

Sweet Jiminy

By Kristin Gore

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Part One

JIMINY DAVIS MISSED SLEEPING. She missed reading for pleasure and having friends and feeling confident that life held some certain purpose, but mostly, she missed sleeping. She'd always been very good at it, and she considered the fact that this skill was not valued in the corporate legal world of which she was now a part a deeply unfortunate fact. However, she was growing as accustomed to casual injustice as she was to the wincing way her thoughts now javelined through her chronically exhausted brain: both apparently came with the territory, and both gave her horrible headaches.

She knew that as a rising second-year law student she was lucky to have landed a summer associate job at a prestigious Chicago firm, yet this knowledge did nothing to alleviate a debilitating sense of panic. Because instead of feeling inspired and engaged—on the cusp of exhilarating professional opportunity—Jiminy felt listless and demoralized and utterly, prematurely, spent.

Perhaps it was this extreme exhaustion that prevented her from being seriously injured by the bike courier who slammed into her as she trudged, laden with heavy file folders and dark thoughts, through the courtyard between the firm's twin towers. Instead of tensing and shattering, her body sank inward and down like a saggy mattress, and she found herself grateful for an excuse to close her eyes. When she finally opened them, she noted that the

red-faced courier was wearing a T-shirt that read “Tupelo Honey.” As she stared up at it, surrounded by hundreds of billable hours of work she didn’t believe in, splayed around her on the hot concrete, something deep inside her suddenly pulled up short. And she understood, instinctively, that she was done.

Lyn Waters had just decided to kill herself when the phone rang. It was a nightly ritual—the suicide plan, not the phone ringing—so her decision hadn’t left her particularly rattled. The phone, on the other hand, had made her gasp.

“Evenin’?” she answered uncertainly.

It was definitely evening. It was the kind of syrupy summer evening that trapped minutes and held them to its pace, making it very easy to forget the time.

“It’s not too late, is it, Lyn?” the anxious voice of Willa Hunt asked over the line.

“No, ma’am,” Lyn answered.

At seventy-six, Lyn was five years older than Willa, but she’d been calling her “ma’am” for more than five decades. No one would have ever thought that Lyn was the least bit bothered by this. It would have been as pointless as being bothered by the moon.

“Well, I wouldn’t be calling at this hour, but I just talked to Jiminy, and it sounds like she’s headed this way.”

For the briefest of moments, Lyn was cast backwards forty years. She brought her hand to her throat, catching her breath for the second time. But then she dropped her arm dully, feeling silly and self-indulgent. Of course Willa meant the other Jiminy.

“Isn’t that nice,” Lyn replied in a soothing, neutral tone, meant to calm her own inner turmoil as much as to convey the good-natured pliability Willa expected of her.

“She’s getting on a bus tomorrow, so I was just hoping you could come help me get things in some kinda order.”

Lyn normally only worked for Willa on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Friday was her day to tend to her own life. Still, she appreciated being needed, even if her acquiescence felt a bit compulsory.

“Well, that sounds fine. I’ll see you in the mornin’,” she replied.

Lyn’s hand trembled a bit as she hung up the phone, another thing she should have been

used to by now. As she resettled into her bed, feeling the ache of an old back injury, she thought again about her death. Every night she resolved to do herself in, and the lightness she felt once the decision was made helped her fall into a peaceful sleep. Each morning, she felt she'd had a long enough break from the world to try it anew. By noon, she'd know she'd been duped.

But for now, she closed her eyes, cradled a pillow in her arm, and willed her dreams to claim her.

The nearest Greyhound bus station was a converted railroad depot thirty miles from Fayeveville, Mississippi. Jiminy had been sardined against a window for sixteen hours, pinned by the girth of a woman who was unapologetic about her considerable overflow. After some initial wriggling and tentative throat clearing that produced zero response, Jiminy had resigned herself to her fate and endeavored to find something good in her predicament. Sixteen hours on a bus was never going to be a fantastic time, but there was something comforting and snug-in-the-womb-ish about not being able to move even a tiny bit. Jiminy fantasized that she was somehow gestating, and might emerge from this trial a more evolved being. How wonderful if it could be that simple.

Willa was waiting for her granddaughter at the bottom of the bus stairs, her fleshy arms outstretched for their standard perfunctory hug.

"Are you hungry?" she asked. "Lyn's got a great supper waitin' at home, God bless her. Jiminy? You okay?"

Jiminy had gripped harder and sagged further when Willa had started to pull away. And now she was burying her face in her grandmother's shoulder, wishing she could be four years old again, when a person could burst into tears for no good reason at all.

Willa watched her granddaughter out of the corner of her eye as she made a careful turn off the interstate onto the access road that led to town. Jiminy had stopped crying a few miles back and was now staring straight ahead with a distant, pensive expression. Willa worried

that something must have gone terribly wrong for her to come running to Fayeville, of all places. And so suddenly, away from so many more alluring plans. They hadn't seen each other in years, so for Jiminy to spontaneously visit was already strange. For her to seem so fragile was downright alarming.

Still, Willa hadn't pressed Jiminy to explain herself. She knew better than most that some things just didn't want to be talked about. In addition to its many charms and eccentricities, her tiny corner of the world was riddled with sad secrets. Had her granddaughter sensed that? Was that why she'd come—because she'd needed a place of solace to keep her own unhappy counsel?

"There's the new restaurant," Willa remarked as they cruised past its yellow painted porch. "Mexican. Can you believe it?"

Jiminy stared at the caramel-skinned young woman sweeping the pavement in front, captivated by the way her long braid was swinging in rhythm with the broom, hypnotizing passersby.

Jiminy remembered roller-skating across that same concrete as a girl, counting the cracks that rattled her teeth. Now she found herself counting again, silently, as she rolled past familiar, faded buildings. There was the old movie theater, abandoned for years, and the feed mill, and the teeny-tiny bank that looked like it could only handle toy money. There was the Comfort Inn, which had never done much business. The four hundred Fayeவில்ლიans who populated the town put any guests up in their own homes. They considered the motel nice but unnecessary, like car washes or dry cleaners. They believed in handling things themselves.

As a child, Jiminy had always considered Fayeville the perfect size. There was enough to intrigue, but not overwhelm, at least as far as she knew. So she'd always felt comfortable here. Watching things slide by her now, she yearned for that feeling to again overtake her.

Lyn saw the headlights approach from the kitchen window. She hated waiting for loved ones to arrive, because sometimes they never did. She passed her hand over her eyes to wipe away the pain that crept in during the day to hover there, then watched Jiminy climb out of Willa's car. She was surprised to see that she only had one bag, but seemed burdened with

much more. That pale-skinned young little thing, so much more timid than her own Jiminy had been, so much more frightened of a world that rolled out a carpet for her, looked up suddenly and caught Lyn's eye. In the glow of the porch light, Jiminy's face brightened with a reflexive smile, and she stuck out her tongue and wagged it around. Despite herself, Lyn grinned back. She even chuckled. And for a split second, she felt a foreign surge of hope. Something was going to change.

JIMINY KNEW THAT she was genetically predisposed to nervous breakdowns, and had long tried to guard against them, but she worried one had crept up on her at last. She asked her grandmother as much, over breakfast her second day on the farm.

"Do I remind you of my mom? Do I seem like I'm going crazy?" she inquired anxiously.

Willa continued buttering her biscuit, and for a moment Jiminy wondered if she'd even heard. Jiminy had a tendency to speak too softly, and for all she knew, her grandmother might be going deaf as well.

But just as Jiminy was about to repeat her question more loudly, Willa cleared her throat.

"You seem like you need a good, long rest," she said. "The world's what's gone crazy. You just got old enough to notice."

Willa took a sip of her iced tea, then rose from her chair.

"So take your time," she instructed, as she placed her dishes by the sink for Lyn to clean. "Take it slow."

Jiminy watched her grandmother amble out of the kitchen toward the living room in her steady, deliberate way. And she felt comforted. Even if she was in fact on the brink of a full-scale meltdown, she didn't have to be in a rush about it. This was a relief.

Over the next several days, Willa and Lyn let Jiminy be for the most part—going about their regular routines, leaving her to wander the farmhouse in search of herself.

The house was more modern than many in the area—a long rectangle with large windows and a minimalist edge. Some rooms were crammed with too many things, but most felt airy and comfortable, if a bit musty. Jiminy found dead spiders and dust bunnies in most of the places she looked, but they didn't bother her. She found them reassuring

actually, after the antiseptic fluorescence of the places she'd fled. She appreciated dirt and imperfection and messy signs of actual life. She didn't leave the house much—she didn't feel quite ready for that. The outside world still seemed pregnant with disappointment.

Willa waited patiently for her curlers to set beneath the heated helmet that she secretly feared might fry her brain if there was a freak power surge.

Every other Tuesday, Willa picked her best friend Jean up and drove the fourteen minutes into downtown Fayeville for their hair appointments. Jean herself wasn't allowed to drive since her county councilman son had confiscated her license a few months previously. Willa was still comforting Jean through this trauma. Especially out here, especially if you lived alone, not being able to drive was tantamount to house arrest. Everyone was just too spread out to get to one another easily.

Their biweekly field trip destination was Trudi's Tresses. There, Willa and Jean spent ninety minutes getting dyed, crimped, and scorched, before driving the long way back through town, talking about times past and present. Willa and Jean could glide easily from discussion of the latest store display to reminiscences about a county fair that happened thirty-five years ago. Time was a fluid plaything in their conversations. They had so much shared history that they could happily pick and choose from it to entertain themselves for hours on end. It was simply a decision about whether to stay in the present or skip around, and they let their whims direct them.

"Any hints about how long she's gonna stay?" Jean asked.

"No," Willa replied. "As long as she likes, I suppose. I've made it clear she's welcome."

"Of course. Does Margaret know she's with you?"

Willa sighed. Her itinerant daughter was always difficult to pin down.

"I left word," Willa said. Which was often the most she could do.

"Well, I can't believe Jiminy's all grown," Jean remarked. "You remember what you were doing at her age?"

It seemed several lifetimes ago. At Jiminy's age, Willa had been a young mother, struggling to make a life on the farm with her husband Henry. By the day's standards they hadn't been well off, but they'd felt full of promise.

“Just gettin’ by, I s’pose,” Willa replied lightly.

“Remember our river parties?” Jean asked with a laugh.

Every Saturday night the people who farmed along the Allegheny River had gathered at one or another’s place and soaked up the company and relaxation that had eluded them the rest of the week. Jean and her husband Floyd had always been the life of those parties, organizing dances and stories and games. One memorable night, Floyd had hooked a dead snake to Henry’s trouser leg with a fishhook and wire, then pointed out the snake with a warning yell. Henry had leapt and yelped and darted every which way to evade the rattler—everyone knew how much he despised snakes—but he of course couldn’t escape. Lathered into a panic, Henry finally dove into the river. It wasn’t until he noticed the uncontrollable laughter of friends who would normally be much more sympathetic that Henry caught on to the prank.

Willa smiled as she recalled this and other river gatherings, then sobered abruptly as she remembered why the parties had ceased. The river had become host to much more horrible events. She still couldn’t bring herself to visit its banks, and it had been over forty years.

“ ’Bout ready?” she asked Jean.

Willa herself was far from it, still stuck under her scalp fryer. She sat up straighter and felt the burn of it on her forehead, perversely grateful for the more manageable pain of the present.

On the grassy lawn of the courthouse square across from Trudi’s Tresses, Bo Waters lay half-hidden in the shade of a hickory tree.

He was Lyn Waters’s great-nephew, the grandson of her late husband’s sister. Bo had left Fayeveille four years previously, immediately after graduating high school, determined never to return. But now that he was done with college and studying for the MCATs, the lure of free lodging and long, slow-paced days had made him reconsider. He’d decided to come back to Fayeveille for six weeks, just to study and save money, and he planned to lie low as he did both.

He’d tried reading in the tiny library catty-corner to the courthouse, but quickly found it stifling. Too many new ideas were crowding themselves into his brain, and he needed

something fresher than trapped air to process them. So he'd set up camp with his books outside, in what used to be the center of town.

The stores along Main Street were all dead or dying now, mortally wounded by the opening of the monolithic HushMart Supercenter a half mile away. Bo understood he should mourn the murder of small town commerce, but at the moment he appreciated the quiet. He hadn't even minded the collection of old broken-down men sitting on the benches between the courthouse and the post office until they'd started talking.

"Reckon Trav'll throw a big to-do if his boy makes it?" one of them rasped.

"Yep, reckon he will."

"That's 'nough to get my vote. Haven't set foot on Brayer Plantation in five years, must be."

"Trav don't call it that no more. It's Brayer Farms now."

"News to me."

"S'posed to help with the colored vote or some shit."

"Shit sounds 'bout right."

Bo willed himself to continue staring at his book. Do not look up, do not give them that satisfaction, he told himself. He wasn't even sure he was denying them glee to begin with. Did they even see him here? Had those comments, that tone, been provoked by his presence, or, had he been elsewhere, would they still have landed like spittle on the parched grass browning in the sun?

This was why Bo had decided to leave Fayeveille; he didn't have time for this. He sighed and tried hard to keep his attention on the diagram of the amygdala on the page in front of him as he wondered whether he was stressed enough to cause his own amygdala to jump-start his adrenal glands. There was no need to get worked up. He had to concentrate. There was a point to his studies, and distractions were only as successful as one let them be. Bo had learned to be strict with his. Forcing himself to stay calm, he focused anew.

The sound of a car horn immediately interrupted him.

"Bo Waters! Is that you?"

He looked up to see two blue-haired old ladies staring at him from the open window of a gigantic Buick. They looked like Martian poodles out for a space cruise. He blinked and registered them.

"Miz Hunt, Miz Butrell, hello," he said as he rose quickly to his feet.

He could feel the benched men staring as he crossed the grass to the waiting car. His MCAT book was heavy and unwieldy, and it made him self-conscious. He turned the cover around so it was facing his leg, away from the gaze of the women before him.

"I thought that was you," Willa said triumphantly. "I didn't know you were back. Why haven't you been to see us?"

Bo smiled politely. He liked Willa Hunt, but knew better than to indulge in any true familiarity. That same old hesitation always hooked him, even with the nicest people.

"I've just been home a couple weeks," he replied good-naturedly.

"Well I'm gonna have to take a switch to your great-aunt Lyn for not telling me so!"

Bo forced himself to smile at this. He thought he saw something flicker in Willa's eyes, perhaps remorse for her choice of phrase? It was too late regardless; her only option was to steamroll ahead. Jean Butrell seemed oblivious, content to let the two of them find their own way out of the quagmire of this already awkward conversation.

"I haven't been able to see nearly any of the people I'd like to yet," Bo said. "I gotta catch up on my catching up, I guess."

Willa smiled, a little gratefully, Bo thought. Though it could have been his imagination.

"Well, the yard's all grown up as usual, so if you wanna make a little money while you're here, just stop on by," she said graciously.

Bo did want to make a little money, but he'd budgeted his time with only the MCATs in mind.

"If I can get a break from studying, I'll be sure to head on over."

"You taking summer classes?" Willa asked. "I thought Lyn said you'd graduated."

She said this kindly, like she'd be nothing but supportive if Bo had failed to stick to the normal schooling schedule. College was a lot to take on, after all.

"I'm all done with regular classes, but I'm taking the MCAT at the end of next month in order to apply to medical school, so I've gotta buckle down for that."

"Oh!" Willa exclaimed, her mouth a perfect O of surprise.

Bo couldn't tell if she was happy to hear this or not.

"Well my, my, that *is* something'," she clucked. "Good for you."

Bo nodded, but said nothing more.

His decision to stay silent led to an uncomfortable pause, something unfamiliar on these Southern streets when ladies of a certain age and breeding were involved. Willa smiled

even more widely to cover it up.

“Well, stop by and see us, ya hear?” she said.

Bo promised he would and raised his hand in goodbye. As the car pulled away, Bo could see Willa and Lyn glance at him in the rearview mirror and burst into chatter, and though an acute muscle spasm coursed through his tensed shoulder, he didn't lower his arm until they had disappeared down the road.

Jiminy scratched her shoulder absentmindedly as she skimmed another almanac. She'd discovered a pile of them in a dresser drawer in a little room at the back of the farmhouse, and had spent a delightful hour thumbing through the decades-old books, marveling at how sure they purported to be about things nobody could possibly know, such as the weather on a particular day, eleven months away. How accurate had these predictions ended up being? she wondered. Were the people who planned their lives by them idiots, or optimists, or both? And what use were the almanacs once their year had past? They became irrelevant, already proven prophetic or off-base, already gone to seed.

Jiminy liked that her grandmother kept the old almanacs around. She felt comforted to know that useless things were welcome here.

Not that Jiminy was comfortable in her uselessness. To the contrary, she longed for a purpose. She always had. Inspired at a young age by Nancy Drew and Jessica Fletcher, and later—nonfictionally—by Erin Brockovich, Jiminy had held vague ambitions of becoming a private eye or a feisty attorney. But these aspirations had taken a backseat to the day-to-day responsibilities of just getting by. Life with an unreliable mother had robbed her of the sense of security necessary for upward mobility. It had rendered her anxious and shortsighted.

When Jiminy was in college, her mother had married a wealthy retiree who delighted in her capriciousness and indulged her every whim. The two of them had taken off to travel the world, ostensibly liberating Jiminy to finally focus entirely on her own life. But the years of worry and insecurity had taken their toll, and instilled in her a reflexive skittishness that she seemed unable to shake.

It had taken all of her nerve just to move to Chicago to pursue law school, and she'd

hoped this accomplishment signaled a new proactive boldness. But once there, Jiminy had continued to feel stunted and hesitant, which frustrated her. Her growing certainty that she was withholding some essential part of herself had filled her with quiet desperation. All of this had come into stark relief in the moments after she'd been taken out by the bike courier. As she'd lain there feeling for broken bones, Jiminy had been filled with revulsion for herself and her inability to fulfill the potential she surely possessed. Concerned that this disgust could harden into something crushing, she'd picked herself up, canceled her life as she knew it, and fled to the first place that popped into her mind. Had the bike courier been wearing a "Keep on Trucking" shirt, she might have ended up in San Francisco. As it was, she found herself in rural Mississippi. Exactly what she was to do now remained a mystery.

Through with the almanacs, Jiminy glanced toward the windowsill and remembered in a flash something she'd discovered about this room nineteen years before and hadn't thought of since. She ran her hands along the wood paneling beneath the window and, sure enough, felt a square portion give a little beneath her fingers. She pressed harder and experienced the same thrill she had as a six-year-old as it sprang open to reveal a secret compartment.

Peering into it, Jiminy found a translucent snail shell perched atop a book. She picked up the book and carefully dusted it off. The black leather cover was painfully cracked. It claimed to be *The Holy Bible*, but the inside pages were homemade and filled with firm, slanted handwriting that Jiminy assumed did not belong to God. The inscription on the first page confirmed this.

Henry Esau Hunt—Recollections and Resolutions

Her grandfather's name, her grandfather's writing. Her grandfather's diary? Jiminy thumbed through the roughly bound pages. The handwriting was very precise, but faded and difficult to read. The first entry was dated January 1, 1954, and titled "Our Wedding Day."

It contained a brief description of the event, really just a record of the fact that Henry Esau Hunt had married Willa Calamity Peal in the presence of their parents and a minister at noon on that New Year's Day. The entry seemed dispassionate enough, though Jiminy supposed it had meant enough to Henry to warrant beginning this book.

From that day forward, it appeared that Henry had made an entry every six months or so, only to record a happening deemed significant. As the years wore on, he began adding slightly to the entries—just bare-boned commentary that hinted at what he might have been feeling at the time. On January 6, 1959, Henry noted that Margaret Peal Hunt was born at eight thirty-five in the morning. Henry had written: “A long, hard night. A joyous day.” Jiminy smiled ruefully, reflecting that her mother continued to be known for such extremes.

She flipped to the last entry, which occurred about two-thirds of the way through the book, with plenty of blank pages left to be filled. It was dated January 1, 1967, and it read: “Hard year, hopeless. Poor Lyn, poor us.” And then, nothing more.

Jiminy knew that her grandfather had died suddenly and unexpectedly when her mother was eight years old. She was less certain that he’d been killed by a lost tribe of Indians hiding in the surrounding hills, or a roving band of land pirates, or a swarm of killer vampire bats up from the Louisiana swamps. All of these explanations had been offered to Jiminy by her mother, with considerable flourishes, but Jiminy had instead accepted a cousin’s report that her mother’s father had succumbed to a massive, sudden pulmonary embolism, and died very prematurely at the age of thirty-two, leaving his wife and daughter to fend for themselves as best they could.

Since Jiminy’s mother had been born in 1959, she would have turned eight years old in 1967, the year of Henry’s final entry. It seemed he’d died before he could make another one. Had the hardness and hopelessness he’d written about brought on the embolism? Was that just a medical term for an unfixable broken heart?

Poor Lyn, poor us. Jiminy assumed the Lyn he referred to was the Lyn she knew. The Lyn who had worked for her grandmother for over fifty years, and in whose indifferent disregard Jiminy had always found a special solace. The most anyone could hope for from Lyn was a gruff affection that could be easily mistaken for dislike. Still, Jiminy had always gravitated toward her, because as shy as Jiminy was, there was something about Lyn that drew her out. Now that she thought about it, Jiminy felt an intense gratitude for Lyn that she’d never adequately expressed. Why hadn’t she? She decided she would. That was something she could do.

Poor Lyn, poor us. What had happened to Lyn? What had happened to all of them?

Jiminy moved backwards through the pages, looking for answers. Her hand paused on an entry that read: “Edward and Jiminy found, buried. Awful.”

For a moment, she felt like she couldn't breathe, like she'd stumbled across a hidden portal into the future and was illicitly reading about her own demise. She'd been found and buried, but how had she died? She shivered. The date of the entry was June 24, 1966. There had obviously been another Jiminy. She'd never in her entire life heard of her, not even in her mother's crazier stories. Who was she?

"Scarin' up the devil in here?"

Jiminy leapt up, slamming the book shut as she whirled around in surprise. Lyn was standing in the doorway, her shoulders stooped with age. She was taken aback by Jiminy's sudden fright. It made her clutch her own heart in solidarity.

"Lord child, what's wrong with you?"

"Sorry," Jiminy replied, somewhat breathlessly.

She wondered if Lyn recognized the book clasped in her hands. Lyn was looking at her strangely.

"Your grandma just wanted to make sure you were still alive since we hadn't heard a peep outta you all mornin'," Lyn said flatly, before turning to leave.

Jiminy stared after her, stricken. She wanted to stop her. She had things to say. She had things to ask.

"Wait," she said, but it came out a whisper that Lyn didn't appear to hear.

"Wait," Jiminy repeated. "Thank you."

She'd meant to say this loudly, and meaningfully, but again the words barely escaped her throat, and they drifted ineffectually toward Lyn's hunched, retreating back, too weak to possibly be heard.

BO WATERS'S BACK HURT from pushing a lawnmower over Willa Hunt's endless yard. When he had done this chore for her years ago, there'd been a tractor-mower he could sit and ride on, turning the task into a relatively painless journey in the hot sun. But now he was stuck with some contraption from the last century, without an engine in sight. It was a hand-powered rotary mower meant for a much smaller lawn than Willa's. Bo was sweating and grunting, and not even done with a sixth of his task. He'd better get paid considerably more for this. He tried to succumb to the rough pleasure of physical exertion—he'd been a decent athlete in high school but hadn't done much since. It occurred to him that perhaps this was his first step back into shape; that maybe he should be grateful for the immense inconvenience of this stupid machine.

As he was distracting himself from his throbbing muscles by cursing the lawn mower, Bo was suddenly stopped by a timid sneeze. He looked toward the sound and saw a movement by the woodpile. Expecting a cat or a groundhog, Bo was startled to see a human form rise slowly from the other side. A female human form.

“Hi,” Jiminy said, sneezing again.

“Hi,” Bo replied, aware of the pollens floating in the air between them. He wondered how many of his curses had been overheard.

“I’m allergic to grass,” Jiminy said, by way of explanation.

“That’s a tough one to avoid,” Bo replied.

Didn’t Jiminy know it. She was allergic to dust also, and wheat, and easy human interaction, or at least it frequently seemed so to her.

“Do I know you? You look familiar,” she said, with her head cocked to the side in an inquisitive way that didn’t feel totally natural to her, but that she hoped was fitting for the moment. Her neck hurt from how she’d been sitting against the woodpile.

“You do, too,” Bo replied. “I’m kin to Lyn. I’m Bo.”

“I’m Jiminy. Willa’s my grandmother.”

They’d made their introductions, declared their affiliations. Jiminy stood waiting for some inspiration about how to continue this conversation. She wanted it to go forward, she liked the look of this guy. It wasn’t just that he was the first person younger than seventy that she’d encountered in the past week, though that probably was part of the attraction. But there was more. He had a smooth assurance to his features that made Jiminy feel calm.

“How old are you?” she blurted.

Bo stared back at her.

“Twenty-one,” he replied. “Is that old enough?”

Jiminy blushed.

“I guess so,” she replied. “Except for renting cars.”

“Who needs a rental car when I’ve got these hot wheels?” Bo replied, lifting up the lawn mower he longed to fling into the nearby river.

Jiminy laughed.

“Are you doing the whole lawn?” she asked.

Bo nodded wearily.

“I should be finished in a couple months. Do you know what happened to your

grandmother's tractor-mower? I'll pay you a thousand dollars if you tell me where it is."

Jiminy laughed again.

"Sorry, I don't know where much of anything is. I haven't been here in years."

"What brings you back?"

Jiminy looked down, unsure of how to answer. Could she say she was running away? Should she tell Bo about her restlessness, and desperation, and how her unsatisfactory world had abruptly folded in on her? Should she mention her mother, and her nervous breakdown destiny? Or admit how random it was that she'd chosen this spot for refuge? She opened her mouth to let all of this out, then closed it again.

"Just getting a break from city life," she managed to say at last.

Bo nodded, unperturbed by Jiminy's awkwardness. He could tell she had plenty more to say, but he felt no urge to pry. Like anyone who wasn't actually from here, Jiminy assumed Fayeville represented a relaxing respite from busier places, but Bo knew there was as much turmoil here as anywhere. If she stuck around, she'd find that out for herself.

"How long you staying?" he asked.

"Just taking it day by day," she answered with a shrug. "How are you related to Lyn?"

"She's my great-aunt. I lived with her some growing up."

Jiminy glanced down at the book in her hand, then snapped her gaze back up to meet Bo's.

"Do you happen to know . . . I mean, I guess you probably would . . . but maybe not, who knows how much families communicate . . . Um, was Lyn ever married, by any chance?"

Bo felt sorry for Jiminy that she had to expend so much effort to ask a simple question. What a difficult way to go through life. He had his challenges, but most of them felt imposed from the outside, not created within. And now Jiminy was looking at him fearfully, like she was worried she'd overstepped her bounds somehow.

"Aunt Lyn was married to my grandma's brother, Edward Waters. And they had a daughter, but she died. He died, too—both a long time ago. Aunt Lyn never hooked up with anyone else, as far as I know."

Jiminy nodded.

"She doesn't talk about it," Bo continued. "No one else does either, to keep from upsetting her. What I know, I heard from a drunk old uncle talking outta school."

Jiminy nodded again. She considered showing Bo her grandfather's diary, but decided to

keep it to herself for the time being.

“Is that a Polaroid camera?” Bo asked.

He was pointing to the camera dangling from her neck. Jiminy had brought it with her from Chicago, to document her decline. She touched it now, and nodded.

“I didn’t even know they made them anymore,” Bo remarked. “I used to love those things. Such instant gratification.”

Jiminy nodded again, in complete agreement. She resisted the urge to snap a photo of Bo right that second.

“So what do people do for fun around here?” she asked instead.

“Oh, we go cow-tipping, throw crab apples at the Hardee’s billboard, make crank calls,” Bo answered.

Jiminy tried to imagine herself doing these things with any amount of enthusiasm. Maybe the crab apple thing, if she actually managed to hit the billboard.

“I’m kidding,” Bo continued. “We’re not that bad off. Though I have been known to spend rainy days in the sports aisle of HushMart. You can get a pretty good basketball game going before they ask you to move on.”

“I’m the queen of HORSE,” Jiminy replied.

It was true. She wasn’t athletic in general, but she had a preternatural talent for making basketball shots. Not while on the move, and she couldn’t dribble or pass or be sure of many rules of the game, but she could get that ball through the hoop from practically any standing position, no matter the distance.

“The queen, huh?” Bo replied.

His tone wasn’t skeptical; it was more amused. Still, Jiminy found herself resenting it. She wasn’t good at many things. She felt she proved this nearly every day.

“I’m not kidding,” she insisted, with uncharacteristic fire. “I’ve never lost a game. I’ve never been anything more than a HOR.”

Bo raised his eyebrows.

“H-O-R,” she clarified, feeling her face flush.

Bo grinned and put his hands up in surrender.

“Do you coach lesser players?” he asked.

“Anytime,” Jiminy answered, surprised at her confidence.

“I’m gonna come find you when I finish this,” Bo said, motioning to the vast expanse of

unmown lawn around him. "If I live that long."

Jiminy smiled, happy to realize she still could.