

## Praise for Casually Homicidal

“Casually Homicidal is a gruesome, gritty, and heart-wrenching lens into the human condition. Olivia once again captivates with a stomach-twisting novel that will shake you to your core.”

—Devin, book blogger @thedearydiary

“With a daring premise and striking, staccato prose, *Casually Homicidal* takes you away on an adventure like no other. Bennett’s sophomore novel puts its finger on the pulse of what it means to love, to hate, to lose, to bleed, to fight, to suffer, to live. With fearsome heights and dramatic lows, *Casually Homicidal* is a bloody story that’s sure to leave you breathless.”

—Brian McBride, award-winning author of *We the Wild Things*

“*Casually Homicidal* is a true glance into the most raw and real of human emotions through the lens of two equally broken and beautiful people. Olivia’s writing captivates from the first page: this is a thrilling read that you do not want to miss.”

—Maddyson Wilson, author of *Don’t Blame The Reckless*

“*Casually Homicidal* is a visceral, honest, and evocative look into the somber lives of characters that feel real. Olivia expertly crafts the suspense throughout, using atmosphere to her advantage in order to

heighten the tension. At times heartfelt and others unsettling, one thing is certain: This is one road trip you will not forget.”

—McCaid Paul, author of *The Summersville Series*

“An adventure, literally as well as metaphorically, showcasing the vast impact of our relationships and our own perceptions of the world. Rich in its emotional depth, gruesomely raw on the page, and unforgettable with its powerful message, *Casually Homicidal* will leave you breathless, offering important reflection on what it means to endure pain, then heal.”

—Brittney Kristina, author of *Fifty Days & Hummingbird Tales*

“With raw and unflinching prose, Bennett takes you on a compelling journey of the human experience. *Casually Homicidal* is a thrilling narrative that will keep you turning until the last page.”

—Kayla N. Jones, author of *Set Me Free & Mourning Doves*

“Buckle up for a killer ride. If Tarantino and *Safety Not Guaranteed* produced a lyrical teen indie novel, this is it. A raw, winding quest of discovery.”

—Leah Humenuck, bookstagrammer @bibliobrunette

Olivia J. Bennett

*to my best friends*

&

*to my Uncle Tim*

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

Ages 14 and up. This book contains scenes of animal death, emotional and physical abuse, smoking, drinking, and discussions of heavy topics like mental illness, abandonment, and self harm.

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Olivia J. Bennett

Casually  
**HOMICIDAL**

Olivia J. Bennett

award-winning author of the Scholastic National Gold Medal



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# 1 Hendrix

Wednesday, May 9th

**It takes three flicks** of my lighter before the end of my cigarette even begins to glow red-orange. When it finally does, I breathe in, both the warmth and the tobacco awakening my chest. Moths fly into the flood lamp above the back door, buzzing and pinging to their deaths. The cool, spring night gives me gooseflesh.

The door to my right peels open and a shaft of light floods the dark alley. Already, I'm annoyed. It's Michelle—Arden, I mean. We usually work together on weeknights.

She peeks her head out the door. Her tan, freckled skin makes her look like a leopard with albinism. “Some guy wants a malt, and I don’t know how to make those. I know you’re on your break, but could you *please* come in and make this one thing?”

Scoffing, I roll my eyes. Most of the time, Arden and I are in a nice limbo of an acquaintanceship. A comfortable, gray level of human interaction. Of course, until she goes and does something insufferable like this. “Jeez, you still don’t know how to make a malt?”

“No, Hendrix, I don’t,” Arden says. She huffs for a moment, considering. “I won’t tell Lisa that you steal a quart of frozen yogurt every third Wednesday if you do this for me.”

I’m just amazed that Lisa, our boss, hasn’t noticed yet. Or that the cash drawer is always a few dollars off when I close. “Fine,” I spit. Arden looks at me expectantly, but I sneer and wave her off. “Can’t I just have this one cigarette in peace?”

“Sure, but you don’t have to be a dick about it.” She sighs and shuts the door.

*In.*

*Out.*

I pull up the sleeve of my work shirt and put the cigarette out on my own skin, savoring the endorphin dump that lights up my brain like the Fourth of July.

**Lisa leaves around seven.** We can pretty much just hang out and serve customers after that woman stops watching us like a hawk.

She gives me strange looks, but really, she's nothing more than a spiteful, middle-aged woman who provides me with a steady income. Nothing I can't handle.

"Making a malt is easy, Arden," I say. I'm sick of always being the one who has to work that blender, and subsequently clean all of the dirty dishes it makes. "Would you like me to teach you?" I tease, as if she's five years old.

Arden rolls her eyes, redoing her strawberry blonde ponytail and pulling it through her visor with the swirly *Billings' Best Yogurt* letters on the front. "Yeah, well I always seem to fuck it up, so why even try?" She leans back on the counter, and I pick at a bloody hangnail. "You know, I don't even know why Lisa keeps this place open this late on a Wednesday night. Everyone in this tiny-ass town is at church, so all we get are the seedy characters."

"*You're* not at church," I counter, pulling my shitty polyester work shirt away from the bloody spot on my upper arm, below my armpit. It stings, the ashy skin already blistering.

"Well yeah, that's because I have to work." Arden sighs and rubs her temples, and her tortoiseshell glasses shift with the movement. The only reason we have so much time to screw around and talk is because we've been here since five and we've had approximately five customers.

"Lisa should just send one of us home." In defeat, I stick the corner of my thumb in my mouth to get it to stop bleeding.

“Amen to that,” Arden says, shaking her head. “God, nothing ever happens here. Can’t even sell froyo on a summer night.”

“There was that one time when our county voted Democrat.” I know she enjoys it when I make jokes, and sometimes they seem to come naturally around her. Sometimes she has an energy I like to rub the wrong way.

Arden bursts into laughter, echoing through the empty, tile-lined ice cream shop. “You’re funny, Hendrix.”

“Thanks.” Arden does provide ample entertainment for me, although not much else. More often than not, she dips past endearing and turns irritating.

The bell rings, meaning someone has just come inside the store. Like robots, Arden and I walk to the front.

Cue the usual spiel. Arden perks up and puts on a winning smile. “Welcome to *Billings’ Best Yogurt*. How can I help you?”

The guy is middle aged with a beaten-up baseball cap tucked low over his eyes. He toes the line of ‘could be creepy’, so a six out of ten. It’s a game Arden and I play when we work these long Wednesday night shifts.

The man orders and sits down at a chrome and pastel table. He wants a milkshake, which is a part of my job description as outlined by Arden herself. Sometimes she’s efficient and eccentric. Other times, I want to strangle her.

I pour in the frozen yogurt, the milk, and the toppings the man requested. It’s moments like these when my hands are occupied but

my mind is elsewhere—where I seem to get lost in my own head, where the darkness tugs at the corners of my vision, crushing my mind like fingers in dough. I move over to the blender, and stick the cup underneath. The machine whirrs to life.

I sense Arden looking at me, so I glance up. She smiles at me, tight-lipped, and I give her the same smile back—an empty reflection. One that reassures Arden. One that makes me feel . . . normal.

But the distraction makes my hand slip, and the cup jerks out of control. The chocolate brownie shake splatters all over the blender, the floor, and me. Lightning rips through my body, shattering my veins.

It comes on fast, like it always does. One second the waters are calm, but the next is a raging hurricane, the darkness detonating at ground zero. “Fucking *shit!*”

I hear Arden gasp, but I don’t care because my hands are trembling from the startle and anxiety and the rage swells up to my eyes. It’s blinding me. Even the man who ordered the milkshake is leaning over the counter. Both of their eyes are wide and accusatory and gaping at me like I’m the headline act in a freak show. Just like the goddamn milkshake, I feel my control slipping from its carefully tuned axis.

Crushing my hands into fists, I storm outside, the door creaking and slamming behind me. My breathing spasms, rattling and beating

against my chest. I hear Arden profusely apologizing to the man and attempting to make him another shake, but I don't care. I don't care.

Digging my spine into the brick wall, I push the heels of my hands into my temples, trying to ground myself. The anger boils in my chest, hot steam clouding my head. I slide to the ground, locking my body into a box, and try to resist the urge to punch the brick wall until me or it is a bloody pulp.

My eye catches on a stack of metal pipes against the alleyway wall. I grab one and bang it against the brick, chips of mortar flying. Fear—the kind that crawls up your back and makes a home in your neck—creeps up on me. The rippling pain through my arms almost feels good as I hit it over and over, replaying the moment inside the frozen yogurt shop in my head. There's a part of me that knows my anger is irrational, but I couldn't care less.

I drop the pipe with a clang and grab fistfuls of my hair. It's like I'm breathing fire.

I wait. I wait until the *nothing* returns.

As I breathe, it returns just like the smothering darkness of clouds covering up the stars above.

I walk back in. Arden's on her hands and knees, wiping up the last bits of chocolate and brownie.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” she hisses, standing and crossing her arms. I clench my jaw. She scoffs, smiling bitterly. “Sorry, that was rude—but seriously, Hendrix?”

“Seriously.” When Arden doesn’t budge, I give in. “Alright, I’m sorry.” I’m not.

Sighing, Arden rubs the bridge of her nose. “It . . . it’s fine. I made him the shake and gave him a generous discount. It’s fine.”

I **don’t think Arden** has actually forgiven me yet, which means I have to play an angle. There’s still two long hours of our shift left, and I’d rather be in Arden’s good graces when we close up. So I decide to approach her when the man leaves.

“I really am sorry,” I say, picking at a hangnail.

She smiles, and it looks like something inside of her is breaking. “It’s okay. We all have those days, right?”

“Right.” *Except that’s my whole fucking life.*

Arden serves herself a small cup of vanilla frozen yogurt and sprinkles in crushed Butterfingers. “It feels like I’m having one of those years, you know?”

I scoff. “Yeah.” More than she’d ever know.

She holds out a spoon to me. “Want some?”

I grimace. “Butterfingers are weird. They’re hard and flaky and get stuck in my teeth.”

Arden drops her jaw. “Wow, I guess we can’t be friends anymore. I *love* Butterfingers.”

“Were we ever friends to begin with?” Maybe not the best thing to say, but it’s too late now.

She hoists herself up on the counter, cleaning her glasses on the end of her shirt. Raising her eyebrows at me in the harsh, artificial light, she says, “Touche, Hendrix. Touche.”

I sigh and start to count the cash in the register.

“Did you ever work anywhere before this?” she asks, her words garbled by a mouthful of frozen yogurt.

“The slaughterhouse out by I-90.”

Arden’s face wrinkles up a bit as she tries to hide her gut reaction. “Oh.”

Yeah, that’s the response I usually get. As I’m counting the ones, I turn around and shove some in my back pocket, away from the camera that sits in the upper right hand corner of the kitchen.

Arden stands, pacing. “Alright, now here’s the million dollar question: where are you going after graduation?” she asks.

“I don’t know. Nowhere.”

“Ha, yeah, same.” Pause. “Are you nervous? It’s in like, two weeks or something.”

I hesitate. “No.” This is a lie, but she can’t know that.

“You’re lying. Everyone’s nervous-excited about graduation.” Arden jabs my ribs with her fingers, and I worm away, cringing. “We are at the beginning of the rest of our lives, Hendrix! Isn’t that an amazing kind of scary?”



Arden's vulnerable questioning makes me uncomfortable. I try to think of something to end this conversation. "I guess."

"Are you ready? To be done?" she asks.

"No." An honest answer, for once.

"Yeah, me neither. I'm just not sure what I fear more . . . staying somewhere safe forever, or the wild, uncertain beyond of *the future*." She waves her hand in a dramatic arc for emphasis.

I nod. "Yeah."

A pause as Arden scrapes the last of her frozen yogurt from the cup. "We should totally hang out sometime, Hendrix. You're a good listener. A bad conversationalist, but a great listener nonetheless, and I need more people like that in my life."

"Thanks." We should definitely *not* hang out. I'm getting the increasing urge to gut her with one of the spinning blades we use for milkshakes. My fingernails vibrate.

**Eleven o'clock comes, and** Arden and I close up shop. She smiles and waves to me on our way out. I drive home in silence.

My house is a crackerbox on the edge of town. One level, no garage, and hasn't been updated since the seventies. Our driveway is at least a half mile long, winding from the road to our patch of dirt where we keep our cars. The grimy windows are black holes,

cardboard cutouts against a backlit stage. I'm not sure where the darkness ends and my house begins.

Some nights it's a gamble on whether my dad will be in a good mood or not. It's no use asking him. Every day is a rough day at work. He's been in one of his 'moods' for several weeks now. Last week, he brought home two women from the bar to have sex with on a Tuesday night. Week before that, he gambled away so much money, we had to sell some of my Grandpa Chuck's antique farm equipment to pay the electric bill.

I sneak inside, letting the screen door fall closed behind me. He's just sitting on the couch in the dark, static from the TV playing in the background like he was waiting for me.

"Where you been?" he asks.

"Hi, Dad."

"Answer me." I can't tell if he's drunk or not, but he's definitely not himself. Then again, I can't seem to remember when my father ever truly was himself.

"I was at work."

"Good." My dad grunts as he stands up. I sneer at the smell of unwashed clothing and alcohol. He steps toward me, and everything inside me retreats. For a split second, I'm no different than a cornered animal.

But he just walks right past me and saunters into the kitchen.

The fridge light casts a yellow haze onto my father, making him look older than he actually is. It floods the dark household like a crack in the universe. “Did you put away the dishes before you left?”

“Yes.”

“No you didn’t,” he says blatantly. “The fuck are those, then?” He points towards the half-full sink.

The ball of fire in my chest spirals. “They’re not mine. They’re probably the ones you used tonight.”

He laughs, hearty and disgustingly sarcastic, throwing his head back. The sound compacts the room, crushing it inwards. I just stand there and take it for a moment, sneering.

Spikes detonate in my gut, and my nostrils flare. “Stop laughing.”

My father pauses, shaking his head, “Are you stupid, boy?”

“I don’t know, are you?” Fear impales me— carves me up like a turkey on Thanksgiving.

He slams the fridge shut, and I rub the hem of my work shirt between my fingers.

My father jabs his finger at my face, and gets so close that his sticky breath crowds out my own air. I can’t breathe. “Don’t you fucking *dare* speak to me that way.”

“Okay.”

He steps back, opening the fridge again. “I’m taking away your car.”

“What? You can’t do that!” I spit.

“Give me your keys,” he says, so utterly unemotional and stoic that it splits me right open.

“You’ll have to drive me to school then. And work.”

He laughs again. “Like hell I do. Find your own goddamn ride. You’re eighteen, boy.”

“Stop calling me that. I have a fucking name.” The tendons in my hands twitch. My clenched jaw throbs. Why doesn’t he just call me by my fucking name? Oh, right. Because that’s the name *Mom* wanted.

“Give me your keys,” my dad says.

“No.” I fumble with my lanyard in my hands to try and shove them in my pocket, but it’s too late. He’s already seen them and suddenly he’s grabbing my face and my neck and my hands.

He pins me onto the wall, his forearm at my neck, and claws the keys out of my hand. My eyes burn.

*Don’t cry don’t cry don’t cry you learned a long time ago what happens when you fucking cry in front of him—*

Then he lets up, clutching my keys and tucking them deep into his pockets. “Get out of my house.”

I heave, utterly castrated in front of my father. I push it down, down, down, until it’s gone. This is a home I will not miss.

“Gladly.” Shaking, I walk out the back door to the wooden shed, slamming the shitty door frame behind me. Flick on the single light bulb that illuminates the grimy space. I crouch down under the worktable and pull off a blanket to reveal a metal cage, teeming with chittering rats.

Like muscle memory, I prepare my workspace. Latex gloves, an apron, a cutting board, a rag to wipe up blood.

Carefully, I reach my hand into the crowded cage and pull out the largest rat. I like to let them grow a bit, feed them grain and such.

“Hey hey hey, shhh,” I say, as the small rodent writhes in my grasp. Its pink tail whips my bare arm. I find myself smiling a bit. Here, I am in control.

From a small, hidden bag near a rake, I take out a utility knife. While they’re small, I find their precise sharpness works best on small animals.

I place the rat in the center of the board. Suddenly, it’s gone still. Calm, almost. Its wet nose sniffs the air. I hold onto the rat’s abdomen, bracing for what’s to come.

I saw off one leg. Then another.

The rat screams, wails, whines. For a moment, I fear my dad can hear it from the house, but the rat’s movements become more erratic. The thing bucks under my hand. I plunge the tip of the blade deep into the rat’s neck and rip it downward. The rat twitches for a moment, and then bleeds out.

I breathe. Time to dispose of the evidence.

My fingers claw into the cold, wet earth as I bury the rat. I hose off the board and the utility knife, watching as the bloody water sinks into the black earth. But in that moment, relief doesn't come rushing in. Instead, it feels like I've just begun, just scraped the surface of a deep iceberg. In the lukewarm spring night, I'm nothing short of unsatisfied.

Anger—just as violent and rash as what I experienced in the frozen yogurt shop—rips through me, and I thrust the cutting board against a nearby tree, grunting. With a crack, it bounces off and falls to the ground. Any ounce of calm I felt from killing the rat is long gone.

It may be time to move on to something larger. Something *human*.

## 2 Arden

Wednesday, May 9th

I **have never done** one crazy thing in my whole life.

And I think it's driving me crazy.

One of the ways I make sense of this mundane existence is by making sure that I'm not the only one living a Wonder Bread life. My old friend Sarah was the only other person I ever found who also was so afraid that she, too, was living an ordinary life. That's kind of what bound us together in the first place. Sarah always tried to quantify her

life, too—from the photography we created together, to the strange online dictionary she was obsessed with, full of made-up words to quantify unquantifiable feelings. Despite one concise word being the least crazy thing ever, it still made us feel understood somehow.

But that understanding . . . it had its limits, and it only went so far. Until it gave out under the weight of itself, as all things do.

**Hendrix doesn't acknowledge me** on his way out.

Sometimes I feel this weird longing towards other people, like I want to peel back their skulls and get to know them. Like, *really* know them. I feel that way with Hendrix. I don't know why, but I just do.

I blast the radio and give *Billings' Best Yogurt* the finger on my way out of the parking lot. It's things like this that make me feel like I'm doing something significant without actually having to suffer any consequences.

Ironically, *Billings' Best Yogurt* isn't actually in Billings, Montana. We work at an offshoot in the suburbs, which in Montana language is 'anywhere within one hundred miles of the largest city.' We have one Walmart, one post office, one pair of railroad tracks that runs on the south side of town. Most of the area is poor and rural, but my family lives in one of the few neighborhoods that resemble the white-picket-fence archetype—only because Mom's on the county board of directors.



When I get home, I open the door to a dark house. “Mom? Dad?” The refrigerator hums in the background. “Max?”

Nothing. I tiptoe through the kitchen, setting my keys on the rung. Down the hall, warm lamplight cuts through from Dad’s office.

I push the door open. “Hey, I’m home.”

“Oh, hi honey,” he says from his laptop, the cold, computer light clashing against his face.

“What’d you guys have for dinner?” I ask.

“Um, pot roast, I think.” I wait for him to look up, to give me a hug, to tell me that there’s a plate for me in the refrigerator. But it’s obvious that he’s working. Which is strange, because it’s 11:30pm on a Wednesday night, and we live a comfortable enough life where he doesn’t have to work all the time. But he does anyway. I wish I could say that Mom’s any different.

I think they work so much because they’re afraid of not doing anything. They’re afraid of the quiet, of the stillness. They think that rest equals idleness. That nothing great ever comes out of leisure time. That their status somehow makes them different from the people in this poor, ‘red’ state. That they are strangers here, when they too have been grown from the same hick dirt everyone else has.

I back out of his den. “Goodnight, Dad,” I say, shutting the door behind me.

“Goodnight, Michelle.”

I stop, stiffening in the dark hallway. The name stings because of all the things it means, and all the things it doesn't. It reminds me of being young and loved. And it reminds me of the ache in my chest—the one that's still burning and raw. Sometimes I feel like a stranger in my own house.

I keep walking.

The refrigerator light casts lonely shadows into the kitchen as I eat something.

The floor rumbles beneath me, and I startle, the sound pulling me out of somewhere inside the labyrinth of my brain. I sneak downstairs to find my brother, Max, plugged in to his video game console.

“Hey,” I say. No response. Something explodes on the screen, and the blast comes out of the speakers, shaking the drywall. “Hey!” I shout. If Max has got his headset on, then why the hell does he need the TV at full volume?

I reach over and crank it down. “Hey!” I shout again. “Where's Mom?”

Max sneers, revealing his green and blue braces as he dodges around me. “Get outta the way! I can't see shit!”

“C'mon, Max! Talk to me, dude. Your valiant sister has returned with your favorite frozen yogurt!” It's true. When I work late on weeknights, I try and bring Max home one of his favorite flavors. He likes Butterfingers too.

He rolls his eyes and dodges around me to try and see what's exploding on screen this time. Hardening, I peel away from the screen. I duck behind Max, wrapping my arms around his neck. "Hey, tell me about your day. How are you and Hayley doing? How'd that history test go?"

He cringes, trying to break free. "Sure. Now leave me alone, I'm kind of in the middle of something here."

"Did you do your homework? I might be able to help you since Dad's busy. Or we could go outside. It's not too cold out anymore, and the fireflies are out this time of year. You remember how we used to—"

"C'mon, get off me!" He drops the controller just long enough to peel my arms away.

"Fine." I sit back, behind Max, peering at the back of his head of warm brown hair. Wishing I could peel it back and see what's inside.

I fall into the beanbag next to him. "Hey, give me a controller. I'll play with you for a while before bed."

"Hell no. You don't know how to play, and I'm not about to teach you."

I study his profile, the acne and stubble that buds on his cheeks. "C'mon," I plead. "After this round?"

"No," Max snaps. "Just leave me alone. God, you're so annoying."

This cuts deeper than it should. I breathe for a moment. Standing, I say, “It’s almost midnight. You should be getting ready for bed. We’ve got school tomorrow.”

“Shut up. You’re not Mom.”

“Yeah, and where *is* Mom, then?” I dig my eyes into his profile, but he hasn’t even looked at me once. Without thinking, I reach behind the TV, grab a handful of cords, and yank them out.

“What the hell! I just lost all of my progress, Michelle!” Max springs up from his bean bag, throwing down the controller and headset.

I can put up with Dad calling me Michelle, but Max knows better. “It’s *Arden*, you asshole! And if you’d listen to me, maybe then I wouldn’t have to literally unplug you from the TV!” I say, crossing my arms.

“God, you’re so *stupid*! You can’t just do that!” Max shouts.

“Do you see Mom or Dad? No? Then I’m the oldest and you have to listen to me.” I’m shaking with anger.

“No, I don’t.”

“Yes, you do!” I shout. My ribcage is electrocuting my lungs. *I can’t stop it, I can’t stop any of it.* “Go upstairs and go to bed! Can’t you just listen for once and not be so selfish and defiant and stupid?!”

For a moment, we just glare at each other, heaving. Max sneers at me, in all of his thirteen-year-old glory. “Fuck off.”

Sighing, I eject the video game disk and close my eyes. Max storms upstairs, but not before he flashes me the finger. Already, poisonous guilt drowns out my previous anger.

It takes all I have in me not to snap that fucking disk right between my fingers. My heart crowds out my lungs and stomach, swelling and throbbing in my chest. Listening to him storm upstairs, I fall back onto the bean bag, just plain tired. The noise echoes throughout the empty house, and slowly fades away. What the hell am I doing?

Sighing, I take out my phone, texting my friend Alex and asking if she's awake. I stare at the screen for a while hoping—but also knowing—that the bubbles indicating that she's typing *won't* appear.

I need to get out. Sometimes I wonder how much gas I waste on these impulse drives, where I delude myself into thinking I'm running from my life. I'm actually running from myself, which isn't really something you can run from, but I try to anyway.

Grabbing my digital camera, I get back into my red 2003 Oldsmobile Alero and leave. It's damn nearly my most prized possession, my ticket to freedom. I blast some rock over the speakers to try and drown out whatever awful thing is rising up to my throat. The speed feels good, like it's stringing me along on a wild chase across the sea and through every valley and mountain. The speed fills my bones with *something*, which is better than nothing.

Once I make it out of town, I drive slow along the winding country roads. Not just so I don't get picked up by the cops, but just so I can soak in the glowing darkness. So I can make every second last just a bit longer. So I can take one more moment trying to find myself out there, between the solitude and the empty streets and the melancholy music. Everything else moves just a bit slower when the stars are out.

I'll sit in these empty intersections late at night, staring into the darkness, letting the music flood the car. Hoping the street lights can worm their way into the uninvited hollow feeling that drills holes in my heart. I'll sit there and soak in the textures, the sounds, the sights, and how it all feels. As if being fully present in the moment somehow gives it meaning.

I let the pain in, fully, at these times, because I wouldn't dare let it in anywhere else. Everything's silent here in a liminal space. When I'm in my car, I don't have to be anybody. I'm not a daughter or a sister. I'm not a student or an employee. I'm just me, and all of the in-between.

It's always disappointing when the beams of another car's headlights appear in my rearview mirror, because it means I must move on. The moment is over.

By repeating the intersection process, I end up in the middle of nowhere. I slam my car into park and get out, walking onto the shoulder of the road that leads into blankets of dark fields.

I take out my DSLR and adjust the settings accordingly for long-exposure photography. Setting up the tripod, I try to get some

good pictures of the moon or even the faraway city lights. But everything comes out boring or wrong somehow. Not good enough.

I throw my tripod back into the trunk, staring at the grainy orbs of light that are supposed to be home. Instead of getting angry at myself, at the camera for not doing what I wanted, I'm just disappointed.

I look up. Our tiny, suburban town in Montana shines as pockets of light between mountains and plains. My whole world. Sometimes I come up here when everything feels like it's getting too big for me to comprehend. When I look down and see the mountains enveloping a cluster of streetlamps and glowing houses, I don't feel so out of control anymore. It gives me perspective, I guess.

I close my eyes, winking out the stars and galaxies and streetlights. Part of me wishes Max could be here, that he could see what I see, feel what I feel.

Desire twists inside me, and I feel my soul in my gut. She's tired and weary and fed-up. Fire consumes and grows and fills my lungs with smoke until all that I breathe is this all-consuming, strange desire.

I'm faced with two snapshots. One of what my life actually is: absent parents, disconnected brother, dead-end job in a dead-end town. And another of what I want it to be: something significant, something real, something full of love and fulfillment and a kaleidoscope of all the strange and beautiful things that life can be.

The two feel so far apart—one so startling and disappointingly real, and the other polarizing and just out of reach. The thing is: I know where I want to go; if only someone thought of giving me a roadmap. Out here, under the stars, I try to center myself, but it feels like I'm missing a few parts.

By defining and categorizing the tangle of feelings inside me, that makes them less obscure. They fall into clear focus as easily as a camera lens. My heart wants to run, but my muscles turn and drive me home. I don't want to be the person I am anymore, but I don't know who I want to be. Cognitive dissonance.

This might be one of the last times I make the long, lonely drive home. Because one of these days, I'm just going to leave and never come back.



# 3 Hendrix

Sunday, May 20th

When I was thirteen, I asked my dad to take me to a psychiatrist. He then asked me if I heard voices. I said no because I didn't—*don't*. Some things that people say just stick with us more than others. What my father said next was one of those things.

“Hendrix, grab what’s between your legs and *buck up*. There’s nothing wrong with ya.”

Funny how those things turn out, isn’t it?

So instead, I had to resort to the desperate, clinical, and bizarre corners of the internet. The thing about the internet is if you look hard enough for something, you'll find it. I browsed mental health articles, opinion pages, social media forums—anything to clarify what I was experiencing and why, desperately searching for someone like me—to no avail.

Ever since eighth grade, I've had to hurt or kill something to function like a normal human being—barely. Sometimes I do it for fun or because I'm bored, but sometimes because I have to. It's a reflex, like gagging. Or ducking when a group of juniors decide it would be funny to beat up the resident weird freshman.

It started with rats. For a while, me and my dad had a cat named Maizy, a whiny, matted old thing, who would catch rodents in our house and the surrounding forest. The cat would bring them back, and I'd poke and prod at their corpses. When I prompted her with treats, she eventually started bringing them back alive, which was better for me. Then it was prairie dogs. Squirrels, rabbits, the like. My dad's a hunter, so the waiting, the process, the *thrill*—it was in my blood. He taught me how to do it.

But Maizy. Maizy wasn't my pet, nor my dad's. The cat was my mom's, but she stuck around because of the familiarity of the house, which was an affliction with which I could relate.

One night during my sophomore year, Maizy climbed into bed with me. I didn't realize it of course, but I guess I turned over onto Maizy in my sleep and scared her. She pounced on my face and bit my

nose. I still have a scar. I screamed and dragged that stupid bitch out to the shed at 2am.

Where I slit her throat. One less thing that reminds me of my mother.

I stare at myself in the small mirror, complete with a cardboard back and plastic frame, hanging on my door. I tighten my tie until I feel it pressing against my neck. I zip up the gown and put the cap on, tucking locs of wavy, dark brown hair underneath. And, like I do every day, I slip my knife in between the waistband of my pants and boxers. It's a comfort thing.

Afterwards, I nudge my dad's door open with my foot. The sun casts hollow light onto the dusty wood panels leftover from the seventies. He's sprawled out on the king-sized bed, taking up the entire space in nothing but his boxers, face down. For a second, I wonder if he's dead.

"You coming?" I ask.

I get a snore in response.

**The noise in the** gymnasium gives me a pounding headache. Most everyone is either talking with someone or taking photos. I'm not sure why I have to do this. I suppose I don't, but it makes me feel, and more importantly, seem more normal. And that's important.

Arden stands on the fringes of a group of friends, occasionally butting into the conversation. Eventually, she drifts away and leans

against the wall, doing something on her phone. It's a bit pathetic, really. I'm not sure why, but I maneuver across the gymnasium to her. She looks up, something dark and heavy hanging around her eyes. "Oh, hey, Hendrix."

"Hi."

"You excited?" She crosses her arms, and the tassel from her cap falls in her face. I can tell she's got a little bit of makeup on her face because her lips are rosy and pink, and her freckles look powdery.

"No."

"Yeah, me neither. People always hype graduation up, but pretty much everyone does it." Sometimes I think Arden asks questions that she doesn't actually want the answers to. She just wants someone to listen to *her* answer.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

She laughs uncomfortably. "Everything. I mean, nothing. Just a joke."

I don't laugh. We kind of just stare at each other for a moment, one of us reading and trying to understand the other. Arden glances over my shoulder at the group of people she was just talking with. Huffing and puffing, she pulls me to the other end of the gymnasium.

We lean against the wall, facing the crowd of our peers, floating heads among a sea of black and white. "It's just . . . a friend and I had a falling out. Again. I know, great timing, right? She's just in the group I usually hang out with and I don't really wanna be around her. I don't really wanna be around anyone right now."

“Same.” No need to lie there.

Arden shifts her weight. “I’ve honestly kinda gotten used to it.”

“Was it your fault?” I ask.

She sighs and raises her eyebrows at me. “It takes two to tango, Hendrix. See ya after graduation.”

I’m not entirely sure what she means by the first part, but Arden walks away before I have the chance to ask. I go out and chainsmoke after that, imagining what my hands would look like if they were dripping with Arden’s blood.

The burning sun slices the back of my eyes, like the iridescent blue of a cow’s retina. The big square on top of my head does little to block the sun while our superintendent reads off the names.

It’s methodical, and kind of weird actually. From an outsider’s perspective, it looks like all of these fresh-faced eighteen year olds are being led to a ceremonial sacrifice. But, of course, they’re just given a handshake and a booklet with a piece of paper in it. Some of the girls cry and it makes me grimace.

The meathead next to me notices my stare, and he gives a look back. *Grant Davis* . . . he always called me a twink in the sophomore locker room.

I breathe deeply. The cold hilt of the knife presses against my skin. I could do it. I could. Right now, just bend down like I’m tying

my shoes and slip it out. Take the knife and plunge it into his thick, sweaty neck. Blood, staining the gown, sticking to the chair, making dew drops on the grass. His life, thrashing and crawling in my hands. The heart-lurching adrenaline, the thrill, the release of everything. And then nothing. The darkness that makes everything okay.

*It's definitely time to move on from animals.*

I pick at a hangnail until it bleeds. I start listening when I hear the superintendent call out Arden's real name: Michelle Arden Campbell. It's weird because I'm pretty sure we were allowed to choose how we wanted our names read.

Giving a small wave to someone in the stands, she steps onto the stage with a tight-lipped smile—one that might snap. I'd actually like to see it snap one of these days. I wonder what madness lives behind it.

I try to associate Arden with other people. In high school, your sphere of influence is determined by the people around you, which is why I tend not to surround myself with anyone. But I can't place Arden. She's a drifter, much like me. Except I've drifted so far out that no one wants to paddle over to me. And the people who did want to? Well, they're long gone by now.

Not that I mind or anything.

About midway through the ceremony, my phone buzzes with a text. It's Dad, saying that he's here at graduation. I look up, searching the bleachers and see him hurrying up the furthest staircase.

I don't text him back. I don't care.

**Out of the three** of us, my mom was the most social. However, I was never very good with friends. Setting bugs on fire wasn't exactly a crowd pleaser. I got caught stealing toys from my friends more than once. But when I was little, almost school age, she'd bring all her friends and their kids around, and we'd do normal stuff, I guess. I don't remember who any of them were. They'd all have to leave around 5pm no matter what. Sometimes they had to leave abruptly, at random times. I remember asking my mom why, and she just cupped my cheek and told me not to worry about it. She said that a lot.

It wasn't until years later that I realized who always came home after Mom's friends left: *Dad*. Within minutes of them leaving, he'd show up. Slamming doors, dropping bags, curt words exchanged like darts.

I also realized that in the winter months when Dad was jobless, no one came over to the house. More specifically, no one was *allowed* over. Instead of this constant family time bringing us closer, it cleaved them in two. She resented him. She resented him for isolating her, for slamming doors so hard you could feel the wooden frame of the house trembling in fear, for dragging her by her hair into their bedroom to do God knows what.

Dad doesn't have much family anymore. They're either dead, in jail, or somewhere across the country, estranged. Mom's family did,

but they rarely came around when I got older. Because of that, I never had a family to begin with.

Not that I mind or anything.



# 4 Arden

Sunday, May 20th

**I need to get** out of here.

At least, out of this field. I know my family is around here somewhere, but I can't see them through the cluster of white and black squares. I squint into the sun, disillusioned. At my own high school graduation, I feel out of place. It registers as an uneasy feeling, in that empty space below my heart and above my diaphragm.

*None of this actually matters.*

“Arden!” It’s my friend Liberty, I can already tell. “We’ve got to get pictures together!” She comes up and hugs me from behind.

“Oh hey, Libby.” She’s not my favorite person, but she makes jokes in art class with me, and her pep is kinda infectious.

She clasps her hands in mine. “Okay, let me get the girls!” By ‘girls’, she means her friends, who are also my friends by association. Someone pushes past me, not even thinking to apologize.

“Michelle! Over here, honey!” My mother rushes over to me, clad in pearls that she treasures more than her own social standing, taking pictures of me with her phone. I sneer at her, just enough so she gets the message that I’m not into this. Max slumps into his pockets. Dad just kind of looks around, above the crowd, like he’s waiting for a train or some shit. A pang runs through the age-old wounds in my heart.

“*Arden*, please,” I say, and Libby laughs. She thinks my ‘nickname’ for myself is cute.

“Oh, come on, sweetie! You’ve got to look nice in your pictures so you can look back on them when you’re my age!” My mother rushes over, brushing my strawberry blonde hair back and standing me upright.

“Mom, in five years, my high school graduation won’t matter because I’ll probably have graduated from college by then,” I say, pulling my gown away from my sweaty chest. This is one of the few days of the Montana summer that is gross and boiling hot.

“Oh, hush! I still look at *my* graduation pictures,” she says, pulling back and snapping a few more pictures of my deadpanned face.

“That’s because you peaked in high school.”

Fortunately, she doesn’t get the opportunity to rake me across the coals for that comment, because Libby rushes over with Senior Friend Group #3—which includes some members of Sophomore Friend Group #1—and my mom and her camera are all over the popped hips and wrapped arms and plastic-posed smiles. *Pang*. It’s that hollow kind of empty, the one that makes me want to curl into the fetal position on the ground, as if I could squeeze the awful out of me.

When the photograph pose breaks apart, Libby turns to me. “See ya this summer, girl!” she squeals, and hugs me. But it doesn’t feel like anything. Actually, it feels like she’s taking something from me. I manage to give her a rubbery smile as she bounces off to her real friends to take more pictures without me. Do I care? Well, maybe.

Mom comes up to me and straightens my necklace over my gown. I pull away. “Is there anyone else you want to get pictures with? This is the last time you’ll be here with all your classmates, honey.”

“No, and that’s a good thing.”

My mom huffs and puffs, her heavy foundation crinkling with her skin. She’s dressed like we’re all here to see her, and not me.

I purse my lips, giving her the best ‘I’m-so-over-this’ face I can. “I’m good, Mom.”

My mom laughs a bit and guides me over to Max and Dad. She hooks her hands around my waist and says, “If we weren’t watching our figures, then I’d say we go out for frozen yogurt.”

“I’d rather get stoned.”

My mother’s face falls, all of her saccharine enthusiasm gone. I hear Max snort.

Something grates in my stomach, and I feel it crawling out of my body and onto my skin. I gently push away from my mom. “I’m . . . gonna go talk to some other friends, okay?”

I turn on my heel and walk. Hell, I don’t actually have anyone I want to talk to. The cheap polyester graduation gowns feels like barbs on my skin as I brush past my former classmates. A blur of smiles and camera flashes and the screaming roar of laughter is just *too much*. Sweat beading up on my forehead, I walk towards nothing, faces moving past me in a blur—until my shoulder rams into someone.

The fog clears just enough for me to recognize him. Elliot. His cap is tucked carefully over his tight afro, and his brown eyes search me. He looks like a stranger to my eyes but an old friend to my heart. I struggle to regain a sense of place as panic rises to my throat. All the pain from five months ago comes rushing back.

“Hey, Michelle,” he says. Like always, his voice is deep and soft, but this time, there’s apprehension.

I nod. “Elliot.”

“So, uh, how’s life been treating you?” he asks, the rays of sun spraying out around his square cap like a halo. To a camera this would look like heaven, but to me the glaring sun only gives me a headache.

“Oh, you know . . .” But the words come out all wrong—my mouth’s dry, my head is pounding, and there’s a monster trying to crawl its way out of my lungs via my throat. “I’m fine. Working a lot.”

Elliot nods, peering at me. I’m afraid he can see right through me, that he knows that I’m a star destined to fall in on itself, bleeding at the cracks.

“That’s good,” he says.

There’s a moment where we look everywhere but each other, feeling the frayed connection like bad cell service between us. I think he expects me to ask him how he’s been, but I don’t care. I genuinely do not give a single shit.

Tears gather in my eyes despite myself. The sun claws its way into the empty spaces between me and my former classmates. I think there are some moments in our lives when everything shifts into startling clarity. When you’ve been going around and around the same mountain for so long, everything important gets muddled. You fall into a rhythm of dysfunction, of just putting up with things for so long that you get blinded to what it really is.

Then something happens—and the house of cards tumbles down, the veil rips. You can no longer ignore it, because it’s all right there. Everything makes sense, whether it’s good or bad. Hindsight is

20/20. Everything is clear—painfully so. I am forever longing for the clarity that disaster brings: the way that life seems to always boil our bullshit down to what really matters. Down to what’s truly deep inside ourselves.

These moments define us. They change our lives. They drive us to chase our dreams.

And, more importantly, they motivate us to leave.

As if my gaze is my camera lens with low aperture, I spot Hendrix just past Elliot on the fringes of the crowd. Pushing past Elliot, I beeline over to him, because there’s a thread I feel—a thread that starts inside me and weaves through him. There’s always some measure of clarity in a disaster, and I relish in it. There’s something in Hendrix that I feel within myself; something I haven’t felt in a long time. And all I can do is follow that gut instinct—that clarity, whenever and wherever it comes.

His eyes fall onto me as I approach him. Hints of surprise flash over his face.

“Hey,” I say, squinting up at him. He’s like a waif in his long, black gown.

“Hi.”

The noise from the crowd swells again, and someone next to me laughs like a hyena. We wander away from the crowd, kicking at the grass. For the first time today, the shrill alarms of panic inside me quiet and I feel a bit more centered.

“So, we’re done with high school,” Hendrix says, but his words are disconnected from his being. His eyes are sunken, and he slumps over and broods, as if trying to hide from someone.

I smile, but it feels like jamming a finger into a too-small ring. “Yeah, I’m pretty happy about it.”

“Yeah.”

My forehead knots, and I peer at Hendrix. “Where are you going? Like, after high school?”

“I told you; I don’t know,” he says.

“Me neither.” My thoughts snowball. An idea—a dangerous idea—begins to take shape inside me. It’s one of those lightning ideas, one that can only be unraveled if you follow the string to wherever it may lead. “Do you want to go somewhere else? Like, not here?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you want to leave, Hendrix?” I ask. It all just comes out. Now that I say it, it doesn’t come as a surprise—this fire has laid dormant for too long. And now it’s out of control, spilling out of me like a mess that the universe has forgotten.

“Probably someday—”

“No, I mean, do you want to leave? With me? Like, get the hell out of here.” When he just blinks at me, I continue. I’m doing that thing, where I’m just *doing* and not quite understanding why, but this desire burns, and all I’m doing is heaping coals. “We’re eighteen,

and I've got a car. Let's just leave for like a weekend and do some fun and crazy nonsense. Live it up while we still can."

Hendrix frowns. "Why?"

I pause while my heart cracks like dry ground. "Because I need something different. Something *real*. I feel so sick—disgusted by my own complacency. I wanna find out what I'm made of. I wanna know who I am. I want to remember what's important in life, because it's certainly not this," I say, gesturing to the crowd around me.

Hendrix clenches his jaw and swallows. He's quiet for a moment, so quiet that I'm afraid he's going to turn around and reject me, too. "Don't you have other friends you'd do this with?"

My throat wrings itself out like a washcloth. I can hear the echoes of what Alex and Libby would say—or *not* say. "Uh, not really. They wouldn't want to go. But I think you would."

"Why?" His face is stuck in a slight sneer.

"Cause you're weird, Hendrix. And I like that."

Based on the grimace he gives me, he doesn't seem to like it very much.



# 5 Hendrix

Sunday, May 20th

**I don't sleep much.** I never have. When my mom was still around, she said I never took naps and wanted to stay up late. I was infamous at sleepovers because I stayed up all night, just hanging out. I always wanted to set something on fire or something. I didn't get invited to any more sleepovers after maybe sixth grade. Kids and their parents just sort of *know* who the weird kids are. All of my elementary school report cards had some iteration of "doesn't play well with the other children" written on it.

Speaking of, in Kindergarten, I got in trouble all the time because instead of napping or reading quietly like the other children, I wanted to build towers and then kick them over. I forgot I used to do that.

Even then, I couldn't shut off my brain. Still can't. It runs on a forever treadmill. Instead of drifting away like a normal person, my thoughts just keep on streaming out, like how you can sit and watch a waterfall for hours because it seems to go on and on. Sitting in class all day is fucking hell. Sleeping isn't much better.

Eventually, I'll get bored of listening to myself think after about an hour or two of lying there. I spend most of my nights either smoking or running. I know it's dangerous and bad for me, especially at 3am and being a scrawny kid. No one's out but me and the creeps.

But I don't care.

I'm considering going for a run when something taps my window. It's Arden pressing her face and hands against the glass, stark against the dark forest.

Scowling, I get up and open the window. "What the fuck are you doing?" My hands fidgeting at my sides, I pick at the corner of my nails. Jeez, I need a smoke.

Her hair whips around her face in the summer wind. She shrugs. "We're leaving, remember? At least for the weekend or something."

I almost ask her how she knew where I lived, but then I remember she's taken me home from work a couple of times when

Dad got in a bad mood and decided to take away my car keys. “You can’t just—”

“Oh, calm down. Let me in, loser. It’s chilly out here,” she says, hoisting herself up. I open the window all the way and attempt to pull her in. It’s not an easy task—Arden’s not really overweight, but she has extra inches that make her plump and soft. With a grunt, she climbs in, brushing herself off. “Well, what are you waiting for? We’ve got to leave tonight,” she insists. She drops her bags with a thump, and the sound sends spikes in between each vertebrae of my back.

“Shhh,” I hiss. No need to alert my dad of this. Lord knows what he’d do. “Hold on, let me think about—”

“Nope, no thinking,” she says. Arden begins grabbing handfuls of my clothes from my closet and dresser and shoving them into a duffel bag. “Because if we think about this for too long, then we won’t do it and we’ll regret not doing it and we’ll spend the whole summer working at that damn frozen yogurt shop. Do you want to work at a damn frozen yogurt shop for the rest of your life?”

Her eyes pin my soul, just like— “No.” The words flood out. I stand as she drops the bag into my arms. She’s got a point. But she also poses another point I don’t think she realizes: this is an opportunity, a light bulb waiting to be electrified. This is my chance to finally move on from pesky animals and onto something bigger, something truly complicated and challenging: a *human*. It’s not like I haven’t had passing thoughts about killing her before, but now, this opportunity is like a guillotined head on a silver platter.

But Arden's too focused on herself, on what she wants, to notice much about me. If I lead her out somewhere remote—and places like that aren't too hard to find in Montana—I can kill her with ease. Maybe then, with the slash of a knife and a simple scream, I'll satiate the empty pit of dark desire brewing inside of me.

Silent. Sharp. Fast. No one has to know. No one *will* know. We'll both disappear tonight—her forever, and I'll reemerge in another state under another name. Or something like that.

It'd be a shame to pass this up. My gut lurches, antsy with anticipation, telling me to *do it*. It's not like I have anything else to lose.

“Alright, Arden. I'm in.”

**Arden raids the kitchen** while I pack my bag. Before zipping it closed, I light a cigarette. Dad always yells at me for smoking inside, which only makes me want to do it more.

I come out of my room, closing the door behind me. In the harsh, warm light of the kitchen, Arden looks striking. I'm not sure why, but the sight kicks me right in the gut, and the power of memory takes over. It's like a sick case of *deja vu*. Flashes of Mom putting her finger to my lips, shoving bags into my arms, telling me we're leaving for the weekend—

“Would you mind putting your stuff in the trunk? Here's my keys,” Arden says, tossing them across to me. I almost miss them because the past had clawed all the way up to my throat.

“Yeah, sure.”

Outside, I pop the trunk of her red compact car and finish my cigarette, listening to the sounds of the forest—I can’t bear to go back inside. The cool, midnight wind, the swell of cicadas and nocturnal birds-of-prey. The occasional cry of a wolf. Arden comes out, bags in tow, beaming.

I toss her keys back to her, and we get in. Gunning the engine, she turns the radio up and speeds out of my driveway. Her laughing turns to hoots and hollers. She turns on the radio, and classic rock rattles the windows.

“Hell yeah! Look at us, Hendrix! We’re outta here!” Arden rolls down the windows as we drive down the country road heading toward the highway. Smiling, she punches me in the arm. “Isn’t this thrilling?”

“Yeah, yeah it is,” I say, nodding. I’m elated, really. I’m getting a big fucking kick out of this whole thing, but not for the same reason she is. I can’t let it show, though, because I know I’m an avalanche—all or nothing.

I suppose it might not matter, because when I do let it all show, Arden will be dead.

**We aren’t even on** the road for an hour before Arden pulls into a gas station a few towns over.

“Alright,” she says, turning on the dome light, illuminating the small space with harsh orange light. “So here’s what we’re going to do. We’re going to go into that gas station, and pocket a bunch of candy and snacks and other shit. Take whatever you want, but not too much ‘cause we can’t get caught. We can even buy one thing to throw the cashier off. I’ll leave the car running so we can just get in and go.”

Not that I’m opposed to this idea—in fact, I’m looking forward to the dopamine rush—but I’m feeling difficult because it’s 1am. “You didn’t bring any money on this trip, then?”

Arden shakes her head. “No, I did. I brought eight hundred dollars, actually, but I don’t really wanna spend money on car snacks. And I want to . . . I don’t know, go out with a bang. Stick it to The Man.”

The offer is tempting yet again, but small, petty crimes like this might set someone on our trail. That’s the last thing I need. But I’m tired and already fed up with being in the car with Arden. I could use some fucking chocolate.

So I get out of the car. Arden, flustered as usual, gets out after me and follows me inside the store. With a ding, we’re in.

Already, prickling anticipation has taken root in my stomach, but I’m calm, discreetly knocking items off the shelves and slipping them into my pocket. I’m actually a pro at this. As I slip a candy bar into the seam of my pants—right next to my knife—Arden peeks her head around the corner. The cold, fluorescent light makes her strawberry blonde hair look dull and dark. But she smiles at me with a

glimmer in her eye as she holds up several bags of chips and proceeds to stuff them in her bra. I have a hard time smiling back.

“Okay, you go up and buy something, and I’ll sneak out with some bigger items,” Arden says, handing me a couple of dollars.

I stuff the bills in my pocket and meander towards the front. The counter houses a middle-aged woman with hand tattoos and thin, sandy hair. My eyes fall on a container of Bic lighters, and I pick one up and toss it in the air.

“One lighter. And this beef jerky,” I say, pulling a stick off a display.

The woman, whose name tag reads Kristy, leans on the counter onto her elbows and peers at me. “You know you’ve got to be eighteen to buy lighters.”

My nostrils flare. I’ve never had a problem with this shit before. “I am eighteen.” The fluorescent lights seem to burn the edges of my vision like blue fire.

“ID, please,” she says, the poor lighting making the bags under her eyes look like deep shadows in carved rock.

I reach for my wallet in my pocket—only to feel the hard, polished wood of my knife. *Fuck*. In an instant, I can picture my wallet on the floor of Arden’s car. That’s where it is. “I don’t have it. It’s in the car,” I hiss.

Kristy sighs, leaning back. “Well, then I can’t sell this lighter to you.”

“Bullshit,” I say.

Kristy’s jaw drops open in shock, only to reveal a row of crooked, yellow teeth. “Excuse me?”

I glance behind me to see Arden’s eyes wide like saucers, her jacket bulging with stolen food. Nudging my head to the side, Arden makes a break for it and runs out the door.

Kristy shouts, “Hey!” after us as I shoot her a conniving look and follow Arden outside. Too fucking easy.

However, as Arden celebrates our tentative victory and drives away, my eyes catch two huge tv screens hanging from the ceiling on the inside of the building. We were definitely caught on security cameras. As Kristy gives us the finger and the lights of the gas station fade into the background, my knuckles turn to steel and darkness wavers at the corners of my vision.

*Stupid. You’re fucking stupid.* I look over at Arden as she steadies her breathing and keeps glancing behind us, probably checking for police and admiring our stolen loot. But all I can focus on is those old, tube televisions and how the fingernails buried in the palms of my hands are sending rockets of pain up my arms. We’ve been at this for what, an hour, and we’ve already set someone off on our trail.

Here’s the thing: I let Arden distract me, and now some rural gas station has our dumb little stunt all on film.

**As the night wears** on and we’re positive no one’s following us, Arden asks me to drive since she’s tired. Interesting that she’s already



trusting me with her car. I'm acutely aware of how the knife pokes into my abdomen and upper thigh as I sit in the driver's side. The thrill still buzzes against my skull, still sends my heart pounding, and I relish in it. It makes my blood vessels swell with sweet adrenaline.

The headlights cut into the swallowing darkness. We've long left our hometown, and the only light is the occasional street lamp and the moon, drifting in and out from behind dark clouds and pines.

After snacking on some of our stolen goods, Arden snores lightly next to me. The radio hums something sweet, so I turn it off. The road winds on the way to Billings. In the absence, the silence burns. My mind starts to fray at the edges, and I adjust the wheel so as to not careen off a cliff. The problem with driving is that it's just as easy to get lost in your own head as it is to not think at all. I prefer the latter, but rarely is that the case.

*Just do it. Just run right off of the edge.*

I really could. I could just veer right off the road, down into the trees, and it would look like an accident. Except I might die, which isn't the goal. I don't think I want to die, anyway. I'm not sure it would make much of a difference.

I glance over at Arden, who's curled up and wrapped in a blanket. Metal guardrails and reflective dots are the only thing guiding her car along the road. I've checked out. The hum of the car and the buzz in my brain morph into one sound.

But what if Arden didn't die in the crash?

*Branches on metal. The cries of a thousand shattered pieces of glass.*

Then I'd have to get out and kill her.

*Screaming of tires. The crush of metal against bark.*

But then they'd see. I wouldn't be able to bury her, and they'd examine her body and find the stab wound. We'd be missing persons, and our petty thievery was just caught on camera mere hours before. There would be a massive crime scene just waiting to be found on the side of the road. My gut kicks inside of me again, urging me to do it. Dangerous curiosity crawls up my back.

*I can't get caught.*

With a jerk of the wheel, my mind is back. I'm not sure what stops me. Probably the fact that stringing this along, letting the pot simmer would be a hell of a lot more fun than just killing her now. Like cat and mouse, a game to keep the darkness at bay. To make it all the more satisfying.

I flinch when Arden murmurs in her sleep. For a moment I believe I've been thinking too loud and she's heard me.

*Jeez, Hendrix, that sounds crazy. Not that she could, but if she heard what you'd been thinking about, she'd be scared shitless.*

I suppose she very well should be.

# 6 Arden

Monday, May 21st

I think sometimes, we paint over people—and ourselves—with ideals. We coat people and life in one brilliant sheen of what we want. The problem with that is when you smother someone with so many layers of what you *want* them to be, you cover up their true colors—which can sometimes be beautiful or ugly. Sometimes both.

One of those people I painted over with my ideals was Elliot. This is going to sound like shit, but I think one of the reasons I dated him was because he was the only black kid in our high school. In small-town Montana, that definitely turned heads. More importantly, it turned my parents' heads.

Elliot Wambua was one of the nicest boys I had ever met, and I didn't deserve him. That's the truth. His parents moved here from Kenya before he or his siblings were born. They live on a farm about a mile or two out of town. A cute, idyllic place, really. Sometimes, when I'm feeling really down, I'll miss going over to his house.

Of course, none of that mattered to my parents. They couldn't get over the fact that he was black, and neither could anyone else. They didn't have to tell me they hated him. I just knew, because whenever I got home from hanging out with him, my dad wouldn't speak to me for a while. Couldn't even look at me. Mom was a bit more vocal about it, digging in snide remarks whenever she could. They were pleasant enough when he was around, but that was somehow worse. For a while, that was what got me what I wanted: attention. That gritty sense of "sticking it to the man" that I think we all crave sometimes. Deep down, I knew at the time that it was an awful thing to do, but sometimes we don't realize until it's too late.

Elliot and I dated from the second half of my junior year to last winter. Almost one year, but we were friends since seventh grade theater. He was on the hockey team, so I spent most of the school year dragging my friends to games with me. It was fun, but the real fun came after the games. I'd go back to his house and eat authentic

East African food with his family, and then he'd shower while I'd set up a movie in their basement home theater, which was really just a projector and a bed sheet pinned to the wall.

If you'd just met Elliot, he wouldn't strike you as the film buff kind of guy. He was more the farm boy type who thrived on the brotherhood aspect of hockey. But movies were his real passion—that's why he did theater. Once you got him started on his favorite director or the 'art of visual storytelling' or the best cinematography or some obscure indie film festival, you couldn't get him to stop. That's one of the things I loved about him.

Our Saturday nights were formulaic, but they were ours. Hockey game, family, movie, make-out session. It sounds dumb, but he's still the best guy I've ever kissed. Some guys just go in for it, you know, and tear at your lips with their mouth and want to run all over you with their hands. But not Elliot. He'd start out slow, and let me lead sometimes. But really, what shattered me to pieces was the way he held me. He kissed me and spoke to me and looked at me like I was the only thing that mattered. Like he *loved* me.

I think he did, at one point.

I didn't just know how his body felt next to mine. I knew how his soul felt. All the rough edges, all the smooth spots. I thought I knew every inch of it.

Sometimes people just have that instant connection with each other, like the way a match explodes into the darkness and quickly

flickers out. We were sixteen and we were young and we made each other feel like we mattered. Like life was whole, somehow. Like it was bright and full of possibilities. We had something I never had with anyone else. It was a connection that burned bright and hot. It was real. At least for a while.

Together, we felt like a dream. That's because we were.

We all have countless moments in our lives—ones that have real, authentic meaning. And for a moment, I saw a moment where the universe seemed to split off into a million red threads. It was a glimpse of what we could have been, if the timing had been right, or if Elliot and I had been in different places of our lives than we were senior year. It was too late for us.

Unfortunately, I had put all my eggs in the Elliot basket. A basket that was doomed to fall.

**“Hey . . . hey. It's like** I am, and I don't want to drive anymore. We're in Billings, if you want to—” Hendrix shakes me awake.

“What?” I push myself up off of the seat, rubbing my eyes. Hendrix's face is up close to mine—I can smell his breath, warm and reeking of tobacco.

“We're in Billings,” he whispers. “We should stop for the night.”

“Okay.” My brain is still lost somewhere under my fleece blanket, but I've still got enough clarity to say, “Watch out for cops.” We did shoplift, after all.

We drive around for a while, and find a cheap motel on the fringes of town, where the streetlamps cast a glow into the sky, but the rest of the world seems forever dark, surrounded in a black curtain. Sandstone mountains attempt to reflect any bits of light from the city they can, but they just end up looking flat and gray, like the Plains out east when unharvested grain turns dull in the early winter. In this part of town, everything is low and old, full of crackerbox houses and burned-out neon.

A college kid dozes off at the front desk. Only one overhead light is on, and it buzzes in the dead lobby. I drop my duffel bag onto the counter. The boy jerks awake.

“One room, please,” Hendrix says, fishing for his wallet.

The kid—Darren, per his name tag—drags his eyes up from the back of his skull. “You do realize it’s like, I am, right? I don’t even think I can check anyone in at this hour.”

*Shit.* Something dangerous dances on my lips. “We’ll give you a generous tip. We’ll . . . we’ll be out by eight.”

He frowns, and bushy eyebrows appear from underneath a mop of hair. “Are you trying to bribe me?”

“Yes.” Hendrix responds without hesitation.

Darren shifts in his chair, and clicks on his computer. “Fine. Whatever. Just, don’t fuck or anything like that ‘cause Mrs. Chavez is a nice lady and doesn’t deserve to change those sheets.”

Hendrix steps back, his eyes wary.

I stammer. “Oh, my God. We won’t— we’re not—”

Darren scoffs and hands me a key. “Just . . . get out of here so I can try and get some sleep.”

“Ditto,” I muse, rolling my eyes. Hendrix takes his bag, and he follows me to our room.

The carpet feels like a sad rug, and the room smells faintly of disinfectant, but it ought to work.

**Everything in the room** has got some sort of garish pattern on it, and the plaster in the corners chips off and leaves powdery dust on the swirly, rusty red carpet. We drift like zombies as we get ready for bed. Gravity feels a thousand times stronger as I flop into the scratchy, patterned comforter, smelling of must and bleach. It doesn’t hit me until I’m staring up at the popcorn ceiling that there’s only one bed.

Something pricks in my gut when I think of Max, sound asleep in his room, still painted robin’s egg blue. I rub my eyes, as if that could wipe away the suffocating exhaustion. *I should’ve left a note.* Granted, he’s still a brat, but he doesn’t deserve to think I abandoned him.

“I’m turning off the light,” Hendrix says.

“Okay.” The room flicks into darkness. Moonlight still streams in through the blinds to my right. Turning away from Hendrix, I bunch the covers up around my chin and try to sleep. I only fade in and out. Just when I think I’m about to sink, a thought reaches down and pulls me back to the stiff bed and the starchy sheets. Thoughts



*like holy shit you ran away with your coworker. Thoughts like eight hundred dollars probably isn't enough money. Thoughts like where the hell are we even going? How long will we be away? What if something goes terribly wrong?*

In this quiet darkness, it doesn't seem so exciting anymore.

A sweaty and agonizing hour of this passes before I hear Hendrix get up. I freeze, assuming he's going to the bathroom, but I don't hear anything. Just the soft patter of feet as he walks over and looks out the window. He must think I'm asleep.

The air conditioner shudders before spewing cool air into the room. Thank God, I'm already about ten degrees too hot from my brain doing cardio in my head. But Hendrix is still standing there. Just staring out the window. There's nothing to look at—it's just a paved road and a small gas station. The neon gives the light an inauthentic tint.

"Thanks for paying for the room," I say.

"Yeah," he says. His voice seems to bounce around the room.

"Can't sleep either?" I say. We haven't moved; we're too afraid it might shatter something.

"I don't sleep much."

My insides feel slimy. It's probably because of the shoplifting earlier. Immediately after, I remember the rush, the invincible feeling I had. But now, in this quiet darkness, I feel small again. Insignificant. "Do you feel bad about stealing?" I ask Hendrix.

“No. Do *you*?”

I’m taken aback—and, quite frankly, hurt—at his quick, unflinching words. “Yes, I do.”

A small pause. We listen as the air conditioner whirrs and grinds. The poor thing is really struggling. Hendrix turns towards me, leaning his back on the wall, and the pale light reveals something. I see that his hands are trembling, and that he’s fiddling with them, back and forth, open and closed, in and out, over and over.

“Hendrix?” I ask.

“You don’t have to talk to me,” he says, crossing his arms, but his fingers pulse and dig into his forearms over and over.

“Yeah I do,” I say, sitting up. “We’re in this together. We ran away together. At least, for a while, you know. For the weekend or something.” He looks over at me. In a sea of black, the world is nothing but paper cutouts illuminated by moonlight. “Okay, I’ll shut up,” I say.

He doesn’t speak, and it sends my thoughts splaying out in a thousand different directions. He’s so frustrating. I think back to when he screwed up that milkshake. How he yelled *fuck* and stormed out like it was nothing. His hands. His skittishness, but also utter stoicism. A brick wall in an earthquake. Teetering, ready to crash to earth. It’s like looking down over a pier on a lake, but instead I’m looking into the ocean, blue and warped. There’s a tangled mess of something beneath, but nothing recognizable. A vague, milky kind of unease. That’s what Hendrix feels like.

“There’s nothing for me there, anymore. Back home,” I say. The realization, the confession, feels like a clever separating the two unequal halves of my heart. “Maybe besides my brother.”

“Yeah. Same,” he says.

“Was I right about you, Hendrix?”

“What?”

“Was I right, that you wanted to leave too? That you feel this terrible, awful stringing feeling, like your stomach is made of a ball of yarn and someone’s just pulling and pulling and pulling it? Except you’re not sure where they’re pulling it, so the spool just grows smaller and smaller, until one day you know it’s just going to pop out of you. Do you feel that way, too?”

Hendrix looks out the window. He sighs, long and hard. “No.”

Sharp and metallic, his voice strikes painfully hollow. He’s lying; I can feel it right in the core of me. People lie to me all the time. I’ve gotten good at sensing it. “You’re lying,” I accuse.

Hendrix just picks at his nails, muscles flickering in his neck.

I breathe out, the sad sound hanging in the air. I ought to take him at face value—I really should. I sit up and start to walk over towards him, to see if he’s genuine. If he really *means* anything he’s saying.

But he turns on his heel and walks away from me, towards his side of the bed.

“We should sleep, Arden. It’s almost two.”

My chest splinters, like a wooden ship against rocks. The rejection is crushing. I wander back into bed, swallowed by the soft darkness. I’m sleeping in the same bed as Hendrix, but he feels so far away. The divide between us is lined with sinkholes and jagged rocks and monsters on both sides. What skeletons are hiding in his closet? Do they look anything like mine?

It’s not like he felt any closer when we worked together at that Godforsaken frozen yogurt shop. But us being in this together—not to mention being partners in petty theft—it feels like we should be.

Granted, the world *should* be a lot of things.

But we both know it’s not.

In this quiet darkness, I realize that we are homeless. Hendrix and I are without a home in the figurative sense because I don’t think either of us have ever truly known what ‘home’ means. We are in limbo, some strange in-between of forever and nowhere all at once.

Again, in this musty motel room with my strange acquaintance of a coworker, life flashes around in my head like a picture show. The fabric unfolds, the threads unfetter, spilling onto the thin carpet beneath our feet.

Yet another glimpse of what could be.

# 7 Hendrix

Monday, May 21st

**For my first job**, I worked for a slaughterhouse and butcher. They operated just outside our town, not far from where my Grandpa Chuck had his bait and tackle shop. I applied there just after I turned sixteen because I needed money, because money equals freedom. The butcher aspect was just a plus. I had been hunting with my dad for as long as I could hoist a rifle over my shoulder, so I knew a little something about animals. Those are some of my best memories. Not because of the violence and death. No, that

fascination came later. It was because of my dad. I remember he'd wake me up real early, when the world was still dim and the sun had just barely begun to color the edges of the sky. Much later, it would haunt me how there could be so much good and so much bad in my father. How those two things can coexist in one body baffles me.

He'd lean over my bed, shaking me awake, his breath hot against my face. "Hey, kiddo. Wanna come out with me this morning?" Sometimes we'd go out before school, but most of the time it was on weekends. He'd throw my heavy camo at me, and we'd shove down some slimy eggs and orange juice. He made it this big deal, like it was a secret and we couldn't wake Mom. I always thought it was so we could surprise her.

The dawn always felt a certain way, especially up north and in the mountains where we lived. Fresh, but so incredibly cold. Even in the summer, our breath made little puffs in the air and our fingertips turned pink.

We'd hike out basically in our backyard, until we came upon our regular spots, usually just a stone's throw from a water source. Of course we had to be quiet, nestling down on our stomachs in the brush, the world only visible through our scopes. The cold seeped right through that cheap-ass camouflage. Sometimes, I can still feel it—the cold, the prickling anticipation whenever we heard something move, the thrill of getting the right shot.

Even though we couldn't talk much during those long morning hours, it was him *being there* that mattered. My father showing me how to do these things was enough. We were there, a boy and his dad

in the wilderness, hunting like we were bringing it home to a log cabin nestled in the treeline, with a burning hearth and a wife and an adoring family.

My dad didn't teach me a lot of things, but he did teach me how to hunt. He taught me how to be patient. He taught me how to skin and butcher an animal, and prepare it so it was safe and ready to eat.

He also taught me how to be angry.

We stopped hunting when I was fourteen. I tried to keep him at it for a while, but since he didn't have anyone to bring it home to, the passion died out. He had also started drinking more, so it was harder and harder for me to convince him to get up at 4am and crouch on the freezing ground for hours with no guarantee of profit.

But I wanted that back. So I tried doing it myself—hunting, that is. It wasn't the same.

I shot a mountain goat one Monday during my freshman year. I remember being drenched in a cold sweat under my hunting gear, my trusty knife rubbing my stomach raw. I remember thinking how much easier hauling this deadweight back to the shed would be if Dad was there. I remember hanging it from the ceiling and watching the blood drain into a bucket for hours from the two slits I'd made in its neck. I remember watching its rectangular pupils growing cloudy as the sun crawled in through the holes in the wood grain. I remember sitting on a hard stool, staring at the drenched red and white fur with sore eyes. I remember the *nothing* setting in, the darkness prowling in

the corners. Like a vacuum sucking in and destroying everything around it, falling forever and ever towards me.

It only spiraled from there.

**Darren is gone by** the time we roll out of bed. I know we were supposed to be out by eight, but I didn't feel like waking Arden up. Of course she's all frazzled and stressed about the fact that we could be wanted and charged for petty theft, but I don't care.

Outside, we both stand by her car, squinting in the sunlight.

"I want to drive," I say.

"Why?" Arden asks, shoving our bags into the trunk.

"Because I like driving." Or, alternatively, *because I like being in control.*

Arden shrugs, and tosses her keys to me. I catch them without a hitch. "Fair enough."

We decide to drive for a few hours before grabbing food. Arden takes out the fold-out map of Montana and spreads it on her knees.

"Alright, so we just left Billings. Definitely not far enough for me. And it's only Monday. We can spare a few extra days. Any place you want to go?" she asks, trailing I-90 with her finger.

I shrug. "I've never been up north."

Arden leans over and slaps my arm with gusto. She does that a lot. It's really quite annoying. "Well, then, north it is! If I'm reading this right, there's an exit by Columbus that goes north."



We stop in Columbus for breakfast. Well, more like brunch. Arden uses her phone to find a hole-in-the-wall pub. Even though the town's only got about 1,500 people, there's got to be a good pub. According to her, the reviews say the wings are great. I hear someone washing dishes in the back, and a fan hums a monotone pitch. Other than that, the restaurant is almost deserted. The place is covered in dark, lacquered wood and smells like B-rate beer and grease. Half of it is the actual bar, and the other half is a couple of wooden tables and booths. A guy with ashy blond hair who looks barely legal opens the register and tells us to find a seat anywhere.

Arden clicks her tongue as she looks over the menu. "Oh, man, I wish I could drink. Some of these cocktails look really good." I don't say anything and just sneer, but she catches this. "You don't drink?"

"Not really," I say. Believe me, I've tried, but it just makes me feel out of control. Besides, I've seen what it does to my dad.

"Oh, fuck," Arden whispers, and I look up.

"What now?" I say.

"Don't look, but a cop just walked in."

*Shit.* Even the thought of this makes me nervous. The ice inside me is beginning to crack, releasing the unsettling darkness. I start to bite my fingernail, watching as the cop meanders over to the middle of the bar and pops a squat.

"Fuck shit fuck," Arden whispers to me over the sticky menus. "What are we going to do?"

I shrug. “Nothing. For all we know, he doesn’t know anything about us.” Pain pinches at the side of my nail, and I taste blood.

“Yeah, but what if he does? What if they got our plates back at the gas station?” Arden says. When she doesn’t get the reaction she wanted, she grabs my wrist to get my attention. Her eyes speak of an insane desperation. It’s frankly off-putting.

I put my palms down on the table, looking at Arden right in her four eyes. “Then we run.”

She frowns, shrinking behind her menu and giving side eyes to the cop. What’s more ironic is that this cop is having a beer in a bar in the middle of the day. I wonder if he’s patrolling and can write this off on his tax return.

Honestly, I’m still a bit on edge though. “Order me a burger with a side of onion rings,” I say, getting up out of the booth and walking out.

“Hey! Where are you going?” Arden says, but I ignore her and push open the smudged glass door. Leaning against one of the window supports, I pull out a cigarette and light it, letting the nicotine open my chest. Sometimes even it shocks me how much I don’t care.

**After a tense brunch**, Arden slides in a CD, and we listen to that for a while. She doesn’t say much because I think she’s still shaken up and mad at me about what happened back in Columbus. Every once in a while she makes me stop so she can take photos with

her digital camera. Also probably to throw any suspecting cops off our trail that we're running from . . . something.

When we stop about another hour into driving, she wanders further into a field, adjusting the lens to focus on the snow-laden mountains in the distance. The bells and whistles in my brain go off. This is yet another opportunity—a quiet, serene place. Far enough away from civilization . . . I reach for my knife, imagining the golden wheat striped red. Using the shovel I spotted in her trunk to bury her body.

But something stops me. What would it hurt, to get to know my prey before the kill? Hell, it might even make it more fun. “You into photography?” I ask.

“Yeah,” she says, bending down to take a picture of a flower bud. “There’s something wonderful about photography: how you can capture the beauty or even the ugliness of life in a single frame. How it can just take you somewhere else.”

I decide to be difficult for shits and giggles. “Not really. It’s just a picture. It can’t possibly capture everything.” I wonder if this is how this entire trip is going to go. I ought to think one step ahead, and be prepared for the kill. Consider all angles of how a situation could go. Snatch up all opportunities like a game of jacks on the floor near my mother’s wiggling toes—

Arden suddenly turns around, interrupting my spiraling thoughts. I flinch, my hand and the knife snapping behind my back.

“Yeah, and that’s the beauty of it. Of what the photo doesn’t say. Of what it means to that person.” She puts the camera back up to her face and snaps a picture of my ugly sneer. “Don’t be a dick.”

That shuts me right up.

**We get gas on** our way out of Harlowton. Arden buys fifty dollars worth of snacks like she’s preparing for the apocalypse. I know she says she’s still got six hundred dollars left, but I’m not convinced. She told me to bring all the cash I had, and I did because I have no plans on returning home.

“Alright, where to now?” Arden asks, now that we’re back on the road. Things are starting to get more mountainous—less forested river valleys and golden plains, and more hearty gray rock jutting to the skies. Shouldn’t I be asking her where we’re going? She dragged me along on this stupid trip.

“Arden,” I ask. “Where are we going?”

*Now* she clams up. She sighs, picking at the hem of her shirt. “I mean, does it matter? We’re just out here exploring our home state, you know, seeing our little corner of the world—”

“Cut the shit,” I say. God, this might have been a mistake. Sometimes Arden is so annoying I can’t stand it. I twist my hand around the leather steering wheel, taking some pieces of the decaying material with me. I should have killed her when I had the chance. “Where are we going, and *why?*”

“Because I wanted to! It doesn’t matter why. I mean, who doesn’t want to just get away for a while? That’s why vacations exist, you know.”

“Where are we going?” I accentuate each word, because I’m so irrationally angry that it has no other place to go but out.

Arden huffs in indignation. “Alright, you’ve got me. I guess I *don’t* know where we’re going. Does that matter either?” She’s defensive now, her voice pushing against the roof of the car.

“Nothing matters,” I say, countering her emotionality with dryness. I’ve found that’s something that always works.

Arden huffs at me like she’s going to launch into a rant, but just sighs and slinks away from me, leaning her head onto the window.

The thing she doesn’t get is, it absolutely does matter why you leave. People who are content and happy don’t just *leave*. I’d be the first person to know.

**Arden puts in her** earbuds and pretends to be more angry at me than I am at her. We’ve passed Ringling and Sedan in relative silence. We’re driving south towards Bozeman when Arden’s phone rings. I’m surprised it took someone this long to contact her.

“Oh shit,” she says, pulling out an earbud and sitting up. “It’s my dad.”

“You gonna answer it?” I tease.

Her nostrils flare. “Hello? Dad? Yeah, I’m just on a weekend trip with some friends. No, you don’t know them.” Pause. I try to decipher the muffled speech to no avail. “I don’t know when I’ll be back. Is Mom worried about me?” Her dad speaks for a long while, and Arden visibly deflates. “Okay, bye.”

I flick the end of my cigarette out the window. “See, that wasn’t so bad.”

Arden seethes next to me, her head turned away. “Shut up.”

I consider for a moment, if I should keep egging her on. Since I can’t kill her while driving, why not? “Did you cover for us?”

“Why do you care?” she snaps. Yikes. But her voice, it cracks, revealing the truth.

“Oh, I don’t.”

Arden rolls up the windows, shutting us in a bullet of our own misery. “If they really wanted to find me, they could just get the police to track my phone.” She scoffs, slumping back down in her seat. “I’m actually not surprised. They only care about me now that I’ve gone and left.”

“And that’s bad, *why?*”

“Because it’s *fake*. They’re only doing this so they can convince themselves that they care. We’re eighteen, we can leave whenever the hell we want to. My parents don’t give jack-shit about anything else in my life unless it affects them. But if we turn around and drive home, then everything will just go back to the way it was. And I’ll tell you what, it’s fake because they only care about me running away because

they can't control *this*." She gestures to the car around us. I assume she means our situation. "My mother likes to exercise control over all things. But she cannot control me." She sits back down, facing the open road, scoffing. "You just don't get it. You don't fucking get anything."

Her flaring anger only throws gasoline on my own fire. My hand goes to my hip, where the knife digs into my flesh. "Oh, right, yeah I forgot. I couldn't possibly understand."

"What?" she spits.

There's something hot and bitter trying to boil up inside me, but it gets caught in years of dusty cobwebs. I clench the wheel until the tendons in my hands snap. "That doesn't make any sense. You don't see my dad calling me, do you? At least your parents pretend to give a shit."

"Yeah, exactly. They're *pretending*. At least your dad is honest enough to not bother you."

The words cut deep, stinging with poison. I grind my teeth.  
*Breathe.*

Arden sighs, and it's like ash falling from the sky. "All my parents ever do is pretend. When they're not pretending, it's because I'm an inconvenience to them."

I hesitate. Something aching pulses in my chest, like a long-forgotten heartbeat. Fuming, I give in to the conversation. "My dad . . . is a lazy piece of shit. That's probably why he hasn't called."

“Yeah,” she says. There’s a pause that lasts for an eternity. “I’m just so sick of it all, Hendrix.”

I can barely speak. Glue has dried in my throat. “Me too.” Not a lie.

“My dad’s a spineless loser, actually. Lets my mom run all over him and only cares about his work. And I *hate* him for it.” Her words settle like snow, heavy and deafening. “What’s your mom like?”

I keep silent. The darkness has its claws locked on my shoulders, pressing down, down, down, until the weak spots inside of me begin to crack. It’s almost physically painful.

Arden frowns. “C’mon, Hendrix. Why don’t you ever want to talk about anything? First in the motel room, now—”

“Cause I just don’t.”

“Why, though? You pushed me on the whole ‘where are we going’ thing, so I’m going to push you on this.”

That’s when I snap like the painful, instantaneous breaking of a rubber band. I slam on the brakes and tear the wheel to the right, veering off the road. The underside of the car eats up the tall, golden grass and rumbles over the uneven ground. Arden shrieks, grabbing the handle above the car door. “Jesus, be careful! This is my car!” We shudder to a stop.

“Because I just *don’t!*” I shout, slamming my hands on the steering wheel. Arden reels back, her face torn with fear. “I don’t want to talk about my mom.”



Tears shine in Arden's eyes, but I don't feel bad about it. What I do feel bad about is the awfulness, the abhorrent *everything* that rises to a scream inside me. Her absolute insistence on picking me to shreds only makes me want to kill her even more. With a small voice, she asks, "Why not?"

"I said I don't want to *fucking* talk about my mom." My voice is not my own. It is steel and darkness.

*Heartbeat. Blood. Breathe. Heartbeat.*

"Are you okay?" she asks.

*Heartbeat. Blood. Breathe. Heartbeat.*

"Do you want me to drive?" she asks.

"Yes."

We get out and trade places.

A great monster inside of me has begun to stir in his slumber, something greater than this present darkness. Arden's monsters are dragging my own, kicking and screaming, into the light.

# 8 Arden

Monday, May 21st

It annoys the hell out of me that Hendrix won't tell me anything about his mom. He's hiding something—bad or just plain painful, I don't know. But I do know one thing: if it was a good thing that he's hiding, he wouldn't feel compelled to hide it.

However, there's nothing to hide about my mother. She's all glossy red lips and pinstripe skirts and motivational quotes that don't actually mean anything. I mean, I love my mom. I just wouldn't say that I like her. She's a pusher. She pushes people, especially my dad and me, even when we don't need or want pushing. She pushed me

into taking a stats class first semester senior year, which I couldn't care less about. She pushes Dad around just . . . in general. Dad wants to order Mexican food? Nope, can't happen because Mom's not feeling it. But you know what she is feeling? Italian. Italian food would be so much better, honey. You know I don't like the way they do the salsa there. C'mon.

I think she does that sort of stuff because she expects people to be a certain way. I think I can be that way sometimes, too. The only difference is that my mother does it in such a disgusting, condescending way that can make anyone feel about an inch tall. She can also get what she wants with and without crying.

Every kid goes through a phase in middle school where they're trying to figure out what their interests are, so they start a lot of stuff, and subsequently quit a lot of stuff. I, of course, went through a phase like that and took ice skating lessons, guitar, etc. I wanted to quit most of them because I knew they weren't for me.

But no, Michelle Arden Campbell—daughter of Emma Charlotte Campbell née Holloway, real estate agent and county board member—would not be a quitter. Even if she was miserable, Michelle wouldn't be a quitter.

But Arden, well, she was a quitter.

Eventually though, Mom sort of gave up on shoving and squeezing me into her premade molds around my freshman year of high school. When she stopped caring, ironically enough, I started

doing lots of stuff. And then subsequently quit them—clubs, activities, jobs, even relationships. I’ve actually made it a personal rule to quit jobs every six months or so just out of fucking *spite*. She’s stopped noticing at this point.

No one’s really allowed to be themselves in my house, and I think that’s the great tragedy of it.

**I love cities.** Well, they’re not the greatest thing ever. They can be dirty and dangerous, but at least they’re up front with their darkness—unlike the idyllic countryside, which hides its ignorance and violent isolation behind a friendly facade.

Maybe everything just sucks no matter how you look at it.

We drive around Bozeman for a while, before deciding on a local bar & grill around 5pm. There’s a moment where both Hendrix and I sit in the parking lot, staring out the windshield, thinking about what the hell we’re actually doing. Time feels frozen.

“Are we going dutch? Or do you want me to pay this time?” Hendrix asks, his voice flat. Like he’s the narrator of a documentary from the eighties on the sex lives of aquatic mammals, one that your deadbeat biology teacher would play when he didn’t feel like lecturing.

I frown. “We’re not on a date.” I think I finally get why his voice grates on strange nerves. He sounds so painfully disinterested almost all of the time. The only time Hendrix has had any sort of emotion

threaded through his voice was earlier in the car, when my dad called. Even then, the emotion in his voice was rage.

“Oh, right,” he says. His voice doesn’t even indicate a sense of knowing, like he’s reminded of something. It has the rhythm of a human’s voice and even the inflection. But not the soul. It feels . . . saccharine. Manufactured. I hate it. Makes me want to punch him in the face.

In the bar & grill, Hendrix and I look everywhere but each other while we sip our drinks. There’s live music in the back, assumingly to draw in a larger Monday night crowd. The ceiling is low and painted black, with sticky bar stools and lacquered tables.

Hendrix plays with the lemon from his drink, occasionally tasting it.

“You like raw lemons or something?” I ask. It comes out harsher than intended, but hell, I’m actually kind of mad at him. He grimaces and drops the lemon in his water. “What you did in the car was kind of rude. I get if you don’t want to talk about your mom or whatever—” My words trail off when he meets my eyes—so directly it startles me. He says nothing.

Grumbling, I sit back and take in the scope of the restaurant. I ought to let it go. I’d be the first to know that painful experiences can cause us to react poorly. But damn. He couldn’t even apologize.

In the background on one of the TVs, an advertisement shows glittering lakes and polished mountains. ‘Visit Beaverhead-Deerlodge

National Forest,' it says. Jeez, that's a mouthful. 'Where you and nature become one.'

This makes me snort, and Hendrix looks back at me. "What?"

"Just this advertisement."

"Oh."

Again, the voice. Its hollowness stings, somehow. I breathe out, holding his gaze. Daring him to stare into my eyes and find something. I can almost imagine him in his 'Billings' Best Yogurt' uniform, staring blankly at the fluorescent tubes, or at the bottom of an ice cream dish. When I close my eyes, I can see his outburst from a few weeks ago. *What's wrong with him?*

Reaching into my bag, I take out my wallet and count my cash. You'd better believe I took out a chunk of my savings before leaving, but I only have about \$650 left of the \$800 I started with. Hendrix hasn't contributed much other than paying for his food. It annoys me a bit, but I get it. It's my car. It was my stupid idea to come on this trip. But if we keep draining cash like we have today, we'll be out before we leave Montana.

*Leave Montana.* It really hits me then, like the squeezing of my heart. Like buzzing anxiety punching right through my diaphragm. This is really what we've done, what we're going to do. Maybe not forever, but at least for a while.

But still none of this feels quite *right*. Nothing I think about doing in the future feels *right*. What have we actually done? Driven a few towns over and gotten angry at each other, that's what. I picked

Hendrix to come with me because I thought he was cool. Thought he was cool-weird. Thought he would understand me.

But he obviously doesn't.

I look back at Hendrix. Is it too late to go back? Hendrix and I work Wednesday evening again, and today's the Monday after graduation. Could we be back by then? No real harm done.

The waiter comes with our burgers, and I pick at my steak fries. I abruptly stand, pushing back my chair with a scrape. Hendrix flinches a bit, and looks up at me.

"What?" he asks.

I open my mouth to speak, but the live music in the background stops.

"It's the top of the hour, so you know what that means . . . karaoke time!" In the back of the dim restaurant, the tables closest to the stage clap and cheer.

Something sparks deep in my chest, like the frantic hands of a cold survivor trying to light bits of kindling. I look at Hendrix and his flat demeanor. This is what I've been waiting for. Maybe this will pull him out of his funk. *Maybe this will pull me out of mine.*

I reach forward and grab his wrist, but he pulls away, confused. "We're going up there to do karaoke." I say, grabbing his hand again.

"What?" he says, knotting his eyebrows in disdain.

"You. Me. Karaoke! It'll be fun, loser."

He sneers, looking at me like I'm crazy. "No, thanks."

I huff. "C'mon, Hendrix! It'll be fun! See, this is the 'crazy shit' we were talking about!"

His grimace softens, like he's studying me.

"Well, I'm going if you're not."

He just frowns at me with that same vaguely annoyed expression that makes me want to twist his face off with my bare hands. I turn on my heel and start walking to the stage.

My insides bubble and boil. No, this is good. This is going to be fun, even if it's just me. This adrenaline, this edge-of-the-world feeling, is what I've wanted. It's what I *need*.

I stand at the foot of the stage and raise my hand.

The lead band member, who looks no older than twenty-one and *smoking hot*, winks at me. "Looks like we've got our first contestant!" He offers a hand, and I take it, stepping up onto the stage. The Monday evening crowd looks like it mostly consists of older couples and families. Suddenly dizzy, I squint under two spotlights. "What's your name, sweetheart?"

For a moment, I can't speak, and not because the lead singer is staring deep into my head, but because I feel so incredibly small. "Arden. Arden Campbell."

The lead singer flashes me another dazzling smile. "Cool name. What would you like to sing, Arden Campbell? You name it, we can play it."



Shit. I should have thought of something *before* I came strolling on up here. I scan the room, searching for something that might spark an idea. On a black chalkboard, someone's drawn a massive pie, spilling out maroon cherries. "Try our signature pies" it reads . . .

"American Pie! American Pie by Don McLean. Yeah, that's what I want to sing."

The lead singer laughs low and sweet. "We can do that, sweetheart. Alright, boys." The lead singer looks something up on the iPad resting on his music stand, and with a few snaps of his fingers, the keyboardist starts up the chords.

Somehow, something comes out of my mouth. "*A long, long time ago . . .*"

Against the harsh stage lights, I can barely find the shadow of Hendrix. He sits at our table, watching me blankly, with just a slight sheen of frustration. It sets off a spark in me. It drives the last nail into the coffin. I can't stand him anymore. I can't stand his distance, his confusion. I can't stand my own complacency, the emptiness that gnaws within me, that stains the shredded fringes of who I am.

I don't care anymore. I *can't* care, not anymore. If we're really going to do this—leave, that is—I'm going to do it with all that I am.

I throw my head back and belt the hook into the first chorus, and I float away with Miss American Pie herself. The music builds and the crowd begins to sing along with me. Hendrix stands, his

hands tucked in his pockets, and my heart swells. A flicker of *something* passes over his face like the fractals of a rainbow.

In the interlude, I shout into the microphone and point, “Hendrix Williams, get your ass up here and sing with me!”

People look back, and Hendrix freezes. Shadows form under his brow, but he stomps forward anyway. The small crowd cheers as he steps onto the stage, raising their beer glasses.

There’s a sinister flavor of ‘pissed off’ in Hendrix’s eyes, but I’m just so glad he’s up here that I couldn’t care less. One of the band members gives up a microphone for him, and we jump into the second verse.

As we sing about the book of love, Hendrix starts off timid and stiff, his neck muscles bulging from his skin. His eyes are saucers, and he nearly grimaces as he fights whether he’s uncomfortable or wants to be sarcastic about it. As the song progresses, though, he starts to loosen up. Music has a wonderful way of doing that to the worst of us.

My voice drops off at the second part of the verse because Hendrix has closed his eyes, and his voice is booming clear and strong through the speakers. His whole body has become the music. It comes from an unknown place, streaked with the colors of pain when he sings about being out of luck when the music died.

It all swells up inside of me until it feels like I’m experiencing it with him. When the chorus bursts from the speakers, I turn Hendrix towards me and grab his hand. We shout the chorus to each other, and the whole crowd and the band joins in while we jump and twirl

on the stage. It's bright like sparklers in a midsummer's night, and the whole world spins. I can almost see the heavy layers flying off of Hendrix as we toss them into the darkness of the crowd. My heart feels the way that soda does on the back of your tongue. And, in those moments, he's not the same person, and neither am I.

The song goes on and on forever, and the crowd is our support, our ship on a musical sea. Breathless, Hendrix and I shout the lyrics to an egregiously long song in a bar & grill in Bozeman, Montana. It's the strangely beautiful moments like these that I can't put into words, where it feels like I've swept up all of the darkness and the room is bright and the world is bright and I can't see all of the things I don't want to. I wish I could photograph this, collect it all up in a little bottle and wear it around my neck.

When the band fades out, the crowd cheers and laughs. The lead singer pats me on the back. "Thanks for a great show." I throw him a wink.

We wander back to our table and sit down. Hendrix's mop of dark brown hair is all awry.

"That was fun, wasn't it?" I smirk.

"Yeah, I guess," he says, pursing his lips and scratching the back of his head, only messing up his hair more. It would be a perfect polaroid.

Laughing, I reach forward to fix his brown waves, but in that single moment, all of his defenses come snapping back up. He reels back, cringing.

“I was just going to fix your hair—”

“It’s fine,” he snaps, the last shreds of whoever Hendrix was up there disappearing from his voice. He flattens his hair down with his hands, but it doesn’t do much to fix the problem.

Something in my chest begins to splinter, like wood creaking under immense weight. “Do you want to stay in Bozeman for the night?”

“Sure.”

The karaoke continues on, but no one makes as big of a splash as Hendrix and I did. As we finish up dinner and search for a motel, I try to hold on to that feeling. *Why* exactly, was that what I needed? And if it really worked, why do I still feel empty afterwards, like a high wearing off: slowly realigning all my parts and falling back to earth?

It’s an empty kind of happy, I realize. Like bubbles. Or sea foam, crushed by the waves and pulled back to sea, only to be created again and again. But this doesn’t feel strange. It feels normal. Because it’s what I’ve been doing my entire life.

Or does it just remind me of all the times I used to feel this way?

# 9 Hendrix

Monday, May 21st

It feels like I'm underwater. Not just in the memories, but all the time. I'm just barely floating, with small ankle-weights that pull me down slowly. There's a small light coming from somewhere inside me, illuminating the dark, murky water around me into blueish-green, but if I reach out my hands, everything's cold. And so incredibly dark.

But there are some memories that are clearer, like looking through a glass of water. One Christmas, when the whole family gathered at my grandparents' house, I remember looking through a glass of water at my mother. That was something we did sometimes. She'd place a glass of water in front of me, and if I didn't want to drink it, I'd lay my head down on the counter and make funny faces at her through the distorted water.

This time around, she just scoffed at me and snatched the glass of water away from my face. "Well, if you're not going to drink it, then go play in the living room or something."

So I did. Not long after, I was stuck listening to Mom grumble about how her and her sister had to do all the cooking and all Grandma did was complain and order them around. After my mom screamed at her to get out of her own kitchen, an unpleasant guest came and joined me.

With a groan, my grandma sat on the couch and lit a cigarette. She turned on the old tube tv, switched through a few channels with her dome-shaped nails. I remember they were this bright, garish red color, probably for Christmas, but they were all chipped, revealing textured, vertical ridges and a sickly yellow appearance underneath. She finally landed on the film version of *Fiddler on the Roof* and sat back with a sigh.

"Christ, your mom's something." She spoke only when the blender or the microwave was on. She sat back, lighting a cigarette. "You know how your parents met, right?"

I nodded. As the story goes, Dad was traveling for a construction job, and mom was a waitress at the diner he went to for breakfast. They had a drink that night, and, like they say, the rest is history. That's where history is—in Rapid City, South Dakota.

I'll bet that's where she is now.

Grandma leaned in, blowing smoke out of the corners of her mouth, revealing chipped, stained teeth. “Yeah, well you know why they got married?”

I shook my head.

“It's ‘cause your ma got knocked up. Yeah, she got pregnant with you. That's the only reason your parents are together, that's the only reason she married that piece of shit—”

I winced at the language. But Mom had caught on, and she stormed in and started yelling at Grandma, and then they got into it, and someone threw a lit cigarette into someone else's hair.

When I first heard that, I wondered if it could be true. But then later, I realized that it was. Grandma never lied. She couldn't keep her mouth shut and was always looking for a drop of bad in an ocean of good, but she didn't lie. Because she knew the truth was often more hurtful than a lie could ever be. She used the truth against you.

I didn't realize my own mother was like that until much later. Funny how those things work, isn't it? That we don't realize something's happened right before our eyes until the right dots connect, and then you're kicking yourself for not seeing it sooner.

Sure, my dad was a reckless drunk, but my mom was a manipulative bitch. It takes two to tango.

**We find a place** to crash on the rough side of town because the motel fares are all Arden is willing to shell out. I make a comment about how her family's well off enough that we could afford a room somewhere safer, but then she tells me to fuck off.

The room smells like tobacco smoke and mildew. An air conditioner in the window clamors and coughs as we drag our bags in and flop them on the bed.

Later, after we've showered and changed, we sit on the bed in the dark, back to back, neither of us wanting to sleep, or even move really. The light that streams in from the outside is bright blue and buzzes faintly of neon. Our room faces away from the city, so our window is dark, cut-outs of the mountains framing the distance.

I turn towards Arden, kicking my feet up onto the bed. My hands find my knife, always hidden on the inside of my pants. She wouldn't even see it coming. I could just lean forward and—

“Wanna watch something?” Arden asks, grabbing the remote off the bedside table.

“Sure.” Like the dust settling after an explosion, the tension in my back subsides.

Arden turns on the tube tv and lays back on the springy bed. She surfs for a while, then stops on a channel playing a cartoon. Not an



educational cartoon or an adult cartoon, but one that kids would be weirdly obsessed with in middle school.

“Oh, man,” Arden sighs. “I haven’t seen this show in years.”

“I’ve never seen it.” It seems to be about teenage superheroes with double lives. To be honest, television bored me as a child. Still does.

“What? I can’t believe that!” Arden exclaims, whipping around. I jolt, for fear she’ll see the silver glint in my lap. “My brother and I *loved* this show when we were younger. Well, actually, I loved it when I was in fifth grade, and, as little siblings do, he watched it with me until he grew to like it. It was something we got to bond over.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you have any siblings, Hendrix?” she asks.

I stop. Something tries to push its way past the gray haze, and I struggle to respond to Arden. “No. Not that I know of.”

Arden turns around. Nothing short of sheer panic jolts through me as I shove the knife behind me. The sensation almost takes me aback. “What do you mean?”

The words get stuck in my throat like peanut butter. “Uh . . . I mean, I don’t know if my parents—if they had any other kids before . . . or after me. You know.”

Sighing, Arden takes off her tortoiseshell glasses and rubs her eyes. “Do you think you would have liked having siblings?”

“I don’t know.”

Arden looks down, smiling to her lap. Her glasses slide down to the end of her nose. “It’s a double-edged sword sometimes. But I remember Max and I went as the two main characters from that show for Halloween like, three years in a row.” She laughs, but it tapers off, as if it left a bitter taste in her mouth. “What did you go as for Halloween?” she asks, in a futile attempt to not make everything about her.

“Uh, I don’t really remember doing Halloween much.” The cartoon continues in the background, the noise elbowing it’s way into the empty spaces between us.

Arden vocalizes. “Mm, that sucks.” Frowning, she moves again to turn off the tv. “This sucks too, I can’t watch it anymore.”

“I thought you liked it,” I say.

“I do,” she says but her voice begins to soften at the edges when she says, “but I just . . . can’t watch it anymore.”

The tv shuts off and hisses for a moment as the static fades away. It’s nothing but silence, for the longest moment. She faces the window again, her warm strawberry blonde hair pale in the blue light. Her shoulders tremble a bit as she sniffs.

“Are you . . . crying?” I ask, a hint of judgment seeping into my voice.

“Yes, I’m crying. I’m crying at a goddamn children’s cartoon, Hendrix.”

Confused, I pull back, her words lighting me aflame like gas-soaked charcoal. It's almost like the emotion radiates off of her, like heat flooding the room after opening the oven. Taking out the knife again, I move toward her back slowly—

“I'm sorry. It's just that I'm so fucking sad, you know?” She leans back, crossing her arms under her head as she stares up at the ceiling.

My nerves almost shatter as I scramble back, tucking the knife under my leg. She *cannot* find out, because then I'll really have to kill her right then and there, and I'd rather not try to get away with it in a hotel room.

“It just made me think of the ‘good old days’ or whatever. You know, when we were young and innocent and all that mattered was . . . stuff that didn't actually matter. But now that we're older, it matters a lot.” Arden goes silent. Her sobs start up again, and for a moment I'm struck with disgust and confusion. It's just a children's cartoon. Still, something stops me. I just sit there and let the sounds of her sobs shrink the room.

Gaining her composure, Arden blows her nose and breathes. “Do you know my brother, Max?”

I hesitate. “No.”

Arden laughs spitefully, veering back into weeping for a moment. “Ah, I don't know why you would, but he's pretty terrible sometimes.”

I take out the knife again, feeling the smooth wood handle between my fingers. She's not making any sense. Arden sighs for a long moment, and the air stiffens like it's live with electricity.

"But . . . he's my brother, you know." She wipes her cheeks with her palms. "I love him, but that doesn't mean I like him. He just feels so far away these days, you know? Like there's this terrible, massive divide that I'm screaming across, but he doesn't respond back. I can't tell whether it's because he doesn't hear me or . . . because he doesn't want to."

She sits back up again, and I flick out the knife. Back and forth, cat and mouse, is all this really is. Spiders crawl around my spine.

"And it's equally awful because we had some good times when we were young. He liked rocks and birds and shit, and we'd, uh, we'd go camping and . . ." Her words trail off, and she sniffs. "You know?"

"Yeah," I say, mostly because Arden being so candid isn't as off-putting as it once was, because her words are beginning to take shape; they're no longer hysterical ramblings to me. I'm listening—really listening.

"What do your parents do?" she asks.

"My dad works construction."

"What about your mom?"

The knot in my chest tightens, constricting my throat. I don't respond. God, how many times does it take for her to understand that my mother is not a topic of conversation. The silence stretches on for so long, Arden senses that I'm not going to answer her.

“Well, my dad’s the regional manager of a mining branch or something. Mom sells real estate, in case you care.” Arden sighs and wraps her hoodie around her, like the melancholy itself is cold. “I dunno, they just . . . they want me to be someone I’m not. Someone who cares about status and money and image. It’s all *you need to focus on what really matters in life, Michelle, and you need to get into this fancy-ass college to be successful, Michelle, and you can’t be friends with those kind of people, Michelle*—and God, I can’t stand it!” Arden whips around to face me, her eyes blazen. “I can never do anything right! They do the same thing to Max, and they don’t see what it’s doing to him. It’s like he’s not all there anymore. Like he’s checked out of life and has just decided to drift by. And . . . and I don’t want that for him. Even though he’s a pain in the ass because he’s thirteen, and I know he doesn’t actually like me and . . . I don’t know. I feel a bit powerless. And really unneeded in that family.”

The weight of her confession falls like grief. I’ve never heard anybody speak the way Arden does. It’s like she’s ripped herself open for me, but not like she’s vomiting her feelings onto me, but that’s she’s just putting it all out there, not caring whether I’ll take it or leave it. The knife is hidden in my lap, and it’s not until she makes eye contact with me that I realize I’ve been swept away by her words. Finally, they make sense. Her authenticity begins to dust off old crevices and pick at spiderwebs inside me. The music of her lamentation resonates in my own hollowness. Except I don’t know what to say.

“Do you have anyone like that, Hendrix? Someone you wish wasn’t so . . . distant?”

I swallow, letting Arden’s gaze worm into my head. “Yeah.” Pause. Arden won’t break eye contact and it’s making me uncomfortable. I almost don’t say it, but Arden is one of the few people who can tell when I’m lying and will definitely call me out on it. She did it all the damn time at work. Reminds me a little too much of *Josh*.

So I swallow and say it: “My mom.”

Arden blinks, moves closer to me. Her eyes speak of great interest, like she’s trying to sift right into me. “Will you tell me more about her?”

“No.”

She pleads, “Why?”

Three letters and a question mark and I’m off kilter. I peer back at her, but she’s unrelenting. No one has ever really asked me why. Just hearing the word spoken aloud triggers so many moments, so many times when people would have asked ‘why’ if I was a nice guy, if I was a funny guy, if I was a *normal* guy.

Very few have ever cared enough to ask why. If they did—well, they’re long gone by now.

My fingernails dig into my palms, and steel anger locks around my throat. “Because I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Why?”

The hairs on the back of my neck rise. My mind skips like a record, stuck on the endless memories. “I said I don’t want to talk about my *fucking* mother!” I shout, standing up, towering over Arden. My entire body boils with anger, threatening to lash out at any second. “Christ, are you fucking stupid? I’ve said it like five times!”

“*Why*, though?” she presses, just as unrelenting as I am. I’m no match for her intensity, and it actually frightens me. “Why don’t you want to talk about anything? Why did you snap at me in the car and after karaoke? Why are you like this? I . . . I don’t understand.” Her voice comes out like a whimper. “I want to understand.”

Immediately, my brain snaps back at her statement No, she doesn’t want to understand. How could she? I am stuck—a small bumblebee caught in the sickly-sweet honey of my own deception.

*Why are you like this?*

*Why are you like this, Hendrix? Why are you like your father? You’re such a sweet boy, you don’t have to be like him.*

Her voice fades in and out like snippets. Red-hot anger boils past the landscape of gray.

*Why are you like this?*

*Why are you like this, Hendrix? Can’t you just be normal? Have friends? Go out and do teenage boy stuff or some shit like that? Get out of my goddamn house for once!*

Like scissors snipping a string, I flick out of my own body. The ocean waves crush the seashells until they are nothing but sand. The anger ravishes my veins, rips through my muscles, tears through every part of me until all I see is red.

But I don't stay. If I stayed, I would have killed her right then and there—slit her throat, stabbed her stomach until it was nothing but bloody applesauce, dragged her body onto a railroad track and watched it get sliced to bits by metal on metal.

Slamming my fists on my forehead, I shut my eyes, fighting through a world of my own darkness. Arden's still speaking, but I can't hear her. She chases after me as I float out the door, following my stomping footsteps.

Down the hall, down the steps.

Into the night where the rain is cold and chops like a kitchen knife, cutting through the food we so carefully prepared as a family—

Into an alley where a young man smokes a cigarette.

“Hey, if you want one, you're going to have to—”

“I don't want any of your shitty cigarettes.”

“Okay . . . well, what do you—”

And then my fist connects with his face.

My mind slams back into my body. Suddenly, I'm aware of myself—so startlingly aware that I wish I was gone again, just a shape in the misty darkness, not a cryptid plagued with self-hatred. But I am here. I can't be anywhere but here, so I lean into the pain, the ugly.



Bucking under me, the faceless being claws at my hand, clenched around his neck. I hear him cry out—*why am I doing this?*—but I don't really hear him. All I hear is the ringing—the sweet, sweet ringing of pain flowing back and forth from me to him. If I get the pain out, it can't

Punch.

A cry, a plea.

*I feel anger.*

Crush.

A scream, a sob.

*I feel grief.*

Blow.

A whimper, a word.

*I feel too much.*

I am darkness. I am everything and nothing all at once.

At some point, the man escapes my grasp and flees, but I can't stop. Over and over and over, I hit until my back aches. I hit until pain has made its way up my arm and buries deep in my gut. I'm no longer just underwater; now I'm drowning. I realize that I'm alone again in the slick, inky darkness.

And I feel I feel I feel *I feel I feel I FEEL*

until I don't.

# 10 Arden

Tuesday, May 22nd

I **started getting into** photography my freshman year. They offered a class on it, and since I did art in middle school, I thought I'd like it. I thought it might be one of those things I'd start and quit out of spite. However, I fell in love with photography. I was absolutely in love with the idea of using photographs to not only capture life, but to manipulate reality to portray ideas.

To be frank, photography is a coping mechanism for me. I know that. I loved the idea of a photograph—that you can literally capture a

piece of reality and put it in your wallet. For just a second, you can stop time and relive that moment over and over through the photograph. Splicing together photos, retouching, and good lighting can fix any broken memory. Or even create new ones.

My friend Sarah, the one who introduced me to both photography, was always down to be my model for photoshoots. We went out into the woods that fall—it was absolutely freezing that day, but the leaves were bright yellow and red and the woods touched with that warm brown that only comes with autumn. We brought a suitcase full of outfits and props, and climbed into an ice-cold stream. After taking photos, she made me buy her some half-price frozen yogurt from work.

I finished the project in November of my sophomore year. Three eleven-by-fourteen photographs, matted and framed, conveying a colorful and surreal narrative of identity, disillusionment, reflections, and dreams. When art show season came around, I submitted that project and some other photos just for the hell of it.

And the triptych got into four art shows. One regional one where the showcase and reception was in Helena. I hadn't really told any of my parents about this. I mean, they knew I was taking photography classes, but they didn't know I had found so much success. So much fulfillment. Photography was a way for me to go somewhere else for a while. To capture what I loved—what I felt—and preserve it forever.

Mom flew to the capital city frequently for work so I thought it would be no big deal. Actually, part of me thought they were going to be ecstatic. This was something big, something important. Michelle was actually doing something with her life.

Dad had gotten takeout on his way home from work. Home cooked meals were a rarity around here, unless I had the time or energy to do it.

“So, you know that photography class I’m taking?” I said into my beef and noodles.

“Yeah?” Dad said.

“Well, I did this project with Sarah, and since art show season is coming up this spring, I decided to submit it to some shows. And it got in!”

My mom frowned. “Who’s Sarah again?”

“You know, Sarah Luccetti. Her dad runs that farm equipment supply store? She’s been over like, a hundred times.”

“Well, I think that’s great, Michelle,” Dad said, swearing when a piece of sweet and sour chicken landed on his laptop. He even works at the table.

“Let’s see the piece,” Mom said. “I’m glad you’re actually showing us something you’ve stuck with.”

I decided I was going to ignore that comment. But I was prepared. I pulled out the photographs—all nice and matted—and held them up for everyone to see.

Max squinted at it. “It looks weird.”

“Yeah, well, you look weird.”

Mom sighed, but grabbed the photos anyway. She looked at it for a moment. I studied every flit of her eyes, every twitch of her lips, yearning for signs of approval.

“It got into this one state-wide show in Helena. I was thinking we could go. Together.”

“I don’t know, Michelle. Helena’s a long ways away,” she said, looking up. She hadn’t even touched the food Dad bought for her.

“You go there for business trips all the time. We can fit it in for one weekend!”

Mom narrowed her eyes. Dad and Max looked back and forth between us. Dinner table fighting between us wasn’t uncommon. “This is nice, Michelle, but you can go with one of your friends. If it’s on a Saturday, Max usually has his hockey games then, so the three of us couldn’t go.”

“Wow, I can’t believe you’re prioritizing a single game over this amazing thing that’s just happened to me.”

Mom cocked her head at me, and I knew exactly what was coming next. She was going to tell me that I was being dramatic. That I was the crazy one for wanting some fucking approval for once. “It’s not like that, Michelle.”

“Yes, it is,” I said, unrelenting. Like lightning crumbling into thunder, my pain turned into anger. “Do you even get it? The artwork?”

Mom sneered at me, her red lipstick leaving flecks on her white teeth. “I’m not sure what there is to *get* about it. It’s just photographs ...”

As she trailed off, I just stood there fuming, unable to properly articulate what was boiling beneath. Of course she didn’t get it. No one did. Even if Dad did get it, he wouldn’t have had the balls to say anything.

It sounds stupid, I know. It sounds like it shouldn’t matter. What does one rejection from your parents mean in the grand scheme of things? It means a whole lot when you’re wide-eyed and fifteen and you finally found something you’re not totally shit at. Because when your parents don’t believe in you—when the people who brought you into the world, who provide for you—don’t believe in you, why should anyone?

It wasn’t really that one rejection that started it. It had only confirmed something I already knew: that I wasn’t good enough. When you’ve had to live with that pressure your whole life, that’s what you start to believe the world thinks about you. All the little things eventually become big things. And when the big things build up, one little snowflake can trigger an avalanche—like the one that had just buried me alive.

At around 1am, I wake up in a haze of these stormy emotions when Hendrix wanders back in to our room, smelling of pavement

and metal. I don't ask about it, and pretend I'm asleep. He breaks my heart a little bit.

I turn over and dream of all of the things I have been starved of. I dream of a world of broken mirrors, a world where I am good enough. A world where no reflection can consume me. A world where photographs can truly capture reality. But maybe that's a pipe dream.

**In the shower, no** one can hear you crying. The hot water turns my skin a blotchy, sunburnt pink. I let the water burn away the morning sleep from my body. My bones whine from sleeping in a strange bed. Even though I scrub off the night, it's still not enough. It never is. I have yet to reach the bottom of all this shit.

I wonder what Max is doing. I wonder if he misses me. I wonder if they all miss me. *I want them to miss me.*

Closing my eyes, I stand under the shower and turn the water up to the hottest setting. I don't feel like I'm a part of anything. My anchor is gone, lost among the rocks and tangles of seaweed below.

I left my ringer on after Dad called me, to see if anyone has tried to contact me, but there's been nothing outside of the ordinary.

Despite it all, leaving still feels good. It feels like a big middle finger to that whole town, everyone in high school. Everything that used to define me. It's a devilish kind of feeling. One that feels righteous and angry, stuck in the mud of indignation.

Sarah always talked about leaving. I didn't think she'd ever do it. Then again, I didn't think I'd ever do it until I did, but we liked to talk about it. It made us feel like we were going to do something big someday. It was just nice to know we weren't the only people who felt that way, the intense and terrifying desire to just up and leave.

It's funny though, because she was the one who left me.

I shut my eyes, as if that could block out the pain that rushes in anew, like I'm still raw and bleeding right into the shower drain. *Friends just drift away, Arden. It's just a part of life*, I tell myself, as if that might make it true. I still can't help but think that it was something I did—something I didn't do. If I'm being honest, it probably was something I did, because after that night the summer before senior year we swam in her lake after drinking too many apple ciders with caramel vodka, she slowly pulled away. It's like that feeling of pulling on wool yarn—taut and vaguely uncomfortable.

That was the night she told me she was gay. And I was drunk, lonely, and pathetic enough to be jealous of her. I was menacingly green with envy—envy that Sarah got to be herself, was accepted by her family, and yet I wasn't.

I don't think I reacted well—correction, I *know* I didn't react well because every time I see her, this ugly, revolting feeling of *self-hatred* consumes me. I tried to apologize, I really did. Explain to her that I was drunk, I made a mistake, and was so unbelievably selfish, but it didn't matter. Maybe I deserved it.

A small surge from the showerhead jerks me back to the present, where I sit on the floor of the shower, naked and cold.



*Bad person. Not enough.*

I try to wipe my face of tears and snot, and I stand up in the shower because my butt has started to fall asleep. The showerhead is unnaturally shiny and clean compared to the rest of the motel, and I stare at my reflection in the warped metal.

After that night at the lake, I remember doing a lot of things. I remember pleading that I was just taken aback, drunk, and an all-around shitty person, deformed and colored envious green. But still, she told me to leave. I realize that maybe she just needed to be alone. Not that it matters now.

I barely remember leaving. Pulling my clothes over my soaking swimsuit, coated in a fine layer of ashy shame. I remember driving for hours, out on the dark, Montana roads—the kind of dark like bottom-of-the-ocean dark, the kind of dark that makes it hard to breathe—just so I didn't have to go home and sleep on what I had just done. In my complacency, vines of resentment had grown around me. A seed planted long ago had sprouted green, poisonous leaves and tore my body apart.

*why am i like this why am i like this why am i like this*

The spaces between the fabric of my heart burn, and I am acutely aware of the emptiness that seems to stretch on forever. It didn't hit me until much later, why she had really left.

When Sarah told me that, it was a moment of vulnerability, and it could have been a moment of breakthrough in our friendship. But

it wasn't, because—drunk or not—I fucked it up. I let myself get in the way. I pushed her away without even trying to. I guess she decided I wasn't worth the effort anymore. I kind of don't blame her. In a string of broken relationships, I am the poison ivy that started an infectious itch.

Hendrix knocks on the door, startling me out of my misery. “Hey, are you about done in there?” he asks.

Tears prick in my eyes. I clear my throat so he can't tell that I'm crying. “Yeah, just finishing up.”

I've tried so hard to be authentic, to be real. But sometimes, in the case of Sarah, I fail. After, I promised myself that I wouldn't be like that anymore. I would try my hardest to be authentic, to be kind. To be present and vulnerable, even when it's hard.

But oh God, I hope with all my broken pieces that I don't hurt Hendrix the way I hurt Sarah.

*i don't want to be like this anymore*

**Hendrix says a total** of about three words to me as we pack up the car and exit the motel. He seems flighty, like the devil's looking over his shoulder.

As the green and gray landscape flashes by in a dizzying display, Hendrix blasts some rock radio station. The purple bruises on his scabbed knuckles pulsate with the pounding of his heart.

I look away from him, and down at my lap. A worm digs its way through my chest. Even if I'm not enough right now, I can be better.

“Hendrix,” I say, over the music. The sound of his name floating between us sends his shoulders adjusting themselves upright. “I’m sorry.”

A pause as he turns off the radio. “What?”

I look down at my lap in shame. “I said: ‘I’m sorry’. For pushing you about your mom last night.” I glance back up at him, but he hasn’t relaxed yet. “I shouldn’t have kept asking you about it. If you didn’t want to talk about it, I should have respected that. I’ll try not to do it again.”

He swallows, and I see his throat move up and down under his skin like a soup can. “Thank you.”

Something still itches behind my ear. “Do you forgive me, though?”

Hendrix licks his lips. His dark brown hair still sticks up in the back in little wavy spikes. Did his mom even teach him how to properly comb his hair?

“I forgive you,” he says.

I breathe out in relief, and it sounds like an avalanche crashing over my red Oldsmobile. Reaching over towards the radio, I look back up at Hendrix, seeing his hazel eyes trained on the road, like there’s strings connecting them to the pavement. They flick over at me, sparkling with something I can’t place.

I let it go though, because it’s a step in the right direction.

I calculate the time by how many songs we get through. Around 3pm, I see a billboard advertising that mouthful of a name I saw at the diner yesterday: *Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest*.

“Dude,” I say, breaking the almost hour-long speaking silence we had going. “Take exit 93A.”

“What?” Hendrix says. Every time, he looks at me like I’m crazy. He’s one to talk.

“Just do it. Trust me, man,” I say, pressing my face against the cold glass. “I won’t make you drive tomorrow if you just take this exit.”

Hendrix runs his tongue over his teeth. “But I like driving.”

“Jeez, just take the exit!”

“Alright, alright,” he concedes. We swerve into the exit lane.

“Yes!” I say. I reach over and punch Hendrix’s arm playfully. “This is gonna be fun, right? We might even go camping!” The same surge of dopamine that ran through me on stage while singing ‘American Pie’ rushes through me again, and I interpret this as confirmation. I feel good. This is good. I’m excited.

Hendrix scoffs, but I’ll take that as a ‘yes’.

**Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest** ends up being a glorified podunk town with some hiking trails and a general store. Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest also sounds a lot cooler than what the town is actually called: Wise River.

Hendrix pulls up to the gas station, looking unfashionably vintage. The small cluster of buildings are nestled into a sweeping river valley with golden fields, where mountains support the town and the landscape opens up into dense, evergreen forest.

I enter the general store attached to the gas station. The place smells faintly of tobacco and mildew. And of the hot Cheetos the cashier wolfs down.

Strolling the aisles, I find that half of the store is junk food and the other is camping supplies. What a diverse selection. Wandering over to the camping section, I find myself staring at a two person tent kit, complete with a large sleeping bag and cooking materials.

The whole thing is about \$200, sucking another chunk out of our rapidly dwindling funds. I'd be lying if I wasn't a bit worried. Hendrix paid for the motel room last night which helped, but after this purchase, I'm going to have \$300 left. Which might sound like a good amount, but not with gas, food, and housing for . . . God knows how long.

I stare at the water purifying set in my hands, debating with myself. I know what I'm doing. Max and I used to go camping all the time with my aunt, and sometimes even with my dad. Besides, camping is always cheaper; we can reuse this tent over and over. I've just got to convince Hendrix to contribute some cash.

The tent plus a few other things like a pan for cooking, freeze-dried meals, and bug spray, and we should be set. Right? Sighing, I think for a moment, scanning the aisle.

Then I grab the stuff in my arms and head to the checkout counter because why the hell not.

**Back outside, Hendrix squints** at me in the harsh, afternoon light. “What did you buy?”

“Hendrix,” I start. Sighing, I drop the bags containing the camping supplies and junk food, respectively onto the trunk of the car. “We’re going camping.”

The confusion wrestles on his face for a moment. Then he accepts it, shrugging. “Alright.”

Back in the car, we drive for a short while outside of the town and into the forest. Remembering what I got him, I reach into my bag and toss him a small white box. “I almost forgot. I got you these.”

He somehow catches the pack of cigarettes as we pull over and park the car in the gravel. “Oh. Thanks.”

“Why do you smoke those anyway? You’re probably going to get cancer,” I say, hopping out of the car and popping the trunk.

Hendrix rolls his eyes. “I don’t care. Why do you smoke weed?”

“Cause it feels good. Gives my brain a break and makes reality a little less agonizing.”

“Yeah, well that’s sort of what tobacco does for me,” he says, taking a long drag and leaning against the side of my car.

“Well, at least I’m not addicted to anything,” I say, closing the trunk with my foot, arms full of the camping supplies.

Sneering, Hendrix flicks the end of his cigarette at me. “Don’t be a bitch.”

I smile, popping my hip out. “I can’t help it.”

He peers at me for a moment longer, as if deciding whether or not fighting with me is worth it. Sighing, he finally trails along behind me, carrying the newly-purchased camping gear. Unfortunately, I think he’s genuinely mad about it.

# 11 Hendrix

Tuesday, May 22nd

“Even fish can drown, Hendrix,” is what my Grandpa Chuck always used to say to me. I think he was making commentary about how everyone can fail, but that’s not how I took it. To me, it meant that the things we love most—what we depend on, day in and day out—can be our Achilles’ heel, our downfall.

Sometimes I feel . . . stuck. Things that people have said or done to me just seem to stick around, always dragging me back into the past. My grandfather is one of the skeletons in my closet—one of the tendrils of darkness that traps me in the in-between.



My mom's father was one of those old people who never seemed his age. Sure, he was stuck in the past in the way that most grandparents are: he refused to get a cell phone, only listened to The Ink Spots and Glenn Miller, and had a sign on his lawn that said "Proud Union Home" but also a bumper sticker that said "Support the Troops." But that also meant he was always up for an adventure. He kept the young outlook despite the crushing horror of life. "It's never the wrong time for a little fun," was another one of his catchphrases.

I remember he always called out my grandma for her snide comments. Sometimes I wonder how the hell they ended up together. Then again, I only knew my grandmother in her sixties. Maybe she was like Grandpa when she was younger. At every family get together, my grandpa Chuck would venture into the basement of whoever's house we were at to see what the kids were up to, and just hang out with us for a while. Not that there were very many of us. Dad was an only child. I was an only child. Mom's sister only had two kids of her own. I never knew them very well.

Grandpa Chuck's dream was to be a marine biologist, but he worked as a repairman for a while and later opened up a bait and tackle shop just south of our town instead. When he found out I was into hunting and fishing, he got such a kick out of it. You should have seen him. Any time we'd go to a lake to fish, he'd spew fish facts, most of which went over my head. God, I wish I paid more attention.

When I was eight, my mom's side of the family went on vacation, and Grandpa Chuck insisted that I came along. Not Dad, though. Never Dad. Almost always, someone made an excuse, some half-assed reason why he couldn't go or wasn't properly invited.

We went to the Washington state coast in July. I remember standing on the beach that first night, sinking into the sand. The oily black sea tugged against the pull of the white moon. I remember hearing stories of how they were two eternal lovers, caught in a dance.

Grandpa crouched down and whispered, "Hey, Rix! Come look at this!" Grandpa Chuck always called me Rix—sometimes Ritz, like the cracker—because he thought it sounded cooler than the stuffy old-man name Hendrix.

I pulled my feet out of the sticky sand and dropped to my knees to see what Grandpa was peering at.

"Okay, kiddo," he said. "Take your fingers and very gently, brush the top of the sand."

So I did. Nothing happened. The dark sand just scattered about.

Grandpa Chuck laughed, and it sounded like the crashing of the waves, the majestic booming of thunder. "No, Rix. Real soft, like this." He proceeded to graze his fingers over the wet sand, barely disturbing a grain.

The ground lit up with tiny blue sparkles as his hand waved back and forth over the wet sand. I gasped and tried it myself. Like magic, blue light trailed after our fingers on the warm, summer night.

"These little creatures are called *noctiluca scintillans*," he said.

I laughed at the funny, strange name. “What?”

Grandpa Chuck stood up, the glowing sand slipping through his fingers. “The common name is Sea Sparkle.”

“Whoa, that’s so cool!” I exclaimed.

“Sure is, kiddo,” he said.

And then plopped his handful of bioluminescent sand on my head.

“Hey!” I shouted, shaking out my hair like a dog. I grabbed a handful and lobbed it at my grandpa.

That night my aging, sixty-five year old grandpa and I threw handfuls of glowing sand at each other, hooting and hollering, until we dove into the sea of stars to wash off. Laughter—full and warm and dancing across the ocean like it could go on forever. I wondered if the moon could hear us.

Sometimes, I think of moments like these to make my childhood more bearable to remember. But when I do remember them, I only see the things I’ve lost. They are like pockmarks on my soul. It’s in these moments that I realize: I didn’t just lose my mom. I lost my grandpa too.

Even fish can drown. When plants clog the surface, when pollutants are dumped into the water, and when phytoplankton bloom, the very water the fish breathe is stripped of oxygen. Except unlike a fish out of water, the fish doesn’t know until it’s too late,

drowning in the very waters it used to call home. What was once safe is now toxic.

The warm sunset tries to worm its way through the heavy pine forest. Here, the wilderness seems small—just a backdrop of endless trees—but I know that just outside of this clearing are mountains that swell into the sky. Arden and I set up our tent in a group of about six other campers—one family and two guys in their early twenties, fresh out of grad school or something. It's like we're in a cave, the smoke and light barely weaving through the trees up to the stars above.

I sit on a log, cooking a hot dog over the fire. Arden's been sipping a hard cider and chatting up one of the guys for the past twenty minutes. It actually kind of pisses me off, but because I thought we were in this together, you know? That's what she said anyway. Why is she going and trying to make friends with someone she'll probably never see again?

Besides, it'll be harder to get her alone. I think of the blood, thick like syrup, seeping into the black earth. Just thinking about it, the relief washes over me. I let it distract and entertain me.

Eventually, I snap out of it when Arden comes back over and elbows me in the side. “Dude, you've burnt your weiner!” she exclaims, laughing at her own joke. She gets me another one, and sits right back down next to me.

“Want a beer?” she asks, holding out a can of Rainier.

“No,” I say. Alcohol loosens me up too much, makes me feel out of control. That has never been my goal.

“So,” the taller guy sits down across from me and Arden. I think his name is Jake. The mother and little boy from the family are also out, making s’mores. “What are you two kids doing all the way out here?”

I glance over at Arden, but she’s already jumping at the opportunity. “We’re eighteen, actually. This is my boyfriend, Hendrix, and we’re taking a road trip.”

Jake smiles, scratching the stubble on his chin. “Right. Eighteen. I remember those days.”

Arden scoffs. “Oh, shush. You guys are like, what, twenty-one?”

“I’m twenty-three, and Ben over there is twenty-four, actually,” Jake points behind him to the aforementioned Ben. He waves at us. Arden waves back; I don’t. “So, where are you guys headed?”

I twirl the roasting stick between my sweaty hands. I’m interested in how Arden’s going to answer this.

“I’ve got a hippie aunt who lives up in Washington state. We’re headed there,” she says. The lies roll off her tongue with only seconds of buffer. It’s impressive, actually. Not any better than me, though.

The mother speaks up, trying to hold back her worming child from sticking his hands in the glowing fire. “Your parents do know you’re out here, right?”

Arden shrugs. “Oh yeah, totally.”

Shit, this is making me nervous. I clench my jaw so hard it hurts. My hands tremble with nicotine withdrawal. I want to smoke, but I know I shouldn’t right now. I look over at Arden. “Remind me, why are we camping again? Isn’t your *aunt* waiting anxiously for us?”

She gives me wide eyes, ones that dig holes in my tangled brain. She pulls her mouth into a smile, shrugging. “We have time, Hendrix. It’ll be fun.”

“Right.” Time? We have all the time in the world.

Arden sips her way through another can of beer as she chats it up with not only Jake and Ben, but also the parents, who couldn’t be more than thirty five and look like they’re workout enthusiasts. The wife probably doesn’t eat gluten.

Someone turns up the stars, until the sky is a hazy purple-black against paper cutouts of hollow trees. Eventually, the family retreats to their tent, and so do the two guys. One by one, their lights flick out. Arden has finally settled back in next to me. The whole world has shrunk down to just us and the glow of the fire.

“Why’d you call me your boyfriend?” I ask.

Arden scratches the back of her neck. “It was easier, I guess. Unfortunately, guys treat you better if they know you’re taken.”

“I thought you liked one of those guys,” I say.

Arden scoffs. “Oh, Hendrix. If we weren’t camping in the middle of nowhere, Montana, Jake wouldn’t have given me a second glance. I hope you don’t take me for a fool.”

I swallow. “I don’t.” This is kind of a lie. Pause while the fire crackles and owls whine. “What about your aunt?”

Arden smirks a little at that question. “Yeah, I’ve got an aunt. She does live in Washington, but I haven’t spoken to her in like, seven years.”

“Good.”

“What?” Arden says.

I shake my head. “Nothing.” *Christ, way to be inconspicuous, Hendrix.*

Arden stands abruptly, crushing her beer can between her hands and tossing it into the communal garbage can. I look up, trying to guess what time it is. Past eleven most likely.

“I dunno, I just wanna leave, Hendrix,” Arden says, from across the fire. A pang of conflict digs trenches through her face.

“We did leave,” I say.

Arden rolls her eyes. “No shit we left.”

Sometimes the wrong thing comes out of my mouth before I can stop it, and then I have to wrench the situation back in my favor. “Sorry,” I say, and I make it sound genuine this time.

“Whatever, I just . . .” Arden starts. She sits back down next to me. God, I hate it when Arden gets all emotional on me. I never know how to handle it.

“I just had to get out of that fucking town, you know? I just feel like I’m missing out on life, sometimes. There’s so much more to see, more to do,” Arden says. Her voice gets real low and intimate.

“Yeah, I get you,” I say.

“You do?” she starts, turning towards me. I can feel her studying my face, but I keep my eyes trained on the fire—the reckless abandon as it eats the wood, the writhing flames, the heat, the pain. I’m jealous of it.

“Yeah,” I say. “I’m searching for meaning in my life, I guess.” Lying is so incredibly easy sometimes, it scares me. I’m just reflecting back the things Arden has said to me. I wonder how deep my lies go.

Arden laughs, but it’s sad and stifled. “Exactly.” She leans her head down on my shoulder, and I resist the urge to push her off. “I’m so glad you understand, Hendrix.”

My throat burns. “Yeah.”

Arden cups my face in her hand and brings my face toward hers. Her eyes dart back and forth with almost painful desperation. There’s nothing ceremonious about the way she touches me, though, like she’s done this a thousand times.

And then she kisses me—hard, fast, and alarmingly deep. It feels like static electricity so my instinct is to pull away.

“What?” she asks, pitiful and confused.

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. “I just . . . I don’t want to.”



“Why?” Arden asks, her voice twisted with hurt.

“There you go, asking me ‘why’ again,” I say, throwing up my hands. There it goes again, the words I can’t control. I’m either dead coals or on fire.

Arden scoffs, standing, glaring at me with nothing but searing offense. “Oh, sorry for being curious as to why you rejected me.”

*Rejected.*

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I say. A monster growls under the hazy gray, through the prairie grass of my mind.

“You *never* want to talk about anything. Is it because you think you’re better than me, keeping all your problems to yourself? Do you spite me because I’m always a sobbing mess?”

I don’t answer. I can’t, or I swear to God I’ll kill her right now.

“Or am I just not good enough, huh?” Arden’s leering at me and waving her hands around but I can’t focus on anything but the red and orange and yellow fire before me, like the end of a blazing cigarette.

I still don’t answer. Anger sets my bones alight like dry tinder.

“Oh, *fuck you*, Hendrix Williams,” Arden sneers at me, storming into our tent.

At this, I jerk to my feet, ready to absolutely lose it. But I stop, listening and shaking with rage. She rustles around in there for a few moments, and then all is silent.

Except not really. The crickets scream. The fire hisses. The darkness pulls at my heart like a thousand hands. My own hands won't stop shaking, so I put them near the fire until they boil.

I wait. And smoke three cigarettes to try and let it go. If I was at home, this would be the time I would escape to my shed. Instead, I now have three red welts on my upper arm.

After waiting thirty minutes to make sure she's asleep, I slip out my knife. I'll do it now, and then I'll steal some shit and squat in the forest for a while. Bury her deep in the all-seeing trees.

I toss handfuls of dirt onto the fire until it sputters and dies. Quietly, I unzip the tent door and crawl in. I thumb the cold metal as I see Arden's sleeping frame, curled up on the far side of the tent.

*Breathe.*

I kneel down next to her. My heartbeat has risen to a scream in my ears, grabbing my brain by the collars and demanding that I listen. I take the tip of the knife, shining just barely in the dim light, and press it against her spine.

Arden shifts in her sleep, and I jump back.

Seized with fear, I back off. She can't know it was me before she dies. *She just can't.*

Wide eyes. Dripping fear. Crawling bugs and animals drawn to the warm, sweet death.

She might scream. She might cry.

I turn the knife in my hands. For the first time, I'm really thinking about what it would be like to kill another human. Would it be just like animals? Would it be *better*?

Can I even do it?

"Arden. I'm sorry." Nothing. She doesn't hear me. "I . . ." And it all gets caught in my throat.

*I can't do it.*

Not now, anyway.

The words flow as easy and effortless as water. "Earlier, you asked why. Actually, you've asked why several times. But my dad's a real piece of shit." I scoff, thinking about what my dad must be doing right now, with me gone and out of his pathetic little life. "Arden, if you think I'm fucked up, you should meet my dad. He's the reason I'm—"

I almost say it. I almost reveal who I am—*what* I am. But if there's even a small chance that she's awake, then I can't let anything incriminate me. And I don't know if it's entirely fair to put all the blame on him.

"He's the reason why my grandparents won't speak to me. He's the reason my mom is . . . not here. He's the reason, Arden. My mom and dad married only because they got pregnant with me. My dad is an alcoholic with undiagnosed bipolar disorder." I can almost hear Arden asking me her token many questions.

*"Undiagnosed? How do you know?" she would ask.*

*“Cause I just do.”*

*And then she’d smirk. “How do you know so much about mental disorders like that?”*

*“Because I think I have one,” is how I would have responded, in a different world.*

“His highs were me on top of his shoulders, shouting the lyrics to rock music on a sunny day outside our little cabin, shotgunning beers. He worked construction, so he had to travel a lot, but when it was the off-season, he had nothing to do but hunt and drink and watch shitty sit-coms on full volume. Sometimes, he would come home real late at night. He slammed the door so hard that it shook my bones. Set my nerves on fire. His lows were screaming at me, convincing me that I was crazy. Locking my mom in the house, forbidding her to leave because he was jealous of the hot cashier giving her ‘eyes’.”

I swallow, ruminating on the astronomical weight of my words in the small, dark space. Arden hasn’t moved. The knife has sunken to the cold ground beneath the tarp and sleeping bag.

“So, yeah, Arden. To answer your question, I don’t entirely know why, but he’s definitely a part of it.”

I sit back and breathe, shoving the knife back in my pants, feeling like God Himself is coming down to smite me. Staring at Arden for a moment, I back out of the tent and into the pitch-black clearing.

Rage boils under my skin, seeping through my pores like poison. I kick over the trash can, not giving a fuck whether I wake anyone up.

I take a rock and throw it deep into the forest, my back muscles screaming. When I hear someone rustling in one of the tents, I run. Not because I'm fleeing the crime scene, but because I need to get away. The darkness has got me by the shirt collar. I run up and down the path to and from the vehicles for about an hour before I get to the bottom of it:

Boys need their fathers' permission to become men. Mine never gave me the chance.

**Aching right down to** my bones, I eventually crawl into the massive sleeping bag. Why Arden chose one for us to share, I'll never understand. Probably because it was cheaper.

As I'm lying awake, staring at the moonlight barely pushing its way through the tent's fabric, I hear something.

Arden murmurs in her sleep, and turns on her side to face me.

# 12 Arden

Wednesday, May 23rd

It's not like my childhood was all that terrible, really. Max and I had some good times, and back then, I was too young to realize how toxic my parents really were. It's not like they hit us or anything, but they weren't particularly good parents either. It's weird when you grow up and experience that nuance. Nobody likes nuance.

Sarah Lucetti had a much better home life than I did. Not saying that her parents were perfect, but I could just tell that her parents didn't have the waxy, fake veneer mine did. I was over there a lot in middle school, and I never once heard them raise their voices. There

was always home-cooked food, and nobody came home late. What a difference being present makes.

It's weird, because I always thought I had a normal childhood until I spent so much time at Sarah's. In many ways I did have a typical experience, but I was always lacking. Kids just sense that sort of stuff. It was the subtle kind of lacking, the one where you're skimped just a little each time. All those "slightly less" moments add up, and I entered adulthood with a glass half-full, a bare-bones toolbox.

Once, we were up in Sarah's room, and I was flipping through Sarah's journal. She had written down all the made-up words, including a few of her own in a journal in alphabetical order, like an actual dictionary. The spaces between the lines were decorated with stars drawn in glitter pen, trees and flowers blooming on every page.

My eyes fell on a word filled with yearning, one that reminded me that escapism is just that: escaping to a fantasy world, never attainable, a forever reminder that *I'm stuck here*. As I read the definition, my heart jumped in my chest. My cheeks flushed green with envy, and then fell with the disappointment that I understood this definition all too well. I looked up at The Princess Bride poster on Sarah's wall and the shelves of fictional fairy tales, and I longed to jump inside one at the ripe age of 13.

Sometimes when I'm alone, the yearning rips me apart, and all I can ask myself is *why?* I was an escapist child, one who spent her time

playing pretend and reading books, and I held onto that for so, so long because reality was never what I needed it to be.

Sure, my parents work a lot so we can live a comfortable life, but what I'd give to have them be there for me when I needed them. Deep down, kids don't want money or success or the newest this-or-that. They want love.

It didn't really hit me until high school that everything is not as it seems, and it wasn't until recently that I wanted to go back. Back to a time when my dreams were just dreams. Back to when Max would actually hold a conversation with me. Back to when the world really was a fairytale, because we were young and oblivious. Back to when I thought I had everything I wanted—needed. But even that wasn't real.

God, I hate growing up.

I **wake Hendrix up** a bit before dawn. No one else is up, and the forest is just barely fluttering its wings. The air is chilly and humid, and it's still so dim I can barely see the other tents around us.

"We should go," I say.

He rolls over, barely opening his eyes at me. "Fine."

His words have an extra bite, aside from his usual dryness. I swallow, feeling the echoes of our conversation last night. Something tugs inside of me, reminding me that I should probably apologize again for swearing him out—and nonconsensually kissing him.

"Hey," I hiss at him.



“What?” he says, his voice scratchy and obviously annoyed.

“I’m sorry again. For kissing you, and then yelling at you.” The words skin me alive. “I don’t like you like that, I guess I just, uh,”—*be honest, dammit*—“I just wanted to connect with you, Hendrix. But I guess I didn’t do it right.”

He studies me for a moment, a peculiar look flickering across his face.

**We pack up and** hike back into Wise River. We’re gone before 8am.

I drive this time because Hendrix can barely keep his eyes open. It makes me smile, actually. I let him doze off while I put on some indie folk music.

As I approach the road that will take me back to Interstate 15, I hesitate. Keep driving—flanked by golden plains and roaring mountains—or take the fast lane? When stated that way, it seems like there’s no choice.

The landscape rises and falls, and the road breathes with it. In a better world, Max would be with me. He’d be curled up under a fleece blanket while I defrost the windshield because it still gets freezing at night in Montana. He’d be deejaying the hell out of the speakers. We’d share milkshakes and fries and talk on the phone to Aunt Lena for hours.

In the near silence, I find myself talking out loud. At first, it's just to myself, musing about what my family must be doing—or, *not* doing—and just how freaking gorgeous the mountains are when they're frosted with morning mist, pointing out the quaint log cabins nestled between the pine trees. In the boredom, I find myself talking to Hendrix. He's probably not sleeping deeply, so he might be able to hear me. However, I don't have anything to hide, unlike him.

I talk about what's on my mind: Max. He's always on my mind.

“Remember what I said about my brother, Max? How I kind of hate him for being selfish and stupid? Well, he wasn't always like that.

“Back before junior high, he used to love nature and animals. He used to go to all of these camps in the summer and collect bugs and rocks and shit. Said he wanted to be a park ranger or an explorer who discovered a new continent or something. You know how kids are.

“Well, Max and I would always go exploring in the woods behind our old house, before we moved into a subdivision. And he always liked to go out after the rain because then all of the bugs and animals would come out and 'cause it was nice and muddy. So, one Saturday, we went out after a thunderstorm. Max found this bird—a little house wren—that had hurt its wing. Probably tossed around by the storm and whatnot. I wanted to take a rock and put the bird out of its misery, you know. That's what they always say to do,” I say, as if both Hendrix and Max could actually hear me.

“Even Mom agreed with me. But, I'll tell you what: Max cried and cried and cried when I said that that's what we should do. So, my

mom reluctantly let him nurse the bird back to health. If I'm being honest, I think she only let him do it because she's always liked him more than me. She looks more like him, acts more like him. They have more in common." I scoff and blink a few times, as if mentally switching gears. "But the bird's sprained wing healed nicely, and it flew away after so many days. I guess it just needed the extra help getting back up again. Sure, it probably didn't live much longer after that, since it was just a little bird, all alone in the world. But my brother . . . he gave that house wren time to live longer, to eat more worms and make little bird babies. And thinking of that makes me happy."

I feel the silence like sandbags tied around my shoulders, but it doesn't matter because the story flows out of me, from a place of deep longing that I don't entirely understand. I'm wrapped up in the memory. I can feel it all, smell it all, like the earth under my feet and the pine on the breeze. And all I can think about is how I wish I could go back.

These sails on my storytelling boat, they take me far away. Speaking about Max—the Max from the past—feels like a balloon caught in the wind, floating further and further into space. And it makes my heart contract, so much so I fear for a second that I'm having a heart attack.

*I miss it.* I miss the Max who wasn't afraid to get dirt under his fingernails, who would get his off-brand jeans wet in the mountain

earth. I miss the Max who saw the world with unassuming and hopeful eyes.

And I miss the Michelle who would do those things with him.

My throat tightens, and I focus on the road as my eyes burn and fill with tears.

I see myself in Max. Both in who he was—the silly, carefree, tree-hugger whose only choice was to see the good, and who he is now—jaded and disillusioned and caught up in things that don't really matter. Both of us aren't so different anymore. Our innocence is gone. I suppose both of us are just trying to fill it back up, because everyone loses at least a little bit of the childhood magic when they grow up. This is not the world of fairytales anymore.

**When I've gone through** all of the music I have downloaded on my phone, Hendrix is still fast asleep, his feet on the dash. I reach over and smack his calves and tell him to “get his muddy shoes off my dashboard”. Hendrix jerks awake. “Sorry,” I say as he sits up, trying to grasp his surroundings.

“Where are we?” he asks, rubbing his eyes.

“Uh, good question. We're going northwest, and we just passed this place called Porters Corner, and it says that Phillipsburg is about six miles away,” I say, squinting at another weathered road sign.

“What?”

I shrug. “I took the backroads. Thought it might be more scenic. Plus I’ve heard that they’ve got security cams on Interstates that record your plates.”

“Okay,” Hendrix says. His voice is syruped with his usual disinterest. “I need to piss.”

I look for a place to pull off, but the road has no shoulder—the left side dips off into a rocky river valley and the right side is an upward slanted wall of vegetation, trees and plants clinging onto the rocky soil. We’re essentially driving on the ledge of a mountain.

Sighing, I stop the car, turn on the hazards, and put it into park. Hendrix steps out and shuts the door behind him. I stare into the dashboard, like it can see me back.

It’s funny how our brain overlooks some things, and hyper-focuses on another. In the whole two hours we’d been driving I hadn’t noticed our dwindling supply of gas, because a red light shaped like a gas pump blinks before me.

*Fuck.*

I sure as hell hope Phillipsburg really is six miles away. I turn off the engine to save gas. Tapping on the steering wheel, I start to get nervous. How long does it take Hendrix to pee? I’d feel a lot better if we were at least heading in the direction of gasoline.

He eventually gets back in, pulling himself inside my car and flopping down on the seat like he’s moving through molasses. His

eyes look as if they've got a cloudy film over them, and his brow forms a heavy shadow.

Exasperated, I blow air through my lips. "So, we're almost out of gas."

The corners of Hendrix's mouth twitch—the first signs of life in his face—and a shimmer passes over his eyes. Just as fast as it came, he swallows and sighs. "Where's the closest town again?"

"Phillipsburg is about six miles from here. Hopefully we can run on empty for about six more miles."

Hendrix turns away from me. "Great," is all he says.

I peer at him. For the life of me, I can't tell when he's being sarcastic, if he ever is. Maybe I'm just dumb.

**About five minutes of** driving later, the engine sputters and dies. Kicks the can. Bites the dust. I hit the steering wheel with the heel of my hand. "Fuck!" Hendrix flinches. I breathe, feeling the way my torso expands. "Sorry. This just sucks."

"Yeah."

Glancing over at Hendrix, I see that he's just staring out the windshield picking at his fingernails. "Get out and help me push," I say. Putting the car into neutral, I step out of the car and wind to its backside. It's not like anyone's coming; we haven't seen another car for miles.

“You’re saying we’re going to push a whole-ass car another . . . what, three miles?” Hendrix yells after me.

I scoff. Jeez, just about every other interaction I have with Hendrix is one that pisses me off. “I don’t know, do you have a better idea?”

I hear him get out of the car, and I push a clump of my strawberry blonde hair out of my face. He stands, nearly glaring at me through the dappled morning light. “You want to push two tons of metal uphill? Be my guest.”

I dig my nails into the boiling hot trunk of my car, my stomach boiling my poor lungs and heart. God, he just makes me so angry sometimes. I didn’t think a quiet boy who worked at a frozen yogurt shop could be such a dick.

I look up at him. “Fuck you.”

He raises his eyebrows up at me, like a challenge. Someone bangs a gong in my stomach, fear ricocheting off my bones. Shit, maybe I’m being mean. There’s a tense moment where we just glare at each other until Hendrix’s expression deflates. Something . . . something flashes over his face, behind his eyes. But as usual, I can’t tell what the hell it is so I just dig my heels in and start pushing.

And nothing happens.

I push for a while, and subsequently break into a sweat in the increasing heat of the summer day. Hendrix is just sitting back, watching me as I’ve successfully moved the car about two centimeters

in ten minutes. He's right—it would be easier to just walk to a gas station and fill up a gas can and then walk back. But my pride has already been wounded, and I know Hendrix would just gloat.

Eventually, I sit down onto the hot pavement that looks like it hasn't been touched by a repair crew in decades. My skin boils—not with heat, but with an anger that seizes my heart and coils around my neck. I can't fuck this up. I can't fuck up *running away*, for God's sake.

The thought takes me off guard. Is that what I'm doing, running away?

*No, not at all.*

The crunching sound of tires on pavement makes me open my eyes. A rusty pickup truck creeps up beside us. Hesitating, I stand. Hendrix comes up beside me. I swallow, the uncertainty snowballing inside me. Immediately, stories of chopped up bodies dumped in ditches sound alarms in my mind.

An older man steps around the vehicle with leathery skin, not unlike the tarp that covers the bed of his truck. “You kids look like you need some help,” he says. He has the drawn-out vowels and hard Rs of a Minnesota accent.

Hendrix steps forward. “Yes, actually, we ran out—”

“No, we're fine, thanks,” I cut in, smiling tight-lipped. I can feel Hendrix giving me crazy eyes, but I don't care.

“You sure?” the man says, stepping closer to me.



The tendons in my neck flinch, and I step further back. But the man leans over the rear end, peering under the car.

“I’m Henry, by the way,” the man says, standing upright.

Henry shakes Hendrix’s hand, and then he moves to me, and I shake it, but he uses two hands with me, patting the outside of my hand with his palm. It turns my insides to liquid.

“You sure you kids don’t need anything? I’d hate to leave you out here all by yourselves,” the man says, hooking his thumbs in his belt loops.

“Nope, we’re good,” I blurt, smiling.

Hendrix scratches the back of his neck. “Um, actually, we could use some gas, just to get us to the next town.”

Henry laughs, hearty and warm. “Well, why didn’t you ask?” The man goes under the tarp of his flatbed and pulls out the distinct red plastic of a gas can. How convenient.

Before handing it over to Hendrix, he hesitates. “Actually, why don’t I just take you kids into town? It’s not safe out here, really.”

I bore into Henry’s eyes. “No, we’re perfectly fine driving on our own. And I’d rather not just leave my car here on the side of the road.”

This only seems to challenge Henry, as he directs himself towards me. “Frankly, sweetie, I disagree. It’ll be quick, really. Just a

trip in my car into town, we'll get some gas, then we'll be back right here, you'll see."

"Why?" Hendrix spits, butting in between me and the man. I nearly melt right there. *Thank you, Hendrix.* "You've got some gas right here, and we have some cash to pay you for it if you're gonna be such a hard-ass about it. Why waste the trip there and back?"

Henry clenches his jaw for a moment, staring down at me. All I can think about is how massive he is and how he smells of sweat and oil and how we're bookended between a literal mountain and a guy who is an 8/10 on the *Billings' Best Yogurt Creep Scale*.

"Yeah," the man croons. "Why waste the trip, when you two could just ride with me to wherever it is you kids are off to?"

Henry puts a hand on my arm, staring straight through me.

I freeze. I always freeze. I freeze when someone tells me something I don't know how to handle. I freeze when I'm uncomfortable. I freeze when I'm feeling something so powerful and overwhelming.

There's a flash of silver and Henry jerks away from me. Hendrix points a knife at the man, his hand trembling as Henry backs into the rear end of my car.

I heave, taking a step backwards. Holy *shit*, Hendrix has a knife. Like a pretty big one too. It's about as long as my hand. And he's pointing it at the chest of another person.

"Don't you *fucking* touch us," he spits, his voice aflame. Fear shrinks my gut.

Henry has completely transformed, with his face marred with genuine fear at Hendrix and his hands up toward the good Lord in heaven. I'd bet money that my face looks the same.

"Bend down and give me that can," Hendrix says, nodding his head toward the bright red can of gasoline on the pavement. He's trembling with rage.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, listen here, kid. We can work something out," Henry pleads.

"I don't care! Give me the can." Everything about Hendrix is so aggressive and unrelenting. It's like he's exploded into another person.

Henry leans down, slowly. "You try anything funny and this knife is going in between your sixth and seventh rib," Hendrix says, holding the knife. He's shaking, ever so slightly. I don't think Henry notices, but I do.

"Give the can to her," he orders, his voice taut with anger. With devilish eyes, Henry glares at me as he hands over the five-gallon jug of gasoline.

Through the buzzing fear, I find it in me to flash a rubbery smile at Henry. "Thanks."

Hendrix and I watch as Henry gets back in his truck, Hendrix holding the knife out. Although at this point it wouldn't do much good.

"I've got your fuckin' plates!" Henry shouts. "I'll call the cops on you fuckers!" The man grinds his engine to a start, whips his car

around, and drives away in the direction he came, still shouting threats.

Slowly, the knife sinks to Hendrix's side as he leans over and braces his hands on his knees. I can hear him heaving. "Fuck," he says. Pacing, he walks around the car, tugging at his hair and rubbing the sweat off his brow. I can feel the anger radiating off him like electricity.

"Yeah, that sounds about right," I say.

The world buzzes as I empty the gasoline can into my tank. Hendrix reaches around me and grabs my fist, wrenching the keys out of my hand. "Hey!" I protest.

"I want to drive," is all he says, storming away with the keys and shutting himself inside. The slam makes my stomach twist.

Back in the car, I replay the previous events over and over and over in my head. *The flash of silver.*

The knife. It's a hunting knife, and that's not uncommon around here. But it looks . . . used. The grip texture on the handle is worn from the impression of Hendrix's hand, and nicks on the blade indicate that it's not a knife just for show. It's been used to hack through things. What things, my mind can only imagine.

He starts driving. The landscape no longer looks beautifully intimidating in an awe-inspiring sort of way. Now it looks just plain intimidating. The trees crowd out the sky, and I remember that we're no longer on a wide, open road. We're still driving on the side of a mountain.

“Hendrix?” I say eventually.

“Yeah?”

“Why do you have a knife?”

He doesn’t say anything.

“Why the fuck are you carrying a knife like that?” I press.

His nostrils flare. “Do we have to talk about it? Can’t it just be enough that I got us out of that shitty situation?”

“No, it can’t be,” I say. The trees leave dusty green smears across my vision.

Hendrix sighs, gritting his teeth. “Alright, I keep a knife because I like to. Makes me feel safe. Never know when it might come in handy.”

Again, his voice strikes hollow. Empty. I see flashes of moments, cast over the noontday landscape: his eyes, so fierce and ravaging, cutting right through me. His temperament, distant and ambiguous one second, and impulsive and passionate the next. The knife, so nimble, even in his shaking hands.

“Okay, whatever you say, Hendrix.”

# 13 Hendrix

Wednesday, May 23rd

I don't have many friends. I never did. Although, the ones I did have were for necessity. They bought me cigarettes before I was 18. They provided me with ample entertainment during long nights serving frozen yogurt. Rarely ever did I feel that flash of connection, those sparks of something deeper.

However, Joshua was one of the few people I did feel those sparks with. In retrospect, I think I was able to connect with Josh because he saw right through me. He had a gaze just like Arden's—one that could pin your soul right to the wall.

And he didn't like what he saw.

Josh and I were lab partners in sophomore biology, and we stayed close throughout the rest of high school, except for last semester. Again, I let him get close to me only because he'd be more likely to give me something, like his notes when I missed class, which was a common occurrence for me. He was the class clown type, but the class clown that no one thought was funny. People laughed out of awkwardness and second-hand embarrassment. Based on how insufferable I find Arden to be sometimes, you'd think I wouldn't be able to put up with him. But around me, he was more . . . authentic, I guess. Less goofy. I know he toned it down around me because I think he realized that we bonded over our social pariah status. Maybe we stayed friends because we didn't have anybody else, which is pretty pathetic if you think about it.

Sometimes, on the weekends, we'd go hunting or fishing or riding our four wheelers out in the country just because we could. Or we'd just talk. It pains me to admit it, but we had fun together. Josh brought out what little good I still had left inside of me. He understood my tense and complicated relationship with my dad. He understood my "fuck this shit" attitude. Josh didn't seem to be weirded out by me. The rumors about me didn't scare him away.

But I can't lie—Josh and I were really, truly friends at one point. After those good times, back home, I'd kick myself. I'd tell myself that it was fucking stupid, that our friendship was bullshit, just based on proximity. I'd tell myself that I could drop him any day, and I'd be

fine. The safety, the unconditionality I felt with Josh was so against everything I believed about myself. My brain kept trying to self-destruct. Even in the light of day, the darkness would whisper: *what if none of this is real?* Really, I think I was just afraid. I was afraid to follow those sparks, that thrumming vein of connection to all of the dark places I knew it led.

We always did homework at my house. Josh insisted on it, so that meant I had to make sure my dad was out of the way. One time, I slipped four sleeping pills into his morning coffee so he'd still be out by the time Josh and I got home from school. Now that I think about it, that could have killed him.

"How come we never go over to your house?" I asked. I left Dad's door cracked, just so I could make sure he was still breathing. Not that I cared.

Josh shrugged. "It's *really* loud at my place. I've got four siblings, and my mom will want to interrogate you."

"Yeah," I said and left it at that. It wasn't until November of our senior year that Josh's dad was arrested for domestic violence that I began to rethink our friendship.

"Your dad sleeps a lot," he said.

"Yeah."

"Is he sick?" Josh opened the fridge and pulled out some deli meat.

"No." I sat at the kitchen island while Josh made himself a sandwich.



“He depressed or something?”

I watched Josh peel the crusts off his sandwich and pop them into his mouth instead of tossing them. My mom used to do that.

“Hey, I asked you a question, Rix,” Josh said, but his voice said he was kidding.

“He’s not depressed. Jesus.” I shook my head.

Josh scrunched up his face at me, peering into the back room. “What is he, then?”

I shrugged.

“C’mon Hendrix. I’ve known you and your dad for almost three years now. I know he’s kinda fucked up.” Josh pulled his eyes away from mine, and I could finally breathe. “You know stuff about my family. How come you never tell me anything about yours?”

“I tell you things,” I said. Not a *complete* lie.

Josh cocked his head at me. “Yeah, but you never tell me anything *real*.”

That was when I felt the sting of his words, the sting that meant *I cared*. People can only hurt you when you let them in, and I had let Josh make a home inside me. The power he held over me . . .

“Yeah, whatever,” I said.

Josh got real mad at me, then. Raised his voice and all that, but the sting had numbed me. I let him rant and rave and storm out the door, but we made up a few days later. Even after we were cool again,

the feeling stuck around. The tugging, the burning—the idea that maybe I should let the darkness out for Josh. Show him something that meant something.

Arden doesn't ask me where we should go for dinner. She just kind of *goes*, as she often does. In Phillipsburg, Montana, Arden pulls into a diner on the fringes of the town, almost nestled back in the mountains. There's one lonely road that leads to this ranch house-turned-restaurant. A wall of pine trees swallows one side of the landscape, neon pockets in a green landslide.

“Let's go,” she says, slamming into Park in the tiny gravel lot.

Inside, Arden stares—no, *glares*—at me across the vinyl table. She picks at her fries, blinking slowly.

“What?” I ask. Our greasy burgers come, but I'm not hungry.

“You're so fucking *dense*,” she says, narrowing her eyes into slits.

I sigh. I know why she's mad, the whole knife thing and all. I try and play the angle. Arden *cannot* be mad at me; she just can't. I hate it too much. I lean forward, making eye contact with her. “I . . . I know you're upset about the knife thing, but you have to understand that—”

“Just apologize, Hendrix. I just want to hear you say it.” She sits back in her chair, crossing her arms. She is unrelenting, as usual.

I pull back, anger and confusion worming across my brow. “Why?”

“*Why?* Because it freaked me out,” Arden says, picking at the wilted lettuce on her burger.

I swallow. “I— I’m sorry.” It just kind of comes out, but when the words pass through me, they’re . . . genuine. I didn’t intend to freak her out, despite my ulterior motives. I thought I was just . . . helping.

“Really?” She doesn’t believe me. I can barely believe me, either.

“Yeah.” Something germinates within me, writhing and exploding. It feels like a rock sinking to the bottom of a slimy green pond. I feel guilty. I feel sorry. I feel . . . authentic. The blur, the black spiral of *nothing* I’ve found myself in clears for a moment, like the settling of silt, and it’s like I can finally see Arden for the first time.

Arden swallows, sitting up. “Oh.” Tenderness passes over her hard expression, and I blink. “I forgive you.”

“Really?” I wasn’t expecting to be that easy. The knots that my muscles have tied themselves in slip from their own grasp.

Arden nods, looking me right in the eyes, with that look that peels me open. “Yeah.” She pauses. “Thanks for, uh, saving my ass back there.” Arden looks away, rubbing the back of her neck.

A smile crawls up onto my face, one that I don’t have to force. “You’re welcome.”

Arden looks up at me. “You promise you won’t be weird with the knife anymore?”

My stomach clenches. “I promise.” It comes out like crushing gravel—a black, caustic lie.

*Shit.*

**We head north towards** Missoula. Arden drives, and I have the sneaking suspicion that she doesn’t trust me. I don’t blame her for it, but in any case, it’s not good for me. If she doesn’t trust me, there’s no way I’ll be able to kill her without a significant fight. I squeeze my eyes shut, breathing deeply.

Out of the blue, Arden reaches forward and turns off the music. “So, Rix, do you remember—”

“Don’t call me Rix.”

“Why not? It sounds cool,” she says.

Of course she thinks it’s fucking ‘cool’. In the echoes of the nickname, I can hear their voices. “If you call me Rix, I’m going to call you Michelle.” It sounds like teasing, but I’m serious.

Arden laughs nervously. “Ha, nope. No way. I sincerely apologize, *Hendrix*.”

I smile.

“Ok, back to what I was going to ask. People have always said this about you, but I was in Mrs. Donnelly’s class in fifth grade, so I didn’t actually see it, and I try not to believe rumors. Did you really break Quentin Pierce’s Nintendo DS in fifth grade?”

My neck stiffens. In my head, I kill her right then, just to end this conversation. “Yeah, why?”

“I dunno. I was just thinking about high school, and whenever you came up, people would always—”

“Did people talk about me a lot, then?” Not that I care. I don’t.

“I mean, enough. I was just wondering, cause everyone always talked about it and you know gossip. You can never know how much of it is actually true and how much is just urban legend.”

“Yeah, well, it happened.” Maybe if I revealed a bit more about myself, she’d trust me. Show some humanity, vulnerability. “Probably not how everyone says, though.”

“Yeah?” Arden says. “You gonna tell me about it?”

Why not? Well, I can think of several reasons as to why not. “Fourth grade was a rough year. So was fifth—”

“How come?”

“God, won’t you let me finish?” It’s not like I would have told her anyway.

“Sorry.” Arden turns down the radio, until it’s just a hum.

I continue. “It was sometime in January. It had been a cold winter. Not just literally, but . . .” I trail off. I can’t bring myself to say the words. That all Dad did that winter was sit on his ass and drink and scream at Mom. That Mom used me as a weapon, as leverage, against him. For once, I wish Arden would say something, use that

big mouth of hers, but she lets the silence thicken. “Yeah. So, we had indoor recess in the gym, and in fourth grade our teachers still made us line up and shit. In Mrs. Smith’s class, everybody had a classroom task, you know, and it circulated weekly. That week was my turn to be line leader, which was such a coveted position.”

Arden nods.

“I don’t know why I wanted to be the line leader so much.” Lie. I wanted it because then I would be first. I would be important, significant. I’d have *power*. I laugh bitterly. “It sounds stupid now, but it was important to me.”

Arden smiles to herself. “Yeah, my favorite job was the paper passer.”

“So, it was my turn to be line leader that week, and we were instructed to line up for recess, you know And so I was trying to push my way to the front of the line, since I was always at the back with my last name being ‘Williams’. But when I got to Quentin, he shoved me out of the way and said I shouldn’t be line leader cause nobody liked me.” The words hurt coming out, like digging your own grave in the frozen earth. “He had his new Nintendo DS in his hands, the one he’d been showing off all week. So, I just wrenched it out of his hands and threw it across the room at the chalkboard” My chest is a black hole, and everything is falling falling falling, ripping out of its sockets and swirling down into nothing. I remember their eyes on me. Everyone’s, even Mrs. Smith’s, frozen and wide and coated in a thin layer of fear. But that was what I wanted, wasn’t it?

I swallow, because I'm ripping apart at my tightly-sewn seams and that's not okay. The darkness bleeds out, becoming one with the ground like fabric dye. "Afterwards, both of us were in the principal's office, and they were trying to get a hold of my parents, but they couldn't. Finally, my mom picked up, and said that it wasn't her problem and that they should leave her the fuck alone. I've never really been able to live that down."

Arden slows the car to a stop, right in the middle of the road. She looks over at me, her brow folded and her eyes heavy with *empathy*. I despise it.

"The fuck are you doing? Keep driving," I spit. No need to make a big fucking deal out of me. Christ Almighty, this is why I'd rather do the driving because shit like this comes out when I'm not in control.

"No, it's alright. We haven't passed anyone in at least a half hour," she says, her voice soft. Her gaze makes my skin crawl, my hands itch. *Joshua Joshua Joshua*—

"Why are you staring at me like that?" I say, my lip curling. God, this whole thing was supposed to make her trust me and not be fucking terrible, but here we are. "It's nothing."

I hear Arden swallow. "I'm sorry, and it's not nothing. Shit like that matters when you're young. That must have hurt, with your mom and everything."

My eyes burn. I dig my fingernails into my palms. "It's fine."

“No, it’s not,” she says. “But I understand what you mean. It was always a pain to get my parents to listen to anything. I was always somebody else’s problem. And if it makes you feel any better, Quentin is still a dick. He was in my physics class in high school.”

For a second, I don’t hear her words. All I hear is this bitch trying to make it all about herself again. But as Arden’s words sink in, I finally feel their weight. I finally hear what they mean, and they are like grappling hooks, pulling together two lonely ships—and ripping apart the sinews that keep me together.

I don’t know how to respond, so I don’t. I claw at my wrists to keep from kicking the dashboard to pieces. Shaking, I light a cigarette.

Arden rolls down the window. “You gonna say something?”

“No, thanks.”

Arden begins driving again, the gravel crunching under her tires. Slowly, we drive northwest to Missoula.

**Arden and I have this** routine when we stop for food. We find a restaurant in Lolo, Montana. We stare at each other for a while, the other trying to figure the other out. Then we talk about something. There’s about a 66.7% chance that someone will get upset about something. If only Arden herself was always that predictable.

The routine starts again as we stroll into a Chinese takeout place. There’s virtually no one there, and the sun-faded signs displaying various stir-frys flicker at us.



We order and sit. Arden looks across the table—a lacquered fake bamboo—and I can sense the empathy in her gaze.

“Do you like sushi?” Arden asks.

I look up from my pork lo mein. “Not really. That’s why I didn’t order it.”

Arden frowns. “Lame. You should try it.”

I eye her two rolls of sushi. “I think I’ll pass. Raw sushi weirds me out, alright?”

Arden smirks at me. “Oh, c’mon. You told me you used to work for a butcher. Raw fish can’t be much grosser than that!”

Pulses of electricity run through me. I sense my face grow dark. I stand up and walk out.

Arden chases after me, apologizing, but the damage has been done. I sit in the car as she stands in the cold, buzzing light of the parking lot, cast in the orange haze of evening. Frowning, she slowly turns back around and walks inside. Through the window of the restaurant, I see her eat her sushi in silence.

Fucking disgusting.

I see an older woman come up to Arden, sit next to her and begin talking. People just kind of come up and talk to us sometimes. I guess we give off that ‘runaway young adults’ kind of vibe.

I wait a moment, and then head back in. Sorry, no one can creep on Arden but me. When I get back inside, Arden stands, and so does the middle-aged woman. I frown as she shakes my hand.

“This is Shelly, and guess where we’re going?” Arden smirks.

I sit back down, twirling some noodles around my fork. “Where?”

“Lolo Hot Springs!” Arden says, even making jazz hands.

“Okay.”

“C’mon, it will be fun! It’s a lodge tucked away in the woods with hiking trails and pools and stuff! And Shelly can give us a discount.”

“Of course she can,” I say. I narrow my eyes at Arden. First the camping, then this. Actually, first it was the ‘running away in the middle of the night’, but whatever.

Arden looks at me like she’s studying the fine print of a textbook, sighing. “Hendrix, you’re such a killjoy.”

I nod. “Yes, I am.”

Arden glares at me. I see Shelly out of the corner of my eye looking back and forth between us, concerned. She damn well should be. “We’re going to Lolo Hot Springs, and we’re going to have fun, goddammit.”

I swallow. “Alright.”

We follow Shelley in her Harley-Davidson, because of course we do.

**Like the vast majority** of our escapades so far, the place we find ourselves in is pretty disappointing. Lolo Hot Springs is nothing but a two-story motel made to look woody and antique and a pool so blue it hurts your eyes. The signs along the highway tell of a good time that doesn't come too easy. I take note of the bicycle rentals down the road. Arden pulls into the parking lot, and above the two-story buildings of the town and the lodge, the mountains rise up and around us, nearly trapping us in.

Arden jumps out of the car as Shelly hops off of her motorcycle. I glance around at the walls of forested mountains, the town that can't be home to more than a hundred people. This looks like the place where people could get murdered, which maybe is the idea. It gives off big Norman Bates-motel vibes.

I look over at Arden as she drags her suitcase toward the main building—so eager, so blinded by her own desires. My knife seems to heat up against my side.

*I could do it here.*

But I don't.

**Furnished with shag carpet** and wood paneling from the seventies, the patterns of pine trees and moose are obviously designed to appeal to tourists. The bedsprings creaking, Arden flops next to me as I stare up at the ceiling.

She tosses something onto my chest—my swim trunks from my bag. She must have packed those in the running away craziness. “I’m not going to let you sit around and mope all night. I didn’t work a discount out of Shelly for nothing.”

“Why?” I want to be mad that she went through my shit, but I don’t have it in me.

“Why am I not going to let you mope?” she says, propping herself up on her elbow. “Because it’s not right. Because we deserve to have some fun while we’re evading our parents and responsibilities.” Arden grabs my hands and pulls me up—and that’s when I realize she’s wearing a bikini.

I sigh. There’s no way I’ll be able to take my knife with me—it might slip out, Arden might get handsy—too many variables.

Arden palms me in the chest with the swim trunks. “Hendrix, please? You don’t even have to do anything other than go into the pool with me.”

Swallowing, I feel the mesh between my fingers. What could it hurt? I’ve got all night to contemplate murder. “Alright, Arden. I’ll humor you.”

Arden beams, grabbing me by the arms and shaking me slightly. The touch worms down to my core, making me uncomfortable. But like most times, I just go with it. “Thank you, Hendrix.”

**At 10pm on a Wednesday night**, the outdoor pool is empty. Steam rises up to the stars, and the concrete is sharp and gritty under

my bare feet. Arden whoops and rockets herself into the pool. The *splash* cuts through the picturesque silence. Soaking wet, she stares up at me.

“C’mon in, Hendrix! The water’s fine!” she tosses a handful of water at me, and I cringe a bit.

Gritting my teeth, I run and jump into the deep blue. The world is muffled, like after an explosion. Even *I* am muffled as I’m trapped in suspension under the water. Hands, fumbling over me. I jolt, kicking at the bottom of the pool, and Arden and I break the surface.

She’s breathless, staring at me. “Thanks,” she says. I’m not sure why. Actually, I’m not sure why any of this is happening.

“You keep saying that.”

“Sorry, I don’t know. I just haven’t done stuff like this in a while.” Arden kicks onto her back, gazing up at the sky, the dark mountains looming above us. “It’s been lonely lately.”

I’m not sure why people do things sometimes. Hell, I’m not sure why *I* do things most of the time. But I think one of the most bewildering things I’ve ever done is utter the following sentence: “You weren’t like this in high school.”

Arden snaps up from the position she was in. “What?”

Shit. “I mean, I just didn’t expect you to really be like this.”

Arden narrows her eyes, swimming closer to me. “Is that a good or a bad thing?”

I blink. “Neither. I didn’t know you that well.”

Arden’s eyes scan me, like they often do. Every time, it’s like I’m being poked and prodded at. “You’re just like how I thought you would be.” A moment passes, and she frowns. “Well, maybe. I guess I didn’t know you that well, either.”

“Yeah,” I say, but it sounds more like a question.

Arden floats away. Something tugs at me—the need to explain myself.

“We only ever interacted at work, and there you were kinda cynical and annoying. I didn’t know you were so . . . adventurous. Lively.”

Arden snorts. “Thanks.” That, too, comes out like a question. “I mean, we did run away in the middle of the night to roadtrip to . . . approximately nowhere, so that should have been your first clue.”

Smiling at my warped feet, I run my hands through the water around me, reeking of chlorine.

“I just . . . thanks for saying that, Hendrix. I hope I’m not the person I was in high school ever again. It feels like I entered into high school as one person, and I’ve emerged as someone completely different.”

“Yep.” Again, more shit spews out of my mouth, but I test the waters with this one. Pun intended. “You ever just really hate yourself?”

Arden sits up in the water again, treading as she swims into the deep end. “Oh my God, all the time. You have no idea.”

“Oh, I think I do.”

“Why do you hate yourself?”

“Why do *you* hate yourself?” I retaliate. I’d rather die than answer that question.

“I asked you first,” Arden says, splashing water at me.

“Oh, fuck off,” I say, but a bit of laughter seeps into my voice.

Arden just rolls her eyes. “Alright, I won’t push you, then.”

I blink—that’s unlike her, if you ask me. “Thanks.” It comes out of my mouth like a reflex, but something else boils in my gut. This isn’t the end of the conversation. I watch as Arden swims back over towards me. I haven’t really moved from my spot in the four foot area.

Then, I decide to open up. I *decide* to. And hell, if it backfires, I’ve got all this water to drown Arden and myself in. “I just . . . hate myself ‘cause I do stupid stuff and I . . . can’t seem to stop. I don’t know why.” Arden lets out whooping laughter, and my hands clench into fists. “What’s so funny?”

She sighs, kicking onto her back and floating on the water. “It’s not funny, it’s just really relatable.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, it is,” Arden says, upright and treading toward me. “I just really hurt somebody cause I reacted and didn’t think. I hurt

someone because I was hurt, too. And I regret it every single day of my life.”

*Sting.* Again, her words cut right to the heart—the one I forgot I had. I reach up to scratch my head, looking everywhere but Arden, because she’s inching closer to me and I can sense her empathy crawling over my skin and it makes me really really uncomfortable.

Before Arden reaches me, she stops. Cocks her head at me like an animal. I look at her, and she swallows. “I’m trying not to hate myself as much. I don’t think it’s working, though.” She smiles up at me, and I can’t help but soften around the edges. “Hey, I guess this road trip is good for something, right? Maybe by the end of this we won’t hate ourselves so much.”

My nostrils flare. “Right.”

Arden’s forehead wrinkles. She gazes down at the water, and then up at the sky that swallows the world. “Hey, Hendrix, can I . . . can I hug you?”

I wince, partially out of confusion. “Why?”

Arden blows air through her lips. “Ah, I dunno, I’m just a really touchy-feely person and I’m not entirely sure what to say because feelings suck, and in my experience hugs usually fix things most of the time.”

“Alright.”

Arden moves closer to me and slides her arms around my neck, pulling me into her embrace. It’s strange for a moment, like two



mechanical robots bumping limbs. Eventually, I wrap my arms around her.

Like a warm ember exploding to life in a cold tundra, *I feel something*. And . . . it's a good something. It's those sparks. Us all wrapped up in each other, breathing in the warmth and the comfort is kind of amazing. It's a stirring, a settling, a heaviness I've never felt before.

Wrong. I've felt it before. Just not since last January with Josh. Not since my mom—

*Stop.*

We just stay there for a moment, Arden holding the pieces of both herself and me together. But then—of course—she puts her hands on my shoulders and pulls us under the water, the shock of cold forcing me to open my eyes. She laughs, and silver bubbles float from her mouth. We push up from the bottom, breaking the surface.

“Thanks,” I say, pushing back my mop of brown hair. I mean it both sarcastically and not sarcastically. I hope she can't tell the difference.

Arden floats on her back again, tossing up a ratty foam ball covered in coral and fish. “Isn't it beautiful out here?”

I look around—*really* look around—for the first time. The walls of mountainous rock remind me of the bowl that our town is set in. The stunning blue takes me back to hot days on a lake with my grandpa. The gleam in Arden's eyes reflect the stars, and they speak of

someone she doesn't even know: the woman who wrecked my life. Even the musty smell in the air forces moments of me and my father hunting in the woods back into my head, ones that I tried to forget. And I guess it is kind of beautiful.

“Yeah, yeah it is, Arden.”

She smiles at me, and it sends something sweet blooming in my gut.

I purse my lips. “Sorry for doubting you. This is pretty cool.”

Arden wrinkles her nose and punches my arm. “See? Told you so. I'm always right.”

“Right.” I look up at the sky. How many times have I looked up and wished to be somewhere else, *someone* else? Not just another place, but where the darkness couldn't find me. Where *I* couldn't find me. But a place like that doesn't exist.

Under the endless sky, I am a piece of pottery, crumbling and cracking under the weight.

# 14 Arden

Wednesday, May 23rd

**The father I knew** as a child was a man of soft-spoken kindness. His favorite song was “Piano Man” by Billy Joel. When I was little, I was so confused as to why the song was called “Piano Man” since the song featured so much harmonica. I remember him leaning down and pressing a fingertip to my nose. “Sometimes things are called by a different name, Sweet Pea. Just like you.” And then just like Billy Joel, he’d tell me to sing him a song.

I speak about my dad like he's dead because he feels dead sometimes. That sounds dramatic, but it's true. It's funny that it's like our idyllic, shiny image of our parents dies at some point in our lives and they become a different person to us. Sometimes I try and remember when exactly the angelic image of my father died, but I don't remember because death is sudden. All at once. But that sort of change—the growing-up sort of change—that doesn't happen overnight.

Some of my fondest memories are of my dad taking Max and I camping on long weekends, back when he didn't work so much. Mom went camping with us once when I was really young, but from what I remember, she just bitched and moaned the entire time. It was a unanimous decision that she wouldn't join us next time.

We would drive about two hours south to Sonnette and camp in the river valley. We'd set up this red tent just in the cover of the forest, but take a few steps out, and the land would open up into a golden field surrounded by blue mountains and white-water rapids. Out here, Max was someone else. We were all someone else. Perhaps a simpler version of ourselves.

I was twelve the last time we went camping. I was going into seventh grade, and Max was going into third. Like most summers, August was disgustingly hot, and by that point, nobody was really in the mood to do anything but sit in front of the AC and whine about school starting. But me being me, I wanted to do something fun before summer ended. So camping it was.

We drove out to our favorite spot, as usual. When he insisted that we listen to “Piano Man”, Dad would do this thing where he played the dashboard in front of him like a phantom piano or drums. Max would always yell at him to get his hands back on the steering wheel, but Dad and I would hammer on that dashboard with our fingers like we were Billy Joel and Stevie Wonder. We’d sing the ‘la-di-da’s in broken harmony. It was truly magical, in all its somewhat stereotypical glory.

There was a lake down by Sonnette where one side had a tiny waterfall and a massive cliff. Of course, we went cliff diving when my friends were around and Dad wasn’t looking. All the teenagers from the nearby summer camp always told us kids that someone died out there, but we still went out anyway. I say this because on that last camping trip, Dad took us out there and showed it to me like I hadn’t known about it for years. We sat on the banks while Max splashed in the water, occasionally pushing off the rocks and diving deep into the clear blue.

“How come you like that piano song so much, Dad?” I asked. I was pulling the fluff from a brown cattail, watching the seed fluff float away and land on the surface of the water.

“What’s that, Michelle?” he asked, smiling at his feet wading in the murky water. My father said my name like it was music.

“*Piano Man!* Why do you like it so much?” I asked.

“Oh, I don’t know.” My dad shook his head. He was balding a bit, but never wanted to let it show. “It came out when I was about your age and when I heard it, it just stuck with me. I carried a cassette tape with that song on it in my Walkman all through junior high, just listening to that sad song over and over. But now it makes me happy. You do know what a Walkman is, right?”

I laughed, splashing him with water. “Yes, I do.” Beat. “What’s your favorite lyric? My favorite is when Billy talks about the waitress and the chorus. I like the chorus.”

My father smiled. “My favorite part is when he talks about John, the bartender.” He began singing the song then.

I frowned. Max had found a frog in the lake and was cradling it in his hands, sitting on the far side of the lake. “But that part’s so sad, even though the music is so happy.”

My father sighed, and it seemed to send waves through the lake and back again. “That’s the point, Michelle. Well, I suppose you’re old enough to understand now—”

I was not old enough to understand.

“I always wanted to *be* something, you know. Be someone great, I guess. Do something impactful. Who doesn’t want to stand out in some way? Who doesn’t want to leave a great impact on the world? And I don’t know entirely what that means, because it’s great that I have you and your brother. But I settled when I was young. I really did.” My father dropped his voice as Max swam closer, his newfound frog pet resting on his mop of hair.

“I guess the truth is . . .” he starts, scratching the back of his head and angling his head down, almost as if it’s too shameful to say. “I was too afraid.”

I don’t know. Maybe my dad never changed. Maybe I just grew up.

**Before long, it gets** too cold to reasonably be in the pool. There’s a sign that says the pool closes at 11pm, but it’s 11:27 and no one’s come to kick us out yet. Hendrix and I are freezing and we’re no longer having any fun, so we climb out.

The cerulean pool steams, despite not being much warmer than the cool Montana night. I toss Hendrix a white towel that feels a bit spiky, like it’s been bleached within an inch of its life. He takes the towel to his hair. After he pulls it off his head, his dark brown hair sticks up in thick waves. I smile.

“What?” he asks, defensive.

“Nothing, you just look . . . nice,” I say, tucking the ends of the towel under my arms.

“Thanks,” he says, mostly confused, but there’s a twinge of self-indulgent arrogance thrown in. It hits a nerve, sending waves of feeling through me. Elliot always used to brush off my genuine compliments with something cocky. It was to mask his crushing insecurity.

I blow air through my lips, as if that would expel the painful nostalgia of times gone by.

Sometimes I hate that Sarah won't get out of my head. There isn't a day that goes by where her impression isn't bearing down on me, in the little moments when a word from her favorite place gives an experience meaning. When I see—no, feel—those fleeting moments of authenticity, of intimacy, of vulnerability. Moments her and I had together. Moments I so desperately lack now.

Hendrix and I wander back into our room via the sliding glass door. Each ground floor room leads right onto the pool deck, but all the curtains are drawn. There are only three cars in the parking lot, not including mine. No one has their lights on.

We're silent as we take turns showering and getting ready for bed. I keep the shades open, letting the thin light seep onto the threadbare, patterned carpet so I can see the mountains, the trees, and more importantly, the stars.

As Hendrix and I climb into the same bed, it strikes me how strange this is. I've never routinely slept in the same bed as someone else. I've gotten to know his habits too. How he always comes to bed after me. How he always starts off sleeping on his back, but then turns to one side after a while. How he gets up to piss and smoke at around 4am every night. How he snores just a little bit. Sometimes I'll wake up in the middle of the night, afraid that there's a murderer crouched over me in the dark, but it's just Hendrix's soft snoring beside me.



We zone out on our phones for a while as my hair dries. I check my messages, seeing that I have about seven unopened Snapchats and a few texts. Nothing out of the ordinary. Not one asking where I am, though.

And one missed call from my dad. No voicemail.

Hendrix suddenly sits up, hunched over his phone. “My dad just texted me.”

“Oh,” I say. I’m not jealous. This is the first time one of Hendrix’s parents has contacted him. “What does it say?”

“Where are you? I’m sorry.”

I click my tongue. “Sounds desperate,” I say. Spite runs bitter through me, and I hate that it does. I can’t help but think, *damn, even Hendrix’s asshole of a father can manage an apology. Mine didn’t even leave a voicemail.*

“Sounds pathetic, you mean,” Hendrix sneers.

I bark out a laugh before I can think about it.

“What’s so funny?” Hendrix says. He turns around and stands, a dark figure against the stained wallpaper. I can tell he’s angry, and the moonlight from the floor reflects in his wet eyes.

“Nothing,” I shrug. Shit, I can feel it happening again. I’m freezing up. This is not how I expected this interaction to go. I’m being a bitch; I know I am, but I can’t seem to stop it. It’s like a fixed action pattern, something hard-wired into my DNA.

The words and radical thoughts Sarah planted in me only seem to blossom, to fractal out further and further until they make *too* much sense. I don't really know how to react to Hendrix, the text, any of it. Well, I know how I *want* to react. I want to throw my phone into the tube television. I want to tell Hendrix he should be grateful that his dad is reaching out. I want to call my parents up and demand why they haven't texted or called more, or even left a goddamn voicemail. Why they haven't noticed I left.

I want them to notice I left.

But that would be hypocritical, so I do nothing.

"What's so *fucking* funny?" Hendrix almost shouts, his voice pressing against the ceiling.

"Nothing," I say. Defensively. Fear sends a spike up my diaphragm and through my heart. Now Hendrix is the one raising his voice and being a bitch.

He fumes at me for a second more, and then says, "I need to smoke."

I'm still frozen as Hendrix slams the door behind him. And then I scream into my pillow. It smells offensively of laundry detergent.

*why am i like this?*

Sometimes I think I asked Hendrix to come on this trip with me just so I could have someone to lash out at. I can't say that I haven't done something like this before. But that's not the whole truth. I want to connect with him. With each interaction, I can tell there's

something there. Some magnetism pulling us together like polar opposites.

I bury my face in the pillow again, groaning. Does everyone feel as terrified as I do? Why do I crave authenticity and intimacy so intensely, only to freeze up when opportunities present themselves? If I want intimacy so bad, why do I always fuck it up? I am a walking contradiction, and I hate myself for it.

But I realize—the defense mechanism I used with Hendrix was useless. It not only hurt him, but it hurt me. Are we just like the people Billy Joel sings about in “Piano Man”? Just people floating by, plagued by the regret, loneliness, and pain that mars our lives?

Something painful clicks together in my heart, like popping a joint back into place. It makes me tense up, the sensation rolling through my body. I think of Hendrix, of Sarah and Elliot. I think of my dad and Max. Their faces pass me by like silhouettes, and I feel the magnetism, the flow back and forth that keeps us connected and alive. Maybe the separation I feel is only in my own head. Maybe we’re all cut from the same cloth.

Sighing and rubbing my eyes, I stand up and look out the window, hoping to see Hendrix there. He is, but he’s looking right back up at me. I gasp and turn back around, tucking the curtain closed. My heart pounds and I begin to cry, tears rolling down my cheeks.

When I close my eyes, I swear I can hear “Piano Man” playing on a loop, crackly and coming in through the speakers of the SUV. Almost like a ghost, like how you can never truly get the smell of smoke out from a place until you rip the guts bare and expose all of the hidden places.

Only then can you begin to rebuild.

# 15 Hendrix

Wednesday, May 23rd

**My parents were never** the type to take their kid to the doctor because of “behavioral problems”. They just thought it was because they didn’t beat me enough when I was little. Since specialists and psychiatrists were out of the question, I had nowhere else to turn to but the internet.

The thing about the internet is that the most desperate corners draw the most desperate kinds of people. As soon as I had access at

home, I was just the kind of person who would crawl those dark corners, looking for some semblance of validation.

Not all of it was deplorable, though. A lot of it was research at 3am, trying to find a name for the sticky, numb feeling that invaded my body in times of stress. Trying to find out if anyone else craved violence and bloodshed the same way I did. Trying to find out if anyone else had the same darkness living in their head like a parasite. Trying to find a language for the unique and twisted sort of pain that has plagued my every moment.

But the only thing all that internet-searching did was make me afraid. Afraid of myself.

**Outside, the night is** still and frozen. Not cold, just frozen. Like someone hit pause. As I look across the two story motel from the entrance, nearly every light is off, except for the hanging lamps outside the small lobby. In the darkness, the garishly-decorated motel looks sepia-toned—even the rusty red metal railings with chipping paint. I light a cigarette, and the smoke curls toward the sky with no wind to disrupt its path.

I fight against the numbness as it detaches my soul from my body. I'm shaking, but I doubt that Arden can see it from our motel window. The adrenaline, the white-hot anger, has got my veins racing like fire. I kick my leg back into the pole I've been leaning on, the pain burying into my bones. Flakes of paint fall to the cracked asphalt.

This is a big fucking mess. I've had countless opportunities to kill her, to end this, and I've taken exactly zero of them. I pull out my

phone again, the text still unopened. I stare at it until the cigarette starts to burn my fingers.

“Shit!” I fling the butt out of my hand. Reaching for more, I realize the box is empty. I start walking across the nearly empty parking lot, but turn around right before I leave the motel property. Arden ducks out of the window, the curtain falling back into place.

She was watching me. I wanted Arden to be afraid of me. Why isn't she afraid of me?

For some reason, this pisses me off. This bitch goes and tries to make everything about her when *my* dad texts *me*. I bristle with anger.

Scuffling down the sidewalk, I open my phone again. The text haunts me, sticking around like a bad cold.

*Where are you? I'm sorry.*

I can barely imagine him saying those words. It's not like he's never apologized, but they never meant anything. He never changed.

I'm reminded of how Arden reacted when her dad called. She nearly threw her phone out of the window. I understand that I probably should empathize with her. She's probably going through her own shit. Too bad I don't care. It gets in the way of my own.

I speed up my pace when I see a gas station a few blocks down. Looks like the only place that's open this late. Its bright logo and sign advertising prices glow like a neon moon in the dark, mountain settlement.

I wander in, gazing at the wall of cigarette packs behind the middle-aged man at the counter.

“I’d like a pack of Marlboros,” I say, slapping a wad of ones on the sticky counter.

“ID,” the cashier says, reaching behind him.

Even though I’m eighteen, I take out one of my fake ones. Better not have this asshole knowing my name and address just in case this is the night I decide to off Arden. He hands me the pack, and I tell him to keep the change. On the counter is a display of patterned lighters. I could use a new one. Holding one up to the light, I toss it up and catch it in my fist.

And then I walk out.

I can hear the man hollering at me, struggling to get out from behind the counter from where he parked his fat ass. Slamming the door behind me, I light my fresh cigarette as he runs toward me.

As if in slow motion, I bend down and pick up a rock—a sharp and jagged lump of broken asphalt and throw it straight through the front window. The alarm screams against the night, and the crash of glass is like ice. A sickening cocktail of anxiety and adrenaline ripples through me, but I can’t help but smirk. And then I run, because the devil really is chasing me now.

I let the adrenaline take me back to the motel, my skin cold and alive. My old habits, they’ve followed me here. Of course they would. I toss the end of my cigarette to my left, and it lands right at the base of the tires on Arden’s car.



*Arden.*

I glance back to see if the cashier from the gas station or the police are after me, but the street is quiet again. Serene, as if I wasn't even there. After catching my breath, the fake good-feelings dissipate and all that's left is the empty. A crushing sense of visceral *loneliness*—the eternal feeling of being alone in my skin. The nothing—painful, unforgiving, and so incredibly dark. It buries itself into all the hollow places, and believe me, there's a lot of places for that darkness to go.

As I sit down on the gravel, my back against the tire, pieces of our previous interaction flash through my mind. Her defensiveness. My anger. The knife at my side bites into my flesh.

Taking out my phone, I finally open the text from my dad. That's all it says: *where are you? I'm sorry.*

The words make my stomach twist. I slam it down on the concrete, half-hoping that I break the damn thing. The truth impales me, unwilling to be ignored. My father is the only person I can't manipulate. Around him, I am out of control. Powerless. Worthless.

I guess the text took me off guard, because in that moment, if Arden had wanted to scream at me, beat me, take away everything I had, she damn well could have. In that moment, it felt like I was back home, and there was nothing I could do to stop the destruction that would have inevitably followed.

I look back over to our motel window, the curtain still and dark. The anger rises up in me again because it's becoming harder and harder to manipulate Arden. She makes me feel so torn open, so dissected, so out of control. She makes me *feel*. How long can we string along these lies, delaying the end of this game? How long until whatever we're running from catches up to us?

I twist around and stab the tire behind me with my knife. The air wheezes out, and my chest heaves along with it. I'm just so sick of it. I'm sick of Arden playing with me. I'm sick of not being in control. I'm sick of road tripping. I'm sick of *feeling*.

I need to take matters into my own hands.

Lit aflame like bone-dry cotton, I stand and dig my knife into Arden's front tire, sawing at the black rubber. Then the third one. I leave one tire inflated, just to fuck with her.

**When I sneak back** into the motel room, the first thing I'm struck by is how it smells faintly of chlorine and perfumy soap, the kind they use to make old, dingy carpets smell like flowers. I'm hoping that Arden's asleep when I come back into the motel room, but the second I walk in, she jumps up to face me.

"What?" I say.

"I just wanted to apologize, again. I'm sorry for reacting that way. Sometimes I have a hard time with that, but I just wanted you to know that it's a bad habit that I'm trying to break. So, uh, I'm sorry if

I hurt you. And, um, I understand, if getting that text was hard for you. Having my dad call was hard for me.”

Firecrackers explode inside my gut. I glance over at the patterned curtains, fluttering softly as the air conditioning unit runs. Like vomiting razor blades, I push the words out. “I forgive you.” *Lies.*

Arden swallows, and then steps forward and hugs me. I hug her back, knowing full well I just fucked both of us with the number I did on her tires.

Guilt, cold and slimy, grows like a cancer inside me. I’m afraid it’s too late now.

# 16 Arden

Thursday, May 24th

Can you ever really love someone you don't truly know? By that logic, maybe none of us ever know each other. There's something so incredibly lonely about that.

What makes it even more lonely is that we get so good at thinking we know people. I thought I knew Sarah; I thought I knew Elliot. The heartbreaking thing is that they probably thought they knew me, too.

Sometimes what happens, I think, is that we delude ourselves into thinking we know everything about someone. That they could never pull a 180 on you. As if the ideals we have painted over other people won't come running off once the rain comes.

**Hockey season was winding** up that winter. Things were going well, although I knew he was going to be significantly busier now. We were graduating soon and coming up on our one year anniversary. Things were good.

On Saturday, the last hockey game before winter break, I sat alone in the stands of the rink, waiting for Elliot to come out so we could go to his house. His mom was making matoke stew—my favorite of her authentic cooking. She was as sharp as a tack and loved me. She always shared embarrassing childhood photos of Elliot with me on Facebook, except she never could figure out how to send them in a private message so all of the photos would end up on my timeline.

That night, however, the rink felt especially empty. The ashy ice made my breaths sound hollow, the distant clanks of metal and boys roughhousing in the locker rooms from another world. Only minutes ago, this rink had been full of screaming, celebrating fans, families. I heard the rustle of a worker picking up empty popcorn bags and neon pamphlets. It felt empty. Soon, neither Elliot nor I would be here anymore. Some other high school kids would play on this rink. Some other girl would sit here, waiting for her boyfriend to come so they

could half watch a movie, half talk about the stars and kiss under them.

*These places . . . they're haunted.*

When Elliot and his teammates finally came out of the locker room, he threw a wave my way. It was casual, friendly, but when it hit me, it struck hollow. He usually came up, threw his sweaty arm around me, kissed me, told everyone I was his girl.

He texted me. *I'll meet you in your car.*

My 2003 Oldsmobile Alero. As red as a Solo cup. I had kissed in that car. I had sobbed in that car. I'd smoked in it, and I had hated and loved in it. It was a portable safe place—more of a home than my own room was.

In that damned vehicle, I turned over the engine and blasted the heat. Montana winters were brutal. The cold would cut down to your bones and bury there, and the snow has been known to cancel school for a week. I turned the radio on, down low until it was just a warm murmur.

As Elliot got in, we leaned over to kiss as we did out of habit. But to me it still felt like it meant something, even after all these months, all these nights.

Elliot pulled away early, our faces hanging in the air between us. I leaned in, just a touch. But he cleared his throat and leaned back, cleverly avoiding another kiss. He turned off the radio, and silence clicked into place.

“What?” I asked. “Is something wrong?”

“No,” he said.

“Is your mom not making food tonight? Are we going to have to get takeout again?”

“No,” he said.

“No to your mom cooking or no to takeout, because—”

“I’m breaking up with you, Michelle.”

In elementary school PE, everyone’s favorite day was the obstacle course. Every kid got so excited when they saw the hoola hoops and the trampolines and the jumping mats set up all across the gymnasium. But one day in second grade, while I was trying to do the monkey bars, I made a mistake. I didn’t get a good enough grip on the bar, and I slipped.

And I fell flat on my back. Sometimes I can still hear the smack and feel the sting across my skin. It was like someone attached a vacuum tube to my gut. For a full three seconds, my ribs were stuck to the floor and my heart pounded, my lungs like deflated, overused balloons.

That’s what his words felt like.

“What? Why?” I said.

“I just . . . I’ve been really swamped with my new job at the movie theater, and now hockey is starting up and stuff. It’s totally not you. I still like you a lot, I just think we need to take a break or something because I just don’t have time for all this anymore—”

“Get out.”

“What?” he said.

For a moment, I considered not doing it. I considered hearing him out. I considered letting him stay in my car, with the slim chance we could talk this out, end it civilly.

“Get the *fuck* out of my car.” Someone had jammed my heart through an apple slicer, the pieces flayed out like a blood red rose. I’m not sure I really wanted him to leave, but I needed the space. His words had crowded out the car—we were drowning in it.

“Michelle, please hear me out. It’s not you—”

“It’s *Arden*, for God’s sake! And did you not hear me? I said get out of my car!” I shouted. I shouted because I knew if I didn’t, I’d start sobbing.

Elliot gives me one last look. Something behind his eyes broke, but I couldn’t see it right then. All I saw was the lies, the betrayal on his lips. Later however, that brokenness behind his eyes—it haunted me.

Then he got out, and I sped away.

I pounded the steering wheel until the bones in my hands ached. I screamed until my voice gave out. I turned the music up so I could feel it in my chest, in the hollow space where my heart was now in pieces. I drove out to the outlook, where I went after Sarah, where I went that Wednesday night after work. The one that feels like ages ago. And I sobbed.



Because I wasn't enough for him to stay. I wasn't enough for him to fight, to make the time. *I wasn't enough.*

Even now, I can't fathom how he could do that to someone. Just up and leave, for a goddamn movie theater job no less.

I would never do that to someone.

Would I?

It wasn't until after that I realized I used him. Yes, I loved him, but I also used him. Strange how those two things can exist in the same space. He became a weapon I used to gain attention and affection, both from him and others. He was where I found my meaning, my self worth. What a great foundation to build a relationship upon. Maybe that's just what broken people do. Use each other.

Elliot and I ignore each other now. Afterwards, I kind of hated myself for leaving him like that. But he left me first, so of course I was going to leave him harder. Yes, I still hate myself for it. Have I forgiven him? To an extent, yes. Have I forgiven myself? I don't know.

At this point, you'd think I wouldn't have anything left of me to leave behind anymore. I had left behind so many places and people until I started feeling just as strange, just as empty. I suppose I was just leaving a trail of breadcrumbs, leading to and from my own destruction.

I left so many parts of myself in those places, until I too became just a place left behind.

And the cycle goes on.

**Hendrix and I** rolled out of bed at the ripe hour of 8am and checked out of the motel by 9—only to find that some asshole slashed three of my tires last night.

“Well, fuck.” I drop my bag onto the gravel. Hendrix glares at me, like there’s anyone here who gives a damn what comes out of my mouth. “Shit. What are we gonna do now?”

Nothing but a couple of unsure stutters come out of Hendrix’s throat.

I scoff. “Oh my God, you’re useless, you know that?”

Hendrix’s nose flares, and his knuckles, wrapped around the handles of his bags, turn white.

“Sorry, that was awful. I just—God!” I exclaim. This doesn’t seem to satiate Hendrix, but then again, what does?

“Maybe we should call someone,” Hendrix suggests, but there’s a twinge in his voice that sounds teasing, threatening. Nonchalant. Seething, it makes my blood boil even more. It’s like he doesn’t care.

I blink. “Yeah, and tell them that our first order of business was to commit petty theft? You remember those cops that came into that bar? What the *hell* would we tell our parents?” I turn toward Hendrix, the morning sun casting harsh and ugly shadows around us.

Hendrix stops, grits his teeth. “The truth.”

“Oh yeah, and you’re really great at being honest, huh?” Sighing, I back off. I press my palms to my temples, breathing and poking my fingers into the slits in the black rubber. My fingers come away black with dirt. I can tell you right now that we don’t have enough money to replace three tires. Installation fees, cost of the tires, absolutely no insurance, the cost of a tow truck . . .

Actually, we have bigger concerns: how do we get anywhere from here? My beloved Oldsmobile has gone to shit.

What I do know is that we can’t go back. *I can’t go back*, because my world will be nothing but disappointed eyes and sad pats on the back and lips curled just enough to show how bloody disappointed everyone is in me. But really, what else is new?

Point being: we can’t go back. I *will not* go back. There is still something to be had from this; I just don’t know what it is. I can feel it in my bones, in my soul. So, I hike up my shorts and haul my bag higher on my shoulders, and start walking down the road. I hear Hendrix follow.

“Whoa, where are you going?” he asks.

“I don’t know,” I say. Speaking it aloud almost boosts my false sense of confidence. The sun shines down into the valley, cutting through everything and blotting the sky to a piercing white. Hendrix’s luggage rumbles over the gravel.

“Are you just going to leave your car there? Where the hell are you going?” Hendrix’s voice rises with intensity, to a level that sends

hackles raising on my neck. My vision tunnels, the green falling away until it's just blackness.

I whip around to face Hendrix, and his nagging questions halt. “No, Hendrix, I *don't* know where we're going. My tires are fucking pancakes, and unless you've got a couple hundred bucks lying around, I can't pay for a tow truck or new tires right now. I don't know where the hell we're going because I've never known! You want to know why I went on this fucking trip? *I don't know!*” I scoff, dropping my bag on the gravel, moving closer to him. His nostrils flare at me, as if he's warning me, but I keep going. “I don't know, but all I know is that I had to get out of that fucking town, and I dragged you into this and . . . and you can't leave now. You can't.”

Hendrix swallows, meeting my red-hot frustration with cold indifference, when he himself was just yelling at me a moment ago. “Why not?”

I sneer. “Because they'll blame this on you. You're the guy, and you're bigger than me. They'll think you kidnapped or murdered me, and maybe I'll let them believe that.” It's awful, I know, but I cross my arms and step back.

Fire rages behind his eyes as he scans me, evaluating the situation. “I saw they had bike rentals around here. We could take those.”

I blink. Just like a match being snuffed out, all the anger previously seen in Hendrix is gone. He seems to mirror me—when I'm hot, he's cold. I'm so stunned that I just watch as he strolls right past me, toward the bike rentals.

I run after him, dragging my bag. I toss one good look at my car. Someone's going to find it and see the receipts from restaurants, the old shoes, the ice scraper that I had to buy. They're going to smell the drugstore perfume and the hockey scent from Elliot's hoodie that I still haven't given back to him because I'm a coward.

My car is now a place left behind. And just like that, I leave all the pain behind, trapped inside the cabin of my red 2003 Oldsmobile Alero.

I glance over at Hendrix, and he's studying me right back. "Let's go, then," I say.

About half a mile down the road, there's a small wooden shack with an old geezer manning the station. A wood-carved sign advertises bike rentals and an entrance into Lolo National Forest. The sun pokes in through the dappled trees, the gravel crunching as we approach the man. The late spring air is balmy and warm. What a beautiful day for the world to fall apart.

"You pay as you go," he says. He blinks at us like he couldn't be more disinterested, his white stubble pushing through his leathery skin. "There's a timer on it. Rates are \$2 an hour, plus a flat rate of \$5 to start. We close at dusk."

I rustle through my wallet, smiling through my teeth as I realize that I've only got two \$20 bills left and a few ones. Who knows what Hendrix has. "Thanks," I say.

I glance over at Hendrix, who stands solid as the old man brings out bikes for us to try out. We hop on the bikes, and the old man regurgitates the rules to us that I tune out. I'm too focused on what we're really doing. We're really doing this. *I'm* really doing this. There's something in these woods, and beyond them. The world is big and beautiful, and I want to get a good look at it before I grow up and can't see the stars anymore.

But another voice chimes in. *What the hell are we doing?* I worked all summer for that car. Am I really going to leave it behind?

Yes. Absolutely. And all of the shitty things that happened inside it.

Hendrix eyes me as I stroll back over. "You ready?"

I sigh. Am I? The voice in my head reminds me that I have no idea where we're even headed to begin with. Just anywhere but where we are now. "As ready as I'll ever be."

We speed down the trails, keeping an eye on the map that I snagged from the stand—always heading west. Technically, the trails are a big loop so eventually we'll circle back to the rental place, but we'll cross that bridge when we get there. The wind blows through my hair, and the summer sun paints our skin with bronze. My anxiety from earlier is mysteriously gone, and I can't help but think to myself that this is good. The speed, the mountain air, the trees—it's all good. Hendrix even seems to be having a good time.

On a rocky ledge overlooking a field, Hendrix stops, and we soak in the view. I smile, the sun painting the grass golden, and the trees a striking, warm green. The mountains and clouds in the distance turn

a deep, cobalt blue. I dig in my bags for my camera. “Beautiful, ain’t it?” I say. The air is sweet, like the sticky tips of clover. The wind rustles Hendrix’s dark waves with a soft hand.

But he doesn’t say anything. He just hops off his bike, and fiddles with the timer on the top bar of the bike, below the handlebars.

“What are you doing?” I ask, but I feel like I already know the answer.

He looks up at me. “Taking off the timer. We have no intention of returning these bikes, do we?”

I laugh once. “No. Right. Yeah.” In the beauty of the trail, I almost forgot our original intentions. Hendrix’s sudden willingness takes me by surprise. It makes me uncomfortable, actually. This whole trip, I’ve had to drag him along like a sack of potatoes, and then all of a sudden we want to go off the grid and he’s all for it? The familiar kick of adrenaline flickers to life in me.

My sweaty fingers fumble with the buckle, and the timer falls to the side, but it’s still connected by a zip tie. And then—of course—Hendrix whips out his knife.

He points the blade at me, and my neck tenses. He recognizes that I’m confused so he flips the knife around. I take it and saw through the plastic

Hendrix removes his timer, and I hold mine up to the light. “Should we leave them here? Break them? Send them careening into the valley?”

He scratches his cheek. “No, they might have trackers. We should just leave them on the trail just in case they come looking. If we smash them, that guy will probably figure it out.”

“Yeah, right. You’re right,” I say, holding the device in my hands. And then I walk to the edge and throw the device into the prairie grass, and watch as it tumbles down the hilly incline.

Hendrix comes up behind me, scoffing lightly, as if he’s just a little bit proud of me. He tosses his over as well.

“That’s that, then,” I say, glancing over at him.

He raises his eyebrows. “It is.”

I grab his hand, feeling the surge of adrenaline that sends my blood running golden. I remember my camera and take it off from around my neck. “Hey, we should take a picture together. To remember this moment.”

Hendrix frowns. “Why?”

I scoff. “Hendrix, can you just humor me for five seconds and let me take a picture? Besides, we’ve been on this misadventure for four days, and I have no pictures with my road trip buddy.”

He sneers. “*Road trip buddy?*”

“Yes, road trip buddy,” I insist. “Now, smile.”

“Fine,” he grumbles.



Extending my arm, I hold up my camera to our faces, making sure that I get the gorgeous mountain valley in the background. One click, and it's done. I turn the camera around, checking to see if it's a good one.

"Perfect," I say, and I catch Hendrix leaning over my shoulder to peek at the picture. See, he does give a shit sometimes. "Let's go, Hendrix. We haven't got anything else to lose."

He smirks at this, and we jump on our bikes and ride.

For most of the day, the scenery is bright and colorful. The sun dusts the summer grass in gold, and the mountains open up like the mouths of whales to reveal the pastel sky. Often, Hendrix carries a near-tactile mood with him, but this time, even that falls away and the darkness disappears from the corner of his eyes. It relaxes the knot in my gut for a while.

We stop for lunch in a wider part of the path, next to a grove of pine trees, spaced apart and waving in the slight wind.

"So we're still on the trails, right?" I ask, picking at my granola bar.

Hendrix glances at the pamphlet. "Yeah. But the trail circles back around a few miles ahead. We'll either have to take the Mountain Ridge one, or trek our own path west until we get out of the woods."

"Literally, or metaphorically?" I tease, smirking up at him.

"What?" He frowns at me.

“Nevermind. Maybe we’ll try the Mountain Ridge, but eventually we’re going to have to go completely off the grid.”

Hendrix pauses. “You sound apprehensive.”

“And you’re not?”

I can tell Hendrix thinks about this for a while, because the sharpness in his eyes flickers for a moment. Then he just shrugs.

I sigh. “Let’s go, then.”

**Thursday, May 24th. 3pm.** That’s when Hendrix and I diverge from the beaten path and go completely off-grid. We belong to no one now.

The afternoon clouds roll in like the underbelly of a wave, taking a washcloth to the hard edges of light and shadow. Eventually, we have to walk our bikes up the forested ridge because the area below is too heavy with brush to drag the bikes through. From here, I can see the world. Or, rather, my slice of it. Somehow, nothing else seems to matter out here. And I like that.

We stop for a moment, though, when I take out my digital camera. It’s just too beautiful not to photograph.

However I notice Hendrix scrunching his face at me. “Why do you have to photograph everything?” he asks.

I sigh. “Because I live in the past.”

“What?” He says it like I just insulted him and not myself.

Holding up the camera to my eye, I capture the yellow fields, the evergreen forest, and the gaping blue sky, forever imprinted in an arrangement of ones and zeroes. I'll forever remember where I took this photo and who I was with. Not just the image is imprinted—now the memory is, too. “Because I want to capture the good stuff in life and put it in a bottle and relive it over and over again.”

The darkness around Hendrix is so deep I can barely see his eyes. “That’s not how life works.”

His voice—so harsh and severe and *hopeless*—makes me inhale sharply. “I know.”

Breathing carefully, I lift the camera up to my face, aim the lens at Hendrix, and—*click*.

**The afternoon light has** turned gray, a pale sheet that barely pierces through the trees. When the landscape changes and the forest only gets denser and the trees only get taller, something takes flight in my stomach. Except then that something flutters and fights against the wind and falls to its death. Hendrix hasn’t smoked in a while, and it’s actually a bit concerning. Digging my fingernails into my thigh, I check my watch—5pm.

*Fuck.* We should be out of here by now, shouldn’t we? And then it hits me—I don’t know how large this forest is. I don’t know where the next town is. The map only covers the trails. *I’m so stupid.*

My eyes travel up to Hendrix. He stopped a few paces ahead of me, facing into the endless forest. It's like a mirage—a sick, twisted optical illusion.

“Hendrix,” I say. “Do you know where we are?”

He scratches his head. “Uh, the sign said ‘Lolo National Forest’, probably near the Montana and Idaho border—”

“Wow, really, no shit,” I say. “No, what I mean is, how close are we to a town, a road, or something?”

Hendrix's voice catches in his throat. “Didn't you bring the atlas from your car or something?”

“I don't know!” I say, hopping off the bike and unzipping my backpack. But I must have misjudged something and all of my shit careens out of my bag, spilling onto the forest floor. “Shit.” Fear shakes my insides around like a baby's rattle.

I claw through my stuff, mud accumulating under my fingernails. Hendrix is just standing there, as helpful as a tree. No, actually, trees are more helpful. They produce oxygen. Hendrix produces nothing.

Since I'm a dumb bitch, I must have left the atlas in my car. Our phones are useless this far out. We could go back, but we'd be biking all night and it would be dark, but we'd have to deal with my car, and I can't go back. Maybe I've gone completely mad, but for some reason my gut tells me we can't backtrack. “Fuck.”

“What?” Hendrix spits, and with just that single word, something in my brain snaps, like the twig that crunches under my feet.

“What do you mean, *what*? I can’t find the atlas, and we’re lost, Hendrix. We’re *lost*. No one knows that we’re out here, and—” My voice cuts out. My vibrating anger has burned away into sobs that pound on my diaphragm. Break my chest in two like a wooden board. I’m terrified.

Hendrix’s jaw hovers in the air as he drinks in the forest around us, growing deeper and darker by the moment. “Yeah, we’re lost.”

It’s like another punch to the gut. God, he drives me up a fucking wall . . . if there were any walls around here. Rain starts, a hum in the forest, the droplets like cold daggers.

“How are you not freaking out?” I try and get angry again, but my entire torso seems to want to contract and disappear. I am a star falling in on herself. Tears stream down my cheeks. “What are we even doing, Hendrix?”

He pauses, while the sounds of my sobs are sucked into the trees. “I don’t know. You *fucking* tell me. This was your idea.”

My fingernails pinch the gummy flesh of my hand. The world is spinning, spinning, spinning around me. I am a toy top almost out of momentum, wobbling and weaving. I’m sick of it. I’m sick of him. I’m sick of *myself*. There’s nothing but fear and pain and anger at myself and Hendrix, and I can’t stop myself from speaking.

“Why, Hendrix? Why do you act so cool and detached? This is serious—like, life or death serious—and you’re just standing there like we’re talking about the fucking weather!” My words are starting to get cut off by my sobs and I’m nearly pleading with Hendrix for him to show me something something *something* because his calm demeanor only makes me think he’s just got a hollow cavity behind his eyes and that I must be traveling with a ghost. That I am alone. Unable to be understood in my vain quest for . . . something.

And that scares the hell out of me.

Hendrix grits his teeth, licks his lips. But I can sense that fire, that seething anger, behind his eyes. Every move is methodical and purposeful, except his hands that clench and unclench at his sides. His lip nearly curls up in a snarl as he heaves his backpack over his shoulders, and he says: “Sorry, I guess I’m just not good enough.”

The words blindsides me. My gut drags me back to two nights ago when we were camping in the forest, where I said those exact words to Hendrix. My throat constricts—I’m going to vomit.

Hendrix backs away from me, the veins in his neck throbbing. He turns around and runs off into the forest like he’s the devil and God’s chasing him.

Forever and always, I am a place left behind.

# 17 Hendrix

Thursday, May 24th

If the police were to dig up my backyard, they'd find the skeletons of dozens of missing pets and wild animals. I'm not sure why I buried so many of them. If we used the animals for food, then I'd just throw them out with the trash. But the ones I killed in my wooden shed? Well, those were all six feet under. Fortunately enough for me, pets went missing all the time around here. That's what it's like when you live in a state with more cows than people.

I was good at keeping all this a secret. No one needed to know. It was my ritual, my blood-laiden sanctuary. It was my sanity. But as I've come to realize—the longer we carry secrets, the heavier they become.

**It was late January** of my junior year when Josh came over to work on homework after that fateful argument. Sometimes, when you get into a fight with someone you're close to, things are sticky for a while. Tender, like a bruised apple.

For a while, I was alright with our acquaintanceship. I told myself I didn't need anything else from him. Yet like a hole in worn fabric, the desire only grew wider and wider until it consumed my every waking thought. I wondered what would happen if I gave Josh a chance. Opened up *just a little bit more*.

So I told myself I was going to try and be more . . . authentic the next time he came over. All day, I had wound myself up tight. I told myself I was going to show him some of it. I was going to tell him about my grandpa. I was going to show him the animals I'd preserved, the skins I'd kept like trophies salvaged from the dungeon. Proof that I'd survived, somehow.

That week, the snow had done that weird thing where it melts a little and then freezes again overnight, so everything was loud. Crunchy and sharp. No way to move silently in this.

Josh and I had to walk from school to my house, because Dad had taken away my keys again, and neither Josh nor his family had enough money for another car. I'm surprised we didn't freeze. All Josh had on was one of those jackets that was denim on the outside



and wool on the inside, except the wool had matted and gone yellow. I think it was because this was his smoking jacket, and it had been weathered with years of use and lack of a deep clean. The jacket was distinctive. One time, he left it in my car, and man, did it stink. Not like B.O., but like bonfire, cigarettes, and weed.

We took a break from pretending to do homework around dinnertime. Dad still wasn't home from wherever he had run off to today. There wasn't much construction to do when the average temperature barely tips twenty degrees Fahrenheit. If it had been a sunny day, then the snow would have been glittering pink in the setting sun, but the mountains disappeared into the overcast sky, and the world was gray. Just like me.

"You wanna go outside?" I asked Josh, holding up two beers.

"Sure." We stepped out onto my back patio, which was really just a sliding glass door, a slab of broken concrete, and two wrought-iron chairs from the nineties. And a few yards away lay my wooden shed, the rotten wood black against the white snow.

Josh reached into his jacket pocket and opened the bottles with his knife. "Oh shit, your dad gets the good stuff."

"Yeah," I said, tipping the bottle back into my throat, but half of it comes back up and dribbles down my chin. "It still tastes like piss if you ask me."

Josh laughed. “Nah, I don’t know what you’re going on about. My old man never buys the good shit. Besides, he’d kick my ass if he knew I’d been drinking.”

Josh talked about his dad a lot, but never actually said much. From what I’d gleaned, he wasn’t a stand-up guy or anything, but I was never under the impression that it was ‘lock-him-in-jail’ bad. Until, of course, he actually did get locked up. “Your dad do that a lot, kick your ass?”

“Enough,” he said. We stood in the shadow of the house, but all around us, the world was cast in golden light.

I reached into my back pocket and pulled out a cigarette. “Want one?”

“Nope. That is definitely not my poison, Rix.”

Yes, I let Josh call me Rix. He found out about the nickname from some pricks from school who had known my grandpa from the bait & tackle shop. Everyone seemed to know my grandpa. Or, at least, they used to.

He was a hard man to forget.

But yeah, Josh called me Rix. I tried to get him to stop for a while, but Josh was a stubborn son of a bitch. After a while, I found the nickname charming again. It dragged those old demons to the surface and painted them in vibrant color.

I flicked the simmering cigarette butt into the snow, watching as it melted and died. Somewhere, under all this snow, are piles of cigarette butts, broken beer bottles, rusted farm equipment,

disintegrating boxes, and a roll of carpet Mom impulse-bought and never used. “Have I ever told you about my grandpa?”

“Yeah, that old geezer who owned Chuck’s Outdoor Supply back on Highway 312? Oh yeah, love the guy. My brother used to buy bait from him before—”

I socked Josh on the shoulder—partially kidding, partially not. “Hey now, he’s not an old geezer,” I said, but I caught myself smiling as Josh laughed. The warmth radiated from my chest like the heat of whiskey, turning me inside out. For a moment, I was reminded of what it’s like being alive. But the snow—it absorbed everything. Soon, we fall silent, and I speak again. “We were close, before.” Even our voices didn’t reach past our little circle.

Josh nodded his head, kicking back the last of his beer. “You gonna drink yours?”

“Yeah, eventually.” I started nursing that thing, just to get it down. Maybe I wouldn’t hate the buzz so much. I stared at my shed. The grimy, broken window. The patchwork tin roof.

*And all the darkness it contained.*

“Can I show you something?” I asked, forcing down another swallow of beer.

“Yeah, sure dude,” Josh said.

The world rose to a scream, as it so often did. Inside my head, I was kicking myself, screaming that this was so fucking stupid and that I shouldn’t do this, *you fucking no-good goddamn piece of shit.*

But I did it anyway, and look where it got me.

When you have nothing to lose, you can do anything. Unlucky for me, I did have something to lose that freezing January day.

It's a good thing I have nothing to lose now.

I opened the shed door. I pulled the chain, and the room flooded with light from a single lightbulb. The bright yellow cascaded over the animal skins, the bleached bones, the piglets suspended in formaldehyde. It shone across the lacquered rifles, the blade tips.

In a perfect world, I would have explained myself. In a perfect world, Josh would have understood. In a perfect world, I wouldn't have had to do what I did.

But we don't live in a perfect world. Nowhere close to it.

Josh didn't say anything for a moment, so I just stood there in the dying light and waited, my heart ramming headfirst into my sternum. I hoped by the time he was done looking, I would have finally pulled myself together enough to say something.

But it took him less than thirty seconds. "What . . . what the fuck is this?"

"It, uh, I . . . it's for . . ." *Shit*. This was a bad idea. This was a very bad idea. My gut turned sour. All of the raw vulnerability I was going to lay out for Josh snapped right back up, right back up behind closed doors and inside shotgun barrels and sealed jars of formaldehyde. What the hell did I think was going to happen, anyways?

“Dude, this is some fucked up shit. Is this stuff even legal?” Josh said. He was looking everywhere but me, his brow knotted, his hands barely grazing over the carnage on the walls.

“Doesn’t matter if it’s illegal or not,” I say, barely above a hiss. My voice was no longer my own. Not even the pain of my fingernails cutting moons into my palms could bring me back. The world went fuzzy, like television static.

“This . . . this is weird.” Joshua finally looked at me, but the disgust and concern previously scarring his face melted into fear. Slowly, his hands went up. “Are you okay, Rix?”

“Don’t  *fucking*  call me ‘Rix,’” I said. There were only a few swallows left in my beer bottle, so with a flick of my fingers, I turned the bottle upside down by my side. The beer dripped out onto the cold, dirt floor.

“Whoa, what the fuck is wrong with you, man? You’re being crazy, dude,” Josh said, taking a step back.

Rage growled beneath the surface. All of the words I had tried to string together, everything I was going to explain—it all flushed down the drain as I smashed the empty beer bottle against Josh’s face.

He cried out, stumbling against my wooden workspace. Blood, a bright and familiar sight, poured down his cheek. I grabbed him by the collar and dragged him out of my shed, slamming the door behind me.

Josh tried to run, but I tackled him. His tears diluted the blood on his face. I put my knee on his chest and bunched up his shirt in my fist. I got real close to his face until the frozen puffs of breath obscured his face. “Don’t you fucking tell anybody, or I swear to God, I’ll kill you! You fucking promise me you won’t say a damn thing! Fucking promise me!” I wasn’t sure where I was by then. Floating somewhere up above, watching the monster, watching the darkness paint the snow red.

Here’s the thing: most people seem normal and functional from a distance. Even good-natured, sometimes. But the closer you get to somebody, the uglier it gets. This was my ugly, and Josh had finally seen every fang, every claw, every corner of my darkness. I hated him for even just knowing about it. But when you treat someone like a monster, that is what they become.

Josh’s nose gushed blood, and his breath puffed hot in my face. Fear shone in his eyes. But still, nothing more than a whimper escaped from his throat.

My fingers trembling, I grabbed Josh by the neck, the world hot and cold all at the same time. He spit a mouthful of blood into my face, and I reeled back. Josh scrambled away from me, his wide eyes darting around in sheer terror.

Heaving and bloody, he shouted, “Everyone was right about you! Jesus Christ, you are fucking crazy!”

Even in that moment of sheer hatred and violence, his words cut right through all of it. I was exhausted. I was raw. And he was right. *I*

*am crazy*. It filled me with so much hate, because the only logical conclusion I could come to after that was *I deserve this*.

Joshua ran off, tripping and stumbling in the snow. I didn't have it in me to follow him. I just knelt on the ground, the cold seeping through my pants. The white snow melted into red, like some ancient war had been waged here. In a way, it had.

After, he told everyone that I tried to kill him. It showed that he was afraid of me, so I guess I had gotten what I wanted. Only thing was, I didn't actually try to kill him. I'll admit, there was a part of me that wanted to kill him. But I didn't. Couldn't. I don't know.

Joshua never pressed charges for the number that beer bottle did on his face. Regardless, he was gone, and everything that he had stitched up inside of me was ripped right back open. This darkness, it was always inside me. I was born with it. Actually, I think we all are. But these circumstances—they were the salve that pulled the splinter to the surface. And that darkness I had been staring at for so long . . . I ran headlong into it.

It was also late January of my junior year that I first thought about killing myself.

**Running.** I'm running through the forest, clawing at the branches and leaves that nip at my heels and drag me further and further back into the past. There's no other place to be.

Running from something I can't see. But I know I'm running from that clearing. I'm running from Arden's words that follow me like my own shadow. Those words that rip into me, expose me. Running from the secrets that rot my insides into mush.

*"You never leave this goddamn house so I can have some peace and quiet!"*

He's everywhere, in the shadow of the trees and in the wet ground. He's in my head, and he never ever ever leaves.

And *she* never leaves either.

I keep running, tripping over rocks with bushes threading through my legs. Birds screech as I trample blindly through the forest.

*"Never tell your father, Hendrix. Promise me that, sweetheart?"*

My mother, as soft as sand, as free as the ocean. As wild and destructive as fire. She loved me *she said she loved me* I know she loved me *I think she loved me*. Then why is she gone?

I can only see the world in smears of color: black, blue, green, and gray. My chest burns with rage and it feels so incredibly good and so terrifyingly awful all at once. Anger is the red monster that drenches my smoking coals with gasoline.

*"Your grandma was right—you're just like your father."*

The sun dancing across the water, the sensation of floating as little and big fingers push through the sand. The numb pounding of them leaving, like waves abusing the rocky shore. It comes, over and over and over and over and—



*“That insane junkie tried to kill me!”*

Pain, visceral and real, rips through me like a vengeful army taking no prisoners. Knees on the cold, hard earth. They’re in my head—they’re all in my head—snapping and bleeding and shredding at every sense of who I thought I was.

*They are the darkness.*

Electricity, burning bright and hot through me, at war with this ever-present darkness. Screams tear from my throat as I tug at my own hair, hitting my temples with my palms. My fingers tremble as I dig my hands into the wet earth, trying, pleading for it to *just stop for once in my pathetic fucking life.*

Pounding. War drums in my head, ones that cry for violence. The realization strikes like a bullet.

Arden. I want to kill her. *I want to kill her for the things she’s said for the things she’s made me do for the things she’s made me feel. For all the scabs she’s torn open in me.*

The knife is in my hand, cold and condensing in the humid air. I can’t stop it. My hands twitch; my arms ripple with pain. Like threads that caress each other as they fall apart, I approach the darkness, and the darkness approaches me once again. It never leaves.

*I am the darkness.*

And with these sensations comes *the nothing.* Blurry like shock. Buzzing like anger.

Heaving, I pull myself up. My eyes peer with laser-focus into the darkening forest. I listen and follow the sound to water, stepping slowly. Not a moment later I see it: on the shores of a small creek, stands a doe—a mule deer—drinking from the water that glimmers in the moonlight.

Like the snap of a branch, my body takes over. I know what I need to do. I'll do what I've always done. I curl behind a tree. My body has stilled, but my mind is in a frenzy. I am here, yet I am not.

Move closer. The deer doesn't even look up. Closer still. I can smell the sweet and muddy scent of the running water.

Almost there. The doe is barely within arm's reach.

I peel out from behind my tree. Her neck pops up. I freeze. My hands start shaking again. I close my eyes for a second. In the blackness, I visualize, savoring the build-up of anticipation: plunge, deep in the neck. Blood, bright and red.

Then it will be over.

I slowly move my knife into an attack position, but light must have caught the edge of the blade, because the doe startles.

My chest lurches forward, and the rest of me goes with it.

The knife digs into the rump area of the deer, shredding the muscle as the deer bucks in protest, kicking me hard in the gut. I scramble up and throw myself over the deer, whining and writhing under me.

And I feel the life—the sheer panic—flowing between me and this animal.

But these old habits, they die hard.

Blood, there's so much of it. It spills out in buckets, onto me and the cold earth, binding like glue. Stabbing over and over and over and over—into the neck, into the gut. The warm blood sprays onto me like hot rain from hell.

I'm screaming. Shouting, ripping as my hands tear at the fur and blood. *Why am I like this why am I like this why am I like this I wish I wasn't like this.*

Pain. Unlike I've ever felt before. It wrenches my heart from my chest and takes the rest of my body along with it. Pain that rips me to shreds like white-hot lightning and burns me to nothing. *Stop it stop it stop thinking these thoughts stop being this way.*

I shred the deer to a bloody pulp. I am falling apart. *They hate me because I'm like him.* I am falling apart. *He hates me because he thinks I'm the reason she's gone.* I am falling apart. I am the cracks, the poison in this ugly universe. I am the ancient ruins, the frozen moment of a tragedy long past.

*I am falling apart.*

*How can I fall apart if I don't know who I am?*

Hot tears stream down my face, and God, I fucking hate it. I am completely at the mercy of myself. *She's gone she's gone she said she loved me but she's gone.*

Slamming down, forever and ever, as my painful blows break bones inside of the deer. Quietly, like a song, I think: *these blows, I hope they break my own bones, too.*

# 18 Arden

Thursday, May 24th

I am so lonely.

It doesn't hit me until Hendrix disappears into the trees, but when it does, it falls like an avalanche of darkness. My chest aches, like someone's gouged out my heart with an ice cream scoop and shoved the carton to the back of the freezer to crystalize and burn.

The emptiness, the lonely solitude of the forest is only a reflection of my current state. But I am not at home here, either.

Hendrix, however strange and unstable he may be, is all I have now. I am all he has.

My world is crashing down, brick by brick. All I can do is watch as they fall, down down down into the darkness. “Hendrix!” I scream. Nothing. The crashing and rustling of brush only grows fainter. Why do I follow him? Why don’t I just go back to my car, go back to civilization and safety?

That’s a good fucking question, because this is really stupid.

“Hendrix! What the fuck are you doing? C’mon, Hendrix, I’m sorry, alright! I didn’t mean it!” Like the walls of Jericho, down comes my idea of safety. Down comes my hopes my dreams for what this would be about, for what this would be like. Something inside me ran away into the woods with Hendrix, because now I feel more lost than I ever have before.

*What have I done what have I done what have I done?*

Down comes all of my emotions, writhing and fluid like ghosts of centuries past, of a time I wish I knew. Down it all comes and I’m trying to hold it up with expectations and blind fucking hope that everything won’t just end up like it always does and that I’m going to be okay even though I’ve never been okay once in my whole pathetic life. Blinded by the blossoms of pain that open up inside me, I crash into the woods in the direction of Hendrix.

*We’re alone, in the woods, at night.*

“Hendrix! Where are you?” In between my desperate cries, the realizations come in like waves. How fucking naive of me, that I

thought I could do this, just run off in the middle of the night and bad things *wouldn't* happen?

*No one knows we're out here.*

I'm being pulled in five different directions as the world becomes a flash of green-blue-gray-black. I wanted to do this. I *needed* to do this, but now it's all just spiraling out of control and I am nowhere closer to where I wanted to be. My limbs buzz, and someone's pulled the plug on my stomach, swirling downward like draining a bathtub.

*Where do you want to be, Michelle?*

The question socks me in the gut as I'm holding my side stitch. The evening humidity is like breathing underwater. Or maybe it's because I'm drowning in my own mistakes, who knows? Tears burn at my eyes, and I scream after Hendrix. Trying to keep my chest from breaking apart into sobs, I pull myself forward into the woods, deeper into the shit mess I've created.

It seems I've tripped on the urge to feel alive.

That's what all of this is, right? Just a fucking facade, but we can't stop now. There's no going back because *I* can't go back. We're in too deep now. There's nothing to go back to. My family doesn't care enough to try and find me. All of my friends are either gone or don't mean shit. Not to mention, we're *lost*. We're lost we're lost *we're lost* and it's all my fault for being so stupid, for desiring something I could never have. I am Narcissus, caught in a cycle of my own self-absorption.

Like a disappointed angel on my shoulder, I can almost see Sarah wagging her finger at me. “*Did you learn nothing from me?*” Despite her best efforts, the guilt barely stops me. My soul floats like a ghost behind me, tied to my waist as my body propels me through the forest. The trees are no longer picturesque pines—they tower over me like giant monsters, their long, arching arms grabbing for me. The overhanging branches are greedy hands, pulsing with jealousy—desire of what they need but can’t have.

Finally, I see red amongst the blue-green. A red that I follow because there’s nothing else to follow. Breathing only because I need to find Hendrix and make sure that he’s okay because I am not okay.

Shouts. Grunts. Cries. They all come from the red, and I see shapes that pulsate along with the dying star inside of me.

And then the world snaps back into alarming focus.

Hendrix is covered in blood, shiny like burgundy paint. He’s thrusting a knife into the belly of a doe, over and over. He thrashes and screams like he’s a puppet controlled by the devil. It’s the worst thing I’ve ever seen.

For a moment, I can’t speak. There’s just the ringing in my ears as the bombs go off.

And then I scream.

“Hendrix! Hendrix, stop it! What the fuck are you doing?” I shout, but he just keeps on hacking away, blood spraying into the air and freezing mid-explosion. “Hendrix! Hendrix, please!” I scream



over and over, but nothing seems to stop the blood and the guts and the cries and the sheer panic that grips my neck and *won't. Let. Go.*

Then I do the unthinkable. I careen forward and grab Hendrix by the waist, using the ground to push upwards. “Stop it, stop it please!” I shout, but he just continues to scramble and thrash violently, stabbing the air with the knife.

I feel him sobbing under my grip. Once I drag his bloodied figure away from the deer, I drop him and stand—only to immediately fall to my knees, weeping. My heart bleeds like the carnage before us. I am a ship anchored at sea, barely floating and tossed about by the wind and waves.

Hendrix heaves as he sits up on his hands. He looks on in horror at the bloody, gory mess before us. Without acknowledging me, he buries his face in his red-stained hands and sobs—really sobs, like he hasn't felt this much in a million years.

And my heart breaks—splits, like overwatered tomatoes in the burning summer heat. What irrevocably broken creatures we are.

# 19 Hendrix

Thursday, May 24th

**Blood. That's all I can see.**

I'm sitting on a rock, the fleshy carcass of the deer bleeding into the dirt. Forever frozen in death. I hear Arden berating me, but it's from a thousand miles away. Muffled, disconnected, like punching a pillow. She's crying. No, sobbing.

But I'm somewhere else.

*I'm the shore, the rocks where the waves crash against the Pacific Northwest.*

*I'm hoisted on top of his shoulders as he blasts classic rock out of the truck.*

*I'm the cold knife in every moment that has harmed, that has hurt.*

*I'm the hard, worn down carpet that shreds the skin on my knees.*

*I'm the buzz, the static, the empty places of where I held on instead of let go. Where I was the one who build these walls of brick and mortar around me, painted red with blood.*

I killed a deer. Not with a rifle, not to hunt. But in a cloud of rage, lost in my suffocating world of anger and pain. It's now that I realize that I've been lost in this world, in this darkness, my entire life. Everyone else has moved on without me.

“What the hell did you do, Hendrix?”

Her voice pulls me out of it, but not entirely. Blinking feels like the shutter of a camera, mechanical and harsh. I feel dirty—sticky with blood, although I'm sure my tears have washed some of it away.

“I . . . I dunno.”

Arden presses her palms against her temples. “Oh, my God. Oh my God, this is kind of very bad.” She keeps ranting and raving for a while, crying occasionally, but the world turns red again. Something's pounding on my chest from the inside out.

Arden appears square in front of me, her face the only thing in focus. “Take off your shirt.”

“What?”

“So I can clean it.”

I look down. My shirt is soaked in blood, thick like wet paint.  
“Oh. Thanks.”

Arden cringes as she takes my shirt and drops it in the stream. I flinch at the splash. “Wash yourself off, would you?” she says.

“Yeah. Okay.”

I wade into the stream, curling up on the smooth rocks, as if the cold, rushing water could cleanse my sins.

I feel her watching me. My neck muscles clench as I look at her. For a moment, we stare at each other, harrowing and sad. Something passes between us.

Arden goes back to scrubbing at my shirt.

*Everything hurts.*

“I heard what you said to me in the tent,” Arden says.

Someone has dropped an antique television in my gut, screaming of static. “What?”

“In the tent, after we camped out near Wise River. With Jake and them? I heard what you said about your dad,” Arden says.

“Oh,” is all that comes out of my mouth. “I heard what you said in the car. About your brother and that bird.”

“It was a house wren,” she mutters. “And I wasn’t trying to hide anything from you, either.”

The true meaning of her words hits me in the gut, hard and numb. I've kept so much from her. I've kept so much from myself.

Arden sits back, hanging my shirt on a rock. "You killed a deer, Hendrix," she says, her voice somewhere between disbelief and exhaustion.

"Yeah." I realize I'm still in the water, curled up and shivering. Something has broken within me. Broken beyond repair.

"Why?" Her face is frozen in a twist of horror.

I look at her, and our eyes cut right through each other. *Because I'm a sociopath. Because there is something extremely wrong with me. Because the thought that consumes my every waking moment is how much I need to plunge this knife into your throat.* "I don't know." *Liar.*

"Bullshit," Arden snaps. She jabs her finger at the deer behind her. "You can't just run away from me into the woods, and there I find you, stabbing a deer to death, and expect me *not* to say 'wow, that's some fucked up shit'."

"I know." The cold worms its way into my bones. I hope it reaches my heart.

"Goddammit, Hendrix!" Arden stands up, slamming a fist into the shore. "You've gotta give me something. There's got to be a fucking *reason* for all of this!"

I swallow. The end of the rope falls, unwinds, careens down the pit until it abruptly whips to a stop, swinging and limp. "I've always

been like this.” My voice splinters, wavers like the water around me. “For as long as I can remember.”

“No, you haven’t. That’s not how people work.”

I feel Arden’s eyes on me for a while, but I can’t see much. Just the warped reflection of myself in the water, and the stones and moss on the bottom of the stream.

She eventually turns away. To do what, I’m not sure.

**Function eventually returns to** my body. My mind, however, travels about a foot behind. When I finally pull myself out of the freezing water, Arden says we need to leave before wolves smell the fresh meat. We walk for a while, following the stream west.

Arden decides to set up camp in a clearing. I listen to her rustling behind me, and stare into the stream as if it’s glowing. I wade back into the water, the cold making my limbs shrink with pain. The slimy water crawls up to my chest and my neck as I sink. Shivering, I’m so cold that I’m convinced I’ve forgotten what warmth feels like. I relish in the numbness that starts at my fingers and toes and crawls inward.

Any body of water always reminds me of Grandpa. I wonder if he still loves it, or if my shrew of a grandmother finally trampled that out of him, too. The cold—sweet and bitter—burrows down into my bones. Minnows swim around my legs. I want to join them. The cold swallows me as I shut my eyes and sink underwater. Finally, it is cold and dark everywhere, too.

Arden crashes into the water, locking her arms under me and pushing up. She drags me out of the stream. I sputter, suddenly aware of the air all around me, and how startlingly warm and alive Arden is. She pulls me to a standing position, holding my face with her hands.

“Jesus, Hendrix! Are you trying to kill yourself?”

I can’t speak. Shock wracks my bones. My vision swirls, blurring into a world of cold gray. I am coming unstuck, and this is not a painless process.

Arden grabs my face, her hands and breath hot against my face. “Look at me,” she says, our noses nearly touching. “Snap out of this. I need your help.”

I don’t snap out of it, but I do help. She tells me to make a fire, so I do. She tells me to go back and cut up some of the deer that’s salvageable, so I do.

We eat the venison, but only because we have to. Arden’s thinking so intensely, I can almost hear it. Maybe if I had told my dad that, he’d have believed that something was wrong with me.

This brokenness, it has changed something in me. I’m not sure what it is, but I can feel it on a molecular level. It has a tactile sensation in my head and chest. I feel the pain, I feel the shock. I feel the hurt, I feel the loss. I feel it all so intensely it’s like I’m going blind or losing feeling in my extremities. It’s as if whatever breakdown I had today was like igniting the spark plug in a combustion engine.

Except I think I’m still missing a few parts.

The forest turns a dark blue-gray. First, it's the trees far back that lose their light—as the forest deepens, so does the darkness. It encroaches on our small fire, and I swear I can see the tendrils beginning to wrap around Arden as she lays her blanket out.

“What are you looking at?” she asks.

I snap back into my head, dazed. From inside her sleeping bag, Arden peers at me, her eyes narrowed and her mouth pinched with concern. “Nothing.”

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” she says.

All I can do is nod. After, Arden turns around, facing away from me. For some reason, it hurts, but I’m thankful to be feeling *anything* at the moment.

The forest is louder at night. Bugs, the rushing creek, wolves howling and birds hooting. All the things that need to make themselves known in the dark. It’s like the hot afternoon sun silences everything during the long, daylight hours. The dark brings everything ugly and loud out to play.

But a sound comes into focus outside of that. It’s Arden. She’s crying.

I throw off my blanket—Arden claimed the entire sleeping bag to herself—and quietly walk over to her. She sniffs and curls up tighter. Leaves and brush rustle under me as I kneel down.

“I’m sorry.” With all my broken pieces, I wholly mean it.



Her crying softens as she soaks up my words. “For what?” she asks.

The words linger around my lips, hang from my throat like chains. “For what I did today.”

Arden inhales abruptly. “I don’t believe you.”

I’m not sure what to say. Shame crawls up and down my body, burning my skin black and gray. Slowly, I move back to my patch of damp, cold grass.

Arden sighs. “Tell me more about your dad.” First traveling out into the forest and echoing back to my ears, her voice rings distant.

“I don’t want—”

She turns over. “I don’t fucking care what you want. Just tell me, dammit. Maybe you’ll shed some weight off of your heavy soul if you actually said something for once.”

Her words sting, and my breathing quickens. I dig my dirty fingernails into my palms. Like the tide, the urge rushes back, and I hate that it does. The urge to stab something until my vision bleeds black and she bleeds red.

So I buckle down and talk.

“My dad, um, he’s kind of an alcoholic. But I think he’s just an asshole who doesn’t understand why he is the way he is. He’s got these days where he goes out with friends and drives fast and takes me out hunting and he’s alright. I remember more of those when I was a

kid, though. But then, there are some days when he's mean and reclusive and so fucking sad he drinks himself into a stupor so bad he doesn't leave the couch for twelve hours." I stop, picking at my callused fingers.

Arden is silent, staring up at me through the darkness. She sighs, choosing her words. "He sounds really depressed."

I run my fingers over the red, moon-shaped indents in my palms. Is it really that easy to see? I always thought my dad and I were pretty good at hiding our crippling dysfunction.

Arden adjusts her position and crosses her arms. "Since we're on the topic of daddy issues, mine's basically nothing. Like, literally nothing. My dad only cares about the grades and whether the boy I'm dating is going to a good college. Sure, he doesn't beat me or anything, but half the time he doesn't even know that I'm home or care about what I'm doing. I'll tell him 'hey, I'm gonna go smoke pot and drink fireball whiskey with some friends in the woods tonight' and he'll be like 'that's great, honey. Can you pass me the salad dressing?'" Arden scoffs, but her nose is running. "The fucking *salad dressing!* Can you believe it?"

Nodding, I swallow. "I understand." The weight of her confession falls on me like the clouds, silent and heavy. But her words, they don't just make sense—they stab where it hurts, strike the hollow places with fervor.

"You're not lying to me, are you?" Arden says, narrowing her eyes.

I shake my head. “No. You remember what I said about my mom in the car? About how I got in trouble and she hung up on the principal?”

Arden swallows and nods, not daring to break eye contact with me. “Yes, I remember.” The world pauses for a moment. As Arden and I hold eye contact, something passes between us—like oil and water flowing back and forth in the same container. One replaces the other, moving back and forth in a dance until they achieve balance.

And as this wave passes from me to Arden and back again, it hits me—wraps up my breath and steals it in one grasp. It’s all the same shit, just with different packaging. Something sinks inside me, and it’s warm and heavy and yearning, like a flower opening up to the sun and rain.

I think this is what they call *empathy*.

# 20 Arden

Friday, May 25th

**The call of a** house wren awakens me.

I jolt awake. Pines swirl above me, and the sky is a dusty blue. It's barely dawn, and mist rises from the dark brown earth. In my panic to get up, I accidentally kick Hendrix in the shin. He's so close. For a second, I freeze as I remember last night. Like the cold ground, the fear seeps back in.

I stand, my muscles and joints painfully recalibrating after sleeping on the unforgiving ground. Even though I'm already cold, I walk to the stream and splash my face with water.

Hendrix is still asleep, just like the rest of the world, suspended in the place where the chill of night remains, but the dawn tints the sky. The air is misty, and the outdoor orchestra is just beginning to tune for the morning performance. Shivering, I pull my shirt off to dry my face.

I stop. Sit back on my knees. Stare into the forest that divides into fractals until branches and pine needles are all I can see. How did I get here? What crucial strings snapped inside of me that made me want to leave and never look back?

I pull my shirt back on to keep from crying, because my heart has sunk past my knees. Out here, I can't hide my loneliness and despair. Out here, I can't hide what I'm feeling because the forest will just throw it right back in my face.

Sobs break in my chest, and I cover my mouth because out here, shit echoes. A hollowness rips through me—up and down and back again.

*I'm so lonely.*

The house wren chirps again, and I stand, whipping my head around to find that damn thing. Because that noise—that bird—it only reminds me of Max and his stupid obsession with that bird from so many years ago.

I pick up a rock and throw it into the forest. Nothing stirs but the brush as the rock hits the ground. Now, that hollowness doesn't just ache. It burns and it consumes. To someone else, the chirp of a house wren would be a delightful sound of spring. But to me, the house wren means death. It means innocence rotted to black.

The detail pops into my head like an unwanted zit, bright and unavoidable: Max named the house wren Arthur. We didn't know if it was a boy or a girl, but he was ten and when you're that age, anything you catch needs a name. So I went with it. Years later, we still brought little Arthur back up again in conversation every once in a while.

The moment feels like it's from another lifetime. Back then, I was Michelle, and he was the Max who always got mad at me for squishing the spider instead of capturing and letting it outside. A sinking kind of panic rises in me, but it's not a panic that something bad is going to happen. It's the realization that the bad thing has already happened.

I can't go back, no matter how hard I claw. Because time doesn't change; it always ticks by at the same rate. But no matter how much we break it up, no matter how many times we divide it or how many ways we quantify it, time still moves forever forward, whether you're with it or not.

Then one day, you wake up, and realize you're teetering on the edge of something. And I don't know how I got there. My childhood has been my whole life up until now, and it's almost over. I don't think I've ever experienced true existential anxiety until now.

Who Hendrix and I were before all this is gone, but we have yet to become who we are. This spiral of life only tightens, and I'm still skipping a beat. Everything keeps going faster, and nothing means as much as it used to anymore. Me, my parents, everyone—we got so caught up in chasing time that we started wasting it.

It's only out here, deep in the woods, that I realize I miss everybody. This separation, this time, only tells me of the things I'm missing and the things I once had.

Despite how awful they can be, I miss my parents. I miss being close to the comforting streetlights and the familiar faces. I miss the good times, because I did have some. I miss the outline of the mountains to the west, and how the sun would settle into a certain crevice in the month of July. I miss my friends, even the ones who wouldn't consider me theirs. I miss what we had. And now it's all over.

I absolutely hate that I miss it. Because I came out here to get rid of all of that, because I hated it. Still do, but I think I left a part of my soul there, back home. A piece that I might never be able to untangle.

Something's splitting inside of me; I yearn to see the stars at full brightness again.

I didn't think I'd miss it all this much. I don't *want* to miss it all this much. But this limbo I have created with Hendrix has brought out things in me I didn't know existed.

Like the ebb and flow of a rainstorm, I start to cry. I let myself hurt, for all of the things I've loved and lost. For everything I never had. For everything I had and didn't appreciate.

That house wren lands on the ground across the stream and begins pecking at the earth for bugs. While the hitches in my breathing slow, the bird perks its head up and begins singing. A smile plays on my lips, as if daring me to allow myself to feel good, to feel relief.

Hendrix turns over behind me and I whip around, alight with panic. The wren flutters away. He's still asleep, thank God.

Composing myself, I pack up our stuff and wait. If he doesn't wake up within the hour, I'll pack his shit up all by myself.

**Hendrix jolts awake, sitting** up. I watch him as he grabs at the dirt with his fists. Slowly, he turns his head towards me and makes eye contact. Immediately, shame darkens his face like clouds covering the sun. His eyes look sunken in, like someone took a spoon and gouged out some flesh like scoops of frozen yogurt for a midnight snack.

"Morning," I say.

Hendrix blinks, like he's forgotten where he is. He takes one breath in, shaking like a leaf.

Chills race over my limbs. "You alright?"

His eyes flash to me, and he clears his throat. "What?"

"Nevermind. Let's go."



Hendrix rubs his eyes, groaning. “What? Where?”

“Somewhere that’s not here,” I say.

Hendrix swallows, something haunting and deep staining his eyes. “Right.”

**We’re carrying our lives** on our backs through open fields to forested mountains to open fields again. After about two hours of walking, both of us are soaked in sweat—not from any heat, but because we’re hauling an extra fifty pounds each. I’m carrying my clothes and toiletries, plus the sleeping bag, food, and money. Hendrix has his clothes and stuff, a blanket, and the camping supplies I bought, such as the water filters, fire starters, and pots and pans.

After the morning gray burnt off, it’s been nothing but dry, mountain air and mosquitos gnawing at my legs. I slap a particularly painful one, and my hand comes away smeared with blood. My eyes immediately go to the jacket tied around Hendrix’s waist, and the faint reddish-brown stains that will probably never come out.

When thunder begins to roll across the sky, we stop and look up. That explains the mosquitos.

“Shit,” I say. Hendrix and I haven’t spoken much today. I’ve been trying to give him some space after yesterday, but to be honest, he’s freaking me out a little.

Then the rain starts in a slow current. We run across the pale yellow field into the next cluster of trees. The mountains and open sky have disappeared once again, and my chest tightens with worry.

It begins to pour, and despite our idea that the trees would shield us, they only collect the water and drop it on us in buckets.

“We should stop!” Hendrix shouts above the roar of the rain.

“Where?” I say. We comb through the woods for a while for any place that’s dry, but it doesn’t really matter. We’re cold and soaked, and our packs have become heavy like water balloons.

Eventually, we sit on a boulder and drop our bags. My back muscles spring up like tight coils, and I finally have the chance to catch my breath. We’ve been steadily climbing in elevation all day, and I think the altitude is getting to me.

I rub the knots in my shoulders and watch as Hendrix just sits there, letting the water drip around his face. Sometimes I just stop and think about the kind of shit Hendrix and I have gotten ourselves into. We’re lost, in more ways than one. No one knows we’re out here, and if this rain keeps up, the wet cold could kill us overnight. No house wrens to be seen this time around to provide solace to my weary soul. I wrap my arms around my body, shivering.

Michelle would have gotten such a kick about all this crazy shit Arden’s doing now. Scoffing, I pull out my wallet. I know, who keeps pictures in their wallet anymore?

Huddling from the rain, I pull out two polaroids. I find myself not looking at Max or anyone else in the photos—just staring right

back at myself from the past. I barely recognize the person I was in them. It's like a carbon copy—a strange, unfamiliar clone making uncomfortable eye contact.

“What?” Hendrix asks. He doesn't look right at me, just turns his head towards me and keeps his eyes trained somewhere on the ground.

“Nothing. Just thinking about how crazy this is.”

“Yeah.”

But I keep talking, like I do. “For eighteen years, I lived such a safe life. Cushy little suburban house. Nuclear family with two-point-five kids.” The rain softens, and the hush of the forest returns. Hendrix still can't look at anything but my feet. “You know Elliot, the guy I told you about? Even he was safe, in some ways. My whole life, I've been trying to break out of this *safeness*. This cycle of mediocrity that just leaves us with decades wasted.”

I think of my parents, who got married right out of college and bought a house and have worked at the same place and have done the same thing their whole life. Not that there's anything wrong with that, but I know that they live without purpose. Something about the years has changed them. Time for them has no meaning. All of it goes by at a numbing speed—and they don't seem to care.

Then I think, *why don't I have the courage to be an absolute nobody?*

“I’m not saying I want to live this crazy, avant-garde life or anything. I’m saying I want joy. I want meaning, fulfillment. And there’s no place for any of those things in *safeness*. At least none that I’ve found.”

Lightening slices the heavens open, but neither of us flinch. “And I’m afraid I’m never gonna get any of those things, you know? I don’t wanna miss it. Whatever *it* is.”

I look over at Hendrix, but he’s just picking at a hangnail.

“You gonna say something?” I ask.

He puts a hand up. “I’m getting there,” he says, the spikes returning to his voice. This sharpness makes me realize something: Hendrix isn’t safe. Maybe that’s why I’m drawn to him.

“I have never lived a safe life,” he says. “Some part of it was always unstable. So all this safeness you’re talking about, I don’t get it.”

“I’m sorry.”

Hendrix finally looks at me—right at me—and the shards of his brokenness pierce me. “I—” His voice splinters. “Shit,” he mutters, shattering our eye contact.

“No, it’s ok. I’m listening.” Like my life depends on it.

“If I’m being honest, I don’t think I’ll ever be happy. Fulfilled, or whatever. I’m not even quite sure what it means.”

His words fall heavier than rain. The same rain that bends the branches, that turns each dip of the land into a river. They are heavier

than the world itself. I don't know what to say, but I think that's my problem. I don't *need* to say anything.

Taking my hand, I place it on Hendrix's hunched back. He tenses for a moment, and then relaxes, accepting the gesture. The rain still hasn't let up, and the sky is only getting darker. Why do I stay with him when he's given me every reason to leave? Statistically speaking, you'd think I would have by now.

Because I don't want to be alone. Because I want to stop leaving people. Because under all Hendrix's rage, I see someone who is hurting. Someone confused, lonely, maybe even a little scared. Someone like me.

Right now, time is moving at the perfect speed. Being fully present in this moment is giving it meaning. Finally, through all that thunder and all that rain, somewhere high up in a tree, a house wren sings.

**Evening comes, and I'm** starting to get stressed again because it feels like we haven't made much progress. I've been checking my phone constantly—not in search of service, but frantically checking the time. We've been walking all day—admittedly not whole-heartedly. Hendrix has been even more down since our conversation in the rain, and being soaking wet and dirty in the wilderness kind of just makes me want to lie down, so we do that for a

while. We're sure as hell not thirsty, but we are hungry, and it's making me particularly irritable.

Hendrix and I sleep apart, cold and wet. He's curled in the fetal position in the dark, and I'm lying flat on my back, staring up at the stars. As our clothes hang to dry on tree branches, they waver like ghosts in the wind.

The stars carve holes inside me. Or maybe it's just the gnawing hunger. For the thousandth time, I take out my phone—nearly dead at this point—to finally check for service. Nothing. Man, I'd kill for some music right now, but I don't want to run down the battery.

“Hendrix?” I ask.

“Yeah?” His voice appears in the dark.

“You okay?”

A pause before he responds. “No.”

I exhale. I want to be okay. I want *him* to be okay. “You hungry?”

“Yes.”

“What do you want to eat?”

I hear Hendrix turn over. “Arden, why are you talking to me? I thought we were going to sleep.”

“Because I want to talk to you. I, uh, want to make sure you're alright.”

Sighing, he turns back over. For a moment, he's so quiet I'm afraid he's never going to respond. “I'd love some pie. In the

summers, my mom would make the best rhubarb and strawberry pie. In the fall, she'd even make it into a cheesecake.”

*His mom.* The detail sticks out, but I decide to ignore it and laugh a bit. “Yeah, that sounds good.”

The roar of forest sounds—from hoots to howls to the frogs that sing near the creek—fill the space for a while as I zone out. I was never a skilled enough baker to make a good pie that didn't involve pre-made crust. And then it clicks—*pie*.

“Hey, Hendrix?”

“Yeah?” He's getting a bit tired of me.

I take out my phone, the dim screen barely showing me that I have 2% battery left. Frantically, I search through my downloaded songs before my battery dies and flickers out for good.

Rustling. “What?” he repeats.

“Just hold on a sec . . .” I insist. After a few more silent moments, the song begins to play.

At first, Hendrix frowns like he doesn't remember, but I know he does. The quality of my phone speaker isn't great, and the piano has that distinctive 1970s accentuation, where it sounds like it was recorded on a tin can.

When the first line starts, I begin to sing. Quietly, like the trees have ears. In an instant, I'm taken back to the night at that bar & grille, and my chest glows with warmth.

“Arden, what are you doing?” he asks, dismayed. The sound from my phone barely fills the space between us, but it’s like candlelight—just bright enough to push away the darkness.

I get up and move closer to Hendrix, barely visible beneath the starlight. The cold ground seeping away all my heat, I lie down next to him, close enough for him to know it was intentional but not encroaching on his personal space. Fear still gives me a cruel poke every once in a while, reminding me of our current circumstances. As I sing about a poor widowed bride, I clutch my chest, pausing for dramatic effect, but he doesn’t respond. “Hey, c’mon, what comes next?”

It comes as a whisper inside me: *Please, Hendrix. Sing with me again.*

I hear him sigh. Scratchy and quiet, he starts out with the chorus, singing about dried-up levees and drinking whiskey.

But at least he starts.

We don’t sing it with any drama or fanfare, but we sing it together. Soft, just so the two of us can hear it. My phone dies midway through, but we sing the entire song like that until it ends, and we fall asleep.



# 21 Hendrix

Saturday, May 26th

**My dreams are coated** in blood.

With one sucking breath, I wake up in cloudy darkness. There's barely light in the furthest reaches of the sky. It's 4am, maybe. Cold and sore from sleeping on the forest floor, my stomach lurches. Still drenched in the hazy, violent nightmare, I drag myself up and careen a few feet into the forest—

Only to vomit up greenish-brown bile, sticky and snotty on the plants and dirt. My back muscles strain as I retch up nothing, reeling at the images of blood and slimy gore that *won't. Get. Out.*

Then yesterday hits me. All of the things Arden and I said in the rain. Singing *American Pie*, again. The vulnerability is raw, and it throbs hot in the freezing night. Paranoid, I look over my shoulder, convinced I'm going mad.

Nearly collapsing forward into my own mess, I grab onto the nearest tree, my breathing ragged. My head throbs as I drop to my knees, retching again, pain aching through me. Seething self-hatred turns my blood black.

Rustling. "Hendrix, are you okay?" Arden says from behind me. Her voice sends my stomach spasming, and I spit out whatever bitter garbage is still in my mouth.

I'm not sure I can speak yet. The texture of the tree bark beneath my fingers becomes real, as does the sensation of where I am relative to the ground. My head spins like a toy top—slow and wide, about to topple over. "Yeah. I'm okay."

I hear her step closer. I can't tell how close she is, but anxiety forces spikes to crawl out of my spinal cord. Something else clenches in my stomach this time around. Arden . . . *cares*. She wouldn't have asked if she didn't. She always has, to some extent. But now, it's so profound and up front. It's all here. It forces me to ask myself: *why?* My stomach lurches and twists again. I'm not prepared to handle this amount of vulnerability right now.

"You sure?" she asks, a bit more apprehensive this time.

Swallowing and wincing at the bitter, acidic aftertaste, I wipe my mouth and turn around. “Yeah. Sorry.”

You look like shit,” Arden smirks. “Just . . . let me know if you need anything.” She gives me a look somewhere between sympathy and confusion.

I feel like I might throw up again, because it’s that expression that triggers something.

I remember what the dream was about.

I finally killed Arden.

**Being vulnerable is scary**, and I fucking hate it. Probably because I don’t know how to do it. It’s like trying to shove fabric into the holes on a ship’s hull. It staunches it for a while, but the water soaks and seeps through anyway.

I don’t think either of us sleep well after that. At least, I don’t. The trees are nothing but dark silhouettes, cutouts on a piece of black paper. The darkness bleeds out from the dimensionless forms.

*Just like how Arden’s going to bleed when I cut the stars into her skin.*

I blink, and the intrusive thought is gone. Pain, dull and radiating, expands from where my fingernails bury into my palms. I hold on until dawn comes.

We don't really wake up; we just decide to get moving when we can't comfortably keep our eyes closed to the approaching morning light.

Everything's still muddy after yesterday's rain, but today the sun is bright, yellow, and piercing through the trees. We have to take periodic breaks to rest because our shit is still damp. My knife and sheath have created permanent friction rashes on my hip and thigh, but I refuse to take it off and put it in my bag.

My brain is television static. One long maddening tone that screams *I need Arden dead*. Thankfully, the thoughts don't go much further than that. Otherwise there's no way I would be able to keep it together. The piece that got dislodged inside of me when I killed the deer is now rattling around, making noise and causing chaos. It's pushing all kinds of buttons I didn't know I had. Like a camera lens falling in and out of focus, my grip on reality—on myself—slips.

I'm off my game; I know I am. My disposition keeps spinning out of control. Every thought is sharper, every emotion that I now experience is off-the-wall. It's a dangerous way of living, really. Especially when I'm playing the most dangerous game.

**We hit a proper** trail at around 2pm. Arden thinks it's a fantastic discovery, but as usual, I'm too preoccupied to care. We follow the trail for the rest of the day. The terrain is getting significantly rockier, and we're either climbing up or down—it's rarely flat, unlike yesterday.

Something I've noticed is that Arden's a loud thinker. I can always tell that her brain's going because she'll sigh or mutter a few swears under her breath, kicking at the dirt—very obviously having a discussion with herself based on her body language. It's kind of amusing.

We don't stop for dinner because we both know we don't have any food. We've still got some money, though. As if that helps.

Arden nearly has a heart attack any time we see signs of civilization—any footprint or stray litter, any signpost or airplane drone—she gasps and tells me all about it as if I can't see or hear it myself. I feel bad for her, in a pathetic kind of way. I think she's going mad.

Then again, I'm hardly one to talk.

The sun starts to set and turn the evergreen forest dusty and red. Arden panics. As much as she likes to put up a front and hide herself away, she's remarkably easy to read, at least to me. She won't shut up after the sun sets and we're walking in the dark again. She points out every wildflower, every change in the wind. If I was in a better mood, it might be endearing.

*I should do it right now. It's dark.*

I physically shake my head to get rid of the thought, but it only rattled the voice into momentary submission. The walls of my brain stop shaking, but the silence deepens the cracks inside of me. I am unsettled, like dust kicked up in a creepy antique shop.

Right before I start tearing out my hair, Arden spots a clearing well after the sun has set. She finally falls silent as we walk into the clearing—it's nearly picture perfect, with minimal plants, a soft, spongy layer of topsoil and leaves, and branches that dip down over the area for cover. Complete with a small firepit and sitting logs.

She snaps her fingers by my ear. "Hey, earth to Hendrix. I know you've been tuning me out all day, but this is legit. They wouldn't have a campsite out here if it wasn't within reasonable distance of civilization. We'll be out of the woods by tomorrow."

"Why not tonight?" I say.

She doesn't answer, and instead starts rummaging through the metal garbage cans. Her head pops out, plastered with a mischievous smile, holding out handfuls of half-empty bottles of vodka and whiskey, lids and all.

"You've got to be kidding me," I say, even though I know she's not.

Arden shrugs, putting her bags on the ground and sitting on one of the logs. "Hey, who knows what else is in these bottles and we might get mouth herpes from it, but I could use a drink right about now."

"You're insane," I say. Ironically, she's toying with what little sanity I have left. Everything pulls me just a smidge tighter, and every time I'm sure I'll snap.

“I’ll bet ten bucks says you’ve never drank anything before,” Arden says, dropping her bag on a log bench and swigging back a mouthful of berry-flavored vodka.

Oh, if Arden only knew. “Ten bucks says you’re bluffing to make yourself seem cooler,” I say, scoffing.

Narrowing her eyes, Arden’s arms straighten at her sides. “You’re insufferable. Just drink and maybe I won’t want to kill you in your sleep.”

I nearly choke.

When I don’t take the drink, she sighs and pushes it into my chest. “Let loose, Hendrix. Civilization is just within our grasps. I think we can enjoy one last night of hippie survivalism before the crushing weight of society falls back on us.”

“Can I have the whiskey instead? Lukewarm berry vodka sounds like shit,” I say. Like most things, I do it to humor her.

“Sure,” she says, handing me the bottle.

Arden and I make eye contact. With three swallows, I chug down the rest of the liquor and immediately hate myself even more than I did before. My empty stomach shrivels up like a raisin, and I physically feel the alcohol poisoning my bloodstream.

I think Arden tries to make a fire, and I collapse onto one of the log benches. I fiddle with a plastic tent peg that someone left behind, stabbing it over and over into the damp earth, playing in the dirt like a child.

Everything seems to fall away. The edges of my vision go pleasantly blurry as Arden strikes match after match on the kindling and ashes. My brain feels like a fizzy drink, boiling at the base of my skull, and I sort of want to lie down and take a long nap.

“Pass another bottle, will ya?” I say, and I think Arden says something about how much of a lightweight I am.

Like the silent darkness encroaching on the world, the *nothing* wanders around the corners of my psyche. Drink after drink, the old friend wanders closer, warm and cold all at the same time, preying on me while I’m weak and tired and already a little pissed off. I never bothered drinking back home because drinking was my dad’s way of handling things, not mine. Besides the fact that I have major control issues. But now I understand—drinking is a hell of a lot easier than cutting things open.

Arden sits back on a log after we get the fire going, gazing down at the amber whiskey swirling at the bottom of her bottle. She sighs, long and heavy. “Do you ever feel really weird, Hendrix? Like you just don’t fit in with the people you’re around? That there’s always something separating you from them?”

I hear her words as they melt through my head, but I can’t formulate a response. “Wait, what?”

Arden laughs, sudden and sweet, and for a moment it’s all I can hear. “Don’t be offended if I prefer drunk Hendrix over regular Hendrix.” Boisterous and like the froth on beer, Arden’s voice fills the spaces between the trees. It makes me feel a bit small. And dizzy.



Arden takes another drink, winces, and passes the bottle to me. “I wonder who left this stuff here. And like . . . why would they leave it, ya know? They didn’t leave us much, but it’s enough to get us lightweights a little plastered.” She reaches over to give me a good-natured punch on my shoulder.

Primal fear pushes through all the alcohol, and I scramble away from her, breathing hard. Fuck, I might throw up again.

“What’s wrong? Did I do something wrong?” she says, sitting up.

Arden’s words bleed together, and I have to squint at her in order to peel them apart. I can’t tell if it’s because she’s drunk or because I am. The fear retreats, crawling back into the darkness.

“I’m sorry,” she says.

I say nothing as I pull myself back up onto the log. I’m numb—as fast as the fear came, it left, leaving nothing but husks behind. Did I really just react like that? Arden’s words finally register in my head, and I understand why she took a swing at me. “Maybe they got eaten by bears.”

Arden laughs again, but this time it hurts, creating a sharp buzz in my head where my ears meet my brain. “Maybe they got murdered.”

“Nah, if they got murdered, the guy wouldn’t’ve left all of their shit in the trash cans, ‘specially that plastic peg thingy.” That

voice—the one that whispers from the dark—is the monster that says this, slurred and drunk.

Arden laughs again, but this time it's detached, coming out of her mouth and floating away from her body.

I seem to have lost track of my bottle, and I absently paw in the dirt for it. I sniff—my nose is running. “Why’re you looking at me like that?”

Arden coughs, blinking slowly. “You’re weird, Hendrix.”

My heart detonates into a ball of spikes. “Fuck you,” I say, but it comes out like syrup. Right, *this* is why I don’t drink.

Arden leans back, grunting as she puts her arms under her head. “Yeah, lay it on thick. I know I deserve it.” As she reaches for her water bottle, I hear Arden shift. “Can I ask you something?”

“I guess.” I barely hear myself say it; it’s just an automatic response.

“I’m just trying to figure you out,” she says. *Good luck*. “You don’t seem to care about much. You never did any extracurriculars at school. You never really did anything. Why?”

I pick at a hangnail and stick it in my mouth when it bleeds. I barely feel it. “I dunno. School doesn’t really matter.”

“Nothing matters, Hendrix,” Arden says. “You’ve gotta *make* it matter.”

“Well, I don’t fucking care about any of that,” I snap back. Pick, pull, *pain*. I wonder if I keep doing this enough, it will take the edge off my thoughts.

“Why?”

I slam down the bottle into the dirt. “I swear to *God*, if you ask me ‘why’ one more fucking time—”

“Sorry,” she says, but it’s bitter with sarcasm. “I’m not trying to psychoanalyze you, I just want to understand. Is that so wrong?”

Scratching my head, as if that will claw out my thoughts, I shake my head. The buzzing, heavy feeling in my head stays. “Too bad I don’t even understand myself.”

Arden sighs and sits back. “I feel that.”

Through the black cloud my head currently lives in, I look up at her. So relaxed, so open. Those demons crawl out from the darkness, seething and devouring every bleeding crack. Their jowls drool, hungry for blood.

*Just do it. You said yourself that nothing matters. She doesn’t matter. If you do it, I will come back, soft and comforting. I know how much you like the nothing.*

My mind splits, the cracks finally giving out under the weight. One into the Hendrix I was, and the other into whoever I am now—this conglomeration of feelings and memories and actions, entirely divorced from how I see myself. From who I thought I was.

And then I start sobbing. Maybe it's the wilderness, maybe it's from Arden being annoying all day, maybe it's the alcohol—it's probably the alcohol—but sober Hendrix has just thrown his hands up at the wheel and said “fuck it.”

I don't really know what's happening, all I know is that I can't breathe and it feels so good but it also feels like I'm dying. I might vomit again—I kind of hope I do, because then I can purge myself of the alcohol and the darkness. I'm trying to breathe and clench my fists and focus on the *nothing* like I always do, but it's not working. It's not working and I'm spiraling out of control and there's nothing I can do about it.

*There's nothing I can do about anything.*

I am a car, slipping on ice, where every twist of the wheel towards the slide makes me spin out even harder. The control I've spent years curating is ripping to shreds in a single moment.

At some point, Arden comes over, profusely apologizing, rubbing my back and shit like that. But it's doing nothing—she's so far away. All I can see is the swirling blackness behind my eyes. All I can think about is how *I'm fucking crazy and I need to kill someone.*

The sobs just keep coming like a thundering waterfall. There's eighteen more years of where this shit came from. Every single one of Arden's goddamn *why's* flood back in an instant.

It's not until Arden wraps her arms around me and tells me that it's going to be okay that I'm finally able to form words. Her presence is grounding, somehow.

“No, Arden, I’m not okay. I’m losing my fucking mind.” With each *why* that passes through my head, I pound on my temples with the heels of my hands. Arden tries to pull my hands back, but I shove her away, my chest still splintering under the weight of my own insanity.

“Was it something I said?” She says it with such tenacity, such tangible pain. If I wasn’t wrapped up in my own brokenness, her words would have broken my heart.

“No, I’m just really fucked up on the inside, Arden.” The words fly off my tongue for a moment of sharpness, and then I’m back to being a sniveling mess. *I can’t make it stop.* I press my hands against my temples, elbows on my knees, locking myself in a cage, as if that could keep in whatever ugly monster has hatched inside me. As if that could keep out whatever it is I’m truly feeling.

Despite myself, Arden climbs back up next to me and starts rubbing my shoulders again, trying to pry my hands away from my skull. “Yeah, me too.”

“No, you— you don’t understand.” I break myself out of it and stare at Arden, the tears burning my eyes. In a moment clouded by alcohol and emotion, I am no more than an inch tall. “I’m pretty sure I’m a sociopath and that . . . and that I’m actually fucking insane. My entire life is this awful, awful, awful angry *nothing* and I have to . . . I have to cause pain in order to experience anything close to normal.”

*Shit.* All of the places that were split apart inside of me slam back together. Clarity seems to come back to me.

I've just blown it.

“Oh,” is all she says for the longest moment.

Fuck. She knows. I have to do it now.

*A flash of silver. Bodies slamming into bodies. The cold, wet ground beneath the hand that braces me above her. A flash of red. Screaming. Clawing. The rush of red, like the rush of calm that washes over me.* And then it's all over.

I fumble at my side for the knife, but Arden thinks I'm losing it again—which, to be fair, I am—so she wraps me in a hug. Freezing, I clench my fists together so fast that my grimy fingernails jab into my palms. Time no longer exists anymore, and I feel everything all at once. *Pain pain pain pain pain pain.*

“It's alright, it's okay.” She lets me go but I can't move. I can't move, for I'm afraid I'll lose my shit for good. I'll kill her and then I'll kill myself—or I'll roam these woods, raving like a madman until I die of dehydration. “To be honest, it doesn't really surprise me. It, uh, it doesn't mean that you're evil or anything. There was this guy in my sculpture class who told me he had, like, narcissistic personality disorder or something. He wasn't a criminal or anything, he was just kind of a dick sometimes.”

The ball of anxiety in my chest subsides, but not for the obvious reason. Sober Hendrix takes back control, and a part of my brain

kickstarts again. Clawing at my arms under my flannel, my breath trembles.

*This is good. She has sympathy for you. She trusts you. You've killed a deer in front of her and revealed your secret. Yet, here she is.*

I'm still crying, but my mind is wobbling like a toy top on its last few rotations, about to fall into submission. Staring at Arden, I'm really not too sure what to think.

Part of me is breaking in two, crumbling and falling apart at the seams because I just revealed one of my biggest secrets to someone, and she reacted with empathy and understanding. Arden is one of the only people that I haven't driven away, or who hasn't left me. It does something strange to my bleeding heart. And I think she sees that.

Of course, the other part of me is pleased. This is what Arden has always wanted, for me to open up and be real with her. Maybe we can push the whole 'killing a deer out of rage' thing under the rug and move forward with my plan smoothly.

This contradiction, this cognitive dissonance—the divide runs so deep that the darkness beneath boils to the surface, ready to burn and destroy everything in its path. Do I really want to ruin the only genuine connection I've ever had with someone?

*Yes.*

Arden rubs my upper arm and says, "It's alright, Hendrix. We're all a little fucked up on the inside." The gesture is kind. It keeps a part of me soft, while the rest of me freezes back over.

I can't do this, but I have to do this.

I have to do this, but it might break me.

I need my *nothing* back. And Arden is the thing standing in my way.

**For the rest of** the night, I can't shake the feeling. *Feeling.*

We sleep right there, under the stars. Even though Arden gives it her best, it's obvious we're too drunk to put up the tent. I feel drained. I feel empty. I also feel a bit better. But is it better *enough*?

The best of us, I think, are nothing but contradictory, and Arden and I are the perfect poster children.



# 22 Arden

Sunday, May 27th

The light is **grainy** and flat, prickling my vision as I rub the sleep out of my eyes. Hendrix is still asleep, snoring slightly. I am definitely more than a little hungover.

My muscles screaming at me, I push myself off the ground. I reach over to my water bottle and down the rest, the water dribbling down my chin. With the introduction of water, my stomach cramps, shrinking and screaming for food so desperately I keel over and wait

until the pain subsides. My eyes catch on the beaten path that loops into the campsite. We're going to make it back to the real world today if it kills me.

*The real world*, how ironic. The two of us have been much more *real* out here than we ever were back on the road. Maybe nothing is real, and we're all just trying to escape that fact.

Hendrix's snoring crescendos, and panic flickers through me. It's almost like a gut reaction to him now. I kind of hate it because I like Hendrix. I like him as a person, despite how insufferable and weird he can be sometimes. It feels like we're on the same wavelength or something.

Swallowing, my throat is so dry it sticks to itself. The alcohol was probably a bad idea, since we don't have much food or water. But we'll be fine. There's a path, and everything's fine.

I clean up our shit—even Hendrix's—and take the liquor bottles in my hands. I stare down at them, and how the light warps through the glass. With a grunt, I throw one against the nearest tree, relishing as it shatters into pieces. Relief and adrenaline surge through me like sweet honey, and I proceed to throw all of the bottles into trees, rocks, anything I can, coating the ground in a fresh dusting of glass specks that glitter like snow. When I'm finally done, I collapse onto the ground, heaving, on the verge of tears.

I can't believe Hendrix slept through all that.

**We walk. I've gotten** used to ignoring the panic. Hendrix and I don't talk, at least not until our hangovers lose their painful sharpness. This morning, I didn't even have to wake him up. He just kind of jolted awake, kicking at the dirt and groaning.

The night before comes back in pieces—ribbons of conversation and shards of emotion. I remember Hendrix, a sobbing mess, revealing to me that he believes he's a sociopath.

*The leaves, sticky with blood, like children's stamps in red ink. In and out, in and out. Smooth and practiced motions, yet undeniably ravaged and overcome with emotion.*

Why doesn't it surprise me?

For lunch, we're kind of forced to stop and talk to each other. I'm so exhausted I might collapse. We don't have any food, so we just sip our water as we sit on boulders near the trail.

"Did you think you'd be spending the summer after high school like this?" I ask.

Hendrix sighs, clicking his tongue. "Arden, I don't really think about the future," he says, and the words strike a chord in me. The emptiness is back in his voice, like he's missing a handful of puzzle pieces and he can't quite make out the final picture. It's a strange and almost transparent contrast to last night. Last night felt . . . real. Sure, it was filtered through alcohol, but there was still something so authentic about it. Like I was seeing something no one else had ever gotten to see—even if it was only because Hendrix was intoxicated.

“How?” I ask. “Sometimes the future is all I can think about.”

Hendrix shrugs and scratches the back of his neck. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“No, I don’t.” He just sounds confused more than anything.

I decide to take advantage of that. “Are you really a sociopath, Hendrix?”

“No.” There’s the gut-punch moment when we both realize he has responded too fast. Laughing, he tries to cover it. “No, I was drunk and sobbing my face off. You shouldn’t take anything I said seriously.”

Blinking at the leaves and dirt beneath me, I let his words sink in. They feel saccharine—like platitudes, like a bandaid over a gunshot wound—not unlike my mother’s words often do. Coming from anyone else, I might believe them.

“Okay,” I tell him, as the breeze picks up and sends the trees chiming in. I say it because I think he needs to think that I believe him, for better or for worse.

**Finally, we find a road**— a gravel one, and then a paved one with street signs. The forest gives way to where the road cuts through the land. There’s some sort of wheat field across the road, and power lines attached to poles hang above us.

I could cry, but instead I scream, pumping my fist, jumping up and down and hollering in the middle of the road. The elation momentarily numbs the hunger that racks my bones. Meanwhile, I catch Hendrix smiling. He humors me, and we double high-five.

The sensation pulls me up short. Hendrix genuinely smiling—such a rare occurrence on its own—paired with the familiarity of the landscape reminds me of home, but a home I don't have yet. A home and a life that I want, that I can have. It makes me feel nostalgic for everything that has already happened but also everything that hasn't happened yet. It makes me feel sad and happy and young and so incredibly old all at once. There's a word for this, from Sarah's dictionary-journal, but I can't seem to remember it. Not that it matters.

We get to walking again, basking in the openness the valley provides—we'd been walking in the choking forest for days. The open air feels like . . . well, it feels like home.

**I was hoping we'd** come across a town or something, but all we see for hours is just fields with a smattering of farmhouses set far back on the land. We stick out our thumbs when we see any vehicles, but no one picks us up. My hands tremble, and I'm having trouble keeping a concise train of thought. Hendrix seems okay; just a little sweaty.

As the afternoon begins to burn away at the clouds, I debate on whether or not we should just go knocking Mormon-style. The raw wheat, still growing in the fields, has begun to look appetizing.

I turn to Hendrix. “Should we just start . . . knocking on doors to see if people will help us? My blood sugar is so low I think I’m about to pass out.”

He shrugs. “We can always just leave if people get rude. Maybe we’ll find a shed or some place to squat.”

I try and picture that smile on his face again, but it’s hard, like putting together a puzzle where someone just describes to you what it’s supposed to look like instead of actually seeing the picture on the box. “Yeah, okay.”

We walk along the road for some time, occasionally hopping a fence or two to see if people’s sheds or barns are open for our business. So far, not much luck. We find a pretty large shed on the corner of someone’s property. As Hendrix lifts up a rock to smash the padlock, I grab his hand.

“Wait,” I say. “Are you sure you want to add ‘breaking and entering’ to our list of petty crimes we may or may not be wanted for?”

Hendrix scowls and slowly returns his arm to his side. “Alright.”

I give him a good-natured slap on the arm with the back of my hand. “Hey, let’s go find somewhere that doesn’t have a padlock.”

However, that’s easier said than done. It takes us at least another hour before we find an old barn, the wood rotted into dark gray and

the windows clouded over. At one point, it probably kept horses and cattle and goats, but the only thing Hendrix reports is a chicken coop, a tabby cat, and lots of rusty farm equipment.

He looks at me and shrugs. “It’s a shelter, at least.”

“I saw a hand water pump in the side yard, too.”

Both the front and back doors are locked, but one of the windows is lacking any glass, so we climb inside the dark, dusty barn. The cat takes off running for parts unknown, and Hendrix uses his cigarette lighter to light an oil lamp on the wall. I check the chicken coop, and several healthy, fat hens cluck back at me.

“Nice,” I say.

For the next few hours, we try and stay out of sight of the ranch house on the property. After killing a chicken, Hendrix makes a fire out back, and I gather water and raid the garden. There’s not much produce since the season is still early, but I manage to gather some spinach, parsnips, and green onions. There’s no car in the driveway, and the house is dark, so I start to feel better about what we’re doing.

In the barn, Hendrix and I feast on a meal of chicken, eggs, and vegetables—all cooked in the camping supplies I bought a while back. It’s a little bland, and the water from the pump has a distinct tang of earth and metal, but it’s more than enough.

As we’re cleaning up, I hear tires crunching on gravel outside. “Hendrix,” I hiss.

He makes eye contact with me, nodding. “I hear it too,” he whispers.

“Did you put out the fire outside?”

“I think so.”

Panic electrifies my nerves. “You *think* so?”

“Jesus, sorry,” he says, scrambling to gather our belongings. I stuff the pots and water bottles into my bag, and Hendrix blows out the oil lamps hanging in the corners of the barn. When we’ve got the area mostly clean, I move towards the front window, the one that faces the ranch house. I wave Hendrix over. We peek over the windowsill and see an elderly man walking to his mailbox. He’s got a slight potbelly and hunchback, but has that rugged look like he’s worked on a farm all his life. He keeps glancing around, over his shoulder, as if he can smell us.

I whip around and press my back against the wooden wall. “Fuck,” I whisper.

Hendrix remains emotionless, and just blinks as he backs away from the window. “Let’s hide.”

We find a spot lodged between a rusty, horse-drawn plow and bags of grain. We huddle there, hugging our knees and backpacks close to our chests. A few agonizing moments pass before we hear the front door of the barn creak open. Several heavy steps across the dirt and hay-covered floor.

The sound of the man clearing his throat pierces the heavy air. More steps. Closer. My breathing is ragged and hot in the dusty air,



and I'm shaking. The stolen food in my stomach churns. I look over to Hendrix for consolation, but the only sign of his distress are his shut eyes and flaring nostrils.

But his eyes fly open with the distinctive click of the stranger cocking a shotgun. A man in his late sixties or early seventies points an antique shotgun right at us, nearly point blank. Wiry gray hair coats his forearms and face. His button-up flannel is smeared with dirt, and the wrinkles in his face only make his gruff scowl even more terrifying.

Hendrix is frozen, his face pale and sweat beading up on his forehead. He holds himself tight and still, like a taut rubber band. But I am a lit firecracker—tears start streaming down my face, and I hold my hands up in surrender.

“Please don't hurt us!” I plead. “We— we're lost, and we needed food and shelter! Someone slashed the tires in my car so we had to use bikes but then we lost those and got lost in the woods and then— and then—” I realize I can't speak about what else happened in the woods, not because I'm sobbing but because I'm afraid that if I say it, it will make what happened real again.

Slowly, the old man lowers the shotgun and adjusts his stance. He sighs, rubbing the sweat off his forehead. He clears his throat, and Hendrix finally opens his eyes. “Do y'all need some, uh, clean clothes or something?”

The man's name is Norman. We give him our real names because, why not? We couldn't think of fake ones on the spot. What's really surprising is that he even invites us into his house. After the terrifying encounter in the barn, Norman leads us across the lawn.

“Sorry for comin’ atcha with a shotgun. I’ve had some other kids break into my barn to steal chickens or tools and such. But I swear, if one of y’all had made a run for it, I would have shot ya.”

Hendrix and I exchange a glance and laugh uncomfortably.

Norman turns around to look at us when we make it to his porch. “It’s real unfortunate what happened to you two. I hope I can help you.”

Tears well up in my eyes. Maybe it’s leftover from the intense terror in the barn, maybe it’s from Norman not calling the cops on two unwashed teenagers and instead, inviting us into his home.

The ranch house looks like it hasn’t been dusted in ten years, but everything is in its place. Carefully manicured to look like the days when his children—shown in photographs on the wall—still lived at home. Norman and the whole house feel lonely—like an empty playground at night, lit only by the harsh orange street lamps.

Hendrix speaks for me as we walk deeper into the ranch-style house. “We’re, uh, just looking for some food and a place to sleep. We can pay you, or we’ll work for it.”

Norman nods and gives a small smile, his whole face moving along with it. “Sounds like a deal.”

Both Hendrix and I wait for him to continue, but he doesn't. It's like we've both been bad and our teacher has sent us to the dean's office.

Norman senses our discomfort and continues. "How'd you lose your car, anyway? You two not from around here?"

"Uh, we were just . . . out exploring the state before we go off to college, right?" I give Hendrix a slap on the back to feign camaraderie, but it doesn't work.

Norman chuckles again, and it seems to come from everywhere inside him. "No, I understand what it's like being your age. It's just you and the entire world. But things got pretty out of hand real fast, ain't that right?"

My face flushing, I nod. "Right." Am I that easy to read?

Norman starts moving about the kitchen, like this is all completely normal. Hendrix and I kind of just stand there, watching. "You two aren't the first wild child I've had come knocking on my door. Lot of drunk teens coming from those trails in the mountains."

I cough to cover up my laughter at the beautiful irony of it.

Norman stops and looks at us straight on. "First off, are you in trouble? Do you need me to call someone?"

The concern aches and sends a dull pang through me. This man doesn't even know us, and yet this is the first thing he asks.

Hendrix speaks where I can't. "No. We're, uh, we're alright."

Norman's eyes flick back and forth between us, and I feel like I'm going to break. His demeanor just cuts right through me, and I don't know why. He nods and gets back to clearing off the table. "Well, ladies first. The bathroom is in the hallway to your left."

This all feels like shock. I'm still not entirely sure what's happening. Or why it's happening.

Norman looks up at us, his hunched frame weighted down by the plates in his hands. "Are you just going to stand there and stare at me, or do you want to get clean and eat food?"

"Thank you," I say, because it feels right. I kick at the shag carpet and find my way into the bathroom, pulled straight from a seventies catalog.

Double checking to make sure the door is locked, I strip down. I stare at myself naked, trying to remind myself not of who I am, but who I want to be.

In the shower, I scrub off the days-old dirt, sweat, and grime. Once I'm all clean, I can't seem to pull myself away from the water. It's still trying to peel away at whatever felt so strange back there with Norman.

As I follow the rabbit hole, something becomes apparent. Neither of us expected Norman to be so kind. So non-judgemental, like two teenagers showing up on his doorstep—dirty, confused, and neck deep in their own existential crises—is a weekly occurrence. Like this is his job.

And maybe it is. Maybe it keeps him sane, with nothing but the chickens outside and the ghosts trapped inside to fill the aching silence.

I step out of the shower and rub the steam off of the small window. Outside looks like a postcard, with the sun just tinted orange as the afternoon fades into evening. The fuzzy feeling—the one I had when Hendrix smiled and when we made it out of the woods—returns, and I just stand there in it, letting the feeling move through me and blossom into something beautiful.

If my mother were here, she'd cringe at the yellow foam that bursts from the vinyl-covered cushions. She'd sneer at the carpet, worn down like paths in the forest. I can almost hear her saying how absolutely outdated—and probably dangerous—the 1950s-era appliances are. God, my mother.

The smell of roast beef coming out of the oven pulls me back to where Hendrix sits, across from me, picking at his nails. I smile at him, but it takes him a moment to smile back. I'm just grateful he does.

The sun streams in through the sliding glass door, past the mountains and fields. We all make small talk during dinner, and it's actually quite delightful. Norman just gets to know us. I think that, more than the food or shelter, is what keeps our spirits up, is what keeps us in this moment.

Afterwards, I ask Norman about doing some laundry, and Hendrix helps out with some evening farm chores. They come back inside at around seven thirty, smelling like sunlight and dirt. Norman looks at us straight in the eye. “Now, I’m a farmer, and I’m also old, so I go to bed early and get up early, ‘cause it’s been a long day. I know you kids like to stay up, so I’ll let ya, but only because you two look like you’re good kids. Not like some of ‘em I’ve had before.”

“Thank you,” I say again, because Norman’s kindness threatens to make me cry again. It seems to strike the part of me that’s missing something. Those same hollow places that always ache.

Norman nods once more and rubs his balding head. “You can use the spare room, and feel free to use the pullout couch if you want.”

This time, it’s Hendrix who thanks Norman.

After Norman leaves, I look at Hendrix, who seems to have fallen into a trance. I pop my knuckles at my sides. All that good food has pumped up my blood sugar again.

“You want to go outside?” I ask.

“Sure,” he says.

We walk through the kitchen, now lit by the brilliant orange sunset, and open the sliding glass door. The sunset almost makes it feel hot outside.

We stand on the concrete back patio, looking out across the fields lined by mountains. I start talking, because I know he’ll never do it first. “I like Norman. I’m glad we found him.”

“Me too.” His voice bounces back, hollow.

“You okay? You seem out of it,” I say.

He swallows hard, and blinks out at the sun, as if the massive star itself is drawing something out in him, like salve on a wound. “Yeah.”

A definite lie, but I let it slide. I’ve realized, some things aren’t worth pushing. “Hey, I’m going to go get my camera so I can take some pics of the sunset.” I turn to head back inside, but Hendrix grabs my arm. Shock turns my flesh to stone.

“Please don’t leave,” he says. Desperation colors his voice blue.

“Why?” I ask.

Hendrix’s breath catches several times as he closes his eyes and sighs. “Just, stay with me, will you?”

I nod. “There’s a bench out there by the tree. Wanna go sit on it?”

“Sure,” he says. He sounds like he’s caught underwater.

We sit on the bench. Everything feels too real. The sun is too orange. The air is too warm. Hendrix feels too sad. Everything looks too picturesque. My fingers twitch, fumbling at my side for a camera bag that isn’t there. I feel a bit naked without my camera. Shame falls over me as I realize it’s a damned crutch. I blink, trying to solidify this gorgeous landscape in my head.

I look back at the small ranch: out of style but still kept up by one old man with a dedication to his farm and to helping kids like us.

Because no matter how old and disillusioned we feel, Hendrix and I are still young. I look out at the fields, the crops breaking through the earth. I look at the mountains, and what might lie beyond.

It all makes me feel really fucking sad, and I wish I knew why.

I rub my weary eyes and look over to Hendrix. My eyes run over the hills and valleys of his profile. “Wanna hear a story?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

“Back in middle school, my best friend was Sarah Luccetti. She got me hooked on this online dictionary thing full of made-up words. It’s by this one guy who made up words to . . . qualify feelings that don’t have a name. You ever heard of it?”

“No.”

“Well, I really like it. Helps me make sense of stuff, you know.”

“Yeah.”

We sit for a while, in the sunset. Together. I’m feeling something. It’s another word from Sarah’s dictionary, but again, I can’t seem to remember it.

“Hendrix,” I say.

“Yeah?” he says, staring out into the thick, hazy setting sun. The green crops look like they’ve been dusted with gold.

“I’m . . . I’m just sad.”

Hendrix blinks, as if my statement has taken him by surprise.  
“Me too.”



I rub the skin between my thumb and forefinger. When his words hit me, they don't feel like they usually do. The softness in his voice, the weight it carries—he means it. The good thing about Hendrix is that he's not a very good actor. Or maybe I just know him that well.

I think for a moment, and then the words come out like a waterfall. "I'm just *sad*. I'm sad that we had to run away in order to feel a sense of accomplishment and purpose. I'm sad that I didn't take advantage of my childhood, or whatever. I'm sad that everything's changing and there's nothing I can do to stop it. I'm sad I've never . . . I'm sad I've never experienced so many things. I'm sad that I missed so much. I don't wanna miss anything, Hendrix." It feels raw and it feels desperate. So does Hendrix.

He swallows, and looks over to me, something vulnerable and a little bit frightening behind his eyes. "Yeah. I missed a lot too."

I look away, out into the field where the hills and trees stretch into mountains. "What did you miss?"

Hendrix sighs through his nose. A pause stretches out, one so long that I'm not sure if he's ever going to respond. "I missed having friends. I missed being a kid. I missed being normal. I missed . . . I missed a lot of good things, Arden. I don't think I knew I missed any of those things until I met you. And. . . yeah, it does make me really fucking sad."

There's a moment where the world stills. I look up at Hendrix. Real, authentic pain carves itself onto his face.

As soon as I put my hand on his arm, I can see the walls starting to crawl back up around him. "I'm sorry," I say.

Something snaps in Hendrix. His face flushes red, and his eyes fill with tears. The world seems to move around us. We are stuck in this one place, floating and suspended, like red balloons are tied to our wrists and anchoring us to the sky.

He clears his throat and rubs his eyes with the palms of his hands. "I'm sorry, too."

For some reason, I lean over and lay my head on Hendrix's shoulder. He tilts his head, accepting the gesture, laying his head on mine. Our hands intertwine.

That's where we stay for a good, long while, until the sun has long left the sky, and all that remains are the hazy streaks of pink and orange amongst the blue-black sky.

**We sneak back into** Norman's house, cringing when the paint-chipped back door creaks. The moonlight casts boxes of light onto the linoleum floor. We part ways where the doorway diverges.

"You can take the bed. I'll sleep on the couch," Hendrix whispers.

For a split second, I hesitate. We've slept close to each other most of the nights we've been out here—why is tonight any different?

Then the moonlight silhouettes Hendrix. Flashes pass behind my eyes. I see the crimson blood smeared up his arms. His haunted, hollow eyes. The otherworldly glow of the knife in the dusk.

I nod my head in agreement.

The guest room is strange and unfamiliar and painted in a sad layer of transparent beige. I try not to think about it too much.

# 23 Hendrix

Monday, May 28th

It rains again in the morning. My body wakes me up early—even earlier than Norman, to my surprise. The floral-patterned curtains glow a dull gray. I pull myself off of the creaky couch, rubbing my eyes and throwing open the dusty curtains.

For a moment, I just stand there, soaking in the cold that seeps in through the old caulking around the windows, watching the rain make mist as it bounces off hard surfaces, wondering how I got here.

Like clockwork, I put my hand against my side and feel the solid knife and breathe out. It's comforting, almost.

Besides the unfamiliar sounds of the strange house, the drizzling rain is nearly silent. I open the front door and step out onto the porch. Water drips off the awning, and I sit on the concrete, my legs outstretched over the yard. I feel the rain on my skin—cold against warm—and then as it snakes around my calves and drips off.

*Laughter, like the rhythmic sound of rain.*

I peer into the horizon, but I can't see much further than the valley that Norman's ranch lies in. Across the street, there's a small field of potato plants, and then a wall of rock and trees that slope up and disappear into mist.

When my mom laughed, it could flood a room. It was unmistakable—one of those laughs where it comes right from the gut, springing out like a bubbling geyser. Sometimes, it was a delightful sound, one that was shared like candy in secret, one that pulled me out of nightmares. Other times, it was a weapon, bitter and laced with poison, like a whip she would throw out and reel back in. She used it against Dad a lot. Later, she used it against me, too.

It was during one of my dad's "manic" episodes, where he thought it would be a good idea to take seven year old me up to the top of a mountain, hoist me up on his shoulders, and teach me the "bona-fide, all-natural, beauty of this crazy, fuckin' world, Hendrix".

His words, not mine. Despite my mother's protests and the later fallout from the event, it's a happy memory.

I remember flashes of it—the muggy, summer evening, slathered with pink and orange candy clouds. Dad hauling me into the front seat of his truck, blasting Led Zeppelin. I was so small he had to help me get in.

I remember Mom screaming at him to come back, saying that he was being an idiot and running away from her. That Dad was going to hurt me.

I remember her spiteful laughter, echoing throughout the car as we drove away. I remember getting out in the gray dark, tinted orange with a beautiful sunset that must have been happening somewhere else. Lightning that illuminated the cardboard cutouts of mountains. Thunder that whispered to our bones.

I remember Dad throwing me on his shoulder, legs draped over his chest. His large hands held my knees in place as the rain cascaded over my face.

“Look at this, Hendrix!” he shouted, pumping a fist in the air. Rain blinded me, and panic gripped my stomach. I grabbed handfuls of his heavy, wet flannel.

“Hey, kid,” he said, turning to look me in the eye. “You’re alright. It’s just rain. It’s just a little rain! There ain’t nothing to be afraid of!”

And I laughed. It was, of course, just rain. Lightning ripped through the sky like God Himself tearing away at the heavens. Dad

howled and boomed and I cheered and pounded on my little chest, like we alone could take on the unrelenting wild, soaked in summer rain. In that moment, all I could do was feel. Feel the power of the moment, feel my father here, with me. Feel the rain and the air and the trembling of the mountains.

For a moment, I wasn't afraid. For a moment, everything was so incredibly simple.

“What are you doing out here?” It's Arden.

I blink. The tragic ending of the memory speeds by in flashes, like a tape on fast-forward. I'm glad she came and interrupted me before the rest of the memory spoiled my mood.

“Nothing. Just getting some fresh air.” I pull my legs up and wipe the rainwater off my skin.

“Well, I kinda feel bad that we crashed at Norman's house, so I was gonna make breakfast before we left. I thought you might want to help,” Arden says, still standing above me. I take note of her red toenails—chipped and bright like the color of her car, the one we abandoned back in Lolo Hot Springs.

“Yeah, sounds good,” I say, but don't move. I can't seem to. Part of my consciousness is still stuck in the past, under the trees and rain, smelling the wet metal and pine on a reckless summer night. Hearing the music and all the different types of laughter.

Arden shifts her weight. Gray gray gray. Both in front of my eyes, and behind them. “Want me to get you a towel? It looks like you’ve been out here for a while.”

“Sure. Thank you.”

**After drying off,** I come back inside to hear warm, crackling record music and the sizzle of something frying. With the towel slung over my shoulder, I lean on the wall that opens up to the kitchen. Arden’s still in her baggy pajamas, surrounded by plaid curtains and vintage appliances with silver and pastel enamel. Donned in a flower-print apron and fuzzy socks, she moves to the music slightly, pushing scrambled eggs around in a pan.

It’s charming, but I’d never admit it. Sometimes I wonder why she puts up with me, considering all of the awful things I’ve done. She must be desperate, which is actually pretty relatable.

“How domestic,” I say, leaning on the door jamb.

Arden scoffs and turns around a bit, but her smile betrays her. “Oh, shut up.”

I shrug. “My mom had an apron like that.”

“Did your mom do shit like this when you were little?” she asks, sprinkling in some cheese.

“Yeah, a lot actually.”

Arden checks on the bacon sizzling in the oven. “Only time my mom cooks is on Thanksgiving or Christmas, and even then, it isn’t



any good.” She pauses, holding the spatula above the eggs. “I only like this shit because I never see it at home. It’s exotic to me.”

I look down at the floor—a vinyl pattern that, without the context of the rest of the vintage house, would be atrociously ugly. I remember my basement, and how it had wall to wall carpeting for the first ten years of my life. The whole house reeked of the seventies, really. Mom wanted to change it—not to something more modern, but something that fit her taste. It was her home after all. Dad threw a fit, bitched about money and how trivial the whole thing was. He often didn’t make much sense. He yelled at her until she finally cracked and said she wouldn’t do it.

And then she did it anyway while he was away at work for a week, doing a road repair job in the city.

For most of my childhood, I was invisible. They never tried to hide their dysfunction from me. I heard it all—how Mom berated him for being sleazy and lazy and a recluse. How he berated her for being selfish and vain and irresponsible. Over some fucking carpet.

Then she hit him.

And he hit her back.

Silence. A few, long, endless moments of it. And then two slams, one right after the other. The growl and hum of a car engine starting up. The garage creaking and whining as it went up, and then back down. And the fear that sent paralyzing spikes through my lungs.

Mom left for three days. I was in fourth grade. We never knew where she went.

“Hendrix?” Arden asks.

“Sorry. Just, thinking about stuff.”

Arden stops cooking and turns around, leaning on the cabinet, eyeing me in that inquisitive way she always does. “Do you want to talk about it?”

*Yes.* I sigh, but it feels more like snow falling on a mountain. Heavy and silent and suffocating. “Do you ever think about something, and it starts off as a good memory, but then the whole thing just descends into madness and then you’re not thinking about the good thing anymore? Like everything’s been soured?”

Arden scoffs at the floor, and for a moment, I harden because I think she’s laughing at me. “Yeah, I completely understand. That’s like, a good half of my internal monologue. I think myself into corners all the time.”

A reflex pulses through me, and I smile. Like gagging at spoiled milk, the chemical reflex bypasses my consciousness. Because Arden understands me. She always does.

“Isn’t there a word for that? Like, in that Dictionary thing you’re into?”

Arden cocks her head at me, leaning against the counter. “I’m not sure, actually. I’ll have to check and see.” She looks at me for a moment, but she’s not digging and searching like she usually does. She’s just looking at me. *Seeing* me.

I feel an impulse, deep in my gut. It's not a bad one, actually. Warm and bright like a beacon, it pushes me to do something for her. Something good for someone else. "Uh, want me to help with setting the table or something?"

"Yeah, that'd be a big help, actually."

I've never seen an old man so happy. Actually, I think he's sad because at first he looks shocked, and then babbles while hugging Arden and rocking her back and forth. I give her a look, but she just smiles at me and pats Norman's back. She's so much better with people than I am. Most of the time.

Norman wipes his cheeks with his handkerchief as we all sit down around the metal table, complete with splitting vinyl cushions, revealing the yellow foam underneath. It looks like he hasn't replaced anything since 1960. But I'm not surprised—most people can't afford new and shiny things where Arden and I come from. Even then, it would have made me wrinkle my nose in contempt, but these circumstances make it charming. Everything feels worn, lived in, old. Real.

I glance at the vase of flowers sitting on the table. While the flowers look freshly picked, the vase is cloudy and caked with dust. I wrinkle my nose a bit, remembering that dust is mostly made up of dead skin cells. Not to mention, the entirety of Norman's house is quite dusty. Not that his house is dirty, but the knick-knacks, the

shelves, the flat surfaces, are all coated in the fine, gray residue. It makes me think he's holding on to the person who helped create that dust. Which is also really relatable.

As I pick at the bacon, all I can think of is that deer. How the blood reached up to my neck. How I drowned in it. I didn't make it out alive that time. I know something broke inside me then, except I've lost track of what's still intact over the years.

"How's the bacon?" Norman asks.

"Good," I nod, mentally reentering the kitchen.

"I cooked it in the oven," Arden says, pointing with her fork. "I've heard it makes the bacon more flavorful, but never got around to trying it back home."

Norman nods. "Good thinking. It also could be good because I raised it right here, on this land. Slaughtered it myself."

I nearly choke.

Arden notices and catches me. "Didn't you used to work at a slaughterhouse?"

"Butcher. They did both. Slaughtering . . . and butchering" *Fuck*. Now I'm thinking of all the death I witnessed there. How I was the kid who hosed off the aftermath. I drop my hands to my lap and press the prongs of the metal fork into my palm.

Arden laughs. "He worked at that place before he came to the frozen yogurt shop with me. Hell of a switch, right?"

I meet her eyes, and her face falls. One of the bad things about Arden being able to see right through me is that she sees the anger simmering beneath. I can no longer hide that from her. She tries to communicate something to me with her face, but Norman speaks before I can read it.

“Strange place for a boy to work, eh?” Norman says, raising his wiry eyebrows. I know he probably means well, but I don’t really care.

“I was sixteen.”

“Still sounds like an odd job for a kid if you ask me. You’d find yourself in better company if you worked on a farm!” he says, glancing over to Arden. His demeanor digs nails in between my skin and muscle, paring away at my flesh.

“Well, I liked it.” The fork hasn’t drawn blood yet, but the pain is making me go blind.

Norman takes a look at me, up and down, and laughs uncomfortably through his tight, wrinkled lips. He *laughs*.

Something snaps in my brain. I’m not sure what’s broken and what’s not anymore. I stand, the chair crashing to the ground behind me. I hiss *fuck* as I stumble over it on my way out the front door.

Arden calls after me, but I keep walking because I know I would have slammed her onto that table and strangled her right there, her warm, dishwater blonde hair whipping wildly—and then not at all.

*I can’t do this anymore. Any of it.*

Fucking *hell*, I was fine this morning. Good, actually. It doesn't make any goddamn sense. I flip flop back and forth between okay and not. My brain is a mess, a tangle of emotions and thoughts that I can't understand—one that I've *never* been able to understand. I hate a lot of people, but the hatred for myself? That runs all the way to my core.

*Maybe those memories have finally spoiled me.*

Yearning expands within me, pushing against the walls like I am Alice falling into Wonderland drinking potion. I wish I could understand. Understand why I'm like this. Understand why Arden is the person I need to kill.

I see the expanse of Idaho before me—mountains, mist, fields, road—and do one of the only things I'm good at: running.

I run up and down the long, winding road until I can't feel the rage buzzing in my muscles anymore. Until I vomit up the food Arden made with love—just like my mother used to. Until everything from my lungs to my shins to my head burns. Until the leviathan has crawled back in his cave. Until the *nothing* has frozen over again.

But it's only temporary. One wrong step and the ice will shatter, and both Arden and I will go under.

# 24 Arden

Monday, May 28th

**We negotiate a deal** with Norman that if we work for him all day, he'll give us each \$100, which is a lot for a guy like him. I think he understands where we are—in life, I guess, and I think he'd be the first person to know that sometimes the best thing for you is some physical activity to smack you in the ass and some good company to tell you like it is. Maybe he too has been here before—nomadic, lost, forsaken.

Hendrix isn't keen on staying, but we need the money. I tell him to try and enjoy the moment. He does that thing where he looks slightly bewildered, but is also trying to soak up all the information he can *and* make sense of it at the same time. It's weird.

**After Hendrix returns from** his “morning jog”, Norman sends him out to water the crops and feed the animals. Norman helps me clean up the kitchen. I think it's because he wants to pick my brain. Standard procedure for teenage vagabond, I guess.

Norman moves slowly, but not necessarily because he's old, but as if he's a man who takes great care with each movement he makes, like he'll come to the end of his life and have to answer for every one of them. He cleans off the table dish by dish, and I start washing. The radio hums something sweet in the background, crackling like a hearth.

“Your friend Hendrix, he's pretty queer, isn't he?” Norman says like he's just stating the obvious.

“Oh, no he's not— he's not gay,” I say, playing with the bubbles in the sink.

Norman chuckles, and it sounds like his ribs are shaking along with him. “No, honey. I meant queer as in strange. Odd.” He drops a handful of silverware into the sink.

I smirk. “Yeah, he is. But that's alright, I still like him.” As soon as the words come out of my mouth, an image of his knife pierces through my memory. Shining silver at the creepy man when we ran



out of gas. Glistening red as it squelched in and out of that poor deer. Everything all at once.

My stomach goes sour as it sinks like a stone. I don't catch the next thing that Norman says because I'm trying to think my way out of the violent, bloody corner I've painted myself into.

Norman's hand on my shoulder pulls my brain back into place.

"Sorry, I missed what you said," I say. I see the best in Hendrix, I really do. It's just buried under a lot of shit.

Norman chuckles again. I could listen to that all day. It just sounds so . . . earthy, like it's got miles and miles of history beneath it. There's weight behind everything Norman does, and I can feel it tugging on my heart. The same tugging that led me to drop everything and run.

"Oh, I's just wondering about how you got your parents to convince you two to let you do this. My folks never would have let me do anything like that with my girlfriend."

I stop scrubbing the dried eggs off the pan, my hands sinking into the warm, soapy water. Which part do I explain first? The fact that Hendrix and I aren't an item, or that our parents never consented to any of this? "Well, things are different now, you know. Just like how queer doesn't mean strange, parents let their kids do a lot of wild shit these days." I pause, then add: "For a variety of reasons."

Norman laughs, and it sends something hollow through my chest, because he just sounds so happy and entertained and grateful for us being here, despite how broken we are. “Oh, believe me, I understand. So, how long have you two been going steady?” I hear the smile in the old man’s deep and creaking voice.

*Shit.* “Uh, Hendrix and I aren’t really together. We’re just friends.” I pull the plug on the sink and watch as the line of bubbles sinks and then swirls out of sight.

“Well, you oughta at least be *something*. Experiences like the ones you two are having bond people. Don’t waste your time, Arden—”

I turn around to start wiping down the table. “I’m not wasting my time, Norman. I understand—”

“No, I don’t think you do,” Norman says, matter-of-fact. “I spent my whole life wishing my youth away. Now, I didn’t have a bad life by any means, but I sure as hell wasn’t enjoying every moment. We can get so caught up in our own pain, wishful thinking . . .”

*I don’t want to talk about this.* “I’m not wishing my life away, Norman,” I say. Jeez, I wish he’d just drop it. I’m not sure what he’s trying to prove, but I can’t bring myself to snip at Norman, at least not as much as I snip at everyone else.

“Then what are you running from?”

My brain goes silent as all the blood drains out through my toes.

“There’s only two reasons I get kids here. One is that they’re chasing something that doesn’t exist, or they’re running from something. Which is it, then?” Norman’s wisdom, the mere presence

of it, cuts deep. I'm not used to adults speaking to me this way. I feel that thing again—that stringing feeling—like someone's unspooling me like thread.

My voice is small when I finally speak, clearing my throat. “A little bit of both, I think.”

Norman smiles to himself. “Sounds about right. You know, I'm not really sure how my place became this . . . haven for kids like you. Kid after kid came here, and word got around, I guess. Now this is all I do, really, other than take care of my farm.”

“We, uh, we didn't know you did this stuff,” I say. The washrag drips from my hands onto the linoleum.

“Oh,” Norman says. He looks out the window, the bright sunlight streaming in through the sheer curtains. The light carves the surface of the earth onto his face. “Maybe people like us can sense each other, and gravity pulls us together.”

I smile, and it lights up my whole being. “I like that. Sounds like something I'd say.”

Norman walks towards me, and I find myself standing up taller, but he just ends up sinking into one of the vinyl chairs. “When I was your age, as soon as I graduated high school back in '58, I left town to find a job in the big city. I was running from my ex-girlfriend who I still loved and my dad who did nothing but sit on his ass and drink. Except I didn't know that's why I left until I'd sucked my funds dry and had to come home. I thought it was 'cause I had crazy huge

dreams and wanted a good time. I wasted five years of my life that way, and got into a lot of debt. I left a lot of good people behind. I's a prodigal son of sorts. You wanna know the people who stopped me from running off the edge of the earth?"

I swallow. His gaze holds mine, like it's just me and this old man in his crackerbox house and outdated furnishings. The world beyond doesn't exist.

"Who?" I ask.

"My future wife. And my best friend, Ernest." Norman looks down, like these words are shaking the skeleton of his world. "Both of y'all are young and can have bright futures if you want to. I ain't gonna let you and Hendrix make the same mistake I did."

Someone has stolen my lungs and my heart beats raw in my chest. "If you want something, go and get it. If you love someone, tell them. That vulnerability—it's so worth it. But don't run all over yourself before you've had a chance to grow. Don't let that hollowness drown you. It ain't about where you are—it's about who you're with."

The only thing that's keeping me from crying is watching Hendrix shower the potato plants in water that sparkles in the late morning sun.

I pause, his words taking root inside me. "Thank you." Although I feel a little called out, sometimes I think I need to be talked back to, reprimanded, and challenged. My parents never did it. As I grew older, there was a point where I *wanted* them to punish me for acting out. I felt like I deserved it.

He chuckles, but it's not the same laugh. This one's a shade darker. "No, thank *you*, Arden. I suppose some things never change."

I begin to put the dishes away, trying not to make much noise as they clink together. I'm afraid of disturbing something, maybe myself.

"What happened to your wife?" I ask.

"She died. Dementia due to blood clots a few years back. I lost her way before then, though."

"I'm sorry." It feels like something I'm obligated to say, but I mean it. I do. Something similar happened to my grandma, and it ruined my grandfather. He was a man who—even before her passing—was worn away by age, both in body and in spirit. He was the kind of man who'd yell at kids riding their bikes down the street too loudly or walking through his backyard to fish in the nearby lake. All he wanted to do was watch the news and play cards and talk about the past. But Norman. Norman is the grandfather I've always wanted. The one I think I needed—at least right now, in this moment.

Norman smiles, looking out the glass door onto the fields he's tended so carefully. "Don't be. She was a spectacularly strong woman."

Smirking, I stack the bowls and put them in the cabinet. "I'll bet—she had to put up with you."

Norman's lips curl up into a grin. He points a spatula at me, flinging water onto the flower print apron that I'm still wearing.

“Now there’s the life I’m talking about. Don’t you ever lose that, Arden.”

I open my mouth to speak, but I stop, because something is moving within me. I feel seen and heard, and I soften. “No, actually. My name is Michelle.”

Norman just smiles and shakes his head.

I sit in the back of Norman’s truck with Hendrix, just to make sure he’s alright, because he sure wasn’t alright during breakfast. But right now, he just seems sad. It hangs around him like black smoke.

Norman offers to drive us into town, and to tell you the truth, I’m a little sad to be leaving Norman and his idyllic little farm. Maybe we’ll stop by on our way back.

*On our way back.* The flippant thought sends my mind skidding into a tailspin. Will we even go back? *Can* we even go back? Or have we been gone too long? I haven’t even thought about it—what comes after all of this. Now that we’re out of Montana, I’m not sure where we’re going. I think Hendrix and I keep going because we must. Because we have nothing to go back to. We have not reached the other side of this proverbial wilderness just yet.

Norman drops us off in Pierce, Idaho. He gives me a wink before he turns around and heads back into the middle of nowhere. Already, warm nostalgia blossoms in my chest.

Pierce, Idaho is a town carved out of the forest. The road cuts through the land, and the town was dropped straight through it. The blue pines encroach on the squat, wooden buildings.

Hendrix and I wander down the main drag in the dusk, the setting sun turning the world a burning orange. We find a hole-in-the-wall bar and grill—the kind where there’s steps leading down under a building into it. The ceiling feels too low, but there’s live music and the whole place smells like frying oil and beer.

Someone seats us near the dance floor—miraculously, this joint is big enough to have one like that place in Bozeman. We make aimless chatter while waiting for our food, but all I can think about is the future. After three songs, the waiter finally brings us our food

“You wanna try my fish tacos?” I ask, holding up the floppy tortilla. Chipotle sauce drips onto my plate.

“No thanks.” Hendrix physically recoils.

“What? You got a problem with tacos?” I smirk.

“No— ”

“Did tacos make fun of you as a kid? Did they point fingers and laugh at you in elementary school, huh?”

The smile immediately falls from my face. Glaring at me, Hendrix grits his teeth, as if he’s deciding whether or not he’s going to lash out. Tension—hot and solid—builds between us, but Hendrix just stuffs his hands in his pockets and glances at the bar. “You’re a bitch.”

“At least I’m not a sociopath.” As soon as the words come out, my stomach sinks with regret. Instead of exploding, Hendrix just takes out his phone, the blue glow pulling him in a digital world. Somehow, deliberate shunning gets on my nerves even more than him being downright aggressive.

“So, what happened this morning?” I ask. It seems like I can still hear the crash of his chair, the way he slammed the door, and how it seemed to awaken the ghosts in Norman’s house.

Hendrix tightens. “Nothing. It’s fine.”

Absently, I finish off my first taco as something aching and strange brews in my chest, a change of heart. “Are you okay?”

“Are you?” His response is lightning fast, and laced with poison.

I sit up, looking past Hendrix to the restaurant around us. The cigarette smoke hanging in the air gets to my throat. “No, not really,” I respond.

Hendrix scoffs. “Yeah, me neither.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” The words, the conversational beats, feel mechanical at this point. Did I learn nothing from Norman?

“No.”

“Of course you don’t.” His answers are quick, but mine are faster. Before I know what I’m doing, I push out my chair and walk out of the restaurant. I’m just mad—fed up with Hendrix, really—and I need some air.



My heart pounds raw in my chest as I walk up the stairs and out into the fading orange light. My brain screams at me: *Why are you doing this? Why are you running away?* But I have no good answer. The only thing that makes sense is this, the one thought that pushes up above all the rest: I want to *know* Hendrix, despite all the ugly parts. It's strange, but I see pieces of myself in him. Snapshots of color that only I recognize. That's why I asked—well, coerced—him into coming. But the tragedy is: I don't think he wants to know me.

In case I had any doubt that I'm in almost-rural Idaho, I pass a black box nailed to a streetlight—a payphone. Something makes me stop and slide silver quarters into the slot. Something makes me dial my mother's cell phone number.

It rings twice, and then she picks up.

“Hello?”

My eyes burn with tears as I clutch the plastic phone in my hands. At just the sound of her voice—the pitch, the texture—the *something* inside me crumbles. For all of my mother's vanity, for all of her shortcomings . . . I miss her. It hits me like a cold wind, rushing through all the hollow places. The evening light fades fast.

“Hello? Is anyone there?” my mom says. She sounds agitated, like there are a million better things that she'd be doing right now. For some reason, it's comforting because my mother always sounds that way. It sounds like a home—a home I've never known but a desire for it that's been ingrained into me like dust from the stars.

She pauses, breathing into the phone carefully. “Michelle, is that you?”

Tears streaming down my face, I hang up the phone. I look back toward the restaurant, but keep walking down the ever-darkening main drag, cast in harsh, orange light.

*She sounded worried.*

Someone’s stuck a massive straw through my heart, coring me straight through the chest. I’m conflicted, all mixed up inside. I keep walking back and forth, up and down the main drag, silent tears streaming down my face. I plead with myself—with the universe—begging for one of my infinite steps to have meaning. The question keeps circling: why did I have to leave—to cut myself off from everyone and everything—to try and find myself?

There’s a bar on the edge of town, with tattered shingles and weak neon signs. Wiping my cheeks, I wander inside. Cigarette smoke hits me in the face, and my heart clenches. Smells a bit like Hendrix. I sit down at the bar.

“Rum and coke,” I say.

The bartender gives me a look—surprise mixed with disdain.

“Please?”

Running his tongue over his teeth, the bartender tosses a white towel over his shoulder. “ID, little lady?”

I scoff. “Well, it was worth a shot.” Tearing a drink napkin into small pieces, I hum along with the music.

“You’re a long way from home.”

I look over to see a man one stool down, nursing an Old Fashioned. “How can you tell?” I size him up—a six out of ten on the *Billing’s Best Yogurt Creep Scale*. My chest squeezes as I think of Hendrix.

“The kids in this town, they know how to drink, and this bar ain’t it.”

“How do you know so much about the kids in this town? You a creep or something?” I ask. Immediately the words bite me in the ass, and I think of what I said to Hendrix: *Did tacos make fun of you as a kid?* The words scathe, even after the fact. Jesus, why am I so touchy?

“No, I’ve just got a daughter in high school,” he says, sighing and shaking his head. He’s got a blue jumpsuit on, and his balding head shines with sweat.

“Then why are you at a bar on a Monday night?” I ask. The bartender gives me a free lemon-lime soda with ice, probably to get me to leave.

The man chuckles to himself, and the sadness in it hits me where it hurts. “Why are *you* at a bar on a Monday night?”

My eyes burn with tears. In every lyric of the music that floats out of the speakers in this cramped bar, I hear my mother’s voice, coming in loud and clear over that shitty payphone speaker. Turning to the man next to me, my heart throbs in my chest. But the man has

looked back at his drink, self-absorbed once again. I suppose I'm no different.

"It's because I'm running," I say. It's the truth—I know I'm running from something, because my heart keeps tugging at my chest, pushing me forward and dragging the rest of me along with it. I'm not really running from my past anymore. But I'm not running *to* anything, because I've got nothing to run to. My future is a blur, a mess of colors and feelings and ideas.

I think about what Norman told me earlier today—did I even listen? No, because I'm in this fucking bar, and not with Hendrix. Because I ran away from him. *Again.*

My skin crawls with shame. I want to go home. I want to go back to the way my life was before all this. Before this trip—before Hendrix—started breaking me open.

*Then why did you hang up on your mother tonight?*

The man turns to me, eyes sorrowful like a chained-up dog. "What are you running from?"

"Not just running." I shake the ice at the bottom of my soda glass. The setting sun paints the bar in the most beautiful shade of dying orange. "I guess I'm searching for something too."

"Ain't everyone?" the man says. My breath gets caught in my throat and forms a knot there. Does what I'm searching for actually exist? Have I been searching for it in the wrong places?

The man sighs, turning back to me. “You’re obviously having a bad night, and I don’t want a girl like you getting caught up in all the shit that happens here.”

I sniff, not meeting his eyes. This man isn’t scary—actually, he breaks my heart a little bit. “What’s your name?” I ask him.

“Scott,” he says. “What’s yours?”

Swallowing down sobs, I say, “Arden.” The bartender’s begun to notice that I’m a sniveling mess.

Scott stands up, holding out his hand. “Why don’t you go on home, Arden? This ain’t no place for you.”

My tears feel like wet paint on my cheeks. Something inside me is breaking, but it’s not a shattering. It’s a splintering, a crack that grows and grows until it collapses under its own weight. If Sarah was here, she’d probably reference her dictionary, but not me, not now. Some things just can’t be explained, I think.

“I don’t think I have a home.” The words cut through my universe.

Downing the last of my soda, I get up and leave the bar. Because that’s what I always do—leave. I’m running from something but I’m also running towards it. How can those exist all at the same time?

Scott doesn’t call after me—why would he? I’m just a stranger. I’m a stranger to my friends. I’m a stranger to my mother. I’m a stranger to myself. I’m running from all these things I can’t escape. It’s like I’ve got a balloon tied to my ankle—no matter how fast I run,

it's always chasing me. I am taking it with me. And in doing that, I've made myself homeless.

But what does that even mean? I only have these vague ideas, concepts, that I've become so fixated on, as if finally finding meaning will somehow fix all my other problems along the way. I've become obsessed with this limbo that Hendrix and I have created—this somewhere-in-between. Because it is nothing and also everything I want all at the same time. Because facing the future is somehow scarier than staying stuck in the past. Running in circles feels better than not moving at all.

On the night of my eighteenth birthday, I didn't hang out with my friends. There was no cake, no celebration, no sips of wine to commemorate my legal adulthood. After work, I went out into the woods, to that lookout I had gone to on so many broken nights, and got stoned out of my mind. When I'm high, nothing feels quite so *real*. Sometimes, that's exactly what I need, but sometimes it's just a visceral escape. I remember lying on the cold ground, staring at the stars, hoping that the earth itself would swallow me into its embrace. Sometimes I think we need to scrape rock bottom every once in a while just to make sure it's there.

And here I am, escaping it all yet again, caught in the middle of this twisted limbo. I stand on the edge of Pierce, Idaho as the pine forest and mountains swallow the road leading out of town. It feels like everyone is inside on this tragically beautiful night. I am the only one to witness the sun's death, exploding in a breathtaking orange and purple display. If only I had any breath for the sun to take.

I had to leave—I had no choice. My meaning had to be sought elsewhere. But I think I've found it in the most unexpected place. My heart is heavy, swollen with the truth I can't dare to admit.

My home is with Hendrix. Despite how he's hurt me, he's also changed me. I've found empathy, understanding, and meaning in him. He has found a cozy spot in my soul and made a home there. Even still, I find myself running from him. Running from someone who understands me more than I'd like him to, more than he'll ever understand. Running from someone who has been down for all of my crazy, impulsive shit. Running from the home that's been beside me all along.

*Because that's what you do, Arden. You run from stuff.*

These old habits, they fight tooth and nail. *I ran from Sarah's vulnerability. I pushed Elliot away.* It all bleeds out of my chest, dripping between my ribs. I'm sobbing again, right there in the middle of the road. I can't run from my past, I just take it with me.

I want to go home. Except the home I left doesn't exist anymore, and the home I want is just a dream in my head. My home is nowhere and everywhere all at once.

So I suppose it's time to stop running.

# 25 Hendrix

Monday, May 28th

Time's always leaving, just like her.

Watching as Arden walks out the door, something rips inside my chest, leaving sensations that ripple out through my body. The fries no longer look appetizing. There's a moment in sheer desperation where I consider running after her, but I feel like that might make things worse. As if this whole thing isn't already fucked up.



I feel like killing something. But I also feel like if I do, I'll vomit again. The bar and grill is full of blue-collar men and couples at the tables. The room seems smoky in the warm evening light

I get up and walk out of the restaurant, just as our waiter comes to refill our drinks. Ghosts of myself—I seem to leave them everywhere, like the rank cigarette smoke that hangs around this restaurant. Anger and pain crawls under my skin. I hope I don't encounter Arden, because I fully intend to kill her.

Sometimes, I do things and I don't really know why. Like why I walk into a general store and ask for a ski mask.

The cashier just laughs and asks me if I'm aware that it's summertime.

I tell him that I know. I demand that he get me one anyway.

The cashier flashes me a strange look as I pay for it and leave.

It's not until I pull the black wool over my face that I fall back into myself, but by that point, it's too late. I'm already combing through back alleys, searching for someone small or weak enough to fall prey to the blade at my hip.

There's a scrawny man yelling on the phone behind the grill & bar, pacing. A child riding his bike down a residential alley. An old, portly man smoking a cigar on a cast-iron park bench.

But no Arden.

I go with the man, since he seems old and overworked—and the least conspicuous. Whatever town we're in is small as fuck, so I can still see the old man on the park bench from the trees that encroach on the town.

Just as the sun has fallen past the mountains and the world will plummet into darkness in minutes, the man tosses his cigar in a nearby ashtray. As soon as I see him move to get up, I pounce, one arm around his chest and the other pressing the blade of my knife to his fleshy, shaved neck.

“Give me your fucking wallet,” I spit in his ear. I jam my hand down his back pocket.

“Oh, *Christ!*” he exclaims, springing up and tugging at my arms.

It seems I underestimated how strong—and how tall—the old man was, because he rips my arms away from his body, whipping around.

And then I do it. I do the thing I haven't been able to bring myself to do all this fucking time. I thrust the blade forward in one sloppy motion, but the man sees the move coming from a mile away and jumps backward.

“Hey! What the *fuck?*” the man says. On the bench, he looked flabby, but now he storms around the bench, rolling up his flannel sleeves to reveal meaty forearms and clenched fists, clad with rings. Regret pools in my stomach. For a moment, I freeze and hope he beats me to death.

Since I neither run nor charge at the man, he reels back and slugs me in the face. My teeth vibrate, and the grass tastes metallic as I hit the ground.

Blinking until my vision returns, I stand.

“You gonna fucking run or should I drag your ass to the police?” the man says.

I run my bloody mouth across my forearm, wincing as my cheek protests to the movement. “Hit me again.”

“What?” he spits, scowling at me.

The point of the knife comes up to the base of the man’s neck before I can think about it. “Hit me again, you bitch.”

This time, he clocks me in the temple with the hook of his cane. My vision explodes into white. I stumble into a tree, sputtering with laughter at how *good* it hurts.

“Again,” I say, and this time, the old man hesitates before kneeling me in the gut. I crumple to the ground, an excruciating mix of bitter laughter and sobs boiling up from my throat.

Before I can plead for him to beat me until I’m dead, the old man rips off my ski mask and grabs me by my shirt collars, forcing me to sit up and look at him.

His face lights up with shock when he sees how old I am. “Fuck, you’re just a kid.” The man steps back, running his hands through his thinning hair.

“Please, kick me again,” I whimper, crawling on the cold ground. Blood from my nose and mouth leaks down my neck, hot and thick.

“Why?”

*Because I am in so much pain. Because that pain has solidified into a coal of hot, burning anger and has lit me aflame. Because before I kill myself, I want to drag everyone else to hell with me.*

I take my knife and stab it into the toe of his boot—in and out. He screams and kicks me in the ribs—so hard that I fall back, groaning and cringing in pain, rolling around on the ground. I can’t breathe. I don’t *want* to breathe.

The man checks his uninjured toes while I grit my bloody teeth, facedown in the grass. He grabs me by my shirt again. Everything hurts.

“That’s enough, *punk*. If you stop now, I won’t rat your ass out to the cops. Now get the fuck away from me.” I can smell the tobacco on his breath, and it makes me miss my habit.

“Thank you,” I wheeze, grabbing fistfuls of dirt as I try to get up, but the old man yanks me upright by my elbow. Before I can thank him, he’s lit another cigar and is strolling back into town, unscathed.

Electric pain sends wooden stakes through my face and ribs, and I fall onto a tree, wiping the blood away from my nose with the ski mask. I try to laugh, but the pain shoots straight up my forehead, and twists the hot metal in my ribs, so I claw at the evergreen bark until it’s over.

With violent sobs swelling in my chest, I hit the tree with my fists until the pain turns them numb, until they're a bloody mess of cartilage and bone. I scream into the ski mask until I choke and my ribs give out.

Heaving, I pound my skull with my fists, as if the force could unstick me. Unstick me from the thousands of moments I've been living in for the last seven years. I am a record skipping, forever stuck on that ugly scratching noise as the world screams at me to *move on*.

But I can't.

A few paces into the forest, I find a creek, swollen and muddy from the recent rain. I strip down to my boxers, blood smearing across the fabric, and jump in. The cold slaps me in the face, shocking my bones back to earth.

Under water, while my eyes are still closed, words come to me like clouds settling in a valley. I hear twinkles of violin riffs and uncertainty. *A bird may love a fish, but where would they build a home?*

In this horror of my reality, surrounded in cloudy, bitter creek water in the middle of fucking nowhere, Idaho, all I can think of is my Grandfather. And my mother. The urge to kill is gone, for that was a mere mask of what I'm actually feeling. After all that has burned away, there's nothing but boiling, black regret and self-hatred.

*I am a fish, and I am drowning.*

This—whatever *this* is—is splitting the continents inside of me, like the earth itself ripping apart at the seams like it did millions of years ago. The problem is: I can't decide which side I'd like to be on, so I let the trench between the land flood with water, so hopefully I'll drown.

# 26 Arden

Monday, May 28th

I find myself back at the bar and grill, staring up at the neon beer signs and wooden paneling. My fish tacos have gone cold.

Of all songs, of course the band's playing their rendition of 'Piano Man' by Billy Joel. *Dad*. My straw chases the ice in my sweet tea. The lights are so low that nobody notices the tears streaming down my face.

"Can I get you anything?"

I sniff, hard. “No, thanks.”

I twirl the straw between my fingers. *I hope Hendrix comes back.* I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't though. Who knows what he's doing right now?

Something sinks inside me and freezes solid. I hurt him; I tend to do that a lot. Then again, he's hurt me just as much. But I won't run from him if he comes back. *I won't.*

Classic rock covers pass by one after the other. The band's actually pretty good, and the bass player is hot. I wonder if he'd be down to make out after.

The thought makes me stop, and I dig my fingernails into my palms. I don't really want that. I don't even know him, and it's all just so not real. So *not real* that it leaves a vapid, aching pit inside me—like a pinhole in a balloon that only grows the more air you pump into it. I'm just hurt. And lonely.

Someone approaches the table, and I instinctively bat the tears from my face.

It's Hendrix, and his face is covered in red splotches that will soon turn into bruises. “You came back,” he says.

“Of course I did.”

He doesn't say anything, and I see myself reflected back in his red-rimmed eyes. Before I think about it, I slide my arms under his and hug him. His dark brown hair hangs low and damp over his forehead, and the dampness from his clothes seeps into mine. Why is



he so . . . wet? Before I can ask, I feel him stiffen, but he eventually hugs me back. He smells spicy like pine, but like *real* pine.

When we pull away, there's a moment where Hendrix looks down at me, lips slightly open like he's going to say something. But his face falls closed, biting his busted lip, confusion flickering across his forehead. We sit at the table, Hendrix barely visible behind the thick atmosphere of the restaurant.

"Where did you go?" I ask.

"Nowhere."

I swallow. "Are you alright? Did something bad—"

"I don't want to talk about it. Please." But he doesn't sound mad. Painful desperation bleeds into his voice.

I breathe, trying to calm the spiraling ball of panic and offense inside my stomach. Hendrix presses a fist to his forehead.

"I'm sorry," I say.

He pauses. "Me too." His words take me by surprise. They weigh heavy on my heart.

Timi Yuro's 'Smile' is being masterfully covered by a girl who doesn't look too much older than us. The lights flicker and change into deep purple. Hendrix rubs his nose and glances around the bar. Blood comes away on his fingers. He looks at it for a moment, and then directly at me. "Do you want to dance?"

It's my turn to stare blankly and ask, "What? But you're bleeding . . ."

He repeats himself, a bit exasperated. "I said, do you want to dance? With me?"

Slowly, a smile breaks on my face. I let go of the subject, knowing that I'll find out in time. "Hell yeah. I love dancing."

Hendrix clears his throat and pushes out his chair. "Ok . . . good, then."

We awkwardly migrate to the dance floor—rather: the sticky, warped linoleum in the low-light. Hendrix and I stand inches apart from each other. The strangeness sits cold and spiny between us.

"Have you ever danced with a girl, Hendrix?" I ask, raising an eyebrow.

He sighs. "Not really. I just asked you 'cause I figured you would have asked sooner or later."

Smiling, I sling my arms around his neck. "Hendrix, you're one of the very few people who can read me like a book."

He furrows his brows momentarily and stifles a laugh. "Ditto."

"Alright, now put your hands on my waist," I say, taking his hands and putting them around me. Albeit bewildered, Hendrix smiles. It sends something warm rushing through me. "Now, I don't really like to do the 'sway back and forth' thing from middle school dances. If you don't mind, I'll lead for a while until you get the hang of it."

Hendrix's smile falters, but I think it's because he's stumbling. It's cute, actually, but I wish I could make him comfortable. Hendrix never really looks completely comfortable.

I curve my arm around his shoulder and take his right hand. There's a moment where we fumble, but I whisper, "Just step along to the beat. I've got this."

I guide his hand to my lower back, so he can guide me if need be, but for a while, I pull us along, slow dancing in the style of our grandparents. There are moments where we trade off, and where Hendrix leads me across the floor and I let him. He keeps looking at his feet, but all I can see is him.

I am fully here in this moment. The rough-yet-soft texture of his flannel, the slightly unwashed scent of his skin—smelling of sweat and old motel rooms and greasy diners and adventure—but it smells like him. His warm, full breath brushes against my neck as we sway to the center of the dance floor. The smoke and the lights turn the rest of the world into dust.

My hands slide down to his hips as we move to the music, but then my finger brushes against the hard outline of the knife on the waistband of his pants. Something deep inside me seizes up—reminders of the darker layers of Hendrix that I don't know.

But as he grabs my hand, clasps it between his, and holds it there, I'm no longer afraid. He holds it like it means something. He looks up, and in that moment, he's all there too. I know he is, because his

eyes lose their shadows. He looks . . . young. Boyish, unburdened. I've only seen this look one other time, when we were singing American Pie all those days ago.

And then my brain sparks with an idea. "Twirl me out," I say.

"I don't think I know—"

But before he can finish, I peel out and fling myself outward while the singer hits a vibrato-filled note as the smooth jazz swells. I hear Hendrix laugh, and I turn back in. But we take it too hard, and suddenly we're nose-to-nose, chest-to-chest, breathless.

Tenderly, I lean into him, letting him feel me in my entirety, holding nothing back. The bridge of my nose finds a home in his neck. He wraps his arms around me, like he's holding himself together, too. We sway back and forth, breathing in the mutual question of *how could life be this beautiful?*

Holding him—him holding me—it hurts so good. It makes the deep and incredible longing inside me throb. It makes me ache for something like this all the time—something this intimate and meaningful. An ache because *this is real*. A confirmation that I *can* feel this way. That I *can* have a meaningful relationship with another person. I've been so starved of it for so long that this all feels so alarming and yet so natural all at once. The sensation stretches out inside me, reaching forward with threads of inordinate color.

Or so it all feels. But really, that's all we have to go off in this world—our feelings, our thoughts, our perceptions. I am sure of very few things. One of them being our inevitable departure from this earth. Another being that nothing—absolutely nothing—is certain.

I realize now: our meaning is not found in what we do or where we are, but in who we are. Really, it's about finding those people who understand us. Those people who will stay with us—no matter what the going's like. You've gotta make your own meaning out of life, because nobody's going to hand it to you. Somehow, Hendrix has helped me do just that. He has taught me how to love.

I think it's all a little terrifying. But I guess that makes this all the more meaningful. What is life, if not a series of beautiful moments?

Even with the awareness that this will not last, I'm alright with that. Because *we* are full of meaning, and that will never die. It is real.

# 27 Hendrix

Monday, May 28th

“Damn, I couldn’t tell you had this much blood on you in the dark,” Arden says after I hop out of the shower and put on some pants. She pops open the first aid kit on the counter. We’re staying in this place called The Outback. It’s a cluster of cabins on the north side of town. Sure, Pierce, Idaho has motels, but the second Arden saw this quaint little place, our sleeping arrangements had been decided. At least we have a whole building to ourselves.

“Yeah,” I say, wincing as she pinches my brow, slapping on a butterfly bandage.

“Where the hell did you go, anyway?” she asks.

“Nowhere.”

She smirks. “Alright, you don’t have to tell me.”

Sighing, I pull out the bloody tissues from my nose and toss them into the garbage can. “Can I ask you something?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Why do you go by ‘Arden’?”

Caught off guard, she pauses, her hands falling from my face. “Why do you want to know?”

*Because I want to know before I kill you.* “Just curious. Most of the time, there’s a reason people go by a different name.”

Sighing, Arden reaches up, fingering through my hair for the spot where that old fucker hit me with his cane. I wince as she presses a cold washcloth against my scalp. It must have opened back up when I washed my hair.

“My parents gave me the name Michelle, and, as you know, I don’t particularly like them. The name just feels . . . tied to who they are and who they want me to be.” She smiles, tight lipped, and rubs the back of her neck. “I guess I had an identity crisis back in like, freshman year, and I asked everyone to start calling me by my middle name—Arden. Some people wouldn’t do it, just because of habit or something else, I don’t know. But . . .” Her face falls and goes serious again, looking right at me. The same way she always does, like she’s

reaching right into my soul. “I needed to take control of my identity somehow. Ironically, I don’t think the name change did much of anything. I still don’t entirely know who I am, really. Maybe I just needed to distance myself from what the name means. ‘Michelle’ just reminds me of when things didn’t suck so much. Reminds me of being young and innocent . . . and I don’t feel that way anymore.” She sighs, and it’s like falling dust, caught by the setting sun that streams in through a window. “Sorry, that was a really long answer.”

I shrug, and my ribs burst with pain. “It was a heavy question.” I chew on the inside of my cheek, jagged and raw, but something else is stirring inside me. I glance over and see that Arden’s looking at me with a sort of self-absorbed desperation, waiting for me to respond. “I don’t really know who I am either.” The truth. Arden makes the truth just as easy as the lie.

“Yeah.” Arden breaks our gaze, her eyes dropping to my hands. “Jesus, your knuckles . . .”

I pull my hands in close to my torso, painfully aware that I’m shirtless and bruised and sitting on a toilet in a cabin in Idaho. “I’m fine.”

Arden exhales, smearing the last of the antibiotic on my cuts. Her fingers graze my jaw as she holds her hand there, her eyes ripping what’s left of me to shreds. She abruptly stands. “Yeah. Maybe that’s something we spend our whole lives trying to figure out.” I think she’s going to say more, but she turns and walks out. The fluorescent light strips me bare.



I look down at my hands—a mess of tattered skin and bone, blood already seeping out. My head pounds, so I dig my palms into my eyes, soberingly aware of everything. My aching nose burns with tears. It feels too much, and I get lost in it all.

I'm starkly aware of where I came from, and what that makes me. *A monster*. For as long as I can remember, my life has been consumed with the ugly colors of pain and anger, an acidic coil burning inside me that is the call of violence. Suddenly, I see the future, a fuzzy mess before me, and for the first time, I care about what happens in it.

And this mess scares the hell out of me.

After so many years of feeling so much that I felt nothing, maybe being scared of something like all this life lying ahead of me isn't so bad. Even Arden herself scares me, to some extent.

I stand up and breathe, slowly pulling back together the pieces of myself. Wrapping my knuckles in bandages and pressing the ice pack to my bruised ribs, I peek into the dark bedroom.

“Arden?”

“Yeah?” She turns in bed and looks up from the blue glow of her phone.

“Thanks. For, uh patching me up and stuff.”

“Yeah, no problem.” Arden turns back over, says it like it's no big deal. But it is.

I stand there for a moment, the fluorescent light from the bathroom leaking into the room, and I watch her. Everything seems so confusing, yet so clear all at once. How can that be?

**I can feel things.** My dreams tell me I ought to.

Everything's sore when I wake up. It's painfully early, and it takes me a good ten minutes just to pull myself out of the lumpy bed. The quilt smells like old lady soap. I feel like I'm a piece of gum that someone stepped on during the summer heat.

I'm moody this morning. The bones in my face throb and my chest still feels fuzzy, all from last night. My hands tremble at my sides, and I wish I could get them to stop. The sun is barely a shadow against the dusty blinds. By the pale light, I stand and walk over to the side of the bed where Arden lies, buried in sleep. I need a smoke.

*Slash—just two swift movements—white, red, and done.*

This thought sends a rusty railroad spike through my brain. I can't do it now. I just can't. I'm not sure if it's because I'm not in the right place mentally or because it would be too obvious that I'm the culprit.

Or maybe because the thought of killing Arden feels significantly less comfortable than it did a few days ago.

I dig my fingernails into my palms as a leviathan shudders to life in my chest, but the physical pain brings me back. I turn and walk out the door, onto the tiny patio of our two-person cabin. The cold is

nice, spiked with morning humidity and freshness that will soon burn away. It makes me feel a bit more alive than I usually do.

*What's stopping me from just doing it?*

I try to focus on how the cold, metal railing seeps the heat from my hands. But I can't get it out of my head. *Shit.*

I'm losing control. Not only is Arden slipping from my grasp, but my own identity, my own mental state is slipping like skates shaving across cloudy ice. Like running my hands over a skinned carcass, sending droplets of salty blood flying.

I feel empathy for Arden. I feel connected to her, like her soul has woven itself into the empty spaces of mine. I fucking hate that I feel this way, but I do. I've been good at lying to other people, but I can't lie to myself. Not anymore. Not about this.

In a flash of anger, I punch the concrete pillar to my right.

*Fuck.* Visceral pain ribbons up my arm. My knuckles bleed, and my middle finger looks like it's been crushed with a baseball bat. Tears shred my vision. I hate that it feels good. As blood drips from my knuckles, I imagine it soothing and healing the dark, rotted wounds within me. God, I wish I could just be normal and feel things like a normal fucking person. I wish I wasn't in so much pain. Dropping to my knees, sobs crack in my chest.

What is wrong with me?

*Everything.*

I pound the heels of my hands against my temples, willing my brain to be normal. Electric and throbbing pain rockets up my arm from my broken finger, but I keep doing it anyway. I don't care. I want to care. I *do* care.

For the first time, I see Arden. I see her brokenness and her as a whole person and *I see*—I understand and I feel. I see how she lives and how she feels. Despite her own dysfunction, I wish I could feel as deeply and profoundly as her. It's like a beautiful curse, how our darkness seems to harmonize with one another.

But I am cracking. I am broken. Arden has changed me, and she *is* changing me. Underneath the pieces, pulsates a burning need: a need to belong somewhere, to anyone. A need to not be an alien in my own skin anymore. A desperate cry to be rid of this ugly, horrendous darkness.

The heels of my hands dig into my temples, as if I can push out whatever the hell is wrong with me. Sobs bleed through the fissures, and I lose myself in the *feeling*, in the utter emotion that just swallows me whole. There are so many things I want. The problem is: I have no fucking idea how to get them.

For a while, it was acting out and getting into fights that dealt with the stress and kept the darkness at bay. Then it was cigarettes. Then it was hunting—the chase, the kill. Then mutilating animals in the dark, cold and sadistic.

But none of it worked.

As always, the pain brings me back to earth, out of myself—the demanding throb of my probably-broken middle finger. I get up,

pushing against the concrete and slamming the sliding glass door closed behind me. Arden doesn't stir.

In the bathroom, I look at myself in the mirror. The person I see back—I don't know him. He has blood on his hands and scars on his arms. He is malicious and reckless. He is made up of nothing but the broken pieces of his past: the broken pieces from my mother, my father, and most importantly, the pieces I shattered myself.

Like a whisper, the thought comes: *this is not who I want to be.*

Furiously, I scrub the blood off my knuckles. Someone has pulled the plug on my brain, and I grow dizzy. Everything I thought I knew . . . I'm realizing I don't. Everything I thought I wanted now feels wrong.

Can I still kill Arden? *Should I?* Is that what I really want? Is it just a bandaid on a gunshot wound? Or is it a lie that I have been telling myself?

A knock on the door sends panic firing in my stomach.

“Hey, I have to pee.”

Sniffing, I wipe both of my cheeks with the back of my hand. I press my cold fingers to my swollen, red eyes.

Hopefully Arden will be too tired to notice.

**We pack up, and** I bite the inside of my cheek every time I accidentally use my middle finger. We have a brief conversation about

our route, and about the hitchhiking we're going to have to do. The rest is done in stifled silence.

She doesn't ask about my hand, but I know she sees it. Arden's not stupid.

As we cross into Washington State, everything gets a lot more urban, and it's harder to stay away from massive interstates and the prying eyes of suburban America who don't appreciate two teenage tramps strolling through their picket-fenced neighborhoods.

We also get lost several times. And each time, I can see Arden growing more tense. She does that thing where she bores her eyes into the ground while she's walking, as if she could dig right through it.

None of this really matters to me—getting lost again and all—but I can see that it matters to Arden. I watch her for a few moments, squinting my eyes.

She's looking for something, just like I am.

The first time I remember breaking something, I was eleven. It wasn't a bone, but it might as well have been. The rain hit our single-pane windows like it too wanted in on the action. I remember watching it streak down the rightmost window, right before the hallway into the bedrooms started.

Like any disaster, it always starts out normal. Mom had picked me up in her red Jeep, and it was raining like hell. The clouds were so thick the afternoon almost went dark.

At home, I took out my schoolwork as Mom made me a snack. She always did that. Cigarette on her lips, she'd stand over the stove or

the outdated counter, making something so carefully. I don't remember her ever being a demure woman, but when she was cooking, she was in her element. My mother would turn on the radio and let the rest of the house grow dark while the little overhead light hung above the island in our kitchen, making the kitchen look like a warm, glowing orb in a dark, cold house. She'd move along with the music and her boisterous laughter would fill the house, her beloved rescue cat Maizy meowing at her heels.

Those memories, they feel like dreams. Fuzzy, ethereal, and sometimes terrifying.

My mother clicked her tongue as she placed a plate in front of me. "What's this?" she asked, picking up a sheet of paper from my take-home folder.

It was a test from school, marked with slashes of red, along with a special pink slip. I was close to failing that whole class, if you can even fail a class at eleven. "My social studies test."

She looked away, her cigarette leaving ribbons of smoke around her. "Why're you failing, Rix?"

It's not that I didn't know the information, but I just hated school. Didn't care about it one bit. I'd rather have stabbed a pencil through my own hand. Never did that to myself though, but I nearly did it to a kid in my biology class freshman year. But I didn't tell my mother any of that. Maybe I should have. Instead, I just shrugged.

“Christ, Hendrix. Please do not shrug at me,” she said, her back to me now. The sink created a wall of sound between us.

“I’m sorry.”

“You oughta be,” Mom snapped. Sighing, she turned back around, hand pressed against her forehead. “Really, Hendrix—what’s up with your grades?”

“I just don’t like it. School.”

My mother laughed, but this time, it was bitter. Deep with an undercurrent of cruelty—a Molotov cocktail. She looked at me straight-on, then. “We all got stuff we don’t like to do, but we’ve gotta do it anyway.”

In theory, it’s good advice. But the thing with my mom was that she was packed with good advice—she just delivered it like a punch to the gut instead of as food for thought. I wasn’t really sure what to say to that, so I just shrugged.

“Fuckin’ hell, there you go with that shrugging again,” she said, taking the last drag off of her cigarette. She flicked it onto the ground, and we watched as it burned a hole into the rug and died. No wonder she was always begging Dad for new carpeting.

“I’m sorry,” I said again. She wasn’t always this mean, but her temperament got worse near the end.

Mom started yelling at me then. I’d learned by that point that she was just blowing off steam, but that didn’t mean it didn’t hurt any less.



Now, I look back on it, and remember the rage. It felt like my veins were pumped full of electricity. My heart vibrated in my chest. I was unraveling. Still, I wonder how so much anger and so much rage could have been contained inside my small body. I vaguely remember Maizy howling when Mom started yelling. Poor Maizy always did that. Sometimes, when that fuzzy feeling would wash over me, I would just focus on Maizy yowling as opposed to the screaming.

But that time, I just sat there and took it. Until I couldn't anymore.

"You come back here right now, Hendrix! This is absolutely unacceptable! I raised you better than that! Maybe your father didn't, but I know I did!" she screamed at me as I got up from the table.

*Only, you didn't raise me at all.*

On the side table next to our old, corduroy couch, was my great-grandmother's antique, porcelain lamp from the 1930s. I still remember the pattern: pink, blushing roses, with purple and yellow wildflowers and soft greenery, tipped with gold.

Whatever awful monster was inside me had successfully torn my control to shreds. Reeling with thrashing anger, I threw the lamp across the room. Savoring the crash, savoring the destruction. As if breaking something would fix whatever was broken in me.

The ceramic tore through the yellowed fabric of the lampshade. The light bulb sparked and died. For a split second, I felt alright. I felt empty, and it was good. Nothing is better than the ugly, twisted,

overwhelming things I felt moments before. Maizy hissed and dashed into my parents bedroom, whimpering.

“Jesus fucking *Christ*, Hendrix!” my mother screamed.

And then she backhanded me across the face.

I didn’t cry.

*I couldn’t.*

I vaguely remember her yelling again, continuing to holler on and on about how much that vase was worth, how much it meant to her. She was just trying to justify yelling at me. And hitting me.

What I do remember, was what she said when my father came back in, carrying the rain with him. “What the hell’s going on here?” he asked.

Like a hawk zoning in on a field mouse, she whipped her head towards Dad. My mother, with her wild blonde waves, just scoffed and poked a finger into my chest, one that rocked my soul out of my body. “You’re turning out exactly like him.” She kicked the rug by my feet, and went outside to smoke or something.

That time, she left for a whole week.

I scrambled to pick up the pieces of the porcelain, trying to search within myself if I felt bad about it. But I didn’t. I didn’t feel much of anything. I just wanted her to stop yelling at me.

Dad, who had just come back from not actually being at work and drinking with his buddies instead, helped me clean it up. He even

helped me bandage my hand when I cut myself on the broken ceramic.

I think he felt bad, I guess. About what Mom said.

It was such a stupid thing. I look back on that moment, and wonder if that would have changed anything. If I hadn't broken that lamp, would she still be here? If I hadn't broken that lamp, would I still be the person I am today?

I think that's why I stay with my dad. He's the only person who truly understands me, and understands the way the darkness wraps it's ugly fingers around my heart and just keeps squeezing. Yet he also doesn't understand anything at all.

I run my finger over the fleshy part of my thumb, near my palm, where the white scar puckers as I move my finger back and forth. It's almost like our pain tethers us to other people.

"You good, Hendrix?" Arden says. "I can hear you thinking back there." We're still walking on the side of the road, attempting to hitchhike.

I smirk. "Yeah. Are you good?"

"Partly cloudy," she says.

"Well, then you're in good company," I say. Arden turns around and walks backward for a moment, smiling at me. It sets off sparks, even in the ashes. Right now, in this moment at least, thinking about killing Arden makes me uncomfortable, like the tension of ill-fitting

clothing. This is highly subject to change, but for the moment, I just stay in it. I stay in the discomfort, and I try to wrestle with the *why*.

I'm reminded of how I felt when Arden was talking about her parents after I killed the deer. I wallow in the sweet experience of it—the empathy I feel for Arden. She has reawakened the parts of me that I thought were long dead.

In that moment, as we walk along the country roads, I begin to bleed again.

# 28 Arden

Tuesday, May 29th

Every hour or so, I'll have that fleeting thought of *wait, why the hell are we doing this again?* But for once in my life, I feel like I have purpose. Like Hendrix and I are moving towards something—that stirring, those sparks of passion lit aflame that tell us, *this has meaning. Keep doing it.* It doesn't matter what it is, but it's something. I imagine this is what Lewis and Clark felt, combing

through the untamed America. A ‘Manifest Destiny’ sort of thing, but without all of the Native American mistreatment.

We’ve been walking west most of the day, following the winding Route 12 through the Rocky Mountains. The hot, late May sun shines off Clearwater River, turning it into blinding glass. Hendrix and I don’t talk much, but when we do, it’s about light stuff. Favorite foods—son of a bitch still won’t tell me why he hates tacos. Favorite movies—mine’s *Dead Poets Society*, an eighties classic about rebellion, friendship, and *carpe diem*. An obvious favorite. Hendrix says his is *No Country For Old Men*. I ask him why he likes it so much, but he couldn’t really give me a straight answer.

We stop in Weippe, Idaho at a gas station. Hendrix needs a smoke and we both need food. At this point in the road trip, I’m convinced that every gas station in America looks the exact same. They sell the same shitty junk food. They all have the same yellow, water damaged linoleum and harsh, fluorescent lighting. The same mentally-checked-out teenager working the counter. It’s a little comforting, really, that I could walk into a gas station in rural Idaho and one hundreds of miles away and find relatively the same characteristics, with subtle differences that add flair.

Hendrix buys a pack of cigarettes and goes outside to smoke, and I comb the store, buying some odds and ends and refilling our water bottles.

After, I poke my head outside the grimy, metal door and see Hendrix smoking and leaning against the wall.

“You like coffee?” I ask.

“I guess.”

“Well, they got free coffee. Do you want cream or sugar in it?”

He considers this for a moment. “Both.”

I raise my eyebrows, smiling. “Damn, I would have taken you for a black-coffee-only kinda guy.”

Hendrix breaks my gaze, staring out at the pumps. The sharp smell of gasoline wafts over to us in the thick, summer wind. “There’s a lot you don’t know about me.”

The words are mixed, layered. I sense a twinge of teasing, but also something darker. “Touche,” is all I say.

Back inside the gas station, I grab two cups of coffee, stirring sugar into both and cream into one. I slide cardboard holders onto both, grabbing them—

—and running straight into a woman wearing a bright, flowery shirt. Hot coffee pours down her, and she yelps, pulling the fabric away from her skin. “Shit,” I say, grabbing beige napkins and gingerly dabbing at her chest and stomach.

“Oh, don’t worry about it, honey!” she says, grabbing the wads of napkins and wiping herself off. “I was a waitress for five years; I barely feel it.”

I smile. “That’s good. Sorry about that.” The woman looks to be in her late sixties, pleasantly plump with golden curls around her shoulders. She’s got on mom jeans and sandals, but it seems to fit.

Turning to grab two more cups of free coffee, the guy at the counter says, “Hey! One serving per customer. And you just spilled two.”

“I’m getting them for my friend who bought the cigarettes,” I say.

“Well, that’ll be two dollars!” the guy shouts.

“Oh for heaven’s sake!” the woman says. “Leave ‘er be.” The woman comes up next to me, her hip nestling against mine. “Actually, these cups of *free* coffee are on me and my husband.”

“Thanks, but you don’t have to—”

“Shh,” she hisses at me, stirring in two packets of sugar for Hendrix. “Since you’ve got to bargain for free coffee, it doesn’t seem like you and your friend are having the best luck. They’re on me, sweetie.”

“**Sorry it took me** so long,” I say, handing Hendrix his cup and squinting in the bright midday sunlight. “Accidentally spilled the first two on . . .”

“Lydia,” she says from behind me. I take a sip, and the hot coffee only makes the summer heat balmier.

“Right, Lydia. She also offered us a ride,” I say.

“Cool,” Hendrix says, flicking the end of his cigarette on the ground. Lydia nods her head and we follow her.



I pick up the cigarette butt and fling it at him. “You’re the reason the oceans are full of trash.”

Hendrix turns around, and for a second, I think he’s going to be flaming mad at me. I have good reason to believe this, but he just laughs, shaking his head.

It’s sweet, really.

In Lydia’s green pickup truck, we meet Ernest. He asked us all the usual questions, and we answered relatively honestly. Except this time my name is Shelley, my mom’s nickname for me that I hate, and Hendrix is Richard, which I later learn is his middle name.

“You kids aren’t from around here, are you?” Ernest says, adjusting the rear view mirror.

“No, but our parents know where we are, though,” Hendrix says. “We’ve been together for over a year now, so our parents trust us to do this kind of stuff.” Clearing his throat, Hendrix worms his hand into mine.

The action sends ripples of soft electricity through me, but I can’t tell if it’s good or bad. It’s his sudden confidence that’s surprising me. I look down and see that his middle finger is swollen and bruised. I remember seeing that earlier. It was just a bad time to ask.

“What happened?” I whisper.

He just shakes his head.

“That’s so sweet,” Lydia says, turning around and crinkling her eyes. “That’s what Ernest and I did for our honeymoon—took a road trip all around California. It was the greatest experience of our life—”

“Until we had kids,” Ernest adds. Lydia feigns offense, and their laughter floods the cabin.

“You guys from down there—California, that is?” Hendrix asks.

“Yep,” Ernest says. “San Francisco area.”

“Then why the hell would you move out here?” I ask. The words come out without really any thought.

“Lydia, you want to take that one?” Ernest says.

She huffs, smiling, her massive dangly earrings swinging. “Oh, please, I took the last one!”

The two of them bicker like two teenagers flirting, and it makes my chest ache a little. Lydia eventually gives and turns back around to face us. I feel Hendrix’s hand getting sweaty. Or maybe it’s mine.

“Ernest’s father owned a logging company in Washington State, and when he died, Ernest wanted to take the company and make it more sustainable, you know, all that good stuff. So back in ‘81, we took all our kids and our dog and moved out to the northeast part of the state—so far north you could mistake it for Canada. Then when our kids left the nest, Ernest was fortunately able to pass on the responsibility to other employees, and we spend most of the warmer months traveling.”

Ernest chuckles. “Are you going to tell them our life story? How about the time you and your gals went to—”

Lydia reaches over and gives Ernest a couple of knocks on the arm, and he laughs and shuts up. His laughter and her squealing makes the truck cabin seem less spacious, and if I closed my eyes, I could imagine them as young, stupid, and free back in the sixties.

“That’s cool,” Hendrix says. By his tone, they probably think he’s just saying that to humor them, but I know Hendrix, and I know that it’s genuine. And I agree—it is pretty cool.

But it also makes me really sad for some reason. The kind of sad that makes me feel all warm and quiet on the inside.

Lydia’s talking about the story earlier, about how her and her girlfriends went to this music festival in the California desert brush for a weekend and she totally forgot that it was her second anniversary with Ernest. She tells it with such fondness, that the whole thing really wasn’t an embarrassing disaster, because she loves Ernest and Ernest loves her. I can even see him chuckling every once in a while as he taps on the steering wheel to the beat of the faint radio. Like after all this time, what matters is her, not the pain.

In that moment, as the mountains and the trees speed by, I see everything that I want in life: love, a family, good memories, and a little bit of wild adventure. The longing stretches out in me so profoundly that I nearly scramble for Ernest to stop the car because I’ve left pieces of myself along this dirt road. The nostalgia—the

sadness, warm and silent—comes because I'm living the times they're telling me about right now—or I will be living them in a few years, which is *way* too soon if you ask me.

Then the fear comes, the straw that breaks the camel's back, the wrench that sends the whole thought pattern into a cacophony of garish color. The fear that I'll never have any of that. The fear that no matter how hard I want it or no matter how hard I work for it—that it'll never happen for me.

That I'll get to the end of my life having lived it *safely*.

**Lydia and Ernest drop** us off in Othello, Washington. The most notable feature is the massive water tower, painted a brilliant white and red. It's a bit of an eyesore, really. Lydia blows kisses at me as they drive away, waving wildly, like we're her children she's dropping off at the airport. I'm going to miss her.

"Now what?" Hendrix asks. Washington state is flatter than I expected it to be. And more beige. Or maybe that's because we're back in a small town in the middle of fucking nowhere.

I slide my backpack off, rubbing the fabric of our two-person sleeping bag. "Wanna go camping again?"

"Always," he says. We start walking down the main drag into town, past buildings with white vinyl siding and red tin roofs, advertising restaurants, mechanic shops, and farm supply stores.

We stop for dinner first, because that's how we found out about all of the other shitty places we've been. We decide on a family

restaurant on the fringes of town—the kind with sticky booths and coffee stained, plastic covered menus, where the food is just alright but everyone keeps going there because the place has been run by the same people for fifty years and all the girls have a crush on the son who runs the cash register. You know the type.

The sun hasn't quite begun to set yet, but the afternoon grows deep. I order an omelet and Hendrix orders pancakes with honey and not syrup. He's got a weird thing with food.

"They were nice," Hendrix says after a while.

"Lydia and Ernest? Yeah," I say. Something's still unhinged within me, and I can't tell what it is.

Hendrix unrolls his utensils and turns the silver butter knife in his hands. Right there in front of me. When I blink, my mind projects nothing but slick red and shiny silver and the tawny fur of a slain deer.

"You remember what I said in the woods on that rainy day?" I ask. I pull a pen out of my bag and start sketching on my napkin. Already, it looks like shit. There's a reason I did photography and not drawing in high school.

"Yeah, about being safe?" Hendrix drops his hands—and the butter knife stained with limescale—into his lap.

I flip the napkin over and try drawing again. "Yeah. I dunno, I just see people like Lydia and Ernest and get so jealous. Like, why isn't my life like that?"

Hendrix drops his gaze to his lap, and I narrow my eyes. It's almost like he's taunting me with the butter knife, and I know he's still got his other knife. I'm not stupid. "Yeah. I understand."

I inhale sharply. Does he really? *I want him to.*

"Whatcha drawing?" he asks.

"A bird."

Our food comes, and we're silent for a while. After, when the check comes, I just stare at it.

"You ready to find someplace to camp?" Hendrix asks.

"Not yet." I need to get to the bottom of this. "Do you ever ask yourself why we did this?"

Hendrix blinks. "No, but—"

"Of course you don't." I bite the inside of my cheek. "Shit, sorry. I feel like I just needed to get away, you know?"

"I do," he nods. I've spent so much time with Hendrix that I can tell when he's being transparent versus when he's lying or hiding something. He's being genuine now.

"I just. I feel like I needed to get away from everything. Cut everything off. Find myself, or whatever. Sorry, you don't have to listen to me, I'm just rambling."

I see Hendrix's forehead knot up under his mop of brown hair. He finally places the butter knife on the table, up from his lap. "It's okay."

Someone drops a plate in the kitchen, and the whole diner turns to look. “Everyone back home wanted me to be someone I wasn’t. Except I didn’t know who I was to begin with.”

“Yeah, I don’t . . .” Hendrix does this thing whenever he’s uncomfortable—he picks at a hangnail, either with his teeth or his fingers. He does this now. “I don’t know who I am outside of my pain. Outside of . . . what I thought was my home.”

This time, his words don’t strike empty. They resonate in all of my hollow cracks and crevices, filling them with empathy. Hendrix is being real with me. I laugh softly, spitefully. Hendrix jerks his head up. “I understand that. Maybe that’s why we both left. I always wonder: if I could see my whole life at once, maybe I wouldn’t be such a fuckup. Maybe then, if I saw my whole life before me, stretched out and simplified like a storyboard or something, I’d finally know who I am. I’d finally know why things happen the way they do.” Like all good things, the words hurt coming out.

Hendrix breaks our gaze, picking at his thumb again. I hide my sketched napkin and a few dollars under my plate. “Yeah. Maybe then, I would finally understand myself. Maybe I’d know there’s . . . hope.”

His words shrink my soul. There’s a moment where I stare at Hendrix and he stares at his hands. Something attempts to pass between us, but falters like a newborn deer.

“I’ve got to piss,” he murmurs. He gets up, shaking the table and nearly running over the busboy. I watch as he storms into the bathroom.

I wait for a moment, then go pay the bill.

I suppose that’s why older people—like Lydia and Ernest—are sometimes better with children. They’ve got insight. They can see most of their lives with the clarity of time. For the most part, their lives make sense because they’ve been through the majority of it. The best ones have seen the other side of heartbreak, of loss—of horror and hate and all the awful this world has to offer, and still see the good in it. I guess that’s why grandparents and kids are like, partners in crime. Because good grandparents, the ones who pushed through life and emerged on the other side, see so much potential in us. They’re the ones who are really ‘living life to the fullest’, because they don’t have much of it left.

It’s funny how the best of us leave life the same way we entered it.

With so much hope.



# 29 Hendrix

Tuesday, May 29th

I always thought my life would be better without my family, because if they weren't disengaged, they were toxic. Until, of course, they were all gone. It was only then that I realized: I didn't know who I was without all of that pain and anger and hate. It had *become* me. It wasn't just my environment that was terrible. That darkness, it stayed when everyone else had left.

Something good that I do remember is that my mother loved food. That sounds lame, because of course, people love food. We need it. But for my mother, preparing and serving food was an experience in and of itself, not just the part where you got to enjoy it. That was just the reward. She'd play music and smoke cigarettes and fill the house with the smells and warmth, and Dad would come home from work and give her a big, sloppy kiss on the mouth.

Some of my fondest memories are of the three of us making food from scratch. Meat from when Dad and I hunted. Grain and crops from Grandpa Chuck's farmland. You could *taste* the care, and the love in everything. Like it was from us and made by us and it would return to us. The circle of life, or some shit that Arden would say. I miss her food to this day. I was kind of a chubby kid, but after, I lost the weight really fast. Puberty happened, and I got tall. Despite that, I just couldn't eat the same way. My world lost what little color it had.

Sometimes, I wish I could turn back time so I could still be with my mom. And so I could kill her for what she did to me.

**Arden and I squat** in the wilderness outside of Othello, Washington. It's not really a forest, more of a craggy grassland with a smattering of trees and brush. In the mountains, the trees almost trap the day's heat, but here, the chilled wind cuts right through the rolling hills.

I start a fire in the clearing, and Arden kicks at the sagebrush, smoking one of my Marlboros. She coughs every so often. The sunset

melts into a gray-blue dusk, one that casts a dull, fuzzy light onto the world. “Remember when we did this last time? With Jake, and Ben?”

I smile, almost without thinking about it. “Yeah. I wonder what they’re up to.” I blow on the fire, the embers chasing after the cloudless sky.

Arden laughs, popping out her hip and standing by the fire. “Oh, if only they could see where we are now.”

My stomach drops, pushing against my organs. “Yeah, if only.”

Arden sits, lying on her side and propped up by her elbow. She twirls the half-smoked cigarette between her fingers and then tosses it into the fire.

“Hey, I would have finished that,” I say. Our banter takes me by surprise—how light and easy it comes.

“Really? That’s kind of gross,” she says.

“Yeah, well, I’m desperate.” As soon as the words come out, I realize the broader implication of them.

“Same,” Arden laughs. There’s a pause as she stares into the fire, a smile like a whisper on her face. “Lydia and Ernest were cool,” she says, picking at the dull grass and throwing it into the fire.

“Yeah.”

“I’d love to grow up and be like them. It seems like they’ve done some cool shit.”

“Yeah.” It’s not like I’m *not* listening. I am, but I’m also thinking about how right here, right now, would be a great time to do it. To kill her. I hate that’s what I’m thinking about, but images of her blood seeping in between the blades of grass, the raw flesh torn open, burning her remains in the fire I’ve built are alarmingly alluring.

Arden scratches the back of her neck, and my eyes go to her. “I dunno. I just wanna *feel* something, sometimes. Like, the good stuff in life. Everything just feels so . . . vapid. So empty and meaningless. I go to school, then work, then home.”

Her words cut right through the violence swirling in my head. Despite myself, I find myself hanging onto every word. They burrow their way into the cracks, pushing open every abandoned fissure.

Arden leans back. “You’re gonna think this sounds stupid, but what gives it all meaning, you know?” She pauses, but I don’t have an answer. “Sometimes I feel like I seek out stuff to make my life feel less empty—like sad movies and rock songs and frozen yogurt and kissing boys I barely know.” Sighing, Arden sits up and blinks at me a few times. “Do you know what I mean, Hendrix?”

Thousands of blood-splattered moments flash by like a perverse slideshow. “Yeah, I do.”

A smile flickers over Arden’s face. “I’m glad,” she says. “Sometimes it feels like you don’t really get anything I say.”

Her words bite like an attack, but I know they’re not malicious. I clear my throat. “I do understand.” It’s not a lie. Sometimes I understand too well.

Arden looks at the fire, rubbing her hands in front of it. I've just noticed how cold and dark it's gotten. The sky is no longer a muted watercolor painting. It's just darkness.

"How'd you get your name?" she asks. "Since you wanted to know so badly about mine."

"Hendrix is my name," I say, knotting my forehead.

Arden scoffs. "Yeah, I know it is. But like, why? I know my dad always said I was named after his dead sister Michelle, which sounds really morbid, and it kind of is, but he said she died when she was really young, of some accident or birth defect or—"

"My mom chose the name Hendrix."

She falls silent, making direct eye contact with me now. "You wanna talk about her yet?"

"No." Anger solidifies inside me, turning my veins into lead pipes. Under all that, my chest aches with something nasty.

Arden purses her lips and looks down at her criss-crossed legs, picking at the dry grass peeking up through the rocky earth. "You gonna tell me something else, then?"

"Are *you*?" I challenge.

Arden glares at me for a moment, then looks away, up to the sky, grabbing a particularly long strand of prairie grass. "I'm gonna make a deal with you, Hendrix. You've gotta tell me something about

yourself—who you were—and I’ll tell you something juicy and dark, too.”

“I don’t care.” I clench my jaw, scratching the back of my head.

She points her strand of overgrown grass at me. “See, I think that’s a lie. I think you do care, at least about some things.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” she says, smirking like she can read me like a big, flashy billboard. “I think you care about your dad. Hell, I think you might even care about me a little bit.”

It strikes such a nerve—such a painful nerve—because she’s right. “Fine.”

*I should tell her. About mom.*

The thought is invasive, like most of the things that pass through my brain. It pushes its way to the forefront and demands my attention. Runs itself ragged on my mind’s treadmill.

I scratch the back of my head again, digging in so hard my scalp tingles in pain. “Uh, shit.” I laugh uncomfortably, and Arden eyes me. “Sorry, I can’t think of anything right now.”

She shrugs, not catching my *holy shit I do not want to do this* drift. “That’s okay, take your time.”

Her nonchalant gaze connects with my steely one for a moment. I sigh, giving in. I’m going to eventually kill her anyways. Why does it matter if she knows all my secrets?

“Our junior year, did you go to the homecoming dance?” I ask.

“Nah. Dances are overrated and are just place where teenagers can grind on each other without having to get into a club,” Arden says, basking in her own pseudo-philosophy.

“Didn’t *you* go to to prom this year?”

“Yeah, I mean, it was my senior year, and somebody I actually liked asked me to go. That’s not the point. You were saying?”

*Shit.* “Right. Well, I ended up going to homecoming my junior year. There was this girl, Julia Reyes, who was in my physics class and friends with Josh. She liked me, for some reason. She wasn’t even weirded out or repulsed by . . . me.

“Well, we went to homecoming together, just us. Like, romantically. And . . . she was great. I hate to say that I thought we actually *had something* or whatever, because that sounds cliché. It sounds like something you’d say, actually.”

Arden feigns offense, but then she smiles at me. It’s so sweet, so genuine, that the divide deepens within me, runs all the way to my burning core. I’m glad that I’m successfully playing the angle, but the banter, the fact that we’re enjoying this, that we’re connecting over this interaction is . . . real. It’s not malicious. It’s genuine. It feels *normal*. My chest contracts.

I sigh, as if trying to reinflate my heart. “Anyway, we went to the dance, and it was typical. Julia brought something out in me, I guess. Well, rather, she forced herself onto me most of the time. But we had fun. The lights, the music, all that shit. She was really a joy to be

around, and didn't judge me."The trees are falling, collapsing in at a right angle directly onto me. The darkness, both inside and outside of myself, creeps closer and closer. I'm finding it hard to breathe, with the memories escalating to a scream, building to what only I know is coming.

"But, uh, you know me. I have a hard time 'coming out of my shell' or whatever. At least that's what she always told me. I thought I was, I was trying to interact with her, I was trying to dance and be normal, but she wasn't having it. I guess I couldn't . . . I dunno. And then, her ex-boyfriend, I think—"

"Brian," Arden cuts in. I'm surprised she knows, but then again, there's a chance she's already heard this story from everyone else. I taste something bitter.

"Right, Brian. Well, uh, they started talking, and he got into it and then the next thing I knew they were dancing together, so then I just kind of went blank. I went up to Julia and grabbed her and whipped her around and demanded to know why she was doing this . . . why she had ditched me. Brian had her in his arms, and I remember her eyes. How furious they looked, even in the neon darkness. I remember she yelled at me and told me that I was just arm candy, and that her and Brian were back together now.

And then Brian got up all in my face and I'll tell you, it took all I fucking had in me not to kill him right there. But then they just walked away."



Arden's silent, hanging onto every word. She's averted her eyes out of respect. Or fear, I can't tell. Doesn't matter. I still have a captive audience of one.

"I was sweaty as hell, and I was absolutely blinded by the rage. Everything was a white-hot blur, except it was dark and crowded and all I could think was: how could I have been so stupid? And I mean, it totally was petty high school drama. But still, it . . . it felt like it did every single time my father ever said something awful about me. Every time he brushed me off, acted like I didn't matter. Every time he expected things I couldn't deliver on. It felt like when my mother—"

My voice cuts out, because I really *can't* breathe. The darkness bears down on my neck, slamming like the waves in a turbulent sea.

"What?" Arden says, and it all backs away for a moment, like a demon seething in the light.

I scratch the back of my head again, until my fingernails come away dark with specks of skin and blood. "You know what happened after that. We beat the shit out of each other right there on the dance floor. I busted his nose, and he gave me three stitches in my lip."

"Yeah, that's what I heard," she says carefully, like she might disturb the brush around us.

"I think I went into the bathroom after that and had a panic attack, or something. Then, I went home and—"

*Fuck.*

Up from the great divide arises this darkness, and it has locked its hands around my throat. Like the devil crawling up from hell.

“What?” Arden asks again. *Arden and her goddamn questions.*

“Nothing. It doesn’t matter,” I say, because there is no way in fucking hell that I will be able to get these words out and *not* kill Arden right here and now.

*But what would be the harm in that? I could do it. This is good a time as any.*

No, I can’t. I just can’t. There’s something that holds me back. Is it my own cowardice? Is it shame? Is it this newfound side of myself, so gnarled and raw and vulnerable?

Is it because I care just a smidge too much?

Arden sits up. “No, it does matter.”

“Christ, Arden! Can’t you take a fucking hint? I said it doesn’t matter, so it doesn’t.” The words come out like bullets, ricocheting from deep within my ugly, shameful core.

“I can tell that it does! Why can’t you just say it?” she says, standing, which only makes me feel so much smaller than I already do. Fuming, she reaches over into her bag, balls up one of her shirts and throws it at me. In that moment—actually, in most moments—she reminds me of my mother: so fiery and passionate, but just as destructive with the flick of the wrong switch.

My stomach punches through my diaphragm. I stand up, towering over her, because I need the control. I need the power to feel

normal—whatever the fuck normal is. “I don’t give a shit. Just let it go, for once in your life.”

I see Arden bristle, but she pushes right back. “Do not make this about me. Hendrix, I just don’t understand! Why can’t you just be real with me? Why can’t you just be honest and open? It’s like you almost get there, but then you shut down. It honestly makes me feel like shit.”

“I don’t care how you feel.” The malice drowns me, clawing at my throat, smothering me with *nothing*—until it is everywhere all at once, and I am nothing.

“Why? *Why* don’t you care?” she shouts, her voice fraying.

I scoff. “I ask myself that question every day.”

Arden pushes me, her hands landing smack on my chest. “Stop it! Don’t shut down on me.”

“Why not?” I sneer. *I can’t stop myself.* “You don’t deserve any answers from me.”

Her eyes—so fiercely locked on me. “That’s not what this is about. This is about you not trusting me with a damn thing, despite everything. You have told me a lot of shit, Hendrix, and I have tried to be nothing but good to you. And I’ve apologized if I haven’t. How the hell are we supposed to even be *acquaintances* if you won’t even finish your fucking story? Why don’t you trust me?”

Arden hasn't even pinched the nerve anymore. She's snapped it right in half and flayed it up the middle for dissection, just like she has done with *me*. "Because I can't even trust myself?"

The silence lights a fire under my heart, filling it with black, putrid smoke. Heaving, I hold Arden's gaze as something changes behind her vision. She steps back, shocked and hurt. Because *I* have hurt her.

And then I walk away.

The memories of what I did that night after homecoming barge in through the front door of my brain like giants, overturning the furniture, and dragging in massive suitcases that break down the support beams. Sweat breaks out on my face despite the cold, dry wind as I storm away from our campsite.

Up until that night, I had only ever killed wild animals. Rodents Maizy had dragged in, larger animals I had hunted. I don't count Maizy because that was before I became intentional about it. That was a crime of passion. But that night, as I walked up to my house in the dark, I heard our neighbor's dog barking. The houses around here are tucked into the woods and set far apart, so I never spoke to the guy much. He seemed like the kind of guy who would wear stained, white tank-tops and threaten you with a shotgun if you got too close to his property line. But I always saw his dog on the way to school. It was a poor, mangy old thing, constantly chained up in a plot of packed dirt by their house.

And that night, unfortunately, the mutt wouldn't shut the hell up. I took a slab of meat from the deep freeze and lured the dog onto

our property. I dragged it into my shed by the chain and tied it to one side of the room while I sat on another. I let the old dog bark and growl at me, flinching every time spit flew from his gray jowls. I let it torture and scare me, because I deserved it.

When I'd had enough, I hit the skinny dog over the head just enough to stun him. Then I bound the feet and mouth and hung it from the metal frame above me—just like how I'd hang any slain deer or goat for food. But as I made the first incision in its abdomen, I pictured I had Brian tied up. I pictured I had Julia tied up. I imagined it was a person I was skinning alive.

I didn't sleep for three days after that.

I **only get a** few yards away before I scream into the shirt Arden threw at me. She has moved back into the tent, so the fire burns out in the open. I kick at the rocks, grab fistfuls of my hair, banging at my skull as if I could beat the darkness out of me.

My chest expanding and collapsing like a hot star, I pull out my knife and storm back over to the tent. Black and oily, the desire to kill rises up to my throat, ripping my soul right out of my chest. It's like a conditioned response—I drool at the prospect of soothing the darkness that gapes open inside me.

*Arden* . . . she exposes me too much. She has come through me like a wrecking ball, ripping past all my traps and knocking down all my walls. Just like how my grandfather did. Just like how Josh

did—until both of them gave me the tools to build those walls right back up.

This is why I need to kill Arden. I need to kill her before she entombs me in even more of my own seething anger and self-loathing. Before she knows me in and out and decides that I'm the monster I know myself to be.

Knife in hand, I rip the zipper down and the canvas tent flies open. Arden is lying in the sleeping bag, her back to me. I imagine the squelch of the knife entering her body, the warmth pooling out.

*Perfect.*

Except then she turns over and looks at me. I pull the knife blade back in with my fingers as all the nerves in my gut coil back up.

“What?” she snips.

I don't lunge forward. I don't dig the knife into her soft flesh. I don't roll around on the ground as she fights for her last strands of life. The ugly images thrash around behind my eyes.

*I can't do it.*

“Nothing. I'm sorry.”

A part of me seethes, screams and bucks like a madman, because I can't believe I'm doing this. The desire still crawls under my skin, yet I fight against it. *Why why why why?*

Why not?

Arden blinks at me, the weight of my words brewing in her. The hilt of the knife, still in my sweaty, shaking hands, burns a hole the

size of a quarter into my palm. “You, uh, wanna come into the sleeping bag? I won’t lock you out in the cold just because you’re being a dick.” Her face flutters with a smile.

Forgiveness—relieving and soft—crushes me. The darkness inside me hisses, reaching and growing, trying to consume whatever good I’ve found within myself as I hang onto the cliff of my sanity. I debate whether or not I should take the offer, whether or not I should give in to the darkness, close myself off and try again later. Or whether I should stay with Arden. Sleep in the warm sleeping bag next to her and tighten my grip on the edge. The metal of the knife leeches the warmth from my skin where it presses against my arm.

I stuff the knife into my back pocket. “Thank you.” Climbing into the tent and into the sleeping bag, I justify the palpable awkwardness to myself by reminding myself that this is intended to be a two-person sleeping bag.

We try and make it so that we’re not touching, but our fingers intertwine nonetheless. We just kind of let it happen. My gut reaction is to pull away, but we stay there, our hearts suspended in the bridge unfolding between us. Her finger runs over my bruised and swollen middle finger, back and forth.

I think, for the first time, what would happen after I killed Arden, logically speaking. I’ve had plenty of opportunities, but I haven’t actually brought myself to it. A beautiful opportunity just passed me by moments before, and yet, I didn’t take it.

Killing animals only works for a short time; it only provides a brief reprieve from the seething awfulness inside me. Killing another person would definitely keep it at bay for longer, but would the crash be harder? Would I fall headlong into insanity, with no one ever able to drag me out? Would ending a human life snuff out these last embers of hope?

**An hour later, we're** cold and still drifting in and out of sleep. I hear Arden turn to face me.

“Hey, Hendrix,” she says, her voice coated in drowsiness.

“Yeah?” I’m wide awake.

“Your darkness doesn’t scare me.”

I sink into the earth, into the warm-cold, until I am floating, skimming the surface of the darkness. *My* darkness. I’ve lost sight of where it ends and I begin, but Arden’s words divide like lightning. These two sides of me have existed in conflict for too long.

The cognitive dissonance rips me in two. One into the Hendrix I was, and the other into whoever I am now—this conglomeration of feelings and memories and actions, entirely divorced from who I thought I was. I am egodystonic, my behaviors and thoughts utterly at odds with who I am, like light and dark caught in an eternal fight. How can it be that I am breaking in two?

Ultimately, I have two reactions to what Arden said: one of crushing, heartbreaking relief; one that bleeds of grace and



understanding. Another of crude flippance that makes the darkness snarl with anger.

Because Michelle Arden Campbell has only seen the smoky fringes of my darkness.

# 30 Arden

Wednesday, May 30th

**The world is beautiful** in the morning, like the night somehow washes everything anew. Hendrix and I have to pull ourselves off the ground in pieces because we're so sore from sleeping on the rocky ground. He seems alright when we're packing up, so I don't ask him about anything.

We walk back into Othello and ask someone in a novelty general store where the nearest truck stop is. The old man behind the counter whips out his phone and scribbles down the address and a crude map.

Hendrix thanks him by grabbing a shiny Zippo lighter off the counter and walking out.

“Holy shit,” I say. And then Hendrix grabs a magazine and a handful of candy bars from the racks by the door.

At first, the cashier looks shocked, like he wasn’t trained for this. He fumbles a bit and comes out from behind the counter. But I look out the window, and Hendrix is just strolling off, already lighting a cigarette with his new lighter and pockets full of empty calories.

Hooting and hollering, Hendrix and I run out of the parking lot and onto the road. The scrawny cashier guy chases after us for a while, but then considers that leaving his post for a lighter, a magazine, and a handful of candy bars isn’t worth it.

After we’re far enough away, I squint at the sticky note and the smeared blue ink. “Dude, we totally could have paid for that.”

Hendrix just shrugs, rolling his head back to face the sky, warm smoke wafting toward the bright blue.

“Gnarly,” I say, nodding.

“Gnarly?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I say. “Like, that’s pretty fucking gnarly.”

He reaches into his pants pocket. “I got you a Butterfinger.”

I smile. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” His eyes glitter with mischief. This is the first time I notice they’re hazel.

After hitchhiking to Ellensburg, we shower and stock up on non-stolen snacks at a truck stop, which unfortunately leaves us only with \$40 each. Hendrix sits at a booth in the corner of the food court, twirling his thumbs. I slide in opposite him, still brushing through my damp hair. The whole place is a sprawling metropolitan, full of advertisements and neon lights, but it's rather deserted. I spread out a map of Washington state on the booth table. Hendrix stirs his cream and sugar into his coffee.

“What’s the plan?” he asks.

“I dunno.” It sounds simple coming out, but the complexities of those two words just keep spiraling. Where are we even going anymore? There’s not much *west* left to go. Then what? After west, there is nothing. Hendrix runs his finger along the rim of his paper coffee cup.

Actually, there’s everything. Then there’s the ocean and then Asia and then Europe and then back again. There’s north and south and there’s everywhere I haven’t been. Everywhere I’ll never be.

Swallowing, I look out at Ellensburg—a small town but bustling nonetheless. Trucks lined up like sleeping giants against the bright blue. Purple mountains forever reminding me of what’s beyond.

*I want to see the Pacific Ocean.*

Out of all of the traveling my family did, we never went anywhere interesting. Mom traveled a lot for work, but it was mostly just in Montana, and we took vacations every once in a while, but

they were always to see family or to big cities or to the places where everyone goes. None of it ever was particularly memorable. Especially since the most memorable part of the vacation was someone getting into an argument with someone else. Eventually, we just stopped going.

My chest aches, but not with an emptiness—with a bittersweet sort of longing, of hope that I'm so close to seeing the ocean. That maybe I'll find myself—finally get that spark of epiphany—where the sky meets the sea.

Or maybe I won't. Then what?

"Have you ever seen the Pacific Ocean?" I ask, still staring out of the smudged window at the idyllic white clouds.

"Yeah."

I turn to meet his eyes, but he's gazing out of the window too. "Really? Was it amazing?"

Hendrix runs his tongue over his front teeth, breathing in and out. "Yes."

I fold the map and stand up, and Hendrix starts at my abruptness. "Well, then that's where we're going."

Hendrix raises his eyebrows, scrambling to grab his stuff as I stroll out of the food court. "Then what?" he calls after me.

Walking backwards, I throw up my arms, laughing both at the absurdity of it and at the joy that begins to bubble under the surface. “I don’t know!” I shout. I get a few head turns, but I don’t care.

I’m going to see the fucking Pacific Ocean, baby.

I’m not afraid of hitchhiking. I’m with Hendrix, and that boy can take down a deer with just a knife. I think we’ll be okay. One of the truckers from Ellensburg takes us all the way to Buckley, a suburb of Tacoma, where we stop for lunch. Pretty much anywhere you go in Tacoma, you can get a glimpse of Mt. Rainier, which is really cool. It’s massive, like a sleeping giant watching over the city.

We stick around Buckley for a while and then start walking, looking for anyone willing to let two teenage tramps into their hybrid compact car. It takes several hours, but a man in a white pickup truck finally picks us up around Orting. He says he’s headed south to Portland, but we ask if he can drop us off around Grand Mound. An hour and a half later, the man in the camouflage Ducks Unlimited hat drops us off. I think his name was Tom. Or Tim.

There’s not much to do in Grand Mound. There’s a Great Wolf Lodge, but that’s too touristy for my taste. Hendrix and I stop at a gas station to get drinks and regroup. After waiting for a few hours, we find a young couple who are going to Elma but can take us no further than Rony. We accept the offer because we have to. The day is ripening into afternoon, and I’d rather not be stuck hitchhiking at night. Someone could kidnap us. Or kill us.

Unfortunately, Rony, Washington is basically nothing. Just a small maze of roads, farmhouses, and a gas station. And a massive plant nursery, for some reason. But otherwise—the mountains and thick forests swallow us on either side.

As we're walking in the afternoon heat, the air shimmers gold with pollen. Hendrix speaks for what feels like the first time in hours: "Wanna see if we can squat somewhere again? An abandoned building or something?"

I smirk. "This road trip is just getting more and more illegal, isn't it?"

This doesn't make him laugh.

We decide to find someplace on the west side of town, away from the farmland and into the forest. Along one of these winding sideroads, we find a few driveways marked with 'Private Property'.

"Wanna see if one of these places is open?" I ask, pointing to a dirt road to our left. Two sets of tire tracks lead up a shallow hill, cutting a slice into the ever-darkening forest. In the mountains, darkness always comes a little earlier. Hendrix reaches around behind him and pulls out a flashlight. For a second, I'm blinded by the exposure. Sure, maybe I'm scared, but maybe I'm just feeling adventurous. Brave, even. Like Hendrix and I are blazing a trail of tragic greatness.

Hendrix shrugs. He's been quiet today. Melancholy, even. "Sure."

The first residence is definitely not vacant. There are cars in the driveway and lights on in the house. After backtracking, we discover that the second residence definitely is. It's a small but luxurious cabin set far back into the clearing—an A-frame. The pine trees still seem to encroach on the green roof and deep brown wood. There's no cars, and everything's locked up and dark.

We circle back to the front of the cabin. I give Hendrix a knowing smile. “Looks pretty cool. But how the hell are we going to get in? We can't cause too much destruction or leave anything behind—”

Hendrix picks up a rock and throws it into a window, the shatter sounding strikingly unnatural against the silent forest.

My jaw drops. “You're one lucky son of a bitch that they don't have an alarm.”

He just shrugs at me, and climbs in the window. He's doing that thing again where he retreats into himself—so empty it's like blinking in total darkness.

I climb in after him, careful to not cut myself on any of the remaining glass. It looks like he broke the window leading into a study, so hopefully we can shut the door if it gets too drafty. Inside, the cabin is slightly outdated and musty but fully furnished, with taxidermy, a brick fireplace, and textured wood grain. The power works, but Hendrix has to go outside and check the septic tank. There's no perishable food, clothing, or really any personal effects, which makes me think this is a vacation or a rental home. It's a blank slate.



However, there's a basement we haven't explored. Hendrix goes to scope out the upper level, which is really just a glorified attic. Turns out it contains the house's master bedroom. I walk down the steps, covered in a lush but dusty rug. Otherwise, the basement is unfinished, and the cold concrete leeches the warmth from my bare feet. The basement is mostly cluttered with labeled boxes and old equipment. However, under the stairs is a cabinet full of red wine and a deep-freezer full of food.

I hope Hendrix is hungry.

**Upstairs, I open the** curtains to let the sunset in and turn on the ambient lighting in the kitchen. Hendrix is already in the living room making a fire.

“So I found a bunch of food in the basement. And wine,” I say, running my finger over the granite countertop. My fingers shake just a touch—probably from the anxiety and adrenaline from breaking and entering. Neither of us have seen any security cameras around here, but that doesn't mean there aren't any.

“Nice,” he nods.

“Do you know how to cook?” I ask. I rub my thumbprints off the stainless steel refrigerator with my sleeve.

“Yes.”

“You wanna help me make something fancy?”

He blows on the fire, the flames arcing up into the chimney. “Not really.”

“Too bad,” I say. “If we’re going to break into a cabin in the middle of nowhere, we’re going to make the best of it.”

He looks up at me, pursing his lips. “There’s a record player in the study. Want me to bring it in here?”

I throw him a wink. “That’s the spirit.”

He puts on some sixties album as warm light from the kitchen spills into the rest of the cabin. The towering pine trees crowd out the last bits of sunlight as the sky turns a deep navy. Hendrix said he didn’t want to help, but he eventually does anyway. There’s not much available in the kitchen, but we steam some frozen broccoli, defrost and pan fry steaks in soy sauce and minced garlic from a jar, and heat up a can of German potato salad. We dance—rather, I dance and Hendrix watches, smiling as he cooks the steaks to pink perfection. We sit at the counter on tall, wicker chairs and use ceramic plates with metallic gold rims, filling our plates with food and tapping along to the music.

“Wanna open some wine?” I ask between bites.

Hendrix shakes his head. “No, thanks. Alcohol and I aren’t friends.” A bitter, tight-lipped smile passes over his face.

Taking down two stemless wine glasses, I dig the cork out of the bottle with a corkscrew. “I’ll make sure you don’t get shitfaced this time.” As soon as the words come out, I’m reminded of him sobbing,

shaking in the heat of an alcohol-induced breakdown. What he confessed to me that night.

I swallow. I've had a bad high before. Heart-racing, twitchy legs, crippling paranoia. Felt like I was dying for a solid two hours. Watching as the wine floods the two glasses, I decide to blame that night in the woods on a bad mood made worse under the influence. Maybe Hendrix is just a sad drunk.

I hand him his glass and he sips it. His face scrunches up. "Tastes like vinegar."

I laugh, and Hendrix shoots me a look. "Yeah, that's about right." I hold up my glass. "Cheers?"

Hendrix considers for a moment, then raises his glass. "Cheers."

"Your steaks are good," I say, cutting into mine and sopping up the savory juice. "I mean, I can cook, but not this good. How'd you learn?"

Hendrix sighs, slowly. In the silence, the fire pops and hisses. The wood must be damp. "From my mom."

My first instinct is to jump into a spiel about how my family rarely ate dinner together, and so when I wanted good food, I had to make it for myself. Alone. But instead, I ask, "Did you guys do that together? Family bonding, or whatever?"

"Yeah," he says, nodding, stabbing his fork into the fleshy part of his steak. "Dad and I, uh, liked to hunt together, so then we'd bring it home and dress it up all fancy and Mom would—" His voice cuts out.

He's staring into his reflection on the silver refrigerator. "Mom—she'd, uh, she'd make us cook family dinner together, even sometimes when Dad got home from work late. It was something we always did together, when I was little." He sniffs and covers his face with his hand. "It's a nice memory. I liked doing that."

I find myself smiling. I'm a smidge jealous, but I don't let it show. "That's nice."

"Yeah," he says, breaking his gaze with himself and wiping the corners of his mouth. "How about you?"

I blink, taken aback. Usually it's me doing all the asking. "No, my parents were always too busy for that. They didn't think it was important, I guess."

Hendrix's eyebrows come together for a moment, but he still hasn't met my gaze. "I feel like I need to apologize or something." He clears his throat.

I laugh a little. "You don't have to. But thanks anyway."

Only a few inches separate us. Tenderly, I lean over and nestle my head on his shoulder. He puts his arm around me, and we just breathe.

I can't help but think of what he told me that second night in the woods. Voice clips of that night get stuck in my head sometimes, filtered through the heightened lens of alcohol. The words make my stomach twist even now. Hendrix has proven himself to be violent and reactive. Yet here I am.

Hendrix runs his hand up and down my arm. The fire crackles in the background, and the turntable plays something sweet from a simpler time, and dusk falls like snow.

# 31 Hendrix

Wednesday, May 30th

**Sometimes, the things that** fuck us up the most are the things we can't even remember.

I was eleven when my grandfather told me these things. It was for a school project or something, where we had to learn more about our family history. My grandpa Chuck was a storyteller by heart, so the talk wasn't exactly concise or anything.

We sat at their tiny kitchen table, under the stained-glass light fixture, the ones with wrought iron and flowers. Grandma was in the

other room, hissing the occasional obscenity when she would inevitably drop one of her balls of yarn and their cat would inevitably chase after it. The television hums and crackles in the background.

I sat there with a notebook, drinking sour, pulpy orange juice that Grandma insisted on making herself. Call it a family quirk: doing things without help.

Grandpa told me about his side of the family, about Grandma, mom, and her siblings. He also told the infamous story of how my parents met, got hitched, and how my mom got knocked up with me. Not in that order.

However, what I didn't know was that Dad worked a lot more when I was little: traveling for construction jobs and gone for weeks at a time.

Grandpa Chuck laughed, swirled the pulp at the bottom of his glass. "When your dad would come back from these long trips, he and I used to go out drinking a lot, to eat good food and listen to local bands and such. One time, your old man drank a little too much, and he told me something."

I stopped writing, looked up to see my grandpa, losing the fringes of himself in the past. The world narrowed, going fuzzy at the edges.

"He told me that he wasn't ready to be a dad, and of course, I told him that nobody ever is. But he said he *really* wasn't ready, like that he almost didn't—" Grandpa stood, rinsing the pulp out of his

glass in the sink. The faucet sputtered before coming out white and clear.

“What?” I asked.

“It don’t matter what he said, Rix,” he said, his deep voice flooding the outdated kitchen. I believed him. Sharpness returned to the world again. “Your ma was going through her own shit at the time.” He laughed to the floor, his thick, wiry facial hair obscuring his bitter smile. “Pardon my French. You, uh, you got tossed around a lot as a baby. From daycare, to your grandma and me, to another relative, and then back to another daycare. Your ma also left a lot—went on these long trips with her friends.” He smiled again, right at me. “I love your mom, and she’s my daughter, but she’s a little wild, ain’t she?”

“Yeah,” I nodded. Even at that age, I knew it well.

Grandpa Chuck sighed. He pulled his flannel shirt out of his pants, exposing the white shirt with his supply store’s logo on the front. He sniffed once. “I guess I’m telling you all this so you understand. Sorry that was so depressing, but you asked. C’mere, kid.” He waved me over, and I stood.

He hugged me there, under that ugly, vintage light fixture. From what I remember, he was always the best hugger—warm, sturdy. He held everyone like they were the most important person in the world. Like the hug was the glue holding our broken pieces together. Like the noisy world went quiet when my grandfather hugged somebody.

Grandpa pulled away, digging through his pocket. “You wanna go fishing?” he asked, holding up a mini Butterfinger.



“Hell yeah I do!” I said.

“Christ Almighty!” Grandma shouted from the living room. “Keep your voice down; I’m trying to watch my soaps!” I never understood why Grandpa stayed with her.

That was one of the last times I saw them.

**I’m going to do** it tonight.

After dinner, I let the fire die, and Arden goes to decide where we’re going to be sleeping for the night. Whether it would be safer on the main level versus in the attic or the basement. She’s safe nowhere, really.

I sit on the couch, sinking in deep to the plush fabric, and watch. I’m not sure why I’m going to do it tonight, other than this just seems like the perfect time. The perfect place. Besides, after everything that’s happened, I feel that we’re on borrowed time now.

“We’re sleeping in the attic, for sure!” Arden calls down from the balcony. “It’s warmer up there, and the view is gorgeous.”

“You sure we can’t just sleep down here by the fire? Where it’s warm?” I ask. I’d rather not drag her body down those steep, wooden steps. *Thunk, thunk, thunk.*

“You can, but I want to sleep on an actual bed,” she says, stomping down the steps.

So that's where we settle. The attic is more of a loft above the main level. It's triangle-shaped—long, and spacious. A bed, a chair, a desk, all made of the same rustic, knotted wood. A loose, spongy rug, a full bathroom, wood paneling. The room is bookended with two massive windows, letting the warm dusk in.

“Sweet,” Arden says, flopping on the bed. Dust wafts upward into the dying light. “I’d love to live in a place like this. Not ‘cause it’s fancy or anything, just because it’s so cozy.”

“Yeah. You would like it,” I say, shutting the door behind me. It clicks. I run my finger over the knob. There’s no lock.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” She sits up.

I shrug. “I dunno. You just, you like this stuff.”

“Yeah, I do. There’s nothing wrong with liking it, and wanting something that actually means something,” Arden says. She stands up and goes into the bathroom, the incandescent light buzzing and warm.

I put my back on the cold window and slide down into a sitting position, knees tucked up to my chest. “I know.” Her words gut-punch me, but this time it’s muffled. Muted. It’s like the floor has fallen out from under me. There is none of this *more* that Arden speaks of.

At least, not for me.

Arden comes out of the bathroom, her knit cardigan hanging off her shoulders, dangling past her cutoff shorts. “What’s wrong?” she asks.

“Nothing.” The knife, hooked on the waistband of my jeans, digs into my stomach as I draw my legs in closer to my chest.

She kneels down close to me, the fuzzy rug ending and becoming bare hardwood. The wind blows the branches of a nearby tree into the window, making scraping sounds. The noise makes us flinch.

“Hendrix, I’m not stupid, despite what you might think sometimes.” She cocks her head at me, the light making her brown eyes appear amber. “I know you well enough to know when something’s not right.”

I glare. “Nothing’s ever right.”

She sighs, sitting back. She looks away from me, her neck bare and open and facing me. I imagine doing it then, the blood seeping down, painting her body, staining the hardwood. But I’m frozen—I can’t seem to move.

My eyes burn with betraying tears. There’s this cruel, twisted part of me that *wants* Arden to be just as hateful and angry as me. I want her to hate me. I want her to get angry at me for what I’m about to do, for who and what I am. Because I know I deserve it.

So I say, “Maybe you should just leave, and then I’ll feel better. It’s what you do to everyone else, right?”

Arden blinks, recoiling slightly. “Um, what the fuck?”

“You told me about what you did to Elliot. To Sarah. Then you did the same damn thing to your own family.”

Her eyes flicker. I see that bridled anger in her, the one I saw last night in the wilderness. “That’s not the same and you know it.”

“Yeah? Explain it to me, then.” My words are vicious and taunting, but I stare at the floor. I’m afraid of her eyes. How they draw things out in me. How they cut right through my walls like they’re just red tape.

Arden stands. “I don’t have to explain anything. You think you’re better than me because you think you have it worse than I do. You think you’re better than me because both of my parents are still around and I live in the white-picket-fence side of town.”

I laugh bitterly, biting a spot of dry skin on my lip. “Yeah, actually, I do.” I’m starting to feel the static, like my soul is detaching from my body.

“Remember when your dad texted you?” she asks, crossing her arms. “I know you’ve said some bad things about him, but it’s obvious he *cares*.”

I stand, meeting her at her level, back still pressed against the cold, leeching window. “Yeah, and remember when you laughed at me?” The words sting coming out, and I relish in it.

Arden takes a step back. Her nostrils flare. “If they really wanted to find us, they could.”

“You’re right. And they haven’t. Because *we left them*.” I want her anger to *hurt*. I want that anger to burn everything inside her to ashes the same way mine does.

Tears shine in her eyes. “Stop it. It’s not like that. They all left me first, ‘cause I wasn’t . . . I wasn’t good enough.” She drops her gaze, sobs wrestling in her throat.

But I have no sympathy. “You know what, Michelle? People have left me, too. But people *leave*, no matter who you are. They’ve left you. They’ve left me. It’s the way life is.”

“It shouldn’t be,” she says, tears streaming down her face. “Because people aren’t supposed to leave. Good people don’t just *leave*.”

I get up real close to her face, snarling so I don’t fall apart entirely. “Yes, they do.” My voice catches on my words, tangled and painful.

“Stop it,” she says, nearly hysterical. “Stop acting so high and mighty. You’ve left me! You ran away from me in the woods, just left me there. You’re always the one who’s brooding and storming off. So don’t fucking lecture me about leaving people!”

My vision has gone black. I can taste the darkness, burning at the back of my throat. “You left Max. You left me, back in Pierce.” I’m shaking. “You always leave, Arden.”

Seething and hurt, Arden steps back, like she’s somehow seeing me for the monster that I am. All I can see is *red*. Her blood—thick and hot—running over my skin. Soothing my wounds. A holy sacrifice to atone for my many sins.

“That’s not the same,” she hisses, but her voice frays. “It is *so* not the same. And it’s not the same because sometimes it is so goddamn hard to be around you! Sorry, that sounds like shit, but sometimes I don’t know how to act. Nothing I do is ever good enough. I have done my best to open up to you, I’ve tried to be there for you, and all I’ve gotten is wall after wall after wall!” Breathing hard, she backs down, wiping the tears from her cheeks with resolution. There is so much left unsaid. I can feel it, like the chasm that stretches from me to Arden and back again.

I fall on my own sword. My gut splits open with pain, and a black hole forms, swallowing me from the outside in. Heavy shame—not guilt—pushes down on my shoulders, my chest, splitting me at the seams. Part of me is screaming, crying, bleeding—wrestling with myself, wishing that I could open up. But I *can’t*.

“Leave,” she says, her voice stone cold. “Get out. I need to be alone.” She turns on her heel and walks away from me.

I take out my knife, silver and warm from being so close to my body. My heart, gushing like a gunshot victim, bangs against my breastbone. The crack, the one that has only cut deeper and deeper ever since this whole thing began, is now a great chasm, spewing red-hot lava, consuming the land it was once buried beneath.

For some reason, I can’t do it. I want her to see me—really see me—when I do it. I want her to know that it was a monster that killed her.

But I *am* going to do it. Because Arden will get what’s coming for her. She has been the splinter inside of me, the fissure that has

turned into a gaping trench—one that I am destined to fall into. Michelle Arden Campbell started this awakening in me, and her blood will be the sacrifice to end it.

Slamming the door, storming down the stairs, I leave.

Because that's what people like us do.

I **go outside for** a smoke, but I keel over and vomit the second I get a whiff of the tobacco. I brace my hands on my knees, trembling. My blood is electricity, killing me from the inside out.

The *everything* comes tumbling down like darkness from the skies. Like hellfire. All I can think about is home. All I can think about is her, all I can think about is the pain the anger the hate the loss the loneliness the pain—

I kick the stone foundation of the house, pain rocketing up my leg. Paralyzed. Encroaching and all-consuming, my past has finally caught up with me, and the water's up to my neck. I cannot see the cracks in this darkness anymore.

The weight of my darkness, of my secrets—it suffocates me. Like pressure and heat on coal, this darkness has turned me into something sharp, something hard. Something indestructible.

Like prom night, like when I killed the deer, like when I beat the shit out of Josh. Like when I cut up that last rat in my shed after work that ordinary night, everything falls away, and the nothing remains, throbbing and cold. I am no longer.

My knife, the blade open, trembles in my freezing hands.

I walk back inside the cabin. It's dark and cold.

Up the steep, narrow steps. *Thunk, thunk, thunk.*

I open the door, and the darkness cuts into the moonlit room, like a crack in the universe. It creaks, but she doesn't turn around. Even now, her strawberry blonde hair glows brilliantly warm in the cold, pale light.

"I'm sorry, Hendrix," she says. "For kicking you out. You were kinda right, about the whole 'leaving' thing. I do leave people."

"I know," I say. But it's not my voice. My soul is lost, somewhere, crushed like a bug, in a moment that happened seven years ago.

She's standing there, facing the window on the far side of the room. My feet make no sound as I walk up behind her. My heart panics and runs in circles in my chest. The darkness has consumed me, reaching all the way up to my throat. It affectionately claws at my cheeks, taunting me with the promise of *nothing*.

I am up to my mouth in nothing but hot and thick *darkness*. Drowning, drowning, drowning in it. I swear, she can hear my shaky breathing and hear how the silver knife trembles in my hands. Each step sends cracks feathering across the ice between us.

Into my eyes, worming its way into every intimate crevice, blinding me. Darkness. Not blackness, but such crushing and consuming *darkness*.

And then Arden turns around.



Electricity buzzes through me as I freeze, the knife slipping behind my back. She gives me a once over and then turns back around. Somehow, this cuts through everything, and I see it all with stunning clarity. The world falls back into focus, but it's too much too much *too much*.

Tears, hot and burning, prick my eyes. I stare into the wood grain and try not to breathe and try not to think and try not to exist until I'm not sure if I'm feeling nothing or everything all at once.

I keep my voice steady, for I'm afraid I might break along with it. "I . . . I think there's something wrong with me." Eighteen years of *awful* boil and burn under the surface. Even the dim light makes my head scream at me.

"There's something wrong with everyone, Hendrix," Arden says, her frame deflating in the moonlight.

Someone's turned up the static. Loud and shrill and burning from where my heart should be. A seam has formed within me, stretching and tugging against the proverbial fabric that holds me together. One more *pop* and the darkness will spill out. No way to hide it anymore. No way to fix my broken shell.

"No, like, *really* wrong. Like, in the head." The blade trembles silently in my hand. I poke it into the pads of my fingers. *Back and forth, in and out, back and forth, in and out, back and forth, in and out, back and forth, in and—*

Arden scoffs. “Same. Actually, not really. Sometimes I think I’m just like everybody else, and that kinda makes me unhappy. But then I wonder, why has that gotta be so bad? Why don’t I have the courage to be like everybody else? Why do I feel the need to be something special or great?”

And then, it rips, and nothing floods out into what’s left of me, of Hendrix. It consumes like tar, sticky and corrupting every surface.

I am gone. The tip of the blade draws blood on my finger, and I feel nothing.

“*Jesus*, you’ve gotta make everything about you, don’t you?” My voice, shaky and violent.

Arden sighs, “I’m sorry, Hendrix. I’m trying not to do that anymore, but is it so criminal to want to talk about my feelings sometimes?”

The wood bends and shifts under me as I move closer to Arden. The venomous desire to *hurt* vibrates beneath my skin. Desire to see this ugly, fluffy rug stained with warm red crawls across my skin. I crave the release.

I need it back. I need to not feel everything anymore.

I have no choice.

*I need this to be over.*

Shaking, I walk behind her.

I think she's still talking, but all I can hear are the voices in my head, the ones telling me what I am and where I came from and what I'll be forever.

The voices that tell the ugly truth.

The voices that tell me the lies I want to hear.

The second Arden's voice cuts out, the static dims.

*But it's too late.*

As she turns around, I pounce, one arm around her chest and the other pressing the blade of my knife to her soft, throbbing neck. There's a scuffle as she gasps and cries out, struggling.

But it's nothing.

*I'm gone.*

"Hendrix, what are you doing?" she cries, fumbling with my arms locked around her. Her nails dig into my forearm.

But the blade only presses deeper into her neck. My throat closes up.

"Hendrix, no, please!" She's sobbing at this point, clawing at my skin, kicking at the wood floor to try and throw me off balance. My diaphragm is ripping apart, splitting my lungs in half. The chasm roars, devouring both halves of myself. The lies, the pain, the crippling isolation—it is all that I am.

Everything except for me and Arden spins and spins and spins and I scream. I am crashing and burning, yet I'm so viciously driven.

Driven to be *okay*. Driven to madness, to kill, if it means I get my *nothing* back. If it means my darkness will retreat with it's blood sacrifice like the angry, vengeful demon it is. The *everything*—it boils and builds and screams at me until one thing rises above the terrible noise:

*She left me.*

My mother left without a trace when I was eleven, and she never came back.

Everything shatters inside of me, and I let Arden go.

Sobbing, I collapse to my knees, my knife falling forever to the ground, silent and screaming against the desperate horror of this irrevocable moment.

# 32 Arden

Wednesday, May 30th

**I think Hendrix just** tried to kill me.

Still racked with adrenaline, I kick the knife away from him, but keep it in my line of sight. Heaving, I stand, bracing myself against the bed. *I'm alive.*

Hendrix is having some kind of psychotic break—sobbing violently, kicking at the floor and pulling at his hair, until his back hits

the wall across from me. Strings of words rip from him, but I can't tell what they are.

Something pricks in my stomach—true fear. Fear *of* Hendrix.

*He really tried to kill me.*

Sobs break in my chest. I wish I could be angry at him, but mostly I'm just scared. I suppose it's everything, collapsing under the weight of our worlds, of our demons and our secrets.

Hendrix continues sputtering, sobbing, nearly screaming—it's unsettling to say the least. Sniffing, I wipe my nose, partially wishing I could pull him out of it and also that I could run very far away from here.

And then his words start to make sense.

"I . . . I was gonna . . ." he says between painful breaths. "All along . . . I was . . . I was gonna do it all along."

"What?" The pieces fall together, but I don't like the image that's coming into focus.

Hendrix locks his body in a prison of himself, head squeezed between his knees and arms over his head, clawing at his back. His voice is muffled, frail, as he says, "I was gonna kill you all along. I . . . I slashed your tires, and I . . ."

I flinch as he kicks at the rug, making the floorboards beneath us shudder.

Everything tells me not to do it. Everything tells me that I should run. But I can't. So much of Hendrix is exposed, so much of the person I've so badly wanted to see is right here, bursting forth.

This might be crazy, but it's real.

So I don't run.

And I stay. In the face of fear. In the face of terrifying vulnerability.

I ask. "Hendrix?"

His head rises, revealing his red face, and the brokenness behind it. "Yeah?"

"Are you really a sociopath?"

Nothing. He does nothing but sob quietly for a moment, and then swallows, locking his head back between his knees. "I don't know. Maybe. But what I do know is that there is something really, *really* wrong with me. I hate myself, and can't help but do terrible things."

In some strange way, it makes sense. As my stomach sinks, something else expands in its place.

*Empathy.*

It's so strange, feeling this. All the red flags ingrained in me from violent slasher films pop up, and images of ruthless, vindictive CEOs flash through my mind—all things that come to mind when the word "sociopath" is mentioned. But Hendrix is just a boy, and his mental

illness is ruining his life. He's eighteen. Barely legal. He almost made a mistake that would have ruined his life.

His story—and my story—has just begun.

I hear Hendrix's sobs start up again, and I wish I knew what to say. This feels like Sarah all over again.

But I am not that person anymore. Instead, I sit on the floor, across from him, my knees tucked up like his. My heart still races from the fear, but I stay and hope that it's enough.

"I'm sorry, Arden," he says. "I am so so *so* incredibly sorry." His words fade off into sobs.

My chest aches. Do I really forgive him? I have nothing to say, and I hate it. Maybe I'm just in shock. "It's okay, Hendrix. You're okay. I'm okay." This is, of course, the opposite of true. But that's alright.

He laughs bitterly, grabbing fistfuls of his brown waves. "I am absolutely not okay."

Words and emotions catch in my throat. Things are silent for a moment as the air conditioning kicks on.

Hendrix sniffs and lifts his head, his cheeks shining in the moonlight. I stand up and get him some tissues. As I reach for them, I realize I'm trembling like a wounded animal. I'm still not convinced Hendrix isn't dangerous, on thin ice. "Thank you," he says, his voice like the threadbare rug beneath us.

And so I just sit there with Hendrix, staring at the moon and the sketchy outlines of pine trees outside the bedroom window.



“When I was a kid,” Hendrix says, his voice crumbling like old paint, “my dad would have days when he would be the best dad a boy could ask for. When he wasn’t away on a job, he was never too busy. He was never too uptight that he wouldn’t get in the mud or the sand with me. In some ways, I felt that he was a child like me.”

He clears his throat, and I look back over at him. Now, the world outside has captured his gaze. The way the moonlight grazes the planes of his face seems intimate somehow, like the moon knew we would need it.

“My grandpa Chuck on my mom’s side was like that too. But, um, everyone else seemed to hate me and my dad, though. My parents only got married ‘cause my mom got pregnant with me.”

Something inside me reaches out, strong and yearning, but I let him continue. I’m breaking in half and fusing back together all at once. The room feels too small to bear the weight of what he’s just said.

Hendrix scratches his head, sending his hair awry. “But as I got older, dad got to drinking more and he’d have these . . . these seasons where he’d lose a job and he’d gamble and drink at night and then never leave the basement during the day. They hated each other; they’d fight about everything. They’d scream and bang and throw shit at each other. My dad was all over the place. My mom threatened to leave all the time. In fact, she did several times. Stayed with her parents or friends. She rarely took me. Then Dad found out she was having an affair when I was eleven.”

“But—” Hendrix’s voice stops abruptly, and I perk up. He’s crying again. “But I think what made her leave for good was when she saw traces of Dad . . . in me. I wasn’t good enough for her to fight for, or even good enough to take with her. I wasn’t good enough for her to stay.”

A knife worms its way through my lungs and out through my heart. There are so many things I could say. There are so many things I *should* say.

But I say just one.

“I understand.”

Because I do. In trying to be everything my parents aren’t, I’ve only swung to the other end of the pendulum. Hendrix is there, caught somewhere in the middle of his parents dysfunction that has become his own. I understand Hendrix more than I’ve ever understood anybody in my whole life. And I think he understands me too, more than he could ever fully know.

“She left me, Arden. My own mother left me, after eleven years of hell. Usually, mothers take their kids with them, but she didn’t want me. And I don’t know *why*.” He swallows, tears rolling down his face. “I don’t know where she is. I haven’t seen her, talked to her, contacted her, in seven years. Her side of the family refuses to speak to us. She probably has a *normal* family with a *normal* son in a *normal* town—” With each repetition, Hendrix pounds his fists against his temples. I crawl forward and grab his wrist, to keep him from seriously hurting himself.

Then he collapses like a dying star falling in on itself. And I collapse with him. I hold him as he sobs, as the darkness swirls around us. But it can't touch us.

Hendrix, the boy who tried to kill me. Hendrix, the only person I know who would go on this disastrous excuse of a road trip with me. Hendrix, this boy who I understand and who understands me—he grips onto me like the world will shatter into pieces if he doesn't. And I hold onto him like we are the space between the stars, where the mountains kiss the sky, where the pine trees burst from the cracks in the earth.

With no words, with nothing more that needs to be said, I understand the pain. I understand the loss and the whole fucked up mess of a life that we live. He understands that I'm still here because I care. And because I *understand*. It's like we're one big closed circuit, energy flowing from me to him and back again.

Being here—holding each other both physically and emotionally in a way that is so profoundly intimate—we find our pieces, our echoes, and our lost fragments again. This trip and these moments are the glue that hold us together, that shape us and break us and fix us.

We are forever bound together in this way, souls touching souls. I find echoes of myself in Hendrix, and he finds echoes of himself in me.

# 33 Hendrix

Thursday, May 31st

I think the worst part was that it felt like a normal day. Early spring—when the lakes were thawing and the forest floor looked like it had a dusting of moss from all the new plants sprouting. Mom brought me home from school that day. I remember her being quieter than usual, but that's all.

I did my homework like a good boy. I screwed around outside for a while, doing chores. Dad had come home late, since spring was when construction work started getting more frequent for him. We all had tacos for dinner. Together.

My parents sat in front of the television for a while. At some point, they went into their bedroom to talk. I'd long given up on eavesdropping. It was just something they did. The house was so quiet I could hear the crickets and frogs outside. I sat and listened to them under the light of the kitchen.

Eventually, Mom came out. I stood up when I heard her. She had a small duffel bag, but that's it. She kissed my forehead briefly.

"Are you leaving?" I asked.

She shook her head, but wouldn't look me in the eye. "No, Rix. I'll just be gone a few days."

I nodded, and I watched her leave out the front door. She left the screen door open, like she might actually be back.

A few days turned into a week.

Dad tried to get her to come back, but she went radio silent. My mother's parents withdrew almost immediately. They had moved away, so suddenly. My aunt blocked my dad on social media and refused to return his calls.

A week turned into a month.

Dad made a few attempts to appeal to the courts, to get Mom to pay child support, but she was gone. Off the grid. Cut all ties, and somehow got her parents and her sister to play along. I don't know if her intention was to come back after a few days, or if something happened when she stayed with her friends or relatives that caused her to abandon us—abandon *me* completely.

A month turned into three.

Arden once told me about how she thinks that everyone's got a rock bottom. Where you come to the end of yourself. Where you just stop and think, *I can't live like this anymore*. After that, one has two choices: start climbing back up, or start making rock bottom more comfortable.

This was when Dad finally hit rock bottom. He came home from work drunk and punched a hole into the fake wood paneling in our hallway. The hole is still there, almost as a horrible reminder of that rock bottom. We cleared out all of Mom's stuff after that. Some of it we sold; some of it we burned.

Our lives changed completely after that. Dad retreated into himself, and I had to be almost entirely self-sufficient at age eleven. That first summer without her contained some of the darkest days we ever saw. It's strange that when the world is warm and green with life, it only makes the darkness seem all the more devastating.

I thought that was my rock bottom, too. As it turns out, I just kept digging. I dug for seven years, burying myself beneath the weight. Now I realize: last night was my rock bottom. But unlike my father, I am not going to make a home in it.

**I'm not aware of** much when I wake up, but what I do recognize is how tired I am. How my soul hangs weary in my body, like beating the dust out of a rug.

But for the first time in seven years, I am okay.

The stripes of morning sun cast light on the dust that floats around us. From my place in the plush bed, the wooden paneling on the walls looks warm and inviting. I just lay there, half awake, listening to the birds tweeting and the trees rustling outside. No one has come to awaken us. We are here, suspended in time and space, divorced from the world and somehow forever connected to it.

For the first time in thirteen days, I think about what lies ahead. I think about going back to my father. I think about going back to the frozen yogurt shop. I think about college and work. I think about getting help. None of it ever crossed my mind before because I never thought about anything past killing Arden. That was my zenith, the pinnacle of my miserable existence. I never thought I was destined for anything more than to feed the virus inside me.

Without that, I don't really know who I am. It's terrifying and exciting all at once.

Then again, I think we spend our whole lives trying to find ourselves. It's not something you finish in adolescence or young adulthood. Once you think you've got yourself all figured out, life throws you some curveballs just for fun. You've got to know who you are, otherwise life's going to do all of your living for you.

I don't think I'll ever *not* struggle with my mental illness. Now I know that I can *feel*—it's like a dam broke inside of me, and nothing but colors flooded the ravine. At least now I can see the cracks, the places where the light shines through what I thought was

impenetrable. At least I know that it's possible to chip away at this darkness.

I feel smaller, in the grand scheme of things. But I also feel so much stronger.

I turn over in the stranger's bed. Arden snores lightly next to me, and our feet intertwined sometime in the night. Through it all, she's still here. I don't know if that makes her loyal or crazy. Either way, she'll never know how much it means to me—the depth of her one, single, perpetual act. That she stayed, when so many other people didn't.

It'd be a shame to ruin it.

I hope I don't ruin it.

**Arden shakes me awake**, gently. Her face falls into focus, silhouetted by the sunlight. “Morning. I think this is one of the few times I've woken up before you,” she says, eyebrows raised.

I stretch, feeling the soreness rip through my muscles. “No, I was awake, I just dozed off.”

“Right, whatever,” she smirks.

Blinking away the sleep, I watch as Arden's eyes wander, indicating that she's thinking. I can see the distress in the lines of her face. As always, Arden wears her heart on her sleeve and her emotions on her face. It's intimate, really.



“You need to get help, Hendrix,” she says, her voice as heavy as the sea. “Like, professional help.”

“I know,” I say, allowing the discomfort to writhe inside me. “It’s just so hard.”

Arden presses her lips together. “I know.” She puts her hand on my neck, just below my ear. “When we get back, I’ll help you. We’ll do it together.”

I nod. Tears burn in my eyes, but I manage to smile through it. “My dad will take a lot of convincing.”

“Yeah, about him.” Arden raises her eyebrows. “I’m sorry you have to go back to him.”

“I’ll be okay,” I say.

“Yes, you will.” Smiling, Arden averts her eyes and sighs. She gets up and rips the covers off of me.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“I need for you to get up and hug me,” she says.

Grumbling—and cold—I stand up. “You could have just asked.”

“Yeah, well, I’m pretty bad at that,” Arden says, and she leans into me. Her hands run up my back, and I wrap my arms around her neck. It feels like a sigh, like rain falling on a warm spring day. It feels like the physical embodiment of what Arden and I have, whatever that is. It feels like love. And it feels like hope.

“I forgive you, Hendrix,” she says into my shirt.

My chest splinters with something simultaneously beautiful and painful. “Why?”

Smelling of lavender and sleep, she rubs her thumb over my shoulder blade. “I don’t know.” We breathe for a moment, and I try not to fall apart.

Arden pulls away, but we hold hands in the space between us. “I was thinking that we should probably be going soon. Less time we stay here means less of a chance we’ll get caught,” she says, shrugging.

“You still want to see the ocean? Even after last night?” I ask.

“Of course I do,” Arden says. She looks at the floor for a moment, and then pulls her hand up, displaying a flash of silver. My knife. “And this? It’s mine now, just so you know.”

I laugh. “It’s alright, I’ve got plenty more at home.”

At the mention of *home*, sadness colors Arden’s smile. “Get up, loser and help me so we can blow this taco stand.”

*Tacos.* Mom loved tacos. She liked most Mexican food, really, but tacos were her favorite. You could stuff them with whatever you wanted, just as long as it was wrapped in a warm tortilla. She’d make them sometimes—my shrew-of-a-grandmother’s recipe—for us, and they’d always hit the spot for some reason. That day, no matter the day, tacos were the perfect comfort food we all needed. It brought the three of us together, like food always did. It’s one of those things that seems so ordinary, so unmemorable, until it’s gone, and there’s nothing left but the *aching*.

Smiling to myself, I say, “That reminds me: out of all of the places we’ve been, we haven’t had Mexican food yet.”

**We gather up our** stuff and make the place as clean as possible. The broken window is a bit hard to hide, though. With our bags on our backs, we walk down the hill away from the cabin. Arden gives a few hoots and hollers, and I turn around and give it one last look. Maybe I’ll tell my wife and kids about this cabin. I’ll tell them about my Grandpa Chuck and Josh and Arden. I’ll tell them about the rats and Maizy the cat and frozen yogurt. I’ll tell them about the lodge and losing the car and camping under the stars. I’ll tell them about the deer. I’ll tell them about Norman and Ernest and Lydia and about Arden who forced me to sing American Pie in front of a restaurant full of strangers. I’ll tell them about my mother and my father and the ocean. Especially the ocean, and the way it sparkles even in the night.

When we make it to the main road, Arden outstretches her hand. I take it. It doesn’t feel romantic, it feels resolute. That’s how we stay until another eccentric figure takes pity on us and gives us a ride.

The whole world is ahead of us and also behind us. It’s like that limbo Arden’s always talking about. We are caught in the middle, and we have finally made peace with that. What are we to do with all this future?

**When we come upon** Elma, Washington, Arden spots a Mexican restaurant. Not an Americanized chain, but one that looks authentic. Or as authentic as you can get this far north.

“So your Mom liked Mexican food?” Arden asks after we order.

“Yeah,” I say. “She always liked to experiment with the styles and flavors, cooking-wise. It was always her first choice when going out to eat.”

Arden smiles as she dips her red tortilla chip into the queso. “That’s sweet.”

“Yeah,” I say, looking out the front window of the restaurant as it begins to drizzle rain. “I can’t tell you why she liked it so much, though. I guess it made her feel like she was somewhere else, which I can’t blame her for.”

Arden nods. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to keep saying that. It’s not your fault.”

“It’s not yours, either.”

As always, Arden moves so fast I can barely keep up. Her words hit me where it hurts, like a blind gut-punch. Out of habit, I feel myself digging my fingernails into my palms.

“I think, even if you never see her again, you’ll be okay,” she continues, pointing a chip at me.

Her voice brings me back. “Sorry, I’m just . . . feeling things. But you think so?”

Arden raises her eyebrows at me. “I really do.”

I smile, but I can feel that it's a sad one.

Our food comes—Arden ordered chicken fajitas and I, of course, got tacos. They aren't like Mom's, but I wasn't expecting them to be. A couple of times, Dad tried to make Mexican food the way Mom did. I regret not recognizing his effort.

The memory sends a pang through me, running clear and white-hot. I eat the food and laugh with Arden anyway. Instead of pushing it down, I let it run its course through me. I let myself feel sad and nostalgic and angry and happy all at once.

The feelings still don't go away, even after we leave the restaurant and start walking again. I'm starting to get frustrated with it, and I feel a bit helpless, at the mercy of my own body and emotions. I guess being obsessed with being in control and consumed with numb anger for seven years does some shit to your psyche.

I start up a conversation to distract myself. "I still can't believe you've never seen the Pacific Ocean," I say. The noon is softly overcast, the ground cool after the morning rain.

"Yeah," Arden turns around, walking backwards, and shrugs. "It's not like we don't have money to go on vacations either. My parents just . . . don't think that shit is important. Like, family time and stuff."

"I'm sorry." Some of my best memories are with my family. Granted, some of the worst ones are with them, too.

Arden points a finger at me. "That's my line," she laughs.

And I laugh along with her, the entirety of the world howling along with us. Because laughter? It's not a weapon; it's a beautiful thing.

# 34 Arden

Thursday, May 31st

When the mom van pulls up beside us, I mistakenly think it's a woman, but the driver is a middle-aged man. Hendrix and I gauge him up as he rolls down the window.

"It's 11am on a Thursday morning. What are you guys doing out here?" he asks, his voice booming, but it doesn't feel intimidating. He sounds like he was a vintage radio announcer in a past life.

"We're, uh, trying to get to the beach," Hendrix says.

“Yeah, we’re on a road trip, but our car broke down.” I hold up Hendrix’s hand in mine, to show that we are anything but threatening, because something about this man strikes me, hits me in such a deep part that I don’t really know how to react. I *never* really know how to react.

“Well, you’re pretty far from the beach. Coastline is about forty miles from here,” he says, stroking his short, dark beard.

“Can we, uh, have a ride somewhere? It doesn’t have to be anywhere in particular. Just, closer to the coastline,” I say, laughing a bit. I try to see past this man’s demeanor, but I find nothing but openness. Nothing but authenticity. He just reminds me of a dad—someone that you could crack open a cold one and just talk about life with on the front porch.

“Sure, no problem,” he says, hitting a button to open the side doors. Hendrix and I hop in the middle seats. “You can just toss that in the back,” he says, gesturing to the booster seat to the left.

Beneath the seat reveals crumbs and a few lost Legos. Hendrix wrinkles his nose at the mess, but it makes me smile. It shows that this van is lived in, that there is a happy family that uses it. We throw our bags in the back as well.

“I’m Todd, by the way,” he says, leaning back.

“Hi, Todd,” Hendrix says, and I almost laugh again. He’s so different, but so incredibly the same. I love it.

“I’m Michelle, and he’s Hendrix.” He turns and gives me a look, and I just shrug. “It’s my name, isn’t it?”



“So does that mean I get to call you Michelle now?” he says.

“No, you still have to call me Arden.”

“Alright.”

“I don’t quite know what just happened there,” Todd says. “But it’s nice to meet you, Michelle and Hendrix.”

*Michelle.* Something finally clicks. My dad always calls me Michelle. Not Mitch, or some other pesky sibling insult like my brother Max would use. Not Chelle or Shelley or some other shit that Mom says. Just Michelle.

**We tell Todd that** we don’t have to go back to his house, that it would be totally fine to just drop us off at a restaurant, but he insists on taking us back to his place to try his wife’s phenomenal cooking. We’re never one to turn down free meals.

The two-story is set far back on the property, framed by lush trees. It’s picturesque in a unique way, with messy pops of character all throughout the yard and house.

“Would we be able to use your washing machine?” I ask as we hop out of the car.

“Sure, sure!” Todd says. “But you’ll have to get Jamie to teach you. That thing’s a real beast.”

Todd leads us inside, and it smells of people and savory spices. The foyer is small, and leads directly up the stairs or into the living

room. “Hey, Jamie! We’re going to be having two extra kids for lunch.”

“We’re gonna what now?” she exclaims over the music humming from the radio. The woman I assume to be Jamie peeks her head out from behind the wall, leading into the kitchen. “Oh! Good thing the kids went over to the Stephens’ house today.”

Jamie walks toward us, swaying her hips and drying her hands on her apron. We shake her hand as she smiles. “Hope y’all like tomato soup, because that’s what I’m serving.” She turns the radio down as she heads back to the stove.

“Mmmm, you know that’s my favorite,” Todd says, coming up behind his wife and wrapping his arms around her.

I glance over at Hendrix, and we just watch while Todd and Jamie embrace. He kisses her forehead as she playfully leans away, trying to cook and rub her husband’s back at the same time. Snapshots of a life—not portraits—line the walls. Pictures drawn by children and certificates and awards hang on the refrigerator, and phrases about God’s love decorate the frames of doorways. Some of my friends had homes like these. I was always jealous of them.

**After lunch, Jamie tells** us that the washer and dryer is upstairs in the back room. However, as Hendrix and I walk up the stairs and down the hall, we realize there are two back rooms.

“Which one is it?” he asks. I shrug and knock on the leftmost door. No answer. Thinking it can’t hurt, I open the door, and fall headfirst into someone else’s life.

It’s like a museum exhibit, frozen in time. It’s a young girl’s room, one of the faces dotted along the walls in picture frames. The walls are a soft pink, but the room is decorated in color—from the scribbles and stick-figure drawings taped on the walls to the dolls and stuffed animals left strewn about after her mother told her that her friends had arrived. Golden light floods in through the curtains, onto an unmade bed with tangled sheets that could have been caused only by excessive jumping. I’m left breathless by it. I don’t even know this girl, but somehow I do.

“Hendrix?” I ask. I hear him walk in behind me, but I can’t make myself turn around.. Tears stream down my face. It’s just so damn happy and sad all at once. Nostalgia colors my vision, weighs heavy in my chest.

“Yeah?” He comes up behind me and puts an arm around my shoulder.

“Do you ever think about how your childhood is just . . . over now?”

“I never really had a childhood,” he says.

“I’m sorry.” I can almost see the little girl twirling around, making a beautiful mess. Like a bubble, trapped in time, before someone comes along and pops it. I hope, when someone comes

along and pops her bubble, that she'll still be able to pick up the pieces again and keep making more beautiful messes over and over again.

Hendrix hugs me from behind. "I'm sorry that yours is over. From what you've told me, it sounded pretty alright."

"Parts of it were. But thanks anyway," I say.

"For what?" he asks.

"Understanding." My voice cracks, because the atmosphere of this room is just too much. It pulls at memories that I thought I had long forgotten. It pulls at something I didn't know I had. "I want this," I say. "I want this for my life. I want any children I have to make beautiful messes and have a safe place. Because it's what I never had."

I've never been married, never had children, but already I taste the bittersweetness of it all. Of both my future and my past, and how strangely beautiful it will be.

Hendrix pulls me just a bit closer, and I lean into him. He doesn't have to say anything—I know he understands. We are just here, basking in the weight of the moment that falls on us like dust in the warm light.

I feel like crying, and Hendrix's arms feel like the weight of the world around my shoulders, but I'd gladly carry it for him.

**Later in the afternoon,** Todd runs errands and says he'll be back to drop us off somewhere closer to the beach. Hendrix and I

hang out on the porch, with its worn wicker chairs and peeling, white paint. Basking in the thick summer heat, we just sit there, watching the cars drive down the country roads and listening to the soft radio that floats out through the screen door.

Hendrix takes out a cigarette from his pocket and lights one. He offers one to me.

Taking it, I twirl it between my fingers. “I didn’t think you still had those,” I say.

“Yeah, me neither. Found ‘em in these jeans I haven’t worn in a while.”

Our gazes meet for a moment. A strange sadness colors his eyes, like it’s always been there, but just buried. “What are we gonna do after we see the Pacific, Hendrix?” I ask.

Raising his eyebrows, he holds out the lighter to me one more time. I let him light the end, but don’t inhale. I stare at the glowing tip, and the smoke that ribbons out.

“I dunno,” he says. “Call our parents, I guess.” He pauses to take a drag. “Go home.”

*Home.* The way he says it feels like deafening snow. “You really wanna go home?”

He taps his foot and I see his eyes scanning the fields and mountains, the atmosphere hazy. Even the birds sound nostalgic, like they too are young in voice but old in soul. “Yeah.” Tears well up in his eyes, and his voice breaks. “I gotta get help, Arden.”

Nodding, I take a drag of the cigarette, coughing on the exhale. I try to picture what our lives will look like once we get back. But it's like a dream—fuzzy and fragmented, with nothing I can quite put my finger on. “You think Lisa will let us keep our jobs?”

Hendrix laughs at this, but his eyes still speak of that profound sadness. “I hope so.” He pauses. “I think I’m gonna go to community college or trade school, just to figure out what I want to do with my life.”

I nod. “Yeah, same. My mom wants to send me to some big university to get ‘the college experience’. And because she thinks our family is ‘too good’ for community college. Fuck that, though.”

Hendrix smiles. “Yeah, fuck that.”

We laugh about it for a moment, but really, under all of that, Hendrix is right. We have to go home. No matter how much it sucks, no matter how much it feels like an ill-fitting shoe, we still left pieces of ourselves there, in our tiny town in Montana. In order to move on, we have to go back and find those pieces, and take them with us wherever we go. For me, it's Max. It's the people, the roads, the houses, the places in that town that hold memories like red balloons tied on strings. I can't abandon that part of myself. And for Hendrix, it's his family. He has to let go before he can move on.

Whenever Hendrix or I come back, we'll still see those balloons, tied to places and people and things, still bright and red and floating in the wind like the memory was only yesterday. We will remember, and it will be good. We will make new homes, until our lives are full of balloons, floating forever toward the open sky.

These places, they're haunted. Maybe these places we were trying to escape this whole time do have meaning. They're haunted by memories, by the people we once were. But the people we *are* and the people we're going to be? That's what matters. There are no places left behind because all we have is right now and whatever comes next. Hendrix and I are at the edge of the world. We are young. We are so burdened, yet so free. We've found companionship and connection and healing. What's better than that? Nothing.

It's not about being 'good enough'. It's not about what we do or where we come from. It's about who we are, and who's going to stick around through the mess. Our whole lives are ahead of us, and they are so much brighter than whatever's in the rearview mirror.

**Before we leave, Hendrix** and I glance back at Todd and Jamie's house with its chipped white siding and green roof, and all the love and life it contains. We tie red balloons onto the front porch, around the stout chimney, onto the doorknob of the little girl's bedroom—where these balloons hold both memories and dreams.

# 35 Hendrix

Thursday, May 31st

We catch a ride into town, and then walk the rest of the way to the beach. Arden insists that we stop at this ice cream vendor first. We get crushed Butterfinger sprinkled on top.

Just before we cross the last rocky patch to reveal the ocean behind it, Arden grabs my elbow. “Stop.”

I turn around. “What?”

“I want to savor this,” she says.



“Okay.” We stand there and finish our cones. I outstretch my hand, and she takes it. We walk over the uneven ground as it turns to small, moss covered stones, criss-crossed with piles of pale driftwood. Like the world has been cut in half, the beach stretches out before us. It’s sprinkled with people, but the sand is soft and malleable. The ocean begins to glitter as the sun sets.

I look over at Arden, eyes resting on the horizon, soaking it all in. “You want me to get out of the way so you can take a picture?”

She shakes her head. “No. Wouldn’t do it justice.”

She kicks off her shoes and wades in the sea foam as it drags against the shore. Arden leans down, digs for a moment, and picks up a broken seashell. She stuffs one piece in her pocket, gives another to me, and throws another piece far in the ocean. The wind picks up, and so do the waves. Clouds streak across the sky, turning into purple cotton candy.

“There,” she says. “Now, we’ll have something to remember this moment.”

Removing my shoes and wading in, I stare out at the ocean. “Is it everything you ever imagined it would be? The ocean?”

“Yeah, it is.” I hear the smile in her voice. “I wish Max was here.”

“Yeah,” I say to fill the space. Picking up a handful of sand, I remember how I used to use sand to sop up blood in the shed if things ever got out of hand. The memory sends something sour running through me. I reach down, and feel the saltwater wash the

sand off my fingers, thinking of how it felt all those years ago. As the water drains away, I run my fingers over the damp sand, but it's not dark enough for them to show. "When I was like, seven or something, my family and I all went to the ocean. That first night, I was absolutely begging my parents to go see the ocean, but they said it was too late. My grandpa went out with me, though. He told me that there are these little plankton called *noctiluca scintillans* that glow when you rub the sand. I'd show you, but it's too light out." Recalling the memory feels strange, like it's someone else who lived that life.

"That sounds sweet. Where's your grandpa now?" Arden asks.

"He left when my mom did," I say, and the words bite like razors coming out.

Arden lays her head on my shoulder, as the sun burns a brilliant orange and dances across the waves. The ocean has always made me feel small. The insignificance is comforting.

In the quiet of the moment, where there's nothing but the whisper of the ocean, something makes me roll my sleeves up and expose my wrists.

My wrists that bear the marks of my mental illness.

Arden looks over at me—first my arms, and then my face. My neck tenses up as she runs her fingers over the lines and circles. She doesn't say anything—just waits for me to speak.

"When I was young, some time after my mom left, I started doing this to myself. Both because I didn't know how to express what

I was feeling. And because I felt . . . nothing. I just didn't care about myself. The pain—it made me feel something.” The words feel like an anchor dragging along the bottom of a rocky sea. “But when that wasn't enough, I moved on to animals. Hurting them, because it was a power fantasy, and I felt that relief after doing it. It was better than feeling the seething, awful nothingness that lives inside of me.”

My words cut off, because I am everywhere in between. I am so engulfed in the past, it reaches up to my neck, threatening to drown me.

Arden's thumb rubs along my hand. “I'm not sure I understand that specifically, but I understand doing things so that you don't feel quite so empty.” Laughing to herself, she looks down at the sea foam gathering around our legs. “One time I got my cartilage pierced because a stupid boy broke up with me.”

It doesn't surprise me one bit. Arden looks over at me, something genuine behind her eyes, and we smile at each other.

“Was it Elliot?” I ask.

That's when Arden throws her head back laughing, really leaning into the ridiculousness of herself. “Of course it was. But damn, it hurt like a bitch,” she says, fingering her upper ear. “I let it close up a while ago 'cause it just reminds me of him.”

I can't tell if I'm laughing or crying anymore, but I'm smiling and tears are rolling down my cheeks and the sea foam is swallowing our knees now, and Arden can't stop telling me how stupid of a

decision that piercing was, and she holds my wrists—my scarred wrists—like they are nothing. Sometimes I forget about them because they're so faded, but other times, it still feels like they're bleeding. Sometimes it still feels like *I* am bleeding.

But if you don't bleed, you can't heal.

Arden runs into the ocean, kicking at the waves and hollering at the world, at her ex-boyfriend. I can't help but run in after her, feeling the golden Pacific on my skin, cold and warm and alive all at once.

Arden stops, looking at me straight on, the water swaying up to our waists. She takes my hands as the ocean swells around us. "Thank you, Hendrix."

"For what?" I ask.

Arden looks out at sea, at peace. "Teaching me how to love."

"Oh. How did I do that?"

She smiles to herself. "Because love is all about being outside of yourself. It's about empathy. It's about staying, even through the ugly. And somehow, you taught me how to do just that."

*Empathy.* I taught her that? Seems like it should be the other way around. And then what she's really saying sinks in. "Are you saying that you love me?"

"I guess so," she shrugs.

"Well, I love you too."

Then she hugs me, throwing herself in deep, holding me in that way she always does, like her arms are the only thing keeping us both from falling apart.

“Thank you for being vulnerable with me,” Arden says.

“Thank you for staying with me,” I say into her hair.

*It's possible. I can love someone. Someone can love me. I can feel.*

**We decide to go** home after that. Arden calls her parents, and I call my dad. He was surprisingly distraught and excited to hear from me. They tell us that they're going to catch a flight, and should be there by 9pm.

It's strange, really. I don't think my dad has ever been on a plane before. And now, at the drop of a hat, he's coming. This must be another one of his manic episodes. The thought makes me pick at the skin around my nail.

*But maybe it's not.*

Arden grabs my hand and says, “Alright, Hendrix, we've got two and a half hours of freedom left. What do you want to do?”

I shrug. “Wanna go find a place to dance?”

Arden smiles, like she's got something devious in mind. “Now you're speaking my language.”

So that's exactly what we do. We find a place on the coast, and blow most of our cash on overpriced seafood. A band plays rockabilly

music, and the orange sun and the glittering ocean colors the wooden dance floor in gold.

**We're supposed to meet** our parents at the airport at 8:45pm. We use our last couple dollars from Norman to take a bus. It's so empty that the sound of the engine echoes, and the lights make the metal bus feel less desolate. Arden and I put our feet up on the seats in front of us and snicker like schoolchildren.

“Ocean Shores Municipal Airport,” the bus driver calls out.

“Thanks, Owen,” Arden says sticking out her fist. The man just stares at it. “You’re supposed to bump it,” she says.

Owen, I assume, looks like he’s sixty-something and hates every second of these night shifts, but Arden’s enthusiasm convinces him to do it.

“Hey, that’s more like it!” Arden hollers as she steps out of the bus, fists raised above her head, as if getting a fist-bump from Owen the bus driver was the epitome of her day. I catch Owen smiling and shaking his head as I chase her off the bus.

We squint beneath the cool, fluorescent lights of the airport, static and buzzing. It’s a small airport with only a handful of terminals, but we check the virtually empty screens for the flight coming in from Bozeman, Montana.

The status is green—departed. It’s estimated time of arrival is 8:51pm. Arden and I just stand there for a moment, staring up at the pixels as they blink. It doesn’t feel real.

Actually, it all feels too real. Like the lights are too bright, the air is too stale, like it doesn't want to move from around us. Big questions pull my brain in every which direction. When do our greatest fears become inevitable? When do our dreams become reality?

This is the end of the beginning. The rest of my life stretches forth beyond me like the ocean Arden and I stood in hours before, bright and big and absolutely terrifying.

What do I want it to look like?

Arden and I sit down in the fabric chairs by Terminal B. We look everywhere but at each other.

"I'm going to be in such deep shit," she says, her elbows digging into her knees.

"Why?" I ask.

"One, because I ran away, two, because we didn't notify Lisa about our little 'vacation', so we probably lost our jobs, and three, because my beloved car is somewhere in a junkyard near Lolo Hot Springs."

For some reason, this makes me laugh. Not because she's being ridiculous, but because none of that stuff really matters. It just reminds me of how we got here, and what a wild ride it was.

"It's not funny," she says.

“No, I know. But you really think Lisa will find any two people crazy enough to work for her? She’ll be mad at us for a while, and then she’ll forget about it.” I turn to look at Arden, as she twists a strand of hair between her fingers and stares out the dark window, pricked with red blinking lights.

She laughs a bit. “Yeah, you’re right.” She pauses, and the distant airport sounds fill the space. “It’s really over, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

Then we bask in the feeling, hands intertwined. We just sit there and wait for reality to come and meet us again.

**When our parents enter** the terminal, I step out of myself for a moment. I’m reminded of where I was when we started this, and how I still have a long way until the end of the tunnel.

But now, at least there’s a light.

As soon as Arden’s family approaches her, Arden runs over and wraps Max in a huge hug. Even though he’s about as tall as her, she still wraps her arms around him and spins around like they’re children again. Maybe they still are.

For a moment, something rips inside me when I think my dad didn’t come, but then I see him walking into the terminal, eyes flitting about. My stomach warps. I’m afraid he’ll be angry at me.

But he’s obviously not mad. He looks like a mess—half-shaven, fiddling hands, sweaty forehead. But his shirt is buttoned all the way



up to his neck, and he's wearing his shiny loafers Mom got him that I've only seen him wear about three times.

What I'm really afraid of is that being around him will bring out the darkness in me again. I'm afraid that everything will revert, that I'm walking right back into the hellfire that bred my darkness.

When his eyes catch mine, he runs over to me, pushing recklessly past Arden's family.

I nearly fall back with how hard he hugs me. He's apologizing over and over, rubbing my back, but I lose myself. I'm stunned, stuck in time, as my father shows me real, authentic love for what feels like the first time in years. Shows me that despite everything, I am still his son. That we are still family. I know he might be an asshole again next week, but right now he's not. For all intents and purposes, I am all that he has.

Then I start sobbing, hard and painful, my face buried in my father's flannel that smells like sweat and dirt and *home*.

I see Arden at community college occasionally. I'm working and taking a few vocational classes; Arden's studying . . . something. I don't know, it changes like every month. She still wants to leave someday, see the world and stuff. But now we have each other.

At least once a week, we grab lunch. We've made a pact to try and go on mini-adventures whenever we can, but that was a lot easier this past summer. Sometimes it's just a weekend away or an afternoon

adventure to someplace new. We hang out a lot, and it's nice. I like Arden a lot. It isn't always smooth sailing, but she stays with me. And I stay with her.

I wish I could say that my aggressive behavior stopped immediately, but that would be a lie, and I'm trying not to do that anymore. My shrink and I work on coping mechanisms for my behavior and try to get to the roots of my anger. But it's like an addiction. I liked the way it made me feel—or, rather, *didn't*. The thoughts still spiral, and sometimes my impulses get the better of me. There are still some instances where I have to isolate myself so I don't hurt anybody or anything. Or myself. But in the end, Arden's there. I don't think I could get rid of her if I tried.

My relationship with my dad doesn't turn around immediately—not even in the long run. It's slow, and sometimes it feels like we rewind right back to square one, but we're getting somewhere. He's drinking less, but he still refuses to see anybody about his problems, so I try and just look after myself. For the first time I can remember, I don't hate my father. I understand him. I see him as a whole person, and he sees me for the man I am becoming. I see that he cares. That under all his own strife, he's trying. Not very well, but trying.

Months later, I search on the internet for my mom. I find her after some digging, and send her a letter. She probably won't respond, and there's a chance she changed her name or it's the wrong Sharon Bauer I'm sending it to. But I do it anyway, to work on letting go of years of pain that have changed me forever.

*I forgive you* are some of the hardest words I've had to learn to say. When I tell Arden what I did, she tells me that she also apologized to Sarah, but Sarah never responded. Her and Elliot are on speaking terms now. They do community theater sometimes. I've realized: hanging on to the pain—to the past—is almost easier. The more difficult thing is letting go and moving on, but the hardest thing to do is often the best.

**Sometimes, in the quiet** moments, I think of the ocean.

I think of the way Arden looks while she's on stage in a greasy bar & grill, singing her heart out.

I think of the neon signs, the endless road, and the food we shared.

I think of Norman, and his little farm. How he saved us.

I think of the secrets we told each other in our most vulnerable moments.

I think of the cabin, and what happened there.

I think of the blood-stained memories, the ones that follow me at every turn.

I think of the pain, and how I feel I'll never reach the end of it.

I think of my life now. College. Dad. Arden. *Healing*.

I think of what's to come. What lies ahead in the great expanse of this strangely beautiful thing called life.

Coping with who I am, and where I came from.

A job I can succeed in.

A family of my own creation. People who love me. People whom I love.

A home, full of what it means to be *real*.

The things that give me purpose and meaning. The things that chip away at the darkness, little by little, every damn day.

A good question to end all this might be: “What do I have now that I didn’t have before?”

*Hope*. Hope that shines so brightly, and how it sings against this quiet darkness.

And I think, *this pain is not who I am. It is not who I am supposed to be.*

I think of it all, and I feel happy. Content.

**FIN.**



## Author's Note

While it's unlikely that the majority of you reading this book are like Hendrix, the darkness that Hendrix speaks of is something that I believe all of us will experience at some point in our lives. The darkness that lies, that tells us we're not good enough, the darkness that traps us in bed all day. Even the darkness that grows so large, it spills out and hurts other people.

The fact that you're holding this book in your hands is proof that it gets better. But unfortunately, not for everyone. Below are resources if you or a loved one is struggling.

National Suicide Prevention Hotline

988

National Child Abuse Hotline

800-422-4453

National Domestic Violence Hotline

1-800-799-7233

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Please consider leaving a  
review on Goodreads, Amazon,  
and Storygraph!

If you enjoyed *Casually Homicidal*, please consider leaving a review on Goodreads, Amazon, Storygraph, and other social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram. As an author, reviews from readers like you help me out the most!

Thank you endlessly,

Olivia J. Bennett





photo courtesy of Miles Howley

**Olivia J. Bennett** is a writer, artist, educator, and lover of all things cozy & aesthetically pleasing. Her debut novel, *A Cactus In the Valley*, was published when she was a 17-year-old senior in high school. She won a Scholastic National Gold Medal in Flash Fiction in 2018. When not writing, she can be found baking cookies, binge-watching tv with her partner, or cuddling her two cats.

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