

## Family Ties & Lies

Growing up in a small town that is in the deep south is a blessing and a curse within itself. The blessing is in the people, and the curse is in the people as well. You may wonder how that is even possible but by the end of this, you will understand exactly what I mean. Take me for example, I'm Laney and I'm a fifth generation Walker (whom is one of the founding families of Elijah County) and my daddy is a southern Baptist preacher just as his father before him and so on. The minute I was born, it was set forth there in stone (literally) that I would never leave Elijah County nor EVER change religions. That was just something you do not do, no matter the circumstances.

It's now been eighteen years and most people would say I am the most beautiful girl in the county, I'm dating the mayor's son and I have already been accepted at the local college (the one that every Walker before her has ever attended). Nothing could get any better, so I thought. One of the last sunny days of the summer in good ole' South Georgia right before the start of my senior year, I'm sunbathing at the local lake, wearing a yellow bikini that hugs my curves just right. I can promise you this though, my parents have no idea that I am wearing it. I left the house in an ugly long sleeve one piece that hides all the parts that don't need hid. I'm chatting with some friends when along comes this tall, dark glass of Johnny Walker looking boy. He has a thick Italian accent and speaks English like a toddler trying to speak their first words. "Excuse ladies, to where is the Walker Manor?" as the words leave his perfectly plump pink lips, I dream of kissing them. After the moment passed of me being mesmerized by this boy whom I think may be a man, I thought to myself, "wait a minute, did he just ask where the Walker Manor is?"

Minutes have passed and we are still staring at this beautiful human being, as he starts to frown and walk away, I finally speak up. “Hello sir, I’m Laney Walker and please excuse my friends and I but they just don’t make them like you around these parts.” The boy slightly parted his lips and then a smile crept over his face, “I’m Matteo but my Familia say I go by Matt to seem, uh more American.” I asked, “what brings you here to Elijah County, Matteo or shall I call you Matt?” I winked at him with my long, black eyelashes and wondered, why would God create such a beautiful human like him if he wants me to stay pure until marriage?

Matt and I chatted for a few minutes until Matt said he needed to get going and left me standing there wanting to know more about this mysterious boy. One of my best friends, Bridget Clarke, tapped me on the shoulder and started me so bad, I almost jumped out of my skin. I was so lost in thought about Matteo that I had totally forgotten who I was with or even where I was altogether. Bridget Clarke’s been my best friend for as long as we can remember and has been jealous of me our entire friendship. Let’s face it, everyone is jealous of Laney Walker because I literally have it all, the perfect boyfriend, the perfect body and hair, and the perfect family. The only thing missing in my life is an actual life.

I just realized that I never actually told Matteo where to find the house or even asked why he wanted to know. I immediately hopped on my Vespa, the one that was imported from Italy (what a coincidence) and raced home topping out the speed on the scooter. I came in sideways and squeezed the front brakes so hard, the scooter fishtailed sideways on the pea gravel mother insisted on having be laid out in the courtyard. All I remember is one minute I was upright on the scooter and the next, I was sliding across the gravel on the side of my head. “Good thing for safety first, huh Laney?” said a voice who seemed very familiar but was hoping it wasn’t who I thought because a fall like this is embarrassing.

It was indeed exactly who I thought, my college boyfriend who is also our beloved mayor's son, Jason. I wasn't expecting him until Labor Day Weekend, he must have come home early, and of course I was excited to see him, but I couldn't quite shake the thought of Matteo. Someone I most definitely shouldn't be thinking of at all, but I just couldn't help but dream of the day I would see him again. I felt like I had known him forever even though we have only talked for a short amount of time. I couldn't quite figure out why I was thinking about him considering I was with the boy everyone wanted, someone who is attending an ivy league college, someone who is in love with me and wants to be with me. So why, why am I thinking about someone I most definitely can't be with?

After things finally calmed down and Jason attended to my bruises and scrapes, and I finally caught my breath and decided to ask mother why a young, Italian boy was asking about our home? Mother responded, "Oh, you've met Matteo already! Your father and I decided to host a foreign exchange student for their senior year!" I know I couldn't hide the excitement on my face, and I know Jason could read it all over my face exactly how excited I was, and I know this made him angry. If there's one thing you don't want to do, it's to not make Jason angry because when he gets angry, I must make up excuses as to why I have bruises covering my body.

Jason is the type of guy to beat the ever-living shit out of you and get away with it, because in Elijah County they teach you to keep your mouth shut and just fix your makeup. People know about Jason's anger problems, but they dismiss it as a "phase", and what's even worse is that my parents know, and they just don't care. Jason is "Laney's future", and nothing will ever come between that. Hell, every woman in Elijah County is beat on and everybody gossips about the other one while it's literally going on in their own homes. When did beating on your wife become a norm and/or a religious norm at that?

Later that night Jason and I are sitting in the family room with my family when a knock echoes through the Manor, I immediately tuck my hair behind my ears and sit upright in the chair. I knew exactly who would be walking into their lives at that moment but didn't quite know exactly what kind of an impact he was going to have on all of us. The butler walked Matteo into the family room where everyone was and he immediately scanned the room until he locked his eyes with me, he let out a side smile and winked. "Hello Walker family, I Matteo from Italy but I want you call me Matt, please!" Jason jumped out of his chair, walked over to Matteo, and stretched his hand out to shake it. Matteo towered over Jason and as clueless as he was, he knew exactly what Jason was doing and that was asserting dominance over him. Matteo leaned down and planted a kiss right on his lips and said, "we welcome people into our Familia with kiss!" Jason pushed Matteo off him and landed a punch right to the lips he just used to kiss him, Matteo blinked and barely rocked backwards but it did not faze him the way Jason had hoped.

Matteo immediately started apologizing and explained to the Walker family he was not there to cause any problems, but he was trying to bring some of his culture into their home. I knew exactly why Matteo did what he did, and it caused me to like him even more for it, because nobody and I mean absolutely nobody had ever stood up to Jason before. Which made me think to myself, "I'm going to get along great with him."

It is now a cool, crispy fifty degree fall day, me and Matteo are inseparable, and I can honestly say I have fallen in love with him, but of course Jason is still in the picture. I will never be able to get out from under him if my parents have anything to do with it. Matteo and I spend our time together scheming and trying to make a plan that allows us to run away together after we graduate from high school. Matteo already has his ticket to go back home to Italy for Christmas and our plan is for him to find us a place in Italy for when we return, and he already

has the perfect place in mind: his grandparents' home is sitting empty after they were forced to move in with his aunt and uncle.

Everything is coming together, so we thought. Jason paid the Walker families housekeeper to eavesdrop on me and Matteo and this whole time he knew exactly what our plan was, and he was never going to let me leave. "If I can't have her, nobody can," Jason was adamant on that. So much so that he stole his daddy's gun and started planning on killing Matteo when he was supposed to be leaving for Italy. Two plans, two disastrous outcomes, and a whole lot of lying.

The time has come for Matteo to leave for the airport to go back home for Christmas break. While we are sharing our goodbyes, Jason is lying in wait to kill Matteo, him not knowing what's about to become of this sad day in December. I kiss Matteo so passionately it causes Jason's ears to turn blood red from the anger he feels but what really sends him over the edge is when Matt slips his hand down the back of my blue jeans and ever so slightly grabs a hand full of my ass. Jason storms out of the bushes where he is waiting and pulls the hammer back on his daddy's gun, aims down sight and fires.

My ears are ringing from the loudness of the bullet that whistles past my head, dazed, and confused, I see Matteo lying next to me in a pool of blood that's gushing from his arm. Thankfully it was just a graze, and he's going to make it which is ten times better than Jason. It turns out that Bridget is my guardian angel, and she has been watching over me for a long time now. When she realized what he was up to, she grabbed her hunting rifle out of her truck and shot Jason just like she would a ten-point buck. Which caused Jason to barely hit Matteo and sadly, the outcome was fatal for the woman beating guy named Jason.

Jason had finally gotten what he deserved; Bridget went to prison for what she did but only because of whose son she killed. Everyone knew she did this world a favor but of course the mayor would never see it that way. As for me and Matteo, we both left for Italy right after it happened and have never looked back. The people in Elijah County never spoke about what truly happened that sad, cold day in December but the gossip mill was full of so many theories that nobody ever knew exactly what happened. My favorite is the one where I died and Matteo buried me in a grave that nobody can find and then left for Italy, because that rumor is the one that allows me to run freely in Italy as a newly converted Catholic girl.