

Wind Scarred



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Sarah Mankowski



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Merritt Island, FL 32954-0931
www.fallenpalm.com
info@fallenpalm.com

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, places and events portrayed in this novel either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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Blossom Lake

The novel originated as an Internet drama called *Blossom Lake*, serialized in eight parts during the summer of 2002. I set out to write an entertaining tale of passion and intrigue, flavored with orange juice. While the little town may have some similarities to places drawn from fond memories of growing up in Polk County, the characters and events are strictly from imagination.

Several readers who followed the saga, faithfully, encouraged me to write the novel. Well, I decided to do just that last July. Since the story takes place during August, while Congressman Whittemore is running for reelection, it only seemed logical to set the adaptation during the heated political summer of 2004.

In the original version, much of the action takes place during a hurricane that was to some extent modeled after Hurricane Donna, which came through Central Florida in 1960. I was born in Lake Wales, my earliest memory is that storm. In my story the hurricane comes ashore around Ft. Myers and exits the state at Daytona Beach. So try to imagine my shock and disbelief while writing the novel, suddenly watching the approach of Hurricane Charley. This *was* the storm described in *Blossom Lake*. I was stunned by the similarities. My imagined storm now had a name.

Of course, our hurricanes just kept coming during the summer of '04. I can tell you with absolute certainty that had I not been well into rewrites by the time Frances and Jeanne dropped by for a visit, ain't no way I woulda written a hurricane story from scratch. Indeed, by then I was reluctant to admit that I was writing about a hurricane. Heck, I would tell folks that my novel was about citrus canker or politics.

Even as I type these words, I gaze out my office window at the blue tarp dangling from our roof. I note with sadness the empty space where my honeybell should stand, laden with ripe fruit. What can I do but laugh at the absurdity of it all.

—Sarah Mankowski

Monday, January 22, 1979

“A big man with a big voice, ambition enough for a-hundred.” That’s how folk described his daddy. Some said Raymon Kavanaugh never even needed a ladder to pick oranges. Kendall figured they didn’t know about grove work. Six-foot-six didn’t count for that much when the fruit hung ripe-and-ready fifteen feet overhead.

The booming voice resonated through the clear January morning, carried on a mild breeze rolling off Blossom Lake. “Berilo, bring that ladder down here. McCorvey, you missed four, five. Go back and get ‘em before you move on. Raúl, wanta move down this way?”

Kendall’s agile, eight-year-old legs balanced easily on the rough cypress ladder. All the flawless navels were long since picked, packed and shipped off to customers loyal to the Kavanaugh Citrus brand. Today his daddy wanted to clear out everything that remained to sell for juice. He stretched his arm into the lush foliage and with a slight twist of the wrist loosened an orange from the twig. Fascinated by the pattern of blemishes, he turned the fruit in his glove. Apparently the wind scarring happened early in development, possibly during a storm last June. As the navel matured, the rough pattern expanded, and so the fruit was passed over during previous spot pickings.

He tossed the orange into a sack slung over his slight shoulder, and snuck a sideways glance toward Neil. With no school that Monday his older brother was plenty angry about spending the day picking fruit.

Kendall knew to pay attention whenever Neil was in a bad mood. No telling what he might do.

“McCorvey!” his daddy bellowed. “Come on down off that ladder and settle up with Vernon.”

“I need this work,” the man pleaded. “I got five youngons to feed.”

“Shoulda thought about that before you got liquored-up last night. Look how you’re shakin’. I can’t afford the liability if you fall down.”

“Mr. Kavanaugh, I been pickin’ oranges fer near as many years as you have. I ain’t never fallen down off no ladder.”

Raúl’s dark face poked through the foliage farther down the row. “Better do what the boss-man says, ‘cause ain’t nobody else in this town givin’ you work.”

Kendall watched the defeated picker shuffle unsteadily toward his father. “Please, Mr. Kavanaugh, I gotta have work. My little girl turned six, today. Just the smartest little thing. Cute as can be. I wanta buy somthin’ special.”

His daddy pulled some money from his jeans and pressed it into the other man’s hand. “Settle up, then get on home to those children.”

Kendall reached for another orange.

“Neil! You fall asleep up there? Look at your brother. Half your size and already workin’ like a man.”

“That boy has skill,” Raúl shouted. “Bet you wouldn’t mind a dozen more like Kendall.”

“No, I wouldn’t mind one bit.”

Neil mouthed the words, “I’m gonna whip your ass.”

His brother got the chance that evening, after supper. Kendall went out back with breadcrumbs for the ducks that congregated around the dock. Neil came up from behind and pushed him off the porch. Before he could catch his breath, the larger boy leapt on his chest and punched his face. “Think you can make me look bad?” Neil was so close, he could smell the peas and okra from supper. The fist landed even harder against his nose. “Mess with me, you pay.”

“Get up off your little brother!” The powerful voice came from directly overhead. A big weathered hand yanked Neil away. “Get on back in the house, I’ll deal with you in a-minute.” The hand reached down again and lifted him upright. “Think you’ll live?”

Even though his face throbbed painfully, Kendall knew his daddy couldn’t tolerate weakness in anybody. He shrugged his shoulders and wiped blood from his nose. “I’m not hurt much.”

“Son, no matter how far you go in this world, there’ll always be those lookin’ for a fight. If you can’t beat ‘em with your fist, you out-smart ‘em.”

Outsmart Neil? “Shoulda stayed close to you until he forgot about bein’ mad.”

The strong hand rested against the top of his head as they walked back up to the porch. Raymon Kavanaugh wasn’t one to show affection, but Kendall always felt protected in his long shadow. “Some men have the strength of the fist. Others have brains. What matters is the instinct to know when to use which. Good instincts and the drive to keep goin’ when other men call it quits, that’s what it takes to get ahead in life.”

He wiped more blood from his nose. “Like you, Daddy.”

“Forty years ago, when I was your age, we camped in orange groves not far from here. We struggled every day to survive, with none carin’ if we dropped dead from hunger and exhaustion.” He gestured toward the view below their position on the back porch. The wide green lawn and flowering shrubs swept down to meet the east shore of Blossom Lake, calm and golden in the setting sun. Beyond the sprawling ranch-style house the groves stretched as far as the eye could see, like endless rows of obedient green soldiers. “When you set your standards higher than others and you never call it quits, I reckon it don’t matter if a man was spat out a nameless migrant woman after a day pickin’ tangerines.”

Kendall pressed a hand to his throbbing nose. He wondered if his daddy would consider it good instincts or weakness if he said he thought it was broken.

Sunday, August 1, 2004

6:49 p.m.

A cloud of yellow sand drifted up from Uncle J.T.'s mower, glittering like pixie dust in the late afternoon sun. Amberleigh figured stronger magic was needed to transform the patches of crabgrass and weeds into a lawn worthy of her uncle's attention. "We sure do need rain."

"Uh huh," Billy McCorvey agreed without raising his head from the opened hood of Grandma's '89 Toyota Camry. "Seems like everybody's gettin' rain in Central Florida 'cept for Blossom Lake." Her father scooted his wheelchair back and reached for a wrench. "Sweetie, you wanta hand me a rag?"

She reached to obey, even as she felt a featherlike tickle on the back of her arm. Amberleigh studied the undersized and twisted wings. "Even the 'squitos are a sorry lot on Heathen Road."

He rebuked her and put the deformed insect out of its misery with the same well-placed swat. "Don't let your grandma catch you sayin' Heathen Road. She's lived on this street her entire life. That'll be sixty-three years come September."

"Everybody says Heathen Road."

"Your grandma ain't named Everybody."

"Heaton Road, okay?" She listened to the sounds of her neighborhood, what could be heard above the mower. From somewhere down

the block Toby Keith blended with the even more distant Eminem. The steady thunk, thunk of a basketball against pavement drifted through the late afternoon heat.

Uncle J.T. cut the mower, wiped the sweat from his face, and joined them beside the Camry. Tiny fragments of grass clung to his soaked t-shirt and jeans. "Figure out what's wrong?"

"Transmission, like I told you."

Amberleigh twisted a strand of long red hair around her index finger while she watched the men bent over the opened hood. They were more than brothers, best friends, at one time the finest athletes in the county. Billy managed to stay fit, despite fifteen years in a chair. Beneath J.T.'s shirt, translucent with sweat, the well-defined muscles remained impressive. She remembered something her grandpa used to say, before he died of a bad liver: "McCorveys ain't got much in this world, but we sure know how to grow some good lookin' children."

A question burned to be asked ever since J.T. announced that his sister was coming home for the wedding. Aunt Jan was the one McCorvey to break free from life on Heathen Road, becoming a successful attorney in Tallahassee. Amberleigh only knew her from the occasional phone conversation and from the birthday cards that always included cash. Why did her father and uncle argue about the homecoming, the dispute fading to stony silence when she entered the room? Why was her aunt rarely mentioned by anybody in the family? "The yard sure will look nice when your sister comes home."

Neither man said a word.

Exasperated with their behavior, she said, "What's wrong with my aunt? She seems real likable on the phone."

"Likable ain't the issue," Billy said. "Jan doesn't have no business comin' back here right now, not when the past could drag her down."

"She'll only be in town for three days," J.T. protested.

"Whatever happens, let it be on your conscience. There's nothin' in Blossom Lake for Jan. Nothin' 'cept for heartache and trouble."

With the squeak-clatter of the front screen door, her grandma came outside. "J.T., you're wanted on the phone."

J.T. went into the house to take the call, while Delta McCorvey came on out into the yard. She wore a floral patterned dress and carried her Sunday white pocketbook. Her freshly washed iron-gray hair was already clumped with sweat. “Amberleigh, you need to go on across the street and get some clothes on, if you’re comin’ to church.”

Amberleigh looked at her father, but his head was under the hood again. Could she muster the nerve to say it? *Grandma, I’m fifteen. I’m old enough to decide when to go to church. Besides, I think Reverend Morgan is a bigot and a moron.* If she said it, her grandma would tell her mama and then look out for the hollering. “Grandma, Reverend Morgan did go extra long this morning. Daddy and me figured that was enough church for one Sunday.”

Grandma didn’t argue. “Well, if you’re not comin’, take your bike down to your Aunt Rita’s. Her phone ain’t been workin’ all weekend.”

“Probably didn’t pay her bill,” Billy suggested. “Anyhow, I don’t want Amberleigh goin’ down to the Shady Palms Trailer Court this close to dark.”

“I don’t mind going,” Amberleigh spoke up before Grandma changed her mind about church. Her mother and the twins were already over at the First Baptist Church for the Vacation Bible School program. If Grandma said she didn’t have to go, she was home free.

Uncle J.T. came out of the house wearing his uniform. When need arose, he could shower and change in five minutes flat.

Grandma looked at the uniform, shaking her head. “They don’t give you a minute’s peace.”

“There’s been more trouble out on North Tangerine.”

“Drugs? These days it’s always drug related.”

“I did volunteer for the mayor’s taskforce. Looks like another meth lab. The man threw his three-year-old kid out a second-story window. That’s how they found the lab, right there in his kitchen with a pregnant woman and two other youngons livin’ in that apartment.” J.T. headed for his patrol car. “Mama, Roselle’s gonna swing by and pick you up for church. Amberleigh, better get dressed. She’ll be here any minute.”

“I’m gonna go check on Aunt Rita.”

“Then get goin’. I want you back up here before dark.”

Amberleigh retrieved the battered green bike from her own yard, directly across the street from Grandma’s house. The Shady Palms was only four blocks south. Heaton Road dead-ended at the trailer park. “Last stop before Hell,” her mama always said.

She sped past small concrete-block houses set behind front yards overgrown with weeds and beer cans. At the corner house a blue wading pool with split bottom sprouted sandspurs. She was ready for the pit bulls behind the fence on the next block and barreled past their yard at top speed.

Heaton Road ran two streets west of Hibiscus, which used to be the main downtown shopping district for Blossom Lake. These days there wasn’t much left except for gray empty shop windows and spider webs. Amberleigh vaguely recalled when Woolworth closed up, remembered going to the store with her mama and grandma looking for closeout bargains. After that, for a time, a store that sold used books moved in. More often than not she didn’t have money, but the nice lady let her take them home, anyway.

The road abruptly changed from cracked asphalt to gravel where Heaton dead-ended at the trailer park. Amberleigh slowed the bike. She couldn’t afford to blow out another tire. Aunt Rita’s trailer was the third on the left, an ugly blue heap with most of its skirting missing. She dropped the bike to the dirt and climbed the concrete blocks that served as steps.

The door was locked. When nobody responded to her knock, she peeked through the dusty living room window. A fan hummed drowsily, she heard the TV from the bedroom. Odors of cat pee and marijuana assaulted her nose. *Aunt Rita must be too stoned to hear the door*, Amberleigh decided. She walked around to the back of the trailer and looked inside.

An old box fan filled the wide-open window; the escaping aroma of weed was even more potent. When Amberleigh peered in under the blades of the fan, she saw the TV on the dresser. The reception wasn’t

very good, even with the aluminum foil wrapped coat hanger. Behind the TV, the activity on the bed reflected in the cracked dresser mirror.

At first she couldn't make out the face of the man that Aunt Rita's naked body straddled. She only observed shapely thighs gliding over an erect penis. A big sun-weathered hand came down hard. "Get some life into these buns. You act like you're sleepwalkin'." The deep baritone voice possessed a distinctive drawl that sounded strangely familiar.

The hand came down much harder against her aunt, who squealed a protest. Only then did Amberleigh see the face.

Neil Kavanaugh. The Kavanaughs weren't just the most prosperous family in Blossom Lake, they *were* Blossom Lake. Ask anybody in Florida about the little town and they probably only knew two things: good bass fishing and Kavanaugh Citrus. Actually, Neil wasn't involved with the groves; he ran his wife's dairy. His brother Kendall managed citrus production. While Amberleigh and Kendall's son Josh were close friends—their fathers having played sports together in high school—she didn't know the rest of the family very well. People on East Shore Drive rarely socialized with the residents of Heathen Road. *Unless this is what they're after*, she thought in disgust.

She didn't have a second to absorb the shock of seeing Neil Kavanaugh in her aunt's filthy, pot-saturated trailer because even as she saw his face, he noticed her peering into the window. Without the slightest hint of surprise he said, "Hey darlin'. If you like what you're seein', come on in here and join the party."

Horried, scared, sickened, disgusted Amberleigh fled for her bike and took the four blocks back home at top speed.

The sun wasn't yet down when she reached the safety of her own front yard. Having finished with Grandma's car, her daddy wheeled himself back across the street. He didn't ask questions. He simply looked at her face and said, "You're not to go down there, anymore."

7:55 p.m.

Rita rolled back on the bed and reached for a small brass pipe. She inhaled deeply. “Know what I’ve been thinkin’? Maybe you could take me for a ride up in your Cessna.”

“Why would I want to do that?” Neil pulled on his jeans. He never hung around once he had his fill of what he came for.

“Never been in a plane before.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Never been no farther away than Miami. That was when I got my boobs fixed up.”

“A worthwhile—” He paused dressing as his commercial came on.

Rita looked at the half-dressed man in her bedroom and the one on TV. On the screen, looking real handsome in well-fitting jeans and plaid shirt, Neil strolled through a pasture at Sangster’s Dairy. The congressman’s voice spoke over the image, “I’m Riley Whittemore and I approved this message.”

Neil’s voice spoke over his image walking among the cows. “The men and women of Florida’s dairies are proud that the products we produce help to build strong bones, strong immune systems, and a stronger Florida. Congressman Riley Whittemore understands our pride. He’s a proven friend to the growers and ranchers of The Blossom Lake Ridge. He understands that while government regulations are sometimes necessary to protect our vital natural resources, regulations must make sense. So, this fall, let’s say no to partisan mud-slinging and let’s send Riley Whittemore back to Washington. The Blossom Lake Tribune calls Riley Whittemore ‘one politician who has earned our trust’.” Neil lifted a tall glass of milk. “I’ll drink to that.”

She sucked deeply from the pipe. “How come you’re doin’ the commercial when Congressman Whittemore is Kendall’s father-in-law?”

“I’m better looking, darlin’.”

“Who says?”

“Female voters. Every demographic.” He reached for his shirt “They think Kendall is kind of nerdy. They find me devilishly charming.”

“Devilishly charming. ... Yeah, if they only knew what a devil—”

Before she finished the sentence, Neil flicked open a pocketknife and touched the blade to her nipple. “What would you tell them?”

“Nothing. I won’t say nothin’ to nobody.”

“That’s right. You won’t say nothin’ because if I ever thought you were telling our secrets, I’d introduce you to a couple of fellas that you don’t want to meet. Know what would happen if I said I have this cheap bit of trash who bought herself an expensive pair of tits? Pay her a visit. Slice open those implants. Know what my pals would say? Yes Sir, Mr. Kavanaugh. How thin do you want those tit slices?”

“I’m not gonna say nothin’ to nobody.”

“While we’re at it, make sure that cute little niece keeps quiet.”

“Leave Amberleigh out of this. She’s only fifteen.”

“Gotta pick the fruit while it’s still fresh, darlin’. Look at you. Twenty-eight, already a washed-up hussy.”

Even thoroughly stoned, his words chilled to the bone. “Please Neil, I’m always here for you, always done whatever turns you on. You don’t need to be thinking about Amberleigh. Anything you want, anything at all, you can get it right here.” She spread her legs wide for emphasis.

“That’s what I thought, but then you start talkin’ about tellin’ our secrets...”

“I’ll never do it. Just flappin’ my jaws, is all.”

“When a slut like you doesn’t have somethin’ more productive to do with her mouth, she needs to keep it shut.”

“I know it.”

“Why do I waste time with trash like you. Look how you live. This place is filthy—reeks of cat piss. We need a good hurricane to come through here and knock down this trailer, with you in it.”

“Don’t say that, Neil. You know I need you. Don’t I make you feel good? Don’t I always treat you right?”

Neil rose to leave. “Reckon so.” Almost as an afterthought he removed a small plastic bag from his jeans and tossed it on her belly. “Reckon I know what you like too.”

If you enjoyed *Wind Scarred*, please tell a friend.

Learn more about the author at
www.sarahmankowski.com

Contact Sarah at
sarah@sarahmankowski.com

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