

FIREWORKS  
*over*  
TOCCOA



Jeffrey Stepakoff



THOMAS DUNNE BOOKS

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## A CHANCE MEETING

**H**eading north, Lily drove the Packard down Currahee Street to the east of town until it became Highway 123. After a few miles, she pulled off onto Owl Swamp Road, a rural two-lane that wound through pine forest north of town. It was late afternoon but still wickedly hot, and even with the windows fully rolled down, Lily perspired profusely. But she didn't care. She loved the forest around her, verdant and hushed, the warm, wet breeze carelessly whipping her hair. Lily unfastened the top buttons of her nice summer dress, letting the wind meet her damp skin.

Nearly halfway back to her house, as she was crossing Prather Bridge, another jarring *boom* shocked her from her heat-induced reverie—but this one was much louder than the one she'd heard earlier with Honey. It shook the car.

Lily pulled over to the side of the road and saw a silver trail of light fly up into the sky. Mesmerized, she opened the door,

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leaving the engine running, got out of the car, and walked toward the climbing sparkling light. It seemed to be very close, just over her head. She could hear it whistling as it climbed above the grassy field into which she was walking.

Then, *boom-boom*, even louder again, and the trail exploded into thousands of beads of light, each one shooting out on its own dazzling trajectory, filling the entire blue and white canvas over the meadow with shimmering silver tinsel. Lily just stood in the field, looking straight up, slowly, reflexively, turning, as the firework continued expanding, engraving the sky.

Lily had never seen anything like this. It was beautiful and powerful and magical. She was so fascinated, so taken by what she saw, that she didn't hear the voice that was calling out to her: "*Look out! Get away from there!*"

When she finally heard the voice, registered the alarm it was trying to impart, and looked around to see from where it was coming and what exactly it meant, suddenly a young man in boots, jeans, and a dirty white T-shirt tackled her, pulled her to the ground, and lay on top of her, forcefully covering her with his entire body.

Before Lily could even find a breath to scream, she saw the pieces of smoking debris from the firework landing all around them. Some of the pieces missed them by inches.

Realizing what was happening, she lay still. His cheek

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pressed to hers, his hands cupped around her face, his chest on her back, his hips on hers, he lay still.

The last of the debris fell. But Lily and the man continued to lie there, frozen, for a long moment. Until, slowly, gingerly, he rolled off her.

“Didn’t anyone ever teach you not to stand under fireworks?”

Lily lifted her face off the ground and took in Jake Russo. Though he was clearly just a few years older than her, he had a quiet, knowing sense about him that was much worldlier than usual someone in his age. His eyes were dark and mature. His tousled hair and three-day beard were ink black. While visibly lean, his body felt muscular, not simply taut, like a young man’s, but hard, presumably from use.

He reached out a hand to her. She took it and he helped her up, never taking his eyes off her. *What is a beautiful girl like this doing in the middle of a field in the middle of Georgia?* he wondered.

“I feel like an idiot,” she said.

“You’ve got a pebble stuck to your chin.”

Lily swatted at her face.

“I suppose I should say ‘thank you.’”

“I suppose I should say ‘don’t worry about it.’”

Jake reached out to her and removed a tiny stone that was

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pressed to her face. Lily considered him as he did this. He smelled of sweat and earth and black powder. And now she did, too. It was animal. Visceral. Her father smelled this way when he returned from extended camping trips in the Appalachians when she was a child.

Trying to get her bearings, Lily looked around, tossing some stray strands of hair from her face. As she looked up, light refracted in the tawny trails still lingering, like viscous nectar from a great tupelo comb hewn and oozing over the clouds.

Not too far from where they were standing, Lily saw the freight truck and several rows of buried mortars in the field.

“That your truck over there?”

“That’s mine.”

“So you must be the pyrotechnics man.”

“That would be me.”

There was a moment of silence. Jake just looked at her, and she let him. She felt him studying her, considering her. This sort of thing would usually compel her to make some sweet small talk about the weather or an upcoming party and gracefully move the moment along, but she didn’t. She just let this be, surprised by how natural it felt.

“What are you doing out here?” he finally said.

“I was just driving by and I saw the firework, your firework, and I thought it was amazing, and I wanted to watch it.” Without

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meaning to, Lily let words just fall out of her. She felt so uncharacteristically clumsy and rationalized that she must be a little dizzy from being tackled.

Without realizing it, Jake smiled, in a way he hadn't for a long time. There was something about her, beautiful, yes, but also something . . . confident unapologetic eyes, like blue sapphires, like cobalt, both profound and elemental, a proper dress improperly buttoned, she was refined but bold . . . so many things, actually, that made her so hard to stop looking at.

Feeling the sun on his neck, beads of perspiration rolling down his cheek, Jake just stood there in the stillness and the heat, legs firmly astride, one knee slightly bent, arms down, palms a little forward as if ready to receive something, maintaining his controlled breathing and his constant gaze at her, afraid that if he broke it and looked away, or even just moved from his stance, she'd see how nervous her beauty and being this near her was actually making him. Finally, he wiped his forehead with the back of his wrist.

"You're bleeding," he said, squinting and pointing to her scraped knee.

"Oh," whispered Lily, embarrassed that she hadn't even noticed how much this really hurt until just now.

"That has to be cleaned." He hooked a finger into a belt loop on his jeans and again just watched her.

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“Well, I’m just all out of sorts this afternoon.” She tried to wipe some dirt off the wound but only made things worse. “Ow!” This did have to be cleaned.

“I have some antiseptic in the truck. Why don’t you hobble on over to it,” he said, noticing her car off on the side of the road. “I’ll turn off your engine and be right there.”

“You’re too kind. But I feel like I’ve already caused you enough trouble.”

“No trouble.”

Lily looked at him for a moment and, without further reflection, decided to accept help from this stranger. “Thank you. I’m Lily. Lily Davis Woodward.”

“Jake Russo.”

“Pleased to meet you, Jake Russo.”

Jake nodded and began to head for Lily’s car. Then he stopped.

“By the way, what you said about fireworks, I think they’re amazing, too.”

Having no idea how much that comment made her like him, Jake quickly marched off, the late afternoon sun before him bronzing everything it touched.

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## CANDLELIGHT AND MAGIC

I know I'd seen them even earlier, but the first one I vividly remember was when I was three," said Jake.

"You remember that far back?"

"Like it was yesterday."

Lily grimaced a bit. She sat on the edge of the truck ramp. Legs dangling. Dress pulled up mid-thigh. Jake stood and wiped dirt and tiny rocks from her knee using gauze moistened with a strong distillate of witch hazel. She was also barefoot because, unlike his rubberized tank boots, her jute-soled espadrilles could create static electricity, not something you wanted on a fireworks truck.

"It was a twenty-four-inch multibreak 'weeping willow,'" Jake continued as he gently tended to her knee. "Like the one you saw in the field, only bigger."

"Bigger?"

"See those shells over there?" Jake pointed to several large

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fireworks shells secured on a grounded metal shelf in the back of the truck. “Those are thirty-sixers, three feet in diameter. One of my family’s specialties. My father really mastered them. Each one takes several hours to make, and each one makes the night brighter than noon in July.”

Lily took in the sight of all the shells secured in the back of the truck. About ten feet away from the truck, on a large folding wooden table, were several gallon-sized heavy cardboard containers filled with fine powders, each a different color, another container of long black-powdered cord, presumably fuses, and a stack of heavy light brown paper. A few fireworks shells sat on the table in various stages of construction and repair. Lily was enthralled. It was like peering into a sorcerer’s workshop.

“All that time and work for something that lasts a few seconds,” she said.

“A moment in the sky, forever in the heart.” Jake smiled, surprising himself again.

Lily nodded, understanding entirely. “That’s nice.”

“That’s my father. Well, the English version. What he always said was more like *“in cielo per un attimo, in testa per una vita, e nel cuore per sempre.”*

Lily didn’t realize how lyrical, how romantic, really, Italian sounded. It was, after all, the language of the enemy, and so one didn’t hear it very often. Certainly not the way Jake Russo made it sound.

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She continued listening to him talk, passionately about fireworks, vaguely about himself. She was intrigued by both what he was saying and how he was saying it. He used words comfortably but sparingly; he was at ease but measured. Such a fascinating bundle of contradictions, this man. He looked tough but spoke thoughtfully. He was a laborer, and an artist. His hands were rough; his touch, gentle, tender. He was complicated, Jake Russo, so different from the boys and men in Toccoa whose nature and needs were so readily apparent.

Lily looked up and saw an old pickup driving down Owl Swamp Road. It slowed when the driver saw her Packard parked by the side of the road and then sped up and continued. *Was that the Browns' pickup?* Lily wondered. She wasn't sure. Had they recognized her car? If it was the Browns, probably not. They'd recognize Paul's Cadillac but not the Packard. But why did she care? She wasn't doing anything wrong. Of course, her neighbors might not see it that way. Yes, Lily Davis in a dirty dress, alone with a boy in a field, some would certainly say that flew in the face of the old Toccoa code of living.

"Lived in Georgia all your life?" Jake said, blowing on her knee to help the excess alcohol evaporate.

The sensation of his breath lingering on her skin distracted her from her previous thoughts. "That obvious?" she said.

"It's your accent, mostly." Jake had served with men from all over the United States. Long days spent in muddy foxholes

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with men from South Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia had made him quite expert in the subtleties of various regional accents.

“Yes, all my life.”

“Your husband from the area, too?”

“Paul is from Gainesville, just north of Atlanta.” She had seen him notice her ring and knew he was asking about more than where Paul was from. “He’s been stationed overseas. He’s returning in a few days.”

Jake expertly taped a small square of gauze to the scrape with some white surgical tape. “There. All set.”

“You’ve done this before.”

“That obvious?”

Lily smiled. “Thank you.” She pushed her dress down, stood, and hopped off the truck ramp. She slid into her sandals. “I wish I could do something to return the favor.”

“No need. Honestly, it’s been nice just to talk for a little while. I’ve really enjoyed it.”

“I’ll bring you a pie. A pecan pie. That’s what we do in Toccoa. Baking. Lots of baking, usually with nuts. Where are you staying?”

“The Auxiliary has a room for me. But I’ll most likely stay out here. I’ve got all my gear, everything I need, and I prefer it.”

Jake realized that Lily was shaking her head. “You okay?” he said.

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“I’m just remembering, I’ve got a trunk full of ice cream and butter.”

“In this heat?”

Lily realized her groceries were probably ruined. “I’m not usually like this. Really. I don’t know what’s wrong with me today.”

Jake laughed. Increasingly certain that he was seeing a part of this young woman that very few ever saw. A part she kept carefully hidden, maybe even from herself. And he liked it. He liked it a lot.

Jake had learned during his time at war that there are moments in one’s life, critical moments, small moments, passing flutters of a second, in which decisions are made and actions taken, perhaps the slightest of offers extended, that at the time on the surface seem simple and transparent but upon consideration or reflection are proven to be instants that can change the course of everything.

As she stood there in her sandals in that field, smiling comfortably at him, an evening breeze kicking up, tossing her hair, rippling her dress, the feel of the skin of her leg rooted in his mind like a lovely haunting melody, growing louder and more resolute each time he tried to forget it, on a level that he was not wholly aware at the time, this was one of those moments. It could have ended there, Jake knew. There was nothing else between them, and the last thing he needed was complications.

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He was decidedly avoiding such things in his life. That's one of the main reasons he was here, after all. *Say good-bye, wish her well, do the show, and move on to the next town*, he told his conscious self.

But after several years of living by his gut, literally surviving on what it directed him to do, he once again found himself acting on that core instinct. "Would you like to stay for dinner?" he said. "I don't have much. But there's some risotto, and I'm not entirely bad with my little camp stove. And I suppose we could have ice-cream soup for dessert."

Lily was a little taken aback at the offer. But she continued standing there. "You save my life, you bandage my knee, I can't have you feed me, too. The Ladies Auxiliary will throw me out of Toccoa for being such a poor southern hostess."

"So we won't tell them."

How long had it been since she'd been invited to dinner, to anything, by someone besides her parents or someone who was connected to her parents? Dinner. More time with this man. Yes. That was exactly what she wanted. Was it okay? Was it proper? Was it right? She didn't know. But she was in the middle of a grassy field and the sun was going down and Jake Russo had been nothing but nice and kind and interesting, and all she knew for sure was that she wanted more. And that, that certainty, felt right.

"I can stay."

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