

I Know the River

(version 2.1)

a short story about Clay Aiken

sequel to Blue Moon

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Summary of Story

At the request of Clay fans, I wrote this sequel about Clay and Joanna. We're back in the Southern Appalachians for the conclusion to the story begun in *Blue Moon*. The twin themes of romance and Clay's fear of water intertwine and come to a head. Wow—gorgeous mountain scenery, waterfalls, wildflowers, and wildlife. And yes, he gets to sing.

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I Know the River

“What is going on with you?” Crystal asked her sister. Joanna sat on the couch in her apartment in T shirt and pajama bottoms, absentmindedly strumming her mandolin. The afternoon light streamed in the window.

“It’s lunchtime, you’re still in your pajamas, your hair’s a mess, and all you’ve done yesterday and today is putter about and play that thing,” continued Crystal. Joanna picked out a few notes with her right hand, then paused to adjust the tuning pegs.

“Joanna, you are ignoring me!

Joanna put down her mandolin. She’d found it several months ago at a garage sale and had bought it on a whim. It had been a joy to discover her small hands could manage the shorter strings and fingerboard much more easily than those of her guitar, which she’d played for years. She was hooked, but still learning about her new instrument and how to make it sing.

“I’m sorry, Crystal. I missed my mandolin, that’s all. I should have brought it to camp with me.” Joanna stroked the marred wood of the tear-drop shaped body and ran her hand over the four sets of brand new double strings that stretched its length.

“Well, if today’s any indication, it’s probably best you didn’t or your campers might all have wandered off or got into who knows what mischief while you were playing,” commented Crystal. Joanna had spent the last weeks working as a counselor at a YMCA camp up in the mountains.

Joanna laughed. “You’re right. I have been kind of preoccupied since I got back.” She reached up to touch her hair, which was pulled back in a haphazard bun.

“Is it really the mandolin?” asked Crystal.

“No. Yes. I don’t know.” Joanna sighed.

“What’s the matter, girl?”

“Well, I’ve just been thinking about this ... guy.” said Joanna.

“Now it’s getting good. I knew something was going on. What about this guy?” probed Crystal. “Some guy you met at camp and have been hanging with the last month?”

“No, it’s worse than that. This is ‘some guy’ I met my very last night there.”

“Maybe he’ll call you.”

“He doesn’t know my number. I don’t even think he knows my last name.”

“Do you know his name? Or anything else about him? And what happened your last night, anyway?”

“I know his name is Clay, but not much else. He’s about my age, I’d say—20 or so. And he goes to school in Charlotte. Anyway, on my last night we were both out walking in the woods. And we, well, we had an ... encounter. I don’t know what to call it.”

“An encounter? Hmmm, that sounds pretty exciting. Vague, but exciting. What happened?”

“Nothing, actually. Absolutely nothing.” Joanna remembered with a flush how, unknown to Clay, she’d listened to him sing to the moon out by the river and how she’d been mesmerized by his voice. He sang like an angel. They’d met, talked, and discovered they were both out for a walk to chase away bad dreams.

“Joanna, you wouldn’t be turning that nice shade of pink if ‘nothing’ had happened,” said Crystal.

“Nothing happened,” said Joanna stubbornly. She didn’t feel like mentioning to Crystal that somehow she’d ended up fainting in Clay’s arms. Or that she’d had on almost zero clothes because she’d been for a swim. But nothing had happened, Joanna insisted to herself. Why, oh, why could she not stop thinking about him then?

“But you wish it had.”

“Maybe.” She remembered the next day when she’d seen him in the daylight and he’d given her a hug. She’d noticed the blonde-red hair on his forearms, and she kept seeing that image in her mind, as if it were a photograph, preserved forever.

“Call the guy. Just do it. You have his number?”

Joanna nodded. “But he’s still up at the camp, helping close the place up this week for the Fall. So he won’t be at home to answer.”

“Just call, leave a message. You’ll feel better. You know, like you took some action. Just do it.”

“OK. I can leave my number. Then at least he’ll have it. And if he never calls, then I’ll know he’s not interested.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

The first night after the campers—and Joanna—had left, Clay had gone for another walk. There was just a skeleton crew of counselors and others left behind to put the camp “to bed” for the winter. He’d worked this week at the end of other summers, and it was always a fun time.

After dark they'd gather for talk and snacks. Or pranks, or music. Or whatever. They always had a good time. But tonight Clay had slipped away early and gone for a walk. He hadn't felt like joking or singing or being with the gang. He was remembering Joanna and the night before.

He walked out to the river, the way he'd gone last night. Tonight it was cloudy and he carried a flashlight. He wished for the bright moonlight of the night before. Joanna had been beautiful in the light of the full moon. The moonlight had colored her skin—and there had been *a lot* of skin, he remembered with a smile—a pale blue. As he came to the boathouse, he allowed himself to hear the sounds of the river, which usually set his heart pounding and his palms sweating, since he was deathly afraid of water. Usually, he would grab a life jacket from the boathouse—as he had last night—and put it on as a security blanket before continuing toward the water. But tonight he did something he'd never done before; he did not stop for a life jacket, and he did not stop to really listen for the river. He shrugged off the sounds and instead went back to thinking about Joanna.

Last night they had sat together in the moonlight, just feet away from the deep, still section of the river the campers used as a swimming hole. He'd had his arm around her as they leaned back against a boulder and talked, sharing the bad dreams that had awoken them and brought them out into the night. In his dream, a rare but recurring one, the ocean crashed around him, its waves deafening—he shook his head now to push away the memory. The dream's terror had jolted him into a wakefulness that made sleep impossible. But then he'd met up with Joanna. And been intrigued by her—he'd marveled at her casual ability to swim by herself in the river at night. Talking to her about *her* dream and feeling the touch of her damp skin on his own, he'd forgotten the water and its power over him. In fact, he remembered now that he had consciously pushed his fear away. The life jacket, after all, he realized, might be just a self indulgence. He was here tonight to see if that were true. And because he wanted to spend some time in the place where he and Joanna—the girl who'd magically allowed him to ignore his fear—had been together.

He went to sit in the same grassy clearing and leaned back against the same boulder. And closed his eyes. He heard the river, but paid it no mind; his thoughts were of Joanna. He'd even sung a song to her, a love song, and as he had leaned over to kiss her, she had fainted in his arms. He wondered what would have happened if

“There you are, Clay.” His thoughts were interrupted by K.C., a junior counselor from the camp who had also stayed behind to help this week.

“What's up?” asked Clay. “How'd you find me, anyway?”

“I saw you head out this way. And your flashlight is the only light in the woods for miles around,” said K.C. “C'mon, the camp director wants us all to meet to go over the plans for tomorrow. Some of us will be going up the mountain for trail restoration.”

“By the way, uhhh, if you don't mind my asking, what are you doing out here without your life jacket?” K.C. and Clay had lived together all summer long in the same cabin with a new batch of campers each week. He knew well Clay's fear of water.

“I just didn’t need it,” said Clay. “Someone helped me to see that.”

Joanna dialed the number Clay had given her. She’d thought about what she would say when she left the message and so was speechless when she got a static-laced, live response.

“Hello?” said Clay. He quickly looked down at his cell phone. They were up in the mountains now working on the trails and the signal came and went. He didn’t recognize the caller’s number and prayed it was Joanna. “Hello?” he said again.

“Clay?”

“Yes, hello?”

“Clay, it’s Joanna.”

He could not help grinning. But the signal was poor and might cut out at any time. “Joanna! Hey. Hi. How are you? Can you hear me?”

“Not too well. You’re breaking up.”

“What’s your number?” he asked. Joanna gave it to him and he repeated it back to her. “Can you wait by your phone for an hour or two? I’ll call you back when I ...”

The rest of the sentence was lost. “OK,” said Joanna.

Clay walked the short distance to their campsite—three tents, each set back a ways from a fire ring. Shovels and tools littered the area. Their crew was there to repair some trails before the cool weather arrived. Sheila, who like Clay and Joanna had also been a summer counselor, was gathering and stacking firewood.

“Hey, Sheila. I’m hiking up the ridge to get better phone reception. Got to make a call. Be back in a couple of hours.”

“Everything all right?”

“Yep. No problems. Just got to make a call.” Clay kicked off his sports sandals at the entrance to the tan and yellow tent and rummaged around inside for his socks and hiking boots.

“Hey, Joanna. It’s Clay. Can you hear me better now?”

“Yes, much better.”

“I’m up on the ridge now, way above the Y camp. A few of us are camping up here doing some trail restoration.” He looked down from his vantage point onto the stands of red spruce forest covering the slope below. This was a great spot—good for more than just phone calls.

“Hard work?”

“Not really. We have a good time. Sheila’s here. You know Sheila? And K.C. And a few others.”

“I was surprised when you answered the phone when I called,” said Joanna.

“I was hoping you’d call.”

“You were?”

“Yeah, I was waiting like for two whole days.”

“You were?” Joanna said again. She was sure she was sounding like an idiot. She didn’t know what to say.

Clay hated talking on the phone. Everything seemed so distant and you couldn’t look into the other person’s eyes and guess at what they might be thinking. “I’ve been missing you, Joanna. Well, not really missing you but maybe missing the chance to get to know you.” What a mouthful, thought Clay. She would think he was an idiot. He decided to just go for it, so before she could respond, he asked, “Why don’t you come back up here for the rest of the week? We’re shorthanded and could use your help. It would be fun.” There, he’d done it.

“OK,” said Joanna. Why could she not think of something more intelligent to say? Or at least more enthusiastic. Her heart was beating so hard it seemed ready to thump on out of her body. She pictured the red hair on his arms. Slow down, heart. How could she not go? “OK,” repeated Joanna. “I’ll come.”

Clay had been tired from the day’s trail work and the hike up the ridge, but now he felt ready to hike up a ridge twice as high. “Where are you now?” he asked. “I don’t even know where you live.”

“Asheville. Pretty close.”

“Great. Can you come about noon tomorrow? I’ll meet you down at the main camp. Bring your sleeping bag and some shoes for hiking. See you then.”

On the way back down to the trail crew’s base camp, Clay turned off on a side trail. Rhododendron branches overhung the path and slapped at his sides. They’d have to do some trimming here before they left. He could hear the waterfall up ahead. The splash of the water on the rocks reminded him of the sounds of the wider, faster river down below. But way up here, the water was just a stream. It cascaded over the rocks above, splashed to the ground, and made a

pool just inches deep, and then disappeared into the ground. The mist from the waterfall created a haven for wildflowers. Late summer sprays of red Bee Balm decorated the slopes. After an underground journey, the stream emerged again much further downhill, well below their camp. This place served as the official bathing spot for the gang. Although Clay did not like standing under the sheet of water as it fell to the ground, the others loved to come here and rinse off. Joanna would like it here, he knew, and he looked forward to showing her this place.

The next day, Joanna pulled into the camp parking lot. She got out of her car and looked around. The dusty lot was empty except for a few scattered cars. A robin, its breast a shocking red against the gray of the dust, picked at the ground and then turned to regard her, its head cocked to one side. What a contrast to when last she'd been here, only three days ago, when hordes of campers had milled about trying to find the right buses to take them back home. Clay had been assigned to organize the whole operation that day, and he'd been so busy they had not even had a chance to say good-bye. He'd sent her a messenger—a boy from his cabin—with a note containing his phone number. And that had been it.

And now here she was again. But where was he? Where was anyone? Joanna headed toward the mess hall. Where there was food there would be people.

As she walked through the cluster of camp buildings, a man emerged from one of the doors and approached her. "Joanna?" said the camp director, a wiry man with graying hair. It was less than a month since he had hired her as a replacement counselor to finish out the summer at the camp.

"Hi," said Joanna.

"Clay told me you were coming to help. Thanks for lending a hand. I'll be by in a bit with some paperwork for you to sign. I think Clay's in the mess hall."

The double doors to the mess hall stood open. Joanna felt suddenly shy. What was she doing here? What would she say? She didn't even know Clay, really. She slowly climbed the steps to the door. She could see Clay alone inside, sorting food—pasta, fruit, bagels, cookies—into piles on a table. His back was to her. She'd forgotten how tall he was, and thin. His hair—so red—looked damp, as if he'd just taken a shower. She stood in the doorway. He still didn't know she was there. She cleared her throat.

Clay spun around. "Joanna," he exclaimed and grinned. She stood framed in the door, dressed in shorts and a blue shirt, her dark hair tied back in a long braid. Had it really been only three days ago when last he'd seen her? He moved quickly toward her across the floor. She smiled at him but he could see her hesitation. Even though he felt like swinging her into his arms, he brought himself up short, reining himself in as you would an overeager pup.

“How was your drive?” he asked. They chatted for a while and then Clay went back to organizing the food. “The word from up the hill is ‘bring more food,’ so that’s what I’m doing right now,” said Clay.

“Anything I can do to help?” asked Joanna. When Clay said no, she went to sit at the nearby piano. She ran her fingers over the keys and played a triple octave C scale.

“You play?” asked Clay.

“Not really anymore. When I was younger, you know, piano lessons.”

“Play something, anything, while I finish up,” said Clay. Joanna closed her eyes for a second and then played part of the very first piece she’d ever had to memorize, which somehow she still remembered.

Hmmm, that was pretty good, thought Clay, as he listened to the classical selection. “What was that?” asked Clay.

“Oh, Rachmaninoff something something. I had to memorize it for an 8th grade piano recital. It’s so dramatic—perfect for an 8th grader.”

“It’s good. Why don’t you play anymore?”

Well, I gave it up to concentrate on another instrument. Plus, I don’t have a piano now.”

“What other instrument?”

“Well, violin at first. Or fiddle, because that’s the kind of music I like to play.”

“And then?” asked Clay. Joanna turned around on the piano bench to face him. He seemed to have finished assembling the food he wanted to take. She went to the table and helped him pack the food in stuff sacks.

“Well, there’s guitar,” she said.

“You play guitar?”

“Yes, I have for years.” She hoped she didn’t sound like she was bragging. “But I’m finally facing up to the fact that I’ll never be any good. It’s my hands; they’re just too small. And not strong enough. It makes playing really hard. I can’t do bar chords at all. My finger’s just too short to reach across all six strings.” And she held up her hands to show him. “You, though, would make a great guitarist,” she said, looking at his giant hands and long fingers.

“I would?” he asked. He held up a hand and looked at it.

“Just compare,” said Joanna. And they each brought a hand to the other, left to right, palms touching and fingers aligned. Clay’s fingers towered over Joanna’s. As their hands touched, a wave of recognition hit Joanna. She remembered their late night meeting at the river, remembered lying back in his arms, remembered the feel of his singing. Clay looked into her dark brown eyes. She was even more beautiful than he’d remembered. He wrapped his hand around hers, took a step closer to her, and said, “Joanna.” She looked at her hand cradled in his and then at his arm, with its blonde-red meadow of hair, just as she had pictured it what seemed like a thousand times since they’d parted. She reached out her other hand to touch his forearm, to run her fingers through the hair, but before she made contact, they were startled by the sound of someone coming up the steps to the mess hall. They dropped hands and backed up a step from each other just as the camp director crossed the threshold.

“Joanna, here’s that paperwork,” he said, waving a clipboard in his hand.

Clay looked in the trunk of Joanna’s car. “We’ll only be up working on the trails for a couple more days. Then we’ll have some more work to do down here. So just bring what you need for the next two days—it’s about a two hour hike. You’ve been up there?” Joanna nodded. “You can make a stack of what you won’t need and just leave it in your trunk for when we come back down. OK?”

Joanna began going through her backpack and sorting the contents into “take” and “leave” piles. She was glad she’d brought her most compact sleeping bag. She eyed an oddly shaped plastic bag in the back of the trunk. Clay, following her glance, asked, “What’s that?”

“Well, it’s probably not worth bringing up there ...” she said, taking a towel-wrapped object out of the bag.

“Hmmm,” said Clay, as he saw the neck sticking out of the towel. “Not a guitar? It’s so small.” Joanna unwrapped her mandolin and handed it to Clay. “Mandolin?” he asked. Joanna nodded. “Joanna, is there anything you don’t play? You’re a regular one-woman band.”

Joanna flushed. “I just started playing a few months ago and I’m not very good yet.” She told him the story of finding the mandolin at a garage sale. “It’s perfect for my small hands. I’m not sure I could go back to playing guitar after playing this baby,” she said, smiling down at the mandolin.

“Of course you should bring it. It’s light. We’ll fit it in somehow. I’d love to hear you play.”

Clay let Joanna set the pace. She had the shorter legs but the lighter pack. Clay had the food, the sleeping bag, and the mandolin; Joanna, just her clothes and a bottle of water. Clay liked walking behind Joanna on the trail as it gradually gained in elevation through the trees. He liked watching her hips move rhythmically as she hiked. And her thighs. And her strong calf muscles.

He'd like to cup one of those calves in his hand. He stopped, practically running over Joanna, who'd stopped suddenly ahead of him.

"Which way?" she asked, gesturing to a branch in the trail. "Both paths end up at the same place, right?" The left path was more direct, but steeper. Clay had taken it the first time up and on the way back down. The right branch was more scenic, and easier, following the narrow river on its meandering course up the slope. He looked at Joanna. She was panting a bit, and they were both sweating in the North Carolina afternoon heat. It wouldn't hurt to take it easy. But he rarely took the river path. Walking alongside a rushing stream was not his idea of fun, especially without a life jacket. But he was past that, wasn't he? If he was able to sit by the much broader and deeper river downstream at the main camp merely by thinking about Joanna, he should be able to handle this tamer version of the river with the real Joanna at his side.

"Let's do the river trail," he said.

"Are you sure?" she asked, remembering how the life-jacket clad Clay had told her that night about his ocean dream and his fear of water. He nodded.

They followed the path toward the river, and again, Clay let Joanna lead. He focused on her, rather than the steadily increasing sounds of the water, trying to recapture his earlier fascination with the view of her walking from behind. He had a sudden vision of himself as an old man, blithely walking along the ocean shore while thinking about a young Joanna. He smiled. Well, whatever worked.

Joanna turned around to check on Clay's progress and interrupted him in a lopsided grin. She looked at him expectantly. "Nothing," he said. "Just thinking."

They came at last to where the trail crossed the water. To get across, they would have to either wade, step from stone to stone, or cross a log that spanned the water just upstream. If it had been up to her, Joanna would have chosen the stones. There were plenty in this stretch of the river and they were easy steps apart, or at most, manageable jumps. She'd brought her campers up here before to play stepping stones in the river. And the water was only calf-deep at best, even less for Clay. She glanced sideways at Clay. He looked very pale—his freckles stood out against his fair skin—and he was not smiling anymore.

"How about if we cross that log?" asked Joanna, nodding upstream, thinking that the log would be the easiest route. She walked to the log and stepped up on top of it. It was sturdy, fairly flat, a straight walk to the other side. She walked across, then turned back, still standing on the log, to face Clay.

He stepped up reluctantly on his side and started across. He could hear the river flowing beneath him. It talked to him in its familiar, hissing way, making threats in a language only he understood. He shook his head slightly, as if banishing the sound from his ears, and stopped. Looking down, he saw twigs and leaves tumbling in the water. He watched a yellow leaf—early victim to the approaching Fall—float toward the log, slide around a mossy rock, and then

disappear from sight. His eyes picked up the leaf again as it reappeared downstream. Strange, how the moss on the submerged rocks was such a brilliant emerald green.

“Clay,” whispered Joanna, startling him slightly. He looked up. How long had he been standing there? Joanna smiled and stretched out her hand. Wisps of dark hair had escaped her braid and loosely framed her face. Clay moved again, traveling the last steps to Joanna, and placed his hand in hers.

Holding hands, they walked side by side up the trail—broader here—as it followed the river upstream. The sunlight filtered through the trees, dappling the ground. Joanna thought Clay looked as if he needed distracting, so she launched into talk. Who else is helping with the trails? How do we repair them? How can I help? And on and on. Clay seemed grateful for the chatter—at least he answered all her questions. Finally, she fell silent. Their feet scuffed in the layers of old leaves and acorn shells that covered the trail. Joanna stumbled on a rock, but Clay’s hand steadied her.

As they neared the merging of the trails, Clay stopped suddenly, tugging Joanna to a halt. He dropped her hand and pointed into the oak and pine forest. Joanna saw two white-tailed deer, a doe and a young buck. They stood, half in shadow, half in light, and held their pose for several long seconds. Then they turned and trotted off, disappearing into the woods.

By late afternoon, they reached camp. Sheila and Carrie were boiling water on the camp stove. Clay and Joanna let their packs slide to the ground and sat down.

“Hi, you two,” said Sheila. “The boys are up at the waterfall. We made good progress on the ridge trail today.” She shook her short blonde hair out of her eyes as she lifted the water pot off the stove.

“All done for the day?” asked Clay.

Sheila and Carrie glanced at each other. “Well, *almost* everyone is,” said Carrie with a smile.

“Meaning?” asked Clay.

“Meaning, well, K.C. said he left something for you by your tent. He said you would understand,” said Carrie.

Joanna watched Clay stride towards a tan and yellow tent, set among the trees up the slope from the cooking area and fire ring. Sheila and Carrie laughed, turned to Joanna, and explained.

“This morning, before he left to go down to meet you, Clay said he’d work on the trails a couple of hours after he got back, so we could keep on schedule,” said Sheila.

“Plus, he said he’d bring back more food,” said Carrie.

“He did,” said Joanna.

Clay returned with K.C.’s reminder, a shovel, and tossed it onto the ground. He also had a blue towel thrown over his shoulder. Joanna couldn’t help thinking that Clay looked great in blue.

“Yeah, I haven’t forgotten. Let me get a drink and I’m off.” He rummaged in a bag, pulled out a packet of powdered lemondade, and dumped it into a bottle of water.

“Joanna, the girls will help you find something to drink or eat and get you settled. See y’all later.” And he headed off in the direction of the ridge.

“So what did you two do today?” asked Joanna. She’d known Sheila and Carrie for the last month. They had all been counselors in neighboring cabins.

“Oh, cut back brush from the trails mostly, “ said Carrie. “Sheila ripped open a blister on her hand—too much machete work, girl—so we’re down here trying to clean it out and bandage it up. You should have worn gloves, Sheila.”

“How was the hike up?” asked Carrie.

“Really nice, “ said Joanna. “We saw two deer on the river trail.”

“The river trail?” asked Carrie immediately. “You took the river trail?”

“Yes,” said Joanna. “It was beautiful, and not as steep as the other path.”

“Clay took the river trail?”

“Uhhh, yes,” said Joanna. Carrie and Sheila exchanged glances. Joanna wondered if she had said or done something she wasn’t supposed to.

“Sheila, do you remember Clay ever taking the river trail?” asked Carrie.

“No, I don’t,” said Sheila.

“And he was like, *normal*?” asked Carrie. Joanna nodded. “Sorry to grill you like this, Joanna. Here, let’s get you something to drink. It’s just that this is so ... interesting. K.C.’s gonna love this.”

“Joanna, welcome back to counselor gossip! C’mon, we’ll show you our tent,” Sheila said, gesturing toward a blue tent in the opposite direction from Clay’s. “We have room for one more inside. The guys have two tents for the four of them, Clay and K.C. up there,” she said, pointing up the slope, “and Sam and Dave on the other side of those huckleberry bushes.”

After working for a couple of hours, Clay headed back down toward camp. He stopped at the waterfall on his way. It was growing dark. He wondered how Joanna was doing. He took off his shirt and shoes and sat on a flat rock at the pond's edge. He rinsed off his feet and splashed water on his back. It was a clear night and he could see the moon rising, a golden disk just above the horizon. The clouds of the last few nights were gone. Joanna had returned and so had the moon.

After they had eaten and washed the dishes, the group gathered to build a fire. Joanna wandered off to the girls' tent and came back with her mandolin.

"Joanna, music!" exclaimed Dave when he saw her mandolin.

"Woo hoo!" said Carrie.

"Well, don't expect much. I'm new to playing and I don't know that many songs. So, if it's all right, I'll just fool around in the background. You all just keep on talking or whatever you want to do," said Joanna.

"Clay, can you come over here with me for a minute?" asked Joanna. Clay looked at her, an eyebrow raised in question, and followed her a short distance from the fire. Joanna put her foot up on a stump, placed the mandolin strap over the front of her right shoulder, and asked, "Can you sing me an A?"

Clay smiled and sang an A. Joanna tuned first one A string and then the second. "I know it's hard, but try not to listen to the mandolin. Just sing true A. I need to tune to you, not the other way around." Clay closed his eyes and sang A again.

"Now G." Clay sang G. She could have tuned the whole mandolin with just one or two sung notes, but she asked for the last two notes as well. Just to hear his voice.

"Now D."

"And E. Next octave up." Even though he sang just four simple notes, the sound of his voice sent a thrill through Joanna, bringing back memories of the night they had met by the river and she first had heard him sing.

When she was done tuning to Clay, she strummed the four pairs of strings in succession, listening carefully to the sound of each string in relation to the others. She made a few minor adjustments. "Good enough," she said. "Thanks."

They returned to the now blazing fire. Clay spread a blanket on the ground, and he and Joanna sat on it a little ways back from the fire. The others sat closer, talking and teasing, occasionally changing places to avoid the shifting smoke.

Joanna propped herself against a log, gripped the pick loosely in her right hand, and strummed the mandolin. She picked out a few notes and then a few phrases. She closed her eyes and listened to her instrument against the background of nighttime sounds—the rustling of a breeze in the trees, the crackling of the fire, the call of an owl. Because the mandolin is a beautiful instrument, Joanna felt a responsibility to play it as beautifully as possible. She wanted others to hear how the mandolin could sing. Suddenly aware that everyone had stopped talking, she opened her eyes. They were all watching her. She stopped playing.

“I’m not very good at being the center of attention,” she said softly to Clay.

“OK,” he said. He stood and joined the inner circle around the fire. “Is it marshmallow time, yet?” he asked.

“If you like them charred to a crisp,” answered Sheila.

“Where are the sticks from last night?” asked Dave. And soon the whole group was involved in roasting marshmallows. Clay looked back at Joanna, his hair a deep red in the firelight, and winked.

Under the buzz of their talking, Joanna began to play. She tooled around, plucking phrases, strumming chords, playing a few short and simple bluegrass tunes that she used to play on guitar and had transferred over to mandolin. The mandolin had such a clear, high sound, that the experience of playing the songs was completely different from on guitar. She loved it, and gave a small sigh of satisfaction. After a while, she put down the mandolin and walked over to the fire and helped herself to a marshmallow. She squatted next to Clay, and they held their sticks over the same patch of softly glowing coals. Everyone was curious about her mandolin, and again, she told the garage sale story.

She and Clay returned to the blanket and sat down. She took off her sandals and stretched out her legs.

“I like your playing, Joanna. It adds to tonight—the moon, the mandolin, the marshmallows....”

Joanna laughed and picked up her mandolin. “Here’s a song for you, Clay.” She played the short traditional Irish song she’d learned just two days before, while sequestered in her apartment thinking about Clay. It was a fast and infectious tune, a lilting folk melody that begged Joanna to play faster than she was able.

“Sounds familiar—I like it, but I don’t know it,” said Clay. “Why is it for me?”

“Because it’s called ‘Red-haired Boy,’” replied Joanna. “I just learned it this weekend. And I thought of you.”

“Thanks, Joanna.” He paused. “I was thinking about you too.”

They looked at each other and smiled. Joanna wondered what it would feel like right this minute to have Clay's arms around her, to feel his breath on her face, the warmth of his body spreading to hers, even the rasp of his unshaven face on her cheek. She began playing another song.

Clay lay on his back and closed his eyes, enjoying the cool evening air, the crackling of the fire, the bright sound of the mandolin, and the knowledge that Joanna was within arm's reach. He wanted to reach out and hold her hand, but of course her hands were busy. He extended his arm blindly, and found her foot. It was small and warm. Clay stroked it absentmindedly, content to touch any part of Joanna, this magical girl who liked to play mandolin and swim in the river.

"Clay," whispered Joanna. "My feet are filthy."

Clay didn't say anything but just smiled, with eyes still closed, and moved his hand from her foot to her leg. He enclosed her ankle with his hand, completely encircling it with thumb and forefinger, and gave it a gentle squeeze. She was so small. Moving his hand slowly up her leg, he cupped her calf in his palm. And then shifted his hand to the top of her leg and stroked her shin, then her kneecap, and then around to the back of her knee. Joanna closed her eyes and struggled to keep playing her mandolin. By the time Clay's hand moved to her thigh, it was all she could do to just strum the same chord over and over. And when at last he moved his hand to the inside of her thigh, she stopped, absolutely unable to play another note, her left hand unable to muster the strength to hold the strings to the fingerboard, and her right hand robbed of its knowledge of how to strum.

At the sudden silence, Clay opened his eyes and removed his hand. Joanna looked up. "What song was that?" Clay asked, innocently.

"Very funny," said Joanna. "That was a song called 'I can't play when you do that.'"

"I'm just getting back at you," said Clay.

"For what?"

"The other night. Out by the river. I was singing you that song and finding it impossible to get through."

"You were? I didn't notice. You sang great." Joanna remembered his song and blushed. His voice had been so powerful and pure, that she'd been overwhelmed as he held her in his arms, and she had fainted.

"You didn't notice? I guess you were too busy being unconscious."

They laughed. A long time.

“OK, y’all, what’s the joke? Sounds like a good one,” called Sam. He and Sheila were the only ones left at the fire. The others had gone to bed. When neither Clay nor Joanna answered, he asked, “Are you done playing, Joanna? That was really nice.”

“Thanks. Yes, I’m done for the evening. My hand is tired,” she replied.

Clay looked at his own hand, as if to say, ‘my hand’s not tired doing what it was doing.’ Joanna caught this silent Clay-to-hand dialogue and collapsed in laughter again. Sam looked at the inexplicably laughing Joanna and then back to Clay. “What you been feedin’ that girl, Gonzo?” he asked, using Clay’s camp nickname. Clay shrugged.

Joanna walked toward the girls’ tent and was met by Sheila.

“Possible change in sleeping plans,” Sheila said. “It’s K.C. and Carrie. And their on again off again romance. Well, it’s on again and they’d like to sleep in our tent.” She rolled her eyes. “But if you and I don’t want to move, they said they’ll survive.”

“Where would we move to?”

“Well, there’s space for two with Clay and space for one with Dave and Sam. I would vote for us both going with Clay. I’d rather be with him and you than on my own with Dave and Sam.”

“I guess it’s OK,” said Joanna. “Why not?”

Clay lay on top of his sleeping bag, wearing only an old pair of running shorts. He had the lantern on and a book in hand, but he wasn’t reading. He was thinking about that night’s fireside gathering, about lying next to Joanna and sliding his hand all the way up to the inside of her thigh. He remembered the way she had laughed in the firelight’s glow. But most of all, he remembered how she had looked playing her mandolin, bent over, focusing on her chords and picking.

His thoughts were interrupted by Sheila’s voice.

“Knock, knock. Clay, are you still awake?”

He sat up. “Yes, what’s up?”

“Can we come in?” Sheila asked, unzipping the tent as she spoke. Clay grabbed his long-sleeved flannel shirt and pulled it on.”

“C’mon in,” he said. Sheila, followed by Joanna, came into the tent. They sat down, and Joanna pulled the zipper closed.

“You seen K.C.?” asked Clay.

“Funny you should ask,” said Sheila. “That’s why we’re here.” She explained the situation.

“You girls are welcome to sleep here. But are you sure you don’t want me to go on up to your tent and bust K.C.’s ...” He paused. “Well, anyway, I’m happy to go up there and drag that boy back down here so you can sleep in your tent. Just say the word.”

“No. No need to do that. We can just stay here—if it’s OK with you?” said Sheila.

“Joanna?” asked Clay. She nodded. The girls brought their sleeping bags and packs inside. It was going to be a cozy night. They rolled out their bags. Clay and Joanna were on the ends, with Sheila in the middle. Probably just as well, thought Clay. He wasn’t sure he’d be able to sleep at all if Joanna were lying right next to him.

The next morning, Joanna woke up early. Clay and Sheila were still sleeping. Joanna looked over at Clay, lying on his stomach, half in and half out of his sleeping bag. He’d taken off his shirt during the night. In the morning light, he looked vulnerable—eyes closed and long red lashes trembling as he breathed the slow breaths of sleep. The back of his neck was sunburned, and she saw he had freckles not only on his cheeks but across his back. And there was the much remembered hair on his forearms, exposed to her now for a glorious close-up view. Joanna lay there for she wasn’t sure how long, content to look at Clay in the strange golden light created by the morning sun passing through the tent’s yellow fabric. At last Clay stirred. He opened his eyes and smiled when he saw Joanna. “Good morning,” he mouthed.

Joanna motioned that she was going outside. Grabbing her pack, she unzipped the tent, stuck her feet out to find her sandals, and stepped outside.

Clay put on his glasses and lay back, looking at the yellow roof above him. A black speck—a bug on the outside of the tent—moved slowly across the nylon ceiling. There had been something wonderful about waking up to find Joanna watching him. She had not looked away when he opened his eyes but had gazed at him calmly and—did he imagine it?—longingly, and then given him a crinkle-eyed smile. He wondered if she were coming back or was up for good—it was still so early—and decided to go find her. He pulled on his flannel shirt, stepped over Sheila, and exited the tent.

Joanna had changed into her turquoise swimsuit for a visit to the waterfall. Camping was all well and good, but she felt like she needed a bath. Her two piece swimsuit was the popular tankini style—the top came down to just above the bottoms, leaving only a ribbon of midriff exposed. As Clay approached, she threw a jacket over her shoulders.

“Ahh, off to the waterfall?” asked Clay. Joanna had let her hair out of the braid, and it cascaded over her shoulders and down across her breasts. She looked much as she had that moonlit night by the river, only then she’d had on even fewer clothes. Clay noticed the band of pale, exposed stomach, and had an urge to slide his hand over Joanna’s belly, move it up beneath her suit, and stroke the underside of her breast.

Joanna looked at him expectantly, and Clay realized she’d just asked him a question.

“What was that?” he asked.

“Do you want to come too?” repeated Joanna. “To the waterfall?”

“Sure,” he agreed. He would follow her anywhere. Shouldering towels, they walked together up the ridge trail. At this early hour, they would have the waterfall to themselves.

“If we work hard today and tomorrow morning, we should be able to hike out tomorrow afternoon,” said Clay. “And then we can take real showers,” he added. “Warm showers.”

“Is the water that cold?” asked Joanna.

“Not freezing, but brisk. You’ll be glad you have your jacket for after. And standing under the waterfall has a certain charm, or so people say.”

Joanna realized then that Clay had never been in the waterfall, what the others had described to her as a ‘not to be missed’ experience. Most likely his water phobia again. But he really wasn’t as water wary as she’d first thought and as the others seemed to think. Maybe he just needed encouragement.

“I can’t wait to see it,” said Joanna. “C’mon, let’s race.” And she took off up the trail, running ahead before Clay could respond.

Race? Well, why not? thought Clay and gave pursuit. Joanna had a head start, but with his long legs, he easily gained on her. He let her stay just ahead.

Joanna turned off the ridge trail onto the side path leading to the waterfall, thankful the uphill climb was over. She was panting as she ran down the trail. The branches slapped at her arms and legs. She glanced behind and shrieked—Clay was almost upon her. There was something thrilling about being chased by Clay; it brought back memories of being chased by the boys during first grade recess.

At last she reached the clearing and saw the waterfall. She stopped and Clay slid to a halt beside her.

“Beautiful,” she panted, looking at the splashing water, the mossy rocks, the red flowers. “Postcard material.” They were both breathing heavily.

“I’m exhausted,” she added and flopped down on the grass to take off her sports sandals. They piled their clothes and towels together, and Clay laid his glasses carefully on top.

Clay, in his running shorts, and Joanna, in her swimsuit, approached the pond. Clay squatted down, cupped some water in his hands and brought it to his face, eyes closed. Joanna watched as the water dripped down his cheeks and chin, which were covered with the new red fuzz of a day’s growth of beard.

Joanna waded out into the shallow pool, splashing water on her arms and legs. “It’s not too cold,” she said.

“Wait for the waterfall,” said Clay. “It’s colder.”

Joanna turned and waded through the ankle deep pool to the base of the waterfall. Here it was louder, and the splash of water on the rocks made a fine mist that rose into the air. Joanna stepped up onto a large rock that received much of the falling water. She looked back at Clay and smiled, and then stepped under the stream of water. She let the cool water flow over her body. She closed her eyes, held her head back, and allowed the water to stream through her hair. It was cold, but bearable.

Clay watched Joanna in the natural shower of the falls. He felt a bit the voyeur, watching Joanna bathe from a distance. Her wet swimsuit clung to her and outlined every curve in her body. She was so small, so perfect. Her dark hair seemed even longer now that it was wet; it reached almost to her waist. Joanna moved through the water and disappeared. And then came out again.

“Clay,” she called. “Have you been up here?”

He shook his head.

“Not in the waterfall, I mean behind. There’s a place behind the falls, big enough to sit. Did you know that?”

“No,” he said, raising his voice to be heard over the water. “No, I didn’t.”

“Do you want to see? You don’t have to go in the falls, just come around the side.”

Clay had somehow known it would come to this when Joanna asked if he wanted to come along with her to the falls. With a feeling of inevitability, he began to walk through the pool toward Joanna. The water dragged at his feet. Even though he didn’t intend to stand under the falls, the sound of the water still bothered him, and it got louder the closer he got to Joanna. He could hear nothing else. He wished she would say something to distract him, like she had on their hike up the river trail.

Joanna watched Clay approach. He was so pale—was he going to be sick? When she had discovered the hollow behind the falls, she had called out to him, intending only to share her

delight. But maybe this had not been a good idea. His eyes were drawn wide, like a frightened deer or horse, ready to bolt. As he splashed closer, he seemed to flinch, and then he tossed his head, as if to rid himself of the sound. At last, he stepped up onto the stone and stood next to her, well away from the tumbling water.

“Don’t listen,” said Joanna, realizing how much the noise of the water bothered him. “Don’t listen to the water.” And she reached up and covered his ears with her hands. “Better?” she asked.

But Clay didn’t hear her. With the rush of the water pushed into the background, he saw Joanna’s lips move and her eyes look up at him expectantly. He saw her dark hair dripping, the rise and fall of her chest, and her breasts outlined under the clinging fabric of the swimsuit. He saw the shower of water behind her and the mist rising from where the water collided with the stones. All this he saw in an instant that expanded and revealed details usually left unnoticed. Like a sparkling droplet of water on Joanna’s eyelash, or the delicate star shape of the tiny white flowers that decorated the moss that covered the stones. Joanna’s lips moved again, but he couldn’t hear. He bent down, his ears still cradled in her hands, and kissed her gently on the lips. Joanna let her hands drop to his shoulders, and Clay drew her toward him in the embrace they had both been waiting for.

Joanna gasped with the shock and delight of their bodies coming together. They stood there for one minute, two, who knows how long, until she pulled Clay behind the waterfall and gestured, “See?” Clay, who had his face buried in Joanna’s neck, vaguely noticed the large flat stone covered with spongy moss in the hollow in back of the falls. He pulled Joanna down to sit beside him on the moss. He kissed her again and slipped his hand under her suit and moved his palm across her stomach. She thrilled to his touch as he drew his hand over her belly. He lowered her to the ground and lay on top of her, pausing just a moment to look into her eyes.

Joanna came to that perfect moment, that moment when both a woman’s body and mind acquiesce and give themselves over to the man. Clay felt Joanna relax beneath him, as if in welcome, and he kissed her hard. They lay there stretched behind the falls, oblivious to the water splashing down on their legs.

“Good morning, campers,” rang out a voice, interrupting the pair. Clay rolled over onto his back and lay next to Joanna, his feet sticking out beyond the falls. Clay looked at Joanna, shook his head, and sighed. He had heard K.C.’s wake up call every morning for the last two months, ever since K.C. had been assigned as the junior counselor to Clay’s cabin of 8 year old boys. What the hell was he doing out at the falls so early in the morning? Without hesitation—why had this waterfall ever bothered him?—Clay ducked through the curtain of cascading water to greet K.C., and found Carrie there too. He stepped down off the stone and walked over to where they stood in the grass next to his and Joanna’s towels.

“Good morning to you too. You’re up early,” said Clay.

“Likewise,” said K.C. Clay picked up his towel, dried his hair and chest, and put on his glasses.

Joanna had gasped as Clay strode out *through*—not around—the waterfall. Then she smiled. Who was this guy, this man, scared one moment to come near the water, and on top of her the next, pressing her down into the moss with the water drumming on his legs? She came out from behind the waterfall. “Hi,” she called to the others.

Carrie, dressed in a pale yellow bathing suit that perfectly suited her honey colored hair and deep tan, climbed up onto the stone and stood underneath the water. Joanna joined her and the two rinsed off.

K.C. and Clay stood together, watching the girls bathe. “Bad timing?” asked K.C.

Clay glared at him. “Don’t ask.”

“You amaze me, Gonzo. A few nights ago I find you sitting next to the river without your life jacket on—a first in the three years I’ve known you. Then Carrie tells me you and Joanna hiked up here on the river trail. And now I find you soaked to the bone and wallowing under the waterfall.”

K.C. gestured toward Joanna. “She’s that mysterious ‘someone’ you mentioned, isn’t she?” Clay didn’t answer. “Well, all I can say, buddy, is great. Congrats. About the water and all that.” He paused. “And sorry about the interruption.”

For the rest of the day, the guys worked high up on the ridge trail, erasing with shovels the shortcuts created by hikers who shunned the trails’s switchbacks. The girls cleared a fallen tree from a trail on the other side of camp. Joanna expected questions from the girls—about Clay, about the waterfall, about the two of them—but none came. Carrie, uncharacteristically, had said nothing to Sheila, and Joanna was grateful for that. Up on the ridge, Clay experienced much the same. K.C. had not said anything to anybody. At midday, K.C. disappeared without explanation, but returned later that afternoon.

When both groups descended to camp for dinner, they found another tent pitched near Dave and Sam’s.

“I had an extra,” said K.C. “So I thought I’d put it up.”

“You’re a sweetheart,” said Sheila, and gave him a little hug.

After dinner, they built another campfire and gathered around. Dave and Sam roasted marshmallows. The others sat and talked in low voices; they were tired after the day’s work and looked forward to finishing tomorrow and hiking back out.

Joanna thought she might get her mandolin, bring it out to the fire, and play for a while. Maybe something slow and sweet rather than energetic and bright. She headed to Clay’s tent to

get her instrument. Once inside she turned on the lantern that hung from the roof. Sheila had taken her pack and sleeping bag to the extra tent. Joanna's belongings were scattered about, and her sleeping bag lay bunched in one corner. She smoothed the bag flat and stuffed her clothes in her pack. She searched for and found a pick, sat on her sleeping bag, and played a few notes.

She was interrupted by the sound of the zipper as Clay yanked it up and ducked into the tent.

"Hey, Joanna. Bluegrass girl." he said. He pulled the zipper down again.

"Hi," she said.

He sat on his sleeping bag. "Tuning?" he asked.

"Not really," she said, laying down the mandolin.

"I've hardly seen you since this morning," he said.

"I know," she replied.

There was a long silence, and Joanna fought the impulse to fill it with words, any words. The lantern swayed gently, and the shadows flickered across the tent walls. She looked at Clay in the shifting light—his glasses, the blue flannel shirt with the rolled up sleeves, the hair on his forearms, the big hands. She flushed.

Clay looked at Joanna, miles away on the far side of the tent. She held his gaze, her dark eyes pools of water, calm and quiet, waiting.

"Joanna, come sit over here?" he asked at last, and patted a spot next to him on top of his sleeping bag. She came to him and sat. Just being near him made her breaths come more quickly. Clay removed his glasses. This close he could see her fine. Her hair hung loose around her face and spilled like a dark cape over her shoulders. He lifted a hand and ran it through the hair. He gently pushed off the sweater she'd draped across her back.

"Not too cold?" he asked.

Joanna shook her head. She moved her hand to stroke Clay's forearm, to run her fingers through that hair at last. Clay closed his eyes, then exhaled slowly.

"Joanna," he whispered. He drew her close until her soft curves pressed against him. Joanna closed her eyes and forgot everything but the pulse of Clay's heart. "Joanna," he whispered again. Joanna opened her eyes, pulled back from a place she didn't want to leave. Their eyes met and he asked, "Will you sleep in my tent again tonight?"

"Yes," she said. Clay reached above to turn off the lantern. As their lips met, he gently pulled her down beside him.

The next morning, Joanna again awoke first. The soft morning light lent the scene—two sleeping bags unzipped and pulled together like blankets, two sets of clothes scattered here and there—a certain tenderness, or maybe it was just memories of last night coloring her vision. Yesterday morning she'd watched Clay from the other side of the tent, his long body sprawling out of his sleeping bag. Today she was a part of that sprawl—he lay on his stomach with one arm stretched across her. Again she admired the freckles that dotted his back and the long red eyelashes. She sighed and stretched her body like a cat. Unfortunately, she needed to get up. Carefully, she slid out from under Clay's arm and looked around for clothes to put on quickly. She wanted to leave and then return to this perfect scene, without waking Clay. She found his flannel shirt and pulled it on, buttoning it up all the way. She slowly unzipped the tent and stepped outside.

The sound of the zipper awakened Clay. He rolled over onto his back and stretched. His muscles were so relaxed he felt he might dissolve into his sleeping bag. Smiling, he remembered the night before. There was only one problem. He missed Joanna already, and she'd only been gone three minutes. He sat up and searched for his clothes.

Before returning to the tent, Joanna stopped at the cooking area for a drink of water. She buried her face in the shoulder of Clay's shirt, inhaling deeply. Hearing something, she glanced up at the tent and saw Clay walking toward her down the slope.

"Morning," he said. Joanna leaned against their makeshift table, bare legged, with Clay's blue shirt hanging down almost to her knees. "Nice shirt," he added, wondering what she was wearing underneath.

"Sorry," she said. "Water?" Clay nodded. She set out two cups. As she lifted the transparent amber bottle to pour, it caught the sun, and a dozen golden jewels of light were sent dancing across the table. The sound of the water filling the cups reminded Clay of the waterfall, and he remembered lying on top of Joanna on the mossy rock behind the falls. After she set the bottle down, he pulled her to him for a long kiss. He slid his hands up beneath the shirt and found only bare skin. He cupped her hips in his palms and pulled her hard against him.

"Hmmm," he said. "Joanna, what are we doing out here?"

"We're getting a drink, and then we can go back to the tent," she said. "If you'd like."

"I'd like," he said, tugging her in the tent's direction.

After they made love, they slept again, the deep, contented sort of sleep that pays no mind to the clock. When they awoke, the bright light told them that early morning was long past. Clay found his watch and sighed. He reached over and ran his hand down Joanna's back.

"I hate to say this, but we'd better get going," he said. "We have to finish the trails, pack up, hike out. But prepare yourself—the gang is going to love the fact that we slept in so late."

They dressed and walked down to the cooking area. The camp was deserted.

“Here’s a message for you,” said Joanna, hoisting a shovel from the table.

“And one for you too,” said Clay, gesturing at the hatchet that lay nearby. “You’ve made it, Joanna. K.C. is leaving you tool messages!”

Joanna smiled. “They left us something else too,” she said, pointing to the bouquet of red Bee Balm in the water bottle.

“A nice touch. Yep, they are having fun with this,” said Clay.

“So every week, you come up here and do this with a cabin of third grade girls?” asked Clay, as he stepped easily from stone to stone in the river. It was late afternoon and the golden sunlight streamed through the trees. He and Joanna had paused along the river trail on their hike back to the main Y camp. They’d left their packs on the trail and changed into their sports sandals so they could get their feet wet.

“Every week,” said Joanna, leaping to a stone several feet away. “They love it.”

“You are making me feel really good here, Joanna,” he said.

She laughed.

“Why can I do this today?” asked Clay. He balanced, each foot on a rock, then abandoned the rocks in favor of just sloshing through the river. He bent down to pick up a small orange stone from the river bed. He ran his fingers over its smooth surface and then placed it in his pocket.

Joanna thought for a moment. “Because you know this river,” she replied.

“I know the river?”

“You’ve walked along its banks, you’ve waded near its source, you’ve lain under the waterfall. And I just saw you put a river rock in your pocket. You know the river.”

“Hmmm,” said Clay, thinking. “Well, just don’t expect me to go swimming in it tomorrow.”

Joanna laughed again, and Clay caught up to her and kissed her as they stood in the water.

“Come over here,” he said, pulling her by the hand toward the bank. They waded over and sat on a large rock at the stream’s edge, leaving their feet in the cool water. Clay looked into her eyes, held her hand in both of his, and began to sing.

*They say for everyone, there's that certain one
Out there, somewhere
I'd been looking hard, searching every heart
Getting nowhere
Didn't know I was making my way to you*

The beauty of Clay's voice overwhelmed her. She was taken back to their first night by the river and remembered how his magnificent voice had soared into the night. And now—how could *that* voice be singing *those* words to her? Its pure tones, its words of love—sung so tenderly—were for her? She felt tears coming to her eyes.

*Now I know how the river feels
When it reaches the sea
And finally finds the place
It was always meant to be
Holding fast, home at last
Knowing the journey's through
Lying here with you
I know how the river feels*

She knew two tears had fallen down her cheeks, but she couldn't help it. Clay bent to gently kiss her and then held her close against his chest. Joanna sighed and relaxed against him.

"I will never sing that song again without thinking of you," he whispered. Joanna was still, unable to respond.

Clay drew back slightly, looked down at her, and then wiped her tears. He shook his head. "Joanna, Joanna, what am I going to do with you? First time I sing a song to you, you faint. This time, you cry." He smiled, and bit his lip. "Are we making progress here?"

She smiled back. "Yes," she said. They stood and walked back up the trail to get their packs. Then they continued hiking along the river, their talk and laughter blending with the river's gurgling, rushing song.

THE END