

# Someone to Calm Me

by Laura Steadham Smith

When Tabitha left Baton Rouge, she drove north with the intention of telling her momma she was calling off the wedding. She stopped at a gas station in Natchez and took the cross necklace off her review mirror and stuffed it in the center console with her engagement ring. She crossed the Mississippi back into Louisiana practicing what she would say. It's not Daniel. It's God. I can't be a preacher's wife if I don't believe He's up there. But when she wound along her mother's gravel driveway and saw the cypress trees breaking the water in the lake, her mother was waiting on the porch with her lapdog, a deer rifle, and a plan.

"You know André likes to play in the lake, but it's just not safe with a gator in there." Momma held André with one hand and braced the deer rifle across her lap with the other. Even in late October Momma wore shorts, and they revealed the prosthetic limb below her left knee. André wriggled, and Tabitha hoped the gun wasn't loaded. They'd have to do it quiet-like, Momma explained. The lottery for gator hunting licenses wasn't for months, and they might not get one anyway. A gator would eat André or one of the spaniels before that. "You know I can't be all alone up here, a mile off the highway."

Tabitha slung her purse onto the porch next to two spaniels stretched out beside each other. Neither dog raised its head. "And nobody else can do it?"

"Doreen's sister married the warden. Word could get around."

"So you want me to do it?"

"I'd have asked my almost son-in-law, but since you didn't bring him along, you'll have to do. Preachers don't need to be breaking laws anyway."

André squirmed out of Momma's grasp and onto the porch.

"You know I love having you all to myself, Tabitha. We just have some business to take care of. Down, André."

Tabitha shook the dog off her ankles and turned back to her car. "Let me get my stuff inside first."

Tabitha grabbed the duffel bag off her passenger seat. It was the only thing she'd brought. Even after she told Daniel she wanted to call off the engagement, he'd offered to drive her up here. He'd been calm. He stood in his kitchen with his back straight, the kitchen they were supposed to share in a month, and he looked her in the eye. They could work things out. He loved her, and he would be patient. But there was church on Sunday, and he certainly couldn't miss that. She knew she'd have to go back to her apartment in Baton Rouge, so she'd only brought enough things for the weekend. She just wanted to get away from Daniel for a few days. Tell Momma and let her cancel all the wedding invitations while Tabitha curled up in a fetal position somewhere quiet.

Momma followed Tabitha into the house, past the office where she met with her counseling patients and down the hall. "We oughta see if it's out there while it's still daylight. We can't shoot the thing if we can't see it. How was the drive?"

"Fine."

"You know Kristen Ray? Did I tell you she found herself a rancher out in New Mexico and got married? A bonafide shepherd. She was always a sweet girl. Her sister's going to drive down for the wedding. How's Daniel's preaching going? You know I pray for him every day."

"It's going." Just before their engagement

six months ago, Daniel had been appointed associate pastor at a Methodist church right out of seminary. Tabitha worked as a geologist for an environmental consulting firm, cleaning up behind chemical and oil companies, and at first she didn't mind going straight from work to church on Wednesdays for the weekly supper. "The old ladies love him."

She threw her duffel bag onto the bed in the room that Momma had left untouched since she graduated from high school. Her valedictorian medal still hung from the mirror above the dresser. Tabitha thought Momma kept it hung up as a reminder that she could have used her brains for God, if she wanted to. That it still wasn't too late.

Momma kept the rifle barrel pointed at the floor. "Why don't we take this thing out in the backyard and see if we can take care of it now?"

"Is it loaded?"

"I have cartridges in the kitchen."

Tabitha loaded the rifle and Momma put the dogs in the laundry room. They walked outside together. The yard sloped away from the house to the lake. Flowerbeds rimmed the house and sprang up in circles like pockmarks, covering the holes where tree stumps had scarred the yard at one time or another. The sun was low across the lake already, mostly hidden in the trees on the other side. Tabitha walked toward the water and held the rifle up to look through the scope. "How am I supposed to find this thing?"

"They like to sun, you know, on banks and logs and such."

Tabitha's hands were shaking, but she could see the cypress knees far across the lake and even bits of fishing line caught in the branches. Through the scope, the lake looked dusty from all the water bugs.

"You know, I'm not sure the last time that rifle was fired. You always used your uncle's when he took you hunting, yeah? This might not have been fired since your father passed." He'd died fifteen years ago, in the car accident that took Momma's leg and left her a fanatic for

Jesus. Tabitha was ten years old at the time. "We haven't had an alligator out there since he was alive to kill it."

The rifle was heavy, but Tabitha kept her arms extended and swept them from left to right. An egret's wings filled the sight and startled her, but she kept looking. She lingered over the spot where the lake bled into the woods behind and formed a marsh. Growing up, Tabitha found it strange that when the lake levels dropped in dry weather, the marsh never did. After she finished her geology degree, she learned about aquifers on the job, about the fluid system that filled the cracks beneath the ground. One Christmas she wore boots and waded through the muck until she found a spring bubbling up through the oak and bay leaves. The marsh worked according to a different set of rules. It made sense, once you understood them.

And there it was. An alligator floated in front of a cypress tree past the marsh. Tabitha smiled, and it blinked.

"Ma, I think we got lucky."

"You see it?"

Tabitha nodded and lowered the gun. Her arms were shaking from the weight. "I don't think I can hold this steady enough to shoot that far."

"Then lay down."

"You could've done that without me."

"The ground will brace you."

Tabitha lay down with the rifle stretched in front of her and clicked the safety off. She looked back through the scope and scooted the rifle this way and that until she locked two eyes and a snout into the sights. The eyes looked like marbles, the snout like a bunch of algae on the lake's surface. It was a medium-sized gator, Tabitha guessed from the size of its head. Maybe four or five feet long. She focused the sight over the scales between its eyes. She took a breath and released it, anticipating the recoil, and she pulled the trigger.

The shot hit the water in front of the alligator, and the rifle butt slammed into Tabitha's

shoulder. She looked back through the scope, but the alligator wasn't in sight.

"Did you get him?"

Tabitha shook her head and stood, rubbing her shoulder. "It was far out. I'm not that good a shot."

Momma looked to the lake. "Then we'll have to think of something else."

They left the dogs in the laundry room and rode into town. Momma drove through the fields and slipped across the centerline on the curves. Five years back the paper mill closed down, and now the empty factory stuck out above the trees ahead. They crossed a small bridge, and the car lurched where the pavement reconnected to the highway. "There's the creek where you were baptized, Tabitha Joy."

"I remember. I was there."

"You were so sweet in that little dress."

Tabitha watched the fields end and the pine trees flash by the window. There hadn't been a moment where the belief was there and then it wasn't anymore. It had been a slow reversal, a gradual understanding that the world worked according to a different order. She had questions when geology taught her that the earth was billions of years old, but the first chapters of Genesis could be read as poetry. She had a gay friend in college, and that was confusing, but she prayed and left that one up to God. She dated Daniel long-distance while he was in seminary at Asbury, and they wrote long emails as much as they used the phone. He wrote to her about the Holy Spirit descending on Wal-Mart parking lots, about knowing people well enough to love them like you love yourself. I want a simple life, she'd written him. I want to give people hope, he wrote back. She was excited at first about Daniel preaching, excited that they could care for people the way Momma had always done.

Momma slowed down to bump across the railroad tracks. "Wal-Mart carries big fish hooks, don't you think?"

Tabitha shrugged. "If they do anywhere,

they do in Louisiana."

"You've seen alligator traps before, haven't you?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Is Daniel gonna miss you helping with the service on Sunday?"

"I don't give the sermon, you know."

"But you greet people. Let them know you care about them."

"They don't need me that badly."

"You don't know that." Momma hit the gas too hard, and the car lurched. "Let's pick us up something to eat while we're in town."

Momma turned onto the main road, and the pines gave way to a car dealership and a strip mall. She pulled in at Sonic, and they ate two chicken strip baskets quickly before they headed to Wal-Mart. When Tabitha was a teenager, the block around Sonic was called the Strip. Boys would park their cars there and girls would strut from one to another wearing jean shorts and boots. Tabitha never hung out at the Strip. The girls who did got pregnant early and disappeared into the bayous, and Tabitha had Jesus and college aspirations.

Momma led her to the sporting goods aisle, and they picked up the biggest hook for sale. Then they split up—Momma went to find some rope, and Tabitha went to the grocery section to get the biggest whole chicken they had. Daniel texted her to make sure she'd made the drive safely. Tabitha responded, Yes. Her phone lit up again, with Daniel asking how her mother was doing. Tabitha turned her phone off and slipped it into her purse. She'd been surprised by her calmness. She wouldn't marry Daniel. The thought didn't make her sad. She pulled a chicken off the refrigerated shelf. She'd figure the rest out later.

When they stepped outside, it was raining. Tabitha covered her head with a grocery bag and ran to the car. Momma couldn't run with her prosthesis, so Tabitha pulled the car around for her. Now that the paper mill was gone, the rain smelled different up here. In Baton Rouge it smelled acidic, like the chemical plants north

of the city. Here, even in the Wal-Mart parking lot, the rain smelled like leaves and rich soil.

Tabitha drove slowly through the rain. Back at the house, Momma let the dogs out of the laundry room, and Tabitha put the chicken in the refrigerator.

Momma sat on the couch and André hopped up next to her. Momma took her prosthesis off to dry. She rubbed the sock she wore over her stump. “You know what I tell the kids when I speak at church?”

“What?”

Momma waved the prosthesis, which still had a tennis shoe tied on one end. “I show them my robot leg and I take it off for them, and then I tell them that Jesus is taking me up to heaven one piece at a time. That He saved me to take me up one piece at a time.”

“You’ve been telling people that since I was a kid.”

“Well, it’s a good testimony.”

The church ate it up. Momma was a walking miracle, saved by grace to do something with her life. That was why the only wrinkles on her face were smile lines, why people flocked to her counseling office to tell her their stories, why people left her and felt something good. Growing up, Tabitha always wanted God to speak to her like He did Momma. She still did.

Momma pulled André into her lap and crossed her stump over her other leg. “You know I pray for you every night.”

“You oughta try harder. I’m not sure it’s going through.”

“Is there something you want to talk about?”

“Not right now.” She wanted to tell Momma and get it over with. Let her look shocked and hurt, and get back in the car and leave. But she turned the TV on instead, and they went to bed early.

The next morning, Tabitha braved the cobwebs and got the canoe out of the shed. Momma stuck the hook through the raw chicken and wrapped it in plastic until they

could hang it from a cypress limb. Tabitha dragged the canoe down to the water and held it steady while Momma got in with the rifle. They probably wouldn’t need it, but they brought it just in case. Cold lake water washed over Tabitha’s ankles. There were leeches in the lake. Tabitha focused on the canoe instead, on bracing it between her knees while Momma got settled.

Tabitha paddled, and Momma kept the hooked chicken and the rope at her feet. The water was still in the early morning. It looked like a sheet stretched tight, interrupted here and there by cypress trees. Mist clung to the trees and obscured the marsh from view. The water seemed blank and empty, but Tabitha knew that was because it wasn’t—the silt and leaves underneath made the water reflect sky and trees like a mirror. An egret floated from a treetop, its image doubled on the surface. When she was a teenager, Tabitha had gone to the lake to pray.

“Where are we going to hang the chicken?” Momma asked.

“Wherever there’s a good limb. Hopefully by a bank, so I can wait there instead of in the canoe. But not too close to the bank, either. Not too close for comfort.”

The water murmured with each stroke, and water bugs skated across the surface. Momma hummed, and Tabitha bit her lip. Fishing line hung from the branches of the cypress trees, old fish traps Tabitha and Momma had strung up years ago. The threads looked like spider webs when they caught the light.

Two months ago, Daniel had taken Tabitha with him on his hospital rounds. They’d visited a woman whose leukemia had seeped into her spinal column and spread to her brain. Daniel brought a DVD to show her. He put the disc in the hospital player, and he held the woman’s hand while the video started. The opening was a montage of people explaining that they’d been healed—of cancer, of back trouble, of lupus. A pastor with white teeth smiled and asked you to remember the power of prayer.

The woman stared intently at the screen, and Daniel grasped her hand. He looked across the room to Tabitha. He smiled. "They're talking about a cure." Daniel squeezed the woman's hand and turned back to the TV. Tabitha looked at his profile against the light coming through the window, at his head tilted back like he was looking up to heaven, and she said, "This is bullshit."

The woman burst into tears, and Tabitha clapped a hand over her mouth. "I am so sorry," she said. Daniel grabbed Tabitha by the wrist and yanked her into the hall.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I don't know what I was thinking," Tabitha said.

"Telling a dying woman that her hope is bullshit."

Tabitha's eyes filled, and she crossed her arms across her chest. "You aren't helping them if you tell them things that aren't true."

"Am I?" Daniel asked. "Do you think I am?"

"I'm so sorry," she said again, but they both knew her answer.

Momma pointed to a cypress farther out in the lake with a low-hanging limb. "What about over there?"

"I'm calling off the wedding."

Tabitha pulled the paddle out of the water and laid it across her knees. Momma sat with her back perfectly straight. The canoe coasted, moving in the direction Tabitha had been paddling. Cicadas whirred in the trees on the bank.

"Do you want to set the bait in that tree?"

"No, Momma."

"I think we oughta."

"Did you hear me?"

Momma shifted the Wal-Mart bag in her lap. "I just think we oughta get the trap set up, is all."

The canoe glided toward a tree, so Tabitha stuck the paddle in the water to turn right. The water rushed into an eddy from her stroke. "We need to set it up closer to the bank. It'll be easier to wait for it there."

"You're the one paddling. Take us there if

that's where you want to go."

Tabitha pulled the paddle back into her lap. Water dripped off the blunt end and made circles in the water.

"Is there someone else?"

"No, Momma."

"What happened?"

An old cypress log extended on the other side of the tree on their left, a few yards away. The canoe crept up, almost alongside it. At work a few days ago, Tabitha had done some calculations for a refinery just north of Baton Rouge, about how to get to the contamination in the soil around the plant. That was when it occurred to her: what if the square root of 4 wasn't 2? What if it was -2, and it had been all along?

"I can't be a preacher's wife. It doesn't make sense to me anymore."

The canoe drifted ahead, broadside to the log.

"You know I pray for you every night." The Wal-Mart bag rustled in her hands. "I know it doesn't seem like a lot."

The log was maybe ten feet away, and an alligator dozed next to it just along the surface, the ridges on its back visible all the way to its tail. The alligator's ridges kept going, six, seven, eight feet. This gator was huge. "Momma, it's next to us."

Tabitha threw the paddle inside the boat and reached for the rifle, and the canoe swayed. Momma clasped her hands together and Tabitha jammed the rifle against the sore spot on her shoulder. She pulled the bolt action, up and back. An empty cartridge popped out and clattered against the bottom of the canoe. Tabitha pushed the bolt forward and down, and the sight wavered with the canoe's motion. The alligator dived, and Tabitha pulled the trigger.

The recoil rocked the canoe, sending circles out across the water.

"The trap!" Momma grabbed the rope coiled at her feet. "Let's do it quick, while it's still underneath us!" She twisted on her seat and leaned down to grab the paddle. She put

both hands on the blunt end of the paddle and held it up high, trying to catch a cypress branch. The canoe twisted in the water away from the tree, but Momma swatted at the branch and the paddle slipped out of her hand.

Momma reached for the paddle, but she wasn't quick enough. It floated out of reach like an oversized cork. Momma rocked back and forth, but her motions spun the canoe farther to the right, and the wake pushed the paddle away.

Tabitha clutched the rifle to her chest, barrel pointed toward the sky. Bubbles broke the surface by the front of canoe. Tabitha stared at the water and pulled her knees up, like the gator might charge through the aluminum.

"Pray, Tabitha Joy. Even if you don't believe, God's got us in His hands."

Small waves splashed against the canoe. The noise was like a gulp, like something was churning underneath them.

Momma grabbed the rope at her feet and tossed it back to Tabitha, handfuls at a time. "Tabitha, see if you can catch this on the tree before we get any farther away."

Tabitha put the safety on the rifle and slipped it into the bottom of the canoe with the barrel facing away from her. She took the rope and turned around, but when she tossed it fell in the water.

"Try again, honey."

Tabitha reeled the rope back in and tossed it, but it flopped back into the water without even brushing the cypress limb. She tried again, but a breeze pushed the canoe to the side. The breeze caught the paddle, too, and it skidded farther out of reach.

"Maybe we'll drift into another tree in a moment. God's got us."

"But we'll still need the paddle."

The water grew calm, and Momma cleared her throat. "Well, let's wait a minute, anyway. Give the gator time to go somewhere else."

Tabitha scanned the surface, but nothing broke the water. It swelled away without showing what it contained, where the bottom lay.

Maybe eight feet below, maybe two.

"Did Daniel hit you?"

"Never."

Momma was quiet.

The sun was higher now, and warm on Tabitha's shoulders. She began to sweat. She wanted to pray. Jesus, keep us safe. But God was quiet. Bubbles broke the surface a few feet away, and a turtle peered out of the water. He gasped for air and then dove again.

"I can still feel my leg, you know. Even after all these years. Sometimes I forget I lost it. I can still feel it guiding me."

"Is that gonna get the paddle for us?"

A bird called from across the pond.

"We should have brought two paddles," Tabitha said. "That was stupid."

Momma propped her prosthesis on the edge of the boat and slipped it off her knee. "We can improvise." She dipped the tennis shoe in the water and began to paddle. She laughed. The prosthesis splashed the side of the canoe and the boat stalled, but then it began to move. Slowly, one inch at a time. "See that? It will get the paddle for us. God always provides."

"You thought of that," Tabitha said. "Not God."

"Don't you just know everything?"

"I think there's more than one gator. That one was bigger than the one we saw last night."

"That could be." Momma leaned forward and grunted, trying to get more of the leg in the water. "They might travel together, I don't know. Or maybe they've been here a while and were breeding and we didn't know." Momma steered the canoe toward the paddle. "Just pray, Tabitha."

"Just pray, and God will make the gators go away."

"He's taken care of us this far."

"Like He did your leg?"

Momma pulled the prosthesis out of the water and twisted around. The canoe kept drifting, but Momma stared at Tabitha.

"Who are you mad at, Tabitha Joy?"

Tabitha heard André bark from across the

lake, and she looked toward the sound. Cypress trees shaded the yard. She looked for the dog through the trees, but she couldn't see him. "I don't know."

Momma turned back around and dipped the prosthesis in the water.

Tabitha scanned the lake, looking at the hollow cypress trunks that stuck out of the water, dead pieces of wood. "What good does it do? What good does any of it do? You just call people in to sit on your couch, and you ask them questions, and you make them think you're listening, but at the end of the day you just want them to pat you on the back and say, wow, Mrs. Davis is such a good listener. She's an example for all of us. At the end of the day, you haven't helped anybody. Not really. Their problems are still the same. You've just made yourself feel better."

"And that's a bad thing?" Momma steered the boat the rest of the way toward the paddle in silence. She dropped the prosthesis into the canoe, then leaned forward and grabbed the blunt end of the paddle. She passed it, dripping, to Tabitha.

Tabitha thrust the paddle into the water and steered them toward the house. "Let's just call it a day."

André was still barking. The canoe slid across the lake, the water smooth and glassy. Momma left her prosthesis on the bottom of the canoe. She rubbed the sock that covered her stump while Tabitha paddled. Tabitha looked up at the cypress limbs stretching to the sky, and she felt very small.

The chicken stank from the front of the boat. Tabitha paddled quickly, and the shore grew closer with each stroke. André's bark echoed across the water.

They came to the break in the trees where they'd launched the boat. Tabitha could see the house up on the hill, the gardenias dotting the yard. André was stretched low to the ground, barking and jumping before an alligator.

For a moment, Tabitha was too stunned to react. She held the paddle out of the water and

the canoe drifted closer to shore. Fifty, forty yards out. The gator took a step toward André and paused, like it knew it was in no hurry. André yipped and darted back and forth.

Momma's voice was hoarse. "Tabitha, shoot it. You have to shoot it."

Tabitha raised the rifle to her shoulder and looked through the sights. She was at a bad angle to do any real damage. The alligator's hide, thick and scaly and impenetrable, filled the lens. The soft spot between its eyes would be a stretch. The alligator lunged forward, a dark blur. Tabitha looked away from the scope and saw André dart away just in time.

"Come on!" Momma hissed.

Tabitha looked back through the sights and aimed forward, on the alligator's nose. She stabilized the gun on her shoulder and pulled the trigger.

The shot rocked the canoe. Tabitha's shoulder hurt from the recoil. She looked at the bank and saw André limp on the grass. Her small body a white smear, leaking blood. The lake was silent. Then the gator lunged at André, and Tabitha shut her eyes.

Momma turned her head and whimpered, but her voice was soft. "You done good, Tabi-girl."

The water lapped at the canoe, quiet hands against the aluminum. Tabitha rested the rifle against her knees. The barrel was warm. A breeze caught the cypress limbs and rustled through the moss. The gator crept down the yard toward the mud and the lake. Tabitha looked across the water to the bank, but the shore felt a long way off. ▲▼▲