

# A HEART LIES WITHIN US

STEVEN LABREE



He playfully danced his fingers beneath the silk and lace, her soft skin excited by his touch. She reached behind her back, allowing the covering to fall. His hands moved lightly down her slender back as he unbuttoned her skirt. He gazed into the caressing eyes of this goddess standing before him and wondered how it was that he stood in her presence. Her hair flowed down around her soft shoulders, just barely covering her angelic skin. She tilted her head as she looked past his eyes and straight into his soul; her lips curved into a slight smile as her unspoken passion burned through him. For the first time in her life, she was happy and fulfilled.

Without words, slowly and deliberately, she unbuttoned his shirt. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer. Her head fell back as his lips gently touched her neck. Lucas had never been with a woman like this, and heaven could not have been closer at that moment, he thought.

Savannah gasped with sweet surrender as they became one, folding onto her bed. A touch, delicate and tender, she was warm and soft. Tomorrow would bring no regret. Tonight, there would be no moments of shame. They released their passionate desires, holding no secrets. They surrendered into each other's arms without regret as time passed two lost souls into the morning light.

## **Praise for Steven LaBree**

“I enjoyed the story.”

*~ Sam Keen*

“Steven writes with incredible emotion.”

*~ Jeanne Krause*

“What a story! I loved it! Your words and descriptions are masterful.”

*~ Borbala Branch*

A Heart Lies  
Within Us

by

Steven LaBree

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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Contact Information: [info@thewildrosepress.com](mailto:info@thewildrosepress.com)

Cover Art by *Kim Mendoza*

The Wild Rose Press, Inc.  
PO Box 708  
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## **Dedication**

To the only woman, I have ever truly loved





## Chapter 1

*In the letter my father gave me it said,* “Just after I turned eighteen, just before I left home, I killed a man. I told myself it was an accident, but no one in town would have believed me—not with my reputation, nor his.

There was no way I was going to hang for his death, so I chucked the lantern down the hallway toward the back of the house and watched for a moment as yellow flames raged across the wooden floor and climbed the walls. At the time, the whole thing made perfect sense. I figured before anyone would notice the fire, gather help, and haul in water, there would be nothing but a heap of ashes and smoke, and I'd be long gone.

If you were to ask me to pinpoint the day my life changed, I'd say it was my tenth birthday, August of 1918, the same day my father died.

Eight years later, I buried my mother, the darkness taking her as the wind carries off the flicker of a candle. She said she loved me, but at that point in my life, after I'd learned the truth, I didn't know what to think, and since I couldn't ask her, I guess I had to figure it out for myself.

Being poor didn't begin to describe us. Mother worked, but Finley owned the house, the land, and just about everything else, and at the time, I thought he was a kind man. After she died, I found a tin box full of the lies that my mother had kept hidden under her bed; all

the things you don't want anyone to know. All the secrets kept hidden while you are alive. All the things that can destroy any sense of faith or respectability or unconditional love. But because of my curiosity, I opened the box and released the Pandora curse that filled all the evil things of her life, exposing the lie she lived, the truth of my father, and Finley and what he did. If I had never known what happened, how just one man destroyed my family, how he murdered my father, perhaps my life would have been different. Then I think of where I would be today. If I'd never left that town, I would have never met Savannah or your mother, and our lives would have never touched. I suppose that hope rebounds within each life of tragedy and brings us to the right path of our existence, providing us with our purpose.

Still, this made me realize everyone lies, and, in the end, everyone gets what they deserve. Finley, without a doubt, got his.

Since the only thing mother had left me was a whole lot of nothing left to lose, I did what I had to do and walked out the front door as flames began to spread through the tiny house. In retrospect, it was in that moment that I understood, death is sometimes the perfect substitute for life.

My years have taught me that lies, even ones you tell yourself, hide nothing, and if you lie long enough, the deceit becomes the truth you will carry within your heart until it kills you.

I could go on about the other crap; voices through thin walls, over the shoulder looks, deceit from someone you should be able to trust, or the conflict she'd held within her heart that, I believe, killed mother faster than

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any cancer, but I'll save that for later. I have covered most of my life in the journals on my desk, and they are yours to use as you wish. It's my hope you will learn from the mistakes I've made and the undeserved absolution I've received which showed me that love, although rarely perfect, is a gift that you can only receive when you open your heart to the truth.

It's a sure thing that you are confused, so it's my hope you will see, through these journals, how we all ended up in this particular place. The last thing I expected after all these years was to find my son.”

## Chapter 2

I folded that letter, placed it between the pages of my journal, and turned off the lamp. I tried to sleep, but my restless mind thought only of how quickly life could change course.

My wife, children and I had arrived in Brantôme earlier in the week. We were there to visit my father as we often did and enjoyed the area where he and Savannah had retired. We did not intend to bury him on this trip, but as Lucas Colby would've told you, you can never predict the destination of your journey.

I awoke sometime later, knowing it would be hours before the sun would rise. The hearth fire at the far end of the bedroom created a ginger glow across the elaborate ceiling as shadows danced above my bed, entertaining my tired eyes. A soft radiance in an otherwise dark room reflected the surroundings as sleep escaped me. I examined the intricate artwork thinking of the gift found within the hands of the aging master, skills lost through the ages, along with the art, hope, and romance. I was restless and with a slight headache.

My wife slept, and I watched her and thought of how fortunate I was to have found my love so easily when some men try all their lives, searching for the perfect love. She clutched the bedsheet in her slender hand and pulled it closer to her chin. I slid my cover down and lifted myself from the bed.

I stood and raised the sash at the window, hoping to relieve the stale air in the warm room. A light breeze drifted across a marbled sill, and silk curtains billowed as cool air chattered the wooden blinds. Looking through the black of the morning, I closed my eyes, inhaled the taste of morning dew and thought, darkness has a scent all its own.

I stared into the distance, and soon, it seemed night faded as the sun peeked over distant hilltops. I watched as the sky transitioned from starry black to shades of red, orange, yellow, and blended into the cerulean heaven.

The sound of rushing water beyond the surrounding stonewalls drew my attention. It splashed against the water wheel and delivered a souvenir memory reminding me of perhaps how life itself works: lifting, pulling, and turning while the ever-changing tide of the river ebbs without thought to patience or circumstance. Turning away from the window, deciding to go downstairs, I recalled how he was always the first to rise.

The hinges of the oak door creaked as I pulled it open. My wife, in her slumber, shuffled and pulled the bedsheet closer to her face. In the quiet of dawn, passing the library, I recalled the endless joy and laughter created from his engaging stories that always ran deep into the twilight hours as we sat near the warmth of the fireplace. Time advanced quickly and without notice as it does when one is enjoying occasions occupying mind and spirit.

The aroma of fresh coffee, which had welcomed me each morning, was absent. A cold pot sat alone in a kitchen lit only by sunlight streaming through the paned window. Typically, I would've found my father sitting on the portico overlooking the banks of the river, as if in

anticipation of a guest long overdue from a journey. I knew he longed for Savannah, missing her every moment of the day and night. He often mentioned how he would give everything he had built or created for one more day in her arms.

I started the coffee and returned upstairs, peeking in on my wife. Still sleeping soundly in the quiet of the morning, I walked to his library where he wrote his stories. I sat at his desk and called to mind our last conversation.

I had entered his bedroom after a soft knock on the door. He was pensive through the evening, and I wanted to ensure his comfort before we retired. He'd appeared to be asleep upon large pillows against an immense and ornate headboard. His hands folded across his stomach. He opened his eyes as I approached and turned his head.

"Running a bit late this morning, are we?" I had asked.

"A bit. I'm a little more tired than usual."

"Well, we have no plans for the day, so just rest, and when you are ready, ring me downstairs. I'll bring you coffee." I stood, and his hand touched mine.

"We had a good time last night, didn't we?"

"Yes. It was a lovely evening, and the children enjoyed it as well."

"Do you have a moment?" he asked, and I knew there was only one answer.

"Of course. What is it you would like?"

"I want to tell you a story."

"You've told us many stories," I said. "Yet, there is still another?"

His expression changed, and his eyes wandered to a place in the past, beyond my view.

"I had a dream last night . . . about Savannah. She reminded me of something I hadn't told you. Not that I haven't wanted to, it's just that—"

"I can't imagine what it would be," I said. "You have shared so many stories."

"True, but this story is different. It's the story you don't know; how all of this ends."

The lines on his face, like a map of life, told a tale few have lived, and I knew it was my time to be quiet.

"Take this advice with you if I teach you nothing else," he said. "Never let deceit stay within your heart and allow a lie to come between you and the one you love. What you hold inside your heart will define you. It will define your life."

His eyes glistened, like emeralds in a treasured life, showing happiness and yet some regret as he continued.

"After leaving my past, I lived my life believing everything I did had a purpose. Before those times, before I met Savannah, the world bowed to me. I had wealth, power, and everything a man could want. I was that man before Savannah. Now, I am not. What the world saw in me was only the shell of the man. What Savannah saw in me was the man I could be. I refused to listen to her, broke the rules, made my own, and treated people who loved me without compassion. I have paid for those deeds many times."

I realized this was his confession, truths from a man believing his time would soon pass. I felt a tinge of discomfort knowing of secrets not shared but understood. Perception is an odd companion. As you grow up, innocence allows you to believe so many things as truths only. In time, you discover things are not as they seem.

My mother and I had shared many talks; her love for Lucas was evident. Together, the gazes shared between them, something in their eyes one rarely sees in a relationship, told of a secret only they knew. Now, I was beginning to understand.

"There is no reason why you should share this with me, Lucas," I said to him.

"There are many reasons," he said. "Some of which you know nothing of." He continued as if this conversation must persist without close. "Over the past few years, we have talked of a great many things. There is still so much you don't know about my life, Savannah, and even your mother."

Trying to evade the unavoidable conclusion, I said, "We have time. We have today, tomorrow, and even next week before we leave."

"It's nice to think so, but I am an old man and afraid tomorrow may not come." He paused for a moment and then said, "I have mostly finished my journal, and I would like for you to have it."

He raised his arm and pointed to five brown leather notebooks neatly stacked on the corner of his desk. I stepped across the room to look over the books.

"Sit down," he said. "No need to stand."

His chair held me like embracing arms as if coming home from a long passage. I felt oddly at ease, as if I belonged behind this desk. My eyes scanned the mahogany desktop covered with mementos, traveled recollections of his life. His typewriter was at my right, the keys worn and faded, a picture of Savannah capturing her spectacular beauty, a picture of him and my mother from more recent times, and a hand-carved wooden tray

holding a Conway Stewart pen.

"Your mother bought that pen for me," he said.

"It's beautiful."

"I've written a few stories with it."

"I bet you have." I placed the pen back into the tray.

"When she gave me the pen, she had placed a note in the box. It simply said, 'Lucas, Write your story.' So, I did, and the results are the journals before you. All my sins, all my confessions. All you need to know about our lives together and how we ended up here."

I turned the pages of the first journal; it reflected a life not experienced by many. I understood this was to be his gift of eternity.

"This is your life?"

"You could say that."

I read the first few pages of his journal as heard the latch on the bedroom door. Maryann, my wife, stood in the doorway.

"Good morning, men," she said as she entered the room. "Am I interrupting?"

Lucas smiled. "Good morning, Maryann. No. No interruptions. I was just giving Luke something to read."

She walked to the desk and stood behind me. "What are you reading?"

"Lucas wrote these journals," I said as she scanned the pages.

"This is wonderful, Lucas," she said after a few minutes of reading over my shoulder. "Will this be your next novel?"

The warmth of her hand touched my shoulder as heard the casting tone of her voice breach the silence, whispering my name. The need for words evaporating as I saw the glister in her eyes telling me the end of another

Steven LaBree

story. I knew on that day, this was the gift handed down through family; my duty to take his journals and share the story of my father, his life, his journey, and his truth. The last chapter breaking my heart.