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Run Me Dusk

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RUN ME DUSK

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

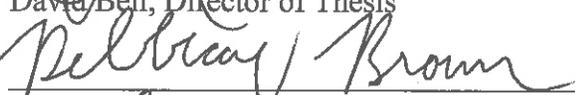
By
Zane DeZeeuw

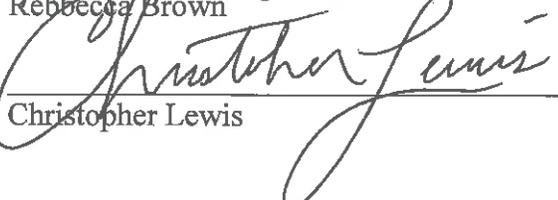
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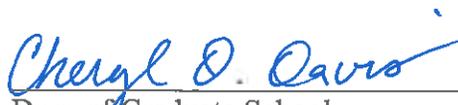
RUN ME DUSK

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RUN ME DUSK

Zane DeZeeuw

August 2018

177 pages

Directed by: David Bell, Rebbecca Brown, Christopher Lewis

Department of English

Western Kentucky University

This is a full-length novel with a critical afterward. *Run Me Dusk* is a falling-out-of love narrative about twenty-seven-year-old Milo who, after being broken up with by his boyfriend Red, flees from Illinois back to his hometown in southwestern Colorado to meditate on his place and purpose in life. The themes covered in this book are gay relationships, family relationships, mortality, and the natural world.

Run Me Dusk

by Zane DeZeeuw

“Is the blue the blue you think of when I tell you?”

“Meditations on a Moth” – Meghan O’Rourke

“Most people, they agreed, could either love or be loved, for these two were like rubbing your stomach and patting your head – nearly impossible to do simultaneously.”

After the Parade – Lori Ostlund

CHAPTER 1

June 2017

The orange sky ripens with the onset of dusk over the Illinois countryside. The abrupt, staccato sounds of the TV as Red changes channels reminds me that I am watching with him. I'm not sure how long I have been staring at the sun's finale through the longitudinal window blinds, but it has been long enough that the show we were watching has ended. Lately, it has been difficult for me to stay focused in the present.

Red stops flicking through channels and settles on the news.

Doctors have discovered what causes cells to age, and they are getting close to figuring out how to prevent cells from going on this process. The hope is to be able to stop the process of aging. This will possibly be able to prolong human life, maybe even forever. Here to talk to us about the recent breakthrough is Dr. Sarah Gunther...

"Look at that, Milo," Red says. "To live forever, that would be fantastic."

"Well, they said it's only a possibility," I say.

"Sure, but we wouldn't age, wouldn't get old. No pain, no aches. We could stay like this, in our mid-twenties, forever. We wouldn't be restricted by our bodies failing us. I hope they figure it out soon. Doesn't it sound great?"

Dr. Gunther, how does it all work exactly? Why do our cells age?

That is the main question we've been tackling, isn't it? There are a few factors that deal with apoptosis as well as with the duplication and transference of DNA during mitosis...

"In theory it sounds good, but I wouldn't want to live that long, definitely not

forever. Aging is a part of what makes life, life.” I recall reading *Tuck Everlasting* in the fifth grade. For years I refused to accidentally swallow water when swimming in a pond or lake. Even when it rained, I padlocked my lips and breathed through my nose in fear of consuming the same water the Tucks drank, the same water that cursed them to walk on this earth forever.

“Wait, wait, wait. You’re saying you want to get wrinkles and crippled?” Red’s amber and cocoa eyes grow large in accusation.

“No one wants wrinkles, but it is a rite of passage.”

“See? You said it yourself! No one wants wrinkles.”

“OK, fine, but I still wouldn’t want to live longer.” I want to say, *Getting from day to day is difficult enough as is*, but I know that Red wouldn’t understand. Life comes naturally for him.

“You and your crazy ideas. Only you would want to age,” Red says. “But that’s why I love you.” He pats my knee and gives me his smug, confident grin before returning his gaze back to the TV.

The aging segment of the news is already over. We watch a little longer as the newscaster interviews a girl whose car spontaneously combusted in a CVS parking lot.

On my end of the couch, I hold me knees tucked up to my birdcage chest. I’m not sure why I like to sit this way. Perhaps I try to hold my legs in order to hold myself together in fear of falling apart.

I look over at Red. He’s on the other end of the couch. His dark skin inherited from his Black ancestors contrasts the bright orange shirt he is wearing. One of his hairy legs is crossed nonchalantly over the other. Even when he is relaxed, Red’s back is still

straight. Posture comes as naturally to him. For him, it's mindless. I envy him for it.

There was a time when I would be over on his side, my head in his lap while he stroked my dead, straw-colored hair. His cocoa-colored fingers would remind me of tractors in the fall sifting through wheat. I should miss that feeling I think.

"I'm going to go for a run," I say.

"Alright, I'll be here." Red gives me a quick smile and then returns his gaze back to the TV.

By now dusk has grown past its sunset cocoon, the breeze of the night begins to put the world to rest with its crisp, lullaby notes. The air greets my skin, cools it down, as I run through the country roads.

No car lights pollute the road tonight. The only signs of human existence are the farmhouse windows illuminating in the distance and the paved road that guides my run.

I have been running this route for nearly three years now, but I still am unable to gauge how much time has passed tonight on my run. Red wonders why I have not measured the distance of these roads, but I tell him, "It's against the point."

"That makes no sense," he says. "How do you track how far you run, if you've run enough?"

"I run as much as I need to," I say.

"But you can't know what you need if you don't know if you've been running two miles or three or four. You're not able to track your progress." Red looks at me, but I just shrug my shoulders.

"I guess you just do things your way, Milo," he smiles and laughs. "And you also

run at night. And you don't run with music. You and your ways." Then, he tackles me on the couch and kisses me, and I let him because he thinks he is being cute and caring.

What Red doesn't understand is that I do run to music. I run to the cicadas, the crickets, and the frogs of this late Illinois spring night. Their song tonight is on repeat, but it differs from what they were singing a few weeks ago. Tonight their tempo has picked up slightly. They are playing at a subtle adagio in celebration of the end of the cold, dwelling season and in celebration of summer's sweet promises.

I have been running long enough tonight to work up a sweat. My breathing is getting heavier. I breathe in the lush green of the countryside flora, and there is a subtle, sweet hint of pollen from the season's first blooms in the air. The air is getting thicker with humidity this time of year. In a few weeks it will feel like a knitted afghan around me.

Before I know it, I arrive back at my house. I walk up and down the driveway to cool off, and then I turn on the front porch light and stretch. The porch was a selling point for me when I was looking at houses.

Roger and Donna, an old farm couple from down the road, had put up the house for sale. The house used to belong to Roger's mother, and she had passed away a few years ago. Roger didn't know what to do with the house, but finally Donna convinced him to sell it.

"I thought he would never sell it," Donna confessed to me the day I signed the paperwork for the house. "He turned down people left and right. I kept telling him he had to because we weren't using the house for anything. But, Roger is more sentimental than he lets on. He needed someone who would respect the house and keep it as is."

“Why me, then?” I asked.

“I think it’s because you said it reminded you of your grandparents’ house. It was also out in the country, right?”

“Yes, it sure was.”

“And you said you didn’t want to fix-up the outside, even if it is a little rough,” Donna smiled. “If it were me, I would completely gut the siding and put up that newer siding that never needs painting. Good thing it’s you buying the house and not me because Roger definitely wouldn’t have sold it to me.”

The outside was a little rough. The blue paint and white trim around the windows was peeling in most places. I could tell the house hadn’t been painted in quite a few years, but I liked it because the house looked lived in, which made it feel like a home. I spent much of the first year scraping and re-painting the house. I even got Roger’s approval of the paint color to make sure it matched just right. All the painting was worth it though because after I would spend an entire Saturday painting, I would get to sit on the porch swing and watch the green, rolling farmland tuck the sun in for the night.

I finish stretching, and then I go inside to shower. As I walk by the bed to get into the bathroom, I glance at Red. He is asleep on his stomach with his head cocked to the side. I can never tell when Red goes to bed because he falls asleep instantly. I envy how peaceful his face looks when he sleeps. I confronted him about it once.

“I think it’s because I don’t dream,” Red said.

“You don’t dream?” I said. “Ever?”

“Nope. Never in my life. I shut my eyes, everything goes black, and then I wake up.”

I still find it hard to believe. I sift my fingers through the dark curls on his head; he doesn't stir. How can there be no scenes playing out in his mind without consent? Perhaps his world is that simple and easy.

I leave him be and go shower off the salt exoskeleton from my night run.

CHAPTER 2

“Milo,” Linda says as she pokes her head into my office. “How are the copyedits coming?”

“Good. They’re coming right along,” I lie. Well, it’s not a complete lie. I have been making good progress the past week, but today I have been struggling to stay focused. I can only continually edit a new edition of *The Principles of Economics* textbook for so long. I feel bad for the students who will have to read this book in school, but I can’t say that since I’m not the one who wrote it.

“Glad to hear it. The boss needs the final edits by Thursday,” she says as she shuts my door and leaves. I’m relieved that she only stopped for a moment. She’s one of the only other worker in her twenties, and because of that, she thinks we’re pals. Usually when Linda wanders into my office, she stays to chat for far too long. It’s never a conversation. She just talks at me until she realizes that she has stuff to do. I know too much about her like how she has started sleeping with this new girl named Shawna who is a paralegal, yet she hardly knows anything about me because I stay silent.

I turn back to editing, but I quickly get distracted by the walls of my office.

I hear a knock on my door. Before I can get up to open it, the door swings open, and all of a sudden he is here.

“Surprise,” he says.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

“Looking for a publisher to edit and produce my book,” Red says. I get up and pull him into the office and shut the door to make sure no one has seen him.

“Really, why are you here?” I ask.

“I had a doctor’s appointment this morning, and I took the whole day off just in case. Well, it didn’t last as long as I thought, so I decided to stop by and see if you wanted to get lunch.”

“It’s not even lunchtime,” I say, but then I look at the clock and realize it is 11:56 am. “Wow, I guess I was wrong.”

“So, lunch then?”

“Sure, umm, just let me get my stuff together.”

I make sure all my edits are saved on the computer because the last thing I want to do is have to reread any more economics than I already have, and then I look around for my wallet and keys. Red has taken a seat in the beige chair by the door and looks around my office. The walls, ceiling, and carpet are all the same yellowy, off-white color. I wonder who was responsible for this monochromatic palette and why so many other offices I have been to also have the same colors, or lack of colors that is. Even my few decorations—lamp, artwork, chairs—are unable to spruce up the space.

“It’s been awhile since I’ve been in your office,” Red says. “Looks the same.”

“You should have just told me ahead of time. Then I could have met you outside.”

“That would have ruined the fun of surprising you.”

“Well, I’m ready. Let’s go,” I say.

I open my office door for Red, and then I shut it behind us. I quickly walk towards the exit, but then Linda comes out of her office.

“Oh my,” she says as she looks Red up and down. “Milo, who is this?”

“Linda, this is Red,” I say panicked.

“Red, what a great name. It’s nice to meet you,” she says as she reaches out to shake his hand.

“I’m sorry, but we’re in a bit of a rush. See you later Linda,” I say as I begin walking again. Red briefly shakes Linda’s hand and then follows me out the exit.

“Why the big rush?” Red says as we hop into his Chevy Blazer. His front seats are always clear, but I glance at his back seats which are cluttered with CD cases, a Walgreens bag, some food wrappers, and random pieces of paper. His apartment never gets this bad, but for some reason, Red never minds his car being consistently messy.

“My boss is pretty strict about us getting back from lunch on time. Plus, I’ve got a lot to do today,” I say.

“Yeah, you look pretty stressed.”

“Well, I didn’t exactly know you were coming, now did I?” I say. My words come out snappier than I expected, but Red doesn’t show any reaction to them. One of my pet peeves is when someone says I look stressed because it’s never a compliment and only makes me feel embarrassed.

“Sorry your day is busy. Hopefully lunch will help,” Red says with a smile. He always thinks he knows the solution to everything.

“Where are we going anyway?” I ask.

“You’ll just have to see,” he says. Red looks over at me while we are stopped at a red light and rubs my shoulder romantically. If anyone else had been surprised at work by their boyfriend, they would be ecstatic, yet here I am wanting to get this lunch over as quickly as possible before we even arrive. I wonder what is wrong with me.

The clouds above us are a deep gray, the kind of gray that promises rainstorms later this afternoon. They are a welcome addition of shade as we sit outside and wait for our food. Red has taken me to our favorite place, Bent River Brewery. It's downtown Moline by the Mississippi River. We haven't been since last fall because the place loses its specialness when the outdoor patio isn't open. The inside just doesn't have the same relaxing effect.

"She seems fun. Why have you never mentioned her before?" Red asks as takes a sip from his beer.

"Linda? Oh, she's no one really. Just someone I work with," I say.

"I've never heard you mention her. Is she new?"

"No, we were hired around the same time," I say.

"Dang, I didn't know. I guess that's not surprising since you never want to talk about work."

"That's because it's just work. There's nothing much to talk about. It's just the same as always."

"I'd still enjoy hearing about it even if it is uneventful. That's what boyfriends are for anyway, right? To share boring work stories." Red tries to make it seem like a joke, but his expression isn't quite convincing enough. His words lack his normal enthusiasm. Since we've sat down, he's seemed more tired and worn out than usual, and I can't tell if something is on his mind or if he's just had a busy day.

"What was your doctor appointment for this morning?" I ask to change the subject. I didn't remember him mentioning it to me, but then again, I'm not one to talk.

"It was just a checkup. I hadn't been in a while and was overdue for one."

“Gotcha. Is everything good?”

“Yeah, everything is good,” Red says. He looks off into the distance at nothing in particular. His eyes lack the brightness they normally do, but he still looks amazing. Red is only wearing a simple, black v-neck, yet the shirt hugs his chest and shoulders in the way shirts only look in advertisements. I can even see the outline of his collarbones. That’s the thing with Red; his good looks are effortless, which I have always been jealous of.

The clouds are still covering the sun, but the breeze barely saunters past us. I undo more buttons on my striped shirt and untuck it from my pants for more breathing room. I’m suddenly aware of how my shirt is too loose for my thin frame.

The conversation stops. I’m unsure of what else there is to talk about. Our hangouts have gotten quieter and quieter lately as if we have run out of things to say to one another.

Our waitress appears with our food and sets it in front of us.

“Everything look OK?” she asks.

“Yes, thanks,” Red says.

“Alright. Let me know if you need anything else,” she says as she leaves.

“Eat quickly. I need to be back at work soon,” I tell Red without looking at him. Honestly, we have more than enough time to spare, but Red doesn’t need to know that. We eat quickly, and the food is a welcome excuse for silence between us.

“Well, here we are,” Red says as he pulls up to my work.

“Thanks for lunch,” I reply.

Red alarms me as he goes in for a kiss.

“Not here,” I say as I put a hand on his chest. Red pulls back with a surprised look on his face.

“What? No one is around.”

“It’s just work is right there and...”

“And what?” Red cuts me off. It’s not like I’m kissing you in the middle of work, and so what if someone sees us? Surely they know you have a boyfriend.”

Red stares at me. I’m not sure what to say, so I look down into my lap instead. I spot a small, unnoticed stain on my khaki pants from lunch.

“Milo, someone’s got to know about us, right?” Red asks again.

“I don’t really talk about my personal life at work,” I say as I try to scratch off the morsel of sauce on my pants. It doesn’t give way though. The color has already bled into the fabric.

“Seriously? We’ve been together over two years, almost as long as you’ve worked there.” His tone becomes sharp like kitchen knives.

“Red, it’s just...”

“It’s just what, Milo? Are you embarrassed to be with me? Is that it? That explains your behavior when I picked you up. I thought you were just in a rush, but clearly you just didn’t want anyone to see me.”

“I was in a rush.”

“BS, Milo.”

“Whatever. Fuck you. I’ve got to go to work,” I say. I throw open the car door.

“Fine. Fuck you, too. Go say hi to Linda for me! Or don’t since I’m too embarrassing.”

I don’t say anything. I storm off without looking back to see Red leave. I almost make it to my office until I’m stopped by Linda of all people.

“So Milo, who was that Red guy from earlier?” she asks in an insinuating way.

“No one important,” I say. Before Linda can ask any more questions, I continue into my office and shut the door. It’s not until I sit down at my desk that I realize I am shaking. My fingers take three tries to type my password to get back into my computer. My armpits are soaked, and I cannot tell if I am still sweating from the heat outside or if it is because of Red. His words still ring in my ears. *Are you embarrassed to be with me?* That should be an easy enough question for me to answer. Red doesn’t understand that I don’t share much with people in general. He ought to know that firsthand because it took me a long time to share details with him.

“When did you lose your virginity?” I remember Red asking early in our relationship.

“I’m not really ready to talk about that,” I said. We were in bed curled up next to each other after sex. Sex was still fairly new to our relationship at that point.

“Come on. It’s not that big of a deal. I mean we’ve had sex, so it’s not like this is new territory.”

“Still, I don’t want to talk about it,” I said. I looked at Red, and I could tell he looked visibly hurt. He was still learning how I worked. Even now I’m not sure if he really knows.

Red doesn't understand boundaries or slowly opening up to people. Red is always Red to everyone around him. Nothing is too personal for him to talk about. I on the other hand take time to share myself with others. For me, intimate and vulnerable thoughts are earned over time. Sharing them is like gifting a small piece of your soul with another person.

It's not that I did not want to tell Red when I lost my virginity. I would come to find that he lost it in high school when he was a sophomore. I eventually shared with him that I was a late bloomer and didn't have sex until I was twenty. I wasn't ashamed of the differences in our experiences, but I wanted Red to know that sharing such a detail with him was me unraveling another layer of myself for him to see.

"You're like a puzzle," Red said after he became more aware of my slow pace. "But I'm going to figure out all the pieces. Just you see."

Over two years together, and I still find myself withholding bits of myself from him. It's hard to relate to Red because he does not share himself with me the same way I share myself with him, and he still doesn't see that I remain closed off to most people around me. I don't talk about Red to my coworkers because I don't talk about anything personal to them.

I try to get back to editing the economics book, but I keep hearing, *Are you embarrassed to be with me?* in my head. I reassure myself that Red is wrong because I just compartmentalize my life and refrain from opening up to people. But the more I think about it, the more unsure I am of my answer.

I'm sitting on the couch watching the rain patter against my living room windows. I could spend hours like this. The consistent clicks of drops on the glass is lulling and reassuring, and I love watching the beads of water pair up and fall into trails down the window. The storm isn't as relaxing tonight though because Red said he wanted to stop by and talk.

I stare at the rain for I don't know how long until Red opens my front door. I didn't even hear his car pull up. Small droplets of water fall from his curls onto his face.

"Hey," Red says.

"Hey," I say.

He takes off his jacket and his shoes. Then he comes and sits by me on the couch. He reaches for my hands, and I let him intertwine his fingers into mine.

"This is not us. You and I don't fight, Milo."

"You're right," I say. I can't quite look him in the eyes. "I guess I was just thrown off today when you..."

"No need to rehash any of that," Red interrupts. "Look, I love you even if I may not always understand your thinking at times. We're OK, right?" Red leans in close and presses his forehead against mine. His cocoa and gold eyes reflect my blue irises back to me.

"Yeah, we're OK," I say.

Rather than make a rebuttal, I let him kiss me. His lips are soft like rose petals. He starts out slow, but then we begin making out more intensely. I cannot remember the last time we kissed like this. Soon we are standing up, lips still locked, and he is pulling me

upstairs to the bedroom. We rip our clothes off, and then we are rolling on top of each other in bed.

Sex becomes our unsaid apologies to each other, but this isn't what making love is supposed to be, or what it used to be like for us. Finally, we climax and lay in a sweaty heap together on top of the sheets. He holds my head to his chest. I listen to it as his heavy breathing lulls into a slow rise and fall.

"You've got to let me in sometimes, Milo," Red says quietly. I'm pretty sure he thinks I am asleep because rather than wait for a response, he just runs his hands through my hair until his fingers stop moving and he is sound asleep. I wish instead he had said *I'm sorry* because then I may have also apologized for my actions earlier. I think I should feel guilty for treating him badly at lunch, but there are other things I should feel lately that I just don't.

CHAPTER 3

A single, minute string, the color of the silver linings of clouds, extends from the rugged porch beam above. I follow the string downward to find a tan, delicate spider floating in the wind. The soft, evening breeze pets the spider just so slightly that its string of web only slightly arcs. The spider is free and calm even though it is barely connected to anything in this world.

“Watch out,” Red says. *Whap*. The silver lining snaps. Red scrapes the bottom of the flip-flop he is holding on the railing before putting it back on.

“That was a close one,” Red says to me. “Good thing I spotted it.”

“Good thing,” I say. Red smiles, and I look at the three dismembered legs on the porch railing.

“...And then he was on one knee,” Matt says. “I blurted out, ‘Yes!’ before he even asked the question. Jim, being stubborn as he is, wouldn’t give me the ring until after he finished his speech and properly asked the question. Didn’t change anything though. It all makes sense now that two months ago he had me try on all his sister’s rings. I thought it was just a fun game, but now I know he was figuring out my ring size.”

“I’m so happy for you guys,” Red says as he puts an arm around my waist. My goose flesh prickles. “When is the big day?”

“We’re thinking something unconventional. Everybody gets married in the summer, early fall, or around winter holidays. We were thinking sometime in March.”

“March?” Olive asks. “It’ll be rainy or snowy. Definitely cold.”

“Exactly! No one will have any other plans, and people will have recovered from the previous year’s wedding season. The only problem we’re running into now is what

colors to choose. I jokingly said green and orange to Jim, but he replied, ‘Just because I can drink doesn’t mean I’m Irish!’ But, we’ll settle on something eventually.” Matt twirls the ring around his finger.

“That truly is wonderful,” Red says. “Congratulations.”

“Yes, congratulations,” I say. “Where is Jim tonight by the way?”

“Oh, he’s not feeling well. Also, as much fun as Olive’s dinner parties are, they still aren’t quite his scene. He’s so dark and aloof in social situations, but that works well. We balance each other out.”

“Right, dinner party!” Olive says. “The rolls! I’ve forgot to put them in the oven. Excuse me for a second.”

I release Red’s arm from around my waist and follow Olivia into her house leaving Red, Matt, and the others outside. Once or twice a month Olive hosts a dinner party. The dinner party is not formal by any means. Olive usually makes some appetizers and has some wine. Everyone usually brings a side dish or two. This time I made mini-quesadillas.

The first time I went was with Red about two years ago. We had been dating for a little over a month at that point.

“My sister is hosting a dinner party Friday night,” Red said. “You have to come. Olive will be there as well as a ton of her and my friends.”

“No way,” I replied. “I am not going to meet your sister and friends in a large social gathering. I would feel uncomfortable. We’ve barely even been dating. You really want me meeting your sister already?” I paused. “What if you and I don’t...”

“I wouldn’t have invited you if I wasn’t confident about this. Plus, Olive’s been

dying to meet you. You'll absolutely love her." Red pulled me in for a hug.

His confidence wasn't what I was worried about.

I remember it being one of those hot and windy days in June that eventually wanes down to a slight breeze in the evening with a cloud-speckled sky. Red drove us into downtown Moline to Olive's.

She lived in a quaint, town house with tan siding. Her front yard was bedecked with sunflowers and daisies. We parked on the street, and Red led me around the house to the backyard where some light rock music was playing.

I did not know how formal the dinner party would be, and I didn't want to ask Red because I was trying my best to hide the true extent of my nerves. I settled on a yellow, plaid shirt, but I was regretting it now because of how hot it was outside.

Red spotted Olive and waived her over.

"Hey, sis," Red said as he hugged Olive, who was easily over half a foot shorter than him. "I hope it's alright if I brought a plus one."

"Nope, not allowed," Olive said with a wink. "You probably kidnapped this poor guy against his will anyway. He is much too handsome for you, Red. Look at that bright, white smile and those blue eyes." I blushed, but Olive was the gorgeous one. She was unmistakably Red's sister. Both were the perfect mix of their parents who I had only seen in pictures at the time. Red and Olive both were Black and had the same umber skin, but her eyes had more honey in them than Red's, which made them stand out like two harvest moons. She also had Red's dark curls that she wore in a messy pony tail slightly to the side. Olive wore a black cutoff tank with ripped jeans. Her style was simple yet stunning.

"Thank you for inviting me," I said. "I'm Milo."

“Of course, Milo. The more the merrier,” she said. “I’m Olive, and you’ve obviously met Red. Our parents were very colorful namers. They pulled our names out of a Crayola crayon box. Red’s lucky he wasn’t named Magenta.”

“Yeah, I would have had a lot of explaining to do growing up,” Red joked.

“Is that true? That your parents only wanted to use colors as names?” I said.

“No, didn’t he tell you?” Olive said. “My real name is Olivia, but Olive became a nickname that stuck when I was little.”

“My name is actually, Rhett,” Red said with a grimace.

“He had a difficult time saying his name growing up. It always sounded like he was saying, ‘Red,’ instead. Plus, Rhett is way too country of a name for this city slicker.” Olive playfully hit Red’s arm.

“Red just stuck, so we both serendipitously ended up with colors for names.”

“Huh, I never knew,” I said. Before I had time to dwell on the fact that I didn’t know Red’s real name until this moment, Olive grabbed my wrist.

“I’ve got to get back to being a host,” she said. “Let me take you and introduce you to everyone.”

She led me through the crowd and introduced me to Jim and Matt, Sarah, Cris, and everyone else. Since then, I’ve been a regular at all of Olive’s parties. At that time, Jim and Matt were barely dating as well, only a few months in. Now, they are about to get married.

“You don’t need to help, Milo. I just need to put the rolls in the oven,” Olive says once we are inside. “Everything else is pretty much ready to go.”

“I’ll still stick around if that’s OK just in case you think of anything else,” I say as Olive opens the aluminum can of rolls and begins placing them on sheets. The air fills with the aroma of their yeast.

“How’s work been, Milo?”

“Good, I just edited a new book on contemporary economics for everyday people. Exhilarating doesn’t even come close to describing how fun that book has been to read through all five edits.”

“Thrilling,” Olive says. “It sounds even better than the book you edited last month about the history of html programming. The rest of your life must be a bore in comparison to what you read at work now. How do you cope with that?” Olive and Red both get the same bird footprints embedded in the corners of their eyes when they smile, which makes their laughter even more genuine and contagious. But tonight, Olive’s expression looks forced for some reason.

“It’s been a real struggle, for sure. I thought editing would be more fun than this. If only I was working for a fiction press. But what can I say? It still pays the bills.”

“And how’s Red? Works been busy for him, right?”

“Yeah, his company is opening up another branch somewhere in Indiana, so he’s leaving soon for a week to help train the new people.”

“Cool cool,” she says as she finishes unpacking the last of the rolls. Olive goes to the sink to wash her hands. I notice her fingernails are painted a navy blue. Their shape reminds me of teardrops.

“How are things with Red?” Olive asks without making eye contact with me.

“Fine,” I say, but the word tastes empty. “Yeah, things are fine.”

Olive dries her hands and looks directly at me.

“Really, Milo?”

“Yeah, really.”

“OK I was just wondering because...” she pauses. “Oh, never mind. It’s none of my business.” I don’t know why she has brought this up suddenly, but before I can respond she shouts.

“The oven! I didn’t turn on the oven.” Olive quickly fidgets with the oven dials. “I’m sorry Milo, I’m just a distracted mess tonight. Don’t think anything of it. You should go back outside and join everyone. I’ll be a bit.”

“You sure you don’t need more help?”

“No, no. I’ll be ok. Thanks though.” She turns away and starts arranging a cheese tray. I can tell the conversation has ended. As I head outside, I turn around one more time, and I catch Olive wiping her eyes.

I am confused because Olive and I are typically very transparent, so much so that it feels like Olive gets me more than Red does. She knows how to read people extremely well. That first dinner party when we first met, Olive pulled me aside after she introduced me to everyone.

“Hey, Milo, I know Red can be pushy. He moves a little fast, so I totally understand that tonight is weird for you.”

“No, it’s fine. I’m happy to be here.”

“That’s nice of you to say, but I can tell you’re the wary and observant kind of guy. I get it. I’m the same way. It was rough growing up with a younger brother who never knew a stranger and always knew what he wanted. Heck, I’m still so self-conscious

and insecure that I have to host my own parties because I'm afraid of being excluded from other peoples'. Red's a good guy though, I promise, but I'll be sure to help keep him in line for you." Olive smiled and gave me a pat on the side of my arm. "Anyway, I'm glad you're here, so I'm going to make sure you have a good time tonight."

Olive's aloofness is evident the rest of the night. As people continue playing bag toss and munching on the finger food, Olive somehow stays on the opposite side of the yard from me. I am sure I am just overthinking things, and I have to remind myself that Olive isn't a stagnant person. She's allowed to have off nights. I have no room to talk as of late.

I catch myself standing at the food table eating the last of the quesadillas I brought when Matt comes over to me.

"Milo, I need a partner for bag toss," he slurs.

"Nah, I'm OK. Thanks."

"Come on, bro. Red and Landon want to take us on." Matt gets super close. His breath smells like Bud Light. "Please."

"OK," I say. "Just one game." I already know what the end result will be. Landon is our goofy friend who works construction, but he is strong and easily could be a poster boy for a lumberjack company. He's a natural athlete, and Red is hyper-competitive when it comes to games.

The game hardly lasts long. Matt is giddy and drunk, so instead of aiming for the board, he thinks it is funnier to hit Red and Landon with the bags. I am not bad at bag toss, but I lack a competitive drive when it comes to playing. Landon and Red do a

victory dance once the game is over, and then they seek new competitors.

At the end of the night, I sit on the porch and watch the moths flit between the string lights Olive has strung over the entire back area. I imagine I am one of them sailing through the thick, night air. The lights must appear like a sea of stars to them, and I feel sad that my body is so rigid and weighted. Their silver wings embody a freedom I will never know.

As Matt and the others begin to leave, Red comes over to me.

“Let’s stay the night at my place tonight,” he says. He extends an arm out to me.

“Okay,” I say. I grab his hand. I never understand how my hand is always frozen while his feels like a hearth. Perhaps it is because he is centered like the equator while I feel like am lost in the mountains of the north.

As we leave, I look to say goodbye to Olive, but she is nowhere to be found.

If it wasn’t so late, we could walk to Red’s from here. He lives closer to the riverfront of the Mississippi than Olive. It’s late, so we drive. Moline is brick-adorned from its history of being a river city. Nearly all of the large buildings, the old factories, are made from the crimson blocks. Some of the older side streets are even paved with brick still.

Red lives here even though he works on the Iowa side of the Quad Cities in Davenport.

“I don’t want to get rid of my Illinois residency in case I want to move to Chicago,” he told me.

I’m the one who works in Moline, but city life suffocates me. I need to be surrounded by green in order to breathe, to meditate my mind. That’s why I choose to

live southeast of the city in the country. What I like most about the Quad Cities is that it is a large metropolitan area full of jobs, but when you drive ten miles outside of the city, you are surrounded by forever green fields of farmland and trees where, if you didn't know better, you would never know a city was even remotely close by.

We pull up to Red's small flat near the river. It's a one bedroom, one bathroom apartment. The small size makes all of his belongings seem larger and more cluttered than they actually are. Usually when I stay here, I have to escape outside and walk the riverwalk in order to calm my mind.

I should offer to stay over here more often. It is convenient for me to get to work, and my small abode adds fifteen more minutes to Red's commute if he stays at my place. But, I was not made for the land of concrete.

Red and I walk through our choreographed routine of getting ready for bed. The finale usually ends with me holding him as he quickly turns onto sleep mode, but tonight I ask to little spoon. I feel more comforted by watching the wall tonight than the back of his head. Red's breaths quickly slow. He twitches a few times, and then he is out for the night while I watch the copper window-light saunter across the bedroom wall.

CHAPTER 4

The aromas of churned soil and new, green life whisper prayers of good fortune on this day in May. Red is a few rows from me picking the ripe green beans from their plant mother's grasp. Meanwhile, I am defending my rows of infant okra and peppers from the portulaca invaders with my hoe.

I picked up gardening from my grandfather the two summers I spent living with him and my grandmother south of here near Peoria. I went to school at Drake University in Iowa, and because my own parents are back in Colorado, I used my grandparents as an excuse not to have to travel the sixteen hours back to the mountains.

My house here already had a garden bed that had clearly not been used in over a decade. By some miracle though, I found some kale and onions that managed to survive the colonization of grass and weeds. After I painted the house, I made the garden my next task.

By the end of my first July here, I had a fully – well, mostly – functioning garden. One day, Roger and Donna pulled up in their truck to see how I was doing when I happened to be in the garden.

“By golly,” Roger said. “I can't believe this college grad knows how to garden.”

“I wouldn't say I completely know how to garden,” I said. “It's an experiment in action. I still can't get my cauliflower to stop molding, and half of my leaf lettuce became lunch for the local rabbits. But, my green beans are doing better than expected.”

“It's been perfect weather for green beans this summer, that's for certain,” Donna said. “We can give you some of our cauliflower if you'd want. Like always, Roger planted way too much of it, and I can only eat so much cauliflower at a time. Okra on the

other hand I could eat for breakfast, lunch, and dinner and not get sick of it, but someone,” she looked at Roger, “never plants enough of it.”

“How about I make you two a deal? My okra should be ready in another week or two. How about I bring over some okra in exchange for some of that cauliflower?”

“What do you think about that, Roger?” Donna said with a smile.

“Well, I was going to tell the boy how to keep his cauliflower from rotting, but I like this plan better,” Roger said with a friendly slap to my back.

“Cauliflower sounds good to me,” I said.

A few years later and my cauliflower game has only slightly improved. Last summer only half of my cauliflower molded. My goal for this year is to have at least a seventy-five percent survival rate.

“Why do we have to work in the middle of the day?” Red says as he wipes sweat from his face with the back of his arm. He is wearing one of those ridiculous straw hats to shield himself from the sun. “Do you want me to die of heat stroke?”

“A little sweat never hurt anybody,” I say as I annihilate another intrusive weed with a swift move of my hoe. “But it is fun to hear you complain.”

“You know I’m more of an arctic cold kind of guy?” Red squats down to assess another green bean plant.

“And I’m a scalding sauna kind of guy. This is payback for that time you took me sledding in sub-zero temperature this winter. You have to admit, the sun feels good.”

“The thing about the cold is that you can always add layers whereas today, no matter how many layers I take off, I am still going to be a hot mess.” Red always looks

like a kindergartener playing in a sandbox when he is in the garden. I think it is because of his long limbs which stick out when he squats coupled with his intense look of concentration at the plants.

“You’re forgetting one thing,” I say as I put down my hoe and reach for the garden hose.

“What’s that?” Red says, but he’s too late. I bombard him with my aquatic artillery. He stumbles back and falls into the dirt. His oversized straw hat flies off behind him.

“Oh no you don’t,” Red yells as he pushes himself up. He sparks a counterattack by running toward me. I shuffle backwards into the yard while keeping the hose directed at him. By this point, Red looks as if he had just jumped into a large body of water.

“Take that, arctic boy. The heat isn’t so bad now, is it?” I laugh. I’m too busy focusing on backpedaling away from him that I don’t realize the hose slack runs out. Suddenly I’m trapped. Red tackles me to the ground. The prickly grass carpeting breaks our fall. He wrestles the hose out of my hands, and suddenly I am engulfed in a jetstream of water.

“Who’s laughing now?” Red says. I try to muscle myself out of his grasp, but he has the upper hand on me. “Do you surrender?”

“Never!”

“OK, you leave me no choice but to continue this battle,” Red says as he resumes soaking me from head to toe. By this time I am laughing too hard and am out of breath.

“OK, OK. I surrender.”

“What was that? I didn’t hear you,” Red says with a smirk.

“I surrender, you win,” I manage to say. Red throws the hose away from us. Our lungs are heavy from our battle. We both lie together on the marshy ground we have created and look up at the Toy Story clouds in the sky. They are perfectly shaped and spaced apart, nature’s own motif.

“That was fun,” Red says.

“Yeah,” I say. Red looks over at me and smiles.

“This is the Milo I’ve been missing. Where has he been?” he says. I don’t respond and look back up at the sky. Suddenly it feels less like summer and more like winter. My insides feel cold, and my goose-flesh prickles.

I see a solitary swallow navigate the vast, open sky. I imagine the swallow looking down at the two humans on the ground. Perhaps the bird watches as one human gets up off the grass and heads inside to dry off while the other human stares back at the bird. I wonder if this swallow can sense the longing this human has to switch places with it in the sky, to be free to lift off and drift far away. I am a prisoner to the ground, a flightless being who receives no pity from the uncaged swallow that escapes off into the distance.

I am too lazy to make a fancy dinner tonight after gardening all day, so I make one of my odd staples: spaghetti and ketchup. Everyone I have ever told about this meal has judged me until they have tried it themselves. Red was skeptical at first, but he ate his words the first time I made it for him. Now, it’s just something he expects a few times a month when he stays over.

After I strain the squirmy noodles, I divvy them up between two bowls that I

bring into the living room with a bottle of ketchup. I hand Red his bowl on the couch and give him the ketchup first.

“What? I get first dibs?” he says.

“Yup. That way I don’t have to worry about not leaving you enough ketchup. In other words, more ketchup for me.”

Once he is done, I douse my bowl in the crimson sauce and flip on the news.

Tonight we have Dr. Sarah Gunther on the news again to talk more about the medical breakthrough on aging. Hello, Dr. Gunther, it’s good to have you again.

Thank you. I’m glad to be here, Carlson.

Now that you have found the gene correlated with aging, what’s the next step?

When will this be accessible to people?

Well, right now we are continuing testing with mice. It’ll be a long process before we will be able to advance onto human trials.

I stir the ketchup into my noodles, and then I reach for the remote to change channels.

“No, keep this station,” Red says. His expression is suddenly serious with an underlying hint of something else I can’t quite identify.

If you need willing participants Dr. Gunther, sign me up. I’m only in my prime for another few years, so I would definitely like to maintain these looks.

I appreciate the offer, but we aren’t that far yet.

“I’d sign up for sure,” Red says as he slurps noodles into his mouth. I always spin my noodles around my fork before putting them in my mouth whereas Red stabs the noodles like a pitchfork in a pile of hay. Strands always stick out of his mouth. Already,

there are sauce streaks on his chin.

“I still don’t understand why you wouldn’t, Milo. You wouldn’t have to worry about running out of time. You could travel to any place on the globe, have time to try out different careers without feeling financially stuck, and most importantly, you would get to spend it with the person you love.” Red looks over at me, and I can’t quite read his expression. Pleading, perhaps?

Of course, Carlson, there would be no guarantee. We still don’t know how long we could get humans to live if we stopped the aging process. Plus, we still haven’t cured cancer and other diseases either. However, there is a chance that this breakthrough may help us solve those problems as well.

“See, it’s no guarantee,” I say. “And anyway, we’re meant to age. Life is long enough anyway, almost too long if you ask me.”

“Too long?” Red says. “It’s not long enough. And you wouldn’t you want to prolong the time you have with the person you love? Even if that person is me?”

“It’s not that.”

“Really?” I’ve never heard this tone from him. Red’s words start to feel like cactus pricks. “Then what is it?”

“I...I...,” I can’t look at Red right now. I feel a crater opening up inside my chest. “I can barely spend this life with myself. Why would I want to extend the agony?”

“Wow,” Red slams down his bowl on the coffee table. Some red, ketchup magma erupts out of it. “The agony? And having someone you love beside you wouldn’t be worth it? Wouldn’t make it better?”

So, Dr. Gunther, even though there is much we don’t know at this point, the

prospect is still inspiring, is it not?

Oh it is definitely inspiring. We're one step closer in understanding how this vastly complex universe we live in works. We all are alive, yet we know so little still about our existence here on Earth in the scheme of things.

The crater inside me grows. The opening fissure causes quakes that extend out to my fingers.

“I can't say. This is all hypothetical anyway, so it doesn't matter.”

“But that's why it matters, Milo.” Red stands up. He looks like Red but also doesn't look like him at the same time. The color of confrontation chameleons him. “You can't even pretend to picture a future where we get to spend years and years together. Something is fucked up with that picture. You've been so distant to me lately. Don't think I haven't noticed. I've tried my best to be supportive, but it's frustrating because you never open yourself up, you never say what's wrong, and you never allow for me to help. As your boyfriend, I'm supposed to be your support system. I'm supposed to be the one that makes you feel better and makes life better for you. You haven't let me do that for you in months, and you sure as hell haven't been a support for me in months. When is the last time you asked how I was doing? When's the last time you've cared?”

“Red, I do care, it's just...”

“Milo, don't. I can't do this anymore. You need to figure your shit out yourself since you won't let anyone else help.” Red goes to the door. He swiftly slips on his shoes and grabs his keys off the cabinet next to the door. The keys clash like symbols in his hand.

“Red, wait.” I'm standing, but I don't remember even getting up

“No, Milo,” Red says as he opens the door. “I’m done waiting. Goodbye and good luck figuring your shit out.” He slams the door. Before I can even get out the front door, I hear the car door open and slam. The ignition of his car yells at me as it starts, and then his wheels carry him down my driveway.

I am out of breath and shaking as if I had just run a marathon. I sit down on the rough porch steps. Their rustic wood is on the verge of splintering on each taupe board. Maybe the porch is splintering me, but I am too numb to know. The large crater in my chest has fully expanded. A cool, hollow breeze echoes through me, through my empty solitude.

I look down to find a lone mosquito on a hairless patch near my forearm. Not knowing how long it has been feasting on me, I swat its stilt body with my right hand. Blood colors my arm. I am surprised the mosquito found anything inside me to lap up.

The air is crisp for this time of year indicating a stormy night ahead. I sit and gaze off into the darkness for I don’t know how long. Eventually, the sky holds up on its promise, and it begins to rain. The water streams down my face in sea-strength waves. My clothes greedily collect the droplets until they are saturated with water wealth. Only until my flesh body begins to shiver do I go inside.

I slowly peel off my clothes by the door. They come off difficultly like price stickers that have been left on the bottom of cheap plates for too long. I am naked, shivering, exposed, but instead of going upstairs to dry off, I spot the ketchup splatters Red has left on the coffee table. I go to the kitchen to retrieve a fresh washrag that I then wet under the sink. I return to the coffee table and wipe away the red reminders Red has left. The specks have yet to dry, so they wipe off easily. A commercial for Applebee’s

plays in the background on the TV. I flick the TV off and then set the rag in the kitchen sink before going upstairs.

I dream-walk to my bathroom. The first thing I see is Red's toothbrush lying on the sink. I am unsure what to do with it, so I turn it over with the bristles facing the countertop. In the mirror, I see a reflection of a man with jagged bones trying to escape his flesh shell. His face displays signs of guilt, surprise, and disgust. And most of all, the mirror man wonders why he isn't crying.

CHAPTER 5

“...and then we went boating on the Mississippi with Shawna’s family. They are still getting used to me, but her dad brought the same beer as me. We were able to bond over that, so I say that’s a win in my books. I’m exhausted though. I haven’t been hungover on a Monday at work for quite some time.” As Linda talks, I staple the draft I have printed for proofing. The stapler is cold and black in my hand. Its silver teeth bite into the innocent white paper.

“I also have a wicked burn on my upper back. This always happens the first day I spend entirely outside in May. I keep forgetting it’s there until I lean back into my desk chair...” I release the metal clamp to find the staple is misshapen and only goes through half of the document. As I dig my fingernail into the distorted staple, I notice some remaining dirt hidden under my nail. Dirt from gardening with Red yesterday. Red.

“I hope the afternoon meeting today does not drone on like it did last week. I’m afraid I won’t be able to stay awake no matter how much of this coffee I drink...” The staple comes out too easily. I reach for the stapler, align its jagged teeth back on the corner of the stack, and aggressively press down. I hold it close longer than necessary, and my hands briefly turn red.

“Anyway,” Linda says as she takes a drink of coffee. “How was your weekend, Milo?” I relax the stapler. This time, the staple is crisp and perfectly set.

“Fine,” I say. “My weekend was fine.”

“Good, good. Well, I better pretend to get back to work. See you in the meeting later.” Linda walks off.

I am exposed. I carry my guts in my hands, unnoticed. As I walk back to my desk,

no one looks up or gives me a second glance. I have always been a quiet worker: one to socialize only when approached first. Privacy is something I value more than others.

The rest of the week is the same. I sit in meetings, walk down the rows of desks, yet I ring no alarm. I feel that my existence this week is a cover. I go into the office bathroom and look at doppelgänger me in the reflective silver. Doppelgänger me is neutral as water. I notice a slight relaxing of his muscles around his cheeks, around his eyes. We have yet to cry.

Red's absence at night goes unnoticed. I cook the same amount of food but use the second portion as the next day's lunch. The dusk air this week has been cool and refreshing. A cool breeze guides me down the road and back to my house. I am not reluctant to re-enter the house, nor am I anxious to leave. I have slept more soundly than I have deserved.

I have spoken zero words to zero people about the breakup. Perhaps it feels unreal because I have not articulated it. My words have not made it concrete in the world yet. I am unsure of who I would tell anyway. My work colleagues are that, colleagues. Most of them probably did not know I was even dating Red in the first place. During the week I have not had the urge to talk to anyone about Red. I think about why this is so, and I realize that I never had talked about Red to other people. Red was for me. My life was for me. The only person I talked about Red to was Olive.

Starlight particles dance in the windowsill sunlight in a slow ballet. The music is flitting yet subdued, perhaps in a flute's low register. They move back and forth as instructed by cello strings, melancholic. I move the duster across the bureau, and I stir up

an amalgam of particles and instruments in an escalated allegro. The music plateaus and returns to the deep, hollow flute.

In this Saturday ritual, I sweep away skin archaeology. The eighty percent of dust made up of human matter sings songs of memories past. I grow tired of their notes, so I have to rid them, have to rid them of me. And whoever else's history has ceased here.

I choreograph the duster around my amber cologne bottle, around the glasses I wear only at night when my eyes tire. The synthetic feathers caress my grandmother's clock, its porcelain legs and rotund waist, and around the glass, beakless owl I stumbled across at a thrift store when I was young. "It cannot speak, so I must speak for it, Mom," I said. My mother was confused, but three dollars and nineteen years later it has perched by me since.

I skirt around the navy coffee mug with a tiny cactus planted inside, around the seashell I discovered at my aunt's wedding as a toddler, around *Of Mice and Men* whose pages yawn outward due to the hours spent retracing the text day and night again. Around the melon-scented candle and the stained-mahogany "M" from the Ute craft festival from my youth. Then I get to the...

"Here, have this," she said as she handed me a rectangle covered in beige tissue. The package crinkled like distant fireworks in my hands.

"What for? It's July. My birthday isn't for months."

"No reason. Just open." I had always been skeptical of gifts. They reminded me of holidays past filled with forced, material exchanges to simulate love.

I turned the tissue gift in my hands to find the taped edge. I began to methodically peel the first layer of tape off.

“Oh, here.” She snatched the parcel and shredded off the wrapping to reveal a brown, bound journal. She handed it back.

“Open it. Carefully,” she added.

I tilted the spine down and panther opened the journal. The collection of papers naturally opened to the right page.

“See? It’s a cucumber flower. When I visited the garden earlier this summer, you said they were the most underrated yet beautiful flowers there are. If I remember correctly, you said, ‘The cucumber flower’s yellow is the definition of yellow, and its shape is the shape stars envy to be.’”

“Thank you, Olive. This gift is beautiful. I just don’t understand...”

“Understand what? It’s just a little something. It’s been nice having you around.”

I move the duster off the book and reach for it. The cover feels rougher than I remember, out of tune. The book opens to the same page as always. The yellow has aged to brown. I caress one of the star edges with my index finger. Flecks of the flower-corpse chip off. I had every intention of filling up the other pages with other pressed plants: stems, leaves, flowers. Yet, every time I went to do so, I could not surpass the feeling that I was invading Olive’s gift. Two years later and all that remains are fragments of her cucumber stars. I dust where the book had been, but when I go to set it down, I hesitate. I bring the book over to my desk. I sit down and grab my phone. My fingers automatically know which buttons to press. I’ve always had a knack for remembering people’s numbers. For some reason it feels just as personal as remembering someone’s favorite fragrance or their most-prized book.

“Hello. Milo?”

“Yeah hey. How are you?”

“Look, Milo. I know this is a mess, but I’m Red’s sister.” I hear other echoed voices in the background.

“I know. I was just wanting to...”

“You know I can’t do this. I’ve got to go. Sorry, Milo.”

“Olive, I...” Click. *Just miss you.* I bring the phone down from my ear. I grab her journal and hide it underneath a stack of books already on my desk. Her voice sounded hollow. I stand up, and resume my dusting.

The wood is coarse and familiar in my hands. I scrape its silver blade along the soil next to the infant okra shoots. The hoe was my grandfather’s, the same hoe he used to teach me the ways of gardening. Aesthetically it has seen better days, yet its utility has never faltered. The portulaca is invasive this year. The mix between sweltering days like today and rainstorms has created an optimal climate for the water-logged weeds. Just since last weekend, new, fully fleshed adults have infiltrated the garden. Because it grows rapidly, the portulaca does not hold a strong, rooted connection to the earth. With a light scrape of my grandfather’s instrument, the plant’s existence is wiped away indefinitely.

I am numbingly caught up in the hoeing, so I do not notice right away when I accidentally take out one of the infant okra plants. A few seconds later it registers, and I toss the hoe to the ground and fall to my knees next to the plant. With the gentleness of a soft, morning breeze, I pick up the green fatality. The poor thing has been decapitated. Its roots, I find, are still clutching to the ground, but soon they will lose their grip. The same goes for its tiny green body in my hands. Right now its cells are firm, vibrant green with

life, but I can already feel the first signs of its strong structure staggering. My face is a river whose tributaries meet the river of sweat from the sun. I weep for the plant, and for the first time in a week, I weep for me. I weep out the unsaid words I have carried all week. I now process the unnamed sadness I felt yesterday after Olive hung up the phone. With one end comes others: food parties, friendships, cucumber flowers.

I weep, so I do not hear the truck pull up nor the slamming of its door.

“Milo? Milo, are you OK?” I turn around, okra corpse still in hand. “My goodness. What’s wrong?”

“Sorry, Donna. I’m OK. I think it’s just the heat. Been out here too long.” I try to stand up strong and tall. Donna’s face is tilted with a confused expression.

“Boy, it’s ninety-five degrees outside. Let’s get you a cold drink inside.” Donna comes over to me and grabs the crook of my elbow. I no longer feel strong and tall as she leads me to my house. The cool air gives me a gust of goosebumps on my exposed torso. I wander over to the kitchen table and hunch down on the orange, wooden chair. Donna opens and closes the cabinet doors until she discovers my alcove of glasses. They clink like wind chimes as she selects one. I hear her run the faucet, the familiar burble of water escalates until the glass is full. I hear her open the freezer, but I already know that she will find no ice in there. Room temperature is often too cold for me. The ice trays were only used by Red, winter’s child.

Donna delivers the glass to me. I reach for it with my grubby right hand. The dirt metamorphosizes to mud as it comes into contact with the glass’s perspiration. The water is a calming brook as it trickles down my throat. Donna sits down next to me. She reaches for my left arm.

“Milo, what are you holding?” The only thing that comes to mind is the water glass. I look down and realize my left hand is clenched. I slowly uncurl it. The infant, crushed corpse of the okra plant unveils.

“Oh, it’s a... it’s an okra plant. I accidentally weeded it along with the portulaca.”

“I see,” she says. She gently touches a lifeless leaf at the end of the plant.

“I’m sorry. I just,” I let the words fall like petals in the air.

“No need to be sorry, Milo. I’m just here to make sure you’re alright. No need to tell me anything.” Donna looks up at me and smiles with her soft, brown eyes. I nod, and we sit in silence for some minutes. My breath regains a slow, familiar regularity. Donna’s time blankets me with a comfort I have not felt for a while. I finish the rest of the water in my glass and set it down. I also set down the okra plant.

“You feeling better?”

“Yeah. Thank you.”

“Of course. Let me know if you need anything. I was just coming over to bug you about some bell peppers, but I’ll come back again later.” Donna lifts herself up out of the chair and begins walking to the door. “Remember, Roger and I are just a short drive away. Don’t hesitate to holler.”

“Yes, definitely.”

Donna begins to open the door.

“Wait, Donna.”

“Yes?” She turns back around.

“It’s just. It’s just that I was broken up with recently. I guess the loneliness finally hit me today.”

“Ah, I see. Loneliness is a time to reach out to our other loved ones. Thank you for sharing. Again, let us know if you need anything.” Donna gives me one final smile and gently closed the door behind her. I sit. Sometimes dream sequences can happen right in front of a person in real time. At the end of the sequence, the person pinches skin only to realize the dream was never a dream at all. I feel groggy, yet when I look down at the table, the mangled okra plant lies where I left it.

CHAPTER 6

“It’s our last night in Tampa, so we need to make it epic. I, for one, think we should go to the gay bars tonight. Milo has politely gone along with us to all of our ‘straight’ bars, so we should return the favor and go to his bars. Plus, Milo doesn’t get the opportunity to hit up gay bars like this, so he needs to take advantage of this while he can.”

“No, it’s OK, really,” I say. “Des Moines has a gay bar, that’s enough for me.”

“The Garage?” Markia says. “It is nothing compared to an actual gay scene like Tampa.” As far as I knew, The Garage is like the gay scene in any place. It has drag shows and people of every sexual orientation and gender. Truth be told, I have only been there two or three times. Everyone is loud, extroverted, and assertive. I do not like getting touched by people I do not know, nor do I like getting prodded with propositions. I much rather spend a quiet night at a bar with friends talking and playing pool rather than a high-energy, crowded dance bar. Even in quieter bars, I eventually feel out of place. In most bars, straight people interact seamlessly. They don’t hold the burden of wondering if the opposite sex is straight because in bars, heteronormativity thrives. In those bars, I feel thrown into a world that exists without me. On the other hand, gay bars have too many opportunities. Gay men are unable to hit on guys in regular bars in fear of getting ridiculed, beat up, or worse, so gay bars inherently become a hunting ground for intimacy. I just wish a bar could exist for LGBT people without the presence of urgent, sexual desire.

“Yeah Milo,” Clare said. “We should go. It will be a ton of fun. Right, Jones?”

“Sure. I’m down,” Jones says with a half shrug. I can tell he is not thrilled about

the idea. I wish he would fight about not going. Don't get me wrong; Jones and I are great friends, but much of our friendship exists in the realm outside my sexuality. We go to bars together, study together, make food together, but we never talk about what or who I might be attracted to. It's not that he is not supportive, but Jones, like most straight men I've befriended, still has an uncanny reaction to the prospect of the male gaze being turned on him.

"Perfect," Markia says. "It's settled. Tonight is going to be a gay night."

As our taxi drives us to the bar, I look out the window and watch as the vibrant, orange Floridian sun sets on the crisp, Tampa skyline. The sky is dappled with purple, pink, and yellow clouds and the colors appear too vivid for reality. Their appearance almost seems artificial, staged. How could such neon colors exist in a world where I feel so muted?

Jones is sitting shotgun ahead of me next to the driver. His head would hit the ceiling if he wasn't slightly hunched over. Small cars were not built in mind for tall, athletic giants like Jones. His light hair looks extra bright in contrast to his red skin. We had told him to wear sunscreen the first day at the beach, but it was hard for Clare, Markia, and I to keep track of him since our skin did not require the same attention to sunscreen. Markia is black with dark brown skin, Clare is a mix of Hispanic and Italian with deep olive skin, and I am unnaturally tan for a blond guy. My mom is of what they call black Irish decent, and I inherited her ability to tan and stay tan year round. Jones, however, has the kind of translucent skin that needs sunscreen applied every fifteen

minutes. Jones was a bit tipsy at the beach that day and had forgotten to reapply when he needed.

The taxi pulls up to one of the gay bars. The air around me feels too heavy for my weak chest to syphon in and out of my lungs. Markia and Clare are full of energy and giggle from excitement. Jones is quiet. Already, I hear loud, techno music leaking from the bar into the peaceful dusk of the night.

After we pay the cover charge, I walk in and immediately feel out of place. The bar must have stolen the neon colors from the sunset because everything, from the walls to the bar to the lights, is doused in synthetic hues. The loud beats of the music meld the audio with the visual, so the colors all over appear to distort and jump out with the beats.

The music is so loud that I could barely hear Markia when she asks me what I would like to drink. She grabs my arm and drags me over to the bar. The bartenders are shirtless and all have the same toned physique. I'm not sure what to get, so I tell Markia,

“Just get me something strong.” I need something, anything, to survive this night.

While we wait on our drinks, Markia and Clare try to spot different, attractive men for me to pursue for the night. The men who walk by me all wear skin-tight jeans or shorts to show off their asses and bulges, and they all wear t-shirts or tanks that look like they are about to rip off them at any moment. I feel and look out of place with the nice button-up shirt that Markia and Clare regrettably made me wear.

“You've got to look your best if you're going to find your husband tonight,” Clare had said.

“I'm not looking for a husband,” I said. “I don't even want to...”

“Here,” Markia said as she pulled my teal shirt out of my suitcase. “This is the

one.”

“No, really. I...”

“Just try it on, Milo,” Markia said as she shoved the shirt my way. Markia and Clare have such strong personalities, so it was nearly impossible to refuse their requests because they would keep persisting. I took off the orange tee I was wearing and slowly buttoned the blue shirt on my torso.

“Yes. This is the one,” Markia said with a smug smile. “I knew it would bring out those blue gems in your eyes.”

“If I was a boy and you walked into the bar, Milo, I would instantly drop on one knee. Just look at you,” Clare said as she grabbed my shoulders and maneuvered me to the bathroom mirror.

Markia and Clare were right. The shirt brings more attention to my blue eyes, and my newly tanned skin helps them stand out even more. However, blue has never been one of my favorite colors. The color always looks sad to me.

The shirt feels wrong on me at the bar, and it fits loosely on me in this bar of skin-tight clothes. Standing in the bar, I feel like a too-think coat hanger.

Before the drinks Markia ordered arrive, one of the bartenders puts a shot in front of me.

“I didn’t order this,” I say.

“I know,” he replies. “Compliments of the man over there.” The bartender points to a muscular man with a well-trimmed beard. I am not used to people buying me drinks, so I just awkwardly wave to him and mouth *thanks*.

“Ooo Milo is already getting hit on,” Markia says.

“Are you going to go talk to him?” Clare says.

“No,” I say. I feel overwhelmed. “Plus, he looks like he’s in his thirties.”

“So? There’s nothing wrong with an older man,” Clare says.

“You wouldn’t know, Clare,” Markia says. “Your fiancé is the same age as you.”

“Whatever,” she responds. “Take the shot at least, Milo.”

“I don’t even know what it is.”

“There’s only one way to find out,” Jones says. Even Jones is loosening up and getting in on the fun. I take a deep breath and take the shot. It leaves a familiar burn down my throat.

“Whiskey,” I say. Our drinks finally arrive. Markia had ordered something purple that tasted like grapes and vodka. After I take a few swigs of my drink, Markia says,

“Let’s go dance now.” She grabs my free hand and attempts to usher me to the dancefloor.

“No, I really don’t want to,” I say.

“Come on, Milo. How often do you get surrounded by a sea of guys, hot guys I might add. This isn’t just for you, Clare and I also want to experience the eye candy.”

“That’s right,” Clare says. “Now that I’m engaged, my times to dance among hot men are few and far between.”

“Come on,” Markia says as she tugs on my arm again. “Jones even wants to dance. Don’t you?”

“Count me in,” Jones says. “I’m not going to stand here by myself. I’d look like fish bait.”

Markia tilts her head and gives me the look that lets me know I really do not have

a choice. With her grip still on my arm, Markia leads us smack dab into the middle of the crowded dance floor.

The music is so loud that I cannot tell what song is playing. The notes and lyrics are masked by the bass beats. Markia and Clare meld to the erratic movements seamlessly. They even join some of the guys dancing around us and match their improvised choreography. Jones tries his best to have fun while also looking as masculine as he can. I notice that he kept his eyes on Markia the majority of the time. I have always suspected that Jones is into Markia. This was even more evident a few nights ago when Markia made out with a guy at the bar.

On the dancefloor, I try to bob to the music and relax, but I cannot get over the sense that I am alone on a stage and everyone is watching me. A few guys lock eyes with me and try to dance up on me, and each time, I promptly avert my gaze elsewhere and move away. I notice that I have drifted away from Markia, Clare, and Jones, so I take it as my opportunity to escape from the dancefloor.

I find an empty, padded bench on a wall in one of the corners of the bar. It isn't until I sit down that I realize how hot and sweaty I have gotten from dancing. Large, damp circles have formed on my shirt underneath my arms, and my back clings to the shirt with more sweat. My hair is drenched as if I had just taken a shower or had been caught in a rainstorm.

"You look a little out of place," someone next to me says. I hadn't noticed that someone sat down next to me. When I turn around, I am met with amber and cocoa eyes and a half-moon smile. "Don't worry, me too."

The man before me looks like an Egyptian god. His jawline is not overtly defined,

yet it is still masculine. He is simultaneously slender yet toned. The man carries around him the subtle confidence and posture one would find in models in magazines.

“It’s all performative in here. People are all trying to fit a mold and be people they aren’t,” he says. “I can tell you’re not like that.” The man slouches back onto the wall as if he had been sitting there for a long time.

“I’m Red, by the way. Red as in the color,” he says as he extends a hand to me. It takes me a second to remember how to talk.

“Milo. My name’s Milo,” I say. I feel self-conscious about how sweaty my hand feels in his.

“Milo as in *Milo and Otis*?” Red says. “Just kidding. I’m sure you get that all the time.”

“Actually, it is from that movie. My parents are big animal freaks.”

“Really?”

“Nope,” I am surprised at myself for the joke.

“Well it’s nice to meet you Milo, not from *Milo and Otis*,” he says. I am unsure of his motives. The man before me is unreadable.

“It’s nice to meet you, too,” I say.

“So Milo, what brings you to this bar? Clearly you did not come here on your own free will.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m here with friends on spring break. They thought it would be offensive not to take me to a gay bar while we were down here.”

“Ah, I see. You’re the token gay in the group, so your friends were able to use you as an excuse to go to a gay bar. Classic tale,” Red says. “So spring break, huh?”

Where are y'all from then? Somewhere cold I bet since you picked sunny Tampa as your getaway."

"Des Moines. It was snowing when we left for break. Can't say I miss the cold. It'll be rough going back."

"Lucky you. I miss the cold. This weather here is too hot for me. You can always put on layers for the cold, but you can't take off enough layers when it's hot."

"Are you from Florida then?"

"No sir. I'm from the Midwest. Illinois, born and raised in the Quad Cities. High school me thought it was a genius idea to go to Florida for college. I wanted to get away from home and try something different. I had only visited the beach a few times growing up, so I thought it would be amazing to be by one for college. However, winter holidays don't feel the same here. The festivities seem artificial. I miss things like sledding, snowball fights, hot cocoa, and sitting by a fireplace."

"I would trade any of those things for a warm, sunny day," I say.

"Well, I guess we'll have to agree to disagree then," Red says with a wink. "So are you from Iowa then?"

"Nope. I'm from Colorado. My family is from the Midwest originally though. It's always been a sentimental place for me, so I decided to go there for school. I went from a cold place to a colder place. I guess I like self-sabotaging myself."

"Sounds like you do a lot of things you don't like such as go to gay bars with friends," he says.

"I guess I do," I say. I nearly forget I am in a bar. For a brief moment, it is just Red and me in the world as if we were on a bench in a secluded park. The more I look

into his cocoa eyes, the more I see the little flecks of gold around his pupils.

“I also came to the bar against my will. I guess we have that in common. I’m supposedly wing-manning for my friend, but he seems to be doing just fine without me. He’s had his lips locked with a guy on a dancefloor since we got here.”

“There you are,” a voice shouts at me. I turn around to find Markia coming my way. “I thought you ran away with some man without telling us or something.”

Markia then notices Red sitting next to me. She looks between him and me, and then a peevish grin emerges on her face.

“Well, well, well,” she says. “Who have you found here, Milo?”

“Oh, uh. This is Red,” I say. “Red, this is Markia.” *Am I blushing?* I worry.

“Red. What a handsome name,” Markia says as she extends her hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“You must be one of the friends that dragged Milo here. It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Red says as he pats my shoulder. “Well, I’ll let you have Milo back here. I should also find my friend I came with. He’s a bit of a trouble-maker.”

Red stands up. Before he walks away, he turns to me.

“I hope to see you again before the night is over, Milo,” he says, and then he is lost in the neon sea of the bar. I remain seated, and Markia sits next to me. I already know what she is going to say. Markia is never been one to be subtle.

CHAPTER 7

The world is hazy, monochromatic. A bleak grey tidalwaves over the world around me. My breath is swept back down my throat. The stove in my chest tha-thuds, fire-whistles for the oxygen it pines for. And then we are up. The grey recedes from the iridescence of the world above. My breathing burns steady. I look out the window to see dappled, white entities skating through the sky. I slowly release my grip on the armrests as the ‘seatbelt’ sign is turned off.

I am so used to looking to the clouds from down on the ground that I cannot look away from them now. I forget how effortless they are. Their forms are mountainous yet they crumble with the slightest breeze. The clouds when we first broke through them were quilted together in cotton lumps, but now they island off of one another. I am able to see the landscape of the Midwest below. A spectrum of beige to evergreen puzzle pieces piece together over the vast expanse of the ground. Country roads line the jigsaw exteriors. They are adorned with electric wires and silver silos.

“Sir,” I jump in my seat. “Excuse me. Would you like a beverage?” I turn around.

“Yes please. Thank you.” The flight attendant wears a blue uniform with a white ascot. I wonder if he gets tired of wearing the same uniform day in and day out. I have to wear button-up shirts every day to work. They are not all the same color, but I still tire of the regularity. A moment of silence passes, and the flight attendant continues to look at me.

“Sir.”

“Yes?”

“You never specified which beverage you would like.”

“Oh yeah. Uh, water will be fine.”

“Ice?”

“No, thank you.” He grabs a stocky, plastic cup and fills it with an oversized waterbottle.

“Thanks,” I say as he hands it to me. There is not a person in the seat next to me, so the flight attendant moves on to the next row. I suppose a Wednesday towards the end of June is a random day to fly. I quickly down the room temperature water and crush the cup into the seat pocket ahead of me. I am always afraid of spilling on myself on planes. I once saw a man spill his soda all over his laptop. My oath to myself is that I will never take that risk.

I watch the terrain below change slowly from speckled farms to the wide open plains of Kansas. Soon I will be back home in the mountains. Donna’s words really stuck with me after that day in the garden two weeks ago. Although she knew nothing of my relationship, her advice still rang true. That night I called my parents and told them what had happened.

“Why don’t you come home?” Dad had said. “It might be good to get away from it all. Plus... it’s been some time.”

“It has been awhile, hasn’t it?”

“Come home, Milo. It’ll be good for you.” I went into work day and asked for the time off. I was approved by the next day and bought my plane tickets shortly after.

“Any reason you’re taking a vacation back home?” Linda had asked. I half thought about telling her why, but instead I said I missed the mountains, which was not a complete lie.

As the pilot reminds us to return to our seats and fasten our seatbelts because we are beginning our final decent, I see the crown of peaks appear in the distance around Denver. The mountains before me hold sharp truths.

“First call for passengers departing for Montrose, Colorado on flight...”

I get in line to board my final flight to Montrose, to home. As a kid, I used to people watch with my parents at DIA. Each time people emerged from recently landed planes, we would guess where they were from. Cowboy boots and navy shirts adorned with white stars would hint to Texas. Floral-printed pants and flip-flops would perhaps suggest Florida or California. Well-dressed business people were hard to pinpoint because that could mean Chicago, New York, D.C., or any major city really. Colorado flights were always unmistakable though: zigzag woolen shawls, “Life is Good” tees, ski-boots draped over backpacks like evergreen accessories, and the detail non-locals would miss, the sagebrush lotion only indigenous to western slope natives. I am hugged by the familiar scent as I stand in the line of my origins.

Ahead of me, I spot a woman with hair the color of spiderwebs in moonlight. She turns to hand over her ticket to the agent, and a small breath escapes my throat. I am not sure if it is her, but if so, her hair is a testament that time did not cease when I left Ridgway.

I am corralled into the terminal with the other members of my flight. The narrow, twenty row plane is quickly filling up. I scan the flock of heads until I spot her in a window seat in the fifth row.

“Mrs. Flores. Mrs. Flores,” I wave my hand awkwardly in the air as not to hit the

dwarf roof of the plane. When she turns around, she wears a look of confusion.

“It’s me, Milo. Milo Landis.”

“Milo, it’s been so long I just didn’t recognize you. What brings you home?”

She stops there and smiles the smile I remember.

“Oh, just needed to use some vacation days. Why are you traveling?”

“Retirement lets you travel when and where you want.”

“Move it,” a large man in a green beanie pushes me with his bag.

“Sorry, my bad,” I say to him as I begin moving down the aisle. “It was good seeing you, Mrs. Flores.”

“Same, Milo. I’ll have to tell Sam I saw you. Say hi to your parents for me.”

I am pushed farther down the aisle until I reach row fourteen where I sit down in my aisle seat. I would have preferred to be next to the window, but I will reunite with the San Juans after this forty minute flight. I try to put in earphones to listen to music, but the rock in my stomach grows three sizes. Colorado has already reminded me why I have not been back, why I never brought Red here. These pebble thoughts plague my mind. The forty minutes feel like eighteen years relived on a flight.

CHAPTER 8

The silverware morsecode plays the same message as it did throughout my youth. The clinks of serving spoon on bowls replace eye contact and words as we formally fill up our plates. The plates are the same flower-rimmed porcelain from meals past. My parents have outdone themselves as always. Mom passes me the green beans, and I place them on my plate which is already filled with rolls, pork chops, mashed potatoes, and an ear of corn. They may live in Colorado, but they still eat like mid-westerners, always more food than three people could possibly eat. I cut into a pork chop. Dad still has not mastered the art of grilling. I've tried to show him not to put the grill all the way on high, but I think the crisp exterior gives him peace of mind that everything is cooked through.

“How's work been going?” Dad says. At sixty years old, his brown hair has hardly greyed. I can only hope that he at least passed on those genes to me. I definitely did not get his height or his thick shoulders. My bones are bird thin like Mom's brothers. I even have Mom's ice eyes. His are dark blue like a forest floor at dusk.

“Same old, same old. I've been editing a lot of economic books lately. Fun stuff.” He nods his head and continues eating. “What have you two been up to?”

“Not much. We still play cards with the neighbors on Thursdays,” Dad says. “We had to re-do the carpet in the basement after a pipe leaked a few weeks ago. Mom has been working more at the plant nursery.”

“I didn't know that. When did you start working there?”

“Oh, I don't know,” she says. “About a year or so ago. Gives me something to do in retirement.” Her voice as always been quiet and hollow as if she is standing at the back of a cave.

“That’s great. Been working on any projects in the shed, Dad?” I ask.

“Nothing too seriously. Been fidgeting on a bike I bought off a buddy of mine a few weeks ago.”

“Sounds like fun,” I say. “Oh, guess what? I saw Mrs. Flores on the flight today.”

“Who?” Dad says.

“Sam’s mom,” I say.

“Oh, it’s been forever since I’ve seen her,” Dad says.

We sit in silence for the rest of dinner. I have not felt this full in quite some time.

In a choreographed routine, we take the dishes off the table. I begin scraping off the dishes into the sink.

“No, no, it’s OK,” Mom says. “I’ve got this.”

“Let me help. It’s the least I can do.”

“No, really. You don’t know where everything goes.” She pushes me aside with her thin arm. I do know where everything goes because this house is unchanging. But, I know better than to interfere with their regimented routine.

I head down the hallway past my parents’ wedding photos, past my school pictures, and past the one family photo we have had done when I was four.

My bedroom is the same: white walls, beige carpet, plaid bedspread, empty. I’m sure my parents vacuum and dust the room every weekend. The dresser’s deserted top still smells fresh of lemony Pledge. I lay down on my comforter, which has obviously been freshly washed.

I open my phone to check my messages. Besides Dad checking in on my plane departures, my last message has been about a month ago from Red. *Work ran late, sorry.*

I'll be over soon.

Weeks have passed with no messages from Olive, not even any from Matt or Jim or Landon. My world has been so quiet and has not gained more sound since coming home. Mom's silence is as loud as ever. This house still feels more like a hotel than a home. I haven't even spoken to Sam in years.

I set my phone down and walk back out to the living room. Mom is sitting in a chair reading a book.

"Where's Dad?" I ask.

"The shed," she says.

"Figures." I sit down on the couch and turn on the TV. The weather channel pops up. I stare at the forecast for the San Juans, but out of the corner of my eye I look at Mom. Her ice eyes are directed towards her book. They go left to right, left to right, never lifting to the son who hasn't been home in over three years.

I dream I am in an endless field of grass. A summer wind kneads the gold and green hues around me. The sky's curvature slopes more drastically than I am used to. Though I am outdoors, the world smells of hazelnuts rather than dug earth. Gravity feels more like pillow feathers than authority. I turn around. My eyes follow the horizon of grass; the world is an empty bliss. Then, I notice tiny specs in the distance. The specs grow larger and larger, and I realize they are coming right for me. My breath panics. The specs turn to people, and then they turn to people I know. I relax as I see Olive grow close. My hand waves in a friendly flag. Soon, I recognize Matt and Jim, then Landon, and all my friends back in Illinois. They grow near, and I feel a warmth that overtakes the

shadow of loneliness I have felt the last two weeks. *Come here, come here!* I yell. *I'm here!* But before they reach me, they stop. Olive and the others stand with expressionless, doll-esque faces at me. I wave and wave. They don't move. I try walking towards Olive, yet somehow the distance between us remains the same. Then out from behind Olive steps Red. He smiles at me. I am unsure if I smile back. He and Olive turn toward one another. Suddenly, everyone but me ages. Their skin wrinkles, and their hair ombres to grey. Red nods and walks left. Olive follows, then Matt, Landon, Jim, the others. The grass recedes to dirt, snowflakes fall, and I am alone.

CHAPTER 9

As I drive up Highway 50, I watch as the San Juan mountains slowly ombre into the adobe hills of Montrose. The adobe hills appear more white than their true taupe in the summer because their barren landscape is a harsh contrast to the evergreens of Ridgway and the cottonwoods that line the Uncompahgre river that chases the road.

Our local grocery store in Ridgway does not have much variety, and what it does have is overpriced even for Colorado standards. Instead of shopping there, I head to Montrose, the town over, where there is a Target.

The drive used to be a huge deal back in the day, but really it only takes twenty minutes. My commute to work takes about that time now. It's funny how our perception of time changes with place and age.

I frequent the Target in the Quad Cities back in Illinois, but for some reason I still get a giddy feeling when I shop at the Target here. If I ever had a dental or doctor appointment, I would get to skip half a day or sometimes even a full day of school. By the time that I could drive myself to appointments, I would always make time out of my way to go to Target to get the newest CD that came out or secretly buy an R-rated film Mom would never want me to see. Because there was not a mall for another fifty miles or so, Target was the closest thing to a shopping experience us mountain-town kids had.

I am a fairly meticulous packer, but I always forget to bring either a toothbrush or toothpaste. On this trip, it happened to be both. I also did not realize my deodorant stick had run out, and even though I packed a lot of shirts, I somehow only packed one pair of shorts and no pants. The present continues to feel numb, so details fall to the wayside.

I stare at the deodorant sticks on the shelf. I pick up the one I had been using, but

for some reason the smell is off as if I have never encountered the scent before. I place its grey tube back in its original spot. I sniff some more random tubes, but each scent is confusing, disorienting. Smell is supposed to be the strongest of the senses because it evokes the most vivid memories, yet I seem to have forgotten what scents I like.

“Milo?” I jump, unaware that someone was behind me, unaware that someone would recognize me here. I turn around.

“Sam?” At least, I think it’s Sam. Her hair is darker than I remember. Her skin seems a bit weathered as if she’s spent much of her time outside. And, she’s more defined, muscular than when I last saw her at graduation. But it’s those soft, almond-shaped eyes I recognize above all.

“I can’t believe it’s you. I hardly recognized you,” Sam says as she goes in for a hug.

“Same. I’m glad you recognized me first.”

“My mom said she saw you on the plane, but I wasn’t expecting to see you around. She didn’t know why you were here.”

“Yeah, we didn’t get much time to chat on the plane, just in passing.”

“Wow,” Sam pauses. We take one another in. She feels familiar yet so foreign. The experience feels like I am at a wax museum where her figure is on display in a faux-familiar setting, yet this is the real deal. The world now revolves around Facebook, yet I have always refused to make an account. I’m not sure if it’s because I didn’t care to keep up with people or perhaps it’s because I’ve been hiding.

“It’s really been a long time,” she repeats. Her voice almost sounds different, as if I am listening to a lost recording.

“It really has,” I say.

“There’s so much to catch up on. Um, where are you living? I think your parents said somewhere in the Midwest, but that was a while ago.”

“Yeah, Illinois, the Quad City area. What about you? Are you just home visiting?”

“No, just moved back over a year ago, almost two now,” Sam says.

“Wow, there’s not much to move back to. Oh, that sounded bad. I just meant that you were so adamant on getting out of here that I wouldn’t have expected it,” I say. I mentally kick myself for saying that. I once knew Sam, but so much time has passed. I don’t know what’s happened in her life since we’ve graduated.

“No, it’s OK. I didn’t ever think it would happen either, but here I am,” she says. I get the sense that she gets asked that question a lot, too much I bet.

“How long are you in town?” she asks.

“Just for a little bit,” I say. “A little under two weeks I think.”

“Well, I’m glad I got to run into you then. I guess I’ll let you get back to your shopping.”

“Thanks, it was good seeing you, too,” I say. Sam goes in for a final hug. She then gives me a half-wave as she leaves the deodorant aisle. I pause for a second and then run after her.

“Sam, wait,” I say. Sam turns around.

“I, uh, we should grab a drink and catch up sometime if you’d like.”

“Yeah, of course. I’m free most nights,” she says. We type in our numbers into one another’s phone.

“I’m extremely free. My parents don’t have much planned for me while I’m home. Text me and we’ll figure out a time,” I say.

“Sounds like a plan. I can’t wait to unlock the mystery to what the aloof Milo has been up to all these years,” she says. I want to reply that I would also like to know what I’ve been up to all these years.

CHAPTER 10

“Wow, Red is a hottie. When’s the wedding? Can I be the maid of honor or at least the flower girl?” Markia is shaking my arm. “So, did y’all kiss? Was it love at first sight?”

“No. It was nothing. We were just talking.” Markia gives me a skeptical look.

“Seriously. He was just being nice.”

“Hot men like him in places like this aren’t just ‘nice.’ Clearly he was into you. Did you see the way he was looking at you?”

“You’re just projecting,” I say.

“Am not,” she says. “What’s more is the way you were looking at him. You can’t deny it.”

“Really, it was nothing. Plus, he was way too attractive for me.”

“Not this again. Have you seen yourself tonight?”

“Yeah, I look like a sweaty pile of blue clothes.”

“Whatever. Everyone is sweaty here. Milo, if you only knew...”

“Where are Clare and Jones?” I cut her off.

“Umm I think they are still on the dance floor. We better go find them,” she says.

Markia is drunk enough for me to change the conversation without her realizing. I hate talking about my appearance because truth be told, I’ve never liked the reflection in the mirror. I think it stems back to being closeted in a small town. I didn’t know how to be attractive to guys because there were no gay guys at my school. There were also no LGBT role models in my town. The only gay person I knew of was a kid named Nolan in the town next to me. I never related to him. He was flamboyant, feminine, extroverted,

loud. He was all the stereotypes I did not see in myself. At least he had the confidence to be himself though. I never spoke to him out of fear that by association people would figure out I was gay for sure. I couldn't afford that because I was already being made fun of at school for being gay even though I was closeted, and I was scared it would get worse because I saw how kids treated Nolan.

Nolan was on his school's basketball team. Whenever we played him, people in the audience would sneer, and I even heard some people boo him one time. Our team would noticeably be extra rough to him on the court. They would push him far out of the way during rebounds, drive a shoulder into him as they dribbled past, and take jabs at him when the referees were not looking. My teammates guarding him would whisper things like 'fag' or 'don't touch me homo' into his ear.

However, Nolan handled the tormenting better than I could have. He never acted aggressive or lashed out during games even when slurs were yelled at him. He kept his head up high and his mouth shut. Sometimes, when he shot the ball and made a basket, he would add a little flair to his follow-through as if to remind people he was gay and was proud of it.

I don't think that being closeted in a small town is the only reason I hate my appearance. There were so many more factors like how effortlessly muscular and tall my father was, how quietly disapproving my mother was about my looks. Both of these things had nothing to do with my sexuality. My father wasn't to blame for his appearance. He never threw it in my face that I would never be as built as he was. Well, he never did intentionally. Sometimes he would do things that would unintentionally rub it in my face.

In the tenth grade, my parents bought some new furniture. When it arrived, my father told me,

“No need to help, Milo. I have someone coming over to help me move the stuff.”

That someone was a neighbor of mine who was in the twelfth grade. He was large and on the football team. I watched for a bit out the window as he helped out my father, but then I left the house and went for a long run. When I was back, the neighbor was gone and my father said nothing more about it.

My mother though, she was the one who outwardly expressed disappointment in my appearance. I did not care much for clothes nor did I do anything special with my hair, but for Mom, appearance was everything. She always looked impeccably put together even if she was just going to the grocery store. Like our pristine house, she curated her projection of herself to the world. I, however, did not work on my appearance, so she found ways to constantly remind me of this.

“No one is going to take you seriously in those clothes.”

“Stand up straight, your slouch is unappealing.”

“Your skin is broken out. Please use the face wash the dermatologist gave you. People can’t see past your red skin.”

“Maybe if you ate more, you would finally fill out.”

“Whether you like it or not, you’re representing our family. You’re going to make me look like a bad mother if you dress like that.”

“Maybe someday we could get your ears fixed so they don’t stick out so far.”

“Could you at least try sometimes?”

After all these years, it is still hard not to hear her voice when I look in the mirror.

I try thinking back, but I cannot remember a time when my mom said anything nice about the way I looked. I also can't remember a time when I said anything nice about the way I looked.

Maybe this all did tie into my friend's theory about being closeted for years. I never received a compliment from my family about the way I looked, and I never had any guy desire me physically until a semester or two into undergrad. For years, the only pair of eyes that accidentally made eye contact with me was the doppelgänger in the mirror. Those eyes never looked seductively or with any amount of confidence. Their irises held puddles of shame, of vulnerability, of isolation.

Once guys finally returned my gaze early in college, they only pursued me physically in adherence to the superficial, unwritten laws of the gay world. The gay dating/hookup scene was all about fitting into types and molds. Some considered me a 'twink,' and would try to sleep with me just because I was skinny. Hardly ever was it more than just for a onetime thing. I hated hookups and quickly got out of that scene. They leave me feeling empty inside because I feel I am not attractive enough for them to see me again.

All of this leaves me wondering why this guy, Red, came up to talk to me at this bar. I cannot figure out his motive for seeking me out. As I follow Markia back to the dance floor, I look around to see if I can spot Red, but he has truly disappeared into the waves of men.

We do not find Clare and Jones on the dancefloor, so we scout the outskirts of the dance floor and spot them at the bar with freshly poured drinks in their hands. Jones's hair is drenched like mine. He looks more relaxed than he did earlier. Clare's hair is

slightly coming undone, and I can tell by her large hand movements that she is a bit drunker now than she was when I left the dance floor.

“There you two are,” Clare says loudly. “You just missed it. Guess who paid for these drinks?”

Before either Markia or I can respond, Jones says,

“Not us,” and then he and Clare clink their drinks together and take swigs.

“Jones and I got tired of dancing and needed a refreshment to cool us off, so naturally we came back to the bar. Before a bartender saw us, a handsome fellow, wouldn’t you say he was handsome, Jones?”

“Oh, definitely handsome. Even I can admit that,” he nods.

“Yes, so this handsome man comes over to Jones and tells Jones he would like to buy him a drink. Jones asked why, and the guy responded that he thought Jones was hot. Jones told the guy he was straight and not interested. And you know what the guy did?” Clare pauses and looks at both of us. “He bought both of us drinks. He said, ‘I appreciate a man who can throw away his machismo aside and still come to a gay bar.’ That’s how we got free drinks.”

“It was amazing really. I’ve never had a stranger buy me a drink,” Jones says. “If I’m being completely honest, my biggest fear tonight coming to a gay bar was being hit on by a dude. Turns out it’s no big deal. You just say ‘no.’ And honestly, it was a little bit of an ego boost knowing hot guys find me attractive.”

“To free drinks and ego boosts,” Clare says. She and Jones clink their drinks and take a swig from them again.

“So, what were you two doing?” Clare asks.

“Well, we have a spicy story to tell as well,” Markia says as she nudges me.

“Oooo did our Milo find himself a husband?” Clare asks.

“Not just a hot man, but the hottest man at the bar. He looked like he came out of an Abercrombie and Fitch catalogue. Get this, his name was Red...” Markia goes on to tell her dramatic rendition of the story. Clare giggles, and Jones gives me a congratulatory slap on the back. The whole time I am not thinking about the way Red looked physically. I keep thinking about the look his eyes gave me. The look wasn't hungry in the way other men had looked at me who were only trying to pursue my flesh. The look was not animal, not carnal by any means. For once I did not feel pursued by a wolf, mountain lion, or hawk trying to corner its prey into fright, into submission. Red's look was entirely different. His gold-flecked, cocoa eyes held a genuine inquisition tinged with confidence, and it was his confidence that was most alarming because it was not motivated by arrogance, rather, the confidence stemmed from his comfortability with the world and his place in it. It's as if he had lived for hundreds of years and knew everything was going to be alright no matter what.

Markia and I order another drink in order to catch up to Jones and Clare. It is nice to see Markia relaxed. For the last few months she has been applying to medical schools and studying to retake the MCAT. She has been aloof and serious recently, so I'm glad that this trip has allowed for her to party and reclaim her adventurous spirit. I also haven't seen much of Clare recently because she and Mateo have been spending most weekend planning their wedding. I thought senior year would be a time for us all to grow closer, but the call of the real world is slowly drifting us apart. I'm afraid that this trip will be the last time we all hangout.

While the four of us continue chatting and drinking at the bar, I periodically scan around for Red, but he is nowhere in sight. Maybe he has left. This thought saddens me surprisingly.

“Alright, I’m rested and ready to get back on the dancefloor,” Markia says. “Who is with me?”

“Count me out. I wore the wrong kind of shoes, and my feet are killing me,” Clare says as she lifts up her feet and motions towards her heels. “I knew these puppies might be a bad mistake, but they are so damn cute that I just had to wear them since I hadn’t worn them all break.”

“I’m also pretty tired. I’ll stay with Clare,” Jones says. “You two go along and have fun.”

“But I…”

“No buts, Milo. Looks like it is you and I again,” Markia says as she starts heading back to the dance floor. “And who knows. Maybe your husband will be there dancing.”

“He’s not my husband,” I say as I follow her. Plus, I am convinced Red is long gone from the bar.

The dance floor is not as packed as before. People, like Clare and Jones, must have worn out and given up on dancing. This does not stop Markia from dancing though. I envy her. She could be the only one dancing in a room full of people, and she would still be as comfortable as ever. Markia’s self-assurance and my slight tipsiness help me relax and let loose a little bit more than usual. All of a sudden, I spot Red from across the dance floor. My body freezes for a second, stunned by the realization this man actually

existed and I had not imagined him. We lock eyes. I blush and quickly turn away. I try to dance as if I have not seen him or make a fool of myself staring at him. I make a quick glance back and see that he is weaving his way through the mass of people over to me. I turn away. Markia notices the change in expression on my face.

“What is it?” she asks.

Red, I mouth. Before she can respond, someone taps me on the shoulder.

“Hello,” Red says.

“Hello,” I say.

“I was worried for a second that you had left already and that I wouldn’t get to see you again,” he says exactly what I am thinking, but I do not have the courage to say such things.

“Here I am,” is all I can manage to say.

“Here you are,” Red holds out his hand to me. “May I have this dance?”

“Isn’t this the wrong type of scene and the wrong type of music for this?”

“Well we’ll just have to make do with what we can.” Red, Red, Red. Who is this man?

In response, I let him take my hand. He pulls me in and slides his other hand around my waist. I look over to Markia and give her a confused I-don’t-know-what’s-happening face, and she returns a just-go-with-it-he’s-hot, stern look. She backs up and disappears into the crowd.

Other guys around us are grinding, grabbing at one another’s crotches, and making out, but Red holds me and sways. I nearly forget that techno music with heavy beats is playing rather than a slow waltz played by a single piano. Our bodies rock back

and forth as if we are gentle waves lapping at the shore of a secluded pond, and he holds me in the way a warm breeze holds a body on a summer day. Red is tall, well over six feet, much taller than I noticed when he was sitting beside me earlier in the night. I am an average, five foot ten, but I feel so small next to him. We are both slender, but his frame is much wider and sturdier than my narrow, sloped shoulders.

“I’m glad we met tonight,” Red whispers into my ear. “Two strangers both out of place in this wild bar. Both a part of this gay community yet outside and different than it. Kind of beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it is refreshing.” I make the mistake of looking up at the gold-flecked cocoa of his eyes. He looks back intently without turning away. His eyes whisper that he may try to kiss me if I stare any longer, and this thought makes me nervous. I back up and mutter,

“I should find my friends. This has been fun though, thanks.”

I turn and quickly walk away.

“Wait, Milo,” Red says, but I do not wait nor do I look back. I head to the bathroom to hide for a second. I turn on a faucet and splash crisp, cold water on my face. I grab a coarse, brown paper towel from the dispenser and pat my face dry. When I finish and look up into the mirror, I am startled by the face of the man staring back at me in the mirror. I cannot understand why he looks both panicked and sad. A minute or two passes as I try to relax and regain my composure before exiting the bathroom to find my friends.

“How did it go with Mr. Red?” Markia asks when I find her and the others at the bar.

“Alright.”

“Just alright? From what it looked like when I left, things appeared to be going pretty well if you ask me.”

“I’m ready to leave,” I say. “I’m getting pretty tired. How about you guys?”

Markia visibly looks skeptical at my avoidance of her comment.

“Bar closes soon anyway I think,” Jones says.

“I’ve had about enough fun for the night. My feet have been over this place a while ago,” Clare says.

We all close our tabs and go outside into the night. I keep forgetting how hot and muggy Tampa is, so I am caught off guard when the air outside is not cool and refreshing like I am used to in Iowa.

A few cabs are lined up on the street. Jones waves to us when he finds one that is available. Jones sits in the front seat. Clare and Markia slide into the back seat, and I am about to slide in after them when I hear,

“Milo, Milo wait.” My first instinct is to sit down and shut the door, but some unknown force tells me to turn around and confront the voice. Red runs up to me.

“I’m glad I caught you before you left. Look, I really did have a good time tonight. I wanted to give you my number before I left,” he says.

“But I’m leaving tomorrow,” I say.

“I know. Doesn’t matter to me.” He is quiet for a second. All I can hear was the woosh of cars driving up and down the street coupled with the drumming of my bird heart. I reach into my pocket and hand over my phone. Red gives me an assured smirk.

“There’s my number,” Red says as he hands back my phone. “Please text me, Milo. Will you?”

I do not know what comes over me because it is so different than the feeling of fright I had earlier on the dance floor, but rather than respond, I grab his face with one hand and bring his face in for a kiss. I feel the slight sandpaper of his stubble on my hand as I caress the side of his face. Our kiss is broken up by the sound of the taxi driver insisting that we need to get going. We pull away.

“Goodbye, Red,” I say.

“Goodbye, Milo,” he says as he watches me get into the taxi. Not soon after I close the door does the taxi pull away. I hesitate a second before looking back, and there is Red, waving to me as we drive off into the night.

The city of Tampa is not as filled with palm trees and does not exude the tropical vibe one might expect. Like most cities, it is filled with concrete sidewalks and large, rectangular buildings. However, Tampa pays a great attention of detail to glass, so many of its buildings downtown mostly are sided with glass so that during the day the blue and white of the sky are reflected in order to give off the appearance that people are surrounded not by buildings but by the world above. Tonight though, the buildings reflect both the streetlights and the stars from the clear, night sky, and, I’m not sure if it is because I am drunk or if I am just elated, but our taxi seemed to be driving through the night sky as we head back to our hotel.

The last thing I do before falling asleep is text Red, *This is Milo (from the bar)*.

I wake up to three texts from Red:

Thanks, it was great meeting you, Milo!

When do you leave today?

Let me take you on a date.

I must have been staring at my phone a long time without doing anything, because Markia comes over and tries to look over my shoulder.

“Is that who I think it is?” she says. I roll away from her on the bed as she tries to grab my phone.

“So it is?” Markia smiles peevishly. “What did he say?”

“Nothing. He said nothing, just that it was nice meeting last night. Doesn’t matter anyway. I’ll never see him again.”

“Sure you won’t.” Markia gives up on trying to talk to me about Red. She disappears into the bathroom to get ready for the day. Clare and Jones are taking advantage of the free, continental hotel breakfast one last time before we leave later today.

I open Red’s messages again and reread, *Let me take you on a date today*. I shake my head and type back,

Our plane leaves around 5pm today. Thanks for the date offer though.

I send the message and set my phone down on the side table next to the bed. As I do so, my phone buzzes. I pick it back up and read Red’s new message:

Perfect. That’s enough time for me to take you out. How about a picnic on the beach?

Red, I can tell, is one of those impulsive kind of people, which would usually annoy me; however, right now his impulsiveness comes across as charming and suspicious. I can’t bring myself to take up his offer though. He is too unlike anyone I have met before, and that scares me.

Really, your offer is sweet. It's not practical though. I'm leaving today, I respond. I am not able to understand why a man who had just met me would go through such great lengths to see me knowing I am leaving in a few hours for good. It feels useless like planting flowers in late October. The flowers would thrive for only a few moments before the first frost whisked their petals away.

My phone begins ringing. It's Red. I stare at his name on the screen while I debate picking up the phone or not. Right before the phone goes to voicemail, I answer.

"Hello?" I say.

"Hello, Milo," Red says. Even over the phone, his voice resonates his assuredness in the world. "It's good to hear your voice again."

"Thanks."

"So, I really do want to take you out. It doesn't have to be a picnic on the beach if that will take up too much of your time. We could just stroll around downtown and grab a bite to eat somewhere near your hotel. I'm not sure where you're staying, but I know a great café that..."

"I can't. I leave today," I interrupt.

"But you don't leave until five. I promise I won't take much of your time. I just need to see you again."

"Why? What's the point? I leave today forever. We can't start anything. I'll never see you again."

"What's the point?" The point is I like you. Last night was amazing."

"Last night was fun, but you don't even know me."

"But I want to get to know you," Red says, but I cannot understand what sets me

apart from others to him. Red seems like the kind of guy who could find interest in anyone. His sporadic nature contradicts my slow, methodical way I reason my way through life.

“Do you not want to get to know me?” Red asks.

“It’s not that. I would maybe if we lived closer, but I live in Iowa. I’ll go back, graduate at the end of the year, and who knows where I will be after that.”

“I really can’t convince you to see me today, can I? It’s a ‘no,’ isn’t it?”

“I’m sorry, Red.”

“Dang, I really thought I was going to be able to see you again.” His voice reflects his disappointment. It gives off that same feeling that people get when they stand in a cave and expect their voice to echo. They yell out into the vast void of the cavern but the walls are too soft and muted, so they do not receive the mirrored reply they had unquestioningly expected.

“Maybe someday, just not today,” I say, but then I surprise myself with the words that come out of my mouth.

“I’ll make you a promise.”

“A promise?” Hope rain-drops into his words.

“If our paths ever cross again accidentally. I will take you on a date. No questions asked.”

“No questions asked, huh? OK, Milo. You have yourself a deal. I’m going to hold you to your promise though.”

“A promise is a promise.”

“Don’t think I won’t remember this promise, because I will. I’m going to hold this

to you.”

“Deal. I don’t break promises,” I say. I hear Markia step out of the bathroom.

“I’ve got to go now, Red.”

“OK. Goodbye, Milo. I’ll see you on our future date.”

“Goodbye, Red.”

CHAPTER 11

I park my car at the gas station then run down the hill, across the bridge over the gurgling Uncompahgre River, and continue onto the dirt roads beyond. The dirt feels familiar, dry, and soft beneath my feet as I take stride after stride. Out here in the wider part of the valley near the river, ranches thrive. Fields and fields of green stretch out, and wooden fences house horses and some cattle. White, fluffy flakes of summer snow fall around me; these are the cottonwood trees' reminder in summer that I am here in the mountains.

This is one of my favorite spots to run back here. It is near the town of Colona over fifteen miles away. Colona can hardly be considered a town though. All it has is a gas station, an old and abandoned school building, and a restaurant that closes and changes hands about every two or so years.

What's best about it though is that it is in the wider part of the valley away from Ridgway. In Ridgway, I am too close in the mountains to get their full effect, but out here, I am able to see the entire range of the San Juans of southwest Colorado. I can identify the familiar mountains of the Cimmaron and Sneffels Ranges: Chimney Peak, Courthouse, Lookout, and the token Mt. Sneffels. I can also see Horsefly to the west, and Buckhorn slightly to the east looms over me as I run. Out here, their blue-grey bodies contrast the vibrant green and taupe brown of the valley. Even in July, their caps are still adorned with white snow from the previous spring. The snow won't be gone until late August, but come October, the snow will return.

I am not as used to running during the day, but I dare not run at night here. Mountain lions and black bears are abundant out in these parts. Such threats do not exist

in Illinois for me to worry about when the sun goes down.

My breath is shallow as I run. The air here is much thinner than that of the Midwest and lacks moisture. My mouth begins to dry. I curse myself for not bringing my water bottle on my run. The sun is hot and more direct here. The added elevation has less atmosphere to protect me. My sweat dries quickly and leaves salt residue on the sides of my face.

I can't help but wonder about Red out here. As much as I run and the harder I run, I still can't outrun my thoughts about him. He would be enthralled by the largeness of the mountains, and his adventurous nature would beckon him to climb them, to conquer them in order to unveil all that they are. Truth be told, in my eighteen years of living here and in my trips home, I have yet to climb a single one of the peaks. In my speculation about Red's desire to climb them, I envy him and feel belittled.

"Silly, Milo," he would say. "You're from the mountains yet have never been on one. You need to climb one in order to truly know your home." Red always believed knowing a place was so simple. In fact, everything in life appeared simple and easy for him.

As much as Red's view of the world frustrates me, I can't help but wish sometimes that life could be less complex for me. I'd like to know why the beauty of the valley can evoke joy and nostalgia in my mind while simultaneously creating tears in my eyes that quickly evaporate in this dry, Colorado heat.

CHAPTER 12

“Wow, I had no idea.”

“Really? I was bullied off the basketball team, Jaden and Anthony yelled ‘gay’ at me all the time. People always asked,” I say.

I take a big drink of my whiskey. It flames down my throat. Someone once told me the warmth is called a Kentucky hug. I’ve never been to Kentucky, so I can’t say for sure. All I feel is the sting from this town scraping my insides.

“But no one knew for sure. Not everyone believed the rumors,” Sam says. “I didn’t.”

She gives me that same, sincere face she always wore. I forget girls in high school were mean to her. She wasn’t the right kind of skinny, and even though she was good at sports, she was too nice to muster attention.

I look around the bar. Sam and I decided to meet up at a sports bar in Montrose. We figured we would have less chance running into people we knew here. Skis decorate the walls along with metal signs displaying the various major league teams from Colorado. The bar was fairly empty tonight. There was just us, the bartender, and an older woman sipping on a drink at the other end of the bar.

“Well, thanks, but you’re just saying that,” I say.

“No, really. I had the biggest crush on you forever,” Sam says.

There’s no way. Sam never made any advancements. No one did.

“Wait, wait, wait. Did you really?” Sam turns away and her face blooms like rose petals. “I had no idea.”

“You were my first kiss.”

“You were mine too, but that means nothing. It was just during truth or dare senior year.”

“Yeah, a truth or dare I set up just to kiss you. Natalie was in on it the whole time. You and her were so close, but I was also friends with her. She confessed to me that you had never kissed anyone, so we set up this whole scheme to play the game on our fieldtrip to Denver. That’s why she dared you to kiss me.”

“That’s why she dared me! And here I was thinking the whole time that I robbed you of your first kiss. I was so mad at her. I was so nervous, and you were so quiet.”

“Yeah, I didn’t want to give away that I wanted you to kiss me. But, I did want you to think the kiss was magical enough to do again. I thought it would make you like me.”

“This whole time I thought no girls liked me in high school because I thought everyone just suspected I was gay.”

“You are so dumb. So many girls had crushes you at different times. Me, Sarah, Riley. Even Jen liked you for a while in middle school.”

“Why did no one ever tell me?”

“I was going to after the fieldtrip, but then you got distant. I was planning to ask you to prom. Natalie was also in on all of this, but then you went to prom with that girl from two towns away and dated her until graduation.”

“Reagan? We were friends from track. We barely even hung out. I only went out with her to get people off my back, but I guess last semester of high school was too late to do that anyhow. Teen logic never makes sense. I never even kissed her. You were the only person I ever kissed before college. And then in college...” I half laugh. The

sensation of finally revealing years and years of my suppressed, past self to Sam is both tangible and dreamlike at the same time.

“In college you what?” Sam gently shoves my arm.

“I kissed a guy or two.”

“Just a guy or two?” Her eyebrow raises suspiciously.

“Well, maybe three or four.”

“Damn, who would have thought Milo would have gotten a bit of action. You were such a prude in high school. I have no room to talk though. I didn’t even get laid until my second year of college, and I fell into the typical ‘kid from a small town’ trap. I dated the first dude who said he loved me for the majority of my undergrad. Gah, was I stupid. I even moved in with Steve afterwards for almost two years.”

“Wow, that’s quite a while.”

“It’s alright. That was a few years ago. No need to rehash all of that right now. What about you? Any serious relationships in college or recently. Is Milo Landis seeing someone now? Let me guess. He’s tall, dark, and handsome.”

“Not exactly. In undergrad, there were just a few guys I dated for a couple months each. Nothing too serious. It wasn’t until,” I pause and look down at my drink. Small swirls of water melt off the ice into my whiskey.

“Until what?” Sam’s expression is light but then grows dim when I don’t answer.

“Oh. I see. Recent then. I’m sorry.”

“It’s OK. Again, not the time to rehash stuff.”

Suddenly my eyes feel like thin, plastic bags not meant to hold liquid. I pretend to check my watch.

“I should be getting back home. It’s been good catching up though,” I manage to say. I fumble some money onto the bar and begin walking away.

“Already? Ok. Will I see you again before you leave?”

I’m trying not to be obvious, but Red is closing in on me from three states away.

“Yeah. Text me tomorrow. Bye,” and I am out the door. Thousands of miles west and thousands of feet up, and I still cannot escape Red. Red, who was tall, dark, and handsome just like Sam described. Is this solitude not what I wanted?

The next day I am in the shed with my father. My goal for the day was to sleep in and ignore the world, but Mom’s vacuuming woke me. After she was done, the house’s silence bullied me out of bed and out the door.

The shed displays gadgets and tools on its corkboard walls. Dad’s organizational skills are displayed at their finest. Each tool has its own space, and an equal gap separates each item. However, one segment of the main wall has more artistry than the others. There hangs the old tools from my grandfather as well as some given to Dad from an old family friend who has also passed away. These tools will be mine someday, but I fear I won’t have the same appreciation for them as my father does.

Dad works on his buddy’s bike, an old green Suzuki from the early nineties. He really should have been a mechanic instead of an accountant. Grandpa told me even as a young child Dad picked up the ability to read machines quicker than most kids learned how to read books.

I watch as his thick, hairy arms navigate the inner guts of the bike. They are the same strong arms he used to pick me up with as a child. I envied his strength and looked

forward to the day I, too, would be strong like him. But little Milo did not know he was cursed with bird bones.

“You’ll never get muscles running as much as you do,” Dad said once. I tried lifting heavily for a couple months, but lifting doesn’t quiet my soul the way running does. I also found out no matter how much I ate and lifted, Dad did not give me his cedar frame to hold such muscles. I am forever cursed to be light and thin, to not take up much space in this wide, wide world. On top of not being as strong as him, I am also not mechanically inclined, so as I watch him work, I cannot even gander what he is tinkering with. He takes a step back from the bike and wipes his grease-slicked hands on a cloth rag.

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to tell Frank it’s more than a simple ignition problem, but I should have the parts to fix it,” he says.

I just nod as I lean up against the ice chest in the shed. He turns to me.

“You doing OK, Milo? You know, with everything that’s going on?” He looks at me but then turns his gaze to the walls as if he’s checking to make sure everything is in place. I wish he would just say Red’s name.

“Yeah, I’m good,” I want to talk about Red, really I do, but it’s always been weird talking to Dad about guys. Maybe it’s because he’s a guy and I’m a guy. Maybe it’s because it’s hard for me to talk to anyone about Red.

I’m not sure if I’ve ever had a conversation about him to my father. After almost a year of dating Red, I finally told my parents there was a guy in my life.

“Glad to hear it, Milo,” Dad had said over the phone. “How is he?”

“Good,” I said. “He’s good.” Even then, I was not sure about what to articulate

about him. I suppose it was good enough that a man had lasted longer than three months in my life. Red was the first guy worth mentioning to my parents.

Dad and I sit in silence for a bit longer as he works on the bike.

“You know,” he starts. “You can talk to me about... stuff.”

“Yeah,” I turn to look at one of the museum-esque walls. “It’s just new I guess. I don’t know.”

He keeps his eyes directed on his bike.

“And Mom. Well, she’s never been good with people. She cares, just in her own way,” Dad says.

“I know,” I say.

Dad looks up as if he is about to say more. His mouth even opens a little, but a gear in him changes. He returns back to the bike.

CHAPTER 13

Sam picks me up in the late morning the next day. She had called the night before and asked if I wanted to go canoeing.

“I’m not sure. The water is always pretty choppy at the reservoir. Plus, it’s crowded this time of year,” I said.

“Why would you assume we’d go there, silly?” Sam said.

“I’m not sure. Isn’t that where everybody goes?” I said.

“No. Clearly you’ve been gone for a long time. You don’t know much about the area,” she said, and she was right. I don’t know much about the area, but it’s not because I have been gone for a long time. Sometimes it is hard for me to admit that I am from Colorado but don’t know much about camping. Most people move to the Ridgway area because they love the outdoor lifestyle. However, my family doesn’t camp. I’ve only really camped a few times on school field trips growing up and once with friends in undergrad. The time in college hardly counted though because we just got a bunch of blankets and set up a tent on the football field.

“So, where are we going today?” I say as we follow the Uncompahgre River up the valley towards Ouray.

“You’ll just have to wait and see,” Sam says. As we drive, the valley narrows, and cliffs begin to hug us on both sides. During some times of the year, bighorn sheep can be seen adorning the rock faces on the sides of the road. A few miles in, Sam takes a right off of the main highway and gets onto a dirt road which we follow until we pull up to a lake.

“Here we are,” Sam says. “Black Lake.”

I vaguely remember this lake, but it has been years and years since I have driven by it. Never though had I been on the lake.

“It’s gorgeous,” I tell Sam as I step out of the car. I help as we get the canoe off the top of her Subaru. The metal frame of the canoe is sturdy yet lighter than I expected. I take off my shoes before we walk the canoe into the lake. My feet are unprepared for the cold water of Colorado. Even in the hot summers, the air has no humidity to keep the heat around at night, so lake and river water remains cold year round. Sam lets me get into the canoe first. Then, she follows suit. And suddenly, we are waterborne.

The canoe causes ripples that distort the crisp reflection of the scenery around us in the water from the dark greens of the evergreens and the light greens of the aspens to the amalgam of browns in the ground and the true blue of the sky. The sound of our paddles in the water is calming, meditative. Black Lake is not large by any means, so we find a spot in the middle of the lake to float.

“This is what peace feels like,” I say as I lay back to look up at the clear sky.

“It really is. I came up here often after Steve and I broke up,” Sam says while also looking up at the sky. “Some of the other lakes are harder to access, so it’s nice that this lake is just far enough off the beaten path that not many people come by but just close enough to make it easily accessible. Sometimes I see fisherman here when I come, but there is the unspoken agreement of silence. Something about the slight rocking of the canoe on the water is soothing and reminds me that the world can be kind.”

I’m not sure if I said I agreed out loud or in my mind, but the feeling was still there. I take off my shirt in order to let my chest breathe in the view around me as well. After a few minutes of silence, Sam speaks again.

“Milo, do you want to talk to me about why you left the bar the other night so quickly?” Suddenly, I am no longer with Sam in the canoe. Red’s presence is with us, and the canoe feels heavier. I sit back up to look at Sam, except I cannot look at her. Instead, I observe to the mountains in the distance.

“If not, that’s OK. Just know I am here to talk if you want,” Sam says. She lies back down in the canoe. A few beats pass as I watch some Colorado blue jays fly in the distance.

“The reason I came back home,” I say, “is because of a breakup. His name is Red. Well, actually it’s Rhett, but that name was too country for him, so he went by Red growing up.” It feels absurd to say his name here in this land he’s never been to.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Sam says. “How long did you two date?”

“About three years.”

“Wow, that is a long time.”

“Yeah, I guess it is.”

“And the breakup? How did it happen?” Sam asks. I take a deep breath.

“That’s the confusing part, the hard part. He broke up with me, but I’m starting to think I’m the one that broke his heart. I didn’t cheat, flirt with other guys, physically hurt him, yell at him or anything. But I no longer knew how I felt about him, and he caught on before I could get the guts to tell him. It’s all confusing and complicated, and I’m not sure what to feel or what to do.” A few tears begin to well up in my eyes, but I am able to wipe them away before more come.

Sam reaches over to grab my arm, but then she changes her mind. I’m glad. I’ve never been one for physical touch. It’s never consoled me. Of course, I’m not sure what

does console me at this point. Instead, Sam says,

“I’m sorry, Milo. That does sound difficult. I can kind of relate. I knew things weren’t going well with Steve for a while. I wanted out, but I had never been in a serious relationship before. I didn’t know how to end a relationship. Lucky for me, well I guess not so lucky, he did cheat, which gave me a reason to leave him. It made it easier to tell people why it ended. The breakup was still difficult though. The first year was the hardest. That’s when I moved home. It’s helped a lot even though there aren’t many people to hang out with. The setting keeps me busy. Sorry I’m rambling about myself. This is supposed to be about you.”

“Sam, I had no idea,” I say.

“No worries. Of course you didn’t. You’ve been gone a long time,” she says with a smile. She really does exude a confidence which demonstrates that she has moved on, that things have gotten better. I’m envious. I want to be beyond all of this with Red, so that I can look back and make sense of all these feelings.

“What helped you the most?” I ask.

“Honestly?” Sam says. She puts her hand in the water and moves it back and forth. “Being outside, time, and talking about it. Without having someone to talk to, I’m not sure I could have made sense of my muddled feelings at all.” Sam pauses. I can tell she is revisiting a memory in her head as she continues to move her hand back and forth in the crisp, lake water. Then, she looks back at me.

“Thanks for being here to talk. I haven’t talked to anyone about it at all. Well, I broke the news to my parents, but they’ve never been easy to talk to about anything. Dad tried talking to me about it in the garage, but it just weird talking to my dad about boys or

relationships in general. And Mom... she's just never been one to talk about feelings. My parents aren't mad or opposed to me liking dudes. Mom, well we just don't have anything in common I guess."

"I feel that. My mom was a single mom, and all of the pressure was on me and my siblings to turn out perfect. Lucky for me, she has chilled out in the last few years and was the most supportive person when I broke up with Steve. Most of my friends were Steve's friends also, so I really did not have many people to turn to. That's one of the reasons I ended up back here. That, and I missed the mountains."

"I am in the same boat," I say. "All of my friends back in Illinois I met through Red. My closest friend even was his sister. Now, she made it clear that I can't talk to her because Red is her brother. I guess I can't blame her. Still, it sucks though." I cannot believe that after all of these years apart, all these different lives we have lived, and Sam and I have both ended up back in the mountains for similar reasons.

"Yeah, it does suck," she says. "But the good news is that there are new friends to find. Or," she nudges me, "old friends to reconnect with."

"I guess you're right," I say. "Where was this Sam in high school? Why did we never hang out?"

"Well I was too busy crushing on closeted gay guys and getting picked on by the basketball team. But in all seriousness, I think we were in different places and needed different things."

"Do you still talk to anyone from school?"

"No. Not at all. I run into Natalie, Ricky, and Selena from time to time, but that is only because they still live back here at home."

“Who do you hang out with then?”

“Oh, I have a few people at work I hang out with here and there, and I have some pretty good friends I have made through various parts in my life I try to talk to or visit from time to time.”

“That’s good,” I say. “I should be better at reconnecting with friends from the past. I’ve not talked to some of my undergrad friends in a while. We all became adults with jobs and got busy.”

“You’re connecting with me now,” Sam smiles. “That’s a start.”

“That is a start,” I say. “A good one at that.”

Sam and I lay back in the canoe for a while longer. It hits me that I feel something I have not felt in quite some time: peace. I have gotten away from taking time to go outside and just be. The serenity of the landscape around me now is a meditation long overdue. And Sam. I would have never expected that she of all people would be here helping me out.

We canoe for a bit longer, and then we pull up to the shore. The lake is still ours except for a duck couple who returned on the side opposite of us.

I find a smooth, flat, and oblong rock on the shore. The grey rock is warm on the side that was facing the sun and cool to the touch on the bottom. I position its curves in the crook of my index finger and then release it over the water. The rock skips a few times before submerging to its new home in the lake. The ripples move slowly outward.

CHAPTER 14

Each metallic stem adorns a different shaped shade. Some are a cylindrical canvas material while others force silk fabric to jag out at sharp angles. The decision to select a lamp should not be as difficult as I am making it out to be. I don't need a lamp, but I do need a lamp. Last night before bed, I tried reading in my bedroom, but the overhead light was too aggressive. The white of the paper became fluorescent and overpowered the thin, weak letters on the page. Yes, I could just read in a different room at night, like the living room where I have two lamps I inherited from my grandparents set up on end tables next to the couches, but that's not really the point.

Lately, I've been making a lot of random runs to the store to buy tidbits for my house. I feel as if I am trying to make up for lost time. Markia, Clare, Jones, and my other friends graduated last May, so they already had a head start on the 'real' world while I was stuck in Des Moines for the summer and a final fall semester. Jones went to Nebraska as planned. Clare and Matteo moved to DC to begin their political endeavors. Markia was accepted into almost every med school she applied to and chose to move to New York in order to see what life is like in the 'Big Apple.' That period of time for me felt unmoving. I watched on social media as the lives of my friends began to move forward. They started jobs, bought houses, began making communities in their new settings.

I finally graduated in December, scored a job in Moline, and now I was living in my first ever house. It is a beautiful rustic, blue house about ten miles south of the cities nestled in the countryside. The house is the first place I have ever lived that has been mine and only mine. After all of those months of watching my friends settle down into

the 'adult' world, I feel a pressure to prove my worthiness as an adult by compulsively finding new things to add to my house. This is why, on a random February Saturday, I am staring at lamps that I do and do not need.

No one has ever taught me how to buy a lamp. I got lucky with the two from my grandparents in the living room. They fit the rustic feel of my house. They have glass bases filled with various types of dried coneflowers from the Midwest that my grandparents collected throughout the years. However, buying a lamp from scratch is entirely a different matter because it feels like I am making a commitment to this lamp for not just the duration of my life, but possibly for the future lives of my hypothetical grandchildren.

I always head to Target when I need something for my house or if I drive to town for no reason at all. Target is never anyone's number one go-to store. No one shops there primarily for their groceries because HyVee, Walmart, and Fairway all have larger selections of groceries. People go to Target not out of necessity but out of novelty. The store has a little bit of everything, and the little bit of everything is just different and interesting enough to garnish attention. People go to Target when they need something, but they cannot identify what it is they need. Target provides that childlike wonder that is lost with age and is able to fill a small piece of that missing void by conjuring an item that is so specific and unique, that it seems that it could only be designed just for you whether it be a rustic wooden bear that perfectly accents the couch in your living room or a cardigan exactly the color as that plaid shirt you inherited from your grandfather. Or, perhaps it is a candle scent that somehow bottled the woods behind your first home you played in as a child.

I reach for a lamp with a wooden base and a simple, off-white shade when, out of the corner of my eye, I spot a tall, slender man with black hair walk past the aisle. For some reason, the presence seems familiar, but I shake my head in order to bring myself back to reality. There is no way that was who I think it was.

I stand frozen, lamp in hand. This experience is almost like *déjà vu* because it leaves me feeling as if I am in a semi-conscious daydream, as if reality is no longer my own but rather is cloudy and scripted. This was not quite *déjà vu* even though it rendered me similarly, for it was not something, an occurrence I have seen before; rather, it is someone I have seen before.

I place the lamp down and cautiously follow in the direction the man went. Perhaps, there is a better image to depict what I am feeling in this moment. I'm not sure if there is a name for this sensation, but I felt it often when I first arrived at college. I kept seeing people from my school in Colorado scattered sporadically on campus. Stunned, I would stop in my tracks, my mind unable to make sense of seeing a person in the wrong setting like a fork accidentally placed in the drawer of spoons. I would blink a couple times in disbelief until my vision sorted itself out allowing me to come to the realization that it was only a person who slightly resembled the person from back in Colorado.

Only this time, I did not have enough time before the man disappeared to sort out if I was mistaken or not.

I wander up Target's food aisles. Then, I go to the home-goods aisles. Then the electronics. Then the clothing. Then I circle the store again probably looking like a madman, but the man has altogether disappeared. Or, perhaps my mind is transposing an image of him without him being there at all.

I attempt to go back and look at lamps, but I am too jumpy and distracted. My head darts towards any person who walks by me.

CHAPTER 15

The dinner table at home, once again, is immaculately set. And again, my parents have made too much food for three people to eat. We have not yet even finished the leftovers from yesterday or the day before.

My hands suddenly feel large while gripping the silverware as I recall the feeling of the same silverware in the hands of my younger self. I used to feel so important sitting at the dinner table with my parents because I was the only kid at a table for adults. The novelty has since worn off, and now dinner just feels like another motion that must be done to get through the day. Even after all of these years and being gone so long, hardly anything has changed. Sometimes I question if I have changed at all either.

“How was your day out with Sam?” Dad says to break the silence.

“Good. It was really nice to catch up.”

“What did you two do?”

“We went canoeing at Black Lake over by Ouray. What did you guys do today?”

“Just the same old same old. Isn’t that right, Sarah?” Dad says as he looks over at Mom who has been staring down at her plate as she ate this whole time.

“Yeah, nothing new,” Mom says and then returns her focus back on the pork loin in front of her.

“Do we have any plans for Saturday? Sam has the day off, and I was wanting her take me up Mount Sneffels,” I say.

“Nope. We don’t have anything planned. Well, Mom works at the garden center then. Isn’t that right?” Dad says.

“Yeah, I volunteer Saturdays,” Mom says.

“So yeah, no plans,” Dad says as he cuts off another chunk of his pork. “Mount Sneffels, huh? Haven’t you already climbed that?”

“No. I haven’t,” I say.

“I could have sworn you have,” Dad says. “Maybe it was Chimney Peak I was thinking of. Or was it Courthouse?”

“Nope. None of those. Dad, I’ve never climbed a mountain,” I say. “Have you climbed any of those?”

“Yeah, Mom and I climbed quite a few of those when we first moved here.”

“What? How did I never know this? You never mentioned it and I would have never imagined it because we never went camping.”

“Yeah we did. It was when we... No, that’s wrong. It was that time we went to...” Dad struggles to recall a memory that is not there. I am appalled he would even assume we went on any trips like that as a family. All those years I grew up watching kids in my class go camping with their families. Then my classmates made it to high school and went on camping trips with each other. Meanwhile, I sat by too embarrassed to admit I didn’t know how to camp.

“See? We never did anything outside. You and Mom can hardly survive seeing dust in the house. We never did anything as a family then, and we sure as hell don’t do anything as a family now, even now that I am home for a short amount of time.” My voice raises in a way I have never let it raise before towards my parents. I am unsure if the man speaking is even me.

“Milo, calm down,” Dad says. Mom just stares down at her plate.

“No. I’ve been home for over a week now and you two have hardly talked to me

besides table talk at dinner. I came here because I went through a breakup and it sucked, it really did, and this silent avoidance of the topic is not helping it any. You hardly talk to one another. You don't talk about anything." I realize I am standing up. My arms are clenched and shaking. Dad stares at me in shock but remains silent. Mom looks down at her plate.

I'm frazzled and slightly embarrassed about my escalation. I turn from the table, grab my shoes, and head out the door for a run. The sun's last rays are losing their fight to the dark of night on the western horizon. I quickly slip on my running shoes and just run.

Like all nights in Colorado, the temperature gradually drops with each step I take. Out here, there is no humidity to remember the sun's gift of warmth from the day like there is in back in the Midwest. The only sounds I hear besides my feet as they pat on the dirt road is the periodic cricket chirp off in the distance.

The last of the sun's indigo disappears and the black of night takes over, yet I keep running. Slowly, houses become less frequent and are instead replaced by the forest of pines.

I run and think of nothing other than instructing my legs to move one right after the other. The world always gets obscured at night. Recognizable landmarks distort. I have no idea how far I have run or where I am at exactly, but still I keep going.

Suddenly a rustling in the trees erects the hair on the back of my neck and stops me in my tracks. The realization that I am alone in the Colorado wilderness at night with no phone, no mace, no nothing hits me. My primal instincts kick in, and I begin to walk

away backwards from the noise.

A deer then walks out of the brush onto the road in front of me. I wait to see if he was the one making the noise. When I see no other critters and hear no more rustling, I finally let my guard down and relax.

The mule deer is a young buck with small antlers hardly big enough to call a rack. He does not appear to be looking for anyone and does not appear to be running from anything. I cannot tell if he looks lonely or content.

He spots me and stops only for a moment to stare back at me. The young buck quickly decides that I am not a threat and continues on his way. He disappears into the trees on the other side of the road. I am alone again.

Even though I only encountered a deer, I am still on edge. My imagination runs wild, and as I head back home, I am constantly checking my surroundings. I run cautiously as to not make too much sound in order to not warrant attention from a bear or a mountain lion. Logically, I know there is nothing I can do if such a predator seeks me out, but my body is in survival mode.

After I run for some amount of time, I finally am able to identify where I am in relation to my house. I am still three or so miles away from home, which means I ran quite a ways in my trance.

Slowly I begin to be in a more urban area with houses and leave the forest behind. However, I still take my time. I slow my pace because I do not want to arrive home with my parents still up. I get closer and turn my jog into a walk to take up more time.

Some of the houses have changed since I graduated from high school. The infamously pink house of Mrs. Carson is now a neutral tan, and I wonder if she moved or

passed away. Toys no longer litter the Walden's yard, and the large tree in front of the Jefferson's has been chopped down.

Before I know it, I am back at my house. The lights in the kitchen and living room are still on. There's a chance they forgot to turn them off when they went to bed, but knowing my parents, I know that is unlikely. I debate whether or not to waste more time outside until I am certain Mom and Dad have gone to bed or to go in and confront the mess I left.

As much as I want to avoid them right now, I know I will have to face them at some point tomorrow. Plus, I don't want them to worry about where I have disappeared to any more than they already have.

I reluctantly reach for the handle of the front door and peek inside to see who is up. I see no one, but I do notice some tiny, new splats of paint on the door windows. Dad must have recently repainted the house. He's always been good about keeping up with the paint, obsessive almost. The door has always been painted white, yet it does not look like it has spent a day outside. The dust of the southwest has failed to make its mark on our house.

As smoothly and quietly as I can, I open the door and enter the house. I take off my shoes and softly creep down the hallway. The light is off as I pass my parents' bedroom.

CHAPTER 16

The car heater kicks on and hits my shivering body. The two amber beams from the headlights graze the grey pavement ahead of us. At this early hour of the morning before the sun has even thought about stirring, everything feels deserted as if Sam and I are the only people alive and that the world is our own.

Sam was the one who insisted we wake up hours before sunrise so that as we climb, we can watch the sunrise over the entire vast Southwest.

“That way we also won’t be rushed,” Sam had said. “We have to be back down the mountain before the afternoon anyway because that’s when the summer thunderstorms move in.”

Sam’s climbed many mountains, so she is well-versed in the dangers of hiking them. Lightning is the biggest danger on top of the peaks. Last year she knew a guy who was struck dead by lightning as he was biking down a mountain near Telluride with his girlfriend.

I thought being up before four am would be more difficult than it was, but my body woke with ease as this was a part of its normal routine. In a way, it is magical how quiet and empty the world is. I imagine it was like back in the old days before miners and ranchers took over this area, even before the Utes inhabited these mountains and their valleys. Sam takes us through roads I did not even know existed out here up in the mountains until we finally arrive at the trailhead of Mount Sneffels. I am surprised that there is a full parking lot and an outhouse of sorts way up here.

“Just because you haven’t climbed a mountain doesn’t mean that it is a rare thing to do. People climb these mountains every day,” Sam says as she gets her backpack out

of the trunk of her Subaru.

Luckily my parents still had an old coat of mine because I only brought warm, summer clothes. I had not anticipated that I would be climbing a mountain and would need to wear this many layers in the middle of July. Sam also has a jacket on and is wearing a hat and warm pants. I wish I would have thought of wearing a hat because my ears are already feeling cold. Lucky I know the sun will warm us up in an hour or so.

The lower trailhead takes us on a gravel path up the basin. We are below the tree line, but as I look ahead, I see under the starlight that the trees quickly begin to thin out. Ahead of us, I see the peak of Mount Sneffels. I point it out to Sam.

“Wrong,” she says as she shakes her head. “Most people mistake that for Sneffels at the beginning. That’s Kismet ahead of us. Sneffels,” she points to the right of us, “is that way. We can’t see its peak yet. We have to go farther up the basin first.”

“Gotcha,” I say.

“Kismet is only thirteen thousand feet, nearly a thousand feet shorter than Sneffels. We’ve got quite a ways to go.”

The sky slowly evolves from black to a soft grey, a sign that the morning sun is finding its way into the world. With the first hints of light approaching, I begin to notice the windflowers in full bloom on either side of the trail. I may not have climbed a mountain before, but I can still identify the flowers of my homeland. I see the white of cow parsnip, the blue and violet of larkspur. I see the yellow of the dwarf sunflowers that remind me of the sunflowers of the Midwest. Then the red of the Indian paintbrush grabs my attention. The color is bright and almost invasive in the soft light of the pre-dawn. And all of a sudden Red is hiking alongside Sam and I, at least his presence is.

I think about how I am now taking charge and climbing this mountain like Red would have. He never sits and waits for life to happen for him. Instead, he makes it happen. I know if he came down here with me, he would see Mount Sneffels and want to climb it, just like he saw me in the bar all those years ago and knew he wanted to get to know me.

All these wasted years I could have been climbing mountains, learning how to camp, yet I stood by waiting for someone to invite me along. When my parents didn't and when kids at school didn't, I assumed the mountains were not meant for me. They belonged to others, those who knew how to climb them, those who took charge. But this time, I am taking back the mountains for me.

After Sam took me canoeing in the Black Lake the other day, she asked,

“So you've never been canoeing in this lake, never been hiking on any of these trails, never been camping. How much longer are you here for again?”

“Only half a week or so. I leave next Monday.”

“Well, I can't show you everything, but I do have Saturday off. So, what's one thing you have always been dying to do here?” Sam asked. A few days later, we are hiking Mount Sneffels.

The world is getting even lighter as we pass the upper trailhead sign. We have left the pine trees behind and are only surrounded by wildflowers and rocks.

“This is where things begin to get a little tricky,” Sam says. “Are you still game? This is a good place to turn back.”

“Of course I'm game,” I say as I walk ahead of her past the sign.

“Good. That was just a test. I didn't want you giving up on your first mountain

experience,” Sam says.

“From here,” she points ahead of us, “we will slowly wind up the mountainside past the switchback. From there, we have to climb up the gully which is full of rocks until we get to the peak. Sound good?”

“Yeah, sounds good,” I say. I follow Sam up the trail as the flowers slowly recede below us. Then the grass begins to get sparse as we climb elevation. I realize I am panting heavily. By no means am I out of shape, but I have never experienced such thin air. I look to see how Sam is doing, and I feel better as I see that she is also breathing harder. Sam then turns around and says to me,

“Look behind you, Milo.”

I turn to see that the sun is rising over the basin. I had been too focused on the trail ahead of me that I failed to notice the world was suddenly doused in light. The sky is vibrant with the orange glow of the summer sun. The wildflowers farther down are now vivid and mirror the colors of the sky.

“Wow,” is all I manage to say.

“Wow is right,” Sam says. “No matter how many mountains I climb, this never gets old.”

“I guess I’ll have to climb more to confirm that.”

“You haven’t even finished climbing this one.”

“Well, I guess we had better get going and climb this mountain,” I say. As we continue to hike, I cannot help but glance back every now and then to see the sun’s progress over the valley.

We reach the beginning of the gully. The sun has mostly risen in the sky. Ahead

of me is the peak of Sneffels, the same peak I could see each day from my house growing up time and time again. The summit looks different than I imagined. From afar, the mountainside seems compact, cohesive, but here, I see the peak is a large rock with an amalgam of other rocks and rubble around it. There are a few patches of snow and ice scattered about which, for a moment, makes it hard to believe that it is the middle of July.

The sun is up, but it is colder this high up than when we started. The wind has nothing, no mountains, to block it, so it chills me. The thought of how close I am to the summit of Sneffels pumps my adrenaline and does not let the thought of how cold I am bring me down. We begin our ascent up the steep and rocky gully.

“Be careful and follow my lead,” Sam says.

She methodically tests each rock with her hand before stepping up on it with her foot. I follow suit. The grey rocks are coarse and grainy to the touch. The path quickly steepens and becomes less obvious and more unstable and slippery. I don’t know why in my mind that I thought an easy trail would lead us directly to the summit.

As we climb closer, I look up and am distracted by how close we are to the top. I lose my focus, and my hand slips off a rock. The side of my arm scrapes against the jagged edge of another rock as I try to regain control.

“Milo. Are you OK?” Sam says as she glances back at me in a panic.

“Yeah, I just lost my grip for a second. That’s all.”

“You promise you’re good?”

“Promise. Let’s keep going.”

Sam resumes climbing. I check my left arm and see that it is slightly gashed. My arm needs to be wrapped up, but it’s nothing too serious. It can wait for the summit. I see

the rock I slipped into is jaded red with my blood. Red.

I look away and follow Sam's lead up the final leg of our journey. She climbs the summit first and then offers me a hand up. I grab ahold of her, and she hoists me up. And suddenly, I am on the top of the world.

The world does not look like what it was from down below. The trees, dirt, rocks, flowers, grass, everything are like liquid pigments running together on a watercolor pallet. The greys, whites, sulfur yellows, and crimson of the mountains bleed into the ombre of dark and light greens of vegetation below. And every so often, there is a pool of water so blue that it seems to have been stolen from the sky itself. The mountain peaks fade into hues of blues the farther away they are into the distance until the world ends and there is only sky left.

"Welcome to Mount Sneffels, elevation 14,150 feet," Sam says. "What do you think?"

"This is amazing."

"Takes your breath away, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, it really does."

"Could just be the lack of air," Sam jokes. "But my theory is that it's the magnitude of the world that reminds us and our lungs how small we really are that makes us at a loss for air."

Sam then points out Yankee Boy Basin, Governor Basin and names off some of the other peaks: Gilpin, Cirque, Dallas, Reconnoiter, Teakettle, Emma, Horsefly, Courthouse, Chimney. She shows me how we can see the peaks of mountains in Utah and how the valley ahead opens up to the Grand Mesa of Grand Junction.

I thought I would cry from the overwhelming sensation of finally climbing a mountain, but instead I feel strong. For once, I feel like I belong to the mountains. I no longer feel like an imposter to this land. Red and all of my worries feel states away rather than with me.

“Milo, your arm. It’s bleeding.”

“I know. I’m fine.”

“We need to get that wrapped up. Let’s head back down.”

“Just a second. Let me have a few more moments here. It’s not every day that I get to climb a mountain.”

I do a gradual three hundred and sixty degree turn on the peak. I want to memorize this for this image to be burned into my mind forever of all the colors of the mountains, of the crisp smell of the mountain wind and the way it hugs me as it moves by, of the sound of my heart beating against my chest as if it is echoing off all the surrounding peaks, so that when I am lying in my bed at night, all I have to do is close my eyes for me to be back on the mountain. When I am done, I motion for Sam to lead the way back down. Upon going down, I realize just how steep of a climb it was for us to reach the peak and cannot help but feel my nerves stir, but I remind myself that I came up here so coming back down will be just as easy. Sam and I take our time down the gully and through the narrow trail off the side of the mountain. Once we reach a level spot close to where vegetation begins to grow again, Sam stops me so that she can wrap up my arm. By now, it has mostly stopped bleeding. She pours some water from her water bottle on it to clean it somewhat. Then she takes a roll of bandages out of her backpack and begins to wrap my arm.

“Wow, you really do come prepared,” I say.

“This isn’t my first rodeo. Someone always gets scraped up when climbing mountains it seems. It’s nearly a rule,” she says.

“Thanks again for taking me up here.”

“You’re welcome. You really need to stop thanking me though. It’s what friends do.”

Sam makes quick work of the bandage over my arm. Once she’s done, I test out my arm and wince. I hadn’t noticed the scrape hurting before, but now that a bandage binds it, I can feel the openness of the wound to the world.

“You good?” Sam says.

“Yeah, thanks,” I say and put my arm down.

“That’s the spirit.” Sam looks up and around us. “It doesn’t seem like any afternoon thunderclouds are forming. But, to be safe we should still move to lower ground before eating our lunch.”

“Lunch?”

“You’re lucky you picked the right guide for mountain climbing. I packed both of us some sandwiches and fruit,” Sam pats the bottom of her backpack.

“Sam, you’re the best.”

Sam nods and smiles and begins walking down the trail.

Hiking up the mountain was fun because I was uncertain of what the view from above would look like. Plus, every now and then I would get to glance back and be surprised at how far we had come. However, hiking back down was nearly as fun if not more fun because I was able to look at the view around the whole time rather than just the

steep ground ahead of me. The way down is also quicker because gravity is assisting us rather than fighting our every effort.

I was still surprised by how fit Sam was. She hardly seemed to be breaking a sweat while I could feel the sweat dousing the back of my shirt. Sam played basketball in high school, but I did not picture her being the fit, outdoorsy type. She never hung around the hyper-athletic kids who always spent times outdoors camping, skiing, rock climbing. But like me, not many people hung out with Sam. She kept to herself and tried her best to not let the bullying she received from the other kids affect her.

Now she exuded confidence, independence. The world was hers and she took it. Was this the same Sam that was hidden in high school or did she slowly grow into the person she is now? I don't think I will ever know the answer to that because the fact is I didn't really know her then. I don't even know how to answer that question for myself. I simultaneously feel like myself and a stranger from the past looking in.

Sam finds a level spot with some rocks to sit on by some wildflowers for us to eat at. She plants herself on a rock, opens her backpack up in her lap, and pulls out the lunch food she has brought. She hands me a sandwich, apple, orange, and a Capri Sun.

"No one is too old for a Capri Sun," she says as she jabs the yellow straw into the pouch. "Whoever says otherwise is a liar."

I unwrap my sandwich and take a bite into it. The lettuce, cucumbers, and tomatoes have dampened the bread a bit, but I am too hungry to care. As I chew, I see that we are sitting by some columbine flowers. When I was a kid, I used to think they looked foreign and alien. The tendrils of the back of the flowers unsettled me because they were so different than other flowers. They were not the two dimensional daisy-

figures I drew in school. The tendrils broke the reality of flat paper and invaded the real world. And the color was not that of one that could be found in a crayon box. The blueish purplish color was not simple or easy to emulate or comprehend. But, as I grew, I appreciated how the flower stood out among the rest. Now I am torn if I like the columbines of my childhood or the echinacea of the Midwest more. One's irregularities remind me of my own and the other reminds me of a future peace I am still seeking in my new home.

“So Milo,” Sam says breaking the silence of my flower thoughts. “You leave Monday, right?”

“Yeah in two days. I can't believe this trip is already over.”

“How're you feeling about everything? Are you ready to go back?”

“I haven't really thought about it to be honest,” I say. This whole time I had been running from the past and trying to understand the present that I hadn't had the energy to imagine what going back would entail. “I don't have a choice if I am ready or not. I have to get back to work Tuesday if I still want a job.”

“A job is important for sure.” Sam laughs but then her face turns serious. “But what about Red?”

“What about him? We're broken up. Haven't heard from him, and I'm not sure if I want to.”

“Isn't that the whole reason you came up here? To step back and reflect on what happened with Red?”

“Yeah, I guess it was.”

“So, what have you figured out?”

“I’m not sure if I have figured out anything. I don’t know what else there is to do. Things are over.”

“True. You two are broken up. And I know you don’t want to get back together with him, but it’s inevitable that you still have some underlying feelings for him no matter how confusing this all is. You can’t avoid him forever. I think you need to talk to him.”

“I just don’t know,” I say. The breeze quickens and swings the columbines around us. What would I talk to Red about? Going home? Climbing this mountain? How I broke his heart? I’ve had a million conversations with Red before, but now he has become a stranger.

“I’m not sure if he would want to talk to me,” I say.

“Of course he would,” Sam says.

“How do you know?”

“Because it helped me. After Steve cheated on me and I broke up with him, I kept avoiding him, and that fear of running into him, this person I thought I knew so well who hurt me so badly, built up inside me. I wasn’t able to relax without being tense that he might show up at my place or I’d randomly see him in public. It wasn’t until my mom convinced me that I needed to face him in order to get some not closure, but solace. He agreed to meet up. He apologized for his actions, and we both admitted to being unhappy with the relationship and realized we should have done something about it before. I’m still hurt at what he did, but I’m no longer afraid of our past. Again, this is just my two cents, so you can take it or leave it. But, I think talking to Red would help you get peace. You can’t just run from him and pretend like he never existed.”

“I guess you’re right. I’m just afraid of...” I pause to gather what it is exactly that I am afraid of. “I’m not afraid of what Red has done or what he thinks because he is unabashedly transparent all the time. I think I’m most afraid of confronting myself in front of Red, admitting to all the feelings I never said, to all the things I never did.” My voice cracks a bit, but I do not feel like crying.

“Yeah, admitting your own faults to the person you hurt is painful, but you can’t hold those in forever. You’ve got to face them. You’ve got to face Red.”

“I hate that we’ve reconnected here,” I say as I jokingly shove her shoulder. “You’re a horrible influence by making me confront myself. I just want to live in denial forever.”

“Maybe why that’s still why I don’t have many friends. I don’t enable them. But seriously,” she says. “You need to promise me you’ll talk to Red. And then I’ll shut up and let you finish eating.”

“I promise.”

“Good,” Sam pretends to hold something in her hand and pantomimes letting the thing go. “Subject dropped.”

We eat the rest of our lunch in silence. I’m not sure why, but apples always taste better when enjoyed outside, particularly paired with a crisp breeze like now. Red. Red. Red. I feel as if he is sitting with Sam and me and is waiting for me to say something to him. If he actually were here and we were still together, Red would be frolicking in the wildflowers, trying to climb trees, and continually articulating his excitement to not just us, but the world around. I would be like I am now, quietly contemplating the beauty of it all as I watch the columbines bob in the breeze.

After Sam and I finish our lunch, we hike the rest of the way down the mountain. The farther and farther we go, the more the landscape ahead disappears. As the view sinks, so do my feelings. It hits me that I really am leaving soon. Mt. Sneffels was the last thing I had to look forward to before going back to Illinois. Like the morning after a fun night drinking, I am suddenly hungover and aching for the last moments in Colorado to last.

CHAPTER 17

Raindrops fall like reassuring taps on the edge of a desk, like the times in high school I would tap my number two pencil during class in order to keep my stormy thoughts at bay. Today's mid-April rain graciously returns to the ground as if the sky had only temporarily borrowed the earth's water. I've never quite been able to peg the color of a rainy day. There's an aura of subtle greys, blues, and even greens, but the true color seems something else that is inescapable altogether.

I had planned to work on my garden today, but nature is telling me through the hint of warmth in the rain that today is a nourishment day for the garden. I return back inside from the porch, and I try to find some other Saturday task for me to do; however, the house is clean, dishes are done, and clothes are already folded. Somehow after months of settling into my house, I have finally earned a free weekend. I decide to go to town for nothing in particular other than to get out of the house for a change.

My car's headlights turn the rain gold as the drops nuzzle my car on my drive to Moline. I decide to start at Target. I pull into the parking lot and find it fairly empty for a Saturday, but such is expected for a rainy day like this. Rather than sprint to the entrance, I slowly make my way through the rain with the hood of my rain jacket pulled over my head. I feel a kinship with the rain. I'm sure it, too, gets tired of people misunderstanding it.

I walk inside, grab one of the signature red carts, and decide to roam the store with no intention in mind. Nothing particularly grabs my eye until I walk by the book section. I stop the cart and reach for the familiar, yellow cover of *Tuck Everlasting* on the shelf. I think back to all the times I checked out this book from my school's library. I

remember thinking that the majority of the date stamps in the front cover were from me. The book feels right in my hand the way a body feels in freshly washed bedsheets. I open the book up to the first page and begin reading.

“Milo? Is that you?” a voice says behind me. The voice is familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. I turn around, and I am met by cocoa and honey eyes.

“My goodness! It is you, Milo. What in the heck are you doing here?” Before I can process what is going on enough to render a response, he leans in for a hug. I knew he was tall, but somehow he is taller than I remember. My head rest at the height of his shoulder.

When he steps back from the hug, that’s when it hits me who it is. Red. There he is, standing right in front of me. His hair and smirk are all the same. And his eyes. The contrast of the dark cocoa mixed in with the gold flecks is even more dynamic in the store lights in comparison to the bar.

“Well, aren’t you going to say anything?” Red says with a laugh.

“Yeah, sorry,” I say. “I just was not expecting to see you here. You took me by surprise.”

“I wasn’t expecting to see you either. What’re you doing here?”

“I live here. Moved over a year ago and have a job in Moline. What’re you doing here?”

“I’m from here, remember? As soon as I graduated college, I decided to move back here. I live in Moline and commute to Davenport.” Red steps back more and looks me over. “Wow, I really never thought I was going to see you again, but here you are.”

“Here I am. I can’t believe I forgot that you were from here. It’s been awhile since

that trip.”

“It sure has been awhile. So, Mr. Milo. Do you remember your promise?”

“What promi... oh yeah. I guess I have to take you on a date since I don’t want to be a man who goes back on his promises.”

“True true, but there’s one problem?” Red says.

“What problem?”

“I have a boyfriend.”

“Oh,” I say. “Well, it was good running into you anyway. I suppose I may see you around.” My stomach sinks. I don’t know why I am suddenly disappointed to the extent I am. I have never expected to come across Red again in my life. Yet, for a fleeting moment, I had thought there might be a chance at something.

“Are you serious? You’re going to give up that easily?” Red smirks. “I’m just messing with you. I don’t have a boyfriend. I guess you’re just not that interested.” Red feigns sadness and pretends to walk away.

“What? Really? That’s not fair,” I say.

“I know. I couldn’t help myself.” Red says. His laugh wafts over me like an oven baking cookies.

“But on a serious note,” Red says. “I would be honored to go on a date with you.”

“OK. I, uh, I guess we should exchange numbers,” I say. I have not asked someone on a date in, well I am not sure if I have ever asked someone on a date. My timid nature prevents me from doing such things.

“That’s a good first step, but you already have my number. Remember?” Red says.

“Oh yeah. I forgot,” I say. I check my phone just to make sure, and sure enough, I find his contact saved from all that time ago.

“Since you already have my number, the next steps will be for you to tell me where and when this date is happening.”

“Since I have your number already, how about I text you later this week?”

“Sounds good, Milo. It’s been really nice running into you. I look forward to seeing you again.” He leans in and gives me another hug. Then he turns and walks away as if he was never here in the first place.

I tried to remember what I had come to Target for, but when I failed to find a shopping list in my pockets, I remembered that I came here just for fun. My mind was too frazzled to spend any more time in the store, so I left. On my way to the parking lot, my phone buzzed. When I looked at the screen, I saw,

Hey Milo. You looked just as handsome as I had remembered you if not more.

Then, another message said,

You’d better keep up on your promise on that date.

I try looking at my home from another person’s eyes. Everything from the blue exterior to the kitchen to the living room is rustic. My table and chairs in the kitchen are made of re-furbished wood from an orange barn that I discovered at an antique store. My coffee table in the living room is from the same place and looks equally worn in an intentional way. I stare at the two lamps in the living room I inherited from my grandparents. The shades are antique-white, and the material seems like it could be used to draw a map on. The bases are filled with various dried coneflowers. To me, the flowers

are nostalgic, but I imagine other may just see dead plants that should have been thrown out a long time ago. The only ‘modern’ looking item in the room is my TV mounted on the wall.

My main decorations aren’t really decorations at all: they are books. I have shelves and shelves of books. And on other shelves and end tables, I have small piles of some of my favorites. On the end table next to the couch with one of the lamps, I have *Of Mice and Men*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Giovanni’s Room* and *The Great Gatsby*. I gently place my new copy of *Tuck Everlasting* on top of the pile.

I wonder what Red would think of my house. Would he see it and want to spend many nights, or would he change his mind about me when he saw that I lived a rustic, country life? Maybe he would be polite and stay for a while before finding an excuse to leave and to never return. Or maybe, he would flee right then and there.

I have never been self-conscious of my house before because I have never had anyone over other than Donna and Roger who had sold me the house and had swapped many vegetables in my kitchen with me. But here and now, I question why a guy who barely knew me would have any interest in me. I barely have interest in myself.

I have still not responded to Red’s texts, and I am not sure if I will. It would be better to cut it off right now rather than go through the effort and have it end as quickly as I had anticipate.

But, it is the thought of his stupid smirk when he talks to me, the way his hair sits upon his head, the way miners have spent centuries looking for gold as pure as the flecks found in his cocoa eyes, and the way his lips felt that night long ago on spring break that draws me to text him.

CHAPTER 18

“What do you have planned when you return?” Dad asks.

“Not much besides work. I start back on Monday,” I say.

“Oh, OK. Good,” he says as he returns back to cutting up the potato on his plate.

Mom doesn't say anything. She hasn't looked up from her plate all meal. Silence is an added guest at the table as it has been the last few days here at the house. My parents have always been quiet, but my outburst the other night has pushed them even farther back. The three of us have waltzed through the formalities of meals and brief interactions.

When I returned from my hike up Mt. Sneffels with Sam, Mom asked about my arm and helped me patch it back up after my shower, but neither of my parents asked me about the hike itself.

Like leaves in the fall, we don't know who should make the first move from security to release and freefall. So, instead of bringing up a conversation about what we feel, we waver in the breeze and try to hold onto our past green.

“Thanks for dinner,” I say as I get up from the table. I head over to the kitchen to put my dishes in the sink.

“I've got dishes,” Mom says.

I set the plate in the sink Mom pre-filled with soap and fresh water for the dishes. The fragments of food float to the top as I gently submerge the porcelain into the water. I'm always surprised at how one action can sully water so quickly.

I know I should not run at night here, and although I ran earlier today, the Colorado wilderness yearns for me to run one last time.

The mace I remembered to bring swings back and forth in my pocket against my leg with each stride I take. I do not want a repeat of the other night when the young buck surprised me because next time my adversary might end up being more threatening. I opt to just stay close and repeat a small loop tonight.

The finality of my time here wavers over me. I welcome the aroma of piñon and sage into my lungs. I should feel different, aged as I run the roads of my youth, but I feel the same as I did all those summers ago. Back then, I had imagined how strong and confident I would be as an adult, how the world would have finally revealed to me who I was, but as the final threads of heat from the day seep away into the dry cool of the night, I still wander aimlessly through the passing of time.

I finish my final Colorado run, and head inside. When I pass the living room, I see that Mom is still up. Mom is sitting in her reading chair, but she holds no book. The blue of her eyes stand out.

“Milo? Is that you?” she says. Her voice is soft. I don’t respond and instead, walk into the living room.

“Thank goodness. You had me worried. I didn’t know where you went off to.”

“I went for a run down the road.”

“Oh.”

An awkward silence congests the room. I stand in the center. Mom stares down at her hands. I can’t look at her, so I gaze at the photos on the walls. The photographs look like those of another family, of other people entirely. The people in the frames are candid, poised, and appear unified.

“Milo, I was looking through some boxes today, and I found these photos of you.”

Mom picks a few photos up from the coffee table and hands them to me. In the five by seven cards she hands me, I find my high school self wearing a basketball uniform. The too-big green and white jersey hangs off of my coat hanger shoulders. My face is rounder and smooth, but I am even skinnier than I am now, which I thought was impossible. My eyes in the photo are trying to feign happiness, but they are the eyes of a boy who is tired of being harassed by his teammates. I quit the team not long after these photos were taken.

“I don’t want them,” I say to Mom. “You can have them.”

“Do you not like them? I think you look good in them,” she says.

“No, I don’t. Basketball wasn’t exactly the best time of my life if you don’t recall. Plus, look at how small and weak I was.” Of all the photos Mom could have shown me, I can’t believe these are the ones she chose.

“You don’t look weak here. I like these because they remind me of how strong you are.”

I don’t see strength in these photos. All I see are the times my teammates bullied me like the time they put up signs that said ‘fag’ on my locker, or when they cornered me in the locker room and threw gay magazines at me. I tried to hold my head high and still play in the basketball games with those same teammates, but I couldn’t take it.

“Mom, I really can’t take these.”

“You’re stronger than you think you are, Milo, even now. You’ve managed difficult things before. Would you look at the time? It’s getting late. I really think you should keep these photos. Goodnight, Milo,” Mom says as she gets up out of her chair. She leaves the pictures on the end table, and disappears into the hallway.

I remain seated staring at the photos on the coffee table. Mom's never spoken to me like that and certainly has never brought up basketball. I'm unsure about why she uncovered these photos. I quit basketball sophomore year which felt like an eternity ago until tonight. The boy in them looks so young and scared, yet I do not feel distant from him.

CHAPTER 19

The wet, Midwest air clings onto my damp back as if to kindly urge me to knock. But I can't. My feet are cemented to the ground, and my mind is trying to run far away from this place. The pale door before me is larger than I remember, or maybe I am feeling smaller than ever before. It's funny how our emotions can alter spatial awareness.

I raise my hand to knock, but gravity's might forces it back down to my side. A few days ago I said goodbye to my family, to Sam, to Colorado. I was bummed to leave, but on that Monday, I felt stronger than I had before.

"Milo, it was really good to have you home. Love you, son," Dad said at the airport. He gave me a firm handshake and then broke it for a hug. Next, Mom came up and said.

"I love you, Milo," Mom said as she gave me a hug. Her words had more weight to them, and I thought it might have had something to do with the basketball photos I had packed away in my luggage.

"We're proud of you. I'm proud of you," Dad.

"Thanks again for having me, for everything," I said.

"Of course. Remember, if you need anything, don't hesitate to call," Dad said.

On the plane ride home, I thought more about my parents and how I am not so different than them. We all quietly move about the world, and we get caught up in our internal lives. It's not that we don't care; we do but are just unsure of how to show it.

Upon landing, I received a text from Sam that said,

Hope you get home safely! Remember to keep your promise even though it will be hard. Let me know how it goes. It was great reconnecting with you. Stay in touch!

And for those brief moments on the plane ride home Monday, I felt confident and calm. But when I walked into my rugged, blue house, Red was everywhere. It was as if all the moments he was at my house played out at once. He was on the couch watching TV. He was in the kitchen putting ketchup on his pasta. He was walking up the stairs, walking down the stairs, holding me on the bed, brushing his teeth, opening and closing doors.

I barely made it into the door. I sat down against the doorframe and watched all of Red play out in front of me. Then, he was gone. All of him. And the house grew dim. A blanket of quiet hushed over everything. A feeling I hadn't anticipated crept up to me and nestled into my chest: loneliness.

Besides runs by myself and brief moments at home, I was always in the company of someone, whether it be my parents or Sam. I hadn't quite gotten accustomed to being alone before I left Colorado, so my return home panged me with the absence that Red left in my life.

The still air in my house whispered a solitude that felt like the pricks a body sends an arm that has fallen asleep to remind it that it is still alive and awake. If any air moved, I didn't feel it. My house was a forgotten dollhouse whose visitor had lost interest in and moved on from.

I couldn't bring myself to run that night because it was hard enough to lug myself upstairs to my bedroom. I crept onto my made bed, fully clothed, and held my legs to my chest. I suppose I fell asleep even if it didn't feel like it because I was awoken by an alarm I didn't recall setting that reminded me to go to work that day.

At work if anyone noticed my absence of nearly two weeks, they didn't say

anything. My quiet nature of keeping to myself had never been foregrounded before like it was that day. My coworkers let me keep to myself as I had taught them to do with my actions before.

I could hardly focus at my desk because I kept thinking about how I needed to talk to Red as soon as possible. Sam told me to get it over with as soon as possible like a bandage. I thought about how I ripped off the bandage from my arm after I got back home from Mt. Sneffels, how my dried blood to the bandage, how it begged to stay with me as I painfully ripped it off, how I forgot about the wound for a moment as I stepped in the shower, and how the water stung on the open flesh more than when I initially scraped it. I knew that talking to Red would be bandage difficult. But, Sam was right. I needed to start the process sooner rather than later.

I told myself I would do it after work that day, but I couldn't muster the guts. And I told myself Wednesday that I would do it after work, but I still couldn't muster the guts. So, I arrived at work today thinking I also wouldn't have the guts to confront him tonight as well, but then I found the rock he had given me in my desk.

I don't know how I didn't catch it before after we broke up. The small, jagged orange rock was the only memento of him that I had at work.

"You used to collect rocks when you were a kid, isn't that right?" Red had asked one night at dinner at my place.

"Yeah, I did," I said.

"That's what I thought," he said with his peevish, smug grin. He leaned back in the chair in order to make room for his hand to grab something in the front pocket of his jeans. He brought his closed fist over to me, and set something next to my plate.

“I saw this when I went for a walk at lunch today, and it made me think of you. A rock because you used to collect rocks. Orange because that’s your favorite color. And, if I also remember correctly, orange is your favorite because it reminds you of sunsets, which we are going to miss soon if you don’t finish up your food.” Red looked over to the window then dramatically slammed his hands on the table and looked at me. “Forget food, the sun is fading fast. We’ve got to get a move on.”

Red stood up, grabbed my hand, and dragged me outside. He let go of my hand to go to his truck. He pulled out a checkered blanket and a bottle of wine. He rushed to a spot in the yard and set out the blanket. Red sat down and patted the spot next to him.

“What’s all this?” I said as I hesitantly sat down on the blanket.

“It’s a sunset picnic. Well, it’s a picnic with wine but minus the food since I knew you had already planned on cooking dinner tonight.”

I was trying to rack my brains for any special reason, but I couldn’t think of any occasion. The day wasn’t our anniversary, wasn’t Valentine’s Day, wasn’t anything. I cannot remember the day of the week or even the time of year of the memory.

“Did I forget something? What’s the occasion?” I asked.

“No, no, no. There is no occasion. When I found that rock at lunch, it just reminded me of how lucky I am to have you. That’s all.”

Red uncorked the wine and then looked around him.

“Dang, I forgot the wine glasses. Oh well, who needs glasses when I have you?” he took a swig from the bottle of wine and then handed it to me.

“Cheers. To us,” he said.

“Cheers,” I said.

Red never made gestures like this. No cookies, no flowers at work, no movie nights after a long week, no drives to bridges to watch the stars. I guess this is why this rock memory sticks with me more so than many of our other memories together. I needed to find the rock today in the office because it embodies a time when Red knew me. I needed to remember that Red is not some stranger on the street, and this small realization gave me enough strength to talk to him today.

With that orange, jagged rock in my pocket, I stand in front of his door at a loss for the courage to knock, to see him. I try to raise my hand but put it back down. Then, a rush of adrenaline comes over me and I rap on the door three times. A wave of regret, fear hits me with the realization that in a few moments Red will be right before me. I tense up, begin to sweat again, and am hyper-aware of the air entering and leaving my lungs.

Time feels frozen as I wait for the door to open. For a split second, I think about running and hiding, but I quickly discard the idea. I wait, but I do not hear any footsteps coming to the door. A minute or so passes, but still no sound comes from his place. I try knocking again louder this time, yet I still receive no answer.

I think maybe he is not home yet. Perhaps he is at the gym, or maybe he is out with a friend at dinner. I could text or call him. But, I fear hearing his voice on the phone, and I fear he will see my number and ignore it.

I decide to wait a few more minutes. He has a tattered chair next to his door, so I sit down in it. I lean forward and clamp my hands together. If only I could hold myself together the way I can hold my hands.

Down at my feet, a few ants scout the ground. They zigzag and feel out the area in

no apparent order, but I know that nearby their underground home is meticulously constructed in a way that still baffles both scientists and architects. The black, beady creatures hardly amount to the size of a grain of rice, yet they forgo solitude to work together in a way I never have been able to with my own species.

I sit for I don't know how long, but the sun is setting. I can't remember if the sun was up or starting to set when I arrived. A few of Red's neighbors pass by me on the way to their own apartments. I recognize a few from sight, but I've never had a conversation with any of them. I wonder if they recognize me. If they think I am some stranger sulking outside of a random apartment, they don't make any attempt to check.

One young couple I've never seen before waltz out of an apartment two doors from Red's. It is nearly dark out, and they are clearly dressed for a night out on the town. The girl is wearing a yellow sundress, and the guy has tucked in his blue button-up shirt. The man looks happy, cheerful. I can't make out what he is saying, but I can hear his laughs between words. The girl, I can tell though, is not really paying attention. She is looking down at the flats on her feet quietly. She glances up and makes eye contact with me. Her soft eyes are familiar, not in a way that I've seen her before, but that I've seen her expression before in the mirror. It's the look I had the last few months with Red, the feeling of distance from the cyclical nature of quiet dissatisfaction.

She locks eyes with me for a few seconds, and then she bows her head back down in a way to indicate that she, too, recognizes the same look in me. The guy in blue then grabs her hand and ushers her away with him.

The sound of crickets informs me that night has finally begun. I go up to knock one more time on Red's door, but as I do, I notice that no lights are on in his apartment. I

go over to a window and try to peer in. The blinds are open, but the darkness indicates that no one is in fact at home. I check the time and see that I have been here for hours.

I wonder if I should wait longer. I think that maybe he is out with some friends, friends I know, or maybe he's out with a new guy. And what if whoever Red is with comes back to his place with him?

I know that I need to talk to him tonight. I've made too much effort already, and I'm not sure if I can conjure such an attempt again tomorrow if ever. So, I do the only thing I can think of to do. I call him.

As the phone rings, I suddenly feel anger towards him. Anger at the fact that he isn't home tonight. Anger at him for not trying to talk to me. Anger for Red being Red. Anger for how confused he's made me.

Then I hear him pick up the phone, and my anger quickly changes into fear again. My mind has gone blank. I am unsure if I will be able to form any logical words.

"Milo?" he says, only it doesn't sound like his voice.

"Red?" I say, but I'm confused. Have I forgotten the sound of his voice?

"Oh Milo, it's Olive. I shouldn't be talking to you but..."

"Olive. Why do you have Red's phone? Where's Red?"

"Red... he's... he's." Her voice sounds faint, weak. There is a hollowness to it.

"What's happened? Olive, what's wrong?" The phone in my hand shakes.

"I shouldn't be telling you this, but I think you need to know. It's Red. He's..."

CHAPTER 20

The wind violently scrapes against my face and stings my eyes. I am running, running harder than I have before. My feet no longer process hitting the ground. They just move the way pigeons know how to fly, the way sea turtles know how to return back to the same beach, the way infants know how to take air into their lungs.

I feel weightless, suspended. A better word for it would be unattached. The threads of the world, like tiny strings, have suddenly released their hold on me, and I am running, running to grasp them, but the threads dissipate away. It's the feeling of first jerking awake from not recognizing where you are sleeping coupled with the widening of your eyes after holding your breath too long underwater. It is all of this plus a stillness.

I run. And I run. My legs should be on fire, but the animal adrenaline numbs them. Cars pass, and I hardly process their passing lights. I am both looking ahead and not looking at anything at all. A forced silence rings in my ears blocking out the cicada and cricket chorus of the countryside paired with the forceful breath of my body.

My foot snags on something. I fall. Hard. I am unsure if I caught myself or not, but my hands are raw and embedded with asphalt bits. I get up and try to resume running, try to outrun my thoughts, but I step on my right leg and cripple in pain. I sit up and see that my leg is scraped badly from my shin to my knee and all the way up my thigh. My leg is sticky and coarse where the blood has dampened the dirt. I don't have my phone, and I see that I am miles away from my house, from any house really. I'm unsure of what to do, and I realize I am crying.

Through my tears, I don't see the truck's lights pull up behind me and stop, and I don't hear the car door open and shut. It takes me a second to process the voice coming

from beside me.

“Milo. Milo. Milo. Are you OK?”

I shake to a bit and begin to recognize where the voice is coming from. The woman sets down beside me and looks over my leg.

“Oh my, Milo, your leg. Is it alright if I touch it to check if anything is broken.”

I think I nod, but I am too disoriented to know for sure. I barely know what is going on at this point. The woman grabs ahold of my foot and ankle softly. I wince as she begins to move my ankle and foot. Then she moves up to my shins trying not to touch the open wound.

“Milo, I don’t think anything is broken, but you’re still beat up pretty badly. I’ll help you get up. Come on.” She lifts me left arm over her shoulder, and we slowly stand up together. With her help, I limp to the truck and get in. She shuts my door then goes around to get in on her side.

It fully hits me that it is Donna who is driving. I mutter something about apologizing for bleeding in her truck, and she shushes me that it’s alright and that we’ll be at her place shortly.

Donna whips into her driveway and pulls up to her house. She lets me out of the truck and has me lean on her as she slowly escorts me into the house. She flicks on a light with her free hand and then guides me to a bathroom.

As we pass by the living room, the news plays on the TV.

Dr. Gunther, a lot of attention has surrounded your recent discovery in regards to the aging process. However, you’re experiments with mice have not been successful in the way you’ve hoped. Could you please elaborate on why you think that is for us?...

“It’ll be best if you sit down in the tub, so we can clean your leg. Do you think you can do that?” Donna asks as she guides me from the living room and into the bathroom.

“Yeah, I think so,” I say.

I slowly step over the lip of the tub with Donna’s help, and then I gently lower myself down. My leg is scraped up worse than I thought. The sandpapered asphalt tore off quite a bit of skin from parts of my legs. Donna lifts the movable shower head off its stand lowers the hose down. She turns on the water slightly and runs it over her hands while adjusting the temperature.

“OK, Milo. This is going to hurt, but we need to clean your leg and your face with water and rubbing alcohol in order for the wounds to not get infected.”

My face? I think. I lift my hand to the right side of my face and touch it. I wince when my fingers graze the open flesh.

“Are you ready? I’m going to be as gentle as I can.”

I give her a nod. Donna puts the stream of water over my leg, and I whimper in a way that lets me know that I have never truly whimpered before in my life. My body tremors, cries, shudders, and exudes muffled yells at the same time. Donna is quick but efficient. She finishes with the water then disappears for a bit and returns with the rubbing alcohol.

The water feels like mere embers compared the inferno of the alcohol.

“I know it hurts. Just hold on a little bit more.”

I shut my eyes until I notice no more fire coming from my wounds. I open them and look over at Donna.

“All done. We just need to wrap you up now. It’s bad, but I don’t think you’ll need to go to the hospital. I’m no trained professional, but I’ve bandaged many a farm animal in my life.”

The wounds on my leg are a shiny red. The bleeding has slowed noticeably.

“I trust you. Thanks.”

“No need to thank me. I’ll go get the bandages and gauze.”

I am thoroughly bandaged and sitting on a chair in the living room. Donna comes over and pours me a warm cup of coffee, and then she pours herself a cup and sits down on the sofa. The news plays on.

... What we’ve come to find is yes, we’ve identified what’s caused cells to age, but like all biology, the system is more complex than what we first thought. We’ve been able to slow down the aging process in mice, but one of the biggest roadblocks we didn’t see coming was the psychological component. It’s almost as if the brain is unable to process or catch up to the biological slowing of age...

Donna gets up and shuts the TV off and then returns back to her chair. She does not make a move to say anything. I’m not sure what to say. I look down at my coffee and watch the steam slowly pirouette up and away from its dark, liquid stage. I’m embarrassed. I’m sure Donna had better things to do tonight than find me crippled on the side of the road and then bandaging me up. I’m lucky she did though. I’m not sure what condition I would be in if she hadn’t found me.

“Where’s Roger tonight?” I finally say.

“He’s out of town on a hunting trip. I get some peace and quiet for a few days,

which is nice. But, home isn't the same without him." Donna says. The ceiling fan quietly whirs above us. I know too well what an empty house feels like.

"How's your leg feeling?" she asks.

"Good. Really good. I should probably get going since I've taken up enough of your evening."

"No, no, no. Stay here a bit and rest some more. I was just coming back from some errands in town. Like I said, I could use the company."

I nod and smile then drink a little of my coffee which is about the perfect temperature now. The thing I dislike about hot liquids though is that there is a small window of time where it does not burn one's tongue and when it is not cold and stale. I wonder why such things have to come to pass so quickly. However, I am appreciative of the kindness Donna has shown me. I think about all that she has done for me tonight, and I recall the time she also helped me get inside from the garden. Tears tiptoe into my eyes for all the compassion Donna has expressed towards me for no reason besides that it is her nature to do so.

"Sorry," I say as I brush a few tiny tears out of my eyes.

"Don't be. We all need to cry sometimes. Nothing to be ashamed of. Do you want to talk about it? If not, there is not pressure to say anything. However, it's not every day that a man goes for a night run and ends up scraped up on the side of the road."

I look to this woman, this woman who gave me a home, who I have hid so much from. All she knows is where I grew up and what I do for a living, nothing more. Yet, in her aged eyes there is a gleam that she knows more about me than I even know, even with the little facts I've given her. She's saved me twice now, so I owe her, at the very

least, an explanation I realize.

In a teary blubber, I tell her about Red, how my inaction treated him poorly, how he left me, how that hurt me more deeply than I imagined, how I fled to Colorado, and how when I just thought I was gaining the courage to confront him and come to peace with things myself, things all came crashing down.

I tell Donna how Olive told me Red is in the hospital after I waited outside his doorstep for hours today.

“Red’s been battling cancer for a few months now,” Olive had said. “At first, we thought it was just mild, but then the doctors found out it had spread throughout his body. He’s had a few procedures, chemo sessions, and some radiation.”

As I say this, I still don’t know how to process the new information. I tell Donna how Red had found out he had cancer while we were still together, before he left me.

“And I don’t blame him for not telling me,” I confess. “I wouldn’t have told me either because I was never there for him, and I see now that he knew that the whole time.”

I try to say more, but my tears don’t let me. They have invaded my throat and have blockaded my lungs. I feel their hands grip my vocal cords.

“You poor thing,” Donna says. “You have been through a lot. I’m so sorry. It makes more sense now why I found you on the side of the road now.” She tries to make me smile. It doesn’t quite work, but it does lessen my tears.

“Why didn’t you just tell me before?” she asks.

“I don’t know... I... I have a hard time telling anyone anything. And, I was scared.”

“Scared about what?” she asks, but her voice indicates that she knows exactly what. “About us knowing you’re gay? I guess I can’t judge you. This is small town Midwest. However, you’ve got to give people a chance once you get to know them. It’s not like it used to be before. Of course, I can’t blame you because I haven’t been in your shoes, but I can sympathize. There’s no way you would have known this, but Rodger’s brother is gay.

“In fact, that’s who he is hunting with right now. Roger is extremely protective of Richard. It pained Roger to watch Richard to through what he had to go through back then. Roger was always there though, every step of the way, to support and help Richard. They’ve always been so close.

“I guess that was a roundabout way of saying that Roger and I are always here if you need anything.”

I feel ashamed because she’s right. I assume too much about people without giving them a chance at my trust.

“Hey, it’s all OK now. The question though is if you’re going to be alright.”

“I think so,” I say.

“What’s the plan now? What’re you going to do about Red?”

“Well Olive said that I would probably be able to see him next week depending how he is feeling. She didn’t want to speak on his behalf, but she said she would let me know what he says.”

“I think that’s a good idea. I think you’ll come to see that he’ll be happy to see you.”

“We’ll see I guess.”

I glance at a clock sitting on an end table, and I see that it is nearly midnight. Donna helps me out of my chair, but I find that I am able to walk by myself for the most part. We get in the truck, and she drives me back to my house.

I give her a hug goodbye in thanks. She says,

“Let me know if you need anything. Not just tonight, but whenever.”

She watches as I let myself into my front door. I turn around and watch as the truck’s two headlights stroll off into the distance. I make it up my stairs, and I get into bed without changing clothes. It’s hard to tell if I am more exhausted from my run and fall or if I am exhausted from all the tears I’ve produced today.

My bed feels foreign to me like it has every night since I’ve been back from Colorado. Tonight in particular, the mattress seems massive, empty. Back in my old room at my parents’ house, I felt slightly more cozy and comforted in my small, full-sized bed from my youth. But here in my queen, the fit is wrong like a shirt bought by a relative two sizes too big. I am in a rowboat surrounded by waves and waves of sheets. This is a bed for two, not one. It hits me that more than anything, I want to be held, not by anyone in particular, but I want someone to hold me tight, to hold me together so I do not get lost in this expansive world. I’ve relied on myself too long for comfort, and these past few weeks have showed me how poor of a job I’ve been doing all these years at that.

I grab the comforter off the bed along with a pillow, and I bring them downstairs to the couch. At least here I feel snug and supported even if it is artificial.

CHAPTER 21

I watch as a solitary butterfly flits by me. Its reddish wings are as thin as, if not thinner than, parchment. I wonder how the insect's frail wings can support its body. How do sudden bursts of wind not shred the paper of its wings? Such design seems impractical for survival. One would think they were bred for novelty, only surviving in human-made enclosures for entertainment, yet here this solitary being is fluttering around me, proof of their beautiful resilience and finessed purpose. The little guy is one of the first of the butterflies I have seen this spring. Even though it is delicate, it dares flying between tables of people much larger than its size.

I want to tell it to leave because it is in danger. One of my first memories of butterflies is from the summer before kindergarten. Back then, there was a field next to my house that had yet not been sold and developed into houses. For my birthday, I received a butterfly net of my very own.

One morning I was out in the yard with my mom. It was still early enough for the morning dew to dampen the grass. I think Mom was watering the roses along the house when a white butterfly passed by me in the yard. Quickly, I ran to the garage and grabbed the net. The butterfly had traveled out of the yard and into the field full of bindweed and filaree.

I swung my net wildly, but the butterfly was more elusive than my six-year-old arms wielding the net could manage. Finally though, the butterfly landed on one of the purple filaree flowers. I swatted the net down and trapped the butterfly.

I then reached under the net with my young, grubby hand until I caught ahold of the insect. When I unclenched my hand, the butterfly laid crumpled in my palm. The

white of its wings had marked its powdery film on my hands as if to identify the murderous culprit. I tried in horror to flatten out its wings, but they ripped like tissue paper. My tears fell on my palms and made a paste out of the powdery dust. I never used my butterfly net again.

As the reddish butterfly continues to fearlessly fly around the tables, someone taps me on my shoulder.

“Sorry I am a little late. Parking downtown is always a struggle,” Red says as he takes a seat in front of me. “Hope you weren’t waiting long.”

“I wasn’t, no worries,” I lie. I am always one to arrive ten or more minutes early to everything. My punctuality manifests due to a fear of not letting others down and ruining plans.

“Well, you were easy to spot at least. I just had to look for the most handsome guy out here on the patio,” Red says.

“Stop, you’re just being nice.”

“No, I’m just saying the truth. And here’s another truth: I’m glad you kept your word on your promise. I promise I won’t let you down on this date.”

“I’m trying my best.” I can’t tell if Red is just putting on a show. I question if this is a routine he pulls on every date or if he is merely being himself. A handsome guy like Red, I suspect, must go on dates frequently.

“How did you manage to score this weather?” Red gestures to the sky around us. It is a wonderful evening, probably one of the warmest so far in April. The warmth is a nice appetizer for the promise of summer to come.

“I was hoping it would be nice because the patio here is my favorite.”

“Oh really? I hate sitting outside,” Red says.

“I’m so sorry. We can move inside if you’d like.” I grab my menu and stand up.

“I’m kidding,” Red says as he puts his hand on my menu and guides it back down onto the table. “I love sitting out here. I haven’t been here in a while. Great choice.”

I feel slightly embarrassed for falling for Red’s little joke because I am too nervous trying to keep my composure in front of this man who I think is way out of my league.

I am relieved he said he liked this place though. It is a small brewery called Bent River in downtown Moline close enough to the Mississippi River that when sitting outside, you can sometimes hear the water flowing by. It is one of Moline’s hidden gems. Their beer is well known, but what most people don’t expect is how good their food also is.

“I’m glad you approve,” I say.

“Even if we were meeting at McDonald’s I would have still been excited though,” he says as our waitress arrives at our table. I order one of their lighter beers, and Red orders their infamous jalapeño beer. When she asks us if we are ready to order food or an appetizer yet, we say we need more time since we have not yet looked at the menu.

“Alright, I’ll get those drink orders in for you then,” she says.

Red is quiet as he thoroughly reads through each option in the tiny menu. I pretend to look over the menu even though I know what I want already. I don’t know what to say as always. Even as a kid I was always too shy to begin conversations. It is much easier to discuss what others begin talking about rather than beginning a conversation that people may have no interest in discussing, so I hope Red will say

something soon.

The waitress comes back over with our drinks and takes our food order. After she grabs the menus and leaves, Red just looks at me in silence. I begin to grow anxious. Is he questioning coming on this date? Is he already bored? I am too nervous to return his gaze, so I look down at my lap and fidget my fingers instead.

“You really can just sit in silence, can’t you?” Red says finally. “It’s not a bad thing. I noticed it when we first met at the bar. You’re an observer.”

Red must see how uncomfortable I am. I don’t know if I am failing this date because I haven’t been on one in a few years or if I have always been bad at first dates. I wish I hadn’t texted Red back after Target. It would have saved me this embarrassment.

“No, really I mean this as a compliment,” he says. “It’s a good quality. Well, enough about me talking about you. Let’s find out more about the mysterious Milo.”

“What do you want to know? There’s not much to tell,” I say. I feel that all I have to offer is that I am an editor and that I live in a house in the country, and I figure this man will discover all of that and we’ll have nothing left to discuss.

“Hmmm there’s so much I want to know.” Red strokes his freshly shaven chin and looks into the distance in order to pretend to be deep in thought. “What flavor of ice cream is your favorite and why?”

I’m not expecting his question. It’s definitely not a first date question I have ever been asked before. I take some time to think before I respond.

“Cookie dough. I guess it’s because I like cookies,” I say.

“Good choice, good choice. Mine would have to be cake batter because I like celebrations and sweet things.”

“That’s too sweet for me.”

“Perfect. That means less competition for me over cake batter ice cream,” Red says. I am both impressed and insecure about how witty Red is able to be on the spot. Red does not seem to be nervous on this date like I am, and this realization puts more pressure on me.

“What else do you want to know?” I ask.

“No, no, no. That’s not how this works.” Red takes a drink of his jalapeño beer. “I asked a question, so now it’s your turn.”

“What’s your favorite color?” I ask and instantly regret when I remember his name is Red.

“Red,” he says. “But, it’s not just because of my name. It reminds me of winter holidays. I always love seeing the friendly pop of red around pine trees on a snowy day. What’s your favorite color?”

“Orange,” I say. I’m relieved he answered my question without mocking its obvious simplicity.

“Nice, not many people like orange. You must love citrus fruit.”

“Nope. Orange reminds me of sunsets at dusk when all of the world is quiet.”

“That answer helps out my hypothesis about you is. This next question will confirm if I’m right about you. If you could have any superpower, what would it be and why? You only get one, and it can’t be that you’d have the superpower to have all superpowers because not only is that against the rules, but it is an answer I have given before and have gotten scolded for.”

I am not sure about what his hypothesis is about me, nor am I excited that he

thinks he can easily read me. I have never been asked this question before, but it is something I have thought about often.

“The ability to stop time,” I say. “I want to have time to finish tasks without rushing and, mostly I guess, be able to enjoy moments longer. For instance, have you ever seen a sunset so beautiful on a summer night that you just wanted time to stop so that the world could be basked in oranges, golds, pinks, and purples for longer? Yes, I could just take a photograph, but photographs don’t do a moment justice. Instead, a photograph is just a reminder of how fleeting life is.”

“Dang, I was wrong,” Red says. “I thought you would say invisibility if I’m being honest. Stopping time, huh? I’ve never thought of that one before.”

I’m not surprised that Red thinks I would choose invisibility; however, I feel invisible enough in this world. It does not seem like a superpower at all to me, more like a curse.

“What would be your superpower then?” I ask.

“Easy. I’d want the ability to fly. That way I could travel to new places but always return home easily. Plus, how cool would it be to be the only person that could fly?”

“Pretty cool I guess.”

“Your turn for a question,” he says.

“What’s your theory about me that you mentioned before?” I ask without thinking. I’m sure Red wanted another ice-breaker type question, but I am bothered that he thinks he knows me already.

“My theory? Well, I think you were interesting, enigmatic even, and I see that my hypothesis is, for the most part, true. However, there is more to you than you lead people

on to think, Milo.”

Is there really more to me than I let people think? I wonder. I am around myself too much to think there is anything deep about me. I am shy and quiet, and I feel that the world is too large and open at times. I look at Red’s face trying to find something, anything, to indicate that he is just leading me on with his observation, but I can’t find anything discernible. He’s looking at me intently with a relaxed smile. Maybe he is intrigued by me, but I find that hard to believe.

Our food arrives. I expect our conversation to die down as we shovel food into our mouths, but Red keeps the conversation continually going for the rest of dinner. Red’s enthusiasm to find things out about me becomes charming, maybe even genuine, so to me, a man who has not been pursued before by a guy I thought was out of my league, I am overwhelmed and unexpectedly enthralled.

As we eat dinner, the horizon tucks away each color one by one. First blue, then it puts away yellow and orange and red. Shadows begin blanketing the world around us. A deep, consoling indigo is the last to be folded away until morning. Slowly the white specks of stars spread across the dark night sky, and the brewery’s patio lights illuminate the tables around us. The date nears its end, and I am surprised to think that I don’t yet want it to end. Even if this is all a ploy and I never hear from Red again, at least I will have this one moment to hold onto, this one moment in time, perhaps one of the first moments, where I feel desired.

The asphalt underneath my feet feels softer than usual tonight like the way petals slightly compress when held between two fingers. When I arrived home after the date, I

crawled into bed, but I was too wired to sleep. After a few hours of stirring around, I knew I had to expend my energy in order to get any amount of sleep tonight, so, like always, I went for a run.

I checked my phone one last time before I headed out the door and saw that it was well past three in the morning, but I also checked my phone to re-read the message Red had sent after our date: *Thank you for the wonderful date and keeping up on your promise. The next date is one me. Goodnight, Milo.*

The night sky is a rippleless pond above me, and I swim below it along the empty country roads. If there is a breeze, I do not register it. I can't quite tell if Red is sincere about seeing me again or not. I try not to listen to those thoughts, the kind of thoughts that grab my feet like lake-water mud. A foreign, calming buoyance keeps me afloat though. It is the slight feeling of hope trickling through me that perhaps I am running towards something for the first time. Instead of trying to be one stride ahead of my thoughts, they hold onto me the way clouds gently hold the night's colors at dusk. I'm slightly uncertain of their motives, but I don't shoo away their presence. Together we run on into the night.

CHAPTER 22

The light here filters through slight hues of mint and parchment. The cleanliness of the machines along with the orderliness of the motif attire worn by the staff makes it feel as if all this is merely staged. This must be one of those places seen on TV, in television shows where families come with illnesses that don't exist in the outside world. All of it cannot possibly be real. But as I walk by a room on my way through the hospital, I hear wet screams too ugly, too real to be scripted, and I see a glimpse of a boy whose arm is bent in places it shouldn't be.

I continue walking until I see a sign that indicates I've arrived at the correct department. Olive is in the waiting room waiting for me. The first thing I notice is that there is not her usual bounce in her step as she comes over to me, and then I notice that the gold bursts in her eyes are overshadowed by the slight red lines in her eyes. I recognize that the crimson is debris from tears gone by.

Before she says anything, she pulls me in for a tight hug.

"It's good to see you, Milo. I've missed you."

"I've missed you, too." I say back. In another setting, I would be overwhelmed with joy by our reunion. However, the current circumstances do not allow for such feelings.

"How's Red?" I ask.

"It's been a rough week for him," she says. "But, he's having a good day. He's excited to see you."

"I'm scared, Olive."

"Don't be, Milo. It's just Red. He's the same old Red you've always known. It'll

all be OK. I promise. Come on. I'll take you to his room."

I follow her through double doors and down a hallway. She stops when we get to a room about halfway.

"This is him," Olive says. "I'll leave you two it."

Olive leaves to go back to the waiting room, and I am left alone outside Red's door. I take a couple deep breaths to prepare myself. I have to remind myself, like Olive said, that I'm not seeing some stranger. It's just Red.

I grab the cold, metal handle. As I open the door, I wonder if I should have knocked or not, but it's too late to do differently because Red has already spotted me.

"Milo," he says.

"Hi, Red," I say.

The blinds are opened. The light of the day illuminates the room so I can clearly see his face. His skin is paler than before, his skin looks tighter, but his honey and cocoa eyes are still filled with the joy of the world, even in spite of his current circumstance. He is sitting up in bed and is wearing an institutional white hospital gown, and there is an IV connected to his arm.

"Thanks for coming. It's good to see you," he says.

"It's good to see you, too," I say. "How are you doing? Olive told me a little bit, but not everything."

"I'm doing alright. Could be a lot worse. At first they thought it was just stage one testicular cancer isolated to just one testicle. It was a scare, but nothing to worry about they said. Well, in a follow up appointment before my surgery to remove it, they found out that it had metastasized into my lymph nodes in my abdomen. They did a scan of my

whole body then just to make sure it wasn't anywhere else, and they found that some of it also had spread to other parts of my body. As of now, I've had the testicle and some lymph nodes removed, and I'm in the early stages of my chemo and radiation treatments. My doctor is really nice and smart. She's been really good to me, and she says she's hopeful. Only time will tell. I'm handling it OK, but I feel bad for my family. My parents freaked out. They are here all the time even though I tell them there's nothing they can do, and there's no use in missing work and worrying. Poor Olive though. It's hit her the hardest. She's here all the time, and I don't think she's been sleeping much. She's taking off as much time at work as she can, but I know work is only going to let her miss so much. I have to remind myself that I would do the same for them though. At least I got a room with a good view. I would go stir crazy if I didn't see any sun. They let me out into the garden every now and then, which I appreciate. Well, today isn't the best for it since it's misty and slightly rainy, but earlier I was thinking about how it reminds me of the random trip we took to the lake down by Springfield? We'd found a cheap lakeside cabin online. I remembered how it rained the whole time, so we were stuck inside the whole time for the most part playing a lot of games of cribbage except for Sunday morning when we were determined to swim before we headed back home. We decided it would be a good idea to skinny dip in the storm. I swear it must've been the coldest rain of the summer, but we tried our best to not let it bother us. Do you remember that weekend?"

"Of course I do," I say. "I was sick that whole next week because of it. I couldn't believe I had a cold in the middle of summer."

"I nearly forgot about that part. It was still worth it though in my books."

"We did have some fun though. I'm sure we would have looked crazy to anyone

who saw us splashing around butt ass naked in the water in the pouring rain.”

“Good times,” Red begins to laugh, but then he clenches his abdomen in pain which quickly stifles the laugh. “Sorry. That happens from time to time,” he says.

His pain passes. We turn back to silence. I’m not sure what to say next. I don’t know if Red had intentionally planned to bring up a happy memory of ours or if the moment really just popped up into his head.

“What have you been up to?” Red asks.

“Just work mostly. Oh, and uh, I went back home and visited my family for a bit because, well, I guess I just hadn’t seen them in a while. I feel horrible now. I had no idea this was happening to you.”

“Of course you had no idea. I meant for it to be that way.” Red’s face changes from happy to a serious expression I have only seen once before on the day he left. Each word feels like a little jab in my side. I’m taken off guard. I thought today would just be a formality of catching up. Sick people were not supposed to talk about serious things, were they? I have no idea what Red has been through the last few months, no idea how isolated he has been in his confined state, no idea how he has reflected about us.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I ask, but I’m pretty sure I already know the question. However, this is what I came here to hear, to confront.

“Milo, what do you think? Those last few weeks, you would hardly look at me when we hung out,” he says. He turns away from me. I can’t tell if he is holding in tears or clarifying his thoughts. He takes a few deep breaths then turns back to me. His eyes aren’t from the Red I knew. When I don’t say anything in response, he speaks again.

“Milo, why won’t you speak? You would barely speak to me then. The least you

could do is speak to me now. I kept telling myself that you were just in a bad mood and going through a bad time. I tried my best to be supportive and to not intrude on your space. I was in denial that you were losing feelings for me. But one day, I looked at you, and I realized the spark in those blue eyes, the one that would light up in those quiet moments when I could feel you, had died out.

“Milo, you stopped trying altogether, and I couldn’t figure out why. Right as I had this realization, I went to the doctor for a routine checkup and found a lump on my testicle. I broke down and told Olive that day about what the doctors thought the lump was, and I told her about how the love of my life had stopped loving me. See Milo? Even now you’re not denying it because you know it’s true. I really thought you were going to end it any day, but I didn’t want you to because I loved you so so much. So, I decided to wait a week or so to see if there was any flicker of a chance that you still liked me, but I couldn’t find it Milo. It had all died in your eyes.”

Red isn’t crying, but his skin is flushed. His voice sounds raw like sandstone. Time no longer feels like it follows its normal rules. The last few months feel like they are all compressed right here before me in a rippling pool. All of my past thoughts, my past emotions, are creating tiny waves, but instead of rippling out from a common center, they are converging into a single point until the pool that is time is still like a windowpane.

“Milo, you don’t know how badly I have wanted you here this whole time. But by you, I mean the old you: the one who turned to hold me in the middle of the night when he got cold, the one who told me about his favorite books in a shy enthusiasm, the one who saw the best in people from the sidelines without being able to see the best in him,

the one who would surprise me with a kiss halfway through a movie. I wanted that Milo to be there for me, but I don't know if he still exists. Does he?"

Red intently looks at me.

"Milo, say something. Say something, please," Red pleads as much as his weak body allows him, but then he breaks into a coughing fit. When it subsides, he says quieter,

"Milo, where did the boy I found in Florida go?"

"I don't know. I'm sorry," I finally say, and it's mostly true I think. I still feel like that same guy from then, shy, uncertain, wavering. Maybe Red is just seeing the true Florida guy for the first time now.

"I wish you knew where he went. I wish he was here now," Red says and then asks, "Why did you come, Milo?"

"I wanted to see if you were OK."

"Well, do I look OK? You don't have to answer that. I know I don't look good. I'm sick and gross, and I am sure you were just guilted into seeing if I was alright. And I knew that's exactly what would have happened if I had told you the news from the start. Nobody wants to break the heart of a cancer patient. What has it been? Nearly two months? I really thought you might have tried to reach out to me that night I left or the next day. But you never called. You never came."

Red is mad, an emotion I never knew he was capable of. His mad isn't loud and violent. His mad is quieter like sand hitting you in a breeze. It's small but ingrains in hair, fingernails, ridges of skin. His anger is the disappointment of spring flowers during a slow, unexpected frost.

“You’re right,” I say. “I didn’t call.”

“Why didn’t you?” Red asks. I don’t know what to say, so I just shrug my shoulders and look away. The sheets on his bed are slightly frayed on the edges. String fragments move in the subtle breeze of the air conditioner in the room. How many things have these sheets had to endure without coming undone?

“What happened to us?” he asks.

CHAPTER 23

“But what for?”

“Because it’s fun.”

“How far do you run?”

“I just run as long as I need to. It’s not about the distance. It’s about the experience of running.”

“No thanks.”

“But you run at the gym? What’s the difference?”

“It’s just one of your things you do. Have fun though.”

Red directs his attention back at the TV. I remain standing to wait and see if he’ll change his mind, but Red settles into the couch as if I have already left. I slowly walk towards the door, but before I close it, I look back; however, his cocoa and amber eyes don’t greet mine as I had hoped. I shut the door and run into the orange dusk. My runs lately have been solemn prayers, prayers to unravel myself, prayers to offer hidden fragments of myself. All prayers that a man would want to share this ritual with me, if only once.

When I finish, I walk in the house and quietly get ready for bed. Red doesn’t flinch or notice my silence. He assumes I am just tired and lets me go to bed alone. The bed feels like citrus juice on my papercut thoughts.

CHAPTER 24

“I realized today that I haven’t read a book in quite a while. You’re always reading. What’s a good recommendation?” Red asks. I respond by sprinting from the bedroom to the living room and back. My suggestion for him is reflex.

“What’s this?” he asks when I hand him the book with the yellow cover adorned with the red house and silhouettes of people canoeing.

“*Tuck Everlasting*. It’s one of my favorite books. I actually bought it when I ran into you at Target that day. I had read it a long time ago and forgotten about it.”

“Oh really? That’s wild,” he says. Red flips over the book and begins reading the back description. As I watch him scan it, I think about how this book of Natalie Babbitt’s is one that I have read so many times that a piece of me had latched onto it and will forever be a part of it.

“Eh, no thanks. Not my kind of book.” He hands it back to me without a second thought. “I’ll probably just head to the library or something. I should have guessed that you wouldn’t have something I’d like.”

CHAPTER 25

“But you said your favorite color was red?” I ask Red.

“I just say that because people expect me to. I really don’t have a favorite to be honest,” he says.

“So do you have a favorite of anything? Animals? Food? Movies?”

“Nope. I have things I like, but not favorites.”

But what about me? Am I not a favorite?

CHAPTER 26

I lied. I've been lying to everyone, including Red. To each person we introduced ourselves as a couple to, Red regaled the origin of our relationship. He would goad as he replayed the scene in the bar of how he spotted me on the sidelines of the dance floor and how he knew, in that instant, that I would be someone special to him. Then, Red would tell of the promise I made him and how I had to keep that promise when fate brought us together in Moline's Target. And every time he recounted our relationship, I would sit back quietly and would continue to lie. I lied through omission.

I let Red and everyone think that it was he who spotted me first. While it's true that he first approached me, it is not true that he saw me first.

Truth be told, I saw him first four days before on the beach. I was at the beach in Clearwater with Markia, Jones, and Clare. Only that morning, I had gone to the beach by myself. The others were still sleeping or slowly getting ready for the day back at our hotel. I was the morning person out of the group who was functional before eleven A.M. unlike the rest of my friends. I had decided to head to the beach early to read.

I love reading next to ocean. I like the way the sound of the waves massages my muscles and how my towel on the sand cuddles up to my body in a way no human ever will be able to. The beach is also one of the few places where I am able to be alone amongst a crowd. People are able to run, swim, collect shells, play catch all around me without ever intruding on me.

Usually I am not a people-watcher. I prefer to pretend I am isolated on the beach alone. However, a flash of red in the ocean caught my eye mid page turn.

The morning was still early enough to where people were not gathered in clumps

swimming in the water. At this time, there was only one man swimming near my portion of the beach at that time. It was his red trunks that first caught my eye, but I remained transfixed watching for other reasons.

Even though the man was all alone, he swam and explored the light waves with a confidence I could never uphold. On the beach, people remain unnoticed, but in the water, people are at the mercy of the beach-goers' gazes. However, such thoughts clearly did not cross this man's mind.

There was no rush to his actions, nor was there a showiness of him trying to impress people with his strokes. The man swam for no other reason but to swim. I was entranced by him. I remembered thinking how I envied his confidence to act in front of others without a care as to what they thought.

I watched him for a long time while hiding the direction of my eyes behind my sunglasses. The man looked like he belonged to the sea in the way he ebbed and flowed with each elevated increment of the water. The water guided him with each stroke as if they were familiar friend reunited.

Before I knew it, the man stopped swimming and got out of the water a little bit away from me. He was tall. Slender yet toned. The water glistened as he shook it from his dark, spiraled curls. The drops on his skin clung to him as if they begged him to return to the water.

I envied the man's physique and his confidence. I thought that a man like this would never take a second glance at me. I was absolutely positive of it because no such thing had ever happened before. I knew my place in the hierarchy of men.

The man with the red swim trunks toweled off and left the beach. I figured I never

would see him again, but for whatever reason, his image remained stuck in my mind. I was wrong though.

Four days later at the gay bar, my last night in Tampa, I had to do a double-take when a man approached me on the outskirts of the dancefloor.

I was so afraid that day, more afraid than I revealed to anyone, because I was afraid to not only admit that I had seen this man before, but that I was afraid that this was all a ploy because there was no way that this exquisitely attractive and confident man could have willingly approached me. What's more, is that I was afraid to admit to myself that I wanted this man, and I was afraid that I was going to be let down.

He introduced himself to me as Red.

CHAPTER 27

The candlelight whispers small, shadow songs on the table before me. I can nearly hear their wick-voices with their calm and fleeting notes. They adorn a glass vase filled with tulips. Their white petals sit regally atop their long, green stems.

“Champagne?” a tall, slender server asks us. He is wearing a white, button-down shirt tucked into black slacks, which is not far off from what I am wearing. The only things he is missing that I have are a tie and a jacket.

“Yes please,” I say. He grabs my champagne flute and pours the bubbly, parchment-tinted liquid into the tilted glass. He hands it back to me and then fills up the other one.

“Thank you,” I say.

“You’re welcome,” he says. “Enjoy the rest of your evening you two.” He then walks away.

“Cheers,” I say.

“Cheers,” Sam says. We clink our glasses and then take a sip. The bubbly liquid skips down my throat. I set my glass back down and look over at Sam. She looks beautiful tonight. She is wearing an emerald green dress that frills out at the end along with a white cardigan. Her hair is in a graceful and understated side ponytail.

Before we can get back to talking, someone starts clinking a knife to a glass.

“Attention. Attention everyone. It is time now to introduce Mr. and Mr. Aleksandrov to the dance floor for their first dance as a married couple,” Landon says through the microphone.

Sam and I get up along with everyone else in order to get a better view of the

dancefloor. As Matt and Jim come into view, everyone breaks into applause and cheers. They grab ahold of one another and begin slowly dancing back and forth. The whole time their eyes are locked, and it is as if all the happiness in the world is concentrated between them. They are dressed in opposite colored suits. Jim is wearing a black suit, black tie, and white shirt, and Matt is wearing white suit, white tie, and black shirt. Each of them have a white tulip on their lapel.

“We’re just going to have tulips at the wedding,” Matt said to me a few months ago. “They are a springtime flower, and we want everything to be simple yet elegant at the wedding. It’s our one day we can pretend to be fancy, but we don’t want to overdo it.”

They nailed their theme. All the tables in the reception area have white tablecloths, vases with tulips, fine white china, and flickering candles. Everything is simple, elegant. Beautiful.

“Don’t they look wonderful? I want something like that someday,” Sam says.

“They look amazing. I’ve never seen them so happy.”

“Thanks again for bringing me. I’m having a blast.”

“Of course. Thanks for agreeing to come all this way. I really couldn’t have done it without you.”

In fact, I am surprised that I am even here at the wedding. Matt and Jim were Red’s friends first, so it was unexpected when I received their wedding invitation in the mail. I put it up on my fridge with a magnet and stared at it for a few days before getting the courage to call them.

“Are you sure you’re OK with this? After Red and everything?” I said.

“Of course,” Matt said.

“Positive? I won’t be offended if...”

“Yes, we’re positive. Shut up. You’re our friend, too. Speaking of which, would you like to get dinner with Jim and me soon? We miss seeing you around.”

Not only am I at their wedding, but I’ve hung out quite a bit with Jim and Matt, particularly Matt. I realized that I had never truly hung out with them before, only in large group settings. Even Landon has joined us in hanging out a few times.

I have enjoyed getting to know Matt and Jim more. I had never interacted much with Jim before because, like me, he is introverted, which is why he did not make regular appearances in groups with Matt. Turns out he is a kind guy even though he appears large and intimidating at first. He secretly loves to cook and has a passion for poetry. Matt, on the other hand, has helped me get out of my shell by making me go to yoga classes and occasionally the bar in order for me to meet people. What I like most about Matt is that he also loves to run, so we’ve been running a time or two a week together.

I was so worried that I would have no friends after Red and I broke up, but I realized I never truly had friends with him. At Olive’s backyard cookouts and other group events, I never initiated conversations to try and get to know people better. Instead, I was shy and waited for people to talk to me, and I never made the effort to try to hang out with people.

Sam has turned out to be a great, consistent friend as well. We talk and catch up about every other week. When I told her that I was nervous about going to this wedding and that I didn’t have a date, she immediately said,

“I’ll be your date.”

“No,” I said. “I wouldn’t make you come all the way out here just to babysit me at a wedding where my ex will be.”

“Take me. I need an excuse to come visit you anyway. I’ve got to see this house and garden you keep raving about, and I need to confirm whether or not the Quad Cities are as magical as you make them out to be. I’m skeptical since there are no mountains.”

Today is Friday. Sam just barely got into town yesterday, so I haven’t had the chance to show her around the area yet besides where I live and the wedding venues.

“You really do live in the country,” she said on our way to my house. “Are these all corn fields in the summer?”

“Either corn or soybeans, but yeah, there are fields and fields of them. I like it right now though because you can see all the farms and silos in the distance.”

“These are nice.”

When we pulled up to my house, Sam made an audible gasp.

“Wait, you really live here?”

“Yes, welcome to my home.”

“Wow, it’s even more beautiful than you describe.”

Before I could stop and turn off the car, Sam bolted out of the car.

“This must be the infamous garden you were talking about, and those must be the farms in the distant that you say twinkle at night. And your house, it’s the exact blue I imagined it to be, rustic and cozy.”

I grabbed her stuff and showed her into the house. Tuck must have heard us come in because he came down the stairs right away.

“You must be Tuck,” Sam said.

“Yes, that’s him, the new man of the house,” I said.

Tuck, without hesitation, came up to Sam and greeted her with a rub against her leg accompanied by a purr.

“What a handsome kitten. He looks like he is wearing a gray tuxedo.”

I have come more accustomed to not having Red around the house, but some nights when I come home from work, I miss feeling greeted at the door. My bed also felt hollow like a too large cavern some nights, particularly when it rained because each droplet would amplify the echo of solitude throughout the house.

I’m not sure why getting a pet had not crossed my mind, but about a month ago I had gone to Target one Saturday for no particular reason but to get out of the house. When I walked up to the store, I saw a bundled up lady sitting outside with a box of kittens. My curiosity led me over to the box where I could hear a Morse code of mews coming out of the cardboard confinement.

I looked into the box and was greeted by six tiny kittens of different colors vying for attention, well, all but one of them. One kitten sat in the corner and watched its siblings. Then, his forest eyes made contact with mine, and I saw me looking back at myself. In his little eyes, I saw a shy, timid uncertainty of the world.

“You can hold him if you want,” the bundled up lady said. She reached in and grabbed him. He did not squirm, but his eyes widened in fear. She placed his tiny, kitten body into my open hands. I could not get over how small he was, nor could I get over how quickly his teeny heart raced against my palms.

“We call him Tux since he looks like he’s wearing a grey tuxedo. He’s yours if you want him.”

I slowly ran my fingers through his soft hair, and then, the faintest of purrs emerged from his tiny figure.

“I’ll take him.”

While he was shy the first couple days, he quickly ditched that persona and became a courageous and friendly presence in the household. He doesn’t know a stranger, so I envy how warm and trusting he is to anyone who walks into the door.

Most of all, I love how he greets me with meows and purrs every night I come home from work. It’s nice to be witnessed at home. And at night, he curls right up next to me. The ebb and flow of his breathing helps lull me to sleep.

I renamed him Tuck for two reasons. One, it sounds similar enough to his original name. Two, as much as I would love for him to be a kitten forever, I know that he’ll have to grow up and grow old. I’ll probably outlive him, but like the Tuck family in Natalie Babbitt’s book, I know that the evolution of life is the most beautiful gift of all.

While Matt and Jim dance on the reception floor before us, I spot a familiar presence out of the corner of my eye. When I turn to look, I see Red sitting from across the room. I had not seen him during the ceremony, so I did not know if he was well enough to attend the wedding. Yet, here he is sitting across from where I stand.

He’s changed a bit. His frame is thinner. His skin is still dark but has a worn, ashy tint to it. It is not the deep, earthy color I am used to seeing on him. The strangest thing is not seeing the black, galaxy spirals on his head because it is shaved.

Red and I haven’t spoken since I visited him in the hospital. I knew it is not my place to support him through this endeavor. A few weeks ago, I asked Matt about Red.

“They think his cancer is gone, but he still has some more treatments to do just to make sure it’s all gone. I’m not sure if he’ll be at the wedding because he’s pretty weak. But, you know Red and how there’s nothing that will stop him from doing what he wants, so I wouldn’t be surprised if he makes an appearance. Oh, and there’s one more thing you should know about him...”

As I observe Red, I see him talking to the man next to him. The man is average height, has medium brown hair, and what I notice most about him is that he has soft, kind eyes. As Red looks at him, I see Red’s cocoa and gold eyes illuminate the way they used to when he used to look at me.

“He’s a nurse in the hospital. That’s how they met. I guess Red one day got the courage to send him flowers at work, and the rest is history,” Matt said.

Red turns his gaze back to the dancefloor as Jim and Matt’s first song ends. Red begins clapping like everyone else, and then we lock eyes. There is an element of surprise in his eyes, but then they crinkle into a smile. I wave at him, and he reciprocates a wave back. Seeing Red is like coming across a book in the library that I read long ago. That day at the hospital we both had to confront what had gone from us, what had led us to this point, what could not be regained. The answer was difficult to pinpoint because no one had cheated, no one had hit the other, no one had lied. What we came to see was that, though hard to find, the answer was simply that the love had gone not all at once, but slowly the way dusk turns day into night.

CRITICAL AFTERWARD

When I first set out to write *Run Me Dusk*, I only had a vague idea of what I wanted the novel to be. I knew I would write some type of narrative about two gay men in their twenties, but beyond that, I was unable to formulate a story. It was not until I read Lori Ostlund's novel, *After the Parade* (2015), did my story start to materialize. I could not put Ostlund's novel down because it was a refreshing gay narrative that I had not encountered before. *After the Parade* is about Aaron Englund, a forty-year-old gay man, who leaves his partner Walter after twenty years. Aaron moves to San Francisco in hopes that a new environment will free him from his past family issues and liberate him from Walter who had primary control over Aaron's life (Ostlund). This was the first time I had read a falling out of love narrative about two men. The novel was not about AIDS or death, it veered away from stereotypical gay character traits such as flamboyancy and promiscuity, and 'coming out' was not its central theme. I related to Aaron in his insecurities about love, and I was moved by Ostlund's prosaic insights. Early in the novel, she writes, "Most people, they agreed, could either love or be loved, for these two were like rubbing your stomach and patting your head—nearly impossible to do simultaneously" (24-25). The passages in this novel demonstrate how it is a true piece of literature. However, as much as I wanted this to be the breakthrough in gay literature I have been desperately looking for, I grew more and more agitated because the book is not exempt from all of the tropes gay literature falls into.

After the Parade still displays a pederastic narrative that many books with gay characters and themes contain. Walter, the lover Aaron leaves, "was a language professor—French and Spanish, Italian in a pinch—at the university" who seduced the

then eighteen-year-old Aaron (Ostlund 18). Aaron leaves Walter after twenty years because he realizes that Walter coerced Aaron to be with him by taking Aaron under his wing after Aaron's father died and Aaron's mother abandoned him (Ostlund 19). *After the Parade* also heavily deals with family issues and 'coming out.' Aaron never had a good relationship with his father before his father was killed in a freak accident when Aaron was a child, and Aaron's mother abandons Aaron some years later. Coming out is a difficult process for Aaron, but later in the novel, Aaron finds out his mother left Aaron to live a romantic life with a woman (Ostlund 285). I was frustrated that *After the Parade* contained these tropes when it was so close to inventing an original gay narrative, and it was through this frustration that I began to figure out the novel I was going to write.

My goal for *Run Me Dusk* was to write a falling out of love narrative between two gay men that existed outside of the tropes I have encountered in the majority of novels about gay men I have read. Milo, the book's protagonist, and his boyfriend Red split up early in my novel. Milo then takes a trip back to his childhood home in Colorado in order to reflect on why his relationship with Red did not work. Unlike *After the Parade*, I have made the characters in *Run Me Dusk* both men in their mid-twenties because I am tired of seeing novels where there is a pederastic relationship/large age disparity between the characters. Many books centered around gay characters display such a relationship. *After the Parade* is not alone in this. A canonical gay narrative is *Death in Venice* (1912) by Thomas Mann where an old man fantasizes about a younger boy. A more timely and mainstream example is André Aciman's novel *Call Me By Your Name* (2007) which has recently been adapted into a film in 2017. *Call Me By Your Name*'s plot centers around seventeen-year-old Elio who has a summer romance with Oliver, a twenty-four-year-old

graduate student interning with Elio's family for the summer in Italy (Aciman). Although the age difference in *Call Me By Your Name* is not as drastic as the age gaps found in other books, the age difference still plays a significant role. Elio is young and trying to figure out himself while Oliver is older, settled into his identity, and it is ultimately his experiences—both sexual and generally speaking—that set the two men apart and forces the relationship to fail. *The Front Runner* (1974) by Patricia Nell Warren falls into this trap as well. I wanted my characters in *Run Me Dusk* to be around the same age in order to steer clear from this trope.

I also wanted *Run Me Dusk* to exist outside of the realm of the overwrought 'coming out' narratives. The 'coming out' stereotype is everywhere in the media, but it is particularly dominant in gay YA literature. *Run Me Dusk* is not a YA book, but the overwhelming presence of coming out narratives in YA books and films still contribute to the conception that coming out is one of the only narratives to tell about gay men. The book *Simon Vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* (2015) by Becky Albertelli has been in the spotlight the last year due to its adaptation into the film *Love, Simon*. Inevitably, the story is about Simon, a closeted high school boy who gets outed in his school. On one hand, it is important to tell coming out stories in order to help depict LGBT struggles to the general public, but on the other hand, the continuous coming out narrative is too widespread, which only reinforces the idea that LGBT sexualities can only be told through this narrative frame. Even non-YA novels center around the coming out story too much. A great recent example of this is Garth Greenwell's novel *What Belongs to You* (2016). The entire second section of the story reflects on the main character's coming out experience to his parents, particularly to his stereotypically disapproving father.

In *Run Me Dusk*, Red's journey to his sexuality is never mentioned, and Milo's coming out story is not told. However, Milo does acknowledge some of the struggles he has had growing up gay such as being bullied by the basketball team and being closeted in a small town. Milo also recognizes some of the issues he has with his parents, but the issues do not stem from his sexuality. He has a hard time relating to his father who is big, strong, and partakes in hobbies that never interested Milo. Milo's mom is cold and distant, but it is because she does not relate to Milo in many ways other than just his sexuality. Milo is not the son his parents envisioned having; however, they do not display a problem with his sexuality. After Milo's breakup with Red, Milo's dad tells him, "'You know,' he starts. 'You can talk to me about... stuff.'" Milo's mom does not express outwardly her support, but Milo recognizes her silence is a reflection of her general struggle with showing emotion. Milo does not reflect on his parents' past road to accepting his sexuality, nor does Milo contrast with how his parents treat him now versus the past solely based on his sexuality. I want to show that Milo's sexuality is important, but it is only one part of his identity. His sexual identity intersects with his other identities (race, background, class, age, ability, etc.) and does not trump those identities, which is why 'coming out' is not a theme relevant to the book.

Other themes I intentionally strayed away from are those of AIDS and death. Well-known books such as *To the Friend Who Did not Save My Life* (1990) by Hervé Guibert, *Holding the Man* (1995) by Timothy Conigrave, and *Tell the Wolves I'm Home* (2012) by Carol Rifka Brunt all center around the loss of gay men from AIDS. Not only are there a plethora of books involving AIDS or the death of a gay character, but the problem is further reinforced in mainstream cinema. Some of the most notable films

about gay men recently revolve around AIDS such *Milk* (2008), *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013), *Rent* (2005), and *Philadelphia* (1993). Richard Canning in his article, “The literature of AIDS,” says “The relationship between AIDS and gay sexuality has had a vexed history since the symptoms emerged in a number of sexually active gay men, mostly in the United States, in the late 1970s and early 1980s” (Canning 133). AIDS in fact used to be referred to as Gay-Related Immune Deficiency (GRID), and that association makes it difficult for people to separate the idea of AIDS from the gay narrative (Canning 133). In his book *Gay Male Fiction Since Stonewall*, Les Brookes looks at how gay male fiction has evolved as a result of Stonewall and the AIDS crisis. He notes that AIDS narratives were important in the 80s and 90s because literature needed to not only validate the harsh experiences gay men faced at the time, but it also needed to make society see the horrors of the AIDS epidemic from an inside perspective (Brookes 6). However, if we only continue writing gay narratives that include AIDS, we are only further reinforcing the belief that the lives of gay men cannot exist outside the realm of AIDS. The fact that I am even justifying why I did not include AIDS or death in my novel speaks to how ingrained these themes are in gay storytelling.

I also wanted to stray away from death in my book. It seems that in gay books and movies that if a character does not die from AIDS, there is still a good chance that a gay character will still die of something. The best, and perhaps most notable, example of this is the movie *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), which is based off of a short story by Annie Proulx. *A Single Man* (1964) by Christopher Isherwood is another book to movie adaptation that also deals with the death of a gay lover. It’s tiresome how easily I can name off gay literature that involves death: *Giovanni’s Room* (1956) by James Baldwin,

The Absolutist (2011) by John Boyne, *The Clothesline Swing* (2017) by Ahmad Danny Ramadan, etc. I wanted my novel to show that stories with gay characters can be told without loss because right now the number of gay stories involving death almost conveys that being gay is a death sentence in literature. I do not kill off any of my characters in the book, but I do flirt with society's preconceived script of the gay death/AIDS narrative. Red, in my book, falls ill with testicular cancer; however, he does not die, nor is it central to the main plot of the book. I want to briefly have readers think that the book is going to fall into the trap of killing off the gay lover, but then I break through the mold in order to show readers that gay love stories—or falling out of love stories—are not always tragic. Gay men are not mourning lovers in real life any more than any other human demographic, so gay stories need to reflect that as well.

While *Run Me Dusk* averts from large tropes in gay literature, I also took the opportunity to write this book to include other narrative aspects that I do not see often. I feel that a large majority of gay books and movies (even non-LGBT books and movies) are set in either large cities like Los Angeles, New York, or Chicago, or they are set abroad in other countries. As a person from a small town who has not lived in many cities myself, I wanted to write a story that was set in smaller, less-explored parts of the country. The book has two main settings. The first is Moline, Illinois where Milo moves to after college. Moline is a smaller city that is part of the Quad City metropolitan area that straddles the Illinois and Iowa border over the Mississippi River. I do not think I have ever read a book set there. The nice thing about the area is that it has the conveniences of the city, but outside of the city exists the expansive farmland and rolling hills of the Midwest. I wanted Milo in my book to resist the idea of city life by conveying

his love for the countryside, which is a perspective I wish I saw in more books. The other setting in the book is my hometown of Ridgway, Colorado. Milo returns to his home after Red breaks up with him in order to meditate on what he wants in life. I thought the small mountain town setting would work well for that since it is far removed from most civilization. Ridgway only has a population of less than a thousand people, and there are no large cities anywhere nearby. Not only did I want to offer a small-town perspective in my book, but I also wanted to expose readers to a piece of America that many people do not get an opportunity to visit.

Run Me Dusk also exists outside of gay hookup culture. Milo mentions he may have observed that scene when he was first experimenting with his sexuality in undergrad, but Milo does not actively partake in dating or hookup apps in the present. I also made Milo and Red an interracial couple, Milo being white and Red being Black, since that is something else I do not often see in gay books. Queer narratives, at least the ones I have observed, are completely whitewashed, so I did not want to contribute to the experience that queer stories can only include narratives between two white gay men.

I think the story of Milo and Red in *Run Me Dusk* is important to tell because falling out of love is a universal struggle many people have or will encounter in their life. Moving away from a relationship, whether romantic or not, demands a vulnerable introspection integral to the human experience. I want to show that this is universal, but I also want to show that falling out of love in the LGBT community poses unique struggles. The dating pool for gay men is significantly smaller than that of the heterosexual population, so I have seen in my own experience that it's harder to step away from a gay relationship in some circumstances because the thought of having to

delve back into the dating scene is fairly daunting.

Overall, the purpose of *Run Me Dusk* is to offer a different perspective of what it means to be a gay man in America. I want the book to accurately represent what it's like to be a gay man while also conveying to society that the lives of gay men are not entirely different than that of the heteronormative experience. Gay literature is still seen as a niche genre, but hopefully books like mine will slowly break down that wall to the point where my book is just seen as a book with gay protagonists rather than just a gay book. I forget who I heard this from, but it was definitely from a conference panel I went to at AWP in 2017. The person in the panel said that reading books about LGBT in our current society should not be seen as niche because their experiences are much more relevant than those of novels with heterosexual characters from centuries ago. I hope that *Run Me Dusk* will be able to draw in readers of all experiences because I know at least something—feelings after a breakup, family dynamics, reconnecting with the past, insecurities about loving, etc.—will reflect something they have felt in their own lives.

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