

LEBRIS

We know
books

ALL
THE
LITTLE
HOUSES

MAY COBB

PROLOGUE

Later

The water claps along the marshy shoreline, its calming ticktock like the clicking hands of a metronome.

Under the spotlight of the full moon, though, the normally placid lake roils, its metallic surface disturbed by both the torching summer breeze and the body recently thrust there.

It's not sinking fast enough. Not as fast as I imagined it would.

And from the car speakers twenty feet away, I can just make out the lyrics to the song the local station has been playing on repeat all summer, a song that seems perfectly summoned for this moment:

Michael Hutchence singing about every one of us having the devil inside.

LBRIS

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PART I



NELLIE

Now

twist the knob on my car stereo, silencing it.

Just moments before, I was blasting Prince while cruising out here, driving too fast on the backcountry roads, sun bleaching the wild grass a pale yellow, searing the top of my head, the wind whipping my hair into a knotted mess. But I don't care. It's summer. I *have* to drive with the top down. Why else would I have this cherry-red Beamer convertible?

Mom thinks I like fluffy music like Madonna, and her songs are *okay*, but Prince is the tasty little secret I keep from her. Well, one of many. She thinks she knows everything about me; she practically does, but I keep a few things to myself. And Prince is one of them. When I listen to his music, I don't feel like the little rich bitch who lives in Longview's biggest mansion, whose mommy buys her every crisp new Esprit and Guess outfit she wants, and also buys her friends.

I feel free. Wild. Capable of anything.

I kill the engine. It crackles as it cools, little pings of noise, bacon popping in a skillet. I don't want them to notice me, the crowd that's gathered down on the dock. No one turned in my direction when I pulled into the dirt lot, so no one has spotted me yet, thank freaking God. I'm too stirred up, not ready to face them.

I planned on springing from the car, making my way down there with a freshly lit cigarette wedged between my lips, when the crowd parted and I glimpsed her, hands above her head, dancing like she's some freaky hippie from Woodstock. She was showing off some move, and when she finished, she threw her head back, laughed that rough laugh of hers.

Jane Swift.

What the fuck is she doing *here*?

This is *our* spot. Miller's Swimming Hole. Only the rich kids come here.

Who the fuck invited *her*?

Rage builds in the back of my throat, and I want to scream, but instead, I take a nice, long pull of my drink, a cherry limeade from Sonic, packed with their pellet ice, spiked with vodka—lots of it. The alcohol feels good as it slides down, burning away the rage. Or at least numbing it.

She and her weird family moved here a few weeks ago, right before school let out. Who does that? Moves at the end of the school year? We're both juniors, about to be seniors, and there she was in my trig class, the cute new girl soaking up all the attention.

I don't have any friends—not any real friends—but I'm used to it. It's been this way my whole life. I'm a bully, a mean girl, people say, and Mom's always had to bribe my way into acceptable society. People basically *have* to be friends with me. So I'm in with the rich bitches, even if they don't like it. Even if they try and exclude me. Even if they're distant.

It doesn't bug me much—most everyone in town is an idiot anyway—but watching Jane just now, parading in the spotlight, makes it glaringly obvious what an outcast I truly am.

When they first got here, Mom and I were downtown, shopping at Ritz's, the high-end clothing store. We spotted her and her mother on the sidewalk, heading toward Smithy's—basically the feed store. I snickered as they passed us, both of them wearing sad little homemade dresses. But Jane walked with this strut of confidence that pissed me off.

Who the fuck does she think she is? I thought to myself.

As soon as they disappeared inside a store, I said in a low voice to Mom, "I don't like her." Meaning Jane.

"I don't like her either," Mom said.

That's just how we are with each other. She knows to always agree with me.

I take another scorching sip of my drink now, letting the liquor trickle through my veins, dull my thoughts.

Behind the group, the river sparkles, catching the sunlight. It's beautiful out here. It's always been one of my favorite places; everyone is more carefree by the water. Drinking, smoking, swimming. Diving off the roof of the old metal boathouse. And

it's just understood that we'll show up at sunset most summer nights. You don't need, like, a formal invitation or anything; you just have to be in with the in crowd, which I guess Jane now officially is. *Ugh.*

She's ruining the beauty of it all. Everyone thinks she's so pure and innocent in her homemade fucking bikini. But I see what she's doing as she casually tugs the thong out of her crack, drawing all eyes to her.

Her own eyes are almond shaped and green—wholesome eyes—but she saves this wicked, evil glare just for me. Shoots it at me when no one's looking. Everyone else, it seems, thinks she hung the fucking moon.

As fucking if.

I don't get it. And normally, one would get skewered in town for having those buck teeth of hers. All our smiles have been trained to perfection with braces, followed by headgear and retainers to maintain, but on her, wild teeth are somehow sexy?

Dustin joked right out of earshot—I saw him make the blow job gesture to his friends—that he bets she's good at going down. I knew he was just doing it to get a rise out of me. It's his main goal in life. Not that she'd ever go after *him*. His family is among the richest in town, second only to mine, so we've lived in the same neighborhood all our lives, but, like me, he's not all that good-looking. I'm with him only because no one else will go out with me, and Mom made it good and goddamn clear that I would have a boyfriend, even if it were a fake arrangement.

I like Dustin okay, but I won't let him do anything other than

take off my bra, get to second base. But that doesn't mean he stops trying to go further, every single time. We're stuck together, at least until we graduate, which can't happen one goddamn second too soon.

I suck the rest of my drink from my Styrofoam cup, getting a large hit of the alcohol that's settled at the bottom. I yank down my visor to study my face. My cheeks are flushed, my lips are cherry red to match the car, and my cobalt-blue eyes are swimming. Normally, I'd be satisfied enough with how I look to bolt down there, drop into the crowd, but now I snap the visor back up and drill my eyes into Jane's form, wishing I had super-powers to set things on fire just by looking at them, like Drew Barrymore in *Firestarter*.

I flinch when the icy liquid hits my hot thigh. Without even realizing it, I drilled a hole in the bottom of my cup while staring at Jane.

Jane, who has nothing and is nothing. Who lives on a farm on the outskirts of town. Her dad's a fucking carpenter—but they all act like he's Jesus or something.

Now she's twirling, arms above her head again, before she climbs the rickety ladder to the top of the boathouse, then dives off. Everyone cheers her on.

Everyone seems to already love her.

Whatever.

I'm a rat, and I know another rat when I see one.

CHARLEIGH

The waiting is hard. No, excruciating.

Charleigh swishes past the open curtains for the third time this morning, checking for Jackson's convertible in the circular drive, a lavish river of concrete gushing through the turf-green lawn. One of the many extravagant touches she commissioned for this place.

So unlike the dirt drive of her childhood. Forlorn, pitted, and weed-pocked. An actual river of glassy mud when the springtime rains came. The hemline of Charleigh's clothes splattered with muck as she trudged each morning to catch the school bus.

Now she peers around at her manse, watching as morning sunlight splashes across the marble floors, filling the house with light. Freshly squeezed lemonade being poured into a clean, empty glass.

She chews a nail as she stands at the window.

Lettie, her long-suffering housekeeper, could just let him in

when he rings the bell, but Charleigh always likes to be the one to greet Jackson. Prying open the hulking pair of doors, folding his taut, tanned form into her arms. The two of them squealing like it's been forever, even though they see each other nearly every damn day.

It's part of their schtick, their special bond.

A signal to anyone looking on (and Charleigh *does* love an audience) that they are the most important people in the world to each other.

Twin bitches, she likes to joke. Charleigh calls him Jackson, but in serious moments, she'll draw out his full name, Jackson Lee Ford, the only person to do so other than his estranged mother, Willamena.

Her stomach continues to churn. She *hates* this feeling, the almost agonizing pinch in her gut. It's not desperation, exactly, but rather anticipation, and she wishes she didn't still get this excited—no, needy—at seeing her best friend.

Her only friend?

At least, her only true one.

He's coming over today to help her decorate for her weekly Bunco night.

In just eight short hours, this room will be buzzing with the sound of a dozen women. Women she claims as friends and women who, in turn, claim her. And technically, they *are* friends, but not in the same way as she and Jackson.

Soon, this space will be filled with the feral clatter of gossip, the clinking of glasses—first champagne, and later, for dessert,

grasshoppers—voices climbing higher in octave to match the surging of blood-alcohol levels.

Charleigh's nerves will be muted by then, her own blood-alcohol ratio at peak level as she sweeps her gaze across the room, satisfaction trickling over her when she registers that—once again—she's successfully hosted this klatch of women in her home. They're having fun! Skin flushed, eyes swimming with booze—lost in the dice game and chatter.

But until then, she's hell on wheels, annoying even herself.

"I don't know why you throw these things," Alexander purred into her ear last night as he unclasped the front of her bra. "They make you crazy. And not the good kind of crazy that I'm about to make you."

"Ha!" That familiar rush of attraction zipped over her that she always feels when Alexander makes his moves.

But she also felt a flash of annoyance.

Because he doesn't understand.

He doesn't get it; he's not from here.

Doesn't know what it was like to grow up in this town. Judged by these very women who now hustle into her house, lapping up proximity to the richest family in Longview.

Charleigh grew up here poor, outcast, even made fun of and bullied until she fled to Dallas for community college, then returned triumphant just three years later, engaged to handsome Alexander Andersen, oil heir from Highland Park.

Six foot two with pale golden hair, lean but muscular, with intense eyes the slate color of fjords from his great-grandparents'

homeland of Sweden, Alexander was—and continues to be—the answer to Charleigh's prayers. Their attraction was instant, their bond magnetic.

"You seriously should do something else with your energy." He continued undressing her.

But before her lips could form an answer, he was already pecking at her breasts, thoughts of the upcoming Bunco night sliding away as he hoisted her onto the edge of their bed.

JANE

Everyone loves a good girl. Especially a poor one, stuck in her station in life, who knows her lowly place yet manages to plaster on a smile.

Here's an underdog they can all root for, but not be threatened by.

She will never have what they have; the cards are stacked against her, so: *Bless her heart.*

But look at how she smiles, curtsies, all gratitude and light, repeating her father's down-home parables about honesty and self-worth.

I don't mind being that girl. Been her my whole life. Teeth bared, yet lips curved into a grin. A warm sensation spreads across my chest when I first meet someone, win them over. It's so easy.

Too easy, in this one-pony town.

Here, they are hungry for someone like me. Ready to feed off me in order to feel better about themselves.

Had a nice chat with that Jane girl today; she sure is sweet!

She doesn't have a stitch of new clothing, but it doesn't seem to bother her, poor thing!

Wonder if we should bring her family a meal? Add them to the church meal chain?

"I have a good feeling about this place, Sunshine," Pa said to me the night we first arrived.

And I do, too. Honestly, despite my complaints.

As soon as I stepped from the truck, the tangy night air suckled my skin. In the deep pines, it's way more humid than in Dallas, and the heat—coupled with the wild honeysuckle strangling our fence, stamping the air with its reckless scent—felt embryonic.

I circled the path around the pond, the grass high and dewy, licking my calves, and gazed up at the belt of stars pulsing in the sky.

I hadn't glimpsed a single star in Dallas.

Then there was the impromptu swim in the pond with Pa that first night after we got the horses settled. The water felt as warm as the stack of pennies baking in the ashtray of our truck.

I hated Dallas. Hated the big city and the fact that we had to let go of most of our livestock. Hated the filthy air and the bland strip malls.

Hated it all except for Luke.

Just thinking of him now sends shivers over me. I miss him so much.

Even though Dallas wasn't for me, that's where he is, and I was torn up—still am—over our sudden departure.

But it couldn't be helped.

"We gotta get back to the land. To what we know," Pa told our neighbor, an elderly gentleman named Mr. Baxter, who was always in his front yard tinkering with a vehicle sitting on cinder blocks.

"Sure gonna miss y'all," Mr. Baxter said, then packed a wedge of Skoal in his gums.

I won't miss seeing that, I thought, but just grinned back.

What we know is homesteading. Our rowdy pigs. Chickens. Farm-fresh eggs so natural, the yolks are the color of tangerines. Not the store-bought, watery mass-produced stuff.

Mom's little wooden shed filled with her drying herbs. Her oils.

The land. Our luscious gardens with tomatoes so heavy, the vines threaten to snap.

Pa's woodworking shop.

The land is in my blood. It's who I am.

I'll never get sick of an open night sky, so pitch-black that it looks like I'm gazing into a bottomless well. I'll never get sick of riding Cookie, my thoroughbred, legs clamped around her strong back as she ferries me through the pasture.

But now that I'm seventeen, I *am* getting tired of some aspects of country living. Of being poor. Wearing handsewn rags, for one, and Mom's hippie-dippie projects. When I was little, dyeing my own clothes and canning fruit was fun. Now it's just humiliating.

Pa tells me we won't always have to live like this. That he's saving.

But peering down at Mom just now from the loft (she can't tell I'm looking at her) as she hums to herself, stirring a pot of figs to make jelly with, I think she *likes* living this way. Likes all this wholesome bullshit.

She circles the kitchen table, then folds her arms around Pa, who's sitting in his chair, whittling a new pipe from a pine log, curls of blond bark spilling onto the packed-dirt floor.

This all is enough for her.

One of the cross-stitches she made when I was a baby hangs above the stove in the kitchen:

A truly good wife is the most precious treasure a man can find! She is good to him every day of her life, and with her own hands she gladly makes clothes. She is like a sailing ship that brings food from across the sea. Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.

—Proverbs 31: 10–31

She and Pa trade Bible verses all the time, sing hymnals back and forth. The family Bible stays parked on our kitchen table, Pa's ancestors' names jotted in the front pages with jarringly short life spans.

Every Sunday night, Julia, little Molly, and I are all expected