

a long line of cakes

Deborah Wiles



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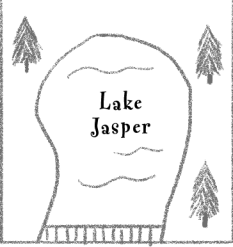
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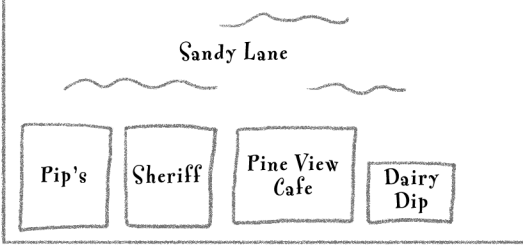


Melba's House



Lake Jasper

← To Bay Springs



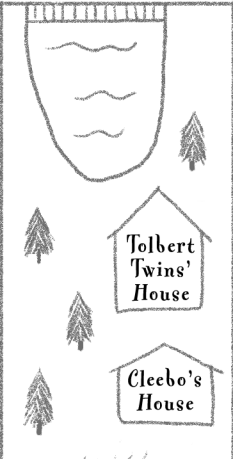
Sandy Lane

Pip's Sheriff Pine View Cafe Dairy Dip



Corn

Wheat

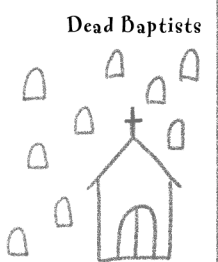


Tolbert Twins' House

Cleebo's House



Meadows



Dead Baptists

Baptist Church



Phoebe Tolbert's House



Miss Eula's Pink Palace



Chicken House



Ruby's House



Main Street

Filling Station Miss Mattie's Mercantile The Cake Cafe Post Office

Silver Maple

Ford Econoline

Play ball!

Chinaberry Tree

Methodist Church

Dead Methodists

Pastor Merson

Fire Department

Corn

Good Fishing Pond

Old Laying Sheds

Halleluia, Mississippi
400 Good Friendly Folks
and a few old soreheads

Library

Doc MacRee's House
Garden
Pip's House

To Jackson →

Sunshine Laundry
"send us your sheets"

Sandy Lane

Halleluia School

Miss Mattie's House

Garden

Silver Maple Trees

Gate

Norwood Boyd's House

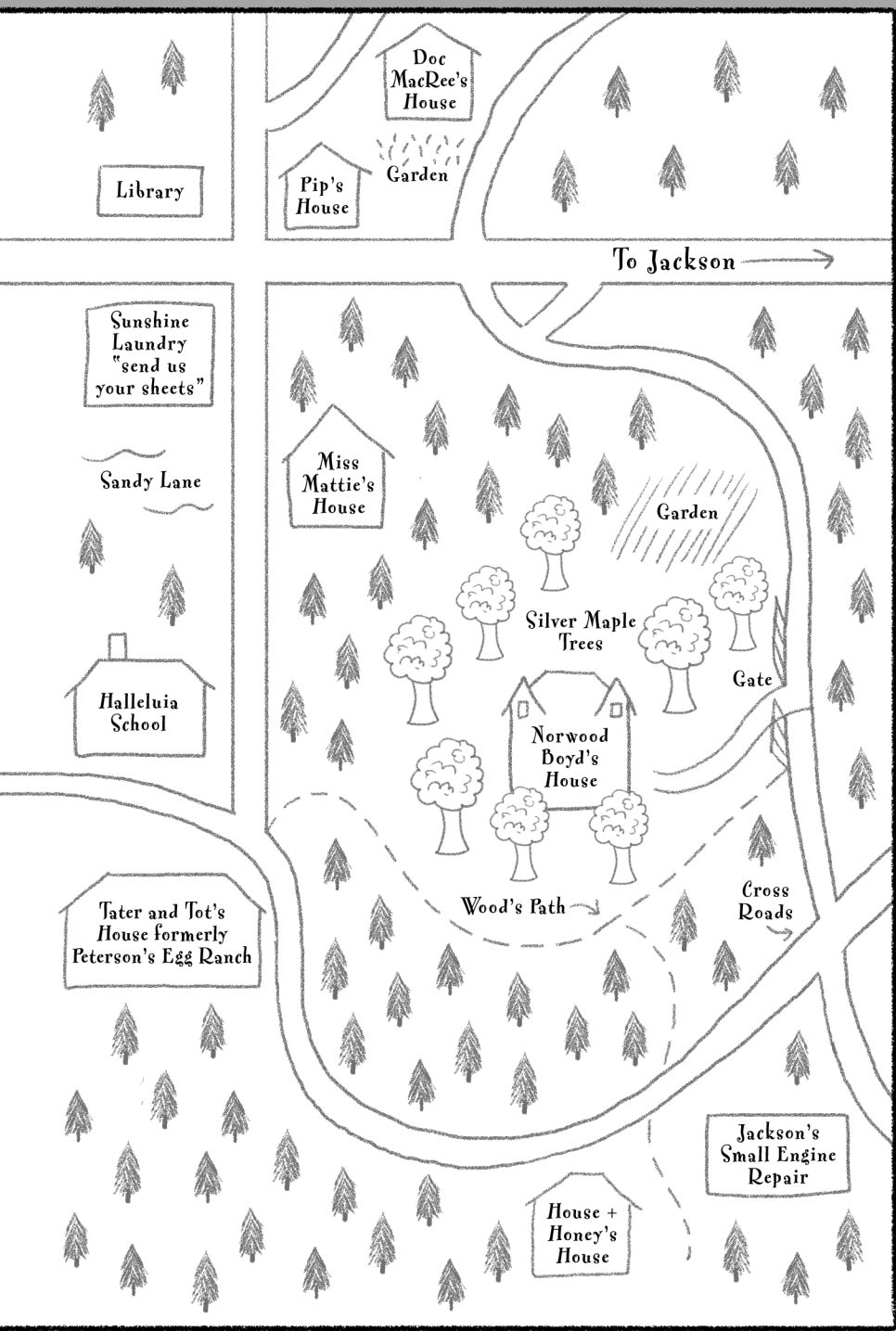
Tater and Tot's House formerly Peterson's Egg Ranch

Wood's Path →

Cross Roads →

Jackson's Small Engine Repair

House + Honey's House



~ Chapter One ~

They came, like secrets, in the night.

The Cake Family:

Emma Alabama Lane Cake

Benjamin Lord Baltimore Cake

Jody Traditional Angel Food Cake

Van Chocolate Layer Cake

Roger Black Forest Cake

and

Gordon Ridiculously Easy No-Knead Sticky

Buns Cake

Their parents were with them, of course:

Leo Meyer Lemon Cake

and

Arlouin Hummingbird Spice Cake

Somehow, there were also four dogs.

Thank goodness there was a suitcase rack on top of the car, and bicycle racks front and back. The Cake family

had driven across the miles with the windows down, and everyone's hair was whisked to a froth.

The night air smelled like honeysuckle. A wispy fog rolled over and around the town as the Cakes arrived. It played leapfrog with the muggy summer air, just as that clever Cake fog always did. And then a cooler breeze, soft and snappy, began to dispatch the fog . . . just as it always did.

The breeze tickled the leaves of the majestic silver maple tree behind the post office on Main Street. Leo Cake turned the Ford Econoline onto the sandy lane that ran behind the post office and Miss Mattie's store. Their new bakery space—an imposing old structure—sat between those two buildings.

The radio was playing “King of the Road.” King Leo Cake parked the car under the silver maple and leaned his forehead against the steering wheel.

“We're here,” he said in a weary, dusty, long-time-traveling voice.

The car began to boil with boys trying to be the first to escape.

“Out of my way, birdbrains!” shouted twelve-year-old Ben. Lord Baltimore indeed.

The boys never noticed anything. Did they even notice they were moving their entire lives across the country—again? Emma Lane Cake wondered.

She was the only one, it seemed, who wanted to stay in one place.

“*Already?*” she’d asked her mother, when the packing had begun once again.

“We go when it’s time,” said Arlouin. “You know that.”

“I know that I’ve moved seven times that I can remember,” said Emma. “And more times that I can’t.”

“We suit up and we show up, Emma!” Leo Cake had told his daughter, with the delight in his voice that new beginnings always brought him. What was different this time for Leo was two lines of a poem that had floated into his head as they’d begun their trip:

Day by day and night by night we were together—
all else has long been forgotten by me

“Yes,” he had answered the poem. Then, “No. I don’t remember.”

Now Emma’s brothers and the dogs tumbled to the ground, a tangle of arms and legs stumbling over one another, glad to be *free-free-free* of their confinement and squash-ed-ness. Emma lingered in the space their absence created and stared at a knothole in the silver maple tree. Inside the knothole was a sliver of pink. A piece of paper? A secret note? She wanted to touch it.

A bright-orange moon shellacked the night. The boys

were giddy with the happiness that comes with finally arriving. Without speaking of it (which was how it usually worked), they had a plan. They raced across the sandy lane, turned their backs to Emma and their parents, and challenged one another to a peeing contest. Ben—always the ringleader—shouted, “Go!”

“Boys!” called Arlouin. “Mind your manners! There’s a bathroom upstairs!”

“Aw, Mom!” whined Roger, only seven. “We couldn’t wait!”

Emma, who was used to her brothers’ shenanigans, got quietly out of the car and walked a few soft steps to the tree. The moonlight slid over her straight-as-a-stick brown hair and highlighted the spray of freckles across her nose.

The tree warmed to her touch. She felt its rough pulse under her fingers. It was the oddest feeling. She removed her hand and then put it back. There it was again, like a heartbeat. If trees could smile, this one would. She looked around her in wonder. Was she mistaken, or did everything about this town feel alive and waiting for her?

On tiptoe, she peered into the knothole of the silver maple. It *was* a note! Her fingers itched, wanting to tug on it.

“Quiet!” Arlouin shushed her boys, who were whooping and hollering through their contest. “It’s midnight! You’ll wake the dead!”

“No one lives on Main Street,” said Leo. He put his arm around his wife. “Not even the dead.”

“We passed two cemeteries on the way here!” shouted Jody in his high angel-food voice. Ten-year-old boys are practiced at being informative when necessary . . . and even when not.

“No one will hear us,” Leo assured Arloun. “And we’ve been cooped up for hours.”

He used his index finger to push the bridge of his glasses up on his nose as he walked toward the boys. “Good idea,” he said.

“I won!” shouted Jody.

Then Ben shoved Jody who shoved Van who shoved Roger, which made Gordon, the littlest Cake, cry. The dogs began to bark as they swirled around the shoving boys.

“Where’s my baseball glove?” shouted Ben, in his Lord Baltimore voice. “I just had it!”

Jody—who was no angel—jumped like a frog and waved Ben’s baseball glove in the air. “Keep away!” he shouted.

“I’ve got the ball!” cried Van in his thick chocolate-layer-cake voice, an unusually low voice for an eight-year-old.

“We live on Main Street now,” said Arloun as she swooped the wailing Gordon into her arms. “And we will mind our manners. Cakes always mind their manners. Boys! Bedtime!”

Leo was right. No one else lived on Main Street. Long ago people often lived above their stores in little Southern towns, but now people lived in houses of their own, away from Main Street. No one in Halleluia, Mississippi, saw them arrive, because it was midnight and everyone was tucked in bed, asleep—all four hundred good friendly folks, and a few old soreheads.

“Emma,” said her exasperated mother, “take Gordon, please, while I round up the hooligans.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Gordon, who at four years old wanted to be like the big boys, held out his reedy arms for his sister, his favorite. Emma’s itchy-fingers spell was broken, and she smiled at her brother. “Come here, Sticky Buns,” she said with a sigh.

“Emma,” he sniffed. He tucked his head under her chin.

Emma’s eleven-year-old arms were muscled from hauling bags of flour for the bakery and stirring so much soup for the lunches the Cake Café served every weekday. She could tote a twenty-five-pound bag of carrots all by herself. Her brother was as light as a cinnamon stick. Gordon wasn’t built like her other brothers, who were as solid—and thickheaded—as baseballs.

The boys, relieved of balls, gloves, and full bladders, scuffled to the back of their new home between the post office and Miss Mattie’s Mercantile. The last tendrils of fog and the breezy dark shadows of the silver maple played across its surface.

“It looks gothic,” said Emma.

“It’s haunted!” Jody declared with delight.

“I’m hungry!” said Van. He grabbed Roger’s arm and pretended to eat it.

“Mom!” whined Roger.

“Shhh,” said their mother.

There was a milk-box cooler by the back door, used for dairy home deliveries. Leo opened it to find a glass jar of milk, a clutch of eggs, and a pound of butter inside. “How thoughtful,” he said.

Arlouin unlocked the tall red door with a long metal key. It turned with a solid *click* in the metal keyhole.

Emma gave the silver maple one last look before walking through the doorway of her new home. She imagined the note had been left for her. It was easy to imagine it when a tree had almost talked to you.

“What will we find in this new place!” Leo Cake crowed, suddenly revived. He loved the first moments of a new life in a new place. Everything was possible and nothing was spoiled. There was no disappointment. The world was born again, every time they stepped across a new threshold.

The door swung open. Their story began.