

WALKS IN THE PARKS

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By

Lauren Elise Thomas

Director: Professor Pamela Duncan
Associate Professor of English
English Department

Committee Members: Dr. Catherine Carter, English
Dr. Mae Claxton, English

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ABSTRACT

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Lauren Elise Thomas, MA

Western Carolina University (April 2015)

Director: Professor Pamela Duncan

This creative thesis consists of a collection of six short stories following the main character, Annabelle Jones, through the National Forests and Parks of Western North Carolina as she faces difficult life choices that will not only change life as she knows it, but also the lives of those around her. In her twenties and only a high school graduate, Annabelle finds herself settled into a quiet life revolving around family and friends, her art studio, and her job with the Mountain Research Station in Waynesville, North Carolina. Having applied for a scholarship through Mountain Research to study agriculture in Raleigh, and not thinking much of what decisions or leaps of faith she would have to make upon earning the scholarship, Annabelle discovers that, though she had convinced herself the life she led was good enough, she had been merely going through the motions of living since the death of her father four years ago. Then, as if the opportunity to attend college was not enough to rattle her, her boyfriend of seven years proposes marriage. Annabelle struggles through her fears of moving outside of her comfort zone by exploring the wonders of nature around her as she used to when her father was alive. On her quest for guidance, she learns the truth of what she really lost after her father's death—her courage—and the encounters she makes and experiences she has in the parks and forests provoke

her dormant confidence to take chances and live again. Fear is an emotion that can rule anyone's life if we let it, as if grief, but through Annabelle's journeys to overcome her fears and grief to reach for her dreams, *Walks in the Parks* aims to inspire readers to combat fear and find peace in their lives while also illuminate the identity of Western North Carolina's social and environmental community as well as reveal to readers the sublime quality of North Carolina's National Forests and Parks.

INTRODUCTION

When I began the journey of writing these short stories one question stood out in the back of my mind: What's so special about National Parks? I was born in Orange County, California and spent the first eight years of my life in Florida, where my half-sister was born, before my mother and stepfather encountered the Blue Ridge Parkway while vacationing and decided to move the family to Candler, North Carolina. Neither my mother nor stepfather were much for outdoor recreation and my father, who I visited at his home in Corning, Arkansas for only two consecutive summer months each year, introduced me to leisurely fishing and four-wheeling around my grandfather's farmland. I visited Florida's beaches as a child a couple of times, but if there were efforts being made by local nonprofit organizations to preserve the environment or save an endangered species I didn't notice them and no one in my family ever highlighted those efforts. I hadn't discovered what hiking was until a friend in Candler Middle School shared her hiking experience with the class for show-and-tell. My parents' frequent drives along the Blue Ridge Parkway was the first National Park I ever experienced and was my only interaction with a National Park until I entered into Haywood Early College High School. My high school was situated on Haywood Community College's campus and, come to find out, was filled with teachers and students from all walks of the world who embraced mountain life and shared a passion for Western North Carolina's Forests. For three years I studied surrounded by people who enjoyed sharing their stories of trout fishing in Nantahala, swimming somewhere called sunburst in the National Forest, camping along the Parkway, and so much more. I listened, hung on every word, and waited for my chance to also experience those things for myself, even if only

once to see how I liked it. I finally gained my drivers licenses and car from my father and the first place I headed out to was the Cradle of Forestry. The scene before was magical, everything I imagined up when reading fairytales or my favorite children's book, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*—it was love-at-first-sight. However, due to my responsibilities to school and a part-time job at a local bookstore, I was unable to explore Western North Carolina's forests and parks as much as I wanted during my time in high school, but I always continued and hoped to return to the great outdoors.

As I am someone who moved to Western North Carolina in my childhood, I have been able to grow in the mountains of North Carolina and compare my experiences of mountain life with life in other places of the United States, like California, Florida, and rural farming areas in Arkansas. It has not escaped my notice that many natives to this region do not visit the National Parks of North Carolina. However, flourishing communities concerned with the environmental and agricultural needs of Western North Carolina do exist and their passion, which I shared, is what sparked the idea for *Walks in the Parks*.

Before entering Western Carolina University's English program, my writing experience consisted of my own imagination scribbled out in notebooks and creative, as well as formal, assignments completed during my undergraduate career in Charlotte. I knew I loved writing, even if I wasn't very good at it, and learning the craft that would help me improve my skills in creative and professional writing was what brought me to Western Carolina University. During my graduate classes I learned valuable techniques to improve and strengthen my writing and, what's more, I was encouraged to practice and explore them. The importance of research in the creative writing process was also brought to my attention and only intensified my love for the field. My first semester at Western Carolina University I enrolled in course called Environmental

Literature and one of the first books assigned to the class was Ron Rash's *Serena*, a book set in Waynesville, North Carolina—the town I have lived in since my freshman year in high school—and with a plot surrounding the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. My first class presentation in Environmental Literature was on *Serena* and opened my eyes to the importance of research for fictional works. The book is set during the time of the Great Depression and for Rash to successfully depict that era he had to research what times were like for mountain people during that time. He also had to do extensive research on logging during the 1930's. Since my presentation I have gained a new appreciation for authors who incorporate research into their work and I aim to someday write with as much intellectual and creative strength as they do.

A key factor in writing a good short story, I discovered, was good research, which was not something I expected in creative writing, but found invaluable for my work of realistic fiction, *Walks in the Parks*. A challenge, however, was that although I had become familiar in with the short story during Ron Rash's creative writing class at Western Carolina University, I was not familiar with connected short stories. The design of connected short stories differs from traditional short stories in that the character's story doesn't necessarily end in one story, but over the course of several. Unlike a novel, though, the stories—if compared to chapters in a book—should be able to stand alone and not completely depend on the next chapter to reveal the main idea of the story.

In addition, it would be a challenge to write about a place I had never seen before because, although I lived in the same town my character resided in, the stories were set in the forests and parks and I had not yet visited all the places my character would, like Chimney Rock State Park, Nantahala National Forest, and the Road to Nowhere in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Visiting the parks and places my characters were to experience proved useful.

Writers of fiction sometimes imagine the settings of their works and write about them, but I was writing about specific, real world places and wanted to accurately represent those places in my writing. I have often heard writers suggest writing about what you know and I employed their advice.

However, though visiting the parks and forests helped me gain a grasp on what my characters would see around themselves, I still needed to know more about their setting if it was to also act as a character in the collection, so I carefully chose sources that would help me research the planned settings for the connected short stories, such as Kevin Adams' *North Carolina's Best Wildflower Hikes: The Mountains* and former Cataloochee resident Hattie Davis' *Reflections of Cataloochee Valley and Its Vanished People in the Great Smoky Mountains*. Not only did I have to research the National Parks and Forests for these stories, but I had to dig up some works that would help me overcome the challenge that connected short stories posed as unfamiliar territory for me, so I read previously published works of connected short stories, including Fred Chappell's *I Am One of You Forever* and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. These works provided the basic structure of connected short stories for me to build my own work from. I also examined the craft of the connected short story through the lens of books on the craft of writing, such as the anthology *The Art of the Short Story*, in which the sections included on authors' perspectives was invaluable, such as with Carver's "Commonplace, but Precise Language" helped me see that it was okay to have a completely commonplace setting and event happening in my stories as long as I utilized precise language to also illustrate what changes were taking place in my characters or how a place connected to or compared with what my characters were struggling through. *The Hemmingway Short Story: A Study in Craft for Writers and Readers* helped me several times during my endeavor to write my

stories, including by pushing me through writer's block a few times by advising that I write just one true sentence. After I had written the first sentence wherever I was stuck in my story I knew I could write more, so I did, and then I cut out what I felt the story didn't really need because it wasn't inline with the plot. I did, however, run into some advice that didn't work for me, like stopping for the day while I still knew what was going to happen next in my story; I tested the advice and stopped one day, but I couldn't keep my mind from working through the rest of the story after I stopped writing and I ended up forgetting it all by the next day and had to start fresh. In addition to researching place and craft, I also turned to works like William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* for his eloquent use of Southern language and the internal monologue, which I attempted to employ in my stories to add depth to my main character. Horace Kephart's *Smoky Mountain Magic* worked as a model of how to put the astounding beauty of the landscape into words, proving to me that short sentences with precise language work well when you want to leave an impression on your reader. Too, Scott Herring's *Lines on the Land* gave me some insight as to how to approach writing about National Parks and although there is usually a backstory within the parks they are not impossible to write about without sounding like a preacher and it's better to focus on a few important details at a time rather than try to fit the entire park's history into one paragraph.

The challenges in writing this collection of stories have been numerous, and far from overcome, but have aided me in my journey to grow as a professional and creative writer. The challenges, too, were not always what I had expected. I expected the difficulties in writing about a place I had never before seen and working in a realm of fiction writing I had not delved into before, but the struggles in writing descriptions of Western North Carolina's inspiring National Forests and Parks without sounding like a brochure proved more trying than planned. I learned

that I did not necessarily have to describe the landscape in a straightforward manner, but could instead use my characters to describe the scenery and at the same time reveal something about themselves. By utilizing my characters and their senses and thoughts I was better able to equip my readers with a sense of how a place looks and feels as well as develop my characters further. For example, my first story in *Walks in the Parks* actually has my main character on a canoeing trip and I struggled to illustrate my main character's fear to moving forward in her life after her father's death four years ago, but then I revised the story and described the flow of the lake's current through my character's senses and was more successful at illustrating both the lake and my character's fears.

Although my writing doesn't hold a candle to Chappell's *I Am One of You Forever* or Kephart's *Smoky Mountain Magic*, with the tremendous help and support of dedicated teachers, great writers, and trial and error, I have been able to contribute to the growing genre centered around the Southern Appalachian region and the people in it with *Walks in the Parks*. Fear is a huge obstacle in all our lives, especially when it could mean denying ourselves our dreams, but is something that must be overcome to achieve true happiness and a sense of peace. The research I have done on this region, the history of the National Parks and Forests, as well as their founders, has brought to my attention just how brave Western Carolinians are and have always been and I hope my stories, in some ways, illuminate this.

CANOEING AROUND NANTAHALA'S BEAR CREEK LAKE

We reached Bear Creek Lake's boat ramp at nine-fifteen and the majority of the area still lay covered in shadow. I parked the old Ford in the graveled boat access area and opened my door. My hands felt around behind the driver's seat for a canvas bag.

"I got it," Amanda said, reaching back and pulling up the bag. She handed it to me. "Listen to the birds." Her eyes closed and she was quiet. "Isn't it peaceful, Annabelle?" Amanda asked, her window rolled down.

The songs of the cardinal, wood thrush, and Carolina Junco created a soothing symphony around us, impossible to ignore. I stepped out of the truck to inhale the fragrances of pine and rhododendron.

"Aren't you excited?" Amanda asked. "Our first canoeing adventure." She spun around next to the truck, arms open, a smile turning into a laugh on her face.

I nodded and dug out a tube of 80 SPF sunscreen from the bag. The sunscreen was cold against my skin, and thick, and sticky, but it was supposed to help keep me free of sunburn and skin cancer, so I used it.

If truth be told, it was because of Amanda that I had sunscreen on hand. She'd been steeped in the nursing program for almost four years now, and every year made her more aware of impending danger. I expected as much, though. When a person reads up on illnesses and injuries as much as nursing students, I imagine it would be difficult not to be tempted to take the necessary safety precautions that helped prevent illness and injury. Amanda had me toting

around sunscreen and organic bug spray since her first year in college, and I didn't mind so much. She worried because she cared.

“When do you think the others will get here?”

The canoeing class we had signed up for was advertised to meet this June morning at Bear Creek Lake's boat ramp access by ten. Ours was the only vehicle in the parking area.

“Thirty minutes or so,” I said.

Amanda wasn't usually much for waiting idly around when she had something planned for the day, but she continued twirling and wandering about the parking lot as if to have no care in the world about time or agendas. It was a nice change from seeing her pour over schoolbooks and scribble memos in her daily planner. Maybe being in college demanded all of your attention and energy, but it had not been that way for us in high school. Sure, we studied and did our homework, listened to our elders and attended class, but we had had spare time to spend together. When Amanda went off to college, spare time seemed to disappear, save for a few weekends during her winter, and summer breaks.

“Do you want some sunscreen?” I asked, my voice echoing in my ears. The sound rang clear, as if I had spoken into a well, despite the spirited choir of birds lilting around.

“Yes,” my friend said, walking over to me. She picked up the tube and squeezed a dollop into her left palm, and then commenced to spread the sunscreen over her right shoulder. “Can't risk skin cancer. Have you heard from Hayden recently?”

I smiled and rolled my eyes. It was just like Amanda to ask about boys on our first day out in months. “He's helping his uncle rebuild a barn this summer, but we have plans to horseback out past the Road to Nowhere.”

“Sounds romantic.” She nudged me with her cream-covered, sticky elbow and raised her brows.

“Nosey,” I teased. “What about you? Have any college guys asked you out since you started school?”

Amanda finished up with the sunscreen and put it away. “You know me. I’m busy with classes.”

“And SGA, and your teaching assistantship, and that stray cat you found by the library.”

“I know,” she said. “But, you and Hayden have been on and off since forever, and you two are my favorite couple. It’s like watching a soap opera.”

“I’m so glad my love life is entertainment for you.” I laughed, thinking back on the silly arguments and misunderstandings Hayden and I had had, only to wind up back together every time. Our third Valentine’s Day together we had an entire romantic evening planned—dinner in Asheville followed by a showing of *My Fair Lady* at the Diana Wortham Theater—and Hayden somehow managed to sleep through that whole evening. He never picked me up. Even though he had an alarm set, when he got home from a twelve-hour workday and tried to squeeze in a quick nap, he was too exhausted and ended up sleeping through the alarm. I accused him of not considering our relationship a priority. We had separated for a whole week before I finally forgave him for being a sleep-deprived human being.

“Seriously though, you two should get married or something. At least live together. Neither of you are in school, so you wouldn’t have to worry about being distracted from your studies, and Hayden makes good money.”

That was true. Hayden worked for the phone company and lived in an apartment in Asheville. Even though rent and utilities demanded nearly one thousand dollars every month, he

still managed to have funds to cover dinning out, an internet bill, gas, and a car payment. He started work at the phone company about two years ago.

“I don’t want him paying for everything.”

“Well, your studio is pretty stable right now, isn’t it? You’ve got paintings for sale in there.”

“Yes,” I said. “But, my paintings alone aren’t enough to cover both rent and the lease for the studio, along with whatever miscellaneous purchases I make throughout the month.”

Amanda put her hands on her hips and stared me down. “You really don’t want to leave your mom in that house by herself, do you?”

I looked away from her.

Amanda balled up her hands and pressed them against her chest. “I’m just saying he’s a good guy. I know it’s tough without your dad. Tough for you and your mom, but it’s been four years. Maybe it’s time to move on with *your* life.”

A truck with a full rack of canoes hitched to it pulled into the parking lot. The rest of the group we’d be canoeing with arrived on time. We met up with our group off to the side of the parking area and introduced ourselves. Altogether, eight people showed up for the class—our instructor and her assistant from the Jackson County Recreation Center, two older women who said they were neighbors, a mother and daughter, Amanda, and myself. Everyone wore shorts of some kind and either old sneakers or hiking sandals.

Bear Creek Lake felt massive once I sat down in the canoe. On the map, the lake resembled a blue tadpole, but up close, it was more like a gigantic, rippling mirror lying face up in the middle of Nantahala forest. The lake’s current pulled and rocked the boat, urging us to move away from the motionless ramp. I looked back toward the parking area where the cars sat

on the gravel and where my feet had been firmly planted only minutes ago. I was no longer able to rely on my feet as a means for transportation, but instead on the paddle in my hand and the lake's current. It didn't feel natural. Amanda and I guided the canoe to the right of the boat ramp and waited for the rest of our group and the canoeing instructor.

"First canoeing adventure," Amanda squealed. She looked absentmindedly around, probably watching birds in the trees or daydreaming. For a moment, I envied how she had her hair up in a neat, fluffy ponytail, making it look like smoothing out the bumps on the top of her head was easy. I had given up ponytails back in middle school and opted for braids. Braiding was easy and didn't have to look neat to be pretty.

I nodded. "Yeah, but I was comfortable in my kayak. I can't believe I let you talk me into this." My gaze lingered on the mountainous shoreline.

My mom introduced me to kayaking when I was about thirteen. Dad had known he would be working on the day of my birthday that year, so the three of us went out for dinner the night before and mom took me kayaking for my first time on my actual birthday. Since then, it had been our thing—just Mom and me—but we haven't been in the water together for a while now. A kayak isn't as big as a canoe, but just big enough to seat only one person, and the paddle was different for that reason. In a kayak, even though you might be out with several friends, you can still enjoy the experience from your own bubble.

"Oh, hush, you want to be here." She twisted around in the front seat to face me. "You want to be here with your bestest friend in the whole wide world because you missed me." We laughed.

"It gets me out of the monotonous routine that has been life," I said with a raised brow. "And, yes, Amanda, I did miss you."

Our instructor, Rebecca, and her assistant, Michael, shared a canoe and were the last to get their boat in the water. I rested my paddle over my knees, waited. It was two people to a canoe. For the first twenty minutes, Rebecca had everyone practice different paddling techniques to get us acquainted with the canoes. We all clumsily bumped our boats into each other's at first. I sat in the back of our canoe and therefore acted as a rudder, which I discovered was not my forte when my strokes repeatedly caused our boat to spin around and turn into a large branch sticking up out of the water. Eventually, though, I was able to push off of the branch with the end of my paddle and get us far enough away so Amanda could paddle us out into the open. Amanda did well pulling us along, and as long as we paddled on opposite sides of the canoe, we glided forward through the lake just fine. Slow, but fine.

"So, how have classes been?" I asked when our group had dispersed along the south edge of the lake, some further apart than others.

"Spring semester went well, but I'm taking classes this summer too."

"You're taking summer classes?"

"Yep." She switched from paddling on the right side to the left.

I switched sides as well. "What are you taking?"

"Anatomy and Organic Chemistry."

"That sounds awful."

"It is, but if I fail, I'll have time to make them up and not have to sacrifice another semester."

"That's smart," I said, splashing water straight into my lap. At least I was prepared to get wet today. It didn't bother me to get water on some old clothes and sneakers already ruined by paint and there were towels in the truck.

“Have you given any thought to taking some classes?”

I looked around as if for something to wipe the question out of the air. “Not too much. High school was enough.”

“Well, are you still working on that farm?” she asked.

“It’s called the Mountain Research Station, and yes, but only part-time right now.”

“Sorry. I keep forgetting its name. Mountain Research Station,” She mulled it over. “So official sounding for how it looks.”

“For real,” I said. I couldn’t blame Amanda for forgetting its name, The Mountain Research Station. The place resembled that of a simple farm settled in a valley behind Main Street in Waynesville and I had often mistaken it for a plain, old farm when I was a child. Cattle roamed around the farm most of the year, but blueberries and various crops were planted on the land too. It was a farm in every sense of the word, but we also conducted a lot of research—soil sampling, rainfall measurements, crop evaluations, and more.

“I guess with painting and the farm you’ve been too busy for taking classes right now.”

I considered her words. Painting and working at the research station had taken up a lot of my time, especially lately. I tried to keep myself busy, though, but it hadn’t gotten me very far if I was still living with Mom. I just sort of got stuck, though. In high school, I had plans to study art at a college in New York, but that took a lot of money my family just didn’t have, so I helped out at Mountain Research to save up some money. Then, I open my own studio instead. After the studio was up and running I never left the research station. I met a lot of nice people there and got settled, and never left.

“Anyway, you’ve been there a long time and it was a paycheck after graduation.”

Because Amanda sat at the front of the canoe, I couldn’t see her face. “A perk to not jumping into college fresh out of the gate—paychecks.” We laughed together for a moment.

“I thought about college when I was in school,” I said. “But, you know my family didn’t have the money.” Amanda had been there when the Honda broke down and we had to buy a new car, it was about the same time I got the Ford, and just before the accident. It was a bad year, four years ago.

“I know. It didn’t help that you wanted to go all the way to New York. There may have been scholarships to help get you in, like with me. If I didn’t get a scholarship every year, I don’t think I could afford it, let alone paying everything back.”

No one in my family ever went to college—there was never any money for it and no time to apply for scholarships. It wasn’t that I didn’t ever want to go, I just didn’t want to rack up debt for a degree I might not love putting to use, or be able to pay back. I’ve heard so many stories about people majoring in something like marine biology and winding up working at the post office the rest of their lives. I didn’t want that. I piped up finally with, “I’ve actually just been offered scholarship money from Mountain Research to study agriculture in Raleigh.”

“I didn’t know they did scholarships. That’s awesome,” Amanda said, looking back at me.

“Mm hm. My boss there had me apply.” I looked down at my knees, which were beginning to turn pink despite my use of sunscreen. “It’s enough to cover the full cost.” I turned my head and gazed across the water’s surface, the ripples glistening in the sunlight. “I haven’t decided if I’m going to go.”

“Why wouldn’t you?” Amanda asked, eyes wide and an eyebrow raised. “It sounds like a great opportunity and maybe you could continue working at that research station, but fulltime when you graduate?” She faced forward and paddled harder.

I struggled to keep up and wondered if it mattered if my paddle was in the water or not. The lake’s current wasn’t strong like in the rivers and didn’t rush us forward, but it was enough to keep us moving. We just moved faster if we paddled and the harder we paddled the faster we moved. It was a constant motion. One I couldn’t stop even if I wanted to. We glided into some of the ample shade along the shoreline. I observed the moss-covered rocks as we passed by. “I don’t know if I can just up and leave right now.”

“I’m sure your mom will understand. It’s only four years, and you’ll probably get a better job after you graduate. Sure, it’s not New York, but it’s more than you have now.”

Easy for her to say. Amanda was almost finished with her undergraduate and only twenty-one. I’d be twenty-six by the time I finished school, if Mom didn’t work herself too much at the nursing home and need me to come home to help out at the house. She’s always too nice, helping people even when she’s not being paid and working even when she’s not at work. Some of the other nurses call in all the time, but Mom hasn’t taken a single day off and works overtime without the extra pay just to make sure her patients are cared for. Sometimes she forgets to eat, or sleep. It’s not healthy.

More water splashed into my lap, ice-cold, and I positioned the paddle over my knees to give my arms a break. My gaze drifted from Amanda’s back to the side of the canoe. The breeze from the boat’s constant motion blew little wisps of hair around my cheeks. The scenery was good inspiration for a painting. I thought about my studio, the thick aroma of paint, the soft ridges in my canvases. My stomach growled.

Looking around hungry, I noticed there was no little place to haul out for a break anywhere. We hadn't come to a beach or other ramp since the start of our trip. Then I saw Rebecca and Chelsea paddling around toward us.

When she was within earshot, Rebecca called, "How are you guys?"

Amanda looked back at me and I smiled. "We're good," she said.

"Good," Rebecca said. "It's about eleven-thirty now and there's a small place we can stop to have lunch. If you could just meet the rest of us there, that'd be great."

"Okay," Amanda and I called back.

Amanda and I followed Rebecca to a flat rock shaded by large rhododendron bushes and some tree branches. We tied our canoes together, so they wouldn't float away, and seated ourselves with the rest of the group. The rock was slick and covered in moss around the edges, which made walking on it difficult, and although the shade felt good, the coolness sent chills through my sunburned areas and I wished I'd had a jacket with me. Even if the sunscreen was advertised as being waterproof, it wasn't really and probably washed off after all the water I'd been splashing into my lap canoeing.

For the two of us, I had packed granola bars, grapes, and some trail mix for lunch, which turned out to be a good idea when a motorboat whizzed by, creating a wave that splashed up on the rock where we were. Eating a granola bar, I had a free hand to help push myself up on the rock and out of the oncoming water. Eating a sandwich usually takes both my hands. I tried resting them on my knees after the motorboat went by, but my sunburn was worse than I thought, so I settled for keeping my hands in my lap instead. The water's surface rippled softly—up and down, up and down. It kind of reminded me of a funhouse mirror. A couple of leaves fell on the lake and drifted into the current, going with the flow to a place entirely different from home.

After a minute or two of watching the ripples and munching on trail mix, my stomach began to feel queasy. I blinked and gently turned my head from side-to-side to reverse the effect.

“Where are you two from?” Michael asked.

I took my attention from the current to answer him, finding six faces staring at me in wonder. “Amanda and I live in Waynesville.”

“Oh, that’s a pretty place,” Michael said and commented on how he and his wife frequented Waynesville’s main street and attended the apple festival last fall.

My hometown was becoming one of those tourist places, like Asheville and Disneyland, right before my eyes. It wasn’t exactly bad for business or the community. It was just as if the only thing the world could see about us was a mountain range bursting with color, quaint downtown shops, and the best apples this side of the U.S. That was probably why I liked working at the Mountain Research Station so much. It did something for us, helped us learn and grow, be better and more than a quaint bed and breakfast. At Mountain Research I didn’t have to give in to the demands of tourists or consumerism—I was able to spend my time working towards leaving something behind for the people who lived in this region, who cherished it and valued the beauty of this land and its peoples’ heritage more than selling moonshine jam and cheap, black bear plush toys because they know someone will buy them.

I looked again across the lake to the mountains on the other side. Their foliage this time of year still held strong in vibrant greens and blues. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine the mountains in my mind, to hold on to them and their color. I looked again across the lake to the mountains on the other side. Their foliage this time of year still held strong in vibrant greens and blues. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine the mountains in my mind, to hold on to them and their color. Fall would come in a couple of months and these vibrant greens and blues would

change, turn into shades of red before fading to brown and falling away. It seems like everything could change. The evergreens will remain though—a constant, like the lake’s current.

The group decided to start canoeing back towards the ramp at twelve-fifteen. Rebecca had everyone switch places in their canoe, so if you were paddling in the back previously you were now paddling in front. The sun was high in the sky and I saw with my own eyes why Nantahala, “Land of the Noonday Sun” to Native Americans, earned its name. I estimated reaching the boat ramp around one or one-thirty and getting back to the house in time to make some dinner for Mom, if she was eating tonight, and myself.

“What’s on your mind, Annabelle?” Amanda queried. “You seem quiet.”

“I was just thinking about how nice it is here.”

“Yeah, I wish we had paddled further up, though.”

“What for?” I asked.

“The waterfalls we could have literally paddle up to. I read about them on the website.”

“Wow, that’s intense.” Amanda was into some intense stuff though. Once she tried getting me to zip line through this forest, but I told her to go with someone else. I imagined what it would be like sitting in this canoe at the bottom of a waterfall.

“They aren’t really big ones, but beautiful. I saw a picture on the internet of one—the rocks around it covered in a deep, green moss and the water as clear as glass. Sort of like a place you’d expect fairies to live by.”

“You never know around these parts. It certainly feels like a fairytale.”

We enjoyed the quiet for a while, listening to the birds in the distance, but unable to see any. I eventually tried to focus on how I was paddling to keep us moving forward, instead of

drifting aimlessly around. It wasn't as easy as it looked and we trailed to the back of the group, but we were gliding forward all the same.

"Amanda?" I asked, looking forward.

"Yeah."

"Is it worth it?"

"Is what worth it?"

"School. I know you're busy all the time and sometimes don't even sleep for a week, and the loans you have to pay back after you graduate." I tried to think of all the countless reasons going to college would be a burden.

"Yeah. I think so anyway." She paused. "I mean, there's all the things you mentioned, but when it comes right down to it, it's what I want. Being a student has been the best thing that's ever happened to me, even though I'm sleep deprived eighty percent of the time. I've met so many different people that I might not have met if I'd stayed at home. My classes helped me grow in ways I never expected. I wanted to just become a nurse, because I wanted to help people, right?"

"I guess. You've always been one for helping people."

"Well, going to school has helped me to better understand not just what needs to be done to help other people, but understand more about what I specifically can bring to the table to bring about a change that will continually help people, even after I'm gone. I can't put a price on that, not monetary or in terms of energy."

I lowered my gaze to the bow of the canoe. Amanda was brave for going to school, even if she was just a commuter. I guess it's done a lot for her though, opened doors and broaden her

horizons, which is what people say education does. I wouldn't know. Not yet, but I could, having the scholarship.

We did reach the boat ramp a little before one-thirty. Everyone grabbed up their belongings and helped get the canoes on the truck before leaving. Amanda and I thanked Rebecca and Michael for hosting the class and making it such a fun experience. Then, we covered the seats in the truck with some towels, climbed in, and drove back down the mountain, back into our lives—ever changing, like the foliage, and in constant movement like the current of the lake. Life would change no matter what—there was nothing I could do about that—but Amanda was right. It was time for me to move onward in my life.

WORKING HARD IN CHIMNEY ROCK STATE PARK

From Waynesville I traveled about an hour to Chimney Rock State Park. I brought Bear, our Labrador, because the park was pet friendly and the fresh air and new surroundings would be exciting for him. Mom was working at the nursing home all week and wasn't able to take him out for a run.

From the parking lot I could already spot the top of Chimney Rock with the American flag flying high overhead. Warblers called from all around. Bear darted around me, taking in a few of the park's many surprises—the tangy sweet aroma of the fresh mountain air, fallen bird feathers at the edge of the parking lot, and the lulling distant rush of the nearby waterfall. With the six-foot leash, walking normally with his energy was near impossible. Bird watching would have been a possibility if I had come alone, but not so much with this Lab. I showed my annual pass at the admission booth and was waved into the park.

We walked in a few steps before I discovered myself at a crossroads.

“Where am I going?” I asked myself, looking down at Bear, who only stared silently up at me, probably wondering what we were doing standing around.

I made a quick decision and chose the Skyline Trail, so we could get to the Opera Box for its views and the Exclamation Point if we weren't too tired. If we wanted, we would be able to reach the top of Chimney Rock itself too, but it was tourist season and was bound to be crowded. The sun burned hot down on us, so hiking through some of the wilderness was a cool alternative from standing around by the ticket booth.

On our hike Bear either had his nose in the ground or in the air, catching the scents of numerous wildflowers and animals around the park. The trail wasn't crowded, which was nice with a dog because if we passed a group with children I knew we'd be slowed down while the kids petted Bear and I tried to politely make our escape.

We walked the forested trail for only ten minutes before we reached Devil's Head, the first major geographical phenomena. The spot had been given the name for a specific jagged rock positioned on a ledge; balanced between the cliffside and thin air. I tried to imagine how the rock even got out on that ledge in the first place, just sitting there up against the wall with nothing in front of it. The idea of standing out there without any guidance or reliable equipment made my heart pound hard and fast. I pressed my hand to my chest and looked away. If my parents were both here they'd probably joke about sitting me out on the ledge, but I was already on a ledge of my own—caught between the comforts of home and leaping off into school. I drank some water before moving on.

We had only paused at Devil's Head for a few minutes, but that was enough time for another hiker to catch up to us. A young man dressed in shorts and an orange shirt, a visor on his head, walked up. By the looks of his boots, I had the impression this wasn't his first hike. He waved, so I waved back to be polite. A retriever trotted at his side and once Bear spotted a potential friend there was no pushing on until he got to meet it.

"I'm sorry," I said when Bear fought against me to greet the retriever.

"It's fine," he laughed. "Lucy doesn't mind."

I gave Bear some slack, not that he could go very far on a six-foot leash.

"My name's Ben." He held out a hand.

I shook it. "Annabelle."

Ben stared out at the view from Devil's Head. "Wow, so clear."

"Yeah, at Clingman's Dome you can see about twenty feet off, but here they say about seventy-five feet into the distance, at least on the top of the Chimney. It's crazy."

"You from here?" Ben asked.

"Waynesville."

"Sylva."

"Oh, I was just out canoeing with a friend at Bear Creek Lake."

"It's great there too," he said and pulled away from the view to resume his hike.

I figured Bear and I were done, too, so we should start walking again, but I hesitated.

"Come on. We can hike it together," Ben said, gesturing me to come forward. "That is, if it's okay with you."

Bear wagged his tail, more than likely eager to join Lucy.

"Um, sure, why not?" I said and continued forward.

"I go fishing at Bear Creek all the time."

"Oh, what kind of fish do you catch?"

"All kinds, but mostly for the trout."

I nodded. Hayden was fond of the trout too, not that either of us knew the first thing about trout fishing. We just liked to see them, glittering by in the rivers or lakes, some specked and others a smooth blend of colors zipping by. "So, you've been to this park before?"

"Oh yeah, dozens of times, but it's a drive from home, so I mostly visit just during summer break and when everyone else has something else to do on their days off." He rolled his eyes and smiled. "What about you?"

I shrugged. “I try to get an annual pass every year, but I don’t always make it out to the park. I’ll hike closer to home instead, but at least the ticket money helps the park.”

“I just heard they put an elevator in the Chimney.”

“Really?” I asked, half amazed and half glad for the people in wheelchairs or with other reasons for not being able to climb the stairs. It must have been someone’s dream to have an elevator up through the Chimney and I could only think of the work it took to achieve, and to see that dream become a reality. Even small dreams, like opening my own studio, required more time and energy than I realized when I first dreamt it up. I spent every waking moment working toward an independent art studio of my own—working at Mountain Research for the funds to start up the business, posting flyers in nearby towns to get the word out, carefully planning the layout of the finished studio and prices, and painting to have stock. The seemed to being never ending too, but my dream had come true. Kind of like the elevator.

“They do a lot to better the region too.”

“Oh?” I knew Chimney Rock State Park was a safe haven for birds and plants, but I hadn’t been reading up on what was going on to necessarily better the whole of western North Carolina.

Ben nodded. “The food in the restaurants is locally grown and they try their best to keep out invasive plants.”

“I see,” I said. Because of a passionate biology teacher I had in high school, and my work at the research station I was aware how plants that didn’t grow native here had been becoming a problem. Kudzu brought in from Japan to help prevent erosion had gotten out of control a few years back and covered a large portion of flora in the valley, suffocating the trees and other plant life. There wasn’t anything that grew in western North Carolina that would eat the kudzu,

though. The woolly Adelgid wasn't a native species either and was eating away at our hemlocks. I didn't know this park was actively doing something about eradicating nonnative species, and all the food is from local farms? That had to be good for local farmers."

"Yeah, preserving this area kind of goes with the vision the family that founded the park had."

"The Morse family?" I asked.

"Yep."

"I only knew about this place being a safe haven for endangered species. I didn't think too much about whatever happens behind the scenes." I looked down at a spray of Star chickweed—the bright white petals spread out like snowflakes on the edge of the trail—and a sense of relief washed over me.

The tiny white flowers could always be found in North Carolina as long as not just one person, but many people, actively sought to protect them and so many other plants, animals, birds, and more. It truly was a beautiful place. Its beauty and history made this area almost cliché, even if I was standing in the middle of it.

The next big point of interest we came up on was the Opera Box, a seating area covered by a rock overhang where park visitors could relax and wonder at panoramic views of Lake Lure and Hickory Nut Gorge from a horizontal gap between the overhang and the floor. Ben and Lucy walked smoothly into the Opera Box, but I hesitated at the entrance. Seeing the huge rock over my head made my stomach a little queasy. I eased myself under the rock and toward the railing.

The gorge looked different to me now after hearing of the efforts taken to protect plant and wildlife. It sort of looked like a project, or work of art, something that human energy was spent to create. I held more appreciation for the park now and didn't mind stopping to behold the

view. I stood still in awe, as if standing in an outdoor art gallery beholding the careful brushstrokes the picture that made the scenery possible.

Bear and Lucy sat side by side, panting. I took out a stainless steel bowl from my backpack and another bottle of water, set the bowl on the floor and poured the water for Bear to lap up. Ben did the same for Lucy.

“Do you go to school?” I asked Ben after taking a gulp of water.

“I do,” he answered.

“Oh, cool. Do you go to Western?”

He nodded. “Did where I said I was from give it away?” He laughed.

“It made sense. My friend that I was canoeing with is a nursing student there. She seems to love it.”

“I’m no nursing student, but what I see of the campus is nice. Commuter though, so, you know.”

I imagined that meant he wasn’t on campus for much more than his classes, which was Amanda’s situation, except with more of a forty-five-minute commute. “What do you study?”

“Chemistry. Not sure right now what I’m going to do with it, but that’s the degree I’m working toward.” He paused. “What about you? School?”

I shook my head. “No, but I have been offered this scholarship to study agriculture. The only thing is the school is in Raleigh.”

“Hmm. Tough decisions there.”

“Yeah. I think my friend wants me to go for it and my mom might be disappointed if I don’t just try it out for a semester, but I’ve been out of school for so long.”

I looked back out through the opening in the Opera Box, considering again the effort put into this dream and wondered if it was similar to my own artwork. Even if I did stay up late most nights, reading for research or sketching things out on a blank canvas, and the work was hard it felt like I was immune to the intensity of those tasks. I had gone through the motions for so long that I didn't feel the pain or challenged anymore. Maybe that's how it was for students like Amanda and Ben. The workload inevitably becomes moderate when it's all you do after a while. Maybe if I went back to school and made it through the hard part, just gave it a try, then things wouldn't be as daunting as they seem now. Of course I imagine being in college would consistently be a challenge, but I could work up to each test bit-by-bit, like people do hiking the trails in the state park, or the park has done just by working up to installing an elevator.

"How'd you get the scholarship?" he asked.

"I found out the place where I work and volunteer, the Mountain Research Station in Waynesville, has a scholarship for it. My boss told me to apply, so I did, but didn't think much of it, and turns out I got it. The scholarship would pay the full cost of school."

Ben took in a deep breath and let it out. "So, leaving home is what's holding you back?"

I thought about it. "I don't know. I've just sort of settled into my routines and I have family and friends who depend on my being around. I don't want to just up and disappear or miss out on important moments of their lives. Going back to school and traveling so far from home to do it is pretty scary on its own."

He nodded. "I get that," he said, "but at some point you've got to go for it, just step outside your comfort zone and see what you can do, you know? When I was in high school I didn't think I had the slightest chance of getting into college, let alone pay for it, but I tried anyway and my parents were so proud they wouldn't hear of me not going, whether we could

afford it or not. They've always wanted me to do better and have more than what they had and neither of them went to college."

"Mine either."

"Then maybe you should take the opportunity. People find a way to make do when you're gone or busy with school, trust me, I know."

I knew the truth of that too. Dad's been gone for four years and life has continued on even without him. Even when I didn't think it would and I was moving on with my own life too, just applying for the scholarship was a step and then here I was actually considering going. It was just a matter of believing enough in myself, and finding the confidence and the courage to get up and go. Still, confidence was nothing when Dad was around; he always had my back. He always believed in me, told me I could do anything if I willed it. I believed in him, too. He was nearly invincible as far as I was concerned, but everything eventually meets its match.

I packed up Bear's bowl and water, and we resumed the hike. The sun hung at its highest now, but it was a nice temperature for shorts and t-shirts.

"Another thing, though, is the relationship," I said.

"You mean a boyfriend?" Ben asked, blinking. It hit me then that maybe we were bonding on this hike more than I anticipated. "I can't help you there. I've never had a long-distance relationship and I can't say I ever really want to."

I left that conversation at that and struggled to think of another topic, but the only thing that came to my frantic mind was, "The weather's nice today."

Ben looked around. "Eh, I like it to be a little cooler, but yeah, I'm glad there's no rain or much overcast."

The rest of the hike was quiet, except for the birds and animals. A woodpecker pecked at a tree nearby and squirrels seemed to be in every tree. Bear was having a blast, even if the upward hike wasn't his usual exercise. Then we reached Exclamation Point. At an elevation of 2,480 feet, this was the highest point in Chimney Rock.

The view from Exclamation Point was worth every drop of sweat and every awkward moment I endured to get to it, and more. It was absolutely worth fighting for and there was no question in my mind as to why 20th Century Fox chose Hickory Nut Gorge, which flourished in the valley below, as the backdrop for scenes of *The Last of the Mohicans*. Sunlight streamed down from the clouds like a stage light onto the valley, which looked to be a bed of soft trees from where we stood. I can't say the scenery was magical like some spots in the mountains—places in Pisgah Forest and many of the waterfalls in Western North Carolina—but it was magnificent. I had come to this park and chosen the challenge of the skyline trail, even if only out of a jump decision, but I had finally reached this point on my own, with my own two legs and will. The sight left me breathless, just in awe. I could do it.

NORTH CAROLINA'S SHARE OF THE SMOKIES

The Road to Nowhere is a real road about an eight-mile drive outside Bryson City. It's not a place people happen on by accident. The road dead-ends in a quarter-mile tunnel inside the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The story behind the road to nowhere is this: In the midst of World War II, while Swain County's and Graham County's men were fighting overseas, the Federal Government and the Tennessee Valley Authority made plans to build the Fontana Dam, which would flood 11,000 acres of North Carolina land, to power aluminum factories and make airplanes for the war. Swain County gave up the bulk of its land to the Federal Government so Fontana Lake and the Great Smoky Mountain National Park could be born.

With the creation of the park, hundreds of people found themselves homeless. Some of those people were widows with children, others were elderly, and most families had never lived anywhere else for generations. None received assistance to relocate, all were cut off from family cemeteries and the road which led back to those communities, Highway 288. The highway was buried beneath Fontana Lake, but the Federal Government promised to replace this road.

Construction on this new road began and, due to acidic minerals in the ground, stopped in 1969. Disturbing these minerals would have killed everything growing nearby and polluted the watershed. The road reached only six miles into the park with a bridge and a 1,200-foot tunnel. Although the issues were resolved eventually, work on the new road never resumed. During the summer months, the Park Service ferries Swain County residents across Fontana Lake to visit their family cemeteries and, in 2010, Swain County received millions of dollars for the completion of the road, a promise made over sixty years ago.

Now, you can travel through the abandoned tunnel at the end of the Road to Nowhere, going deeper into the darkness and coming closer to the end wondering if you'll ever reach the light or not. If you do manage to reach the light, you'll find that the road disappears into the forest, where various hiking trails will welcome you, carrying you off into the park.

Hayden and I had made plans two weeks ago to come up here. His uncle lent us two horses and the truck for the day. Hayden packed a picnic and picked me up around eight in the morning. From the house, getting to the Road to Nowhere took a good hour and a half. I slept through most of the ride.

"Hey," Hayden whispered. "We're here."

I blinked my eyes open, yawning. "Already?" I stretched my arms and hunched my shoulders forward, then straightened up.

"Rough night last night?" he asked.

I groaned and climbed down out of the truck. He got the horses out and saddled them while I continued to blink myself awake and stretch some energy into my body.

"After work I tried mending a coat and the sewing machine started acting up."

"What do you need a coat for in the middle of June?" He stared at me with a crooked grin.

"I don't need it for June. I need it come November, though, and I'd like for the lining to not be all limp and flopping around when I'm out and about, okay?"

"Right." He shut up the trailer and locked the truck doors. The horses were fairly relaxed in the parking area, so Hayden and I wasted no time mounting either of them. "Did you get the sewing machine working again?"

“I did.” We started down the path. “I was too tired to finish the coat by the time the machine was feeling all hunky dory again.”

He shrugged. “Eh, whatcha gonna do?”

I knew this was rhetorical, but I conceived an answer all the same, and kept it to myself. We listened to the birds chirping, waterfalls gushing far off in the distance, and leaves rustling high above us. It felt as though peace wafted through every fiber of the forest. Being up in elevation was especially nice mid-June. The air was undeniably cooler, crisp too, like walking through a stream without getting wet. I closed my eyes and let the horse meander down the path.

“How’s it been at Mountain Research?” Hayden asked.

I opened my eyes. “Good. Hot. Jude is planning pumpkins again this fall and the cattle have been average.” The birds chirped high above us, calling and singing to one another. Birds weren’t difficult to paint, but sometimes they were harder to see than hear in the forest. One call I recognized was the high-pitched, fast *chick-a-dee-dee-dee* of the Carolina Chickadee. I closed my eyes again and, recalling an image from a book on birds of the Smokies, imagined the bird’s soft gray back and wings, its black and white head. The small squeaky song of the Canada Warbler could be heard from a clump of rhododendron to our left. I turned my head to search for the Warbler and its bright yellow breast wasn’t very difficult to find. “Did you know over 200 species of birds call this forest home?”

“I did not. That’s a lot of birds.” He exaggerated this point by raising both brows and opening his mouth wide when saying “a lot.”

“Mm hm. And at least thirty species of salamanders.”

“Between that farm and your studio, you sure learn a lot about this.”

I shrugged. “I guess. Reading mostly. North Carolina is very diverse in flora and fauna, actually one of the most diverse in the entire world. How can you not be proud of that?”

He looked over to me and smiled.

I smiled back and guided the horse to the right at a fork in the trail. “I assume we’re heading to Deep Creek.”

“You assume correct. It might be crowded this time of year though.”

“If they give us trouble, we’ll just push ‘um in,” I said grinning, and then broke into a laugh. “It’s nice though, people taking advantage of the free recreation this time of year.”

“Yeah, but if it ends up getting too crowded the park might charge admission, like at sliding rock.”

That wasn’t hard to believe. Sliding rock was loaded with people almost the whole summer season, which was why we hadn’t visited that place in years. When more and more people flocked to sliding rock for a dip in the cold water or a ride down the sloping rock into the pool, Park Services started to charge a small fee to everyone visiting, whether visitors planned to slide down the slippery slab of rock or not. I looked around at the trees, trying to spot more birds. “I still think it’s a good thing so many people like the parks.” If the parks weren’t important to someone they wouldn’t exist, and if the parks didn’t exist the great landscape Hayden and I were wandering through might have been developed and turned into a city. I straightened my back and raised my nose in the air for a whiff of the tangy, sweet aroma of fresh mountain air.

“Yeah, me too. Still, not enough of our own people make it out here.”

At a loss for words, I hung my head. All of North Carolina was beautiful and offered an immeasurable abundance of recreation and inspiration, but even I didn’t get out to experience it but maybe fifteen percent of the year.

We came to an overlook less than a mile into the trail. The horses trotted up and paused. Whether they were taking a break from the walk or observing the grandeur of the mountains I didn't know, but in a fleeting moment I felt like the four of our souls had each passed into the others' and I experienced for one instant a sense of loss. Kelly Bennett Peak was one of many suffering the wrath of acid rain and the woolly adelgid. The firs and hemlocks of our mountains have been fighting a losing battle with these threats. Trees grow shorter in the higher elevations, because of the atmosphere. Their leaves and needles endure the acid rain and deteriorate, filling the close-range view of the overlook with gray or naked spikes of trees with once strong, healthy limbs.

A wispy, smoke-like fog hung further in the distance, created from rain and evaporation from the trees. The fog made Kelly Bennett an ominous spot for a romantic outing.

"You don't really notice it when you're in the valley or on the trail. Isn't it sad?" I said.

Hayden looked from the view and petted his horse's mane. "It's still beautiful, when you look past the trees. Kind of scary."

I wanted to do something that might somehow reverse the damage done, but what? I considered my own life, what I was doing at Mountain Research, then I thought about the college. If I studied environmental biology I might be able to get in on the research being done to help our conifers and our communities and history in turn.

"You know, it's the perfect picture for one of those ghost-stories-of-the-mountains books," Hayden chuckled. That was true. Mom and Dad used to take me camping all time before high school, when my life became busy with friends and their drama, along with homework. Dad brought at least one book of ghost stories to tell, and they were always especially scary because he seemed to be able to find one tale of where we were camped, no matter where in the Carolinas

we were. Maybe it was because of those stories that walking alone in the mountains made me feel like something was watching from the bushes, or when a strange bird calls I instantly think a witch has her sights set on my head as the perfect center for dinner that night.

We pulled our attention from the overlook and continued toward the falls in Deep Creek, encountering a few hikers as we went. The equestrian trails shared many of the foot trails, which never proved much of a problem for either party because the paths were too narrow and too dangerous to allow horses to do more than walk at a molasses pace. It wasn't really irritating though. We were out here to enjoy the wonders of the forest and the views, and each other's company. There was no need to be in a hurry, unless a bear came up or something, which wasn't unheard of, but not entirely expected.

The falls were nestled about two miles from the tunnel of the Road to Nowhere. The sight and sound of the falls were breathtaking. The water rushed in white down the granite wall, creating a poetic scene of the white water dancing over sparkling black, all framed in sprays of green. I didn't try to look away. The water ran clean, free of people, because the park advised visitors not to swim. Drowning was a leading cause of death in this area. Still, there were those who couldn't resist the falls, calling to visitors like sirens of the forest, and became sad stories for rescue crews who fished the bodies out to tell to their families and friends as a warning to not be reckless just for the sake of fun. Dad was often part of those crews and never let me enter the forest or water without sharing some of his knowledge of potential dangers.

Hayden and I dismounted and tied up the horses. He carried a knapsack with him that held our lunch and a few good things to have with you hiking in the Smokies, like a flashlight and first aid kit. The picnic area was sizable. An open shelter with picnic tables and bathrooms stood off to one side, leaving the rest of the tree-and-stream-encircled area available for running,

skipping, and playing around. It wasn't uncommon for this area, and the several other picnic grounds in the four national parks, to be reserved for events, like birthdays and weddings. I've hiked in on a few, but today it seemed to be a free for all.

After our two-mile trail ride, it was nice to walk with my own legs and stretch out. We spread an old blanket in the grass. Shade was not in short supply here, so we weren't too concerned about getting in someone's way, or occupying the best spot around the shelter. Hayden dug around his knapsack and pulled out two tomato sandwiches, cornbread wrapped in foil, two bottles of water, and a quart-sized canning jar of strawberries.

"Are those from your mom's garden?" I asked.

He just smiled and nodded, then handed me a sandwich.

"You know me so well," I said, unwrapped the sandwich and took a bite.

After we had eaten our sandwiches and appreciated more of the birds in the area, chiefly a group of ducks waddling by, Hayden asked about my plans for fall. A shot of anxiety rushed into my chest. I had no idea what I'd be doing come August and that was only a month and a half away.

"I'm not really sure right now," I finally answered.

"Well, there's always a few festivals to count on that will keep you busy. Painting away like a worker bee."

"Ugh, don't remind me." I laughed. Although it was my studio and kind of a dream for me in high school, painting abstract pictures of wildlife and the mountains in acrylics wasn't the only thing I enjoyed, but to make any money at it I had to have stock and to have stock I had to paint a lot. Nearly all my spare time in the fall and winter months were devoted to artwork. During the spring I helped out at the farm and in the summer it was working at the farm,

preparing for the winter, and this—reveling in the green oasis that is home. I laid back on the blanket.

“You could always find a different hobby, like photography or pottery, if you’re getting bored.”

“It’s not that,” I said. “Maybe I’m just restless. It’s summer; the sun hasn’t set for winter yet. I just want to be in the sun for a bit.”

“Okay,” he said. “Don’t let me get in your way.” Moments of silence lingered between us, expanding out around us it seemed until the picnic area fell mute to my ears, as if hypnotized by the blue of the sky. “Annabelle?” Hayden asked.

“Yes,” I said, sitting up and crossing my legs to better look at him.

“I was just thinking about how long we’ve been together—about seven years now.”

“On and off,” I interrupted with a grin.

He smiled. “Only because you’re right all the time and I simply can’t handle that,” he said. “Seriously though, I’ve been thinking a lot about us lately, more than usual. I know we haven’t exactly been looking for different fish in this pond, but you’ve been my fish for so long.”

“Are you really comparing me to a fish?” I laughed. “Why not a deer or a bird, something romantic like that?”

“Sorry, it’s just what came to mind. You know how people are always saying there are other fish in the sea.” He paused, and then said, “Look, I love you and I don’t need to keep fishing around, or hunting, or whatever kind of romantic metaphor you’d rather me use. I want to spend my life with you.” That’s when I realized what was happening.

I took in a deep breath. My hands felt cold and hot all at once and my eyes were locked on Hayden’s face. Even though I wanted to tear my eyes away and escape this moment, I was

trapped. He was going to ask and I was going to watch him do this, because no matter how I wished for it in my mind, he was not never going to ask. I mean, it had been seven years. I should have expected this.

“So, will you marry me?” And that was it.

I could feel my heart beating like a rabbit’s. I focused on taking another breath, and then another, until I recollected how to form words with my mouth and project them into the air to be heard, but I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t want to say no, but I wasn’t sure if I wanted to get married. Besides, if I said no would that mean the end of our relationship? That he’d set his mind to finding another fish?

“I’ve been offered a scholarship to go to school in Raleigh,” I said. The words were dry in my mouth. I took a sip of water as if that would help.

“What?” Hayden pulled back. “That’s great.” He took a minute for himself, probably wondering what it meant that I didn’t answer his question, if he should reconsider the proposal. “What will you study?” His voice was quiet.

“Agriculture, probably some environmental biology. I haven’t decided if I’m going to go yet, or not.”

“Oh. Well, that’s okay. It’s your life. You should do whatever makes you happy.” He didn’t look at me. His gaze fell on the grass at the edge of the blanket and I could feel his pain radiating from his body. We had been together for a long time, since sophomore year anyway, and we were in our twenties now—about the right age to marry and settle down. He had invested so much of his life into our relationship only to discover that maybe it was all for not.

“I know. It’s just that, I’m not sure if I want to leave right now, or what exactly my goal would be if I left. I’ve become so accustomed to life here, painting, the Mountain Research station, being with you. At the same time, I don’t know if getting married is what I want either.”

He looked back to me and took my hand in his. “It’s okay, Annabelle. Just let me know what you want when you’re ready.” His eyes stared back at me, longing, as if clinging to a strand of hope that I might stay and choose him.

I was seeing into his eyes for what felt like the first time and all I saw was a tunnel. A long, dark tunnel with a light at the end that I wasn’t sure I would ever reach. I wasn’t even sure of what would be on the other side. Would I find circles of broken promises? A lifetime of waiting to live my life free from just hoping for my dreams to come to fruition? The start of forever? I didn’t know and I wasn’t ready to commit that much to the unknown.

JUST HIKING THROUGH SOME OF PISGAH NATIONAL FOREST

My hike started around six AM in the Pink Beds. The sun hadn't come up yet and I was guaranteed a slice of solitude for at least two, maybe three hours. The Pink Beds were settled in a woodland paradise known as the Cradle of Forestry, which resided in Pisgah National Forest, just off of the Blue Ridge Parkway. It was a familiar area to me, having grown up in Waynesville and utilizing what was within an hour's radius for inspiration for my paintings.

Why they called it the Pink Beds, I didn't know for years, because there was never any pink that I ever found in the area. No one I ever ran into knew the answer either. I had to read about it in a hiking guide. Years ago there used to be an abundance of pink phlox that grew here. That was it. The phlox hasn't grown in this specific areas for many years, although I find it everywhere else—the roadside, spilling over people's lawns, in abandoned fields.

The Pink Beds is just one of those places that gets its name from some unique feature and then that feature disappears, but the name remains, like a scar. Western North Carolina is full of places with names like that, though: the Pink Beds whose phlox has gone, Licklog Gap where there are no longer any cattle to lick the salt out of fallen trees or boxes put there by farmers, Deerlick Gap where the deer have been hunted out, the Man in the Mountain whose face has fallen off. It also has its fair share of places with names that are likely to never change, at least not in my time. I doubt if Cold Mountain will ever stop being cold year 'round; Mount Pisgah will probably never up and leave the Pisgah area; Cherry Cove is still plentiful in its cherry tree population. I've visited Sliding Rock, which isn't far from here, and its name was aptly given. Most places names are.

I wasn't out here for names, though, or finding out the history of things. Solitude. That was what I was out here for, before the sun rose and people started talking to me and I had to make sense of whatever it was that was in my head and going on around me. I hadn't slept for days since Hayden proposed and I just couldn't stop thinking about it, so I needed a slice of time to myself for figuring out what I was or wasn't going to do.

Thoughts about what to do with my life whirled a hundred miles an hour. Sometimes I couldn't even keep up, I'd run up to one idea and see a detail in another, bounce back to the first and forget the detail altogether for what reason I can't remember. It should be easy to know what to do with myself. The future was such a big deal, though. What if the choice I made now didn't make me happy the rest of my life?

Trees were damp with fog and dew, as were the ferns and the grass, and the mulch, and everything else. My boots were already covered in muck and I couldn't even see my feet in the places I was traipsing, but I felt them. The weight of damp jeans and the suction of my boot treads slowed me down.

"Annabelle," I groaned to myself, because myself was the only company I had to groan to at the time. "What are you doing?" My gaze had fallen to the forest floor, to the feet I couldn't see and the soil I couldn't feel. I thought about what I was asking myself and sighed. I was going crazy, that's what I was doing.

A stream snaked through the forest where I found myself. I listened to its bubbling over and under the mossy rocks. As I focused on the sound of the stream, its song seemed to get louder. Then the twitter of cardinals and the wood thrush reached my senses and I discovered just what a magical place I happened into. The invigorating perfume of mountain mint wafted through the air. It was just about berry season.

“You’ve got to let the school know if you’re accepting the scholarship or not soon,” I told myself, stepping back into the reason I was out here in fairyland in the first place. I resumed the hike, reminding myself, “They’ll withdraw it if you don’t give a response.”

The dew soaked the tops of my socks and I knew they’d start chafing my calves soon. I didn’t come unprepared for that. Nope, comfort was important, especially important on a hike like this. I had packed two extra pairs in my backpack, and one of those towels from the Mast General Store that dried fast and packed small.

I pulled out my water bottle and took a swig. It wasn’t cold enough to get my throat all tingly when I swallowed, but it kept me hydrated. I carried the bottle in my hand. Pisgah forest spread as a celebrated bio-diverse wonderland, but to the untrained eye, all the forest was just a bunch of nice ferns and big bothersome bushes.

Bee balm, with its blossoms shooting up like fireworks from tall stems, was prevalent this time of year, as was rattlesnake plantain with its column of small white flowers reaching up like tiny trees from a patch of handsome white-striped, green leaves. You’d have to look carefully to find lady slippers, and although the mountain laurels faded, the dark catawba rhododendron was still growing strong. It was kind of pretty when you accepted that the large bush and its fuchsia flowers existed nearly everywhere you turned in western North Carolina. Honeysuckle, something Hayden, I, and the bees delighted in, grew along parts of the parkway, but not so much in the forest.

An indigo bunting flitted by. I almost took it for a ghost when its blue color blended in with the greens and blues of the forest. There was life all around. Birds learning to fly and leave the nest, flowers blooming and fading, bees collecting honey so sweet and pure it wouldn’t turn into sugar in your cabinet, but remain a liquid amber forever. I saw these things happening, but

was too caught up in my own struggles to see the workings of the forest as more than mere acts of nature.

The forest was still dark when the sun came up, and darker still as rain clouds accumulated above. I pulled my raincoat on just in case.

“How ironic,” I muttered, “feeling gloomy and it looks like it’s about to rain.” I hadn’t given Hayden an answer to his marriage proposal yet either. It had been two weeks since we had journeyed through Deep Creek and he proposed. He had compared me to a fish. How was I supposed to be impressed enough to accept his proposal when I was a fish to him? “You’re not really a fish. It was a metaphor.” Of course it was a metaphor. I couldn’t expect him to read my mind and know how I’d had liked to have had him holding my hand and telling me about our life together thus far and how much I’d meant to him, and then kneel on one knee before proposing. It wasn’t that I hadn’t wanted it to happen on a picnic, or in private, but maybe not sitting and being compared to a fish—just a fish, like all the other fish, even if we were destined to be each other’s. Why couldn’t I have at least been a fish with glittering scales? I sighed and stopped by the stream.

I gazed down into the clear water rushing by. It ran so clear I could barely tell it was moving. I knew I should start heading back. The research station said they needed my help with the blueberries around twelve. I took off my backpack and sat down. My ankles were chafed from the wet socks and now the whole inside of my boot was damp. Between my toes felt squishy. “You can bet on a couple of blisters tonight,” I said.

The stream had a hypnotic pull. The pebbles at the bottom were worn smooth, just the way all the good old things were, like dining tables, chairs, that leather jacket Dad had before the accident. A rescue mission in the mountains. It was his job. Some guy was trying to climb down

to a waterfall and got stuck out on a ledge. I was in school when Mom got the news and my principal pulled me out of History and Civics when she found out from my mom. I was told it was an accident, that Dad did everything he was supposed to do. It was an equipment malfunction. The guy panicked, Dad slipped, hit his head. All it takes is one good hit. He was wearing that jacket and Mom gave it to me after. It wasn't something I wore. It just hung in the closet, where it was safe.

A rustling came from the direction I'd hiked. I pushed myself up by grabbing hold of the trunk of a tree beside me, cutting the palm of my hand on its damp, rough bark in the process. I swore and balled my hand into a fist as a fellow hiker came nearer.

"Hello," he said smiling and holding up his right hand. Wrinkles spread out at the outer corners of his eyes and the hair at his temples was partially white. He didn't wear a cap, or hat of any kind. He had on a pair of khaki shorts and a blue raincoat zipped up to his chin.

"Hello," I said.

"Nice day for a hike, huh?" He stopped at the stream. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"It's fine. The stream had me in a trance." I glanced back down at the running water, but not for too long.

"That looks bad." The man pointed to my hand. "Let me help you with it." He took off his backpack and began unzipping the front pocket. He pulled out a neat roll of gauze and first aid tape.

"It's okay. I was just about to head back anyway."

"Nope, I am a doctor and I insist you at least let me clean it for you. It's a good hike back and then you've probably got to drive somewhere." He looked me in the eye like Mom does when she knows I'm not telling the full truth about something. "Gonna need both hands for that."

I relaxed my hand and showed him my palm.

He pulled out a canteen of what I could only assume was water and poured it over the cut. “This is real mountain spring water,” he said and I felt a wave of relief that it wasn’t peroxide or something else that might send shocks of pain through my arm, even if the stuff did clean out the wound. “So, where are you from?”

I watched as he poured the water over my palm and blood washed away. “Waynesville.”

“What brought you out here this time of morning?”

There appeared to be no splinters, remarkably. “Just trying to clear my head.”

“Oh?” He patted the palm dry with a white, flannel cloth. “Must be something big to bother a girl like you. You’re pretty tough for handling this cut like you have.”

I leaned my head back against the tree for a second.

“I don’t see any splinters and it doesn’t look like it’s very deep, so I’ll just bandage it up for you and you can be on your way. Sound good?”

“Sounds great,” I said.

He laid several pieces of gauze over my palm, then a few pieces wound up like a cigar and began wrapping the tape around my hand to hold the gauze in place. “Is it too tight?”

I shook my head.

When he finished he packed up the supplies and refilled the water bottle he’d been drinking from with water from the stream. Dad probably would have filtered it first, that is, if he hadn’t another bottle on him.

“So, you know why I’m out here, but what about you?” I asked. “Isn’t it kind of a rule of thumb to have a hiking buddy or something? It’s easy to get lost out here.”

The man laughed. “I could say the same thing to you. In fact, I should probably make sure you make it out of here all right.” He paused and gave me that sideways look Mom gives when she knows I don’t intend to do what she’d asked. “But, I won’t, and I know you’re not lost. I just hiking through on one of the many paths this world has to offer. Which reminds me,” he said as he took a long sip from his refilled water bottle. “This mountain water certainly is a refresher, isn’t it?”

The stream looked still; moving, but frozen to my eyes.

“Well, I’ll just be on my way. It looks like it’s going to rain,” the doctor said, looking up into the clouds and tugging his backpack on. He started back on his hike and passed from my peripheral vision before I could think to say anything.

When the words of what I wanted to say had come to me I tore my gaze from the stream and spun around. I looked in all directions, but the doctor was nowhere within sight. “Thank you,” I said into the forest, hoping the leaves would carry my message to him.

Before picking up my pack I considered the stream. The water had to be cooler than what was in my water bottle. However, just by looking, there was no way of knowing if the stream water was clean and safe enough to drink, even if these mountain streams were known for their purity. Stream water was something people had to take a chance with, especially if threatened by dehydration—it was better than dying, but it could also kill you. If you weren’t going to filter it, you had to just hope for the best. There’s no filter for life, though—only hope.

I picked up my bottle and knelt down by the stream. The water was cool to the touch. I hadn’t noticed the soreness in my good hand until the water glided over it, massaging away the aching from tension held there. I exhaled, dropping my shoulders, my hand drifting deeper beneath the stream’s surface. The bottle was full. I capped it and pulled away from the stream.

Still wet, my fingertips pressed into my forehead and a coolness spread from the point of touch back through my temples.

For the first time during my hike, I saw life in the forest and not just existence. Yes, I took in the vibrant blooms the bees buzzed around and collected nectar for the hive from, the draping fronds of the ferns and small game scampering around with curiosity, dew sparkling on the tree trunks and fallen leaves. Everything was working and surviving, but not only that. The forest lived and breathed, slept and woke, its energy shifting with each of its community members and its visitors.

I took a sip of the water. A burning in my throat that I had become so accustomed to I thought it was normal, vanished. “Thank you,” I whispered.

The rain began in a sprinkle. I made sure I had all my belongings and started back to the Pink Beds. It didn’t take more than a minute for the rain to turn into a drizzle, and less time than I could bother thinking about the drizzle for it to turn into a heavy downpour. By the time I reached the Pink Beds, though, the sky began to clear and the rain stopped. That was the way it rained around the Pisgah area—started light and picked up fast, but it usually cleared up just as quickly. Couldn’t plan anything around it, but you could bet on mud.

My boots were caked in mud when I reached the Pink Beds. The added weight of the mud and soaked jeans made walking awkward. I took another sip of water. “If Hayden could see you now,” I chuckled, imagining his impersonation of someone witnessing a Bigfoot sighting. “That goof.” I tried knocking and scraping off some of the mud at a picnic shelter. The majority of it was still pasted to the tops of the boots and getting the mud off didn’t do much about wet jeans, so I gave up and walked out to the truck. I drove home in some old Converse and my underwear with a towel around my waist. On the bright side, I had clean socks.

LIFE IN THE CATALOOCHEE VALLEY

Cataloochee sat high up in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, nestled in a valley where the mountains encircled the land in a natural barrier separating Cataloochee from the rest of the world. It was no wonder why people who visited this part of the park felt as if they had driven through a portal to another, older world.

I had planned on some solitude when I got up here, but Cataloochee attracted more foot-traffic than Pisgah Forest's hiking trails and reasonably so. The valley is easily accessed by motor vehicle and outhouses sat at the far edge of the pasture in Cataloochee.

The ride up was peaceful. I kept my window down to enjoy the brisk morning air and fragrance of maple and pine. The campground on the way up looked to be at max capacity when I drove by. The sound of children laughing and talking to one another in their high voices soared above the trees, vibrating through the valley. Picnickers sat around the churchyard and pasture. A pair of horses and their riders started down the gravel road toward one of the trails past the outhouses. I was lucky to find somewhere to park.

Not many elk roamed in the pasture yet; they would likely come down from the mountain closer to the evening, when fewer people were around and the air was cooler. I was surprised to see the three that were grazing. Picnickers stared in awe; some snapped pictures with digital cameras, others posed for a picture at a safe distance from the animals, and only a few merely watched. It was not hard to pick out the tourists.

I had a lunch in my knapsack, but decided to wait a while before eating. Tucked away off to the left of the road sat a good-sized, white, two-story house with a blue roof. I started my day

off there. Between the house and the old pasture runs a stream with water as clear as moonshine. A bridge with one railing crosses that, and then a bridge rests over a dip in the ground in the front yard. I crossed both, first allowing a man and two small girls finish crossing the bridge toward the field.

The house had been completed in 1903 and was probably the most visited house in the valley; maybe because it was the prettiest (at least in my mind) with that white paint and the porch nearly wrapping all the way around, the bright blue roof against a green backdrop of forest. The other houses built in Cataloochee were all single story houses and the natural brown color of the trees used to build them. Of course, no one lived in any of the houses after the park was established, but the park kept the buildings up nicely and did repairs when needed. Despite that, vandalism was not unheard of. The names or initials of fair-weather lovers were scrawled in ballpoint pen, Sharpie, or with a pocketknife into the railings of the porch and stairs, some even on the walls in the upstairs bedroom.

The house was empty. No furniture sat in the front room or any of the bedrooms. No quilts sat folded in a closet. No mat or area rug welcomed you in. The aroma of must seduced you, but this wasn't the same kind of must that meets your nose when you've left laundry in the washer longer than a few hours. No, this one was the kind with stories settled in it. The kind that held onto the past in its finite particles, like when you're up in grandma's attic and discover one of her embroidery works half finished buried in a drawer in Granddad's workbench.

The floors screeched. You couldn't shift your weight without creating a ruckus, but I climbed the stairs anyway. The whole interior of the house was brown, somewhat dull really, but I imagined a bed in the corner of the upstairs rooms covered with a goosedown mattress and a quilt of blue, or red for the children. Looking outside the windows, I wondered how any part of

life here could have been dull. No, the view was not like some you can buy in the mountains today, like one of Cold Mountain from your front room, or a panorama of the Blue Ridge from your porch. It wasn't like having dinner at the Horizon at the Grove Park Inn in Asheville, but it was nothing short of breathtaking.

The front yard was lush and green, with no blemishes of daisies or buttercups to take from the simplicity of the blades save for the bridge over the dip in the ground. The stream then rushed past, a few leaning trees on its border (the kind that are good for climbing). Next, the gravel road, and then the barn, weather-beaten and gray, and finally the field shimmering golden in the sun met in the distance by the forest and beyond. At first glance that was all there was, but if your eyes forgot to trail upward you'd miss the mountains which encircled the valley, sheltering it from the rest of the world.

I made my way down the stairs and out of the house, walking slow and with little in my mind about anything more than the view, but there was the question then of what to do next. The number one complaint I'd heard, and fallen guilty of, was that there was nothing to do around here and, to be frank, there wasn't if you weren't one for hiking, fishing, picnicking, or absorbing the simple pleasure of being in this paradise. I was lucky to have experienced the great outdoors during my childhood as often as I did and I had Dad to thank for that. We camped every week during the summer, as long as he wasn't scheduled with a rescue crew, and he had me reading up on how to tie different knots or catch specific fish when he was working. I remember being eight years old and being picked on in school for watching lizards during recess; one kid made me so mad and when we sat down for the last class of the day I tied his shoelaces into a tight surgeon's knot. That boy got up at the sound of the bell and fell right on his face. I went home and told my father about it and, although he tried to tell me how wrong I was, he could

barely scold me and hold in a laugh at the same time. I didn't use my survival skills at school much after that, and no one in the house left their shoes lying around for me to get my hands on either.

We had a good time on our camping trips; identifying the trees and animal tracks, fishing, cooking up pancakes over an open fire. Having fun wasn't all we did, though. We talked about things, school mostly and whatever else was on my mind. His advice usually looped back to the mountains and the rich history around us. I had walked on many paths of North Carolina, taking in the history, and I was now walking on some of the richest soil this region had to offer; quite literally, pioneers chose this valley for its fertile soil. The history it has collected over the years was a crime to overlook. My father had taught me a lot and made me do a lot, like worm my own fishing hook and start the campfires, tie my own knots, but there was still more he could have taught me. I still needed my dad. What was a bride without a dad to walk her down the aisle on her wedding day?

I moved my feet toward the schoolhouse, which wasn't a far walk from the pasture. The building stood tall and all white at the back of a small glade in the valley. All the buildings in Cataloochee were surrounded by woods. There was only a beaten dirt path to the glade the school stood in, but no path directly up to the building, just a brown sign with white lettering reading, "Beech Grove School built 1909." From far off it looked like a child's drawing of a house, just a pentagon with a black rectangle where a door stood, no windows. Up close, you notice four windows along each side. At the back stands another door.

When I arrived at the glade a group of women had colorful mats spread out in the grass and were contorting themselves into strange positions. I recognized their current position as the Downward Dog Pose from the yoga practice of stretching. It wasn't totally strange finding a

group of people engaging in this activity in the park. As long as the buildings and wildlife were not disturbed, I'd never heard of a restriction on the kinds of events that could take place in the park. The rangers didn't seem to mind, not that rangers were always strolling about in large numbers to keep visitors in check. Hosting a yoga class wasn't much different from hosting a book club up here anyway, and was probably just as good a place as any, if not better for the uplifting sense nature provides.

I didn't want to disturb the yogis, so I snuck around behind the group and slipped into the schoolhouse via the back door. Inside sat rows of old school desks, wooden with metal legs. The writing desks were attached to the back of the chairs, instead of attached at the front of the chair, like they were when I was in school. Positioned in the middle of the front wall was a door and a blackboard hung to the right. It was what I imagined for the school in *Christy* except for the lack of children, a teacher, and their belongings. I remained standing at the back of the school for some moments, staring forward at the door, which held the glade in its view. There was only the one room for the school, if you left out all of the surrounding nature.

From what I understood about the people who had lived in Cataloochee, seeing as I'd picked up one or two books on the place from work at the Mountain Research farm, education was exceedingly important to them. Although there weren't always enough books for the students, they learned arithmetic, grammar, and many things pertaining to nature and the place where they lived. While Cataloochee Valley was a charming spot for picnics and peaceful leisure activities in modern society, living up here took a lot of courage and strength.

Not only was building the structures we tour a physically challenging endeavor, as was maintaining crops and livestock, but it wasn't uncommon for a sheep to be killed by wolves, or some of the cattle to be killed by bears. Panthers were alive and well, too, and there are stories

that they'd come by the half dozen to a house with pork on the fire and try to crawl down the chimneys for the meat. People had to be smart to survive Cataloochee; smart enough to learn the Cherokee language and be a friend to their Native American neighbors, and quick enough to think about throwing hot peppers on the fire when a panther tried climbing down the chimney. Trips to town weren't frequent and took days, so if someone needed a doctor they had to also know how to make do without one for a while or, more than likely, die.

Children had to learn how to make a fire and tend to a burn, mend clothes and identify the different animal tracks of the area. It was a different kind of education than what I had growing up, or either of my parents, but I suppose the contents of a class change according to what was most needed during the time. I remember when I had to learn cursive in second grade, because penmanship was important, but it had apparently gone to the wayside when I reached middle school. Dad used to tell me about his home economics class when he burned a batch of brownies, but successfully sewed on a button. All I ever learned in home ec was how to cross-stitch and not very well. I guess those teachings weren't all that necessary for me to know then, considering how many of our consumables were made available to us at the drop of a dime. What was important now seemed to be computers and how to manage the digital age, not so much what we could accomplish with our own hands without a YouTube video.

A group of people came down the glade and started into the schoolhouse. I exited through the back door. The women who had been stretching before were now rolling up their mats and saying their goodbyes. The day was passing its hottest. I checked my watch and noted the time.

"3:15 already," I muttered to myself. My stomach growled and confirmed the lateness of the day. I left Beech Grove School and made my way to the historic church building.

The church in Cataloochee looked almost exactly like the school—white, tall, one door in the front, four windows lining either side of the building. It stood brilliantly well-kept tucked away at the back of a eye-opening green clearing. The only differences were that a steeple and bell sat atop the church and the church was a church. The clearing was larger, too, I suppose. This building was kept a little cleaner than the rest, I think. The walls were painted white inside and the floor was swept. A large, but simple cross hung at the front of the room, where a podium stood. Off to the left sat a small piano and two columns of pews filled the rest of the space. The church, like the schoolhouse, was composed of a single room.

The clearing was mostly vacant by the time I finished touring the old Palmer Church. With the sun about to go down in a couple of hours, and the air being a few degrees cooler than what I was used to down in Waynesville. I chose to enjoy lunch on a nice patch in the clearing where the sun brightly shown down. While I munched on some trail mix and apple slices with peanut butter, visions of social gatherings like weddings danced before me.

Hayden and I weren't very religious people, even if we were raised in what some called the bible belt. Our parents said they were religious and we were taught to never say the Lord's name in vain, but no one in my immediate family ever went regularly to church. Anyone could have their wedding at the old Palmer Chapel. The park was free admission, but to reserve the church and the clearing might cost ten or so dollars. The pictures turn out worth every penny, I'm sure. No electricity ran up here though, so a band might have to be hired, one that doesn't need an outlet.

I imagined what a wedding might have been like one hundred years ago. There was probably music, guitars and a harmonica playing something like a fox run for sure, and I can't even begin to think how good the food was. Warm homemade bread, cobblers made with fresh

or canned berries, the cakes with frosting from hand-churned butter. What a fortune those delicacies would cost today, unless you knew how to do it all. Just think, someone had to sew that dress too, and write the thank you cards. It's hard to really appreciate those things until you've done them yourself, though.

I had no idea what my wedding would be like, or if I was getting married at all. Even though Hayden proposed last week, I wasn't sure I was ready to jump into sharing a life with him, or not. However, even if I wasn't ready in my mind, we were already sharing a life together. Little-by-little a person works their way into your life and eventually it's near impossible to imagine living without them. Yeah, both my parents were in my life since I was born and Amanda and I were close neighbors all our lives. Hayden may not have been a part of the world I knew right away, but even just seven years of someone's life is enough for them to become part of the picture.

I accepted the scholarship to study agriculture in Raleigh. Hayden doesn't know yet. It was the right thing for me to do though. I'd been working with the Mountain Research Station now for nearly a decade of my life, since the end of my sophomore year in high school, and it has been someplace I just fit in. Maybe I won't stay there my whole life, but studying the land is one way I can help my community and maybe preserve more of its history. That seems like a worthy legacy to leave behind, for me anyway. Maybe he'll take back his proposal now that I'm traveling four to six hours away for four years. By the time I return we'll both be older and grown apart, I'm sure.

I've been with the same guy for seven years though. That seems like a good amount of time to be with someone before getting married, even if we don't live together. The money hasn't been there to allow me to up and leave home on my own yet. Besides, with as many hours

as she's worked in the home, Mom has needed me at the house to make dinners and keep things up and running well, like Dad used to. Maybe that's just an excuse now. Of course, Mom's able to take care of herself—she's a grown woman—and I doubt Dad left her with no knowledge of how to turn off the water breaker if you're trying to fix a faucet; that wouldn't have been like him. Mom hasn't taken any money from me since I opened the studio either, not what I make from my paintings and not what comes in from working with Mountain Research, so there would be something for me if I did want a place of my own.

Hayden wasn't a bad guy and it wasn't that I didn't want to be with him. In fact, I felt my best and safest when he was around. It was just that I wasn't sure what would become of me, my independence. Everything might become 'us' and 'we' and 'our,' and what would become of the life that is mine, the mind and opinions that were mine. Would those become ours too, or fall away from existence without my knowing it? Because I know it wouldn't happen overnight, like a flash before my eyes, but slowly, over time, and with small adjustments to the life I was already so accustomed to.

Evening was beginning to settle into the valley. The sun's light faded from the clearing and the roar of car engines sounded in the distance. People were getting ready to leave Cataloochee Valley to get away from the cold and the things that go bump in the night. The elk had probably already been to and left the pasture, or not come at all with the number of people in it. I got up and looked back at the church, which still stood bright against the wilderness, a beacon.

I reached the pasture just in time to spot the rears of three elk heading back up the mountain. All that was left of the vehicles from this morning were a small Ford Fiesta and my truck. I scanned the area for litter and found only a water bottle. I picked it up and tossed it into a

wastebasket behind the passenger's seat. A young woman, had the hood up on the Fiesta and she looked inside. Judging by the tight knit pants and loose tie-dye shirt she wore, I guessed she was one of the women I had seen earlier doing yoga by the school.

I checked my watch. The park didn't really close at night, but the rangers would all be leaving for home around six or a little after. I went over to her car, still keeping a polite distance.

"Is everything alright?" I asked.

The young woman looked up. "Um, well, I don't know. I think the battery might be dead."

"Do you need a jump?" I asked.

"Oh, no, it's okay. I don't want to bother you."

I wasn't entirely sure this woman was taking into consideration that night was coming on and she would be up here without a soul around and no cell phone reception until morning. "I've got some jumper cables in the back. I'll just pull my truck up closer to yours." I didn't wait for her next words.

Once I got the truck alongside hers, and the cables on right, the woman's face started looking more at ease. I started the truck and waited a minute or two, then turned it off and took off the cables. She got in her car and started it. The thing sounded better."

"Thank you so much," she said. "My name's Nickie."

"Annabelle Jones," I said with a hand held out for her to shake.

Nickie shook it, although weakly.

"How far you headed?" I asked.

"Clyde."

“You should get down the mountain fine, but I’ll follow you into Maggie Valley just to be safe. You don’t want to get stranded up here and if anything happens on the way down I can at least give you a ride wherever you need to go and the car will be fine alone until tomorrow.”

“You don’t have to do that. I’m sure there’s someone I can call.” She waved her hand in the air like the matter was nonexistent.

I laughed to myself. “I’m sure you could, but not with any cell phone. No reception.”

“Oh,” she said, looking down. “Yeah, that would be a problem, I guess.”

“Just try driving down. I’ll follow you and we’ll see what happens, but even if you do make it home alright be sure to have that car looked at before you head up somewhere else. At least take a friend next time.”

“I will. Thank you and I’m sorry for bothering you.”

“It’s no trouble.” I packed up the jumper cables and got in the old truck.

We started down the mountain and the little Fiesta in front of me looked to be doing okay. Of course, Nickie would probably have been fine in Cataloochee Valley during the night now, as long as she had a blanket or two in the back. The panthers that used to live around here have been hunted out. So have the wolves, although wolves were reintroduced up in the Blue Ridge a few years back. The population was doing well from what I understood. There was always a bear or two to think about. It was never fun to be stranded, though, especially when you can’t let anyone know you are. With my dad having been on the rescue team for the parks, I knew no one could be too safe in the mountains, or valleys. Even though Waynesville, Clyde, Canton, and many other small towns in this part of North Carolina were settled in the valleys, and fairly well-populated for Western North Carolina, they’ve each had their own share of bear

sightings and trouble, as well as the troubles that rise up just from people being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

ON THE PARKWAY, LOOKING INTO THE HORIZON

Campgrounds speckled the parkway and surrounding areas, but we weren't looking for a place to camp for more than the one night. Hayden parked at one of the overlooks near my mom's house, Wagon Road Gap Overlook. I hadn't told him yet that I had accepted the scholarship and we hadn't talked about the proposal all week. The sun was going down and we watched from the car as the sky turned from blue to red, and purple.

I watched as Hayden lifted the neatly put away tent out of the truck. It reminded of when he came to the house for the first time to cut down a dead tree in the yard. Dad had been busy with work and heard how Hayden was sweet on his little girl. Most dads might have hit the roof and given Hayden a good long talking to about leaving their daughter alone, but mine sat patiently in the dining room chair as his good friend, Hayden's uncle, joked about the love-struck boy. Dad said he needed that tree cut down and if Hayden could do it for him he'd pay him for the help. Amanda and I were in the kitchen working on homework when Hayden's uncle dropped him off to cut down the tree; we knew he was doing little things here and there to save money for a car of his own, so we didn't think much of it. He cut the tree down, my dad paid him and mentioned some other thing that needed to be done—replace some shingles on the roof, or repaint the house. Eventually, Mom had him staying for dinner for working so hard and staying until night to finish his task. I eventually came around and talked with him while he worked, just for something to do sometimes, and then because I enjoyed it. His laugh and his wit drew me in. His sincerity and determination was what had kept me all these years. Like blending two colors of paint, Hayden blended his life into mine—the red and blue turning to purple with each stir.

We finished pitching the tent in the dark. It was a small, two-person tent and we pitched it in the grass by the overlook's ledge. We didn't have any food outside of the truck, just a bottle of water. I laid out the sleeping pads and then the bags while Hayden finished tying on the rain cover. Rain wasn't called for, but we weren't going to chance it. He crawled into the tent and got in his sleeping bag. I sat by the opening and closed it up when we were settled.

"It's cold up here," I said.

"You knew it would be." He said. "It's not as bad as it will be come September though."

The thought of September ignited memories of the autumn foliage when the mountains were ablaze with red, orange, yellow and spots of green. My nose would run like a leaky faucet around then, too. Allergies.

"How was your trip to Cataloochee?" he asked.

I sighed. "It was good. Helped a girl with some car trouble."

"Oh yeah?"

I nodded, even though he probably couldn't see me do so in the dark. "She needed a jump. How is your uncle's barn coming along?"

"Pretty well. Almost got the siding finished."

The night was loud with cricket chirps and cicada shrills.

"Sounds different than when we're in town," I said, thinking back on the soft swoosh of a car driving by and the low hum of electricity.

"Peaceful though."

I nodded again and closed my eyes.

—

By morning, the roar of insects was reduced to a minor symphony in the background while the chirping of birds took over. Hayden was still asleep when I woke up and I thought it best not to bother him. I rubbed my eyes and took a swig of water before leaving the tent.

Sunrise was a truly magical moment to witness on the Blue Ridge Parkway. It wasn't quite sunrise yet, but I knew because I'd seen it before. Hayden and I weren't the only ones at this overlook this morning. A woman with frosting white hair and a frail-looking form stood by the sign looking out at the view. I glanced around and saw a truck next to Hayden's. I neared the sign and made my presence known.

"Hello," I said.

"Hello." She wore a pair of jeans that had been worn and washed so many times the blue had faded to white everywhere but the seams. She pulled a shawl tighter around herself. "Pretty, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said. "Do you come here often?"

"Oh, not often enough." The woman smiled at me for a moment and pointed down into the view. "I live just down there and come up here to clear my head, seek guidance sometimes." The smile faded and left soft wrinkles around her eyes to blend slowly back onto her face.

I nodded and wondered why an elderly woman like herself would need guidance. I always took the elderly to be wise people, except on the road.

"My husband and I used to ride this parkway all the time, parts of it anyway."

I looked back at the truck to see if anyone else was with her. The truck sat empty.

"He loved these mountains, was born here." Her voice trailed off. "Are you native to this area?" She turned to me, blue eyes sparkling like big dewdrops on a bluebell petal.

I nodded. "I was born over in Jackson County, but my family moved to Waynesville when I was in middle school."

"I was born in New York. Being in love with my husband brought me here." She paused and resumed looking upon the view. "My oldest daughter has a taste for the city." She shrugged.

"I'm sorry," I said, feeling rude for listening to parts of her life without fully introducing myself. "I'm Annabelle. I didn't mean to intrude on your moment. I was just—"

She cut me off, shaking her head and saying, "No, not at all. Being up here brings back many memories for me is all, and different things on my mind, things left unsaid in the heart." She smiled again. "My name is Lucile Caldwell."

"It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Caldwell."

"Lucile will do, and the pleasure is mine."

I turned my eyes to the view and stood still for a moment, very aware of Lucile's company, but not wanting to be rude and walk off suddenly either. I endured the awkward silence and hoped the view would smooth out my feelings.

"I hope you didn't camp up here by yourself," Lucile said after some minutes passed.

"Oh, no. My, um." I realized how much more awkward things would get after telling an elderly lady I camped up here not with my husband, but boyfriend. I didn't want to lie either.

"My boyfriend came up here with me." I could only hope she wouldn't assume anything of us.

She nodded.

"So, what kind of guidance are you in search of?" I asked, and followed with, "I hope that wasn't rude." My cheeks felt hot.

"It's fine." Lucile's eyes remained on the horizon. "I have some old quilts and different things Delbert's mother left to us when she passed. Delbert is my husband." She said the last part

with a glance at me, then returned her gaze to the view and continued. “There’s actually quite a bit of things, but they’re heirlooms, too, made by either his mom or his dad, his dad’s dad, and I don’t know what to do with them.”

“Why would you want to get rid of those things?” I asked, half astonished at the thought.

She sighed. “Well, I don’t really, but I want to make sure they go somewhere nice. My daughters wouldn’t want them and our son, who was probably the only one of our children who might appreciate them, he’s passed.”

My eyes got wide and my frame felt stiff. I wanted to wrap my arms around her and cry, even if her son had no relation to me. Instead, I pressed my hands to my sternum and said in a soft voice, “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s all right,” Lucile said. “It happened when Delbert was still here, some years back. Anyway, I’m getting up in years and I’m afraid that if I don’t do something with them now I never will and they’ll end up in places where they really aren’t appreciated. My grandkids are too young right now for them, too.”

I considered her problem and what objects it was she was talking about. “You might be able to donate or loan them to one of the museums in this region.” That was it. “If your husband was a native of this region and you said his ancestors made these things, I’m sure any heritage museum in the area would be thrilled to have them. You can probably make the stipulation that if anything happens to you, ownership goes to your grandchildren.”

She was quiet for a minute. “Yes, maybe that’s what I should do. Then the grandkids can have them after they’ve grown some and gone to college or gotten a place for themselves.” She grinned and faced me. “Thank you, Annabelle.”

I stood surprised that Lucile remembered my name. “You’re welcome.”

“It’s been a long time since I last pitched a tent anywhere, even in my own backyard.”

She laughed. “Is it still peaceful?”

I looked back at the tent, imagining Hayden laying in his sleeping bag, the covers pulled around his face. “Yeah, but the bugs are loud at night.”

Lucile laughed again. “Yes, I do recall that. Delbert and I did pitch our tents in the designated campsites, though.” She gave me the stink-eye, probably because we should have also camped in a designated area—Dad would have wanted us to.

I exhaled and grinned. “It was just for the night and I live pretty much at the bottom of the mountain. We didn’t have any food with us—”

“Makes no difference to me, just don’t let the word get out to everyone.”

I looked around and imagined this overlook full of campers, the grass worn down to dirt, the parking area tilled up and filled with tents, people having to pay a fee for a spot. “I won’t,” I said.

“Well, I’m glad I got to meet you,” Lucile said, “but I should be getting on home now.”

“Oh, you aren’t here for the sunrise?” I asked.

She looked back at the horizon. “No, my oldest is visiting from Charlotte today and I have a lot to do before she gets here. Besides, I didn’t come up here for the sunrise; that ball of fire will rise and fall, rise and fall whether I’m up to watch it or not. I needed guidance, and I think I found what was in search of.” The elderly woman winked at me.

“All right,” I said. “It was nice meeting you too.”

Lucile walked over to her truck and began driving away just as Hayden stumbled out of the tent, his clothes rumpled and dark hair disheveled.

“Hey,” he said once he reached me. “Who was that?”

“Her name is Lucile and she lives around here.”

“Oh, I didn’t even hear her truck pull up.” I hadn’t heard it either come to think of it. We both must have been too deeply asleep to notice. “Watching the sunrise?” he asked, wrapping me in his arms.

I rested my head on his shoulder. “Lucile mentioned some old quilts she has, handed down from her husband’s family, and I suggested she donate them to one of the heritage museums or something.”

“I’m sure they would appreciate the donation.” Hayden smiled.

“You don’t think they get overwhelmed with those kinds of things?”

He shook his head. “Someone will appreciate them, or she could sell them to a collector.”

I nodded and watched as the sky brightened to purple. “I accepted the scholarship, Hayden.”

I felt his head pull back from mine and settle back down before he said anything. “You’ll be in school for the fall then. You’ll miss the apple festival.”

“It will be four years.” I turned around to face him, but he kept his eyes on the horizon, a weak smile on his lips. “I don’t plan to live there long-term, but I don’t know what the future will look like after I graduate, either.”

“Bright,” Hayden said, his voice barely a whisper. He inhaled quickly and sighed. “You should go. Like I said, it’s a great opportunity and the field needs someone like you, people who care about all of this.” He gestured to what stood around us and to the valley below where fertile fields spread out.

“Hayden,” I began. “When you first proposed it was a lot to digest, even if we have been together on and off for seven years now. I know you love me and I love you. It’s just that marriage is still a big step and we haven’t even lived together yet.”

“Then move in with me, even if only until you go off to school,” he said, taking both my hands into his.

I took a deep breath. “It’s likely that after I’ve graduated and come back here we’ll both be completely different people. We’ll nearly be in our thirties.” I tried to laugh to lift his spirits. “I’ll probably close the studio here, maybe open another one in Raleigh. It depends on classes and stuff.” I paused to refocus my mind on what I really wanted to say. “When you first asked me to marry you I saw my life flash before my eyes. I saw my independence being eaten away, my freedom slowly deteriorate and myself having no way out.”

“It doesn’t have to be like that,” he said.

“I know.”

“Then what’s holding you back.”

“Just let me finish. All summer I’ve been hiking around and observing people in the mountains and parks, trying to figure out what to do with the rest of my life and where I’ll be happiest. This morning I still wasn’t sure, but I knew I’d accepted the scholarship and that was a big step on its own. Then I saw Lucile standing here, looking out into the horizon of our home. She told me about her husband and camping, her children, the quilts, but she was up here alone. For a moment, I thought she was just crazy. It’s o’ dark thirty and freezing, and she’d catch her death, but then I listened to her problem. She was still completely herself, at who knows what age, and she hadn’t given any of that up even after a husband and children.”

“Annabelle, I would never dream of asking you to give any of that up. I just thought it was the right time.”

“And it is,” I said. “You’ve become a huge part of life since we first met and you did random little things around Mom’s and with Dad just to get closer to me. I can’t pretend that in walking away from you I would still be leaving a big part of myself behind.” I looked out over the horizon for a moment. “Dad’s not here anymore, so I can’t wait around for him to tell me what would be the best thing for me to do. I have to figure out what’s best on my own now.” I turned my gaze back on Hayden. “I want to get married. I want to marry you. I just don’t know when.”

“So, are you saying yes?” he asked, one brow raised. “We’ll just be engaged while you’re in school?”

“I’m saying I’m starting the rest of my life, and yes, I’m starting it with you.”

He smiled.

We stood by the ledge and watched the sky turn red and quickly change to blue, and in those moments the earth did not stand still, or silent, or even completely calm, but went on and on and on forever in a winding trail of wilderness and life—life I was agreeing to not just endure or merely go through the motions of like I had been, but to actively take part in. There was more than I could see just looking into the horizon, but I was going to go out there and see for myself what waited on the other side of tomorrow because life goes on. It must.

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