

# BROKEN & VESSEL

BOOK 1

THE BEDROCK GATE

Alex Aili

## PROLOGUE

### *Bound*

Kithlom tore through the brambles of Taren Forest. Thorny branches grabbed at his long white hair. Lightning seared the canopy while thunder rattled his bones. Both crumbled his remaining courage.

Morik, the Lacmar Lord, was nigh.

Kithlom flicked his black staff, sending a blast of wind to clear his path. It only severed a few branches; the forest still gouged his cloak, forcing him to exhaustion. He ducked behind a stout trunk to catch his breath. The scheme was proceeding as planned, but he still bemoaned his role in it.

Sudden movement disturbed the nearby undergrowth. A dozen figures, nearly identical to Kithlom, emerged from the foliage. The Ganok, with their distinctive white hair coiling in the wind, leered with ghoulish faces.

Kithlom gritted his teeth to play his part, then stepped out to reveal himself. He aimed his staff at them with no intention of using it.

“You!” he croaked. “You cannot—”

His insides melted when one of the Ganok approached, disregarding Kithlom’s threat.

“Traitor!” The Ganok’s voice rivaled the wind. He pierced Kithlom with a haughty gaze. “Always a traitor!”

The Ganoks’ staves, ripe with dark magic, aimed towards Kithlom. They twitched their weapons in unison, casting a gust of wind across the ground. The air popped and a volley of rocks exploded from the soil, sailing towards Kithlom.

He bolted, narrowly missing the rocks as they cracked the trunks behind him. He wove through the forest labyrinth until he spotted what he was looking for—the looming shadows of the Fallow, the cursed bog. But he languished in the forest’s claws, allowing the Ganok to draw nearer with threatening footfalls.

“Kithlom,” one hissed his name like a taunt, “you cannot escape our Lord.”

The Ganok reached for him, but Kithlom launched himself with an inhuman leap, higher than the treetops, and landed a safe distance from his pursuers.

“Now!” boomed a man’s voice from the shadows of the Fallow.

The ground beneath the Ganok caved, forming a whirlpool of dirt around them.

Three ancient gods, resembling mere men, emerged from their hiding places, arms raised to sustain this spiraling trap. Vibrant hair adorned their heads: gray, green and gold, respectively.

The Ganok wailed and cried as the hellish mass of sinking earth swallowed them underground. Their muffled shouts rose as a flash of heat turned the ground to glass, sealing them inside, motionless.

The man from the Fallow crept into view at the edge of the Ganoks’ glass grave. His bushy beard and scraggy hair gave him the appearance of a shrub.

The three gods nodded to him, then to one another. But to Kithlom they only offered a blank stare. The Ganok traitor knew it was the only gratitude he would receive from his enemies.

Thunder rumbled before anyone could speak, and all five conspirators turned to see Morik’s darkness billowing above the treetops. Their enemy had accepted the ruse.

Kithlom used this opportunity to crouch behind a log, only risking a single eye to monitor the scene.

A tight column of destruction—a tornado of shadow—ripped into the clearing. The only sign that Morik was inside was an eerie, black light, shimmering within the torrent.

The eldest, the gray, countered the dark vortex by flailing his arms to whip a tornado of his own. The green and gold gods likewise waved their arms to launch small trees and rocks into the gray’s wind. The trio’s storm met Morik’s darkness with a deafening report. The bout persisted—two spirals competing for dominance.

“The stone!” roared the green god. “Take the stone!”

Kithlom gaped as the mortal man leapt into Morik’s torrent, hand outstretched to grab the shimmering object inside. The man’s skin radiated as he clutched his quarry. His hair gleamed like hot wire.

Morik bellowed. His deep reverberations made Kithlom’s skull creak. The Lacmar Lord redoubled the speed of his dark tornado, suffocating the mortal’s glow.

The battle was evenly-matched and showed no sign of stopping. Pops of light and cracks of dark littered the air as the four heroes battled the foe.

Safe behind the log, Kithlom glanced down at his staff, convincing himself it wouldn't be enough to aid the fight.

Trees shattered, unable to withstand the clash of pure white and pure shadow. Amidst it all, the radiant mortal flapped like a flag, refusing to release the shimmering dark object.

Then, a white light pulsed from the dark tornado and both Morik and the mortal cried with alarm. The latter's voice echoed, as if he was careening down a cistern, while the Lacmar Lord's wails were cut short with the crunching of earth.

The wind subsided, bringing the ruined forest to stillness.

Kithlom crept out of his hiding to see the gray god alone, standing before a pillar of wood and rock, brushing his hand across it as if it were the casket of a loved one.

Kithlom noticed the bony hand of the Lacmar Lord drooping out of the pillar, fingers motionless.

"We must seal this with the Tarendril." He forced strength into his voice. "If he gets out and finds me, I'll be—"

"Morik is bound," the gray god said, voice faint. His hair shrouded his expression.

The pillar prison swelled with the eerie dark light.

"He still has the Ziru stone," Kithlom countered. "No amount of rock and wood will be enough to hold him. You must awaken the Tarendril."

The god tossed him a sour look with his ancient face. "I expect as much from a Ganok. You doubt the strength of my brothers. This prison is not made from mere elements. They gave," his voice faded as he sauntered away, "everything."

Kithlom addressed the pillar and recognized the melted shapes of the green and gold gods—one of wood, one of rock—coiling around the enemy.

Nearby, the glassy ground glistened. Kithlom stepped over and peered down. Despite the hazy surface, the dark forms of the Ganok could still be seen. They rested like frozen threats. Kithlom thought he could see their eyes watching him—waiting for their chance to one day emerge. He gently waved his staff to send a breeze, covering their gazes with a layer of dust.

“And what of the mortal?” Kithlom asked, turning again to the gray god. “He perish from touching the stone?”

“He is...gone,” the god muttered, now walking aimlessly. “All of them. Gone.”

Kithlom’s eyes narrowed. He tensed his limbs, finding strength to stand tall once again. He knew what he had to do.

# 1

## *Secret*

Ander Barr pressed his temple against the bus window to silence the worming in his mind. Every bump in the road rattled his skull as he watched the passing trees blur. Their drab, leafless branches were a reminder that Northern Minnesota was due for its first blanket of snow.

The spacious hardwoods faded from view when the bus turned onto Bear Trap Road, where darker trees grew. The shift in light pried Ander off the pane. He surveyed the younger kids from his backseat throne. The vantage reinforced the fact that he was the only seventeen-year-old onboard. It made him want to slip out the back door and disappear.

The road descended into a tunnel of evergreens and bedrock outcrops. The bus tires clicked over the Thompson Creek bridge and its diesel revved to climb the high hill to the Barr family trailer home.

Ander mindlessly ruffled his brown hair, giving it permission to self-govern, before readying his backpack. His stomach fluttered at the promise of being home alone, in his room, behind the locked door. The internet sirens beckoned to him. His imagination ignited with curves of skin as he strolled down the aisle. His innards rose in a pubescent squall before he even reached the front of the bus.

But the moment he stepped off, the promise of solitude fizzled when he saw Big Betsy, the immaculate off-roader, parked in the driveway.

*Uncle Brian.*

The Wretch was nowhere in sight, but Ander knew he would be looking for him—to give him more “goodies.”

The bus door closed behind him. He nearly whirled to rip it back open to somehow convince the driver to take him back to school. But

the yellow behemoth hummed around the corner and left Ander in silence.

He stood motionless, like an alert rabbit. He knew his uncle heard the bus, and soon he would greet Ander and ruin his day. The thought made him consider hiding in the thick evergreens that surrounded his house. But he couldn't budge.

*Just get to the trees, you idiot!*

He heard his uncle's voice somewhere behind the house, echoing off the detached garage. His sonorous murmuring gave indiscernible details in a rapid manner. It sounded like an ordinary phone call to one of his many tenants, but Ander knew better. Judging by the tone, it was to Mr. Sparn, his handyman.

The air penetrated Ander's thin hoodie. He shivered, wishing he had his jacket. It was just inside the front door, and he considered creeping inside for a sneaky grab, but Uncle Wretch's laugh boomed from the garage again and the decision was made—no jacket.

He lurched leftward, slinking into the darkness of the trees. Immediately at his feet was a drop-off to the shadowy pine floor below. He crisply maneuvered his nimble frame down the cliff until his feet found the ground. The damp shade intensified the chill, and his shoulders hunched forward in a vain attempt for warmth.

He meandered through the pillar-like trunks of mature red and white pines, occasionally halting to listen for his uncle. Only the breeze and birds sounded, so he let himself relax while he strolled to Scott Lorin's gravel pit, which bordered his family's five-acre plot.

The greenery gradually thinned to reveal piles of dusty aggregate, choked in tansy. At the edge of the gravel pit, Ander was greeted by a pile of charred logs he and his friends had been trying to burn all summer. He sat on a flat boulder and used a stick to poke a monstrous chunk of charcoal.

Thompson Creek trickled nearby, running alongside the pit. The water pulled his gaze, and he admired the way it danced over boulders and lapped the sandy banks. Its rhythmic fluttering became something of a sedative, numbing his nerves, but the ever-looming presence of his uncle spoiled lasting relief.

*I can't avoid him forever.*

He pulled out his phone and took a moment to peruse his usual selection of games. Nothing looked appealing.

*But I need to end it...somehow.*

The saturated color schemes and cartoon people on the screen couldn't keep his attention from the water. Slouching towards it, he lost himself in a daze at its unending flow.

*Boom! Rap! Rap!*

The sound pulsed his chest. It came at irregular intervals, like a hammer pecking at a hard-to-reach nail. He touched his ribs, expecting to find the source there, but then he glanced around the trees when he heard it echo off the bedrock cliff behind him.

After a few more blows, he realized it was coming from farther up the river, closer to Scott Lorin's house. For a minute he faced the noise, finding it hard to believe his neighbor was actually home. As long as Ander could remember, he'd never even seen Scott Lorin, which naturally turned the recluse into a legend.

The pulsing cast Ander into reverie. Hypnotized, he stared at nothing while the droning took control. The quality of its uneven beat was like a melody he didn't know he'd forgotten. It was as if a song, stuck in his head, had fallen into the rest of his body.

He stood, aching with a strange longing. He wondered if he should investigate, but his legs were already stepping towards the sound before his mind could decide. With the river to his left, he sauntered through the gravel piles.

The rapping reverberated every stone in the homegrown quarry. It still hummed his body, despite being muffled. When he finally came to the cusp of Lorin's premises, he crouched behind a pile of sand to survey the scene.

A lonely workshop sat in the center of the pit, appearing out of place. Beside the worn and sun-chapped building sat an old backhoe, lost in a tangle of saplings.

From the shop's entrance stretched a well-worn path into the pines, ending abruptly at a bedrock cliff. It looked like a path to nowhere, as if an entire rock wall had been dropped onto it.

On the far side of the pit, stuffed deeper in the trees, was Lorin's oversized house. The thick trunks weren't enough to conceal its sickly yellow siding, accented as it was with patches of green mildew. So decrepit and bereft of upkeep, if Ander didn't know better, he would assume it was abandoned.

The sound repeated. Ander pinned the source at the workshop. A small window offered him a peek inside, if only he could sneak closer.

This was his chance to finally put the legend into fact—to unveil the mystery that motivated many contests between him and his friends to see who would get closest to Lorin’s abode. These challenges, Ander would now admit, were only thrilling in thought; for only rarely would they actually do it.

The source of the noise was definitely a hammer, but the object of its violence had a peculiar reaction to the blows. Instead of the expected dull thud of wood or the clang of metal, it strangely resembled the crumble of clay. Yet even this was not the best description.

*It sounds like he’s...smashing bones?*

But the force of the rapping was the most baffling, hitting him like a subwoofer. His entire body tingled.

*Big bones?*

Ander’s heart leapt forward, but his feet didn’t move. Something in him wanted to keep his neighbor’s secrets a mystery, so he tore himself away from the shop, returning through the gravel pit, past the charcoal heap, and back into the forest.

The warmth of curiosity faded back to cold reality as the breeze blew into his hoodie again. Then he remembered that he still had the cigarette lighter in his backpack from when he and his friends went hiking the previous weekend.

The temptation to start a fire was successful. Warmth returned with the mere idea of it. He forged deep into the evergreens to find an old footpath that was barely visible under the encroaching brush. As a boy he had walked the trail daily, yet now the overgrowth betrayed bygone years.

He passed through a cluster of papery white birch trees. Without losing stride, he groped for the best piece of scroll-shaped bark. His selection snapped loose with a crinkle. He cradled the precious tinder to climb the neighborhood’s tallest bedrock hill. Using his three available limbs, he crawled up the rock like a monkey. When he reached the top, he dropped the birch bark and let his backpack slide off his arm.

The tops of evergreens spanned the horizon. While he soaked in the panorama, panting to regain breath, his teenage eyes were overcome with boyhood imagination...

Monstrous beasts surrounded the rock, clambering to overtake him. In the sky swooped a swarm of dragons.

He stood alone against the horde. He clenched his fist, as if gripping a sword. He was usually the warrior, but sometimes he was the rapid-fire archer who loosed arrows from the safety of his fort.

*The fort!*

The thought snapped him out of his daydream and he turned to a cluster of large sticks nearby—his “fort.” Years of abandonment turned it into an unrecognizable heap of debris. He considered it was probably never that remarkable anyway, yet in his memory it was unbreakable to all but the hottest dragon breath.

He approached it with unhurried steps, stooping to look under the ruined walls. A peculiar, twisted piece of diamond willow lay inside. Moss covered half of it, but the shape remained true—his trusty sword.

He gripped it and the horde reappeared, now nearly upon him. Heat coursed through his sword arm, ready for fury. Ander bent his knees for the onslaught, but he couldn't raise the weapon.

The beasts halted just before colliding with him, swaying side to side in a chorus of jeering and cackling. They pointed at his stick and beckoned him to raise it.

With great effort, Ander poised the sword behind his shoulder for the first blow, but they met the challenge by stumbling over in laughter. He lowered it immediately to glance around, as if someone could be watching despite being in the middle of the woods.

The horde was gone.

Feeling silly for feeling silly, he exhaled and casually swung it a few more times, halfheartedly, and finished with a slow thrust at nothing. He gingerly placed it back into the fort, as if returning it to its museum...or grave.

He found a fallen white pine nearby and popped the brittle branches off with a twist of his wrist. Once he had an armful, he returned to the birch bark and dropped the load with a rattle.

Fishing the lighter from his backpack, he clicked it a few times under the bark. While the fire crackled to life, he placed twigs, smallest to largest, on the hungry flames.

After he positioned the last piece of wood, he propped himself against a pine trunk, which conveniently leaned back to create a makeshift lounge chair. The fire matured into a violent flicker that forced Ander to move his legs to avoid scorching.

A vibration in his pocket soon rent him back to the world. He roughly ripped his phone out and let a groan slip as he saw the caller name. He chiseled his face, then pressed the green button.

"Hi, Dad." He stared up at the pine branches to concentrate on his tone.

"Ander? Hey, I just got back from Crest View. Where are you?"

"Out for a hike behind the house."

"Oh, ok." He sounded surprised. "Uncle Brian said he didn't see you get off the bus."

"He was on the phone." Ander dropped his head and frowned at the fire. "How's Mom today?"

"The same nonsense. Musical rocks. Strange clouds. Nothing new."

Ander grunted.

"Anyway, I'm getting supper started. Be about an hour."

"I'm not hungry yet so I guess I'll see you later. Bye."

"Okay, when do—"

Ander tapped the red circle on the screen and closed his eyes. His stomach growled. He remained motionless as the fire dwindled. His mind raced with vague images that never became clear.

Realizing his phone was still in his hand, he opened up his game selection again. But now the screen was embarrassingly desperate in its allure. The bubble-shaped features of the faces reeked of artificiality. He stowed it away and reprised his zoned-out posture until the fire lost its heat.

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At the edge of the lawn, Ander cowered in the trees as he watched the house windows. His appetite disappeared when he saw the distinct shape of Uncle Brian in the dining room. Even from such a distance, sitting at the table, his hulking figure loomed. Ander nearly crouched back into the shadows.

He had no energy to fake a polite conversation, so he decided to do something he'd never done before: sneak in through his bedroom window.

He crept to the house and pushed through the gnarled, weed-choked shrubs—evidence of how long it had been since Mom could tend to the landscaping. Fortunately, he rarely locked his window, and after quiet grunting and lifting, he slid the pane up and scrambled inside.

He quietly shut the window behind him. His backpack and shoes fell off in a wet mess. He plopped on the bed in the darkness and relished the warmth while he listened to his family's muffled conversations through the closed door. As usual, Uncle Brian's droning was the loudest.

He rolled over to turn on his nightstand lamp, splattering the room with yellow light.

Posters of LEGO and dinosaurs mingled with those of the military and video games in a mural of boyhood evolution. The depictions collectively buried the brown paneling that cursed the whole home.

His disassembled airsoft gun laid like scattered bones atop of his dresser. Together with his camo gear and his old Xbox 360, the debris formed a pile that eclipsed his retired gaming monitor. His new one, twice the size, was set up like a shrine, complete with a matching sound system, on a small table off the foot of his bed. All hand-me-downs, their presence in his room was only possible because of his richer friends.

On the floor, piles of video game cases, accessories, and unopened programming manuals were scattered across a long un-vacuumed carpet.

He pulled off his socks and searched for clean ones in the dresser, but all he felt was wood. He glanced at his bean bag chair, which had become his hamper, to notice a teetering heap of dirty clothes.

*Dad needs to do laundry...last week.*

He begrudgingly put the moist socks back on.

To act normal, he pulled out his homework and laid it on the bed. He started some music on his phone for an added touch. But the longer he stared at the geometric angles, the more they went fuzzy.

His stomach growled and the smell of lasagna was hard to ignore. He decided to see if his uncle was still visiting, so he went to the door and pressed his ear against it.

But as he concentrated on their voices, he couldn't keep his eyes from the top drawer on his desk. It was a simple junk drawer, filled with dry pens, useless trinkets, outdated cables and brittle candy, but he monitored it with suspicion. The longer he stared, the more his heart pulsed. Panic rose. His ribs ached. He expected the drawer to slide open any moment, as if Uncle Brian himself was crammed inside.

*I wish I could cram him inside...rip it out and send him down the creek.*

He heard footsteps in the hall. He recoiled from the door and dashed to his homework, bracing himself for his uncle.

His visitor tapped the door with a distinctive rhythm.

Ander sighed with relief. "Come in, weirdo."

The door opened and his sister, Kris, entered with her face concealed behind her sketchpad, showing only her black pixie haircut. She wore her favorite black jean jacket with complementing red pants.

"Ander!" she howled for everyone to hear, but her husky rasp struggled to reach high volume. "You need to lock the door when you do that! Put some clothes on!"

Ander clenched his teeth. "Yes, you got me red-handed."

She poked her dark brown eyes over the pad. "It smells like you've been...red-handing...all over in here."

"Gross! No."

She sprawled herself on his geometry and assumed her usual, lazily cheerful demeanor. "You fasting or something?"

"Not hungry."

"I don't believe you."

"Okay, you got me. I'm celebrating Ramadan. Or Lent. Whatever it is you Christians do."

"Lent isn't in October. Even you should know that." She rolled over and casually looked at the floor. "Why are your shoes in here?"

He had no words.

Her mouth dropped as she fought a laugh. "Oh. My. Goodness. You came in through the window, didn't you? I didn't know people actually did that."

He snatched her sketchbook.

"No, stop!" she pleaded, sitting up. "It's not ready."

He studied her latest work-in-progress. It was a sketch of three teenage girls, a style derivative of anime, with the girl in the center having a mouth a little too large for realism. Then Ander noticed it inside her toothy cavern: two glowing yellow eyes with a cheeky grin.

"What's it called?" he asked.

"Fragile Creatures."

"Interesting." He cocked his head in surprise, for the girl's mouth strangely resembled a monster's body, with teeth like horns and lips like skin.

"It's from a song," she added. "You wouldn't know it. By John Mark McMillan."

"This is from your Jesus songs?"

She sighed, ripping the book back.

"What's it mean?"

“What do *you* think it means? If I tell you, it defeats the purpose.”

He pretended to rummage in his end-table drawer. “All right. Be gone, you rat. I have homework to do.”

She didn’t say anything, so he glanced at her. Her expression made him roll his eyes.

“What?” he asked with sarcastic interest.

“Tell me what’s wrong.”

“Everything, as usual.”

“You never miss lasagna.”

“No red sauce for me tonight.”

“It’s Uncle Brian, isn’t it?”

He shrugged.

“You know he left right after he ate. Said he had somewhere to be.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’m not hungry.”

“What happened between you two? You used to do everything together.”

“He’s just,” he glanced at the junk drawer, “a lot.”

“Communication.” She emphasized each syllable. “Let it out. That’s how we grow.” She paused to smile, as if to lighten the mood. “Stop being a ridiculous, teenage, angsty putz.”

He stuck his tongue out at her.

Her smile faded slightly. “You can’t get anywhere in life without giving yourself up, Ander.”

“Is that from your golden tablets?”

She shot to the door, stopping just before leaving. “You know I’m for real. And you could stop being so stubborn.” She went to leave, but lingered to add one final remark. “And the golden plates are from *Mormonism*.”

“Same thing.”

Her nostrils flared and her eyes expanded, but before she could fire off her apologetics, the baritone voice of their dad came from down the hall.

“Is Lewis Clark back from his voyage?”

The Barr rattle, as the family called it, was the only thing in common between their dad and his brother, Brian. The slim figure, with dirty blond hair that always needed a trim, popped inside the doorframe to reveal a faded Pearl Jam T-shirt.

Kris shuffled back into Ander’s room, now unable to escape.

“What’s going on out there?” Dad said, his clean-shaven mouth sipping from a cup of coffee. “You auditioning for *Survivor*?”

Ander shrugged. "Am I not allowed to like the outdoors?"

Dad raised an eyebrow. "Should I be concerned? You depressed or something?"

"What is this?" Ander grumbled. "Twenty questions?"

"And when did you even come inside?" Dad persisted. "I didn't see you."

"You were too busy talking to Brian." Ander glanced at Kris, who pursed her lips at the fib.

Dad studied Ander for a moment, taking a sip of coffee, before speaking in a typical fatherly tone. "That Big Dan kid is calling you 'Fish' again, isn't he?"

"Dad," Ander rolled his eyes, "everyone calls me Fish. It's a joke."

Dad shook his head with severity. "Not a funny one. You're not ugly. We Barr men are never ugly. Just...rough."

Kris mumbled something as she leaned against the desk. Her hands were inches from the junk drawer.

Ander forced himself to ignore her. He readdressed his dad, framing himself with his fingers. "Big eyes, long nose, skinny face." He waved off the frame with a flutter. "It's fine. I like how I look. Besides, Big Dan was only a bully because he happened to be the first boy in Seventh Grade to grow fuzz."

"Big Dan's *sister* is still a bully," came another girl's voice, whose rasp was slightly smokier than Kris'.

Ander's eldest sister, Abby, peeked around the doorframe. Always considered the prettiest of the family, her glistening brown hair, pulled into a perfectly tight ponytail, topped her chiseled face with magnificence. Ander assumed she was manifesting the powerful woman she aspired to be.

"She hasn't changed since graduation," Abby continued. "All she does on her MyTube channel is make fun of people."

"Eavesdropping?" Dad looked at her over his shoulder.

"We're not supposed to say, 'bully,' anymore," joined a final voice—the middle-school pitch of Ander's younger sister, Grace. She hopped into the doorframe just behind Abb. With her bangs and pigtails she was the personification of innocence. "That's what they teach us, anyway." She rustled her thick purple-rimmed glasses into a comfortable position on her tiny nose.

"What are you supposed to call them, then?" Dad asked.

"Aggressors," Grace replied.

"Like that's better," Kris said, opening the top drawer of the desk.

Ander fidgeted to smoothen his panic. He tried not to make it obvious that he was watching her.

"It's meant to help them," Grace replied. "I guess to make them feel bad."

"Or enable them," Abby added.

"What does that mean?" Grace said.

"It means they use it as an excuse to live into their social identity," Abby said.

"Look at you, Abby," Kris snarked as she rummaged through the drawer. "Learning stuff at college." She gasped and stopped perusing. "My, my...what's this?"

*No! I thought I buried it deeper than that.*

"What is it?" Abby asked. "There a dead mouse in there?"

Ander's mind raced to explain himself as Kris angrily pulled out an old phone charger.

"This is *mine*," she said.

Relief spiraled into Ander's gut.

Kris dug into the junk again. "What else you got in here?"

Ander leapt to the desk. "What is this? A family conference?" He slammed the drawer shut. "Everyone out! I need to do homework."

"Sure you do." Kris winked at him while nibbling the cord.

"Have we ever done a family conference?" Abby pried herself off the doorframe.

"You can always talk to me," Dad muttered to Ander. "Whatever it is."

"Wow, that means so much." He hoped his sarcasm wasn't too rude, but he shut the door before his dad's face could show if it was.

He let out a silent moan before dropping onto his bed in a fog. The junk drawer magnetized his attention again.

*One day everyone will know.*

His insides squirmed at the notion.

*When the time is right.*



## 2

### *Mera*

Ander methodically tore an iced sugar cookie in half.

"You know I'm only here for these." He continued to split the cookie into equal fourths. "My asylum from school."

His friend, Nolan, who called himself, "Booda," looked squarely at him.

"At another school?" Booda's cheeks pursed his lips without permission. "To do math?"

"Yes." Ander chomped a quarter cookie. "The Mighty Math Meet meets my needs."

Ander scanned the streamlined, minimalistic cafeteria of the host school. It hummed with activity as three dozen students from five schools chowed processed desserts. The teachers were busy scoring the tests in an adjacent room.

Booda mentioned something about computer programming but Ander's attention was drawn to the girl with caramel hair strolling to the kitchen serving window. The sight stole his breath, choking him with one unavoidable fact.

*The girl I'll never have.*

She took a chocolate chip cookie and walked back to her seat, nibbling as she went. Ander noticed the way her lips...he blinked and shook his head, but his insides continued to worm. He cleared his throat and eyed Booda for a distraction; he had apparently just asked a question.

"So that's a 'no'?" Booda said, surprised. He raised a cup of punch and paused before drinking. "I thought you said you were going to Full Sail?"

"What are you even talking about?"

Booda guzzled half his cup, then quickly swallowed to reply. "Computer science."

"Oh, right. What about it?"

Booda closed his eyes and took in a long inhale—the thing he always did when he was struggling to rein his frustration. He wheezed it out before responding. "Have you decided which laptop to get?"

"No."

"Full Sail uses Apple, right?"

"Yeah."

"Hmm. You'll have to fork over the money."

"Ya think?" Ander chuckled. "I'm going to Full Sail."

"What about scholarships? Have you applied for any?"

Ander peeked at the the girl as she mounted her leg over the bench.

Booda looked away. "All right then, keep your secrets."

"I have a dream." Ander admired her hips. "Don't wake me up with all this real talk."

"Fine. Then you'll just stay in the Matrix."

Ander ate the rest of his cookie, then collected its crumbs off the table by pressing down with his fingertips. "Actually," he said through chomping, "when it comes down to it, the Matrix was better."

"Better? It was an illusion, a dream world."

"The illusion was better than the wasteland."

Booda sipped the last of his punch. "Luckily we don't live in a world like that."

"Maybe we do. Maybe that's all this will be in the end: a broken world that lets you down. Forgive me for wanting something better."

"Like?" Booda's fist compacted his styrofoam cup with a crunch.

"Something unforgettable. An adventure. A new world." He thought for a moment. "The perfect video game."

Booda watched Ander with a flat expression. "Gaming." His tone left no doubt of his opinion.

"Didn't you know? That's what I'm going for: game design. Not computer science."

"Escapism is always a good time...until you glitch."

"You're a glitch."

They both glanced down the table where a debate about quantum physics rose to a high volume.

The boy on Booda's side widened his bug-eyes to argue his point about String Theory. "Supersymmetry," he said, clicking his overdue fingernails with each syllable, "is the only way we're going to find a

theory of everything." His curtain of black hair was immovable, held in place by a crust of unknown origin.

The other kid, soft and hamster-like, fired back with cookie crumbs spewing from his mouth. "But you can't measure gravitons!"

"Gravity needs a medium," insisted Crust.

"They said that about the light aether," laughed the Hamster.

Ander leaned towards Booda. "You think they dream in binary?"

"Affirmative," Booda spoke with a nasal intonation.

Ander slid out of his seat and went to the punch dispenser, wondering if quantum physics could fast-forward him to graduation.

"Hey, Mister," came a familiar girl's voice.

His worming gut redoubled. "Oh, hey, Mera." He panicked at the collapsing in his throat.

"You said Gunter's was open 'til eight."

He slowly faced her, but kept looking to the ceiling with a finger on his chin. "I did, did I?" He gave her a quick look, but it was a mistake.

Her bright eyes enraptured his own, and he nearly gasped. Her curvy, slender eyebrows conveyed an animalistic side that knew how and when to take control. Her soft jawline, framed as it was with her shoulder-length caramel hair, was a dais that glorified the rest of her face. The angle of her nose promised dignity, complemented with inviting lips. Neatly binding her features together was skin he wanted to get lost in. She was altogether devastating.

"You okay?" She held out a hand, as if to keep him back from the cookies. Her hand pressed his chest like the first drop of a roller coaster. "Don't puke."

*I might.*

He gave a playfully sour face. "I think I just ate too many cookies."

"Me, too." She picked up another chocolate chip. "They're my weakness."

*You're my weakness.*

"Anyway," Mera continued, "I'm not sure when I'll get to Gunter's again, since I have to help my grandpa with his honeybees tomorrow."

"Ew. How do you handle those nasty things?"

"Nasty?"

"Just the way they swarm everywhere. Not to mention the stinging..."

"They don't sting if you just ignore them."

"Don't they cover you?"

"Like fur."

Ander gave her another disgusted face, this time without jest.

"I kinda like it."

"Well, the world needs saving. Save the bees. And I like honey, so there's that. See? I'm a bee person, too."

They smiled and shared a lingering gaze.

"Arum," he croaked without warning.

Her smile grew deadlier. "What was *that*?"

He slipped an awkward laugh and slumped his shoulders, pretending to sulk away. "I guess I better get back to my hive. My clique."

"I don't believe in cliques."

"Neither do I." He raised the cup to his mouth as he turned away. "But who's going to change that?"

"Hey," she said before he could escape, "you're something of a woodsman, aren't you?"

He pivoted back to her, overeager. "I'd like to think so."

"There's a dead tree at our place that my dad can't cut down alone. I think he called your uncle about it."

His neck tensed at the mention of the Wretch. "Oh. Yeah." He soothed the back of his head, trying not to make it obvious.

"You still work for him, right?"

"Kinda."

"Speaking of our house," she said, "our internet sucks. Any chance you could tell your uncle to get an upgrade? It's weird because we tested the connection speed and it—"

"We should," he blurted, unsure where his mouth was going, "uh, we should go disc golfing. Before winter."

She blinked to process the suggestion. "We?"

"Yeah. Good exercise. It's chill, fun."

"I don't know...is it?"

Ander smirked with an overblown nod, only meeting her eyes cursorily. "No? Yes?"

"One condition: Will your lame friends be there?"

"I hope not."

"So it's a date?"

He put his hands up in defense. "I never said that."

"You don't want to take me on a date?"

He smiled at the floor. "Stop putting words in my mouth! You know what I mean."

"It's a simple question."

"You can call it a date if you want."

"What do *you* want to call it?"

He popped a nervous chuckle, still looking down. "I don't know..."

"Maybe your friends should come after all. Then it won't be awkward."

Ander brought his head back up, canting it and trying to study her unreadable face.

"What's wrong with awkward?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Is that a challenge?"

His stomach fluttered. "Yup."

"Just me and you?"

"Yup."

"No friends?"

"Nope."

Her lips held back a smile, quivering. "Shucks, I really wanted them to see me school you."

His own lips tingled in response. "I guess we're at an impasse."

"Let's keep it that way." She frowned playfully. "Stop talking to me."

"Fine," he said with overblown sarcasm. "Better get back to my clique."

"Okay, let's go."

"Huh?"

She grabbed his arm and spun him around. "To your table. Now."

"What are you doing?"

"No more cliques."

She kept her feisty fingers on his upper arm the whole way to his table. Ander didn't realize his face was red until they were seated and Booda made a quip about tomatoes. Ander rolled his eyes but he didn't want to admit how much he enjoyed the Mera-handling. He ignored Booda's next remark because he was too busy wondering how he could make her grab him again.

"So, Nolan," Mera began.

"Booda," he corrected.

"Booda." Mera echoed with a flat expression.

"Yes. Like the religion, just spelt differently." Booda locked his arms in front, closed his eyes and grinned. "Don't you see the resemblance?"

She bobbed her head to the sides. "I guess a shaved head is close enough to bald, but you're not Indian."

"Come on," Ander insisted. "He's identical to the Buddha. He's basically his reincarnation."

"Isn't that Hinduism?" said the Hamster, who completely ditched his conversation with Crust once Mera arrived.

"Yeah," Ander added quickly, "you know what I mean."

Mera slapped the table in front of Booda. "I need to know: Are you the one who unscrewed Sadie's trumpet valves?"

Booda gave a slow, contented nod.

Her eyes closed with bliss. "I owe you my life."

*Wow. Calm down.*

"I thought you don't like pranks, Booda," Ander said.

Booda didn't take his eyes off Mera. "I made an exception for her."

"Right?" Mera widened her hands in agreement. "Sadie's been driving everyone insane. But the way she freaked out when her instrument fluttered made it all worth it."

Booda grinned. "It was a better show sitting next to her. She kept blaming poor Selene, saying she ruined the band."

"Yup," Mera said. "Heaven forbid First Chair Sadie misses her solo."

"Ha!" Ander contrived a laugh. "That was so funny."

Booda leaned toward Mera. "What do you think of Ms. Raither's selections for the Christmas concert?"

*What do you think about leaving her alone, Booda?*

"Meh." She flicked her head to the side. "No one likes that Jack Frost chestnut song."

Everyone's attention was drawn to the clang of opening doors, which meant the math teachers had finished scoring.

Ander casually snuck a peek at Mera, who already had him pinned with a stare of her own, untamed and gouging without care. He felt water creep into his vision. His chest ached.

Her cheeks perked and out came the dimples.

Now he had to look away, half-listening to the teachers as they rambled the results. East High won, as usual. The Meet was adjourned shortly after, and the kids mingled in chaos as each school filed onto their respective buses.

Ander stepped onboard their bus and immediately noticed Mera, sitting alone. He knew all it would take was one final conversation and the date would be set.

*Just confirm disc golf.*

He lingered by her seat.

They locked eyes.

He paused, almost stopping entirely.

She smiled, but said nothing.

Nor did he. No words came. He simply gave a weak smile and let his body pull him onward. Each step reminded him of the inevitable fact.

*I'll. Never. Have. Her.*

He chose an empty seat near the back, across the aisle from Crust and the Hamster. Booda plopped next to him and immediately barraged the two experts with questions about wormholes.

The bus pulled away and Ander let their cosmology take his mind off the vixen. But the distraction didn't last. He sat up and stared over the seats at Mera. She no longer sat alone, for a girl named Elaina now sat beside her. She was a spidery girl, thin with dark features, who constantly twitched her frizzy hair to the side as she spoke. Mera remained still as she soaked in whatever it was Elaina was saying.

The moment Mera's cheeks folded for a smile Ander collapsed back into the seat.

*How can someone be that...*

He puzzled at the lack of words. Any attempt to describe her left a terrible gap between the word and the reality.

*Beautiful, gorgeous, stunning.*

All of them were like stale bread.

"But, like I said," Booda proceeded loudly, rising above the nearby noises, "the bridge model is floppy. It's flimsy."

"Tell that to Einstein and Rosen," the Hamster countered.

"No," Booda shuffled in his seat. "What I mean is: How can you construct it in the first place? I can't see how to manipulate all that energy, or how to stabilize the tunnel and prevent it from collapsing."

"Alien tech, obviously," Crust said.

Booda rolled his head in frustration. "Come on, I'm serious."

"No, for real," Crust replied. "We don't have that kind of tech yet, but aliens might. They might have found a way to conjure black holes to create the portals."

The Hamster raised a finger. "My cousin—he works at StratuSky—said they just acquired this huge building to develop jets that can go to space."

"No rockets?" Booda canted his head incredulously.

"Hypersonic," the Hamster replied. "Turbojet and ramjet combined. Rockets will come later."

"Weak sauce," Crust chimed in. "No vessel, alien or otherwise, is strong enough to survive black holes."

"I know what we can do," Ander interjected. "Let's storm Area 51. They've probably constructed the gate to Mars. Have you guys played *Doom*?"

"Not my taste," Crust said.

Booda leaned back as much as he could for Ander to join the conversation, but his girth only made the seat crinkle.

"It's called a 'theory' for a reason," Crust continued to Booda. "We need negative matter for it to work, but that's all theoretical at this point."

"Call me when you two create the portal." Booda said. "I want to be the first one to Proximo."

"Proxima," Crust corrected. "Proxima B."

"Whatever." Booda fluttered his hand. "How about you two rename it when we land there."

The Hamster raised his finger again. "Bottom line: We just need a source that can control the space between all particles."

"And that'd be God," Booda spoke the words with momentum.

Ander heard Mera cackle and he was back at her, craning over the seats. Her hair shone copper from the backlit sun.

*Life-altering.*

He smiled at finding the right words. But it was short-lived. His wormy gut fluttered, bringing him back to the world. He dragged his stare from Mera and shoved it out the window. The bus had already merged onto the Interstate and the white birch trees along the ditch filed past like a zoetrope. He was tired of relying on bus windows to give his life a semblance of motion. He wondered how many days he had left until he could leave for college. Then, worse than that, came the realization that he had to actually *do* college.

"That's why traveling to the past is impossible," said Booda.

"Precisely," the Hamster nodded, pleased at Booda's understanding, before continuing to expound Singularity Theory—which lasted until they arrived at school.

By the time Ander rose to his feet, he noticed Mera already outside and strolling to the front doors.

*"Disc golf. Let's go on the half-day this Thursday." That's all I need to say.*

The line to exit the bus got clogged somewhere near the front.

Ander leaned to the side and saw Elaina struggling with her backpack. It had apparently gotten caught under the seat.

“Come on, Elaina!” someone yelled. “Get the brick out of your butt!”

Ander glanced to the school doors. Mera had just slipped inside.

Elaina finally pried her backpack free, and the kids burst out of the bus like a wide-open garden hose.

Once to the pavement, Ander weaseled his way through the crowd. He speed-walked through the lobby and rounded the corner into the locker hallway. Students formed a gauntlet as they eviscerated their lockers for the end-of-the-day dash.

Mera’s hair appeared, a few steps ahead. He imagined grabbing her arm.

*In a manly way, but not too manly.*

He pictured her turning in surprise, then mellowing into a smile of recognition.

*Let’s go disc golfing.*

He would speak to her with confidence.

*No friends. Just you and me.*

Ander melted as if he had already asked her and was currently crumbling under the weight of her answer. But then he hardened again, returning to reality, when a boy sprinted past and brushed his shoulder. Ander huffed at the jolt and glared at the back of the boy’s blonde head as it bounded away through the hallway horde.

He slunk the rest of the way to his locker with his head down to watch the tiles. He rattled his combination and thunked the door open. He tore his hoodie from the hook, put it on, and grabbed his backpack before slamming the locker shut.

He dashed down the hall to catch her.

She had already closed her locker and was strolling away.

He trotted faster, but faltered when he got too close. He felt like a creeper now, staggering his pace like a yo-yo.

He opened his mouth to call her name, but his voice failed.

The opportunity was soon gone, for she disappeared through the doors to the student lot, and he was left standing in the river of kids as they filed behind her.



# 3

## *Mom*

Ander and his dad sat in the parking lot of Crest View, waiting for Abby, Kris and Grace. The Pontiac was idling rhythmically, massaging Ander's bones. With his ear buds in, he fixed his attention on his phone screen to pass the time. His thumb twitched through images while a guy's falsetto, riding the waves of upbeat electronica, pumped into his brain.

The car's windows were down to let the crisp breeze seep inside. The sun, filtering through the clouds, was too weak to compete with its chill.

As the phone's images passed like a promenade, one with the caption "sexiest cosplayers" made Ander pause for closer inspection. He angled his screen so his dad couldn't see.

A blast from the Pontiac's speakers pummeled Ander's body. He flinched and yanked his buds out. Snarling vocals and bottomless drums penetrated his soul.

"Rock is dead, Dad!"

"Is it?" Dad turned it up even more.

The speakers rattled from years of max volume, now unable to satisfy the greedy bass of the song's breakdown. The vocalist topped it off by gargling snot.

Ander winced. "Did he just *puke*?"

His dad's face brimmed with delight.

Ander turned the volume down to a background level, looking out the window to see if anyone was watching. "That's embarrassing."

"That's *art*," Dad chuckled with satisfaction. "And it's not rock. It's metal."

"It's all oldies to me."

"Don't fix what isn't broken. Besides," Dad said, jabbing a finger at the car radio, "it's illegal for these speakers to play music released after 1999. The only exception is Atomship."

Ander rolled his eyes. "Your music is weird."

"As if! Without our generation, you'd all be stuck with either country or rap."

"Our'?"

"Mom and me. Did you—"

An ambulance siren cut him off. They waited for it to fade.

"Did you know that Mom and I wanted to start a band?" Dad said. "She has a bunch of lyrics and I always wanted to play bass."

"Really?" Ander leaned forward, shocked. Dad never mentioned it before.

"Well, everyone in those days thought they could be in a band. You know, like your indie bands today. Mom could play drums. That's where she got her arms. But it would've been bass for me. Chilling to my own beat, not the center of attention, but noticed when gone."

Ander relaxed back into his seat. "So you just liked the *idea* of it?"

"Doesn't everyone?"

"I guess," Ander fiddled with his headphone cord. "What sort of music would you have played?"

Dad reached over to open the glovebox, which showcased a bloated collection of Sharpie-scrawled CDs. He mumbled their titles as his fingers clicked through them.

"Wow," Ander whispered. "Compact Discs. So tech-savvy. I didn't think you'd stoop to such a level."

"Hey, now," Dad paused with a smirk, extracting his selection. "I'm retro, not a cliché." He slid the CD into the player and dialed up the volume.

The opening track began with a creepy beat. The vocalist whispered through gravel for a verse before an electric guitar plucked with somber distortion.

"Grunge," Dad's voice oozed with nostalgia.

"More like *cringe*."

"Right!"

"Didn't you meet Mom at a concert?"

He nodded. "Screaming Trees. My friend brought me, and there she was, a friend of my friend's cousin. I still remember how she looked: motionless, entranced, enjoying the music."

Dad looked across the parking lot to the front doors of Crest View. "Mom's always been that way, letting life happen to her, just hopping on for the ride."

Ander looked into the sky as his father spoke.

"She always liked the music that dragged her through Hell," Dad continued. "As long as I've known her, she's always searched for something to scare her. She never found it." Dad stopped himself before saying more.

*Until now.*

Ander knew that's what he wanted to say.

A rusty rattler whipped into the spot next to them, a hard brake freezing it to a bouncing halt.

"Finally." Ander opened the door as Dad turned the Pontiac off.

Abby opened the rattler's driver-side door and immediately burst out excuses about Grace, with Grace protesting the accusations from the passenger side. Kris exited from the back with a contented smile, enjoying the display.

"Hey, girls," Dad said, ignoring the argument.

The sisters' quarrel faded to a hush when they approached Crest View's front door, but they still continued to occasionally jab each other as the family navigated across the off-white and outdated linoleum floor. Its scratches and blemishes were barely hidden by the institutionalized glare of the florescent lights above.

The green walls offered a feeble attempt at comfort, and the various pictures of hazy scenery that spattered its surface were a well-intentioned gesture of homeliness. The paintings were meant to reduce anxiety; but, in reality, they only made otherwise healthy people feel languid by reminding them what sort of building they were in.

The sisters fell silent by the time they rounded the final corner and into the small lobby. Dad went to the closest receptionist and signed the guest clipboard while the kids, as routine, found seats in the waiting area.

Ander noticed the other receptionists giving their familial procession pitiable smiles, as if they lessened the gravity of the visit.

Kris and Abby whispered to each other on Ander's right while Grace sulked on the left. Dad joined them, seating himself on the row of chairs opposite. His face had gone sour.

A nurse strolled by, but then paused. "Hello, Nate," she said. Her tender voice was barely audible.

Dad's face brightened. "Hi, Amy. I see you don't need crutches anymore."

She wiggled her spindly limb. "I'm back at it."

"You're tougher than you look."

She smirked, blue eyes shining. "Tough enough to keep your wife in line."

"Still bad?"

Her eyes widened, overzealous. "She *does not* like me!"

"Better watch your other leg."

"Yikes!" She took a step to leave. "See you later, Nate. I'm late for lunch. Say 'hi' to Angie for me."

"Maybe not. I wouldn't want to put her in a bad mood."

"Touché." She bit her lip with a smile. "Best to just forget all about me, eh?"

Dad wished her a good day and watched her walk away.

Ander cleared his throat and raised his eyebrows at him.

Dad glanced over and shrugged. "First name basis around here."

A door opened and the voice of a familiar old lady called their surname.

They stood up in unison. Ander felt his neck tighten, as if he were a dog to an invisible leash.

Dad gave the lady a quick nod. "Hello, Barb."

"Good afternoon, everyone." She seemed to have missed her retirement date with a snail's pace to prove it.

"How is Monday treating you?" Dad asked.

"Good. Two-hours-left kind of good."

*Two hours left to live?*

"I know the feeling," Dad replied, forcefully kind.

She swiped her badge to open a set of double doors. "She's had a great day." Her voice was too loud for the hall. "She ate all her food."

"Good." Dad kept the strained tone.

The aroma of the wing, conflicting air freshener scents and iodine, choked Ander. It wasn't strong, but the years of visiting made it harder to ignore.

They followed Barb through the hall to Room 34.

She knocked before unlocking it, then cracked it open. "Angie? It's me, Nurse Barb. Your family is here."

She opened the door fully so the family could file in.

Dad stooped beside her for a kiss. "Hi, Ange."

“Let me know if you need anything,” Barb said before excusing herself.

Ander lingered in the doorway, concealed behind his sisters as they gave their greetings. But Mom looked beyond them, locking her eyes onto Ander. Her face gradually melted with pain—the sort of face one has when *witnessing* pain.

“Abby and Kris are here,” Dad said, following Mom’s gaze, “and Ander.”

Abby and Kris stepped forward, exposing Ander even more.

Despite the entire family crowding around Mom, her attention remained on Ander. She lazily reached out to him, fluttering her fingers in a beckoning gesture.

“Come on, Ander,” Dad insisted.

Ander’s legs faltered as if he were approaching a cliff.

She beckoned again.

He inched to her bedside and tried keeping a cool expression.

Her rich, turquoise eyes were blank, rimmed with splotches of red and blue. Her brown hair was freshly washed, but the way its original color had faded gave it the appearance of grime.

Ander had always had two moms: the one in the picture frames at home, and the one who looked nothing like her.

“Hi, Mom.”

She reached up to his face. Her eyes frowned with pain again.

“Ander...” she said.

The instant she brushed his face, his body surged: His eyes seared with light, a deep blast pummeled his ears and chest, the smell of nail polish overwhelmed him, caking his tongue and choking his throat.

He staggered and gagged.

Mom cackled, still fixated on Ander. She didn’t even blink.

“Easy, Ange,” Dad cautioned.

“What’s wrong, Ander?” Grace said.

He looked at everyone in turn. “Wh-what do you mean? You didn’t see or hear any of that? Or *smell* that? Yuck. Nail polish.”

Mom closed her eyes to hoot and howl.

Ander rubbed his face. “There’s glitter in my eyes or something.”

Mom coughed out something incoherent.

“My ears are ringing,” Ander continued, using it as an excuse to slip into the hall.

"Okay, Ange," Dad said after Mom's bout subsided. "Change of scenery will do you good. Let's go to the visitor lounge. Abby, get the wheelchair."

There was a shuffle and rustling inside. Ander scooted away from the door as his family emerged with Mom. He kept walking to the lounge, without looking back, but he could feel his mom's eyes.

"Ark," she muttered. "Dar-ka-tuh."

"What?" Grace asked.

"Ander," Mom repeated. "Ander..."

Ander eyed the bathroom sign on the right and impulsively slipped inside. Walking to the urinal and pretending to pee, he took a moment to breathe. But it wasn't enough—the glitter in his eyes persisted and his ears rang and swelled as if pumped with cotton balls. He went to the sink and cupped water to rinse his face. He'd never fainted before and he wasn't sure if this was how it felt.

He forced himself through it and joined his family in the lounge, which featured gray furniture and picture frames with the same hazy scenes like those in the hallways. Ander surmised the hospital used the same three pictures and just hung them up repeatedly.

They all sat near the floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out over rolling hills. Dad was trying to get Mom to leave the wheelchair for the couch, and he managed to get her seated as Ander stepped inside the ring of furniture.

He felt her eyes on him.

"Ark," Mom mumbled again.

"What?" Dad asked.

"Dark. Dark touch."

Dad brushed her hair from her face. "What's 'dark'?"

She kept looking at Ander. "Swim in music rock."

"What does that mean?" Abby said.

"Rock music," Grace offered.

"Nonsense," Kris said.

Mom stood and went to the window. Then, turning to Ander, she reached out to the glass. "The dark touch. Rock sound. Feel it."

"Angie," Barb cautioned, entering the lounge. "Remember the rules: We don't put our fingerprints on the—"

Cracks spread like lightning on the pane.

"Mom!" Abby yelled.

The glass shattered. A shower of shards piled around them, along with the surge of cold air.

Everything descended into chaos. Barb and Dad dashed to Mom before she fell through the open window. Grace went to help but got bumped onto the floor, hands into the shards. She wailed.

Abby grabbed Grace to pull her away while a reinforcement of nurses appeared and, after balking at the site, converged on the scene.

“Move that chair.”

“Becky, help me move the couch.”

“Get a new wheelchair!”

“Need a broom.”

“And tell the maintenance guys.”

“Anyone have bandages for the girl?”

Amidst the turmoil, Ander sat still, staring at the glistening glass on his jeans. It wasn't until a nurse clenched his shoulder that he snapped into motion. When he looked to his mom, he noticed a stream of red dripping off her fingers.

“Coming through!” Dad pushed Mom out of the bustle in the new wheelchair.

“Sorry, Mr. Barr,” Barb said, “this is...I don't know how this happened.”

“Grace!” Dad boomed. “Get out of the way!”

Ander tried to remove himself, but Mom's eyes tethered him to the commotion.

“Ander,” she said. “The dark touch.”

Barb awkwardly leaned over as she walked. “Angie, you okay? Nate, stop. I need to look at her wrist.”

Dad kept pushing.

“The dark touch of sound,” Mom rasped. “And the neighbor...”

“What?” Dad finally stopped the wheelchair, fire in his eyes. “What about the neighbor?”

Abby and Kris joined them, both puzzling over their dad's reaction.

“He's not just a neighbor,” Mom continued.

“Angie,” said Amy, who appeared with some gauze, “can you hold up your arm?”

“You!” Mom growled at her. “Hussy.”

“Ange, what about the neighbor?” Dad pressed.

“Amy smelly,” Mom croaked. “Stinky human.”

“Ange!” Dad pleaded. “She's helping you.”

Mom sneered at Amy.

“Scott Lorin,” Dad said. “What about him?”

"The sound touches," Mom continued. "He's more than a neighbor."

Amy stretched out the gauze. "Nate, hold this for me."

Dad looked annoyed as he obliged.

"What are you talking about, Mom?" Abby said.

Kris slapped Abby's shoulder and gave her a glare. "Stop pressing her. She's...you know."

"Crazy?" Mom interjected. "You try swimming in music sound." She shifted her eyes to Ander. "Feel it, Ander?"

Ander squirmed under the weight of her lagoon eyes.

"Feel the sound of the rock?" She added.

Ander finally looked away.

Dad put his hands on Mom's shoulders. "The window broke. We're moving you to your room."

"Just your crazy girl," she looked at Dad, "swimming in the rock music. Music of the rock."

Everyone followed Barb as she wheeled Mom down the hall. Ander took the rear again. The glitter in his eyes was gone. His hearing also seemed to be normal again.

"Sounds," Mom said. "Strange sounds."

Kris dropped behind to join Ander.

"She's had a 'great day,' eh?" she said, imitating Barb's voice.

Ander couldn't share her humor. Spotting a bench in the hall outside Mom's room, he lumbered to it and sat. He could still feel the draft from the broken window.

No one seemed to object to him lingering behind as they all entered the room. After he was left in silence, a few nurses and visitors walked by, but he just kept staring at the bricks across the hall. Movement back in the lounge caught his attention, and he turned to see maintenance men with plastic wrap.

"Everything okay?" came a voice.

Ander rolled his head to see Nurse Amy.

"Yeah."

"What an ordeal!" She sat down beside him. "Your mom is quite the woman."

"I want to be alone, if that's all right." He didn't mean to sound rude, but he didn't bother apologizing either. Nor did he look to see how she took his words.

"I understand." She abruptly stood. "Hope you can still have a good visit."

He listened to her walk away, then waited a few minutes to gather his nerves before taking out his phone. But then he just spun it between his thumb and middle finger. He listened to his family's mumbling conversation inside but didn't care to understand it.

His sisters suddenly emerged to say they were going back to the lounge to get coffee and to take another look at the scene. Abby and Grace didn't stop, but Kris slowed to ask if he wanted to join. He just returned his attention to the opposite wall and shook his head.

After another few minutes, Dad came out and sat next to him. "Where did the girls go?"

"How's Mom?" Ander said.

Dad just shrugged.

"Are the drugs working or not?"

"They seem to, at least a little. But the window! What was *that*? Some serious side effects."

Ander stood and began pacing. "Can we go home?"

"What about seeing Mom?"

"Is that really her?"

"What are you saying?"

"I'm tired of all these games, Dad. Her rambling has never gotten better." He looked up at the ceiling to speak to no one in particular.

"We need to be—" Dad began.

"Don't say it. I'm tired of being patient."

"Like Dr. Bannin says, the brain can be a mystery. We don't know how this will play out."

Ander stopped pacing and sat down, head slumped towards the floor. He wanted to bring up the subject that Dad considered taboo. He opened his mouth to ask, hesitating.

*Screw it.*

"You know what's really bothered me the most?" Ander spoke without looking up. "I've never been given a clear answer on how this all started."

Dad sighed and shuffle. "I've told you: just came out of nowhere."

"Really?"

"Yes. What do you expect from an illness?"

Ander faced his dad squarely. "Then what was all that about Mr. Lorin?"

He sighed again, harder. "What about him?"

"You seemed pretty interested in what Mom said about him."

"What do you mean? That back there?" Dad stuck his thumb towards the lounge. "That gibberish was nothing new."

"She seemed to know what she was talking about."

"Psychotic people," he used the word delicately, "can appear fine, Ander."

"But of all things, why was she talking about Mr. Lorin?"

"Like I said, gibberish."

"Dad, you can tell me the truth."

Dad said nothing.

Ander hated to say it, but he needed to push Dad further.

"They weren't...*together*...were they?"

"No! No." He looked away, then turned sharply back to him. His face twisted, offering a glimpse of a beast inside. "Why would you think that?"

Ander shook his head. "I'm just assuming the worst," he said. "That's what life brings in the end after all, isn't it?"

Dad calmed the beast and sat back with crossed arms. "You're too young to think like that."

"It's true, though. Don't blame me for getting a head start. I mean, come on. School is useless. I failed geometry. I'm the only one of my friends to not have a job because I'm too much of a foo-flippin' wuss to get my driver's license. And my mom is a psycho."

*And my uncle ruins lives.*

Dad nodded slowly, pathetically empathetic. "There are many good things for you to look forward to."

"Like what?"

"Family, friends, memories. Happiness and, uh, what's that word? Fulfillment." He paused, lowering his head like he typically did for some final fatherly encouragement. "Even when things get rough, there's always the hope for something better. It keeps us going."

"And what if it never comes? What if somewhere along the way I make a decision that pulls the rug from so-called 'fulfillment.'"

"Somewhere out there is a version of you that you need to take hold of."

Ander stood up again. "So there's a parallel universe where another version of me is just peachy? Who cares? What about me? *Me*? This is all that I am." He spun around, mockingly showing off. "It would seem all this carcass can hope for is a good grave."

"Oh, Ander, don't be so dramatic."

He stepped away.

"Where you going?"

"Vending machine."

Ander's head hurt as he walked, and he wondered if it were possible to check himself in for a few nights.

*Maybe madness runs in the family.*

When he reached the main waiting area, he remembered that he didn't have any money for the machine. He thought about bumming some from his sisters, who sat across the room, but they were too busy with their phones and he didn't feel like talking.

He huddled on a couch and grabbed National Geographic with a blank stare on the first page he opened to.

Dad was there in an instant, handing him a few dollar bills. "I suppose you need money."

"I'm good."

"I know you don't have any, unless Kris or Abby are giving handouts."

Ander frowned, but couldn't meet his eyes. "It's fine."

Dad waited for a moment before sitting down next to him.

"How did Mom break that window?" Ander said, staring at the plastic as the men taped it over the void.

"All right." Dad slapped his thighs. "I'll tell you what happened."

"What?"

"It was our addresses. That's all it was. That's how it started."

It took Ander a moment to forget the window and listen.

"167 Bear Trap and 167 Parish. Lorin's on Bear Trap, we're on Parish because of the odd bend in the road. An absolutely rotten coincidence of numbers and an absolutely incompetent mailman. Such a stupid reason..." He waved around the room. "For all this."

Dad took a moment to rub his face, agitated. "All your mom wanted was to bring Scott the mail. Twice in one week his nerd packages were jammed into our mailbox, so she figured she'd just walk them over instead of leaving 'em for Mr. Illiterate, the mailman. What are neighbors for, you know?"

"So she went down the road, and at the end of his driveway," he said with a dramatic pause, "she heard him operating machinery in his gravel pit behind the house." He angled his head up, eyes closed. "If she would have just left it all in his mailbox...but you know Mom, strolling in, ready for anything."

"Machinery?"

Dad opened his eyes, nodding. "That's what she told me. It was all she could remember after she came home, feeling dizzy. Figured it was his backhoe or something."

The maintenance men had nearly completed taping the plastic wrap when an old lady's panting came into earshot. She stopped at the couch adjacent to Ander and tossed her purse down, then used her cane to plop into her seat.

"What happened here?" she asked Ander.

"Window broke," he said flatly.

"Oh," she grunted, "and I thought they turned on the air conditioning." She muttered something else as she buried herself in a gardening magazine.

Ander looked out the window with renewed curiosity about Mr. Lorin.

*"Machinery"? What was he hammering?*

He turned to Dad. "When did this happen, exactly? Growing up, I just remember Mom's mind slipping."

"You were very young. Maybe it was before you were born. Actually, Mom was pregnant. Was she with you or Kris? Anyway, it took a while for the mental fits to take hold. It wasn't until after we had Grace that it got worse—when she got laid off from Marty's Meats. Remember that?"

"Barely. I was four when Grace was born."

"Right. Wow." Dad stared out the window. "She's been here that long?"

"Does Mr. Lorin know he did this to Mom?"

Dad sat lost in thought.

"Dad," Ander said louder.

"Huh?" He spoke in a trance. "Does Scott know what he did? I don't think so."

"Are you saying you didn't even tell him?"

"By the time I realized it was him—or suspected it was him—it was too late. Water under the bridge, you know?"

"But you've never actually talked to him about this?"

Dad lowered his head to the floor. "We don't talk."

"Why not?"

"No one talks to their neighbors."

"Uh, normal people do."

"Sure."

The lady next to them cleared her throat and rustled her magazine.

"Why can't you suck it up and talk to him?" Ander asked.

Dad shrugged roughly. "Because I don't like him."

"Because of what he did to Mom?"

"Not just that. He's always been...I don't know, *off*."

"Off?"

"Yeah. Unapproachable."

"Maybe you're unapproachable."

"Wow." The old lady didn't even hide the whisper to herself.

"For what it's worth," Dad said, "I tried to talk to him."

"Really?" Ander's voice was so incredulous it was barely a question.

"Sort of. When he first moved in, mid-90's, first thing he did was dig up his back yard. I assumed he was going to start a little gravel pit business. Either that, or looking for something underground. Whenever I drove by his driveway, I would peek down to see what he was up to. Sometimes I saw him and waved, but he would just stare blankly at me. His face, even at a distance, was off-putting. It was like just *looking* at his property was trespassing.

"I figured he was just one of those odd, hermit types, so I let him be for a while. Then that winter, when the ground was frozen, I heard him operating his backhoe across the river. You know that patch of reeds in the middle of the pines?"

"Yeah, I always thought it looked out of place."

"That's where he was digging. Whatever it was, he seemed to be going deep."

Ander's head twitched with shock. "Bizarre."

"I waited for him to leave before I crept over to investigate. But all I found was just a big hole. Thought maybe he was digging a pond. Or expanding his agate empire."

Ander cradled his chin, mouth gaped.

"When I turned to go," Dad continued, "there he was, standing in his pit with a look...intense, you know, like a threat. Like cowboy meets shock rock."

Ander crimped his face to imagine the unusual image.

"I apologized, but he said nothing. Shortly after that he put up all kinds of signs. 'Trespass At Your Own Risk.' I got the message."

"So...how come I've never heard of this before?"

"Didn't think it was that interesting. The whole situation just made me dislike him even more."

"This makes him more of a legend."

"He's legendary all right. A legendary schmuck."

"Any idea what he was digging? Big bones or something?"

Dad frowned. "That's oddly specific. But, no, I have no idea. The only thing that looked a little odd was the pile of black rocks beside that deep hole."

Ander gaped.

"Thought it weird to be from a swamp. But who am I? A geologist?" he chuckled.

"You never asked what he was up to?"

"I don't care what he was doing. I refuse to care. In my book, he wanted nothing to do with us, so that's why he became a nobody to me."

"Until Mom."

"Unfortunately."

The lady had rested her magazine on her lap, clearly from eavesdropping so hard that she gave up on the facade of reading.

"You're saying you have no idea what made Mom crazy?"

"No idea."

"But the answer could be right next door. This whole time."

Dad looked out the window for a moment. "Yes," he finally said, bringing his eyes back to the floor in front of him. "I've thought about asking Scott about that day, of telling him about Mom, but I don't want to dig all that up again. No pun intended."

"Sue him."

Dad laughed.

"I mean it."

His face leveled and he looked squarely at Ander. "If only it were that simple."

"It *is* simple. Mom was fine before she went over to his place. Something happened there and now she's loony. Period."

"Ander," he sighed, "calm down."

"Seriously?" Ander risked a hoarse whisper. "This is fresh news to me. You've had years to calm down about it."

Dad squinted at the ceiling tiles for a moment before responding. "Even if I wanted to sue him, we can't prove anything. Dr. Bannin says insanity is complicated. We can't know for certain what caused Mom's condition."

"But what if Mr. Lorin's to blame? Shouldn't he pay?"

Dad shook his head and turned away. "No. I went down this path already. I blamed him for a long time. But I love your mom more than I hate him."

"If you love Mom, you'll fight harder."

The beast reared. "You don't get to say that."

The lady threw her magazine down and used her cane to rise to her feet.

"And you—" Ander said.

"Bringing someone to court is no light matter, Ander."

"But it's the right thing to do. Justice. People need to face what they've done."

"What about forgiveness?"

"You're saying you've forgiven Mr. Lorin?"

"If he's responsible? Yes."

"But you just said—"

"I don't care for him," he retorted. "But I don't need to hold a grudge."

"Forgive him for making Mom insane? Honestly?"

Dad hesitated. "Yes."

The lady shouldered her purse, adjusted her shirt and walked away as fast as her cane allowed.

"You're not just avoiding him?" Ander continued.

"I don't need to talk to him. It's over and done."

"You're saying you have no hard feelings?"

He shook his head.

"Then you'll have no problem talking to him when we get home."

He shuffled on the couch. "I don't need—"

"You're avoiding him."

"What will that even accomplish? 'Hey, Scott, remember when you made my wife crazy?'" He let out a fake chuckle and stood.

"He could tell you what happened," Ander pressed. "Isn't that enough of a reason?"

Dad halted him with his palm and shifted to leave. "I'm done talking about this."

"Maybe Lorin could fix her mind," he said as Dad slipped away.

"Then *you* talk to him," he called back, "I've come to peace with everything."

Ander remained on the couch, recycling his dad's story. It kept buzzing in his brain, even when he blinked himself back to reality and returned to his mom's room.

She had already resumed her usual demeanor—her empty shell—when he walked in. She didn't stare at him anymore, nor did she

mutter absurdities. But her tamed form, sprawled on the bed, left him with growing unease.

*Mr. Lorin...*

# 4

## *Discs*

The Barr kids left Dad inside Crest View and climbed into Abby's wheeled dumpster. Ander shoved her clothes to the middle seat so he could fit in the back.

"Hey, don't pour them all on me," Grace grumbled from the opposite seat.

"It's fine," he said. "Just smash them down in the middle."

Abby turned the ignition. "Stop throwing my clothes everywhere. I'm tired of losing socks under the seat."

"Just do laundry at school," Kris suggested from the passenger seat.

"They cost a buck-fifty at the dorm."

"Poor psycho student can't afford laundry," Kris said.

"Psychol—" Abby shook her head, "nope, not worth it."

"So, psycho," Kris asked, "which course we playing at?"

"Hillside," Grace offered.

"I need to de-stress after seeing Mom like that," Abby said, "I'm in no mood for something intense. Spirit Lake course it is."

She shifted and sped off before anyone could complain.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sun was nearly at the horizon when Abby stepped up to the seventh tee-off.

"This tunnel shot gave her a hard time on the Northland Open," she spoke like a sports commentator, "but Abby Barr is not known to let her past hurdles steal her momentum."

"Oh, save us," Kris remarked sarcastically.

"I feel an ace," Ander said, playfully tossing his disc from one hand to the other.

Abby trotted across the tee pad, and, with a firm twist of the hips, flung the disc. It flew like a laser through the narrow path in the woods.

"Perfect throw!" Grace said.

"No," Abby moaned. "Not enough."

The disc lost speed and drifted left, crashing into the shrubs before it reached the basket.

"Darn..." Ander said flatly. "Guess I jinxed it."

"All right, then." She gestured for his turn. "*You* get the ace."

Ander snickered and positioned himself on the pad. He visualized how the disc should fly, then slowly practiced a throw that would accomplish it.

*I'll take Mera to this course.*

He lined up the disc for his shot, squinting. "Abby, can I borrow your discs Thursday?"

"Sure. Why?"

He bit his lip and skipped along the tee, launching the orange disc along the right side of the fairway. It sailed directly for a spindly oak, bouncing off with a thwack.

"Because I obviously need to practice," he said.

"Fine, but you should get your own."

"He can't afford his own," Kris said.

Ander waved her off. "Shut it, Sister Warbucks."

"Yeah, I'm so rich."

Grace giggled.

*I'll confirm it with her tomorrow. First thing.*

Kris stepped up to the pad. "Brother, Poor Art Thou, ever see a train wreck?" She flounced forward like a stiff ballerina, whipping her disc skyward. It crashed into the treetops, plinked through the branches, and onto the fairway. "Right on target." She punctuated her words with fake, whiny arrogance.

When they were ready to putt, Abby's phone whistled a text from her bag, but she ignored it to ready her shot.

"The trick is not to force your throw," Kris instructed, imitating Abby's voice.

"But only one of us is getting a birdie," Abby countered.

"Don't speak too soon," Kris said. "You still need to sink it."

Abby rolled her eyes. "It's a gimme."

"Only for professionals." Ander tossed his putter disc near the basket.

Abby easily sunk the birdie. "You were saying?"

Kris didn't even try to putt. She just picked up her disc and made a ruckus in the chains to distract Grace.

"You'll have to do better than that," the youngest sister retorted.

Abby's phone whistled again. This time she took it out and read the screen.

"Uncle Brian is here," she said.

Ander whipped his head in all directions.

"Why?" Kris asked.

Abby typed back. "Don't know. I'll tell him where we're at."

No.

They made their way to the eighth hole and sat on the bench to wait for their uncle.

Ander peeked through the trees to see Brian amble across the field.

"What does he want?" he wondered aloud. "We can't stop playing now. We just have two holes left."

"How did he find us?" Kris said.

"Dad probably told him," Grace replied. "The Find My Clan app."

The hulking Wretch strolled through the trees, pretending to sneak, or creep, in a hunched-over tiptoe. His expertly-trimmed crew cut crowned his angular face. His thick eyebrows caved downward, which gave him a permanent glare, yet this was balanced by the not-so-subtle twinkling of his bright blue eyes. He was more cartoon than human.

"Gotcha," he growled playfully.

"You got us," Kris said sarcastically.

Brian emerged fully into view, but Ander just examined his disc's edge, picking at its nicks with his fingernail. He then rotated it in his palm, feeling for the right grip. But no matter how much he fondled the plastic, his throwing hand never found a comfortable position.

Brian produced four crisp hundred-dollar bills. "Benjamin Franklin once said," his voice flowed with smooth depth, "'it is better to give than to receive.'"

Grace eagerly took her bill. "Now I can get those shoes!"

"I hate handouts," Kris said as she snatched hers. "By the way, that quote is from Jesus."

"You would know," Abby remarked as she delicately pinched the money.

Ander shoved the disc back and grabbed another. Made from a softer plastic, he fanned his fingers over it and rubbed its chalky surface. This one had more damage: deeper gouges in the rim and permanently bent like an umbrella. He tried bending it back.

Brian came closer to him. "And what about you?" He waved the Benjamin in his face.

"You didn't kill anyone for this, did you?" Ander replied without looking up from his disc.

Brian chuckled. "Money is money."

Ander offered a fake smile and risked a glance, but it was enough to notice the knowing sparkle in his uncle's eyes. He looked down at his disc again, but his vision suddenly went dark as Brian's paws spun his shoulders and pulled him to his chest. There was no escape from the muscular envelopment. Corded arms pinned his back and suffocated him with the odor of expired deodorant losing its battle with sweat. His uncle had always acted like he invented bear hugs.

"Hey, where'd Ander go?" Brian's chest reverberated against Ander's ear. He then laughed at himself, sending pulses like thunder into Ander's skull.

"All right!" Ander protested.

"What, you claustrophobic now?" Brian held him tighter.

He squirmed until the grip dropped away, nearly sending him backwards.

"Always a good time, bud," Brian said with a final slap on the back of his shoulder. He ran his other hand over his buzzed hair with an amused sigh. "That's what you get for not responding to my texts!"

"Been busy."

"Oh really? Doing what...or *who*?"

"Are you going to join us, Uncle Brian?" Kris interrupted.

"Well, the thing is," he said with fake sheepishness, "I got pizza for you guys. Back at Big Betsy. Think we can have one last picnic before it gets too cold?"

"We only have two holes left," Abby said, obviously annoyed. "Can't we just finish up, then take the pizza home?"

"Pizza will be nasty cold by then," Brian whined.

"We don't mind cold pizza," Abby said.

Ander agreed with a slight nod and his eyebrows high.

"Fine." Brian plopped on the bench by the tee-off. "If you want it cold, just keep playing."

"We can eat now," Grace offered.

"It's fine." Brian dismissively waved a hand towards the fairway. "No rush. Besides, I've always wanted to play. Show me how it's done."

Ander nearly bent his disc into a bowl.

"Watch and learn." Abby demonstrated a smooth drive.

"I'll be lucky to get it past that first tree," Brian said.

"Just take it easy." Abby held her disc arm back. "Stand like this and imagine you're about to rope-start a lawn mower, then, in a straight line..." She cranked the disc.

She grabbed another one and held it up for Brian to see. "And this one is probably best for a newbie like you. The key is to throw it level." She practiced a throw, pivoting back and forth on her legs while she moved the disc on a flat trajectory. With a sudden flick, she threw the plastic down the fairway.

"Are you just going to throw our discs for us?" Kris said.

"Okay, fine." She handed a disc to Brian. "Your turn."

He gripped it like it was covered in grease. "Is there a proper way to hold it?"

Abby showed him her grip of a disc. "You need to—"

"Let's go!" Ander's voice was harsher than intended. "Sun is getting low."

Brian slapped his disc. "He's right. I'm too hungry to learn right now. Don't mind me. I'll just throw however I want." He marched to the tee pad and immediately chucked the disc straight into the trees. "That is the warrior way."

"Semper Fi," Kris said.

"Hey now," he countered. "I was *not* in the Marines!"

His next throws were no better, and he kept mouthing off excuses for every hiccup. At the basket, he interrupted everyone's concentration with loud questions on the rules of putting.

"Brian," Abby said, lining up an easy putt, "there was a favor I wanted to ask of you."

"You're old enough to buy your own beer."

"No!" she groaned. "Sometime soon I want a professional picture of me throwing a disc."

"Of course I can do that." Brian casually tossed his disc into the chains. "And the beer too."

*What a perfect uncle.*

Ander would admit that Brian Barr was talented with a lens. Most of his work donned the walls of Moose Crossing, the local coffee shop,

and he even made the runner-up list on the recent Lake Superior Magazine's photo contest.

On the final tee-off, Brian stepped beside Ander and studied the fairway. Two trees halfway down bent inward before meeting at the canopy.

"Kinda looks like two legs," Brian said.

"Kinda does!" Grace laughed.

Abby lined up her throw and effortlessly sliced it through the gap.

Brian nudged Ander. "Aim between the legs and nail that hole...in one."

Ander ignored the crude jest. "It's called an 'ace.' This isn't Putt-Putt." He swooped his arm in a practice throw but couldn't concentrate.

"Then nail the ace," Brian corrected.

Ander tried ignoring him as he readied himself, but his tense body jerked the motions, sending the disc's flight low. It skipped off the fairway, dying in speed before bouncing and rolling to a stop.

"Oh, darn," Brian grinned. "Couldn't quite...*keep it up.*"

Ander stepped aside for Grace, being sure to stay clear of Brian. But the Wretch nestled up beside him anyway.

"What disc you use?" he said.

"Depends on the throw," Ander replied. "This one's called the Razor. Good for narrow tunnel shots. Accurate."

"What's the difference between that one and the blue one?"

"Some plastics are better than others. Some—"

"This one is the best plastic," Abby interjected, holding up her green disc. "Hard yet grippy." She took out an orange one. "This one is hard but slippery. A little cheaper." She waved her hand over an assortment of red ones. "And these are the cheapest, they bend and crack easier but that means they take on unique flying abilities. They're also the best to grip."

"So the cheaper are better?" Brian asked.

"Depends on the player," Abby said.

Grace threw her disc gently down the center.

"How graceful, Grace," Brian chuckled. "Nice and easy. Like the turtle." He took a giant step to the tee. "The turtle may have won the race," he rolled his head in a circle, "but everyone wants to be the rabbit!" He threw the disc over his shoulder. It immediately careened after a bad bounce, soaring left and dying at the base of a knoll that crossed the fairway.

"Poor rabbit," Kris said.

Ander ducked into the brush after his disc, meandering with attentive eyes. Then he heard footsteps and breaking branches behind him.

"I'll help you find it," came Brian's voice.

"No need. You better go get yours."

"Already did. I can—"

"Found it!" Ander lied, frantically searching to make it true.

The Wretch's frame closed in. "How do you throw out of here?"

"I don't know." Ander's eyes darted faster. "You just find a lane and whip it."

"I thought you said you found it."

"It's fine." The words fell hot. "Just wait for me out there! It's rude to crowd."

"That's cool, that's cool." Brian retreated slowly.

Ander glanced to make sure he left, then let his nerves relax. A few steps later he found the orange disc tucked under a log. He envied its ability to hide. He tossed it out halfheartedly and returned to the fairway. Luckily, Brian was occupied with his sisters, talking about Mom.

"She was better today," Abby said. "Almost sounded normal."

"Normal enough to blast out the window," Kris added.

Grace raised her bandaged fingers. "I got all cut up!"

"What!" Brian gasped. "Tell me all about it."

Ander gritted his teeth and ignored their recount while they all played the ninth hole.

When finished, Brian let out an exaggerated sigh of accomplishment.

"We should do this again," he said.

"You need to improve your game first," Abby ordered.

"All the more reason to take me along."

Ander hustled his pace towards the parking lot, trying not to make it obvious.

"Ander's going Thursday," Abby suggested.

"Ah, perfect!"

"Nope!" Ander hollered back. "He can't come."

"What!" Brian was clearly insulted. "Why not?"

He couldn't hide it now.

"It's...a date."

He cringed as his sisters' sappiness poured over him.

"Who's the lucky girl?" Brian inquired with juicy curiosity.

"Secret," was all he could say.

Kris and Abby started spouting names of possible girls, making Ander want to laugh.

*They clearly don't know my type.*

They were halfway to the lot when Ander heard the Wretch sneak up behind him.

"Ander," he called, "join me in Big Betsy. Let's talk about this girl."

Ander couldn't think of an excuse. "Yeah, uh..."

Grace dashed past him. "Not if I get there first!"

"You're going to let her beat you like that?" Brian prodded.

"It's fine," Ander said.

"My one and only nephew doesn't want to spend time with me." He spoke like a baby.

"Unlock it!" Grace yelled from the passenger side.

"Hold on," Brian dug in his pocket for the keys.

Ander slid into Abby's car. Once buckled, he glanced at Brian through the window. The Wretch gave him an eerie smile that pierced him with the force of a threat.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dad was in the living room watching *Impractical Jokers* with his second beer in hand and a permanent smirk on his face.

"Go ahead and eat," he said without diverting his eyes from the TV. "I already had mine."

Ander grabbed a Moon Cola, went to the living room, and sat on the couch with his plate of pizza. He placed his can on the end-table and turned to see a hulking butt in his face.

"Oh!" Brian flinched, overacting. "This seat taken?" He sat right next to Ander, giving him no room to squirm free.

Ander almost laughed at how quickly his plight fell to such a level. He steeled himself to look cool, but it was hard with his uncle's greasy pits and pine cologne pressing against him.

Abby sat awkwardly on the floor while Kris and Grace fought for the only available chair, the younger eventually surrendering to the advantage of her elder.

"You know, Nate," Brian said, "if you built a *real* house—"

"Not in the mood, brother," Dad grumbled with a sip of beer.

Ander couldn't focus on the show, too busy deciding what to say to justify an escape to his room. He'd never eaten pizza so fast. He didn't even taste it.

Despite the many nudges and mumbling from his uncle throughout the episode, Ander didn't even try to reciprocate his jesting.

"What's wrong?" Brian asked.

Ander wiggled. "Just crammed in here."

Brian pressed him against the armrest even harder, smiling.

"That better?" He expelled his death breath.

"Seriously. Stop."

His uncle abruptly scooted his bulk to the opposite side of the couch in a huff.

*Oh please, drama mama.*

As the Jokers set up the final prank, Ander took his chance to leave, but a large hand clenched his arm.

"Before I go," Brian whispered, "I've got more goodies for you."

"Sorry," Ander whispered back, "I have too much homework. I'm way behind."

"All the more reason for a *release*."

Ander winced. "Not now."

Brian pulled him closer. "I have new...angles."

His breath was now as rancid as forgotten cheese. Ander writhed for freedom, but the Wretch's grip was too strong.

"What's going on?" Dad said.

Ander yanked harder, but the grasp redoubled. Like a snare, the more he tried to escape the tighter he was clenched.

He stood up, blocking Dad's view of the TV; but he remained tethered.

"Come on." Dad waved his beer bottle. "Get out of the way."

Ander gave one final tug and Brian released, causing him to stumble into Grace on the floor.

"Hey!" she yelped.

He rolled to his knees, scurrying into the hall as the Jokers howled with laughter. After he made it safely inside his room, he closed the door and pounced on the bed. He wished he could sink into oblivion. He closed his eyes and imagined himself dissolving into the scrambled blankets and sheets. Yet no matter how much he forced his body to

Alex Aili

relax and sink, the stink of his uncle's piney pits and rancid cheese hovered in his nose, trapping him in a cruel limbo.

*Am I dead yet?*

# 5

## *Handyman*

The handyman eased the rattling white van into the shady cul-de-sac. He entered the last driveway and crept past the row of spruce trees lining the front yard. Shifting to park, he nervously unwrapped a caramel candy, waiting a moment to monitor the house's living room window for movement.

He looked at his phone to double-check Boss's message.

The Hannon house will be empty from 1-3. But only Tuesdays and Thursdays.

He threw in the candy and killed the engine. Once he grunted out of the van, he hobbled to the front door. His fingers ran through his bristly tuft of hair as he rehearsed his phony story.

"Looking for my pit bull," he muttered, "wandered off again. Name's Ripper."

He pressed the bell, heart banging. No one answered the door, so he rang it again, waiting in silence. The longer he waited, the calmer he got.

He took out the master key and swiftly unlocked the door for a peek inside.

"Anyone home?"

His ears hummed. He grinned, giddy, and hustled back to his van to fetch a step ladder and tool bag. Bringing both to the house, he dug into his tool bag and extracted his furry disguise: a Sasquatch mask.

"I'm the hairy handyman," he sang to himself, as if a mantra. He slipped the mask on and strolled across the living room. "I'm the hairy handyman. I get your fix."

He set the ladder and bag down before positioning his body like the famous Bigfoot video. Arms swinging, he ventured into the kitchen. He did a little loop, acting ape-like and bobbing his head to the sides. With eyes wide and tongue worming through the mask's mouth, he did a little jig. A cackle erupted in his throat, bringing his clowning to an end. He completed his performance by giving a thumbs-up to the light switch.

"Remember, fellas," he said to the switch. "I'm the hairy handyman. I get your fix." He dashed closer to it, peering at the tiny speck in the middle. "No liking or subscribing required." He winked.

Grabbing the ladder and a microfiber rag from his tool bag, he pattered down the hall to the master bedroom. It greeted him with the must of dirty laundry.

He positioned the ladder below the smoke detector before ambling to the top. He twisted the detector from the ceiling and turned it over to reveal a nest of wires glued to its underside. The device resembled a gutted cell phone. An SD card, battery and circuit board stared up at him. He replaced the battery, refastened the device to the ceiling, before cautiously descending the ladder and slinking into the master bathroom. He delicately stepped into the bathtub.

"Hairy hairy drain...hairy hairy handyman."

He gave the shiny center of the shower-head a quick wipe. Satisfied, he kissed at it through his mask. "That's for all ya filthy fellas." He went serious. "Then what does that make me?" He stooped to clean his boot prints from the tub. "Filthy, *filthy* fella. Ha!"

He gathered his equipment and darted into the hall, but then paused at the next door. It was the forbidden fruit—the morsel reserved for Boss alone.

He cracked it open to let the scent of the teen girl's perfume overwhelm him. He tingled.

A smoke detector, like the one in the master bedroom, peered down at him. He considered how Boss would react if he disobeyed his one rule; so he shut the door, forced his feet down the hall, and slipped outside before he could succumb to the temptation. Yet even after he was out of the neighborhood, his thoughts lingered on the forbidden.

# 6

## *Legend*

With his dad and sisters gone for the evening, Ander opened the fridge door to ensure there was enough hot dogs and Moon Cola for his friends. Satisfied, he strolled down the hall to his room. The sound of clicking controllers and sci-fi combat grew with each step. The Halo match was in full fury.

He rounded into the room to see Booda lounging on the bed, propped against the wall. Ander picked up a pillow and whipped it at him.

“Ah!”

“Let’s go!”

Booda didn’t budge.

“Escapism is always a good time,” Ander chided.

“Some of the time.” Booda glanced away from the screen to give a sheepish grin.

Ander turned to the two boys on the chairs. “Aiden. Conner. Come on.”

“Hold on, Fish,” Aiden said. His deep voice belied his peach-fuzz face. “Almost done.”

“Yes! Got the battle rifle.” Conner flipped his red hair from his eyes and adjusted his seat.

“Who needs guns?” Aiden’s energy sword slashed on the screen.

Conner recovered from the blow then switched to his shotgun.

Aiden dodged Conner’s mindless blasting, then flanked and slashed again.

Conner slammed his controller on his knee and threw his head back. “Screen-peeker.”

“I don’t need to peek,” Aiden said. “You’re just predictable.”

"Never let your opponent predict you," Booda added.

"Never screen peek," Conner complained.

"Never underestimate the power of sword and skill," Aiden said.

Ander threw the pillow again, this time at Aiden.

"Pah!" He whipped it back and leaned in to the screen. "All right, Booda. Let's finish this. Where you at?"

"Hiding."

"Cowards hide," Aiden gibed. "Come out and play."

"You can forfeit," Booda said. "Just toss a grenade between your legs."

"I'll show you what to toss between your legs," Aiden retorted.

Ander walked to the side of the TV. "Don't make me pull the cord."

"Pull this." Booda stuck Aiden with a grenade.

Aiden swiped his blade at him, but it was too late. He tossed his controller on the cushion beside him. "I'm out."

"And *that*," Booda said with satisfaction, "is why hiding is the best tactic."

"For someone called Booda," Aiden sighed, "you sure like violence."

Conner smashed the power button. "Fire time."

"Come on, Conner, light my fire," Booda sang.

Ander and Conner strolled to the kitchen while Booda and Aiden slipped outside. Ander opened the cupboard above the stove, standing on tiptoe, and extracted the lighter. He tossed it to Conner, who flicked it to flame like a desperate smoker.

"Big fi fi," he said, prancing into his shoes and disappearing with a squeak of the door.

Ander savored the silence. Taking a moment to relax against the counter, he stared at the wood grain on the cupboard across from him. He remembered how he used to see as many faces as possible in the knotted figurations. He eyed his favorite one: "the old man," as he and his sisters called it.

"I forgot to ask her to disc golf tomorrow. Is it too late?" he asked the face in a whisper. He took out his phone and stared at it for a moment. "I'll text her."

His friends' obnoxious howling came muffled through the sink window.

He looked back at the Old Man. "I could bring them along, make it easier?"

He imagined Mera flirting with them instead.

"No. Only her."

He saw his junk drawer opening.

*She doesn't need to know. Not yet.*

The knotted old man winked at him.

*I'll tell her when she's ready.*

He opened the fridge and extracted four cans of Moon Cola, cradling them against his chest. His free hand clutched the hot dogs and buns.

*But when will I be ready?*

He awkwardly carried everything into the crisp night, following the dark trail down the bedrock cliff to the fringes of Mr. Lorin's gravel pit. The sandy mounds glistened orange from the growing fire. When he neared the glow, he caught the end of a story that sent his friends into a laugh. But without context the wisecrack hit Ander for the juvenility it was.

"And it was so bad!" Booda said. "You could smell it down the hall. It took him two days to find it."

Now Ander remembered the story. It was when they hid a tuna sandwich in Mr. Switzer's file cabinet.

"He threatened the class if no one confessed," Aidan said.

"But he never did anything," Conner added.

Ander dropped the buns in Booda's lap, then tossed the hot dogs to Conner.

"Yes, gimme that meat," Conner said.

"That sounds so bad," Aiden laughed, taking the cans of Moon Cola.

"I need da meat," Conner repeated in a piggish voice.

"Gimme those dogs," Aiden said. "Where's the skewers?"

"Dogs'?" Booda snickered. "You sound like a dad."

Aiden chucked a Moon Cola at his belly, and with a few more tosses of food, cans, and quips, they settled into their seats.

Ander rammed his dog with a skewer and waited for the fire to produce cooking coals. But his stomach forced him to dip it into the flames for a quick scorch.

"Half-day tomorrow!" Aiden said. "What we gonna do?"

"Too bad it's not on a Friday," Conner muttered. "We could go camping."

Aiden sipped his can. "When was the last time we went camping?"

"Probably a year ago," Conner said.

"When it rained all night," Booda added.

"Sleep on a cot and you won't get wet again," Conner suggested.

"I ain't hauling all that extra crap on my back," Booda said. "I'll just drive the camper."

"Boo!" Conner hooted. "Don't go yuppie on us now."

"What about airsoft?" Booda asked. "We can skirmish the Franzen cousins again. Conner, your mom let you get a gun yet?"

"Nope. And she still doesn't know I play. Let's keep it that way. I don't want the drama."

"No biggy," Booda replied. "You can still borrow my MP5. I'll be getting a P90 soon."

Ander let the conversation fade as he watched the flames dance around his hot dog. He didn't know how to say he was busy.

*If I really am busy. Should I text her now?*

The oily black residue formed on the meat, and he searched for a better spot to roast. He used a stick to pry a log and expose a nascent bed of coals. He snuck the hot dog into it and the skin began to crackle and hiss.

"...I'd tent with her," Aiden said, catching Ander's ears.

"Naw," Conner countered. "Better someone like Olivia or Mera."

Ander looked up from the fire at the mention of her name, but then made it look natural by leaning back to look at the misty sky.

"That Mera," Aiden said, making a flow motion with his hands. "She's got all the right terrain, if you know what I mean."

"How does she not have a boyfriend?" Conner asked.

"Didn't you hear?" Booda joined in. "She's taken."

Ander jolted his head down, only to see them all smirking at him.

"Ha!" Conner bellowed. "Fish *does* like her! That's a downright confession."

"Break her off a piece of that An-der-Bar," Aiden sang.

Ander returned his attention to the hot dog. "She's friendly with everyone."

"I wouldn't mind some *friendly*," Aiden said.

Booda pointed his hot dog at Ander. "He's leaving out the best part: He spent a lot of time at her house this summer."

"What!" Conner's face stretched to the limit. "Why have we not heard this?"

"His uncle is her landlord," Booda said.

Ander watched the skin of his hot dog shrivel. "I worked with him for some money."

"You gotta tell us about this," Conner pressed.

"Tell us the juicy deets," Aiden added.

Ander rotated his hot dog. "I did some mowing and random jobs."

"Yes," Aiden said flatly. "Tell me about the mowing."

"Tell me more, tell me more, did you have a good mow?" Conner piped.

"What's with all the singing?" Ander asked with an annoyed frown. "We didn't..." he sighed, gripping the skewer like a lifeline. "We played some games. TV. Had supper with her family a few times. But I was there for work, so—"

"Just tell us how far you got," Conner said. "You at least got into her room, right?"

"She's just a friend."

Conner slapped Aiden's knee. "See what he's doing there? He's not denying it."

"We didn't do anything!" Ander insisted.

"Get on the bed?" Aiden said.

"No, we didn't do *anything*."

"You crossed that threshold, right?" Conner asked. "Into her room?"

"What's the big deal with her room?" Booda said.

"The room," Aiden adjusted his posture assertively, "is where third base runs home."

"We didn't do anything like that," Ander insisted.

"So what did you do?" Aiden inquired.

"Talk. About stuff."

"What stuff?" Conner said.

"None of your business."

"So no whippy willy time?" Aiden grinned.

"No!"

Aiden bit his lip. "You just couldn't *rise* to the occasion?"

"I think that's what they call a fumble," Conner said.

Aiden winked at Conner. "Better grab that ball...before she changes possession."

"Strikeout!" Conner whipped his thumb over his shoulder.

Ander's dog tapped the coals.

Booda cleared his throat. "And with that, we just maxed out on sports metaphors. Ander, your uncle—wasn't he in the military?"

"A photographer in the military."

"What?" Conner's face twisted with confusion. "That's a thing? What do they even do?"

Ander rotated his skewer. "Take pictures of soldiers and stuff, but there wasn't much going on when he was in Korea. I remember him saying how bored he was."

"Isn't that a good thing?" Booda said. "That there wasn't combat?"

"Impossible," Ander replied. "He likes it."

"Likes what? War?" Conner asked.

"Anything bad."

"So...he's a psycho?" Aiden said.

"Ehh, no." Ander bounced the hot dog against the coals, then overreacted and grazed it against a charred log. "It's like watching a car accident. He can't look away."

"I can't look away either," Booda added. "I thought everyone was like that."

"But not everyone likes it like he does."

"What do you mean?" Booda asked.

"He would *let* a car accident happen, just to see it."

"That would make him a psycho," Conner said.

Ander winked at him. "Correct. He's a special kind of twisted."

The three friends exchanged glances, but Ander didn't care.

"He can't be that bad," Conner offered.

"I think mine's done," Ander took his petrified hot dog out. "Where's the ketchup?"

Suddenly, a sound like a giant subwoofer shook the ground and rattled their seats.

"Was that...?" Aiden's face filled with awe.

"Lorin." Conner stood. "We should totally investigate. For real this time—actually get closer."

"He was doing something in his workshop the other day," Ander said.

"Man, I just settled in," Booda whined.

"Come on," Conner rubbed Booda's shaved head. "It's *Mr. Lorin!*"

"I don't care if he's Jesus Christ. I want my hot dog."

"So you don't want to meet the legend?" Conner asked, incredulous.

Booda sipped his cola. "Maybe he's better in our imagination. You know they say to never meet your heroes." Booda's finger pointed at them from beside his can. "They fail to live up to expectations."

"They also say that curiosity killed the cat," Conner replied. "But no one cares. Everyone wants to tempt death."

"It sounded like he was taking a hammer to a giant bone," Ander said.

"Escaped convict." Aiden smirked at everyone. "I still stand by what I've always said."

"Nope," Conner countered. "Government operative. Only explanation."

They all looked at Booda.

He sighed with a drop of his head. "Wizard." He spoke as if confessing to an embarrassment. He then rolled his head around his shoulders a few times. "Fine! Get me a flashlight."

\* \* \* \* \*

They immediately felt the loss of the fire's heat. Booda let out a prominent shiver in a passive-aggressive protest, but no one gave him the attention.

After the fire's crackling faded from earshot, the only sound was their own footprints on pebbles. The thick night air crept into the pit and pressed in around them, bringing with it a mist that confined their light-beams to giant cones.

*He's more than neighbor.*

His mom's words spurred Ander onward.

Soon they heard the pulsing again, forcing them to slow their pace. They frequently stopped to listen. After a long pause, Ander turned his flashlight off and told the others to do the same. Once their eyes adjusted to the darkness, they gasped. The shop windows lit the mist like a lighthouse.

"This is it!" Conner whispered.

"Shh." Ander didn't take his eyes off the shop.

A door slammed. But if Ander had to put words to it, it sounded more like the lid peeling off of a giant tin can. Then came silence, save for the faint trickling of the river.

Ander snuck forwards, hunched over to paw the frigid sand, until he had gotten close enough to see strange equipment through the windows.

Booda's raspy, incoherent whispers fluttered behind him. They became increasingly louder and carried a frustrated tone.

But Ander continued. The chill penetrated him, causing his whole body to rattle. But adrenaline coursed through his limbs and rapped

his heart like an escalating drum. His eyes bulged through the darkness.

Something shimmered to his right, coming from the bedrock cliff—at the end of the path to nowhere. It only glimmered when he wasn't looking at it directly. He thought it odd, something too curious to ignore.

But the shop proved the greater curiosity. He crept closer to the building, using the backhoe for cover.

Booda's whispering repeated. It sounded urgent.

Ander looked back just to wave them quiet again, then tiptoed to the window. He gingerly gripped the sill, preparing to lift himself up for a peek.

"Ander!" Booda nearly yelled.

Before Ander could see the reason for such alarm, a loud pulse tore through the air. Like the earlier subwoofer blast, this one, being so near, rent Ander's skull with an instant ache that left him dazed. He blinked and breathed to regather himself, then raised his eyes above the window frame to squint through the dirty glass.

Silhouetted against a dim yellow light was the shadow of Mr. Lorin. He appeared to be wrestling with a large boulder, using a monstrous pry-bar for leverage. He heaved his weight into the task, bouncing repeatedly. The struggle continued until something popped.

The shockwave rattled the shop, and the yellow light faded into a cloud of black dust.

The concussion made Ander fumble his grip on the sill, causing it to creak slightly.

Lorin, barely visible in the haze, abruptly wheeled to face the window.

Ander recoiled and crouched, motionless.

"Ander!" Booda's voice echoed. "There's acid on the rock!"

"Hey! Who's there?" Lorin's voice hollered from the shop door.

"Scram!" Conner squeaked from somewhere behind. This sparked a cacophonous explosion of rocks and thumping feet as Ander's friends scrambled away.

*Idiots!*

Ander squirmed backwards, staying low but still scurrying with panic. Like a tumbleweed, he awkwardly raced after the bouncing shapes of his friends. He eventually rose to his full height and kept his light off to remain hidden, but he suffered for it once a boulder, hidden

in shadow, found his foot and sent him down. His hands caught his fall, wrists wracking in pain.

"Wait!" he yelled.

They kept running, flashlights now alighted.

"Barr!" Lorin's voice now came louder.

The shadows forced him to turn on his flashlight too.

"Kids!" Lorin's voice was as loud as a megaphone.

Their thumping feet and panting gasps echoed around the dusty labyrinth. Mist swirled in their light beams. When they finally reached their fire, now a bed of coals, Conner paused, pointing at the skewers.

"What about the—?"

"Forget 'em!" Aiden barked.

They didn't stop until they were safely in the cover of trees. Their lungs wheezed, followed by trickles of laughter.

Booda pointed at Ander. "Your neighbor..." He paused to gasp. "... is a serial killer."

They all broke into a cackle again before strolling along the path home.

"Who was he burying out there?" Conner asked.

"I told you," Aiden said, blasting him with his flashlight beam, "he wasn't burying anyone. It was acid!"

"What are you talking about?" Ander asked.

"That sketchy stuff on the rock!" Booda said. "It was goo or something."

"Yeah, I saw it," Ander replied. "It was weird, but why do you think it was acid?"

Now Aiden flickered his light at Ander. "Because it was shiny. Splattered bodies."

"What idiot splatters bodies in his own yard?" Conner said.

"Well, this is riveting," Ander said with the voice of a changed topic, "but I'm beat."

"No kidding," Booda added. "Good luck sleeping now that he knows that you know his secret."

"Wait...we're done?" Conner said.

"Guess so," Aiden said.

Booda angled his head. "Everything all right, Ander?"

"Yeah." Ander waved his arm as he went to the house. "Just... tired."

His friends sauntered to their cars while Aiden began to lecture on what he learned from Investigation Discovery about body disposal

techniques, followed by cynical quips from Booda. Their cars revved and sped down the road, leaving Ander in silence.

Once in his room, he turned on his nightstand lamp and sat on the bed to text Mera. But he couldn't think of how to word the message. He tossed the phone aside while robotically preparing for a shower, considering the best way to phrase the text. Yet by the time the water massaged his scalp, his mind slipped to the mystery of Lorin's pulsating shop.

His mom's warning returned.

*He's more than neighbor.*

When done and dried off, he got dressed and went back to his room. He picked up the phone and nestled into bed, turning his lamp off to let the screen illumine his face.

The empty text message box greeted him, but the words still hadn't arrived. Complicating this was how he imagined the date would go—if she said “yes” to whatever mess of a text he would send. He pictured the two of them on the course. They would talk awkwardly, and he would be able to teach her how to throw. He could use that as an excuse to get close to her body. He assumed she'd wear a hoodie for the cold weather, but even in baggy apparel her figure would still prove disarming. His chest went giddy.

He would bring her home. They would enter his bedroom and lock the door.

*Heaven.*

But the junk drawer would slide open.

*Hell.*

He recalled the words he said to his dad at the hospital.

*That is what life brings in the end.*

He flicked his phone to silent and placed it on his nightstand with the text box still blank.

*I'll. Never. Have. Her.*