

## Green, Green Destiny · *Andrea Cohen*

“THOSE BAPTISTS will plop a church down anywhere. All those evangelists are just the same. Driving home today I saw where they converted the old drawbridge tollbooth, converted it right into a sinners do-drop in. I would not be the least bit surprised or astonished to see some small new meeting hall cropped up anywhere. They’ll probably have one down to the frozen food department at the Krogers. The *Krogers*, nevermind *you*. I would not be astounded.”

Lucy Ann Frelander tried to let her mother’s words float out the window into the pleasant morning air spotted with late-blossoming dogwoods and the gangly pines, green all year but getting even greener now, coming alive again, and the barkings of every neighborhood mutt following the busy calls of bluejays and redbirds and the hammering of woodpeckers and the non-stop crowing of Sam Doolittle’s crazy rooster.

“They were going around town today with a loudspeaker hooked up on top of a station wagon. And what were they yelling out for the whole, entire world to hear? You know what?”

“What, Mamma?”

“‘Stripped and whipped,’ that’s what they were saying. ‘Gather all ye sinners. You must be stripped and whipped and nailed to the cross. You cannot crucify yourself. Just try. Nail one hand down and the other flails around. You cannot crucify yourself, only God can crucify you.’ I thought I would be sick. I think that if I’d had a shotgun handy . . .”

No, no, somehow, try as she might, Lucy Ann couldn’t get the words out of the house. They hovered above her scrambled eggs and breakfast sausages and she thought she could actually see coffee splotches on the blue tablecloth—a sure sign that her mother’s words had actually plopped down into her morning coffee cup. One swig of cream, two spoons of sugar. Mamma’s lack of astonishment, her intolerance of evangelists, her *If I’d had a shotgun handy*, her *mark my words*. At least Mamma’s words weren’t fattening, leastways, probably not. Didn’t anybody notice? Lucy Ann was already getting bigger than a house. Bigger than a house? Hell no, Lucy Ann thought. I’m getting bigger than all outdoors. Pretty soon they’ll have to designate a planet specifically for me and my huge belly. Lordy. Who’d have thought. Me, Lucy Ann Frelander. Home of the

Free, Land of the Brave. Two times Titonsville girl of the month and just so recently, why practically yesterday, voted girl of the year at Titonsville High, and she just a junior. She, a girl who some said might go on to college, or just straightaways to Broadway. She could act and sing and think. And each time she'd gotten up on that podium to accept her award and somebody had yelled up from the audience, "What you going to do *now*, Lucy Ann?" she'd replied with her winning, her knowing, her oh so sly smile, "I'm keeping my options open." No, no, who'd have guessed? Who would have thought? Lucy Ann Frelander, knocked up, done in, with child.

Of course, Luther Willis had told her uh-uh, no way, I'm sure, *for god's sake*. Had said that by some cruel and twisted act of fate, the Lord at birth had reached down and touched his tiny member, saying, uh-uh, no way, the buck stops here, no more Luther Willises. And all through his silent teenage years and into his silent, miserable twenties, Luther had privately moaned his childless fate, his uninheritable lot in life. And then one day while raking a pile of pine bark together in the Frelander's front yard, he'd gotten the idea into his head that somebody might as well profit from his sorry predicament, and it might as well be him.

It was practically yesterday when Luther dropped his rake and went straight into the Frelander's kitchen, where Lucy Ann was sitting at the kitchen table, touching up her nails with beet-red polish.

"Want a glass of water?" she asked Luther, without looking up from her fairly vital task.

"Huh?"

"Want a glass of water?"

"Oh, yeah."

Lucy Ann groaned a little, more like she *arghed* a little, then got up and picked up an ice tea glass from the dishrack with the center of her two palms, being careful not to smudge up her nails. She put the glass down in the sink, let water run into it, then picked it up with her palms and handed it to Luther.

"Watch my nails," she warned him.

He stood there and drank it down in one swallow. "That was one mighty fine glass of water," he told her. "Don't mind if I have another."

"Don't mind if you get it yourself," Lucy Ann told him, heading back to her fingernail repair.

Luther got himself another glass of water and sat down at the kitchen table, across from Lucy Ann, something which Luther never did.

"Yeah, well, *what?*" she said to him, though if he hadn't been in the room, Luther would have sworn she was talking to her fingers, or else, to the bottle of red polish.

"Huh?"

"What do you want?"

"I just want to talk."

"You want to talk?" Luther had been doing her family's yardwork for practically as long as Lucy Ann could remember. Luther did just about everybody's yardwork. Lawn mowing, weeding, stump removal, pruning, tilling, wood chopping, the smoking out of groundhogs or yellow-jackets. Luther did yardwork. Good yardwork. "Damn good yardwork," Lucy Ann's father would proclaim, coming home from the office, standing out on the back patio, slicing an imaginary four iron as he surveyed his acre of land. "Damn good yardwork."

Well, all right, Luther was a damn good gardener. But Luther, ask anybody, Luther doesn't talk. At least, not more than a "huh" or a "How about a glass of water?" A glass of water, which, once drunk, was always eulogized as having been "One mighty fine glass of water."

"Yeah, well. I just feel like talking. Man's got a right."

"Do tell." Lucy Ann didn't exactly let on, but her irritation was edging toward amusement, and almost a small sense of, what was it? oh, honor, maybe. Luther Willis had deemed that the time had come for him to speak and Lucy Ann Frelander was to be the receiving party. She thought that maybe she ought to stall Luther and go call up her best friend Evelyn to come over. Evelyn might want not to miss this.

"I just feel like talking."

"Well, okay. What do you want to talk about?"

"Well."

"Well, forget gardening, because I don't *do* green things."

"Uh-huh." That made sense to Luther, though he'd never quite thought of it in those exact terms. Okay, so he was a doer of green things. But then, come to think of it, yard things coming in a variety of colors, he was also a doer of brown things, yellow things, pink things, red things, any number of color of things. But yes, maybe fundamentally, at the heart of things, he was a doer of green things. And Lucy Ann was always paint-

ing her fingers beet-red, which meant perhaps that at the root of things, she was a doer of red things. Together they would make a Christmas tree. Festive. Happy. Light-hearted.

Luther leaned across the table toward Lucy Ann. "I didn't set out to be a gardener."

"No." Lordy. Here it was, coming straight at her, Lucy Ann thought. Luther Willis had always aspired toward the presidency. President of this, president of that. It didn't matter. And somehow he'd gotten sidetracked, sidelined, a huge curveball had been thrown in the life of a man. "What did you set out to be?"

"I set out to be . . ." Luther Willis stopped. It was as if God had given him so many words to try out on the world, in this case on Lucy Ann in particular, and that number had been used up, spent, spoken. Like Luther was playing an all-import game of Scrabble and had suddenly run out of letters.

"Set out to be what?"

"I set out . . . I set out . . ." Luther downed his second glass of water the way other men tip back a tumbler of whiskey on the way to delivering the truth. "I set out to be a Daddy. A family man."

"Uh-huh." White lightning. Great shakes. Luther had set out to be a Daddy. And just how was Lucy Ann supposed to process this tidy piece of information?

"And I can't."

"Sure you can, Luther. Lots of girls would marry you. Jump at the chance." Jump into the *river*, Lucy Ann was thinking. But be nice, she was thinking, be kind, be friendly. Luther Willis has chosen to speak and for some reason he's chosen to speak to you. Listen up. Take heed. From the mouths of . . . what was it her mother used to mumble in that sacrilegious tone of hers?

"No, honest, I can't."

"Sure you can, Luther. You just have to . . . I don't know. Everybody gets married and has kids. Though to be perfectly honest, I am never marrying. I am never having children. That stuff makes you old. How old are you?"

"Twenty-six."

"Hmm. What month?"

"September."

“Well?”

“Well, what?”

“Well, September *what?*”

“The nineteenth of September.”

Lucy Ann did some quick calculations in the air with her fingernail polish brush. “Nine years and two-hundred thirty days, give or take. That’s how much older you are than me.”

“When’s your birthday?”

“I just told you. I said, nine years and two-hundred thirty days. That makes my birthday the fifteenth of May. You know what that means?”

“What?”

“I was conceived on the fifteenth day of August, and on that day, in the year preceding my birth, Titonsville experienced the hottest weather recorded since they even started making recordings. 116°. Fahrenheit. It doesn’t get any hotter around here. And you know what that means?”

“No.”

“Well, no, of course you wouldn’t. So I’ll tell you. In a nutshell, it means I’m a fireball.” Lucy Ann let her eyes get narrow and wild at once. “It means that I am Destined.”

“Destined for what?”

“Hell, Luther, don’t you know anything? When you’re *Destined*, with a capital D, like I am, well, it’s bigger than anything you can put your finger on. Destined for great *things*. Big things, all kinds of things.”

“Oh. Well I can’t.”

“You can’t what?”

“Meet with my destiny. Being a family man, a Daddy. That’s what I’ve wanted since I was ten years old.”

“Luther, you’re not an old maid yet. You’re not so ugly that nobody would want you. Actually,” Lucy Ann said, studying his face, “I never thought about it, but you’re pretty good-looking. You’ll get a wife and before you know it you’ll have so many smelly babies running around the house that you’ll think back to our little conversation at this table . . .” Lucy Ann leaned back in her chair, a breeze flittering at the neck of her blouse. “. . . and you’ll say to yourself, ‘Hell, Luther Willis, what I wouldn’t do to be back there with a something of a breeze tugging at me and nothing bigger than a glass of water to worry about.’”

“But no. You see . . .” Luther got himself another glass of water and

slugged it down. This was to be the clincher. This would tell her that it was all right, that she didn't have to worry. This would make her want him. "I *can't* have kids," he told her.

"You *can't*?" Lucy Ann's eyebrows hiked up to her hairline.

"Well, I mean, I can, well, *you* know," Luther said, his eyebrows hoisted up just like Lucy Ann's. "But I can't have kids."

Lucy Ann had never actually talked to a man about such things. Most of her talk was with the other girls, talking about how they should conduct themselves should a certain situation arise, and how most specifically they should conduct themselves to make sure no little toddlers should arise from such aforementioned situation. "A medical problem, you mean? A biological *phenomenon*?"

"I never exactly thought of it as a phenomenon. But I guess you could call it that. And I just wanted to let you know."

"Uh-huh."

"On account of I like you."

"Uh-huh."

Lucy Ann looked back down toward her nails and started doctoring them again. Was Luther telling her all this as some sort of favor, so she'd now not to wait for him, on account of he couldn't deliver the goods? Or that he could deliver the *goods*, there just wouldn't be any kids. Lucy Ann's mind started to race. What was she supposed to think? Or say? She knew Luther was looking straight at her. She was afraid to look up, afraid he'd be standing there naked with some dead groundhogs or a vine of wisteria slung over his shoulder. Whoa, hold on there. Luther wasn't supposed to have a body. She'd known him for ten years. Since she was seven. Luther did yardwork. Damn good yardwork. The boys at school had bodies and the new science teacher, Mr. Driscoll, serious, blond Mr. Driscoll, mysterious, sinewy, I'll-lay-down-and-die-for-you Mr. Driscoll, he had a body, and of course the boys at school, the baseball players and the track stars, but Luther Willis didn't have a voice, much less a body. Didn't, at least, up until this very moment.

"I said I *like* you, Lucy Ann."

And Lucy Ann could see one of Luther's hands, one of those hands that was supposed to be good at, damn good at yardwork and nevermind anything else, one of those hands with long, tanned fingers was inching across the white formica-topped table toward one of her just painted hands.

“Oh no!” Lucy Ann yelled, jumping to her feet. “Did you prune the azaleas?”

“What?” She’d caught him off guard. Luther wasn’t used to so much talking.

“Daddy says they’re getting wild!”

“Well, they are *wild* azaleas, Lucy Ann.”

“No. Daddy says they’re getting *too* wild, out of hand. He wants them all cut into box shapes by the time he gets home. Nice, pretty boxes. He’s going to be home *soon*.”

“Boxes?” Nobody in Titonsville cut azaleas into boxes. People down in Florida, say in Disneyworld, they cut bushes to look like boxes and horses. And granted, Luther had once cut one of Sam Doolittle’s bushes into the shape of a hen—a very fine likeness, everyone had said—in hopes that somehow might convince that crazy rooster to crow only at daybreak instead of all day long. Sam Doolittle had been willing to try anything. And Luther had obliged him. But the rooster never even noticed the transformed bush and just kept up its ridiculous crowing. But in Titonsville? No. Nobody cut azaleas into boxes.

“Hurry up! He’s going to be home any minute. If each one of those bushes isn’t looking like a cardboard box by the time he gets home, I . . . I don’t know *what* he’ll do. Yell and scream. Fire you.” Lucy Ann narrowed her eyes. “Burn down your mother’s house.”

“My mother’s *house*?” Chuck C. Frelander had never hurt a fly. His wife, it was rumored, had threatened to take a shot at some of the more zealous local soul-savers, but Mr. Frelander, no, he was a peaceful fellow.

“Quick, hurry!” Lucy Ann pleaded with him, pushing Luther out the back door.

When Lucy Ann’s father drove up just a few minutes later, he saw Luther out back clipping the azaleas. “Hello. What are you clipping those for, Luther?” he called out.

“Clipping your boxes, Mr. Frelander.”

“Say what, Luther?”

“Don’t you want these azaleas clipped box-like, sir?”

“Huh, well now, I can’t imagine why. Nobody else in Titonsville’s got box-shaped wild azaleas. Nobody I know about leastways. Something going on in the world of gardening that I don’t know about, Luther? Some new trend, some new horticultural fashion, this box situation?”

“No sir,” Luther called out to him. “None that I know of.”

That night Luther called up the Freelanders house and Lucy Ann answered the phone. “Oh, hello, Luther,” she said, looking at her face in the oval mirror above the telephone stand. She pushed her lips out and watched them grow fuller, luxurious, in the reflection. “I’ll go get my Daddy.”

“I didn’t call to speak to your Daddy.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I called to speak to you, Lucy Ann.”

And as he said her name, something dropped in Lucy Ann’s stomach. It rose and fell and hesitated as a tiny shudder right where she had no use for it.

“I see.”

“I want us to go out on a date, Lucy Ann.”

“Shhh,” Lucy Ann told him, thinking her Mamma and Daddy could hear, thinking they must have felt the whole house shake just a second ago. “Forget it.”

Luther was pushing it. Her mother might be a freethinker, she might hate fire and brimstone, but she was not about to hand her daughter over to the gardener, not even a damn good gardener. And what was going on? Ten years, fine, Luther’s the yardboy, the yardman, now he’s having a body and a voice and medical phenomenons and asking Lucy Ann out on a date.

“Let’s go on a date. You and me.”

“Eat my Daddy’s car,” she told him.

“Lucy Ann,” he started. Then he took a deep breath. Lucy Ann thought that maybe he was drinking a glass of water. “I want us to make love, Lucy Ann.”

“What?”

“Lucy Ann, I said I want us to—”

“I heard you. Jesus Christ, Luther. Go eat my Daddy’s house.” Then Lucy Ann hung up on him.

Luther got into bed and figured he had blown it. Tried too hard. Hurried things. He closed his eyes and imagined eating Mr. Freelanders’ car. It was a blue Oldsmobile. A big car. A whale, a moose, an elephant of a car. Luther had read once about a man who’d eaten an entire jeep, bit by bit. It was a long meal, a meal eaten in many courses, over the course of many

years. Mr. Freelander's Oldsmobile was far bigger than any jeep Luther had ever seen. Forget that, Luther thought, hugging the pillow to his face.

Luther started getting sleepy. And he started imagining he was eating a red brick from Mr. Freelander's house, a red brick from the corner of Lucy Ann's house. He began drifting off into sleep and the brick softened, lost its edges, lightened and blossomed into the inimitable shape of Lucy Ann's left breast beneath her blouse.

Lucy Ann decided to talk it over with Evelyn. They met downtown at the ice cream shop. Evelyn got a double scoop of fudge nut royal and Lucy Ann got a double of amaretto. They were still trying to figure out if it was at all possible to get drunk off the liqueur ice creams.

Evelyn sat down at one of the small wooden tables to eat her cone. "What's up?"

"Uh-huh, outside," Lucy Ann told her, pulling her friend up out of the chair and out doors. "We'll walk and talk."

"Oh, I get it. Walk and talk. Hold on." Evelyn fished a pair of black sunglasses out of her pants pocket and put them on. "Are we being followed?" She glanced left and right. "Act calm. That way they won't know we're on to them. We'll have the element of surprise in our favor. Then—"

"Evelyn!"

"Then, as I was saying, then—"

"Evelyn!"

"Then—interrupt me one more time and I'll start over from scratch—*then*, when we get to the alley, you turn around and gun them down. I'll hide behind that wall. I'll be rooting for you."

"Evelyn."

"What? So we're walking and talking."

"This is serious."

"Oh. Can you feel it?"

"What?"

"The amaretto. A little buzz?"

Lucy Ann stopped to think about it. "Yeah, actually. Maybe. I'm not sure."

"So what's up?"

"What do you think about Luther Willis, now don't laugh."

“Luther? A helluva gardener. That’s what my Mom always says. Sometimes, no kidding, she’ll just watch him, gaze at him, gaga for hours, completely entranced by how he’s pulling up these tiny weeds from out of the zoysia. She says he is God’s son sent down to do the gardening.”

“Get out of here.”

“I’m serious.”

“No you’re not.”

“Maybe I just *am*, Miss Freelander.”

“Well, forget it, nevermind anyway.”

“Uh-uh. What’s the deal with Luther?”

“Nothing.”

“Uh-uh. What’s up. You *didn’t*? Not with *Luther*?”

“Evelyn! I most certainly did not. And who mentioned anything of the sort?”

“So what’s the deal?”

“Just that, well, I never even . . . I think Luther likes me.”

“What makes you think that? The man doesn’t even speak. I think he must be lacking in a few essential vocal chords.”

“We talked.”

“You *talked*?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Like in sentences?”

“Yes, like in sentences. Honestly, Evelyn. He’s not an idiot.”

“I didn’t say he was an idiot. Did I say that?”

“You didn’t have to say it, you—”

“Lucy Ann?”

“Huh?”

“Can we sit down? I’m tired of walking.”

“Uh-uh. Somebody might hear. We’ll walk slowly.”

“Okay. But just give it to me straight. Every detail.”

In between licks on her ice cream cone, Lucy Ann told Evelyn about doing her nails, about the glass of water, about Luther’s unfulfilled paternal desires, about the azaleas being shaped into boxes, and about the telephone call. Lucy Ann gave out all the details except the one about the whole house shaking.

“So what did you tell him?”

“What *could* I tell him?”

“Yes, no, I’m thinking on it.”

“What do you think?”

“Well. Hmm. I think there’s something appealing about Luther. Honest. Something even, yes, sexy. Besides, he’s older. So he ought to be experienced. Luther would be as good as anybody to get started on.”

“You make it sound like picking out a starter home.”

“Well, you could do a lot worse. And you know, the more I think about it, I think you can certainly use the word sexy to describe Luther.”

“You do?”

“Uh-huh. Only, I might add that the idea of little Luthers running around calling my best friend Mamma, that is not even remotely sexy.”

“But I told you. He said he can’t have kids. It’s a medical condition.”

“We ought to make sure just the same, get proof.”

“How we going to do that?”

“Easy. Just about everybody in town goes to Jenna’s Dad, Dr. Hendricks, right?”

“Right.”

“So we explain the situation to Jenna and she lets us into the office so that we can check his file. We make sure. No stone unturned.”

And it was easy. Jenna got them into her father’s office and they found Luther’s medical files. And there it was. Numerical and plain as day. Luther simply didn’t have enough of them. He wasn’t going to be anybody’s loving Daddy and more importantly to Lucy Ann, he wasn’t going to get any adventurous young girl, some young girl such as herself, for instance, into any sort of trouble.

“Go ahead,” Evelyn told her. “This is the perfect opportunity. And if he’s good, I want in too.”

Lucy Ann thought it over. That next Saturday Luther would be coming out to do whatever it was that made him a damn good, a helluva gardener. Lucy Ann’s father would be out playing golf and her mother would be off somewhere getting underfoot, in the way of do-gooders, yelling at them that neither she nor any other member of her family fell into the category of lost sheep.

Lucy Ann would invite Luther inside the house for a glass of water, ice water maybe, maybe a beer, maybe one of those imported beers her father kept stashed in the back of the refrigerator just for special occasions . . .

“. . . stripped and whipped and nailed, you cannot . . .” Lucy Ann’s mother was loading the dishwasher, repeating the words quietly, to herself, the way other women might stand over a mixing bowl and repeat the ingredients in a recipe for chocolate cake. Lucy Ann didn’t like the idea of people trying to rescue her soul any more than her mother liked it, but what *if*? What if her mother was wrong? What if the world was chock-full of little lost lambs, all lambs gone astray? What if she was one of them?

Lucy Ann stuffed a sausage into her mouth. “I’m pregnant,” she said, barely audibly, as if she were only speaking to the breakfast sausage.

“What’s that, honey? The water’s running. I can’t hear you.”

“Mamma, I’m . . . I’m going outside,” she said, crumpling her napkin up and tossing it into her plate where it sucked up the sausage grease and turned transparent.

“Well, you watch out.”

“Watch out for *what*, Mamma?”

“Not *what*. *Who*. You know perfectly well what I’m speaking of. *Them*. They’re dangerous, you mark my words. Saviors, my eye. They’ll skin an innocent like you alive.”

“Oh, Mamma.”

Lucy Ann dragged her feet as she headed out toward the immaculate backyard. She could hear her Mamma commence back up again with her steady, fed-up-to-here chantings and she could hear Sam Doolittle’s rooster whooping it up, having one hell of a time, winning every imaginable blue ribbon for the world’s most maladjusted rooster.

And yes, as Lucy Ann looked around her, she saw that it was indeed another springtime. The days were getting longer, the woods were filling in, birds were taking off every which way, and Lucy Ann Freelander was supposed to have been keeping her options open. Keeping her Destiny intact. Lordy, lordy. It was a far, far cry to think that this horror of fertility was even remotely connected to the Destiny which was her birthright.

Oh, it was possible that she’d been tricked. Weren’t people with Destinies always being tricked by those clever, scheming sorts endowed with lesser fates? Jesus and General Sherman. Mozart, Perspephone, Marilyn Monroe. It was just possible that Luther Willis was brighter than he let on. Maybe he’d been hushed up all those years on account of he was thinking, plotting about how in the world he could ever become a Daddy, a

family man. And what he'd no doubt decided in that big, silent skull of his was that if anybody could make do with his meager supply of baby-making material, it would be a somebody who'd been chosen, a somebody with a Destiny. Somebody who'd been conceived on the hottest day recorded in the history of Titonsville.

"Oh, you," Lucy Ann mumbled, feeling sick and faint, feeling the pull of gravity for the first time in her life as she bent down over her belly full of gardener-to-be toward an azalea bush thick with handfulls of delicate blossoms. She took one leafy branch and squeezed her hand around it. "You cannot crucify yourself. You cannot nail yourself onto a cross."

And in the kitchen, Lucy Ann's mother grew silent as she watched out the window. What she saw was her beautiful, young daughter drinking in the fragrant azalea blossoms, without a care in the world, on this fine, blue day, spring all started up, the world getting ready for itself all over again. It was the kind of moment that makes a mother pause, that makes her forget that any molecule might be astray in the world. It makes her remember when she was a girl.