for a laugh, ashamed of the tears drying in her eyes.



Bobbi heard the knock on the front door from upstairs in her room where she was carefully applying blush to her cheeks. She hoped her side-swept updo would stay in place; she’d used three-fourths of a can of Aquanet and still one tendril kept falling down onto her forehead. Bobbi’s hair was fine, always slipping out of barrettes and never holding a curl, much to her chagrin. She remembered, with a pang of sadness, how her mother had always joked about it. “To think, bobby pins are named after you and they don’t do a lick of good with this cornsilk you call hair.”

“Bobbi. Sounds like your date’s here,” Guy called from his room.

“Can someone get the door?” she called back, but received no answer. Groaning, she dabbed a bit of opaque pearl-colored gloss on her lips and left the room, grabbing a light shawl to go with her dress. It was pale pink and off the shoulder, a very modest dress by modern standards, but the fabric—a crisp, shiny taffeta—caught the light in a way she loved. The neckline was set with tiny teardrop pearls that matched the barrettes in her hair and the gloss on her lips,

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and she'd set the knee-length dress off with opaque white tights and white boots. She hoped Daddy wouldn't gripe that it was too short, since she'd foregone the lower necklines that girls were wearing these days. Most of them wore long dresses to homecoming and prom, but Bobbi didn't give a fig what the other girls were doing.

Her heart gave a little thump of anticipation as she made her way downstairs, the excitement giving way to nerves. Ed had answered the door and was now standing awkwardly in the foyer, talking with Landrum, who was with his mother. *Cripes*, Bobbi thought, *why is she here?* Mrs. Walton held onto her son's arm as though he was her escort, and she was smiling through tightly pursed, lipsticked lips, her eyes unnaturally bright. All three of them turned to look at Bobbi as she came down the stairs.

"Bobbi, you look beautiful," Landrum breathed, rushing forward and taking her arm. "That dress is breathtaking on you. Look how it lights up your hair."

Bobbi smiled. She had to give it to the boy next door, he knew how to give a compliment. "Why, thank you, Landrum. You look awfully nice yourself." She looked appreciatively at her date. He was in a nicely fitted black suit with a shiny black tie, and his shoes had been polished to a gleam. His hat, which she thought she'd seen on his father from time to time, was bedecked with a single white rose, matching the one on the corsage that he held out to her.

"I hope this is alright. I went with white because I didn't know what color your dress was."

"It's perfect."

Landrum moved to put the corsage on her dress, frowning with

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concentration as he tried to avoid pinning her in the chest. Bobbi watched his face as he did so, delighting at the way he bit his lip, taking in his smooth cheeks. He had shaved for her; she remembered how his cheeks had been stubbly the night before when she'd hugged him. His eyes met hers as he stepped back, and she marveled at how beautiful and steely gray they were, and with such long lashes. How had she never noticed how pretty his eyes were?

The moment was broken by the sound of tittering. Bobbi looked up. Mrs. Walton appeared to be on the verge of crying, pretending to laugh at some stupid joke Ed was telling her in hushed tones, though he looked like he'd rather be swallowed into the earth and taken into the bowels of Hell than be standing there. Landrum's eyes met Bobbi's again, and his mouth was set in a hard line. He was protective of his mother, she knew, and he had every right to be angry, though of course he'd try not to show it in their home. The business between her brother and Mrs. Walton had barely missed becoming a scandal, and Bobbi knew her family had gotten off light; her father had lost a bowling partner and friend, but much more had been lost than that. The fact that Mrs. Walton had ventured over—and that her brother had dared to come out and speak to her—was a disrespect on both their parts to the shaky foundation of forgiveness that had been forged between the families.

Bobbi stepped forward, not wanting Landrum to feel another moment of discomfort, and said brightly, "Mrs. Walton, it was so lovely of you to escort Landrum over. I'm afraid my father isn't here to greet you; he's working late tonight." Ed's eyes widened in alarm. Bobbi glanced at him and went on. "My brother Guy's

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upstairs though if you'd like to say hello. I suppose Landrum and I ought to be getting along."

"Oh, that's alright, dear, no need to fetch your brother." Mrs. Walton dabbed at an eye, managing another merry little laugh. "Goodness, my fall allergies are acting up quite badly. No, darling, I just wanted to see my boy off to his homecoming dance. And if I'm being perfectly honest, I was itching to catch a glimpse of your dress. It's been so long since my own homecoming dance, and you always choose such lovely things to wear." Her eyes were unnaturally bright.

"That's very sweet of you to say, ma'am," Bobbi said. Ed was inching closer and closer to the staircase. She'd never wanted to slap him so badly in her life. Couldn't just one moment of joy be had without his constant philandering spoiling things?

"I suppose you ought to be on home then, Mama, now you've seen her," Landrum said, and Bobbi became aware that he was clutching her arm in his own. "Bobbi and I don't want to be late."

"Of course, of course." Mrs. Walton stepped toward the door, Bobbi and Landrum flanking her. "Your father will be wanting his dessert anyhow." She turned with a wistful, desperate look. "Goodbye, Ed. Always lovely to see you. Regards to your brother and father."

"Of course, Mrs. Walton. Nice to have seen you again." Ed was bounding up the stairs before the three of them could get out the front door. Bobbi never even had the chance to ask him to take their picture. Her face burned with embarrassment and shame. Landrum would probably rather eat glass than attend the dance with her now,

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seeing his own mother's desperation and how badly Ed had wanted shut of her.

As Landrum escorted her to the family car, she looked over and saw Mrs. Walton walking along their footpath back to her house, hands clasped in front of her. She stumbled over a patch of monkey grass and Bobbi winced. "Is she going to be okay?" she asked in a whisper as Landrum held the car door open for her.

"She's fine," he said, a hint of irritation in his voice. He walked over to the driver's side and got in the car. His hands clutched the steering wheel. "Sorry. I just hate seeing her like that. I wish she'd never come over. She insisted on escorting me. She claimed she just had to see your dress, but I knew she was trying to clap eyes on your brother. She's still mad for him, even now." He bit his lip, his cheeks reddening. "I'm sorry, Bobbi."

"What are you sorry for?"

"For my mother making a spectacle of herself over some guy fifteen years younger than her." He swallowed. "For the way she's... carried on...with him."

It was the first time the affair had been mentioned out loud. "It takes two to tango," Bobbi said after an awkward pause. "I love my brother, but he's no saint. You've got nothing to be sorry for. If anything, *I'm* sorry." She swallowed, then asked, "Does your dad know? About...everything that happened?"

Landrum chuckled joylessly. "He knows. Everyone on our street knows." He looked at her from the corner of his eye, his cheeks growing redder. "Don't they?"

Bobbi didn't know how to answer. He was right, of course. After

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all, it was one of the reasons her brother was moving out, wasn't it? She watched Landrum's face in the glow of the streetlamp, looking somehow boyish and manly at the same time, his eyes gleaming, cheeks red with embarrassment, and her heart went out to him. She put a hand on his arm. The two of them weren't so different, really. Both idolized a family member who was less than perfect, who was good and kind and wonderful, except for one small flaw. "If anyone's to blame, it's Ed. Please, Landrum, don't think about it another second. Please."

"Alright," he said, but he was still staring out the window, his face gloomy.

"Come on, let's go to the dance," Bobbi pleaded, her hand still on his arm, enjoying his warmth. "Forget the two of them. Plenty of time to worry about it later. As for right now, I'm just dying to get you on the dance floor to see if you've got two left feet or if you're the next Gene Kelly."

He turned to her with a grateful smile and started the car.



Bobbi and Landrum hadn't been at the dance for five minutes before Todd had approached her. "You came," he'd said by way of greeting, holding out a cup of punch to her, as she gritted her teeth, trying, and failing, for a smile. "When we broke up, you said you weren't." His wide grin, which she'd always found endearing, had looked like a leer to her.

"If I want punch, I'll get it myself, or my date will." Bobbi retorted, grateful for Landrum by her side. "Why don't you go find Debra and leave us alone?"

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“Yeah, where is Debra, anyway?” Landrum asked. He and Todd were both on the basketball team, and while they weren’t close friends, Bobbi wasn’t surprised that he was being cordial. After all, it wasn’t his battle to fight.

“Didn’t you guys already go out?” Todd smirked. “Last year, right? She dumped you, didn’t she?” He laughed and took a sip of punch. “Stick with Bobbi, man, Deb’s not interested.”

“C’mon man, don’t be a jerk,” Landrum said easily, putting an arm around Bobbi’s shoulders. “I’m not the least bit interested in your date. Hope you have a swell time. We’re going to go dance.”

He led Bobbi away before a retort could be made. Bobbi seethed. “I can’t believe he had the *nerve*—”

“Don’t let it get to you, Bobbi. He only came over because he’s jealous. He saw you with a date and it was galling him so he wanted to rile you up. Don’t let him.”

“But—”

“Don’t let him ruin your dance. *Our* dance.” He smiled at her, his gray eyes on hers, and she felt her stomach give a little flip. With a shrug of her shoulders, she acquiesced and stepped into his arms. Landrum was a surprisingly good dancer; there was no woodenness to his steps and his arms around her waist felt natural and easy. He gave her a little twirl, and she laughed, surprised at how effortlessly he moved.

“Who taught you to dance?”

“My ma,” he said with a smile, and Bobbi banished sudden unwelcome thoughts of Mrs. Walton twirling around a dance floor with her brother Ed. “She used to make me watch Lawrence Welk

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when I was a kid and we'd dance around the living room."

"Well, that's adorable."

"It is not," he said, flushing. "It's humiliating."

"No, it's wonderful. She did a good job. You're amazing!" She grinned up at him, enjoying the feel of his arms around her. "When I said that about Gene Kelly in the car, I was just teasing, but gosh, you're good!"

He laughed. "I don't know about that. I may've practiced a little last night to make sure I could give you a proper turn around the gym."

"That's so sweet. Thank you for bringing me," Bobbi gushed. "I heard your mother say that you didn't want to come. I never would have guessed. I'm flattered that you ventured out just so I would have a date."

"It wasn't that I didn't want to come," Landrum said with a sly smile. "It's just that you were the only girl I wanted to go with, and up until two days ago you had a boyfriend."

"That can't be true, Landrum."

"Why can't it?" he asked, pulling her closer to him. His eyes bore down on hers. "Why would I lie about it?"

Bobbi felt heat rise in her cheeks. "But I thought you were dating Millie."

"I did for a while," he said easily. "But that's been over for weeks."

"Oh," she said again, feeling dumb. She was very aware of how his hands felt on the small of her back, warm and delicious. "I didn't know."

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“Come on, Bobbi,” Landrum said, twirling her again, then pulling her close, his face inches from hers. “You had to have realized that I’m crazy about you. I have been for years.”

“I didn’t—”

“You knew,” he pressed, his eyes imploring hers. “You had to’ve.”

“I thought maybe you—you had a little crush, back when we were younger...but I didn’t assume that I was the only girl you were interested in,” Bobbi said, aware of how fast her heart was beating. “We haven’t hung out as much, and you’ve dated a lot of girls, so I...” She was rambling. Landrum’s bemused smile was making her nervous. “I mean, you could have any girl you want.”

It was true, though she herself hadn’t ever considered Landrum that way. Oh, of course she’d known that he liked her a little, that had been obvious. He’d always been so kind to her. As kids, they’d played together on the street, rode bicycles, hung out after school. Later, as they got older, he would occasionally bring her gifts like cookies from his mom or the RFK banner he’d given her the day of the UGA lecture, the day that had begun the affair between his mother and her brother. That whole thing had been so embarrassing that she’d avoided Landrum, mainly out of shame. Since then, she’d seen a number of girls drift in and out of Landrum’s circle. She had never begrudged him that popularity—he was the sweetest guy in the world, and handsome to boot, and he deserved it. He’d always been nice to her, but she’d wondered how much of it was actual interest and how much was him just being nice because he wanted to avoid causing a scene or unnecessary awkwardness. She

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didn't really know why; all Bobbi knew was that she'd never really considered him like that. As someone for *her*.

Until now. Landrum dipped her, and she became aware of just how tall he was, how strong, and her heart began to beat even faster. Suddenly Todd seemed like the last guy on earth, and nothing existed for her but Landrum. He pulled her close, the two of them still dancing but slowly, as though they were the only people in the room. His breath fluttered her hair, and his lips brushed up against her ear as he spoke. "You're the one I've always wanted, Bobbi."

She felt her knees go weak. So this was what the romance novelists wrote about. She wrapped her arms around Landrum's neck and pulled him closer, smiling as he nestled his head into her hair. She knew it'd be a matter of seconds before one of the buttoned-up teachers came and told them to break it up—to them, even holding hands was as good as necking—but for now she didn't care. She'd sway in Landrum's arms as long as she could. Whatever cologne he was wearing smelled heavenly—musky and sweet—and there was a hint of cigarette smoke wafting from his hair, wild and dangerous. She rested her head on his shoulder and breathed it in, the familiar repeating lines of "Happy Together" by the Turtles resounding in her ears.

"Well, hello, y'all." A girl's voice cut through her bliss, and she and Landrum both turned.

Debra Hawkins stood there, holding a cup of punch out in front of her. She was wearing a bright red, lacy dress that clung to her curvy frame, like something straight from Sofia Loren's closet, and her auburn hair was in an updo that made her blue eyes appear as

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wide as saucers. She looked like a glamorous fashion model. Next to her, Bobbi felt like a little girl playing dress-up.

“You look very cute, Bobbi,” Debra said with a smile. “You too, Lando.”

Bobbi wanted to scratch her fellow cheerleader’s eyes out for using the nickname that she’d only ever heard his mother use. But she pasted on a smile and rested a hand on Landrum’s arm. “Hey, Debra,” she said with saccharine sweetness. “Don’t you look beautiful tonight.”

Debra shrugged. “This dance is dull as dishwater.” She gave a pointed gaze to Bobbi’s hairstyle, as though to say and so is your hair. Bobbi bristled. “I can’t find my date. Have you seen him?”

“No,” Bobbi said, her voice giving away her anger. Landrum put a calming hand on her lower back, and Debra smiled.

“I’m sure he’s around someplace.” Debra smiled sweetly. “Anyway, I hope all this won’t affect our relationship on the cheer squad. Let’s not let some stupid guy get between us, okay?” She gave a little wink, and Bobbi’s hands curled into a fist.

“You backstabbing little—”

Landrum cut her off. “Come on, Bobbi, let’s go get some punch. It’s so hot in here.” He pulled her toward the refreshment table without a goodbye to Debra.

Bobbi was desperately trying to blink back hot tears as Landrum handed her a drink. “She’s just trying to get a rise out of you, Bobbi.”

“I just wanted to come to the dance. Not play dodge-the-jerk all night.”

“Don’t sweat it, Bobbi,” Landrum said, reaching up to brush the

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wayward tendril of hair from her face. “Debra’s always been nasty, and Todd is an idiot. The only thing they have in common is they’re both jerks. Which is why they’re a match made in Hell.” He grinned, and his eyes shone with mischievousness. “We could always bail. Debra was right—this dance is dull as dishwater. I know somewhere cool where we could go and talk.”

“Is that a euphemism for necking?” Bobbi asked, wiping at her eyes, Todd and Debra suddenly the farthest thing from her mind. She was surprised at the coyness in her own voice.

“And risk the wrath of your older brother, Ed? Not on your life. You might look like Twiggy, but I don’t feel like having my nose broken.” He laughed.

He thinks I look like Twiggy? Bobbi couldn’t stop the grin that broke out on her face. And anyhow, Landrum was right. The dance was turning out to be a big nothing. The punch was watery, the music wasn’t that great, and none of her friends had shown up yet. Not to mention the couple of jerks she’d had to deal with. “Okay, I’m game,” she said with a smile. “Anyplace has to be cooler than here. Besides—Ed owes you one, wouldn’t you say?”

She regretted it the moment she said it, but to her relief, Landrum grinned back at her. “I suppose he does, now that you mention it.” He wrapped an arm around her waist and led her off the dance floor.

Then Bobbi was sneaking out of the gym through the back door that was usually locked to students, following Landrum’s retreating back as he walked through the staff exit and emerged outside.

“Where are we going?” she whispered. Landrum had taken off his suit coat, and his white sleeves were rolled up to his forearms,

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his skin pale in the moonlight.

“This trail leads to the back of the stadium,” he answered, reaching back to grab her hand. “Some of us on the baseball team have keys for the back exit since we’re here for practice so much. I thought we could go out here to talk. But if you want to go back in, we will.”

“I don’t,” she said firmly, following closely behind him. She had no desire to go back into the dance and see any of those people again, to watch that disgusting display of nepotism and cliquy-ness. Her feet sunk into the soft ground. She hoped she wouldn’t ruin her white patent leather boots. The night was cool, a little foggy, and the breeze was a sweet relief after the muggy, stifling air in the gym

They meandered through the back of the outside bleachers toward an expanse of lawn, which sloped downhill and into a grove of trees. “Students aren’t supposed to be back here,” Bobbi said stupidly, still staring at the back of Landrum’s head.

“Oh, live a little,” he replied with a laugh. “We come back here after practice all the time. Just talk, smoke, sometimes drink a little beer. The coach knows and doesn’t care. As long as you don’t get caught, it’s no big deal.”

“Right,” she said, thumping him in the back of the head. “Just as long as you don’t get caught.”

“Bobbi Newton, such a square.”

“You just shut up, Landrum Walton.”

“Well, if you’re going to talk to me like that, I suppose I’ll just take you on home.” They had reached the grove of trees, and Landrum whirled around, his eyes dancing. “And it’s a real shame,

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because I know you'd love this spot. Too bad you won't see it tonight."

"Come off it, Landrum." She laughed, thumping him in the chest this time.

"Nope. I only show this spot to women who know their place."

She stared at him and he stared back, his mouth pursed in a line, his eyes boring into hers, until he lost his decorum and burst out laughing. "You're going to make someone a formidable wife someday." He thumped her back on the shoulder.

"Who's to say I'm getting married?"

"Good point," he said with a smile, grabbing her arm. "I can't think why any sane man would ever want to marry you. I've had those rocks you call biscuits. Come on, it's just through the trees here."

She ignored his retort, suddenly excited. Always the dutiful student, Bobbi had never dared venture this far behind the football field before. She knew some of her fellow cheerleaders had accompanied their boyfriends back here or gone exploring with their friends with a bottle of cheap wine, but she'd never dared. Her father would tan her hide if she'd gotten caught, and anyway, Ed and Guy had done enough teenage partying for all three of them. Bobbi didn't want to do anything that would mess up her ride to law school.

But tonight was different.

Landrum continued leading her through the trees, only a tiny sliver of moonlight leading their way as she clung to his arm. Luckily, it wasn't too cold out; October was clinging to the last bit of

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humid heat, and there was a slight breeze in the air. She could hear cicadas and crickets, and the odd bullfrog. Landrum was holding her arm, warm and steady, and she didn't mind the feeling at all. He pulled her along, turning every few seconds to smile at her, and her entire body felt warm.

"Here we are."

Bobbi emerged with him from the woods to find that they were standing on a sandy creek bed, grown up with weeds. A space had been cleared out, undoubtedly by the students who had sought refuge there. The makeshift beach was only a few meters wide, but big enough for two people to sit down and stare into the creek, which was small but clear, with a few smooth rocks for stepping across. Above them was a looming, rickety steel bridge. Bobbi recognized it as part of the old train track just past the school, on the way back to her house.

"I always wondered what was under that bridge," she said. "Now I know."

"It's us," Landrum said with a shy smile, and Bobbi felt her insides turn to liquid.

"How far does the creek go?" she asked, smoothing out her skirt over her legs as they both sat down in the sand.

"It's actually part of the Oconee River," he answered. "So it goes all the way down to Madison or something, I think. Probably farther."

"I can see why you like it here." The "beach" was more dirt than sand, but it was soft under her fingers, and the creek was softly trickling in front of them. The sounds of the night were like music

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all around them. She felt a twist of nerves in her belly as Landrum turned to look at her, the moonlight illuminating the gray of his eyes. “But just you behave yourself, Landrum Walton. I am a lady, after all.”

“Believe me, I know *that*,” he said, his eyes twinkling. Bobbi wanted to ask what he meant by that, and whether or not she should be insulted, but she couldn’t seem to find the words. How could this be happening? Two days ago, she was nursing a broken heart over Todd Tatum, and now, she was full of jitters because she wondered if Landrum Walton, the boy who’d lived next door to her for seventeen years, would kiss her?

She couldn’t bear it if he kissed her. She couldn’t bear it if he didn’t.

“You have such pretty eyes,” Landrum murmured, staring at her. “Sorry if that’s too forward. But you do.”

“It’s not too forward,” she said huskily. “You have pretty eyes, too. They look blue from far away, but tonight I’ve realized they’re gray. You don’t see gray eyes very often. I think your mama has gray eyes, too, doesn’t she?” She was aware that she was babbling. But she’d never been so close to Landrum before, had never been alone with him, and the way he was just staring at her, listening to her every word... “Anyhow, they’re beautiful.”

“Bobbi,” he said, inching toward her, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat.

“Yes?”

“May I kiss you?” He swallowed. “It’s okay if you don’t want to.”

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“No,” she said, unable to stop the nervous giggle coming from her mouth. “I do. I mean, I do want you to. Yes, you can.”

He smiled, then cupped his hand on the back of her head, gently nudging her forward until her lips met his. He tasted like Doublemint gum, and his cheek was warm and soft beneath her fingers. His breath mingled with hers, his mouth opening against her own, and she felt her blood quicken in her veins, rushing to her face, filling it with heat. She’d been kissed before, had spent plenty of time necking with Todd in the back of his car, but those kisses had been fervent and rushed, full of his demanding need. Nothing like this. Landrum’s kiss was full of an almost hungry passion, but also with reverence, tenderness—as though she were a flower he coveted but didn’t want to crush. He kissed her gently and slowly, but with a promise of rougher things to come. Her entire body erupted in goosebumps as he ran his hand from the back of her head into her hair, then back down her neck to her shoulders. She thought her heart might stop from the delicious, intoxicating shock that the boy next door could kiss her like that.

She pulled away after a time, gasping for breath, and began to giggle, staring at him with wide eyes. Landrum’s cheeks were flushed, as she knew hers no doubt were. He stared back. “Did I get carried away?” he asked. “I’m sorry if I was too forward.”

“No, you weren’t. You seem awfully worried about being too forward.” She gave a short laugh. “For a guy who once dated Debra Hawkins.”

He looked embarrassed. “It didn’t last long. I wasn’t ever serious about her, and she wasn’t serious about me, either.” He picked up

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a rock and threw it into the water. “I hope you don’t judge me for dating a few girls in the past. I like you so much, Bobbi. I meant what I said before. I guess I’m just being cautious because...well, I don’t want to do anything that messes things up with you. I’ve liked you for so long...” He trailed off, looking at her with a smile that made her stomach do flips. “Todd is a fucking idiot—excuse my language.” His smile deepened. “I like you a lot. And I’ve been wanting to do that for a *really* long time.

She was touched. “I’m just like any other girl, Landrum,” she said. “You don’t have to tiptoe around me.”

“No, you’re not just any other girl,” he said, brushing her hair away from her face again. “You’re Bobbi. The girl next door. Who just happens to be my favorite girl in the universe.”

Bobbi’s face filled with heat and she pulled Landrum to her, kissing him again with such force that he almost fell into her lap. She could feel his laughter as his lips met hers, but he didn’t resist, pulling her close to him and placing a kiss behind her ear, then one on her neck. Bobbi’s breath caught in her throat as she felt his lips trail down to her collarbone, his hair slicked back earlier in the evening, now falling down over his forehead, tickling her deliciously. Her brain wouldn’t stop taunting her. *Landrum is kissing you, you’re kissing Landrum, oh my God, you and Landrum*, but it was a wonderful taunting, full of happy surprise. His mouth found hers again, and she tasted him, uttering a little moan as his hands found her waist. Then she was pulling him down onto the sand with her, gasping a little as his weight fell on top of her, loving the feel of his hands caressing the bodice of her dress. She could feel him holding

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back, deliberately staying near her waist, her shoulders, her hair; he was trying to be a gentleman and she both loved and hated him for it. She was suddenly filled with white-hot desire, running her hands from his shoulders to his chest, down to his stomach and to his belt buckle. His kiss became more intense as she touched his stomach, his lips hard against her mouth.

“Bobbi,” he said in the darkness, his lips kissing her face, her neck, her hair.

A low rumble shook the ground. For a moment Bobbi just assumed it was the force of the kissing rumbling in her veins, her heart. But the ground shook and Landrum pulled back, sitting up, grabbing her arms and helping her to sit, both of them out of breath. She looked at him a little stupidly, her hair falling out of the pins and into her eyes, still wrapped up in his kiss, not wanting him to stop. She stared at him in confusion.

“The train’s coming,” he said breathlessly, his hands still touching her, caressing her. He pushed her bangs out of her eyes and tucked them behind her ear. His fingers tickled her face.

“Oh,” she said dumbly. His hands felt so good. “Should we move?”

“It might get a little loud. Come on.” He pulled her to her feet, back toward the trees. Bobbi leaned against an oak tree and listened to the sound of metal clanging against metal, and the train’s loud whistle that echoed in the night. She could see a light up on the bridge through the thick trees coming closer. The bridge shook and rumbled as the old metal relic came over the tracks, breaking the solitude of the night, inky black and screeching.

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“Beautiful, ugly old thing, isn’t it?” she said, watching the black beauty clang heavily down the track and into the night. She hadn’t expected it to be so eerily poignant. Goosebumps erupted over her arms as she tore her eyes away from the train and back to her date’s eyes.

Landrum didn’t answer, only smiled at her softly, then he leaned forward and pressed his hands against the tree she was leaning on and kissed her again. Bobbi closed her eyes and lost herself in the moment—the sound of the train rolling down the heavy track, the breeze rustling through her hair, the feel of the rough bark against her back, and Landrum’s soft lips searching her own. His chest thumped against hers, and his leg pressed against her thigh, warm and firm. For a moment, they were all that existed.

The train seemed to go on forever, and when the final horn shrieked into the fall air and the train had rumbled away, Bobbi broke away from Landrum, and stared at him, out of breath and falling in love. She smiled in the darkness, and he smiled back, leaning into her, one arm cradled protectively near her shoulder.

This is it. He’s the one. Her teenage heart soared and nearly split with joy.

“It’s getting late,” Landrum said in a gruff whisper, his lips near her ear. “The dance will be ending soon, and your daddy will be looking for you to come on home.”

“Tired of me already?” she teased, letting her lips brush against his.

“No way,” he said, staring at her. “Never.”

“I’m surprised you’re ready for this to end,” she said boldly,

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touching his cheek with a finger. "I know I'm not."

"You and I have plenty of time," he said, his voice deep, thrilling her. He placed a gentle kiss behind her ear. "There will be many more nights like this to come, Bobbi Newton. That's a promise."



He deposited her at home right at curfew, and she checked his visor mirror to make sure her hair, which she'd hurriedly put back up, wasn't mussed, that she didn't have pieces of leaves stuck to her clothing. Landrum's hair was in messy disarray, but she supposed boys didn't have to answer for that sort of thing. She pretended not to see the way he watched her, the smile that lit up his face. Feeling suddenly shy, she gave Landrum a quick peck and thanked him for a lovely evening.

"I had a wonderful time, Bobbi," he said, his voice all politeness and decorum, playing along. "I hope you'll allow me to call on you again."

"We'll see about that," she said, exiting the car. She winked at him, noting the grin that sprung up on his face. "Thank you for escorting me to the dance, Mr. Walton."

"It was my pleasure, Ms. Newton." He returned her wink, and cheeks hot, she sprinted from the car to the house.

Daddy was still waiting up, sitting in his chair, an open package of doughnuts on his lap. "How was it?" he asked as she came in.

"Oh, you know, the usual," she answered, depositing her purse on the coffee table. "Awful. Terrible. Painfully bad."

"So the boy next door showed you a good time, then." He raised

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his eyebrows, his mouth curling up into a smirk.

“I suppose so,” Bobbi said dreamily, drifting up the stairs. “He did his best.”