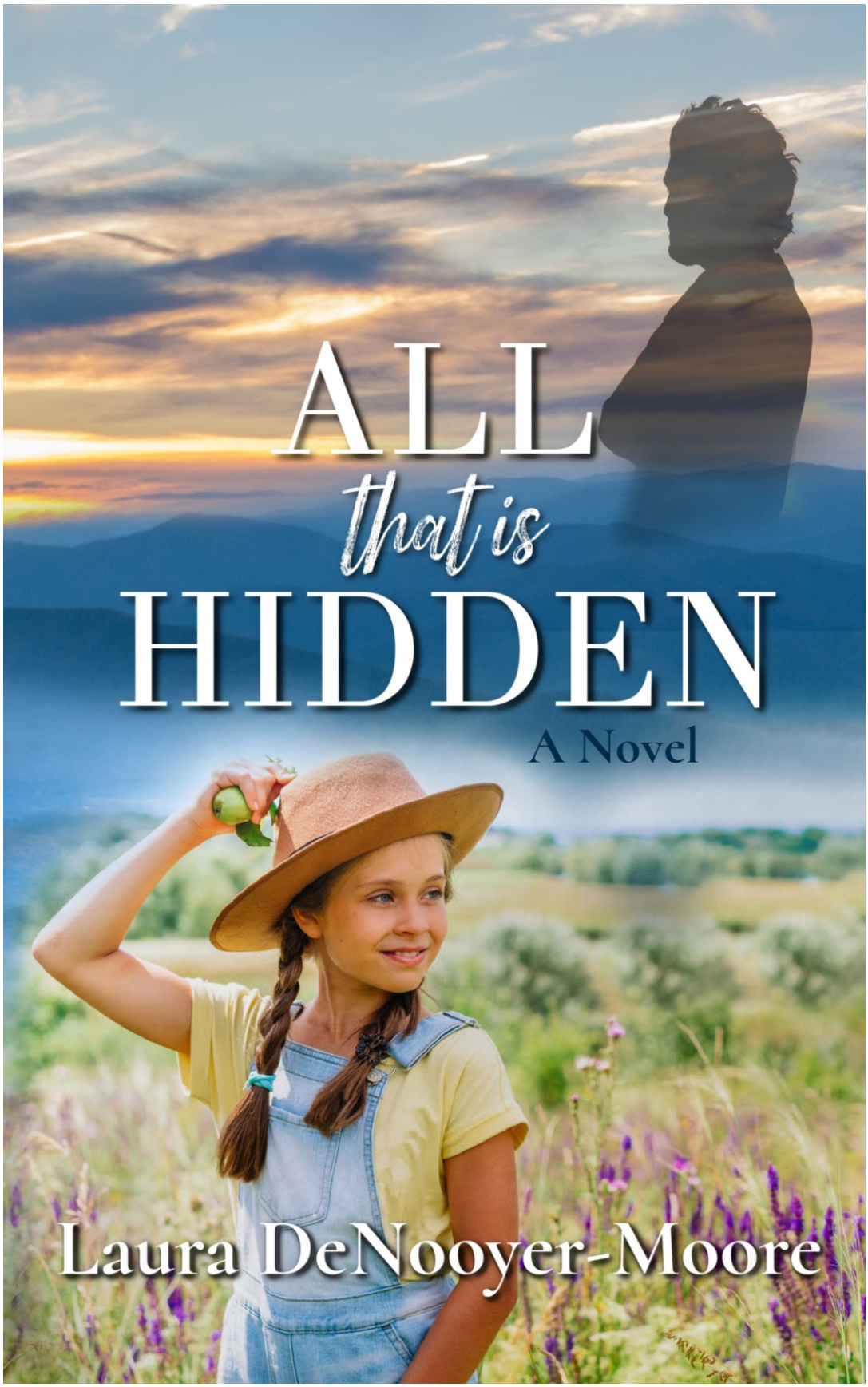

ALL
that is
HIDDEN
A Novel
Laura DeNooyer-Moore

All That Is Hidden Prequel

About the story . . .

Are secrets worth the price they cost to keep?

Ten-year-old Tina Hamilton finds out the hard way. She always knew her father had a secret. But all of God's earth to Tina are the streams for fishing, the fields for romping, a world snugly enclosed by the blue-misted Smokies. Nothing ever changed.

Until the summer of 1968. Trouble erupts when northern exploitation threatens her tiny southern Appalachian town.

Some folks blame the trouble on progress, some blame the space race and men meddling with the moon's cycles, and some blame Tina's father.

A past he has hidden catches up to him as his secret settles in like an unwelcome guest. The clash of progressive ideas and small town values escalates the collision of a father's past and present.

~~~~~~~~

All That Is Hidden unfolds the story of how her father's secret unravels, told from Tina's adult perspective as she reflects on the summer of 1968.

Whether you've read the novel or not, I think you'll enjoy delving into this Hamilton family tale that takes place twelve years prior. Tina's mom shares her own side of the story of Drew's unexpected return to North Carolina. Despite all of his secrets, community gossip about his long absence, and her parents' warnings, Jennie is smitten by Drew Hamilton. If she lets him captivate her heart, folks promise she'll regret it.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Rindlewood, North Carolina, 1956

I stared out the drugstore window, sunshine masking the chill that meandered inside.

A blackberry winter, that's what they call it. A cool spell plunked smack dab in the middle of May, now dribbling over to June. Nothing good comes of it, no siree. Already, Ma's azaleas and buttercups folded up like a toddler playing hide-and-seek, curled up behind the cushion. This morning I helped her re-cover the blooms before I came to work.

Five minutes after five, the clock said. Mr. Dudley left me to close up the store. I'd only been back from college in Durham for a week, and he already trusted me with the keys. It helped that I'd worked here the past two summers. And he was plumb tuckered out.

I busied myself closing down the soda fountain, which resembled more of a cafe lately since we offered sandwiches, too. I wiped down crumbs, spills, and stickiness from the raspberry jam jar--razzleberry, I preferred to call it, having worked with the young-uns in the throes of Dr. Seuss and nursery rhymes.

I would have graduated last month if I'd started college right after high school. But I worked two years first to help Pa scrape tuition money together.

When someone rapped on the door, I dropped a napkin holder. It clunked on the floor. Who in the Sam Hill was that? Couldn't he see we're closed?

Some sad sack stood outside, looking like he'd been working all day in the woods. Maybe a lumberjack. I strode to the door and pointed to the "Closed" sign hanging there.

He knocked again. It was a blackberry winter, after all. Nothing good comes of that.

Again, I pointed to the sign, pursed my lips, and set hands on hips as if I meant business.

More knocking. This fellow wasn't giving up. I leaned toward the window, exaggerating lip movement with each word. "We. Are. Closed."

That face peered inside and glory be, it reeled me back fifteen years to the logging camp when I was seven, when Ma was chief cook and bottle washer, and Pa managed 120 men cutting down pines to send downriver to the Hamilton sawmill in Currie Hill ten miles away. One of those younger workers was . . . could it be?

I unlocked the door and opened it.

The man stepped in with his grizzled chin and sparkling brown eyes with that hint of mischief I knew all too well. A schoolboy face with a lot more wisdom etched in it. And the handsomest sight I ever laid eyes on even though he was ten years my senior.

He handed me a quarter. “Let it be to your credit you’re saving a life right now, miss. Can I trouble you for a Coke? Keep the change for the inconvenience.”

“Why, Drew Hamilton! Is is really you? Welcome back. You’ve been gone a coon’s age.”

He looked at me like I was a fragment of a lost dream. “I’m sorry, miss, I can’t seem to place you.” His southern drawl was softened by northern inflections.

“Of course not. I was seven when you last saw me.” I lowered my voice as if divulging a big secret, but he needed the prompting. “I didn’t ever want to call this to mind again, but remember that frog . . .”

That was fifteen years ago when I was seven and he was seventeen. One morning when Drew was fixing to light out for the woods, he joked with my ma and ordered frog legs for dinner that night. I chanced to overhear him and decided that frog legs was exactly what he was gonna get, a lavish of it, right on his dinner plate. My brother Garrett and I hunted for the best frog with the best pair of legs. Somehow we got it on Drew’s plate just in time for supper.

I'll never forget the look on Drew's face when he saw a big bullfrog a-staring back at him, right atop his 'taters, too. Boy, was he furious! After a long, hard day of work, and famished, he had to wait in line again for another plate. Garrett made sure I got the blame and Ma walloped me. "We've 120 mouths to feed," she said, "and you up and spoil perfectly good food. How dare you task me like that."

Back to this full-grown man standing before me. Drew broke into a wide grin. "No, I'll never forget that frog on my plate, right alongside my biscuit and beans. That's on your permanent record, Jennie Ross."

I handed him a bottle of Coke. "Let's hope my credit in saving your life today remains clearer in your memory than the other incident."

"Perhaps it will." He popped the top off and took a swig. "Mmm. That hits the spot. But I recollect that I promised retaliation."

"I won't hold it against you if you don't keep your word. And the statute of limitations has long since passed for exacting revenge."

"I reckon so." He guzzled more, then set the bottle down. "I'm sorry I didn't recognize you, but everything looks the same here. The mountains and trees--excusing the chestnuts--the streams, the hills. So timeless, I'm surprised folks are older, children have grown up."

"Like my siblings and me. Garret and Graham moved out east. Parker's back from journalism school and working for the newspaper. Elaine's finishing high school. Have a seat here while I finish cleaning." I gestured to a stool at the counter.

He hesitated. "You're not gonna serve me frog legs, are you?"

I chuckled. "No frog legs at the drugstore. Incidentally, if you hadn't paid us young-uns any mind back then, we wouldn't have latched on to you like a cocklebur in sheep's wool."

He narrowed his eyes and took a seat. “So you’re saying I brought that frog fiasco on myself by being too friendly to you little firecrackers?”

“I surely am.” I smiled and continued wiping things down. “Now what’re you doing in this neck of the woods? And before that?” I’d only caught rumors of his life in New York.

“We’re working a stand of pines down the road apiece. Been back here a month now.”

“I hear tell you were living high on the hog in the big city.”

“This farmer boy is returning to his roots. And high on the hog’s an exaggeration. I was working as an architect. After I served my army time and the war ended, I went to University of Michigan for my degree, then landed a job in New York City.”

I whistled. “Well, don’t that beat all. You gonna lay all those rumors to rest now?”

“Which ones?”

“Some say you took over a corporation so big it put others out of business. Other say you adopted a life of crime. You know how the city corrupts. Reckon it’s all slack talk, but everyone in the county concluded that Drew Hamilton was never coming back to puny little Currie Hill.”

“That’s what they say, eh?” He swirled the Coke in his bottle.

I paused my cloth on the countertop. “That’s the gist of it. It wonders me how you could come back here and be properly content. You know, after . . .”

His mouth twitched into the most endearing smirk. “After living so high on the hog?”

“Yeah.” I smiled. “After getting used to city ways and all. And talking like a northerner. Might take you a spell to fit in here again. Especially the way you say *hills* and *south* now. Only one measly syllable instead of the right proper way. *Hee-ills* and *say-outh* . . .” I drew out the words for emphasis.

"Leftovers from being up north." He chuckled and finished his Coke, but he didn't leave. "I'm here for good now. The Smokies are my home. And if you don't mind some extra business, I'd like to order a sandwich."

"With peanut butter and razzleberry jam?"

He raised a quizzical eyebrow and I giggled. "That's leftovers from teacher aiding in first grade last semester." I felt silly, but he smiled as if appreciating a good joke.

I made him a salami sandwich and poured him some water. We talked for another hour. He asked me a powerful slew of questions about my schooling. Made me feel like the most wanted girl at a corn shucking.

When I left the drugstore that evening, I was so warm I didn't even wear my jacket. Either blackberry winter was over or I was so took in by Drew Hamilton that I could have walked through a blizzard and not noticed.

****

The next three afternoons, Drew popped in at ten after five, like clockwork. He bought a Coke with a quarter and let me keep the change, then sat on the stool while I closed down the drugstore. He ordered a sandwich and we kept right on talking--about my family, his family, my schooling, his logging days, the Hamilton sawmill and farm--but not much about his time in New York. He only gave vague answers and deflected my questions.

That final day, he said, "Sorry I can't get here earlier. I'd like to do this right proper, though, and drop by your house on Sunday to ask your parents for permission to court you."

Somehow I had the presence of mind to not gape. Surely my cheeks turned as red as that Coca-cola logo. I was flabbergasted. He was so much older and smarter, more educated. Why was he interested in me? I was about as worldly wise as Ma's azaleas. I was country mouse to his

city mouse. Yet I managed to answer. “I’d like that very much.” His concern with tradition by asking permission impressed me.

The best thing I ever did that week was open the door for Drew Hamilton. And open my heart.

****

“Granny sakes alive, child!”

It was the second time in thirty seconds Ma uttered the same exclamation. That’s after I forewarned her and Pa that Drew Hamilton was coming over to ask to court me.

Ma rolled out biscuit dough, a task like salve for her disappointment in droopy flowers four days prior. “Granny sakes alive . . .” She shook her head.

Cringing, I handed my silent daddy a mug of coffee made from chicory, guaranteed to encourage a good mood. Chicory--the word alone was enough to coax a smile. “What’re you thinking, Pa?”

Pa rocked back and forth in his rocker. “How long you two been carrying on?”

Just like Pa to answer a question with a question.

“We ain’t carrying on, Pa. We’ve just been talking, real friendly-like at the drugstore.” Never mind without a chaperone.

Ma rolled the dough faster. “Harold, did you hear tell that Drew Hamilton was back?”

“Heard rumblings of the sort. Got back a few weeks ago. He’s working in Fred’s crew.”

“Where was he before that?” Ma huffed with judgement.

Dismayed by Ma’s outburst, I tried to remain calm and reasonable. “After the army, he went to University of Michigan for architecture, then worked in New York City.”

“He’s all done working in the big city?” Ma asked.

"He wanted to move back here. For good. Claims he's a Tar Heel now."

Ma's unleashed her aggravation on the dough, rolling even faster. "He just up and moved back here?"

"Says he was right done with city ways."

"Hmm. So he comes back here with a degree in architecture--"

"Business, too." Setting plates on the table, I fumbled one and caught it.

"And business, just to chop down trees. How long is he gonna be happy doing that?"

"You can ask him those questions yourself," I said, hating to be on the defensive.

"I will. And plenty more. Like how many women did he have his way with in the city?"

Surely I flushed as red as a bear's behind in pokeberry time. I glanced at Pa. "Mama!" Thank goodness my nosy younger sister wasn't listening.

"A city slicker like him would like nothing better than coming back here to take advantage of an innocent like you." Ma clamped a round cutter in the dough to form a biscuit. "Not to mention, he's ten years older than you. Why's he hankering after a spring chicken?" The cutter hit the table again. *Plunk, plunk, plunk.*

This whole time, Pa had hardly broken rhythm with his rocking. "Now Dorothy, you usually give folks the benefit of the doubt."

"Not potential beaus. Not ones who been in the city for so long with hardly a peep." Ma looked up, her gaze piercing mine. "As your Granny MacKenzie used to say, you've gotta have both eyes wide open before you belly flop into the whirlpool of love and can't see your way out."

Pa sipped his coffee, but no smile emerged from the chicory. "I share your concerns, Dorothy, but let's withhold judgement till we meet the fellow again. The Hamilton clan's a good

one. Drew was always a hard worker back then, honest and trustworthy. Still is, from what I hear. And Jennie's got a good head on her shoulders."

Ma harrumphed. "Nobody does when love comes knocking."

****

That evening I took inventory of Drew Hamilton. I'd only known him four days, mind you, but seems I could check off every item on my mental list. Kind. Respectful. Easy to talk to. His good looks put Rock Hudson to shame. His sense of humor could make the squirrels drop their acorns and even start sharing. Loves fishing and the outdoors. Hardworking. Responsible. Educated and knows Tolstoy from Dickens. Discusses a right smart heap of subjects without being a know-it-all.

Unlike every simpleton in Madison County who never ventured outside a twenty-mile radius. Unlike every co-ed I'd met. At college, fellows my age still acted like schoolboys. Drew was as good a man as God ever blowed breath in. I just hoped my folks would agree.

At church Sunday morning, I could hardly concentrate on the sermon for worrying about Drew's visit that afternoon. Would my parents like him? Would they see the same man I did?

After a dinner of fried chicken and mashed potatoes that I could barely eat due to prickly nerves, I gathered the heartier peaches that survived the cooler days of blackberry winter, and made a peach cobbler. My sister Elaine, a high school senior, wanted to help but I wouldn't let her. I wanted Drew to eat something I made myself. I asked her to set the table instead. She did so, as calm as could be. I kept bumping bowls and dropping spoons.

Ma peered into the kitchen. "My, my, the tables have turned. Now Elaine's operating as smooth as a carousel horse, while Jennie's got the intensity of a tractor at plow time."

That astute observation did little to settle my nerves.

The aroma of warm peaches and cinnamon filled the house by the time Drew arrived. Answering the door, I willed my parents to be on their best behavior.

There he was, clean-shaven, washed and scrubbed in his Sunday slacks and a collared shirt, all fancy and fresh from church in Currie Hill. I made the introductions and we stumbled through amiable small talk on our way to the table. I served peach cobbler with whipping cream and poured apricot tea and coffee made from dandelion roots.

Elaine grinned. “Jennie made the cobbler all by herself.” She sounded like a second grader with sprightly gossip.

I nudged her under the table.

Drew smiled. “I’m looking forward to it.”

My usually reticent Pa settled into discussing the lumberjack business. Drew offered appropriate nods and questions. So far, so good. Then Drew asked Ma about her years of rug making and woven blankets, made of wool from our own sheep. Ma’s eyes lit as she talked. Bonus points for Drew.

I kept a strict watch on everybody’s faces to gauge their reactions to Drew. Despite his obvious northern inflections betraying his city years, no cause for concern yet.

Drew asked Elaine about her senior year in high school, and future plans.

Elaine babbled about her beau and possibly just working at the department store until Pa let them marry. “I don’t have the same ambitions Jennie has. She wants to be an elementary school teacher. But maybe you know that already.”

“I do.” Drew swallowed some coffee. “I reckon she’ll be a powerful good one, too, with her smarts and enthusiasm.”

Pa cleared his throat. “Drew, what are your own plans now that you’re back?”

Drew set down his fork with his last bite of cobbler. “This year I’ll finish out the logging and tinkering on my father’s sawmill with my brother Ross. Next spring, I’ll for certain start working the land with Daddy and Ross, and stick to farming the rest of my days.”

Pa wiped crumbs off his beard. “That’s a mighty contrast to your work in New York. Jennie said you got book-learning for architecture and business.”

“Yes, sir. At University of Michigan. I was fortunate to land a good job upon graduation and moved to New York City.”

“What kind of projects did you work on at your firm?” Pa asked.

Drew sat back, opened his mouth, then hesitated. “A variety. We designed commercial properties. Restaurants, theaters, and shops. That sort of thing.”

“What did you like about it?”

A frown rippled Drew’s forehead. “I enjoy designing things. Coming up with ideas, then drawing up the plans.”

“Then seeing those plans come to life, I reckon,” Pa said.

Drew nodded. “That’s the payoff.” He seemed quite intent on finishing off his cobbler.

Pa slurped his coffee. “Reckon you’ll miss designing things now that you’re back here logging and farming.”

“Tinkering on the sawmill and whittling wooden toys will take its place.”

“What’s it like in New York City?” Elaine asked.

Drew chuckled. “Multiply Asheville by a thousand and stretch buildings to the clouds. Put fifty honking cars on each block and you’ve got yourself a New York City.”

Elaine lifted a forkful of whipping cream. “What do they eat there?”

"Anything you have a hankering for. Fettuccine and spaghetti in Little Italy, then head to Chinatown for egg rolls, dim sum pork, and moo goo gai pan."

"Moo goo gai pan . . . " I tasted the words.

"Only to be eaten with chopsticks. A feat in and of itself."

Ma batted the air. "Nothing compares to good ole chicken dumplings and grits."

Everyone chortled, even Pa. Then he sobered. "Why'd you come back, Drew?"

I braced myself.

Drew straightened. "Mr. Ross, I had enough of city ways to last a lifetime. The pace there is grueling. Competition is relentless. Prices are astronomical. Truth be told, a body can only take it for so long."

Ma piped in. "What attracted you to the city in the first place?"

"During my army time, I visited a variety of cities that intrigued me. The notion of studying architecture was compelling. I wanted to give it a go."

Pa eyed him closely. "What circumstances would have kept you in New York?"

Drew wiped his chin though there wasn't a crumb. "Fair question." Was he reaching for the truth? Or searching for a palatable answer? What *was* the truth? "I was plumb wore out, Mr. Ross. If I'd had the gumption, I could've stayed on for a longer spell. But I longed for home. I gained a greater appreciation for my roots here, for my family."

Ma pursed her lips. "I reckon that's from not seeing them even once in those fifteen years you was gone."

Pa scowled as if to silence her. I could have served the tension on a plate.

"That's right, Mrs. Ross. I didn't come back in all that time. Now I regret it. I'd latched onto a different way of living while I was there, and wasn't knowing how to combine that world with this one."

Ma opened her mouth but Pa patted her arm. Her lips tightened.

Drew continued. "I assure you, I'm back here for good."

Pa cocked his head. "You reckon you'll just fit in as if you never left in the first place?"

"No, sir. Folks have their suspicions. I know how it is in these parts. Nobody trusts a soul who hightails it to the city. Let alone somebody who comes back. It'll take time."

I could almost hear Ma thinking, *You got that right.*

Drew straightened. "Which brings me to my purpose for being here today. I'd like to speak to you privately about Jennie, sir."

"You can speak your mind right here at this table, Drew," Pa said.

Drew cleared his throat. "All right, then. I'll understand if you ain't partial to this notion, but I'd like permission to court your daughter."

I could hardly breathe. Why did Pa have Drew ask right in front of me? What if Pa said no? I was sweating like a greased pig.

Pa leaned forward. "What do you see in my daughter?"

Drew smiled. "I see a young woman who's just as beautiful inside as out. She loves God and her family, and has a passion for education. She notices folks who are hurting, and wants to help. She's intelligent. Bright and cheerful and friendly. She's the kind of woman I want in my life permanently, the kind who makes me want to protect her and care for her so she can be the person she's meant to be."

The skin on my neck prickled at such a lovely speech. Was he really talking about me? I wanted to throw myself in his arms.

Drew tapped his fork on the plate, his expression intense. “Mr. and Mrs. Ross, I also gotta figure out how to get back at Jennie for that frog leg dinner she served me.”

Nervous laughter circled the table then silenced.

I made an effort to breathe, but every muscle numbed.

Pa offered his hand. “I perceive your honorable intentions, Drew. You have my permission to court Jennie.”

****

After we finished peach cobbler, Elaine hauled the games over and plopped them on the table. We played Clue and Yahtzee for two hours. Then Drew left with a promise to take me fishing on Saturday.

The minute he walked out the door, Ma set in. “As fickle as the wind, taking up city ways and coming back here. I don’t confidence that any more than I can throw a cow by the tail.”

“I don’t see no grounds for objections yet.” Pa sat in his rocker. “He’s always been a hard worker, good at motivating the others. A good influence.”

“Did his answers satisfy you?” Ma crossed her arms. “Why he went to the city, why he came back. Hmmph.”

“I suspect there’s more than meets the eye.” Pa started rocking. “His answers were vague. I reckon he suffered some kind of failure on his job. That’ll silence a man.”

“Failure or not, he can’t be one of us anymore. He was in the city too many years to still belong to these mountains.” Ma turned to me. “He’d better do right by you, Jennie. You’d best find out more about him. Get him to talk about those years.”

"Maybe that's nobody's business," I said.

But she wouldn't abide that notion. She rattled off a list of questions I should ask, squelching each of my protests. I felt like a bug arguing with a chicken.

****

I was used to fishing with my dad and brothers. And I was used to cleaning and gutting fish with Mama and Granny. But I wasn't used to sitting on the riverbank next to Drew Hamilton who smelled like cedarwood and laughed like a rushing stream. Taking in the pleasure of his company made me as addlepated as all get out.

He saw to my comfort, showed me his fishing techniques, and listened to me babble as if nothing would pleasure him more. I could be myself, not some woman in New York City who might have to play the approval game.

After an hour, we'd fetched a bucket of bass and settled into swapping funny family stories, pondering *Great Expectations* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*--a thrill for me that he was well-read in literature--and discussing pros and cons of planting by the signs.

"Ma and I *always* plant our garden by the signs. If you don't plant beans two days before the full moon or at least when the signs are in the arms, the beans will be speckled and they'll plumb rot." I said this as if declaring Biblical prophecy.

"Have you ever tried planting beans under a different sign or under a new moon?"

I jolted. "Of course not. Why in the Sam Hill would I?"

"To test if tradition's really true."

"I don't need to experiment to know the truth."

He chuckled. "Well, suit yourself. But I don't think it would hurt any."

"Don't you all plant by the signs?"

"Don't rightly have a choice with my daddy running the farm. He swears by it. Gotta plant potatoes by the old moon. My ma only does her pickling by the new moon. Just this week we planted corn. Pa insists on it when poplar leaves grew as big as squirrel ears, the dogwoods bloom, and the whippoorwill calls. But I don't put as much stock in dogwoods, full moons, or constellations."

Perhaps that was a sign in and of itself. Maybe he wasn't one of us after all. Thank goodness Ma wasn't nearby to hear such flapdoodle. "Are you talking that way 'cause of your time in the city?"

"Hardly. The signs are valid but not necessary. There's plenty of folks here who don't pay attention to signs for planting and harvesting anymore. Been that way for decades."

I crossed my arms. "I don't understand that one bit." His stance prompted Mom's voice in my head. *You'd best find out more about him. Get him to talk about those years.* I shifted and fiddled with blades of grass. "You've had a long time away to be pondering such things. Starting with your army time. What was it like being in the army?"

He leaned against a tree trunk and faced the river. "It was rough. I didn't have to fight in the front lines but I found enemies in men who were supposed to be my comrades. A lot of folks don't like us southerners. But I had a few friends in my unit. Traveling outside of the Smokies and then outside of the States opened my eyes to new vistas."

Whoa, back up the wagon. He summarized four years in three seconds. "So you got bad treatment from fellows in your own troop?"

His brow wrinkled. "Yeah, but I don't like dwelling on that. I served my country. For that I'm proud."

"You should be."

"And that experience compelled me to try college." He shared a few tidbits of his university years as if offering a mere forkful of meat from a gigantic pork stew.

"What was your favorite architectural project in New York?"

His eyes lit as he described details about a particular restaurant he'd designed. A harmless topic he took his time with.

"Seems you'll miss designing things now. Can't you be an architect down here?"

"Nobody's hiring." He smirked.

"Yeah, not much new architecture goes up in these parts. Truth be told, not much new of anything happens around here."

"Therein lies its charm." He afforded me a smile, then took my hand. "I hope you always stay the same, Jennie Ross. There ain't nothing more charming."

My face heated. My spine prickled at his touch. "But I don't understand why you left a good job that you really liked."

Withdrawing his hand, he faced the river again, brow furrowed. "Like I told your pa, the competition runs something fierce in a company like that. The headaches started to outweigh the pleasures."

That assessment was as vague as grits without butter or salt. I ventured lightly. "What happened?"

The gurgling river made itself known in Drew's silence. The whippoorwill's triple chant and squirrels' ruckus in the branches filled the gap.

"I just couldn't abide the rat race anymore. Things you have to do to climb the ladder of success." He pursed his lips.

Had he failed? Did he have to forfeit a project to a competitor? I hardly knew what questions to ask about such a foreign world. “So did one big bad thing happen or a bunch of little things add up?” I tensed waiting for his reply.

“It’s still too fresh, hard to talk about.”

“It’s too bad you didn’t have family close by to see you through. Must have been hard being so far away.”

Again, nature’s music filled in the the blank spaces.

He finally spoke. “I did have family there. My brother Sid lives in New York. We saw each other from time to time.”

“Does he ever come back here to visit?”

“Now and then.”

“But you didn’t.”

He shook his head.

“It’s lonely without family. I can’t imagine it. At least you had your brother.”

He turned my way. “He wasn’t my only family.”

I tilted my head. “What do you mean?”

“I was married for a couple of years.”

His words stunned me. “You got married in New York?”

“Yes.”

“Did your folks go to the wedding?”

“No. I . . . I didn’t tell them till after the fact.”

“And you never brought your wife back here to meet them?”

“No. She was a city gal . . . would have hated it here.”

I frowned. I didn't want to think of him with a city gal. Especially not one who wouldn't want to come here to meet his family. "What happened to her?"

He glanced my way. "She passed away . . . she was took down sick for a spell."

"I'm so sorry." Maybe that was the reason he finally came back home, full of grief. But then why was he wanting to court me? "How long ago did . . ."

"About a year ago."

"What's her name?"

"Sonia."

I swallowed. "What was she like?"

He fidgeted and gazed beyond the river. "She was kind and sweet . . . very thoughtful. I met her when she was a secretary in my firm."

I wanted to ask more questions but it didn't seem right. "I'm so sorry you lost her. Did *her* family live close by?"

"No." Though we'd packed up our fishing gear, he hooked a fishing lure and cast his line. Part of him went with it, into deeper waters where I wasn't invited.

****

Later that afternoon, Ma and I cleaned and gutted the fish at home. Drew helped Pa with house projects while Ma, Elaine, and I cooked up a dinner of fried fish, cheesy grits, hushpuppies, and green beans with bacon. He left after an hour of Yahtzee. Ma wasted no time in priming the pump for information, but I declined sharing what I believe he told me in confidence. I told Ma she needn't worry.

****

The next two months flashed by in a whirlwind. Not wanting to get me in trouble at work, Drew didn't stop by the drugstore anymore, but I saw him weekly. We took walks, went fishing, drove to town for ice cream, ate supper with my family or his, and played games. We certainly didn't court as if he had big-time money from his city days. I kept wondering about Sonia, how much he missed her. If his heart still ached. If she and I were similar or different. But those worries were fabricated in my own head. Drew treated me like I was the only one he ever paid any mind to.

And he kept teasing me to watch out. When I least expected it, he was gonna repay me for that frog dinner I served him.

When I wasn't with Drew, the hours drooped like Ma's azaleas during blackberry winter. Ma and I tended her vegetable and herb garden. She continued to teach me how to use herbs medicinally. We brewed her cure-all spring tonic--good for any season--with sassafras, spicebush, sweet birch, and morel. We dug up dandelion roots to wash, peel, roast, and grind for coffee. We made tea from scrubbed sassafras bark--peeled it, boiled, it, then sweetened it with sugar. We threaded green beans and hung them to dry--called leather breeches, to eat in winter.

If I got married, she was bound and determined that I enter the holy state of matrimony with all the knowhow of traditional ways to run a household. We come from a long line of Scots-Irish loggers and sawyers, carpenters and woodcarvers, fishermen and hunters, farmers and fiddlers, peppering the Blue Ridge hollows of Yancey, Buncombe, and Madison Counties since the mid-1700s. But most important in Ma's eyes, we knew how to care for our own with home remedies.

One Saturday she was baking a dried apple stack cake while I peeled sassafras bark. She cracked two eggs in a bowl, and set the eggshells on the table. Though she was a practical, God-fearing woman, she never threw eggshells away before the cake was baked, for fear of bad luck.

She stirred the batter. “This afternoon let’s get started carding and braiding some wool for a rug for your future home.”

“What future home?”

“You’re plumb headed toward marriage, girl, whether I like it or not.”

“Drew hasn’t said one thing about marriage.”

“How about love?”

“No, not yet.”

“But it’s there in his eyes.” She frowned. “Yours, too. You got stars!” She patted my cheek. “Look at you. A lilt in your voice. A sprightly step.”

I sighed. “Loving Drew Hamilton’s as easy as falling off a log.”

Ma stood hands on hips. “You’ve done belly flopped off that log into the whirlpool of love. You’re stuck.”

No sense denying it. “Stuck but not drowning, happy as all get out.”

“Nothing good’s gonna come of this. It’s getting worse and worse.”

“Or better and better.” Ma’s objections made me want to chuck those eggshells before she even put the cake in the oven. “You seem to like Drew well enough whenever he’s here.”

“Like you said, it’s as easy as falling off a log. But he was still gone a passel of years.”

“I told you he and I talked about that.”

Ma stirred cake batter like she was racing to the County Fair. “Did he tell you everything?”

"Everything I need to know."

"Humph. Meaning there's a right heap left unsaid."

"Ma, it's not what you think. He didn't live a life of crime or go to jail or anything horrid like that."

"What *did* he tell you?" She thunked an empty cake pan on the table.

"That the army was a rough time. That he liked his job until . . . it got too stressful." *And that he was married before.* No, that would raise eyebrows. "Ma, you don't need to worry. Love can overcome any secrets he might still have. He'll eventually tell me more if he needs to. He's learning to trust me."

Ma pursed her lips as if preparing to spout. Then she did. "He's the getting-aroundest man I know. No telling--"

"But he don't act like one." Desperate for an ally, I turned to my father. "I think he's proving himself. Don't you, Pa?"

Pa rocked across the room, reading the newspaper. "Time will tell. It pleasures me having him around the house for family dinner, helping with repairs, too. I've got my eye on him, and I'm giving him the benefit of the doubt." He raised an eyebrow. "For now."

****

In August, Drew drove me to dinner at his folks' house in Currie Hill, a fifteen minute drive. Nicholas and Emma Hamilton were still getting used to their son being back in town. Seems they didn't know what to make of me at first, but they knew my parents and welcomed me warmly each time I came.

On the way, Drew stopped downtown Currie Hill at Bob Hutchins' woodworking shop to ask for advice on a fence he was mending. I went inside with him. The woodworker's head of

furry white hair bobbed enthusiastically as he greeted us. While the two men talked fences, I studied the beautiful walnut rocking chairs he'd made, lining the wall.

The bell over the door tinkled, taking our attention. In walked a stranger in fine pressed slacks, a white button-down collared shirt, and a tie. Seemed out of place in Currie Hill.

"Hello, Phil," Bob said. "Drew, have you met Phil Kepler yet? He's been popping in from New York all summer." Bob's southern drawl flattened a bit as if to accommodate the northerner.

Phil Kepler froze. Drew's face paled. Why?

Phil broke the ice with a grin. "Why, Drew, I wondered when I would run into you. How have you been?" He extended his hand.

Drew moved in slow motion, as if a string lifted his arm against his will. They shook hands. "What are you doing down here, Phil?" His voice was business-like. No hint of his roots. Not exactly the epitome of southern hospitality, either. Had they worked together in New York?

"You always talked about the beauty of the Smokies. I figured it was time to see for myself. I'm getting the lay of the land."

"You've been here all summer?"

"On and off. I've had some free time to explore."

Drew's face darkened. "I know the kind of exploring you do. This isn't the right place. I suggest you go back home."

My heart was hammering by now. What was going on?

Phil didn't seem as nearly concerned as I was. "This is starting to feel like home to me. It sure can't compete with New York City."

Drew frowned. “Bob, Jennie, excuse us. Phil, we need to talk outside.” He headed out the door. Phil followed.

There I stood with Bob Hutchins who looked as puzzled as I did. I mustered a smile. “I love your chairs, Mr. Hutchins. I declare, they are the most downright gorgeous chairs I’ve seen. Remarkable workmanship.”

“Thank you, Miss Jennie.” With his furry head bobbing, he proceeded to give me a tour of his shop and demonstrated machinery. He made a chair so solid he balanced it on one leg with all his weight on it.

Ten minutes later, Drew returned for me. Phil Kepler was nowhere in sight.

Back in the car, I sputtered, “What in the Sam Hill was that all about? You knew that man in New York?”

Drew hunkered over the steering wheel, grasping it for dear life. We went down Main Street to the country road toward his parents’ property. “He’s a part of New York I thought I’d left behind. Used to be good friends.”

“What happened?”

“Let’s just say . . . we don’t see eye to eye anymore.”

Again, vague like grits without butter or salt.

“Why is he here? You seemed shocked to see him.”

“More than shocked.”

“Appalled. You were white as a ghost.”

He pulled into the driveway, trembling. “It’s a long story I can’t get into right now.”

“Are you gonna be alright?” I touched his arm.

He closed his eyes. “After supper, I’ll tell you more.”

We got through supper but not without his mother noting his lack of appetite three times. At least his brothers Ross and Eddie were there to pick up the slack. And Ross's wife and kids.

My own appetite lagged, too. My stomach teetered on edge. Though Mrs. Hamilton was a right smart cook, that night her chicken and dumplings were as appealing as cold grits.

After supper, we excused ourselves for a walk though the fields, our long shadows preceding us. "Phil and I used to work together. He actually helped me land my first job. I . . . can't say much about that now, but here's why I'm back to stay."

I was all ears.

"When I was in high school, my backyard was these fields and those hills." He gestured to the mountain ahead. "I traipsed all over and chanced upon a man who lived in the spruce woods past Strawberry Gap, as dark as a pocket up there. Old Man Fuller, they called him. He told the best stories about bear hunts and Halloween pranks. When he learned that I liked carving toys and figures, he showed me the shed behind his house. He had a whole slew of machines run by a generator, some bought and some custom-built. Better than a dozen drills, a jigsaw and other saws, plus dumifutchets he'd concocted himself. And a heap of hand tools to boot."

"He was a carpenter?"

"He didn't make furniture. He made marquetry, intricate pictures from a variety of wood grains that fit like a puzzle. He made pictures of trees, birds, mountains, landscapes, you name it. He told me he had nobody to teach his craft to, nobody who could figure out all the machines without his help. He started teaching me for the next few months. I was eager to learn. Just before I left for the army, I promised Old Man Fuller I'd be back directly after the war to learn it all. That was 1941." He wiped sweat off his forehead.

My stomach tightened with sad anticipation.

"But I didn't come back. As you know." He paused. "I came down here in early May to visit my folks, after fifteen years. My first day back, I was fixing to see Old Man Fuller to finally keep my promise. But my pa says . . ." Drew's voice cracked. "He said Old Man Fuller's dead, buried most of two months by then. There was a fire in his machine shed . . . he never got out." He sighed. "The townsfolk had already cleaned out his place, junked everything. Except for a notebook they'd fetched by his bed."

A stray tear rolled down his cheek. "He'd written that Drew would be back any day now. He was sure of it. He was for certain I'd return like I promised. I'd keep his work alive . . ."

I found myself swiping my own tears.

We reached the edge of the woods. Drew stopped at a log and sat. I joined him. "I broke my promise while he was depending on me. While all I thought about was my so-called important work up in New York, he waited and waited, then died alone. All those beautiful pictures were destroyed, all those wonderful stories gone, his hands full of unmade pictures . . . ones that nobody will ever see. And nobody to pass his work to." Drew bowed over his knees and wept like a baby. I rubbed his back.

Minutes later, he sat up and wiped his eyes. "See, Jennie . . .that's when I decided my priorities were all out of whack. I'd only come for a visit, but I flew back to New York, quit my job, moved back here three days later, and took up logging."

I tilted my head. "All on account of Old Man Fuller?" Surely there was more reason to cause such a drastic change.

Drew nodded. "All my New York work suddenly felt like I'd been dancing on Old Man Fuller's grave."

Wind whistled through treetops, a lonely tune. “I’m so sorry. I wish I could change how things happened for you. And for Old Man Fuller.” I couldn’t bring myself to say *And Sonia*. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be sitting here with him. I took his hand. “Were there other things that happened in New York that made you come back? Like . . . Phil Kepler?”

He winced, then seemed to study a patch of moss. Moments gathered into more silence. “It was bad enough losing my wife . . .” His voice cracked. “Then I lost Old Man Fuller.”

I sensed there was something more, but it was buried for now.

****

A few days later, Drew said he had to fly to New York one more time. His last commitment on the job, he claimed, but didn’t explain further. And he wanted to visit his brother Sid one last time. When I asked if this trip had anything to do with Phil Kepler showing up here, his answer was so vague I could have walked through it like fog. He was gone three days.

In late August, I started preparing to return to Durham for school. I’d been looking forward to it all summer, but now I couldn’t imagine going so long without seeing Drew. Would he still care for me after months of absence? Would he visit on weekends?

The week before I was supposed to leave, he showed up in an extra nice shirt and smelling like cedarwood. We walked through the woods. He asked me more about my schooling. I still wanted to come back to this area and teach third grade, and talked about it at great length.

We stopped walking. He faced me. “I don’t know if I can match all that but I’m gonna try.” He took my hands. “I want you to be my wife, Jennie. I can’t offer you a teaching certificate or job satisfaction but I can offer you my land and my house and all the love I’ve got. If you wanna continue schooling, I’ll wait for you, but selfishly I want to marry you now. You know I want a family someday. And there’s no other woman I want for my kids’ mother.”

I was riveted to his eyes, getting lost in the whirlpool, not wanting to paddle my way out.

"I love you, Jennie Ross." He leaned in and kissed me, a beautiful, wondrous kiss--our first. It gave a bigger thrill than reading *Jane Eyre*, harvesting razzleberries, or drinking sassafras tea. Every muscle lit on fire.

We paused from a long kiss as he caressed my face. His minty breath and closeness filled me. His voice lowered. "Jennie, there's only one thing I would ask of you."

"What is it?" Trembling, I slid my arms around his neck.

"If we marry, you can spend money we don't have, burn meals three times a day, even wreck the car, but please don't ask me anymore about my time in the Army or New York."

In the moment's bliss, that seemed a small price to pay. But I pulled back. "So if I agree to marry you, you're permanently closing off that part of yourself from me?"

"I'm closing it off from *myself*, Jennie." He took my hands again. "I'm starting over fresh, hopefully with you by my side. Forever."

I lifted my chin. "You don't trust me with knowing your past?"

Looking down, he stroked my fingers, then faced me again. "It's not that, Jennie. It's just that I want to move forward, with you, not look back. I understand if you need time to think over my proposal. You can tell me next week, before you leave for Durham. If you agree, I'll ask your pa for your hand. Either way, I'll be by to help you load the truck."

****

I didn't tell Ma and Pa, fearing their distress. I studied on the situation without their intervention. I loved my schooling. But I reckoned I'd rather devote my whole life to a few children than touch the surface of many. If I married Drew Hamilton now, I may not finish

school, but I could still learn and read, teach my own kids everything Ma taught me, and garden to my heart's content. In the meantime, I could be a teacher's aide at the local school.

But was I too taken up with the man at face value? He'd shared a few things, but I suspected much more beneath the surface. What big failure drove him back here? What else should I know about Sonia? Why the sparks between him and Phil Kepler? What was Phil doing down here? Did Drew still have connections to New York City?

Could I live with a shut door to his past? A permanently locked door?

But I had the key to opening his heart to share secrets. That key was trust. He was learning he could trust me with anything, though it would take time.

Yet whatever happened in New York surely didn't matter. He was the man I admired and couldn't wait to see every week, the first one I envisioned every morning, the last one I thought of every night. He was everything I wanted in a husband. Not a ladies' man, not a romancer, but loving, thoughtful, caring, and responsible. Loyal and single-minded. Good to my family.

He stood out as as a lion among the male cubs in Madison County and at school. The educated, city part of his past made him into who he was now--not proud and polished, but experienced, wise beyond his years. Strong, but soft where it mattered.

Yet I was torn. So I couldn't decide till the last day before returning to Durham.

Drew came by as he'd promised, the evening before I'd be leaving for school. I'd pondered what to say, wanting it all to be so romantic. I wore a pretty white dress for the occasion, and we went for a walk. We laughed and chatted--all small talk, of course--as I got more nervous about my planned speech. So I kept delaying it.

When we turned a corner in the woods, I slipped in the mud and toppled into the creek, white dress and all. I shrieked. He scrambled in after me and took me home. He was chuckling, trying to help me see the humor in it. But I didn't.

My evening was ruined. We were both muddy and the romantic mood had disappeared like the vittles on Jack's magic tablecloth on his way to silence the North West Wind. My answer to Drew's proposal would have to be rushed and matter-of-fact. Unless I persuaded him to clean up and stay awhile. Then we could sit on the porch together.

I handed him a towel. "Pa has dry clothes you can wear." I wrung out my hair again, over the kitchen sink.

"No, I should be moving along and let you finish packing."

Ma walked from her bedroom and offered one of Pa's fresh shirts and pants. "You can shower first. Bathroom's open."

"No, thank you, Mrs. Ross. I should get going." He was already at the front door.

I panicked. What if I never saw him again after he walked out? My heart caught in my throat and I buzzed with a new burst of vigor and complete lack of manners. "Wait! Just wait! I'm not gonna go anywhere tomorrow, and I'm not packing anything tonight--" my voice raised-- "or tomorrow, or the next day, or ever again, because I'm not doing anything but marrying you, Drew Hamilton, whether you like it or not!"

That stopped him dead in his tracks. He stared at me as the screen door slammed shut behind him.

Ma's jaw dropped. "What in the Sam Hill are you doing, Jennie? You gone about it all wrong. The man's supposed to do the asking."

Drew's face lit up and he laughed. But he quickly sobered as he turned to Ma and Pa. "I accept your daughter's proposal of marriage."

Ma rolled her eyes and for once in my life I wanted to smack Drew Hamilton.

He walked over, still dripping wet. "I thought you'd never ask." He hugged me, mud and all. I melted in his arms. He called me his Cotton Jennie, long before that Gordon Lightfoot fellow ever sang about it. Drew gave me a big kiss right in front of my parents. By the time he finally took a breath, Pa was clapping. Clapping, for crying out loud!

Drew showered, put on Pa's clothes, and stayed another hour. Outside on the porch between smooches, he said, "I was afraid you wouldn't reply to me for another hour or more. I had to try to leave so as I could get an answer out of you."

"You rascal." I combed my fingers through his damp hair.

He whispered in my ear, "Reckon I finally got my revenge for that frog incident. Now we're even."

I withdrew in mock alarm. "You're as mischievous as a boy let loose on the last day of school."

"Do you mind too much?" His lips landed on mine for another long kiss.

From that day on, Drew told everybody that I did the proposing. The retaliation that keeps on giving.

Ma and Pa gave consent for us to get married at Christmastime. Ma said it gave me time to back out. The next few months, she asked several times if I was gonna regret marrying a man with secrets, ten years my senior, over a decade in the city to boot. I said no. The man I saw and knew was the man I loved whole-heartedly.

The day before the wedding, Ma had me try on the veil she'd altered. "Jennie." She set her hands on my shoulders. "I hope living in our household and watching your pa and me was good preparation for how a husband and wife should be treating each other, especially when they're as different as night and day." She lifted the veil and kissed my cheek. "As your Granny MacKenzie says, before marriage, a girl has to have both eyes open. But afterward, close one."

I already had.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

I hope you enjoyed the Prequel to my novel.

All That Is Hidden unfolds the story
of how Drew's secret unravels twelve years later.
It is told from his daughter Tina's adult perspective,
reflecting on the summer of 1968.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Learn more about *All That Is Hidden*, watch the trailer,
or purchase on my website:
https://lauradenooyer-author.com/books/all-that-is-hidden/

Or purchase *All That Is Hidden* here: https://amzn.to/2HF4UB9

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Looking for more novels?
I post book reviews and interviews with a variety of authors
on my **Standout Stories** blog:
https://lauradenooyer-author.com

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~