

Nevada State University

*Ten Thousand Silver Spoons*

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## Chapter One:

Tinkle Plaza reeked like burnt toast, that was the first thing Graham Johannek noticed as he entered through the threshold and into the lobby. He let the flimsy metal door squeak shut behind him, and walked the tightrope of sunlight strands that draped over the carpet beneath his feet. The lobby boasted a staggering five story tall central atrium, and had been split into thirds by intricately crafted wood beams and expertly placed— though decrepit— oak cabinets still stuffed with glittering photographs. Each footfall of Graham's resulted in a plume of dust that curled up around his foot; and when he raised his foot, the newly exposed swirling red pattern gasped for air. The once deep crimson and gold glittering walls now hosted false windows of sun bleached wallpaper, and the wood had soaked up each and every breath of cigarette smoke until it leaked out in a yellow film. To Graham's left lined rows and rows of decaying red leather armchairs that sunk so deep into their springs they certainly couldn't hold weight any more, and side tables that boasted scuffed inlays of precious stones; to his right, the great stretch of the reception desk with all its rippling laminate and water stained ledgers— mosaics of amber glass bottle shards shattered across the pages. Behind the desk, a crown of soot and burnt wallpaper tore up to the ceiling— the source of the smell. Graham trailed his gaze up the scarred wall and up to the great atrium, which had been cracked open to reveal the low, gray clouds above. The rounded arch where beams would have met the metal of the stained glass was replaced by splintered wood, and the nests of pigeons who chattered above. Graham stalled where he was and checked his watch. It was a quarter to twelve, and the man he was supposed to be meeting with was nowhere to be found. Graham tucked his sleeve back over his wrist and thrust his chapped hands into his pockets, where his flaky skin caught on the fleece like velcro. He ambled across the lobby to the gnarled wicker rows as he waited, the sour beginnings of concern trickling into his stomach.

Years ago, during one of his climbs along the central border of California— back when Graham still climbed— he'd discovered a wood paneled box plastered with the name of a long lost dynamite manufacturer in the keyhole of the canyon. In his research on the origins of the crate, he'd come across The Miner's Pan, a forum fiercely dedicated to identifying the very tools the prospectors had used. The forum intrigued Graham enough to stick around, long enough to notice the hysterical antics of user G0ldfish4. G0ldfish4's profile was stuffed to the brim with pages upon pages of his theories, his research, observations, and conclusions regarding each candle box, pick head, or old coin either found or re-posted. His incessant posts and comments pulled Graham out of bed most days, just to see what the *hell* was causing all that noise. After lurking a few days, Graham made an account on the forum; they met while debating in the replies of a posted picture of a stearic acid candle, and eventually began exchanging long, long emails. Two months in, Graham had earned a name, and a phone number.

Graham checked his watch again, barely two minutes had passed. The hairs on his neck stood up; the kind man he spoke with online could have lured Graham here only to murder him— surely to use his skin for the lampshades and his teeth for the tableside inlay. Graham shook the idea from his head, only for another to sneak in behind it. Maybe it wasn't a man at all,

maybe it was an elaborate prank— or maybe he'd finally lost it and imagined the whole thing. A clatter to his right pulled Graham back to focus, and his gaze shot down to the entryway. Through the front doors, the string thin silhouette of a man supported by electric blue lofstrand crutches. Graham's shoulders relaxed, and his chest opened up again; there in the doorway was Anslem Adler.

"Graham!" He called down, then waved madly. "How are you?" They crossed the lobby and met in the middle, both flinging into a hug Graham hadn't even planned for.

"I'm good!" Graham's voice muffled against Anslem's hair.

"Couldn't wait in the parking lot, could you?" Anslem pushed off and gave Graham a once over with his open mouthed smile. "Have you eaten yet?" Graham shook his head, and Anslem cocked his head towards the door. "C'mon, I've still got some leftovers." It was November 24th, the day after Thanksgiving, and the idea of day old dry turkey made Graham a little queasy.

Anslem was a good head taller than Graham, but he slouched enough that he lost his height. Graham inspected him through the corner of his eye as he tried to keep up with the man's expert pace through the lobby— not once did he shudder with the creaking foundation beneath his feet, or the scream of the metal against the concrete when the doors flung open. He supposed Anslem looked a bit like a tomcat; maybe it was the heart shaped face, or the way his eyes darted around. His hair was sunkissed gold, and his gaunt face was mottled with lovely dark freckles. His slight wire glasses needed an adjustment to keep them from slipping down his long nose, and Graham could see the scuffs inside the lenses from over Anslem's shoulder. He seemed kind enough, too, if his messages were to be trusted. Anslem led Graham outside, onto the great veranda and into the brisk gray breeze. He hung a sharp right and headed down a short series of steps that led into the courtyard. He bypassed it, completely, and headed for an offshooting dirt path. Graham kept walking, but swung his head over to peer out at the main road still visible from the path; if Anslem tried anything, Graham could make a run for it. Graham's eyes stung as they grazed over the piles of bright snow against the beige, threadbare town that scurried up to the edges of the mountains, and he had to blink back the wince that tugged at his cheeks.

"This way, Graham." Graham turned back to Anslem's voice and followed, leaving behind the muddy asphalt. At the end of the path, hidden behind the height of the plaza's buildings, was a tiny railroad cottage with green, sun-bleached paint. Graham sidestepped the slush beneath his feet as they walked. "Did you have a good Thanksgiving?" Anslem asked over his shoulder, as he swung open the already unlocked front door. Graham shook his head.

"No." He said. Anslem's face saddened, and his eyebrows drew together. Before he could apologize or grovel, Graham quickly lied and cut the air with his hand. "I left before dinner." Once inside the house, Anslem motioned for a seat at his round kitchen table, then headed off into the kitchen. Graham sat down, and looked around. It didn't smell like burnt toast in the house, but musty and heady. Not bad, it took Graham a second to place it. Like the inside of an old linen closet, or an antique store in a restored cabin— the kind of smell that lingered in museums and thrift stores. The space was modest, a living room that split off from the kitchen—

two doors that lined the far left wall. There were framed photos of Anslem in various stages of his life; smiling between two elderly women, arm and arm with an older man both holding out ghastly welded trophies, alongside a group of boys all holding one massive fish. From the kitchen, the beep of a microwaved echoed out, followed by a slam. Anslem returned carrying a shallow bowl of leftover Thanksgiving samplings and two plastic bottles. He slid the bowl over and held up the bottles.

“Seltzer?” Anslem handed one over and sat down across the table. “Have you ever been to Nevada before?” He asked between sips. Graham shook his head and grimaced when the cap of his bottle snagged on his palm. “How was the drive? I know that the first one can be grueling for a lot of folks.”

“I liked it.” Eight hours between Beakbridge to Monterey, then Monterey to Silverpeak, and down to Tinkle. Those eight hours moved in a steady green to brown gradient as Graham’s horizon lost its rolling hills and trees; towns lost their people, and the comforting names warped into the namesakes of railroad-owning men long gone. Tinkle, Nevada sat right smack in the middle of Esmeralda county. The last time the census data was taken, Tinkle boasted a population of eighty-three; these days, Anslem couldn’t be so sure it was more than forty.

When Agar Tinkle bought up the adjacent mining town of Selkoy in 1881, and the eleven miles that stretched south from it, he’d already welcomed a solid fourteen hundred miners and laborers into the new city. From there, Tinkle’s population exploded to its peak of thirty-five hundred in 1926, then ever so slowly trickled down to double digits. Today, the slow thirteen miles of crumbling buildings, streets, and gnarled cottonwoods was more than just unincorporated. It was totally and utterly forgotten. When Anslem had initially asked Graham for his help, Graham couldn’t find Tinkle online. He went off directions Anslem had given him, and a xerox of Esmeralda county he’d gotten from the library.

“I’ve got the rest of the weekend off to spend together. I was thinking I’d show you around the plaza a bit.” Anslem motioned around them with a pointed finger. “Maybe we could head into town and do some shopping for your suite, if you’re up for it.” Anslem’s voice lost its fervor near the end, and his eyes darted up to meet Graham’s. “Are you sure you want to stay?” He cocked a feathery blonde brow as Graham nodded.

“Certain.” Anslem was baffled when Graham suggested he stay indefinitely in Tinkle—or at least until the job was done.

“And you’ve got enough money to do that?” Anslem had asked the same question three weeks before Graham disappeared to Nevada, during an early evening phone call. Anything was better than home. That night, Graham watched the shadowy footfalls of his mother in the yellow light that pooled under his door, heart in his chest, until Anslem pulled his focus. *Anything*.

“I’ll be fine. Besides, after we find our treasure we’ll be more than comfortable,” Graham cooed. That was why Graham was in Nevada, why he’d gone barreling into Anslem’s world taking anything he could fit in his car. Sitting at the kitchen table heavy with silence, slipping out into the yard to avoid the shrill scream of the landline, watching the calluses on his hands seal up

and go plump, Graham would rather rip up walls and land with Anslem searching for a rumor than stay home one second longer.

“Har-har,” Anslem grumbled with a wide smile now. “I wouldn’t count on it one bit.”

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The first time Graham heard Anslem’s voice was when he’d called to tell him about Agar’s treasure. Gravelly through the phone and full of verve as he’d explained his favorite conspiracy— one that wouldn’t end up on *The Miner’s Pan*.

“My great-great grandfather, Agar, was ridiculously wealthy. Like, sinfully, incredulously, old money rice-plantation wealthy. He started building the plaza as a wedding present to his wife Julienne in 1883; they could both agree that they wanted to spare no expense in building the largest hotel in the state at the time, but that was as far as Agar wanted to take it— the building.” And for a moment, Graham could imagine it. Julienne and Agar, hand in hand, wild newlywed smiles and dreams bigger than the dunes around them could bear to hold. “Julienne wanted everything. Imported textiles, custom sofas, lush spring mattresses— which mind you were still pretty new at the time.” It made Graham laugh, wetly. Images of Julienne flipping through catalogs and pointing men with crates down golden hallways the only thing that warmed Graham’s otherwise twilight-blue childhood bedroom. “So when it came time to order the furnishings for the plaza, *she* wanted the kitchens to use custom silver flatware and serving dishes. In fact she wanted everything that could be silver to *be* silver! Agar thought, okay, a-hundred of each is plenty. He ordered one hundred of everything. But it was Julienne who added two little zeroes to his order.” Anslem’s enthusiasm sobered down to a quiet little scheming. “But when the plaza passed down to my great-grandparents, the silver was gone! That’s ten thousand *custom* silver knives, forks, teaspoons that just disappeared! Cliff’s gonna sell the place in January, but if we find it, I could give the people of this town what Agar couldn’t. I’d make sure they had food on the table. And their kids got new shoes— we could revive the plaza!” He’d go on, and that had Graham wiping his eyes. He wanted to blurt out his reactions, his laughter at the incredulous treasure, the praise for Anslem’s planned philanthropy. But, Graham ended up ending the call the moment his mother swung open his door.

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After Graham finished eating— surprisingly savory turkey, peppery potatoes, and cranberry chutney that was still a bright red the day after— Anslem led Graham back out towards the courtyard. Tinkle Plaza had three main buildings, with a sprawling courtyard in the middle. There were two guest wings. One off of the main lobby with the larger suites, and one with the single rooms. Anslem showed off the first building— which was much larger than Graham had realized. Two restaurants— *three* cafes scattered throughout, four ballrooms, and an exuberant amount of luxury smoking rooms, studies and libraries. The gaming floor was in the second building, alongside several ballrooms. Each space was a little dustier than the last, but

looking entirely untouched. Frozen in time; they stood beside the brilliant cashier's cage, and the desk still had chips stacked upon it—cobwebbed and decaying.

"West end's a little more decrepit," Anselm sighed. "It's got the gymnasium, the Turkish baths." He looked out towards the other wing, and slumped his shoulders. His eyes trailed up the scuffed, hazy bars of the cage; the pigeons that poked their heads through to peek down. "There's more, if you want to see—"

"It's okay." Graham waved the thought off. "I'm sure I'll see it when we're searching." Anselm's face lit up with a horribly knowing smile, and set off past Graham.

"I've narrowed it down to two locations," he began, voice full of mischief. "It has to either be in the lower levels, or the walls. Everywhere else I've scoured! We have to check the lower levels first," he said. This puzzled Graham; there *couldn't* have been more to the sprawling plaza. "Then the kitchens. There's storage rooms all behind the cooking and serving areas. There must be something I'm missing." Anselm lifted from his crutch to wag his finger at Graham, then lowered it. "We're gonna find it." Graham couldn't help but smile at Anselm's determination. He nodded along.

"When do you want to start?" Graham asked. Anselm scrunched up his nose as he thought.

"Before we head into town, let's head for my granddad's first. I want to let him know you're here." Anselm nodded to himself, then grinned at Graham. "You think you've got the energy for it?"

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Tinkle had one main road in and out, with offshoots of gravel and narrow one way streets. The plaza was at the far south end, right as you pulled into town. As they headed north, past the dinky post office, eroding government buildings, and dilapidated auto shops, the rows of crumbling railroad houses like Anselm's revealed themselves. Old concrete houses with rotting foundations, confederate flags in their windows, and even older dogs pacing in the front yard. The plaza was at the far south end, right as you pulled into town—and the last thing you'd see as you left. In the thick November haze, the whole town took on various shades of decay. The tall grass between the buildings had yellowed, the mountains all around were thick with sludge, and the meadow just visible beyond the town's limits had filled with fog. The cottonwoods were bare, and in the gutters even the yarrow were beginning to crackle. Hand painted signs had chipped away with time; too many of the shop's windows were broken. The few people that did walk the streets were wobbly. Each kept busy salting their driveways, lighting second and third cigarettes, or mumbling to themselves on the sidewalk. Graham wondered what the town would look like in summer, when things turned green again and tourists passed through. Would the people change, would the shattered front windows gain new repairs? It wasn't until they were pulling in amongst the commercial shops and gas stations—which stuck out as bright, garish corporate sore thumbs—that Graham realized he hadn't even seen a school. When asked,

Anselm picked his hand off the spinner knob on the wheel, and motioned behind them. “It’s in the mountains.” Graham turned to peek out the rearview window, to the brown, rolling hills.

“Closer to Selkoy.”

“Did you like it?”

“Yeah, I think it was fine. The school’s small, kindergarten through to twelfth grade. So I had the same groups of friends throughout,” Anselm explained, nodding to himself. Graham tried to imagine Anselm as a child, remembering the pictures of him that hung in the kitchen. All gangly limbs and a puppy dog smile; his friends were faceless, though many.

On the edge of town, close to the sprawl of the meadow, sat a ring of maple and apple trees around a pale yellow two story, with towers that seemed to stack upon themselves haphazardly and a deep porch covered in oddities; not quite the hardware store Graham was imagining. Across the dying grass, lawn ornaments were arranged in awful, almost sexual positions. A massive gnome sat between the bent wire legs of a sparkling flamingo. A christmas reindeer, which had all the twinkling lights stripped off in place of ivy, mounted a bright orange statue of a pig. Graham stifled his laughs, which nearly choked him as they snuck up through his throat. What got him, though, was the life-sized crocodile that hid just before the porch. He nearly doubled over, smacking his hand against his mouth as Anselm began to stammer.

“Alright, alright, I know—” he clipped, a hand held out to split them from the porch. Graham waved his hands, and stood up straight. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” Graham quickly tried to compose himself. Anselm rolled his eyes, and shifted his weight where he stood.

“The whole house is like that. If you say something about one thing, he’ll start talking for *hours*—”

“I thought I felt my ears burning!” The screen door creaked open, and out came a broad man in a sticker collaged wheelchair, who enthusiastically pushed himself onto the porch. He had Anselm’s ashy hair, but his face was animated in this wild, scheming grin. His skin was wrinkled and tanned with time, beneath a dirty beige corduroy jacket he wore an electric blue t-shirt with thick, green impact text across the front. ‘*SAVE THE SLIME!*’ Screamed off the shirt. Anselm rolled his eyes, again, and held his hand out to motion between Graham and the man.

“Granddad this is Graham, Graham this...” Anselm couldn’t have been more annoyed—face flush like a teenager whose mother just waltzed into the classroom. “This is my grandfather.” The man thrust himself forward, reaching his hand out to take Graham’s.

“Lieutenant Cliff Adler, nice to meet you.” The man shook Graham’s whole arm when he grabbed it, Graham didn’t even have a second to respond— or catch his footing— before Cliff was talking again. “I’ve heard too much about you Graham. He’s quite the looker, isn’t he Anselm?” Cliff held up a finger to point up at Graham, speaking rapidfire. “And what on Earth are you telling him? Not to laugh at my art, that’s what it’s there for!” The man shook Anselm too, clapping him on the shoulder, his toothy smile coming up to the edges of his darting eyes. “Come on in! Watch your step, I just got some new deliveries in.” Cliff beacons for them to follow, as he whirled around and rolled into the foyer. Anselm followed, only to begin chastising Cliff for the amount of boxes by the door. Graham stepped up onto the porch, in awe at the array

of dangling windchimes all around him. Some in the shape of fish, some bent tools on strings, scuffed teaspoons of all different sizes— a single twinkling dinner plate by the door with six perfect silver knives bouncing the sunlight off their blades. Graham approached it, and reached up for one of the spoons. The iridescence caught him off guard, for a moment he wondered if it was silver. He pulled his sleeve down onto his thumb, and buffed the length of the knife.



**Saturday, January 17, 1925**

The dormer windows in Agar's office had muted, green German stained glass inlays. They were dark and shiny enough that Wren Adler could see her sunken face reflecting back at her. The dull colors somehow made her own graying skin look warmer in comparison; her bleary brown eyes stared back into themselves as Agar shuffled around behind his desk. He wasn't an easy man to catch an appointment with, but with no secretary to guard his office Wren was to wait a handful of seconds until eleven o'clock when their time together would start. In her trembling lap, the stack of bound papers with her business proposal— all the eavesdropped numbers and liberal percentages of shares she'd bribe Agar with bounced with her legs. Her heart stuttered as the Gingerbread clock that hung over the desk, haloing Agar, began to whirl and wind up its chimes. All too quickly it let out its premature bleats, each chime to mark the hour a little too close to the last; Wren counted them in her mind. One. There wasn't much of Astoria in Agar's features. Save for maybe the strong dark brows and eyes. Two. Agar's hair didn't bounce in loose ringlets, it didn't shine like white gold or catch the light of the sun through the trees. Three. Wren could see Astoria staring down at her, the green rustling leaves in the canopy above framed her. Four. In the sanctuary of her own mind, Wren could lift a hand up and cup Astoria's unblemished cheek. Five. Wren's palm once curved around a thick, waffle knit rag. Six. She used it to wipe the soil and smeared lipstick from Astoria's face. Seven. Astoria still cackled against the damp cloth; she squirmed beneath it but all Wren could smell was the lingering wine on her swollen lips. Eight. Wren slathered Astoria's sliced hands with ointment and ignored her growling stomach. Nine. She wrapped the skin in white bandages cleaner than her own clothes— wrapped another layer around once the blood seeped through. Astoria laughed, and a single web of drool fell into her own palm. Ten. The bandages didn't stay on for more than two hours and Astoria's palms stained the bed. Eleven.

"I've always liked that clock," Agar sighed. He finally sat back in his chair and showed Wren the warmest smile he was capable of. "Excellent taste." His eyes thinned around his smile; she'd hand picked it for Agar. Half a thank you for letting her run off with his daughter, and half an apology for all that would come. Wren flicked her gaze back up to the clock face; her eyes burned.

"Thank you."

"You won't want it back anytime soon, will you?" Agar turned in his chair, his voice thinning as he looked up at the clock. If it was a joke about Indian givers, or genuine concern over whether Agar would be directly impacted by Wren's heartbreak, she'd never know.

"No."

"I was surprised to hear you were back in town so soon." Agar spun in a single circle in his chair, then stopped himself by gripping the side of his desk. He pinned his tight, pinprick pupils into Wren's bloodshot, bleary eyes. "I'm sorry, my dear. Truly," he sighed. "I used to admire Astoria for her courage and... spirit. But now I just realize she's an idiot."

“She’s not.” She was. She was more than an idiot. She was cruel, violent, and perfect. “She’s kind. She just-” Wren rushed into her protective ramblings, as she always did. Agar held his hand up.

“Don’t make excuses for her.” Agar stood, his chair turning in place as he poked his fingers through the shutters. “I’ve always liked you Etelvina-”

“You’ve disliked Astoria for just as long.” Wren stared at Agar’s back. There were bruises beneath the fabric, surely, if the man still stumbled down his own stairs every morning. Agar snorted.

“I’m not wrong.” Wren shrugged out, and leant her body against the desk. Agar released the shutters, and whatever was beneath his stare, and turned to Wren.

“My daughter took your name, soured both your reputations as honest, desirable women in the process— then dragged you across the country where she starved you and broke your heart.” Wren stared up at Agar, took in the harsh brow, the clean, jet black walrus mustache, the permanent tremor in his limbs. He shouldn’t have been able to make Wren wince with his words, but he did. Agar spun on his heel, stuffed his hands in his pockets, and hunched down to peer through the window. “You’ve no idea the trouble I’ve gone to these past weeks.” He shook his head. “Moving money around for her,” Agar muttered, then turned again. “The least I can offer you is an apology. I’m grateful you haven’t asked me for some kind of compensation.” Agar exhaled hard. “Though I’m assuming you’re here to negotiate... what, physical and emotional damages?”

“Quite the opposite, actually.” Wren sat up, and brushed her hands over the bound papers in her lap. “I read your listing. For the pool house.” Agar grunted, and fell back into his chair. He pressed his forefinger and thumb against his forehead, and squeezed his eyes shut.

“Julienne will run me out of house and home if she keeps drinking the way she is-” Agar flung his wrist out and slammed his fist against the desk. “She’s demanding we install those *ridiculous* general electric refrigerators in all the kitchens. I’ll never win with her!” Agar cried, and fell backwards hard enough his knees hit the underside of the desk. His daughter starved a family friend half to death, nothing. His wife asked for money, however.

“Why sell it to some stranger?” Wren straightened herself out as much as she could, and outstretched her papers to Agar. “Keep the property within the family and sell it to me instead.”

Agar glanced at the papers in Wren’s hands, before reaching out and taking them.

“Whatever for?”

Wren took in a ragged breath, like huffing water up through the nose; she tried not to wince. The idea was foolproof, and if she’d learned anything from Astoria, it was that their little desert was a fruit ripe for the picking.

“I’d like to open a nightclub.”

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Wren Adler’s rumored return spread across Tinkle too quickly for her comfort; she felt the shocked eyes on her back and felt the mutters grazing over her head with each step into town she took. Agar had it right. Astoria had taken Wren’s reputation, hope, heart and any frail

semblance of respectability she'd had and tossed it right into the face of the wind. Before, Wren's hopeful, unrequited heartache had her losing hours at a time. There, in Wynnewood in the shell of the house that belonged to her and Astoria, Wren lost years.

After Christmas, when Astoria had folded her tiny blonde body in half on their living room floor, and Wren's stomach ate up the last of the duck from their neighbor's christmas party four days prior, she scooped up the little courage she had and stretched her tired, shaking limbs out for the telephone. She called home, and at the first note of her mother's 'hello', she broke into choking tears. Wren's family didn't move when their daughter slipped out from the desert and across the country. They answered her letters, opened their arms to Astoria when they were girls, and closed them when Astoria had returned their daughter to them in nothing but skin and bone. And while her father had supplied Tinkle with their vendors— Agar with his hotel's fine furnishings and homes with furniture— Wren didn't know the first thing about running a business, let alone a night club. But, she had her nights spent pacing, waiting for Astoria to return breathless, covered in glittering sweat.

Tinkle looked exactly the same as Wren had left it. The ground was still brown, and eventually went green with the turning season. Wren spent much of her winter turned spring in bed; her mother spooning small bites of food between her lips, propping her head up on pillows, trying to pull Wren's gaze from its place in the corner of the room. Already Wren was small, but what was once a lithe, athletic figure had been whittled down to sharp, fearful angles. Her elbows and hip bones bruised; her tailbone rubbed against the mattress beneath her. The purpling, fistfulls of bruises in Wren's eyes rivaled the dark circles she'd worn when Astoria had been engaged to a man whose name Wren couldn't even recall. There was once a time when Wren had torn herself limb from limb at the thought of Astoria disappearing into the embrace of a man; now, Wren swallowed down spoonfuls of mushed rice and chicken, and let her neighbors gossip about what they think caused her return.

Wren flung herself up the steps of Gustav Minty's bookshop, skipping every other stair the way they would when they'd visit on suffocating summer days, and pressed herself through the threshold. The building, despite being renovated within the last decade, still reeked of urine and shit and sand, but the creaking wood boards beneath Wren's feet and the way the sun poured between the shelves made Minty's worth lingering in.

"Wren?" A lilting, familiar deep voice pulled Wren's eyes. Edsel Minty, Gustav's beanpole thin grandson, manned the shop now that Gustav had been bedridden. He still looked the same, in his permanent spot behind the counter. There were usually three objects in his hands: matchsticks, incense sticks, or a pen for the ledger that sat on the counter. Lanky, dark featured draft dodger with pale translucent skin and a cap of fine brown hair. Wren supposed that, if her brain worked right, she would've married Edsel purely out of convenience. But with how long the man spent in the bookshop and libraries, Wren didn't know if he wanted to share his company with anyone but his books. Edsel entertained Wren and Astoria by fulfilling each of their most absurd, borderline inappropriate, orders. When Astoria wasn't ordering books on identifying rocks and birds and plants, she was usually ordering classical nudes. Through the

door of the shop, and under the jingling bell, she'd get hit by the cloud of incense Edsel constantly burned to get rid of the shit smell. She'd come home positively caked in the stuff, and back when her mother could hug her without wincing, she'd earn smiles and embraces for her sweet smell. Edsel, holding a lit incense stick he hadn't blown out, wavered backwards, and widened his eyes to take Wren in. "Jesus Christ, look at you."

Wren stepped up to the counter and stood on the wobbling board she always had, and teetered on the wood.

"I'm well, Edsel, thanks for asking." Wren studied a wire rack of watercolor bookmarks, and flicked one awry bookmark back into place.

"What happened to you?"

Wren slouched over the counter, and poked her head over her shoulder to scan the few patrons of Minty's. Silently listening, trying to look busy in their books. Gordon, their librarian, was skimming through the pages of a hefty book on zen buddhism; Wren rolled her eyes.

"Storia," Wren grumbled. Edsel exhaled hard, finally blew out his incense, and shook his head while settling the stick into its stand.

"God, Wren, she break your heart?" Edsel winced. Wren pushed off the counter.

"If only," she sighed. "I have to go home, Edsel. Do you have any accountant's ledgers?"

"Hang on," Edsel leant across the counter. He frantically searched Wren's features. "I haven't seen you in two years! And you show up looking closer to death than you left asking for ledgers?"

"Keep your voice down," Wren hissed. She glanced again towards Gordon, then back at Edsel.

"How long have you been back?" He'd glued his eyes to Wren's chest now; if there was anything left she might have found it within herself to get offended.

"I came back after Christmas."

Edsel scoffed, and leant in further. Wren escaped Edsel's gaze for a moment, and looked instead back to the bookmarks. There was one of an ocean, with tiny fingerprint fish floating within its waves. Another with cherry blossoms-

"You've been here since December and didn't tell me?"

Wren curled her lip up.

"Well you were always more Astoria's friend than mine--"

"Bullshit!" Edsel shrilled, and someone behind them dropped their book. Edsel reached around himself and flicked his apron away. "I'll get you the ledgers but first you're telling me everything."

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The back loading docks of Minty's hadn't been used properly since Gustav's decline; Edsel opted to carry in his boxes of books one by one. They sat at the white cast iron patio set Edsel had rescued from the plaza's latest renovation; Wren's parents had the same set. She'd

been offered a cigarette that only hung limp in her fingers, enjoying the smell more than the smoke.

“You’re not wearing your ring.” Edsel nodded towards Wren’s bare left hand. She looked down at it, then wrestled for the loop of olive green embroidery floss around her neck where her wedding band dangled.

“Doesn’t fit anymore.” Wren took the makeshift necklace off and handed it to Edsel. Fourteen karats of gold alloy with enough silver in it to just make it tinge green; there were leaves and bluebells carved into it. Edsel rolled the ring in his palm and muttered.

“Christ, Wren.” He held his hand out for Wren to scoop out the ring. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t think she’d unravel like that.”

“It’s fine.” Wren tugged the floss back over her head and tucked the ring into her shirt.

“What are you doing now, then?” Edsel took a drag from his cigarette and blew the smoke out from pursed lips. Wren inhaled, and let the smoke sting her nostrils.

“I’m opening a club.” She hung her neck over to look at Edsel, who blinked once then smirked.

“A bird watching club or something?”

“No.” Wren sniffed into a laugh, then shook her head. She hunched herself over, balanced her elbows on her knees, and let the ash from her cigarette collect around her feet. “Story frequented these clubs, up north in Brooklyn heights and Greenwich-”

*“People just like us, Wren! Women who love and dance and drink the same way we do!”* Astoria’s voice had whistled out in the bare kitchen. She spun circles around Wren as she sung out her praises.

“You can’t be serious-” Edsel choked. “Did Astoria bash your head in or something?” He didn’t mean to send Wren’s stomach down between her feet, but he did. “You’ll end up in prison.”

“No one here actually follows those rules.”

Edsel kicked one of his legs up over the other, and leant backwards in his chair.

“And here I thought ‘Story broke you.’” He waved his cigarette over Wren. “But you’re still a freak— a smart one, but still.” He smirked, and Wren didn’t fight her smile..

*“These clubs,”* Wren had uttered against Astoria’s shoulder. In their shared bed in the Wynnewood house, where every day Astoria’s side took on the stinging reek of the same gin her mother drank. *“Is there anyone there who looks like me?”* She squeezed Astoria’s frame in her arms, and waited for the quiet to pass. Astoria shifted her head against the pillow, and dusted Wren’s face with her hair.

*“Y’know, I never even thought to look.”*

## Chapter Two:

When Graham and Gage were on the cusp of middle school, their mother took them to an estate sale. It was the kind where the bereaved were attempting to sell their loved one's odd possessions—or at least the ones they didn't want. Beer glasses with Looney Tunes characters, faces bleached by the sun; dark amber ashtrays; and tackle boxes filled with sewing supplies. It was the first time Graham had seen silver; rows and rows of odd, partially broken and heavily tarnished service wear. No two pieces were alike, and what could have been brilliant fodder for Anslem's wind chimes were instead a dollar a piece beneath a hot sun.

"That's what we're looking for." Anslem's voice in the doorway made Graham jump. Graham turned to see, Anslem rested his head on the wood threshold and pointed up at the windchimes. Graham turned back up to look, grinning. The way it shone, faint rainbow halos along the handles.

"Do you know I'd sold six of those online before I even knew what it was? One of the buyers reached out and let me know before I listed another at six dollars." Anslem lifted off the doorframe and flicked one of the knives.

"These are the silver?" Graham watched Anslem nod through the faint, warped reflection of the blade.

"Come on in, Cliff can tell you more about my internet-naivete." Graham followed Anslem through and into the bright stretching corridor that bisected the house. Before them, in the foyer, a staircase loomed and stacked three stories above Graham's head. All along the creamy walls, along the dark wood arches, sat photographs and sideboards littered with knick knacks. Some were obviously Cliff's, wind up tin toys and novelty mugs storing thousands of bright gel pens. Others, surely the belongings of those before Cliff. Intricately woven blankets draped themselves over the tables and backs of chairs, framed black and white photos of the same women, still-standing pamphlets and cards folded from crisp paper. Graham swung right, through the arches and into the living room. The space was grand, just as bright as the corridor—with billowing curtains and nearly-white paint to match. The floor beneath Graham's feet, wood and creaking, was layered with thick rugs of all designs. Surely Cliff's doing—the fine ornamental rugs clashed with bright, kindergarten classroom rugs. He followed the trails of photographs. Anslem with that same group of boys as those in his kitchen, though this time each holding out a different, *smaller* fish. A teenage Cliff with his tongue out at the camera, on the floor with a scattered collection of stickers. Graham traveled along all four walls, and watched both men get younger, and younger. Anslem as a toddler sitting on the handlebars of Cliff's bike— Anslem smiling widely and Cliff sporting a lot more hair. Anslem with a pair of older women, one laughing as Anslem played in her braids, the other busying herself dusting off Anslem's jacket. These were photos foreign to Graham, like nothing he'd seen in his own home. Down to the smiles, his family photos were forged; the only truly candid photos were the ones buried deep in the family computer. If Graham wanted to trail back in time via photograph, the only route he'd have would be by school photos— each with the same dull gray background, and the same tired smile. Graham walked along photos of Cliff with a woman, and a child swaddled

in their arms. A girl who grew through big frilly swimsuits, handfuls of mud thrust up at the camera, and eventual peace signs thrown at the lens. Graham squinted at a teeny photo of her with an equally sleepy looking boy, both cradling each other. Graham settled at the mantle, before a closed-door fireplace that still warmed Graham's shins as he approached. Along the mantle, teeny crystals and collected pebbles. Cliff's air force portraits, his glittering medals all in pristine frames. Graham's gaze settled on a lovely wire frame, inside a warm, grayscale photo of the same two women who fussed over Anslem. Both significantly younger, in soft sweaters and twin smiles. Last, at the opposite end of the parlor, sat an exact replica of the house they all stood in now. Save for the sculptures and windchimes, the dollhouse shone the same pale yellow, and the sunlight lit up the rooms within.

"So Graham!" Cliff's voice pulled Graham's attention, and he turned to see both Cliff and Anslem heading in from the kitchen. "I've heard a lot about you. Anslem wouldn't shut up once you two started talking. Graham this, Graham that—" Cliff put his fists on either hip and bobbed his head like a goose. "Graham says that when he went climbing up in Mount Whitney he got to see the mines in Cerro Gordo, think we can go to Cerro Gordo?" Cliff mimicked Anslem's voice in a high nasally squeal, and Anslem thrust his head into his hands to block his flush. Graham chuckled and shook his head.

"I only just got to *see* the mines. More in the literal sense... like the tops of them," Graham muttered, and floated his palm in the air as though brushing over the surface of the mines. Cliff rolled down into the living room and lifted himself with ease from his chair to the navy recliner in the corner.

"Really? When my parents were older they practically *lived* in the mines up here. Clubhouses and hideouts and whatnot. Even Anslem and his buddies would hang out there—throw fireworks down and see what happened." Cliff chuckled. Then his eyes lit up. "Even the plaza, too, which is why you're here so I've heard!" Cliff bellowed out. Graham followed Anslem to the couch, and they both fell into it. "I gotta hand it to ya, I won't even go into that building anymore." Graham opened his mouth to respond, but Cliff kept going. When Graham settled back into the sofa, Anslem shot him a knowing grin. "I told Anslem, if he can't find the treasure by New Year's, I'm selling the place." Anslem rolled his eyes loud enough for Cliff to hear, because he was up in arms that second. "The taxes on that thing are too damn high! It's got a sinkhole in the basement, did he show you the hole?"

"I—" Graham gaped.

"Any silver that was there is probably back in the ground!" Cliff leant back and punctuated his sentence with the firm catapult of his legs as the recliner jut out its spring loaded ottoman. "'Sides, it's not ADA compliant!" Cliff showed Graham a toothy grin; his front few teeth were chipped. Graham smiled back, but bit back his laughter to lean in.

"Cliff—" He began. "Is there anything you might know about the treasure—I hope we're going on more than just rumors. No offense, Anslem." Graham hinged at the waist to look to Anslem, but he was already waving Graham's worry off with his hand.

“No it’s outlandish I know.” Anslem stared down at his fingernails, picking at their rounded edges.

“How do we know they didn’t sell the whole collection?” Graham looked over to Cliff.

“My mother was raised by Agar.” Cliff pierced the air with a pointed finger, and a quirked upper lip. “And the stories she’d tell me- mink stoles under floorboards, shoeboxes under beds full of beautiful pocket watches...” He dropped his finger and shook his head. “The only things she inherited from Agar when he died were the house and the plaza. Anslem found that first batch of knives in a wall during a tantrum—”

“I punched it,” Anslem muttered.

“And I thought, maybe Agar squirreled away a little more.” Cliff shrugged, then leant in. “I’m sure Anslem told you about that prophesied ten thousand?” Graham nodded. Cliff sniffed, then looked down at his lap. “That’s what they ordered, but I’m sure it’ll probably only be a handful of pieces.”

“I don’t think so.” Anslem blurt, then turned to Graham to share a smile. “We’ll start with the walls. We’re gonna find it!” He shared a firm nod with Graham, and Graham bit his lip.

“Cliff-” he started. “Could you think on some of those stories for us? Maybe there’s something we’re missing.” Graham raised a one-shoulder shrug, and Cliff’s eyes fell down to their corners.

“Sure. I’ll chew on it for a while.”

...

They pulled into the vacant lot of the Bluesy’s, over mounds of snow that had gone black with grime. Graham stared into the face of the unsettling mascot: a bipedal rabbit with a disturbing set of human eyes- and horrible wire lashes that stuck off the front of the building. Pigeons perched on the lashes, tittering over the heads of Graham and Anslem as they walked inside. Graham pushed the cart, arms crossed over the rail, as they weaved through the maze of white, wire shelves. Bluesy’s was just as decrepit as the rest of Tinkle. A single heart shaped balloon drifted down from the rafters as it lost helium, shelves caked themselves with thick dust, and a lone cat— orange, fat and happy— trotted past with a heel of bread in his mouth. But it all had a certain charm to it, Graham found; a liminal familiarity. He’d seen too many of those balloons in the rafters as a child, and wished they were his. He’d trailed his hand over the shelves, collecting the dust in his palm to shape into little balls. And while the supermarket at home didn’t boast stray cats, there was always the wandering toddler, with a fistfull of loose candy and a skip in their step. They’d headed for the tools, Anslem eager to grab up some new headlamps and flashlights for their search. As they headed through, Graham caught a glimpse of the bright rainbow of ropes in a passing aisle— and for a second he was standing in the sporting goods store with Gage. Gage held two bundles of rope in his hands, one cerulean blue with highlighter yellow stripes, the other a bright red with purple braided through it. “I don’t know why you had to pick the most complicated sport on the planet, Graham,” he’d said. Graham



returned to the shelves before him. The shining tools, metallic glare of the flashlights. With a final glance at the headlamps, Anslem picked one and tossed it in the cart.

Graham picked out whatever kitchen necessities he thought were cutest as they made their way through; a set of primary-color measuring cups, plastic spatulas in bright, screaming neon. Each addition seemed to be more ridiculous, judging by Anslem's reactions.

"Oh you *have* to get that," he'd said when Graham held out an ice cream scoop with a t-rex grip. They moved through housewares, picking up soap dishes and all the miscellaneous fixtures Graham needed to fill the empty cupboards of his room. They wandered into the dubious produce section, the fluorescent-flickering bakery— all the while scooping up essentials with Bluesey's rabbit printed on the box. Anslem pointed out which brands of eggs, milks, and meats were trustworthy, and which should be avoided at all costs.

The rows of registers were just as uninhabited as the rest of the store, but blinking to attention were five self check-out machines. Graham hesitated, having never used these machines before, but Anslem waved him over. They started scanning items, Anslem handing them over and Graham waving them under the sensor. By the third one, the machine was letting out shrill alarms and flashing lights. Graham stepped back, waiting for the thing to explode, while Anslem rolled his eyes. Eventually, waltzing over was a short man, with his black greasy hair in a ponytail, and his vest covered in pins.

"Damn things," the man muttered under his breath— smiling too. "Corporate's making us do a trial run of these... stupid computers." He tapped a corner of the screen until it shone horrible, crashing computer blue. "Dunno what they were thinking. Half the time customers just walk out when the machine starts screaming. I don't blame 'em," he sighed. He looked over to Graham, his full cheeks turned up in surprise. "Wow, look at you— beautiful! passing through?" Before Graham could answer, the man was talking again. "Lemme guess, lemme guess. You're from Yerington? No-Luning! Yes, you've *totally* got that ghosty look—"

"Dustin, please." Anslem jut his hand out. "Dustin, this is Graham. He's helping with the plaza—"

"The plaza?" Dustin guffawed. He rolled his eyes, as he leant forward to tinker with the machine again. His pins jingled as he typed a string of numbers into the keypad. "Oh give it up, Anslem!" Dustin cackled, then leant back on his heels as the screen returned to its normal display. "He's never gonna find that treasure," he said to Graham. Then pulled back to face Anslem. "I'm convinced you've lost the plot."

"Oh get fucked," Anslem spat— though his smile was wide. Graham returned to scanning the items as Anslem and Dustin caught up. He seemed about the same age as Anslem, though a bit more hyper. He had thick black brows, a long neck with a tiny tattoo of Linus from The Peanuts, and a shirt beneath his vest with an illegible font.

"Speaking of which, are you going to Phoebe's Christmas party?" Dustin asked.

"Not this time." Anslem wrapped his arms around himself— voice thin.

"What?" Dustin exclaimed. "You're kidding!" Graham smiled at Dustin's dramatics.

"I don't think I can handle another party. Last one was kind of rough."

“Are you sure?” Dustin sounded dejected. “Don’t leave us out in the cold, everyone’s expecting you!”

“Last Christmas I woke up at the base of Tinkle Point! How’s that for cold?”

Graham stifled his laugh.

“Only because you wouldn’t let me give you a ride!”

“I didn’t want to die via Vespa,” Anslem blurt.

“You’re no fun anymore,” Dustin whined. Graham caught the man in the corner of his eye, leaning up against another machine to pout.

“You don’t mean that,” Anslem sighed.

“Ok but we *have* to do your birthday. Big septennial!” Dustin recovered quickly.

“That’s not what that means,” Anslem droned.

“Oh sorry, *octennial*.” It was still wrong, but Dustin’s confidence made Graham smile. He tried to imagine himself as confident and excitable, but even fumbling for his wallet wrought on a wave of nauseous insecurity.

“Maybe,” Anslem said. He pulled the cart up to the bags Graham had filled, and started putting them away. “If I can’t go to this one, we can still hang out. We’ll do something different for my birthday. You think on it.”

“Ooh, what’ll ol’ Dusty think up?” Dustin seemed pleased with this, he crossed his arms over his chest and bobbed his head. Graham finished paying and pocketed his receipt.

“I’ll catch you later then,” Anslem called as they headed out. Dusty waved.

“Talk soon! Bye guys.”

...

Once back in Tinkle, and under the darkening sky, they grabbed Graham’s bags from the car and headed for the lobby. Anslem rounded the front desk and fumbled with one of the drawers.

“You sure you’re still okay with sleeping in one of the rooms?” Anslem shot Graham a glance through his lowered lashes. Graham nodded. Anslem returned to the drawer, and opened it. He pulled out a key, a real key. It clamored onto the top of the counter, with a jingling number tag. Graham reached for it, and inspected it. It was tarnished, and a bit shorter than a typical skeleton key. Before he could make out the engraving on the tag, Anslem was walking out towards him. “I’ll show you how to unlock the door. The locks are sticky,” he called. The elevators were down the corridor that split off from the lobby. The gate in front had been folded to one side, to reveal beautifully ornate double doors. Graham leant towards the wall, to get a closer look at the buttons— teeny gold things with once red details. The numbers and symbols had chipped away, but Anslem seemed to know which ones to press to open the doors. “This one’s new,” Anslem supplied, grinning. Graham looked up the length of the grating, moaning elevator as the doors began to open. He wondered just how new.

Graham's room was on the sixteenth floor, the highest in the plaza. This high up, the plaza lost its cigarette stench; It only smelled like mothballs and stale, stuffy air. They walked to his room, Anslem went on to explain how the suites were practical apartments— exacerbated, he wondered aloud why he didn't just live in one. The suite had two rooms, a bathroom, and a kitchen with a gas range you had to light with a match. One of the rooms with a bed, the other with not much but a sleeper couch, a desk, and some empty built-in book cases. The rooms had obviously just been cleaned; the smell of bleach wafted in from the bathroom, and the windows didn't have that same calcium staining as the rest of the plaza. The linens were new, the packaging was still in the kitchen trash. He sat down on the edge of the bed, swept his hand over the duvet beneath him; softer than he'd felt in a while— like the fleece under his sweatshirt. All around him, little additions. Plush towels, feather down pillows, sconces that lit the dark corners of the room in a soft, warm orange.

"You furnished it?" Graham turned to Anslem, who thinned his eyes and chewed on his upper lip.

"Barely—"

"Anslem this is too much."

"You're my guest!" He yelped. "I wasn't gonna let you lay on forty year old bedsheets." Graham looked down at the carpet beneath his feet, with fresh vacuum track marks still in it.

"That was very kind of you." In Graham's bags were his own extra blankets and pillows— still smelling like home.

"I'll let you get settled. I turned the gas on for your room so the stove and water should heat." Anslem nodded to himself and looked around the room— then perked up and turned to Graham. "Let's meet in the lobby tomorrow morning, we can start our search!"

Anslem left Graham to sit in the bitter silence of the suite. He slumped his shoulders and exhaled hard, then leant forward to drag the backpack he'd thrown on his floor closer. He unzipped the bag and pulled the contents out onto his bed. His hand stopped— he contemplated laying out his climbing gear, like he had at home. The shoes on the shelf, the chalk bag dangling from the headboard. He swallowed that down.

"The hell are you gonna climb here?" Graham nipped at his own thoughts. Instead, he pulled a zippered pencil case out and thumbed through his money; threw a ziplock of toiletries towards the bathroom; fumbled for his buzzing phone. He held it out in front of him and wished the name across the front would disappear, trade places with an unknown number or by God's grace, a telemarketer. Graham tried to envision his phone going muddy as it vibrated from the bottom of the ocean. He could see it: the bright screen reading 'GAGE' in digital text, while a fat silver surfperch swam by.

Friday, February 27, 1925

The Adler family home was much more modest than Agar's mansion, but he still cooed and smiled over whatever new additions Wren's mother had installed. Julianne, on the few visits she made with Astoria over the years, often turned her nose up at the place. Four bedrooms, two new bathrooms, and a wide parlor that bled into the kitchen. It was more than most of Tinkle's people had, too many of the homes that lined Tinkle's streets were the square railroad cottages with twins along the Las Vegas lines.

*"I'd like to run this by your father, at least."* Agar had grumbled into his palm after reviewing Wren's proposal.

"You could sell water in a rainstorm, couldn't you Daddy?" Wren spun on her heel to face her father. They'd clustered together in the parlor, Agar, Wren, her parents, her brother Eamon and sister Euphemia. Agar raised a brow and Wren's father let his mouth bob open like a fish.

When the saints sponsored the immigration of Ehrhard Adler's parents from Germany to Utah, they brought with them partnerships with piano makers, woodworkers, and cabinet makers that spanned generations. Selling finery to the missions and clusters of Mormon refugees who starved today to eat tomorrow, and buried pianos in buffalo skins to preserve them in the hopes that someone—someday—would ask them to perform. Wren's family did more than just sell pickaxes in a goldrush, they gambled on the hopes that eventually their little towns would become more than dirtcaked compounds. When the church had enough money to feed its people, and when the Adlers were staple names enough to support themselves, Ehrhard left the dusty, early wobblings of Cache Valley for Tinkle, and he shared those partnerships with Agar. Now, these two men sat on their gluttony—though only Agar seemed to know this.

"That's very generous of you, Etelvina—" Ehrhard stammered, then let a bleary smile spread over his cheeks. Wren crossed her arms over herself, and tipped her chin up at her brother.

"Can I count on you and Eamon then?"

"Absolutely not!" Eamon scrambled to stand from his spot in one of their plush wingback chairs. "Sodomy is a crime in the state of Nevada, Etelvina, and not to mention—"

"It's a good thing it's not a sodomy club then isn't it?" Wren dropped her hands into balled fists at her sides, and leant into Eamon's shrillness.

"Did Astoria beat you stupid as well? We aren't doing this! You're going to get us all arrested."

"Don't talk to her like that, Eamon!" Euphemia reached up from her spot beside Eamon, and pulled his wrist back towards her. Out of Wren and Eamon, Euphemia was the sweetest. Softer features than Wren's: full cheeks, ears that she dangled beads from, lips she painted. She'd married last year, and she already carried her first child in a great heap at her stomach. She wore her hair down today, matching with Eamon. Waves of black hair down their mid backs, probably their mother's idea. Eamon was, like most of the Adler children, lithe and pointy. His firm, narrow jaw turned up as he stuck his tongue out at Wren; his back held him tall as he yanked from her grip and spat down at her.

“Don’t act like you aren’t thinking the exact same thing, Euphemia!” He turned and thrust his pointed finger into Wren’s face. “Just because they do whatever the hell they want in New York doesn’t mean it’ll fly here.” Eamon trembled when he yelled; his dark skin tinged pink and the tips of his ears turned red. He dropped his hand and lowered himself to meet Wren’s eyes. “California sends its pigs down to Vegas constantly to sweep for liquor. Have you been living in a cave these past two years?”

Wren chewed on the inside of her cheek. She kept her hands planted to her folded arms despite the sting in her palms, eager to smack Eamon— give his face a reason to go bright red. She turned to face Agar, who’d been watching them over the brim of the empty glass he nursed at his chest.

“Agar you serve spirits at the plaza don’t you?” Wren asked; her voice a soothing, steady note when compared to Eamon’s crackly shrill. Agar began to speak, but Wren cut him off—stepping further into the parlor and shaking her finger near her ear. “And if I remember correctly, not only is Chief of Police Ivan Walls a loyal customer of Le Jardin, but I distinctly remember when Governor Boyle came through, not a soul even attempted to lock up their bars.” Wren dropped her finger and stopped to stand at Agar’s side. Agar stared up at her, eyes twitching behind the lids.

“That’s true.”

“It’s different—” Eamon groaned. Wren held her hand up to him.

“I don’t think any of you realize how much money we stand to make from this.” Wren turned in place; her mother’s eyes were wide, glittering white. Both her parents shared the same twitching brows, slightly gaped mouths.

“Etelvina,” Euphemia chirped. “The public stands to gain much more reward by simply outing this... business.” Euphemia struggled on the word, and clutched her hands to her swelling belly. “They could report us to the state, and we’d all be done for.”

“No one will report us.”

“Your guests would hardly be decent people,” Eamon snapped.

“Decent or not, they wouldn’t give up their only refuge.” Agar’s voice sent all of their heads turning inward. He looked down into his glass, let it rest on his upper lip. “Tattling on us would only spoil the fun. What else do the people here have to do but drink and dance?”

Wren puffed her chest out, and balanced her palms on her hips; she shot Eamon a satisfied smirk he sniffed at.

“This is dishonest, Etelvina, truly—” Euphemia cried. She clutched the ends of her braids in her hands.

“We have never been anything but dishonest!” Wren’s bellowing declaration silenced Euphemia with a gasp. She turned back and cut through the air with her hand. “None of us have ever even attempted at being honest.” She smacked her palm against her chest. “My marriage—a sham. Our business? Thievery! And Agar—” Wren shrilled as she spun to face him. “You and I both know you are far from honest.” She lowered her voice, and stared right into the dark spot where his brows protruded over his nose. “This has never, ever stopped us,” she hissed. For a

second, a light flashed over Agar's face; his ears twitched up, just slight enough to smooth out the wrinkles in his temples, and tighten his cheeks against the bone. Wren knew that look—Astoria finding a rock she liked, Julianne discovering a bottle in the floorboards. She leant into him. "This is but a thread in a tapestry of my community— give me an inch and I will pour into not only you but into the town a level of growth beyond your comprehension. We will build families here, we will place our businesses here—"

"You'll put us on the map by overrunning this town with queers?" Eamon yelled, and Wren whirled back.

"The men sent home on blue discharges on our block alone could fill this room top to bottom! And that's not even counting the ones who wriggled out of it because of their anemia." Wren pinned Eamon with a sharp glare.

"Etelvina!" Their mother cried; Eamon's face turned from red to purple, and he moved to charge for Wren, but let himself be stopped by Euphemia's hands wrapped around his middle.

"When this is over Eamon you won't see a cent. Nothing," Wren spat.

"That's enough." Ehrhard stepped up from his place, and took the space between Wren and Eamon. Wren scrambled for her father's hands, and pressed them together in hers.

"Daddy, can I expect your cooperation?" She felt Agar's eyes; and reflected in Ehrhard's quick glances back at Wren's mother, she felt the fear pooling off her father.

"I—" He cleared his throat, and blinked back the shimmer in his eyes. "Is this going to work, Etelvina?"

"Yes."

"But my dear do you..." he opened his mouth and tried on the first few syllables of his question. "Are- are you certain?"

"It's going to work."

Ehrhard shuddered and turned to Agar.

"What do you think, Agar?"

Agar finally set his glass down at his feet, and sat up straight.

"Two hundred down, fourteen for the whole space. And I'll seal up the pool for free."

...

Four years ago, Agar's only concern was with selling off his daughter. Before he'd ever dreamed of selling pool houses to queers, when he was fat with wealth and Tinkle's streets swelled with conference goers, travelers, and gamblers. Somewhere over their heads, above the beams and smoke, Agar was tucked away in his office conspiring. Or he was in the walls already, trying to see which poor woman wasn't watching her purse closely enough, or which families had vacated their suite long enough for him to sneak in and swipe coats, pearls, rings. Agar was trying to establish a legacy; part of this meant finding Astoria someone who could ensure place and continue a steady stream of capital for the family was just as paramount as swiping loose earrings from bathroom vanities. Half of the men he'd picked out knew nothing of the world, nor art, nor philosophy. Too many hadn't even regarded the world around them.

It was too hot for April already; Astoria and Julianne had sat in Le Jardin des Chèvrefeuilles long enough that Wren was certain that the yellow tablecloth beneath their fingers would bleach white under the heat of the sun before Astoria ever laid eyes on whatever poor soul Agar was attempting to thrust upon her. Wren watched from her place leant up against the bar as Astoria tugged on the collar of the dress her mother picked out; a stupid, lacy walking dress from the collection of other stupid, lacy walking dresses, that had clogged her wardrobe since the debutante ball a year ago. The dresses looked best in gauzy heaps in the grass. Astoria wore them well, but something about the way she squirmed and fidgeted kept Wren's eyes stuck; catching glimpses of skin and neck and chest. They sat beside the window-lined veranda, and the bustling restaurant was flooded with bright warm sunlight. The French doors had been flung open and in wafted the sweet smell of the honeysuckle that lined the windows, and the maple trees canopied just outside. Round tables filled with chattering women; waiters circled with carts filled with spirits, steaming teapots, and teeny desserts.

From what Wren had collected, they were waiting on Bremen Madsen, a twenty-seven year old heir to his family's fortune, earning manufacturing and selling goose feather and down. In the time he was bound home from the draft thanks to a shoddy liver, he'd become obsessed with bonds— and talking about said bonds.

"He's a nice boy." Julianne's voice carried over the light chatter in Le Jardin. Wren sipped on her own bitter lemonade from the bar, and watched Julianne hum into a gin ginger on its way out.

"If only niceties were worth anything." Astoria grunted as she clawed at her neck.

"Sit up straight." Julianne reached over and jabbed Astoria in the elbow to try and knock it off the table, but Astoria stayed rigid.

"No." Astoria dropped her arms to her lap and slouched back against her chair, letting the boning of her stays poke under her arms.

"Sit up straight," Julianne spat just as she'd finished her final sip. Astoria rolled her eyes and crossed her arms over herself. Wren chuckled, warm and hearty in her chest. She set her glass down and folded her hands behind her as she waltzed across the dining room towards Astoria's table. Wren thought it sweet how all the local boys gave Astoria a wide berth— knowing she'd throw them down the mouths of mines should she get the chance. Meanwhile, strangers flocked to Astoria like she was the reason for all their travels; a souvenir to lure back home. Despite it, they'd have each other to fall into. They could forever giggle over whatever poor line or attempt a man had thrown at Astoria. She came up and pressed her hips to the table's edge; she watched a shadow of jingling earrings dance in the shadows over the tablecloth. Astoria whipped her head over, up the waist and to the nimble shoulders, to her savior: the tawny-brown skinned young woman with an awful grin.

"Join me on the veranda, Story?" Wren winked, and Astoria slammed her palms on the tabletop to jump up.

"She's waiting on someone, Etelvina." Julianne raked her eyes up Astoria's skirt, and Astoria reached down to smooth down the wrinkles.

“What’s the matter, Mother, afraid we might have a bit of fun?” Astoria droned out hout looking up from her skirt.

“The fresh air can’t hurt.” Wren blurted out before Julianne could bite back, then lowered her gaze to meet Astoria’s eyes. “We won’t be long, won’t we?”

“Not at all.” Astoria swallowed down her smirk, and nodded to her mother. “We’ll see you soon.” She wove her hand through Wren’s arm, and pressed their hips together.

Wren had known Astoria since their birth— a shared terror deep in the July monsoon season, when Tinkle’s mainstreet was flooded and a toppled Selkoy marked the turn of the century. Astoria called her Wren, the little thing she could have held in the palm of her hand; they could have been sisters, this girl who had pulled Astoria from the edge of creek bends, mine mouths, and cliffs too many times to count. A sanctuary in a storm of suitors, a girl to give bruising smiles.

“I had to get you out of there,” Wren muttered down into Astoria’s ear as they both flung open Le Jardin des Chèvrefeuilles’ grand doors and flew out into the warm air. Astoria laughed and shoved her shoulder into Wren’s.

“I think my mother is going to poison you. Did you see her face?” They trampled down the hollow steps and onto the dirt before the plaza; to their left a coach with two restless horses was wobbling as a couple offloaded their screaming children.

“I try not to look her in the eyes, these days. Too much annoyance. It’s sure to rub off on me!” Wren waved her hand in front of her face and scrunched up her features. Astoria rolled her eyes, and looped her arm firmly into Wren’s.

“Let’s hit up Minty’s, my orders are finally in!” Astoria shrilled. Wren’s smirk exploded into a toothy smile.

“You’re going to put that poor man in the hospital.” Today, Astoria and Wren fell through the door and into the sun soaked bookshop; they clamored over each other, giggling, as their feet slipped out from under them on the waxed floors.



### Chapter Three:

Graham winced against the flat pillow at the clatter that'd woken him. He lifted his head towards the noise; his phone had vibrated for so long that it'd fallen off the bedside table, and taken an empty water cup with it. His joints hissed as he reached down to the carpet to pluck up the still-ringing phone. The display flashing green at him was brighter than the room, which was still a hazy morning blue; across the tiny screen a firm six twenty-six, and Gage's name scrolling along. Graham watched the tiny pixelated phone above his name bob— off the receiver, back on, off, on, off. When the call went to voicemail, Graham reviewed the damage. Two calls and one voicemail from last night— promptly deleted with a press of his thumb. There were still texts from his mother he hadn't read, and a single text from his father he'd read but hadn't deleted from days before he'd left. "Did you get gravy mix?" And nothing more. Graham let his arm fall flat out off the edge of the bed, and dropped his phone to the floor with a thud. When he rolled out of bed, the time the sun had breached his window's edge, the phone was ringing again. Graham stepped over it, and into the kitchen to find the kettle and instant coffee they'd bought yesterday.

When Graham had brushed the yellow slime from his tongue, and christened a bottle of generic peppermint shampoo in the shower, he slipped two macadamia nut granola bars into the pockets of his green fleece hoodie and dropped a straw into his watery coffee. The edges of his sleeves still had gym chalk caked into the hemline, and when his arms brushed his jeans they left stripes of white dust. He left his phone to finish throwing its silent tantrum on the floor of the suite and stepped out into the hall. Graham turned to slip the key in the door, but a brown flicker in his peripheral turned his head. At the end of the hall, near the elevators, another man was slipping the key into his door. Tall, frenzied hair tucked into a cap, blue veins across his cheeks clearly visible through his pale, translucent skin. He must have seen Graham, because he looked up too. His crooked nose crinkled and untamed black brows rose, but he didn't approach— Graham had frozen in place, and the man only waved and showed Graham a wide smile. Then, he was slipping into his own suite and closing the door.

Graham didn't find Anselm in the lobby. Rather, he followed the clamoring sound down past the elevators and into the defunct restaurant. Anselm was behind the bar, grasping at the backs of the massive built-ins, sweeping his hands up and down the edges of the shelves, pulling occasionally. When he noticed Graham standing there, he pulled his hands away and dusted them off on his shirt.

"Sorry," he muttered. Graham blinked at him. Anselm didn't seem to know what to do with his hands, now that he was discovered. He fumbled with his now dirt stained shirt, looked around as though the rafters were the most interesting thing. "Was trying to get a head start." The restaurant didn't smell as bad as the lobby, but it still boasted the same ghosts. Massive, dark wood arches, windows that poured gray light into a once warm, airy Anselm took up a hand and waved around them. "This is the restaurant... I think it was meant to be Parisien, hence all the—" Anselm trailed and looked around as he thought of the word. He pointed at the yellowing rattan dining chairs that had lost all support in their seats, practically rotted into the floor along

with the once beautiful herringbone tile. “Er...wicker,” he droned. Graham nodded, as Anslem led him away from the bar. “Did you sleep well?”

“I did, thank you.” Graham tucked his hands into his pockets to soothe the pulsating cold that ran up them. “I did want to ask, though... I thought the hotel was defunct. I didn’t know there’d be other people staying here.” Graham watched Anslem’s brows raise, then fall as he shook his head.

“Ghosty looking guy a few doors down from you?” He drawled. Graham nodded. “That’ll be Daniel. I didn’t know he was back in town.” Anslem sighed. “All these empty rooms, and sometimes Daniel just needs a soft place to land.” Graham nodded. Anslem perked up and leant towards Graham. “Did you do any research into the place? Before you came?”

“Aside from what you told me, I couldn’t find much on it. The librarian thought I was having a stroke,” Graham explained—he stifled his chuckle at the memory of the librarian attempting, and failing, to read his handwriting.

“Sounds about right. Tinkle’s not on the map.”

“It’s a ghost town.”

“Not any ghostier than Goldfield!” Anslem snapped, smiling over at Graham. He turned and looked back up to the back of the bar. “I was wondering if you’d read up anything new. I’d like to look into some of the building styles for the time. Maybe we can hit up the library.” Anslem exhaled and shifted his weight.

“Building styles?” Graham echoed.

“I was trying to pull the wood paneling off the back of the bar. Before you got here.” Anslem raised his finger to drag in a line through the air. He shook his head and pressed his fingertips to the crown of his head—tapping his skull with exacerbatation. “I’m telling you it’s hollow back there,” Anslem shrilled. Graham nodded and watched Anslem reach across and knock on the panels two, four, six times. Anslem tore his hands away, slipped back into the crutches he’d neglected on the bartop, and turned his back to Graham. “I need to get a crowbar, or a mallet, something that’ll put a hole in those planks,” he muttered as he walked away. Graham looked up the wall, all the way to the rafters. He felt his shoulders drop, and lungs exhale as Anslem’s voice disappeared. His frantic searches and agitation made Graham nervous, sure, but it was also the proximity that sent sweet, breathless pangs all through Graham’s bones. Openness in his chest he hadn’t felt in years, and certainly not on the ground. These bursts only came to him at the fresh relief of a finished climb, or waving down to his teammates from whatever crevice he’d clipped into. “I’m back!” Anslem’s voice made Graham jolt. He snapped his head over, to see Anslem spinning a crowbar in one hand, and a mallet in the other. He smiled and used the mallet to wave. Graham smiled back, and resolved to help Anslem rip the plaza apart board by board.

The back of the bar was hollow. But no silver lined the shelves that were tucked away. Only horribly thick, caked on dust, and the occasional dead, shriveled roach. Anslem had thrown himself on a barstool to pout, while Graham piled the thin panels. Too many of them were bent from Anslem’s crowbar, or splintered by the mallet. When Graham made the first strike, and the

mallet fell through in one swoop, both men stilled in excitement. Anslem had shone a light through, a bright white from one of the new flashlights. The first beam left a twinge of disappointment, by the last one Anslem was practically ripping his hair out.

"It's like- " his breath hitched as he stammered from the barstool. "It's like you lose something that was just in your hand. And you're looking around the room like an idiot because it completely evaporated!" His eyes had gone wild and wide as he searched the restaurant, as though it held the answer in the rafters. "I mean... it's just silverware! Ten-thousand fucking forks and plates and... and ice tongs!" Graham bit down his laughter; the sight of Anslem bent over in chagrin was awful, but hearing him curse the ice tongs was darling. Graham finished placing the panels, then kicked them to the side. They'd dust out the shelves another day, maybe even restore them. The panels still boasted their labels from now defunct hardware stores; an early seventies plea to... Graham couldn't have even guessed why the shelves were boarded up. Maybe to hide the fact the plaza lacked funding to supply the bar. He turned and walked up to the bar's edge, across from Anslem—who now rested his forehead flat on the bartop. Graham leant forward onto his elbows and nudged Anslem with the back of his wrist. Anslem only grumbled. "Let me wallow," he muttered into the sticky laminate. While Graham enjoyed the melodrama, he had something to say—so nudged Anslem again and waited for him to roll his head up. Anslem lifted only so that his temple rested on the bartop, and an eye stared up at Graham.

"I'm sorry we didn't find it," Graham said. Anslem just sighed and shook his head just a touch.

"It's fine." Anslem placed his palms on either side of his head and lifted himself up. "It's just annoying as hell."

And so the days went on like this. Anslem driving his sledgehammer through the thin, half rotten wood—Graham pulling away the boards to peer inside the gray, dusty caverns. They'd created a horrible trail of holes, snaking down the wall right at their eye line. And when their flashlights shone through those holes, down to the floor, all they found were crumpled candy wrappers, dead roaches, and the spare shards of long lost plastic here and there. No silver. And for each pull of the boards, Graham wished Anslem wouldn't get his hopes up; but the man always did. He paced, and grinned madly when his hammer made the first thwack into the wall—then crumpled and screamed into his palms when all Graham pulled out were brittle receipts or dust bunnies. It was a sight to see, when Anslem threw himself against the wall, dragged down it to sit and grumble. Like a man who'd lost it all at the roulette tables, or a toddler who'd had too much sun.

"I'm going to rip my eyes out," Anslem said into his hands this evening, when they'd completely destroyed the far walls of the east gambling hall. Graham sat across from Anslem on the cigarette stained carpet, toying with the piles of their findings. One for paper, one for glass, one for oddities. Between his forefinger and thumb he spun a faded blue bottle cap.

"Don't say that," Graham muttered. He threw the cap into the paper pile and sat back on his hands. "We've got a ways to go anyway."

...

A week into Graham's stay, they'd found everything but silver. The massive kitchens boasted empty, dust covered cabinets. In the rafters, which hung high over their heads, nested the pigeons who cooed and rained their shit to the floor. Anslem had boxed up the sporadic copper pots that they found in the cubbies and corners; Graham had earned a sizable collection of old food wrappers to be tossed— though some were pretty enough to place in teeny frames. The remaining lower rooms were the same. The laundry boasted bottles upon bottles of more recent, plastic, neon detergents, hoarded and stacked upon the machines. The pantries were bare, and water damaged files had been stacked along nearly every available surface. The whole level had a miserable, thick stench of mildew.

It wasn't all bad, though. Graham had wandered into what he believed to be a storage room, and found a cabinet filled to the top with word rolls for a player piano. Anslem squealed when he saw them. Excitedly, he pulled one from the wall and rotated it in his hand. The cardboard was soft and thin from the water damage. Anslem filled his bag with a few, and that evening they brought them to Cliff's. He was happy to see them too; Cliff placed them in a slot on an upright piano, and out played the staccato melody. Anslem jumped up and clapped his hands; he grabbed Graham by the shoulders and gave him a shake as the music filled the parlor. The touch sent an electric shock through Graham, enough to make him jump.

Graham found oddities too, ones that made it difficult to stifle his laughter. A strange collection of Ronald Reagan glamor shots, stamps with topless showgirls, a collection of embossed notepads— each misspelled 'Tingle'; the man designing them must've misheard. When Graham was done cataloging the room, he found Anslem in the hallway; he'd covered his whole shirt in 'I Like Ike' buttons. Graham couldn't hold back his hysteric cackling. But, for all the knick-knacks and treasures, there was no silver. Not a spoon tucked away nor a tarnished pitcher hidden in a cupboard. Graham could see it though, in the quick glances and walks back up to the lobby, that it was beginning to wear on Anslem. He'd giggle over the findings, but still sigh when the sun began to set; he helped Graham splay out his favorite pieces on the bare shelves of his suite, but still wrung his hands up in his hair on his way out the door. Graham lingered in the threshold then, stomach in twists, watching Anslem mutter to himself the whole way.

"It's not fair." Now Anslem sounded truly like a child, and it sent a pang up through Graham's ribs. "I mean—" Anslem scoffed and pushed his head up from his hands, smacking it against the wall. "I just feel like an idiot. I just saw it!"

"I know," Graham echoed. He searched Anslem's pleading face, the frenzied eyes behind those thin glasses. Graham sighed, and stood up. He leant down, and picked up the sledgehammer from Anslem's side. "Come on. Let's get the far wall." He sighed and turned away, but Anslem wailed out his protests as he slumped further against the wall. "Okay," Graham hissed as he looked back. "Then what do you suggest?" Anslem blinked at a particularly dusty pile, then a grin spread across his face.

"We could form a suicide pact."

Graham felt his eyes bug out from his skull as his mouth dropped open.

“Anslem!” He tried to sound as serious as he could, despite Anslem’s giggling.

“No, no. Sorry.” Anslem swallowed down his laughter and wrinkled his brows as he composed himself. Graham waited, toes tapping in his shoes, for Anslem to stop wallowing. But the gears were still working inside that pretty skull, if the man’s darting eyes were to mean anything. “Y’know,” he drawled. “That’s what my great grandparents did.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Graham spat.

“No it’s true!” Anslem began pulling himself up, as he insisted.

“That’s morbid.” Graham raised a brow as Anslem straightened out.

“But it reminded me of them, and I started wondering if maybe they knew something!” Graham tried to picture Tinkle Plaza in any sort of stability— physical or otherwise. A-hundred years ago, there weren’t holes in the wood panels, there weren’t even wood panels at all. The carpet probably didn’t cloud up with dust or the stray grasshopper with each step, the chairs probably held distinguished debutantes and mustached businessmen. Did Anslem’s great grandparents float through the same gambling halls Graham was currently destroying? Were they ever here at all? Graham mused on this image, of the faceless figures walking up the length of Tinkle’s grand bellman’s desk, for a second until the realization struck him.

“Wait!” Graham jutted an arm out, stopping Anslem in his tracks. “They must’ve lived here, right? Been in the plaza?” Graham dropped his arm and kept the sharp stare with Anslem. He chewed on this for a while; his furrowed brows loosening as the gears turned in his mind. “Did she have diaries? Records? Anything?” Graham hissed. Anslem flicked his head up, face open and eyes wide. Graham reached out and grabbed Anslem’s arms as the second wind overtook them both. “Anslem there could be clues! We could find something!” He exclaimed. Anslem, though laughing, shook his head.

“We’d probably have to rip up the walls at the house too. And Cliff would kill me,” he huffed. Graham dropped Anslem’s arm, and spun on his heel— sledgehammer swinging at his side.

“Please, it sounds like your family hides everything they touch. I’m sure he’d understand.”

Friday, April 30, 1921

Astoria and Wren trekked up the low hills where Tinkle met Selkoy, to the meadow at the base of the mountain. The sun had started its descent, but still burned bright and lit up the sky in a painful, pointed blue. Astoria fell on her stomach into the tall grass beside Wren, both of them balancing their tools in their hands— a pencil for Astoria and a knife for Wren. Under the quiet, damp sky, Wren watched the light reflect off Astoria's polished nails as she worked through the pages of the exam book. The long, rounded fingernails— the way they came up to move stray curls from her face. Astoria caught Wren looking and snorted.

"Mind your own paper Miss Adler," she droned. Wren rolled her eyes and returned to the wood block in her hands.

"Do you think Bremen's gone home by now?" Wren quipped and leant over her folded legs towards Astoria's ear. Astoria huffed and shook her head.

"No. Knowing him, he's just arrived."

Wren saw Bremen's wide, doe-eyed face behind her eyes; he never looked quiet, always on the brink of discovering something with his mouth wide open. Her stomach churned, and she rolled the block back and forth. As of today, Wren had observed four of their dates. At this point, Wren doubted that Agar would allow Astoria a fifth before pushing her into the engagement.

"Where's your dowry at now?"

Astoria looked up and let the exam slide down her legs and fall onto her stomach.

"Two hundred," Astoria sniffed.

Eager to shed himself of his burden, Agar had turned Astoria's hand into something more of a lottery— "I will pay you to take her far, far away!" He promised to the young bachelors of Tinkle. If the family home wasn't crawling with clammy men ready to beg for Astoria— or Agar's money— then the plaza was. Julianne had set up a handful of chaperoned dates here and there, dances for Astoria to promenade herself at, dinners meant to aid in finding any common ground between the two hopefuls under the watchful eye of a chaperone. All of which Wren lingered in the corners of: shadowing Astoria, watching from bars, behind glasses, from patio windows. But now that Bremen was in the picture, she knew it'd only be a matter of days before he was two hundred thousand dollars richer.

"What would a man even do with two hundred thousand dollars?" Wren spat and thrust her knife up the length of the block. "Buy the whole state?"

"I've heard some boys spend double that on pearls for their girls." Astoria mumbled into her hand, which had found its way under her chin.

"You want pearls?" Wren cocked a brow

"Sure, if I'm the one harvesting them." Astoria let out a breath into her palm; Wren felt the heat in her own hands. "Mark my words, Wren." Astoria squeezed her eyes shut, and Wren smiled at the coming complaint. "The next man to confuse a spotted sandpiper from a least is going to have my boot heel in his eye," she spat.

There was a night early in March where Wren had climbed up the trellis to Astoria's window and lingered like a ghost at the top of the stairs long after Julianne and Agar had called Astoria for dinner. At the time, she'd met three times with the son of the president of a pool supply company Agar did business with. Apparently, on their fourth date— a meeting between both their families in the private room of the Ingelram's restaurant— Astoria stabbed the poor boy in the hand with a fish knife. With a wave of his hand he'd decided that they'd use the money to convert Selkoy into a resort town, fill the land with concrete and ornately tiled swimming pools. Astoria flung up her knife and cut through the air, pinning his palm down to the tabletop and leaving it to flutter with frantic desperation like a butterfly pinned in a frame.

"You're almost twenty-one, Astoria, I've given you nothing but time!" Agar had shrieked at her.

"Some debutante." Julianne swallowed down the remainder of her wine with a harsh gagging gulp that echoed up the stairs. "Agar, is there a word for a failed debutante? Would dowager be the correct term for our daughter?"

"She's had no husband to make her a dowager. And at the rate her dowry's inflating you'll be a sore example of one—" Agar guffawed. "By the time I decide to throw myself off the roof of the plaza, we'll have nothing."

Wren lowered herself until her stomach pressed against her thighs and wrapped her arms around her legs.

"That's your fault," Astoria grunted.

"Only because no man in his right mind would marry you without the certainty that he'd be wealthy enough to afford a doctor who could sew him back together after you've maimed him beyond repair!"

"I wish it was easier," Astoria muttered now. She plucked a blade of grass from the dirt, and watched the granules fall from the edges.

"You'll find someone." Wren picked at a stray hair of wood from the block with her nail. "You're beautiful, and creative, and whip smart—"

"Am not," Astoria bit up at Wren. "I've got shit for brains and you know it." Astoria looked down at her open hands.

"You've already started answering some of the questions in your exam book—" Wren stopped short and tore her eyes down to her lap when Astoria jerked her head over to glare. Astoria sighed and inched up to rest her head on Wren's knee. She buried her face into the soft spot where hip met thigh, and let out a breath that webbed up Wren's waist to pull at her heart.

"Wake me up when it's over."

## Chapter Four:

The master bedroom of Cliff's house was truly massive, but he didn't stay in it. Couldn't stay in his parent's sprawling, plush bed. Didn't want to stare up at the creamy ceiling, or past the deep windows and into the gardens. The room pooled with warm sunlight; Graham thought that, even in the early reaches of winter, the room looked like it was stuck in a permanent summer. The light reflected off prisms and crystals in the windows, casting rainbow shards across the walls. The bathroom boasted stained glass, and ringlets of overflowing silk ivy. Graham walked the perimeter of the room, eying books on the shelves, the art untouched by time. Behind him, Cliff sat at the bench of the vanity— off in the adjacent dressing room, Anslem rustled through boxes.

"I come up to clean sometimes," Cliff sighed. Behind Graham, glass bottles clinked together, Anslem's crutches clicking against the wood floor pulled Graham's gaze. He came from the bathroom, a long book in hand. He slipped from his crutches to sit beside Cliff

"Pictures?" He smiled, as Cliff took the book to cradle in his lap. Graham stepped forward and sat down on the other side of Cliff.

"I know this book," Cliff chuckled. He opened the cover, the plastic that protected thick leather crinkled beneath Cliff's fingers. The pages of the album were crisp and dark; along them, the photos were framed by black scalloped paper. The first photo featured a white family of six, each looking up at Graham with small, distant eyes. In the center stood a man with a large, dark pushbroom mustache that bled into his beard. His face was thin, though his pronounced brow and deep set eyes had Graham looking away into the corners of the pages to escape it. Beside him, a woman with a great brown pompadour and intricate dangling earrings. And surrounding them, three near twins of the man— presumably sons, though save for the facial hair and height. Then, amongst them sat a single girl, with light hair and shining features. She wasn't smiling, and. If the white knuckles grasping the stool beneath her were any indicator, she burst the second after the photo was taken.

"That's my mother." Cliff pointed to the girl. "Astoria— Tinkle's only daughter," he mused. Graham jolted forward and pointed at the mustached man in the photo.

"That's Agar?"

"Yep. And his wife Julianne." Cliff pointed to them, trailing his finger over the photo. "These are his sons Jacob, John, and Edward. All died in the war, though Edward—" Cliff tapped the lankiest boy, with wide eyes and a look like he'd just choked on his breath. "They never found his body. My mother theorized he ran away to France with a few friends." Cliff shot Graham a glance, then a wink. Graham looked back to the page, where out sprawled varying photos of the family. The sons and their portraits, the decadent wedding photos between Julianne and Agar, a thumbnail of Astoria's chubby baby face. On the next page, a single photo of the sons as boys out on a porch. They sat beside a white card table, and all around them, trailing flowers bloomed. In the distance, a stark naked Astoria— a tiny toddler— was doing a cartwheel in the grass. Graham gasped when he'd noticed it, and Cliff cackled. "She was a horrible little



girl, that one.” He turned to Anslem, who was smiling down at the photo. “Remember her story about the dumbwaiter?”

“I do,” Anslem huffed. He leant over to look at Graham. “She would wait in the kitchen’s dumbwaiter, one they used to transport food up and down the floors of the plaza. She said her favorite trick was to scare the poor pastry chef until he was barreling down the halls cursing and in tears!” Graham imagined it. This little girl, all ribbons and laughter, waiting for the unassuming to discover her— only for them to be sent flying backwards as she’d leap into a great screech. Cliff turned the page. On this one, scattered portraits of another family. This one smaller, just four. In their family photo stood a broad, round faced white man— with circular glasses on his nose and a cap of fine black hair. All around him, three dark skinned women of varying ages and smiles. One woman, with her palm on the man’s chest, was smiling with her teeth to the camera. Sat beneath the couple were three children, two girls and a boy each in braids and matching smiles. The one to the left held herself tall, with a deep skirt that cut in at her waist, and a pair of sharp heeled boots that poked out from beneath her. Her sister, a few touches shorter, was in a great billowy white shirt, with a long skirt patterned with tiny flowers. In her ears hung two long, beaded earrings that caught the light and sent a slight glare into the photo. They felt warmer to Graham than the other family— soft around the edges. The first felt too familiar. The painful stillness, the urgency of an annoyed parent at the back of a child, the eager plea of a photographer to “*Hold still now!*” But the photo lacked a person Graham was waiting on, but the question fell silent on his lips. Cliff pointed to the girl in the flower patterned skirt.

“That’s my mother too,” he said.

Graham drew his brows, as his heart leapt up into his throat, then dove straight for the floor. The great shock that had him both seen and *suffocated* all at the same time.

“Both of them?” He wheezed out; the sound was horrid and he’d wished it swallowed down the moment it escaped his throat.

“Yes.” Cliff turned to face Graham fully, head tilted and brow raised. A whistling wheeze crawled up and out of Graham’s throat, and he scrambled to escape Cliff’s stare by clearing his throat into his elbow

“Can I see more?” He croaked, and Cliff looked back down to flip through his book with a smile. As they moved through the book, the girls got older, and closer. Some photos even featured the both of them, palms full of flowers, lizards, rocks— shared smiles and wild eyes. In one, a teenaged Astoria was crouched in the dirt on the bluffs outside of town, a pick mattock in outstretched in her hands— the wood handle skillfully chip carved with quails, cranes with their necks outstretched, and thick floral borders.

“Those two absolutely terrorized this town.” Cliff mused. Graham’s gaze trailed down the photos. One of their two hands out over a shallow pond, each holding a tiny toad. A photo of them in the sunny restaurant of the plaza, once surrounded by perfect tables and patrons. Even a local newspaper article. The Tinkle Times crying out: “Tinkle Heiress Floods Hart’s Mine!”

Graham laughed as he read the story of the girls who'd managed to mangle a well pump so horribly that the excess poured into the mouth of an abandoned mine.

"Terrors," Graham echoed. He shook his head as he smiled down at the girls. The photos got better as they grew, though the outfits meager and the faces a bit thinned, their smiles wide. Anslem hopped up and returned back to the closet to keep rustling; Graham leant deeper into the photos. "Astoria studied geology, but I think she just liked to collect rocks. They got on like a house fire. Etelvina—" Cliff pointed to the other girl. "She was half Shoshone, and her father was some merchant's son from Germany if I remember correctly." Cliff's hands danced through the air as he spoke, eyes wide. "Though they weren't as rich as Agar, I'd like to think they were much happier. They always had my mother over for dinners, took her in as one of their own," he hummed as they moved through the album.

Anslem returned with his crutches under one arm, and a box under the other. He settled the box down in front of their feet and sat down.

"And here—" Cliff wheezed as he bent over to pull the box closer. Inside were stacks of books, each with a different color, but they shared their yellowing pages. "-the diaries."

"All of them?" Graham gasped, staring down as Cliff began loosely thumbing through. Within each page was the tight scrawling of cursive that got better and better with time.

"Astoria was a bit better at keeping them than Etelvina, although both of them recorded quite a bit." Graham chewed his lip and stared down at the books— one covered in warm, yellow gingham; another bright red with embroidered herons. He saw himself already, scouring the pages in the dead of night, pouring over them at the bar. He wondered if Anslem would read beside him. "I've already read them cover to cover." Cliff said, picking up the yellow one. "Not much on Agar, if that's what you're after." He handed the book off to Graham to inspect. The pages were water damaged, and brittle. But close to the spine, the pages were thick and creamy.

"It's quite a lovely story," Anslem hummed and reached for the book in Graham's hand.

"You've read them too?"

"I have. They're electric."

"Anything related to our search?" Graham asked. Cliff shook his head.

"I told my mother she ought to write." Cliff turned the red book over in his hand. "Too busy being a troublemaker, I suppose." Cliff reached down into the box for a blue copy with a thick leather cover and bible thin pages. "The only thing I think will be of any use to you, though—" he flipped through to where a thick envelope had been nestled into the pages. "Is this." Cliff reached in and plucked the letter out, handing it off to Anslem. Anslem's hand stuttered in the air as he moved to take it.

"A letter?"

"From Agar." Cliff released the letter into Anslem's eager hands. "They weren't close— she very seldom wrote of him."

"I haven't seen this before." Anslem flicked the envelope, then looked up to Cliff. "Why didn't you show it to me?"

“I never had a reason to. It’s not a nice letter.” Cliff drew his thumb over the open pages of the diary. Anslem slipped his finger beneath the envelope’s flap, but Cliff was quicker, and grabbed Anslem’s wrist. “Read it at home, please.”

...

“I’m glad Cliff shared the album with us,” Graham echoed out once they were settled in the car. They fell through the doors into the seats and watched their breath fog up as Anslem’s car warmed up. “With me, specifically. His parents seemed really special.”

“They were.” Anslem smiled down at the letter still in his hands.

“Did you know them?”

“I did, they died when I was eight.” Anslem rolled to lie flat against his seat, dragging his thumbnail back and forth beneath the fold of the envelope. “They were incredible. Even in their old age, just so alive and *fiery*. Always ready to play with me, or debate over which of my toys was the coolest.” Both Anslem and Graham laughed. Graham still felt the familiar warmth that radiated from the album, and when he’d looked down into it all he felt was the relieving weight of commonality—a single shared thread in their histories. “I’m sorry if I came off like I was uncomfortable with your grandparents. Or even you.”

“It’s okay,” Anslem huffed into a barking laugh, and Graham’s chest tightened. “I’ll admit though, that little squeak up there in the bedroom—”

“Shut up!” Graham fell back into the chair behind him, smiling up at the fabric ceiling along the roof of the car.

“Your grandfather and you, you’ve both been so welcoming.” He shook his head, then rolled his eyes down to look at Anslem. “It’s weird.”

“Y’know you’re giving the poor people of Monterey quite a bad rap, Graham.”

“Technically, I’m from Beakbridge. It’s a few minutes out of Monterey.”

“Not nice in Monterey?”

Graham gave it a thought. The people he’d met in his time spent were nice enough; he’d made plenty of friends in school, even more in his climbing league. The teachers were kind, strangers were fine.

Graham finally settled on: “My circle’s unforgiving.” Anslem nodded, then reached around to look out the rearview window. His hand rested firmly on the back of Graham’s seat, sending a wave of fresh, almost woody scent Graham’s way. Graham tried not to lean into the almost-touch, or pay mind to the moss damp, smoke-logged trees that he imagined when Anslem reached over.

“That’s too bad.” Anslem said, once they were out of the driveway and back on the road. “Lemme guess...” Anslem’s tone reminded Graham of Dusty’s— all investigative and a little teasing. He leant back in his seat, one hand on the wheel, to throw a glance at Graham. “Affluent little cul-du-sac folks?” Graham smiled, and wrung his hands in his lap.

“My family’s comfortable, I’m not.”

“Oh I knew it!” Anslem smacked at the wheel with his palm. Now Graham had to fight the smile; it was true. They lived in a cul-du-sac; his parents both drove incredible, humbling cars. Their house was too big for comfort, with massive windows, beige walls, and close-cut carpet of virtually the same color. The house reeked of brand name laundry detergent.

“I could tell. We’re cut from the same cloth, y’know.” Anslem took his hand off the wheel again to motion between them. The man could’ve looked right at Graham and the car would still run straight. “Fat cat family.” Graham chewed on that for a moment, then shrugged. He’d known the feeling; his parents came from a decent, upper middle class family. Their parents, and their parents, and so on. And while the money was nice— he didn’t have to worry about his most recent medical bills for too long— it certainly didn’t cushion any of their blows.

“Fat cat’s gotta eat too y’know?” He mustered, half sarcastically, half out of fear his mother— somehow listening— would weasel out from the glovebox and spit defensively in his face. Anslem rolled his eyes.

“Sure,” he muttered. They sat with only the rumbling of the crackling asphalt beneath them to soothe the silence. Anslem spoke again before Graham had a chance to curse himself for ruining the mood. “Y’know, I never met Agar. But he made sure we felt him.” Anslem rapped his fingers over the wheel.

“What do you mean?”

“He wasn’t ever good to us.” Anslem shook his head. “The town needed money, the school needed books. I got lucky. Cliff had his inheritance, his parents had theirs, but it wasn’t like that for the rest of the people here. I still remember how they couldn’t afford to keep the lights on in the school one year. Then another, no air conditioning.” He stabbed the center of the wheel with his finger, hard enough to emit a premature bleat. “When we find that treasure, I’m giving as much as I can to them.” Anslem’s voice had gone bitter, spitting almost as they pulled into the steep parking lot of the plaza. The car wheezed and moaned beneath them, taking the brunt of Anslem’s annoyance.

“Anyway, Monterey.” Anslem tested the word out a few more times. They took the box inside with them, while Anslem echoed: ‘Monterey’, ‘Monterey’ ‘Monterey’ “Dustin was right. You’re too pretty to be from here!” He closed his eyes and nodded to himself. Graham snorted, if anything Cliff was just excited to see someone new on his porch. “That’s quite a drive, though, isn’t it?” Anslem asked. Graham nodded.

“It’s a lovely drive. I like my car though, so any excuse to drive is a good one.”

Graham stopped and stared at the poor thing. Anslem stopped too and attempted to hide a snort. The sedan was almost ten years Graham’s senior, with a boxy front and shiny lines. It was grass green, though rusting brown in the corners, and a little under nine-thousand dollars when Graham bought it. It ran fine, though. Never gave Graham any trouble— not even when the paved roads that split lush farmland turned to unforgiving gravel. “It’s dinky.” Graham supposed. “But it’s mine. I bought it with my competition winnings.” They started walking towards the plaza again.

“Winnings?” Anslem echoed.

“I used to climb a lot.”

“Climb...” Anslem trailed, then his eyes flew open in shock. “Like on rocks?” Graham giggled; people outside of his league always bugged their eyes out when they heard. He tightened his grip on the box.

“I was in a top ropes climbing league for a long time. We won lots of awards.”

Anslem shook his head, and exhaled hard. “Isn’t that completely horrifying?”

“Sure, but it’s a lot of fun.” Graham nodded to himself; they came up to the steps and ambled up. “We’d take trips down south and climb in the canyons. I was pretty good too.” That was an understatement. Graham was very good. “I got really into free soloing there, for a while.” Graham had long limbs and noble fingers that made for excellent climbing. But what was once a lean, muscled body had now gone soft, scrawny, and loose. Often he reminded himself that he should be grateful; he had legs to carry him, shoulders to hold his head up, a body that breathed. Once, he could swing himself up in overhangs or run between orange canyon walls. The league’s trips were his favorite; the pursuits of the ragtag team took him everywhere, from magnificent free climbs in the humbling valleys of Sedona, to the Keyholes of Zion. He could still see it: the sunlight that trickled into the hidden crevices of the canyon; he could still feel the way the air heated his blissfully sunburnt skin.

“It’s been at least two years since I’ve even put on my shoes,” he choked.

“Did you fall?” Anslem asked, his voice echoing up through the foyer. Graham shuddered, up around him the dark wood beams loomed— cold reminders clashing against the warm memories.

“No— of course not.”

“Then what happened?” Anslem leant in, like a child on the brink of a story.

Graham shrugged. “Shit, I guess.”

“Oh.” They lingered in the lobby, while Anslem started rifling through and sorting the diaries out on the concierge’s desk. “You miss it?” Anslem asked over the clatter of the headlamps falling to the desktop. He flung open a drawer, the contents clamoring when he did, and brought out a pair of scissors to cut the plastic from the package. Graham walked up, resting his forearms on the edge of the desk.

“I do.” He nodded. “I wish I could go back.” Graham rolled his head over to the side. His climbing had ebbed and flowed with his moods. In the months when his vision cleared and his chest didn’t feel so heavy, he could throw himself with ease from gym to gym— excursion to excursion testing his limbs to their limits. In the months when nothing short of death could pull him from a burrow of blankets on his bed, climbing was out of the question. “But I’ve gotten all small. Not sure how much I’ve got left in me anymore.” He motioned over his arms. Anslem gave him a quick once over, then returned back to flipping through the slicing open the packaging. It seemed to resist every close of the scissor’s blades.

“I’m sure you could, if you gave it another go.” Anslem nodded his head a bit, back and forth— like draining water from either ear. Graham looked down at the table below him, trailing

a finger over the grains of the wood. His shoes were still neatly nestled in their drawstring bag; his backpack was still stuffed with ropes and chalks and jingling clasps. Graham bet that the pockets still held folded flyers from two- three years ago; the packs of gum and little electrolyte drink powders had most likely gone stale. Graham straightened up and pressed his palms to the countertop.

“How about that letter?” Graham began to shake, from both the chill that worked its way through the lobby and from the excitement in his stomach. He watched Anslem’s thin fingers flick up the envelope and tear away the yellowing paper. He pushed his glasses up with the back of his wrist and carefully opened the letter. Graham leant over, looking down at the upside-down header.

“Astoria,” Anslem cleared his throat. “Starting a letter like this one is daunting and impossible. All matter of formality and meaning has slipped my mind and pooled onto the floor beneath me.” Graham picked at his cuticles as he listened. “I hold no real idea of the lines I hope to write— condolences, apologies, in the event of my untimely death, etcetera.” Anslem paused, inhaled, and continued. “I’d rather be frank with you. In all my years, I’ve never known a woman like you. I remember holding you mere moments after your birth, believing you to be costly and fickle. The burden on my wealth, just as your mother. A girl I’d pawn off to the luckiest bachelor in town; a hoard of a dowry I must protect like a dragon, all the while hoping maybe you’d die and I could keep the treasure. But you surprised me at every turn. Firstly, never wanting for anything but earthly gifts— and I use that word quite literally my dear, *destructive* geologist. When your mother begged for pearls, you pleaded for the oyster; when your mother tugged at my hand to scrawl my signature over the checkbook, you merely wished for the trees pressed to make the paper. You wore your dresses until they were rags, your shoes until I could see your toes wiggling through the soles. My girl who wanted nothing, and yet had everything. Who let me keep my hoard, who returned the dowry in exchange for a wife. And for that I thank you. How you managed to wriggle out from the greed and selfishness that even tainted your brothers, is beyond me. Perhaps the two traits from your mother and I canceled each other out as you were conceived, or maybe God decided to bless me with a frugal heir. With this in mind, I bless you with my own everything— though I’m afraid my treasure may be too clean for your tastes. My world is yours, should you choose to seek it out. The plaza will turn over to you, all of its spoils intact (although your mother has surely drained the bars of their spirits). I’d hope that, some day, you decide to climb down into the spindly, dark depths of your heart, and uncover the keys to this treasure. The success that awaits is so close to the surface, so familiar to you I worry you’d miss it. The way our world is spiraling, I hope your inheritance serves you well. It may keep you with your head above water in the disgusting swamp that is your cherished Wynnewood, but remember that it will ensure you more than the meager raft you float upon *here* in Nevada.” Anslem paused and let out a long, ragged breath as he began the final sentences. “I hope this letter has served you well. I know you’ll make the best choice, whichever it is. With all of the love I am capable, Agar J. Tinkle. And again, many thanks for the elopement. You’ve no

idea how much you saved our family, despite your mother's whining." Anslem stopped short of his own wobbling reaction and settled the letter down into his lap.

"Wow," Graham exhaled. Anslem nodded. Behind them, the wind picked up and whistled through the lobby. Graham watched the snow-thick clouds grow lower and lower from the collapsed ceiling above their heads.

"It's somehow..." Anslem trailed, the paper wavered in his hand. "The warmest and cruelest thing I've read."

Graham reached out.

"Here." He motioned. "Let me see." Graham followed the tight lines of script— down to the line that pulled him. "This bit here, about her heart." Graham pointed. "Did that... speak to you at all?"

"I thought it was bitter."

"No I—" Graham turned the paper around to look down at it, then held his palm out to Anslem. "Hand me the album?" Anslem cocked a brow, but reached into the box for the album anyway. Graham flipped through each thick, crinkling page. He landed on the newspaper clipping about the girls flooding the mine.

"This, here." He held it out for Anslem to read.

"Tinkle Heiress Floods Hart's Mine," he narrated, then glanced at the paper. "The spindly, dark depths of your heart— you don't think they're related?"

"It's certainly something. It could be a reference," Graham exhaled, then burst into a smile. "Should we take a look?"

Saturday, July 23, 1921

For Wren's twenty-first birthday, she thought she might drown herself in the creek. It seemed like a nice way to go. After the thrashing and gurgling, she'd bob onto her back and stare up at the sky—let the water dribble from her nose to her brain and flood her thoughts. Just imagining it, she felt the sharp inhale of water pressed against her sinuses. When she woke up this morning, she stretched her legs out beneath her blankets until they shook and throbbed; she ran her fingers over the down comforter and felt the needly feathers prick her skin. Outside her window, the early monsoons were crawling up the country from down south, and Tinkle usually caught the edges of it. The rain pattered against the dry dirt just beyond the walls, and never really hit her window. Wren rolled back over into the pillow she'd been cradling for much of the night and fell back into her daydreaming. Blonde hair that was plush in the grass, sharp canine teeth that shone when she smiled; Astoria had been formally engaged to Bremen Madsen since June, and each day since, Wren had been frozen.

Today, she did want to at least see Astoria. To look into the eyes that had been hidden from her, to embrace her. Wren knew she'd be eternally inseparable from Astoria, but hadn't realized what separation may look like. When Julianne had declared that enough was enough, and that Astoria had to focus on shaping up rather than running outside to play with Wren, they both knew it meant the summer would be achy and quiet. And upon seeing Wren out of the house that evening, Julianne looked upon Wren with creased eyes and a pitying smile.

Wren watched the window and waited for Astoria's figure to appear; she waited for her to fling herself through the panes and curl up in Wren's bed. When it didn't happen, obviously, Wren rolled herself out of bed and decided she'd go to Astoria instead. She slunk into a creamy white shirt, and pulled on a warm orange skirt—the waist had gone loose and she had to pin it into place. She stepped out into the dark hall and past the shut bedroom doors; she could hear Euphemia and Eamon already pouring over their morning coffee—the stench was thick and already wrought on a grimace at just how sour it'd be. She stepped out into the parlor and waved to her siblings who sat just across the way at the kitchen table.

“Good morning, Etelvina. How did you sleep?” Euphemia wrung back to hang her arms over the back of her seat. Eamon rolled his eyes as he sipped.

“Like hell.” Wren fell down into the sofa and flung her head back to stare up at the ceiling. “Eamon, get me a cup, won't you?”

“Get it yourself.” His retort had earned him a smack on the shoulder from Euphemia; Wren could hear it. Eamon was twenty five, still apprenticing under their father; Euphemia was twenty three, and chose to spend these past few months enjoying her singledom by doing positively nothing. The two of them knew of their baby sister's affliction, and both were as kind as siblings could be. Eamon trudged over and handed Wren her scalding hot cup; she peeked up at him through one eye.

“How's twenty-one feel on you?” Euphemia tucked her chin into her palm and grinned up at Wren. It felt like shit.



“Fine.” Wren sipped.

“She’s gonna spend the whole day moping, y’know.” Eamon yanked a spoon out from the drawer and slammed it as he rounded the counter. “I can hardly sleep for all your crying,” he grumbled.

“You knock that off! We hardly get a moment’s refuge from your nightly devotionals.” Euphemia smirked over at Wren, and Wren finally snickered when Eamon flushed a hard shade of red.

“I’m writing and you know it!” He slammed down his spoon. Euphemia threw her head back and cackled.

“You must be some specific kind of stupid to have to groan that much while you’re writing!”

Eamon launched himself away from them both and muttered to himself as he stormed down the hall and slammed his door. Wren covered her mouth to keep the coffee from dribbling out, as Euphemia sighed into her laughter. “He acts like he’s never been heartbroken.” She shook her head, then met Wren’s eyes. “You seeing her today?”

“I’d like to.” Wren shrugged.

“Got her anything special?” Euphemia’s eyes got all moony as she leant in further. Wren nodded.

“New diary; carved the cover and set it myself.” Her body rocked as she spoke. Euphemia shook her head, and smiled.

“You are hopeless.”

...

Just about everyone in town was involved, somehow, in Astoria’s wedding. The local stationary stores had been churning out custom headers and envelopes painted with creamy watercolor flowers; the print shops carved and stamped so much that the roads alongside their storefronts reeked of ink. Wren was sure that, soon enough, the stuff would be pooling in the gutters. The seamstresses bickered over who was doing what, and as Wren moved through town she could only guess at which dresses were picked out by Julianne and which by Astoria. Wren’s father had worked diligently alongside a handful of men to send orders simply for the engagement party. Even Eamon had his hands full as the tasks their father couldn’t be bothered with were handed off to him. And Wren did nothing but lie on her back in bed and cry.

She trudged up the hill towards the Tinkle house, past the yard, and well into the back gardens, on the path she’d worn into the grass. Her bag with Astoria’s bound diary bobbed behind her with each step. She came up on the trellis with the footholds exposed from the honeysuckle vines she’d folded inward years ago and settled into the soft grooves to pull herself up from. When she’d reached the window and thrust up the sash wide enough to slide through. It was never too long before Astoria, having heard the wail of the old wooden window sashes rubbing against each other, slunk her hands through and pulled Wren over the edge. Astoria cried out as her wrists went taught with Wren’s weight; they pulled until both their bodies had collapsed flat on Astoria’s floor in breathless heaps of giggles. Wren laughed into the fresh

bruise blooming across her stomach and shut her eyes— her feverish skin cooling against the tiles. Astoria reached around and scooped Wren into her powder smooth arms. Wren's limbs relaxed, her heartbeat slowed; she collapsed and could've fallen asleep if she wanted to. Astoria reached up and cradled Wren's head, kissing her hair.

"I've missed you terribly," Astoria cooed. Wren nodded against her, then raised herself to fully drape over Astoria's shoulders. Astoria's palms drew up Wren's back and cupped her shoulder blades. "Have you been eating?"

"Not nearly enough as I should be," Wren grumbled. She burrowed into Astoria's neck now, breathing in her perfume— ylang ylang and figs.

"Wren," Astoria strained. She pushed Wren up so they faced each other. Her slight brows pulled together, her sharp eyes soft at their edges.

"I miss you."

"I know."

Astoria traced her finger across the back of Wren's hand.

"Why don't you visit more? My mother doesn't care—"

"She does." Wren sighed.

"Then just hold out until the wedding. Once it's just me and Bremen you can visit all the time." Astoria smiled and nodded. Wren's lips drew tight together, and she shook her head. That was worse. Julianne's annoyance was one thing, but it was just how oblivious Bremen and Astoria were that was enough to kill Wren on the spot. Bremen was sweet, he'd treat Astoria well. He wouldn't make her happy, but he wouldn't subject her to cruelty or terror and that was all Wren could be grateful for. But he wouldn't hold her— Wren looked at her own hands, tangled with Astoria. Astoria'd do what she must but Wren knew that she'd be tossing and turning unsatisfied at it all— at the world that was now shut out to her.

When Bremen would drag his lips across Astoria's, did he ever consider just how lucky he was to be feeling the velvet of her skin against his? Would he, just once, treasure her body and hold her in the cup of his hand? When Wren went to bed at night, she clutched her pillow close and thought of Astoria until it made her stomach hurt. She thought of how all their meetings ended, with hugs, and shuddered promises. And if Astoria cried and begged Wren to stay, Wren would wipe her tears. At least in Wren's daydreams, she could have Astoria completely.

"I thought we could do something fun today." Astoria grinned at Wren.

Wren cocked a brow and tried to quirk her lip. "Oh?"

Astoria pushed off the ground and to her feet. She yanked her night dress up and scampered across the room to begin getting dressed.

"Come on, let's go out!"

"Not fair! Help me up." Wren's voice caught on her own grumbles as she fought to pull herself upright. When she'd finally straightened herself out and entered the room proper, she fell face first with the awful, haunting portrait that hung on Astoria's mantle. Astoria's walls were covered with women, nudes cut from books, photographs of poets and writers, watercolors she'd

done herself, all tasteful— save for the photograph of Florence Bascom she'd had enlarged and framed.

"Jesus Christ!" Wren flung her palms to her eyes. "I'm telling you, Story, her eyes absolutely move!"

"Florence never hurt anybody," Astoria gushed.

"She's ogling us!"

"Me mostly." Astoria crumpled a skirt from her wardrobe against her stomach. Wren poked her eyes over the edges of her fingers.

"Lucky for her."

"She's only jealous, Florence." Astoria had pulled a shirt from her wardrobe and was buttoning herself into it. Astoria's bedroom was much bigger than Wren's, with bright birch floors, the limewash brick fireplace, the great cast iron bed frame with its creamy paint. At least in their sorrow, the bedroom stayed a hopeful, sunny white.

...

Astoria and Wren swam in the creek on the border of Selkoy too many times to count. Under the clear lapping water they stripped down and flung handfuls of water at each other; Astoria would fling herself on Wren's shoulders and pull her beneath the surface, Wren would slither through the water and pull Astoria down by her feet. They fought and played and sang. When they were girls, they'd creep beneath the surface and give themselves imaginary fangs and fins. Wren, painfully fast, almost always yanked Astoria down under so suddenly that she'd come up for air crying, laughing, and sputtering.

Wren watched as the leaves reflected the light through the dappled blue sky. Teeny black birds flitted through the air and disappeared behind Wren's peripheral as she lowered her head to face forward. Astoria still held her hand, and Wren felt their heartbeats press together through their palms.

"I've been so bored with Bremen..." Astoria turned to look up at Wren, a grin on her face. "He's such a rule-follower. Do you know he gifted me with measuring cups at our last meeting?" If Wren had Astoria, she'd buy her the universe; she'd buy her the planets and fasten them in a velvet drawstring bag for Astoria to roll in her palm like marbles. Wren just hummed and followed close behind, keeping their hands glued.

"What's he think of you running off with me?" Wren mumbled. "Have you asked?"

"I don't want to talk about the wedding right now." Astoria shook her head to Wren. "All I've been talking about is the wedding, tell me about something else."

Wren told her about the carving she'd been doing and her dabbling in bookbinding, instead.

...

Wren watched Astoria fall out from her sleeves and skirt, down to her stays and chemise. In summer, she was always eager to throw off her clothes— so was Wren— to pluck the sweat-slicked fabric from her skin and send it hurtling far, *far* away from her. Wren undressed as well, but stayed transfixed on Astoria. Wren had known Astoria's beauty their whole lives, but only recently had she looked at Astoria selfishly. And when she was on the cusp of seventeen, after a thick summer spent swimming again and again, at night she'd lie back and think only of Astoria's breasts, of her hips, of the lips that curved around a bright smile.

They waded into the water, and Wren stretched her arms out in front of her as she cut through the rippling waves and into the center. The creek swelled in summer; narrow trickles in winter had flooded to great ponds and pools encircled with lush trees. The surface of the water was bathtub warm, but the depths were still cool against Wren's feet. Astoria leapt in after and hurried up to tread water before Wren.

"Anything new in your world?"

Wren nodded back, then turned to float on her back towards the shore. "I'm not sure. My brother is still working with my father... my sister is doing well."

"Has she gotten married yet?"

"She's been talking to a boy my mother introduced her to, a son of a friend from the reservation."

"That's sweet." Astoria giggled. She turned on her back and faced Wren. Wren twisted her fingers together against her stomach.

"I suppose."

"And you?"

"I'm—" Wren sighed, and looked back over at Astoria. "I'm the same as I have been."

The water cast a rippling light over Astoria's face. Wren watched the reflections move, under her eyes, over her eyes, lighting up the faint flecks of gold in her pupils.

"Have you thought at all about marriage these days?" Astoria asked. Wren smiled and drew her brows.

"I thought you didn't want to talk about weddings."

"My wedding." Astoria turned herself upright, and sat upright in the water against the sand beneath them—holding herself up on her elbows.. "I want to know about you, though." Wren tried to crane her neck up to meet Astoria's eyes. "This must be horribly lonely for you."

"It is."

Astoria leant closer into Wren, and Wren began to back herself up in the water.

"But truly." Astoria sighed. She hovered over Wren, hair coming down around her shoulders and brushed in fine wisps against Wren's face. Wren backed up further and picked herself up on her hands.

"I'm fine. I haven't..." Wren's back pressed against the flat of the shore. Astoria raised her palm and pressed it to Wren's shoulder. She drew closer; her eyes had hooded and been darkened by the frame of wet blonde hair all around. Wren felt Astoria's legs against hers, languid movement against the water. Every movement a spark that jolted Wren to a bitter attention—accidental movements, surely. Nothing, she had to remind herself. Astoria reached up and cupped Wren's cheek, she brushed her thumb across the skin.

"I've missed you so much Wren, I couldn't express it if I tried."

Wren's mouth had gone dry, and her mind had narrowed to purely Astoria very nearly in her lap, and the weight in her hips. Wren gasped when she felt the featherlight snake of fingers up her stomach; Astoria's hand moving up her torso, to press to the flat between her breasts—right on her fluttering heart. She blinked and felt all too heavily the want to fling herself at Astoria, to fall into a teeth gnashing kiss. Instead, she pushed off of Astoria's shoulder and went careening back onto the shore.

"What are you doing?" She spat. Her heart thrust up into her chest, and she felt the hot trickle of tears around her eyes amongst the cool lake droplets. Astoria stared back, mouth gaped, the water lapping at her still round shoulders. Wren reached up and dragged her wrist against her eyes, trying to stifle the want and wobbling shock. "What—"

“Wren.” Astoria began her crawl forward, and Wren backed up. Through her joints, and up into her throat, the ache erupted. It wasn’t real, it couldn’t have been. And even if Astoria’s touch was, it wasn’t because she wanted Wren the same way.

“No!” Wren cried. “I don’t want to, I’m sorry, I—” she stammered. Astoria’s heart surely didn’t scream like Wren’s. It didn’t hollow itself out and plead for just a smile back in return. Wren scrambled for her clothes and quickly began to dress. “This was a mistake, I have to go—”

“Wren, I—” Astoria had climbed onto the shore now, and in her hunch forward, reached for Wren. “I’m so sorry, just let me explain myself.”

“No, I don’t want to hear it!” Wren recoiled. “I can’t hear it. I can’t- I—” Wren heaved, and stared back at Astoria, who was still stuck half upright in the water, then she turned to run.

### Chapter Five:

It always terrified Graham, climbing. It took a while before the fear evolved into exhilaration, and for the fear of falling to turn to fear of being forgotten.

“Are you sure you don’t mind, Graham?” His coach had asked after waiting alongside Graham in the rainy, early hours for over an hour. “I’m sorry to do this, it’s just— the girls have school tomorrow and—”

“It’s okay.” Graham nodded; his breath fogged up in front of his face around his smile. “My parents are on their way.” He waved his phone towards his coach— the phone that only ever made calls, never received them.

Gage was the one who’d started this; a birthday party at a climbing gym here, a few visits to the abandoned high rises in town, and Graham had been hooked. It wasn’t long before he was winning his first, second, third, fourth— uncountable meets and competitions. By fifteen he was already going out of state for his climbs. On this latest trip, their bus driver had dropped them off at the gym after a weeklong excursion, when the fog was still thick and dank in the air. It was on a weekday at an awkward time for his parents, and Graham was the only climber who didn’t have someone screaming their praises from the edges of the crowd. It meant he didn’t have a ride home, and when his teammates had paired off with their parents whose headlights flooded the parking lot. Hours after the bus had left, his teammates had filed away, and his coach had gone home, Graham was still sitting on the curb with his cheek pressed against his wobbling knee. It was another hour, the tear stains on his pants wet and dried again, until Gage’s rattly car shuddered through the parking lot.

“I’m here! I’m here!” Gage burst out and slammed the car door— not even stopping to turn off the car. “I’m so sorry!” he panted as he came up to Graham. When he stopped, he hinged in half and pressed his palms to his knees. “I’m so sorry, Graham, there was a three car pileup on the way here and the whole road was blocked, and then the rain started up and I couldn’t—” he had to stop to catch his choking breaths. “I had to rush here but I didn’t want to speed— and I forgot which knob was the windshield wiper, so I just had my turn signal on for the whole time!” Graham chuckled at the image of Gage darting his head around the wheel, squinting and trying to balance his attention between the road and the varied buttons on the wheel. Gage finally lifted his head, and showed Graham his wide, weary smile. “I’m sorry,” he wheezed. Graham reached for his neck and held his medal up to Gage, who only needed a second to render it before he whooped in the air. “First place? First place! You absolute animal, you got first place!” He flung himself down and wrapped his arms around Graham’s neck. “Oh congratulations! I can’t believe it— my baby brother winning first place at climbing!” Gage lifted off Graham and directed his excitement towards the single, bewildered crew member counting the change in his register. Gage whipped his head around and gave Graham a good shake by the shoulders. “This is only the beginning, I wanna see that hanging off your headboard the second we get home!”

...

Anslem had to consult a map of Tinkle and Selkoy's cataloged mines to make sure Hart's mine was where he'd remembered it. West of town, within the muddy hills of Tinkle Peak. They threw Anslem's tools haphazardly into his backseat, and both clutched their headlamps close as they tumbled back into the car. They flew north and Anslem darted his eyes from up at the road to down at Graham's lap where the map sat. The gray desert whipped by as Anslem gripped the wheel with white knuckles, and the sun moved behind the blurring, frozen clouds.

The hoist house above Hart's mine had been thinned down to its bones; the blackened wood was threadbare enough that from within its creaking walls, Graham could still see the slivers of sky. The only thing still holding the building up were the thick logs for beams that trailed the center of the room. There was no cage to lower them down into the mine; the cables had frayed over the years and sat in a limp pile beside bright, plastic debris. The rusted wheels and gears that had once transported hoards of men up and down the channel now stuck out from the ground and collected thick dust. Anslem dropped his toolbag and turned to Graham.

"There's a single shaft down, and five separate levels—" Anslem held out his finger to point. "One channel straight down, collared with wood and bottomless, the other's have ladders and terraces. That's a manway, we want to take that route."

"You climb down here before?"

"Few times," Anslem grunted as he hunched over and dug through his toolbag. Graham felt his lips twinge into a smile as Anslem handed one of the headlamps over.

"The clue could be in any of the levels," Graham whimpered. He tightened his arms around himself and peered across the floor at the great gash where the mine began. Anslem reached into his pocket and unfolded the crinkly letter.

"I'd hope that, some day, you decide to climb down into the spindly, dark depths of your heart, and uncover the keys to this treasure—the success that waits is so close to the surface should you choose to find it." Anslem looked up from the paper. "It's gotta be closer than we think. It's only about eighty feet before we hit the water." He craned his neck over to look towards the mouth. He reached out and grabbed Graham's wrist and took them both across the floor. "I've only been down here twice, back in high school, the panels that line the shaft are fairly sturdy and we've got for every level four panels to balance on—"

"Are you sure you can do this?" Graham wobbled in place as Anslem released him. Anslem shot him a sharp glance over his shoulder as he slipped from his crutches and propped them against a beam to his left.

"Positive." He snapped his headlamp into place, spun on his heel to walk backwards towards the mouth, then dropped himself down and pressed his palms to the floor. He stepped his legs back until he'd found his footing enough to stand. Graham stepped forward and craned his neck down to see how Anslem had positioned himself, both feet in the slim gaps in the panels from his left and right; when he started to make his way down, he reached out for the panels in front of him, and took them down like a ladder. Graham waited for the wood to give, and for Anslem to go hurtling to his death; he'd staunchly avoided urban exploring and climbing—even when Gage and his climbing partner Abraham ached to spend their days snooping around the

wobbliest of buildings. When Anslem had made it far enough down that Graham could only see the golden top of his head, he got down and slipped his legs into the makeshift holds. With a quick, cool breath, Graham popped the headlamp's elastic around his head, steadied his trembling heart and began his descent. The wood threatened to leave slivers behind in his fingers as he moved; some pieces smoothed and others having been nibbled away. Each touch left a sandpapery film of dust on his fingers, but he kept moving down. As he moved, dust and dirt flurried down through the ray of his headlamp like snow; the world quieted around him as he moved deeper and deeper into the ground. With each step on the rungs of the ladder, he wished he'd gotten his rope and at least a jacket thicker than his billowy fleece hoodie. The world had gone silent around him, as even his breath had taken on a tinny echo. Then with every finished ladder, and safety on the wood terraces that split them, Graham was gasping with relief.

"We're coming up on an adit here to your left, it might be best to go in feet first!" Anslem called up, and Graham nodded into a labored breath. The skin around his mouth had gone hot, and sweat started to pool on his upper lip. Graham watched Anslem disappear beneath him as he rotated his body and slipped sideways to shimmy into the first gaping level. Graham continued to work his way down—he jut his head up to try and see the world above—the sky nothing but a bright white square. The adit Anslem had found came into view, wide enough for Graham to slip his legs into as though he were sitting and shimmy down. The fabric of his shirt caught on the stone as he moved; then, he was sliding to sit on the floor of the narrow corridor. Anslem had propped himself up against the place where wood paneling met jagged stone; his cheeks red as he held his head back and caught his breath. Graham hunched himself over and watched the sweat drop from his brow down into the dirt. All around them gravel, wood debris, rusted scraps of metal, and loose mouse droppings; the air had gone thick with fluttering dust, and the adit only stretched out about ten feet before it turned into flat rock.

"You did really good," Anslem wheezed. Graham looked up to see his weak smile.

"Thank you."

"I hope it's here." Anslem shook his head against the rock and squeezed his eyes shut. "I really hope it's here."

Graham reached out and wagged his fingers. "Here, gimmie the letter."

Anslem fished for it in his pocket and handed it over.

Graham read over the lines again, and again. "I'd hope that, some day, you decide to climb down into the spindly, dark depths of your heart, and uncover the keys to this treasure. The success that awaits is so close to the surface, so familiar to you I worry you'd miss it.' What's the familiarity?" Graham looked up from the letter.

"Maybe we ought've read the diaries first." Anslem shrugged. Graham looked back to the paper, as Anslem relaxed against the wall. What familiarity besides dust sat in this mine? "Let's just start ripping into the walls."

"And suffocate ourselves?" Graham rolled his eyes, though he was wishing for a crowbar right about now to dig into the wood that did run up the wall of the drift.



On the edges of the paper, Graham could see Anslem's splayed out legs. His right knee turned in towards his left, and his calves seemed to sway out past the knees at unnatural angles. Graham tried to imagine it, he wondered just how severe Anslem's injuries were—they'd never really talked about it on the phone or online.

"You alright, Graham?"

"I should be asking you." Graham shifted his shoulders against the rock, and nodded his head towards Anslem's legs. Then immediately he shot his eyes up and blurt out his apologies. "I'm sorry, that was rude of me—"

"I have cerebral palsy." Anslem just blinked back at Graham and waved his hand over his legs. "I have spasticity in both my legs, that means the muscles are constantly tense." His voice was steady and practiced; he'd had to tell this story before. "It's a lot better than it used to be, I had to have some gnarly surgeries on my ankles to straighten out my achilles tendon—"

"Does it hurt?"

"It's annoying, and I get cramps. But it's never stopped me from doing stupid shit like this." Anslem grinned an awful, catlike smile, and spiraled his pointed finger in the air. Graham chuckled and looked at the cave around them. Anslem had driven them here, had thrown himself into the mine, had coached Graham, he even put up with his questions. Graham lowered his eyes to his lap, where his jeans had been caked with dust.

"I'm sorry for worrying—"

"Don't apologize," Anslem chirped. Then he shrugged. "You're curious. A lot of people are."

Graham nodded and let his eyes wander over the ground beneath him. "Do you think he buried it?"

"He might've." Anslem pulled his arms up to hold his arms. "What in here would be familiar to her?" He poked at the pebbles around them. "The rocks?" Graham sat up straight and reached up to broaden the scope on his headlamp—the light poured into the tiny cavern and refracted the light of the minerals and layers within the stones. The same metal scraps still warped and twisted in pieces across the floor of the adit. Settling for the return of his brute force searches, Graham reached out for the metal, stones, and loose mounds of dirt and started turning them over. Working from right to left, and Anslem starting up behind him, Graham brushed his palms into the dirt until he'd cleared an area completely to the bare stone. He moved across the ground until he'd come to the halfway point of the room, then rotated to cover the other side. To his left the ground raised as dirt and gravel piled near to the adit's ceiling, and Graham reached out to brush through the rubble until he'd cleared the area. As his hand fell further into the dirt, he settled on rocks that needed to be pulled and tossed behind him. Three rocks that fit perfectly into the curve of his palm came out, and when he reached back in, his hand settled on the jagged edge of a long stone. Graham wrapped his hand around the pointed shard and pulled, but the stone didn't budge. He reached in with the other hand and brushed away the dirt, which only revealed the stone to be attached to another pointed head, and chiseled. It was the head of a pick, and the more Graham dug, the more was revealed. The head attached to a handle, rippled with

carvings that had been filled with dust. Graham finally uncovered the whole of the tool, a small pick mattock that stuck firm into the ground. In the center of its handle, a long dowel had tethered it in place.

“Anslem, I think I found something.” Graham turned to look over his shoulder then returned to digging out the ground from under the mattock.

“What?” Anslem came up behind Graham and looked over his shoulder. “What is that?”

“It’s screwed into something, here help me lift it,” Graham winced as he tried to pull on the wobbling dowel. Anslem crawled around to the other side and got up on his feet in a squat. Graham mirrored him, and they both pulled on either end of the mattock until the ground gave way and out crackled the dowel, and the box that was attached to it. The dirt rumbled and filled the hole that had once misplaced it, and lying out before Anslem and Graham was a wooden tackle box with the dowel splintered through the center of it— the mattock its handle.

“What the hell?” Anslem uttered. Graham got down on his knees before the box and reached for the clasps to open it— the second he’d slipped his fingers under, the hinges gave way and the whole lid came tumbling down mattock and all. They both flinched, but quickly turned their eyes to the contents of the box. A moisture rippled envelope staring back up at them. Anslem gasped into a sudden laugh, and Graham’s smile spread across his cheeks to his ears. “Read it!” Anslem dropped down and sat on his crossed legs, while Graham reached for the envelope. He flipped it open, the adhesive long gone, and flicked out the folded paper from within. When he’d unfolded it, it was Agar’s familiar handwriting, and Graham squealed.

“This is it, this is a clue!”

“Read it, Graham!” Anslem pleaded. Graham nodded and began:

“My clever, foolish, reckless girl— brilliant work, although I don’t think it took too much thought on your end, I’m sure. Getting this letter down here was a terrible thing, I wished I could merely drop the letter into the depths. But, here I am, penning this in the stifling heat of the walls around me.” Graham paused and wiped the dust from his eyes. “If you’re reading this, I assume you’ve decided to seek out the bounty beyond your inheritance— the treasure so rumored and guarded referenced in my previous letter. Though I’m flattered, grateful even, that you’ve chosen to pursue protecting my bounty, don’t think it will come so easily to you. Although, for you, I anticipate a mere *glance* into the drawers of my study will suffice. No, your treasure demands patience and wit, one of those traits floods your veins, the other I think God skipped entirely. Going forward, I’d consult your dear Etelvina. I think she’d know what to do.” Graham’s enthusiasm faded as the letter finished out. Anslem reached out for it, and Graham handed it over. “You think it hinges on the expertise of a dead woman?”

“I won’t believe anything until I’ve gone to his office and torn the place to bits,” Anslem muttered. The letter wavered in his hand, then disappeared into his pocket. “We should call it. Do you want to catch some rest?”

“No-” Graham shook his head. “No, I want to find the other clue.” Anslem’s eyes stayed wide with concern for a beat; then, he smiled and got up onto his feet.

“Grab the pick, let’s go!”

...

Graham and Anslem dragged themselves into his car and *flew* back to the plaza. They stopped at Anslem's house first, though, to fill themselves with water and wash their dirt-caked limbs in the sink. Then, they were darting across the courtyard and into the main building. Agar's office sat on the third floor, above the restaurant and looking over the courtyard from a room dotted with gabled dormer windows. The room was furnished with dark wood shelves and a behemoth of a desk Graham was surprised hadn't collapsed through the floor. Anslem made a beeline for the desk, leaving Graham in the doorway. Agar's office was virtually untouched, a turn of the century snapshot. His desk still had oil lamps on either side of it, the windows boasted jewel toned stained glass. Books piled high in the corners of the room, and all along the walls were framed photos of Agar and various other men— hands clasped as firm business deals were immortalized behind glass. Anslem thrust open a drawer in the desk and barked out.

"A-ha!" He reached down into the drawer, disappearing behind the desk, and Graham rounded it to look over the edge. He'd flung open the bottom right drawer, empty save for an envelope set atop another tackle box— this one not so decrepit. Anslem grinned back at Graham, as the latches on the front gave their perfect, satisfying clicks and the box flipped open. But within it, no treasure map, no clatter of spoons, not even a gasp from Anslem. Graham peered inside the hollow box, empty save for what appeared to be a small toy soldier. Anslem reached in and picked up the little man. Graham inspected him too. The tiny bisque-limbed doll rolled in Anslem's palm. He had a severe face, the great mustache and beard that took over his face, a red coat glimmering with tiny beads, sashes of glittering fabric, and sequins. He looked entirely regal, though his tiny, paint dot eyes unnerved Graham.

"It's Agar," Anslem muttered. Anslem took Agar's hand between his forefinger and thumb and made him wave. "It's...it's from the doll house. He's been lost since before I was born." He turned the doll over in his hand; On his back, jut out a tiny hex shaped peg made from wood. "I don't get it."

"Maybe it was attached to something," Graham hummed. He pressed the pad of his thumb to his lower lip. "And they just... left Agar behind."

"Or it's meant to be propped up somewhere."

Graham reached in and brushed a finger over the brown paint swipe of Agar's hair. Anslem folded himself in half and pinched the bridge of his nose between his forefinger and thumb. "This is all so... contrived," he grumbled into his knees.

"It's a start." Graham leant down to meet Anslem's stormy gaze. "Let's bring him back to the dollhouse, maybe we'll find a clue there."

"I hate this." Anslem thrust his hands out and dropped Agar; Graham grabbed the doll before he hit the floor. "Let's take a break."

**Friday, June 10, 1927**

Euphemia could count faster than any machine, so instead of employing some hunk of gears to count out the dollars Wingtips and Quailsongs churned out at the end of the week, Wren employed her sister to do it. She'd sit on the broad end of the bar, near the end, and lay out the bills in stacks while she muttered her numbers to herself. Wren had only ever checked Euphemia's work once, and that was after her son, still toddling, had managed to crack his head open on the steps of the stage. Outside of that, Euphemia worked fast and flawlessly. So, that's where Wren found herself at the end of each week: counting the dollars with Euphemia. Or more, watching Euphemia count the dollars while she measured out their inventory—they'd balance the earnings with how much of the bar had been drained, and almost always come up grinning.

Wingtips and Quailsongs opened soon after their first dealings with Agar, and thankfully it only took the first few circling of Wren and Edsel's few friends to bring forth the knowing into Tinkle that there was a spot that'd cater to their queerness. And, within months, Wren and Euphemia were counting out their first hundreds, thousands, ten thousands. Since it's opening in the late summer of 1925, the walls of Quailsongs had taken on a cluster of different awards, but the reflective plaque that Wren was most proud of was '26's Tourism Champion award. The money meant her parents could build on extra rooms for their grandchildren; it meant that for the first time since Wynnewood, Wren wasn't hungry.

Agar had commissioned oak hardwood for the dancehall that had been stained dark as wenge. It sprawled in broad lines across the nearly six thousand square feet space. They'd kept the atrium and the massive ceilings, only opted to line the space with great oak vaults and hang from those beams branching chandeliers. Too much of the wood and too many of the fixtures had come from plaza installations Julianne had labeled *ancient*, but with enough stain and blistered hands working on them, they could have been new. Along one end of the hall, a gorgeous built in bar with mirrored shelving, and ancient stained glass fixtures Erhard had shipped in. There was a modest stage on the far end, and along the walls arched identical beams and lantern sconces. Wren had set into a good chunk of those beams her relief carved inlays; Canada geese, robins, quails, starlings, turkey vultures—leaves of lilac, juniper, sage and creosote moving up through their beaks and talons.

Wren slid down from her stool and rounded the bar to the register where the rubber bands were bundled as Quailson's front door opened. By default, she called out over her shoulder.

"Club's closed until eight." She came up to Euphemia's side and began scooping up her stacks.

"Etelvina?" Euphemia shuddered, and Wren looked up towards her wheezy voice, then at the figure in the threshold. She whimpered, and the breath in Wren's lungs collapsed out from behind her chest, through her mouth, and out—her throat a hollow panic, and lungs begging for air. Astoria looked just as warm and *light* as always. Her hair had grown out of the bob she'd sported in Wynnewood, and she'd slung a leather purse across her torso. Her outfit was still drippy, and as flowy as the dresses she'd used to sport before the move: a white skirt and creamy

blouse— no paillettes, no glitter, nothing stained with lipstick. Looking back at her, something had smoothed out. Her features, maybe; perhaps it was the sheepish smile, or maybe it was just how sobriety looked on Astoria. Whatever it was, eyebrows creased and lips parted, the look on Astoria's face that only worsened Wren's breathing. Wren planted her feet beneath her, and let the soles that screamed for jumping release over the bar burning into the tiles; she pinned her elbows into her sides to keep from flinging them around Astoria's shoulders.

"Wren," Astoria wobbled. She smiled, and Wren had to school her features from twitching up into a mirror. She opened her mouth to return the hello, and nothing came out. She croaked.

"Euphemia, would you give us a moment?" Euphemia didn't move; she stared back at Astoria. Wren hitched in a breath and backed up; she clung to the bar's edge where there were bottles that lined the shelves behind her. One of them would serve just fine should she need to send it catapulting into Astoria's skull.

"Wren I—"

"No." Euphemia blurt, then scrambled to her feet. "No you don't—" Euphemia's voice trembled, and her pointed finger wavered in the air, but Wren watched her corral Astoria back towards the door. "You don't get to do this. Get out."

"I know it— I know," Astoria stammered as she stumbled over her feet. "Just give me a moment." She held her palms open towards Euphemia.

"We're closed. Come back another time." She shoved Astoria into the doors, and the grunt from the wood sent something panging up in Wren's ribs. Euphemia flung open the door as far as it could with Astoria in the way and let Astoria walk back out into the courtyard. When Wren's ears had stopped their shaking, shrill ringing, she let her body jerk her forward. She cast the bills back in place on the bar and finally did lift herself over it.

"What'd you do that for?" She grit out and set for the door.

"Wren, don't!" Euphemia yelped, but Wren was already making her loose jog to the shutting door. She caught it and pushed it open, the air in the courtyard filling her throat and cry.

"Astoria, wait!" She ran out under the scalding, early summer sun, to the empty concrete courtyard between Quailsongs and the plaza that hosted nothing but pigeons. Astoria stood facing Wren a good few yards from the entrance. "I'm sorry, she's—" Wren turned back for Euphemia, expecting her at the open door, but only finding its face as it closed. Wren looked back at Astoria. "Don't mind her."

"It's alright." Astoria wrapped her hands around the strap of her bag. "She's well within her rights to throw me out." She nodded towards the door.

"What are you doing here?" Wren squinted back at Astoria; the sunlight clung to her hair and lit up the stray strands in white and gold.

"I graduated," she said. Immediately, Wren's stomach twisted; she'd missed the ceremony. "I'm back home."

"When was it?" Wren wrapped her arms around her waist and stepped in closer to Astoria.

“It was June second.”

“Did Agar come?”

“You couldn’t have known, Wren.” Astoria showed Wren a slight smile, then shook her head. Wren swallowed the image of Agar in a folding chair out in some humid field, watching Astoria in her cap and gown. “They had to. They needed to bring me home.”

“You didn’t want to stay?” Astoria stared back at Wren. Who’d want to stay in that house? Wren had felt each passing day without Astoria; surely Astoria felt the days pass through the empty halls too. Astoria shook her head.

“I needed to see you. I needed-” She looked away, gritting her teeth behind her lips. Then she exhaled and straightened up.

“Wren, I need to apologize.”

Wren looked Astoria over. Her body the same; her waist smooth beneath her skirt; her hands still nimble, nailbeds pink— not blue.

“I don’t think I have it in me to listen.” Wren met Astoria’s eyes again. She cocked her head and leant in.

“Wren—”

“No.” Wren stepped back. “No I don’t—” As strong and cold as she wanted to be, Wren’s eyes stung. This girl’s massive doe eyes, the whimpering plea in her throat, the same beg that lingered behind proposals and orgasms and promises only made to keep Wren from crying.

“God damn you Story—” Wren broke away and thrust her hand up to stop the tears. She turned her back to Astoria completely and lowered herself into a crouch.

“You don’t have to listen.” Astoria came up beside Wren, as the first sob came through— dry and choking. “Not now, not ever. Say the words, Wren, and I’m gone—”

“That’s not helpful, Story.” Wren turned her head up out from her hanging arms and looked only at Astoria’s ankles. She’d heard all the stupid, half assed apologies before. *“I’m sorry I made you cry; I’m sorry I screamed; I’m sorry I didn’t see you today,”* understatement that only dragged Wren further, and further, into the blue cloak of her guilt. Wren wiped her running nose on her sleeve, and sniffled. “What would you be apologizing for, specifically?” She choked out. “Did you make a list?”

Astoria came up beside her, and planted a warm hand to Wren’s shoulder. “Did you want one?”

Wren hung her head back between her knees, and let the bile and snot fill into her nose. She stared at the ground beneath her— the single ant weaving in and out of a crack in the concrete.

“Okay,” she muttered. In the corner of her eye, she saw Astoria’s legs turn to a small bundle of hunched body.

“Okay what?” Astoria’s hand slid down to stroke Wren’s elbow— the skin lit up and her touch threatened to singe away the hair on Wren’s arm. Wren shook her head; a tear hit in the ant’s path, and he turned around to go in the opposite direction.

“Write me a list,” Wren gasped. “I’ll consider it.”

**Sunday, August 12, 1923**

"I've never left Nevada," Julianne muttered beside Astoria. "It's such a green world, out here." Her eyes were pinned to the great window to their left, as the west dissolved into the east in a great rush of leaves. Astoria hadn't left the state either, nor had Wren. Agar was the only one of the four of them who had even been beyond the Atlantic—though he'd only allow mutterings of this in the safety of the walls of their home.

"This school is definitely..." Agar began, then cleared his throat—he darted a glance up at Astoria from over the brim of the papers he'd had arranged on Bryn Mawr. "Progressive," he grumbled.

"That summer work program was certainly something," Julianne gasped. She turned to take Astoria's hands in hers. "But you won't be doing anything so strenuous—"

"Not a scratch on her head, Wren." Agar commanded with a shaking finger and a wide grin to the girl beside him, Wren shuddered with the steady movement of the train, eyes pinned down to the corner of their compartment. Her eyes were clear, but her skin still sallow, and stained with herd tear streaks.

"You'll stay warm. Right, Etelvina?" Wren's had mother brushed her palms up and down Wren's arms. Her gray eyes danced up and down Wren's frame, hands smoothed her shirt, fists pulled down on her satchel straps to make sure it was secure. Early that morning, they'd stopped at Wren's home for a final goodbye. In their parlor, seven was a crowd—between Astoria's parents, Wren's, Wren's brother, and themselves, if someone wasn't looking awkwardly at the ground, or at the ceiling like it was scrawled with the secrets of time and space, they were wiping tears from their eyes. The deep red walls were as bright as they would be in the middle of the day, as the summer morning shone bright through the stained glass windows above.

"Vera—" Etelvina's father grimaced at his wife's little movements—her brushing out Wren's hair in her hands, scraping her thumb across her cheek.

"And you'll write?"

"Endlessly." Wren giggled.

"It's time for them to head off now," her father muttered into Vera's ear. Vera sputtered out quick bleats of failed words, her "I-" and "Uh!" all jumbled together as she pressed herself into Wren.

"Please stay safe!"

...

Getting on the train in Caliente just hours ago had been an effort all on its own. The very man who'd flushed rosy pink as he helped Julianne and Astoria up the steps and into the car was the same man who thrust his flat palm against Wren's sternum, flush gone from his body.

"Your car's a-way's down there." He pointed off to the trailing end of the train, Wren followed his finger to the lines of black and brown skinned passengers outstretching their hands to help each other up into the cars. Wren furrowed her brow and returned to look up at the man.

"I'm with them." She motioned behind the man, to where Astoria had disappeared down the corridor and into first class.

"The domestic workers don't ride with their employers," he droned. Behind her, she heard the voices of incoming passengers nearing— soon to be on her heels. The man poked his eyes over her head and stepped past her to greet the crowd and lead them through the dust. Wren stepped back and watched him take up the palms of the women who'd approached— their blonde swirls of hair slick against their scalps under bright caps, their excitement not once stunted by a hand in their chest. The train exhaled a hard gust of hot steam against Wren's back, and pushed her deeper into her eye-darting worry. She stepped back further and clutched her arms tight around the capelet draped on her shoulders, the hand holding her leather suitcase had gone clammy, and began to tingle.

"What are you doing out here?" Agar's gruff voice zapped Wren from her daze, and she shot her head up. Agar hung in the doorway, pinning Wren with a tight glare. "Come on, we don't want to lose you."

"I—" Wren croaked, then looked to the man— now gladly taking the suitcases from the women. Agar stepped down and leant his arm out for Wren to take.

"Come on," he muttered. Wren released one arm and crept it up the inside of Agar's elbow. Her foot skipped on the pavement as they turned for the steps.

"Sir," the same droning voice as before pulled Wren gasping to face it. The heat beating down from above radiated against her skin, and paired with the steam, Wren felt her throat would close any second and she'd drop dead. "Domestic workers must ride in their assigned car—"

"She will do no such thing. She is a first-class customer." Wren winced as Agar spat back at the man, then spun them both for the doors. Agar practically yanked Wren aboard, and as they trampled down the narrow corridor of plush carpet and glittering gold accents, Wren felt her eyes burn. Her nose swelled shut, and breath narrowed down to a strained whistle as frustrated tears began to wriggle out from the corners of her eyes. Her tears fell from her eyes like rocks to the carpet, and not one streamed down her face, rather they shot straight down from her hung head. When their corridor had narrowed and gone dark, Agar spun her around and gripped both of her shoulders.

"Look at me," He uttered. Wren looked up through the blur at Agar, and the thick lines between his brows as he leant into Wren. "You're just fine, Etelvina."

"I know," Wren wobbled.

"Look at me, Etelvina." Agar's breath hitched, and he pulled her closer. In that second, Wren caught a flash of her father behind her eyelids. Her fingertips ached; she remembered the pull of her muscles as she'd fling herself around his neck when they embraced. "Stop crying. It'll be worth it if you just stop crying, I promise." Agar's words sounded foreign in his mouth; Wren wiped her eyes to look at the same man who'd never seen worth in anything.

...

For the next two days, Wren dodged glares in the dining car. When outside of their private cabin, she kept her eyes stuck— if not on Astoria— to her feet. She kept her chatter with



Astoria to a minimum and blotted out her tears on her sleeves under the lavender dawn that spilled from the windows. And as they moved through the flat expanses and into the rocky edges of the country, Astoria and Wren slipped from their thin summer dresses to firm vests and layered shirts. In August, Lower Merion's varied and crisp colors took Wren's breath away, dried her throat, and chapped her lips. Though it was only twenty degrees cooler than Tinkle's record-breaking heat, Wren felt every gust and mist. Julianne would have dropped dead if Astoria had asked to stay in the residential halls of Bryn Mawr, so Agar had found Astoria a cottage in Wynnewood—a lush, little green town spitting's distance from the college.

"Crowding yourself in with an ignoble bevy of girls, I won't have it!" Julianne had shrilled when Astoria had suggested living on campus. They were gathered around the table, rummy cards in their hands and Agar winning as effortlessly as usual. "Not only do we not know their families, nor their breeding, but you are currently—" Julianne had faltered on the word as she turned to look at Wren. Married? Promised? On the arm of another woman? "Occupied."

There were two large houses on their little gravelly street in Wynnewood, hardly cottages. Near twins, both massive; one bright yellow with garish orange and red accents, the other paneled in pale blue with white shutters. When Wren had stepped out from the automobile and onto the grass, she filled with a cool, scented air that had not once touched her lungs before. There was the rare maple in Tinkle, constant enough that in the sharp changing seasons one could smell it as their feet fell. Here, Wren's mouth fell agape as cold air rushed in, up her throat, and coated her with a lightness she'd never known. The two houses were framed by weeping beech trees and oaks; above their heads chattered a chorus of birds, and accompanying them were the faint titterings of squirrels. Astoria had run up around the edge of the car to stand beside Wren, and her rustling alone was enough to frighten a raccoon from beneath the porch half to death— sending it scurrying up the length of the house and earning a shriek from Julianne.

The house was clean enough, when they entered, and the few furnishings were quite modern. Though several rooms were left unfinished—with walls still coated with the old wallpaper, some a creamy eggshell, and others a bright white that hurt Wren's eyes to look into.

Some of the walls even exposed the foundation cracks and lines from where the blocks had fallen into place by skilled masons long ago. The kitchen was vast, sprawling, with a single butcher block table in the center— painted army green. They settled their bags in here for the time being, as Astoria and Julianne flitted down the halls, up the steps, and out into the balconies of each bedroom. Both shrilling shared: "This is perfect!" and "This is abysmal!" up and down the halls. Wren twisted her hands against her stomach, where would they even begin?

"Etelvina." Wren looked back from the walls to where Agar had called her. In the light, his face was gaunt and yellow. Beneath his eyes two thumbprints of purple. "I need you to do something for me."

"Anything, sir."

"I need you to stay strong for Astoria." He neared Wren and rested his elbows firm into the butcherblock. "I need you to keep her." He held his palms out, as though holding something midair, then sighed and dropped them flat.

“Sir?”

“She is too incorrigible, these days especially. And I know that sending her here will only worsen it.” There were no mines for Astoria to throw boys into, they didn’t know where the nearest river worth swimming in was— but Wren knew that wherever Astoria went, trouble followed. “Whatever happens, whatever temptation she faces, I need you to stand by her.” An ignoble bevy of girls! Wren’s eyes thinned as she drew her brows together.

“Are you suggesting—“

“Astoria is going to do whatever she wants,” Agar said. “She’s always been flighty like that.” Between the two of them, their mothers, and Wren’s sister, Wren wasn’t so sure how many other women Astoria knew back in Tinkle. Her circle, once horrifically small, had suddenly exploded.

“You think quite low of your daughter,” Wren huffed.

“You don’t deserve a second of the mistreatment I know you’re going to get.” Agar took a step back to pivot and point behind them. “But look what your strength alone has brought my daughter,” he breathed. Wren’s eyes burned with each blink. “You are going to hold your head up because you are one of us now. And you are going to live.”

“I don’t think she’ll tangle herself up with someone else.” Wren rolled her eyes.

“It’s not just that.” Agar reached out and took Wren’s hand. “Astoria has been very lucky. To be able to go to school, to love freely, to run into a train car without a second thought.” Agar locked eyes with Wren just as she felt herself waver. The room darkened around them, as dark spots clouded the corners of Wren’s vision; Agar’s bowing head all that was clear, his receding dark hair, the faint dandruff in the waves. “Do not ruin this for her. This was an incredible and expensive sacrifice.”

“More expensive than selling her off to the highest bidder?” Wren snapped back, clearing the daze only for a second. She looked down at her own fingers, enclosed in Agar’s hand. “I want Astoria to have every...wonder and pleasure of the world at her fingertips,” Wren whimpered. “I don’t want to hold her back.” But I seldom have a choice echoed in her mind.

“Then make sure her hands are always open.” Agar released Wren and rounded the edge of the butcher block. Wren stared at the imprint in the soft wood his bones had left behind, then spun on her heel.

“I didn’t want to leave!” Wren admitted in a quick blurt, but Agar only shook his head and smiled faintly— no widening eyes, no fear in his voice.

“You’ll be back soon enough.”

### Chapter Six:

Graham had enough saved up to last him a few visits to local restaurants, so he got in his little green car and let Anslem point him down the main road and up side streets until they came up on whatever diner Anslem thought best. Gilly Handy's place was a local pseudo-grill with enough Elvis decor outside and in to render Graham nauseous. Above their heads on the wall over the maître d'— a sun-weathered young woman bent over the scattered ledger on the counter— a clock in Elvis's silhouette hinged at the waist, and his swishing legs were the pendulum. There were a few scattered bodies in the diner; at one circular table a gaggle of elderly white women— gray hair in pigtailed or tucked into bandanas— were chattering over a cluster of wrapped gifts in the center of the table. A few men in trucker hats with thick embroidered sayings: "Don't Tread on Me!", "BJ's 60th Birthday", "Bathroom's Where I Do MY Best Work!". The maître d', Devonne, led Graham and Anslem past the groups and windows where the setting sun glared through, but didn't stop winding around the tables when the patrons had started waving down Anslem. Each with the same questions in their own varied chirps.

"How is your grandfather? Still making those sculptures?"

"Are you almost done fixing up the plaza?"

"Who've you got there? Oh when are you going to bring home a nice girl?"

And to each of these questions, Anslem had an expertly crafted response— one that simultaneously satisfied the receiver with a laugh, and kept Anslem from answering.

"So long as the definition for sculpture stays nice and loose!"

"I'm trying my best— lipstick and pigs and all of that."

"When you find me one! Put me on that emailing list of nice girls."

All so easy. He never went bug eyed or fell into awkward silence; he could round chairs and hug women who wanted them, or clap massive, wiry haired men on the shoulders and call out "How's it going?" And when they turned to regard Graham with welcomes or jibes, he just stood there smiling.

Graham had only ever had mixed experiences with seniors; he never felt at home with his own grandparents, and certainly wasn't close with their friends. His grandfather on his mother's side typically introduced Graham and Gage in pairs to his buddies— a two pack of strong, athletic, whipsmart boys! These friends of his were men who made their living selling homemade mead to each other, swapping recipes and filling their garages with jugs upon jugs in varying stages of fermentation. Graham never liked this hobby of his grandfather's. These men with their thick, fruit pool fingers and kind smiles were always too eager to give Graham a sampling of whatever they'd brewed up. And, at the prodding elbow of his grandfather, he'd down the little cups right on the spot. Twice he'd thrown up, in two separate garages. Twice he'd poured handfuls of sawdust on the concrete to soak up the mead and stomach bile.

They sat down in a booth with cracked crimson leather, beside great windows that looked out onto Tinkle's flat, brown expanse. Devonne took their drink orders and left them with long, laminated menus; but while Anslem poured over his, Graham twisted his hands in his lap. He

watched the women at the table begin to push their gifts towards one woman who'd had her back to Graham— but he saw her shoulders shaking with laughter behind a red flannel.

"You're so good with them," Graham awed. Anslem peeked over his shoulder, then looked back at Graham with a cocked brow.

"What... them?" Anslem pointed behind him with his thumb. Graham nodded. "They're my neighbors, of course I'm gonna say hello."

"No I just mean—" Graham's words caught in his throat; he tasted the bile tinged with yeast and tart cherries. "I never know what to say to... older people. I always clam up." Graham's shoulders rose up towards his ears, and the muscles in his neck twinged.

"I've known them my whole life— that woman there with the yellow blouse and the blonde streaks, that's Lee, she was the librarian's assistant all throughout my school." Anslem leant towards Graham and pointed at the women with his pinky finger. "I think they're celebrating Connie's birthday, that's the one with the buzzcut. She breeds chihuahua terriers." Graham watched Anslem's lips move as he spoke; the gold in his bobbing eyebrows when they caught the light. The canine on the upper left side of his mouth was more pronounced than the otherwise straight teeth, and it snagged on his upper lip when he grinned.

Devonne returned, took their orders, and slipped away as quickly as she'd appeared. Her blonde ponytail swished with each breath, and while Graham asked for a water she chewed on the tiny abscess that was filling beneath a thin black lip ring. Behind the chatter between the patrons, Graham could hear the crashing of dishes and the ignition of the range. Anslem rested his chin on his folded hands, face and glasses lit up by the dimming white sky. If Graham let his eyes go unfocused, he could see Gage in Anslem's figure— breathless after all the post-practice drink breaks. It wasn't long before they got their food— Anslem a patty melt on marbled bread, and Graham a turkey club. Anslem broke away after his first bite and sat back.

"So—" he rested his bent forefinger against his lips until he swallowed. "You're not in school right now are you?"

Graham shook his head.

"No," he swallowed.

Anslem's eyes flickered over Graham, his thin line of a mouth unchanged. "You think you'll go after this?"

Graham tried to fall back into his booth to release the ache in his back, but he stayed rigid in place. He twisted a fry between his fingers and let the salt bead off onto his skin.

"Maybe?" He'd sent Anslem a few names of the universities he'd considered, back when they first started talking. But if anything he spent more time reminiscing. "Back in high school I had considered studying in Utah. Mostly because of their bouldering community... but the universities I looked at had great environmental science programs."

"Why didn't you apply?"

Graham felt the tight apprehension in his chest as bitter memories flooded to the very forefront of his mind— collected on his forehead and in his knitting brows.

*"This was our chance and you completely wasted it!"*

“My brother and I,” Graham sighed, and darted his eyes out the window to escape Anslem’s gaze. He watched a bright blue snack wrapper cling to the rusted, broken chain link that separated the asphalt from the dirt lot. “We wanted to enlist in the army. We were gonna do it together—” He saw Gage on the edge of his bed, showing Graham the brochure from the recruiter who’d visited the high school. The two of them awed over the potential to see the world; to leave. “Me because I had just... no idea what I wanted to do, and him because of 9/11. Or at least that’s what he told the recruiter, the patriotic fuck.” Graham shook his head while Anslem snorted, then schooled his features.

“Sorry, it’s not funny,” he muttered.

“I think we just wanted to get out to be honest.” Graham shrugged, and his voice got high around the edges.

“Get out?”

“It’s a ticket. Good pay, cover our college—” Graham had considered the potential he’d get to climb somewhere distant; Gage had argued that with Graham’s body and his brain, that they’d be unstoppable. *“They had a rope dangling in the gym as part of the assembly, and all I could think was about how out of all the guys you could scale it the quickest!”* Gage’s near screaming laughter rang out in Graham’s mind.

“But your parents... wouldn’t they be able to pay for it?” Anslem suggested, and returned to his sandwich for another bite.

“Gage maybe.” Graham supposed. “He wanted to study something hands on— inventing, engineering, something where he could sit and scrawl out math problems, or dissect the inside of a computer.” He couldn’t help but smile; seeing Gage across the library computer lab taking off the display unit from the monitor so he could poke around inside, unaware of the terror that grew in Graham’s eyes. “I just wanted to be outside,” he took in a sharp breath and felt the heat on his skin, the crunch of bright desert trails and tough rock beneath his shoes. “I wanted to hike and climb and it just didn’t seem to make didn’t seem to make them too happy. Too soft I think.” Graham twisted his fingers together. “They’d gotten very excited and... attached to the military idea.”

“Your dad?”

“No, none of us. But my mom put it on the Christmas card the second we even suggested it.”

“Woah.” Anslem blinked. “So... what happened?” Graham dropped his hands.

“Hm?”

“Why aren’t you off in- oh what is it now... Iraq?” Anslem guessed into his cup as he raised it to take a drink. Graham stilled his fidgeting, and let his eyes fall to their corners.

They went for their MEPS on a hot April morning. Under the eye-stinging blue sky and the ever increasing humidity, they waited in a line outside the beige building along with all the other hopeful, nervous young men. where they’d meet the doctors and who’d be conducting hundreds of physical, aptitude, and psychological tests. Graham’s hands raked up the visited the

entrance processing office's hot stucco walls and wondered, if he'd worn his climbing shoes, if he could find a foothold somewhere among the dents.

"Be honest, and really take your time answering. And none of that sad kid shit, you're a happy, eager applicant!" Gage held his palms out while he coached Graham. And when their recruiter Sergeant Poole, a young, black haired white man whose shoulders and arms were bigger than the rest of him, waved them down, he said the same thing. About an hour in, Graham could finally weave through the strange office with low drop tile ceilings and walls like cork boards—past all the rows of young men sitting with clipboards or filing through the doors of long halls, until they split off into their sterile exam rooms. Graham whipped his head back to look at Gage, still moving through the foyer between the office and the outside, and he mouthed "*You got this!*"

"Failed the psych eval," Graham said. Anslem's eyes bugged out of his skull; his hand suspended in the air where it had stretched out to grab a napkin.

"You're kidding!"

"Yeah. Gage says I was too honest."

"Did they at least tell you why?" Anslem finally plucked his napkin from the holder, but only held it between his hands.

Gage finished quick—Graham didn't know *he'd* taken so long until he came out into the lobby and found Gage half asleep in one of the plastic blue chairs. The physical had been no problem, hearing, sight—he'd studied for the aptitude test with Gage over the course of several weekends. He took his psych eval with the same pencil as the aptitude test, but by the end of it he'd chewn the eraser clean off. He sat with Gage as the chairs filled and emptied, and then alone when Gage was called back. The women behind the counters pulled papers from hopefuls and filed them; they pointed men towards seats or offices. Lines of men in matching shirts led by recruiters wove through; waves of beige and brown and close cropped heads. Naturally, Gage got his call first—quick after. He had the confirmation from the MEPS office and the date he'd be shipped out; the quiet dinner that had been interrupted by the phone ringing had turned celebratory as their mother burst into tears and folded Gage into a hug. Neither Graham nor his father could fight their ear to ear smiles, as they clapped Gage on the shoulder. Graham would be next, and they'd be off.

Graham shook his head, and Anslem looked down and blew a hard, whistling breath out. "Shit I'd probably fail too." He pulled his head up and gave Graham a sincere nod. "I'm sorry about that. That sucks."

"Eh—" Graham shrugged one shoulder. "I think it was a blessing in disguise." He only thought that now because he'd found something else to occupy his time—that and with how hard he fell after Gage left, Graham didn't think he could survive one second under the scrutiny of some drill sergeant. "Hurt though. Gage got in." Graham lifted a steadying finger to his lips. Anslem leant forward.

"Did he take it well?" Anslem scrunched up his face when he asked. Graham took in a breath that caught in his dry throat. He'd gotten his callback soon enough; in a still afternoon

while he churned through trig homework. Sergeant Poole's chipper, but still professional, voice still rang in his ears even as he moved up the shag carpet stairs, and through Gage's bedroom door. He shut Gage's door slowly and backed up against it.

"How'd it go? What'd he say?" Gage crawled to the edge of his bed, where Graham fell. He bounced and giggled in place. "Tell me, tell me!"

"He—" Graham stared at the place where the drywall met the carpet, and pressed his lips together. What was he supposed to tell Gage? His eyes burned as he shut them, and turned. "Gage I can't go," he whimpered. Gage's eyebrows flew up, then he tilted his head.

"What do you mean?" He leant in and pressed his palm to Graham's shaking shoulder.

"He said I failed the psychological evaluation."

"What do you mean?"

"He said that after... careful consideration they were concerned about some of my answers and—"

"What did you tell them, Graham?" Gage shot up and rounded the bed. Graham thrust his shoulders out.

"The truth, I don't know!" Graham gasped for air as Gage's features darkened.

"He said they were concerned about some of the answers and wanted me to elaborate and—" Graham was cut off by Gage barking out a laugh.

"Oh my god you bombed didn't you?" He stepped back and shot his hands up to tangle in his hair. Graham shook his head. The corners of his eyes began to pulse, and with each of Gage's gasping, disbelieving laugh, Graham felt the breath being forced from his lungs.

"No I was just honest—"

"About what?"

"We talked about—" Graham drew his brows together. "I mean I was honest about my lows."

"You get blue, you get sad, you're a teenager!" Gage waved Graham over with one hand, and set the other in a closed fist on his hip.

"I—" Graham gaped. "I mean the form asked if I'd experienced any depression," he stammered. "So I was honest, I thought about it and... I mean Gage you remember last spring—"

"That's not— you were tired!"

"I'm repeating algebra two because of it," Graham muttered.

"You got off track and didn't turn in a few assignments, so what. Not depressed." Gage pressed his palm out towards Graham.

"The same thing happens to you!" Graham spat, Gage rolled his eyes. "At least I passed the tenth grade, *Gage*. I'm surprised they didn't fine mom and dad for your truancy!" Graham waved his hands over Gage, who'd just scoffed. "Don't think you're getting out of this unscathed. They might want to talk to you too!"

"What else did you say? Maybe we can appeal."

“We talked about my motivation.” Which was wavering, at best. “I... I’ll be honest, I did say I’m not exactly happy.” Graham reached up and stroked his arm.

“Were you even trying?” Gage shrieked. “You say *yes!*” He smacked his open palm with a closed fist. “I am always up for a challenge! Safety is my priority! I always do my best to put family first, even when it’s hard!”

Graham gaped at Gage. “Why—Why didn’t you tell me?”

“What’s next, he asks if you hear voices and you probably said ‘Why yes I often hear my own voice when I think my thoughts, does that count?’” He pitched up his voice and bobbed his head to imitate Graham.

“You don’t have to be a dick about it.”

“We aren’t gonna get to go together...” Gage wheezed and fell back into his pace. Graham licked his dry lips.

“Well, you have to drop out—”

“No way, I’m going.”

“Gage!” Graham cried. Gage pressed against his chest with his palm.

“If I get in, I’m going. It’s not my fault you were too stupid for a personality test!”

“That’s not fair and you know it!” Graham stood up and stopped Gage from pacing any further.

“This is a career, Graham!” He took his hair in his hands and tugged straight out. “That was an interview— not therapy! What else did you tell them?” He shoved Graham back by the shoulders. “That you spend half your time sleeping, and the other half drooling over Abraham?” Graham reached up and smacked Gage’s hand away.

“Shut up, that’s not true!”

“Or how you didn’t even want to enlist until I pushed you to?” Gage lowered himself to look right up into Graham’s eyes. “Because I have to do fucking everything for you?” Graham shoved him away, now.

“Shut up Gage!”

“You probably spent the entire interview, if not complaining, gushing about your stupid climbing— because who is Graham without his rocks?” He straightened up and exaggerated his shrug. Graham sucked in a breath and hissed into his retort.

“Well at least I didn’t lie my way through!” He stepped up and jabbed his finger into the soft spot of Gage’s chest, making him waver. “You probably failed yours too— he saw how boneheaded and people pleasing you are!”

“I told him I wanted to defend my country and my family! To do my part!” Gage puffed out his chest.

“You and everyone else!” Graham sneered. “God, you’re so pliant!”

“It’s better than being a sore thumb, Graham!”



If Graham thought on it long enough, he could still hear the rasp in Gage's voice when he yelled. The two of them could never really bellow or growl; their voices only got higher and their throats dried out. Graham reached out, took a sip of his water, and felt it trail down his tongue.

"I haven't heard from Gage since his tour started."

"When was that?"

"2002," Graham said. "It was sporadic during his training, but I-"

"You haven't spoken to your brother in three years?" Anslem guffawed. Graham shook his head.

"I don't want to talk to him."

## Chapter Seven:

Tinkle got its first good snowstorm on Wednesday, the sixth. It came down just after two in the morning; Graham sat up in bed and watched the nonstop flurries. They tumbled down slowly, gently, and yet made Graham feel even smaller. The cold air seeped through the thin hotel's walls with ease, soon enough Graham could see his breath in front of his nose. He watched until white sunlight began to drip down the windowsill and onto the carpet, then burrowed back into his bed where he slept until his phone buzzed him awake. He ignored it, got up, made himself an instant oatmeal breakfast, and slunk into his green hoodie— still heavy with the granola bars. He crossed the kitchen and stepped into the bathroom to brush his teeth and do something about his hair. When Graham heard the knock at the door, at first he thought he'd knocked something off the counter. It wasn't until the second, and some looking around at the floor, that he realized what it was. Graham stepped out, smoothed his hair with his hands, and opened the front door without looking through the peephole. Behind it was the same man he'd seen before in the hall, Daniel.

"Hey, I'm sorry to bother you. Do you have matches?" His hands were thrust in his pockets, and he vibrated in place with the cold. He was already a bit pale, but against the white backdrop of the bright, sun reflecting snow coming through the windows worsened the look.

"Uh—"

"Or like a lighter, or something? I'm making breakfast." He held up his hands and pinched his fingers in the air. Graham did have matches— he'd struck one this morning to boil his water.

"Sure, come in." Graham stepped to the side and let Daniel slip through. He was taller than Graham and smelled like violet mints. Daniel sat on the edge of one of Graham's two chairs, and drummed his fingers on the table while Graham swiped the matches off the counter.

"Here." He handed them out. "You're Daniel, right?"

"Thanks." Daniel shook out two matches, then handed the pack back to Graham. "Yeah, I am. You're Anslem's friend, right?"

"Aren't you?" Graham grinned, and Daniel chuckled.

"Hardly." He shook his head and looked down at the matches. "We're alright, I guess."

"Have you helped out at all with the plaza?" Graham shifted his weight on his back foot and crossed his arms over his chest. Daniel rolled his eyes.

"This place—" he smirked up at Graham. "It's a money pit. He's gonna kill himself looking for that treasure." Daniel tucked the matches into his pocket. Graham cocked his head.

"I'm sorry?"

"That's what he's looking for, right?" Daniel's voice was gravelly, and there was a laugh lurking in his throat. Graham nodded and felt his brow twitch. "I don't think it's real. If it hasn't been sold, it's surely been destroyed."

"Destroyed?" Graham echoed. Daniel gave Graham a quick glance over.

“You’re new here, you haven’t seen it flood.” Daniel groaned as he stood up; his ankles popped. “I wouldn’t be surprised if the water swept it away. Or rusted it all.” He shrugged. “He’s not going to find it. Or if he finds it, it won’t be all he imagined.”

“You might consider being a bit kinder when you talk about Anslem. Considering what he’s done for you,” Graham snapped. Daniel’s head bobbed back, and he blinked at Graham a few times.

“Might I?” He spoke slowly; his smirk had disappeared, and he spun on his heel. “Thanks for the matches.” Before the door slammed shut, he locked eyes with Graham and flipped him the bird.

...

Graham found Anslem behind the concierge’s counter in the lobby busying himself with his shirt; smoothing out the wrinkles and patting around for his wallet and keys.

“So what’s on the agenda this week?” Graham rocked on his heels, palms pressed firmly into the counter.

“Work,” Anslem said.

“Work.” Graham grinned as he echoed.

Graham had a dream last night. He stood in the same field where a tiny Astoria was doing her naked cartwheels. His parents were there, seated on a patio that clung to nothing, watching and clapping while Astoria spun. The sky wobbled like a lapping pond, and Graham’s mouth tasted like cherry cough syrup. He woke up with the feeling still on his tongue.

Anslem looked through his lashes and shook his head.

“No, I mean work.” Anslem flicked his keys from his pocket and spun them on his finger. “I have a job.” He flung his keys from his pocket, and captured them in his palm, silencing their jingles. Graham quit rocking and felt his smile slip.

“Oh. You work?”

“Can’t live off Cliff forever.” Anslem smirked and rounded the counter. “I manage our used book store, the owner’s an old friend. She used to babysit me!” Anslem waved his hands out, and showed Graham a toothy grin. “Come with, maybe you could research while I work.” Graham pushed off the edge and fell into pace with Anslem.

“What am I meant to research?”

“I’m sure you’ll find something.” He chuckled and slipped his hands into his pockets. “I’m gonna ask Phoebe to look over the clues today—she works at the library. She’ll know what they mean.”

They stepped out into the snow, and the light of the sheets that fell on the ground made Graham’s eyes sting. Between them wobbled the tote bag of diaries on Anslem’s shoulder; hitting both their sides as they moved. A stray dog, coppery brown and tail wagging, trotted down the barren streets. Graham watched him move, the fat around his ribs and ease in his steps; someone, even if Tinkle was empty, was taking care of him at least. Anslem worked in a used bookstore that was across and down the street from the plaza. The empty businesses that lined the street echoed Graham’s reflection between each other; within the great windows he could see

bare rooms littered with debris, broken glass, cords, boxes—on the glass, he could see his own face. He looked into his big, doe eyes, and wished he looked meaner. His face was too soft, too open. Even when he was quiet, he still looked like he was on the brink of speaking. Like he'd just noticed something and was ready to spill with awe and wonder. He thinned his eyes a bit, furrowed his brow too, and tried to look fierce. Instead, he looked soft. He pulled his gaze from the reflection before he began to pick apart his body and moved to catch up with Anslem.

Graham pictured a beautiful, dimly lit, multi-story building. Small, maybe, but towering with shelves carved from thick, dark wood. The books he pictured were ornate and ancient, the walls glowed with the yellow lamplight of candles or lovely lanterns. There were reading nooks lined with thick pillows, massive armchairs, and the thick smell of fresh coffee. All the independent bookstores Graham had been in, though few, were remarkable. Minty's Used Books was not remarkable. Maybe it was eye-catching, the whole building's exterior was made from a thick, bleached flat stucco. Inside, the lights were fluorescent, lined up against the low, drop tile ceiling. The shelves creaked, bent, and wobbled. No two were the same—each a different color, laminate, height, and heft. Some were flimsy particle board, some thick wood painted several layers over, many had stickers placed there by the children whose bedrooms once housed the shelves. Many of the books were paperback, boasting titles like “Protecting The Neighborhood: How Socialism Infiltrates Middle Class Communities”, “My Alien Orgy!”, and “Surviving Stanley Goodman” by Sterling Goodman (“Now with never before seen pictures from the scene of the crime!”). Aside from the local library, Minty's was the only place to get books in Tinkle. And the books were stacked all around them in high, narrow stacks. Some stacks grew so high in the windows, one could hardly see into the store, save for a glimpse past the teeny seasonal display of cookbooks Anslem had set out. Graham jumped when he walked in, not from the geriatric teacup chihuahua yapping at him, nor from the sudden stench of mothballs, but the positively massive portrait of Ronald Reagan that hung over the front counter. Anslem slipped behind the cash wrap, not looking twice at the portrait, while Graham caught his breath.

“What is that?”

Reagan looked quite robust, like a Stalin-era propaganda poster—with the rotund chest and cherub features. The man looked out at the bookshop with a great light pouring over his face, an ear to ear smile with teeth that practically glowed. Whoever painted the picture seemed to have been experimenting with contrast and saturation, but the great frame adorned with cheap American flags told Graham the portrait was hung out of genuine patriotism and not humor.

“President Reagan?” Anslem chirped, peeking up over his shoulder. Graham nodded open-mouthed. Anslem cracked the air with a burgundy apron he'd pulled from beneath the counter, and wrapped the strings around his waist. “Little red town like this, people love him. He visited once!”

“You're kidding.” Graham flicked his wide eyes down to Anslem

“In 1982,” Anslem sighed. “He went up to Reno to visit the university, and some poor soul from town convinced him to come pay a visit to Tinkle.”

“Did he?”

“No. But to know that the president knew our little map dot existed,” Anslem trailed, and looked up at the portrait. “Well, I know it at least mattered to Minty.” Anslem lowered himself to peer into the mammoth monitor of the desktop computer while Graham returned his gaze to Raegan. The dog had quit barking, but was now sniffing around Graham’s feet. Disinterested, he ran up to Anslem and jumped up his legs.

“Hey Skip.” Anslem bent down to scratch the dog behind his gray, prickly ears. He had black fur sprinkled with silver, and a beige bell. Anslem scooped up the dog, who couldn’t have been any bigger than six inches long, and cradled him belly-up in his arms. The dog wheezed gurgled as he rolled his big, bobbing, baby beluga head to face Graham, and stared up with those giant, murky eyes.

“Oh my god!” Graham took a step back from Skip, a horrible, pity-stuffed smile splitting over his face. “How old is he?”

“He’s twenty-one.”

“No way.” The dog was two steps from death; he practically choked on each breath.

“He’s my co-manager.” Anslem giggled.

“Why’s his tongue like that?” Graham pointed to the perpetual pink tip of Skip’s tongue that didn’t seem to tuck back behind his lips.

“No teeth.” Anslem grinned while he bounced Skip like a baby.

“Oh my god, is he in pain?”

“Nope. We had a scare a few years ago: he was refusing to eat and wouldn’t get out of bed.” Anslem looked down at the dog. “Took him out to Pahrump to get looked at. Problem was his teeth, but now that they’re gone, he seems much happier.” Anslem’s face had wound up with a massive smile, as he spoke more to Skip than Graham. “Started eating and playing again. He’s a good boy.”

“Good boy, Skip,” Graham said.

“Here-” Anslem heaved up the tote bag and handed it off to Graham. “Wanna find a nice spot to settle down in?” Anslem motioned behind Graham, as the fan on the computer whirred to a horrible volume. Graham nodded and was pulled back to the painful stench of dust and standing water.

There were portions of Minty’s that were missing full ceiling tiles, and beneath Graham’s feet the carpet was spongy. Graham found a place to hide eventually. Between the thick brown carpeted staircase and the wall in the back of the shop. Across from the erotica section’s hidden alcove and in the children’s fantasy section. A spot with a worn down, down to a couch with two cushions different shades of denim blue. The frame groaned beneath Graham as he settled, both him and the tote of diaries sunk down into the dusty weight of the thing. The first diary he pulled was yellow, covered with gingham print. The pages were bound unevenly and moved in thick stacks against his thumb. He flipped the cover and squinted down at the tight script. He waited for the answers to pop out to him that instant as he wove through the tight words that wove across the page in slippery, drippy lines.

Graham had never kept any journals of his own. He didn't have boxes of the things like Astoria and Wren had. There were too many nights he'd wished he'd kept one; a way to timeline the slow, disappearing moments where insults ghosted on his skin. When he'd lay staring up at the beige ceiling in his parents' room, seeking comfort and only feeling worse come the end of their conversations. He'd have cataloged the passing, knowing glances between himself and Gage; he'd have kept a long list of the dates and times for each rancid comment his mother threw his way, just so that when she asked him what had split their family, he'd have proof. All Astoria did in her diaries was complain about what the men who'd attempted to court her failed to do—differentiating mallows from poppies, who'd penned her favorite poems. Even these short lines swelled in Graham's throat. Gage had tried to keep a journal once; Graham could still see it splayed open on the kitchen table when his mother had found it and gone through with her highlighters and pens—all the spots she thought Gage was lying in. Just the shadow of the little book made Graham's pulse thrum beneath his fingertips, and Astoria's diary shook in his hands.

Graham took the jingling bell above the door as his sign to slam Astoria's diary shut and toss it back into the tote.