



GOOD MORNING, GABE HAGER!

(Excerpt from Chapter Three)

Even from the new international airport in Mobile, the drive to Prominence, Mississippi, took two hours, along remote stretches of roads that seemed to just disappear into the forests. Occasionally, the trees gave way to sprawling pastures of land or areas cut low by lumber crews. Interestingly, though, there were very few signs of life. That was also true inside of Prominence. Situated along the eastern banks of the Chickasawhay River, Prominence did not live up to its namesake. Streets near the center of the town were largely deserted; many of its storefronts were either empty or boarded up; and more lumber trucks than civilian vehicles rolled through the main highway that wound through town and stretched westward across the river. In fact, on this bright afternoon, the only real activity in Prominence seemed to come from the sawmill, perched atop of a bluff, just to the south of the neglected town.

Gabe remembered the first time he visited this place with Chancey. He never thought much of life in rural America, and Prominence was just a reflection of everything he detested. It was small, poor, slow, unattractive, and disconnected. To be sure, the mornings were great. He spent



them riding horses, devouring Miss Annette's homemade biscuits, and helping the family on the farm. But there was not much more than that. By the end of each day, Gabe found himself bored out of his mind. There were only so many hours of reality television worth watching and only so many stories worth hearing. And though he was much too respectful to let it be known, he did not care much for anyone he had met beyond Chancey's immediate family. So, Gabe suffered in silence, quietly longing for the moment he and his partner would drive out of this small town, hop on a plane, and fly back to civilization.

The Lewyn homestead was still a twenty-minute drive over the river and to the northwest of Prominence. Aside from the occasional farmhouse and fields of crops, this was a lonely and winding road, but on this trip, Gabe did not seem to mind all the hills and greenery. That was because this city boy absolutely loved the truck he was driving. Burly and rugged, the new GMC was a tribute to American

muscle, even if it was, er, largely built in Canada. Its well-sculpted design also signaled the future of an industry in revival, and no one could easily look away from a vehicle capable of commanding the attention of nearly everyone else on the road. Meanwhile, inside, all that heft and styling mingled nicely with heavy doses of luxury. The touchscreens enveloping the cockpit were big, bright, and busy, and their impressiveness were only surpassed by the supple leather seats and the panoramic sunroof. The truck drove itself, for the most part, thanks to new the High Automation Technology package, and that left Gabe with an opportunity to sit back and enjoy some tunes from 7kingZ.

From the highway, the main entrance to Lewyn Acres was marked by black, metal signs on both sides of the road, each with a large “L” in Babylonica font resting on top of it. The wide driveway dropped into a thick grove of trees, before splitting in two directions at a clearing. To the left, the driveway proceeded downhill to a pond and barn alongside metal buildings. And in the opposite direction, the driveway climbed another hill towards a picturesque, two-story farmhouse.

This was where Chancey grew up, and it was a place that Gabe had only visited thrice during their time together. As his truck came to rest in the circular driveway, Gabe stared at the farmhouse’s wrap-around porch, remembering one of their quiet moments here. Every detail came rushing back - the light breeze, the cold glass of tea in his hand, the creaking of the swing, and the smile on Chancey’s face. That was a good visit, Gabe admitted to himself, for once. Sadly, though, he knew that this one was going to be nothing like that.

“Well, let’s go.” Gabe muttered those words, as he opened the truck door, and climbed out. He made his way up the steps of the porch, but as he approached the front door of the house, he slowed down. Suddenly, being here did not seem like a good idea. “What am I doing?” Instead of knocking on the door, Gabe turned to look out across the yard. Lowering his head, he asked again, “God, what am I doing?”

There was not time for an answer or for Gabe to walk away. God did not operate that way. In fact, no sooner than those last words left his lips, the front door opened behind him. Gabe turned around to find Chancey’s younger brother Kevin exiting the house.

For his own part, Kevin Lewyn was not even aware of the visitor on the porch. His mind was on different matters, entirely. “Ma, I’m guessing we’ll just have to pick one up in Hattiesburg. We can go down there... um... tomorrow.” The sight of Gabe Hager on the front porch of his family home, after all these months, startled Kevin. At first, the two men simply stared at one another incredulously, but for Kevin, it did not take long for rage to set in. Kevin burst through the screen door, and rushed Gabe. “The fuck! What the fuck are you doing here!” Kevin shouted, as his shirt grab left Gabe teetering off balance.

“Kevin, you need to let me go.” Gabe was terrified – and with good reason. Though roughly the same height, at six feet tall, Gabe did not share Kevin’s muscular physique. He also did not share his urge to fight. Even still, Gabe knew better than to show weakness to this irate, tatted country boy.

“Naw, bro. Why are you doing here? I mean, after everything you did to Chancey – why would you even come to our home?”

“You need to let me go.”

“Really? ‘Cause what I think I need to do, Gabe, is beat yo ass into oblivion!”

“There’s not going to be any fighting here. Let him go, son.” A distinctly feminine voice interceded, and Kevin turned back to find his mother stepping out onto the porch, as well, with an empty laundry basket in hand. “We don’t need any problems today. Just go ahead and let him go.”

Kevin complied, albeit grudgingly. “What are you doing here, Gabe?” he asked again.

“I asked him to come here,” the mother told her son, as she sat the laundry basket on a chair.

Kevin looked at his mother with disbelief, and he started shaking his head. “No. No, that’s not true. I know that’s not true.”

“It is. I asked Mr. Hager to come down here.” She was insistent. And while Kevin still suspected that she was lying, she knew he would not challenge her. After a pause, she gave him another instruction: “You go on and head to the barn. The hands are probably waiting for you. We will talk about this later.” This time, the pause was longer and more tense. “Go on, Kevin.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Kevin ultimately complied with that request, too, but not before firing one last shot at Gabe. “My brother was a good man. You didn’t fuckin’ deserve him,” he said. “Don’t be here when I get back, for real.” Following that threat, he proceeded to his own truck and drove away.

Back on the porch, Gabe watched the truck cruise down the hill. Then he turned back to the aging black woman of short stature in a moo moo dress. Her signature smile was absent. Folding her arms, she appeared no less angry than her son; it just was not in her meek nature to act on those feelings. So, Gabe thought it appropriate to lower the temperature. “Miss Annette, I’m sorry about that – deeply sorry. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. Part of me wanted Kevin’s stubborn rage to kick in, but I know that I wouldn’t be able to stop him if it did. And right now, he doesn’t need any more legal trouble,” Annette explained. “So why are you really here, Mr. Hager?”

“Um, well,” Gabe answered, sheepishly, “I’ve been struggling with a lot of things lately. I know no one thinks it’s right for me to be grieving, but I am. I feel so broken and alone and, um, guilty.”

“So you came here to be absolved of what you did to Chancey?” Annette asked.

“No, ma’am.” Gabe’s answer to that question was quick. “What I did, when I walked out of the church, cannot be undone. I know that. My actions were humiliating and hurtful, and for a long time, I was too jaded to consider anyone else’s feeling but my own. Now I will have to live with that mistake for the rest of my life.” Gabe quickly replied. “Honestly, Miss Annette, I just came here to talk.”

“Well, grab that basket,” Annette told Gabe, while she stepped off the porch. “You can help me get my linens off the line before the rain comes.”

Gabe did as he was told, and he followed Annette to clothes lines, near the ranch rail fencing, along the far side of the house. He took care to notice that, besides sporadic cloud cover, this day was still bright and pleasant. “How do you know it’s going to rain? Is that according to some sort of old wives’ tale?”

“No, it is according to Google and the news.”

“Oh, man, that probably came off as condescending.”

"Of course, it did."

"I am sorry."

"You're not, really, Mr. Hager, but that is fine."

After that, for several, long minutes, neither Gabe nor Annette said anything. Annette sang a Christian hymn, as she went through the routine of unpinning linens from the line and folding them neatly. And for his own part, Gabe followed her, almost obediently, with the basket in hand, accepting each item from her hands. As she finished the chorus of third chorus of the song, she looked to the visitor, and she smiled.

Annette finally spoke, as her eyes returned to the work ahead of her. "That was Chancey's favorite song. Did you know that?"

"I did," Gabe said. "He always talked about growing up here and going to church with you."

Annette sighed and looked down for a moment. "It wasn't easy," she began to say. "I mean, Phil and I knew that we were going to have more than our share of struggles, being an interracial couple and raising two biracial boys. We still wanted them to grow up with God at the center of their lives, especially if they were supposed to survive the bigotry in a place like Prominence, Mississippi. So I brought them with me, every Sunday, to my family church. We figured that they would have found more acceptance there."

"I can appreciate that." Gabe could hear the pain in her voice.

"This world has such a remarkable capacity for cruelty. It's something that no parent ever wants their child to experience, but we are powerless to stop it." A strong breeze blew across the yard, and Annette turned her attention skyward, where she saw the first clouds moving in. Then she returned to her chore. "Over the years, Chancey fared pretty well. Kevin had a harder time, as I'm sure you know. But they were always there for each other, especially when Phil died." Annette continued speaking without breaking the stride of her folding. "Then, when Chancey was about to leave for college, he told us. He told us, right there, on that porch, that this was who he really was. Honestly, my heart sank just as deeply as it did on the night those troopers knocked on the door to tell us about Phil's accident.

"I never understood Chancey's lifestyle. Everything that I was ever taught told me that it was wrong, but I was not going to lose another member of this family – not my first-born child, not over something that neither of us could change. So, I spent a lot of time working on myself, trying to be



respectful and supportive, as he settled into a new life in a big city,” Annette said. “For a very long time, there were never any discussions about his life in this way. Our calls were either about this farm or about Kevin’s run-ins with the law. Then, one day, he told me that he had been seeing someone. You were the first person that he’d ever brought home, and I could tell just how much he loved you. I could see it in his eyes when he introduced you to us.” Annette took a deep breath. “As a mother, I was supposed to be happy for him, but I wasn’t. I wasn’t happy for him, because, in your eyes, I could see that you did not love him nearly as much.”

Gabe did not know what to say. He simply lowered his head.

“Am I wrong?” Annette asked him.

“I did love Chancey. I swear to you, I did love him,” Gabe replied, but never lifted his head. “My problem is, I ruin things - my career, my relationships, everything. For so long, I didn’t think that I deserve to be happy, because I had always been so ashamed and unsure. So, I sabotaged things – particularly, good things, on purpose. My counselor is helping me recognize this limiting belief and how much I’ve allowed it to affect me.”

“You ended your relationship with your girlfriend, haven’t you?” Annette asked.

“I did. How ... How could you know that?” Gabe was genuinely confused.

Annette smiled, as she folded another item. “I am a mother and a teacher. My superpower is intuition. I’ve learned to listen for the words that aren’t spoken.” She placed the item into the basket. “You said ‘relationships’, plural. Well, I know that you have only been in two serious relationships, and one of those was with my son. So, it was easy to deduce.”

“I was honest with him. I told him that this was not a good time for us – that I’m not in a good place. He asked me if this had to do with Chancey, and I told him that it very much did. Let’s just say that he didn’t care much for that answer.” Gabe could not believe that he explained away his latest break-up in such a quick and cavalier manner. “I don’t know if I did the right thing, honestly, but within twenty-four hours of that moment, I came here, Miss Annette, to see you.”

“What do you think talking to me is going to do?”

“I have no idea.”

“You had to be hoping for some outcome. Otherwise, you would not have come all this way.”

“I think that’s right.”

“So what were you hoping for?”

“I don’t know. Maybe a better explanation for why he loved me so much.”

“Was the one he gave you before he died not enough?”

Those words hit Gabe with brunt force. Now there was an impasse of silence. After a long moment, Annette extended her hands and gestured to take the basket, which Gabe kindly surrendered to her. Then she motioned for them to return to the house.

As they reached the front porch, Gabe found the courage to speak again. “Before we got engaged, Chancey did something that was remarkable, sweet, and unexpected. He had his friends from all over the world send messages to us, telling me ‘Good morning!’ They were meant to lift my spirits.”

“Oh, yes, I remember,” Annette replied, while climbing the steps.

“There were a lot of messages – dozens, actually, from everywhere.” Gabe followed his host, and the two of them took a seat on the swing. When he began to speak again, he did not look at Miss Annette. Instead, his eyes were fixed on the dark sky in the distance. “There were a few that stuck out to Chancey. He said he wanted to visit and reconnect with those people, just to make sure they were doing okay,” he added. “I think I want to fulfill that wish for him – visit all these people for whom he cared and take some time to share memories with them. Chancey was such a good man. I think this is one way for me to pay my respects to him. I owe him that, and I know that I should start here.”

A singular tear rolled from Gabe’s left eye, and Annette saw it. Instinctively, she took his hand. “When I did not see you at the funeral, I thought to myself that you needed the space to grieve differently from the rest of us. When I didn’t hear from you over the months after, I figured that you had moved on. I never thought I would see you again,” she explained. “I’m glad that I was wrong. I’m very glad.”

Now there was not anything Gabe could do to contain his emotions. For the first time, he was crying. “I loved him, Miss Annette,” Gabe uttered, sobbing. “I’m so sorry for everything I’ve done.”

Ever the caring mother, Annette moved to console her visitor, taking his hand into both of her own, as he cried. “I know, son,” she told him. “I know that you’re sorry, and I forgive you.”