

SMOKING FLAX

JENNIFER HALLMARK

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BY JENNIFER HALLMARK

Pre-teen Reed Anderson receives a mysterious foretelling that shifts his world and can help him discover his true identity if he survives.

CHAPTER ONE

A bruised reed shall he not break,
And the smoking flax shall he not quench;
He shall bring forth judgment unto truth. (Isaiah 42:3 KJV)

May 27, 1984

I turned Aunt Lula's Dodge Aspen off the gravel road onto the driveway leading to Golden Marais Baptist Church. The mimosas had grown tall since I'd last been here, the two magnolias missing entirely. The sun peeked above the horizon, but daylight was not my friend. Who knew the words of my crazy aunt would lead to this? Only three days after graduation.

Her words still hung in the air. *Reed Anderson, you know why you're here.* I repressed the shudder that ran along my spine and surveyed the scene before me. The old rectangular church building stretched to my right, with a shed behind, and woods fringed around them. Where was the outhouse? The wood siding needed paint and a shutter hung like a broken arm from one of the four windows that greeted my view.

I pushed open the car door and stepped onto the half-dead grass which brushed my jeans and wet my cowboy boots. A boat motor on the Amite River revved close by. I hurried to a door at the side of the building and stopped to read a crooked sign tacked near the doorknob. *Services on Sunday and Wednesday. Reverend Rod Guidry.*

What happened to Reverend Littleton? Guess I should be surprised they kept anyone in this pathetic little town. I tried the door and found it open like I expected it to be. Even now.

I pushed my way inside. Little had changed. A rickety pulpit graced the front by the antique piano and four pews intermingled with folding chairs to fill the front of the tiny auditorium. I counted twenty-five seats, the same as before.

A quick investigation of the curtained area in the back showed his and her bathrooms, a real step up for this place.

Had Golden Marais, Louisiana changed? I crossed my arms. *Nah. Hope had deserted this place long ago and would never, ever come back.*

No matter. I darted to the altar and placed a small envelope in one of the two baskets to cover any cost.

I pulled a handkerchief from my pocket and reopened the door, wiping it clean, and then repeated the gesture on the outside.

My heart beat faster. Sweat beaded on the back of my neck and upper lip.

The shed.

I forced my legs to move in that direction and drew deep breaths, the weighty aroma of the honeysuckles sickening me. I stopped in front of the faded building, much smaller than my memory served. The aging wood had been coated with used motor oil to keep it from rotting. The strong smell of the motor oil mixed with the honeysuckles nauseated me even more.

I reached for the latch holding the door in place and licked my dry lips. She said I must. If not now, then when?

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Six years earlier in 1978...

The white-sided church glowered at me from its spot in front of the sparse woods. Two spreading magnolias, a few mimosas, and black pine lay scattered along the thick undergrowth, honeysuckle mingled with wild blackberry.

I lagged behind my parents and my three-year-old sister, Susan, gripping a Bible in my left hand. The school had allowed the Gideon's to hand them out last Friday and I made sure to read a chapter a day out loud so maybe God would hear me.

I didn't understand lots of the words in the Bible, and this worried me, with no dictionary at home to find the answers. "Have to ask the teacher if I can borrow the classroom copy," I whispered.

"Boy, get a move on." My Pa's gruff threat was only loud enough for my ears. "Yes, sir." I took longer steps until I was right behind as Pa pushed through the doorway. All the windows were open as humid air, mingled with the scent of the nearby muddy water from the Amite, kept the congregation from roasting in the small building.

Pa, his blond hair so short he looked military, sat in his normal chair in the third row, by the middle aisle, Susan beside him, Momma, then me.

Susan, his clear favorite, pulled on his coat sleeve. "Pa, can I have money?" She asked each week for the offering plate.

I mowed Mrs. Monterey's yard down the road for three dollars every week. *The first time I came home after mowing, Pa held out his hand. "If you gonna live with me, boy, you gonna help pay your way."*

I surrendered my money.

“Here.” He gave me thirty cents back.

“Thank you.”

He shook his head. “Don’t get any ideas. It’s your tithe money.”

Miss Watts hit the first chord on the piano to gain attention as the congregation took their seats among the chairs and four pews. The preacher, Reverend Homer Littleton, sat by the pulpit. The same people attended each week, twenty or so from Golden Marais—Cajun for golden pond. How could anyone see the look-alike houses in our subdivision and catch a whiff of the stench from the mill and imagine anything golden? This place got its name long ago, I reckoned. Momma held the small hymnal between us. I glanced at her, and she managed a careworn smile. My heart warmed. She loved me, told me how sorry she was when Pa got mean. Like it was her fault. A purple bruise marred her arm, not quite hidden by her sleeve. I frowned. Life wasn’t fair. My red-headed sister wiggled in her seat and tried to sing. Still innocent.

For now.

The songs ran together as I glanced at the hymnal and mumbled the words. Movement caught my eye as a tall man and his wife passed us and slid into the seats across from ours. Their daughter, Talitha Landry, lingered behind.

She turned and nodded to me. I didn’t nod back, ‘cause my father might be looking. Pa pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and coughed. He did that a lot as of late and I figured he wasn’t sleeping good. I prayed every night he would go to bed early and wake up differently.

Or maybe not wake at all.

I snuck a glance at my friend. Talitha had a pudgy nose, deep brown eyes, and dimpled chin.

Her black hair had been carefully plaited and hung to her shoulders. She could never be pretty in any fancy way, but I liked her a lot. She didn't hold it against me, us being poor. Her father had a foreman's job in the mill for he was a fine worker, all things considered.

"Boy." A sharp hiss rose from my right. "Outside." Pa pointed to the back. No one noticed above the notes of the closing song, but I trembled as I followed Pa toward the door. *What had I done this time?*

He pushed his way outside as I followed him. As soon as we cleared the door and were out of sight, the familiar death grip on my forearm pulled me toward the woodshed out back. "I'll teach you to stare at a girl, lusting after a wench like her in the house of God." He stopped abruptly, coughing.

"I weren't staring." My protest didn't slow him any.

The woodshed stood behind the church. I tried to pull away, but Pa moved me inside the door and pushed me against the wall beside the gas can. "God, help me."

"Did I ask you to speak?" He reached for the lawnmower belt which hung on the wall, the one that hurt more than anything.

"No, sir." I blew out a breath and straightened as much as I could. "But you shouldn't call Talitha a wench."

"What?"

"I weren't thinking about her or lusting." The words blurted out and grew stronger with each syllable. "I ain't the one lusting. I *heard* you tell Uncle Jack Saturday night while y'all drank on the porch all about Talitha's momma and her body. Things no one should say. Momma knows.

We both listened through the open window. You were drinking *and* lusting.” Momma’s face had crumpled after the men’s lusting words floated to where we sat. My Momma wasn’t pretty, but beautiful. How Pa could ever look at another lady lay beyond my almost thirteen-year-old mind.

Pa paled at my words and another cough ripped from deep inside. He clutched his chest as the belt slipped from his fingers and landed on the dirt floor.

He trembled like he was skeered. Flat out terrified. And his mouth moved with unspoken words. Did he call for *help*?

Golden light beamed through cracks in the shed and shimmered in the far corner—an unnatural kind of glow. I rubbed my eyes. For a moment, the light outlined a child but it left as quickly as it had come. Was it a ghost?

Or a sign.

Pa coughed again. I stood my ground until he wiped saliva dripping from the corner of his mouth with a sleeve. Sweat glistened on his face as he cleared his throat. “Shut your mouth, you son of Jezebel. Get back in the church.”

I pushed open the door and inhaled the sweet perfume of honeysuckle before running back to the building. I glanced behind me. Pa pulled himself along, his arm drawn to his chest. The preacher had started the announcements as I hurried up the aisle, then slid into the seat. Momma glanced at me, tilting her head, her brow knit. Couldn’t figure out why I wasn’t limping. I would tell her later.

Maybe.

The preacher finished and ushers passed the offering basket. I dug the coins out of my

threadbare khakis. My father had sunk into the seat beside Momma, still pale and breathless. I didn't dare look at him.

Something deep inside had been allowed out and a glimpse of freedom shot hope into a dark place in my soul. I leaned toward Susan. "I said *what I felt* and still have breath in my lungs. But you won't tell, will you?"

She smiled like any three-year-old would.

"Now remember," Reverend Littleton said. "We here in Golden Marais show progress in this year of 1978. We work together, white and black mill workers, not afraid to mix. God is pleased with our advancement. And when He is pleased, we have *joie de vivre*, the joy of living. Let us pray." The minister recited the benediction, and everyone said, "Amen."

Uncle Jack crossed the aisle and grasped Pa's hand as he stood. "You're washed out, man. Ain't missing work tomorrow, are you?"

"Only a cold." Pa's voice rasped. "You know I never miss."

"The mill wouldn't be the same without you." His glance followed Talitha's mother as he punched Pa's arm.

I turned away and hurried out the door after Momma and Susan. No use staying. They shouldn't be staring 'cause it tweren't right.

And Uncle Jack. I glanced back at my uncle, who always had this little smile on his face, but not a happy one. His eyes stared through a person, and then that crooked smirk. His eyes and mouth didn't go together. I shivered, then hurried down the two steps.

"Hey, Reed." Talitha stood to the side of the church. She reached for my arm and pulled me

away from the building toward the parking lot. “I’ve got bad news.” Her face twisted. “Papa was hired for the new job in Alabama.”

“What? Already?” My heart sank. “But I thought he wouldn’t be offered it until this fall.” “That’s what he told us. But one of the bosses retired a few days back, and he’s to be a foreman at the new mill in Marston. And they wanted us there yesterday. We’ll be moving early in the morning. Papa needs to start the job as soon as he can.”

A pain deep inside caught my breath. “Marston? I’ve heard of it. Not too terrible far from where Momma’s folks lived. I’ve been close to there when Yaya—I mean my grandmother—died.”

“I’ll miss you.” Talitha gripped my hand. “You won’t forget me?”

“Course not.” I glanced over my shoulder, but Pa was nowhere in sight. “I’ll meet you behind the house after lunch.”

“Okay.”

As she walked away, I hated the heaviness pushing the free feeling from my heart.

I shook my head. “Nope. I ain’t going back to being afraid.”

No matter what.

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