

A hand reaches down from the top right corner towards a field of tall grass. The background is a dramatic sunset sky with purple, pink, and orange clouds. The grass is silhouetted against the bright light of the setting sun.

fawn

nash summers

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

fawn

By Nash Summers

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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By Nash Summers

Photo Description

The backs of two teenage boys holding hands, one slightly leaning in toward the other. They're walking through a field, illuminated by the sunlight in front of them. Around them are tall grasses and yellow stalks of wheat.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

The guy on the left finds everything beautiful. Creepily so. He makes art out of road kill, writes love letters to people he's never met, and stares incessantly at pretty men without them ever noticing. He spotted the guy on the right walking his dog through fields, and made him his newest object of affection. Only problem was, when he started staring at this guy, he stared back.

Sincerely,

Beth

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: first time, hurt/comfort, men with pets, reunited, slow burn/ust, bullying

Content Warnings: Some non-sexual child abuse, verbal and physical, to one MC when in his teens

Word Count: 26,856

fawn

By Nash Summers

Ancel,

People talk about how beautiful trees are in autumn. Arrays of oranges, yellows, and reds float from the branches and flutter down into their bouquets on the ground. Colors so vivid, they make the world look dull in comparison to their oversaturation.

I've always wondered why no one talks about the beauty in winter. Or summer. Or all the tiny mixtures of seasons in between.

Winter brings the crystals of frost to the blades of grass that are just beginning to change color. The air becomes cold, and just for a few magical moments, you can puff out a lung full of air and see the icy color of your own breath.

Summer is full of being. Life isn't a big enough word for summer because summer brings everything with it when it comes. It brings big storm clouds to drown out the sunlight, and so many shades of green, I couldn't hope to count them in my lifetime if I started now and never did a single other thing.

And then there are those times in between.

Those are the times that take the crisp arc of winter and let it dance with the fresh grass of the spring. Or the times when the summer lakes start allowing the gentle ease of coolness on top of their waters. Or the times when the wind blows freely through the long stalks of grass and cattails, and twirls around the fields like it's thinking of starting a hurricane.

You? You're all those special times in between.

You're those frozen moments that everyone forgets to breathe during. You're what I reach out for, but just can't seem to touch. You're those hours of silence that pull themselves longer and longer until there's nothing left of them but a faint memory of a Once Upon a Time.

But don't worry—I won't forget you like you've forgotten me.

I can't stop fawning over your ghost.

Rust

Before

As I walked through the tall fields of grass and weeds that surrounded me, I stared up into the clouds and daydreamed about Heaven. The afternoon sky was that pure, crisp blue that only seemed to exist in forgotten places or books with Happily Ever Afters. Wind blew through the tall stalks of grass, brushing them as easily as a musician runs their fingers over piano keys. Bright rays of sunlight shone down on my face, warming my cheeks like a kiss from a lover. And the smell—that fresh, robust smell of wheat stalks and lilacs wafted through the air easily like a calm fog.

Everything sang together harmoniously like it always did. It breathed its own life and existed like it had been there since the beginning of time.

I was in Heaven.

Heaven was a small town. So small, in fact, that I figured no one outside of Heaven even knew we existed. But that didn't matter, because to me, nothing existed outside of Heaven.

It was one of those warm communities where everybody knew each other's name, and no one locked their doors at night. When we had town functions, the entire town showed up, and if someone was missing, everyone else would know why. In a town as small as Heaven, everybody knew everybody.

We had one traffic light in the center of town, and when it had been installed a few years back, it was big news. It was in the Heaven Herald and everything. We had two schools, but they were separated by grades. There was one shop for everything down on Main Street—a flower shop, a bakery, a toy store. No two shops ever opened that sold the same thing, and why would they? We had everything we needed here.

The houses were all small and unique—each painted its own color with customized front porches that someone's grandpa made, and driveways that flowed straight onto the road without even a curb. If someone new moved into town, everybody talked about it like a movie star was moving in next door. And then everyone would get together and make pies, casseroles, fruit baskets, and bring them to the house of the new member of our small community.

A field mouse skittered past my foot and ran off toward my house in the distance, snapping me out of my daydream. My mother didn't like it when I lingered in the field after school. She always said that I should come home right

after school to eat and do my homework, and then I could spend the remainder of my evening chasing field mice and hooting back at the owls that hid in the grass. But what my mom didn't understand was the pull that the field had on me. I loved the smell of the grass and the weeds, the familiar warmth of the sun and the moonlight, the paths in the dirt I'd been carving out with my feet since I was young.

I continued weaving through the grass, much like I'd done many times before, but something was different this time. I stopped and looked around.

In the distance, on the other end of the field, was a boy.

And for some reason, just at the sight of him, my heart sped up.

I had no idea who he was, which was peculiar, because I knew every other kid around my age in Heaven. But I definitely didn't know him.

His hair that swept low over his forehead was black like the color of the burnt coal in the fireplace back home. He was walking through the grass just as I had been, but his head hung much lower. The boy had to be older than me, if only by a year.

Who was he? A new kid in town, maybe?

I couldn't help but stand there and stare at him, completely starstruck by seeing someone like him walking through the same field I was, as though it were the most natural thing in the world. Because it wasn't—natural that is. I knew every part of this field inside and out, and I knew every person who set foot in it. I knew every pebble, every blade of grass, every twig covered in dirt.

But I did not know him.

And then, just when I thought my heart couldn't possibly beat any harder, he turned his head and looked at me.

I must have been hit by a stray baseball from Timothy and his little brother swinging a bat and tossing a ball in the field. Or I was having one of those freak accidents where my body suddenly burst into unexplainable flame.

It had to be otherworldly, because when that boy with the raven-black hair and the crystal-blue eyes looked at me, Heaven wasn't heaven anymore.

Eventually, as though realizing I couldn't look away, he turned his head to look back down at the gravel and dirt in front of him, and kept walking.

I stood there and stared at the back of his head until he slinked through the wooden fence that enclosed the line of houses on the opposite end of the field

from mine. After that, I kept watching the cracked, light-brown fence, waiting, hoping, that he'd come back out through the latched gate.

I must've been out there staring at that fence for a long time, because before I knew it, my mother walked up next to me and asked me what I was doing. The afternoon glow had faded away, and the evening sky was taking its place. Air that brushed against my skin had gone from warm to cool, and my feet were beginning to ache.

But still I mourned that the gate had not reopened, and I'd not had one more look at the unfamiliar boy.

My mother slid my schoolbag off my shoulders, and took my smaller hand in hers. She began walking back to the fence that lined our yard, but I couldn't stop turning my head to stare at the gate where the other boy went.

"Rust," she said, "what are you doing out here still?"

"I think I might've seen a miracle, Mom," I replied.

"Oh? And what kind of miracle is that?"

"A boy."

She stopped short and turned toward me. There was a look written all over her face that I would learn later in life was concern. It was concern for her strange, red-haired son who was made fun of by the other kids because of his constant daydreaming and fascination with things other people decided were odd. It was concern for her son who had just seen a miracle in another boy.

But the look was fleeting, and soon it was replaced by a look I knew very well: love. She knelt down on the dirt and grass in her lovely navy dress, and wrapped her arms around me tightly.

"Then you should be thankful, Rust," she said, "because miracles are special, and not everyone is lucky enough to see one."

I smiled into her long, strawberry-blonde hair. "I must be lucky. I've never seen anyone like him."

We walked hand in hand through the back gate of our yard and made our way in through the back door of the house. Not that I had a lot of knowledge of houses, but I'd always loved our house. It was a modest size, but big enough for my mom, dad, and me. The outside was painted bright yellow that my dad hated at first, but grew to love as the years passed. My mother said it reminded

her of sunflowers, and anything that reminded her of something so beautiful had to be a good choice.

My mother had always been like that—positive, sunny—and I think some of her good nature was given to me. My dad always said that I got all of my good qualities from my mom, and my not-so-good qualities from my dad. I was okay with that, since I didn't think that my dad had a single bad quality of note. He was kind, and soft-spoken, and treated my mom like she was the sun that hung high in the sky.

My dad came up to my mother and I when we walked in through the back door. When he took my schoolbag from my mother, he said, "Jeez, Rust, what are you carrying in here, rocks?"

"Yes," I replied excitedly as I kicked off my shoes.

He threw his head back and laughed. "I should've known better than to ask."

Together we trailed up the few steps into the kitchen. My dad set my book bag down on the kitchen table, and I, taking a chair right next to him, began rummaging through my schoolbag.

I pulled out a few rocks, each of different sizes and shapes. Next came the twigs and pieces of bark I'd collected. I set them all down on the table and sat back, proudly, hoping my parents would see the beauty in the things I'd found.

My dad picked up a rock, and I watched in pure glee as his lips twisted up at the corners. He turned the rock in his hand.

"Did you draw a deer skull on this rock, Rust?" he asked me.

"Yes," I replied. "And a bunch of bird feathers on the big piece of bark. Do you like them?"

"Of course I do, kiddo," he said as he ruffled up my hair.

The first time I'd shown interest in the skulls, bones, and feathers that I saw at my dad's shop, my mom was upset. She and my dad argued with each other quietly when they thought I was asleep. She told him that it wasn't right for a boy my age to have an interest in things like that. I didn't understand why, though. I loved animals. I was just interested in what made them work.

My dad was the town butcher, and ever since I was young, I'd constantly hung around the butcher shop with my dad, watching, learning. My mom once asked me if I got upset watching what happens to animals after they die. I

thought about it long and hard, but I told her that no, I wasn't, because it was just another part of the life cycle. I understood that all living things died, and that once I was dead, I hoped there was some way I could help people even then.

Still, it had worried my mom, so she insisted I spend less time at my dad's butcher shop, and more time playing with other kids my age. It wouldn't have been a problem if other kids my age wanted to be around me.

I think other kids found me unsettling. I was fascinated by things that they found peculiar, and I was bored by things they found fun. I wasn't interested in sports, or video games, or playing with toys. I wanted to sit in the silence and wait, listening, hoping that the silence would reach out to me and whisper. I wanted to collect feathers and sticks, and glue them together to make artful gifts for my mom to put up on the fireplace mantle. I wanted to learn about life through experience, by having it run through my blood and letting it wrap itself around me.

My dad sat down in the chair next to mine and put his hand on my shoulder.

"How was your day at school, Rust? Were the other kids nice to you?" he asked.

Ignoring his question, I replied, "I saw a new boy in the field behind our house. He had hair black like the onyx rock you gave me last year."

"Is that right? I wonder who he might be. We don't have too many people who move all the way out here to Heaven."

"I think him and his father just moved in this past weekend," my mom said. "There's a new boy enrolled in some of my classes. I think he might be your stranger in the field, Rust. He seems like a nice boy, but quiet."

"Do you know his name?" I asked hopefully.

She smiled down at me. "Ancel, I believe he said."

"Ancel." I whispered his name like it was a feather I was trying to hold only with the sound of my voice.

My mom and dad left the room to talk, but I remained sitting there in the chair thinking of the raven-haired boy whose name would always be on the tip of my tongue.

“What are you doing?” an unfamiliar voice to my right asked me. I turned to see a girl standing next to me, her knees slightly bent as she crouched down to see what was in my hands. She had dark-brown hair, straight-cut bangs over her forehead, and bright brown eyes that I thought might’ve been unblinking. I’d seen her before in school, talking and playing with the other kids, but not once had she ever spoken to me.

“I’m tying buttons to twigs,” I told her.

“But why?”

I looked back down at my latest creation—a colorful piece of art comprised of yellow string, pink, black, and green buttons that hung down in assorted lengths from the twig.

“Because I’m going to hang it up in my bedroom window, and every time I open the window and the breeze flows through, I’ll hear the buttons snap against each other.”

“That’s weird,” she replied. “You’re weird.”

She wasn’t wrong, and it wasn’t anything I hadn’t heard before. The other kids called me names to my face. I understood why they thought I was weird. I didn’t look like the other kids my age. I was smaller and slighter than the other boys in my class, and my dark-red hair was unlike any natural hair color most people had seen before. At least that’s what my mom said. In the summer, the sun kissed my skin and brought out light brown freckles all over my face, and in the winter, my skin was fair and pale like the color of icing on a cake. I knew my odd looks coupled with my unpopular hobbies had earned me a bit of a reputation.

Still, I was surprised this girl was talking to me.

“Why are you talking to me?” I asked her.

“I don’t know,” she replied. “I think you’re kind of interesting.”

“You’ve never talked to me before.”

“Well, that’s because I don’t want to get picked on. The other kids think you’re weird.”

“I am weird,” I replied without a hint of sarcasm.

“Can I watch you make your stick thing?”

“Sure.” I shrugged. “What’s your name?”

“Beth.”

“Okay.”

I went back to wrapping the bits of string around the stick. I had plans for it once I got home. There were a few small rocks my father had carefully drilled holes through for me to put on necklaces or whatever I liked. I was going to add them to my newest piece of artwork, along with a few of my other prized possessions.

Beth sat there watching me in silence, her keen eyes never wandering from where my hands were lacing the string together into tight little knots.

I wondered if Beth would become my friend, but I doubted it. Beth seemed nice enough, not that being nice was a criteria of mine for friendship. Really all I looked for in a friend was someone who wouldn’t disturb the work I was doing, or the letters I was writing.

We sat quietly as I continued to work on my new piece of art, until the back of my neck began to tingle. I wasn’t sure why, but I lifted my head. When I looked off into the distance, I saw Ancel walking out from the school parking lot with a few other kids. They were all laughing and joking, shoving each other and tossing things between them. Ancel kept his head down, hands in his pockets, staring at the concrete, even though people swarmed around him like bugs to a light, trying to grab his attention.

I knew they’d never grab Ancel’s attention, just like I never would. At least not while Ancel was so busy staring at the ground.

I spent the rest of the school day thinking about how those other kids at school seemed drawn to him. What was it about him that drew people in? Was it his long, dark eyelashes that formed small points at the ends? Was it the gentle slump of his wide shoulders? Was it the way he never seemed to notice anyone around him?

Sometimes I wondered if he ever saw any of us at all.

Since the first day I’d laid eyes on him, I’d been watching him, studying his movements, embedding the curves of his face to my memory. And each time I looked at him, he wasn’t looking at anyone else. We were all ghosts to him, figments of his imagination, maybe, just blurs on the surface of the planet that he had to move around and weave through.

But that was all right. I didn't mind being invisible to him as long as I was still allowed to watch him walk through the field and run his fingers through the grass.

Ancel

The strange boy with red hair was sitting under the same tree he always was when I walked home from school. I didn't stop to stare at him, but I watched him out of the corner of my eye as I moved along the stamped-down dirt path. He was constantly writing in his notebook. I'd often found myself wondering what he was writing. Not that I cared, but it was a curious thing. I'd see him writing vigorously, his dark eyes focused and unseeing of anything but the paper in front of him. A time or two, I'd even watched him tear the paper out and shove it into a hole inside the tree. I'd thought about going to the tree when he wasn't there and taking the papers out to see what he had written, but it felt wrong somehow, like an invasion of privacy. I sometimes felt that way as I walked through the field. I almost thought of it as his field. Some days I would see him in the center of it, twirling in circles, his eyes closed, his arms outstretched, his face pointed toward the sun. Some days I'd seen him talking to the low-flying birds in the sky or the field mice that skittered across the ground. He wore leaves and feathers pinned into his hair, and kept small bones of dead animals in his schoolbag.

Other kids at school told me that he was odd, and warned me to stay away from him. It wouldn't be difficult. I wanted to stay away from everyone.

He was interesting, though, I thought as I pushed my fingers up against the rotting wood of the gate to my backyard. My old man's backyard.

I sighed deeply and pushed the gate open, making sure it was closed tight behind me so Daisy couldn't get out into the field. Daisy, my German shepherd, came over to greet me as I walked up the concrete path to the house. Her long tongue hung heavily out of her mouth, and her tail wagged anxiously. I leaned down on one knee and scratched behind her ears.

Daisy. Some days, she made it all worth it.

When I got inside the house, my dad yelled at me, just as I knew he would.

"What the hell took you so long to get home?" he shouted from the living room.

I felt my shoulders slump. “I walked home from school, Dad.”

“Don’t use that tone with me, Ancel. Remember who keeps a roof over your head.”

“Yes, sir.”

The volume of the television raised, and I knew I was dismissed.

Smoke wafted through the air as I made my way to my bedroom. The white walls were stained yellow from smoke—not just my dad’s, but whoever had lived here before us. The paint was chipped on all the corners, and there were holes in some of the walls. Those were mostly from my dad. We hung no pictures on the walls, because we didn’t have any family photos, and no snapshots of any time we looked happy. If there ever had been a time when we were happy.

The red carpet along the hallway was old and dirty. In the living room around my dad’s recliner, there were cigarette burns in the carpet from when he’d passed out in the chair and dropped a lit cigarette. Luckily, I was always home to catch it before it lit the entire house on fire.

I closed the door quietly behind me and set my bag on the floor. The walls were completely bare, as was most of my room. A small bed with minimal sheets, a table next to it, a lamp on top. I didn’t have much, but I didn’t need much. I didn’t collect anything or keep any mementos. My dad and I moved so often, they’d just get lost or broken in all the moves, anyway.

When I lay down on the bed and folded my arms behind my head, I stared up at the old, wood-paneled ceiling fan and listened to the sound of my dad yelling at the television in the living room.

I wanted to fall asleep and wake up tomorrow. Or never.

I wanted to drown out the sound of the ceiling fan, and my dad’s yelling, and the television. I wanted to ignore the flickering light above my head, the setting sun shining in through my window.

But instead of lying on my bed and wishing all the things in my life could be different, I closed my eyes and found myself wondering about crumpled-up pieces of paper in a tree that had been left there by a boy with hair the color of fire.

Rust

The brisk afternoon felt different—cooler, with a pang of worry filling the air and thickening it. Heaven was quiet, and while that was a usual occurrence in the small town, that day felt different. None of the usual birds were sitting in their trees when I first arrived at the field, and there were no mice scurrying on the ground around my feet.

School that day had been difficult, but that hadn't ignited my sour mood. Even as I stood in the field between our houses, my favorite place on the entire planet, I didn't feel happy.

Unsure of what else to do with myself, I plopped down next to the large pine tree I usually sat below, and pulled my schoolbag off my shoulders. I took my notepad out of my bag, along with the first pencil I could find, and began writing. I wrote letters to anyone and everyone I could think of: Napoleon, the inventor of the Ritz cracker, the boy with the red bike who rode past my house every Tuesday. I wrote to them snippets of my feelings, tales of adventures I planned on having in my life. I wrote about my father's work, the animal bones he let me keep, and the critters in the field that I talked to. I wrote about the strange boy with the black hair and sad eyes, and I wrote about the way my insides turned upside down whenever I looked at him.

As I continuously pushed my hair out of my eyes, I managed to sit and write letters and poems and stories for hours without noticing that time was slipping away from me. The setting sun in the distance had hushed and let me write in peace, not once giving me a clue that night was about to come.

As my fingers began to cramp, and the sunlight was tucking itself away, I realized I hadn't seen Ancel walk past me that day. The overbearing feeling of gloom that I'd felt earlier that day was suddenly back and pressing down heavily on my shoulders. I reached inside my collar and pulled out a small, silver necklace of a feather that my mother had given me years ago for my birthday. Holding the cool metal between my fingers, I stood and looked around the field, hoping the mysterious boy would spontaneously appear right before me.

But he didn't come. Normally, hours prior, he'd have walked home from school just minutes behind me. Then, sometime after dinner, he'd come outside with his German shepherd and walk her through the fields. When he was walking her, it was the only time I'd seen him do anything remotely close to smiling. He called her Daisy and would pick up a stick from the dirt on the ground and toss it to her. I'd sit under the large pine tree with my notebook and

watch him. I would pull my small knees up to my chest and wrap my arms around my legs and watch him play with his dog.

I sat and stared at his gate. I could see the kitchen light on in his house. The wind chime that hung lazily from his back porch was slowly dangling in the wind, barely moving. When I closed my eyes and listened real hard, not to the wind whistling through the tall grass and the pinecones in the trees, or to the gentle buzz of the street lamps in front of my house, I heard something else. It was a sound I knew, but I wasn't familiar with. It was the same sound I heard when my mom and dad fought quietly at night when they thought I was tucked away in bed. That same heat, same unease, filled the air.

The gate to Ancel's yard swung open into the field, with him thundering close behind. He stared up into the sky like he was expecting it to fall. His dad stood out on the back porch and screamed at him, but Ancel didn't turn around. He just kept looking up into the sky. Maybe it really was about to fall.

Ancel was only wearing a black T-shirt and a ripped up pair of jeans with his sneakers. He shoved his hands into his pants pockets and trudged out into the quiet field, leaving the gate door open behind him. His dad slammed the back door to the house, and soon afterward, Daisy ran out of the yard.

As Ancel walked nearer to the tree I was sitting under, I wondered if he knew I was there. I felt like I was imposing, stealing sneak peeks at his private moments with his father. But as he came closer, I completely forgot about myself. All I could see were the black and blue blooming flower patterns that were covering his arms. Some were dark and yellowing around the edges, while others were lighter and more blended in with the tan color of his skin. A few of the marks were up around his neck, just barely sneaking past the line of his T-shirt collar. They looked like dark-blue and black watercolor paints that had been dipped into a bucket of milk.

How could this have happened? How could he have been so careless? Didn't he know how precious he was—how important it was that he keep himself safe? He was the most beautiful thing I'd ever dreamed about, and yet he was covered in angry patterns that reminded me of how very human he was.

I stood up.

His eyes were instantly on me.

The moment our eyes met, I went to him. We were attached by thin, invisible strings that tied each piece of us together. They were wrapped tight around me and shrinking smaller and smaller by the second.

The big, orange sun was setting in the distance, and the last few strands of light it left us with danced against his black hair and his cold blue eyes. It floated against him like he was a foreign object that even the bright sun didn't know what to do with. He was a pillar, unmoving and unyielding, even against nature and all her gentle touches.

"It's you." His voice was like that of stones and long, starless nights.

I pressed the tips of my fingers against his cool, bruised skin. He didn't flinch at the feeling of my hand running up his arm. His unblinking eyes bore down into me even as the intensity forced me to look away.

The sleeve hem of his dark shirt was frayed, the loose threads moving gently in the wind. He smelled like black licorice, and stale cigarette smoke clung heavily to his clothing. Strands of his hair whipped across his face, partly shadowing his eyes from me.

Something passed through me then, and it felt similar to what I'd felt the first day I'd laid eyes on him—a miracle. But this was deeper. It felt heavier, more weighed down by his terribly cool stare and the fine hairs on his arms. It was something intangible that I couldn't have put a name on if I tried.

I wondered if he felt it too.

Daisy circled our ankles, barking excitedly and wagging her tail.

Just as I was about to speak, to tell Ancel my name, a holler echoed through the air. Ancel's father was yelling for him again. The sound must've broken whatever spell he was under, because he pulled his arm back away from me hastily and looked at me as though I'd done something wrong. As if I were something wrong.

He turned and walked away from me, Daisy following close at his heels.

I felt stinging moisture pool up in my eyes like a half-frozen river in the spring about to flood over the shores.

I wanted him to stay with me. I needed him to stay with me. I wanted to tell him my name, and how beautiful he was, and how since the first moment I saw him, I hadn't been able to think of anything else.

As the back of him disappeared through the gate to his yard, I knew he'd never be mine. But I knew just as well that I'd always be his.

Turning back to collect my bag from under the pine tree, I bent over and scooped up my belongings—a discarded pencil, a notepad, a few sticks I'd

found on the ground. As I was about to turn away, I heard a startled sound. It was quiet, but recognizable. I knew it to be a bird. It was crying softly, begging me to find it. Lowering onto my hands and knees, I searched around the base of the tree, looking for the source of the sound. After a few moments of searching beneath large piles of leaves and broken tree branches, I found it. It was a crow, crying and squawking as it leaned up against a rock near the outer branches of the tree. When I was close enough to look down at it, I could see that its wing was badly broken. I knew the chances of a bird surviving after having broken its wing were very slim, but as I looked down at the hurt creature, it stopped its crying and just watched me silently with its glassy, tar eyes. Reaching out carefully, I softly touched the tiny black feathers on top of the crow's small head. As I peered down at the smooth, black feathers of the crow, I knew that I had no choice but to try to keep it alive.

I pulled my arms out of my cardigan and carefully took the crow into my arms, keeping it wrapped safely in the fabric. It cawed as loud as its tired lungs would allow as I dashed across the field and then through the back gate to my yard.

By the time I made it into the house, my mom and dad were both there looking terrified, probably because I'd been screaming since getting into the yard. They both looked down at the tiny bundle of feathers I was cradling in my hands, and then back up at me. Something in my expression must've given me away, because my mom instantly wrapped her arm around my shoulder and kissed the top of my head.

"It's okay, Son," my dad said as he reached out toward me. "I'll take it."

I turned away from him but kept my eyes locked on his face. "We have to keep it alive. I want to fix him. I need to fix him."

"I know, Rust, I know. I'm just going to look. I promise I'll be careful. Is that okay?" he asked.

After a few moments of thought, I nodded slowly. My dad reached out and took my cardigan and the crow that was still bundled inside. Setting the crying bird down on the kitchen table, he pulled back the sides of the cardigan to get a better look at the poor creature.

My mom pulled me into a tight hug, pressing my face into her stomach. She patted my head and whispered softly to me, telling me that everything would be okay, and that I'd done well bringing the bird home.

"Maybe Rust should go into his room and wait," my dad suggested kindly.

“But I found him like that,” I protested. “I should be there with him. He might get scared.”

“Rust,” my mom said. “He’ll probably get too worked up with this many people in here. Let’s go into your room, and you can tell me what happened, okay?”

I felt the moisture in my eyes swell and spill over the edges. Nodding down at the kitchen floorboards, I took my mom’s hand and let her lead me into my bedroom. Once there, she sat next to me on the bed and wrapped me in her arms.

“What do you think happened to him?” I asked with a shaky voice. “I mean, how do you think he got hurt?”

“I’m not sure,” she replied, pulling me a little closer. “He might’ve been hit by a car, or flown into a window. The important thing is that you found him and brought him home. Your dad will do the best he can. You know that, right, Rust?”

“I know, Mom.” I couldn’t keep the tears from streaming down my face. “I know Dad might not be able to save him, but I had to try.”

“You have such a big heart.” My mom leaned down and kissed my forehead.

After a few moments of near silence, with the only sounds being from my gentle sobs and the distant screeching of the crow, I turned to my mom.

“Mom?” I said.

“Yes, Rust?”

I paused for a moment before continuing. “If something or someone is hurting, I can always bring them to you and Dad, right? And you’ll try to fix them, right?”

She pulled back and looked down at me. I didn’t look up from the spot on the floor I’d been staring at, but I knew she was looking at me.

“You can tell me or you father anything, Rust. Anything. And we will always do whatever we can to help, you, or anyone else. What’s going on?”

“Well,” I sniffled, “I think someone might be hurt. That boy who lives across the field—Ancel—I saw him today. His dad was mad and yelling at him. He had black marks all over his arms.”

My mom put her hands on my shoulders and turned me so I had no choice but to look at her. “Rust, are you sure? This is serious. If it’s made up...”

Without knowing it was coming, I burst into tears. “Yes, I’m sure. I want to help the crow and Ancel. I don’t want them to hurt anymore.”

The strength of my mom’s hug was almost unbearable, but I welcomed it. I wrapped my arms around her and cried into her shoulder like the end of the world was coming. I wasn’t sure how long she held me, but at some point I drifted off into a dark, restless sleep.

I finished it. And it was perfect.

It was Saturday morning, and I’d spent all night awake trying to finish it. My mom had caught me once, telling me that I shouldn’t be awake so late and to go to sleep, but I was too excited to sleep. I kept stringing the bits together under my bed sheets with a flashlight in my mouth. And slowly, as each piece slid in perfectly on the string, I knew it was worth it.

The crow lived, my dad told me. After I’d fallen asleep earlier in the evening, my mom and dad had woken me up with smiles on their faces.

“He’s alive—your crow,” my dad said. “But I don’t think he’ll ever fly again.”

“But he’s alive?” I asked excitedly, wiping the sleep from my eyes.

My dad’s kind eyes smiled down at me. “He’ll live.”

“Can I see him?”

“He’s asleep right now,” my dad said, “but in the morning, you can see him. He’s had a long day. It’ll be best to let him rest.”

I listened to my dad. He knew best. I, on the other hand, couldn’t rest. I was too excited. I saved him—the crow. It brought new life and happiness to me. If I could save the crow, maybe I could save Ancel too. Maybe I could help him, somehow.

So I’d stayed up all night making a necklace for him. But it wasn’t just a necklace—it was a piece of me. The necklace was made of a very thin strip of leather my father had given me. It was soft to the touch but strong. I’d taken four of my most prized possessions—varnished and painted animal teeth—and had my dad put tiny holes in them so I could string them onto the necklace. One tooth was light blue, two were pale yellow, and one I’d painted bright green.

And, right in the center of the necklace, was a feather. It was one of the favorite things I'd ever found. A hawk feather from when my mom and dad took me on a trip to the mountains two years prior, and we'd gone hiking through the wilderness and camped out with the animals in the forest.

When I was finished, I tied the leather tightly at the ends and looked at my masterpiece. It was beautiful, and perfect, so it deserved to be with Ancel.

That morning, I leapt out of bed at the crack of dawn, pocketed the necklace, and went straight out into the field. It was still early in the morning, but I was too excited, and I couldn't wait. The sun was just coming up. It was touching the tips of the grass, reflecting off of the early morning dew and making them glow and flicker with light. It was still chilly out, but even though I wasn't wearing a jacket, I wasn't cold. My heart was racing, and the necklace was burning a hole in my pocket. My fingers wouldn't stop twitching, and I could barely stand still.

I stood in the middle of that field and stared at the paint chips on the gate to his yard, and at the rusted, golden hinges on the gate door. I didn't pay any attention to the field mice skittering around my feet, the birds calling to me from the trees, or the sun dancing more and more over my face as the minutes ticked by.

And then, just when I thought he might break my heart by staying in his house all day, the gate swung open.

Ancel walked out with the same air around him as always—dark, dangerous, and so beautiful. His head was down, his hands were stuffed in the pockets of his dark jeans, and his hair hung loosely over his face.

Suddenly, I felt nervous. I was nothing like Ancel. I wasn't made of glaciers and the midnight sky; I was made of the grass in the field, the warm breeze that flowed through it, and the dirt under the heels of my shoes. He was so much more than I could ever hope to be, and while I knew that he'd never look at me the way I looked at him, I had to at least give him a tiny piece of myself.

Before I could convince myself otherwise, I ran. I leapt over the gopher holes in the dirt, and over the deserted logs that piled on top of one another. I ran as fast as my short legs could carry me, and I didn't stop until I was standing right in front of him, and he was looking down at me.

I grabbed his hand at the same time I pulled the necklace out of my pocket. Unceremoniously, I shoved the necklace into the palm of his hand and closed his fingers around it.

“I made this for you,” I said.

Ancel slowly opened his fingers to look down at the necklace I’d placed in his hand. He didn’t say anything, so I continued. “And you can ask me why, if you want, but I already know you won’t. Or you can ask me who I am, but I know you won’t do that either. But please, just take it. I need you to take it. I need you to keep it.”

He reached out and carefully touched the hawk feather with the tips of his fingers. I held my breath the entire time. I watched his careful eyes study the feather, the painted teeth, the thin, leather strip. I watched his dark eyebrows furrow in confusion, and his long, sooty eyelashes cast gentle shadows just under his eyes.

After what felt like years had passed, slowly, he looked up from the necklace and focused on me, unblinking.

“Okay.”

That one simple word stopped my heart. And then started it again.

He would keep it. The necklace that was comprised of all my favorite possessions; the necklace that was a tiny piece of me.

Ancel would keep it.

And with that, I turned and ran back to my house without saying a word. When I opened the back door and closed it hard behind me, I pressed my back to the frame and slid down.

He would keep it. Maybe not forever, but at least for a little while, a part of me would be with him.

I stood up and ran to the kitchen window. As I looked out into the empty field, I wondered if this would change things between us. Maybe we’d even become friends, one day. Maybe tomorrow we’d talk, and eventually he’d let me play with Daisy. Maybe one day he’d let me hold his hand.

I promised myself that tomorrow after school instead of sitting under the tree and watching Ancel cross the field silently, I’d run up to him, as I had that day, and tell him my name.

Yes. Tomorrow, Ancel would know my name.

But life wasn’t fair, even in Heaven.

The next day, Ancel was gone. He'd left Heaven like a thief in the night, and had stolen my heart away with him.

During

The guy in the red shirt was gorgeous. He was all blond hair, green eyes, and way too much testosterone. His muscles stretched under his tight T-shirt as he threw the football across the patch of grass to his friend. My eyes barely left the curve of his strong jaw, or the way his thighs flexed when he stopped from a sprint.

I sighed heavily and looked back down at my notepad. I'd scribbled some nonsensical words and pictures down on the letter I'd been writing to him. Not that I'd ever give it to him.

He and his friend threw a football around in the field most weekends, and most weekends I was there, sitting on my tire swing hung up in the tree, watching him. My mom sometimes questioned why someone my age didn't have anything better to do than to sit around on weekends writing letters to strangers.

Ripping the letter I'd written for the boy in the red T-shirt out of my notepad, I crumpled it up and placed it in the same hole in the tree where all my letters went to die. I swung my legs out of the center of the tire and slid down onto the ground. Making sure my notepad was neatly tucked away into my bag, I slung it over my shoulder and took one last look at the handsome boy in the red T-shirt.

It was almost springtime, and I wished I could profess my undying love of spring like everyone else in Heaven, but it just wasn't true. I loved spring, sure, but I loved the frost of winter, and the leaves of fall, and the unbridled heat of summer. I couldn't pick a favorite season any more easily than I could pick a favorite song, or a favorite smell. Everything was beautiful in its own way—you just had to look close enough.

Everything in Heaven was beginning to turn green. Front lawns, the leaves in the trees, the color of the skirts the girls wore. Something about this spring though felt particularly new and fresh. There must've been something in the air.

I walked down the main street in Heaven as I made my way to my dad's butcher shop. The light posts had white LED lights twirled around them from base to tip, and potted plants hanging from them from Mrs. Langley's shop, Buds. She'd glued business cards to each of the pots so that everyone knew she was the best flower shop in town. Everyone agreed, of course, and not just because she owned the only flower shop in town.

There were a few cars parked along the wide road, but almost everyone in Heaven just walked where they needed to go. Heaven was so small that it felt like a waste of gas to drive anywhere. Still, a few of the popular kids in my high school had their licenses, and even one or two of the seniors had their own cars.

Mrs. Allen waved to me as I walked past her accounting shop. I just smiled and looked back down at the sidewalk. Usually no one noticed me, and I preferred it that way. Those who did notice me were usually just the other kids at my high school. They whispered about me.

When I arrived outside my dad's butcher shop, I stopped and looked up at the sign, thinking of the first time I'd ever laid eyes on it. Paige Butcher Shop—the simple navy sign strung up above the door, painted on a plank of wood. Most people who weren't from Heaven thought my dad had named the shop after my mom, but in truth Paige was my family's surname, and the Paige butcher shop had been passed down through the generations.

The front of the shop was one giant glass window, along with the glass door off to the right side of the shop front. Signs were taped to the inside of the glass so passersby would look and see the prices without having to go in, or what kind of specials they were having that week.

I pushed the front door open and listened to the familiar sound of the bell chiming above my head.

"Be out in just a minute," my dad hollered from the back.

"It's just me, Dad," I yelled back. "I just stopped by before work to say hi."

A few moments later, my dad came out from the back of the shop wearing his typical black apron and a smile on his face.

"Hey, Rust," he said happily. "How's your day going, Son?"

I shrugged but smiled at him.

"You know," he went on, "Sheriff Johnston was driving down the highway the other day and came across a dead fox. He said it looked like the poor thing was run over by one of those big semitrucks."

I frowned. "Poor thing."

"But I convinced the sheriff to let me keep the fur and a few of the teeth. I know how you feel about stuff like that. I figured you'd want it for an art project or something."

Unable to stop myself, I grinned from ear to ear.

I'd once told my friend Beth that I made art out of roadkill. She dry heaved into the garbage can in the school parking lot. At first I thought she was joking, but as it turned out, she just has a sensitive stomach.

"Why the hell do you do that?" she had asked me with her eyebrows low over her eyes.

"Well," I had replied, "it would feel like a waste not to, you know? These animals were so beautiful in life, and because of a tragedy, their lives are lost. It almost feels like a way to honor them—to keep them beautiful a little while longer."

"Holy shit, you're weird," she had replied with a straight face.

I looked up at the clock on the wall, remembering that my visit to my dad's shop had to come to an end.

"Thanks, Dad," I said as I began walking toward the door. "I'll see you at home tonight around dinner time."

My dad waved and went into the back of the shop. I made my way down the street about two blocks to the ice cream shop. When I pushed the door open and it chimed, I was instantly greeted with, "Hello, and welcome to—oh, it's just you."

I smiled and pulled my bag off my shoulders. Beth immediately slumped back down onto the stool she'd been sitting on behind the counter, and went back to eating chocolate cherry ice cream out of a disposable cup.

"You're early," she said.

"By four minutes."

"Still early."

Beth was always late. At least at work I could cover for her. She was late to all her classes, late to work, late for dinner at home, late whenever she and I went to the movies. It wasn't a feature of hers I disliked—quite the opposite, in fact. For some reason, I saw it as one of her notable character traits—one that, while it might've been inconvenient, was just another piece to the puzzle that was Beth.

"What are you planning on doing this summer?" Beth asked me as she scooped frozen cherries into her mouth.

“I’m running away and joining the circus,” I replied as I tied my white apron around my waist.

“You’re hilarious. What are you actually going to do, though? Just work here at the ice cream shop?”

“And work on some art projects. Make jewelry. Bus down to the beach one day, walk along the shoreline, and see if I can find some sea glass.”

“Most other boys your age are doing other stuff, you know. Parties, sports, girls.” I slid her a sardonic look. She laughed. “Okay, maybe not girls. But really, Rust, who wants to spend their summer looking for pretty feathers, or painting animal teeth, or hunting for shiny pieces of sea glass?”

“Me.”

Beth ignored me and went back to her ice cream. I wasn’t offended by her pestering. She liked poking at me whenever she was bored and couldn’t find something else to entertain her. And she meant it in the nicest way—I think.

Besides, my mom and dad were already asking me questions about things that I had no answers to. What I wanted to do after high school, if I was going to take over Paige Butcher Shop, if I wanted to go to college. I didn’t have an answer for any of it. I didn’t want to think about any of it. All I wanted to do was make art.

The first time I told my dad I didn’t want to be a butcher, he frowned at me. It was because the shop had been in our family for so long, and I knew he didn’t want to have to sell it when he got older and wanted to retire. Still, I couldn’t do what my dad did. I knew his work was humane, and he’d never been unkind a day in his life, but it wasn’t what I pictured for myself. When I pictured my future, I imaged sculptures made from fur and bones and smooth pieces of glass. I pictured gold rings and yellow paints in every shade. I pictured lying on my back in the field in the middle of the fall, looking up at the dark blues of the sky, feeling the crisp wind beat against my skin and listening to the breeze flowing through the grass.

“Customers,” Beth said as she stood up and put on a phony smile.

The rest of the evening passed by in a blur. There was a woman who came in with twelve kids, and each of them ordered numerous flavors of ice cream. She apologized and said it was for her son’s birthday. Beth grumbled the entire time, but I smiled at each of the children and tried to make their ice cream cones to their perfect specifications.

By the time I left work that evening, I was exhausted. I walked through the field behind my house slowly, holding onto the straps of my bag, trying to convince myself not to curl up in the tall grass and sleep under the stars.

Just as I was almost at the gate to my back yard, something caught my eye. I turned and looked behind me. The back porch light was on at Ancel's house. Although, it wasn't Ancel's house any longer and hadn't been for many years. People had come and gone throughout the years, no one staying longer than a few months to a year in that house.

The first time after he'd left, I hadn't believed my mom when she told me they had picked up and moved away. I ran over to his house, stared into his backyard through the wood fence boards, and looked for Daisy. But Daisy wasn't there. And neither was Ancel.

Sighing, I closed my eyes, blocking out the sight of the porch light, the field, Heaven itself.

I had to let go of his ghost.

I crouched down on the pavement and picked up a tiny gray stone with two blotches of black embedded into it. It reminded me of the colors of the hound dog my aunt and uncle used to have, or the pattern on a T-shirt a boy in one of my classes at school wore once that I liked.

Sliding the tiny rock into my pocket, I continued through the walkway between the two houses on my way home from school. I followed the path, picking up a stick somewhere along the way, and tapped it against the fence posts as I walked.

Everything was quiet and serene. Nature felt fresh and undisturbed, just like it did most days in Heaven.

Coming out between the two houses, I walked around the short path, past the two side-by-side trees that had lovers' names carved into their bark, and out into the field behind my house. Once I'd made it past the old stump that I passed by each day, I closed my eyes and smiled to myself. I let the sun tickle my face as I walked blindly toward my house, knowing my way through the field better than I even knew the sound of my own voice.

Just as I was about to pass by the tree with my tire swing in it, I heard the sound of a dog barking.

Slowly, I opened my eyes.

Like magic—like the earth had heard my cries and the sky had known my deepest desires, he was there.

Ancel.

But he looked different—older. Of course he looked older. Years had passed since I'd last seen him, but in my mind he was still the same fourteen-year-old boy whose hair was black like a raven's feathers.

The years had given him height, whereas they'd left me lacking it. His shoulders were wider, and his arms were longer and defined with muscle, much like the boy in the red T-shirt. But Ancel wasn't anything at all like the boy in the red T-shirt. Ancel's hair was the same—shorter, perhaps, and his light eyes looked even paler now than they ever had before. He had the ghosting of hair around his face, again reminding me of the years that had passed since I'd last seen him.

But even now, as I stared at him in bewilderment, wondering how it was I'd come again to this same spot to see this beautiful boy across the field, I was hit with the same magnitude of him that I had been the first time.

An arrow struck straight through my heart, or my entire body was going to implode, because suddenly I couldn't breathe. I couldn't move, I couldn't blink, I couldn't be. All I could do was look over across the tall, greening blades of grass, past the few leaf-barren trees, and stare at him.

He was walking through the field with Daisy at his side. The white T-shirt he wore was tight enough to suck any breath I'd had left in my lungs straight out, and his dark jeans hung just low enough that I could see the black band of his underwear.

If someone would've asked me years ago when I'd first laid eyes on Ancel if I thought he could've looked any more devastating than he had then, I would've said it was impossible.

But I would've been wrong.

More than anything in the entirety of the universe, I wanted Ancel to look my way. In my heart, I knew he wouldn't. I knew to someone like him, I was the grass, the trees, the twigs on the ground, and the leaves falling from the branches.

Ancel would never see me. But I'd assured myself that that was all right, because I could still see him. He was all I saw, even when I closed my eyes.

I watched him fade off into the distance, my heart still racing in the pit of my chest. When he was out of sight, and my eyes burned from forgetting to blink, I turned toward my house and went home.

When I walked in through the kitchen, my mom said something to me that I didn't hear. I went straight to my room, dropped my bag to the ground, and plopped down on the bed. No was cawing at me. I rolled over onto my side and opened the door to his cage. The moment the door was open, he fluttered his wings to the best of his abilities and hopped from his perch onto the crook of my hand.

"He came back to Heaven, No," I told my best friend. "The boy with the hair that reminds me of your feathers."

No stared at me with dark, glassy eyes. I petted him gently, and before long, No was asleep on my chest, and I was following him close behind.

Ancel

He was sitting out in the field again—that strange boy with the blood-red hair.

He was scribbling in his notepad. The sight alone brought a small smile to my face. He hadn't changed after all these years. Well, perhaps the way he looked. His hair seemed almost impossibly deeper and redder, like the color of an old Bordeaux wine. Freckles covered every inch of his face, mapping each patch of his skin into a mosaic. The years that had passed since I last saw him gave him a few inches of height, but not much. He was still thin and small, like some breakable, soft twig that had all the bark torn off.

The years looked like they'd been kind to him—well, kinder than they'd been to me, at least. He still retained that ease about him, that air that floated around him seeming lighter than the air the rest of us breathed. He still barely noticed anything or anyone outside of that pad of paper, or the ears of the wheat in the field. A time or two, when I'd caught myself staring at him, I ran my fingers against the tall, smooth blades of grass and wondered if that was what his hair felt like.

I noticed I was frowning.

Interesting as he may be, he didn't belong in the same world I did.

I latched the gate shut tightly behind me. I wouldn't want my dad to get pissed over something like that. Subconsciously, I rubbed my collarbone when

I felt it flare up with a tinge of pain. I had no idea when exactly I'd broken my collarbone, or how. My money was on the night a few years ago my dad smacked me into the living room wall. He'd had his friends over for a poker night and accused me of making too much noise. To be fair, I was. And I was doing it solely to piss him off.

Or it could've been the second time I'd been in the juvenile detention center. I'd been in too many fights to count while I was there.

"Why didn't you go to the nurse sooner?" the doctor at the emergency room had asked me.

I hadn't wanted to report any of those fights I'd been in because I was the one who'd started each and every one. If my dad found out, all those fights would've been the least of my problems. So I kept my mouth shut and broke the cycle.

I looked over my shoulder.

He was still there, nose buried in his notebook. What was he writing? Even in the years I'd been away from Heaven, dragged around from town to town by my dad, I had always wondered what had been written on all those pieces of paper.

Without knowing why, I began walking over to him. The closer I got, the less he was shielded by the tree branches, the tall grass, and the distance.

I paused.

He was sitting under the tree, shoeless, with his jeans rolled up at the bottoms, and a crown on top of his head formed from antlers. The antlers were painted white, the tips colored pastel greens, blues, and yellows. Each antler was strung together by thick, black cords of string. Strands of his red hair intertwined with the crown, contrasting heavily against the starkness of the colors he had painted. His eyelashes were dark and long, casting heavy shadows on his freckled cheeks. Biting on his rosy lips, he continued to jot things down on the lined paper on his lap.

A crow was sitting on his shoulder, barely moving, cawing softly as it guarded its perch. When the crow noticed me it cawed loudly, jolting the red-haired boy out of his trance.

Our eyes locked, and his lips formed a wicked little jester of a grin.

"You," he said softly, setting the notebook on the ground. He stood and looked up at me, his haunting bird still clinging tightly to him.

The wind whipped through the field—whipped through me—and took my breath away with it.

He wasn't from this world, this blood-haired boy. He was from a fantasy where faeries and pixies danced through the woods and slept in dewy beds of twigs and petals. He was a creature unlike anything poets or philosophers could conjure up. He was born from alchemy, created by twisting storm clouds and rays of sunshine together.

He wasn't from here. And he didn't belong here. Certainly not with me.

"Do you remember me?" he asked sweetly, his dark-brown eyes dancing.

"How could I forget you?" I whispered quietly. "What's your name?"

"Rust."

The look on my face must've given me away, because he laughed.

"Would you believe me if I told you that the hair color is a coincidence?" he asked.

"No." I couldn't help the smile that spread across my face.

"Neither would I."

"Why do you have a bird on your shoulder?"

"Oh," Rust said, turning his head a little toward the crow. "Because he can't fly, but he likes to be outside in the field."

"Is it your pet?"

The bird took that opportunity to spread its wings and make a chirping noise. One of its wings was mangled and didn't look as full of feathers as the other.

"I wouldn't call him a pet," Rust said. "More of a friend."

"You're friends with the crow?" I asked skeptically.

He grinned and closed his eyes. "Yes. And the field mice, and the owls, and the gophers, and the wind, and the trees, and the clouds in the sky, and the pebbles in the dirt, and the light in your eyes."

Something inside my stomach sank. "How can you be friends with things like that?"

"Easily. Unconditionally."

As I stared down at him, I began to feel sicker and sicker. Some kind of unease was settling over me, some awareness prickling at the back of my mind. Something was screaming at me to run, to close my eyes from a boy named Rust who spoke in riddles and made friends with flightless birds.

“Do you want to walk with me through the field?” Rust asked. I remained silent, so he went on. “There’s a small stream about a mile to the north. I go there sometimes to collect rocks or leaves.”

That feeling kept growing. Voices in the back of my mind kept yelling at me.

But still, I nodded.

Rust grabbed my hand without a moment’s thought. Together, we walked through the endless pastures until we came upon the stream. Rust talked about the colors of the leaves, the smell of the grass, the feeling of the wind through this crown of antlers as it brushed against his hair. He told me that he’d found his crow with a broken wing, and his father helped him nurse it back to health. He told me that the crow’s name was No, and No was Rust’s best friend.

“Is your best friend Daisy?” he asked me.

My throat was dry, but I managed to say, “Yes.”

“I remember seeing you playing in the field with her when we were younger,” Rust explained.

I remembered too. I remembered leaving the house for hours in the evenings, hoping that my dad wouldn’t notice I was gone. I remembered having to hide in my closet or the laundry room when my dad got too drunk and wanted to start picking fights with me. He still liked to blame his drinking habits and sour attitude on Mom leaving us, but he was like this long before she left. It’s probably why she left. I just wished that she had taken me with her.

“Do you and your dad still fight?” Rust asked as though he’d been reading my mind.

“Yes.” There was no use lying about it.

“Why?”

I shrugged. I had no idea. It didn’t take much to set him off, but it took a lot to stop him when he was on one of his tantrums. I wasn’t sure if it was me my dad hated so much, or himself. Either way, that didn’t stop him from taking it out on me.

“You should tell my mom,” Rust persisted. “She’s a good listener. And she can help.”

“No one can help.” I stared down at the ground. “He drinks too much.”

“My mom can. And my dad, too. They helped No.” As if recognizing its own name, the bird cawed and fluffed up the feathers around its neck. Rust smiled and pet its tiny head.

“Your mom’s a teacher at the school, right?” I asked.

Rust perked up. “Right. She’s a great teacher—or so I’ve heard. She’s never taught me.”

Which, I thought to myself, was probably a good thing. Rust didn’t really need another reason for the kids at school to pick on him. They had enough as it was.

“And your dad,” I went on. “He’s the butcher, right?”

He looked pleased that I knew these fine details of his life. Heaven was a small town and everyone talked. Hell, I was sure half the population of Heaven knew my dad was a drunk. There’s no such thing as privacy when you live somewhere as small as this.

Rust stopped when we reached the edge of the stream. A stick he picked up along the way served as an extra limb that he used to turn over rocks and run through the clear, blue water as we walked along the edge of the bank.

“Will you leave again?” His voice was quieter than the gentle trickle of the stream.

“I don’t know,” I replied honestly.

He furrowed his brow and turned so he was facing me. “If you do, can I come?”

The look on his face was so serious, I could’ve laughed. But I had a feeling that that would’ve chipped away at something deep down inside him. So, instead, I said, “Don’t you love Heaven? And if you leave, who will look after your mom and dad? And No?”

He bit the corner of his lip with his teeth. I couldn’t help but stare.

“Don’t you like Heaven?” he asked, eyes downward.

“It’s the same as every place. There are people who talk too much, small houses that all look the same. Eventually, everyone’s faces start to blend together.”

But not yours, I wanted to tell him. But even the thought of that brought the sick feeling in my stomach back boiling at the surface. I squelched whatever desire I had to tell him that he would never be like everyone else.

We walked together in comfortable silence up the stream. There were trees on all sides of us, some just starting to bring new leaves with them. Piles of dead branches near the trunks were inhabited by chirping birds and squirrels. The rocks we walked along were wet from the river, and, a time or two, Rust had almost slipped and tumbled into the water. But I grabbed his arm and straightened him up. He just laughed and went back to walking along the slippery rocks.

The sun, in the far distance, was hanging low, but big and bright. Colors like those from a kaleidoscope were painted across the sky. With a smile on his face, Rust watched the sun set. I watched him.

But as the late evening came upon us, I told Rust I needed to go home. No, he told me, was looking quite tired himself. Much as we had along the bank of the river, we walked together in silence back to the field between our houses. It was a comfortable silence, like the way old trees stood tall next to one another, their roots twining into one, over time, and never having to speak.

Rust watched me out of the corner of his eye. Sometimes, when I'd turn to look at him, his eyes would lock with mine, and those voices in the back of my mind began screaming again.

We parted ways—Rust to his house in the east, and mine in the west. I walked through the back door of the house as quietly as I could, but I thought if anything at all, my dad would be able to hear the sound of my heart beating wildly.

“Ancel?” my dad called in his usual brisk tone. “Where the hell have you been?”

I could hear the television in the background on low, and from where I was in the kitchen, I could see the glow of it through the living room door. “Out for a walk.”

“Come here,” he commanded. So I did. I stood in the doorway to the living room and stared down at his socked feet.

My dad and I looked nothing alike. I looked just like my mom, and I often wondered if that was another reason my dad hated me so much. He was taller than me, bigger, and he liked to throw his weight around. He had a cruel-

looking face, but maybe I just thought so because he was cruel to me. His unshaven face wasn't anything unfamiliar, and he constantly had a cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth.

"A walk, huh?" he questioned.

I nodded, but he was staring at me, that same skeptical look on his face that I was used to.

"With who?" he went on.

"No one."

He snorted. "No one. Don't lie to me, Ancel. I looked out the back window and saw you talking to that red-haired queer kid. Now, why would you be outside talking to him?"

"We were just talking, Dad." My skin was beginning to crawl.

"No son of mine is going to be hanging around queers. You hear me, Ancel?"

"Yes, sir." I kept my head down.

"And no son of mine is going to grow up to be a fag."

I felt like throwing up, much like I did every time we had this conversation. "I'm not gay, Dad."

My dad's skeptical once-over did little to calm my nerves. His cold stare bore into me like he was slowly picking me apart, piece by piece. Maybe he was.

"Get out of my sight," he snapped. I didn't have to be told twice.

Quickly, I walked down the naked hallway of our house and went into my bedroom, shutting the door quietly.

A few more weeks, I told myself. A few more weeks and you'll have saved up enough money, and you'll never have to see his face again.

I flicked the lights off in my room, unzipped my hoodie, and tossed it on the chair. Fully clothed, I lay down on my small bed and looked up at the ceiling fan. I watched the blades circle round and round until eventually my eyes began to grow heavy. I fell asleep looking above my head at the shadows cast on the ceiling, the slow turning blades of the fan, and the necklace made of painted teeth and a hawk feather that hung from the cord of the fan.

Rust

"The only good part of this job is the ice cream," Beth said. "Everything else is crap."

"I thought you liked it when the football team came in," I replied as I washed one of the ice cream scoops in the back sink.

"Well, yeah, and that. But you like that too. And I mean, what warm-blooded person wouldn't? But do you even like ice cream?"

I shrugged. "I guess."

"You guess? Who guesses they like ice cream? God, Rust, you're so weird. Your dad is the town butcher, and you don't even eat meat."

"I think No would be upset if I did." I placed the scoop on the drying rack and grabbed a dishrag to wipe my hands.

"And we mustn't upset the bird," she replied.

I put my hands on my hips and grinned at her. "He has feelings, you know. Sensitivity isn't strictly limited to the human race."

Beth blinked. She was sitting at one of the small tables in the front of the shop eating the hazelnut and vanilla ice cream that was one of our best sellers. She had her feet propped up on the chair opposite hers. Whenever customers weren't in the shop, Beth treated it like her second bedroom.

"How do you get your hair to do that thing?" she asked.

"What thing?" I replied.

"The thing where it looks all styled, but I know that you didn't do anything to get it to look like that. How'd you do it?"

I paused for a moment. "Uh, nothing."

"Figures." She went back to eating her ice cream.

A few minutes later, the door chimed, and Beth shot to her feet. Putting her hands, and the ice cream along with it, behind her back, she scuttled behind the counter with me.

"Of course," she whispered. "Just fifteen minutes before we close."

I heard what she said, but I wasn't really listening. I was too engulfed in staring at Ancel and the girl attached to his arm.

Of course he had a girl attached to his arm. Of course he had a girl like Cindy Miller attached to his arm. She was all long, blonde hair, bubbly

personality, and big blue eyes. My heart sank a little, but I knew it would. Boys like Ancel always had people fawning over them, fighting for their attention. Ancel was dark and mysterious, and I wasn't the only one to notice.

A group of five people poured in—Ancel, Cindy, and three other boys from our school, Gary, Justin, and Kevin. I'd never spoken a word to a single one of them. They were popular, cool and sleek, like a brand new car with a brand name that everyone knew. Ancel didn't look my way, didn't even see me. He was talking to Gary while Cindy laughed at something he said.

"Hey," Beth said in a whisper. "I'll do till if you scoop the ice cream. These guys are idiots, and I'd rather not deal with them, even if the one with the black hair is hot."

"Okay," I said. I didn't mind interacting with them, especially if Ancel was with them. It didn't bother me that he had popular friends or beautiful girls hanging off his every word. I would've thought less of the people in my town if they weren't. Ancel was something special—something beautiful and rare that deserved to be admired and praised for all it was worth.

"Chocolate," Kevin said. He was standing in front of me, and I hadn't even noticed.

I smiled and looked down to open the glass door to the ice cream chiller. "Sorry."

I scooped out his chocolate ice cream, and then Gary's strawberry-vanilla next. As I was packing the ice cream into the cone, Gary started laughing.

"Nice necklace," he said mockingly. "Is that a rabbit's foot?"

I looked down at the necklace I'd made last summer. It was a rabbit's foot on a long, gold chain, encased with a few gold beads.

"Yes," I replied honestly. Because why wouldn't I?

Justin chimed in from where he was standing near the till. "Are you wearing clips in your hair? What are you, some kind of girl? Why would you wear clips in your hair?"

I frowned. I didn't understand the question. "Because they're beautiful."

Justin, Gary, and Kevin all burst out laughing, doubled over, dramatically clutching their stomachs. I tried not to listen, just to finish my job and ignore their jeers. Gary, I think it was, whispered something under his breath, a word that made my eyes sting. The other two boys laughed even harder.

It was only then that Ancel, who'd been busy talking to Cindy, seemed to notice me.

His head snapped up. Those icy, cool eyes of his darted toward me, then at his chortling friends.

"Hey," he snapped at them. "Keep your mouths shut."

Within a second, all three of the other boys stood up straight and looked at him. He was big in magnitude, not just size. The air in the room changed, just for a moment, and I could tell that I wasn't the only one to feel it.

"Shit, okay," Gary said. "We're just joking around. Cool it."

Silence filled the small room, but the other three boys left me alone. They paid for their ice cream in silence and left out the front door.

"Hey," Ancel said quietly as he walked up to the counter.

"Hi," I replied shyly as I stared down at the counter. I was positive that my face was the same color as the cherry ice cream.

"Ew," Cindy chimed in. "I can't believe you're wearing a dead animal's foot around your neck. That's so weird."

"Then I guess I'm weird," I replied.

Cindy sneered at me. "Come on, Ancel. I've changed my mind." She tugged on his arm, pulling him toward the door.

Ancel just looked at me, the corner of his mouth quirking up a bit in the corner. After they'd gone, it took Beth saying my name to snap me out of my daze.

"You in lust or something?" she asked me.

I smiled at her. "Or something."

"Well, there's no use competing with the likes of Cindy Miller. Especially not for a guy like that. Men like him knock up super models and drive fast, expensive cars. People like us don't stand a chance."

I already knew that. I knew that people like me got lost in the shadow of men like him.

So why did it still hurt to hear?

Ancel

“Are you sure you don’t want to come over for a little while?” Cindy begged. “My parents are out of town with my little sister. It’ll just be us.”

Any other night, I would’ve gone with her. Hell, I had gone with her, or girls who were just like Cindy—pretty, shallow, desperate for attention. Going home with girls was nothing new to me. They were warm and soft and would silence the screaming voice of my dad in my head—at least for a few hours.

But tonight didn’t feel right. Maybe I was just exhausted from the long hours I’d been working at the mechanic’s in town. Maybe it was the look in Rust’s eyes.

“Not tonight, Cindy,” I replied. I leaned against her open car door as she sat in the driver’s seat.

“Next time?”

“Next time.” Although, I wasn’t sure that was a promise I was going to keep.

I closed her car door and waved her off, watching as her expensive sports car turned the corner down the street. With the zipper on my hoodie pulled all the way up to my throat, I shoved my hands in my pockets and headed back home. Normally I’d walk home through the residential areas of the town—less streetlights, more privacy. But something about tonight drew me back down the main street. Right past the ice cream shop.

Following the flickering street lights, I made my way down the concrete path along the shops. All were closed now, their signs flipped over and their lights all off.

No one was around. But, far in the distance, I heard sounds—voices. Yelling.

I picked up my pace.

After rounding the corner, I paused. There in the distance were Gary, Kevin, and Justin, all standing together outside the ice cream shop. They were laughing and yelling something I couldn’t hear.

I walked closer.

Under one of the street lights, shining down gently on his vibrant, fiery hair, was Rust. Circled around him were my friends.

“Fag!” Kevin yelled at him. The other two boys laughed.

That word. One simple, disgusting word and my entire body temperature dropped to that of ice. I stopped walking, shielded myself so I was out of their line of sight. I hid between two of the buildings, watching them still, but covered in shadows.

Fag.

I heard my dad's voice in my head.

Gary walked up to Rust and shoved him. Rust stumbled back a few steps, then tried to turn away. Kevin was there next, pushing him back toward the other two boys.

I started to move toward them, but the voices in my head were bellowing.

Don't. Stay hidden. They'll know.

My dad's voice was louder than ever.

Thunder sounded overhead, and I looked up into the sky. The clouds had turned black in what seemed like the blink of an eye. Heavy, deeply colored storm clouds swirled overhead, while brutal winds began to pick up the dead leaves hidden in the nooks of the buildings and make them dance.

Justin shoved Rust hard, enough force behind it to make him stumble and fall onto the gravel road. They all laughed. Rust looked up at them under the dim streetlight, and I could see small, red scratches on his face from where his pale skin connected with the dirt and rocks. His dark-chocolate eyes shone like freshly blown glass, his long eyelashes damp from wetness.

Lightning struck something far in the distance. But I didn't flinch. I wasn't looking anywhere but at Rust. He stood up slowly, picking up his bag and tossing it over his shoulder. The other three boys continued to laugh and jeer at him. Rust turned and began walking away, but not before I saw a flicker of something in his eyes, a hint of something I was so deeply familiar with—hurt.

Thunder boomed.

I pulled my hood up over my head and slipped out from the shadows.

By the time I reached them, Rust was long gone into the distance. That was good. Someone like him shouldn't be here for this. What I was going to do tainted people. It drew out blood in more ways than one. It bled out. And Rust had been hurt enough for one night.

They'd taken the purity and naivety from Rust's eyes and left him with nothing more than my dad had left me. They'd stripped him of his hope, of the

light he carried around. In doing that, even for a second, they'd made my mind up for me.

I came up behind Kevin, putting my hand on his shoulder. When I pulled back and spun him around, the look on his face swiftly changed from confusion to fright. My fist connected with his jaw, and within a few seconds, he was on the ground. Gary came up next to me, shouting. He took a swing at me. I leaned away, almost thankful for those times spent in a juvenile detention center. I took a step backward, then leaned forward and put my weight into the punch that connected with the side of his face. Gary staggered backward, tripped over Kevin, and then fell. Justin stood off to the side with his hands held up in front of his face.

Lowering my fists, I looked down at the two boys on the ground.

I had just wanted them to stop. I wanted to tell them that robbing Rust of that look in his eyes was worse than any crime I'd ever been sent away for, worse than anything their minds could conjure up to do to another person.

Rust was pure. Rust was good.

But I knew those words would never slip past my lips.

Shoving my hands back into my pockets, I walked away. I could hear them swearing at me and scrambling off the ground even as I disappeared into the distance. I followed along the same path that Rust had used, knowing it would take me to the field between our houses.

Above my head the sky was melting into dark, looming bursts of white, black, and blue. Thunder sounded every few steps I took and the lightning felt like it was aimed at my head. When the first few droplets of rain fell, I was grateful to have my hood still pulled up. When the sky began to pour big, cold droplets of water, I wasn't feeling as grateful.

By the time I made it to the field in between Rust's house and mine, I was in a full sprint. The sky was falling, and all the tears from heaven were falling with it. The crackling of the storm was just warming up as booms of thunder and lightning filled the sky.

I was about to turn toward my house and run along the line of fences, but something caught my eye. Stopping, I looked toward the middle of the field.

His eyes were closed, his chin tipped up toward the sky. Outstretched arms reaching for the clouds had tiny streams of water running down his skin. The pale-green fabric of his shirt was drenched, pressed up against his thin body. I

could see by the way his raised arms lifted his shirt that the freckles on his face were covering his stomach as well.

And he was spinning, smiling, dancing in the rain like the storm clouds were reaching out their long fingers and running them through his hair.

Another crackle of thunder brought me back to where I was standing. I sprinted out toward him, unable to comprehend doing anything else.

“Rust!” I yelled over the sound of the water beating down on the hard ground and the lightning laughing in the distance. I pulled my hood off my head and stopped a few short feet away from him.

Rust stopped twirling. He opened his eyes and faced me. The smile he wore would’ve made me stutter if I’d been speaking. He was uninhibited, glorious and in love with his element. Rust was the rain and the sky and the storm clouds above our heads.

“Rust,” I said uneasily, taking another step toward him. The harsh rain was beating against the side of my face, forcing my eyelids to flicker. “What are you doing out here? You’re going to be struck by lightning.”

“Ance.” When he said my name, it sounded like a secret, something spoken in hushed hymns from an ancient book about dreams. His eyes bore into my own when he said, “I already have been.”

I closed the space between us. My fingers easily slipped into his hair to keep me rooted to the earth. And then I kissed him, and suddenly the world was clear.

Rust kissed like the ocean kisses the sands on the shore of a beach when the tide comes in. His soft lips opened easily, pressing against my own coyly. He shivered when I pressed my tongue into his mouth, and I thought just then I might liquefy.

One of my hands left his hair and trailed down to rest on his lower back and pull him closer. His small palms pressed flat against my chest, squished tightly between the space of our two bodies.

Rust tasted like sweet cherry ice cream and rain water. He said my name in between breaths, and I knew each time our lips touched again, that breathing was a waste of air.

My head was screaming. My heart was pounding. I’d never felt more alive.

A loud bang shocked us both apart. We looked to the north and saw lightning touch down against the ground. When we looked back at each other, I

knew something fundamental had changed inside me. Something big—something unfixable.

I wrapped my arms around him and gently kissed his forehead.

“Go home, Rust,” I said. “It’s not safe out here.”

Rust pulled away and smiled at me in that pure way I knew no one else would ever smile at me. He turned and ran toward his back gate. I watched to make sure he latched it and went into his yard.

Rust wasn’t safe out here.

I looked down at the bleeding, scraped knuckles of my scarred hands.

But it wasn’t because of the lightning.

Rust

Every night for two weeks following that evening, I took my sleeping bag, tarp, and pillow, and slept out in the field between our two houses.

The morning after Ancel had kissed me, I awoke to find No lifeless, lying at the bottom of his cage. His smooth, black feathers hadn’t felt the calming embrace of the wind in the sky since the day I’d found him under the tree.

The evening after Ancel had kissed me, the wind didn’t blow through the grass in the field, and the birds didn’t sing a single song. The sky above didn’t have a cloud to its name, and the sun hung a little lower in the auburn and rose sunset.

Ancel had left me too.

During

Rust

“It’s... powerful.”

“It doesn’t feel right,” I replied.

“Nothing ever feels right to you.” I could hear the gentle humor in his voice.

“Oh,” I said as I turned in my seat to look up at him. “I wouldn’t say that.”

A wide grin spread across his handsome face. Seth was standing behind my chair, hands in his trouser pockets, eyes gleaming brightly. He had light-blond hair that was always parted perfectly off to the side, and he wore a pair of thick, black-framed glasses that probably cost more than our tuition had for the past four years of art college.

Seth put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed. “Drinks tonight?”

“I can’t. I’m meeting up with Beth. Our last *hoorah* in the city before I head back to Heaven on Sunday.”

Seth frowned. “I can’t believe you’re going back to that town. You’re so much bigger than some little hamlet with one traffic light.”

I smiled sadly. “You know Heaven is my home. My parents are there. I belong there.”

“Then skip out on Beth tonight and spend the evening with me.” His fingers tickled the side of my neck. “It could be the last night we have together.”

Seth loved to romanticize everything. He was also a melodramatic solipsist who thrived on his own words and ideas. Everything was a piece of art to Seth. It was what first drew me to him. He saw the beauty in everything, and the tragedy along with it.

He visibly cringed. “You know how I feel about her, Rust. No tact.”

Seth and Beth didn’t get along, to say the least. Seth thought Beth was uncultured, and Beth thought Seth was stuck up. I liked Seth. I’d been drawn in by his powerful words and easy smile, but that’s all we were—smiles and talk. No one was free from his charms, and he used that to his advantage. Seth flirted—and slept—his way to the top, not that it mattered to me. From the first day I’d been in one of the art rooms working on a sculpture and he walked by

and told me my hair was like flames licking my skin, he'd tried to press for more.

And even though I liked to flirt back with Seth and bask in all his charms, we just remained friends.

"Call me the next time you're in town then, all right? We can go for coffee. I promise that I won't try to lure you into my bed." He said it with his eyebrow cocked.

I laughed. "A promise?"

"Well," he countered. "Promise is a strong word. I retract it. My apologies."

Standing up from my chair to face him, I said, "I'll call you the next time I'm in town."

He took my hand into his, brought it to his lips, and gently kissed my fingers. "Good-bye, Rust."

Seth left with his bag slung over his shoulder. I sat back down on my little wooden stool and looked at my final school project—the one I'd been working on for months, and still didn't feel was complete.

It was an installation piece—a large, circular hoop that was wrapped with natural, brown pieces of leather. In the center, I'd corded a web with light blue string, and on each thread hung feathers, gems, stones, a few twigs, and bones. When the art teacher first looked at it, he thought it was a dream catcher. I didn't like that word: dream catcher. Why would I want to catch dreams? Dreams should be free to wander and explore, learning where they belong and to whom. I'd never want to hold something so precious in my hands.

But, the longer I looked at it, the more I saw that it did look like a dream catcher. And yet it never looked complete.

I stood up and went over to it, ran my fingers against the soft crow feathers I'd laced into the intricate pattern. Sighing, I grabbed my things, slipped on my jacket, made sure my name was on the project, and left the art studio. There was nothing else I could do at this point, so I might as well leave the project unfinished, and wait for my final grade. Even if I had a hundred years to work on it, I didn't think it would ever be finished.

I made my way out of the large art campus and out onto the street. The walk back to my apartment was rich with tall, industrial buildings made of metal taller than the clouds themselves. Roads ran along every block, inside and out,

giving opportunity for garbage to collect in their gutters. And street lights along every path, disturbing the glow of the stars, even during the darkest evenings.

I hated the city.

Everything was big and cold. I missed feeling the grass between my fingers, breathing fresh air, and seeing the stars at night. I missed the clouds in the sky, the vastness of looking far into fields and seeing absolutely nothing in the distance but the yellow ears of wheat. The city felt like a foreigner to me that never warmed up to my gentle touches. It was unrelenting and impersonal, even in all its stark beauty. I wasn't at home here. I wanted to go home.

My cell phone rang in my jacket pocket. I pressed it to my ear and said, "Hello, Mom."

"Hello, Rust," she replied. "How are you, sweetie?"

"Homesick," I answered honestly. "I don't like it here."

My mom chuckled. "I know. You get like that every time you go back to school after your summers at home. I don't think you're made for the city."

"No. I'm definitely not made for the city. How's Dad?"

My dad had a heart attack last year, and I worried about him every day. At one point, my mom had told me to stop calling and to focus on my schoolwork because calling her twice a day was driving her up the wall. I'd laughed, but still called every day or two.

The doctors didn't know why my father had had a heart attack—he was relatively young, healthy, and kept active.

"Sometimes, these things just happen," the doctor had said. "It's a sad reality. Keep those you love close to you."

"He's doing fine," my mom replied. "Much better now that he hired someone else to take over the shop part-time so he doesn't have to work as much."

"Mom, he doesn't think that once I come home that I'll—"

"Rust, you stop talking like that right now. Your father and I love and support all the decisions you make, including moving to the city to study art and teaching. He doesn't expect, or want you to give up your dreams just to keep some silly family business in the family."

The knot in my chest eased significantly. "I just want to make him proud."

“I know, Rust. Now, enough about this. When are you coming home?”

“I’ll be boarding the train tomorrow afternoon, and should arrive back in Heaven in the evening. Are you still coming to pick me up from the train station?”

“Of course. We’ll both be there with bells on.”

We said our good-byes, and just as I was about to pocket my phone, it rang again.

“Hello?”

“Rust, listen, there’s a party tonight, and we absolutely must go,” Beth said on the other end of the line.

I chuckled. “And why’s that?”

“Everyone’s going to be there, including that guy I like, Derek. It’ll be our last big, fun thing in the city before Heaven sucks you back into that black abyss.”

“You know how I feel about parties.”

“Honestly, Rust, it’s Saturday night. What else do you want to do? Go to the nature museum—again?”

I sighed heavily and looked at the time on my phone. “What time?”

“I’ll text you the address. Meet there in an hour?”

“Okay. See you there.”

I walked the remaining few blocks in silence. My apartment wasn’t in the nicest or most expensive area of town. In fact, it was small, cramped, and in one of the noisiest places I’d ever slept. But there wasn’t a lot I could afford on an artist’s salary.

I unlocked the gate to the complex, walked through the front door, up two flights of stairs, and down the long, dim hallway to my apartment. The lights flickered sometimes, and there was only one window against the far wall, allowing almost no natural lighting. Even in the hallway, I could hear other people’s television sets, and other people yelling at one another through the cardboard-thin walls.

Unlocking my front door, I slipped inside and dropped my heavy bag full of books and art supplies onto the puce carpet floor. I went to my closet and

stripped off my old, paint-covered T-shirt and jeans, and put on a loose pale-yellow V-neck, along with a clean pair of black jeans. When I went into the bathroom to check on my hair, I paused for a moment to look at my reflection.

Over the years, some of my freckles had faded. Where there had once been dark starbursts of freckles across my face now was smooth, pale skin. I pushed my hair back off my forehead. Beth told me to get some new kind of hip haircut where the front was longer than the sides and the back, but I often ended up pinning it back with gold-plated barrettes to keep it out of my face. Palming the necklace my mother had given me years ago, I examined it for a few moments before slipping it over my head.

My phone, next to me on the sink, beeped with the address of the party, and I had just enough time to slick some blue eye shadow onto my lids before leaving.

The air outside was cool, and I was thankful that I'd worn a jacket. I knew it was only in my mind, but it always felt colder in the city than it did in Heaven. I felt like an intruder in a city that was trying to force me out. Even the city knew I didn't belong here, that I was an unfamiliar something, and I needed to leave.

Just one more night, I thought as I climbed into the back of a cab and gave the driver the address of the party. We weaved through traffic in silence, listening to the soft, flowing music on the radio. The lights shone in through all the car windows, casting beautiful colors against the seat in front of me.

After thirty minutes, the cab driver pulled the car off to the side of the road and announced I was at my destination. I handed him some money, thanked him, and walked up to the front of the building.

The apartment building was far from mine, and in a much nicer, and more expensive area. Huge brick walls made up the outside of the building, while large, unmarked glass windows lined up row after row on every story.

I went to the front door and was buzzed inside.

When I made it to the top floor, I could already hear the sounds of the party in full throttle. I walked down the hallway in between beautiful, well-dressed strangers. They were drinking from red plastic cups and trying to yell to hear one another over the loud thumping of the bass coming from inside the apartment. The front door was open, so I let myself in, hoping to find Beth immediately, but being sorely disappointed by the enormous crowd of people.

The music was loud and sounded posh; some girls were dancing in one empty corner of the apartment with beer bottles in their hands. The inside was much like the outside—brick walls; high, exposed ceilings; and dark wood floors.

I stood in the doorway unsure of what to do with myself.

“Hey!” someone yelled in my ear. “You made it!”

Beth grabbed my hand and dragged me through a hallway with glass windows into another section of the apartment where the music wasn’t as loud, but the crowd was still as thick.

“Here,” she said as she shoved a beer into my hand. “Drink this. You’ll have more fun.”

“Somehow, I doubt that,” I replied with a smile on my face.

And I hadn’t been wrong. Within an hour and a half, even more people packed into the vast apartment, and I wanted to leave. Beth had made me promise to stay for an entire two hours before throwing in the towel. I took another sip of my warm beer from where I was perched sitting on the corner of a granite countertop island in the kitchen. People around me were leaning against the counter, kissing, talking, making new drinks and doing shots of neon liquor. Beth was at the far end talking to the boy she liked. I was happy I stayed when I looked at the size of the smile on her face. She looked so happy, and I knew my small discomfort was more than worth being her moral support for the evening.

“Do you dye your hair?” the incredibly drunk girl next to me asked while she swayed on her heels.

Trying not to laugh, I replied, “No.”

“Well that’s just not fair,” she slurred.

I raised my eyebrows. “Maybe not for you.”

For some reason, she found this hysterical, and within a moment, I was laughing along with her for no reason at all.

After a few moments, she stumbled away, and I was left looking out into the crowded room once more. I went to take another sip of my beer, but when the smooth glass of the bottle was almost to my lips, I paused.

No, I thought. It couldn’t be him.

But my heart knew it was.

Across the wide room, surrounded by men and women on either side of him, was Ancel.

I almost hadn't recognized him, given the time that had passed since I'd watched the heavy drops of rain catch on his eyelashes and run down his cheeks. It had been almost six long years, and each one of those was represented by the changes I saw in him.

He was taller, thicker across his already wide shoulders, the muscles in his chest and arms easily noticeable by the tight T-shirt he wore. His inky-black hair was the same color as the tattooed pictures that spiraled around his tanned arms.

The years had changed his face, turning his sweet, young features and making them into something much more handsome. Still, the persistent scowl he wore looked familiar.

Ancel looked so different, yet so much the same.

He looked... *bad*.

And I'd never wanted anyone more.

But he didn't see me.

Of course he didn't see me. Why would he? He probably didn't even remember the spirited, red-haired boy from Heaven. Ancel was surrounded by people magnitudes more beautiful than I. Men and women leaned into him, touched his arms, his back, all wanting his attention. The years had done nothing to douse his allure. He was simply magnetic.

When he did look my way, I thought my heart might stop. It was just a quick glance through the sea of people, an easy flicker of his eyes over toward where I was. But then his eyes caught on mine, and I was hooked.

In the next second, Ancel was weaving himself through the crowd. He was coming to me.

He stopped in front of where I was sitting on the cool countertop. His voice sounded husky when he leaned in and whispered in my ear, "Little fawn, where have you been?"

I tried not to let my blush give too much away. The corner of his mouth twitched.

"Hello," he said.

“Hi,” I replied.

“No crown of antlers today?”

I smiled down at my hands in my lap. “No.”

When I looked back up, his eyes were searching my face.

“Only blue makeup around your eyes and feathers in your hair,” he said.

“Yes,” I breathed.

For a moment, I thought he was going to smile. But that moment was fleeting. Instead, he asked me, “How’s No?”

My smile threatened to slip away. “Crows don’t live very long.”

“He seemed like a nice crow,” Ancel replied sincerely.

I tossed my head back and laughed. “Oh? And you know a lot of crows to compare him to?”

When Ancel did smile, it was breathtaking.

“My personal experience with crows has been very limited, I’m afraid. Exclusively No.”

“Well, you’re lucky then,” I joked. “He was a lovely crow.”

“What are you doing here in the city?” he asked me.

“I’ve been here at college for the past four years. Studying art and education. And you?”

“I just moved here for business.”

“Business?” I raised an eyebrow.

He smirked. “Yes. Business.”

“What kind of business?”

He leaned forward and placed his hand on the counter next to mine. I could smell his cologne. He didn’t say a word.

“I’m leaving tomorrow,” I said. “Going back home. To Heaven.”

“Back to Heaven,” he repeated. “That’s where you belong, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” I’d never admitted something truer.

Someone walked by us, accidentally bumping Ancel closer toward me. Ancel looked over his shoulder, but didn’t put the small distance back between

us. I was easily distracted by the smell of his aftershave, and the way his Adam's apple bobbed in his throat when he swallowed. My eyes followed his throat downward to his wide shoulders, then to the beautifully illustrated tattoos that wrapped around his arms.

"Hey," I said as I leaned closer and ran my fingertips along his skin. "You have a tattoo of a crow with a broken wing."

Ancel didn't reply. He just reached out and carefully touched one of the pastel feathers I had woven into my hair.

When I looked up at him, his eyes were clouded as he stared vacantly at the feather.

Not reason, nor common sense, nor fear could've stopped me just then; I tilted my head up and kissed him.

And oh, it felt like fireworks were going off in my heart. It felt the same as before but so much bigger, so much better, so much closer to being a reality instead of a memory. He tasted like orange soda and cigarettes. Whether it was because of shock, or instinct, or something else entirely, for just a moment, he kissed me back.

And in the next moment, he tore away.

Some of his friends behind him were laughing, some others staring at us and swearing.

"What the hell are you doing?" Ancel yelled at me.

I froze solid. I thought my chest was going to cave in when I looked up into his face. Horror rippled through my body as the pangs of humiliation began to set in.

Without thinking, I slid off the counter and headed for the door. The people who'd been standing around watching all parted ways and then immediately went back to what they'd been doing before. I made it through the front door of the apartment when Ancel snapped my name and grabbed my arm. I yanked my arm away from him without even looking back. I thought of the way the other boys at school used to call my name, grab me, shove me into the pavement, or against the school lockers. But Ancel wasn't like that. At least, he never used to be. But I knew if the years had changed him into that kind of person, my heart couldn't take it.

So I ignored him when he called my name, and ran toward the elevator. I slipped in between the doors and rapidly pressed the close doors button on all

the people in the hallway watching me. Just as the doors were almost closed, Ancel came blundering down the hallway.

“Rust!” he called out as he sprinted toward me. He stopped just outside the elevator doors.

I self-consciously brushed my hair back off my face and willed all the pooled-up tears in my eyes not to spill.

“I’m sorry, Ancel,” I said softly as I pressed the elevator button to take me to the ground floor. “You’re all I’ve ever wanted. And I was hoping you felt it too.”

The doors closed between us. I heard him shout something and slam his fist against the metal.

By the time I was outside, I was cursing the sky itself. I’d been such an idiot to think someone like me could even stand next to a man like Ancel. I took a deep breath and looked up into the sky as I walked.

I missed Heaven.

I missed the field behind my house, the owls that nested in the tall grass, the birds that lived in the trees, the pathways of dirt I’d walked along my entire life. I longed for the loving touch of the summer sun against my cheeks, the autumn breeze whipping at my hair, the spring songs the robins sang, and the frosty flakes of ice on pinecones in the winter. There was no other place on the entire planet that was more peaceful than the field behind my house—no other place that welcomed me with a full, caring embrace the way it did.

I remembered taking a kite my father gifted me out into the field. Once I’d seen the lovely pink and green material, my hands began to shake with excitement. No, who was sitting on my shoulder, began squawking, and I could tell that he was jealous. So one particularly windy spring day, I’d gone out into the field behind my house, No perched on my shoulder, and flown a kite. And since No had looked upon the newest love of my life so jealously, I’d taken his feathers that he’d shed over the years and tied them into the long string that attached the kite to the spool. Hours had ticked by, but No and I barely noticed. We were both too in love with the wind and the sky and the clouds.

Before I knew it, I was standing in front of my apartment building. I’d walked the entire way home and hadn’t even noticed.

I took the stairs up to my apartment slowly, head hanging low. I probably looked like a defeated man, because I was just that. Stopping in front of my apartment door, I fumbled with the keys before sliding them into the lock.

“Rust!”

Startled and off-balance, I quickly spun around.

Ancel was standing a few feet away from me, breathing heavily, looking wild.

“Ancel,” I said softly as he came closer.

“It struck me too, Rust.”

“What did?” I asked, my voice unsteady.

“Lightning.”

And then he shoved me against my apartment door, jangling the keys still hanging from the lock, and kissed me.

This time when Ancel kissed me, it wasn’t sweet and unsure like our first kiss in the rain had been. It was bordering on uncontrolled. I let out a startled gasp, and he used that as an excuse to slide his tongue into my mouth and lick the inside of my teeth.

He wrapped one of his thick arms around my waist to pull me in closer, the other running up to tangle in my hair. I put my hands on either side of his face, feeling the stubble under my palms. One of his knees went in between my legs as he pressed against me tightly to turn the door handle. The door swung open, but Ancel wouldn’t—or couldn’t—let me go. I stumbled in backward with Ancel’s lips against my throat. My eyes were closed, but I heard him kick the door closed behind us as he pushed me inside my dark apartment and down the hall.

I was thankful, just then, that my apartment was as small as it was, because Ancel navigated me directly to my bedroom without having to ask where it was.

The lights were off—just the gentle glow from the streetlights and billboards outside lit the room with a blanket of colors. Sounds from televisions in other apartments buzzed through the walls, as well as the far-off traffic noise from the outside world.

Ancel laid me down gently on my bed, following along with me. He propped himself up on his arms, again pressing his knee up in between my legs. I knew he could feel how much his body was affecting me, and that alone brought a warm heat to my face and chest.

He leaned down to kiss me again, slower now, taking his time. One of his hands ran up my side and slipped under my shirt to rub along my flank. Just the feel of his rough, calloused hands against my bare skin was enough to make me ache.

“Please,” I whispered, although I was unsure what I was asking for.

Please, what? Please touch me more? Please don't stop kissing me? Please never leave me again?

I had no idea what I was asking for, but judging by the way Ancel's hands were suddenly pulling up the hem of my shirt, he seemed to understand. He pulled off my shirt and tossed it to the side. Within the next second, he pulled his T-shirt up over his head and tossed it off the bed as well.

Ancel's entire chest was a collage of tattoos. Each one had been done with black ink and precise, careful detail. I sat up so we were inches apart. Gently, I reached out and ran the tips of my fingers against a black illustration of a wolf that lingered along the side of his body. Under my touch, I felt him shiver. Unable to stop myself, I leaned forward and pressed my lips to an illustration of a flock of birds in a dark, night sky that ran up the side of his muscled stomach.

“Rust.” He said my name with a hitch in his breath.

When my eyes flickered up, he was already looking down at me, lips parted, breathing heavily. I continued my trail of kisses up from his stomach, grazing over one of his nipples, to his collarbone, then slowly up his neck. By the time I made it to the soft skin behind his ear, his grip on my hips was bruising.

Without warning, he shoved me back down onto the bed. He hovered over me and whispered in my ear. “Please, Rust, say I can touch you. Say it's all right that I touch you.”

“Of course...” My voice trailed off when he began touching me through the material of my jeans.

“Will you say the words, Rust?”

It took my mind a moment to catch up with my body. “Yes. Touch me, Ancel.”

He didn't need any more coaxing. The buttons were soon snapped open, and then he was pulling my jeans down and off my legs, along with my briefs.

Up on his knees, he looked down at my naked body. I momentarily wondered if he could see the red-hot flush that was covering my skin.

“God,” he said, putting his hand on my chest and trailing down my body. “Look at all these freckles.”

I covered my face with my hands, and he chuckled. He took my wrists in his hands and pinned them over my head when he leaned in to press his lips to mine.

“You’re beautiful,” Ancel said.

Pulling my hands out of his grip, I reached down in between us and undid the button of his jeans. When he didn’t pull away from me, I slid my hand past the waistband of his pants and underwear. He was hot in my palm and groaned into my ear the moment my thumb began to move in circles. His eyes were heavy and his cheeks were pink as he stared down at me.

He moved back off the bed, and began shedding his pants and underwear. I couldn’t help but watch, trying not to let my breath hitch when I finally saw him peel his underwear off, along with his socks. He was beautiful—perfect—sculpted from marble or iron or gold. The most wonderful things in life held no flame near him. His body showed signs of the hardships of his past: raised, smooth marks—red, angry gashes, even through his tattoos. But each scar on him was right where it was meant to be. He was perfect.

Ancel grabbed a square, reflective packet and held it in his hand as he crawled back on top of me.

“Roll over, little fawn.” He began tonguing my navel, and if he would’ve asked me my own name just then, I wouldn’t have known it.

He chuckled when I failed to do anything but squirm. Carefully, he eased me over onto my stomach. I felt the weight of him press heavily between my cheeks.

When Ancel ran his tongue up the back of my neck, he asked, “Do you have anything?”

“Oh,” I moaned into the pillow as I squeezed my eyes shut. Ancel reached around me and, painfully slowly, began jerking me off.

“Rust,” he said again, playfully biting my shoulder.

“Wh-what?” I managed to get out in between gasps.

“Do you have any lube, sweetheart?” Ancel buried his nose in my hair. His entire body pressed against mine, waiting.

My heart sank.

“N-no,” I answered. “I don’t. I’ve never—I mean, I haven’t...”

Ancel’s entire body froze. Then, seconds later, he pressed his forehead in between my shoulder blades and made a noise close to a growl.

“*Fuck, Rust.*”

I couldn’t think. I was horrified that he might stop touching me, that all of this had been in vain, that I’d never once feel closer to him than I did now.

Just as I was about to turn over, one of his hands pressed down on my lower back, while a slick finger from his other hand pressed inside me.

I yelped at the feeling of the cold, foreign sensation.

“Shhh,” he whispered into my ear. “I found lotion. I’ll be gentle, and slow. You deserve nothing less.”

I fisted the bed sheets under me, trying not to float up off the bed and into the stars when he slid another finger inside me. He was painfully gentle, careful almost to the point of annoyance. I didn’t know what I wanted, but I knew it was something more than the slow in and out, in and out he was giving me.

By the time I was finally ready to roll over and demand he tell me just what he was trying to accomplish at this pace, his fingers withdrew. My breath hitched when I heard the ripping of the foil packet and then felt him slowly beginning to push inside of me.

I yelped into the pillow. Ancel leaned down and whispered things in my ear that I knew he didn’t really mean. He told me I was beautiful, special, and that he’d been waiting his whole life just to touch me. My mind didn’t believe him, but my heart knew nothing different. It swelled at his words, preening and sure.

He shifted his weight above me, and with one final push, he was fully inside. I’d never felt more complete in my life. And then he began moving, and I forgot all about Heaven and the field back home.

Flecks of sweat from his body dripped onto my back as he slowly rocked into me. He pressed his forehead against the back of my neck and told me things I didn’t understand. One of his hands went to my hip, pulling me up a little closer to him. The other hand carried on its sweet torture as he jerked me off.

I began panting heavily, feeling him bringing me closer and closer to the edge. Then, Ancel moved his hips in just this certain way that caused something deep inside me to ignite.

“Ancel,” I whimpered.

“I know, I know,” he chanted. He kissed the back of my neck, causing all the fine hairs to stand up.

Just as I was about to fall over the edge, I began to beg him. “Please don’t leave me again. Please don’t go.”

I knew it was pathetic. I knew how desperate and needy my voice sounded. I didn’t care. Those words, that request, they were all I had. I had nothing left to lose—nothing besides him—not that he’d even been mine at all. If it made me a lesser man to beg for him, then I would be a lesser man.

My orgasm washed over me like that first wave of ocean water hitting your chest as you waded into the expansive blue depths of Mother Nature. It was soothing—calming—but forceful, rocking me backward, pushing me, making me feel so damn human.

I cried out, saying something that didn’t even sound like words. Ancel wrapped his arm snugly around my stomach and held me steadily. He pressed against me like maybe he’d decided to answer my prayers after all, like he’d never once even fathomed letting me go.

His body shook, and he said my name just once before I felt all the tension leave him in one fast rush.

I collapsed onto the bed beneath him, but instead of following me down, he pulled off. Listening to the sound of his footsteps carry down the hallway, I waited, my heart racing, for him to come back to me.

When he returned, he lay down on the bed to my side. I turned over to face him. His hands were behind his head, his eyes pointed up at the yellow stucco ceiling and the wood-paneled fan.

After a few moments, I whispered, “Is it always like that?”

He turned his head slightly to look down at me. The expression on his face grew dark as his cool eyes pierced mine. Trouble, hurt, pain was all his face spoke of. He looked like a man who’d just been sentenced twenty-five to life.

After a moment, he turned away and stared back up at the ceiling fan. “No. It’s not.”

He was sullen now. All trace of the passionate, gentle man he’d been just moments before was completely stolen away by my question.

“Have I done something wrong?” I asked quietly. I stared at a tattoo of a deer on the back of his arm.

Ancel pressed the heels of his hands into his closed eyelids. I moved to get off the bed, but he immediately reached out and grabbed me.

“No, Rust.” His eyes showed no flicker of untruth. “It could never be you. Nothing about you could ever be wrong.”

He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me back so I was sitting on top of him. The fake, charming smile I’d seen him use before threatened to make an appearance. Instead, a rare, breathtaking smile made its own debut.

It was only then as I looked down at him that I noticed it. I frowned, unsure how I hadn’t seen it earlier.

I reached out, slowly, as though I were afraid it was a figment of my imagination and it would disappear in a puff of smoke. But when I touched it, it felt just as solid, just as real as the day I’d made it.

I ran my fingers along the chipped paint on the teeth that had worn duller with age. The feather was ragged, the strip of leather thin. But of course none of that mattered. It was the necklace I’d made for him when we were just boys. I’d have known it anywhere, because even though I’d been just a child, I’d put a piece of my soul into it.

Wrapping my fingers around it tightly, I met his eyes. He was unblinking. His Adam’s apple bobbed in his throat.

“You’ve kept it all these years?” I had to ask. Ancel moved his hand to trace my collarbone with his thumb.

“You know, Rust,” he said evenly, his fingers brushing against my skin. “I don’t think I’ve seen the sun in years. Or the sky. I haven’t felt the wind blow through my hair, or the rain tickle my skin.”

I clenched the necklace even more tightly in the palm of my hand, the jagged edges digging into my skin.

Ancel looked up at me again. “I’ve forgotten what it feels like—all of it. Summer, winter, snow, rain, wind, fresh air, thunderstorms. I miss the sun, Rust. I miss it so damn much. Show me again what it feels like.”

I spent the rest of the night showing him.

When I awoke the next morning with my hand pressed against the cool sheets on the other side of my bed, I knew Ancel had already left. I lay in

silence, blinking rapidly into the vacant space next to me, willing my heart not to break.

He was gone.

The morning light was streaming through my plain, white curtains and seeping onto everything in my room. The shadows it cast along the sheets did little but remind me of the absence of the man who'd spent the evening with his arms wrapped around me as he whispered into my hair. Everything in the daylight looked different now—strange and unfamiliar. I stood up and glanced around my bland, lifeless room, my eyes eventually catching on a piece of paper placed on my desk that had been torn from my notebook next to it.

I went to it, I picked it up, and I read it.

Rust,

Heaven isn't enough.

Ancel

I spent the remainder of the morning packing the last few bags of things I was bringing home with me. Most of the furnishings in the apartment were packed, but the few things that were too big for me to take home with me, I'd already sent months prior. Slinging my bag over my shoulders, I took one last look around my apartment. The walls looked even more strained now than they ever had before, and the noises I could hear through the paper-thin walls were louder than ever. I'd never had an emotional attachment to this place, and had only a handful of happy memories while living there. I wouldn't miss the city, or any of its buildings, pollution, or busyness. I was ready to shut the door on one chapter of my life and begin the next.

I was ready to go home.

I locked the door behind me, dropping the keys off in the landlord's mailbox on my way down the staircase.

The walk to the train station was uneventful. My mind wandered, not to what it naturally wanted to wander toward, but of home. I thought of the field I missed so badly, my parents, walking down the main street and smelling all the new, freshly potted flowers.

Heaven was the warm embrace I needed just then, the reminder of the things in my life that had blessed me.

Without talking to anyone, and keeping my head down, I purchased my train ticket, boarded, and sat on one of the vacant seats next to a window. I watched people waving good-bye to their loved ones on the landing, smiles on their faces.

When the train began to pull forward, I brought my legs into my chest and wrapped my arms around my knees. Pressing my forehead against my knees, I took a deep, barely controlled breath, and thought of Ancel.

I thought of the way his eyes became dull when I asked him if he'd been with other men, and he told me no. He'd looked stricken by the question, hurt even. It had taken him out of my bedroom and pulled him someplace dark, and far, far away. When I looked at him, I could see the demons he battled every day—he wore them on his skin as noticeably as I wore my heart on my sleeve.

I thought of how his father had yelled at him, hit him when we were younger. Now that I was older, I knew those awful words he'd said to Ancel had turned into scars that were still as fresh as the day they'd first been inflicted upon him.

Ancel would never look at me the way I looked at him. But it wasn't because he couldn't, it was because he'd never let himself.

And then I started to cry.

I cried for most of the train ride home, while we passed by meadows of nothingness but grass and wheat, and in the distance, trees flickered by.

I didn't cry for what Ancel had done. I knew he'd leave because he was never mine to keep. He'd never promised me forever, even though I'd begged him for it when I was at my weakest.

I cried because even though he'd broken my heart three times, it still belonged to him.

After

Rust

“We’re out of purple paint, Mr. Paige.”

I crouched down next to Bobby, one of my younger students. He had a paintbrush held in his hand like someone would hold a shovel, and yellow paint all over his face and shirt.

“Do you want to know something neat, Bobby?” I asked him.

“Always,” Bobby replied.

Smiling, I took a paintbrush from Bobby’s little plastic cup of brushes. I reached over onto the palette he was using and began swirling the red and blue paints together.

“If you mix red and blue paint together, you get purple paint,” I explained.

“No way,” Bobby said, mesmerized, watching the colors mix together.

“Pretty cool, huh?”

“Duh. It’s the coolest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“What are you painting a picture of?” I asked as I looked down at the blobs of paint on Bobby’s piece of paper. “Is that a dog?”

“Yep, that’s my dog, Mitsy. And my mom and my dad, and me, of course.”

“And you’re all purple.”

“Yes. Purple is the best color, you know.”

“I had no idea. Thanks for letting me know.”

“You’re welcome. I can teach you stuff, too. You’re lucky I’m here.”

A bubble of laughter burst into the air. “Boy, am I ever.”

I stood and began making my rounds through the small classroom. It wasn’t much, but it was familiar to me now. The paintings on the walls that had accrued over the years, the old cabinets at the back with art supplies, the red polka-dot carpet littered with bright blue dots. They’d all become familiar to me.

A year or so after moving back to Heaven concluding college, a position had opened up in the local elementary school for a creative arts teacher, and I’d

leapt at the opportunity. Since then, teaching was the only thing I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

The bell rang. Students began running around the room, yelling that it was home time, heading for their cubbyholes on the left side of the classroom. Parents showed up and picked up their kids, some chatting with me about their children and how they were behaving in class.

When all the children were gone, and the room filled with silence, I shut off all the lights in the classroom, and locked the door behind me. Other teachers waved good night to me as I left for the evening.

I decided to go visit my parents to see if they needed any help around the yard now that spring was fully upon us, and my dad couldn't quite do all the physical things that he used to.

It was warm outside, pleasant, without the humidity that often came along with the heat. The air was fresh and there was just a dusting of the smell of spring flowers in the calm breeze.

I barely noticed the people around me, as I leisurely made my way to my parents' house. My mom said this was a usual occurrence for me. She claimed that I never noticed anyone around me so long as I was outside. The sunlight engulfed me, as did the clouds, the cool breeze, the drizzle of rain.

I spent the walk admiring the lovely green grass of the lawns, and the baby birds chirping in the trees.

"Rust!" my mom called to me from across the street. She and my dad were sitting out front on their porch. She stood up and waved frantically, acting as though I hadn't seen her just two days prior. Still, it brought a small smile to my face.

I crossed the street and walked up the concrete path to the front porch.

"I'm just stopping by to see if you two need help doing anything around the yard. It's a beautiful day. We could do some gardening," I said.

"Absolutely not," my dad protested, good humor written all over his face. "Come have a beer with your old man. Sit, stew, revel in the light of the world, Rust."

I chuckled. "Or we could be productive and do some gardening."

"Bah." He flipped his hand in the air. "That's for another time, another day."

I accepted the bottle of beer my mom handed to me from the cooler next to the wooden bench. Taking a seat on one of the chairs facing them, I looked at my mom and dad and felt a swell of happiness. They were more content now than they'd ever been in their lives. My dad still owned the butcher shop, but he'd finally taken my mom's advice and slowed down. He hired a manager for the shop, the son of one of his best friends, and he was running things wonderfully. My dad, in fact, was planning on selling the butcher shop to him within the next few years. My mother was happier because she had more time to spend with my father who lived his days like the semi-retired man he was. I suspected that having me living so close by also had something to do with the constant smiles on their faces.

"So, Son," my dad began. "Bringing anyone to the family BBQ we're having next weekend?"

My smile fell.

My mom rushed to say, "Not that we're pressuring you or anything, Rust. We just want you to be happy. You're such a smart, handsome man."

Age had barely changed me. I still had freckles covering my face, even if they were lighter than they'd been in my youth. My fire-red hair was bright as ever, if a little longer now than I'd worn in it in my college days.

My slight frame hadn't filled out even now that I was on the brink of turning thirty.

"No," I replied. "There isn't anyone I'll be bringing."

"What about that nice man you were seeing a few weeks ago? From the next town over? I thought you two had so much in common because you were both teachers and love children," my mom replied.

"It just wasn't there, Mom."

My dad nodded as if he knew just what I was talking about. "That spark."

I looked up at him. "I'm not looking for a spark, Dad. I'm waiting for a lightning strike."

My parents shared a look.

I looked down at the rim of the beer bottle in my hands. "I know. I'm living with a ghost—a ghost that was never mine to begin with."

My mom spoke softly when she said, "Maybe it's time to go through the field, Rust."

Since the day I'd moved back to Heaven after college, not once had I visited the field behind my parents' house that used to bring me such solace. I'd stood at its edge and looked at it like it was a dark, endlessly deep sea that would swallow me whole if I took even one step out into it. It would rage against me, pulling me down into a dark place I couldn't recover from.

For years, I'd stayed away.

"I can't," I said quietly.

That field I'd loved so much represented everything that had broken my heart. It was where I'd first realized that I liked boys, where I'd written countless, pointless letters, where I'd had my first kiss, where I'd fallen in love, where my heart was first broken...

"We think it's time," my dad said, interrupting my thoughts. "It's a field, Rust. It's not him. And you can't avoid it forever. You live on the other side of it, and walk four blocks out of your way each time you visit us just to avoid it."

A year after beginning my teaching job at the elementary school, I'd purchased the house that Ancel and his dad had lived in. My parents thought it was one last way I could keep my invisible strings on him, and maybe it was, but it helped the aching in my heart subside. If only a little.

I sipped my beer in silence as I listened to the wind rustling the leaves on the trees.

I knew my parents were right. It was time to let him go.

The long walk through my parents' backyard seemed to last for years, an endless road with no horizon. They'd told me that they'd be home all evening in case I needed them. I knew I just might. I wasn't strong without them, no matter how hard I tried to be.

My hand shook as I reached for the rusted old latch on the back gate. Through the wood slats I could see the yellow, tawny stalks of wheat waving to me from in between the thin pillars of grass. They called to me like an old friend, like the sweet voice of a loved one saying your name after years of solitude. The top of the latch was harder to unlock now; years of rain and disuse had allowed it to grow old.

My hands shook. I wished I were stronger. But the second the gate swung open, I could finally breathe. I walked out into the field that I'd experienced some of the most vital parts of my life in. The grass was shorter now than I remembered, or more likely I was taller. But the sun shone even brighter than I

remembered, and the fresh smell of the air and the trees was even sweeter. I closed my eyes and held my arms out at my sides, slowly spinning, feeling like a young boy again. Nothing else mattered. I had the breeze and the sunlight and the soft grass brushing my ankles. There wasn't anything else in that moment.

I opened my eyes.

In the distance was the tree I'd found myself below so often as a child. It was where I wrote my first love letter, my first angry note to my parents... where I'd found No. My heart constricted at the thought of my beloved childhood friend, but still I couldn't stop my legs from pulling me toward that tree. I wondered if any of my old letters would still be stuffed into that hole near the trunk. A part of me hoped they were, but another was afraid I'd weep with the loss of the innocence of my youth.

I swallowed hard. The tree was not quite as I had remembered it. It had felt massively larger, impenetrable even, when I was young. Now it still stood as an immovable piece of nature, but without any of the luster and wonder that used to surround it. The branches hung low, feathered in an array of green and yellow pines that pulled down heavily. The bark was old and rotting in places, but the ground around the trunk was still covered in fallen pinecones and needles.

Uncaring of my pressed trousers, I sat down on the dirt around the base of the tree, and leaned back against the solid trunk. I stared up through the branches and looked at the slits of sunlight that found their way through the maze of branches.

I reached into the hole in the base of the tree to my right and felt around for any letters I might've left there over the years.

My hand stilled.

The tips of my fingers brushed the smooth, soft finish of paper. I knew that feeling better than I knew the feeling of my own skin. Tentatively, I withdrew my hand, taking out the large bundle of paper with me.

The stack of papers was huge. And not mine. I panicked, for a moment, wondering if I was imposing on someone else's letters. Had some other person come here throughout the years and hidden their secrets here as well? There were so many folded pieces of paper bundled together with an elastic band, that I knew from the first touch they weren't mine.

Just as I was about to put the letters back where I'd found them, something caught my eye.

Dear Rust...

It was my name, written clear as day. The ink was black and smudged, worn in places, leaving splotches of running black along the pen marks.

Furrowing my brow, I stared at the piece of paper that had my name on it.

Was it for me? Who'd written it? Could it have been my parents? Had they found my letters and decided to write me some of their own?

Unable to stop myself, I pulled the elastic band off the stack of papers. With unsettled hands, I picked up the one on top of the stack labeled to me, unfolded it, and began to read.

Dear Rust,

Your name is Rust. You told me that today. Who are you always writing letters to? You're always writing letters. I don't understand you. Sometimes I wish I did, though. Everyone else is so black and white. But you sing to the birds in the trees and talk to pinecones when you think no one else is around, and you dance and twirl and spin in the rain.

Who are you, Rust?

I wish I were allowed to find out.

Ancel

My hands shook. I couldn't breathe. I wanted to swallow, but my throat was too dry.

When had Ancel written me this? Years ago, when we were only boys? Why hadn't he been allowed to find out who he was?

The next letter on the stack was also addressed to me.

Rust,

Who are you writing letters to? I have to know, but I just can't ask. I wish you'd tell me. I wish you'd look at me at school. I know the other kids make fun of you—I don't care. I want to tell them to stop.

And another.

Rust,

Why do you wear feathers and flowers laced into your hair? My dad says it's not right for boys to wear flowers in their hair.

I think he must be wrong, because they look like the Earth sprung them from the ground just so you could wear them in your hair.

And another.

Rust,

My dad hit me today. He hits me most days. No one seems to notice—no one but you. You noticed today. You touched my arm, light as a feather, and god, Rust, it was nice to know that someone out there really sees me.

But dad wouldn't like you touching me. He says boys should never touch. I don't understand why, but I don't want to make him mad.

I should stay away from you.

And another.

Rust,

My dad packed us up in the middle of the night. He says that Heaven is too soft—not a good place for us. He says your mom said something to the cops about us—about me.

You gave me a necklace yesterday and made me promise to hold on to it. I'll hold on to it forever.

Ancel

Tears began streaming down my face. I wasn't a man just then, I was a child again—a young boy so hopelessly in love with someone who could never return the sentiment. I sat there all evening, even when the sun started to weigh heavily in the sky and the air grew cold.

I read about Ancel's dad and the things he would call him—the way his dad used *queer* like a curse word and how he'd beat Ancel black-and-blue whenever he said he didn't think there was anything wrong with boys liking other boys. I read about his dad dying in a car accident when he was driving home from the bar drunk. The last words from Ancel's father's mouth were that he wouldn't have a gay son. Ancel wrote about how, even after his dad beat him and shamed him for the person he was, Ancel still loved his dad—and hated himself for it.

I read about Ancel beating up the boys outside the ice cream shop when we were teenagers, and how angry he'd been when he watched what they'd said to me—what they'd done to me.

I read about what our first kiss together meant to Ancel. He'd called it the greatest gift, and the worst curse. He hated how he felt when he touched me, couldn't forgive himself for wanting another boy.

And I read about how he'd left me after the night we'd spent together, and how it was the hardest thing he'd ever done. He said he was still burning up inside when he touched me, but the voices in his head wouldn't stop screaming at him that it was wrong. His demons, he said, owned him, and he couldn't be with me while those demons were still there.

But the last letter held only a promise: that Ancel would come to me if ever those horrors in his mind faded. He promised me that not once had a day in his life gone by since the first time he'd seen the boy under the tree with the fire-red hair that he hadn't thought about me.

The letters seemed infinite, but I read each and every last one. I learned about Ancel, all the things I'd wondered throughout the years, all documented on letters addressed to me as though he'd known I'd been wishing for them my whole life. When I'd read each one through twice, and the time had turned to evening, I thought of the boy—the man—that I'd fallen in love with. Through the years I'd assumed my pain was worse because he'd left me, but now I knew that his darkness far outweighed mine.

I wrapped the elastic band around the letters and held them close to my aching chest. After standing, I brushed off the pine needles from my pants, and looked off into the distance.

My heart knew he'd been standing there on the horizon, but still it raced as I watched him slowly walk over to me. Time no longer affected the universe when Ancel stopped just a few short feet away. His hands were shoved into his jeans pockets, and his open leather jacket flapped gently in the breeze. He looked older now, with lines around his eyes that hadn't been there before. The stubble of hair on his face was thicker now, along with his arms, neck, chest...

Ancel's hair was still the tar-black color I remembered from all those years ago. But his eyes—those sharp, ice eyes—were clearer than ever.

"Hello, little fawn." Even his voice was deeper now.

I clutched the letters tightly against my chest. "Hello."

“You finally found them,” he said, tipping his head toward the letters in my hands.

“Finally?” I asked quietly.

“They’ve been there for almost a month, now. I’ve come by every day hoping to see you here.”

“How long have you been here?”

“As long as the letters.”

“Why didn’t you... come to me?” I struggled with my words.

Ancel tilted his head back toward the sky. “Because you hadn’t forgiven me yet. I knew that when you were ready, you’d come here, and find the letters. And I’d be waiting for you.”

“You broke my heart, Ancel,” I cried out, my voice shaking. I was afraid. Anger wasn’t an emotion I possessed, but the hurt I’d felt because of him over the years was the closest to it that I knew. “You turned it to dust.”

Ancel took a step toward me and reached out to take my hand. His eyes locked with mine, and I couldn’t have looked away even if I wanted to.

“I’m so damn sorry,” he said quietly. “I’ll never forgive myself for that.”

His hand on my own was warm and big. When he touched me, I felt safe. I felt whole.

“Is there someone in your life?” he asked.

“No,” I replied softly, wondering how there ever had been anyone in my life except for him. His eyes twinkled when he looked at me, and all I could think about was how beautiful he was.

But Ancel’s beauty had evolved to me with each letter of his I’d read. He’d shared parts of his heart and soul, spilled them out onto paper for me, and with each word I’d read, I’d fallen deeper and deeper.

“Would you let me try,” he asked, “to be that someone?”

Ancel closed the distance between us, wrapping his warm arms around me, pulling me tight against his chest. Nothing in the world was wrong. Everything was right.

“I thought heaven wasn’t enough,” I whispered into his chest, my cheek pressed against the warmth of his skin through his T-shirt.

“I don’t need a chance at heaven. I just need a chance with you.”

“You can’t leave me again, Ancel.”

“I couldn’t if I tried. I’ve slayed my demons. I’ve come to terms with who I am. I don’t... hate who I am anymore.” He squeezed me tighter. “Please. Just one more chance.”

I stepped back and looked up at him, willing the tears in my eyes not to spill over. Reaching out, I took his hand in mine, lacing our fingers together, and began walking through the field toward my back gate.

The gentle glow of the sunlight was just beginning to slide out of existence, casting long, deep shadows across the field. The grass and wheat danced for us, celebrated us, as we breathed in the sweet smell of lilac in the air. Birds sang in the distance, and the clouds that had once loomed overhead filtered through into the vast redness of the sky.

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s go home.”

The End

Author Bio

Nash Summers likes to write stories about broken boys who are trying to pick up the pieces of themselves.

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