

A large, moss-draped tree stands by a lake. The tree's branches are heavily laden with Spanish moss, which hangs down towards the water. The lake is calm, reflecting the sky and the surrounding greenery. In the foreground, five Adirondack chairs are arranged on a grassy bank, facing the water. The overall scene is peaceful and scenic, with a warm, golden light filtering through the trees on the right side.

*a  
Weekend  
on  
Allyson  
Island*

A NOVEL

SUSANNAH B. LEWIS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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a  
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THOMAS NELSON  
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a  
Weekend  
on  
Allyson  
Island

Susannah B. Lewis



*A Weekend on Allyson Island*

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

CIP data to come

*Printed in the United States of America*

\$PrintCode

## Chapter 1

CELIA KATE STOKES flipped through the pile of mail that her youngest son, Tucker, had brought inside and dumped on the kitchen counter, which was already cluttered with books, papers, pencils, and artwork. One envelope stood out among the bills and junk mail. Even before checking the return address, she recognized who the sender was by the elegant black envelope adorned with gold trim. Something as sophisticated as this must have been from Mrs. Moira Allyson.

She ran her thumb beneath the shiny seal and pulled out the matte-black invitation. A slip of vellum paper fell to her hardwood floor, sticky with syrup from the morning pancakes and glitter from Sophie's latest art project. She settled onto the leather barstool at the counter and reached for her cell phone. As CK ran her fingers through her light brown hair, Gemma Gardner's loud Southern drawl belted out a "Hey!" after the third ring.

"Have you been to your mailbox this morning?" CK asked while reaching for her Golden Girls mug of tepid coffee and pressing it to her thin lips.

"Are you talking about Mo's invitation? I grabbed it out of the mailbox on the way to work this morning and just opened it. Are you able to go?" Gemma asked.

Celia Kate shrugged while organizing stacks of construction

paper on the counter. A weekend at Moira's beautiful waterfront home on the Georgia coast sounded relaxing, but the thought of leaving her family to fend for themselves for three long days also left her feeling a bit skittish. "I don't know. Are you?"

"I would love to get away for a few days. School has only been in session for a month, and Carolina's senior year is already stressing me out. There's so much to do, not to mention how expensive it all is. I will have to sell a kidney to afford the yearbook photos. My high-maintenance daughter is asking for a photo shoot at Swan House. Who does my kid think she is? Princess Di?" There was nervous tension in Gemma's voice. "What about you? Can you cut the cord and pull yourself away from your children for an entire weekend?"

CK rolled her eyes at her best friend's remark. "I didn't know it was a crime to care for your children's needs."

"Yeah, yeah." Gemma sighed. "So when is the last time you even talked to Mo? It's been over a month for me."

CK took another sip of coffee and then replied, "She texted me a few weeks ago about her garden. She wanted to know if it was too late in the season to transplant a hydrangea. There was no mention of her birthday or a party, though. We only chatted for a few minutes. She must be keeping busy."

"Well, that's good to hear," Gemma said. "I have been meaning to check in with her, but between work and Carolina's demands, I just haven't found the time. I'm a terrible friend, I guess. I'm surprised I even received an invitation."

"That isn't true." CK looked out her kitchen window at the grove of magnolia trees in her side yard, their waxy green leaves swaying in the wind. "You know we can go months at a time

without speaking to Moira and pick right back up where we left off.”

Gemma, in her rich-woman impersonation, said, “It’s sure to be an extravagant affair, darling. I imagine we’ll have European facials and mud baths, and we’ll be sent home with Louis Vuitton goody bags filled with caviar.” Then she shifted back to her normal voice. “I could definitely use a spa weekend. Mo always serves the best food too. Do you remember those fancy hors d’oeuvres at her Christmas party a few years ago?” Gemma sighed. “I haven’t looked at a snail the same way since.”

Celia Kate grimaced. “I can do without the snails, but I could use some pampering. I’ll have to check with Sean and see if he can handle the kids all weekend.”

“You don’t have three toddlers, Celia Kate. Sean can handle the kids.”

CK couldn’t stand the sight of the glitter and crumbs scattered on the hardwood floor any longer, so she stood from the leather barstool and headed to the utility closet to fetch the dust mop. “I wonder who else she’s invited.”

“I don’t know, probably her sorority sisters. Maybe her sisters-in-law,” Gemma continued. “Hopefully not MerryLee, though. That windbag never shuts up. I’m still traumatized by that girls trip we took a few years ago. Remember? She started talking the minute we left Savannah and didn’t stop until we pulled into the rental on Hilton Head. I literally fell to my knees and kissed the ground when I got out of the car. I’ll need more than snails to get through a weekend with Chatty Cathy. I’ll need vodka. And lots of it.”

CK laughed while she swept the glitter and debris on the

kitchen floor into a little pile. “I’ll talk to Sean and get back to you. If we do go, I’ll drive. I want to get there in one piece. On our last road trip together, you got a speeding ticket on the way to Biloxi and on the way back.”

“If you ain’t fast, you’re last,” Gemma said, then hung up.

CK placed her phone on the farmhouse kitchen table, emptied the glitter and crumbs into the trash can, and sighed in relief at the sight of clean floors.

“Hey, Mama, think I could get a snack? Reading about the Spanish Inquisition and torture and executions really works up an appetite,” her oldest child, Silas, asked while walking into the room.

She placed the broom and dustpan back into the closet and with a warm smile, turned to her towering sixteen-year-old son, who stood at six three, and offered him a choice between peanut butter and jelly or homemade chicken salad. He asked for chicken salad and a couple of chocolate chip cookies. She got busy fulfilling her boy’s order.

THE CEILING FAN turned slowly above the sleigh bed, its gentle whirring the only sound breaking the thick silence of the night. Outside, the crickets had fallen quiet. Tunnell Hill, Georgia, had shut down hours earlier, tucked in behind porch lights and locked doors. But CK lay wide-eyed in the dark, one hand on her chest and the other gripping the corner of the quilt her grandmother Sue had made decades ago.

Sean’s breathing was soft and even—annoyingly steady, if she was honest. He could fall asleep in the middle of a thunderstorm

or with the TV still blaring. CK had never understood how he managed it. *He doesn't worry because I do it for both of us*, she thought, not unkindly, just truthfully. That's how their marriage had always worked.

But tonight the silence clawed at her, and she hated it. It brought with it too many bad memories. It was the kind of quiet that hung in the air before the phone rang, before everything changed. Tragedy didn't shout; it whispered. It crept in like fog.

Her thoughts were quick and chaotic, always landing back where they usually did these days: Silas. *He's sixteen going on what? Six?*

He was smart and sweet and funny in a dry, clever way. But he was also so irresponsible. He had failed driver's ed. He'd lost two phones and the money his uncle had given him to mow his lawn a few weeks ago. And Lord help Celia Kate, she had let him get away with too much. She'd babied, softened, coddled him much too often.

She pressed her fingers to her temples and tried to ease the tension. What if he never matured? Would he end up living in their basement, waiting for her to bring him leftovers until he was thirty? And worse—would it be her fault?

Sean shifted, mumbling and turning his face toward her. He was still asleep and still at peace. The man could sleep through a tornado. And, mercy, she sure did love him. But sometimes she wanted to shake him awake and yell, "Help me worry! Help me fix this!" But she knew he'd just pull her close and say, "He's a kid, CK. He'll figure it out. Just give him time." Or maybe he'd say, "It's your fault he is like he is."

Time will work it out. That's what everyone always said. Time

didn't hold her boy accountable. And time didn't fix everything. She had learned that the hard way—from people who never came back, from losses she still carried like stones in her chest.

The blue numbers on the digital clock blinked. It was 1:54 a.m. now. She stared at the ceiling, arms crossed, heartbeat loud in her ears. Stillness and quiet would never mean peace for her.

It would always be the moment before everything changed.



THOMAS NELSON  
Since 1798

## Chapter 2

ERIN PEPPERELL TURNED the key on her assigned unit in the cluster box and pulled out a weighty stack of envelopes. She scrambled up the stairway, unlocked the hunter-green apartment door, and once inside, hastily secured it with double bolts and chains. The apartment was small, the kind people rent only when there's no other option. The carpet was rough, the plumbing shoddy, the neighbors unpredictable. But it was hers. And while she lived there, no one screamed at her for not folding the towels right. No one grabbed her wrist too hard, or slammed doors, or broke plates because dinner wasn't hot enough.

She tossed her purse and keys onto the small kitchen table and felt a wave of discouragement as she thumbed through the bills. Grabbing a pencil from a cup on the counter, she jotted down her and her son PJ's take-home pay on a scrap of paper, carefully considering their expenses. After she made some calculations, she couldn't help but feel concerned about having to live on the number she'd written down.

Erin's financial worries were replaced with curiosity when she looked at the luxurious embossed envelope, recognizing the elegant handwriting as belonging to Moira Allyson, her boss. With her head cocked in confusion, she carefully opened it to reveal an invitation to Mo's fiftieth birthday celebration. The itinerary on

the back of the sophisticated cardstock promised a weekend of delicious cuisine and pampering at Moira's coastal home.

For a little over a year now, Erin had worked for Mo three days a week, and her responsibilities included cleaning and running errands. She often found herself with nothing to do and then was tasked with polishing silver that would never be used or rearranging already immaculate closets. But as Erin scanned the invitation, she thought surely Mo could use help in preparations for an entire weekend of entertainment, and yet she hadn't mentioned a thing to her about it.

Erin sank into the shabby love seat in her cluttered living room and kicked off her worn tennis shoes. Her feet, exhausted from a ten-hour shift at the convenience store, welcomed the relief. As she leaned back, she picked up the phone and dialed Moira's number.

Two rings, three, and finally, an answer. Because Mo sounded tired when she breathed "Hey, Erin" into the phone, Erin assumed she must have just finished a cycle workout in her state-of-the-art gym overlooking the intercoastal waterway . . . or she was at the bottom of that evening's bottle.

"Hey! I didn't want to wait until I came in to work tomorrow to ask you about the invitation I received in the mail today." Erin nervously tucked her short black hair behind her ear, which was lined with studs from the lobe to the cartilage.

"Oh, I'm glad you got it. I had to search for your address on the internet so I wasn't sure I sent it to the right place." Moira hiccupped, which ruled out the fatigue in her voice being the result of an intense cycling session. "I hope you'll be able to make it."

"I'll be there if I'm not scheduled to work at Family Pantry.

Even if I do have to work at the convenience store, I could clean the house and prepare the food before I—”

Moira interrupted with a laugh. “No, Erin. You’ve misunderstood. I’m not asking you to work at the party that weekend. I’m asking you to attend as my guest!”

Erin’s eyes widened in puzzlement. Although she and Moira came from vastly different socioeconomic backgrounds, Moira had always been kind to Erin and never acted like a superior, snobby, or holier-than-thou boss. They often carried on friendly conversations about their sons and the television shows they both enjoyed. However, Erin didn’t believe their relationship was close enough for her to be considered a guest at Moira’s birthday party.

“Hello, Erin? Are you still there?” A clinking noise echoed in the background—a familiar sound of glass tapping against Moira’s wedding ring.

“Y-yes, Moira,” Erin stammered and sat upright on the lumpy love seat. “Thank you for the invitation. I just assumed—”

“I know you’re my employee, Erin, but I think of you as a friend as well. I’m inviting you as that friend. I hope you will come.”

“It sounds like a wonderful time, Moira. I’ll be there if I can. Thank you again.”

She tossed her phone aside and shook her head at the strange turn of events. The thought of mingling with Savannah’s elite made her heart race. These were the kinds of people she was used to serving, not socializing with.



A SHOUT ECHOED from the alley below—it was sharp, angry, and too close. Then came the crash of a bottle, followed by laugh-

ter that was high and unsteady. Someone was revving an engine, and tires were squealing. Erin flinched under her thin blanket, her heart pounding before her mind caught up. She lay stiff in bed, staring at the ceiling, which was cracked in three places. One arm clutched the blanket up to her collarbone, as if it could shield her from the outside world. She waited and listened. The sounds outside faded into the usual hum of distant traffic, the occasional dog bark, a siren farther off. Still, her thin body wouldn't settle.

She glanced at the bedroom door, which was barely open. Down the hall, PJ's door was shut. The nineteen-year-old had fallen asleep in the living room earlier while watching football highlights with his headphones on, his large feet hanging off the end of the thrift store couch before he finally mustered the energy to drag himself to bed. He was a good kid—too good for the life they had to endure. He was far too aware of things that no boy should ever have to bear. Enrolled in trade school, he was learning the ins and outs of auto mechanics. He contributed to their income by working at a fast-food restaurant within walking distance of their apartment. They brought home enough to cover the bills, but nothing was left over.

Erin exhaled, slow and tight. Her body ached, not from anything new, but from everything old. She had scar tissue in her mind, in her muscles, and in her heart. Peace hadn't come just because she and PJ left Phillip and their old life behind. The echoes of that life still whispered to her in the quiet—in the way she flinched at raised voices or how her hand sometimes hovered before turning a doorknob, like she still needed permission to move.

Her stomach growled. She had skipped dinner again without realizing it. More than anything else tonight—more than

silence, more than food, more than money, more than safety—she wanted sleep. Not just rest, but the kind of sleep that didn't feel like surrender. She wanted the kind of sleep where she didn't dream about the past.

She turned onto her side and raised her knees to her chest. The air was cool, and the moonlight cast soft shadows across the chipped walls. She closed her dark eyes, and her breathing slowed just enough to drift, not into a full, deep sleep, but into that in-between place where nothing hurt for a little while.

She'd take that for now.



THOMAS NELSON  
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## Chapter 3

NELL REHMAN WAS completing the last steps of her two-mile morning walk, and she thanked the good Lord for the cooler temperature today that didn't leave her drenched in sweat or out of breath. She slowed her steps and intently watched the tracker app on her phone as she approached her long, winding driveway that forked off the gravel road in rural Chatham County, Georgia. The app's icon of her daughter's face showed her slowing down to zero miles per hour, safely arriving in the dorm parking lot after the drive back from an off-campus class. Taylor merging onto the freeway to get to the veterinary science building on Tuesday mornings always made Nell anxious.

Relieved that her Taylor was back on school property, Nell slipped her phone into the pocket of her light gray windbreaker. Suddenly, a nagging concern overtook her mind, prompting her to grab the phone once again. Quickly opening the app, she followed Taylor's footsteps across the large parking lot to make sure she safely reached the dormitory. Distracted by the phone screen, Nell failed to notice a twisted branch left on the driveway from last night's storm and stumbled over it. Although she managed to steady herself and avoid a fall, the unexpected jolt left her heart racing. Before tucking her phone back into her pocket, she watched a few more of her little girl's steps on the screen.

Nell stopped to get a stack of mail from the redbrick mailbox. On the very top was another army recruitment letter—straight to the trash it would go. If Tate saw it, he'd take it as another sign to run off to serve his country and leave his parents and the safety of his hometown behind. Next in the pile was an embossed envelope with Moira Allyson's return address neatly stamped on the back fold. Still standing at the mailbox, Nell opened it to find an invitation to Moira's home for her fiftieth birthday celebration. Surprised that she'd even received it, Nell put the invitation in her left hand, alongside the army's prompting for her only son, her baby boy, to "be all he could be." She continued her walk toward the house—toward the trash—where both were destined, as both were invitations to a bad time.

THE CLOCK ON the nightstand glowed red in the dark: 2:12, then 2:13, then 2:14 a.m. Nell lay on her back, her green eyes wide-open, staring at the ceiling as the minutes ticked by. Beside her, Chip snored softly, one arm draped over the blanket, his breathing slow and steady. The sound made her jealous—a reminder that at least one of them was sleeping.

She turned her head toward the window, where the pale glow of the moon brightened the blinds. The house was quiet, and the world outside felt even quieter. But her mind wouldn't settle.

She thought of her strawberry-blonde girl being over two hundred miles away at the University of Georgia, too grown up for a curfew and rules and too far for Nell to pop in with a hug. The news that appeared on her social media pages daily hadn't helped ease her worries—all that talk of danger, campus crime, and girls going missing, topics she refused to google after dark. And now

Tate—her sweet boy—included the army in nearly every conversation. She pressed her hand to her chest and felt her heart thudding with worry.

“Lord,” she whispered into the silence, barely moving her lips, “I need you tonight.”

All she could hear was the steady hum of the fan and Chip’s soft snoring.

“I gave you my addiction, Lord,” she said on a breath. “I laid it at your feet, and you broke the chains. You got me through the cravings and the shame. You s-still do,” her voice cracked. “Please, Lord, I need that same strength again.”

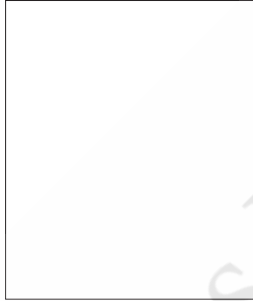
She reached for the Bible on her nightstand, its edges worn from use. She also grabbed her phone and brightened the pages with its light. The Bible naturally opened to Psalm 121—the one she’d clung to during the hardest days of her recovery.

*“He who watches over you will not slumber,”* she read silently as a tear slipped from the corner of her eye and onto her pillow. “You’re awake when I can’t be. You’re watching over Taylor. You’re walking beside Tate.” She claimed these truths out loud.

She placed the tattered book back onto the nightstand and folded her hands over her chest, letting the verse settle over her like a blanket. She didn’t feel better—not exactly—but she felt held. And maybe that was enough for tonight.

She closed her eyes, knowing sleep might not come easy. But also knowing she wasn’t alone in the waiting.

## About the Author



SUSANNAH B. LEWIS is a humorist, blogger for *Whoa! Susannah*, and freelance writer whose work has appeared in numerous publications. The author of *Can't Make This Stuff Up!*, *Bless Your Heart*, *Rae Sutton*, and *Della and Darby*, Lewis studied creative writing at Jackson State Community College and earned her bachelor's degree in business management from Bethel College. She lives in Tennessee with her husband, Jason, their three children, and three dogs.



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