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## Let's Do This Again Sometime: A Novel

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Let's Do This Again Sometime: A Novel

A thesis presented to  
The Graduate Faculty of  
The College of Arts and Sciences  
Department of English  
Georgia College & State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Caleb Bouchard  
April 2021

Let's Do This Again Sometime: A Novel

by

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## **Chapter One — Miles**

Miles hated costumes. Hated them for as long as he could remember. Halloween never made sense to him. As a little kid, he related more to anxious helicopter parents fretting over razor blades in Reese's, rather than the sugar-hyped kids racing around his neighborhood after dark. The year his mom said he could go out trick or treating by himself was the year he stopped going. He never had much of a sweet tooth, anyway.

This disdain for dress-up and Party City fanfare carried on into his college years, and he took a small sense of pride in having never attended a party that required him to wear a goofy hat or a latex mask. He had hoped to continue avoiding such parties in graduate school, but his friend circle was smaller in Stenbridgeville. Continuing the boycott would mean missing out on at least half of the parties, which Miles couldn't stand for. Early on in his grad school matriculation, he learned that if you weren't in the room, you were probably being talked about, and rarely in flattering terms. In a small Georgia town with only one decent bar and a movie theater that played two movies at any given time, churning the rumor mill was the unofficial pastime of every MA/MFA cohort at Central State College. The in group and the out group were painfully obvious.

"I have to tell you something before we go in there," Miles said to Audra, his date, as he parked outside Renée and Amy's house. "This is a costume party."

"In the middle of March?" Audra said.

“Friday the thirteenth,” Miles said. ““Renée and Amy are obsessed with all things spooky.”

The street they were on was quiet and residential, miles away from the highly trafficked downtown district. An invisible chorus of cicadas surrounded them, their chirping rising and falling in waves, tentatively, as if they weren't sure if they had permission. It was the first time since last summer he had noticed their noises. Audra squinted at Miles. He hoped this was due to the setting sun rather than this lie by omission.

“What the hell, Miles,” Audra said. A slant of dark curly hair covered one of her eyes, but she didn't touch it. Her coffee-colored skin radiated in the waning sunlight. “This is a costume party and we're not wearing costumes. We're going to look like idiots.” Audra's words lingered between them. Miles felt his ears turn hot. He was about to apologize profusely when Audra added, “The only thing that could make us look even more idiotic is if we were wearing capes and masks.”

Miles laughed, grateful for the tension to be squashed. “You hate costume parties, too? God. I thought I was the only one.”

“Please. Hating costumes and costume parties is one of my favorite pastimes. Like, you're a grown ass adult. Dress like one!”

Miles leaned in and kissed Audra. It wasn't their first kiss, but it was the first one that felt natural, unscripted, and hinting towards something bigger. He wasn't used to feeling these warm fuzzy feelings with someone this early on — they had been on a couple dates, after all, hooked up once or twice — and now that he was, he wondered if he was being tricked by his own heart. As his dad often said, *If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.*

They walked into the house without knocking. “I’m a regular,” Miles said, lacing his fingers with Audra’s. Renée and Amy threw parties on a monthly basis, sometimes every other weekend. They were the type of couple who loved their home and loved to have people in their home, and were eager to celebrate anything from a conference presentation by one of their fellow MA peers to the end of a long semester.

Immediately, Miles and Audra were greeted by a chorus of *Ayyyees* and open arms. “The Monster Mash” soundtracked the scene as partiers filled their glasses with orange punch and bit into cookies resembling bats, ghosts, and pumpkins.

“You didn’t dress up!” Renée said, giving Miles a side hug. She wore a green crop top, high-waisted black shorts, and donned a flowing red wig, which covered her natural brown hair. Amy wasn’t far behind, decked out in huge sunglasses, a backwards cap, baggy clothes, and wielding a skateboard. Side by side, Miles recognized them from one of his favorite childhood films: Max and Roxanne, from *A Goofy Movie*.

“We were short on time,” Miles said, handing Amy a six dollar bottle of Merlot he’d picked up at a gas station. “But we brought a small offering.”

“We’ll forgive you this time,” Amy said sarcastically. Miles couldn’t help but examine his reflection in her shiny, oversized sunglasses. “Who’s this?”

He opened his mouth to introduce Audra, but she beat him to it. Before he could say her name, she was already shaking hands with Renée and Amy.

“I love that,” Renée told Audra, waving her drink in front of her yellow romper.

“Thanks,” Audra said spritely. “The Stenbridgeville Goodwill has some surprisingly cute finds.”

“Punch?” Miles asked Audra. She nodded, and he left her to continue chatting with the hosts.

At the refreshments table, Miles joined a fellow TA named Kevin, who was dressed as a magician, and his bunny-ear-sporting wife, Mira. They were in the middle of an argument with Katrina, an creative writing student dressed as a witch, over the politics of pronouns and gender. Miles wordlessly filled two plastic glasses with punch.

“This *does* have booze, right?” he muttered into Mira’s ear, and she nodded yes as Kevin floated the idea of coming up with his own gender, called KevKev.

“What’s stopping me?” Kevin said glibly. “My parents wanted a boy, but they got a KevKev. Why? ‘Cause I said so. That’s how I *feel*, despite the dick dangling between my legs. It doesn’t have to be any more biologically sound than that.”

Katrina let out a vexed laugh. “Kevin. Do you not understand the very fundamental difference between gender and sex? Gender, what we’re talking about, isn’t biological. It has nothing to do with what’s in your pants or whether or not you bleed once a month. That’s sex. Gender, on the other hand, is a social construct, a construct which has been used to discriminate and oppress non-cisgender folks for thousands of years. People throughout history have questioned the idea of gender, and when we begin to question we realize it’s much more fluid than it appears at first glance...”

Miles was just about to bring Audra her punch when Kevin slapped him on the back and said, “So you decided to show up after all. I guess reading articles on O’Leary’s mule symbolism didn’t fit the mood for a Friday night?”

The joke was met with laughter. Miles gave a smile that looked more like a wince. Kevin was referring to Norman O’Leary, the local literary legend whose stories explored the grotesque

and devious sides of human nature. Although O’Leary had died in relative obscurity and squalor in the sixties, he was now perhaps the biggest name in the Southern Gothic canon. Miles first discovered his work in high school, with “Ashes To Ashes,” in which an alcoholic sharecropper tries to kill an injured mule, but the mule refuses to die. Try as he might, with machetes and shotguns and poison, each day it stands alive and bleeding in the field. After three days of this confounding routine, the sharecropper loses all semblance of sanity, and turns his shotgun on himself.

“Yeah, I ran out of candles,” Miles said, shrugging, though his comeback didn’t land quite as well as Kevin’s quip. *Come on, people, Miles thought, candles! Ever heard of burning the midnight oil? That was a good joke!*

With the awkward moment behind them, Katrina pinned Miles with a stare, as if trying to cast a spell on him. “So, you’re doing research on Norman O’Leary? For your thesis, I presume?”

“Yup.” Miles nodded and sipped the punch, which was too sweet for his taste, but he’d drink anything to take off the edge. Facing Katrina Boswell, whose car bumper was blanketed in stickers promoting coexistence and Jill Stein’s 2016 campaign, Miles could sense another intellectual debate on the horizon regarding the controversial nature of O’Leary’s work. His depiction of African-Americans was far from flattering in his short stories (collected in *A Godless Realm*) and his sole novel, *The Unseen Sanctuary*. Lots of people in academia had a bone to pick with O’Leary’s problematic representations — for these readers, Miles felt, they failed to see O’Leary’s profound commentaries on the caste system in the American South, which Miles found to be reductive if not a bit childish. One of these readers, he sensed, was standing in front of him now.

“That’s interesting,” Katrina said, “I thought we cancelled him a while ago.”

“Maybe,” Miles said, “but it’s hard to ‘cancel’ the dead.”

“I guess you’re right. His books are still in print, though I wish they weren’t. *A Godless Realm* hasn’t aged well at all, if you ask me.” Katrina took a poised sip from her glass of red wine, the pointy black hat atop her head wobbling. When she lowered the glass Miles noticed her lipstick was a couple shades darker. Her mouth glistened. He knew it would only help her argument if he sputtered a half-baked response defending his favorite writer. The chances that he would come off as a racist apologist were too high; he didn’t take the bait. Still, he felt cornered. Public debate wasn’t his thing — he saw them as a slippery slope into ideological warfare and ad hominem attacks — so he preferred to save his arguments for the page. The forehead sweat kicked in almost immediately, and the rest of his face broke out in ticks.

“His use of stereotypes and racist portrayals doesn’t bother you?” Katrina pressed. “Most of his Black characters don’t have names, you know. He just refers to them as ‘coons’ or ‘jigaboos.’ And the few people of color he does name have animalistic, dehumanizing monikers, which I won’t repeat.” Katrina’s eyes cut across the room. “None of that bothers you?”

It seemed like the entire party had shifted its attention on Miles and Katrina as they went about their rhetorical gladiating. Each pair of eyes brought a certain heat, a certain expectation. Suddenly, Miles remembered that he was not wearing a costume. Flanked on every side by monsters and Disney characters, he felt like he had just been dropped in a foreign country. He scanned the room, and his eyes met Audra’s. Round, dazzling brown eyes. She smiled, and Miles smiled back. As Katrina spoke, he took a long pull from his punch, mentally formulating a logical rebuttal to her points, but after she’d stopped talking and Miles had reached the bottom of his glass, he still found himself grappling for the right words for a rebuttal. He wasn’t sure if

he'd be able to deliver, but he dreaded the idea of being at the center of another awkward moment, so he opened his mouth and started talking, even though he wasn't entirely sure where his words would take him.

## **Chapter Two — Audra**

Audra wasn't going to lie. She was a bit miffed when, in the middle of a riveting conversation about "The White Album," Renée and Amy swiveled their heads so they could listen in to something Katrina Boswell was saying about coons and jigaboos. She knew she should've been outraged by the MFA poet's flagrant use of such terms, but they were so antiquated and cartoonish-sounding she simply rolled her eyes. Besides, Audra was more interested in talking about Didion's reflections on the tumultuous sixties rather than jumping into an argument about race. She knew what would happen if she did.

"Of course I'm bothered by those words and representations," Miles said, his voice ramping up an octave. "Everyone should be bothered by them. I could say that O'Leary was a man of his time, but that's besides the point. They are necessary to the reader, because they force us to recognize the fault lines and injustices in our society. There's a difference between *examining* racism and *being* racist."

As a Black woman who had experienced racism first hand, Audra knew it was easy to muddle this distinction — she had often been at the receiving end of some decidedly racist backhanded compliments by well-meaning white folks who'd read everything by Roxane Gay and Ta-Nehisi Coates — but she hoped Miles was coming from a place of reason and open mindedness, even if his articulation was a bit wayward. She could set him straight on his comments later, preferably sometime that evening, after he had eaten her out for a consecutive twenty minutes.

In the meantime, she needed a drink, and saw that Miles held two. Well, one drink and a cup that once held a drink. His nervous knuckles were white as lightning around the full cup. Her cup. Before she thought to excuse herself from the hosts, she found herself walking to him, taking the punch from his damp hand, and saying, “Thanks, honey.”

Miles blushed underneath his mop of shaggy hair. *He’s always blushing*, Audra thought. *What’s up with that?*

“Of course,” he said, touching his glasses with his newly freed hand. “Katrina, have you met my girlfriend? This is Audra.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Audra said, shaking the poet’s hand.

“Likewise,” Katrina said. “Hey! Maybe you can settle this argument for us. Norman O’Leary. Racist or no?”

*Whoomp! There it is...* the inevitable moment Audra had been dreading, wherein she, the only Black person at the party, was summoned to offer *The Black Perspective*. Whatever she said would probably be received without debate — lest the contrarian want to appear racist or ignorant — and all these white folks would leave the party that night feeling a few notches smarter, woker, even though that wasn’t the case at all. That wasn’t even what mattered.

“I get the deciding vote?” Audra said. “Oof! I’m honored. To be honest, though, I don’t know much about his work. I only read him in this one lit class I took as a requirement. Plantation Lit 101. Not really my thing.”

Loud laughter filled the room, so loud it made her dizzy. As the debate diffused and the party splintered off into different conversations, Miles refilled his cup and drifted back to Audra.

“That was good,” he said. “Plantation Lit 101. Not quite true, you know. But funny.”

“Boy, whatever,” Audra said, grasping her cup a little tighter.

Miles said, “I hope you don’t mind that I referred to you as my girlfriend.”

Audra shrugged, though her heart had been punching the wall of her chest since he uttered the word. *Girlfriend*. They had been on a few dates, but things were still touch and go, as they usually were with Tinder guys. There had been times, for example, when Miles didn’t respond to a meme she’d sent him, and she had to wonder if she’d ever hear from him again. The next day, around lunchtime, he’d finally reply. *Sorry for the silence... I. AM. SENT*. Relief would wash over her. She would leave his text on “Read” for an hour or two before picking the conversation back up, as a small but justified punishment.

*Girlfriend*.

Finally, she could set aside her uncertainty of the nature of their relationship. This wasn’t a one night stand. They weren’t friends with benefits. They weren’t even “just friends” — the worst phrase someone in the dating scene could hope to hear. They were a couple. They were official. Audra imagined them on the beach in the summer, venturing out for hay rides in the fall, wearing matching ugly sweaters at Christmastime. *Watch out, Instagram*.

“It’s a little creepy, but whatever,” she said.

“Really? Yikes. I’m sorry,” Miles said, looking genuinely hurt. Couldn’t he recognize a joke when he heard one?

“I’m kidding, Miles. Of course I’m fine with you calling me your girlfriend.”

“Awesome. Cool. Want to meet some of my friends?”

Audra responded with a nod and a light kiss. Miles smiled and took her hand, once again lacing his fingers in hers. Audra’s heart nearly levitated.

There was Kevin, a tall guy who had a funny shit-eating grin, and his slightly chubby wife, Mira. There was a bespectacled adjunct teacher in his thirties, Tommy, who only seemed to

want to talk about the films of Quentin Tarantino. There was Angelica, a beautiful Latinx poet with a big ass Audra envied. There was Sherwood, who corrected Audra on their pronouns. There were others, too, but Audra could only fit so many new names and faces in such a short span of time. It had been years since she'd been to a party that wasn't for a small child's birthday (she had a niece, Sunny, and nephew, Devin), and she felt she had to retrain herself on how to be around cool people her age.

She was halfway through her second helping of punch when the lights in the house flicked off, and someone cranked up the stereo playing Lizzo's "Juice." Colorful party lights swirled around the living room walls as all of the females (and non-binary folks, namely Sherwood) formed a huddle in the center of the room and began belting the lyrics. Audra remained outside the circle, sipping on her drink and browsing Renée and Amy's bookcase. Kevin tapped Miles on the shoulder and held up a poorly rolled joint.

"Wanna smoke?" Miles asked Audra, and she said no, thanks. "Do you mind if I do?"

"Not at all."

"Cool, cool," Miles said, his eyes already glassy with booze. "I don't smoke regularly, just so you know. It's just something I do at parties."

"You don't have to explain yourself, it's cool," Audra said, and she meant it. "Are you gonna be able to drive us tonight?"

His mouth crinkled in thought. "Probably not. Here, lemme go ahead and give you my keys."

"You comin', bro?" Kevin called across the room.

"Yeah, yeah." Miles foisted the keys into Audra's hand and made for the door.

She dropped the keys into her handbag and shifted her focus to the huddle, thinking, *If these white people start dancing... I just might have to join them.*

### Chapter Three — Miles

“Cute chick,” Kevin said as he drew in his first puff. He inspected the end to make sure it was burning alright. “You guys fuck yet?” He took another puff, then passed the joint to Miles, who was a little chilly in his denim shirt. A cotton white cloud left his mouth as he huffed at Kevin’s question.

“A couple times.” Miles eyed Kevin, then put the joint to his lips. The smoke traveled down his lungs like a warm hug. He held onto it for as long as he could. “Why?”

“Why do I ask? ‘Cause we’re guys. We’re talking guy stuff right now.”

“So, what,” Miles croaked. “Now I’m supposed to ask if you’ve shtupped Mira lately?” The smoke kicked its way back up in a series of staggering coughs.

Kevin said, “Good shit, huh.” His eyelids were already drooping in the slanted way that conveyed one thing — *I’m fucked up, bro*. Miles wondered if a similar look would cross over his face once they were done with the joint. His gaze floated to the inside of the house, and to Audra standing outside the dance huddle. Her eyes were glued to her phone, and a look of mild concern shaped her face. Audra, he knew, worked in the Communications Department of Central State College, which meant she had insider knowledge of campus affairs. Miles recalled their first date at Putnam’s Pub, and how she knew of all of the English faculty members Miles referenced, and when Miles brought up a reading or a grand opening of some kind, she nodded with familiarity. As their second round of whiskeys arrived, Miles said, “You must get around campus a lot. You know everything CSC I’ve brought up so far.”

“I guess you could say I have my feelers out there,” Audra said. “At least virtually. I write the copy of the daily digest email you get in your inbox every weekday at noon.” She took a shallow sip of her whiskey. “I know the announcements before they’re announced.”

Audra stepped into the kitchen, where the lighting was better, sat down at the dining table, and started typing something out, her eyebrows knitted in concentration. After a minute, she lifted her head, though her thoughts were still tangled in whatever news she had just received. Her head rocked from left to right. She winced, frowned, then shook her head. A beat later, she nodded to herself emphatically, as if she was just beginning to demystify a complex algebra equation. Something was definitely up.

“You good, bro?” Kevin said, slapping Miles lightly with the back of his hand. “Don’t tell me you’re crossing right now.”

“I’m fine,” Miles said, then said it again. “I’m fine.”

As he said this, he felt the effects of the weed blindsides him. His head and his heart seemed to have switched places. His vision sharpened and turned blurry at the same time.

“I’m fine,” he said one more time.

“I believe you,” Kevin said. “It’s all good. Just breathe.”

The sound of cicadas, which were at the level of a whisper when he and Audra first pulled up, was now deafening. Claustrophobia flooded his senses. Something was *tick-tick-ticking* his chest. In his periphery, he saw Audra get up from the dining table and rejoin the dance huddle, stiff and tight-lipped. He suddenly felt he had been abandoned. He looked to Kevin, whose face looked like a claymation version of his actual face. How long had he and Kevin been out here, staring at each other? Minutes? Hours? An eternity? *Snap out of it, Miles. Get some water. Go talk to Audra. Find out what’s going on.*

“So check this,” Kevin said. “I had a student plagiarize his personal narrative a couple weeks ago. His *personal narrative!* Can you believe that shit? He told me he was on his roommate’s computer and *accidentally* uploaded an essay his roomie submitted for another class. Something about pissng himself at his bar mitzvah. A *Jewish* bar mitzvah. My student’s last name is O’Shaughnessy. Did he really think I was gonna buy that? ...”

*Jesus God get me out of this conversation. I’ll do anything. I’ll convert to Judaism...*

Just then, he heard someone call his name — “*MIIIIIillless!!*” — and raced into the house without a second thought.

## **Chapter Four — Audra**

Audra's heart dropped the second she felt her phone vibrate against her back pocket. She knew that whoever was texting or emailing her on a Friday night did not have good news. She imagined Devin breaking a bone while trying to climb on his mama's exercise bike, or Sunny with a stomach bug, and Rebecca was texting to ask Audra to grab an emergency prescription. Sometimes Audra wondered if her sisters saw her as anything other than a free babysitter, a free one-woman delivery service.

When she saw that the notification was not from one of her sisters, but rather from Peter, her boss, she was both relieved and confused. His email had been sent to the entire university communications department.

*Evening, all,*

*The president's cabinet had an emergency meeting tonight. Classes will be going online effective next week. This is due to the spread of the novel coronavirus. Meeting notes attached for more details. Mike, can you get on a press release ASAP? Audra, we need to send out an extra edition of the digest. Send everything to Justin for proofing by tomorrow morning. Let's aim to publish before lunch, say 11? Thanks in advance for your efforts during this time crunch.*

*— P*

Audra's mouth went slack and her eyes narrowed as she tried to grasp everything going on in the email. She could understand the school closing for a couple days, but the rest of the

semester? *This was bad*, she thought as she wandered into the kitchen. She sat at the dining table crowded with snack platters and liquor bottles. *This was really bad*.

She opened the attachment that contained the meeting notes. As many times as her eyes scanned over phrases like *lockdown* and *unprecedented spread*, she couldn't fully comprehend them. They refused to sink in. To be real. Of course, she had seen reports on CNN and NPR about the novel coronavirus, but it seemed to primarily be a problem in big cities like New York and Seattle. The threat to remote small towns like Stembbridgeville was practically nonexistent. What had changed, exactly?

She tried drafting an announcement in her Notes app, but it was just one failed start after another. How could she explain something so crucial, so life-changing and so filled with uncertainty... something she herself had no answers to? All she knew was the situation. The problem. All she had were the puzzle pieces, which were different shades of gray, it seemed. Nothing was clear. Everything was a blurry, misshapen question mark. And yet, her job was to bring clarity to the cloudy predicament.

Billie Eilish's "bad guy" throbbed through the house. Amy, sweating and smiling in her baggy Max Goof jeans, stumbled into the kitchen for a refill of punch. Someone shouted something to her from the living room, and she shouted back, "Give me a *minute!* Jesus Christmas." It was impossible to focus. To think. To string even half a sentence together. She closed her Notes and googled *coronavirus update*, then, after a beat, inserted the word *georgia*. *coronavirus georgia update*. There were pockets of cases in Fulton and Cobb counties. Atlanta and its suburbs. Audra almost shrugged. Stembbridgeville was two hours away from Atlanta. You could only get to it by a single state road. Sure, students traveled across the state to attend CSC, but most of the student population came from Augusta, Valdosta, Macon. Atlanta folks stayed in

Atlanta, for the most part. Stembridgeville was safe. It was always safe, and would always be safe.

The weight of Audra's phone felt heavy, like a brick. It was on twenty percent. Her eyes became fixed on the dance huddle in the living room, the way they swayed and jostled awkwardly. She stood from the table and slid her phone back into her pocket. If this was for real, if everything was about to go on lockdown and this was the last party she'd attend in god knows how long, she couldn't live with herself if she didn't show these bitches a move or two. As she approached the huddle, it unfolded like a cootie catcher, and she slid in seamlessly, in between Renée and Sherwood. It had been so long since she had swung her shoulders and swayed her hips and jumped around like she did now, she was grateful she hadn't forgotten how to bust a move.

Eventually, "bad guy" faded into the Talking Heads classic "Burning Down The House." As the iconic opening guitar riff filled the room, Angelica called for Miles.

"Wait 'til you see this," Renée said to Audra, who almost replied, *See what?* But before she could get the words out, Miles was charging into the room, just as the eighties drums kicked in and David Byrne sang, "*Watch out! You might get what you're after...*"

Miles shouted along with the song, swaying forcefully, pumping his knees, striking poses. Audra blinked several times. Between the swirling lights, the punch, and Miles' surreal dancing, she thought she might be hallucinating. But she wasn't, and this was somehow stranger, because she had never guessed he could be so gregarious, so uninhibited. The booze and the joint could have something to do with that, Audra guessed, but something about his moves conveyed to her that he probably would have danced the same way sober. He looked as though he had been waiting his whole life to dance to this particular song at this particular party. He was no Michael

Jackson, she observed, but she couldn't deny that she was a little turned on by his wild man dancing.

"He's obsessed with this song," Renée shouted over the music. "We play at every party, and he drops whatever he's doing and comes out swinging. He's like one of Pavlov's dogs."

Audra was speechless until the instrumental, when Miles' movements turned sluggish. "Hold my drink," she said to Renée, and broke through the circle surrounding Miles with flowing arms and breezy hips. Her entrance was met with a round of whistles and woo's. She was his muse, here to restore his energy and inspiration. When he saw her, his opaque eyes showed a spark, and he gave one of his crooked smiles. Audra had first seen the smile on their first date at Putnam's Pub, and found cuter and cuter every time she saw it. He stood to his full height, which was just a couple inches shorter than her in her brown leather boots, and started running in place as the instrumental swelled. Beads of sweat rained down from his curly hair, and his glasses slid to the end of his nose. Audra had to laugh. He definitely lived up to the name she'd given him in her contacts. *Weird/funny white guy.*

They didn't stay long after the song ended. Miles' light blue denim shirt was soaked with sweat, making it a dark blue eyesore. "Man, I need a shower," Miles panted. "Feel like I just jumped in a lake." Audra had no qualms about leaving the party early. Their dance-off was a strong note to end on. They finished their drinks and bid the party adieu.

A ghostly full moon hung above them as Audra got behind Miles' Camry and took them through Stembridgeville's southside streets, populated with liquor stores and laundromats, the storefronts glowing faintly. Billie Holiday's voice flowed from the radio, and Audra felt a sense of home.

"You sure you're good to drive?" Miles said.

“Yeah, I’m good,” Audra said. “I didn’t even finish my second drink.”

“Did you have fun tonight?”

They seesawed over some railroad tracks, perhaps a little too fast. Miles belched.

“Yeah, I did,” Audra said, and felt she should say more, but couldn’t think of anything more to say, so she didn’t. The party had been fun, but it hadn’t been like some of the ragers she’d been to as an undergrad. And that was fine. It was okay that the party was just okay.

“I saw you were on your phone for a while,” Miles said. “Did something come up?”

The car swerved slightly as she flinched. She had blocked out any thoughts of the worrisome email since she put her phone away; she wished she could continue compartmentalizing her anxieties about the implications of the virus, but it was too late now. Her heart dropped a beat as she responded to Miles.

“Yeah. It was a work thing.”

“Oh? What’s the scoop?”

Audra swung her eyes to him. “Boy, please. I’m not your one-stop shop for all things CSC drama.”

Miles held up his hands. “Okay. Sorry if I crossed a line.”

*Come on, dude,* Audra thought. *Don’t give up that easily.*

“Yeah. You better watch out or you’ll get Me Too-ed for asking all those reasonable, inoffensive questions.”

Miles scoffed. Audra continued, “I guess I can tell you, since it directly affects you. Campus is closing for the rest of the semester.”

“Uh, why?”

“Coronavirus. You’ve heard of it, right?”

“Isn’t that just in Seattle?”

“Apparently there’s a spike of cases in Atlanta.”

Just then, a blanket of flashing blue lights filled the rearview mirror, and Audra immediately felt her blood pressure soar. Her throat constricted and her fingers choked the steering wheel.

“Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck,” she muttered to herself, then to Miles: “Hand me my tote.”

Miles gave her the tote that had sat at his feet, and Audra snatched her license.

“Get your registration out. Now.”

He wordlessly opened the glove compartment and rooted around for the document. Audra swore she smelled the dregs of a joint. The officer, who was walking over to the driver’s side, pressed his thumb on the rear of Miles’ Camry. Audra had heard from her mother that all cops do this during traffic stops; in case things go awry, there’s DNA evidence on the car that a police officer had been near it.

“Shit.”

“It’s okay,” Miles said. “You only had one drink. Be cool.”

Audra’s head snapped in his direction. “Miles,” she said, “I like you. But never, ever tell me to *be cool*. Just don’t.”

In the final seconds before the officer approached the window, Audra rifled through the tote bag for her asthma inhaler. But it wasn’t there. Had she left it at home? The office? Her car, sitting in the carport outside Miles’ apartment? Audra’s throat constricted further, closing in on itself. This was bad. This was very bad. Nevertheless, she lowered the window, killed the engine, placed her license and registration on the dashboard, and wrapped her fingers around the wheel. She looked ahead and saw a Black man in a beanie and a tattered flannel jacket cross the street

holding a black plastic bag. The officer stared at him before leaning in to the driver's window and asking for a license and registration.

"Evening," he said. "Rough neighborhood we're in, huh?"

"We were just passing through," Audra said huskily.

"Any idea why I pulled you over?"

Audra took a beat to consider the question, which felt more like a power play than sincere curiosity. She knew there was probably a speed limit she had violated by one mile, or a taillight she hadn't known was out because this wasn't her car. A simple, benign mistake, but one a guy with a badge would feel no remorse reprimanding. That was why Audra had her documentation ready and her hands in plain sight of the officer, just as her mother had taught her.

"I suppose one of my —" Audra started, but was swiftly cut off by the officer answering for her.

"There's a stop sign about three hundred feet that-a-way you neglected to stop at." The officer flung a finger to the other side of the railroad tracks. "You were also swerving quite a bit. Just wanted to make sure you haven't had anything to drink tonight." His lips tilted upward into a strangely satisfied smile and his head wagged like a bobblehead. It was then that Audra decided then that she hated him. She didn't speak because she sensed he had more to say, maybe a little speech that would do little other than guilt trip her and endear the boys in blue to her even less.

"Where y'all coming from?"

"Kleinstock," Miles butted in. Audra wanted to toss him a stink eye, one that said *You stay out of this*, but she decided to stay cool and keep her eyes leveled on the officer. "The Kleinstock Community Players were putting on a production of *Barefoot in the Park*. My

girlfriend is driving ‘cause I may have overindulged at the post-performance reception. Can’t turn down free champagne on a Friday night.”

As Miles spoke, Audra swallowed hard and tried to regain her regular breathing. A whiff of weed snuck into her nostrils. *Goddammit, Miles*, she thought, clearing her throat. *We’re so so fucked*. She was just about to put on a last ditch effort to get out of the traffic stop — perhaps explain that she’d left her inhaler at home and she was in the midst of an asthma attack — when the officer looked at Audra with a hint of sympathy and said, “So you’re the DD?”

“Absolutely,” Audra wheezed, her heart punching the wall of her chest. “Yup. That’s me.”

The officer’s eyes weighed on Audra, shifted to Miles, then went back to Audra. She felt his stare alone could crush her.

“Well, then. I guess I should let you off with a warning. I ain’t trying to pull over folks coming home from the play.” He tipped his hat. “Be safe out there.”

Audra exhaled and her shoulders leveled out as the officer walked away. He hadn’t even looked at her license and registration, hadn’t even asked them about the dank and distinct smell of marijuana stewing between herself and Miles. She looked at Miles, who looked back at her with glazed eyes.

“What’re you waiting for?” he said. “Let’s roll.”

When they got back to the apartment, Miles threw his coat on the couch and went to the fridge.

“Beer?”

“I’m good,” Audra answered. Already, she was replaying the encounter they just had. She expected the officer’s steely eyes and the blue lights would stain her memory for some time. Her heart still jogged from the encounter.

Agitated and restless, she walked to a record player on a console in the dining room. She ran a finger along the top of the vinyl, stopping where it felt right. She pulled out a record. It didn’t matter which one it was. Not really.

Miles came into the dining room taking a tentative sip from a tallboy. Audra placed the vinyl on the turntable and lowered the needle. They listened to the quiet static, searching for the grooves.

Miles walked up to her and wrapped an arm around her waist. She was cold, stiff. She couldn’t help it. “Is everything okay?”

“Not really.”

“What’s up?”

“What’s up? Seriously? *What’s up*. That cop looked like he wanted to blow off my head. That’s what’s up. Nevermind the fact that he immediately assumed I was shitfaced. Just another day of driving while Black.”

Miles stepped back. “Woah woah woah. You think he pulled us over because you’re Black? That’s a pretty heavy assumption.”

“It’s not an assumption, Miles. It’s a *thing*.”

She wanted to pull out a statistic or two to back up her argument, but she had the feeling it would land on deaf ears. How could he fully understand what she had just gone through unless he was a Black woman? Had he even looked at the cop, the way he towered over her, leering and

smiling wolfishly at her, until Miles interjected? Hadn't he heard his insinuation that Audra was drunk simply because she had swerved once in a rough neighborhood?

Miles' attention wandered to the record player. Meandering piano and loosey goosey percussion filled the room as the singer crooned something about assassinating down the avenue. "Wilco," he said. "Good pick."

Audra closed her eyes, inhaled, then exhaled. "I think I'll have that beer after all."

## **Chapter Five — Miles**

The next morning, before he was even fully awake, Miles found himself faced with a tsunami of his own vomit. Between this, the pounding headache which made his brain feel two sizes too big for his skull, and the rippling chills that covered his body, he would have preferred to be dead than face a day filled with such physical and existential suffering. Those two tallboys he had downed after getting back to the apartment were the worst mistake he had made in recent memory, maybe even his entire life. He tried to stand, but his bones seemed to have an enormous weight to them, so he rested on the wall by the toilet and let his bloodshot gaze wander through the bathroom window, staring at a large brick house across the street.

The house stood on a high elevation, with steep stone steps and a cobblestone pathway that led to an oak front door. A steeple-like arch adorned the roof. The windows were so dark, so filled with shadows that Miles wondered if they had actually been painted black. The front lawn was mostly brown, with patches of weeds and veiny roots sprouting here and there. Oak trees loomed over the entire property, their gnarled branches letting in only scraps of sunlight. The place was, in a word, spooky. In the year Miles lived in Unit A of 150 West Hardwick Street, he had never seen a soul come in or out of the place, though he had seen the occasional light fill one of the upstairs bedrooms, which only made things creepier.

After a few minutes of studying the house through the blinds, he tested his strength again, and this time was able to lift himself from the bathroom floor. On his feet, he felt empty in the most spiritual and perfect way possible. He padded back to the bedroom and got back under the

covers with Audra. She was on her phone, typing at a speed that Miles only achieved after he'd had two cups of coffee.

"How're you holding up, cowboy?" she said in a mock John Wayne voice. Miles grumbled as he crashed onto the bed.

"Just barely," he said. He turned away when a dose of unadulterated sunlight blinded him. "Sorry to wake you."

"You're good. I needed to get an early start to send this off."

"What's that? Is some corpse of a history professor retiring and you have to give him one final brown-nose in the daily digest?"

Audra shot him a look; he wasn't sure if she was insulted or amused.

"You really did get good and lit last night, didn't you."

"It's what I do best," he said with a forced laugh.

"So you don't remember anything about what I told you about campus closing?"

Miles had completely forgotten about what Audra had told him last night on the drive home. He ran a hand through his hair, which was stiff and sore — wasn't it depressing that he was so hungover that even his *hair* hurt? — and said, "Right, right."

"I just finished a quick draft of the digest announcement. Can I read it to you?"

Miles nodded, pinching the bridge of his nose. Audra began,

*"Dear campus community,*

*Due to the spread of the novel coronavirus (also known as COVID-19), Central State College will be closing its campus effective Monday, March 16. In tandem with this closure, faculty and students will begin to transition to an online delivery of course material. Monday, March 16 to Friday, March 20 will be considered a Transition Week. Students will be required to leave campus by 5 PM on Friday; as well, instructors must be ready to teach remotely for the remainder of the semester. Classes will meet again — in an online setting — the following Monday, March 23. More information on specific*

*procedures as well as resources for online learning, will be sent to you in the coming days.*

*We are aware that there will most likely be a level of uncertainty and stress as we embark on this new phase of the semester. Please take heart in the fact that we are responding to this crisis as a community, and we know that students, faculty, and staff members alike will continue to practice the Three P's of Central State College: Passion, Perseverance, and Professionalism.*

*Sincerely,  
Central State College Communications Department*

“Not bad,” Miles said. “I’d take out words like *stress* and *crisis*, though.”

“I gotcha. Negative connotations. What about *uncertainty*?”

“Uncertainty has a negative connotation, but not in the same way as those other words. It’s more clinical-sounding, which is what a good university-wide update should sound like.”

They went back and forth about the placement of a couple commas, as well as the sign off — should she spice things up with something more personable, like *Warmly*? Miles decided against it — and then Audra sent it off for proofing.

Miles wanted to go back to sleep. Even though it was still somewhat early — a quarter past eight — he felt the window to slide back into slumber had passed. He had to face the day now. At least he had a pretty girl by his side as he worked through his hangover.

“You really don’t look so hot. Were you just throwing up?”

“What gave it away?” Miles said.

“Your breath,” Audra said plainly.

Miles cut his eyes away from Audra, and said, “It’s been a regular thing lately. I’m just on the wrong side of twenty-five, I guess.”

“Mixing booze with weed probably didn’t help much, either,” Audra said. When Miles gave her a miffed look, she shrugged, adding, “Just sayin’.”

Miles exhaled, trying to let go of all of the anxiety and achiness he felt. He was just about to let his full weight sink into the bed when he remembered the pills on his nightstand. He propped himself up on his elbow, rattled a white capsule out of the bottle, and tossed it in his mouth, dry. If he didn't take the pill first thing in the morning, he'd forget.

"I didn't know Viagra came in white," Audra said with an arched eyebrow. As sexy as she looked in that moment, with her dark, almond-shaped eyes, her cocoa skin, and her sublime hips hugging her panties, there was no way Miles could muster the energy to go for a second round after last night's post-party romp.

"Prozac," Miles said. He had been on the antidepressant since last fall, when he felt stressed out and unequipped to handle his new role as a composition instructor. He went to counseling services to get his anxieties off his chest. After a couple of sessions with a counselor named Sabrina who seemed stunned that Miles wasn't already on an antidepressant of some sort, he went to the only psychiatrist in town his student insurance plan would cover — an elderly Spanish man named Dr. Navarro who was almost totally deaf and needed a nurse to repeat parts of Miles' answers in a stern, loud voice. "HE'S DOING WELL, DOCTOR. NO SUICIDAL THOUGHTS IN TWO MONTHS." The nurse spoke so loud Miles was sure she could be heard in the lobby. Visiting Dr. Navarro was always a walk of shame, but it was the quickest way for Miles to achieve some chemical balance. He needed the Prozac, even if it was just for the placebo effect.

Audra tilted her head. "Miles, you know you can't drink on antidepressants. At least not like you did last night. It just makes you sick and more depressed."

"I didn't know that," Miles said. "How do you know? Are you on antidepressants?"

“Not currently, but I have been in the past. I always felt like walking death the morning after bar hopping on Bernard Street in my undergrad days. For the longest time I didn’t know what was wrong with me — I assumed I was just allergic to alcohol or something — but then my mom told me that some of the worst alcohol poisoning cases she’d seen at the hospital were from sorority girls who were on SSRIs. So, not to go all mommy on you, but you might want to scale it back. Either the pills or the booze.”

Miles nodded stiffly. He wasn’t used to the women that occasionally shared his bed being so level honest, and he wasn’t sure if he liked it. Either way, he found Audra’s unvarnished concern refreshing.

“I appreciate the opinion, Dr. Holmstead,” Miles said with a smile that made his face feel like it was deadlifting three hundred pounds. Something so easy and rewarding as smiling shouldn’t be this hard. “I’ll take it under consideration.” Audra held his eyes. Miles knew the conversation wasn’t over yet, even though he wanted it to be, even though all he wanted was a big glass of orange juice and a nice, greasy breakfast. But no, not yet. Audra still had things on her mind, and now that they were boyfriend and girlfriend, Miles had an obligation to hear her out. “Does my drinking bother you?” he asked, matching Audra’s directness.

Audra’s eyes veered to the window above the bed. She squinted slightly, as if trying to see through the slivers in between the blinds. “The drinking itself doesn’t bother me,” she said. “I just wonder if there’s a reason why you drink so much. If you’re trying to numb something or forget about something.”

Miles laughed, which made his stomach lurch in nauseated protest.

“I wasn’t molested as a kid, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

“That’s not what I’m getting at, exactly, but that’s good to know.”

A pregnant pause swelled between them. Miles closed his eyes, studying how the sunlight bled through his eyelids in muted reds and oranges.

“I shouldn’t be a prick about this,” he said, “I’ve actually been meaning to take a break from drinking for a while. It dawned on me the other day that since my first drink at twenty-one, I haven’t gone more than one or two days without getting totally blasted. I didn’t drink in high school, hated the taste, so I used to tell myself that I was making up for lost time. But now, I don’t know. It feels phony now. Maybe *I am* covering something up. I don’t know what it could be, though.” While he had been talking, he opened his eyes and looked out to the dark hallway of the apartment, out of reach from the soft glow of the morning light. He found himself in a whirlwind of strange emotions and murky memories, memories he couldn’t fully claim as his own, because he couldn’t fully remember them. An image or a sensation would flash in his mind, and he would try to chase it, grab hold of it, but the second he tried to close his fingers around it, the thing would fly away, carried off by the gusts churning in his head. After almost a full minute, he blinked himself back to his new girlfriend, his (their?) bed, as well as his stinging eyes and deflated stomach. He couldn’t wait anymore; a greasy hangover remedy was in order. “What do you say to some breakfast?”

“Sure,” Audra said. “I know just the place.”

## **Chapter Six — Audra**

After getting dressed in the clothes they had worn the night before, Audra forced Miles to drink some water, which Miles promptly hurled up. This was despite Audra's warning to take small sips and count to ten before going in for another. Miles drank faster than Audra could speak, however, and had downed the water before she could finish her instructions. As a result, he ralphed a splash of clear puke in the kitchen sink. Audra offered to drive to Lottie's Diner, but Miles said no, he needed to drive or else he'd get sick.

“Are you sure you want to eat solids?” she asked.

Nodding, Miles said, “I need something to soak up this devil punch.”

As they approached the traffic light in front of Miles' apartment, he asked, “Which way?”

Audra looked at him, stunned. How could Miles not know the way to the Stembridgeville culinary institution that was Lottie's Diner? How could anyone call themselves a true resident of Stembridgeville without having experienced the sugar of Lottie's famous cinnamon rolls coursing through their veins? This was more than a crying shame. For Audra, who had grown up with weekly Saturday morning visits to the southside diner, this was an abomination.

“Don't tell me you've lived here for a year and have never been to Lottie's,” Audra said. The light turned green. Miles was in between lanes. The car behind them honked.

“Which way?” Miles said again, almost shouting this time.

“Right!”

Miles swerved right onto Washington Street, and towards Stenbridgeville's southside, where they had gotten pulled over the night before. Audra was still rattled by the officer's colorless eyes and sharp tone when he spoke to her. She was also disturbed by the fact that when Miles butted in, the officer took on a new personality entirely. He was forgiving, apologetic even, sorry for bothering a nice young couple coming home from the play. The fact that Miles reeked of weed and booze compounded her resentment towards the cop. If one of her male cousins had been so stupid to smoke a blunt then immediately jump into a car, they certainly wouldn't have faced the same genial police treatment Miles had.

Miles rolled down his window, and Audra followed suit, allowing their hands to coast in the early spring winds. A public radio quiz show soundtracked the drive. Audra wished the jazz program from the night before was still on. That, or some B yonce or Sufjan Stevens. Sufjan would really fit the sunny Sunday mood right about now. She could hardly wait to sink her teeth into that first bite of Lottie's perfectly fluffy blueberry pancakes. It would be the best remedy to reset her mood after last night's traffic stop. There was that bombshell work email, too, but she could wait to worry about that until Monday.

"The parking lot is on your left, just past the Bojangles," she said. The place was a hole in the wall, so nondescript you could barely see the squat brick building from the street. Miles put on his blinker and turned into the parking lot, which was a mixture of gravel and dirt.

Immediately, Audra sensed something wasn't right. There was the only car in the lot, and the restaurant was empty of customers and light. The usual Saturday morning hustle and bustle was nonexistent. The darkness inside the restaurant made it seem the hustle and bustle never existed at all, as if Lottie's was just another abandoned building in a town full of broken windows, boarded up entryways, and forsaken foundations.

“What the...” Audra said. Her voice trailed off as she noticed a sign posted on the door.

“*Due to Coronavirus, we are temporarily closing our restaurant,*” Miles read. “*Check back soon and God Bless.*”

“Fuuuck,” Audra sighed, finishing her original sentiment. She looked at Miles, who was already looking at her. “This is bad, Miles. This is really bad.”

They drove back to the apartment, not quite having lost their appetite but enough to no longer crave a sugary, greasy fare. Miles fried some eggs and put a couple pieces of bread in the toaster as Audra took a closer look through his modest record collection. She was endeared by the presence of Miles Davis’ *Kind of Blue*, but her admiration was quickly offset by Morrisry’s entire solo discography, from *Viva Hate* to his latest, *California Son*. This could have been forgiven if Miles owned a single Smiths album — *Meat Is Murder* had been one of Audra’s favorite records in high school, when she went through a moody vegetarian phase — but alas, Johnny Marr and the other Smiths were nowhere to be seen. It was almost as if Miles had gone out of his way to show his support for the controversial musician.

“You can play something if you’d like,” Miles said from the kitchen, but Audra found it hard to focus on record flipping now. The sight of Lottie’s Diner hollow on a Saturday morning was one she never thought she’d see. It haunted her. It also made the epidemic feel less hypothetical, less of a headline, and more real.

“Order up,” Miles said with the upbeat flair of a short order cook. He brought out two plates piled high with scrambled eggs and shining, buttered toast. He set the steaming plates down on two purple placemats, filthy with crumbs and stains. “You didn’t find something to put on?”

“Records so white,” Audra said, playing off the hashtag about the Oscars a few years prior.

“You didn’t see the Miles Davis album?” Miles said.

“I did,” Audra said. “But, like, everyone who has a record collection has that album. It’s like a law.”

Miles laughed and went to the console that held his records, and plucked out a St. Vincent record.

“Annie Clark is good for all occasions,” he said, lowering the vinyl onto the record player. As the first song filled the apartment and Miles dug into his fluffy scrambled eggs, Audra’s thoughts meandered to her sisters, her parents, Alice and Larry, and the last family vacation they had taken together in Myrtle Beach. This was just a couple months after Alice had discovered Larry slumped on the bathroom floor, unresponsive, his pale face turned blue. Diabetic coma, the doctors explained before they removed half of his lower intestine. His years of the daily Wild Turkey and 7 and 7 nightcaps had finally caught up with him. He spent five days in a coma, a month total in the hospital. Coincidentally, it was the same hospital where Alice worked for close to two decades — Bundry Memorial. After Larry was discharged, there was no question about his drinking. He had to stop, or else it would cost him his life.

The day he was discharged was the day he pitched the idea of a family vacation.

“If I ain’t drinking, I gotta do *something*,” he said.

Everyone thought he might not be up for traveling and, perhaps even more challenging, not drinking on vacation, but he turned out to be a good sport, opting to build sand castles with Devin and Sunny instead of posting up at a beachside bar. Audra’s mother and sisters were ready to rebuke Larry for even mentioning the word *margarita*, but it wasn’t necessary. All the worry

was for nothing. Everyone had a blast. On the drive back, Larry even said, “That was the best vacation we’ve ever been on.”

Audra had to agree.

Miles was halfway done with his eggs and Audra had taken only a single bite of hers when she heard a pulsing vibration coming from the other room. Her phone. She got up from the table and saw that it was her mother calling.

“Where are you?” Alice said. Audra was startled by her mother’s abruptness. Her words felt like a slap in the face.

“I’m at a friend’s,” Audra said. “Well. He’s more than a friend, actually. Is everything alright?”

“I didn’t tell you this, but they started testing people at the hospital. My results just came back. I tested positive.”

Audra sat on the couch. She felt as if the wind had been knocked out of her. Several long seconds passed. Then Alice said, “Are you there?”

“I’m here. I hear you.”

“I feel fine,” Alice said. “I guess I’m asymptomatic, which is good. But still, your father and I have to quarantine for two weeks.”

Audra’s heart felt like it had just fallen off a cliff. Everything around her had turned to a blur.

“I’ll come over right now,” she said with a sureness that surprised her. “We can quarantine together.”

“No,” Alice said. “Not with your asthma. You need to find somewhere else to stay.”

“Well, I’m with this guy,” Audra said. “Maybe I can stay with him.” She looked to Miles, who had been digging a pinky in his ear while she wasn’t looking.

Several seconds of disgusted wonderment passed for Audra, and still he didn’t notice her. She liked him, she really did — he was well-read, could carry a conversation, and his curly hair matched with his nerdy glasses made her swoon — but her stomach swerved with uneasiness as she watched Miles inspect his waxy findings. For the first time since she and Miles had referred to her as his girlfriend, she wondered if they had become official too soon. The timing wasn’t the best, that was for sure. Who changes their Facebook relationship status in a pandemic? *Hella tacky*, she thought. Then again, you could make the same argument for just about anything. Who the hell goes grocery shopping in a pandemic? Who the hell takes their dog for a walk? Who the hell dares to step outside their house? There were some things that had to be done, pandemic or not.

“Well, I don’t know about that,” Alice said warily. “How long have you known him?”

“About a month,” Audra said. It was a lie. They had known each other for two, maybe three weeks max. “He’s pretty chill. He’s a graduate student at the university. Teaches freshman comp. Has a nice two-bedroom apartment downtown.”

At this Miles swiveled his head to Audra, suddenly curiosity. Audra crossed her arms, gave Miles a wink, then stepped into the bedroom.

“No roommate?” Alice asked.

“No roommate.”

“Sounds like he’s got a nice situation,” Alice said. “But still. You should check with one of your sisters first.”

Audra sat on the full-sized bed, which was comfortable enough, but she missed her queen-sized bed at home, the one she had broken in with Ezra over their one year of marriage. It was so spacious, and smelled much better than this old thing, which smelled like a middle school boys locker room.

“What about clothes?” Audra said. “What about Eleanor? I can’t go half a month without seeing her. I just can’t.”

“Your sisters should let you borrow some things,” Alice said. “I don’t know what to tell you about Eleanor. I’m not letting anyone in or out of this house. We’ll feed her, take good care of her. Lord knows we’ll have the time.”

The reality of the situation was beginning to weigh on Audra. She exhaled and her shoulders dropped, depressed. Her stomach felt like a shriveled up raisin. A homesick raisin.

Liz lived with Sunny and her husband, George, in a one bedroom apartment near the student dorms. Rebecca and her family lived in a literal tiny house in the sticks of Kleinstock, where even though they had indoor plumbing, the family always joked that Rebecca used an outhouse. *That’s where I’d sleep*, Audra told herself. She’d call her sisters, but she wouldn’t press too hard. The best option was the one she had right in front of her. Hopefully Miles would agree. If he didn’t, Audra would take it as a commitment red flag.

After Audra made Alice promise that she’d keep her abreast on her illness, she returned to the dining room, where she saw that Miles had cleared the table and was nursing a fresh cup of black coffee.

“Everything okay?” he said, blowing gently at the steam rising from his mug.

“Not really,” Audra said in a seesawing tone. She wasn’t sure how to tell him, so she simply blurted it out. “My mom has the virus.”

Miles’ eyes widened to the size of dollar coins. “You’re joking.”

“I wish I was. She and my dad have to quarantine for two weeks. She’s not letting me come back home.”

“Why not?”

“They say COVID can really fuck up people with asthma,” she said.

“You have asthma?” Miles said.

Audra cocked her head. She was pretty sure she’d mentioned it on their first date and once or twice since then. And besides, hadn’t he noticed her clambering for her inhaler during the traffic stop? Hadn’t he seen her race to her car to retrieve it from her car the second they pulled into the carport outside Miles’ apartment? For someone who was supposed to make astute observations, he didn’t seem that observant. Audra took out her inhaler from her pocket and rattled it.

“Gotcha. Interesting.” Miles lowered his gaze somewhere between Audra and his coffee. “So, what’re you going to do?”

Audra blinked, caught off guard by Miles’ lukewarm response. He was now her boyfriend, after all. It was time for him to step up his game a bit.

“I was thinking I could stay here,” Audra said, an apologetic cringe forming on her face, “if that’s cool.”

“Yeah,” Miles said. “Of course it’s cool. What kind of boyfriend would I be if I kicked you out on your ass?”

*Exactly!* Audra thought, but instead she played coy, saying, “Are you sure? I have other options,” Saying this, she was instantly reminded of the imaginary outhouse in Rebecca’s backyard, as well as the teepee trees and beer cans that littered the sidewalk outside of Liz’s apartment.

Miles waved a hand. “It’s no sweat. It’ll be nice to have you here. I feel like I’m hogging up all of this extra space, anyway.”

Audra smiled, letting go of a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding onto.

## **Chapter Seven — Miles**

No rice. No beans. No pasta. No beef. Supermarket shelves were empty of half of the things on the grocery list Audra had given him, along with her debit card. It was a trope so hacky he felt he was in an apocalyptic pandemic film as he waded through the hordes of anxious shoppers. Although he tried to keep a six foot distance from everyone, his fellow shoppers didn't acknowledge the CDC recommendation as they lunged for cans of tuna and hand sanitizer. Miles grabbed four bottles of Meyer's hand soap — the only brand left and the most expensive. As he left the aisle, he overheard the beginning of a shouting match between two women, and felt he had dodged a bullet.

He stopped in the feminine care aisle to regroup and reassess the shopping list, which was more elaborate (and expensive) than any list Miles had ever done for himself. Typically, he spent his monthly paycheck of roughly nine hundred dollars on eggs, bread, peanut butter, tuna, pasta, and bananas from Markt, a small German chain store. When he felt like treating himself he'd sometimes throw in a frozen stir fry mix, or provisions for chili. He wasn't big on sweets. He went to Hadley's, the big box grocery store, only twice a month to buy a thirty pack of Miller Lite, which cost twenty-two dollars with his fuel points card. Every purchase pained him, even if he was just picking up odds and ends. For the most part his money went towards rent and utility bills. He found himself taking advantage of the billing grace periods more often than not.

During his first few months in Stembridgeville, he had luxuriated in the privacy and spaciousness afforded to him for living alone. For the first time in his life, he could browse

through porn in the living room, and when he found what he was looking for, he could masturbate in any room he desired, a perverse Choose-Your-Own-Adventure. He could dance to Talking Heads in the hall in his underwear for hours, without a worry about annoying his parents or being judged by a roommate. It was a blissful time. But then winter came, and his gas bill nearly tripled when he began adjusting the thermostat. The money tightened even further when buying Christmas gifts. Most days he was a few dollars away from overdrawing his checking account. It was during this time he started to entertain the idea of taking on a roommate. Aside from the financial relief, it would be nice to have someone to share meals with, someone to bounce ideas off of and exchange rants on problemed students. Someone to say good morning and goodnight to. It wasn't a romantic thing, of course. Miles was just tired of paying so much for a solitude he didn't even enjoy much anymore.

An employee restocking the shelves with tampons coughed, and Miles almost bolted from the aisle. But then a thought crossed his mind... *Should I get condoms? If shit is really hitting the fan, and it looks like it is, we might have much else to do other than fuck like rabbits.* Without any more reflection, he plucked a twelve pack of condoms from a conspicuous display and went back to Aisle Nine, where he grabbed a large tub of couscous, next to where the rice had been raptured. In the next aisle over, he hauled all of the canned salmon and oysters in sight, and several cans of mixed vegetables — adequate substitutes for the beef and beans, he thought. In all of the hustle and bustle, his grip on Audra's list slackened, and it fell to the ground in front of the empty soup shelves. Miles didn't notice this, but rather continued cruising the aisles, grabbing what he could from the shelves. There wasn't much left anywhere, and what little did remain was organic and overpriced. *Beggars can't be choosers*, he thought as he dropped a five dollar box of mac 'n' cheese into his cart. He felt good about his stockpile then, even if he hadn't

gotten a single item from Audra's list of produce and meat. It wasn't his fault the store was out of chicken breasts, and there was no way he was going to touch an apple or an avocado some sick person probably sneezed on. *Yes, he thought, we'll be good for a while.*

As he headed for the checkout, he took a shortcut through the wine section. Even though he still had a pounding headache and his stomach felt like a hunk of tenderized meat, he still felt the familiar thirst creep up his throat and cause his mouth to water. He plucked a mid-priced red blend with a jester on the label. He read the description on the back detailing the *hints of raspberry and cocoa*, and how *you'll become a fool for our wine with just one taste.*

Miles shook his head at the corny copy, placed the bottle into the basket, continued to the checkout. After a minute of standing in line, he turned around and put the bottle back where he'd found it.

## **Chapter Eight — Audra**

After Miles left to get groceries, Audra called her sister Rebecca. There was the matter about letting her crash at her place, as well as the clothes, but neither was quite at the forefront of her mind. If she was honest, she wasn't exactly sure what was at the forefront of her mind. Really, it was more of an oblique feeling of dread and depression, rather than a concrete thought. A big, gray cloud or a pile of messy yarn. More than anything, Audra needed someone to help her untangle the yarn and get her head on straight. Rebecca, the middle Holmstead daughter, was Audra's go-to person whenever she had a personal crisis. It wasn't that Audra disliked or didn't trust Liz, who was nearing forty, was more settled, and more established in her role as an Assistant Journalism Professor (tenure forthcoming), a mother, and a wife. Liz could listen and sympathize with Audra's twenty-something issues, but her advice often sounded like that of a parent, rather than a sister. In a way, it had always been this way, as Liz often saw herself as a third parent to Rebecca and Audra. She organized family vacations and birthdays. She maintained a spreadsheet for the Holmstead family diet and weight loss program. She insisted on hosting Thanksgiving every year in her cramped two bedroom apartment, baking the turkey and most of the desserts. Rebecca wasn't like that at all. Rebecca crumpled up the vacation itinerary the second Liz turned away, and went to Outback immediately after their monthly family weigh-ins. She may not be perfect, Audra knew, but she always gave reasonable responses and listened without judgement.

When Rebecca answered the phone, she was on her way home from a birthday party for one of Devin's friends.

"My son bit two kids today." Rebecca was in full rant mode. Audra heard Devin's unhinged crying fit in the background. "Lesley and Patricia are about to kick us out of their friend group. I can feel an ousting on the horizon, Aud. And what am I gonna do then? Let Donnie watch him all weekend?"

"Shit," Audra said. "Donnie'll probably lose him in the corn stocks. Those aliens from *Signs* will get him." Rebecca and Audra laughed. Even Devin seemed to chuckle. "So I guess you heard about Mom and Dad."

"I got a voicemail from Mom. Haven't had a chance to call her back yet. I guess this means you gotta hunker down, too?"

"Actually, I'm at this guy's house. He's letting me stay with him for a couple weeks. If mom asks you, though, I asked if I could stay with you first."

"Why *don't* you stay with us?" Rebecca asked.

"Um, 'cause y'all are at capacity, ma'am."

"Uh-huh. And tell me, how big is his dick?"

"Excuse me! That's how you talk with your son around?"

As she spoke, Audra's eyes were fixed on a framed drawing above the couch in the living room, which portrayed a man in a red bowtie and a woman in a dress standing with two bug-eyed dogs. The drawing — which looked like it had been done with Magic Markers and ballpoint pen — was very primitive. The outfits of the couple hadn't even been colored in. The dogs, as well, were a pair of pale, sketchy creatures. All of the faces had a lifeless, one dimensional quality about them. Audra imagined Sunny looking at the piece and saying

something like, “I don’t like zombies!” or “Stranger danger!” a phrase George had passed down to her. Audra thought Sunny herself could easily draw something close to the chicken scratch artwork she saw before her. She made a mental note to ask Miles about the drawing’s *provenance* (a term she had picked up in an upper-elective art history class).

“Hmmm,” Rebecca said. “White guy?”

“Yeah,” Audra said. “So what?”

“You and your *New Yorker* tote bag and your white boys,” Rebecca said. “I don’t get it.”

Audra pulled the phone away from her ear so her sister wouldn’t hear her vexed sigh. She was tempted to end the call right there.

“It’s just weird, because last night we went to a party and he referred to me as his girlfriend, even though we’ve only hooked up, like, twice. He’s cute and all, and he has a pretty dope pad... but I don’t know. I feel like I’m mooching. And there’s so much he doesn’t know about me. He doesn’t know I’m married, for one thing. He doesn’t know that I sometimes fart so loud in my sleep I wake myself up. Just today he put two and two together and noticed that I’m asthmatic, even though my inhaler is literally attached to my hip.”

She suddenly remembered scrambling for her inhaler in Miles’ car the night before, during the traffic stop. She decided to omit this bit of information.

“Oof. This boy sounds dumb as hell,” Rebecca said.

“Thanks, but I didn’t order the cold comfort.”

“Where’s he live? By the college?”

“Yup,” Audra said, sitting down on the stiff blue IKEA couch. She had been grateful she hadn’t needed to sit on it for too long when hooking up with Miles, but now that would probably

change. “Two blocks from where I work. Or used to work. Campus is on lockdown for the rest of the semester.”

“Lucky you. General Cornish refuses to close campus, even though one of our custodians tested positive.” Rebecca worked at a local military prep school, serving as the administrative assistant to the school’s principal, General Archibald Cornish. “It’s all about dollars and cents to him.” She sighed. “Well. Give it a few days. Don’t eat any cabbage or broccoli, screen Ezra’s calls, and you should be good. But the minute you see a MAGA hat lying around, give me a call, and you can come stay with us. I ain’t playin’. I’m not about to let some white boy turn my sister into a Republican.”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” Audra said. “He still has a Bernie 2016 sticker on his bumper.”

“So he’s a Bernie Bro! That sounds about right.”

Audra ended the call with a promise to keep Rebecca abreast on any odd occurrences or clues to conservative leanings. The second she set the phone beside her on the couch, she realized she’d forgotten to ask her sister about borrowing some clothes. It wasn’t much of a loss, she thought. Both Liz and Rebecca had a hard time losing their baby weight, and now wore clothes two sizes bigger than Audra. It wasn’t a big difference, but it would be enough for Audra to be uncomfortable in their oversized blouses and baggy jeans.

That meant she would have to go to the storage unit, the one she had started renting when she separated from Ezra months earlier.

She felt her mind begin to unwind now, and not in the way she would have liked. Her thoughts spiraled back to a Tuesday morning months earlier, when she woke up alone in bed after yet another drug-filled evening with Ezra. He had been into weed and mushrooms for as

long as Audra had known him, dealing on and off. Audra didn't mind this because he was discreet and only dealt to friends and friends of friends with a reference. She knew where he kept his inventory — in the bottom of his underwear drawer — but never saw it change hands. Once or twice, she had even tripped with him, just to show her then boyfriend that she was a team player. After they married in a courthouse, however, Ezra's weekend habits spilled into the weekdays, and he started pouring whiskey and cheap beer on top of the nightly joints. He started inviting over his clientele to the little ranch house they rented just a couple blocks from where she was now. They huddled around bonfires in the front yard and played beer pong with the reckless abandon of college freshmen. One Saturday the cops were called for a noise complaint. When they saw Ezra's crossfaded eyes and heard his slurred voice, they gave him a warning that next time they would take him in for public intoxication. The following weekend, the cops were called again, and he spent the night in jail. When he was let out the next morning, he joked with friends that he had spent the night at the worst Airbnb in town.

It wasn't long after that he lost his job at a computer repair shop — he told Audra he quit because his boss had thought he was stealing, but Audra had her suspicions. With his schedule wide open now, he went head-on into dealing, and even acquired a couple plants. During the day, he would water and trim them and smoke, burning through countless hours of Adult Swim shows. In the evening, — right when Audra came home, it seemed — he left the house to “run some errands.” Audra knew this was code for dealing, among other things. Each night, she prepared herself a microwavable meal and sat in front of the TV to watch the latest binge worthy drama series from HBO, Ellie at her side.

It was almost as if Ezra could no longer bear being alone with Audra. Did he feel trapped in marriage? Audra wondered. Every now and then she would comment on the empty beer cans

she'd tripped over on her way to work, or that he should open a window if he was going to smoke so much, but Ezra would meet Audra's nudges to sober up with a complacent shrug.

One evening, Audra came home from work to find an eager Ezra holding a brown paper bag, unable to hide a toothy grin. It had been so long since she'd seen him smile like that. His smile was so pure, so childlike, it gave her an endorphin rush. She asked what was in the bag, and Ezra pulled out two orange mushrooms with slender white stems. "I'm staying in tonight," he said. "I want us to trip together. It's been too long." Audra obliged, and while she changed out of her work clothes Ezra brewed the mushrooms in a tea. They sat together on the couch, clinked mugs, and drank. "Happy trails," Ezra said. The taste was awful. Audra drank only half of her mug while Ezra downed the whole thing. For a brief moment, Audra thought, so this is what normal people do after work. Drink tea. Sit and talk. Crack jokes. Then she remembered the fact that she and her husband had just ingested psychedelic mushrooms within minutes of getting home from work, and no, this was not normal. It was very, very far from normal.

The next morning Audra said she wanted a divorce and Ezra complied. It hurt Audra that he agreed with her so easily, but it had to be done. At twenty-eight, she felt the clock ticking on her dream to move to Atlanta, get a job at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and make a name for herself as an investigative journalist. There was still time for her to get her foot in the door, but she couldn't do this while babysitting a drug dealing husband.

Audra heard a key in a lock, and after a few seconds of muffled fumbling sounds, Miles opened the door, his hands anchored with plastic bags. Audra got up to help him unload the groceries in the kitchen.

"The store was a madhouse," Miles said. "Good thing you didn't go."

“I hope you were careful,” Audra said. She pulled out a tub of multicolored couscous from one of the bags and examined it as if it was a prehistoric fossil. “What’s this?”

“Couscous. They were clean out of rice, so I figured that was the next best thing. It’s good! Have you had it?”

Audra shook her head with a bemused smile. If Miles wasn’t so damned cute when he got excited — and that was often — Audra would be mad pissed at him right now.

“My mom makes this amazing couscous salad, with olives, peppers, parsley, salmon... an old family recipe. I’m going to try and recreate it.”

“You didn’t look anywhere else for rice?” Audra asked. She was still smiling, but it was just a mask for her disappointment. After the shitty news she’d received, she wanted nothing more than to taste her mother’s classic curry chicken and rice, which she herself had perfected the recipe a long time ago, when she was a broke ass freshman living in the dorms of Central Georgia College.

“Trust me. When shit hits the fan, rice and bread are the first things to evaporate from the shelves.”

Audra pursed her lips, thinking. “Maybe we can do chicken and couscous — would that be good? You did get the chicken breast, right?”

Miles tilted his head apologetically. “I would, if there had been any left.”

“You could have at least checked,” Audra said. Her face started to crumble as she examined the can of mixed vegetables. First Lottie’s closing, then her mother’s infection, now this? Audra couldn’t bear it.

“I’m telling you, Audra, people were on the verge of looting. It would have been the same if I’d gone anywhere else. Probably worse. The whole reason you’re staying here is so that

you don't get sick, right? I can't be going into stores willy nilly, especially without a mask or gloves. You said you want me to be careful. So that means limiting the number of grocery trips I make."

Audra felt herself reeling back from Miles, blinking back a sudden wetness that had sprung in her eyes. She knew Miles was right in a way, but she didn't need this attitude. She wanted to put him back in his place, but she didn't have the energy. Not now. Not after this shitstorm of a day. It was all too much. Her shoulders spiked as she drew in a breath. She let it out. A nauseous pre-puke feeling rose in her as tears rolled down her cheeks. Miles became a blur on the other side of her tears, a shapeless thing, but she felt his arms wrap her, and was comforted by him, even though she still wanted to tell him off. That could wait for another day, she figured.

He put a hand on her back and on her head and pulled her close without saying anything. They stood embracing each other for close to a minute before Audra gave a determined snuffle, stepped back from Miles, and planted her hands on his shoulders.

"Next time, I'm doing the grocery shopping. I'll put in an order online and you can pick it up curbside."

She blinked once, twice. Miles was back and smiling.

"You got it," he said. "Let's finish putting this stuff away. I got some ice cream for us, and I'd hate for it to get too soft."

As they emptied the bags and filled the fridge and cupboards, Audra continued to poke fun at the stuff Miles had gotten, and he explained what exactly he could do with the canned goods and frozen meats. When Audra saw the organic mac 'n' cheese, she held it up and said, "We're having this for dinner tonight. You won't convince me otherwise."

Miles filled a pot with water to boil, and Audra went out into the dining room to set the table and put on a record — Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue*. “So What?” filled the apartment, and she watched as the sun pummeled downtown Stenbridgeville. At this time less than a month ago, the sun would've been descending, fading, making its exit for the day. Now, it seemed to be in full force, interminable. It was a strange backdrop for dinner, she thought.

An ice cold shock sprang up on her arm, and she spun around to Miles offering her a Razz-Cranberry La Croix. She hit him on the arm, playfully, and accepted the drink.

“I hope the flavor is to your liking,” Miles said, cracking one open for himself. “I've never had these.”

“What?! You've never had a La Croix? For shame.”

“I don't think I've ever had sparkling water period. But I figure it's probably a decent substitute for beer.”

“Oh? Does that mean what I think it means?” Audra took a test sip from her La Croix, and was pleased with the tart flavor.

Miles nodded. “I took our conversation under advisement and thought, yeah, it's time for a break from the boozing.”

Audra was mildly surprised at this — they had just had their talk about drinking that morning — but she would gladly take it over the shitty shit news of the day. “Miles... that's awesome. Good for you.”

They clinked cans. Miles frowned. “Doesn't have quite the same ring at a bottleneck, but whatever.” He took a long pull from his can, as if he could get drunk off the stuff if he drank enough. “Hey! What do you say to roasted broccoli as a side to the mac 'n' cheese? I was

looking through the freezer and found this bag of frozen broccoli that's been there forever. I could sprinkle some parmesan cheese on top and it'd be good to go."

Audra felt a hitch in her throat, causing her to almost spit out the Razz-Cranberry goodness. Her sister's words replayed in her mind — *Avoid broccoli and cabbage!* She rested a hand on her stomach, which no doubt would take a tumble if she put in a single green floret in her body. *Fartapalooza* is what Rebecca coined Audra's digestive process after a family reunion potluck, and there was no way Audra could let Miles see that side of her this early on.

"That sounds... delicious," Audra said, "but I'm allergic?"

Miles scratched his head, jokingly. "Is that so?"

"Yes," Audra said slowly, then again, with more conviction, as if it were a personal affirmation to be said while looking at oneself in the bathroom mirror. "Yes. I'm allergic to broccoli."

"Alrighty," Miles said. "I guess it's bought itself another month's rent in my freezer, then."

"Man 'n' cheese is so carby, anyway, it should be filling by itself," Audra explained. Miles held her gaze, studying her, then took another hefty sip of La Croix.

"Good point," he said. He raised his can then went back into the kitchen. The second he was out of sight, Audra tore a paper towel from a roll that stood on the table and patted her forehead, which had become beaded with sweat.

As Miles brought out the bowls of mac 'n' cheese, Audra flipped the record to the second side. On her way to her chair, Miles scooped an arm around her waist and kissed her.

Pulling away from her, he recited the line of an old viral video they had talked about on their first date. "Hey! I think you're really cool..."

“I like you a lot,” Audra said, joining him; together they finished, “Maybe we can hang out or something?”

They laughed at their goofiness, and Audra went in for another kiss. She had to admit, he was an amazing kisser. He was better than Ezra, at least, who had seemed to try to smother Audra with his lips and tongue. Miles, on the other hand, was gentle yet investigative, but not in a prying way. His soft lips established a sense of trust as his tongue fit perfectly with hers. It never went too deep, but Audra felt it was trying to discover the core of who she was, without regard to how raw or unattractive it might be. He wanted her jagged parts. He wanted her vulnerable sides. He wanted all of her, but on her terms. Audra was entirely okay with this.

“Thanks for dinner,” she said.

“My pleasure,” he said as they sat down. “Sorry... I sounded like a Chik-fil-A employee just then, didn't I?”

They ate in silence for a minute or two, with “Flamenco Sketches” serving as a soundtrack to their satisfied chewing. Halfway through her bowl (it was so good! Well worth the splurge) Audra noticed the unfinished artwork in the living room through her peripheral vision.

“What's the story behind that?” she asked, gesturing with her cheesy fork.

“Oh, that?” Miles said. “My grandfather drew that.”

“Really? So he was an artist?”

Miles nodded, chomping on a particularly big bite of pasta. “He and my grandma lived on a dairy farm in Vermont. He did wood sculptures and drew portraits of the townspeople in his spare time, usually during the cold months. His work is in the permanent collection of the American Folk Art Museum in New York.”

“Holy shit. What’s his name? I took this art history survey when I was an undergrad, ‘Americana Art 1800-Present.’ I might have read about him.”

“Holden Holster.”

Audra leaned over to Miles, her eyes buggy. “Holden Holster is your grandpa? *The Holden Holster?*”

Miles raised his second La Croix of the evening to his mouth, smiling wryly. “Are there a ton of Holden Holsters running around?”

“You true, you true. It’s just a bit surreal. Our teacher showed us one of his paintings —”

“Drawings,” Miles interjected. “He drew, technically.”

“Right. We looked at this famous drawing of his that he did on the back of a cereal box. I forget the name, but I remember it had a weird looking chicken in it. The professor spent, like, twenty minutes talking about the detail on the roof of the barn and the chicken’s feathers... he was obsessed! I didn’t really get his appeal, no offense, but your grandpa must’ve done something right to end up in museums and textbooks.”

Miles’ smile flattened a little. “Yeah... I really like his stuff. I never got to know him personally — he died of lung cancer before my first birthday — but I feel I have a relationship with him through his art. Who he was. What his life was like. What his values were. He had an incredible work ethic, that’s for damn sure. He took up drawing late in life, but still managed to crank out more than ten thousand drawings, hundreds of sculptures. He was drawing up to the week he died.” Miles cocked his head to the drawing. “That was one of his last drawings. Right before I graduated high school, my mom, his daughter, was getting ready to donate his personal collection to the Smithsonian. She was going to hold on to some, and asked me if there were any

that I wanted for myself. That's the one I picked. It's unfinished, obviously, but I don't know. It speaks to me. The people are empty vessels, just like I was at the time.

And now that I've moved away and gone to college and all that, I now see it as a metaphor for self-improvement. Like, there's always room for me to grow and improve. There's always going to be some color that needs to be drawn in, some areas that need to be refined. Of course, my grandpa never intended that to be the message. He didn't draw or sculpt for intellectual reasons. He just loved doing it, and it helped pass the time when things on the farm were slow. Here and there, a small gallery would show his work and he'd sell a few things, which was nice, but he was always surprised whenever someone bought his work."

"What did he value?" Audra asked, tracing her fork in the half full bowl.

"Huh?" Miles said.

"You said you like his work because it shows you who he was and what his values were. What were his values?"

Miles' mouth tilted in thought. "Family, I guess. Community. Hard work. Persistence. Those sorts of things. Things that come in handy when you live on a farm."

They finished their dinner, and Miles changed the record to Edith Piaf. Audra insisted on washing the dishes, to which Miles said, "Good, because I insist on drying." "La Vie, L'Amour" filled the room, and Audra couldn't help but think of party streamers and balloons, chandeliers and candelabras.

They went to bed shortly after putting away the dishes. The next morning, Audra would be surprised at how easily she'd fallen asleep.

## **Chapter Nine — Miles**

When Miles woke up and realized his head wasn't a thorny, throbbing mess, nor did his stomach feel like a carnival ride unhinged from its moorings, he thought he might still be dreaming. With Audra still asleep, he got out of bed, made coffee, got dressed, and opened the blinds. Surely the stark sunlight would either snap him out of this dream, or his senses would sharpen, and the pain he usually felt after a night of heavy drinking would finally hit him. But no. His head and stomach didn't feel even the least bit sour or throbbing. He felt balanced and light. There was the initial morning grogginess, sure, but that would evaporate after a couple gulps of coffee. He poured himself a cup and sat by the window in the living room. The sunlight slanted down on him, and for the first time in recent memory he enjoyed the mellow glow of the morning light. When he was hungover, sunlight was something to be avoided at all costs. But not now. He felt different now, felt he could welcome anything or anyone at all into his life.

As he sipped his coffee, his eyes wandered to his grandfather's drawing, which made him think of his mother and how he owed her a call, especially with everything going on. He was on good terms with everyone in his family — from his parents to his assorted aunts and uncles and cousins — but since he had moved three hours away, keeping up with everyone's life didn't feel as high of a priority as when he was living at home. He resented himself for not being better at responding to texts or making regular phone calls, but now it was just easier to think of himself not as someone's son, but rather his own person, a young man pursuing a career in scholarship

and pedagogy. It was only in these rare moments of stillness did Miles feel pangs of regret for not keeping in touch. He picked up his phone and called.

“Is everything okay?” his mom, Sheila, said after they’d exchanged hellos. “It’s early for a Sunday. Well, not if you go to church. We’re just signing off from the nine o’clock service. The church is closed but Sonny is still going in and doing his sermons live on Sunday mornings. It’s nice.”

“Everything’s fine,” Miles said. “Just thought I’d check in and see how everyone’s doing with all this craziness going on. Are the schools still in session?”

“Cantrell High just announced they’re going online for the rest of the year. Your cousin Lauren was supposed to graduate, you know, but they’re doing a virtual ceremony instead. Aunt Sally is P.O.-ed.”

Miles had to laugh at his mom’s squeaky clean vocabulary. As a kid, he wasn’t allowed to say *Shut up!* or *You suck!* and if he so much as muttered the word *crap* he would be obligated to drop a quarter in the swear jar. What made his mom’s no-swearing policy moderately bearable is that she, too, abided by the rules.

“They just cancelled in person classes down here, too,” Miles said. “Everything will be online starting Monday. That’ll be... fun.”

“I bet that’ll be a doozy.”

“To say the least.” In the background, Miles heard the savory sizzle of a frying pan. “Is dad making crepes?”

“You bet. We thought we’d treat ourselves to something special.”

Miles smiled at the memories of devouring crepes on Christmas mornings past, crepes stuffed with brown sugar and raspberry jam. His mouth watered as his mom explained to his dad that she was talking to Miles, and to say hello.

“Hello, son,” Miles’ dad, Daniel, said. “Long time no see. When are you coming up for a visit? I’ve got some quarter pound burger patties with your name on them.”

“It’s funny you mention that, because my schedule is pretty open these days,” Miles said. From his periphery he heard hardwood creaking lightly, and turned to see Audra padding towards him. She wore an oversized *Stranger Things* shirt that reached midway down her thighs. Her hair was a nest of dark brambles and her eyes still seemed lost in a dream. He reached out for her hand and she surprised him by sitting on his lap. Just then, he realized that last night was the first time Audre had slept over without them having sex. This didn’t bother him; in fact, he felt it was a small milestone. “Could I bring a friend?”

“Of course!” Sheila said. “You know we love Kevin.”

Last Thanksgiving, when Mira was working a double at the hospital and Kevin couldn’t swing a plane ticket home, Miles brought his friend over for the holiday, and boy, had Kevin sung for his supper, telling jokes and complimenting the ladies on their casseroles and pies. *You better bring him back next year*, Aunt Sally told Miles.

“I wasn’t thinking about Kevin,” Miles said. “I actually just started seeing a girl. She’s staying with me for a couple of weeks, because her parents have to quarantine.” He placed a hand on Audra’s hip, and she fitted her head beside his chest. “It’s a long story. But she’s really special. Really sweet. I think you’d really like her.”

The hesitation on the other end of the line caught him off guard, like a step he had missed in a dance. He counted — one, two, three seconds of silence. On the third second, he heard his dad mutter something. Sheila cleared her throat and finally spoke.

“Sure,” she said in uneasy tones. “I’d love to meet her. Is she in the program?”

“No, but she works for the university, in the communications department. She’s super smart and sexy.” Miles met eyes with Audra. His hand grabbed at her thigh.

“Miles!” Sheila said. “You know I don’t like words like that.”

“Sexy is a curse word? Since when?”

“It’s demeaning and, frankly, a little gross.”

“I think it’s empowering. And very accurate, in Audra’s case.”

Miles was unsure whether he should go ahead and throw out a date for a visit.

Introducing Audra to his parents this early on felt premature, presumptuous. He assumed his mother felt the same, because she abruptly switched the topic to tax refunds. She ended the call shortly thereafter.

“Your parents sound chill,” Audra said, then got up and poured herself coffee in a mug from Powell’s Books. *A Reader’s Best Friend*, read the mug, underneath an illustration of a dog who seemed in between smiling and panting. Miles had bought the mug while attending a pedagogy conference in Portland, Oregon. Kevin had been his travel buddy and bunk mate. Since they were beginning teachers and it was their first time attending the conference, the school was able to provide some funding, which made it easier for them to go out bar hopping after a day of dull panels. On their last night in town, after checking out three bars and not liking any of them that much, their Uber driver mentioned that the oldest drag queen in the U.S. lived and performed just a couple blocks from their hotel. Miles nodded at this bit of trivia, as it

traveled through one ear and out the other. “Take us there,” Kevin said, and the Uber driver did. In the end, Miles was grateful Kevin said something. Witnessing an eighty-two-year-old drag queen do the can-can was the highlight of the trip.

Thinking back on the trip now, Miles missed the thrill of the possibility of getting on a plane and exploring a new city, which probably wouldn’t happen again anytime soon. He also felt a twinge of nostalgia, nudging him to mix himself an Old Fashioned — his go-to drink order when bar hopping.

“Yeah, they’re pretty alright,” Miles said vacantly. Audra smoothed out a cowlick on his head, and he felt a magnetic pull to her eyes, shimmering richly in the morning light. She stood and sat on the couch.

“I have an errand I need to do today,” she said, leveling eyes with him. “I might need your help, but I don’t want you asking too many questions. If you’re going to ask questions, you might as well stay here and I’ll take care of it myself.”

Miles’ eyebrows crunched with curiosity. He raised his mug to his lips, but didn’t sip. “Do you have a body that needs hiding? ‘Cause baby, I know all the tricks to making a body disappear. I’ve seen every season of *Fargo*.”

Audra gave him an unamused look. “That’s your first question. And by question, I mean strike. Two more, and it’ll be your body that I’ll be hiding. I need to get some clothes from my storage unit. If I remember right, they’re in boxes behind some pretty large furniture, which I’ll need help moving. I need you as my strongman.”

“A strongman, eh? You asked the right guy.” Here, Miles slipped into a weak sauce impression of Donald Trump: “I am the strongest person that ever lived. No one’s ever seen

anything like it! I'm stronger than Jeb Bush, Hulk Hogan, and Michelle Obama *combined!* Make Men Strong Again!"

"Stop," Audra said. "You're going to make me puke."

They both laughed and sipped their coffee, enjoying the soft morning light while it lasted.

###

It took Audra several minutes to get her unit unlocked. Miles offered to help her with the pair of blocky locks, but she refused. "It's my storage unit," she said, "I should know how to get in." Miles shrugged and leaned against Audra's Nissan Rogue, enjoying a slight breeze that trailed through the empty aisle. For a moment, he considered what they would do if one of Audra's storage unit neighbors were to come along. They couldn't wear masks because they didn't have any — everywhere online was backordered until late April. Would keeping their distance be enough? Miles had listened to a podcast with an epidemiologist that said the virus could linger in the air for hours after someone expelled respiratory droplets. If their storage neighbor were to sneeze or cough, who could be certain that the virus wouldn't tread over to Miles and Audra? It was also unlikely they had been the only ones to visit the storage plaza today; what if someone before them had the sniffles? Miles held his breath as he thought about the air around them already being contaminated.

Just before his mind spiraled down a paranoid rabbit hole, the lock broke open. "That's right, motherfucker," Audra huffed. A small gathering of sweat had formed around her hairline, and she gave a half-crazed smile at her small accomplishment. Miles smiled in return and lifted the door. Inside was an extra couch, floor lamps, boxes marked *KITCHEN STUFF* and *X-MAS DECORATIONS* and *BOOKS* in bold Sharpie. It was the usual stuff that people kept in a storage

unit, Miles noted, but still, he wondered why a single woman living with her parents would have a sectional sofa, or own a set of kitchen utensils.

Audra waded into the swamp of boxes and furniture and home decor, muttering commentary. “Man, I forgot I had these... Oof. These went out of style a long time ago...” Finally, she reached part of the sectional, the largest part, which stood on its side against the wall of the unit. She peeked around the sofa, resting her hand on its precariously positioned back. “Of course, I had to put the stuff I need most in the hardest place to get them.” She looked back at Miles, waving him over. “Come on, Hulk Hogan. Let’s move this thing.”

He stepped into the unit, which was ten degrees warmer than where he’d just been standing, and grabbed the other side of the sofa. Together, they shimmied it away from the corner, grunting all the while. At one point, the sofa almost tipped over onto Miles. “Shit shit shit,” he said as Audra pulled it back to keep it from crushing him.

Once it was semi-stable again, Miles felt a tug in his chest, and realized it was the same tug he had felt before going into the party on Friday night. The undeniable, palpable warmth. The feeling of having found a home in another person. Sooner or later, he knew, he would have to fess up about it. He also wondered if she felt the same thing for him.

“Can you hold it there for a minute?” Audra asked. Although Miles wasn’t entirely sure if he could, he nodded and gave a curt, “Got it.”

He listened to Audra grunting as she moved the cardboard around, trying to gain purchase on a box blocking their path. The sectional seemed to grow heavier by the second, weighing on him like an elementary school bully who had pinned him to the ground. Beads of sweat sprung from his cheeks, and his hands suddenly felt useless and small — much too small to be holding up a gigantic piece of furniture.

Audra had just walked out with the box and came back for another when Miles choked out her name.

“Almost done,” Audra said. Miles held on, even though it might kill him. Audra marched out of the unit with box number two, then hustled back to help Miles prop the sofa against the corner. “Thanks a lot, babe.” She paid him with a kiss for his effort. Miles responded by wiping the sweat from his forehead.

They were making their way out of the unit when something caught Miles’ eye. The framed picture sat at the top of a partially open box labeled *FAMILY STUFF*. At first, he assumed it was a picture of Audra with a light-skinned (maybe even white?) cousin. But did normal cousins — even overly chummy cousins — ever face each other with that lovey dovey sparkle in their eyes usually reserved for engagement photos?

“Who’s this?” Miles said, picking up the photo. Audra immediately snatched it away from him and held it behind her back.

“What did I say about questions?” she said, her tone filled with betrayal. Miles tried to respond, but she cut him off. “Aa-aa-aa! I said *no questions*. That’s what I said, right?”

Miles held up his palms apologetically. “I don’t care that you had a love life before me. You don’t need to keep that stuff from me, you know. I’m not *that* insecure.”

Audra cocked an eyebrow. “It’s more complicated than that,” she said.

“I’ve got time. How is it complicated?” His tone was measured, if not a little inquisitive.

Audra underhanded the picture into the corner of the unit, where it clattered but did not break. “I’m not talking about this.”

Miles reached out for Audra’s arm, grabbed hold of it as lightly and kindly as he could, then let go after a beat. “What good is hiding going to do? We want to have a serious

relationship, right? I need to know the things that you keep away from most people. I need to know your struggles. And you need to know mine.”

Audra met Miles’ eyes, looked away, then leveled with him again.

“That’s my husband,” she said, jerking her chin where she had thrown the picture. “I’m married. We’re separated, planning on getting a divorce. But still. In the eyes of the State of Georgia, we’re man and wife.”

A mixture of emotions, almost like a gumbo, filled Miles’ head. He was simultaneously surprised, confused, scared — did the other guy know Audra was on the market? — and amused (*Well, aren’t I just an everyday homewrecker*, he thought). One thing he was not was angry or upset. Anger would do little to help the situation they were currently in, and Audra was a grown-up, after all: she was smart enough to know who to stay with and when it was time to leave.

“You’re not saying anything,” Audra said. “You should say something before I fucking lose it.”

“I love you.”

The words came out effortlessly and swelled between them, like the perfect globe of bubble gum. After he said them, his eyes widened, as if he, too, was surprised at what he said, and he gave a lopsided grin. In all of his years of putzing around on OKCupid and Tinder, he had never gotten to this moment. He felt he had unlocked some high level of human connection, and the feeling was euphoric. This feeling was duly dashed when a look of scepticism cast over Audra’s face.

“Miles,” she said. “You don’t mean that. I like you. I really do. But don’t you think it’s a bit early to be pulling out the L-word?”

“I don’t think so,” Miles said. “When I said it, this amazing feeling came over me. Like I’ve been waiting for someone to say it to, and you’re that someone. It’s like I’m in a play, but my acting partner hasn’t been cast yet. Until now. You’re my partner.”

“Aww, look at the English major with his romantic metaphors.”

“I mean it!”

“Boy, you just love love. I bet you’ve told every girl you’ve dated you loved them.”

“I actually haven’t,” Miles said. He was surprised that he had to defend his feelings, and that they weren’t duly reciprocated. When someone said they loved you, you said back, right? It was rude not to. “You’re the first.”

Audra crossed her arms. Her face was golden and pristine in the late afternoon sun. “Fine. What is it about me that you *loooooove* so much?”

“You hate costumes, just like I do,” Miles said, then laughed. “Just kidding. I do love that about you, but it isn’t the biggest thing.” One side of Audra’s mouth turned up. “You love to read. You’re intelligent. We make fun of the same things and people together.”

“What about my eyes?” Audra cut in. “My face? My ass? None of that figures in the equation for you?”

“Well, yeah,” Miles said. “But I’m not going to come out and say, *Hey, I love you for your ass.*”

“But that’s what you’re thinking.”

“I think you might be *overthinking* all of this.”

A small gust of air left Audra’s mouth, and Miles had the familiar feeling of remorse after saying the wrong thing, if not the worst thing he could have possibly said at the moment.

Audra's eyes meandered to the cars poking along the parkway leading towards downtown Stembridgeville. "Audra, I'm sorry. That was a shitty thing to say."

She reared back from Miles, even though he hadn't made any sudden movements.

"Let's just go, okay?" she said, looking back at the open storage unit. "I don't want to be here anymore."

## **Chapter Ten — Audra**

As Miles pulled into the driveway of Quiet Hill Cemetery, Audra thought, *Well, I don't want to be here, either. Damn. That's what I get for not specifying: I want to go back to your place and I don't want you to talk to me for the rest of the day.* The pinks and oranges in the evening sky were darkening into dusk. Rows of Spanish Moss greeted them as Miles parked Audra's car by a weather worn shack with splintering white paint. The scene was eerie enough without the sea headstones and monuments surrounding them, yet there they were, one morbid reminder after another, after another. Her thoughts pinged back to her mother and father in Kleinstock, alone in isolation, still uncertain how aggressively the virus would affect them. Albert, in particular, was far from fighting shape, what with his diabetes and his immune system weakened by the surgery. Audra said a short, agnostic, non-denominational prayer as she stepped out of the car and asked Miles, "What are we doing here?"

"You don't like cemeteries?" Miles said, reaching out for Audra's hand. She joined hands with him after a moment of hesitation. "I walk here all the time. It's a good place for a guy to clear his head. Which I think we both need right now."

They strolled in silence. A wave of nausea came over Audra as she thought about all of the hundreds of dead, rotting bodies mere feet below the cracked concrete footpath. True, she and Miles were simpatico on a few things: their shared Bright Eyes obsession, their like-minded humor, their complementary dance moves. However, cemeteries or anything overly morbid were a hard no for her. Ever since she was a child, she'd hated spooky shows like *Goosebumps*, shows

filled with ghosts and zombies, sinister goblins and bloodthirsty monsters. As a little girl, she had trouble articulating why she found these shows so distasteful, but as she grew older she realized the reason was simple. There was already so much horror and uncertainty in the world to begin with. There was the almost daily news of killings of Black men by police, men whose faces at times reminded her of her father, or her cousins. There were reports of a widening wealth gap, studies on stagnant wages for women and people of color, which dampened her aspirations of locking in a promising job in a big city. And, of course, there was the ever-precarious funding of the local Planned Parenthood in Macon, which made her wonder if her red state representatives really gave a flying fuck about her basic right to choose when and if to start a family. The horrifying underbelly of the world wasn't hypothetical. It was a real and present danger, made more visible during the Bush Years, followed by the corrupt, unabashedly racist and unapologetically bigoted Trump Years.

Cicadas and crickets made their nighttime noises as Miles led Audra to a secluded corner of the cemetery. The area was populated by towering monuments and red oak trees. The grass was verdant and perfectly manicured.

“So this is where you murder me, huh?” Audra said. “You cut out the commute. Smart.”

Miles flashed her a goofy grin; she could tell he was fighting the urge to roll his eyes. “I’m sorry if this is my idea of a romantic night on the town.” He separated from Audra and approached the perimeter of a family plot with a large headstone that read O’LEARY. A small metal loveseat stood on the reddish-brown gravel inside the plot’s perimeter. *Rich people gravel*, her mother called it.

Miles had brought her to the grave of one of arguably the most racist Southern writers in American history. Although she had been joking about Miles murdering her, she now felt a curdling chill work through her spine. If he felt this was okay, what else did he think was okay?

“I come here whenever I’m feeling stressed out or blocked,” he said, examining the graves as if they were part of a well-kept community garden. “I think I’m the only one who visits him. It’s kind of sad.”

He sat on the loveseat, resting his arm against the back. She walked over and joined him, but only because she knew he would take offense if she didn’t. She read the etched names of Norman O’Leary (1925 — 1966), his mother, Mary (1895 — 1970), his father, Alroy (1882 — 1931), and someone named Willem (1884 — 1940).

“So he brings you comfort?” Audra said, doing her best to hold back her indignation. She took a closer look at Norman’s headstone, which showed a verse from Matthew 11:28: “*Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*”

“You know, when I first started coming here, it was just for him. I was just a total fanboy. I took pictures, I read his books out here and wrote lyrical personal essays. Awful stuff.”

“Never any love poems?” Audra said, then swatted at a pair of gnats circling around her nose.

“Nah,” Miles said. “I leave poetry to the professionals.” He swatted at something, and Audra wondered if it was the same pair of miniscule insects she had just dealt with. “Anyway, the more time I spent here, the less it became about him. I mean, look around. The trees. This bench. The solitude. It’s the perfect place to unwind and do some thinking. I can’t remember the last time I brought my laptop out here. Most times I just come out here and sit and watch the

birds. Sometimes a few deer will pass through. There are these guys that roll in on skateboards, but that's about it. It's pretty chill."

"Sounds like it," Audra said. "Too bad we don't have any bug spray."

"I usually bring some."

An engine roared in the distance, followed by another chasing it. On the other side of the trees was Stenbridgeville's southside, with its neon lights advertising pawn shops and same-day check cashing, bars lining the windows. She recalled a time a couple years ago when a student had been shot during a drive-by on the southside. Calls from concerned parents that flooded her phone for days. Some of them were enraged, demanding refunds and personal apologies from the university president, while others were simply curious for details — What time did it happen? Was it gang related? What street was it? It didn't surprise Audra that no one ever asked about the student or the other victim, a Black single father working the night shift at a gas station (both victims were in critical but stable condition). University Communications received petitions for weeks afterwards, demanding curfews be enforced for students, or a gate to be erected around campus to keep non-university people out. Peter promised it would blow over, and eventually it did, but Audra still thought about it from time to time.

"What's the appeal for you?" Audra asked, breaking the thoughtful silence. "Why do you like him so much?"

Miles looked at her, then lifted his eyes to study the budding leaves of a red oak.

"I read Norman O'Leary for the first time in high school English class. 'The Atonement of Mary Marvel' blew my mind with its rich descriptions of the South and his *brutality*. O'Leary really put his characters through spiritual and physical hell, while teaching us so much about grace and perseverance through their suffering. When I read that story, I wanted more, so I

checked out everything he had ever published from the library. I also read into his biography. Reading about his struggles with manic depression resonated with me, because I was also starting to deal with some mental health stuff. Not manic depression. Just depression. I also tracked down a documentary about him, which talked about Willem there..." Here, Miles nodded at Norman's uncle's grave. Suddenly, his voice became husky, restricted. "Willem lived with the family on the dairy farm. He was basically the town drunk. He also did stuff... to kids. A few biographers speculate that Norman was molested by Willem."

Audra nodded gravely. She wanted to ask what this all had to do with her original question, but she felt Miles was having a moment. His Adam's Apple quivered in his throat. He adjusted his glasses and ran a hand through his tousled hair, blinking several times.

"I don't know," he said finally. "I just really sympathized with Norman because of that. It makes his stories more powerful than they already are. It's one thing to write about profound suffering. It's another thing to experience it yourself. His stories are just so authentic. Unbudging. I love how gritty and uncompromising he is."

"So how do you feel about his racist portrayals of Black people and Jews?" Audra asked. It was a question she wanted to revisit since the party on Friday. "I mean, how do you feel, *really*? Don't give me any grad school bull."

Miles lifted his shoulders in a slow shrug as his lips wrinkled into a frown.

"It makes me uncomfortable," he said. "I still believe context is everything, and he was a man of his time. But there are some moments in his stories that just come off as purely hateful."

"You're telling me," she said. "So how do you justify giving a problematic writer like her such big real estate in your thesis?"

"Problematic," Miles said, almost sneering. "Isn't everyone problematic to some extent?"

“He publicly supported segregation, Miles,” Audra said, citing a widely known fact about O’Leary, and one that often went unacknowledged by many in the CSC English Department.

“I can’t deny the impact he’s had on me, and on millions of readers. Yes, he had really shitty views on race and that shows up in his writing here and there. But the universal truths he illustrates are for everyone, and he intended her work to be read by everyone, regardless of race.”

Audra tilted her head. “Come on, Miles. You don’t actually believe that, do you?”

Even though she believed that no one was perfect and everyone ought to have the chance to grow, she was starting to get fed up with the rhetorical gymnastics Miles underwent to defend the problematic — yes, she would still use that word — writer. The more they talked, the more Audra worried that Miles himself might maintain some of the same beliefs O’Leary had.

“I do. I’ve read her work very closely, over and over again, at different points in my life. And in all honesty, I think there’s something for everyone.”

Audra looked past Miles, to the far end of the cemetery, where the grass was tall and the trees looked half dead. The headstones were stunted, ashen. Some were cracked, their broken halves laying over the nondescript plots. Something in Audra’s gut told her those graves didn’t belong to white folks. She let out a heavy sigh. It was a sound she was making a lot these days. Pinning her eyes on Miles, she said, “Do you understand that I’m Black?”

“Um, yeah. I see you’re Black.”

“No, Miles. I know you see that I’m Black. But do you *understand* that I’m Black, and that you’re not, and that being Black in America means something entirely different than being White in America.” Miles looked like he wanted to respond, but Audra didn’t let him. “It means lower income. It means getting pulled over by the police for no reason other than my Blackness. It means higher risk for diabetes and high blood pressure. It means lower quality schools and

roads. It means always having to watch how I speak so I don't come off as 'too Black' or 'an angry Black woman.' When we talk about race, you have to remember that you aren't talking to your thesis advisor. This isn't theoretical for me. This is real.”

Miles' slackened mouth had clammed up tight when he realized Audra was on a roll, and it remained that way now that she was finished. He put his hands together as if he was praying, and settled his chin in the valley between his index fingers and thumbs. He stared at Norman O'Leary's grave and Audra stared at him. She felt she had flung away a massive anchor that had been tied to her waist. She knew this was uncomfortable for Miles to hear, but if they couldn't talk about the implications of the color of their skin, how could they talk about anything else of importance? Audra felt her race was the most important thing to get out in the open. It shaped the way she navigated through the world, after all, because it shaped the way the world saw her.

Finally, Miles straightened his back against the loveseat's back. “So what can I do?” he said. Audra could tell he was getting tired of the conversation, but his inquiry sounded sincere.

“First off, you can *not* tell a Black person to be cool when they get pulled over. Just kidding. But not really.” They shared a laugh. Was it the first time they'd smiled that day? “There are lots of things you can do. But the most important thing is to take a step back and listen. Just listen.”

“I think I can do that,” Miles said.

“I think you can, too,” Audra said with a smile. They stood and walked back to the car as dusk settled around them.

Back at the apartment, they decided on an easy dinner of eggs, bacon, and frozen waffles. Audra turned the bacon as Miles stirred the scrambled eggs in a pot. At one point he went into

the dining room and put on a folk record. The songs were slow and solemn, fitting of the day's angst.

As they ate Audra couldn't help but notice the couple with pets hanging from the living room wall. It reminded her of the obviously phony but still goosebumps-inducing portraits at The Haunted Mansion in Disneyland, scrutinizing your every move.

"So what's on the agenda for the rest of the night?" Miles said as Audra washed the dishes and he dried. If this was this way of hinting at sex, that was *way* out of the question. She wanted to take her bra off, but only for her own comfort.

"How are you at foot massages?" she asked with a piqued eyebrow.

After the dishes were put away and the leftover bacon stashed in the fridge, Audra ducked into the bedroom, peeled off her bra, and shimmied into a XL shirt that bore the MTV logo she had snagged from the storage unit. It was still plenty big on her, but it wasn't as billowy as it had once been, during her undergrad years. Realizing this, she was afraid to pull out her former PJ shorts, which had also been out of commission for several years, so instead she opted for a pair of sweatpants she wore when she didn't want to see too much of her own skin.

In the living room, Miles was browsing Hulu's horror selections. Audra settled in beside him and watched quietly as he passed by Jason Voorhees, Freddy Krueger, Chucky. She tried to be patient and open-minded with the grisly options, but when Miles clicked on the description for *House of a 1,000 Corpses* Audra grabbed the remote from him as gently as she could.

"Do you mind?" she said. Miles responded with one of his lopsided grin. She ticked over to *RuPaul's Drag Race* Season 8. Her go-to show when she didn't want to think or feel too deeply.

## Chapter Eleven — Miles

Miles didn't mind letting Audra control the TV remote reins for the evening, but that didn't mean he didn't have questions, the first being "Why Season 8?"

"It features some of my favorite queens," Audra said. "And some of my favorite queens to hate."

They were watching the first episode of the season, which opened with debut entrances from all of the queens. Miles was amazed by everyone's colorful looks, their graceful walks and flourishing hand gestures. Every few seconds he had to remind himself that these wiggled, exquisitely contoured, high-dress wearing characters had the same sexual organs as himself.

When a tall queen in a hot pink cheerleader uniform (with a huge matching wig) strutted into the workroom, Audra rolled out her tongue in disgust.

"Ugh, I fucking *hate* her. Annoying bitch."

The TV showed the queen out of drag introducing herself. He (or was it still she?) was pale as milk, wore round wire-framed glasses, and sported a pile of brown dreadlocks atop his head. Miles thought he looked like a Rastafarian version of Matt Damon.

"Woah," Miles said. "I wonder how many times this guy has won Douche-Nozzle of the Year."

"Right?! Everytime I see her I'm just like, *ew...* and she only gets worse over time." Next up, a steely-eyed Black queen in a bodysuit entered the room. Hugging her abdomen were the

letters *UNT*. Audra snapped her fingers, flashed her bright white teeth. Miles loved her teeth. He matched her smile. “That’s my *girl!*”

“Bob The Drag Queen,” Miles read the name out loud, chuckling. “That’s awesome.”

His skin prickled warmly as Audra rested her head on his chest, and when this positioned turned out to feel a bit awkward, she lowered herself to his lap. His chest started to swell — was his blood rushing to his heart instead of his groin? This was a new feeling for him, and a welcomed one. He placed his hand on the side of Audra’s head, but this placement didn’t feel quite right — she wasn’t a dog, after all — so he extended it to her waist. He was tempted to teasingly slip his hand into the pocket of her sweatpants.

“Are these comfy?” Miles asked, tugging the elastic waistband.

“Um, excuse me!” Audra said. “What — do you think this cake is yours all day every day? Nah-uh.”

“It’s not that, I was just genuinely interested in the sweatpants.”

Audra pinned a glare on him. “They’re perfectly comfortable. Thanks for asking.” Her words were clipped, low. Miles didn’t know much about women, but he knew when they spoke in this way it wasn’t a good sign — if anything, it was the quiet before the storm. Were they about to have a fight? Miles hoped not. He’d gotten his fill of arguing at Quiet Hill. He just wanted to have a nice, drama-free evening watching men transform themselves into campy women. For a moment, he allowed himself to sink into the couch and feel Audra’s head on his lap, and little else. For a moment, he was calm, at peace. Then, out of nowhere, a thought wormed its way into his mind, a pesky reminder: *Hey, Miles... You’re girlfriend’s married. Don’t forget, now.* It felt like a jab, as if his own mind was bullying him for not freaking out

when he learned about Audra's husband. *Are you just gonna take that?* it seemed to needle. A spasm ran down his neck and spread across his shoulders. He knew the feeling well.

"Hey, want some wine? I think there's some wine around here somewhere. Or beer. I might have a couple beers in the fridge, if you want one."

"I'm okay," Audra said. "Well, actually... do we have anything sweet?"

"Let's see," Miles said and got up to check the fridge. There, among the expired sour cream and ketchup and leftovers kept for too long, were two stray chocolate Snack Packs. "There's pudding." He checked the sparsely populated freezer. "And a random thing of frozen Cool-Whip. I think maybe someone brought it over for a party once?"

"That's all?"

"I'm not big on sweets," Miles said as he peeked inside a cabinet. "I also have some peanut butter, but we'll have to do a little scraping."

"That's sad, Miles. Bring the puddings and Cool-Whip. It's not Mayfield's, but it'll do."

The whipped cream and pudding swirl Audra made was a simple recipe, she explained, and one she and her sisters had partaken in often as children when Mayfield's wasn't in the budget. Miles fell in love with the flavor at first bite. It didn't taste exactly like ice cream, but it had an airy, chewy texture that Miles appreciated so much that he thought about having a second bowl. (Too bad there wasn't any more pudding.) Could it be that he was having an awakening of the taste buds? Maybe he had a sweet tooth after all, and it just needed the right thing to bring it out from hibernation.

"That was amazing," Miles said, setting his bowl on the coffee table. On the TV, two queens lip synced to Lady Gaga's "Applause."

“It’s not bad,” Audra said. She jabbed her spoon at the TV. “God, this is one of the most boring lip syncs *ever*.”

As they started another episode, the spastic feeling he had felt earlier returned, this time dropping like a bomb in his gut. His fingers rapped the arm of the couch and his legs bounced. His cravings still haunted him — cravings for whiskey and wine.

“You good?” Audra asked.

“Yeah, yeah.” He focused his attention on the TV, even though he now found it difficult to keep up with the show. In his periphery, he noticed Audra’s eyes lingering on him, then she, too, looked back at the screen. His legs continued to bounce as his thoughts stumbled back to a party he went to six or seven years ago, when he was friendly with a group of community theater actors around his age. One of the actors, a chubby girl named Miranda, had her parents’ house to herself for the weekend, and so on Saturday she filled it with actors and theater-goers (Miles was in the latter of these two).

When Miles arrived, he saw a marble kitchen countertop crowded with liquor bottles and a fridge packed with PBR and he let out a private sigh of relief. At twenty years old, he had only recently started developing a taste for alcohol with the occasional late night nip of cognac or Beefeater from his dad’s liquor cabinet. He’d gotten drunk a few times, but never enough to find himself puking his guts up the next morning. It was something to do after a long shift at the university library, where he worked part time at the circulation desk. After hours of dealing with entitled faculty members and odd night owl students, a few slugs helped him clear his mind and loosen up for sleep.

The house was filled with people Miles had never met before, people who seemed much older than him. Cooler, too. Smarter. These were people who had lived life, people who had their

finger on the pulse of all the new trends and culture, with their thrifted sweaters and poorly dyed hair. Miles overheard someone reference Arcade Fire and *the zeitgeist* in the same sentence. He was beginning to question if he had come to the right party when Emily, a girl he knew from the theater, sidled up to him.

“Did you get a drink?” she said, and Miles’ eyes scanned the counter. He reached for the only bottle he had any history with, the only bottle he recognized from his dad’s liquor cabinet: Glenlivet. He poured two shots, one for himself and one for Emily. The drink slid down his throat like a fiery pep talk. *You can do this*, the scotch whispered to him. *You belong here as much as anyone else.*

“Hey,” Emily said, “let’s play beer pong. But with vodka.”

Feeling more loose and lovable than he had when he walked in, Miles accepted the challenge. They faced off at a ping pong table that had replaced the dining table. He didn’t have much practice at ping pong, let alone beer bong, and within a matter of minutes he had downed three shots of Everclear.

“You got this man!” a guy named Derek said, patting Miles on the back. “You’re going to come back. I believe in you!”

Derek liked to wear t-shirts featuring Marvel superheroes and always donned a plaid flat cap — Miles felt Derek was approximately forty years too young to be wearing such a hideous thing. He often tried to avoid Derek just so he wouldn’t have to look at the thing, or Derek’s piss-poor combover underneath. Now, he simply clinked glasses with him as he slung back his fourth shot. He needed all the positive vibes he could get.

Unsurprisingly, Emily defeated Miles, but not before he flung off his shirt and pounded his chest with a primal pride. This was an entirely different side of him that even he had never

seen. It was startling, but not altogether unappealing to him. He had spent most of his life passing up opportunities to try-out for plays and sports teams, muttering answers in school when the teacher called on him, assuming that no one wanted to hear what he had to say or see his acne-riddled face. Up to this point, he was perfectly content with his wallflower existence, but now, something wild and untamed ignited in him, craving attention and destruction.

They tried to play Cards Against Humanity, but Miles, bordering on black-out drunk, ruined the game for everyone by peeking at other players' hands and loudly pointing out which cards he had played. Some off-color things were said about Toni Morrison's vagina. The game broke up after a couple of rounds. Emily, who perhaps felt a responsibility with the inebriated baby she had helped conceive, said to Miles, "Alright, champ. Maybe it's time for bed."

Miles obliged Emily. The last thing he remembered was Emily draping a knitted blanket over him while he tugged on her insulin pump and cooed, "Thank you, bless you, my diabetes nurse."

The next morning, Miles had his first serious hangover. His stomach felt as if it had been put through a wood chipper. His eyes felt pickled. His head seemed separated from his body, connected only by threads of pulsating pain. Waves of nausea coursed through his body. As he sat up on the couch, he got the feeling that he was late for an appointment, that he should be hurling his guts into a toilet bowl. But as horrible as the hangover was, the urge to puke never arose.

Across from him on a loveseat, Derek was nursing a bowl of Captain Crunch. He was in his underwear and his Spider-Man t-shirt from last night. His flat cap sat on top of his head.

"Dude, you went fucking bonkers last night," he said as translucent milk dribbled down his chin.

“What?” Miles croaked. He felt he was still dreaming.

“You peed in the fireplace.”

Miles blinked several times before saying anything. “Very funny,” he said.

“You did! I was in the bathroom while you were doing it. Miranda kept knocking on the door telling me to get out. I thought she was joking.”

Miles left before anyone else woke up. On the drive home, he pulled over in a church parking lot and threw up as worshippers were coming out of a service. A woman in a leopard print blouse said, “Have another margarita, why don’tcha!”

Back at his parents’ house, he trudged up the stairs, wanting only a glass of water and the warmth and solitude of his bed. Instead, he discovered all of the bottles in his dad’s liquor cabinet on the kitchen counter. His dad sat on a high chair behind the bottles, only his neck and face visible.

“Can you tell me a little about this?” he asked.

Miles felt a catch in his throat as he tried to find the right words. He was never good at lying, but it would look bad to own up to his late night binges. He had to straddle the line wherein he acknowledged the empty bottles but didn’t accept their implications. Beefeater. Tinto’s. Maker’s Mark. Rémy Martin. Glenlivet. Many of the bottles his dad kept in the liquor cabinet downstairs had been locked up for so long they’d collected dust, and now each bottle’s contents had been depleted to a small sliver. Leaving the last little sip, to Miles, represented restraint and moderation.

“Sure,” Miles said, opting for the coy route. “What do you want to know?”

“Why are they all empty?”

“They’re not empty.”

“They’re empty, Miles. They have this much left.” His dad held out his index finger and thumb with a centimeter of air in between.

“I’ll pay you back. I’ll buy you new bottles.”

“That’s not even close to what I’m talking about.” His dad took a beat, looking through the green glimmers of the glass. “There’s a lot of issues with drinking in this family, you know. On both sides. My brother...” his voice trailed off.

“Frank.”

“Frank,” his dad echoed. Frank had been his older brother and more or less drank himself to death during his senior year at UGA. He rarely came up in family discussions, but when he did someone would inevitably mention how much promise he had. *He was so smart*, Miles had heard his grandmother say. *He studied political science. He could have done anything he wanted to do, been anyone he wanted to be. He could have been president.* These sentiments felt hollow to Miles, who had never met his father’s brother and who only knew him as one thing. Dead.

“I’m not going to end up like him,” Miles said to his dad, his words swerving through the crowd of bottles.

“If you want beer, I can buy you beer. Just ask. It’s not good to drink alone. Take my word for it.”

For the rest of the day, the bottles sat on the kitchen counter, arranged like headstones in a boozy graveyard. His mom didn’t say a word to him about it. She’d delegated the tough conversation to his dad, Miles figured.

Even as all of this replayed in Miles’ mind, he couldn’t help but crave a cocktail. Maybe something fruity and low calorie, like the drinks the drag queens held as they waited backstage during the judges’ deliberation.

“Those look good,” Miles said. Audra simply nodded, and laced his fingers in hers.

## **Chapter Twelve — Audra**

She was finally getting around to hanging up her clothes in the closet in the spare room when Ezra called. Miles had ventured out to Kroger to pick up their prescriptions — Prozac for him, a new inhaler for her.

“I’m thinking of you today,” Ezra said on speaker. “Working on tax stuff. The word *audit* popped in my head and I realized how close it sounds to *Audra*. Weird, huh?”

“Yeah, weird,” Audra agreed, rolling her eyes as she fitted a light gray romper onto a hook, then reached for another garment. Ever since their separation, talking with Ezra had the tendency to bring out what her mother liked to call her *shadow side*. The side of her that was impatient, unforgiving, and uncompassionate. “Is that all you wanted to talk about?”

“I need some help on tax stuff,” Ezra said. “Can you talk me through a couple things? Or I can come down there and we can just knock it out real quick.”

“Can I just give you my TurboTax password?” she said through a sigh.

“It would be good to see you.”

“Boy I’m done with you. We are not doing this.”

“Doing what?” Ezra said coyly.

“Doing *this*,” Audra insisted. “We’re done. I’ve moved on, and you should, too.”

“I still love you.”

Staring at her phone, she felt as if some disgusting sea creature had leapt down her throat and filled her stomach with a slime and grime. In a way, she still loved Ezra, and missed the

times from before he went off the deep end. The hikes they went on. The concerts they make-out at. The pay days when Ezra said, “Let’s go shopping,” and they would go out to Barnes and Noble in Macon or the Publix on Lake Oconee and spend inordinate amounts of money on imported olives and hardcover books she had heard about on NPR.

“I... love you, too. But shit’s complicated. We’re not getting back together.”

The faded denim work dress she had been holding slipped out of her hands. As she crouched down to pick it up, a bulky picture frame catty-cornered in the closet caught her eye. After a second, her vision adjusted to the closet’s weak light, and she saw a face as black as tar grinning madly back at her in the darkness. The African-American in the portrait wore a yellow straw hat, sketchy blue overalls and held two watermelons, one cradled in each arm. His lips were candy red and inhumanly, grotesquely large. His cheeks were flat and his nose was wide. His eyes had a dazed, hypnotic look about them, his flat stare made him look like a zombie in a black and white B horror movie.

Audra’s eyelids fluttered as she staggered back up to her feet. On one hand, she was in stunned disbelief. But at the same time, she knew exactly who had done the primitive drawing. The chicken scratch strokes and plastered facial features could only be attributed to Holden Holster. Miles’ grandfather.

*Fuuuuck*, was all she could think. *I thought he was cool.*

Just then, the door to the spare room opened halfway, revealing Miles holding a paper bag from the pharmacy. His eyes were wide, like sad coins. His mouth was slack with a disbelief and shock of his own.

“Audra? You there? Audra?” Ezra asked from the phone’s speaker.

“I gotta go,” Audra said, then hung up. Several emotions spread out across the floor of her mind like screaming infants. She wasn’t sure which one to pick up and claim as her own. Which one to nurture and grow. Rage? Disgust? Guilt? Sorrow? Uncertainty? She wanted to claim them all.

“He said he loved you,” Miles said finally. His face looked like it was sinking.

“Yes,” Audra said.

“And you said you still loved him.”

“Miles,” she said. “If you heard that then you heard that I’m not getting back together with him. He and I are done. We’ve been done for almost a year.”

“Then why aren’t you divorced?”

“We want to file our taxes jointly. But after that we’re going down to the courthouse and making it official. I have all the paperwork printed out.”

“I’m dating a married woman,” Miles said, his words dripping with sarcasm. His head wagged. “Wow.”

Audra felt a twinge strike her brain. Miles had made a complete one-eighty from his reaction yesterday at the storage unit. She wasn’t blindsighted, that wasn’t the right word, but still, she wanted to know what had changed in him. She wasn’t sure what to say, other than, “Is everything okay?”

He tore open the bag and tossed the inhaler on the bed. “I’m going for a drive. Need to clear my head.”

She was quiet as he left. After the front door clapped shut, she looked down to see the denim dress still in a heap on the floor, piled at the foot of the eerie artwork. The eyes of the

absurdly-portrayed Black man bore into her. If she looked too long, she felt, they would hollow her out completely. She needed a cigarette.

### **Chapter Thirteen — Miles**

Miles eyed the odometer as it rose from forty-five to fifty-five, sixty to seventy. The road ahead of him was almost empty, the sky was a blanket of concrete gray clouds. Normally, he would have gone to Quiet Hill to clear his head and untangle his jumbled thoughts, but something told him it wasn't the right move. The conversation he'd had with Audra at O'Leary's grave soured the place for him, at least temporarily. He disliked conversations about race. He felt he had little to contribute, and further, he cringed at all of the emotional language and extreme solutions of cancelling celebrities for wearing blackface, or abolishing this or that federal agency, instead of opening up a dialogue for bettering these things. Wasn't that true progress?

Anyway, Quiet Hill was out of the question. It reminded him too much of Audra and the tiff they had.

He rolled down the windows and turned up the country stylings of Orville Peck, playing through an aux cord connected to his phone with a cracked screen. He thought of nothing in particular as he whipped by the Stembridgeville city limits into Kleinstock, *Georgia's #1 Lake Destination*. He crossed over a bridge, noticed the immaculate lake houses with their docks lined against the shore, and had a fleeting thought of changing majors. Maybe he should get his masters in political science, switch his track to pre-law. He enjoyed tracking legislation as it passed from the House to the Senate, and some nights even fell asleep to the after hours floor debates airing on C-SPAN. It wasn't too late to change course and become a famous trial lawyer,

right? That would be his only shot at acquiring one of these half-million dollar houses with a boat and a dock and a pergola.

His thoughts continued to trail, now back to his second date with Audra, not long before the lockdown. “Date” might be too big a word for the events that transpired that night. It was a spur of the moment thing, set into motion when they’d had a text conversation wherein she told him she’d never seen a Wes Anderson film.

*Seriously???* Miles responded. *Not even The Life Aquatic? Everyone’s seen that.*

*Not a one,* Audra reiterated. Then, a follow up text, *Movies aren’t my thing.*

Miles was almost indignant. How could someone just not care about movies? It was as if Audra had told him she didn’t care about food or sex.

*What’re you doing later?* Miles asked.

*Eating half a tub of Mayfield’s by myself and watching Canada’s Drag Race until I’m comatose. Important stuff.*

*Come over around 8. Bring the ice cream.*

That night, they watched *Rushmore*. Miles had borrowed a copy from a friend in high school and never gave it back. The disc was scratched all over, and skipped often, turning the screen image choppy. The audio was unbearably glitchy. The first time it did this, Miles moved a hand onto Audra’s knee. She noticed it, but didn’t seem to care. She could take it or leave it, as if Miles’ hand was a fortune cookie sitting on a table at the end of a big Chinese meal. The second time it skipped, during the club montage, Miles pretended to stretch, then lowered his arm across her shoulders. She looked at him with a knowing eye, and he went in for a kiss. The first kiss always unnerved him. It was like jumping off a lakeside cliff. Would the water be freezing, filled with sharp rocks, piranhas? The seconds he spent in freefall were enthralling yet terrifying.

Thankfully, Audra met his lips halfway, and his landing on her lips was filled with acceptance and warmth.

By the third DVD glitch, they were in his bedroom, peeling off each other's clothes. Miles found himself easily stretching out on the bed with Audra's thighs braced around him. Even though it wasn't his usual opening position, he enjoyed the new vantage point. Her body was poetry, in all of its surprises, its organic movement, its ebbs and flows. Afterwards, she pulled out the condom.

"Do you mind?" she said, standing in the doorway.

"Be my guest." She ducked out of the room and into the tiny bathroom. She closed the door behind her, but Miles could tell she was standing in darkness. "Pull the drawstring."

A second later, white light filled the crack underneath the door.

"Thanks."

With his arms at his side, he let his body sink into the bed without a care. There was a feeling he couldn't quite pinpoint, but it wasn't anything he had experienced with anyone else. It was as if a hidden door inside him had opened up, releasing a flood of emotions he didn't know he was capable of. *Home*, he thought as Audra came back from the bathroom and filled the space beside him. She lowered a hand on his chest and stroked the few hairs there. They looked into each other's eyes, saying nothing at all as the music soundtracking the ending credits played down the hall.

*Home.*

The daylight began to wane. Through the parting gray clouds, Miles noticed snatches of orange and pink, the sun's last hoorah for the day. He felt a slight chill which only emboldened

him as he pulled into a gravel parking lot filled with used cars, turned around, and started going back the way he'd come.

## **Chapter Fourteen — Audra**

“This is my last cigarette,” Audra said as she pinched the end of her Camel Crush. “For real.”

She had thought these words countless times over the past few months. As sincere as they were in the moment, she had a difficult time following through on them. This was the first time she spoke her intentions out loud. Her mom did this from time to time, because Oprah told her to, and she claimed it always made her feel empowered. Taking in her first lungful of smoke, she didn't feel empowered. She felt controlled, helpless.

She let out an arrow of smoke and looked around for a chair. There were none on the brick patio outside Miles' apartment, so she settled on the stoop. Another drag, a blissful inhalation. *You better enjoy it*, a voice in her head cooed. *You're done after this*. Another voice, this one more crass, said simply, *Yeah, right*. Sad as it was, she felt the second voice rang truer. How could she give up this heavenly release of tension and worry? Her gaze on the big brick house across the street. Immediately, she was struck by its stony hollowness. Something about the gnarled trees in the front yard and the shadow-filled windows made her skin curdle. There was one window, though, that held a muted yellow light. She studied it — absentmindedly at first, then a bit more closely when she saw a flash of a skeletal shadow playing off a wall. Was someone in that house? It was possible... possible, but unlikely. There were no other signs of life. If anything, there were signs of lifelessness and abandonment. No other lights were on in the house, and Audra even noticed a broken window on the top floor, the same floor where the

square of light was, with its enigmatic shadow play. There were no cars in the driveway. The lawn was mostly dirt and rocks, but if vegetation of any sort had a fighting chance, Audra imagined it would have been pretty squirrely.

She took another pull from her cigarette, and admired the plume of ashen smoke that lingered when she exhaled. It was in this haze that she realized she hadn't spoken to her mom in several days. They usually spoke every day at home, but since quarantining the conversation had dried up. Audra figured it had something to do with a subconscious desire for mental self-preservation. The pandemic was behind every corner she looked, from her daily podcast regiment to her Instagram feed, regurgitating what Anthony Fauci said and speculating the sources of contagion — one podcast, she recalled clearly, had even suggested wiping down your car keys. Everyone was talking about it, panicking about it. There was good reason to panic, but her brain and her heart could only handle so much. Certain stressors had to be detoured or blocked entirely. No news was good news, Audra thought, trying to console herself, but shame bubbled in her as she realized she had compartmentalized her parents' precarious situation.

She swatted at a mosquito on her arm, then pulled out her phone.

"Hello?" Alice answered, her voice worn and weary.

"Hey mama. How are things?"

"I'm doing okay, I guess. All caught up on *90 Day Fiancé*. Your father is doing so-so. I'm tired, but he's *tired*. He's been sleeping all day and most of the night. Weirdly enough, he can't taste anything, but that may be a whole other issue. Other than that, we're good. We play gin rummy at night when we can't sleep."

"You're not sleeping?" Audra asked.

"We're trying our best," Alice said.

Audra felt her lips pull back in a frown. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

Alice was quiet for a moment as she thought. “I think we’re pretty much set for the next few days. Rebecca dropped off groceries yesterday. Your father got a new insulin pump in the mail yesterday. That’s the thing we were worried about.”

“How’s Ellie?”

“Oh, she’s... Ellie. I can tell she really loves having us home. A real cuddly lush these days.”

Audra cleared her throat, but only to keep herself from crying. She was caught off guard by the wave of emotions that now overcame her.

“That’s sweet. That’s good to hear,” she said, followed by a contemplative lull.

“How’s that boy treating you?” Alice asked.

“Pretty good.” After a beat, she added, “He found out about Ezra.”

“You didn’t tell him before?”

“I was going to! When the time was right.” Audra took one last drag from her cigarette. She held onto the smoke longer than usual as she screwed the cigarette into the patio and flicked it into the bushes.

“The time is never right for news like that. How’d he take it?”

“He left the apartment.”

“Oof.”

“Yeah. He’ll be back, though. It’s his apartment.” Audra dunked at another mosquito then scratched at the bite the first bug had left on her arm. She desperately wanted to change the topic. The best way forward, she figured, was to go back. “Hey. Can I come pick up Eleanor?”

“Uh, sure. But I don’t want you to get infected. How can we do this?”

“I could just drive up and you could let her out. She’d come straight into the car. No contact.”

“What about her bowls? Her food?”

“I’ll send Miles out to buy new food. I’m sure he has some old tupperware around here we could use for bowls.”

Just then, as if he had heard his name, Miles round the bush-filled corner and approached Audra on the patio. She found herself backing up against the entry door. What if he had the same reaction to the stubbed cigarette as he’d had to her marital status? She flexed her jaw, anticipating another walk-out. *You want a chair?* he mouthed. She responded with a cool nod and a smile, and stood to let Miles through. Her mother was speaking to her, but she was tuned out. She was caught off guard. Not only had Miles come back, but he’d come back in a relatively good mood.

“He just came back,” Audra half-whispered into the phone, cutting off Alice. “I should probably let you go.”

“Of course,” Alice said. “When do you want to come pick up Ellie?”

“Tomorrow. Love you. Keep me posted on dad.”

Audra hung up her phone as Miles was trying to punt open the screened door, each arm carrying a wooden chair taken from the dining table. She got up to hold the door for him.

“So you smoke, huh?” Miles said, tossing his chin at the pack of cigarettes next to Audra. “Man, you’re full of secrets today.”

“That was my last one,” Audra said, settling into one of the hard wooden chairs. She wasn’t sure how to interpret that comment about secrets. Didn’t everyone have secrets and skeletons? Wasn’t that part of being human? She’d withheld certain things about her life because

she *liked him*, not because she wanted to hurt him. Only a sadist wants all the truth all the time. Besides, she knew of a dirty little secret in Miles' closet she was still debating bringing up.

“That’s what they all say. Do you have one to spare?” Audra pulled the pack from her denim cut-offs and handed it to him. “Got a light?” he asked, then opened the pack to see one nestled beside the cigarettes. Audra watched him fumble with the lighter. It took several frustrated sparks and some coughing before the end of the cigarette turned to a solid amber.

“That was a doozy,” Audra noted. “I thought you smoked weed.”

“Only at parties,” Miles said. A gust of smoke billowed out of his mouth as he broke into a coughing fit. He spat on the patio. “If I’m standing in a circle with some people and the person next to me hands me a joint, I’ll take a hit. But I don’t go out looking for it. Beer and whiskey... that’s my true kryptonite.”

“I gotcha.” A tired, orange glow cast the intersection ahead of them. Cars passed slowly, as if in mourning. “How was your drive?”

“Good. I needed it.” Miles was looking at the tendrils of fine smoke rising from the cigarette. “This helps, too. Mind if I hold onto these?”

“Actually, I think I’ll have one more.” She took the pack back and lit up a fresh cigarette. *Ah, yes.* The instant ease again, as if her soul, the tangled, anxious core of her being, was plunging into a warm salt bath. How could she ever give this up?

“I’m sorry about that blow-up,” Miles said. “I guess the whole married thing caught up to me. Either way, I could have been more... I don’t know. Forgiving? Understanding?”

“You’re good,” Audra said.

“So tell me about it,” he said. “What’s it like being married. Why didn’t it work out?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Aren’t all good stories long ones?”

She let out a breathy chuckle and took a drag. “I guess you have a point. But you have to promise you won’t do another of your famous walk-outs. ‘Cause that was shitty.”

Miles held up an apologetic hand. “You have my word.”

“Ezra, Ezra. Where do I start with him? Well, we met as undergrads. We had the same communications class. He was so laid back and cool, not like other guys I’d been with. He wasn’t always clambering to have sex or fool around. I mean, we *did* have sex, but he rarely initiated, which was refreshing, I guess, but also weird. It took me a long time to realize he wasn’t initiating because he was getting his needs met elsewhere.”

“No way,” Miles interjected. “Did you confront him about it?”

“He said he didn’t know we were exclusive, after a year of being together. I gave him the benefit of the doubt at the time but in hindsight it was just one of many cheap excuses he gave me.”

“Yeesh.”

Audra continued, recounting both the good times (the parties and concerts, the hours spent playing video games, cheering each other on) and the bad times (the dead end drug-laden conversations, the fights about his inability to lock down even a part time job, the parties that went off the deep end). Miles listened, one leg crossed over the other, and pulled on his cigarette luxuriously, as if he was sitting in Gertrude Stein’s salon. He looked so sexy, so dignified, Audra wondered where the amateur had gone, the one that had fumbled with the lighter just a few minutes earlier?

Eventually, she brought Miles up to that very day, when he had discovered her talking with Ezra on the phone.

“You said you loved him,” Miles said as he ground the cigarette into the patio. “What’s that about?”

Audra felt her shoulders inflate as she drew in a breath.

“Well, yeah. I do love him. I think I’ll always love him. But it’s not the same sort of love I have for my parents, or my dog, or a boyfriend. There are different types of love. Love isn’t a one-size-fits-all sort of thing. I love Ezra because I want the best for him, even if he’s not the best thing for me. We’ve been through too much for me not to love him.”

“That’s an interesting way of looking at it,” Miles said, redirecting his gaze to the old brick house. “Interesting.”

They were almost completely blanketed in dusk now, and although Audra couldn’t fully see Miles’ expression, she sensed he was still processing the revelation of the day. He seemed to have a particular hang-up on the “love stuff.” But how could he understand the sort of love she was talking about unless he himself had been married? Audra was surprised that Miles, who engaged with nuance and ambiguity as part of his job as an English teacher, had trouble wrapping his head around the complexity of the love she was talking about.

The drawing of the Black man with the watermelon in the closet flashed in her mind again, and she winced. She really didn’t want to talk about it, but she had a feeling if she didn’t bring it up to Miles, the flashes and winces would only continue. That, and the topic would only get harder to broach.

“Speaking of interesting,” she said, “I saw something of interest in your closet, while I was hanging up clothes.”

Miles snapped his head at her. “My closet? No. That’s not my closet. That’s the spare closet.”

*Defensive much?* Audra thought as she pulled in a breath. “Okay, okay. The spare closet... do you know what I’m talking about?”

Miles swept a hand through his hair and sighed. “You caught me. I have a racist grandpa. Am I cancelled now?”

Audra’s brow furrowed. “I’m not trying to call you out, Miles. I just want to let you know I saw it and how it makes me feel. That’s all.”

“Alright. How does it make you feel?”

Audra didn’t appreciate Miles’ snippy tone, but she decided to move past it.

“It hurts.”

“Can you be more specific?”

“No. Not right now. It just hurts.” After a few seconds of silence, she added, “Why do you have it?”

Miles dragged a finger across a tired eye. “None of the museums my mother offered it to wanted it. And she didn’t want it — she was clearing space. We got it evaluated by this auction house that specializes in folk art, and apparently it’s worth a lot. Close to eight thousand. I’m just holding onto it until their annual auction in November.”

“Hmm.” Audra struggled to say more, the same way she’d struggled to elaborate on her hurt. She felt as if someone had opened her head like a toolbox and had taken out half of the words in her vocabulary. She was cerebrally stunned, but she was also tired of talking about Blackness, *her* Blackness, on negative or undermining terms. From the party where she was expected to provide the Black perspective (*as if we all think the same...* Audra lamented) to the traffic stop to the testy discussion of Norman O’Leary with Miles... her Blackness followed her in a way that always made itself known. Of course, Miles’ whiteness followed him, too, but he

had the privilege of not being constantly reminded of it. And when it did shape his interactions with coworkers, professors, and police officers, it was usually in a positive way.

“Look,” Miles said, reaching out for her hand, “I think it’s hideous. Both the drawing and his attitudes on Black people. So not cool. We’re on the same page on that. But why not make some coin off some loaded racist sucker who’s willing to shell out a few thousand for it? Eight thousand is a decent down payment on a house in this area.”

“Miles... we are not talking about buying a house.”

“Did I say *we*? I’m just saying... eight thousand could go a long way when buying a house, a car... it’s nothing to sneeze at.”

“I gotcha. But just for the record, I ain’t staying in Stembridgeville my whole life.”

“Of course not,” Miles said, but the words sounded perfunctory.

They went inside, and he asked if she was up for an episode of *Drag Race*. “I want to see who gets eliminated next. I have a feeling it’s Robbie Turner.”

“Oh, baby,” she said. She kicked off her sandals and reached for the remote. “Oh, baby.”

## **Chapter Fifteen — Miles**

Miles tossed and turned as the green glow of his nightstand stereo inched towards one o'clock. Beside him, Audra was deep in sleep, and had been for hours. She had gone to bed before him, around eleven, while he stayed up with a red pen, a stack of essays, and a mug of chamomile tea. One good thing about the current shelter-in-place order was that he could finally catch up on some long overdue grading. He also needed to put down some words on his thesis at some point, and see about rescheduling his meeting with Dr. Huntley to sometime in the future when he had something resembling a cohesive draft. The mental to-do list loomed over him like a nun as he circled comma splices and pointed out logical fallacies. When his eyes grew tired, he set aside the essays and joined Audra in bed. After ten or so minutes rolling around like a rotisserie chicken, it became obvious to him that even though his body was ready for sleep, his mind was readying itself for an anxiety marathon.

The marathon started off on inoffensive terms with a mental replay of the lackluster lip sync from *Drag Race*. Laila McQueen and Dax Exclamation Point had both put on underwhelming performances, performances so lame and uninspired Miles and Audra wondered if the contestants truly wanted the crown at all. He temporarily reallocated his disdain for Robbie Turner and directed it to the soon-to-be-eliminated pair as they staggered and spun around the stage. Ru was right to send them both home. Miles and Audra sighed in agreement, then Audra rose from the couch, explaining she had a strategy meeting on WebEx early in the morning.

“I suspect we’ll be talking communication strategy,” she said, “but also *strategy* strategy. Like how the hell we’re going to run things for the next few weeks. What’re you up to tomorrow?”

“Oh, you know. Staying around the house, sanitizing every surface until my eyes bleed.” They shared a weary laugh. “Actually, I’m having Zoom conferences with my students. We’re supposed to be talking about their rhetorical analysis essays, but I imagine it’ll turn into therapy pretty quickly. Who wants to talk about pathos in the middle of a pandemic?”

“That’s sweet of you, Miles.”

“The therapy isn’t for them. It’s for me.”

With this replay out of the way, Miles’ nocturnal mind took a hard left turn into woodsier territory, reminding him of unfinished tasks, texts and emails he’d neglected to respond to (and what was the point in responding now, days later?), and the future of the spring semester. Would he even attempt synchronous online class, or would he just toss up a series of discussion boards and expect his student to complete them by the end of the semester? There were several options, but none of them were ideal for Miles. There was nothing that could match the in person class dynamic. As much as teaching drained him physically, it also gave him a surge of adrenaline, which helped convey his passion for literature and language and helped engage his students. The sweating and wildman gesticulating was a small price to pay for a lively discussion. He doubted he could recreate the experience through a screen.

His thoughts took another turn, this time submerging into murky waters of existential dread and feelings of insecurity. What if he got the virus and gave it to Audra? What if his parents contracted it? What if all of his friends, his students, everyone he ever knew got sick? The scientists said it affects the elderly the worst, but it was still early days — there was a lot

about the virus the scientists didn't know, and they would be the first ones to tell you that. The only comparison was the Spanish Flu, which killed more than half a million in the U.S. alone. Were they heading down that path again?

When Miles turned and saw it was nearly two, he rolled out of bed and trudged into the spare room, where he flopped onto his childhood bed, a twin mattress encased in a sturdy wooden frame his father built for him when he was in elementary school. Changing location was a tactic he used when he had trouble sleeping, which was often. The new mattress, slightly cool and firm, served as a reset button for his restless mind, as if the tossing and turning he had done for the past two hours had been erased. The spare room was a new start.

He opened a meditation app on his phone, and selected a sleepcast called "Rainy Day Relaxation." He closed his eyes, and he felt his knotted thoughts loosen. There was a comforter on the bed, but he didn't get underneath it. Unless it was the dead of winter, he tended to sleep best without coverings. He found them to be constricting and confining.

For several minutes, he felt himself ease deeper and deeper into sleep, his focus on all things, both good and bad, waning. The beginnings of a dream started to emerge. A windmill. A woodshed. Chickens and cows in a grassy field. A smiling face, folding with age.

Miles recognized the face from family photos.

The smile, though filled with nicotine-stained teeth, was heartening and kind. Miles leaned towards it, gravitated by it. The old face continued smiling, but something about it turned rotten. Miles tried to backtrack, but he couldn't. The smile was all he could see.

Then, like an electric shock, Miles' eyelids snapped back and he jolted awake. Sweat scabbed his forehead. He drew in a ragged breath and cried as the sound of falling raindrops filled the room.

## **Chapter Sixteen — Audra**

It felt like an eternity since Audra had driven past the Kleinstock City Limits sign, hurtling towards her parents' home. She drove with the windows down, letting the early spring wind toss around her hair. Beyoncé blasted on the speakers. The smell of country pine teased her nostrils. It felt like an ordinary day, an ordinary drive home from work. She could have driven like this for hours.

When Audra pulled into the gravel driveway of 165 Hubbard Road, Eleanor came charging out of the house. The dog flanked the car, flailing herself around like the world's clumsiest gymnast. When Audra opened her door, Ellie vaulted over her lap and into the passenger's seat, panting with the anticipation of a new adventure.

"Jesus, Ellie!" Audra grouched as Ellie leaned in and licked her face. *The first time in almost a week I've had done my makeup and this is how I'm treated? Damn.* Still, she was heartened to see her canine confidant, and gave her a big kiss on the top of her smooth black head.

"Hey, pumpkin," Alice called, waving from the front porch. "I tried putting her on a leash, but she wouldn't stand for it."

Alice wore a faded, flower print nightgown — the same one she had worn since Audra was a small child. Her hair stuck out at wonky angles, gray half-moons were cast under her eyes, and deep lines bracketed her mouth. She looked like the zombie version of her usually youthful-looking mother.

“How you doing, ma?” Audra said, her words rubbed with concern.

“Oh, not too shabby,” she said, then again, “not too shabby.”

“Dad sleeping?”

“Your father went into work.”

“What?!” Audra nearly shouted.

“They’re doing plant-wide training today. Mandatory.”

Alice coughed into a loose fist. Audra blinked rapidly. Larry was a shift supervisor of a nearby paper mill, overseeing close to sixty workers. He had worked there for twenty-three years, and rarely missed a shift, even during his peak drinking years. She shifted her weight from foot to foot and bit the edge of her lip. Where did she begin?

“What the hell, mom,” Audra said, resisting the urge to put a hand on her forehead.

“He’s doing better than he was yesterday,” Alice said.

“He’s still infected!”

“Don’t have a cow. He said he’d stay in his office.”

Audra felt her blood grow hot with indignation as her teeth grated against each other.

“That’s not good enough. Coffins have better ventilation than that stuffy ass office, and a coffin is what he’ll be in if y’all aren’t careful.”

“Audra... that’s uncalled for.”

Audra took in a measured breath and looked to Ellie, whose tongue gleefully hung out of her mouth. “*Hey girl, it’s been a minute. Let’s go shopping!*” she seemed to say. Audra held out a hand and let Ellie have another lick fest.

“I’m sorry,” she said to her mother. “I’m just — I’m already sick of this thing, whatever it is. Outbreak. Pandemic. Dr. Fauci says if we all hunker down for two weeks, we could make it more manageable. Flatten the curve.”

“Flatten the curve,” Alice echoed with a wry smile. “Cute. He’s a cute old man, that Fauci.”

“Promise me y’all stay at home for the rest of your quarantine?”

“Your father is the one who you need to talk to. I’m good.”

On her drive home with Ellie all smiles in the backseat, Audra called her father. She had an entire argument prepared, including shaming tactics and emotional appeals involving his grandchildren.

“Larry,” he answered.

“Dad,” Audra said. When she heard his voice, she took a beat and reassessed her original approach. “How’re you doing?”

“Good, good,” Larry said in his upbeat yet matter-of-fact way. “How are you, sweetie?”

“I’m fine. Tell me about work.”

Audra winced midway through her sentence, when she heard a cacophony of dry coughs from her father’s end.

“Another day, another dollar,” Larry said, half-wheezing.

“You don’t sound good, dad. Why’re you at work?”

“I have to be. I’m a supervisor. Supervisors don’t miss work.”

“Mom says you’re staying in the office all day. What’s the point of being at work if you’re just cooped up like that?”

“I need to be here if something happens.”

But wasn't something already happening? An epidemic which would quickly turn into a global pandemic if people didn't take it seriously? If that wasn't a cause for alarm, what was?

Audra was tempted to antagonize her father on this point, but it was useless. He rarely changed his mind unless it was an internal decision, like the nightly drinking. If he wanted something, he would take it (Audra thought back to a couple weeks prior, when her mother had scolded him at the dinner table for piling on a second pork chop onto his plate). She couldn't change his attitude. His heart was his own, and this simple fact broke hers. She ended the call, telling him she loved him and to be as safe as he could.

*Another day, another dollar.* The cliché echoed in her mind as she approached the eerily vacant streets of downtown Stembridgeville. Ever since Audra and her sisters were little girls, he found a way to incorporate it in any conversation about work, repeating it ad nauseam.

“Anything exciting happen at work today?” *Not really. Another day, another dollar.* “What do your coworkers think of Obama?” *They hate his guts. Another day, another dollar.* “What did you have for lunch today?” *A ham sandwich. Another day, another dollar!* As Audra and her sisters grew older, the response became a family joke, evoking it ironically. As college undergrads, they even turned it into a drinking game, sneaking sips of Everclear vodka from a hydro flask whenever Larry volleyed the phrase.

*Another day, another dollar.*

But what if Larry's days were shortened by the virus? What if there was only so many dollars to be earned? A frightening image engorged Audra's mind. She saw her father on a ventilator, his throat constricting like hers did from time to time, but here there was no return for him. No recovery. No more dollars. No more days.

She felt tears swell in her eyes, but they soon subsided. Eleanor licked her face and this time Audra didn't brush her away.

At the apartment, she noticed a large manila envelope peeking out from the mailbox. It didn't seem like anything important — this wasn't her mailbox, after all — but passing by it, the return address, scrawled childishly with a green marker, caught her eye. She knew that handwriting. She knew that address.

Sunny.

With her free hand, Audra grabbed the envelope, and saw it was addressed to her, in the loopy lettering that unmistakably belonged to her niece.

Inside, she unhooked Ellie from her leash and let her tour the apartment, getting acquainted with her digs for the next week and a half. Ellie raced into the main bedroom, where Miles was having his student conferences. Audra was afraid she would bark, but she didn't. It was Miles who lost his cool a little, letting out a surprised but immediately adoring yelp.

For the first time since she had been here, the apartment felt like home. She walked to the bedroom and stood in the doorway, watching Miles rub Ellie's side, a laptop on his lap.

"I'm sorry, Haley, but the sweetest dog in the world is paying me a visit," Miles said. Looking up, he saw Audra and added, "And her mama, too! Come here, mama!"

Audra settled onto the bed, leaned into the screen, and waved to Miles' student, a skinny girl wrapped in an aqua green monogrammed sweatshirt. "Hey, Haley. Is Miles a good teacher?"

"He's not bad," Haley said. "I wish we had fewer papers, but he gives me useful feedback on my writing."

"Thanks for your candor," Miles said.

Haley asked, "What's a candor?"

When Miles got off the call, Audra showed him the envelope. “What can you tell me about this?” Miles took the envelope from her, and turned it over inquisitively.

“Has this been wiped down?” he asked, revealing a sarcastic smile. Audra responded with a playful slap on the arm, and Ellie inserted herself between them, ready to tussle. “Your sister sent me a note through my school email. She said your niece made a little something for you. I gave her my address, and voilá!”

It occurred to Audra then that although she had mentioned Rebecca and Liz to Miles once or twice, Sunny and Devin had never been brought up. She wasn’t sure if this was intentional or not, but in any case, she now found herself brimming with feelings of appreciation, affection, and wonder for this weird/funny boy. She planted a kiss on him and opened the envelope. Inside was one of Sunny’s colorful drawings, both in scheme and imagination. It portrayed a spaceship in the outer reaches of the starry Milky Way (Audra assumed the pink cow floating in the corner was a hint to this). Steering the spaceship were two brown girl stick figures — one was labeled *SUNNY*, and the other, with wild blue hair, was labeled *ADRA*.

She thought she might cry — and for real this time.

“Love the hair,” Miles said, peering at the drawing over her shoulder. A bell sound rang from his laptop, and he opened up a new window which showed a bleary-eyed freshman sitting on a front porch somewhere. “Hey, Cody. Hanging in there all right?”

Still feeling some weight in the envelope, Audra turned it upside down, and four or five medical face masks rained onto the bed, along with a folded note on yellow paper.

*Snagged these from the break room last fall. Sunny has big plans for y’all when all of this is over. Love you to the moon and back. - Rebecca*

Audra left the bedroom and pinned the drawing on the refrigerator, using a magnet with a Jack Handey quote on it. She stepped back from the fridge, unable to take her eyes away from herself and Sunny, light years away from all of the troubles they had ever known.

## **Chapter Seventeen — Miles**

A hazy orange glow consumed the streets of downtown Stembridgeville as Miles and Ellie took their first walk together. Almost no cars passed by them, and the sidewalks were completely abandoned. In a town where every other undergrad owned a bike and joggers could be spotted making their rounds throughout the day, Miles was unsettled by the empty sidewalks. He missed the nods and how-are-you's he usually exchanged with professors and former students. Peering into the windows of boarding houses and apartments, he was reminded of a Ray Bradbury story he had read in middle school. The peeping tom tactic felt counterintuitive to his original motivation for going on a walk in the first place — he needed to clear his mind, which was still abuzz with the concerns of his students.

One student who stood out to Miles in particular was Gretchen, who wrote deeply insightful response pages but seemed to hate Miles on a personal and visceral level. That afternoon, when he'd started their conversation by asking if she was having any trouble understanding rhetoric, she responded, "Not at all. If anything, it's too easy. I feel I could be getting more for my tuition dollars."

She said this in a deadpan, matter of fact tone that made Miles wonder if she was on the spectrum.

"That's good to know, I guess," Miles said. "Do you have any other questions? Concerns?"

Gretchen thought for a second, then mumbled, "No."

“How are your other classes going?”

“Fine.”

“Okay, then.” A beat. “You sure you don’t have any questions? Nothing I can help with?”

“I’m sure.”

“Any thoughts on the lockdowns?”

“What’s the point? We’re all going to die anyway.”

A slimy chill worked through Miles’ neck and shoulders as he tried to maintain a smile.

“Okay, then,” he said. “Nice talking to you, Gretchen.”

Gretchen hung up without another word.

There had been more lively conversations. There was Amanda, who wanted to talk to Miles about changing her major to English; Carson, who expressed enthusiasm for the upcoming research essay, despite the fact Miles had explicitly shot down his idea to write about Trump’s caravan conspiracy theory; and Blake, who signed off by pounding his chest and saying “Peace, professor!”

Miles knew he wasn’t the smartest or most articulate teacher they’d encounter in their college years, he felt he had helped them feel a little less afraid of writing. This, he believed, was just as important as being able to identify a dangling modifier, or formulate a strong thesis.

On Pennington Street, two blocks away from where it intersected at his complex on Hardwick, Ellie’s pace slowed, and her sniffing became more deliberate. He paused to let her poop. As she was doing her business, he heard someone call for help. He spun around to see an old woman in a wheelchair on the opposite side of the four lane road. A tree-lined median separated them. Still, it was clear her words were directed towards Miles. She was in the middle

of the road, and if a car were to come along, the driver would have two choices — to swerve around her, or hit her.

“Help,” she said in a pitchy, almost theatrical way. “I need help.” That was all she said as they looked at each other. For a moment, Miles was tempted to run over and roll her out of the street. But then Ellie tugged at the short rope leash, looking up at him with somber eyes.

“Help me, my wheelchair is broken.”

The old woman wore an oversized t-shirt with teddy bears on it. Wrinkles masked her face and her hair was stiff and gray, almost white. Miles made the assumption she was probably homeless. Again, he considered crossing the median to help her out — but could he do so safely? He also had Ellie, whose tugging became more adamant.

“Are you hurt?” Miles called. “Do you need me to call an ambulance?”

“No,” the old woman called back. “Just you. I just need you.”

*An odd thing to say to a stranger*, Miles thought. Ellie made a sound somewhere between a growl and a whimper.

“I’m with my dog,” Miles said. Ellie tried to bolt in pursuit after a squirrel, and he was almost knocked off his feet. He felt he should say something more, but he just kept walking. Further down the block, he happened upon a middle-aged Black man in a long sleeve shirt working a weed eater outside an old money mansion.

“Hey,” Miles said, making sure he was a fair six feet away from the man. He didn’t respond, probably because his senses were blocked off by a large pair of earmuffs and safety glasses, Miles reasoned. “Hey!” The groundskeeper peered up at Miles and pulled back one of his earmuffs. “Did you see that lady in the middle of the street back there?”

“Sure,” the groundskeeper said. “She’s always somewhere around here.”

“Scammer,” said another man in another long sleeve shirt. Miles hadn’t noticed him pushing a wheelbarrow until now. Ellie lifted her nose in his direction, trying to get a good smell read on him. “She tries to call you over, then asks you for twenty bucks.”

“Seriously?” Miles said.

“Seriously,” the first groundskeeper said. “We see her all the time. She can walk, you know.”

“That’s really something,” Miles said.

“I guess,” said the wheelbarrow guy, shaking his head. “Con artists.”

Miles and Ellie continued walking. When they reached the end of Pennington, which stopped in front of Georgia Military School, Ellie stalled, taking a moment to assess the new territory. Miles paused with her, even though he knew the area well, and took in the massive Gothic building. The story went that it had been built in the early 1800s, when the state legislature sought to move the capital from Savannah. Mayors and representatives from across the state lobbied for their city to be named the new capitol, but none went as far as the mayor of Stembridgeville, who ordered a capitol building to be erected as a show of political prowess. In the end, the legislature chose Milledgeville, for its more central location in the state. It was then the building was swiftly repurposed as a military school, and had been ever since. Miles had read all of this on a plaque on one of his first solitary walks through Stembridgeville.

They hung a right, passing by a large monument of some obscure Confederate general, long dead and forgotten by the generations. After a couple blocks, they took a left, distancing themselves from the downtown region. Soon, they were entering Quiet Hill Cemetery. Gnats and bees converged on Miles, veering into his eyes, his nostrils, his ears. He batted them away and walked on, stopping only when Ellie decided to pee on a grave. As they walked around the

perimeter of the modest cemetery, his mind wasn't exactly clear, but it was void of caring and feeling. He was certain he was having thoughts of some kind, but they were amorphous, slippery things. If you asked him what he was thinking in that particular moment, he wouldn't be able to say, even though they immersed him so fully, like a thick blanket warmed by his own body heat.

The orange glow of the afternoon dimmed to a gray-purple dusk. As they walked by O'Leary's grave, Miles was reminded of the conversation he and Audra had there. It unsettled him at the time, but in this discomfort he'd found himself rethinking the issue of Norman O'Leary's work. Another trap door opened in his mind. This one led to a class discussion in an American Lit survey class he'd taken as an undergrad, wherein they debated a scene in O'Leary's story, "Atonement." The story's plot was simple — a plantation farmer's daughter falls in love with an African-American farmhand, and they strike up an illicit relationship, meeting at night in a barn. Eventually, they are caught by the girl's father, who murders both the Black farmhand and his daughter using a pickaxe. The story's closing line sent a chill down Miles' neck whenever he read it: "I'm sorry, Lucy, but as the good book says, 'Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.'"

Two of the three Black students in the survey class — who were normally talkative — didn't say a word during the discussion on the O'Leary story. A girl named Kayla, however, spoke up in anger, not only towards O'Leary for writing the story, but also towards the white-haired professor for assigning "this piece of racist garbage."

Miles recalled blushing where he sat in the back of the classroom. In his modest opinion, he felt that the ending was less of a hate crime and more of an illustration of the ills of religious extremism. At the time, he felt this was the only way to read the story. In hindsight, he realized, Kayla probably felt the same way.

By the time Miles and Ellie walked up the brick steps of his apartment, it was almost completely dark. Miles was comforted by the muted yellow glow coming through the windows. Inside, he and Ellie were greeted with “We Are Nowhere and It's Now” by Bright Eyes coming from the record player. The album the song came from, *I'm Wide Awake It's Morning*, was the soundtrack to his awkward and lonely middle school years. He unhooked Ellie, and she galloped into the kitchen, where Audra was, singing absentmindedly along with Conor Oberst, emo as ever.

“What’s this?” Miles asked, gesturing to the couscous cooking on the stove as Audra chopped onions.

Audra flashed an affectionate smile. “I thought I’d try my hand at your mom’s couscous salad. Maybe it’ll give us something to talk about when I meet her in a few days.”

Miles couldn’t help but return the smile. “How long has that been cooking?” he asked, nodding to the couscous.

“About five minutes,” Audra said.

He removed the pan from the heat, took a fork from a drawer and fluffed the tiny balls of pasta.

Audra, just finished chopping an onion, said, “What else do you put in this thing?”

Miles handed her the fork as he dug out a red and yellow bell peppers, celery (the quality of which was on the questionable side, but he wasn’t going to tell Audra that), a jar of green olives he’d purchased over a year ago, and mayonnaise. He then pivoted to the cupboards and took out a can of pink salmon. There was something about these movements that excited him, reminded him of simpler days.

Audra chopped and Miles blended in the ingredients in a metal mixing bowl. When everything was mixed, he placed the bowl in the fridge. “Just for thirty minutes or so. We always eat it cold.”

They cracked open a couple sparkling waters and sat across each other from the table as “Train Under Water” filled the room with warmth and hope. Ellie licked Miles’ hand just once, and he reminded himself to give her the spare can of salmon when it was time to eat.

“Do you miss drinking?” Audra said.

“I didn’t miss it until now.”

“My bad.”

He took a sip from his artificially flavored water and tossed Audra a wink.

She said, “So what should I know about your parents before we see them in a couple days?”

He considered this, then said the first thing that came to his mind. “My dad builds cabinets. My mom is an optometrist. I’m their only child.”

“Care to elaborate?” Audra asked. “Are they both Georgia natives?”

“My dad’s family has been in Georgia for generations,” Miles said. “My dad’s dad and his dad, et cetera, worked in the carpet business. They spent all their lives in Dalton. The carpet capital of the world. My dad and his brother were the rebels. They broke from the carpet tradition. Dad loved the idea of building houses. He went to school for architecture.”

“What about your dad’s brother?”

“He drank. That’s all there is to know about him.” For whatever reason, this reminded Miles he needed to take his Prozac, so he got up from the table and got the bottle from his med stash in the cupboard.

“You mentioned your mom’s family is from Vermont. What brought her down here?”

“College. She attended UGA. She actually dated my uncle, until he died. Mom and Dad met for the first time at Frank’s funeral.”

Audra’s eyes widened with mild shock. Seeing this, Miles squirmed in his chair. This was why Frank wasn’t talked about. It was weird and uncomfortable — and to what end? Frank was long dead, there was no redemption for him. Not now. All he was now, to Miles at least, was a name on a headstone in a cemetery he had never visited.

He drained the rest of his can and got up from the table. “Hungry?”

He pulled the couscous salad from the fridge and checked the cupboard for bowls, but all of his bowls were in the sink. As he washed one, then another, he heard Audra get up from her chair and turn the record over.

## **Chapter Eighteen — Audra**

She had never seen anything like it—a crusty, yellow-almost-brown line coming from underneath the bathroom mirror. She supposed it must've been there for some time, considering how dried and stale it looked. Boogers. That's what it reminded her of. One long booger, traveling from the mirror down to the sink. She leaned in to sniff it as she washed her hands. It didn't smell particularly bad, but it didn't smell good, either. How had she not noticed it before? She rubbed the sides of her hands underneath the faucet, her palms, her fingertips. She laced her fingers together and let the soap attack any germs in the space between. Every gap. Every crevice. She even washed her wrists for good measure. When she was done, she dried off using a towel with bleach stains Miles had let her borrow.

She stood in the doorway of the bedroom for several minutes as Miles spoke with a student, his eyes locked on his laptop opened on the bed. He sat with crossed legs. Ellie's head rested on his knee<sup>3</sup>. Audra's heart swelled a bit, but at the same time she felt a pang of jealousy. Was her dog daughter switching loyalties?

When he was done with the conference, Audra asked, "Have you ever noticed that yellow stuff coming from the mirror?"

Miles' mouth crinkled as he thought. "I've seen it. I was meaning to call the landlord about that, but I guess it slipped my mind."

"Can you call him now?" Audra said.

Just then, his phone lit up with a new call. "Sure. After this conference."

She poured herself some coffee, then went back to the bedroom and whispered Ellie's name. The two of them went into the living room and settled on the couch underneath the Holster drawing. Audra opened up the old Macbook Pro she had unearthed from the storage unit. It had been a high school graduation present from her parents, and served her well in her undergraduate years at Central State College. Term papers. Love letters to Ezra (written when they were still in love). Articles she had written for the MGS campus newspaper, *The Compass* (she decided not look at them, to save herself from profound personal mortification). Failed attempts at fiction, a stab at a memoir. Early resumes and cover letters. This laptop had it all. It was a time capsule of her writing life.

She pressed the power button several times, but the screen remained black and spotted with dust. It had been years since she had opened the thing, let alone turned it on, and she worried it was dead for good. She reached for the charger in the TJMaxx bag she'd hauled from the storage unit and plugged the laptop up to an outlet behind the couch. After a few seconds, the light on the charger went from orange to green. She tried the power button again. The computer lit up with a sterile white glow before displaying the default wallpaper she never got around to changing — a grand yet generic depiction of the cosmos, tinged with purple and starry silver. Seeing this reminded her of Sunny's drawing on the fridge, and for a moment Audra pined for her niece.

She shook her head almost involuntarily, bringing herself back to reality. She used the almost obsolete version of Safari to check her work email and her planner. Other than a virtual editorial meeting on Monday and a request from Valerie to proofread a press release on the campus closure, she had little else on her docket. She looked over the release and sent back edits in a matter of minutes, then spent an embarrassing amount of time on Pinterest, looking at

recipes for Italian cream cake and cinnamon scones. She had just exited out of the browser and was about to give her eyes a break when a document on her desktop caught her eye. It read *BOMBEST COVER LETTER EVER 2014*.

Audra read the words several times as she considered opening the document. There was the cringe factor, of course — the fact that the “bomb” superlative was in all caps probably conveyed there was in fact something left to be desired — but Audra could handle that. The thing that bothered her, when it really came down to it, was having to face her past self, the Audra of half a decade ago, and all of the plans and hopes she had laid out for herself, which, as of now, remained unfulfilled.

A knock came at the back door of the apartment. Ellie went into full guard dog mode, barking her head off, ready to attack. Audra sat frozen on the couch as Miles stepped out of the bedroom and answered the door. She smoothed out Ellie’s coat, imploring her to quiet down.

From the living room, she heard a man say, gruffly, “I ain’t intruding, am I? Boss said there was something to see in the bathroom.”

Miles let the maintenance man in. She caught a glimpse of his shaggy gray hair and tattooed arms as Miles led him into the bathroom. Their bare faces reminded her that she needed to look into ordering masks. Ellie let out one more full-throated bark, then a few seconds later lowered her head back onto Audra’s lap. She tried to listen in on the conversation between Miles and the maintenance man, but from the other side of the apartment it was just indistinct mumbling — until the man let out a surprised shout.

“Holy shit,” he said, his words accompanied by the sound of water smacking the tiles.

Both Audra and Ellie perked up. Miles turned his head away from the bathroom, his upper lip reaching towards his nostrils in disgust. Audra wasn’t sure if she wanted to see what he

saw. She couldn't handle any more bad news or surprise messes, so she dove back into her Pinterest rabbit hole.

The maintenance dipped out, and Miles joined Audra in the living room.

“He’s coming back with a helper.”

“Why does he need help?”

“Water came out of the ceiling. They think it might be a busted pipe from the upstairs toilet.”

That was all Miles could say before the maintenance guy came back with another man, who also had tattoos on his arms but was shorter and huskier and had a drooping white mustache. They had been in the bathroom for a minute when sounds of crashing water reverberated through the apartment. Whatever that was, it can't be good, Audra thought. Ellie jumped down from the couch and began barking at the unseen danger. Audra set aside her laptop and joined Miles, pacing in the hallway. The maintenance men opened the door. Brown water layered bathroom floor. The ceiling had been cut open to reveal a nest of waterlogged insulation, spotted with sewage. She gagged at the smell.

“Just like I thought,” the first maintenance guy said. “Busted pipe. We’ll have to gut out the insulation, fix the pipe, then reseal everything up. We’ll also need to dry all this out. I got a couple fans you can borrow.”

“How long will it take to do all of that,” Miles said, biting the side of his lip.

“We’ll clear out the insulation today. I can get a plumber here tomorrow. It might take two or three days to dry out everything in there, though.”

“Can we still use the bathroom?”

Audra stared at Miles. Miles looked back. He had felt her eyes on him.

“There’s no way I’m using that bathroom now,” she said as evenly as she could. If an exposed, shit-stained ceiling wasn’t a reason to run for the hills, what was? The fact that Miles could even consider using the bathroom now made her question his general judgement.

The first maintenance man looked at Audra apologetically as the second man let out an amused snort.

“It’s not impossible,” the first man said. “But it won’t be no a spa resort. Sorry to say, ma’am.”

Audra wanted to scream, but stayed quiet. Miles thanked the handymen.

“We’ll be in and out,” the first man said.

The second man opened the mirror, showing the medicine cabinet. Brown water rained on Miles’ toothbrush, as well as the spare he’d lent Audra. “Y’all might want to get some new toothbrushes.”

Audra retreated to the living room, where Ellie sat timidly, now the opposite of her attack dog persona. Her tail thumped on the couch as Audra sat beside her. Just when she thought she couldn’t handle anymore bad news, bad news arrived at her doorstep. And not just bad news. Horrible news. Shitty news — on more than one level. She closed her eyes tightly, trying her best to keep the tears at bay. She was tired of being tired. Tired of life serving her one shit sandwich after another.

Miles walked into the living room with crossed arms. Audra could tell by his glazed eyes and nervous pacing that he, too, was reaching a breaking point.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Sorry for what?”

Miles looked out the window and ran a hand through his wavy hair. Audra had a sudden urge to grab a hold of it, to bring him close to her. She imagined their bodies merging, their flesh and blood and souls combining into one. She wanted someone to share the burden of what felt like the world crashing down on her.

“I don’t even know. I’m just sorry. This sucks. Everything sucks.”

He dropped on the couch. They sat in silence for several minutes. Ellie sat in the middle and licked Audra’s hand. When she batted the dog away, she went for Miles’ elbow.

“We could go to my mom and dad’s,” Miles said. “They live about three hours from here. The only downside is that you’d have to meet my mom and dad.”

Audra let out a thin laugh. She felt a warm tug inside her, similar to the feeling she’d had when Miles introduced her as his girlfriend, but now the tug quickly fizzled. She knew she should be heartened by the offer, but she couldn’t pull together the energy to do more than sigh.

“We could also just stick it out here, plug our noses,” Miles added, rubbing Audra’s back. “I probably have some clothespins around here somewhere.”

She looked down the hall, where the bathroom door had been left ajar, and contemplated the flooded bathroom floor, the dripping, gaping ceiling, the brown rivulets and spots on the walls, the smell.

The *smell*.

Based on the smell alone, Audra would have driven cross country, slept on the floor of a klansman’s shotgun shack, and would have been grateful for such accommodations. The smell was that bad.

If she had to describe it, she’d say something along the lines of *ass garbage from hell*.

“Fat chance,” Audra said, getting up from the couch. “Do you think you could be ready in an hour? We can take my car.”

###

Half an hour later, they were whipping by fields filled with cows and corn, abandoned gas stations and ramshackle farmhouses that hadn't seen a fresh coat of paint since the last century. Miles was behind the wheel as Audra scrolled through her phone, checking the weather. Mostly cloudy with a high of seventy-three. Ellie stood firmly on the middle console, her serious brown eyes seeming to chart the journey ahead. Every few minutes, she would turn to Miles and lick his face with affectionate abandon, getting into the nooks and crannies of his ears and nose. When her tongue flung itself around his glasses, Miles put up a distancing hand. “Thank you, Ellie. I get the message. You like me. You really like me!” Audra felt an abstract tingling for Miles, a good sort of tingling, a feeling that had almost fizzled out completely in the last few days.

“You know, I listened to this podcast once. It looked at how women feel when men do certain things. Like, how they respond hormonally. One of the findings was that women go crazy when their man is behind the wheel. We might not show it, but we do.”

Miles looked at her and laughed. “Why's that?”

“I forget how they explained it, but it makes sense to me. I feel that way now.”

“You feel crazy?”

“Maybe crazy is overselling it. But this is definitely a turn on.”

She leaned over and kissed Miles on the cheek. Ellie followed suit.

They had just merged onto I-20 when Audra's phone rang. It was Rebecca. She took the call through the car's Bluetooth.

“You’re on speaker,” she greeted. “I’m with Miles.”

“Hi, Rebecca,” Miles said.

“Hey, Miles. Thanks for your address. You better treat my little sister good, now. I know where you live.” Miles shook his head, chuckling. *That’s Rebecca!* his face said, as if they were old friends. “Sunny wants to know if you received her masterpiece.”

“Hi, Auntie Audra,” Sunny’s honey sweet voice chimed in.

“Hey, child,” Audra said. “I got your drawing in the mail yesterday. It was a wonderful surprise.”

“It’s not a drawing,” Sunny said. “It’s a masterpiece. It’s different.”

Audra and Miles shared a private smile.

“You’re right. It’s one of a kind. I can’t wait to ride off in the spaceship with you.”

“Auntie Audra? Can you bring some cookies when we go in the spaceship? Mama won’t let me have cookies, and that’s why she’s not allowed in the spaceship.”

“Hey now!” Rebecca butted in. “That’s not nice.”

“Give me cookies! Give me cookies!” Sunny growled playfully. Audra could picture her niece curling her fingers into claws and showing off a devilish smirk.

“Get out of here, cookie monster,” Rebecca said. “Don’t you have chores to do, or something?”

“Cookies! Cookies! Cookies!”

“I banish thee, cookie fiend! Now go bother your father.”

“Bye Audra!” Sunny said, then signed off with a series of rampant footsteps.

“That girl definitely inherited the sass gene,” Audra said.

“Say what?!” Rebecca snapped back sarcastically. Audra and Miles laughed. “How’re y’all holding up?”

“Pretty alright,” Audra said. “Some shit went down at the apartment —”

“Literally,” Miles interrupted. “Busted pipe from the unit above me.”

“... So we’re going to stay with his parents for a day or two.”

“Meeting the ‘rents this early? Wow. Miles, did she tell you we didn’t meet Ezra’s parents until, like, three months after they were married? At Christmas. It was awkward as hell. Nice people, don’t get me wrong. Just... awkward.”

Audra blushed, knitting her eyebrows. “How did you know that Miles knows about Ezra?”

“Bitches talk out here,” Rebecca said, her tone a shrug. “It’s all there is to do.”

“Wooooow,” Audra said. “And by bitches, you mean mom and Liz.”

“They’re the only bitches I know.”

They spent the rest of the call talking about the disappointing lack of work drama, now that everyone was hunkered down at home and communicated primarily through emails and Zoom calls. As Rebecca prattled on about a colleague named Cindy who had yet to get in the habit of muting her mic, Audra googled *medical face masks*. A clickbait-y looking site gave a list of twenty small internet businesses that had shifted their production focus to making masks and sanitizer. Every link she clicked on was a dead end. *Sold Out. Back in Stock April 2020.*

“Well... I’ll let you go,” Rebecca said, finally, perhaps sensing Audra’s wandering focus.

“Bye, girl,” Audra said as she opened Facebook. “Love ya.”

She scrolled through her feed, searching for some good news, but after a couple swipes she was beginning to think this was a fool's errand. Good news on Facebook? Good luck. The two were oil and water, it seemed.

She was about to close the app when something caught her eye. The animal shelter where she had adopted Ellie was selling handmade masks, made by volunteers. There was no price attached to them, other than a ten dollar suggested donation. Using both thumbs, she typed in 30 in the donation field, eager to track down masks in addition to supporting one of her favorite organizations. She filled out the order form at lightning speed until she reached the shipping section. Should she enter Miles' address, or her parents' place? Neither one felt quite like home — *her* home. Her gaze drifted to the kudzu, the pines, the interstate gas stations and signs advertising flea markets and fast food restaurants. Eventually the trees disappeared as Atlanta unfolded before them. As Miles merged right to take the Chattanooga/Marietta exit, Audra typed in the address of the house on Hubbard Road.

###

"I hope you're hungry," Miles said, turning into a neighborhood called Plantation Woods. The name made Audra's stomach swivel. Was this a joke? The lettering on the subdivision's giant regal sign made her think of wedding invitations. "Mom will probably have something on the stove or in the crockpot for us."

They coasted by a golf course, a clubhouse and tennis courts, and a series of immaculately manicured lawns that each led up to equally pristine houses. Trump Pence flags and yard signs covered the streets as if ordained by the homeowners association. Audra found herself raising a hand over her mouth as she thought, *This is the whitest shit I've ever witnessed.*

A middle-aged woman in a golf cart passed them coming from the opposite direction, wearing a white cotton skirt and a striped polo. She waved and Miles acknowledged her with a laid back wave of his own, raising only two fingers.

“There’s Mrs. McMillan,” Miles said. “She was my third grade teacher.”

Audra tried to shake herself from this golf-obsessed, tennis racket-toting, Republican-voting hellscape. By the time Miles pulled into the driveway of a gigantic house couched in a quiet cul-de-sac, she was almost speechless.

“Damn, Miles. You never told me you grew up in a McMansion.”

Miles gave Audra a confused look. “A McMansion? What’s that?”

Audra laughed. Miles blinked.

“Oof,” was all Audra said.

Miles led her and Ellie through the front door and into the foyer. The house smelled of cherry blossoms, which Audra personally found distasteful, but hey, it was better than sewage. The walls were cream-colored and displayed framed pictures of Miles and his parents over the years. The first photo that caught Audra’s eye showed a prepubescent, noticeably fatter version of Miles in a swim jammer. His face was rounder than it was now, and his eyes were pinched against the sunlight, as if he had a personal vendetta towards the photographer. His doughy belly spilled over the waistband of his tight swimsuit.

“You never told me you were fat,” she gawked. Miles responded with a sidelong look but nothing more.

The sound of high-pitched barking caused both Audra and Ellie to jump.

“I forgot to tell you, we have a dog, too. His name is Calvin. He’s friendly.” Just then, a furry white shih-tzu came barreling into the foyer and immediately began sniffing Ellie’s

hindquarters — the fact that her tail was snugly packed in between her legs didn't deter the furball dog.

“Do you mind if I let her off the leash?” Audra said. Miles nodded and she unhooked Ellie. The two dogs, David and Goliath size-wise, scurried into the living room, where Miles' mother sat with her legs propped on a coffee table. As they stepped closer to her, Audra saw that she was fast asleep. She was a thin woman with pinched features — narrow eyes, tight lips, and a nose so pointed it looked like it could draw blood. Decker out in sweatpants and oversized *Golden Girls* shirt, she looked as if she needed the sleep she was getting. On the television, Judge Judy was admonishing a Latino man, the defendant, for not watering his neighbor's plants like he said he would.

“Hey mom,” Miles said, squeezing her shoulder softly. She jolted awake and drew in a disoriented gasp.

“Miles,” she croaked wearily, cradling her head in her hand. Again, she said her son's name, then, “Welcome home, honey. Sorry I'm a mess.”

“Another migraine?” Miles asked.

She nodded. “Happens every year around this time.” Her foggy eyes lifted to look at Audra, partly with surprise, partly with bemusement. “Who's this? Where's the girlfriend?”

Miles wrapped an arm around Audra's waist. “This *is* my girlfriend. Audra. I told her about her when we talked.”

“Audra, yes. Of course. Hi.” She shook her head as if fending off a bad dream. “I'm Sheila.”

Sheila extended a limp hand, but Audra didn't accept it. It could have been the recent CDC recommendations to bump elbows in lieu of handshakes, or perhaps it was the sting of

embarrassment she still felt from Sheila's offhanded remark. Was it really such a surprise that her son would ever dare bring home a Black girl?

"It's good to meet you," Audra said, her arms stiff by her side. "I like your shirt. *Golden Girls* was one of my favorite shows growing up."

Sheila blinked, confused for a second, then looked at her shirt, as if she needed to remind herself what she was wearing.

"I got this a long time ago. Christmas gift."

"Timeless TV, if you ask me," Audra said with a nervous smile.

Sheila's eyes lingered on Audra, then to Miles, then to Audra again, then to Miles again. She said, "I'm sorry, I'm out of sorts, kids. This headache has been a doozy. I've been on the couch since the office closed. I hope y'all aren't hungry."

Ellie cowered in the corner of the living room as Calvin tried to sniff her out.

"We can grab something from the pantry," Miles said. "No worries. I'm going to show Audra around."

He detoured to a glass door that opened onto the back deck, and a claustrophobic Ellie bolted outside. Calvin wasn't far behind.

## **Chapter Nineteen — Miles**

As the daylight waned, Miles' father, Daniel, arrived home. He sighed heavily as he sat on the bench in the foyer and unlaced his work boots caked with sawdust. "Hey, rascals," he said, sauntering into the living room. For as long as Miles could remember, this was how he greeted his son and wife at the end of any given workday.

"Hey, ya filthy animal," Miles said, quoting *Home Alone*, a Prestwood family favorite.

On the television, drag contestants strutted down the runway as the judges made catty comments on their style choices. After giving Audra a tour of the house, Miles returned to the living room to find his mom conked out again on the couch.

"*Drag Race*?" he asked Audra as he plucked the remote from Sheila's lap.

"Oh, baby," Audra answered.

They had burned through two episodes before his dad walked through the door, and were about to finish a third.

"What's this?" Daniel asked. "A fashion show?"

"Drag queens," Audra said.

"Drag queens." Daniel repeated the words slowly, as if he was participating in a spelling bee. He ran a hand through his salt and pepper hair. He was a husky man with big arms and a middle that demanded space. These were practically prerequisites in his line of work.

"Dudes dressed as chicks," Miles reminded. He knew his father knew what a drag queen was — still, confusion seemed to shape his face. Why would his straight son be watching such

subversive and girly content? Miles smirked privately as he imagined the questions that must be swirling through his father's mind right now, the chief among them being, *What do they do with their dicks?*

Daniel looked stunned as Kim Chi, paraded down the runway in makeup and dressed in an outfit resembling a pink rose.

"Weird," Daniel said, rattling his head. He looked to Audra, then Miles, and mouthed the word *Girlfriend?* Miles nodded. "You must be Aubrey."

"Audra," she corrected politely. She waved from where she sat, beside him on a plush sectional. "It's good to meet you."

Daniel's mouth stretched into a smile. Had Miles ever seen his father smile for so big for so long? If he had, he couldn't remember it. His father had never really been an overly cheery man, which wasn't to say he was unkind or abrasive. A smile from him was as rare as a solar eclipse.

"Mom's still in hibernation mode, I see. I guess we'll have to fend for ourselves if we want dinner."

Daniel lumbered to the fridge and surveyed its contents.

"There's some leftover broccoli salad," he said. "Your mom made it yesterday."

Broccoli... broccoli... hadn't he been talking about broccoli to someone recently? He knew it had come up in the past couple days, but he couldn't pinpoint what had been said or even who he'd been talking with.

"Sounds good to me," he said, though the mystery around the broccoli continued to nag at him. He looked to Audra, who nodded sniffly.

"Want a beer?" his father asked.

“Actually, I’m good,” Miles said, his words wobbly.

“Oh, come on. Have a beer with your old man.”

Before Miles could say anything more, his father tossed him a beer. The cold sweat of the can sent a cramping chill through his body. For a moment, it seemed as if the can had more power over Miles than he had over himself. He hadn’t missed the taste of beer or its numbing feeling, at least not in a significant way, until now. He sat frozen on the couch as his father cracked open his beer and raised his can, offering socially distanced cheers.

“To good health.”

“To good health,” Miles repeated. He smiled thinly as he toasted his father with the unopened can. This was the same father who shamed him for getting into his liquor cabinet, the same father who winced whenever the words *alcoholism* or *hangover* whenever brought up in an ordinary conversation. Up until now, Miles couldn’t remember a time when he even saw his father opening a beer in the house. Throughout his childhood and college years, the locked away liquor had been the only alcohol in the house, and even then, it only came out around the holidays.

Daniel took a long pull from his beer, then let out a satisfied sigh.

Miles looked to Audra, who seemed to offer sympathy in her soft eyes. His heart swelled every time he looked to her.

“It’s only one beer,” she said with a shrug.

Miles matched Audra’s shrug, cracked open the beer, and took a sip. It was crisp and soothing. He felt something simple and pure rise in the back of his neck and blossom in his brain. A little flower, a reminder that he didn’t always have to take life so seriously. He sank into the couch slightly, and rested a hand on Audra’s knee.

“Want me to grab you one?” he asked her.

“I’m good for now.”

When his mother awoke, Miles suggested they have dinner. He never liked drinking on an empty stomach, and he thought he’d heard Audra’s stomach grumble as guest judges David and Amy Sedaris offered their critiques to the contestants. He stood from the couch and took out the broccoli salad from the fridge, but it didn’t seem enough to satisfy the four of them, so he heated some frozen garlic bread he found in the freezer. He multitasked between setting the table and taking nips from his beer as his mother and father quizzed Audra on her personal life. When the topic of how she and Miles met, she said, “Online,” and left it at that. Feeling flirty and loose, Miles tossed her a wink. There was a warmth in his chest that couldn’t be attributed to the alcohol alone.

For whatever reason, seeing Audra sit in his parents’ living room made him realize how rare an occurrence this was, introducing a new girl to his mother and father. It had only happened once before. A couple years out of high school, he had gotten involved with a girl named Meredith, who he had met after a performance of *Brigadoon* by the North Metro Players. She was a slender girl with chestnut brown hair, and her cheeks were round without being chubby. She had stunning green eyes, and a smile that sparkled like champagne. As Miles sat in the darkened theater watching her sing and saunter about the stage, he knew he had to meet her.

At a post-performance Waffle House meal with some of the younger cast members, Miles sat across from a curly-haired guy in a Georgia Tech sweatshirt and had his arm wrapped around Meredith. His name was Johnny and he was Meredith’s boyfriend.

Miles and Meredith became Facebook friends the next day. Within a couple weeks, they fell into the same circle, attending open mics at the coffee shop across from the theater. Miles

read portions of experimental novels and his paltry attempts at poetry. Meredith sang and played a ukulele, covering Florence and the Machine and Avett Brothers. Johnny was never at the open mics. The only time Miles ever saw his face was on Facebook, when he went to Meredith's page and hovered his cursor over the space that read *In A Relationship*. Otherwise, Johnny seemed like a bit player in Meredith's life. She never posted about him, and rarely brought him up in conversation.

After an open mic in mid-February, Meredith told Miles, somewhat randomly, "You want to know something that sucks? I'm not going to my senior prom."

"What? Why not?"

"Johnny doesn't want to go."

"That's it? He just doesn't feel like it?"

"Yup."

Miles let the information sink in. "So, are you going to go by yourself?"

"Please," Meredith said, rolling her eyes.

"I mean, I'd go with you. If I were your boyfriend and all."

She played footsie with a coffee lid on the concrete, then looked at Miles head on. "Is there some rule that says only boyfriends and girlfriends can go to prom together?"

Miles felt his mouth tilt in a smile. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

Using money he'd earned from his part-time job at the library, Miles rented a tuxedo, bought the tickets, covered the dinner they shared at a swanky Italian restaurant, and even chipped in for the limo they shared with Meredith's friends. That night they danced fast and slow, they sang to all the songs, they sweated and laughed and touched. When it was all over Miles

pulled her aside outside the limo. The night was cool, but the dregs of winter were fading away. Spring was around the corner. The world was about to bloom.

“Did you have fun tonight?” he asked.

“Of course,” she said. “I always have fun with you, whatever we’re doing.” She looked like she might reach out for him but didn’t. “Why do you ask? Is everything okay?”

“Sure. Everything’s fine. I just —” He felt a swelling in his throat and waited for it to pass. “I just have never met anyone like you. What we have — just as friends — is really special. I wish we could, like, explore that more.”

“Miles...”

“It just pisses me off,” Miles continued, “that Johnny is the kind of boyfriend who’d let you go to a prom with some random guy. You deserve better than that.”

A stricken look passed over Meredith’s face. She blinked twice before speaking. “There’s a lot between Johnny and me that you don’t know about. We’re fine. And we’re going to stay together.” She reached out for him now, grabbing between his wrist and elbow. “And you’re a great friend. An outstanding friend. Thank you so much for everything you did tonight.”

Later that night, Meredith texted, *Did I say something wrong?*

Miles responded, *Not at all. Tonight was fun.*

Meredith didn’t respond after that, and Miles didn’t text her again, even though he wanted to. He stopped going to open mics, as well, and whenever he saw her after a play he walked the other way without a thought, without a feeling.

It took time to get over the disappointment and heartbreak Meredith caused. It led him to try online dating, which led him to his first fumbling sexual encounter, with a slightly large girl named Patty who drank Red Stripe beer and played Buffy The Vampire Slayer in the background

whenever they hung out. One day, she texted him complaining about cramps. Because Miles had received virtually no sex-ed at his private Christian school, he jumped to the conclusion that he had impregnated Patty. Patty quickly assured him this wasn't the case — she was just on her period — but Miles was still rattled. He broke it off soon after the false alarm text.

There were other girls, other encounters, that were far less dramatic than Meredith or Patty, but no matter how hard Miles tried to stay the course, he couldn't. He always broke things off before the fling turned into anything that vaguely resembled a relationship. Audra, though... what he had with her was different. With her, he had both eyes on her, as opposed to having one eye on her and one eye on the EXIT sign, or another woman. With her, there was a feeling of calm, of stability, of understanding and affection he'd never gotten or was able to give with anyone else. He wanted to hold onto that feeling for as long as he could.

“How about another beer?” Daniel nudged Miles midway through dinner.

“Sure,” Miles said. He remembered he had forgotten to take his medicine today, so why not indulge in an extra drink?

His father belched and got up from the table. “Pardon me.”

“We also have some wine, dear, if you're in the mood,” Sheila told Audra, waving a listless hand.

“I'm not a big wine drinker,” Audra said. “But I'll take some whiskey if you have it.”

Daniel looked to Miles. “You know the hiding spot.”

Miles got up from the table and went downstairs into the rec room, which served as a graveyard for the video game consoles he had grown out of more than a decade ago. XBox. Nintendo Cube. Guitar Hero. There was even a Wii (Miles made a mental note to take this back to Stenbridgeville — he'd always loved the bowling game).

In the corner of the room was his father's filing cabinet, and what his father meant when he mentioned the hiding spot. He crouched to the bottom cabinet and pulled. At one time, it had been locked, but not now. Not for years. Inside, he found bottles of vodka, gin, rum, cognac, bourbon. It was the same assortment he had nipped at years ago, but these bottles weren't the same ones his father had put out for display on the kitchen counter. This was a new generation — a strange word, perhaps, to place on this cluster of inanimate glass objects, but it made sense to him, at least.

He grabbed a half full bottle of Maker's Mark and went back upstairs, taking the steps two at a time.

"On the rocks or straight?" he asked Audra on his way to the kitchen.

"On the rocks." She was in the middle of telling Sheila and Daniel about how her parents met, at a roller skating rink in Macon in the seventies. Sheila smiled faintly as Daniel sipped on his beer. Miles grabbed a tumbler from the cupboard and plucked a couple ice cubes from the tray in the freezer. Ellie and Calvin were curled up on the couch, side by side, seeming to have calmed down for the time being. Everything was in perfect order — not in the outside world, certainly, but in the house, at least, and that was good enough.

He snuck a sip of the drink he poured for Audra. The taste was strong and uncompromising, the stuff that he wished was already in him. He set the drink in front of Audra just as his father asked her, "So, what are you, exactly?"

Miles' lips peeled back in a wince. Audra, on the other hand, looked straight at Dan without batting an eye.

"How do you mean? *What* am I?"

“You know,” Dan said, waving a hand carelessly. “I don’t know the politically correct way to ask it, but you know what I mean.”

Miles shifted in his seat, unsure whether he should interject. Could he really say his father wasn’t allowed to ask such a question? Was it the question itself that got under his skin, or the phrasing? Could the two be separated? He cracked open the beer his father had brought him, just to have something to occupy the supremely awkward silence.

“Well, I’m a human being, first and foremost, but I think that’s pretty obvious,” Audra said with a wry laugh. “As for my ethnicity, I’m actually multiracial. My dad is white, and my mom is African-American.”

“Interesting, interesting,” Dan said, nodding to Audra’s answer. “Hey. Here’s another question for you. Why do I have to say African-American. Why not just black? That’s your color, right? With white people, you just call us white, and we’re fine with that. You never hear someone saying, ‘Oh, yeah, this caucasian guy at my work did such-and-such today.’ What’s with that?”

“Dad,” Miles found himself saying, “are you seriously asking this right now?”

“It’s a fair question!” Dan said. “I’m just curious why there’s a double standard.”

“There actually isn’t a double standard,” Audra said. “It’s more complicated. Because some Black folks prefer to just be called Black. Some of us prefer African-American. But most of us really don’t care one way or another. There are some boundaries, obviously, like the N-word. Really, it comes down to intention and respect. I am a Black woman, but I am so much more, and I never want to be known as just that loud Black lady at the office. My name is Audra. As long as you call me that before you call me anything else, we’re good.”

Miles and Sheila chuckled nervously as Audra and Daniel sized each other up. Miles wanted nothing more than to get up from the table, retreat to his bedroom, curl up and listen to Sufjan Stevens for several hours.

Audra lowered her fork and ran a hand through her hair. Miles could tell there was more she wanted to say, but withheld her remarks. He noticed her leg bouncing underneath the table and grabbed her hand. They met eyes as Sheila switched the topic of discussion to the recent hike in HOA fees.

## **Chapter Twenty — Audra**

It was approaching midnight, and Audra had been letting out silent-but-deadly farts for close to an hour, ever since Miles started snoring beside her. They were in his childhood bedroom, which, because he had never lived anywhere else before Stenbridgeville, was also his college bedroom. Posters featuring Tom Waits and Patti Smith blanketed the walls, and a row of books by a whole host of macho male writers filled the shelves of a wooden bookcase. Richard Brautigan. Charles Bukowski. Hemingway. Faulkner. Thurber. David Foster Wallace. The whole crew. Audra stared at their names, illuminated by the bone white moonlight slanting in through the window. She was facing Miles but her ass was not, and she farted as surreptitiously and quietly as she could.

This was it. This was Fartapalooza.

She kept the covers tight wrapped around her bottom half, so as not to release the smell. Still, she knew that it would find a way to reach her nostrils. And it did.

She was about to blush privately in the darkness when a loud, ripping fart came from Miles' side of the bed. It almost sounded like a chainsaw or a lawnmower being revved up, but ultimately choking midway. Ellie, who rested at the foot of the bed, popped her head up, jolted yet on guard. She let out a low warning growl as she stared at the bedroom door, anticipating an intruder.

Audra couldn't help but let out a guffawing laugh, and as she laughed she let out another fart, this one undeniably audible. Ellie snapped her head in Audra's direction, assessing her with serious eyes, then let out a deep sigh and lowered her head on the bed again.

Audra giggled relentlessly. As she let her head sink back onto her pillow, though, her thoughts stumbled back to the contentious conversation she'd had with Miles' father. There was more she wanted to bring up, of course. She wanted to ask Sheila about the drawing she had found in Miles' closet, and maybe find out a little more about Holden Holster. Was his stereotypical portrayal of African-Americans born out of ignorance, or something more nefarious? She was also curious about the name of the neighborhood they lived, Plantation Woods. Had there ever been a discussion about changing the name? Audra wondered how the Black folks who lived there — if there were any at all — thought about it. Did Sheila or Daniel ever explain to Miles what a plantation was? The questions and curiosities floated like lead balloons in her mind, eventually, weighing her down into sleep.

###

Her eyelids were still heavy and her mind was gripping onto the wisps of a dream when she was awakened by her phone's staccato buzzing. It was her mom.

"I've been trying to call you for an hour," Alice said when Audra answered groggily.

"Is everything okay?" The morning light flooded her vision, eviscerating the last remnants of her dream. All she remembered about it now was a deep, dark forest. She was alone and lost. If there had been a plot, she had lost it early on in the dream.

"Your father is here at the hospital," Alice said. "He had trouble breathing last night. He's on a ventilator now."

Her words became halted towards the end, and Audra could tell that her mother was holding back tears. Audra was quiet for several seconds — each one felt like an hour.

Eventually, Alice said Audra's name, checking to see she was still on the line.

“I’m here, ma. I’m here,” she said as she snapped into emergency mode. She put her mother on speaker as she raced around the room, tearing off her PJs and pulling on her pants, her bra, a clean shirt. Ellie looked at her with alarm and anticipation.

“I can be at the hospital in a few hours. Does he need anything? Do you need anything?”

“He’s in isolation,” Alice said. “There’s nothing we can do but wait.”

“I still want to be at the hospital.”

“I know you do. But you can’t be here. We can’t have visitors at all right now. Our public entrance is locked. This is serious.”

“What?” Audra said, indignant. “So I’m supposed to stay here and just let Dad suffer alone?”

“You’re safe where you are. Stay there.”

“I’m already getting dressed.”

“Child, I am telling you. There’s nothing you or I can do at this point but wait it out.”

A faint ringing sound filled her left ear. She swatted at it. Her eyelids, which had been as heavy as gobs of sleepy cement were now blinking rapidly. The sunlight was bright, too bright. She felt she was grasping at something, but she had no idea what.

They went back and forth for several minutes. At one point, Alice cried, and Audra became quiet again.

“Go home, if you need to go somewhere,” Alice said, her tone exasperated. They hung up soon after that.

Audra looked at Ellie. Her tail thumped on the bed and her head was slightly cocked, expectant, her eyes yearning for a ride to the nearest dog park.

Audra approached Miles' side of the bed. She reached out to squeeze his arm, but her hand froze before touching him. After she touched him, she knew, their relationship would never be the same again. There was too much uncertainty in the world, she found it hard to imagine a future with Miles, even though she liked him a lot. But liking someone, even two people liking each other, didn't guarantee anything. She couldn't handle any more heartbreak, and yet she had to. She had to be there for Larry. Her family.

She squeezed his arm gently, and said his name.

His eyes opened like the curtain lifting before a play. "Hey," he croaked, squinting against the sunlight.

"Hey," she said, then paused to gather her composure. She wasn't sure if it was Miles or the news she'd just gotten, but she was suddenly rattled. "I have to go."

"To the store?"

"Home. I need to go home. My dad's in the hospital."

Miles propped himself on an elbow and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. Within seconds, they were clear and level. "Seriously? Shit, Audra." Ellie rested her head on his blanketed thigh, and he scratched behind her ear. "I'm sorry."

"No. I'm sorry."

He reached out for her arm. She stepped back.

"Why?"

"I don't know."

## **Chapter Twenty-One — Miles**

After Audra left, the hangover hit him like a punch to the gut. And this time it hit hard. Everything ached, from his spine to his skull. His stomach felt like a pressure cooker filled with poison. His eyes were stale, pickled. The pale morning light slanting through the blinds was unbearable to look at.

He had really overdone it this time.

He rolled out of bed and stumbled to the bathroom down the hall, where a feverish fist worked up his esophagus and he emptied his guts. *Is this the only thing I'm good at?* he thought as he wiped his mouth on his forearm. He sat back against the cool porcelain tub, the same tub he had taken countless baths in as a child. He loved the simple magic of the bubbles, their otherworldly gleam, their precious fragility. Shimmering and wobbling like Jello in his palm one moment, then gone the next. *Poof.*

As his head throbbed, he tried to count the drinks he'd had the night before. There were the two beers at dinner, followed by the taste of some single barrel bourbon his father had received from a customer, chased down with another beer. At some point, Audra said goodnight and Sheila showed her up to Miles' bedroom. Daniel also excused himself from the table, explaining he had an early meeting with a customer the next day. That's when things grew hazy. But he remembered balancing himself on the filing cabinet in his father's office. He remembered pulling out a bottle of amber liquid. His vision crossed. It was difficult to read the label. All he knew, all he felt, was the weight of it. And it felt like perfection.

This had been after everyone had gone to bed. The last thing Miles remembered was uncorking the bottle, tipping it back, and letting the glistening amber liquid slide down his throat.

He got up from the bathroom floor, got dressed, and went downstairs. In the dining room, his mother sat in front of a mug of steaming tea. She was massaging her temples, and looked up when Miles entered. Her face was placid and pale, and the edges of her mouth curved downward.

“So your lady friend left.”

“She did,” Miles said, as the weight of that reality sank in. The fact that she was gone didn’t bother him as much as the uncertainty she had left behind. Suddenly, he felt sick all over again, but in a way that was difficult to describe.

“How’s your head?” he asked his mother; a second after he spoke the words, he realized he had just quoted a running joke from *Drag Race*.

“The same,” Sheila said. She nudged away the mug. “I don’t need to be drinking this. Can you pour me some water?”

He brought her a glass of filtered water and went down into the basement, with thoughts of Audra swirling around his head.

His father sat at his desk blanketed in receipts, bills, and translucent papers which bore sketches of cabinets and countertops. Gray sacks clung to his eyes. Silver bristles covered his sallow cheeks and chin. Miles couldn’t remember seeing his father look so old.

“Morning honey,” his father said, hardly looking up from his puddle of paperwork.

Miles looked to the filing cabinet, which was closed, though he half expected the drawers to be open and bottles abandoned on the floor. But things were tidy, orderly. Had he even come down here at all last night? He scanned the den for other signs of disturbance. Usually, after a few drinks he became restless, curious about his surroundings. There had been mornings at the apartment when he woke up to find his hallway closet completely ransacked, or the books on his shelf haphazardly piled on the living room floor, resembling little fires. Other than his father’s

pile of paperwork, though, he couldn't spot anything out of sorts. No signs of his intoxicated tramlings.

Daniel said, "Can I help you with something?" His eyes were foggy as he looked up from his ledger.

"Just looking for my phone," Miles lied. "I thought you had an appointment?"

"Cancelled," his father said.

Miles pretended to scan his father's desk. A framed picture caught his eye. It showed a man in a suit and tie behind a podium, jabbing a finger at the crowd. His eyes were fierce and filled with color, even in the black and white photo. His hair was wavy, similar to Miles', but unlike Miles the man in the photo had run a comb through his thick crop of hair, making him look like a fresh young Kennedy, rather than what Miles knew he was. A Prestwood.

Miles picked up the frame from the desk. He said, "I've never seen this."

"A friend who works at UGA sent that to me a while back," Daniel said. "A clipping from the student paper. That was in '84, '85. When he ran for student body president."

"Did he win?" Miles asked.

His father shook his head. "He was an excellent debater. Horrible organizer."

###

Miles spent the rest of the morning scrutinizing the bookshelf in his bedroom, seeing if there was anything worth taking back with him to Stembridgeville. By mid-afternoon, he felt himself going a little stir crazy. He went downstairs and found his mother asleep in front of the TV. He retrieved the keys in her purse and took her car.

He knew where he wanted to go, and he thought he knew how to get there, but he hopped onto the wrong highway and didn't realize it for several minutes. He got off as soon as he could,

at an exit he'd always remembered for being populated more by trees than people. It had been a few years since he had been in the area. He remembered a run down strip mall with a dismally lit grocery store, a laundromat, a dollar store, a pawn shop. All of that was gone now. Now, there were fast food restaurants, an outlet to a public park, a big box store with a half full parking lot. He drove until he approached a roundabout (also new) and headed back to the highway. After a few miles, the highway converged with the other he had originally meant to get on. As he merged, he turned the radio to a channel he used to listen to in high school — a college radio station, WEBE 80.4 FM... *Left on the dial, right on the style.*

He rarely recognized the songs that played on the station, and he never cared to find out. There was a strange beauty in letting the music wash over him like a wave then slip away. Miles also loved listening to the cheesy PSA ads for HPV testing and drunk driving. The way the stoned student DJs recited the song titles after a half hour block of straight music soothed his worrisome head.

He cruised along, soaking in the songs, letting thoughts of Audra ebb and flow through his mind. He thought of future dates they could go on, once the lockdowns lifted, and even if the lockdowns stayed in place, there was always fun stuff to do in nature. He wondered if Audra was the hiking type...

He was approaching Blue Ridge when he exited the highway. The town had a four-stop intersection marked with a blinking traffic light. In the distance was a modest downtown district with restaurants, an antique shop, a confectionery, a visitor center. The path forward was hazy now in his mind. He took a left on a lark, bypassing the stores and restaurants.

WEBE fizzled out as he drove along dense pines and ramshackle houses and mobile homes. Dogs sat chained in front yards. A Confederate flag hung like a curtain in a window; another was posted up on the back of a pick-up truck, withering in the wind.

Just when he sensed he was way off course, he saw a sign that read *Newton Gardens Cemetery*. An arrow pointed right, and he followed it. There was a gradual dip in the road, which led to the cemetery. He parked on a gravel path and stepped out. The sky was hard and gray. Wind cut across the barren, headstone-filled clearing, promising rain.

Miles didn't know where to look for his uncle. He had been a child the only time he had ever visited his grave. He lost track of time as he studied the headstones and flower arrangements. After fifteen or twenty minutes of meandering, he stumbled upon his uncle's plot. *Franklin Prestwood 1965 — 1988. Beloved Son & Brother.*

*Beloved.* The word rang hollow in Miles' mind. If Frank had been beloved, *truly* beloved, why had he been buried hours away from where his brother and parents lived, in a town his family had nothing to do with?

Miles swept his hair from his eyes and anchored his hands into his pockets. He stared at his uncle's name, unsure of what else he expected to find. He tapped a foot on the ground, marshy even before the rain. It was strange to think that the man in the photo, who was once filled with vim and vigor, was no more. He was gone, forgotten, a buried secret.

A knot of nausea — leftover from the hangover or from something else, he couldn't tell — formed in his chest. The sky rumbled. He walked back to the car and listened to the radio static until he reached the highway.

## **Chapter Twenty-Two — Audra**

She drove without a discernible thought or feeling, hurtling past cars and turning on her directionals with the enthusiasm of a cash register. The sky above was elephant hide gray. Ellie sat in the back seat, quieter than usual. Flashes of self-consciousness hit Audra, when the car in front of her braked suddenly or when the navigation app told her to merge left, but otherwise her thoughts were submerged in a syrupy quicksand of dread and uncertainty. A White House press conference aired on the radio, but she found it difficult to follow the technical answers of Deborah Birx and Anthony Fauci. She looked at the tall buildings that comprised the skyline of downtown Atlanta. The majority of the windows were dark, empty, devoid of life. She had never seen the city look so desolate, so abandoned. Even the John Lewis mural, which always evoked a sense of hope in her whenever she saw it, seemed stoic, unsure of the future. On the radio, Fauci said something about the spike in deaths being related to overcapacity in hospitals. Audra was reminded of the Bundry Memorial, where her mother worked and where her father was currently being treated. It was a small, rural hospital with only two levels and computers from the nineties. She didn't know how many ventilators the hospital had, but it couldn't be more than two or three. As she merged onto I-20, her amorphous thoughts gained shape and definition, and the realization of her father's possible fate sunk in. Suddenly, his imminent death felt profoundly inevitable. Tears trailed down her cheeks. The road before her turned blurry. Her shoulders shook and her arms rattled but she was able to keep the wheel steady as she took the closest exit. She pulled into a gas station parking lot as memories of her father flooded her mind, like the

Donuts with Dad breakfasts in elementary school, the boozy Christmas Eves in which he dressed as Santa Claus, the driving lessons that quickly devolved into liquor store runs. She and her sisters hadn't had a normal childhood, not in the slightest, but she wouldn't change a thing about it. To think that Larry might no longer be in her life pained her to an indescribable degree. She shuttered and shook as she cried. Ellie emerged from the back to lick away the tears. When she had no more, she patted her cheeks dry with her long sleeve CSC shirt, and continued the drive back to Kleinstock. On I-20, just as she passed Conyers, she had the sudden urge to listen to Bright Eyes, but after a moment she felt differently. Bright Eyes was the band she and Miles had bonded over on their first date, and Miles had played their records repeatedly during Audra's stay over the past week. The more she thought about it, the more the songs from *I'm Wide Awake* *It's Morning* or *Lifted* left a bad taste in her mouth. She had some good times listening to those songs with Miles, but there was too much now that complicated her feelings towards him, and towards the band to which they were both inextricably in love with. With Bright Eyes off the table, she scrolled through Spotify and settled on Lambchop, a group she had never listened to before, but decided to give a listen on a lark.

Their sound was sultry and smooth, softer even than Bright Eyes. It fit the mood well as she took the exit for Kleinstock. She realized then that she couldn't go to the hospital. She could not, as well, go to her parents' house, since her still-infected mother was there. So she barrelled through the Kleinstock City Limits and reached Liz's apartment complex close to lunch time. Cars packed Liz's street, as students carried out their dorm belongings in boxes and crates, but Audra was lucky enough to find an open spot at the end of the block. As she walked with Ellie towards the entrance of her sister's apartment, Sunny, her niece, ran out onto their second floor balcony.

“Audra Audra Audra!!” the little child cheered.

“Hey sweetie pie,” Audra responded with a smile. “Where’s your mamma?”

Just then, Liz emerged onto the balcony wielding a medical mask and a bottle of sanitizer. A blue bandana covered the bottom half of her face.

“Welcome,” she said as she tossed down the supplies. “I’ll check your temperature at the door.”

“Damn! Exclusive club, I see.”

Audra noticed a twinkle of amusement in her sister’s eyes. “Make sure you get in good between the fingers.”

Audra slipped on the mask and lathered her hands thoroughly with sanitizer, then entered the building. Sunny was a jumping, screaming mess when Audra stepped through the door. George, on the other hand, sat quietly at his desk in the corner of the living room. He, too, wore a blue medical mask, which he pulled whenever he took a sip from his mug of steaming black coffee. His eyebrows were knitted in worry as he surfed the CDC website.

“You’re the first person we’ve seen in a week,” Liz said. “You must have heard about dad.”

Audra nodded, trying to lasso back tears. Sensing her despair, Liz wrapped her arms around her little sister and said softly, “Don’t cry. I made lasagna.”

Audra laughed as she wiped away the tears.

They sat down to a hearty lunch of beef and veggie lasagna. Liz and George asked her about the new boyfriend, which Audra waved off, saying, “I’m not sure that would be a G-rated conversation.” Her eyes cut to Sunny suggestively, and they moved on to other topics.

After Audra and Liz washed the dishes, Sunny tugged on Audra's shirt and asked. "Can we play Guess Who?"

Audra ran a playful hand through her niece's curly hair. "Sure thing, kiddo."

As they set up the game, Liz ducked into her bedroom to answer a phone call. Audra assumed it was their mother, calling to provide an update on Larry. Her gaze drilled into the sea of cartoon faces as she tried to eavesdrop on her sister's conversation several feet away. Finally, when she heard Liz say "Thank God!" she exhaled with relief and nodded her readiness to Sunny.

"Is your guy a boy or a girl?" Sunny asked. Audra cracked a smile.

"My guy is a guy."

Sunny's tongue poked out from the side of her mouth as she funneled all of her attention into closing the flaps of all the female characters. There was something so pure about this gesture that Audra couldn't shake. She found herself envious of Sunny's innocence, her profound ignorance to the injustices and horrors of the world. She almost wanted to shake her and urge her to savor this time of her life, this small slice before school and bullies and homework and bills and *boys*. Especially boys.

Her phone vibrated. It was Miles. *Speak of the devil*, she thought. His text read: *How's your dad?*

An odd chill wormed its way through her body as the highlights from the past few days flashed through her mind. She remembered the raucous party, and the unsettling traffic stop that followed. She remembered the uncomfortable conversations they'd had at storage unit and the cemetery, how her frustrations when she tried to talk to him honestly about her life, her experiences. His face, it seemed, turned into a brick wall. And yes, he did also confess his love

for her, but that wasn't what she needed in that moment. She needed an open mind, a good listener, someone who could absorb the things she said without judgement. She thought finally of the journey to Plantation Woods — the neighborhood's name should have been a red flag in itself — and the pointed looks she received when talking with Miles' parents. As if she was the first Black person who had ever stepped foot into their home. As if she was an intruder, a troublemaker. She knew the look of suspicion well. It was the same look that masked the police officer's face during her traffic stop.

She couldn't do this anymore. She just couldn't. Not now.

Audra fought the urge to pitch the phone across the room in anger. Instead, she stood from the table and slipped into the bathroom and typed out a response with shaking hands.

She started, *He's doing alright, we think. He's a real trooper. Send.*

She continued. *Listen. I've enjoyed getting to know you. I really have. And I appreciate you letting me crash with you for a few days. But I don't think this is the best time to start a serious relationship. You feel me? I'm sorry Miles. Send.*

She waited one minute, then two. The blue boxes against the stark white screen spooked her. She waited a little longer for the hint of a response: the ellipses bouncing in their tight gray bubble. When they didn't appear, Audra thought that was probably for the best. She rejoined her family, leaving her phone behind on the sink, where it stayed until the next morning.

### **Chapter Twenty-Three — Three Months Later**

*It is clear to me now that the issue of racially insensitive depictions in O’Leary’s work transcends O’Leary himself. As a current presidential candidate recently said, “Hate just hides. It doesn’t go away.” Yes, we must examine the author’s intention, and reconcile problematic representations, but it is not enough to simply poo-poo certain books based on these attributes, then box them up in a closet. Institutional racism is real — and still with us. Police brutality is real — and still with us (need we look further than George Floyd?). White supremacy continues to shape our society. We must work to expand the canon, yes, but we must also strive to expand the canon of the future, and to do so with the intention of appreciating diverse stories for their universal truths — not simply for their token value.*

*Let me be clear. Norman O’Leary’s work still has import and resonance. His meditations on grace in the face of heinous acts — as seen in his stories “Garrad To The Gallows” and “Four Horsemen” — tap into universal human truths and emotions that are difficult to articulate but are felt by all, regardless of the reader’s background or color. That being said, I would like to task O’Leary scholars (including myself) to explore the ripple effect of his work. How did marginalized writers respond to O’Leary, either explicitly or implicitly, in their own writings? Doing this, I believe, will reveal layers of understanding and appreciation we did not know could be unlocked.*

Miles pushed himself away from his desk and read over the last paragraphs of his thesis. The sentences weren’t half bad, he told himself, but he’d have to do some retooling. He was

unsure whether or not he'd keep the George Floyd line. The incident was still so fresh and heavy on his mind. Part of him felt he needed some distance to say anything insightful about it, but there had to be connections to be drawn between the Black Lives Matter protests and O'Leary's "Four Horsemen" or "Atonement."

He'd see how he felt after the march.

He lifted his glasses from his nose. His eyes felt like sun-dried tomatoes. He had been writing nonstop since early that morning, though he couldn't pinpoint the source of his inspiration. Ever since the shelter-in-place laws had been implemented, he had not heard a peep from Dr. Huntley, and Miles himself felt no urgency to reach out to his usually punctilious and heavily opinionated advisor. With no one cracking the whip, Miles found his writing tumbling down his list of priorities, until it wasn't a priority at all, until that morning dawned on him. The morning of the march.

He looked at the mess he had made of his desk in the past few weeks. Library books, pens and pencils, face masks, assorted bills, as well as a few framed family photos that had been given to him by his mother when he first moved to Stembridgeville. In the sea of disorganization, his attention latched onto a check for six thousand dollars which he'd received in the mail the day before. It was from Buford Folk Art, the auction house where he'd consigned a lot of his grandfather's work two weeks prior. The lot contained the infamous piece, *Black Man with Watermelon*, the very drawing Audra had discovered when she stayed with him. Miles was glad for it to be gone and out of his life. Even so, the weight the drawing had impressed on him had now been replaced with the weight of the check, and all of the zeros it contained. It was a different weight, a different burden, but a weight nonetheless. He pocketed the check as he stood from the desk, and making a mental note to run by the bank before the march.

He looked at the time on his phone, then grabbed one of the face masks lying limp on his desk and wrapped the straps around his ears. Walking out into the bright sunshine that blanketed the brick patio outside his apartment, his gaze meandered until he found himself looking at the towering brick house across the street. It still gave him the creeps, but the creep factor was lessened by the sight of landscapers and workmen traversing the outside. The patchy brown lawn had been revitalized with verdant sod plugs. The brambles and bushes had been trimmed. The broken windows had been replaced; the sheen of the new panes almost blinded him. All told, the place seemed to have promise. New life had been breathed into it. It was a shame that within a few months — assuming students would be brought to campus — it would be filled with backwards hat wearing, Jeep Wrangler driving, Natty Light drinking freshmen. Miles could almost see the sideways kegs and Yeti coolers on the lawn. Oh well. He had already lived through one year in Stembridgeville. He figured he could do it again.

###

Audra parked behind the courthouse and hooked the straps of her face mask behind her ears. The mask — one of three — had a blue paisley pattern, and had seen some wear since she received it three months earlier. She and her mother had acquired many more masks since mid-March (thanks especially to Alice's line of work), but Audra found herself going back to paisley mask (The O.G.!) handmade by the animal shelter and arriving in the mailbox on Hubbard Road the same day her father had been discharged from the hospital. She remembered the sky that day, how infinitely blue and blemishless it was, how the breeze teased the treetops ever so slightly, as if encouraging them to uproot themselves and go on a journey.

Today's weather reminded her of that day in March, which felt like a lifetime ago.

She slung her A Tribe Called Quest tote bag around her shoulder — containing granola bars, water, hand sanitizer, and her phone charger — and walked to the front of the courthouse. On the front steps, a group of masked people were writing slogans on poster boards.

*I Can't Breathe.*

*Justice For George.*

*Is My Son Next?*

*Stop Killing Us!*

*End White Silence!*

She had seen these phrases broadcasted all over social media in the past few weeks, ever since the killing of George Floyd, and they had yet to lose their resonance. Each one packed a punch, and gave her courage and hope for the future.

She walked to the end of the block and approached a girl handing out bottled water and sunscreen. Audra sensed they had met before, but she didn't place her until she looked at Audra and exclaimed, "Goodwill girl!"

It was Renée, from the party she had gone to with Miles Prestwood months ago.

Renée extended her arms, but when neither one of them leaned in for a hug, she stuck out her elbow and Audra bumped it.

"What's new?" Renée asked. Her face lifted underneath her mask; Audra sensed a smile. "Have you done any exciting thrift hauls lately?"

"I have, actually," Audra said, flaunting her tote. "I grabbed this from a hole in the wall in the East Village. Chimera's, I think it was called."

"East Village? Are you living in Atlanta now?"

“I’m in between places,” Audra said, stretching the truth a bit. It was true that the pandemic had shown her that she needed to make a change — several changes, if she was honest — but at this point she was only looking at places in the city. She had Zoom interviews with the Atlanta History Center and the local NPR affiliate station the following week, and she figured she shouldn’t pull the trigger on an apartment until after she was offered a job with one or the other.

“Good for you, girl,” Renée said. “It’s so good to see you! Amy and I have lost touch with most folks in the English department. With everything going on, I feel we’re all on our own little islands. How are you and Miles?”

“We broke up, actually.”

“You did not!”

“He’s a good guy. It was just bad timing,” Audra said, evoking the phrase she had used in text conversations after she’d suddenly left his house that March morning. *Bad timing*. It was cliché, but what other phrase could sum it up?

Renée guffawed. “Well, I can’t argue with that.” She extended her arm again, and again they bumped elbows. “If you want to make a sign, there’s some supplies at the top of the steps. Good to see you, girl.”

Audra hiked up the stone courthouse steps, grabbed a posterboard and a chisel tipped Sharpie, and found a small, socially distant patch of grass by the bus stop. She sat with crossed legs on the grass, staring at the blank white poster. What could she possibly write that hadn’t already been said? She rested her chin on her hand and thought as cars passed by. Every few minutes, someone would honk in solidarity, but for the most part the drivers maintained silent, steely glares.

Suddenly, it hit her. The thing to say. The thing to proclaim on her small square of poster, her modest real estate of protest. She uncapped the marker and started writing, letting her thoughts wander. For whatever reason, she found herself playing back the divorce proceedings that she attended (remotely, via Zoom) two weeks earlier. Ezra was there, and had even put on a button down shirt for the occasion. After it was over, and the divorce was official, Audra called Ezra.

“How does it feel to be a bachelor again?”

“It is what it is.” In the background, Audra heard the sound of cereal avalanching into a bowl.

“Thank you,” she said. “For understanding.”

“I have some stuff in the storage unit,” he said after a moment. “Is it cool if I keep it there for a while?”

“I’ll do you one better. You can have the key.”

“You don’t need to do that. You’re already paying the bill.”

“Yes. And I will keep paying the bill.”

A Black man with a megaphone welcomed the crowd and began giving out instructions. “The police have been good enough to block off Green, Arrowhead, and Sibley Streets. In an orderly, peaceful fashion, we will walk down these streets, and end our march at First AME, where we will hear from State Representative Jackson and Reverend Corbitt. Please, do your best to stay six feet apart, and please keep your mask over your mouth and nose at all times. Thank you for being here. Thank you for being a part of this movement, and for fighting for George, Ahmaud, Breonna, and so many others.”

There was a smattering of applause as the crowd moved into the empty street. Audra looked around to see if she recognized anyone other than Renée and Amy, but she did not. She claimed a spot on the sidewalk that bordered the campus green, brightened by sunlight. A heavysset woman wearing a shirt that read *I Run With 'Maud* approached her with glistening eyes.

“That says it all,” she said, gesturing to Audra’s sign. “That says it all.”

Audra nodded as she looked down at what she had written. 8:46. It was a simple message, but a powerful one.

She recalled when news of George Floyd’s killing had saturated the airwaves, and how apathetic she’d felt. It was the same feeling of hopelessness and resignation that had followed her for years since the Ferguson unrest. She remembered the looting from Black-owned businesses, the tear gas, the rubber bullets, the police cars on fire. The fact that all of this was happening under a Black president boggled her mind. Another fact, the fact that the officer who had shot and killed seventeen year old Michael Brown was never faced justice, further infuriated her. During the second wave of protests in November 2014, she found herself so blind with rage she found it difficult to sit still in work meetings or draft press releases without fighting the urge to switch to all caps.

Eventually, her inner turmoil subsided, and at the same time it also flushed away her passion for social justice. The tiny flame that lit in her eyes when discussing criminal justice reform or the school to prison pipeline was now gone, stubbed out by cynicism.

Then, she watched the video. The grueling eight minutes and forty-six seconds in which a Black man begged for his life as a police officer ground his knee into Floyd’s neck for no apparent reason other than he was Black.

There was something about the video, and Floyd's grim fate, that ignited the old feelings in her. It was difficult to watch it without demanding change, reform. Demanding better.

*"Say his name — George Floyd! Say his name — George Floyd!"*

The chant carried throughout the streets of Stembridgeville as the protesters followed the path that had been charted out for them. Audra's gaze was fixed on the sturdy white columns of the old buildings that served as the backdrop to the campus green. Looking at them, her footsteps grew heavy, as if her shoes were filled with sand. She felt herself begin to daydream. But then, she saw a man — a boy, really — jogging across the green.

Immediately, she recognized his dark floppy hair, those crystal clear glasses, and that mouth, tilted in a goofy, bumbling smirk. It was a smile she had been grateful to see in the darkest moments of the pandemic. It was a smile she would never forget, despite the complex, thorny emotions she associated with Miles Prestwood.

As he closed the chasm of the campus green, a series of memories and emotions throbbed in Audra's chest. The raucous party. The police stop. The storage unit. The first fight. The phone call with Ezra. The second, bigger fight. Holden Holster. Plantation Woods. Going home.

*Going home.*

Miles waved, and Audra pivoted her gaze away from him. A moment later, she peered back and saw that he was still waving, but not to her. As he joined the crowd, she realized it wasn't even Miles.

She was about to let out a sigh of relief when she heard a muffled voice say, "Audra?"

This time, it was undeniable. The voice beside her belonged to Miles Prestwood.

"Heyy," Audra said tentatively.

"Mind if I hang with you?"

“Sure.”

Audra looked Miles up and down. He still had the same mop top hair, and although she couldn't see what his mouth was doing underneath his face mask, she sensed that he was flashing her one of his classic goofy grins. Some things about him had changed. He had traded in his crystal glasses for wire framed spectacles, and it was evident that he had packed on some weight in the middle. Well, he probably needed to bulk up a bit, anyway, she thought, recalling his fridge filled solely with light beer and eggs. Except for a couple cans of soup and olive oil, his cupboards were basically empty. Yes, she concluded, the slight belly was a signal that Miles was doing alright.

“How've you been?” Miles almost shouted over the chanting, then immediately followed up by saying, “How's your dad?”

“Dad's good. How's it going with you?”

“Oh, you know,” was all Miles said. The conversation fell into a lull then, but after a moment he joined the peaceful battlecry. So did Audra.

As they approached the AME church on Sibley Street, adjacent to Quiet Hill Cemetery, Miles said, “I consigned that drawing. It sold online for \$9,000.”

“Really?”

He nodded and lifted his eyebrows, equally amazed. “Back in April, around the time the stimulus checks went out.”

Audra blushed underneath her mask, privately indignant that someone would pay so much for such a problematic piece of art — especially considering the present circumstances. Miles' update was a stark reminder that just because racial equality and social justice were at the

top of her priorities, it didn't mean that everyone in America felt the same, which was equal parts frustrating and depressing.

The heat and humidity intensified as the first speaker walked up to the lectern on the front steps of the church. Every couple minutes, Audra had to dab away at the sweat forming on her forehead to keep it from stinging her eyes. Her sunglasses fogged every time she exhaled underneath her mask. She felt oddly claustrophobic. Midway through the second speaker, she turned to Miles and said, "I think I'm gonna head out."

"Me too."

They broke away from the crowd and lowered their masks. As they walked passed the entrance of the cemetery, Audra said, "I finalized my divorce."

"Hey! That's awesome!" Miles' eyes lit up, and his face broke out in a grin. She still thought about that grin from time to time, usually when liking *Drag Race* memes on Instagram or passing by the Arts & Sciences building on campus. It was the sort of smile that imprinted itself in one's memory, and regardless of what the person behind it had done or said, picturing their smile always evoked warm feelings. *That goddamn grin.* Audra almost hated Miles for making her sort of like him after everything they had been through.

They walked by Putnam's Pub, Cardinal Coffee, Hank's BBQ Shack, and other downtown mainstays. Tables and chairs lined the sidewalks, but few people occupied them. At the corner of Green and Addams, across from the courthouse, Audra said, "Well, I'm this way."

"I'm that way," Miles said, gesturing down Addams. They stood looking at each other for a moment, neither of them going in the direction they pointed at.

"Come on," Audra said, "I'll give you a ride."

As they drove past the historic mansions of downtown Stenbridgeville — many of them rumored to be haunted by the ghosts of Confederate generals and slave owners — Audra couldn't help but think about the future, and the roots she hoped to establish in Atlanta, a city that had risen from ashes.

“So, how are things?” Miles said, breaking the silence, and she told him about her interviews, her divorce, the big move she was planning to make. He listened and nodded until she pulled into the confining carport outside his ivy-blanketed apartment complex.

“Well, this was fun,” he said, stepping out of the car. “Let's do this again sometime?”

“Let's,” Audra said, offering an absentminded smile.

They looked at each other. It was the same look they'd shared before their first kiss. Expectant, infected with anticipation.

“You should come in,” Miles said. “I have something for you.”

Audra's mouth hinged in a smirk.

“Miles. Don't play.”

“Seriously! This isn't a hook-up thing. And yeah, now that I'm thinking about it, that's exactly what it sounds like. Tell you what. You stay here, and I can bring it out for you. It's just a little something.”

“That's cool, I guess.”

Miles jogged into his apartment and came out a minute later holding a check. Panting lightly, he handed it to Audra. It was made out to her, for three-thousand dollars. She was at a loss for words, other than, “Um, excuse me?”

“It's from the auction,” he said with a self-assured smile. “For the drawing. I feel weird keeping it all to myself. Besides, you might need it during your move.”

Audra laughed as she studied Miles' script, which seemed simultaneously loopy yet filled with intention. The check came from a local credit union and bore an illustration of a bald eagle. She was surprised that something so thin and flimsy could feel so weighty in her hand. "Thanks. This is really sweet. But I don't need reparations."

His expression crumbled momentarily, then lifted again. "Well, you should hold onto it. You don't have to make a decision this minute."

Audra smiled, but her eyes wandered, getting lost in the rearview mirror. There was the old creepy brick house, only it wasn't creepy anymore. The windows had been replaced, and the brick seemed to have been injected with color and life. Presently a small landscaping crew was spreading fresh pine straw around the bushes and trees.

"They really spruced the place up, huh?" he said, following her gaze.

"They sure did."

He patted Audra's windowsill twice, affirmatively. "Anyway. Take care. And thanks for the ride."

"See you, Miles."

He waved and Audra watched him walk inside, lifting his face to the sun. She placed the check on the passenger's seat, looked behind her, studying the traffic on Hardwick, then backed out when she had a chance.