

Yesterday, Today

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis is an excerpt from a novel. It's about a young man named Auden Bryce returning to his home in a small Georgia town after being gone for five years. Upon returning, he's faced with the memories and relationships he left behind, as well as the pent-up grief over his mother's death which sparked his moving in the first place. As he explores his home and navigates these relationships as an adult, he hopes to reconnect and gain closure for the life—and love—he left behind.

Keywords: fiction, LGBTQ+, southern, contemporary, loss, relationships, change, coming of age

CHAPTER ONE

On the day of his mother's funeral, the sky cried. Auden Bryce couldn't.

He stood stock still in the little cemetery on the bluff, clutching his umbrella in one white-knuckled hand as the pastor read a passage from the Bible. He waited for the tears to come as they lowered her beneath the ground but they wouldn't. Someone—probably his mother's friend Nel—placed an arm around his shoulder, but Auden felt nothing except cold.

Eventually, the arm withdrew. The good people of Attleboro, Georgia dispersed, water-logged and grief-stricken, until he alone remained. Even then, he waited—for tears or laughter, anything but the cold numbness that began in his fingers and filled his body like venom.

Auden didn't know how long he waited there. Seconds? Minutes? Hours? Time lost all meaning—if time ever had any meaning to begin with—and still he waited.

It wasn't until his friend Oliver returned that Auden was able to mark the passage of time once more. He stood next to him, one shoulder beneath Auden's umbrella and the other exposed to the torrential rains. If he noticed the difference, he didn't show it.

Auden tried to speak but couldn't. The cold weighed down his tongue, the venom absolute. But still, Oliver stood beside him until the moment Auden chose to leave. And Auden did leave, turning from the grave wordlessly and making his way to his truck. Oliver didn't move. Even as the rain poured on him, soaking into his clothes, he stood fast by the grave. A statue against the grief which overwhelmed Auden.

He should have thanked Ollie. He should have told Ollie that he'd keep in touch. After the fight they'd had the night before, however, they both knew that he wouldn't. After all, Auden had only ever been very good at one thing: running away. And so, he ran.

*

The headquarters of *Intrepid*, the travel journal Auden worked for, were designed to be boring. Well-treaded, dull grey carpet stretched throughout the office and met with the creamy linoleum in front

of the building's only elevator. The main floor also hosted a sea of cubicles, outdated and retro compared to the bigger journals in the area. Bored journalists tapped noisily at their keyboards. A few stood in the break room, chatting about their plans over improvised meals cobbled together from leftovers and whatever condiments they found in the office fridge.

Looking at the drab interior of the offices, one would be hard pressed to imagine the beautiful places and locales which inhabited the journal's pages. It was an independent travel magazine, boasting over 40,000 subscribers across the country and considered by many to be the most trustworthy source of travel content in Chicago.

In the year or so he'd worked for them, Auden had traveled to and photographed five countries—most of which he couldn't have pointed to on a map before that—and had plans to visit at least two more. He never could have imagined how far he would come in just a few short years: from the scared, hurt teenager he was to the moderately well-adjusted and very well-traveled adult he became.

The email he received from David that morning had been vague. Auden's boss had never been good at communicating his meaning over text, the words often cold and blanched of all meaning. But the man himself was cheerful and expressive, with naturally red cheeks and a firm handshake. When Auden knocked on his door, he called a cheery greeting that was immediately lost in the sound of papers toppling off his desk.

Auden stepped inside cautiously. The office was chaotic as usual. Overstuffed shelves lined the walls, boasting books on subjects ranging from native flora & fauna to the impact of farming on global economies. David was bent over, shirt straining against his overweight body as he tried to pick up the papers he'd dropped just moments before.

"Need help?" Auden offered.

"Oh, no. It's quite all right!" David said, standing abruptly and shuffling the stack of papers he'd gathered. There were still several on the ground, but he seemed determined to ignore those as he set the collected pile back in the tray on his desk. As he sat back in his seat, Auden couldn't help but notice that his clothing was still disheveled and his curly steel-grey hair was a mess. "Are you well, JB?"

“I’m fine, thanks,” Auden said a beat too slow. Since moving to Chicago, he’d taken to going by his middle and last initials—anything to create a new identity for him in this new world—but he often found himself forgetting that this new name belonged to him. “You wanted to see me?”

“Yes! That’s right,” David said, beaming. “I have a new assignment for you.”

Auden gingerly shifted several books off the chair in front of his boss’s desk to another pile on the floor. David made no move to correct him, so he assumed it was fine wherever he placed them. Then, he took a seat. “I’m listening. Where am I going to next, boss?”

“Where did you say you were from again?” David asked instead of answering right away.

“Uh, Georgia, sir. Small town. You’ve probably never heard of it.”

“Would this be near Atlanta, or further south?”

“Closer to Savannah,” Auden said. The uncertainty leaked into his voice, but David seemed unconcerned.

“Ah! So coastal then. Interesting. You see, I’ve been thinking. What if we sent a few of our journalists back home? What would have changed? How would their perceptions be different? We could call it our Homecoming series. What do you think?” David asked.

“I...uh. I’m not sure. Are you suggesting I go back home?” The scared teenager within him rebelled at the mere thought of it. He’d been running away from there for five years now. And now he was supposed to just go back?

“I am indeed,” David replied. “I think it would be fascinating for our readers to see your home, from your perspective. People often forget that journalists are people, too. That they have roots as deep and as gnarled as their own. But the choice is yours, of course. Here at *Intrepid*, we pride ourselves on the freedom of our journalists, as you know.”

It was a good opportunity. Outwardly, Auden knew that. Inwardly, though, he wasn’t sure he was ready to go back. “Can I think about it for a bit?” Auden asked.

“Of course! But not too long. I want this in time for our Fall issue. In the meantime, would you mind taking these edits down to Lucy?”

*

Lucy Adebayo was perhaps Auden's only close friend at *Intrepid*. She mostly did fashion pieces, but she had the chops and intelligence to pursue even the most complex issues. If asked, though, she claimed to prefer fashion. Her passion was giving a spotlight to black designers, especially those with roots in Nigeria, where her parents were born.

Growing up as the only black girl in some nowhere-town in the middle of the Ozarks, she understood better than most the reasons Auden left and came to Chicago. They both knew what it was like being on the outside in a small town, and both had found freedom in the city.

Lucy was gorgeous too. She had dark, ebony skin and long legs thick as tree trunks. She was prone to saying things like "Thick thighs save lives" and "Loving yourself is the greatest revolution" and she lived these proverbs every day. Whenever Auden wanted to practice his photography, she was always eager to model for him and knew instinctively how to find the light and give him exactly what he wanted. In fact, she'd modeled a little professionally in Denver before moving to Chicago to write for *Intrepid*. Auden always admired her for that. If it hadn't been for the fact that he was gay (which he had only truly accepted after moving to the city), he might have fallen in love with her.

As it was, however, they shared everything—perhaps too much—and neither knew any limits when they talked. She was the only person that he felt didn't judge him. Or, if she did, she told him straight and he did the same for her. He valued her honesty above all else, and even if she could be blunt at times, he knew he needed the tough love.

"What do you have for me?" Lucy asked. Her voice was more a bark than a song, but he liked that too.

"Some edits David wanted me to give you," he said, handing the stack of papers to her.

"One day," she said, flipping through the pages. "He's going to read something I write and not decide to basically rewrite the whole thing. It's my life's goal."

Auden chuckled. "Keep dreaming. David loves this paper; only the best can leave the office. I don't know how he balances all this shit," he said.

“Precariously, probably. Have you seen his desk?”

“You’re right. He literally dropped everything right before I went in,” Auden said.

Silence descended a moment as Lucy shuffled through the papers more intently, checking on the edits. She seemed to have forgotten he was in the room, but when she glanced up and saw him still there, her brow furrowed.

“What?” she asked, point blank.

Auden took this opportunity to drag a chair over and sit down. “David gave me a new assignment.”

“Uh-huh. And?”

Auden dragged a hand through his hair. An anxious habit. Lucy had no patience for it and grabbed his hand, sticking it firmly back on the desk. “Well, he wants me to go back home. Something about a ‘Homecoming’ series he wants me to take part in. Did he ask you about it?” Auden asked.

Lucy snorted. “He sure did. But I told him straight up I wasn’t interested. There’s no way I’m going back there. Even my parents moved on.”

“Oh.” Auden wasn’t sure what else to say. He had hoped Lucy would talk him through everything but it seemed she had a very clear opinion on it. He thought maybe he should feel relieved. At least he had an out. But something itched just beneath his skin, a curiosity about a certain person he’d left behind.

“But JB,” Lucy said, cutting into his thoughts. “That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t consider it. If there’s some unfinished business there...well, maybe it’s worth doing.”

Auden sat up straight. “You think I should go back?”

“Well. No,” Lucy said, then rolled her eyes at Auden’s expression. “I think you should do what would be best for you. Whatever that is.”

Auden sighed. “Thanks for that. Great advice.” Too bad he didn’t know what that was either.

Lucy patted his knee, clearly dismissing him. “Think on it. I’m sure it’ll come to you.”

Auden rose from his seat with a groan. “You’re useless.”

“But you love me. Now get the hell out of my cubicle. I have work to do.”

CHAPTER TWO

That night, Auden dreamed.

He dreamed of impossibly blue skies, of dark, murky marshes, the ocean, and *Catcher in the Rye*. He dreamed of his mother's cornbread, catching snakes in the creek, and exploring the woods around his house. He dreamed of a hand in his. He dreamed of that boy's endearingly large ears, and a too-wide grin that he hadn't seen in over five years. His first kiss. A diner sitting comfortably next to defunct train tracks. A record shop full of dust. A backroad he could navigate with his eyes closed. Then, he dreamed of the rain and a little tombstone on the bluff.

Auden jerked awake. Sweat dripped off of him as if he'd run a marathon, his sheets tangled about his legs like a boa constrictor. He tripped in his haste to get out of his bed and into the small in-suite bathroom. He splashed water on his face, the images slipping out of his mind as the water slipped down the drain. When he finished, he checked his bedside clock. 11 PM.

So much for getting an early sleep, he thought forlornly and made his way over to the closet. He knew better than to try and sleep again.

There was a new gay club downtown he frequented—Shadowland—which was ideal for young twenty-somethings looking for adventure and escape. If he couldn't get sleep, Auden was determined to at least have a good time with someone new.

Perhaps he'd always suspected he was gay, but when you're raised in a rural town down south, it's not something you're encouraged to embrace. He pushed that part of him down so far that it had taken years of trial and error to accept. Now, though, he took great pride in it.

He chose a tight-fitting designer tee and leather pants. Then, he slicked back his dark hair with a hefty amount of gel and mussed the locks into an intentionally messy look. A thick smear of eyeliner finished it off and upon shoving his feet into a pair of weathered combat boots, he was on his way.

His apartment was right near downtown, so all it took was a series of taps on whichever ride-sharing app had the best deals in the moment.

Even on a weekday, the music pounded through Shadowland with a ferocity that struck something deep and primal in Auden's chest. He pushed his way to the bar and ordered his usual drink. It usually took at least one before he would let loose enough to dance; three if he wanted to actually dance with someone. But the noise around him helped drown out any fears or doubts he might have.

The press of bodies on the dance floor proved almost too much when Auden finished his drink. Sweat and alcohol mixed to create a powerful smell unique to clubs. Hands reached for him in the dark. He didn't know who they belonged to, but it didn't matter. He gave himself entirely to music and heat and skin.

If asked later, Auden wouldn't be able to accurately explain how he ended up dancing with the buzz-cut Army recruit. One minute, they were just dancing. Next, Auden was kissing him and asking if he wanted to go back to his place.

Auden only had one rule since he'd embraced his sexuality: never take anyone home. It was fine to go to their place, fine to hook up in a bathroom when really desperate, and fine in a hotel room if discretion was important. But not his place; never his place.

For Auden, home was the place he felt safest. It was a simple loft filled with his necessities and some of his favorite pictures or cutouts from the articles he'd written and photographed for. To bring a casual acquaintance—no matter what they physically did—into his home went against his most basic rules.

Still, whatever part of him usually controlled such things was apparently still asleep, and the pair of them headed to his place without much preamble.

It wasn't what Auden needed, but it at least distracted him from the dreams he could still see when he closed his eyes for too long. As it turned out, the man he brought home had just transferred to Rock Island Arsenal and was looking for new connections in the area.

The Army recruit—turned out his name was Kenny—was a curious one. As the sun rose, he rose with it and began walking around Auden's apartment. Unable to unlearn all the politeness he'd been

raised with, Auden could only watch as Kenny picked up random pictures and showed them to him as if he hadn't carefully taken and/or participated in each and every one of them.

"What's the story with this one?" Kenny asked, holding up a dusty photograph that Auden hadn't looked at in ages. In it, Auden saw himself and his best friend Oliver Lee laying on opposite ends of the couch in Auden's old living room. Their legs were carelessly entangled, though both were engaged with whatever they were reading. Auden's mother had taken it without either one of them noticing. There were no poses, no false faces. Just the two of them, interacting with the casual closeness they had cultivated their entire lives.

He had known Ollie since they were in kindergarten. They had done everything together. More than that, though, he'd been Auden's first love. Not that Auden ever acted on it—though it wasn't for lack of Ollie trying. Auden had just been so deep in the closet, it had taken some serious digging to get him to come out. He wondered how Ollie was doing now; he hoped he was doing well.

"Just an old friend," Auden answered at last. He climbed out of his bed and made his way over to Kenny, taking the picture gingerly from his fingertips and setting it back in place.

"It's cute. Do you still talk?"

There it was: the guilt. Auden should have kept in touch; should have at least told him how to contact him. He hadn't, though. It was something he regretted every time he paused long enough to think about it. The one person he felt terrible for leaving behind.

"Not really," he said.

"I guess it's important to move on," Kenny said, giving him a thousand-watt smile. "Can I call you?"

"Uh," Auden stalled. He ran a hand through his hair. "Sure. Let me just..."

Auden cast about for something to write on and finally found an old post-it note. He scribbled his number in intentionally messy handwriting then handed the paper to Kenny with a smile. "There you go."

"Thanks," Kenny said. "See you around?"

“Sure thing,” Auden said, then showed his hook-up to the door. As soon as he was gone, Auden decided to take a long bath. He needed to think, needed to work through his feelings. He still didn’t know why he’d taken anyone back to his place when he’d done so well with his rule up until then. He wasn’t ashamed of his place, or of his hookups. But it always felt like those things should be separate.

It didn’t help that Kenny somehow managed to zero in on the one thing that had any chance of convincing him to go back home: the picture with Ollie.

Suddenly, he was filled with questions...and worry. Was his mother’s grave well-tended? How had it changed? How had *he* changed? Could he still survive there? Had Ollie ever moved on?

Maybe it was time. It had been five years and he had never really worked through his grief or his feelings about home. Maybe that was what this whole assignment was about. Could the universe be telling him it was time to go back and face all that?

If it was, Auden felt ill-equipped to deal with it. But would he ever be ready? Reaching for his phone, he immediately texted Lucy: *I think I might do it.*

He set the phone back on the toilet seat and sat back in the tub, waiting for a response. He didn’t expect a quick reply—Lucy liked to sleep in where she could and neither of them was expected at the office until noon on Fridays—so he was surprised when she got back to him almost immediately: *Do what?*

Auden rolled his eyes and typed out a reminder of the assignment.

This time, it was a solid seven minutes before Lucy got back to him: *Sounds like you should go. But plz keep in mind that you always have a home here.*

Auden smiled, then typed out a quick *thank you*. Finally, he set the phone down and didn’t pick it up again. He relaxed against the back of the tub and let the hot water soothe away his worries.

I can’t believe it, he thought. I’m going home.

CHAPTER THREE

The shutter clicked, capturing the crumbling barn on film.

It had stood on the border of Attleboro longer than Auden had been alive, the wood rotted out and blackened with age. The husk of a pickup truck, not unlike his own, though clearly an older model, sat just inside the wide barn doors. Nature had begun to reclaim it, yellowed grass sticking out from between the wooden slats of the barn and up into the chassis of the car.

Auden couldn't believe he was here. It was sweltering, the sound of the summer cicadas vibrating around him, the humidity a living thing that ran fingers through his thick raven locks and left behind a residue as sticky as his styling gel. He certainly wasn't in Chicago anymore. The Georgia heat embraced him like an old friend—or maybe an enemy, intent on strangling him.

“It feels like an armpit,” he remembered Ollie saying, and the memory caused him to smile faintly. He hadn't been wrong.

“The homecoming of Auden Jackson Bryce,” Auden said wryly to the empty air.

Somehow, he didn't think Ollie would welcome him back as much as the heat.

Auden pushed the thought down, turning away from the barn and climbing into his truck. It was about time to go in.

After setting his camera in the front seat, he closed his eyes and just breathed in the air from outside his open window. It had been too long since he smelled this particular musk of honeysuckle and gasoline mixing with the pine-scented air freshener hanging from his rearview mirror.

Auden might have stayed like that forever if not for the car pulling up behind him. A grizzled older man stepped out. “Need a lift into town?” the man asked, grinning good-naturedly at Auden as he came to stand at the window. The old man's face was weathered and tough from years working under the sun. His eyes were a piercing green, and he had bushy, animated eyebrows. The whiskers on his chin were greyer than Auden remembered. “Pops always did say you can't trust a Ford.”

Auden glanced briefly at the man, then at his vehicle—a Chevy, of course—and chuckled. “This ol’ girl has served me this long. But I have to admit--I’m surprised you don’t recognize me,” he said.

“Should I?” the man asked, using a greasy finger to scratch underneath his cap. “You don’t look like someone from around here.”

Auden tried not to wince. Had Scuttle really forgotten him? Or was he saying this on purpose, punishing him for leaving? “Then what do I look like?”

“A city-slicker,” he said. This time, there was a twinkle in his eye and Auden realized with a start that he was joking with him.

He made a sound halfway between a sigh of relief and a laugh. “Well, I guess I am that now, too. How you been, Scuttle?”

“Can’t complain too much. I’m still kickin’, ain’t I? You talked to your better half lately? He still works at Nel’s, you know. Been a real help since I had my heart attack. Should we head on into town?”

“After you,” Auden replied, filing the information about Ollie in his mind. He couldn’t believe his ambitious friend still worked at the Red Line. Auden’s mother had worked there too—one of two jobs she worked to make ends meet—and it was she who pulled the strings to get Ollie hired in the first place. For years, all he and Ollie ever talked about was getting away. It may have been for the wrong reasons, but Auden had succeeded. Ollie, however, had been left behind.

Scuttle knocked on the roof of Auden’s truck before returning to his Chevy. Moments later, the smell of gasoline increased as the other vehicle slipped ahead of him and Auden maneuvered his truck back onto the road. The barn disappeared from his rearview mirror and the sign welcoming him to Attleboro passed soon after.

Mind buzzing almost as loudly as the cicadas, Auden braced himself and peered out the window. Attleboro was exactly as he remembered it. The road through town was just as pockmarked with potholes as it had been five years ago. The corner store he and Ollie once stole candy from, the barber shop he’d gone to every month like clockwork, the vinyl record store where he had taken every date he’d ever had... it was all the same.

Time couldn't touch this place, but it did live in the faces of the people. Everyone was older than he remembered. New children were playing in the old playground behind the library. Auden was struck with the odd dissonance of the timeless town and its time-filled inhabitants.

The buildings grew sparser, more spread out, and a couple repair shops and mobile phone stores occupied what had once been a chicken-feed factory. Sometime in the 80's it had become a small shopping complex of ephemeral businesses looking to branch out into new territories—the one place that had changed and always would. And then, like a siren in the dark, there it was: Red Line.

The old diner had once been a train car, the abandoned tracks still half-assembled and weathered in the ground next to it. A fresh coat of white paint brightened the exterior. The windows glistened in the mid-afternoon sun. Only a few patrons were there for an early dinner, most of them pushing eighty, and Auden could see the familiar head of dark blonde hair pulled into a ponytail even from his car: Scuttle's niece, Nel. She owned the diner, and yet she still willingly worked as a waitress, chatting with the patrons and refilling coffees. As he watched, she threw her head back and laughed at a customer's comment. She was too far away to hear, but he remembered the tinny sound of her laugh and the way it would turn to tears if it was something really funny and she couldn't stop.

Nel had been close to his mother, as close as he and Ollie had been. He remembered the way Nel's pretty face had seemed significantly older once he told her the news of his mother's passing—as if her age had caught up to her. Auden kind of felt like that now.

Even so, he honked cheerily at Scuttle to let him know he was stopping and saw the old man's dark hand wave in acknowledgement as he drove off.

The interior of Red Line wasn't cluttered—there were a few booths next to the windows with a wire-frame condiment holder sitting in the middle of each table. A long bar sat in the center of the diner. Rockabilly music played from the jukebox in the corner, and old posters covered the checkered walls, giving the diner a distinct 50's feel.

Most of the regular patrons sat along the bar. Nel hovered next to one of them, an old woman named Mrs. Trudy who had once been Auden's neighbor. Auden's mother used to yell at him when he and Ollie cut through her yard to catch snakes in the creek.

Ollie. As Auden's gaze passed through the diner, it caught on the figure of his old friend. There he was, waiting on a younger couple obviously just passing through. His voice was the same, soft and drawling in that familiar southern accent. Auden had done his best to get rid of his own when he'd left. It was hard to believe that he'd ever sounded like that now.

He caught Nel's eye. She seemed delighted to see him, but tried not to give away the surprise. Instead, she nodded in Ollie's direction.

With a deep breath, Auden prepared to speak.

"Ollie?" he queried, and the name seemed to take his entire voice with it as it left his lips. Auden swallowed thickly, eyes flickering to the door, but he couldn't run away. Not anymore.

Ollie excused himself from the customer he'd been helping, a polite smile fixed to his face as he turned away. As soon as their eyes met, the smile vanished.

To Auden, it seemed Ollie was as timeless as the town. He still had the same exceptionally round face, large ears protruding from his head and too-long bangs swept back from his forehead. He looked like those old photographs from before World War II—a young soldier, filled with grim resignation but certain of his purpose and willing to die for it. The only indication that time had passed were the fine lines around his eyes and mouth. "You shouldn't be here," Ollie said, passing a cold glare over Auden's face before brushing past him.

Auden tried to catch his elbow as he passed, but Ollie carefully extracted his arm from his grip. "You don't get to do that," he said. "Not anymore."

"But Ollie—"

"You left," Ollie hissed. "You can't just show up and expect me to drop everything and talk to you. Now leave me alone; I'm trying to work."

Auden rubbed his face in frustration. “I know you’re angry with me, but it wasn’t like I didn’t tell you I was going back then. Can’t we just...talk about it?”

“Surprisingly, it’s five years too late and I’m over it. You can leave again with your conscience clear. Goodbye, Aud.” Ollie passed his ticket to the chef behind the bar and began busying himself at the cash register.

Clearly dismissed, Auden turned to leave the diner. Nel squeezed his arm fondly as he passed. “He has missed you, hon,” she said. “We all have. But you know him—stubborn as a mule. Both of you, really. Maybe you can come to my place for a cookout tomorrow? Ollie’ll be there and maybe he’ll be more open to a chat then.”

He cast one last look at Ollie and sighed. “Maybe,” he replied. “I’ll see, okay?”

Nel smiled and pinched his cheek. “Cute that you think you have a choice. I haven’t seen you in five years—bet your ass you’ll be comin’ over for a decent meal. You’ve gotten far too skinny for my likin’.”

This did make him smile a bit. “I never could resist your barbeque,” he admitted.

“Don’t take it too personally, sug. Nobody can. Now get on outta here. I think there’s someone else you ought to be seeing now.”

Auden winced at the words. He knew she was right; he hadn’t visited his mother’s resting place since they’d put her in the ground. Even so, he put it off a little longer by going to the florist and selecting the perfect bouquet of his mother’s favorite flowers: chrysanthemums. Unable to put it off any longer, he finally drove the rest of the way to the cemetery.

It, too, was just as he remembered it. There was a gate and a small church near the road, but the cemetery itself consisted of only a handful of tombstones—many too weathered to read properly anymore—surrounded by trees. The trees separated the cemetery itself from the bluff. The bluff, he knew, was a popular place for suicides. Most of the urban legends of his childhood had to do with someone flinging themselves off the precipice.

His fingers traced over the letters of his mother's name on her tombstone. Patti Bryce had been a powerhouse in life, controlling in the way that mothers could be while trying to give her son the space he needed to grow. She worked constantly. He'd given her more grief than he should have, too, complaining about their money situation. He'd offered to get a job dozens of times, but she always dismissed it. She wanted him to focus on school. Then, when he was eighteen, she had an unexpected stroke and died.

He could hear his mother in his mind now, chiding him for letting things get this bad with Ollie. "Some things," she would say, "are worth facing."

CHAPTER FOUR

Auden drove back through town to get home, driving under the brick walkway that led from Attleboro's only apartment complex to the bus station. Beyond that, the road forked. A familiar yellow sign with arrows pointing in both directions sprouted from the growth—to the left, his childhood home. To the right, the interstate. He turned left.

His house sat at the end of a rolling, lonely road on the other side of town. There were few things to look at on the way, only a nearly dried-up creek trickling desperately on its way to the sea. A few pine trees broke up the otherwise barren landscape. They blotted out the sun in places and created odd shapes across the asphalt with their shadows.

When he was a kid, Auden's mother used to speed up on this road. It was long and smooth, devoid of the potholes that marred Attleboro's main street. Cops would try and hide along it in order to catch unwary speeders, but drivers were able to see them a way's off and could slow down before the speed detectors could track them.

During those times, Auden would let his imagination run wild, picturing a black streak racing the car alongside him. It would bounce off of the few rocks and trees and other cars that occasionally passed them going in the opposite direction. He would get so caught up in the journey of this black streak that he would never predict the dip in the road that always sent a swoop through his stomach. It used to delight him, sometimes even startling a giggle out of him. He never said anything, but he suspected that his mother knew and did it on purpose.

"The old speedway," his mom used to call it—a description the street earned for real when night fell on the weekend. Bored teenagers gathered at the parking lot by Sea Shoals' trailhead with their fixer-upper cars to race for cigarettes and booze. When he was old enough to drive, even Auden used to participate, Ollie in the passenger seat with the window down.

Now, Auden's foot subtly pressed down on the gas, urging his old Ford onward to speeds that could be deemed unsafe. It was a thrill; he could almost hear Ollie beside him, hollering for more speed—"Show the bastards what you're capable of."

The thrill slipped out of him a moment later as he spotted the sheriff's SUV sitting in a small copse of trees next to the creek. He released the gas, allowing his truck to drift closer to the speed limit. The woman shook her head disdainfully as if she knew what he'd done, but she didn't chase after him.

He felt like a kid again, and he wasn't sure whether that was a good or bad thing.

The rest of the trip was uneventful. He pulled up to the little house that had been his home for nearly all his life and felt the weight of the moment settle around him once more.

Auden had never had the heart to sell it. He'd been renting it to a couple of international students that attended school in Savannah, which was about an hour away. They had returned to school and on-campus living three days ago, so dust hadn't even had time to settle.

The house, like much of Attleboro, had barely changed. It was still the same small bungalow-style craftsman with faded dark slate grey siding and a single oak tree out front. Spanish moss dripped from the branches like tangled hair. He could smell the just-this-side-of-rotten scent of his neighbor's pear tree; he wondered if the same curmudgeonly old couple lived there or if they'd left the way almost everyone left this town: in a coffin.

The steps on his porch creaked beneath his feet, reminding him of their age despite the lack of change since the last time he'd stepped foot here. As he reached for the door, he hesitated. *I can do this*, he thought, then unlocked it and stepped inside.

Memory washed over him like a wave.

*

“I’m bored. Switch with me?”

Auden glanced up from his own book to see Ollie staring at him imploringly. He was pouting. “You have to write a book report on the *Great Gatsby*, Ollie. What good is *Catcher in the Rye* gonna do for you?” Auden chided.

“Easy. I’ll write your book report, you write mine.” Ollie gave him a beatific smile. Auden hated that smile. He took one more look at his novel, then handed it across to Ollie, accepting his in return. “You always win, you know that?” Auden huffed.

“Yeah,” Ollie replied. “I know.”

The living room was dated but cozy. Two mismatched couches, one a bright blue and the other a dull reddish-orange, sat around a rabbit-eared television. The dusty hardwood floors were in desperate need of polishing, but his mom never had the time to do that between working two jobs as a waitress at Red Line and a nighttime clerk at the convenience store. His grandmother’s rugs gave an additional pop of color to the space and ugly lamps with Bohemian scarves thrown atop the lampshades lit the room. The scarves kept them from being too bright—bright lights usually gave his mother migraines

“What’s this book about anyway?” Ollie asked, flipping through the first pages.

“It’s about the war between idealism and cynicism within an individual, the pain of growing up, and the phoniness of the adult world,” Auden replied.

“Interesting,” Ollie drawled.

“You’re drawing on the pages, aren’t you?”

“What? No.”

Auden sat up from where he’d been laying on the blue couch just in time to see Ollie shoving his pencil beneath him.

“Oliver,” he said sternly. It had been incredibly difficult to keep from laughing at the expression on his best friend’s face as he tried to look innocent. His ears always turned bright red at the tips when he was trying not to laugh, and no amount of hair could hide them. His military father always made a point of cutting Ollie’s hair himself if it came too close to brushing his collar, so as a small form of rebellion, Ollie had taken to letting the bangs grow out and then brushing them back from his forehead in a swoop to hide their length. More often than not, the hair defied being placed in one position, so Ollie was always brushing his fingers through the strands to keep them off his face.

“What?” Ollie replied, but as always the tips of his ears gave him away.

Auden rolled his eyes fondly. “I don’t know how you manage to keep your grades so high with such little effort,” he complained.

“Hey, there’s effort,” Ollie retorted, falsely affronted. “It’s hard work, being so good at everything all the time.”

“Yeah, well, you’re certainly not good at getting girls,” he teased. “How long are you going to wait before asking Courtney Chambers out?”

Tension followed the question. “I actually wanted to talk to you about that…” Ollie began after a beat, but then the front door opened and Auden’s mother slipped inside.

She looked exhausted, deep purple bags beneath her eyes like the hollows of a skeleton’s orbital sockets. Her once lustrous dark hair now hung in strings around her prematurely aged face, falling loose from the ponytail she’d had it up in since she’d left that morning. “Boys,” she said, making the word sound like one of relief, “You studyin’?”

Her accent was thick; it always seemed to get stronger when she was tired, leaving no illusions as to where she came from. She was born in Attleboro and she would die in Attleboro—her blood was made of Georgia’s red clay.

“Yes ma’am,” Ollie said, giving her his most charming smile.

Auden was envious of the way Ollie could ease the tension out of his mother’s thin frame with such simple gestures. It was a talent, one that Ollie employed on nearly everyone he met. But every time he used it on his mother, Auden felt the bitter sting of jealousy because he was supposed to be the one that brought that spark back to her eyes; he was supposed to be the one that made her laugh and admonish him for calling her ma’am because she “wasn’t that old yet.”

Instead, he averted his gaze and did his best to look as immersed in his novel as possible. Ollie joined him on his couch a moment later, giving Auden’s mom space to sit down on the couch he previously occupied in case she wanted it.

Auden didn’t know when things got so tense between mother and son, where the fissures had begun. Maybe it was just the guilt of knowing that she worked two jobs while he only focused on his schoolwork. She insisted—she wanted him to do better than her, to go to college—but he felt she still resented him for it. And when she drank (which was all the time) she made a point of telling him how hard she worked, how little he understood. And truly, he didn’t. Why wouldn’t she let him work if everything was so hard all the time? Why was she angry at him when he did as she said? It was constant war with her, and though he knew she had her reasons he wished that she would share them with him sometimes.

Quiet settled into the house as Auden’s mother changed out of her work clothes. Auden and Ollie both fell into their books despite their playing around earlier—all thoughts of whatever Ollie had been about to say slipping out of both boys’ minds.

It wasn't until a loud click sounded that Auden realized his mother had returned. When he looked up in surprise, he saw her holding a camera and grinning at them. "Got you," she said.

Auden rolled his eyes. "Can't you warn me when you're about to take a picture? I probably look like shit."

"Language," she admonished, giving him a stern look. "And no. Candid photos are the only good ones. Anyway, you boys hungry?"

His mother reached into the fridge, grabbing a beer from the shelves. Auden frowned—he really, really hated it when she drank.

"Nope. We're just heading to my room," Auden said, ignoring Ollie's protests as he tugged him to his feet. "You should get some rest, mama."

He pressed a kiss to his mother's cheek, earning a grateful look and a small smile in return. It probably wouldn't last, but he'd take his victories where he could get them.

As they reached his room, Auden tugged his door closed behind them and flopped onto his bed. Ollie joined a moment later, laying on his side next to him and examining Auden for a moment. "Wanna talk about it?"

Auden's eyes flashed briefly to Ollie's so-rarely earnest expression, wondering if he could even put it into words. "No," he answered a moment later.

"You know you can talk to me about anything, right?" Ollie pointed out.

"Of course I know that. I just don't even know what to say," Auden said. "I can't do anything to stop her drinking."

"Promise me one thing, then," Ollie said, flopping down on his back so that they were both examining the lazily turning ceiling fan above. "When you're screaming on the inside, let me know. You don't necessarily need the words to tell me how you feel."

Auden smiled. “Promise. And you know you can tell me anything too. You wanted to say something before Mom got home, right?”

Oliver didn’t respond, so Auden sat up quickly, looking at his friend. But Oliver had turned away, eyes closed and breath coming in soft, regular puffs.

“Of course, you fell asleep on me,” Auden said fondly, before rolling onto his side, hoping to follow his friend into the realm of sleep.

CHAPTER FIVE

Auden's phone rang, and the memory of that warm September day—the day his mother had taken the picture that even now occupied his shelf in Chicago—faded into the reaches of distant thought. He stood now in his room, the furniture covered by old sheets the color of corpses. Without the nostalgia coloring it in his mind, it seemed cold now—impersonal and ephemeral, a waystation rather than a place he once felt warm and safe and loved. The warm press of Oliver's body next to his in the bed as the ceiling fan creaked and whirred were so familiar once, but now...

Shaking his head to rid it of the last cobwebs of thought, he pulled his phone out of his pocket. "Hello?" he answered.

"JB!" came the loud voice on the other end. "Are you still alive? I've been thinking of a hundred ways to write your memorial in the paper, but figured I should make sure you were absolutely dead first."

"Lucy," Auden said. "I came home, not to war."

"Just as bad," Lucy declared. "How's the assignment coming?"

"It's not," Auden said. "Not yet anyway. It feels so weird to be back."

"I can imagine," Lucy agreed. "Have you run into anyone yet?"

"A few people, actually. Some of them haven't changed at all," he said. "This town hasn't changed at all."

"What about that boy—the one you used to pine for?"

"I did not pine for Ollie—" Auden began, then sighed. It was useless arguing. He kind of had, and then he'd squandered the opportunity when it came. "He's still here. Alive. I guess he's doing well? But he's pissed at me for leaving."

“Well, what did he expect—for you to rot away in that same dead-end town for the rest of your life?”

“No, actually.” Auden tucked the phone against his shoulder and began pulling the sheet off one of the couches. He sneezed at the little bit of dust, then returned his attention to the phone. “He wanted us to go. Even when we were kids, he always dreamed of the two of us running off together.”

“Ahh, but you just left him. That shit’s cold.”

“To be fair, my mom had just died. I wasn’t exactly in the right headspace to think about anyone else’s feelings.”

“For five years though?”

Auden pursed his lips. When it was said like that, he really did feel like a dick. “Okay, point taken. But I’m not responsible for what happened after. Nobody said he had to stay. He could have left, too.”

With the sheet removed, Auden tried to sit comfortably on the couch. He used to spend so much time here that it had an Auden-shaped dent that always fit him in just the right places. But it had been too long—the dent was gone, and the couch smelled like mothballs and cigarette smoke.

“Have you ever considered that maybe there was a reason why he didn’t?” Lucy asked, distracting him once more from the plight of having outgrown his childhood home.

“Whether there is or isn’t, I don’t see how it has anything to do with me. It’s not my fault he stayed behind.” Auden was starting to sound too defensive even to his own ears. Still, he didn’t think it was fair to take the blame for that one. Ollie was an adult. He could have left at any time.

“Not everything has to do with you,” Lucy said, ever patient. “But if he’s important to you, shouldn’t you still care enough to find out? Yeah, he’s mad at you—and maybe it’s somehow tied to the reason he didn’t leave. But you won’t know if you don’t make amends.”

“Luce, I’m trying. Don’t you think I want him to talk to me?” God, Auden wanted nothing more. Ollie was the main reason he took this assignment, whether he’d admitted it or not. He wanted to find out what had happened to his old friend, had to know if he was really okay.

“All right, well, in any case—good luck. I just wanted to check up on you and make sure you hadn’t lost your mind yet. Call me if you need anything?”

“Always,” he said. “Love you, Luce.”

“Miss me with that mushy shit. I’ll talk to you later! And talk to your mans—maybe you can salvage things yet.”

The line went dead, leaving Auden alone once more with only his thoughts and the ghosts of his memories to keep him company.

*

For the first time in years, Auden awoke to the sound of birds chirping outside his bedroom window. It wasn’t that Chicago didn’t have birds; it was more like everything else in the city drowned them out.

But today, he could hear them singing loud and clear. He sat up in his bed, popping the kinks out of his back.

He’d spent most of the previous day cleaning his house. He’d removed the sheets, re-washed the dishes, stocked the main bathroom with toiletries, dusted all the forgotten corners, and rearranged some of the furniture. He even found a box of family photos in the attic. The

mere sight of the familiar handwriting on the box had nearly ruptured the small sense of calm that had fallen over him after the phone call with Lucy. He knew that incorporating those photos would be an incredible way of telling the story of his childhood home, of growing up in Small Town, America.

And yet, he couldn't bring himself to actually look at the photos.

To do so would mean truly facing the fact that those memories were firmly in the past—that there would be no more photos with his mother, and no future photos of his family in Attleboro. Once he finished this story, there would be no reason for him to stay; he would be well and truly done with his hometown. And oddly, that thought pained him.

Sure. Auden missed his tiny apartment in Chicago. He missed Lucy. Hell, he even missed his sad cubicle at work. But for once in his life, he wanted to get to the bottom of something and *he could not stop thinking about Ollie.*

Scrubbing his hands over his face, Auden climbed out of his bed and went into the bathroom. He couldn't write a story about experiencing his hometown as an adult if he didn't get out and experience it, so that was his plan for the day. Go out. Take pictures. Be social at the cookout. And maybe, just maybe, find out what all he'd missed out on in the past five years.

He wished he didn't feel so nervous about it.

Auden dressed simply, opting out of his usual hair gel and branded clothing. Somehow, he didn't think those would make the town any warmer towards him. Apparently, Ollie wasn't the only one judging him for the decision to turn his back on his childhood home. Not that there had been any direct hostility—just stares and whispers as he went into Fred's Grocery late the night before and gathered up a few things to restock his house.

He wished he could say he recognized the faces of everyone—they certainly seemed to recognize him—but he hadn't.

There hadn't been any further contact with Ollie, either. He called Nel to confirm the time of her cookout and subtly asked after his old friend—or so he thought—but she'd seen through him immediately and laughed at his attempt. "He'll be there," she declared. "And you better be, too."

Which is why he felt so nervous. He didn't know if he would get the same reception from Ollie today as he had yesterday and it was driving him mad. When was the last time he'd been this anxious? He honestly couldn't remember.

But there was time yet before the cookout. For now, he told himself, he was going to visit some of his favorite places. He wanted to see if they had changed as little on the inside as they had on the outside. He needed more photographs anyway and maybe in the course of doing that, he'd miraculously remember how to get through to his old best friend. *God help me, I'm already pining again.*

Shaking his head, Auden grabbed his camera and left his house, locking the door behind him.

CHAPTER SIX

It was a beautiful day outside. The sky was bright blue. Wispy clouds drifted by lazily, doing nothing to obscure the sun. The lighting was perfect for photography. He paid a visit to the playground behind the library, snapping a few photos of the families playing there. Then he'd made his way to the record store. There, he'd been disappointed to discover that the original owner of the store—Sid—had died the year before. His son Jesse had taken over in his stead and had updated most of the collection to incorporate newer music. Vinyl, he had been happy to explain, was making a comeback, and pop artists were releasing their songs on records again. One corner of the store was dedicated to the vintage stuff, the things Auden remembered being there, and he'd taken a photo of that corner before taking in the rest of the hugely updated store. After that, he'd driven around town—stopping whenever he saw somewhere familiar but subtly different. It was surprising how much he missed the way things used to be.

It maybe hadn't appeared so at first, but Attleboro had marched on without him after all.

About half past one, Auden took a break from taking pictures to get lunch. The cookout wouldn't be until dinner, so he had to get something in his belly before that.

Following an impulse, he'd gotten a sandwich from Hubert's Deli and made his way to the little park near the center of town to eat it. The sun was too warm to be comfortable, but he found an unoccupied bench beneath the canopy of a mossy oak. The shade kept him cool and he had a view of the park's small pond. A mother duck waddled into the water, followed by her two ducklings. The sandwich, the park, the pond...all of it invoked a strong sense of nostalgia in him.

His and Ollie's school, situated a quarter mile from the park, had very lax security. Auden and Ollie used to skip class and come here all the time. Sometimes, they would eat lunch. More often, they would feed their lunch to the ducks and joke around.

It was also in this very park that they had their first kiss.

*

It was April, their senior year of high school. The day had been similar to the one Auden was experiencing in the present, but a strong breeze brought the smell of flowers from the other side of the pond. Ollie was munching on a tuna sandwich, but Auden didn't think he was tasting much of it as he gazed out at the pond, seemingly lost in thought.

"Something on your mind?" Auden asked. He had already broken his bread into crumbs and fed it to the ducks. They were staring at him with their beady eyes as if they expected him to produce more crumbs magically from his pockets. He steadfastly ignored them, which resulted in him catching Ollie in this state.

"Hm?" Ollie murmured.

"I asked if something was on your mind," Auden stated patiently. His brows knitted in concern for his friend. He wasn't usually this quiet.

"Oh, kind of, I guess," Ollie said. "Prom is coming up soon."

"I thought you didn't care about that shit," Auden said.

"I don't," Ollie said. "Not really. It's just...well, it's the only prom we get. What if we're missing out on something?"

"Is there someone you want to ask?" Auden probed.

"Of course not," Ollie scoffed, but the way he squirmed gave Auden the distinct impression that there was more to it than that.

"Ollie," he pressed. "If there's someone you want to ask, just tell me. I can totally be your wing man."

Ollie looked at him as if he grew a pair of horns, or as if he'd said the stupidest thing he'd ever heard. Auden felt his cheeks heat. "What?" he protested. "I have game."

"No, you really don't," Ollie said, an amused smile on his face. "If I wanted to ask a girl out, trust me, you're the last person I would go to."

"What's that supposed to mean? I've been on dates!"

"Yeah, I know. But I don't want to ask a girl out, Auden."

Auden opened his mouth to say something, but the seriousness in Oliver's voice caused him to close his mouth and examine the other more closely. There was something in the intensity of his gaze that made Auden's cheeks heat further. His heart raced in anticipation.

"What...exactly...are you saying, Ollie?"

Oliver shook his head. "I don't want to say anything," he said and leaned forward. They were incredibly close now, Ollie's eyes drifting to his lips briefly and back up. But he didn't close the distance between them, giving Auden every chance in the world to back out. He didn't. He felt frozen, rooted to the spot as sure as any tree.

Taking this as permission, Oliver's lips brushed tentatively against Auden's. Everything in Auden's brain seemed to malfunction. He couldn't believe this was happening, that Oliver's lips were touching his. Acting on instinct, Auden leaned further into the kiss. Ollie made a soft sound of surprise at the reciprocation, but brought his hand up to cup Auden's cheek nonetheless.

As far as first kisses go, it shouldn't have been a good one. Auden could taste the tuna Ollie had for lunch, and he wasn't quite sure where he ought to put his hands because a man's body was quite different from a woman's. They even bumped teeth a couple of times. And yet...something about the kiss felt right. There was connection, and an electricity in his veins

that Auden had never felt before when he'd kissed the girls he dated. He genuinely desired more, to go further, to explore.

It was terrifying.

The full effect of the realization hit him all at once: he was kissing a boy. Not just any boy either—Oliver. Sure, he had thought of it once or twice—how it might be different, if Ollie would be a good kisser. But never had he imagined he'd get the chance. He jerked back and stood, nearly tripping over the bench in his haste to get away from the kiss. Oliver's face was tinted a soft pink, lips red and swollen from the kiss, but confusion warred for dominance on his face.

“Aud?” he asked, just a little breathlessly.

“We can't ever do that again,” Auden said. His chest heaved.

“What?” Oliver asked, a touch of anger tinting his voice.

“Don't you get it? We can't...we can't be like that. This town will eat us alive.”

“Good thing we don't plan to stick around then, huh?” Oliver said. “Look, you enjoyed that kiss—I could tell. And I've been wanting to do that for over a year, so who cares what the town thinks?”

Auden was already shaking his head. “I'm not gay, Ollie.”

Ollie scoffed. “Then I'm not either. But I liked kissing you and I'd like to do it again. Right now if you'll let me.”

Instead, Auden gathered up his things from the bench and slung his bag over his shoulder. “Don't forget, we've got calculus homework tonight. See you later.”

With that, Auden left as quickly as humanly possible. Oliver didn't follow. And yet, Auden couldn't forget that kiss, nor all that went with it. No matter how much he pretended

otherwise in the weeks that followed, his mind kept cycling back to that kiss...and how much he wanted to do it again.

*

In the present, Auden sighed heavily and tore another piece of bread from his sandwich to feed the ducks. Nothing like a little gay panic to ruin what could have been the best relationship in his life. Then again, Oliver hadn't broached the subjects in the weeks that followed either. They tried to make things go back to normal, to be there for each other as if nothing had changed. And then, Auden's mother died and everything fell apart.

It occurred to him now, with time and distance, that maybe his leaving—and subsequently not contacting anyone in Attleboro—didn't have as much to do with his mother as it did with him and his unresolved feelings. He accepted that he was gay only after he'd been gone for a year. By then, it felt too late to try and get back into contact with Oliver and it snowballed from there.

Auden still didn't regret leaving. It still felt like something he needed to do at the time. But maybe he did regret that he left so much behind. He didn't know if he could get any of it back. But at the very least, he wanted closure. He had to keep trying to talk to Oliver. It wasn't going to be easy. But he felt they both deserved that after all this time.

He wouldn't achieve any of that just sitting in the park, though. With one last toss of bread into the pond, Auden turned away and headed back towards town.

There were still things to do before the cookout, and he knew better than to show up late.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Dinner at Nel's was always an occasion. She usually held these meals at least once a week and invited all her favorite people. Sometimes, it was a cookout; other times, it was a nice potluck dinner indoors. To show his appreciation, Auden stopped by Fred's again and bought a bouquet that wasn't too expensive (she would yell at him if he spent more than ten dollars) along with a pecan pie. It wasn't required, but something about being back in the South reminded him of his manners and he felt obligated to bring something with him. He knew better than to bring alcohol—Nel had been sober going on twenty years.

Her house was a two-story white farmhouse with dark red shutters sitting on three acres of land with a small pond on the property. The white of the siding had long ago been dusted with dirt and weathered by the wind, red paint chipping to the point where it came off in swathes if you so much as looked at it too hard. The pond had long ago stopped supporting fish, and it sat almost stagnant and unused, an old boat half-submerged near its edge.

Even so, the charm remained and the tall, powerful oak that sat in her front yard was as strong as he remembered, ringed by stones with two new lawn chairs and a firepit nearby. Scuttle—whose real name was Dale Scutt, Nel's uncle—was sitting in one of the chairs, wearing a button-up plaid shirt and a slightly nicer pair of jeans. He still wore his baseball cap and work boots. In the other chair, Scuttle's sister Carol sat facing him, voice high as she recounted an old family tale that Auden would know nothing about but which Scuttle had obviously heard a thousand times before. As soon as he saw Auden, he rose from his chair mid-tale and went to clap him on the back. "Well, if it isn't little Aud. Carol, you remember Auden Bryce? Patti's boy?"

“Why, of course I do!” Carol smiled as she stood and moved in for a hug. Auden did his best to juggle the gifts and return the hug. Carol was a stout woman of maybe sixty years, reddish-brown hair curled and teased in a way that might have been fashionable in the seventies. She wore a floral top, shorts, and sandals. She reminded him of a tourist. As she hugged him, Auden noted that she smelled of menthol and, weirdly enough, banana, but the hug was far from unpleasant. “How you been, stranger?”

“Oh, you know. I’m getting by all right,” he said, flashing a slightly awkward smile as she stepped back from the embrace. Freckles sprinkled her shoulders, skin red in places as if she’d spent her life working the sun like her brother. She probably had, though for the life of him, Auden couldn’t remember what she did for a living. “Nel inside?”

“Slaving over the stove. She really wanted to make sure that pork was nice and tender for our guest of honor,” Scuttle said, chuckling. “She’ll be happy to know you made it this time.”

Auden winced a little, remembering that the last time he had been invited over to Nel’s for dinner had been the day of his mother’s funeral. For obvious reasons, he hadn’t attended.

“Oh, don’t mind Dale. He don’t mean to imply anything bad—go on in, hon. Nel never did hold a grudge,” Carol replied. “She knows how hard that day was for you. A child losing their mother ain’t never an easy thing, and she knows that firsthand.”

“Thanks,” he said, nodding at the both of them before scurrying inside.

*

The smell of barbeque pork wafted through the house, but he didn’t need it to tell him where to find the kitchen. Most of his early childhood had been spent in this very house while his mother worked. This had been before she got the job at the diner, and she’d had to drive all the way to Savannah just to work at one of the candy stores there. He remembered that she always

came home smelling of saltwater taffy and caramel, with several small candies sequestered in her pockets to give to him—almost like an apology for being away so often. He never minded, though. Nel was like a second mother to him and he and Ollie would play countless games in the land surrounding her house while she cooked. When the sun began to set, Nel would holler at them to come inside. She fed them both, sent Ollie home before his dad could get too angry, and put Auden to bed in her guest room with cartoons. His mother would usually find him just like that, having dozed off in front of the flickering screen. Other times, Ollie and Auden both got to stay the night and the two would hide under the covers and tell each other scary stories, giggling long after they should have gone to sleep.

The thought of Ollie sent another pang through him. Would he be here? Nel said he would be, but if he knew Auden was coming, he might just not show up.

Before he could follow that train of thought, he reached the kitchen. Nel was just getting the massive pot of pulled pork out of the oven as he entered, her hands protected by her familiar rooster-themed potholders. Everything in the kitchen was roosters—from the potholders, to the curtains, to the crockery, to the apron tied over Nel's red checkered dress. He never understood the obsession, but it was oddly charming much like the rest of the old farmhouse.

As she saw him, she made a sound of delight and hurried over, removing the bouquet and pie from his hands and setting them down before pulling him into a huge, lingering hug. For such a tiny woman, she sure could squeeze the life out of someone. She was like a boa constrictor, hugging him tightly as if she were afraid that he might slip away.

Just when Auden was sure he would suffocate, Nel stepped back and held him at arm's length, looking him over. "My, but you have gotten tall!" she said, shaking her head in wonder.

“Hard to believe you’re the same scrawny kid that used to sneak lemon coolers out of my secret stash of cookies. How you been?”

Auden blushed and ran a hand self-consciously over the back of his head. “Getting by as best I can,” he said again, the edges of his carefully manicured accent weathering away in the face of the familiar blonde before him. It was remarkable, really, how quickly JB had melted into Auden since he’d arrived back in Attleboro.

“Must be strange,” she said, smiling at him. The wrinkles around her eyes seemed somehow more distinct than they had a moment before, her gaze sympathetic. “Being back here after all this time.”

“Honestly,” he began, astounded as usual by her ability to read his thoughts. “It’s not as strange as I thought it would be. But that’s kind of what worries me.”

Nel smiled, reaching up and touching his cheek briefly. “Home is home,” she said. “No matter how much time and distance you put between it and you. But look at you! Little Auden, a big shot journalist out in Chicago.”

Auden blushed. “I would hardly say ‘big shot,’” he said.

“Well, of course you wouldn’t. You always did underestimate yourself. I keep all of your articles from the school paper, you know. It comforts me, sometimes. I like to read them whenever I’m worried about you, which is pretty much all the time. You never called, you never wrote...”

“I’m sorry,” he said, and surprisingly, he truly felt it.

“Oh, don’t be sorry,” Nel said, waving a hand dismissively. “We all do what we can to stay sane. I never begrudged you for trying to protect yourself.”

“Ollie does,” Auden said. He hadn’t meant to keep complaining about Ollie to Nel, but he couldn’t help it. The other boy’s unwillingness to even talk to him was painful and he didn’t know how to begin healing the rift between them. Was it even possible?

Sorrow clouded Nel’s usually cheerful features. “Ollie,” she began, “has been through a lot. He’s got to protect himself, too. Just as you needed to run away, he’s needed to cut you out. To him, it’s like you’re coming back from the dead.”

Auden pursed his lips. That certainly made things complicated, though he supposed he couldn’t blame him.

“Anyways, enough of that. Ollie will come around eventually,” she said, but Auden thought he heard something else beneath the words: *if you stick around long enough to fix it.*

He wanted to protest, to tell her that he truly would do better this time around, but the truth was even Auden wasn’t so sure. There were a lot of wrongs he needed to fix and he didn’t know where to even begin.

“Speak of the devil,” Nel said, nodding out the window.

Auden looked and sure enough, there was Ollie. He was wearing a dark red shirt open at the front and a pair of slacks. His hair was swept back the way it always was and although there were circles under his eyes, his smile as he greeted Carol was genuine.

It took Auden’s breath away just looking at him. If this had been Chicago, he’d have sidled up to him at the bar by now and used one of his most ridiculous pick-up lines just for a chance at a conversation.

“How about we eat?” Nel grinned at him.

Auden did his best to return the grin. “I can’t think of anything better in all the world than your cooking, Aunt Nel. Let’s eat.”

They headed into the dining room and Auden took the pot roast from Nel to place it on the table. Meanwhile, she called the rest of her guests in. There was Scuttle, Carol, a couple of Nel's friends he didn't recognize, and of course, Ollie. He avoided Auden's eye, simply kissing Nel on the cheek and taking a seat at the table with a few words in greeting. Auden tried to push down how much that hurt. Ollie was angry at him, he reminded himself. It was to be expected. Still, the disappointment filled most of his conscious thoughts and at least a couple of his unconscious ones.

Auden wasn't sure where he ought to sit. When he was younger, he always sat between his mother and Ollie. But his mother wasn't here and Ollie seemed determined to ignore him. Oddly enough, Auden hadn't felt the absence of his mother so keenly the entire time he'd been back as he did in that very moment—surrounded by people he knew and some he didn't with no idea where he fit among them. The thought closed his throat, tears burned his eyes. But he didn't want to cry now. Not in front of everyone. He forced himself to stuff it down to deal with later. Eventually, everyone took seats and he took the only one that was unoccupied—one between Scuttle and one of the people he didn't recognize. Auden waited for the feelings to subside, for his appetite to return. When that didn't happen, he gave a tremulous smile to Nel and began eating so nobody would think to talk to him. After all, it was very rude to talk with your mouth full.

“How's your Pa?” Scuttle asked Ollie.

Auden glanced up briefly from his plate to see how the question affected Ollie. He knew things between him and his father hadn't been great, even when they were kids. He'd seen all the bruises, heard about all the fights. They never saw eye-to-eye on anything and when Ollie's father got too drunk or Ollie got too rebellious, it usually resulted in a physical altercation. To

ask Ollie about his father usually meant dropping a bomb on whatever gathering you were in. Even when Auden's mother would ask, Ollie would give her a polite "I'd rather not talk about it, ma'am," and the subject would drop. Truth be told, he was surprised the old man was still kicking around. He was a chain smoker and a worse alcoholic than Auden's mother. He even had a heart attack when Ollie was fourteen. He survived, of course, but the doctors had to put in a stint and didn't have much hope for a long life if he didn't stop smoking.

"About what you'd expect," Ollie answered instead of giving the response Auden expected. "He remembers things, but not always in the right order. He still calls me by my uncle's name sometimes."

Auden tried to catch Ollie's eye, to ask him with a gaze instead of words what was going on with his father. There had been a time when Ollie told him everything, even when he didn't want to. This was the biggest difference in their relationship now and it was killing him. Auden knew it was his own fault, but it still hurt when Ollie didn't even acknowledge the look. He just took another bite of his food.

"That's rough, but your Pa always was a strong sucker. He'll last a bit longer yet, I'm sure of it," Scuttle said in way of comfort. Though Ollie didn't say the words, something about the slump of his shoulders and the dark circles that Auden was just noticing beneath his eyes said that he was worried about that being the case.

There was a sense of protectiveness that surged up in Auden, and he opened his mouth to tell Scuttle to back off but Nel caught him and gave him a stern shake of her head. Auden clamped his lips shut. She was right; he didn't have a stake in this fight and he didn't need to start drama over it.

But he couldn't forget how defeated his old friend looked, and how Auden could do absolutely nothing about it.

The rest of the dinner passed with little incident. They discussed happenings in the town, within their families. He learned that the man sitting next to him was named Steven and that he was married to a woman named Karen who was from the city; she spent all his money and complained about this shithole town—a sentiment Auden could relate to but which also gave him an irrational sense of anger—and he learned that the other friend of Nel's was a member of her AA group. She was just a few years older than him and had two kids she could barely take care of, but Nel was helping her as much as she could. It reminded him of when his own mother struggled and Nel reached out a hand; her heart really was too big for her body.

Throughout the meal, everyone tried to include him, but the sense of disconnect he felt was overwhelming. He was a stranger here. That caused him far more pain than he expected, considering he'd left of his own volition. But part of him had thought—no, hoped—that maybe nothing had changed, or that everything stopped when he left. It was a terrible, self-centered viewpoint that he hadn't been aware of having. And yet, he felt it keenly as he sat in the midst of these familiar strangers and remembered that he didn't belong anymore. Maybe he never really had.

CHAPTER EIGHT

After dinner, everyone gathered around the firepit.

Auden wasn't sure where the chairs came from. One minute, there were two. The next, at least four others showed up and both Scuttle and Carol scooted to make room for everyone else. Stomach full of pulled pork and the fire crackling merrily in front of him, it was easy for Auden to remember all the things he had loved about his home: food, companionship, warmth.

But it was far easier to remember those who were not, or could not be, there with him and his sense of not belonging at dinner lingered even after they placed their plates in the sink. Back in the day, his mother would usually sing by the fireside. She had a great voice—had dreams of being a country singer, once upon a time—and Nel would usually join her. Everyone would cheer and holler and act like a bunch of groupies, and the smile that always lit up his mother's face when she finished was twice as bright as any fire.

Throughout dinner, Ollie maintained his distance. Now, they were directly across from one another and Auden could feel Ollie's gaze on him. He looked up, catching the other's look. He could read understanding there despite the years they'd been apart. It was hard, but at least Ollie was acknowledging his existence now. It didn't last long, however—Ollie's attention was pulled away by Carol a moment later.

Auden clutched a teal mug of coffee in his hands. The air was surprisingly cool for this time of the year, winds from the river lifting his un-gelled hair back from his face. Around him, the others laughed and told stories that he hadn't heard in years but which he had, certainly, heard before. He wondered how he could incorporate them in his story for *Intrepid*. David wanted small town America, after all, and Auden couldn't think of a more perfect representation. Somehow, he felt less like a stranger out in the open like this.

“Tell us about your travels, Aud,” Nel asked eagerly, pulling him out of his thoughts, “I always wanted to see the mountains.”

“Well, there are certainly a lot of them in Denver,” Auden said, remembering his last trip to the mountainous state of Colorado, “and not just little ones either, like the ones you get here in the Appalachians. Even the smallest of Colorado’s mountains dwarfs the tallest peak in Georgia. I was doing a story on a cliff that loomed nearby. It resembled a person’s face so much that everyone called it the Old Man in the Mountain. There were hundreds of stories about hearing his voice if you went hiking out there—complete nonsense, of course. It was just the sound of the wind moaning through the valley and reverberating off the stone, but it was a sound unlike anything I’ve heard anywhere else. You never realize how small you are until you’re standing on top of the world.”

“Sounds frightening,” commented the girl from Nel’s AA group.

“Maybe,” he admitted, but he didn’t know how to explain how profound it had been, standing on the edge of that cliff and seeing the world spread out for miles in all directions. There were taller spires at his back and a wild desert before him. The trumpeting sound of the wind surrounded him so that it felt like the triumphant call of angels more than any old man he’d ever met. There, it had been so much easier to forget his troubles; how could anything be bigger than the knowledge that nothing you said or did could truly matter in a world that didn’t even care you existed?

Nestled in a tiny town in Georgia, even the smallest, most insignificant thing could matter. On top of the world, all of that seemed to melt away in face of bigger, better, and greater things. There was comfort in insignificance.

“It sounds lonely,” Nel added, voice melancholy. The chatter from before had petered out, leaving only the familiar sounds of the cicadas in their place. But Auden couldn’t help but hear the moaning of the mountain echoing in his ears, calling him back even from this distance. He’d loved it so much, he’d gone back at least twice just for fun.

“It don’t have to be lonely,” Scuttle pointed out. “I bet our Aud brought plenty of city ladies up to that mountain and they made a little noise of their own.”

The spell broke as everyone laughed and Auden immediately looked to Ollie in fear, wondering what he thought of that statement. Because, no, he hadn’t brought ladies there, but he had brought a man or two. One boyfriend in particular came to mind; Ryan liked to hike and would often drag Auden out to places like that. When they broke up, Auden had thrown his spiked hiking shoes—the spikes were for traction on steep mountain paths—right at Ryan’s head. He recognized now that if he’d actually hit him, it could have been serious. But at the time, he just wanted to get the last word.

After the shoes hit the wall, Auden shouted that Ryan could go fuck the Old Man because he was done. It sounded juvenile in retrospect, but at the time, he’d thought himself quite clever. As it turned out, Auden wasn’t very good at relationships. Even now, though, he worried how Ollie would take Scuttle’s words.

But Oliver’s expression following the raunchy joke was difficult to read, and that just made Auden even more self-conscious as he hastily took a sip of his coffee.

In comparison, Nel’s gaze when she leveled it at Auden was knowing. Wisely, she didn’t say anything on the matter, simply smiling and taking another sip of her coffee as well.

The rest of the night went on much as all the nights at Nel’s house went, and Auden was spared the torment of recounting anymore of his so-called adventures. Afterwards, everyone

piled the chairs in the storage shed—apparently that was where they had come from—and the fire was put out. Oliver disappeared without a trace and as everyone else began to disperse, Auden chose to help Nel with the dishes. She protested that it wasn't necessary, but Auden insisted it was the least he could do.

So it was that they were the last two in the kitchen, Auden scrubbing and Nel rinsing and piling the dishes in the old wooden drying rack next to the sink.

"It sure was nice to see you again," Nel started after they had finished a few of the dishes. "Everyone's missed you these past few years."

"I know. I shouldn't have stayed gone so long," Auden admitted, brushing a bit of suds off his cheek.

"Damn right you shouldn't have," Nel said, voice playfully stern. "I know there's a lot that ain't right in these parts, but most everyone's good people and we all love you."

"I know." Auden sighed. "It's just..."

"I know," Nel said. "You needed to find yourself and all that. Sometimes, you gotta wander far from home to get the answers you need. But in the end, we all come back."

"I almost didn't," Auden admitted. "If it weren't for this story..."

Auden had told Nel a little about his work while they had been eating. She'd listened intently and hadn't judged him when he revealed that he was supposed to be writing about Attleboro and his homecoming and that he hadn't come just to socialize.

"The Lord works in mysterious ways," Nel said. "He was obviously doing some work in your life to get you to come back here."

Auden didn't believe in God. He never had, really. But Nel was the kind of religious that didn't shout from the rooftops, but lived by example. She read the Bible almost every night. He

remembered finding her at the kitchen table in the early morning hours, Bible splayed out before her as she ran a finger along the words, sometimes mouthing along to the familiar verses or closing her eyes in prayer. She truly believed that God was love and that everything happened for a reason—a simplistic view, sure, but one that gave her comfort, and no matter what Auden believed personally, he respected that.

“You’re probably right,” he conceded, smiling as he handed Nel the final dish.

“I always am,” Nel said, smiling at him. “Best you remember that.”

Auden laughed. “How could I forget?”

Dishes done, he wiped his hands on one of the rooster towels and then wrapped Nel in another hug, holding her small frame against him. He wondered if his mother would feel as small in his arms if he were to hug her now that he was grown, but he didn’t allow his thoughts to linger there for long. “Thank you for dinner,” he said. “And everything else.”

“Any time. Don’t be a stranger, you hear?”

“Got it,” Auden said, though he didn’t know how he could be anything else. Auden mulled over whether or not he should ask the question hovering in his mind. Deciding he may as well go for it, he added, “Hey...Nel?”

“Hm?”

“What’s going on with Ollie’s dad?”

Nel’s eyes grew sad. “I think it’s best you hear that whole story from Ollie himself. Take care, hon.”

He sighed, losing all hope of getting an answer any time soon. He pushed the thought from his mind and with one final goodbye to Nel, headed home.

That night, when Auden lay in his bed, he remembered Nel's knowing gaze at the fire and wondered, somewhat belatedly, if she knew he was gay. She seemed to even at the diner, but Auden couldn't tell if she had just been hoping to reconcile two friends or if there were more to it than that. He hoped she did and still accepted him, but there was no way to tell for sure short of asking and Auden didn't think he could recover if she rejected him now. Finally, his eyes closed and he dreamed of Ollie—of his hands on Auden's cheeks, of his lips on Auden's lips, and of his gaze when they parted after that first kiss. He dreamed that he and Ollie had come to the cookout together, that they sat comfortably next to each other at the fire-pit and held hands as they joked with the others; he dreamed that he was still the one Ollie could always talk to, that he knew all of his secrets and Ollie knew his.

He wondered if he would ever get a second chance, and if he could do it right this time.

CHAPTER NINE

The next morning, Auden spent a few hours on his laptop trying to gather his thoughts. He had already taken a lot of notes. A lot of photos, too. He still couldn't open the box of family photos. So far, he wasn't where he needed to be in this story. Everything felt fuzzy and surreal still.

He knew the fault lay with him. He only ever struggled to tell a story when his emotions weren't clear—and he sure had a lot of feelings right now. Auden's gaze slipped away from his screen and out the window instead. It was an overcast day, the sun tucked behind a thick layer of clouds. A late summer storm was blowing in and promised to be a big one. Not quite hurricane levels, but close. The wind ruffled the trees, dislodging tufts of Spanish moss from the branches. His windows rattled unsettlingly.

Ollie loved storms. He used to get excited when weather reports came in promising “another big one.” Auden hated them, though. He was a habitual worrier, constantly running over the family's hurricane preparedness plan in his mind. The familiar sound of wind on his windows triggered yet another memory, and he slipped into it without conscious thought.

*

“They're saying there might be a tornado,” Auden commented, watching the news on his small television. The volume was off, the weatherman moving his lips as he waved his arms at the map and a scrawl of severe weather warnings rolled across the bottom of the screen.

“You worry too much,” Ollie said. He was sitting by the window, watching the lighting arc across the sky with wide, excited eyes.

“You're insane,” Auden pointed out. “If a tornado tore through here, we'd be doomed. I don't think we even have an entirely interior room in this whole house.”

“We should just go to my place. I have a basement.”

“A crawlspace doesn’t count as a basement.”

Oliver just shrugged, unconcerned.

“Maybe we could go to the grocery store. Or Nel’s. I think she has an actual basement,”

Auden continued, mind already racing with ideas for where they could run for safety.

“It’s probably flooded,” Oliver pointed out. “But sure, why not.”

Auden frowned. “You’re not helping.”

“And you worry too much, like I just said. Why don’t you just chill out and enjoy the storm?”

“Enjoy the storm that’s probably going to kill me? No, thank you.”

“Really? And you say I’m the dramatic one,” Ollie teased.

Another strike of lightning slashed through the sky and hit the ground—close enough that there was almost no pause between the flash of light and the crack of thunder. The power flickered and went out.

The deafening sound of silence surprised Auden. The volume had been off on the television already, but there were so many noises that usually filled the house—the hum of the refrigerator, the creaking of the overhead fan, the drone of power through the wires in the wall—that he wasn’t usually aware of but whose absence made Auden uneasy. Now, all he could hear was the storm and the wind rattling the windows.

“Ollie, you should get away from the window. That lightning strike was close.”

To his surprise, Ollie didn’t argue. He simply made his way over to where Auden was sitting on the couch. He didn’t even manage to sit before the piercing sound of a siren filled the night and Auden’s heart jumped right up into his throat.

“Shit,” Auden cursed. “What do we do? Where do we go?”

“Nowhere,” Ollie said. Even his calm was slightly rattled by the siren. “If we get in a car, we’re as good as dead. Besides—your mom took it to work, didn’t she?”

“I forgot. Fuck—what can we do?”

“Closet,” Ollie said. “Let’s get in a closet. I think the hall closet is our best bet.”

Auden was nodding before he even really processed the words. Ollie took his hand and pulled him towards the hallway. The closet had two sliding doors and half of it was taken up by the washer and dryer, while the other part consisted mostly of clothes in varying states of cleanliness. Ollie tugged Auden down next to him in the pile of laundry and pushed the door closed. Being gangly teen boys, they barely fit—limbs tangled together, elbows finding purchase in painful parts of each other’s bodies—but eventually managed to settle into a position that was at least tolerable.

The wind howled. Lightning crashed. The siren blared. Auden’s heart pounded, and it wasn’t just because of the storm. It wasn’t like he’d never been this close to Ollie before, but this was the first time he’d been this close after they kissed. He was hyperaware of the way Oliver fitted against his body, the smell of his shampoo, the feel of his hand still holding onto his...it was almost too much. Yet even so, he was too scared to let go. Oliver was his safe place. That was one thing that hadn’t changed since the kiss, and he clung to it now as fear filled him.

Eventually, the siren stopped. The house hadn’t blown away. They were safe. But they waited still, making sure, until Oliver slowly disentangled his hand from Auden’s. “I think we can come out now,” he commented.

Auden nodded wordlessly and dragged open the door. His legs felt clumsy after being tucked into the closet for too long and he stumbled as he made his way out of the closet. The

sounds of the storm had calmed. He exhaled a long breath of relief, then turned to help Oliver out.

“Well,” Ollie said. “Not exactly how I imagined myself coming out of the closet, but here we are.”

Auden laughed breathlessly. “Yeah. Here we are.”

“Boys?” Auden’s mother called from the front of the house. They hurried to greet her. She looked more stressed than usual, but as soon as she saw them she tugged them both into relieved hugs. “I was so worried. That siren scared the daylights outta me. Ya’ll okay?”

“Yeah, we’re fine. Power’s out though.”

She nodded. “I’ll call the power company first thing. They’ll get it sorted in no time. You hungry?”

Auden was about to say no when Ollie’s stomach gave a mighty growl. He maintained a straight face with an enormous amount of willpower. “Maybe food wouldn’t be so bad,” Auden said for him. “But how are we going to cook anything? No power, remember.”

“Well, I just so happened to have cut up a cantaloupe earlier. We’d best eat it before it goes bad, right?” Patti smiled and reached for the fridge.

Cantaloupe was always good, but Auden would swear from then on that nothing calmed the nerves after a big storm like that bowl of cantaloupe did.

*

A distant roll of thunder pulled Auden out of his memories this time. It seemed the storm was almost there. The memory of Ollie in the closet and his mother’s cantaloupe still hung over him like a fog, so he closed his laptop and stood.

The trees shook harder, the windows continued to rattle, and Auden remembered how sometimes, Ollie would go out to the bluff when a storm was coming in. It was a terrible habit, one Auden never understood—especially after the tornado situation—but he wondered if he still did that.

The more he thought about it, the more he wondered about the possibilities it presented. If Ollie was there, it might be a good chance to get him to agree to talk to him. There would be no customers distracting him, no dinner guests to steal his attention at every turn—just them and the storm brewing on the horizon. Besides, he'd left flowers at the grave and he kind of hated the idea of them getting blown away by the storm so soon after he'd placed them there.

Deciding it was worth a try and a visit to his mother's resting place, Auden grabbed a rain poncho and headed out to his car.

CHAPTER TEN

The trip back to the cemetery wasn't as leisurely as it had been the last time. Auden was in a hurry, wanting to get there, grab the flowers, hopefully find Ollie, and get back home before the rain started in earnest. He had no interest in getting drenched. After parking, he grabbed his things and hurried through the gate. As expected, the flowers he'd bought were still there though looking a little worse for wear from the wind up until now. He could still salvage them, though, so he gathered up as many as he could carry.

Sure enough, he spotted the familiar figure of his friend on the bluff. Even now, his posture and the spread of his shoulders left no doubt of who he was seeing. The wind tugged at his shirt and grabbed his hair, tossing it back and causing the too-long strands to frame his head like a halo. Auden could have stared for hours, memorizing every detail of the moment: the clouds swirling madly on the horizon, the sound of thunder, the distant forks of lightning shooting from cloud-to-cloud and sometimes down towards the water—all the while, Ollie standing fearless before it, the very picture of calm in the face of chaos.

Auden climbed the slope to get to the bluff.

“Ollie?” he asked once he was close enough to be heard.

The other turned slowly, his surprise only given away by a slight widening of his eyes. For a second, Auden was sure that Ollie was going to turn back around and just continue ignoring him. Instead, he arched an eyebrow. “What are you doing out here?”

Auden lifted the flowers as evidence. “I didn't want mom's flowers to get ruined by the storm.”

Ollie snorted. “She's dead, Aud. I don't think the storm reclaiming some flowers is going to bother her.”

Auden frowned. Perhaps sensing that he had been harsh, Ollie sighed. "Sorry."

Auden shook his head. "It's fine. Still...mind lending a hand? There's a couple more there and I don't think I can get them all."

Ollie didn't say a word. Just turned away from the bluff and headed back towards the graveyard, leaving Auden to scramble behind him. Once they reached the grave, Ollie started to gather what remained of the flowers. The two of them worked quietly, finding a few flowers that had blown across to some of the other graves. Auden made sure they got all of the ones they could, feeling satisfied. "There. That should do it."

"Glad I could help," Ollie said and pushed the flowers into Auden's arms. He turned to leave.

"Wait!" Auden said. Ollie paused, body tense while he waited. Taking this as permission, Auden continued, "What about you?"

"Hm?"

"Why were you here? I came to get the flowers from mom's grave, but you were just standing there on the bluff..."

"I was watching the storm," Oliver answered. "Just like always."

"I thought you might have grown out of that by now. It's kind of dangerous," Auden stated. "What if a gust of wind pushed you off?"

"Then I would die, obviously," Oliver replied carelessly. "But it didn't happen. So you can put away the false worry."

"That's not fair," Auden said. "I wasn't being false."

"You haven't cared for years. What makes this any different? 'cause you could have seen it happen?"

“I care, Ollie. I’ve always cared. Leaving isn’t the same as not caring.”

“Whatever.” Oliver turned to leave once more, but Auden hurried behind him, trying not to drop the flowers.

“Listen, I’m sorry. Just...at least let me thank you for the help.”

“Is that what you think I need? To be thanked for simply doing the decent thing?” Ollie said.

“Would you stop taking everything I say wrong? For Christ’s sake—I left you. You’re right. That was shitty of me. But I’m here now, and so are you. Can we at least talk like normal human beings?”

Whatever Ollie had been about to say was swallowed up by the sound of the sky opening up and dumping its contents over their heads. They both cursed and ran out of the cemetery, doing their best to cover their heads, Auden shielding the flowers with his arms. There was only one vehicle in the parking lot at the church—Auden’s—and he wondered how Ollie got there if he hadn’t driven himself. “Get in the car,” he shouted to Ollie. The other gave him a cold glare, but Auden wasn’t about to let Oliver walk home in this deluge, even if he did love storms. “Just get in the fucking car!”

Oliver rolled his eyes and did as Auden bid, climbing into the passenger seat while Auden deposited the flowers in the back seat. Then, he made his way to the driver’s seat. Once they were both in, Auden started up the truck and turned on the seat warmers. It may have been August, but the wind and rain made a chilly combination and the warmth would help them dry up quicker. “You still live in the same place?” Auden asked.

“...yeah,” Oliver replied sullenly.

Auden nodded and pulled out of the parking lot, making for Ollie's house. The car ride was quiet. Auden thought he'd choke on the tension. Oliver looked out the window, dark eyes tracking some unseen force. Auden wondered if he still played the shadow game and the thought brought a small smile to his lips. He had been the one to introduce it to Ollie all those years ago.

"What are you even smirking about?" Ollie said.

"Nothing. Just glad to see you, that's all."

"You're so full of shit," Oliver replied.

"I meant it, though," Auden said. "I never stopped caring. I missed you."

Oliver didn't reply.

Finally, they pulled into the gravel driveway that marked Ollie's house. Oliver reached for the passenger door, intent to leave, but Auden quickly locked it. Oliver turned and glared at him. "Unlock the door," he demanded.

"I will. Eventually," Auden said. "But first, I want to talk to you."

"Unlock the goddamn door," Oliver shot back.

"Nope," Auden returned.

"You're the most selfish..." Oliver began, then stopped, taking a deep breath. "Auden Jackson Bryce. So help me god, if you do not open this door right now, I will scream."

"Go for it. You and I both know nobody will hear you."

"This is kidnapping."

"Dramatic, but technically correct."

Ollie struggled futilely with the locked door—the locks were automatic so he really didn't stand a chance—a moment longer before, finally, sagging back against the seat. "I should have known getting in your truck was a trap."

“Probably. But it’s not my fault you didn’t drive to the cemetery yourself. What were you thinking?”

“I definitely wasn’t thinking that my former best friend and first love would kidnap me if I didn’t,” Oliver grumped.

Auden’s heart flipped in his chest but he did his best to rein in the sudden surge of emotions the words ‘first love’ caused.

“Besides,” Oliver continued, as if he hadn’t even realized he’d said anything big. “Car’s in the shop. Piece of shit.”

Auden nodded. He remembered how often Ollie’s car would break down even when they had been teens. It made sense that it would only have gotten worse since then. “All right, I’ll make a deal. I’ll let you out of this truck on one condition.”

“What is it?” Oliver asked warily.

“You agree to talk to me properly, one-on-one.”

“You realize I could just say I will and then blow you off, right?”

“You could,” Auden said. “But you won’t.”

“What makes you so sure about that?”

“Because you never could go back on your word.”

Oliver watched Auden, perhaps seeing if there were any doubt on his face. But Auden was determined; if Ollie was still the same, then he would follow through on his word. And if he wasn’t, then there really was nothing left of their friendship. Auden would finish his story and leave Attleboro and all his memories behind. Right now, the story in his mind was vague; it revolved around a few people that meant a lot to him—people like Nel and Scuttle and his mom—and the ways this place had and hadn’t changed. But he wanted it to be something more.

He wanted a story that encompassed all his complicated feelings about Attleboro, and about the life he left behind. He wanted a story that involved Oliver, and maybe even their reconciliation.

Finally, Ollie sighed. “Fine. You have my word. But I’ll decide the when and where. Got it?”

“Got it.” Auden unlocked the door.