

Summer at the Shore Leave Café

Shore Leave Café series, book one

Novels by Abbie Williams

~ The Shore Leave Series ~

Summer at the Shore Leave Café

Second Chances

A Notion of Love

Winter at the White Oaks Lodge

Wild Flower

The First Law of Love

Until Tomorrow

The Way Back

~ *Forbidden* ~

~ The Dove Series ~

Heart of a Dove

Soul of a Crow

Grace of a Hawk

*I would like to dedicate this book to those of you who believe there is more to
this world than you can see*

Prologue

We are a family of women.

In my childhood and early teens, there was the dual force of our grandmother Louisa Davis (with her denim overhauls rolled to mid-calf, long white braid tucked under a battered, wide-brimmed straw hat), and Great-Aunt Minnie Davis, her older sister (who fastidiously kept her own long hair dyed its original shade of cornsilk blonde until the day she died). Both women contentedly smoked homegrown tobacco plucked from the sprawling garden behind Shore Leave, kept their nails trimmed short, could catch, clean and delectably prepare any fish that shimmered beneath the silver-blue surface of Flickertail Lake, in general disdained the company of men and were adamant about the giving of advice.

Though Gran was married for a time, long enough to produce both Aunt Ellen and my mother Joan, my grandfather reeled in his fishing line, snapped the clips on his tackle box and hiked out of Landon before Mom was quite a year old. At that time, in the late 1940s, Gran and Great-Aunt Minnie's own mother Myrtle Jean was still living and, according to every version of the story I've ever been told, agreed that Gran was better off without the thick-skulled son of a bitch anyhow. My grandfather's name? Lost to time, no doubt, though the womenfolk would tell me if I ever asked. I haven't yet, though I do know my own father's (Mick Douglas) despite the fact that he too made an early and entirely voluntary departure the summer I was eight months old and Mom was carrying Jillian.

Jilly was born when I was one year and one day old, in August of 1968; I cannot recall a time without the knowledge of her. People forever asked if we were twins, to which we sometimes replied yes, then laughed about it later, wondering if we could get away with the pranks that real twins were able to pull; we certainly resembled each other, with fair, freckled skin, long, straight hair and wide smiles, the image of our mother.

Jilly, however, had eyes for which I was jealous, very direct and intensely blue, the color at the bottom of a candle flame, framed in lashes too dark for a blonde. It was a parting gift from the father we never knew. I inherited my eyes from Gran and Mom: the Davis family eyes, a blend of gold and green, with the pale lashes Jilly should have possessed. My oldest and youngest daughters have my eyes, but my middle girl opened hers a few moments after birth and stared up at me with the eyes of my sister and my long-gone father, true indigo. Jilly always joked that the stork brought me Tish by mistake; Jilly is the only one of us to have produced a son, and likewise is the only one of us whose man was lost accidentally.

I left Landon, the only home I'd ever known, the August after high school to follow my simultaneous boyfriend of four years and husband of two weeks, Jackson Gordon, to the teeming wilds of Chicago. Trouble was I was already pregnant, a discovery made a month after senior prom, in April of 1985, and so for me Chicago's nightlife consisted of carrying a screaming infant through our tiny one-bedroom apartment, snow hurtling against the rattle-trap windows while Jackie attended freshman year at Northwestern. Flash forward a decade and a half and his high-school educated home-making wife was a step away from being a completely hollowed-out crazy woman who, after bearing three children and raising them virtually alone (not that my genes hadn't prepared me for it, really), discovered my husband screwing a lovely young colleague at his law office's otherwise prestigious Christmas party, which I unexpectedly attended. I stormed in on them going at it on Jackie's desk, suspicions horrifically confirmed; a sight so sickening I could have vomited there on the plushy taupe carpet. I wanted to kill him with my bare hands. My bare hands wrapped around a functional weapon, anyway.

I scanned the room with a vengeance, hearing Gran and Great-Aunt Minnie in my head, egging me on, telling me to grab the weighty bronze sculpture of a cat near Jackie's elbow and smash it over his cheating skull. Trouble was, I couldn't ruin that head, connected to the man whose broad shoulders I used

to grip with both hands, around whose slim hips my own legs used to wrap possessively, whose hair I clutched in my hands like dark, curling treasure. Jackie straightened up, attempting to look as shameful and dignified as a man with designer slacks around his ankles and a pair of long, gleaming legs around his waist can possibly contrive. He said, "Jo, I'm sorry, I am so sorry," while I felt the earth shift beneath my feet like fresh spring mud and melting-hot blood flood my face with the heat of scorn. I had guessed the truth all along, but like a fool I refused to heed my gut instinct, Gran and Great-Aunt Minnie's most vehement advice.

Jackie was mine for so long, my connection to past, present, and future. He was the father of my children, my husband and companion in this enormous gaping mouth of a city we called home since leaving Landon. We, and eventually our daughters, lived in what amounted to a parade of ever-increasingly expensive and well-furnished properties; together we'd spent exactly as much time here in Chicago as we had in Landon. It seemed to mean something. I fled Jackie's office and hailed a taxi home, far too numb with shock to drive. Camille would be seventeen years old in just a few days, on December twenty-seventh, the baby I carried on my shoulder and nursed to sleep in the dim, multi-colored glow of our first Christmas tree, alone, as my husband hit happy hour with his college buddies. I was only eighteen then, smooth-skinned and blindly naïve, my long hair tied back in a ragged braid most days, washing dishes by hand and trudging at least three loads of laundry a day down to the basement of our apartment building, while my baby girl shrieked.

I called Jilly the moment I arrived safely in my bedroom that night, a weekly ritual. My little sister knew something was wrong before I even opened my mouth. Jilly knowing things was not unexpected; ever since we were kids, Jilly, like Great-Aunt Minnie before her, possessed a powerful sense of intuition.

"I had a dream," she said upon answering, hundreds of miles to the north of me, snug and warm in Mom's kitchen, the kitchen of our childhood with its scarred counters and farm-style sink, the solid maple table where we sat to eat when the café was closed. Jackie once bent me over that table on a hot summer night when we were sixteen, while my family slept, both of us further exhilarated by the thrill of the forbidden. In those days, I was the one Jackson could not get enough of.

I imagined Jilly sitting at her usual place, wool socks braced on the seat to the right, my old chair. She would have Mom's crocheted, pine-needle-green afghan tucked around her shoulders, the "Christmas blanket," and a fire would be burning in the potbelly stove, flickering orange through the small cut-out shapes in the cast iron. I imagined it all, correctly I knew, and suddenly ached with homesickness, a kind I hadn't experienced in years. The ache subdued some of the scathing anger that kept me from tears all the way home and through the crowded townhouse to my bedroom.

Jilly demanded, "What did he do?"

A scab seemed to have formed on the back of my throat, obliterating words. Down two flights of stairs, the girls and a bunch of their friends were laughing over *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* on television; the scent of popcorn and melted caramel drifted in the wake of their happiness.

"Jo, I know he did something. What is it?" Jilly's voice dropped a notch and she implored, "Tell me."

"What was your dream?" I asked, hedging, managing a shallow breath, and it was her turn to sigh. In my mind I saw Jilly's right hand lift and cup her forehead, an age-old gesture of uncertainty.

"Jackie was a centaur," she said, and I laughed, caught off guard, though her tone did not indicate a joke. She continued in a rush, "He was mounting a female horse, like, hard-core. And then I woke up. He cheated on you, didn't he? Goddamn him. Gran knew, too. That bastard!" Her voice rose in both pitch and volume.

In the background I heard our mother call, "Jillian, is that your sister on the telephone?"

"Jilly, shut up!" I squeaked. "Now Mom's going to have to know, too. Fucking *hell*." These days, I only swore this much when speaking to my sister.

“Jo, I am *so* sorry. That piece of shit. I *knew* it.”

Anger slowly won out, driving the hurt and sorrow back down my throat. I snapped, “I’m glad all of you knew and no one bothered to call me!” Even as I spoke the words I imagined my mother’s scolding voice: *You can’t always blame the cheater. It takes two, you know.*

As if she could read my thoughts, which she accurately had too many times to count, Jilly retorted, “Jo. You could not have been blind to this possibility. That *bastard!*”

I was about to respond but Jilly muttered, “*Dammit!*” and in the next moment my mother’s familiar voice swelled in my ear.

Mom asked, “Joelle, what is this about? Why is Jillian sitting here in the dark swearing at you?”

“Hi, Mom,” I muttered. Defeat hovered like a cloud of noxious smoke and I didn’t have the energy to sigh.

In the background I heard Aunt Ellen call, “Joanie, is that Jo? Hi, honey!”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” I groaned. But in our family of women, no secrets were ever kept for long, try as we might, and I surrendered to the inevitable.

Chapter One

Landon, MN

May, 2003

Five long and shitty months later, I drove northwest on I-94, angling into Wisconsin as the sun skimmed the surface of the sky, melting to a golden dusk. The girls, released a good ten days early from their private schools at my rather desperate insistence, chattered to each other, alternately fighting over the radio station and coming up with new and inventive ways to entertain themselves with sights available through the car windows. For a spell they played the alphabet game, using billboards and license plates to earn points; then, as we entered dairy country, moved to *Hey Cow*, a ridiculously simple game that involved yelling the phrase to any cows we happened to pass. The “winner” of the game was the girl at whom the most cows glanced. I was utterly grateful when they at last drifted to sleep, somewhere near the Twin Cities in Minnesota. At that point, the temptation to get us a hotel gnawed at me, but we were so close to Landon that I couldn’t bear not to get there tonight. Just a few more hours. . .

The last mile hummed away at long last and I took the final turn into Landon, whose population now totaled three hundred seventy, plus four. Jackie and I brought the girls here to visit of course, every summer of their lives, but there was something about the potential permanence of this trip that quickened my blood and sent pin-prickles of emotion through my limbs. The girls remained blessedly asleep, but I murmured, “Here we are,” as the most deeply familiar street of my life rolled beneath the tires. The geography of a hometown, whether beloved or loathed, is nonetheless engraved on a person’s soul.

I drove slowly, both hands hanging at the top of the steering wheel, leaning forward, the better to gaze at everything, hungry for the sights. The towering, ancient pines at the southern edge of town gave way to Fisherman’s Street, Landon’s main drag; at the northern-most end, Flickertail Lake was visible from the moment the sun rose, its rocky beach a brief walk and subsequent twelve-step descent from any downtown business. The beach itself curved like a clamshell, widening into soft, pale sand as it met the water of the lake a good twenty feet out.

To my right stood the Angler’s Inn, the only hotel in town, with a private balcony for each of the rooms on the second floor. Jilly and I always called those “prostitute perches,” then laughed hysterically whenever we spied a female guest standing upon one to admire our little hometown. The boardwalks were quiet now at such a late hour, though the windows of Eddie’s Bar, a longtime fixture in Landon, just across

the street from Angler's, glowed in welcome behind the Moosehead Beer light and a faded wooden shingle, painted by Eddie Sorenson decades ago, inviting *COME IN ALREADY*.

A handful of the vehicles that graced my childhood memories waited at the curb, patient as old dogs and as familiar to me as their aging owners bellied up to the bar inside. There was the immaculate red '76 Charger driven by Daniel "Dodge" Miller, who ran the filling station on Flickertail and took care of the heavy work at Shore Leave for Mom and Aunt Ellen; beside the Charger sat the once-blue, well-used '74 Ford pickup owned by my daughters' great-uncle, Nels Gordon (Jackie's only remaining relative in Landon, as his own folks passed away before Camille turned thirteen). I spied Jim Olson's rimless, rusted-out Chevy Celebrity, and our high-school shop teacher Del Christianson's pecan-brown, speed-boat sized LTD.

The last vehicle I idled past proved the newest of the bunch, Dodge's son Justin Miller's sporty silver Dakota truck. Justin graduated with Jackie and me back in 1985, and since suffered through a lengthy marriage to and subsequent messy divorce from Aubrey Pritchard. Messy in that Aubrey, lovely Homecoming Queen of Jilly's class and Justin's longtime sweetheart, cheated after Justin sustained a disfiguring injury working in his and Dodge's service garage. I didn't know the details of the divorce, mostly because Jilly hadn't known, but she did tell me about how Justin's face and neck sustained burns all along the right side. This happened five summers ago, but somehow I had not come across Justin since then. My stomach tightened with sympathy; I suppressed the perverse desire to make my way inside the warm, familiar space and see the damage for myself. Once, Justin was like a brother to Jilly and me – in summers of old, Dodge often carted Justin and Justin's little sister, Liz, to Shore Leave when he came to help out.

I realized that I'd come to a full stop in front of Eddie's and sat watching the door, while in the background my girls breathed with the soft sighs of exhaustion, both physical and emotional. After a moment, perhaps wakened by the absence of movement, Camille, with Ruthann's head on her lap, stirred from the back seat and murmured, "Mom, are we there?"

I turned to look back at my oldest daughter, whose head rested on the pillow she'd braced against the window back in Illinois. My heart, as always, tightened with the ache of a love so powerful it overrode any other in my world; I vowed I would stay strong for my girls – no matter how difficult this vow sometimes proved.

"No, sweetie, not quite," I whispered in response, letting my bare foot ease off the brake. The car rolled smoothly forward, but enough that Tish, strapped into the passenger seat beside me, snorted and began rubbing her eyes.

"Mo-om," she complained in a whisper. "My head hurts."

"I'm sorry, honey," I responded automatically, and accelerated to twenty miles an hour – much faster at this hour and I'd risk a ticket from the local patrol cop, Charlie Evans. I assured, "We'll be there shortly. Look, it's the lake." I gestured out into the glimmering starry night as I made a left and angled around Flickertail, where a mile up the lake road, known locally as Flicker Trail, the Shore Leave Café waited.

Tish, fortunately, fell for the distraction and lowered her window, allowing the sweet scent of an early spring evening into the car. The smell of the lake, so deeply ingrained in my consciousness, as familiar to me as my children's skin, was musky and welcoming. I could hear it lapping the shore to our right as the tires crunched over gravel and the headlights illuminated walls of sharp spruce and towering oaks, lacy maples and dense grapevine, decked in new emerald leaves and smelling of childhood and remembered happiness. My thoughts centered on Jackie, against my will; so often I'd driven this road with him, tucked against his strong side, my hand caressing his leg, both of us laughing. . .

I squelched these memories with real effort; it was like pressing on a bruise. No, more like cramming a couple of fingers into an open wound. I bit the insides of my cheeks, feeling the sleek wetness

of tears on my eyeballs, glad that the darkness hid any evidence. I would not cry in front of my children again; I promised myself, fiercely, before we left Chicago for Minnesota.

“What was that?” Camille asked from the backseat, her voice startled.

“A loon,” I said, listening as it wailed again from somewhere out on the lake. It was a haunting, ululating cry, almost human in its emotional intensity. “Don’t worry, that’s just how they keep in contact with other loons on the lake.” The second I said it, another responded, farther out on the dark water.

“It gives me the shivers. They sound so lonesome, like they’re lost or something. I always forget that until we’re back,” Camille said, and Tish cackled a laugh, twisting around to give her big sister a skeptical look.

“It’s awesome,” Tish said. “You’re such a chicken.”

Camille playfully kicked a bare foot at Tish, jostling twelve-year-old Ruthann, who made a sound of protest.

“C’mon, you guys, knock it off,” my youngest mumbled. “I’m sleeping.”

“And I’m carsick,” Tish chimed in, helpfully. I angled a long-suffering gaze at her, and she scrunched down in her seat as if to visibly prove her claim. Tish, unlike her sisters, kept her thick curly hair cut short; the subsequent face-frame made her striking blue eyes appear even larger and more sincere. I knew her well enough to see through any of her attempts at manipulation, but people less familiar to her wiles proved easily captivated by those stunning eyes and pointy pixie chin. Her father, especially, which was the reason our fifteen-year-old sported double-pierced ears.

“Here it is,” I said, immeasurably thankful, as the gravel widened and became the pitted blacktop lot of my family’s longtime business. Two vehicles were parked beneath the lone streetlight at this late hour, one belonging to Rich Mayes, an elderly man I loved like a father, and who’d cooked at the café since my childhood; next to Rich’s car sat an old black truck I didn’t recognize. I thought, *Dammit. There’s still a customer here.*

The café was a long, narrow structure, shaped vaguely like the letter *L*, with two porches, both angled to take full advantage of the gorgeous lake view, each porch constructed of wide cedar planks, now the gray of ashes from years of sun and wet feet. The café received a fresh coat of white paint every other June; Jilly and her son Clint took care of that now. Long ago, the task belonged to Jilly and me; I admired Jackie for the first time while painting the side of Shore Leave, around age twelve. He’d come in with his family for lunch, all those Junes ago...

I parked next to the unfamiliar truck and rolled my head slowly, first down and then back up, still hearing the rush of tires on the highway. Usually Jackie drove us to Minnesota for our annual summer visit; I reminded myself that I was determined not to think again of him for at least ten minutes. The Leinenkuegel, Moosehead, and Hamm’s beer signs in the front window splashed warm tints into the night; technically Shore Leave was still open at this hour, but it was a weeknight and most of the locals retired to Eddie’s. This early in the season, tourist traffic tended to remain light, but in less than two weeks that would change. From the direction of the boat landing, down the shore about twenty yards, came a yodeling cry, and I grinned in spite of myself.

“Mom, Aunt Ellen, everybody! They’re here!” my little sister shrieked, and the girls began hooting and screaming in response, falling out of the car and running to hug Jillian. I climbed out more slowly, happy on the surface, where people could see. Fuck, it just sucked (there was no other way to put it) that I was coming home as the spurned woman, the jilted, separated wife, *the girl who couldn’t keep her husband in her own bed*... I was gritting my teeth and stopped myself instantly. And then I couldn’t help but laugh as the girls and Jilly collided hard enough to send all four of them into a heap on the grass at the edge of the parking lot. My mother’s golden labs loped down the porch steps, barking at the top of their range. The girls climbed all over Jilly, wrestling to get closer to her as one of the dogs grabbed the rear pocket of Tish’s shorts and began tugging.

"Joelle!" My mother hurried out the front porch door, banging the screen we'd always been bitched at for banging, wiping her hands on a dishtowel. Aunt Ellen and Rich followed in her wake, waving and calling, and I jogged forward and into Mom's warm arms, resisting the urge to burrow against her, like a child seeking refuge. No matter how much time passed between my visits here, my mom always smelled exactly the same, of Prell shampoo and rose-scented lotion, just a hint of the fish-fry batter. She hugged me close and planted a kiss on my temple before turning me over to my auntie, whose plump, freckled arms, so much like Mom's, curled me tight and snug. Rich hugged me next, and then ruffled my hair, and his scent, tobacco and aftershave, was likewise comforting, blessedly familiar.

"Looks so pretty, long like that," Rich added, indicating my hair, grinning so that his bushy white eyebrows drew nearly together over his kind brown eyes. He was as dear and solid as ever, and I felt a momentary flash of gratitude that these people, my foundation, remained here, as unchanging as the summer stars. In my teenage years, they made me claustrophobic with their concerns, driving me out of my skin with constant advice and commentary; but now, seventeen years later, I sought this place, my true home, to regroup and lick my wounds. Never mind that Jackson should –

You weren't going to think about Jackie for ten minutes, remember?

"Hi, sweetie," Aunt Ellen said, gathering me against her side. "You look like you could use a drink."

"Or a bar," Mom added, meaning dessert.

"You want a sandwich, honey?" Rich asked, thumbing over his shoulder in the direction of his kitchen.

"Not just now," I told them, although a drink sounded fantastic. "But thanks."

In the next moment my sister bolted across the parking lot, shrieking with laughter as my kids and both dogs pursued her. I turned to catch her in a hug and we rocked together before being attacked by the mob.

"Look at these beautiful girls," Mom said, claiming her granddaughters for a round of hugs and kisses. "Camille, you look so grown-up, doesn't she, Ellen? Look at that face! And my Patricia, what have you done to your hair?"

Rich caught up Ruthann in a bear hug, and then bounced her on his arm. "Ain't you grown a bit since I saw you last," he observed, and Ruthann, my baby, grinned shyly. Rich and Dodge were the only grandfathers my girls had ever known.

"Aunt Jilly, where's Clint?" Tish asked, peering around as though her cousin and best friend in Landon was hiding in the woods, purposely avoiding her.

Jilly, small and deeply tanned, her hair cropped as short as Tish's, bleached platinum from long summer days outside, gave me a look I couldn't interpret (unheard of) and then neatly caught Tish in a light headlock, knuckling her scalp. She blustered, "Not here, punk. He must not care that you guys were coming."

Tish ducked away and fastidiously smoothed her hair, contradicting, "Whatever! Where is he?"

"Inside, sleeping, along with your great-gran," Aunt Ellen answered. "He was tuckered out from his ball game today. He waited and waited for you-all to get here and ended up falling asleep on table three. Rich hauled him home to bed."

The girls giggled. "What a baby," Tish felt compelled to add. "It's not even midnight!"

"Time for these bones to head out, though," Rich said, and pecked my cheek before taking his quiet leave. He added, "It does my heart good to see you, Joelle-honey. Joanie, tell the grandson I'll see him tomorrow."

"Will do, Rich," Mom agreed, as Aunt Ellen herded the girls inside for food and drink.

"G'night, Rich," I added, following Jilly up the porch steps. Mom walked Rich to his car and the girls were already in the café, no doubt being plied with sweets and possibly booze by Aunt Ellen. I paused

before entering and instead leaned over the porch rail, my gaze absorbing sights as well-known to me as my own body. The lake, cloaked in warm, velvet May darkness, stretched back to Landon's little downtown, where the streetlamps shone like small golden stars in the blackness.

In the other direction, to my left, Flickertail curved around a slender bend before opening into a much wider surface area, where jet-skis and motor boats whined from dawn until early evening, dragging skiers and wake boarders. The farthest shore, not visible from our porch, was similarly busy in the daylight, where fisherman tarried for hours upon end, drinking and bullshitting and doing what they loved. Though fully dark, I could see the edges of the trees that ringed the lake, from memory; if I lifted my index finger I could trace the wavering line in the air. Jilly elbowed up beside me and I rested my head on her shoulder.

"You okay?" she murmured, and I lifted my head, and sighed.

"Rich's grandson?" I asked, wishing I held a burning cigarette between my fingers just now. Years had passed since my last one, but the moment I got home, on ancient turf, an insistent craving began until I either gave in, guilted the hell out of myself, or fell asleep. I elaborated, "He doesn't have any kids, does he?" At least, none that I knew of. And I'd known Rich for exactly as long as I'd been alive.

"Actually, it's his stepdaughter Christy's son," Jilly reminded me. "You remember her, don't you? Pam's daughter who lives in Oklahoma?"

"Yeah, I guess, vaguely." A memory flickered. "Teeny bikini and big hair, like 1978, right?"

"Yeah, that's her. She stayed with Rich and Pam that summer. It seems like a million years ago now." Jilly sighed, too. "Anyway, Christy had a kid, and now he's staying with Rich in his trailer, even though Pam's gone. Mom hired him to help in the kitchen this summer. He's actually here now, having a beer."

"Dammit," I murmured, annoyed that a stranger, even a stranger connected to Rich, infringed on my homecoming. I complained, "Is he even old enough to drink?"

"Yeah, he's in his twenties," Jilly said. "And he was in jail."

My head darted to the left and I stared at her in shock. All of the mother-activated alarm bells in my head began wailing. I demanded, "What?"

"Seriously, I freaked a little bit, too, but Rich insists that he's a good kid." In response to the panicked question in my eyes, she added, "He stole a car and some cash in Oklahoma, two years ago."

I absorbed this not-so-bad-as-I-imagined information, but still felt fidgety and irritated. I could hear my daughters chattering with Aunt Ellen, their sweet voices excited and genuinely pleased; just around the corner in the bar, my family's bar, an ex-con sat having a drink, listening to them.

"Jilly, what was she thinking?" I whispered furtively, peering over my shoulder, and my sister surprised me by laughing her warm, rollicking laugh.

She unselfconsciously ran her fingers through her close-cropped hair and then squeezed my arm before saying, "It's not like you have to whisper, Jo. I don't think he has superhero senses."

Mom climbed the steps as Rich's taillights winked with a ruby flicker before he turned right and headed back into town. I accosted her immediately.

"Mom, how could you?" I demanded, yelling in a whisper, also annoyed at Jilly, for laughing at me. Jilly was a mother, but not of daughters, and that caused a distinct difference in outlook. Clint was already tall and strong, the image of Chris, his dad. He wasn't vulnerable the same way my girls were.

Mom stopped and sighed; she'd tossed her dishtowel over one shoulder and reached now into the front pocket of her overhauls for a slim pack of smokes. Her silver-streaked hair was still long, caught up in a tortoiseshell clip on the crown of her head, her ears appearing sunburned in the yellow glow of the porch light. Wordlessly, she passed one to me and then Jilly, and next drew a lighter from her side pocket. She never smoked much anymore, unless under stress. I sincerely hoped the stress wasn't caused by the proximity of a former criminal. Let it be instead her eldest daughter's disgraceful and undignified return home, bearing her children and all of her dearest worldly possessions, these crammed into the trunk of a

luxurious Toyota. Mom lit up and passed the small plastic tool to Jilly; I sighed and handed back the cigarette, unwilling to smoke in front of the kids. I settled for second-hand instead.

"Honestly, Jo, he's a good kid," Mom said at last, speaking quietly, blowing smoke in the direction of the lake. "Do you think Ellen or I would've hired him if we didn't think so?"

"Because of Rich," I pointed out, my voice unpleasantly contrary. "You couldn't say *no* to him, you know it."

Mom shook her head, and from my other side Jilly elbowed me. Mom griped, "Rich wouldn't have taken him in, even in honor of Pamela's memory, if he thought Bly was dangerous. Crimeny, Joelle."

"Bly?" I asked, turning to my sister.

"His name is Blythe," she informed, blowing smoke from both nostrils. Mom dropped her filter into an empty beer can on the windowsill and went inside without another word. Enough of the day and her daughters questioning her judgment, I supposed. Quietly, and yet full of teasing, Jilly added, "And she's wrong, he *is* dangerous."

I gave her a withering look but she only smiled, so Jillian. "The girls are meeting him right now," she said, heading inside, and I darted after her at these words, all of the repressed concern under the surface of my skin rushing up and into my throat. My children would not exchange introductions with a criminal without me in the same room.

"Girls, this is Rich's grandson," I heard Aunt Ellen saying. I followed Jilly through the arch separating the bar from the rest of the café, my lips set in a hard line. I came around the corner and blinked once, then again, noticing things as though in slow motion. My oldest daughter's radiant smile. Tish's slightly open mouth. Ruthann's hazel eyes round and glowing. Aunt Ellen and Mom both grinned up at the man I could only assume was the car thief with the ridiculously sentimental name, Gilbert's name from *Anne of Green Gables*.

He was gorgeous. There was no denying it, no matter how much older than him I must certainly have been, no matter what his sketchy past. I stopped as though having run up against a barbed wire fence and stared inanely before catching myself and darting my gaze elsewhere. My daughters certainly noticed, and were in various stages of adoration; he glanced momentarily over at me and nodded slightly, acknowledging yet another female presence in his sphere of influence before turning his attention back to my mother. He was grinning about something, grinning more with one side of his mouth than the other, a sensual mouth set in a lean face with a strong cleft chin. He towered over all of us, a dark-blond ponytail hanging down his back, navy-blue bandana tied around his forehead, the kind a short-order cook wore to keep sweat from his eyes. His eyebrows were darker than his hair, framing amused eyes, the kind of eyes that would be grinning even when he was not. Long lashes. Stubbled jaws. Hunky shoulders.

I observed this wealth of handsomeness in less than five seconds. It also proved sufficient time to set my pulse hammering before I cursed myself for a nearly-middle-aged fool. Just as I intended to introduce myself, Aunt Ellen did the honors for me, saying, "Honey, this is Rich's grandson, Blythe Tilson. Bly, dear, meet my niece, Joelle Gordon. She's just in from Chicago."

"Hi," he said just for me, warm and deep-voiced, offering a hand. I swallowed and gathered myself, smiling back at him, wishing I'd checked my reflection even once since leaving the city around dawn yesterday. I shook his hand swiftly, trying not to stare dumbly at him. His hand was warm and strong and hard. *Of course it was.*

"Hi," I said, my voice unnaturally husky, and then managed, "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise," he returned politely; surely I imagined the way he seemed to really study my face. He said then, as though in a sudden hurry, "Well, Joan, Ellen, I better head home, let you have some family time," and a gaggle of girls, including my mother, followed him to the front porch. Only Jilly and I remained behind. She grinned knowingly, like an imp of misfortune, while I sank to a barstool and lowered

my chin to my right palm. From the other room, Blythe called back, “Have a good night, ladies. Good to meet you, Joelle.”

I shook my head slowly, not visible from where he stood, letting my children offer a chorus of heartfelt good-nights. The screen door clicked shut behind him and we all heard his footsteps reverberate over the porch as he headed for his truck. I hoped the girls weren’t pressing their noses to the window screen.

Jilly hauled a barstool closer to mine and said succinctly, “*Told* you so.”

The story continues in *Summer at the Shore Leave Café*, coming fall 2016