

The
Key to
Everything
a Novel

VALERIE FRASER LUESSE



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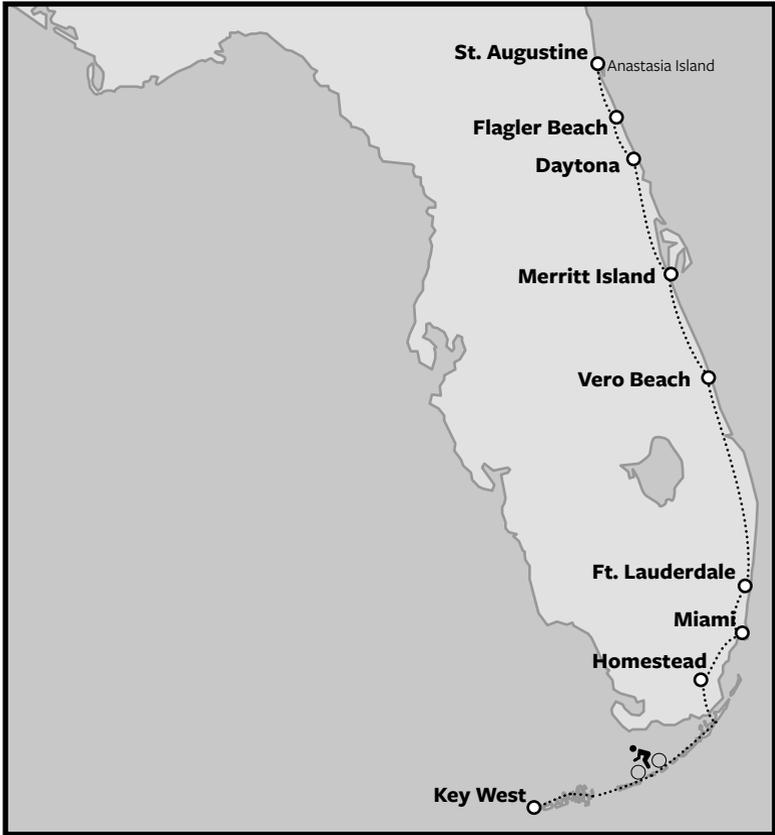
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For my friend Holly and two special dads—
hers, who inspired this story,
and mine, who taught me the alphabet on a little slate
and has encouraged my writing ever since.



one

APRIL 1947

Though he couldn't have known, nor ever guessed, Peyton Cabot had just witnessed a bittersweet kiss goodbye. There they stood, a man and a woman, in the center of his grandfather's library, a mahogany-paneled sanctuary that always smelled of polished wood and old leather, parchment and pipe tobacco. It was empty now, with all the family outside for their annual picnic—empty but for these two.

As Peyton looked on, the couple shared an embrace so passionate that he knew he should turn away, for he realized in that moment that he had become the worst kind of intruder, spying on his own parents. Right now they didn't look like parents—she a blonde all-American beauty, he a larger-than-life movie idol. They looked like two strangers whose past he didn't share, whose present he couldn't comprehend. More than the embrace itself, that's what he found so arresting—the realization that his parents were more than a mother and father, that they did, in fact, have a life before him, apart from him entirely, one they would've shared even if he had never been born.

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The revelation took him by surprise, and he fled to the cover of his grandparents' front porch, sinking into their boisterous Georgia clan as he longed to sink into a pool of water that could wash away his transgression, for he knew good and well that he was guilty of theft. He had stolen a private moment that his mother and father never meant to share.

Peyton would spend this afternoon like so many others—swapping jokes with his boy cousins and listening to the uncles tell their stories (the same ones they told at every family picnic, but everybody laughed just the same). Still, the image of that kiss would be etched on his memory, not just for the rest of this sunny afternoon but for the rest of his life.



For years, the Cabots had been gathering for a spring picnic at the family estate on the Isle of Hope. It was a show of togetherness mandated by Peyton's grandmother and held religiously, regardless of weather, on the Saturday before Easter. Attending the picnic was like performing a role in a play or a movie, the men costumed in their linen and seersucker, the ladies in tea-party dresses and wide-brimmed hats. All the children wore croquet whites, swinging their mallets in an orderly fashion until they got bored and started chasing each other all over the place, like a band of well-dressed jackrabbits.

Picnic tables were covered in starched white linens and dotted with crystal pitchers filled with fresh flowers. Even the ice cream would be served on china with sterling silver spoons. Servants ferried food out of the kitchen and dirty dishes back in. Over the course of an afternoon, the Cabots would

consume platters mounded with fried chicken, country ham, and homemade biscuits slathered with fresh-churned butter; sweet potato casserole, corn on the cob, green beans, and black-eyed peas; ambrosia, Grandmother Cabot's coconut cake, Doxie's chocolate cake (she had to make three to satisfy all the family), homemade ice cream with Georgia peaches; and enough sweet tea and lemonade to float a barge—this in addition to the steady flow of cocktails mixed by the uncles.

For all appearances, the annual picnic was a grand gathering of one of the richest clans in Georgia. But the truth, Peyton knew, was that none of his aunts and uncles particularly liked each other. Moreover, they were all jealous of his father, the eldest—and reluctant favorite—son. Peyton's grandmother—instigator of the whole thing—never appeared to enjoy the picnic. In fact, it would eventually give her “a case of nerves,” and she would retire well before sunset.

The center of activity was the lower front porch of his grandparents' Greek Revival house, which crowned a gently sloping, half-acre front lawn, parted down the center by a hundred-year-old live oak allée and bordered with deep pink azaleas almost as tall as Peyton. Lacy white spirea and more azaleas framed the house with its eight soaring columns. The white wicker porch furniture had been in the family for years, and while his grandmother frequently complained that it was old and needed replacing, his grandfather had it painstakingly repaired and restored every year. For whatever reason, he could not let it go.

Right now the porch was full to overflowing with relatives. Peyton leaned against one of the columns, watching a flock of his little cousins chase each other across the pristine carpet of zoysia grass that was his grandfather's pride and

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joy. Though he had two gardeners, George Cabot still surveyed the zoysia daily, bending down to pull an offending weed here or dig up a wild violet there. The aunts fretted over his weeding. He was not as spry as he used to be and was starting to repeat himself more than usual. *Now, Daddy, if you fall and break a hip you're gonna be in a mess.* Still, he weeded.

With his back to the family, Peyton could listen to all of their conversations, tuning in and out as if he were turning the dial on a radio.

His father's two sisters, Aunt Camille and Aunt Charlotte, were sharing the porch swing closest to Peyton:

"Could you believe that dress Arlie Seton wore to her own daughter's wedding?"

"Ridiculous. It was cut clear to here and twice too short for a woman half her age."

Uncle Julian, the middle son, was doing what he always did—trying to sell Granddaddy Cabot on one of his big ideas: "We could parcel off a thousand acres over by Reidsville and turn it into a residential development. We'd make a fortune. Can't you see that?"

"Julian, Reidsville's not close enough to anything—not Atlanta, not Savannah. All those vets settin' up housekeepin' want to be close to a city where they can find work."

Nothing about Peyton's Uncle Julian was genuine—not his smile, not his concern, and certainly not his devotion to the family. Whenever there was any heavy lifting to be done, you could count on Uncle Julian to be needed elsewhere. Peyton's mother had once said that he was "doomed to go through life feeling cheated" because he believed any good fortune that fell on someone else rightly belonged to him.

He fancied himself a statesman but so far couldn't even win a seat on the Savannah city council.

Peyton spotted two of his cousins on a quilt underneath the Ghost Oak and decided to join them. Their grandfather had named the tree long ago, and the moniker was apt. Sit beneath it on a breezy night—better yet, a stormy one—and the rustle of leaves did indeed sound like a swirl of specters communing overhead. When they were children, Peyton and his cousins would dare each other to sit under the tree on windy evenings while the others hid in the azaleas, calling out into the darkness, “Oooooooooo, I am the ghost of Ernestine Cabot, dead from the fever of 1824 . . . Oooooooooo, I am Ol' Rawhead, swamp monster of the Okefenokee . . .”

Peyton had never been afraid of the family ghosts or the tree they supposedly haunted. There was something to be discovered way up in those branches, and he had always been more curious than fearful.

Stepping off the porch, he dipped himself some home-made ice cream from a wooden freezer that was probably older than he was and sat down on the quilt with his cousins Prentiss and Winston.

“Somebody's goin' home mighty early.” Prentiss nodded toward Peyton's mother, who was walking slowly up a dirt road that led from the main house to a pretty lakeside cottage about a quarter mile away.

Peyton watched his mother's back as she moved farther and farther away from the family, now and again raising a hand to her face. Just then his father appeared, following a path that led from the back of the house, through a pecan grove, and out to the stables. In one hand was a highball glass, already filled. The other held his ever-present

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companion since he had come home from the Pacific, a bottle of bourbon.

Peyton's aunts said it was "the worst kind of stupid" for the Army to draft men in their thirties, but once everybody younger was already over there, they had no choice. Peyton's father was gone for just over a year before the Japanese surrendered, but by then the war had done its damage. The war was still doing its damage.

"Don't look good, does it?" Winston asked him.

"No," Peyton said, watching his father disappear into the pecan trees.

Winston swatted at a bee circling his head. "Hey, Peyton, how come you didn't bring Lisa?"

"To face the whole clan? Way too early for that. Might scare her off." Peyton finished his ice cream and stretched out on the quilt. Closing his eyes against the sun filtering through the branches overhead, he pictured the girl who was never far from his thoughts.

Lisa Wallace had transferred to his school in January, when her family moved to Savannah from Augusta. She was the prettiest girl in the whole town, the prettiest girl Peyton had ever seen. But there was more to her than that. For one thing, she didn't flirt, a rarity in a Georgia beauty. Then again, she didn't have to. Every boy in school wanted to go out with her. Her hair was deep auburn and fell in long glossy waves down her back. Her eyes were blue, with just a hint of green, and she had a complexion like ice cream.

The minute she walked into his homeroom class, he knew. He felt it in his gut or his heart or whatever you want to call it. While all the other guys were working up their nerve, Peyton made a beeline for Lisa in the lunchroom that first

day and offered to carry her tray to her table. She had smiled up at him and said, “You don’t waste any time, do you?”

As beautiful as she was, Lisa wasn’t interested in sitting on anybody’s pedestal and looking pretty. Once, Peyton had invited her to a skeet shoot Winston put together. After watching all the guys complete their first round, Lisa had tapped him on the shoulder and said, “Don’t I get a turn?” He handed her his gun and watched her take down every clay.

Peyton often found her sitting next to unpopular kids in the cafeteria so they wouldn’t feel lonesome. One girl in their class was a little slow and didn’t have the nerve to ask the teachers questions, so she came to Lisa, who would spend her whole study hall tutoring instead of doing her own homework. When Lisa was excited about something, she talked with her hands, and Peyton found himself staring at them as they lithely fluttered in the air, waving her timid pupil toward the correct answer.

Winston interrupted his reverie. “Lisa and Peyton sittin’ in a tree, k-i-s-s-i-n-g. First comes love, then comes marriage—”

“Oh, shut up, Winston.” Peyton threw an acorn at him.

The truth was, he was already thinking about marrying Lisa—daydreaming about it anyway. He had asked her out right after she moved to Savannah and just about every weekend since. Only a month ago, he had taken her to the spring formal, when his whole life seemed as close to perfect as it would ever get . . .

Again his cousins pulled him away from Lisa and back into the fray of a Cabot family picnic. “Listen—here it comes,” Prentiss was saying, pointing toward the porch.

The boys listened as their Uncle Gil retold his favorite

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story, the same one he told at every spring picnic. “Marshall says to me, he says, ‘I believe I’ve seen all this ol’ camp has to offer.’ And I says, ‘What you plan on doin’ about it?’ That’s when he pointed at the bicycles Papa had left for us. He says, ‘I’m gonna ride my bicycle to Key West and see what those islands look like.’”

The cousins finished the story with their uncle, repeating his favorite line in unison: “And *that*, ladies and gentlemen, was the last time Marshall Cabot ever let anybody tell him what to do.”

Winston leaned back to rest against the oak tree. “How many times you reckon he’s told that story?”

“How many spring picnics we had?” Prentiss answered. “Every time he tells it, Uncle Marshall makes the trip in less time.”

Looking up at the sprawling branches above, Peyton watched one squirrel chase another, spiraling up the trunk for several feet and then racing back down again. They repeated their circular journey over and over, as if they were following a racetrack around the tree.

“Reckon they know there’s a whole big world outside that oak?” he said.

“Who you talkin’ about?” Winston asked.

Peyton pointed to the squirrels above. “Those little guys. Reckon they think this tree is all there is—the whole wide world up in those branches?”

“Seriously?” Winston threw a twig at him and missed. “I think a squirrel’s a squirrel.”

The boys were quiet for a while before Prentiss said, “How long *did* it take your daddy to get to that dang island?”

Peyton listened to the oak tree sighing in the spring breeze.

“I got his old map out and figured it up. Looks like it’s somewhere in the neighborhood o’ six hundred miles from that old boys’ camp on the Okefenokee to Key West, so twelve hundred there and back. And he wrote dates on different spots on the map—not everywhere he stopped because the dates are too far apart. No way he pedaled two hundred miles without resting somewhere—doubt anybody could make it more than fifty in a day. And it looked like he stayed awhile in St. Augustine. But judging by the dates after he left there, I’d say that leg of it, at least, took him about a month.”

“And nobody came after him?” Prentiss wanted to know.

“He said he promised Granddaddy Cabot that if they’d let him be, he’d call collect every Sunday to let ’em know he was alright, which he did.”

“Ain’t no way he saddled a bicycle for a month,” Winston said. “He musta thumbed some rides.”

“Well, hold on now,” Peyton said, sitting up. “Course you’d have to stop and rest along the way. You’d have to figure all that out before you left. And you’d prob’ly wear out your tires over and over, so that’d have to be worked out. Then there’s your clothes and food . . .”

“You sure have given this a lotta thought.” Now Prentiss was interested. “Why don’t you just ask Uncle Marshall how he did it?”

“I have—lotsa times,” Peyton answered. “He just smiles and says that’s something I’ll have to figure out for myself.”

“Uncle Gil always tells the story like it was a spur-o’-the-minute thing,” Prentiss said.

Peyton ran a finger along a seam on the quilt where they sat, absently tracing its north-south path. “I don’t think so. The map has a price tag on it from the Savannah Shop ’n Go,

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so he bought it here. And it's dated 1921—that year Daddy woulda been 13, but he didn't make the trip till he was 15, same as us. Maybe he didn't mark all his stops ahead o' time. Can't really tell. But I believe he was thinking about it before he left for camp."

"You believe it's possible—that he rode the whole way on his bike, I mean?" Prentiss asked him.

Peyton nodded. "Yeah, I do. It wouldn'a been easy, but it's possible. I know his first stop in Florida was Aunt Rosalie's in Jacksonville. That's seventy-five miles from the camp. Aunt Lily's family lives in St. Augustine—maybe he stayed there awhile to visit with them because he didn't get to Flagler Beach till nearly two weeks later, and it's only thirty miles away. The trick would be figuring out where to stay and where to get supplies—food and water and someplace to wash your clothes. 'Specially if you went in the summertime, it'd be hot as blue blazes, so you'd be sweatin' like a pig."

"I got fifty bucks that says you'll never do it," Winston said.

"Me too," Prentiss said. "I'll put down fifty bucks."

"I never said I was gonna *do* it. I just said I think it's possible."

"Sounds like he's bailin'," Winston said.

"Yep," Prentiss agreed.

"'Course I'm bailin'," Peyton said. "Why would I want to spend my summer pedaling a bicycle and let some other guy move in on Lisa?"

"You got a point," Prentiss said.

Peyton picked a dandelion and held it up in the breeze to watch its feathers fly. "Y'all would seriously pay me a hundred bucks if I did it?"

“Yeah, but if you start the ride and quit, you gotta pay us fifty bucks apiece,” Winston said. “Wanna bet?”

“Not yet,” Peyton said. “But I’ll think about it.”

They looked up as a horse appeared from the pecan grove. Actually, they heard it before they saw it—a thunder of hooves hitting the ground as a powerful Thoroughbred named Bootlegger raced around the border of the front lawn and made his way to the rear garden before following the same dirt road Peyton’s mother had taken. The rider, at once familiar and foreign, looked reckless even at this distance, holding the reins in one hand and a bottle of bourbon in the other, his boots tight against the horse’s sides, his sandy hair blown by the spring breeze.

Peyton was at once sickened and mesmerized by the sight of it. He heard the familiar murmurs rippling across the porch. “I’m tellin’ you, he’s gonna kill hisself with that bottle . . .”

Horse and rider reached the crest of a hill that blocked the view of Peyton’s house—the cottage his mother had fled to. Peyton heard the horse snort and saw it pawing at the ground, impatient to release the energy rippling through its sinewy legs. The rider kept turning to look over the hill and then back at the main house until at last he appeared resigned to his fate. Turning toward the house, he gave the horse its head and sped back down the dirt road toward the front lawn. As Bootlegger came streaking around the grand old house, Peyton saw clumps of grass fly up each time the Thoroughbred’s hooves landed. It was hypnotic, the sight of his father racing into the picnic, carrying his bourbon bottle like a knight bearing a standard, ready for the joust. Without speaking, the three boys stood but remained under

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the tree, only halfway trusting Peyton's father not to run them through.

Years later, when Peyton was a grown man with a family, what unfolded on this spring afternoon would replay in his mind again and again, always in slow motion. Just as his father raised the bottle to his lips, leaned his head back, and took a long draw, the two squirrels in the tree suddenly raced down the trunk and scampered into the yard. Jubal, his grandfather's Irish setter, spotted them from the porch and tore down the steps after them. Barking as he laid chase, the dog startled the horse. It balked, sending Peyton's father sailing out of the saddle, over the head of his mount, and straight into the Ghost Oak, where he hit his head with such force that it sounded like a billiard ball dropped onto an oak floor. And then nothing—lifeless silence for a split second before all the women screamed and the whole family swarmed the fallen rider.

In an instant, the slow-motion scene accelerated to lightning speed, and Peyton couldn't keep up. The three boys were unceremoniously pushed aside as an ambulance was called and a cousin visiting from Birmingham—the only doctor in the family—ran to his car to get his medical bag.

Suddenly, it hit Peyton. His mother knew nothing about this. As the ambulance sped away with his father—and before anyone else thought to do it—he ran into the library and called home.