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Opening extract from

At Yellow Lake

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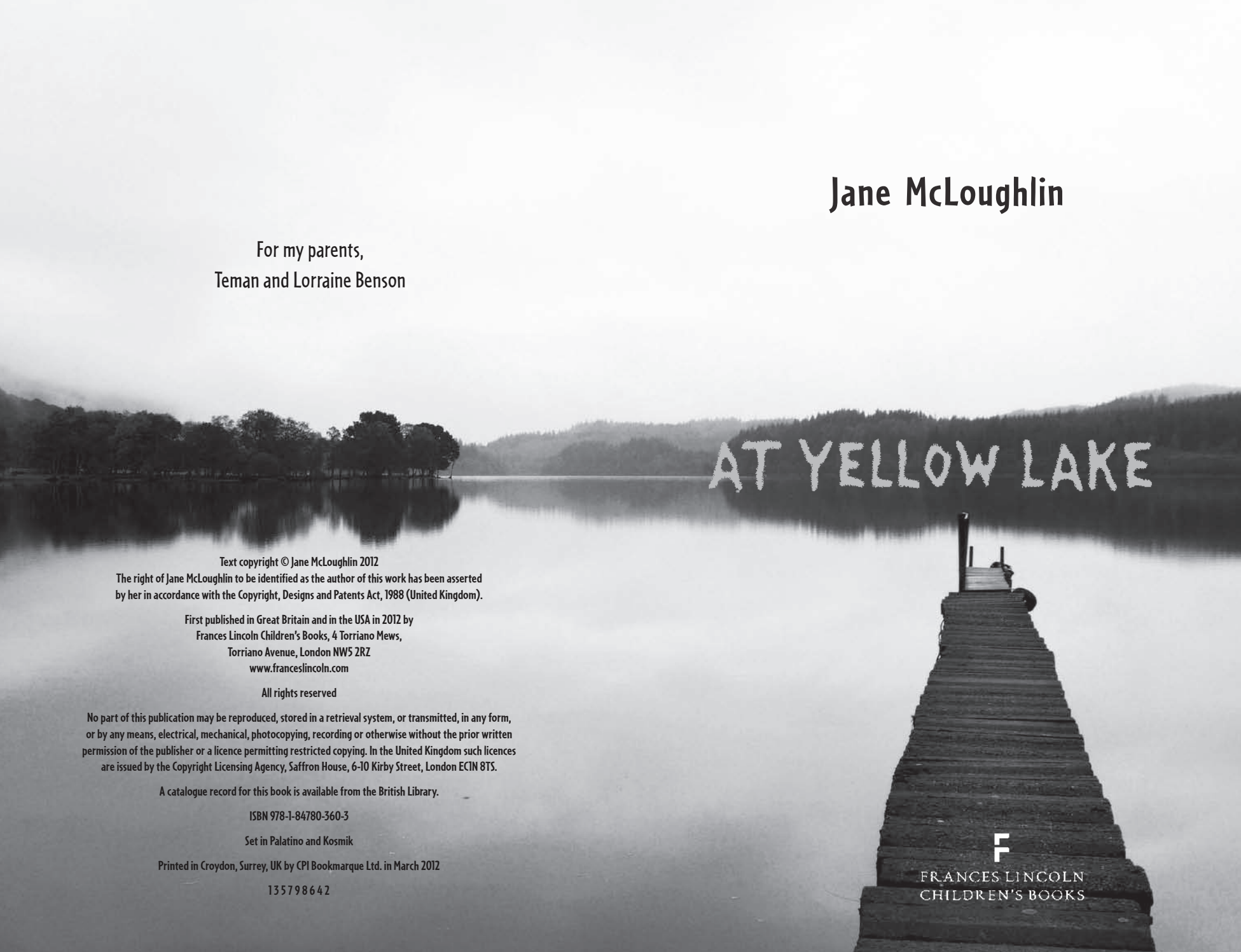
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Jane McLoughlin

For my parents,
Teman and Lorraine Benson



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FRANCES LINCOLN
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Chapter One
ETTA

The way the old lady looked at Mom and me, it was like we were buying Buckingham Palace from her, not a 1992-model Regency Northland mobile home.

Snooty wasn't the word. Her red-smeared lips kept tightening up and her eyes twitched like she was scared of something. A disease, maybe, or invisible germs that might seep out from our trailer trash breath and settle like toxic dew on her white vinyl sofa and chairs.

'Now this here's the master bedroom.' The old lady's butt wobbled as she tiptoed down the narrow hallway. She wasn't fat, but underneath her thin polyester shorts, her skin hung down like lumpy oatmeal off a wooden spoon.

'The *master* bedroom,' Mom echoed, raising an eyebrow the way she did when she was making a joke that was for just the two of us. 'Sounds like my

mother,' she rasped, poking me in the ribs with her elbow in case I'd gone deaf. 'Don't she sound just like the Duchess?'

The Duchess didn't live in a trailer park, though. The Duchess had a five-bedroom home with a two-acre lawn and a driveway longer than all the trailers in the North Country Mobile Home Community lined up end to end. Unlike Mom, the Duchess had married somebody decent – my Grandpa Vernon, who gave her anything she wanted, who stuck by her through thick and thin, who'd stick with anybody he loved, no matter what.

The way he stuck with Mom, and Jesse, Cole and me. His only daughter and his only grandkids, who were all named after outlaws because our father had liked imagining he was a genuine gangster, and not just a low life who held up liquor stores with hunting knives or sawn-off shotguns.

It was Grandpa's money that was letting us buy the old lady's trailer. (I couldn't stop calling it that. I was supposed to say, 'mobile home', or even better, '*manufactured* home', like the old lady did.) Just like it was Grandpa's money that kept us all together when Mom and my *real* dad split up, when Mom and my *step*dad split up, when Mom took up with that guy

who was running a call girl ring from his apartment. This time round, Grandpa's money was helping us escape from Mom's latest crappy boyfriend and move all the way up to northern Wisconsin.

The old lady's trailer didn't seem so bad, not as bad as the ones that we could actually afford. Most of them were like crack dens on wheels, with mildewed walls and tattered sheets hanging in the windows. This trailer didn't smell of pee or have burn marks on the carpet. Still, the old lady's knick-knack addiction made it hard to judge. The bedroom walls were plastered with faded pictures of her grandkids and of pets that had probably been put down years ago. She had miniature glass farm animals on her bedside table: pigs and piglets, cows with their calves, a headless rooster. On her chest of drawers there were ceramic plates commemorating the lives of famous dead people, as though Elvis Presley and Princess Diana were part of her family too.

The tiny bathroom was even worse. The vanity was cluttered up with Avon bath figurines, and there were scented candles shaped like animals perched along the sides of the tub. Mom eyeballed them all like she was looking for something nasty hidden underneath. I caught a glimpse of the two of us in the

old lady's mirror: both with long hair, frayed jeans, faded T-shirts. If I crossed my eyes a little to make things blurry, we could be identical twins. She still wore a size four, same as me. The only things that made her look thirty-nine and not fourteen like me were the lines on her face, the stains on her teeth and the colour of her hair. Hers was dyed blonde. Mine was no colour at all.

Mom found what she wanted. As soon the old lady came in, she started tutting and shaking her head. The old lady panicked and tried to smile – she knew something was up.

'I forgot to offer you ladies some coffee,' she said, her voice all sweet, like we were her friends, like we were company now. 'Maybe you'd care to come and take another look at the kitchen?'

'That's OK,' Mom said, as she peeked behind the shower curtain like a detective on TV. 'I think we've seen just about enough.' She looked at the old lady as though she felt sorry for her. 'That mould around the bath mat.' Mom held out her hands and shrugged, shaking her head as if it was breaking her heart to let the old lady down.

Months later, I'd remember that lady, and how her lip trembled when Mom pointed out the mould and

said that maybe the asking price – $40,000 – was a little bit steep for a damp-ridden used trailer. It was too much for her, being humiliated by people who were so far beneath her, but had somehow found a way to get the upper hand.

It's weird, that. If Mom hadn't noticed the mould and made such a big fuss about it, we wouldn't have moved, because we wouldn't have been able to afford the trailer. We would've stayed where we were, in Minnesota. So the good things that happened at Yellow Lake would never have happened. And the bad things? Who knows. Some things just can't be stopped. Some things can't be fixed by running away, like me and my mom were about to do.

PETER

Under a grey sky that seemed heavy enough to crush him, Peter watched his mother's coffin being lowered into the Sussex soil. A priest was droning words he couldn't understand and a top-hat-wearing undertaker handed him a tray of clumpy dirt. What was he supposed to do with it? Take it home? Put it in his pockets as some sick souvenir? Finally, the top-hat man nodded towards the hole in the ground. Peter picked up a handful of soil and dropped it in. The sound it made on the wooden box was like dry rain.

This was wrong. This was all wrong.

He stepped back from the hole. What the hell was he doing, helping them cover her up? He should be climbing into the ground, scraping off the dirt, lifting her out, carrying her back home.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and shrugged it off. Why wouldn't people just leave him alone? Did they think *she* wanted their pathetic snivelling?

His father was the worst. After it was over, and the priest had gone back to his church, and the undertakers were waiting outside the big black car that would take them back for sandwiches and tea, he lingered at the graveside – the lonely widowed husband. Peter watched from the back seat of the limo, hating every bob of his father's head – up and down, up and down – and the way he made it look like he was sobbing, made it seem as though he were grieving, as though he actually cared. Peter knew what he was *really* thinking: how he'd done everything right on the day, how he'd handled the funeral with such skill, such care, such amazing style.

Peter was struggling to keep awake, trying not to let the car's heat and the day's emotion send him to sleep. He needed to stay alert. He needed to be ready – for what, he wasn't sure, but he'd been praying all day for an omen or a sign. It didn't have to be anything major, he told whoever he was praying to, just a hint about what he could do to make things right again.

And then, just as he was about to nod off, he saw something through the car window. It wasn't much of a vision, and it was very far away. A tiny gap in the

clouds opened up, letting a bright shaft of sunlight shine across the downlands and flicker on the distant sea. The flash of blue water jolted him awake and, in a moment that was perfect and clear, Peter *remembered.*

Yellow Lake.

JONAH

Somewhere in the distance, a white man was mowing his lawn.

Jonah lay sprawled on the forest floor and imagined that the sound was something else – a crow, droning and circling overhead, high above the oak and aspen trees, swooping out over the lake; a hungry wolf cub, crying for its mother; the shrill, clean whistle of a ceremonial flute.

It was just a lawnmower, though, and it reminded him of the list he'd found on the kitchen table the day he left Minneapolis.

Sweep out our half of the garage. Mow the strip of grass by the road. Go to the laundromat, for God's sake – your clothes are starting to stink! Pick up some milk. XX Mom

Thinking of his mother – even her whiny voice when she nagged him about chores – was a mistake.

He couldn't start missing her. Not now. He was sixteen years old – a man, not a baby. He had to do manly things. Hunt animals. Fish with a spear. Build shelters.

The instructions he'd read online for making the wigwam said that building shelters had been women's work. Was that why it was all going wrong?

It had started well enough. By the end of his first day in the woods he'd already cleared the ground of scrub and rotten leaves. He'd marked out his circle using the string he bought at the Hardware Hank in Welmer, the nearest town. He'd gathered up the long thin saplings that the shelter's plans had called for. That was when it got complicated. The saplings had to be bent first, so Jonah stood on one end and grabbed the other with his hands. But the stupid things kept springing out from under his feet, making him lose his balance and crash onto the ground.

Lying on his back, looking up at the blue patch between the green canopy of oak and elm leaves, he felt like he was being watched. Something, or someone, was laughing at his pathetic efforts. Was it a trickster, punishing him for doing women's work?

'It isn't my fault,' he wanted to shout. 'I don't have a woman to help me. What else can I do? If you

want me to be a real man, send me a woman.'

The mid-afternoon heat was taking its toll, even in the shady woods. It wasn't just the wigwam that was wearing him down. He was thirsty, and he was almost out of water. That meant another three-mile hike into Welmer and the chance of some nosy local noticing him and wondering what he was up to. Further north there were tribal communities, so a dark-skinned kid wouldn't attract suspicion. But around here, Jonah wasn't sure. Somebody might stop him, ask questions – or worse.

He stood up and slipped through a gap in the trees. He pushed aside the line of saplings that kept the white man's world safely at bay.

There was always the cabin.

A hundred or so yards from where he'd made his camp was a small house, somebody's second home, one of the dozen or so that were dotted along the Yellow Lake shoreline. It looked older than the other ones Jonah had seen. Its paint was peeling, but only enough to see that its walls were made of real wood, not aluminium siding. It was a solid house, hand-built, board by board, by real human beings, using saws and nails and hammers. It was a white man's house, but it seemed to

Jonah like it belonged in the woods, as if being surrounded by so much beautiful nature had given it a soul.

There'd be water inside too. Maybe going in and turning on the tap wouldn't be the right thing to do, but it would be the easiest, wouldn't it? He could give the door a little push, see what happened.

No. Even the thought of it made his cheeks burn. What was the matter with him? Is that why he'd come to Yellow Lake – to take the easy way? He stepped backwards, through the undergrowth, and crept back to his camp.

He found his water bottle and gulped down the last delicious drops. That was enough for now. And tomorrow? He'd think of something, find a way. He tucked the bottle into his backpack and sat down. He closed his eyes and listened.

Chipmunks scurried over dry leaves. Birds hooted and flapped their wings. Acorns dropped onto the ground and, at the bottom of the hill, the lake lapped the shore like a gentle heartbeat.

The spirits of the forest were speaking to him, as he knew they would.

He just had to listen – they'd show him the way.

Chapter Two
ETTA

Moving day was hot and humid. Breathing was like struggling against a wet pillow. Everything moved in slow motion. Even the flies and June bugs buzzed in a lower gear.

Grandpa Vernon came along to help us load up the van. Mom was quiet, the way she always was around him. What was it – shame? Guilt? She found a spot of shade under a spindly tree, while Jesse and Cole heaved the last of the boxes into the back and piled the sheets and bedding high in the seats, blocking out any view from the rear window. She sucked on a cigarette, hunching down, glancing around like a teenager about to get caught. Grandpa stood next to her, quiet. At times like this, his brown eyes seemed to get bigger, making him look like a dog that'd been kicked but couldn't understand why. He whispered something to Mom that must have really pissed