In the blood
by LansdePlays

Summary

Nicole Haught accepts a bet and finds herself forced to find a new hobbie: play the guitar. Hopefully, it will take away some of her worries.

Classical guitarist Waverly Earp is about to make some important decisions and, meanwhile, she starts giving some guitar lessons.

Notes

Hey there. Is someone reading this?
Hi.
So, this is my first fic ever, and I'm not sure if its a good one. This idea has been cooking in my head for quite some time. I'm basically trying to write the story I wanted to read. But I have one little problem here: English is not my first language so i’m not sure if this even makes sense. I do not have a beta, so if someones is up for that job, please contact me at my tumblr (LasndePlays) or my twitter @SuperLansde, or just to say hi. (or hola).

excuse my mistakes, please, but please let me know if you find them.
Nicole climbs the stairs to the attic and turns on her phone's flashlight.

Last Christmas she’d been up here too looking for the Christmas ornaments and lights, waiting in their respective boxes, and an artificial tree that they had never used before because her mom kept insisting that the real ones were just simply better (they smell better had been her only excuse and to Nicole it was pretty valid). She was trying to locate the tree first, being easier to spot, but it had fallen behind another bunch of boxes, even older and dustier than the long box and she’d been forced to remove them from her way just to reach the stupid tree. She’d been little in the attic in the past, it was full of crap that they never used, things that her parents kept around through the years.

That was the first time that she spotted the guitar, or the case to be more precise, surrounded by spiderwebs and a lot of dust, leaning in a corner next to even more boxes and old suitcases. That day she only took the Christmas ornaments and the tree. Her dad took them back at the end of January when Greg finally took down the Christmas decorations, Nicole supposes.

But today the mission is another: get that guitar. Well, she hopes there is an actual guitar inside. She goes straight to the corner where she last saw it. It’s difficult to say if the guitar has more spiderwebs or dust on than a few months ago. She rips a piece of cardboard from a box and passes it around the guitar case, trying to take most of the spiderwebs and feeling very itchy all a sudden, quietly praying that not a single spider jumps on her. She approaches the guitar and takes it, creating a cloud of dust with the sudden movement and finding the weight of the package strange. She looks around just to see if there is something else worth stealing, but the weird sensation of imaginary spiders walking all over her is very persistent so she gets out sooner rather than later.

In the hallway, Nicole decides to not spread the dust all over the place so she leaves the case there and runs downstairs, takes a kitchen towel, gets it a little wet in the sink, and gets back. Nicole passes the towel over the surface and discovers a deep black below the thick layer of dust. The guitar slowly recovers the color on all of the sides and the shine on all the locks. The redhead leaves the towel in the stair railing (she can wash it later) and enters her room with the case.

Nicole puts it on the bed and passes her hand over the surface, feeling the material. The corners are a little worn out, it has some stickers on that don’t have ink anymore, their designs lost forever. She pulls every lock, one by one, and opens the case fully, feeling anticipation, but the guitar (there was a guitar!) is covered by a cloth.

Well, that was anticlimactic.

Amazingly, the inside of the case looks perfect, the red satin vibrating with intensity, and without a single speck of dust. Everything looks good and Nicole imagines that everything looks the same as when her mother left it. She assumed this was her mother’s guitar, after all, she always had that hippie vibe not to mention her aunt and uncle were pretty much the stereotypes of old hippies.

Finally, she takes the cloth off. The top of the guitar has a light wood, below the sound hole a black tear that she had seen before, but she’s unsure of the name of it. Actually, she doesn’t know any of the names of the guitar parts. So Nicole doesn’t take the guitar out, she just spends a good five minutes looking at it, admiring it, and looking up “parts of the guitar” on her phone.
Ok, so: that thing that she didn’t know the name of is a pick holder. The strings look very slack and pretty oxidized, but at least none of them are broken. The whole body but the top is a dark wood. The headstock says “Martin” and the tuners look a bit worn out just like the frets. White markers on the fretboard. The body is a little damaged, some parts seem to lack some varnish and Nicole finds one or two deep indents in the edges.

Nicole finds out that it’s a little scary to take the guitar out of the case, she feels like it’s going to catch on fire if she just puts a finger on it. It’s illogical but it’s how she feels. So, she closes the case and decides to wait till the next day to start.

Nicole closes the laptop maybe a little too hard for it to be ok, the sound of the video stopping all a sudden. She lets out a long sigh of frustration while she looks at her fingers where the guitar strings have left a deep mark and some darkening from the oxide. She carefully puts the guitar on her bed, even if she wants to crash it to the floor, and gets up to stretch a little before collapsing on the bed. The frustrated girl closes her eyes feeling better to have her back straightened on the bed after being in a weird position hugging the guitar. It’s kinda ridiculous how she can run and exercise for hours and maybe feel a little tired and sore in the morning, but with just two days of playing guitar, her back is killing her.

She stays in the bed, opening and closing her hand, feeling how the blood returns to her fingers.

A text is half written on the screen of her phone, waiting to be sent. It’s a message accepting her defeat, it’s her trying to find ways to buy Dolls’ compassion with favors but no, she doesn’t like losing and she knows that that message is never going to be sent.

She’d accepted this bet, even if she knew that Dolls wasn’t actually serious about it, in a very low moment. They had run into Shae in the high school hallway, going to her math class and she going to her biology class. They were talking about the new coffee shop that had opened near the school. Nicole hadn’t been there yet, but she had heard a ton of good stuff about it.

Most of the school had already been there, just a month after the inauguration, and apparently, the place was really promising. Good food and drinks, table games and a stage that is used for various types of events. Nicole had heard of a covers night that she really had wanted to go to with Dolls and Jeremy, but she let it pass because she didn’t actually have the money to go. Dolls was always trying to pay for her and it was becoming a little uncomfortable. Jeremy always accepted, after years of being friends there are some things that become just normal (even if he was being a little greedy in Nicole’s opinion) and Nicole knew that Dolls’ wallet didn’t even wince, but still. She didn’t like to take and not give anything in return.

Dolls was trying to convince her to go with them to the cafe to see a night of open mic and when Nicole declined going again, he said that supposedly there was going to be a talent competition somewhere in the future. Between talking and joking, Dolls made the bet: if she won the competition she could use his car to get a driver's permit and he would have to complete a dare, but if she failed he could use the video of the night whenever and wherever he wanted. You know, just for like the rest of their lives. And to be fair, there are a lot of things that Nicole would love to see Dolls do, but she knew that there was no way in hell she could win that bet. She was about to say no (a word that was very persistent in her mouth and mind these days) when they ran into Shae, just two days after they had broken up. In fucking February. So she accepted and Dolls, whose only
purpose was to see Nicole getting out of the shitty state of mind that she had been for months, smiled when his evil plan started its course.

Now, present Nicole thinks that past Nicole should have thought more about it, you know? Stupid Nicole.

She had totally forgotten about the bet until Dolls casually said in PE class, while they were both running, that he got confirmation that the talent show was happening. Nicole stopped dead with her eyes wide, her thoughts racing, watching Dolls run through the field, laughing at her. He looked like a bull running, surprisingly fast and kinda amazing, but he still looked funny when he tripped over his own feet and fell to the floor humiliatingly.

Anyway, Nicole doesn’t want to give up this easily, but after two days of YouTube tutorials, it is pretty clear that she doesn’t have any musical talent. Where do people get the talent anyway? Why wasn’t she invited to that party? Now here she is, three days later with a sore hand, a detuned guitar and the mental image of the most embarrassing moment of her life being projected on her wedding day.

The Friday of that week, Nicole finally meets the Homestead Cafe and sees with her own eyes that it is, in fact, a very nice place, thank you very much. It’s not that she believed that the whole school was lying about how awesome the place was, but yeah, kinda. She knows how people of her age tend to exaggerate things. Just like Greg a few years ago when he said that he was dating the sexiest guy in school. Turns out the sexiest guy in school was a brown guy that was maybe a bit taller than Greg and maybe a little bit muscular (ok, he had nice eyes), but, c’mon he wasn’t that great. He’d given 12-year-old Nicole a ride on the back of his motorcycle while Gregory watched him like he just invited his favorite boy band to his backyard. She didn’t see anything special (maybe just that Greg liked him) but to be completely fair, maybe it was just her gayness failing at finding a man appealing. Well, a boy.

A year ago the place was trashed after a fire that had left the owners selling it because who wants to keep a business in Purgatory? And she knew how in bad shape it was because she herself had entered the building with Eliza to write their names on the wall with spray paint. Eliza practically had to sign a paper assuring that Nicole wouldn’t die in the building to get her in.

Nicole wasn’t a coward, she was just cautious, ok?

Now, the building seems in very good shape. The same window where she got in a few months ago now fully covered by clear glass welcoming the natural light into Homestead. And to Nicole’s surprise, the same brick wall where Eliza and she had painted their names is still there uncovered but now clean and with more, and better, designs than their shitty tags. The cafe has a bar where you make your orders, the kitchen door behind it. A good amount of tables, chairs, armchairs and couches (every one of them different from the other) everywhere because the place is pretty spacious and open. And the thing that catches most of Nicole’s attention is the stage in the back of the establishment, tall for everyone to see, not very big but big enough to make Nicole look like a fool.

At least there aren’t any Valentine’s Day decorations.

At the moment, Homestead is kinda empty. They take a table that’s receiving a good amount of natural light on the left side of the cafe. Dolls and Eliza are talking about the upcoming
competitions for the track team. Jeremy is talking to Nicole about his D&D online group and, honestly, she’s not understanding half of what he’s saying but it’s still interesting. They took a while to decide what to order and now they’re just sitting, waiting for their food and drinks. Nicole had accepted coming because she found a bill flying across the sidewalk. She almost cried when she held it in her hands after running to catch it. Hey, it’s not everyday life smiles at you. So when Jeremy proposed to come she almost said no (her favorite word) thinking about her little box with her savings, but you know what? She chased that bill, she was allowed to waste it freely. So Nicole made her order without worrying about the price, which was nice for a change.

While everyone was settling in at the table, Dolls left and returned with a deck of cards.

“So, now that you’re free from Shae, will you be my wingman next Saturday at Mattie’s party?” Eliza says taking advantage of Jeremy scrambling through his notebook trying to find a diagram to explain some nerdy thing to Nicole.

“I didn’t get free from anyone,” Nicole says, slightly annoyed that her friends won’t leave her failed relationship alone. “Also, I didn’t know that you are on speaking terms with Mattie again.”

“Oh, we’re not,” Eliza says casually shuffling the cards.

“Then…”

“She invited Xavier”, Eliza points to Dolls and he only shrugs.

“Oh, well, that makes sense” Nicole takes the deck to shuffle the cards herself. She doesn’t trust Eliza after almost ending up naked in Jeremy’s house one terrible, terrible night. “You know I don’t do parties, I don’t know why you keep inviting me.”

“Well, you should party with us! There's more life outside of your perfect grades and you have to see Mattie’s band play.”

“I have seen them play.”

“Videos do not count,” Dolls states, trying to take the deck from Nicole but she’s faster and moves away in time.

“Think faster, cowboy.”

“Fast as your decision to break up with Shae?”

Nicole rolls her eyes in her head and growls in frustration. The fact that it was a common agreement to end the relationship doesn’t make it less painful. Even if the end of the relationship could have been seen from space. Or at least the International Space Station.

“Look, Shae is nice and we really like her, it’s just…” Eliza starts.

“We didn’t like her when she was with you,” Jeremy says not taking his eyes from his notebook. “And you also kinda suck with her.”

“Maaaaybe it be good for you to meet someone else, clear that big head of yours,” Eliza says. “She should come, right, X?” She hits Dolls with her elbow in the ribs and he lets out a little high pitched groan.

“Yes, you should come,” he says rubbing his side.
“I don’t know,” she says looking at the last card in the deck, it’s a three of hearts.

“Maybe you’ll meet a pretty girl,” Jeremy starts, “or maybe I’ll meet a handsome boy,” he says hopefully.

“Look, she’s pretty,” Eliza says looking past her.

“Clear the table!” The waitress arrives with their drinks. Jeremy takes his notebook and the other three pick up their phones that had been laying on the table. She leaves the drinks, ice tea for Eliza, a strawberry milkshake for Jeremy, an espresso for Dolls and a good cup of coffee for Nicole.

“Hey” Eliza says to the girl with her elbows on the table and her head on her hands.

“What’s your name?”

The waitress leaves the nachos on the middle of the table and straightens up, “Rosita, if you need something else you can ask for it at the bar or call me.”

“My friend might like to call you,” Eliza says and Nicole glares at her.

“Rosita? Rosita Bustillos? Didn’t you win a national prize in chemistry or something?” Dolls asks amazed. Jeremy looks impressed, he’s into chemistry too.

Rosita’s cheeks fill with color but she plays it cool. “That would be me, I’ll be back with the rest of your food,” she says, turning around to leave but turning back again. “And also a little reminder that we don’t like gambling,” she points at a sign on the wall and then she leaves.

Homestead is a healthy recreation place. No gambling. The sign is bright yellow and it looks handmade. Oh well, no gambling then. Nicole thinks, half annoyed that she can't take someone else’s money and half relieved that no one else can take hers.

“She is pretty, isn’t she?” Eliza points again.

Well, yes, she is pretty but not Nicole’s type. Well, Nicole doesn’t know if she actually has a type but in this moment she doubts that anyone would be her type. Being heartbroken and everything.

“I guess,” she says before turning to Jeremy. “Cut,” she holds up the deck of cards, putting an end to the conversation. Hopefully.

Jeremy cuts and they start the game. The nachos slowly disappear until Rosita comes back with more food. Eliza keeps making signs to Nicole but she ignores her. Well, she tries. Eliza is kinda loud, if you can be loud making signs.

After a while, the cafe starts to fill with more people and more noise. The group of friends are so caught up in the game (Nicole was a few cards away from winning, Eliza too and Jeremy was holding half of the deck in his hands) that Nicole’s heart almost stops when a loud sound of plates and glasses shattering to the floor cut through Homestead, interrupting everything but the music in the speakers.

She was a stunner. Riding high and I got low. Rank the others couldn’t see what she was worth.

Nicole searches for the source of the noise and sees the pieces of the plates on the floor. Rosita is standing next to them and Nicole guesses that she was holding the tray that fell. Next to her is another girl, smaller, carrying a guitar case on her back that makes her look even smaller. Nicole feels curious about her all of a sudden but she can’t see the girl’s face. Neither the light nor the guitar case letting her steal a glance. Another woman appears out of thin air.
“Nothing to see here, folks! Return to your non-alcoholic drinks!” She says and most of the people return to their business. But Nicole is still curious.

“Sorry, Wynonna, the tray slipped and-“

“Sorry, Wynonna, I turned around and didn’t see Rosita approaching-“

“OK! Ok.” Says the third woman, her voice slowly disappearing in the sound of the cafe. “Calm down Boobie’s McGee, I’m not firing you just because Waves here doesn’t understand that when she’s carrying that casket, her personal space multiplies by two-“ Nicole can’t hear them anymore but she still keeps her eyes on the back of the girls head.

“Nicole!”

Nicole turns to the table quickly and swears that the girl had just turned her head in her direction, but if she did, Nicole didn’t see her.

“It’s your turn.”

Nicole puts a ten of spades on the table with a smirk and the other three growl.

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When they were leaving Homestead, Nicole took a pair of pamphlets. One of them had the upcoming events in Homestead and she made a mental note to come the day of the stand-up presentation. And the other, thanks to all the gods, was announcing music classes. When Nicole saw it she screamed “BINGO!” and Dolls turned his eyes in his head but smiled and didn’t say anything about it.

Music Lessons. Trained musicians. Make an appointment calling or texting XX-XXX-XXX-XXX or ask in the bar.

Wasn’t this great? Nicole keeps glancing at the piece of paper all afternoon. She pinned it above her desk in her room. She had decided to call, after all she wasn’t getting any good on her own and she always found it easier to learn with other people around. And maybe a teacher would help her not make a fool of herself in the talent show.

She closes the window of her essay for English class and looks at the clock on her laptop. Just a few minutes past eight, still a good hour to call. Or text.

Nicole unlocks her phone and Shae’s Instagram profile is on the screen. She had been scrolling through it earlier. Nicole wasn’t stalking her ex, ok? She was just, you know, um… ok, she was, but she’s still sad about the rupture and curious if Shae had deleted their pictures together (she hasn’t). She is only human.

Nicole closes the app, types the number in her phone and starts writing the text.

Nicole, 20:03: Hello! I found one of your pamphlets i want more information about the music classes
Nicole, 20:03: My names nicole

Good. Short and direct. She mentally high fives herself and waits for the response while looking at her fingers, still red and dusty for her earlier attempts to play. Her phone’s screen lights up with a
little notification sound. She unlocks it quickly.

Music lessons, 20:05: Hi, Nicole. They are individual classes. Would you please tell me what instrument or what subject do you want to learn? In that way we can place you with the right teacher. You choose the day and the time (preferably in the afternoon) and we’ll make an appointment. The price for each class is $15. We promise that we’re worth it, we’re trained musicians. I hope you decide to take it!

Where the fuck was she going to get $15? Maybe if she asks her father… no, preferably not. She could take some money out of her savings, but…

Nicole, 20:06: I would like to learn how to play the guitar but i’m a complete beginner

Music lessons, 20:07: Of course! And don’t worry, we will teach you whatever you need. My name is Chrissy. Text me whatever question you have.

Nicole, 20:07: Thanks! Good night

Is it weird that she told this strange woman good night? Well, that’s not that important. She leaves her phone in her desk and stands up. She opens her third drawer and there it is, next to her socks, a box with her savings. It’s not that much but it’s enough to pay for a few classes. Maybe if she takes a little. I mean, how many classes does she really need to save herself from public humiliation? A few lessons wouldn’t hurt her savings.

Nicole spends the rest of the week trying to find another flying bill, but she doesn't find much more flying other than her hopes flying away. In the floor, however, she found a few pens, a Burger King coupon (there isn’t even a Burger King in Purgatory) and a nice yellow mechanical pencil. She also looked through her room and didn’t find much more money but more importantly did find two lost socks that would be reunited with their soulmates after a good wash, and her headphones, the ones that she thought she had lost in the lockers of the school. Now she has two pairs which are... useless, she only has two ears.

Ok, she could take that money out of her savings, but did she want to? Not really. She had been planning this trip since she couldn’t visit her grandma at Christmas and had to spend it with Jeremy’s family (that actually had been quite nice) because her dad wouldn’t even take Christmas Day off. Sure, Greg had come later after New Year’s, for her birthday, but it wasn’t the same as being in her grandma’s house with her actual grandma.

Her grandma can’t travel anymore so if she doesn’t go, there’s no other way to see her. Nicole loves her grandma, ok? Her grandma is her favorite person in the family (sorry, Greg). Not that there’s a lot of people in her family. Her mother’s side of the family is all the family she has. Her dad doesn’t have any family left, she didn’t even count him as family anymore.

Her grandma is safe in her house. Gregory is taking care of her and he’s always apologizing to her that he can’t take her to Purgatory. The trip is too long and his truck won’t make it that far. He got a job a few weeks ago, just after leaving Purgatory, so there’s not much time for him to visit anymore, like before. He used to go to Purgatory for full weeks when her aunt was still taking care of her grandma, and they would spend the afternoons together after school, sometimes with Shae too. When Gregory was visiting, he would usually take care of all the chores in the house and Nicole felt like she was being taken care of again, not that she would ever tell him that, she’s not
that emotional.

She misses her mom like crazy. When she first left, it was supposed to be a short trip but the days went through and Nicole didn’t hear from her until a week later when she called and informed her that she wouldn’t be back. It was easy to assume why. Her parents wouldn’t spend a day together without fighting. When she asked her dad, one of those days when she actually found him in the house, he didn’t know where she was. Typical, he never knew.

She could have moved with Greg and grandma Lucy but she didn’t want to live in an even smaller town and live kilometers away from the nearest high school. So she was stuck with her father and her mother who wouldn’t call for weeks now.

So excuse her if she’s very concerned about spending some money on a stupid music class just to save her stupid ass from a bet that she shouldn’t have ever agreed to. The guitar be damned.

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Saturday comes and Nicole finally agrees to go to Mattie’s party. If by “agree” she means she is threatened with potential sabotage of her biology project by Eliza. Dolls picks her up at exactly 8:30, like a good damn military man. Eliza and Jeremy are already in the car. Eliza in the backseat of the wagon because she was banned from the front seat for always putting her feet in the console. Jeremy is in the front seat because he always wears the seat belt, like the suck up he is.

“You know? You have a soccer mom car,” Nicole says as she puts her jacket on the middle seat and puts on the seat belt. Nicole isn’t a suck up, she’s just very into security, ok?

“When you have a car, then we can talk about it, Haught,” Dolls says, starting the car and getting into the road.

“Want some?” Eliza says offering Nicole some nuts.

“Are you eating? You know you can’t eat-“

“What time do you have to get home?” Eliza ignores Dolls protest and keeps talking.

“Jeremy has to be back by midnight, just like a princess.”

“Hey! A prince, ok?”

“Not so late that I would mess up my sleep cycle.” Nicole puts tree nuts in her mouth.

“Did you tell your dad we were going out?” Dolls asks worried looking at her through the rearview mirror.

“Oh, well, he’s…” she swallows. “...he’s not home” and then she adds in a whisper to herself. “And if he was he wouldn’t notice”

“You dad looks half dead,” Jeremy says from the front seat.

Nicole knows he does, even she, who is not very fond of him, could notice.

“Put on some music, X” Eliza reaches the radio, that’s in some commercial station, and pulls the cable to plug her phone without waiting for an answer.
“So, midnight then?” Nicole asks while Eliza scrolls through her phone looking for a song.

“At midnight we leave Jeremy tucked in his sheets and then we’ll go to my house, sound ok?” Dolls says.

A guitar comes through the speakers and fills the car.

I got a date with the night!

“Why is Eliza choosing the music?” Jeremy protests.

“Dude, you had the power to put some on but you didn’t.”

“Because you don’t like what I choose”

“Because it’s always One Direction!” Eliza and Nicole shout at the same time.

“So?”

“That’s why Eliza is choosing the music.” Dolls puts one hand on Jeremy’s shoulder.

They reach the outskirts of the town and Nicole honestly thinks for a second that they’re lost when Dolls takes a turn on a dirt road but then she can see a house appear in the distance. In front of the house, there are a good amount of people talking in groups and drinking even if the nights are still pretty cold this time of the year. They leave the car and Nicole puts her jacket on. On the front porch are the instruments that Nicole guesses are going to be used by Mattie’s band later. A drum set, a synth, mics and a good bunch of amplifiers. They get inside the house and the music gets significantly louder.

Baby we’re living in the moment. I’ve been a menace for the longest but i ain’t finished, i’m devoted and you know it, and you know it!

The bass is too deep and makes Nicole's chest vibrate in a weird way. This music ain’t what she was expecting in Mattie’s party. It’s not her type of music, nor Nicole’s. This was more of a Perry Croft thing, to be honest. They are just inside when Mattie appears.

“Dolls!” She screams over the music shoving Dolls. “Do you like the music? We’re letting people put anything in the list. We’ve been hearing everything from Cardi B to Aerosmith. Even an idiot put some grunge on and a few people left the house.”

“Doesn’t your band play some grunge?”

“Oh, yeah, but we give them free alcohol so they have to like us,” she laughs and offers Dolls a small cup. “Take a shot with me, Dolls!”

“Oh, he can’t,” Jeremy interrupts. “Designated driver.”

Then Mattie acknowledges their presence.

“Little Chetri, always so responsible. And Shapiro! I should have known you’d come with Dolls,” then she winks and Nicole assumes she’s no longer mad at Eliza. “Take a shot with me then!”

Eliza takes the cup. “Are you going to poison me?”

“Take care, kid, if I’m Gretta in disguise I might.”
“Cheers.”
“Cheers!”

They drink the liquor and grin at the taste. Mattie then sees Nicole behind them.

“Is that Haught?! Dude, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you outside school.”

Before Nicole could say anything else, a girl with dark brown hair, leather jacket and a devil’s grin stands next to Mattie. She pushes her with her hips.

“Perley! Evil Perley says that we’re on in twenty”

Mattie makes an ok with her hand and the girl, who Nicole kind of remembers from somewhere but she’s not sure, sees Dolls. “Hi, biceps!”

Mattie hit her with her palm in the stomach. “They're underage, Earp”

“What?! That monster is underage?! Are you on steroids?!” She says surprised watching Dolls, and Nicole notices the killer stare Eliza sends the brunette's way.

“Hey! Dolls is not a monster, and if he was he would be a beautiful one!” Jeremy says in a defensive tone. Dolls laughs.

“I’m Xavier Dolls and these are my friends, Jeremy…”

“I’m Eliza,” Eliza gets a bit closer to Dolls.

“And I’m Nicole, Nicole Haught”

The girl laughs out loud. “Dolls and Hot?”

“No, Hot, it’s Haught, spelled H-A-.” Nicole starts protesting but the girl shakes her hand dismissing her.

“Whatsoever. Perley, I’m going for something to drink before we’re on.” The girl leaves and the house fills with the characteristic guitar riff of A-Punk.

“Aaand… that was Wynonna Earp.”

“She’s something.” Dolls says.

“She’s filling Constance’s place, she’s acting like a diva again and left us hanging today.”

“Is she singing?” Eliza asks.

“No thanks,” Mattie laughs. “I am. Anyway, see you around guys, there are drinks in the kitchen.” And she leaves in the same direction that Wynonna had left a few moments ago. They end up in front of the house talking with some people from school, waiting for the band to play. Most of the people are outside when the band starts to take their places on the porch. The girl on the drums looks so ripped that Nicole would bet on her in a fight versus Dolls and most surely win. Mattie is in the front with a guitar hanging and her twin, Gretta, who they aren’t very fond of, is behind the synth with a bass hanging over her back. The last one is the girl from before, Wynonna, with a torn out guitar and a beer in one hand. All of them are in black clothes and look very badass, but Nicole thinks that Wynonna looks even more enigmatic than the others. It’s the fuck it attitude.
The music stops inside the house and Mattie gets right in front of the mic, some static coming from the amplifiers.

“Sup, fuckers! Thanks for coming and blah, blah, blah. Here’s the first song.”

Mattie starts paying some chords and singing, then Greta joins with the bass. And then, a moment of silence. Wynonna takes a sip of her beer and hurriedly leaves it on top of an amplifier.

“I said he’s a scumbag, don’t you know?!” Mattie practically shouts on the mic and the full band starts playing, the two guitars sounding with power, the bass and the drums in harmony. Nicole is moving without really thinking of it. The band is casting a spell over their public. She sees Jeremy and Eliza jump with her too and Dolls moves his feet and head in rhythm, a big gesture coming for him.

This is cool, Nicole thinks, watching the band play song after song, watching Wynonna and Mattie playing like it’s nothing. The twins sometimes change their instruments so Greta is playing the synth and Mattie the bass. She remembers the old guitar forgotten in her room, the frustration every time she didn’t put her fingers in the right position, every muted sound in the strings. Is it so hard to play what they were playing?

Maybe she can take some money from her savings after all.

Waverly Earp is never late but when you travel long distances, five minutes can turn into ten and then, into twenty. So even if she left school in time to make it to Purgatory in time and maybe eat something with her sister, she is late.

She gets off the bus carrying her guitar in the back and her backpack in the front. Curtis apologized over and over for not being able to take her to Purgatory and back, but he’s not in any condition to do it and she will have to do it for as long as these classes last. It’s kind of hard traveling with this much to carry, but it’s worth it. She’s hoping to not do it anymore when the school year ends. Now that Wynonna is back and Waverly is making up her mind about school, she’s hoping to move back to Purgatory.

Living with Wynonna is an odd dream. Waverly’s sure that it could be a nightmare in the eyes of many, but for her, having her sister back is everything she has ever dreamt of.

She ain’t lonely, Chrissy and Robin are always there as good friends and Curtis and Gus are always looking out for her. And there’s Champ who is nice and attentive, even if he doesn’t go to any of her recitals. But Wynonna is her absolute favorite person.

Unlike Willa, she always listened to her and protected her when Ward Earp was too drunk to measure his fist. She always comforted her when her mom disappeared for months, again and again. But when Wynonna went to juvie, she’d been left on her own. At least Ward wasn’t there anymore.

Now, Wynonna is finally back, about to get her high school diploma and being as responsible as she could be, taking care of Mama and Willa’s new business. Yes, maybe she has a lot of help from Gus and Shorty, even Willa, but she is mostly doing a very good job on her own.

She walks fast, as fast as you can walk with all this gear. She checks her phone and opens Chrissy’s
conversation for the hundredth time in the day just to make sure she’s not forgetting anything.

Chrissy, 13:14: The girl’s name is Nicole and i kinda think she’s my dad’s neighbor

Chrissy, 13:14: anyway, she doesn’t know anything so you have to teach her all the basics. I think she was very nervous. be nice Waves

Chrissy, 13:15: you’re always nice but you know, be nicer! :winking emoji: she agreed to meet you in your sister’s cafe at 4, don’t be late babe

Chrissy, 13:16: Robin wants to see la la land again, im getting sick of ryan gosling

It’s 4:05 so she’s not that late after all. But she wanted to make a good first impression. It’s intimidating to teach being this young. Waverly is scared that she won’t be taken seriously.

You force me to learn Bach when you were 9 years old, baby girl, I don’t think anyone wouldn’t take your teaching seriously, Wynonna had said when she first told her that they were going to start teaching.

She gets to Homestead at 4:15 and stops in the sidewalk to put herself together. Breath deeply. Inhale. Exhale. Ok, she is ready.

Nicole’s not ready and she doesn’t know how to know if she’s ready for this.

When her parents sent her to a new extracurricular activity, when she was younger, her mom used to have everything ready for her. Like that time when she took German classes, even if she didn’t learn a single word, and her mom left her in the building with all the books and pencils, the precise instructions of how to get to her classroom and some snacks even if she was supposed to pick her up in two hours. Those two hours usually ended being three so the snacks were never thrown away. But she has never been able to explore an interest on her own, so this was new. She asked Chrissy, the woman on the phone, what to bring and her answer wasn't very helpful.

Music lessons, 11:58: Just bring your guitar and maybe a notebook, but really nothing more than that. If Waverly thinks you need something else she’ll tell you.

So now she’s here with her guitar, the notebook she tried to use as a diary, the yellow mechanical pencil and the awkwardness of being in a stranger’s apartment.

Nicole had been early because you can only be early or on time if you ask Dolls for a ride (he was going to the hockey team practice). When she entered Homestead, she felt a little bit lost. Chrissy had told her to ask anyone in the cafe for Waverly and she was hoping to ask Rosita, she seemed nice the last time. Nicole stood in the door looking around when she saw the girl from the other night behind the counter, and panicked a little when the girl turned to see her.

“Sup, Heat” Wynonna said leaning on the counter and grinning.

“It’s Haught.”

“It doesn't matter,” she straightened her back. “You look like a fool standing on the door, dude. Move so my customers can get in.”

“Your customers?” Nicole asked confused. The bell of the door rang and she realized that she was actually in the way. She moved and changed the case from one hand to the other. Wynonna went to
the cash register and took the order of the two women that had just walked in. Nicole got closer.

“I'm supposed to be meeting my teacher here, they told me to ask for, uh, Waverly?.” Nicole said while Wynonna gave the ticket and some change to the woman.

“Oh, yeah, she's a bit late, isn't she?” Wynonna looked at the clock hanging in the wall. “Man, I wish I knew how to read that thing, anyway, she was supposed to be here an hour ago, but buses, amiright?” She looked past her shoulder and screamed. “Bustillos!”

A few customers turn their heads surprised. Rosita walks hurriedly with a tray with dirty dishes to them.

“What?!?” She said a bit annoyed leaving the tray in the counter.

“Walk Kim Possible to the apartment, I would do it but I'm waiting for Doc.”

“To the apartment?” she asked glancing briefly to Nicole.

“Yeah, the apartment, upstairs, dude. She's Waverly’s new pupil.”

Waverly's new pupil, Nicole thinks fidgeting with a lock of red hair. Maybe she looks a bit like Kim Possible. She picks a hair tie from her wrist and ties her long hair.

Waverly goes through the door and immediately finds Wynonna behind the cash register.

“Baby girl!” Her sister smiles widely. “You’re going to get ripped carrying all that stuff, I'm telling you.”

Wynonna goes around the bar and gives Waverly a bear hug, then she takes her backpack off her shoulder checking the weight of it.

“Is she here yet?”

“Rosita took her upstairs. Don’t worry, it's clean,” she says watching Waverly panic. She knows how messy Wynonna can get. “She got here early. I met her on the weekend. Her name is Hot, can you believe it?”

“Where did you meet her?”

“I was covering Mattie’s ass. You know Constance is a diva and I didn’t have anything better to do… so...”

“There was buzz, right?”

“Free buzz” Wynonna winks. “Anyway, hurry up”. She returns the backpack to Waverly and pushes her lightly.

Waverly goes through a door that leads to a hallway in the side of the cafe. The building has an apartment upstairs that Wynonna is furnishing and Waverly hopes they will share it when she returns to Purgatory.

She climbs the stairs and enters the apartment. And in the living room, on the only couch is a girl with her long red hair in a ponytail.
Nicole contemplates the apartment. It looks a bit empty. There's a lot of boxes piled in one side of the room and she can read Willa’s shit in one of them.

She isn’t sure what to expect from this class, she will probably mess this up, but she’s mentally prepared for it.

Then, Nicole hears the door opening and turns her head, expecting to find an older woman, like Mrs Johnson from English class, but instead, she finds a very beautiful girl smiling at her and feels her stomach do a triple backflip.

Chapter End Notes

Leave a comment if you have something to say or if you have a strong opinion on the Beatles.

Some of the songs:

- **In the Blood - John Mayer**
- **Leading me now - The tallest man on earth**
- **Stuner - Milky Chance**
- **Date with the Night - Yeah Yeah Yeahs**
- **Black Skinhead - Kanye West**
- **A-Punk - Vampire Weekend**
- **When The Sun Goes Down - Arctic Monkeys**

Spotify playlists:

- **Chap. 1 and 2.**
Chapter Summary

Waverly reads something and Nicole loves money.

Chapter Notes

Happy holidays, my friends.

I’m not a big fan of this chapter. But the good news is that it leads to the third. And I’m a big fan of chapter 3.

All of a sudden, Nicole forgets about Shae. She forgets about the fifteen bucks in her pocket and even forgets why she’s in a stranger’s apartment. All the sadness and the desolation is gone, lost in the air, gone out the window. And there, in front of her, a beautiful girl.

Nicole is not a very spiritual person but she’s about to convert to any religion that this angel has come from.

Oh, wow, you’re being super dramatic, Nicole thinks, so she slaps herself mentally, not physically because that would be super weird. She’s hitting herself in front of this girl without even introducing herself first.

Ok, introduce yourself, say hi, give her a good first impression, fast. Hi, good first impression, fast. Hi, good first impression first. Hi, good first impression, fast.

“First hi fast!” Nicole kinda shouts, standing from the couch.

“What?” The girl crooks her head a little to the right.

“Hi, I said hi,” good save, Nicole.

The girl laughs and Nicole feels her heart do some sort of tap dance. The girl gets closer to her and Nicole notices the color of her hair, a bit sandy, and the color of her eyes, hazel. She’s a bit smaller than her, which is adorable.

“Sorry, I didn’t know anyone else was coming.”

“You didn't know...?” The girl leaves a big package on the floor but Nicole is too busy watching her eyes and she ignores it completely.

“Uh, I’m Nicole, Nicole Haught” Nicole Haught extends her hand to the girl and she takes it.

Soft.
“Oh, I thought Wynonna was kidding when she said that your name was Hot.”

“Eh, not hot, it’s Haught, H-A-U-G-H-T. Haught.” Nicole explains fluidly, used to doing this often.

“Ok, Nicole Haught. I’m Waverly.” Waverly lets her hand go and Nicole finds herself missing the contact.

“It’s a pleasure to-“ The hamster that gives power to Nicole’s brain starts running again and suddenly it clicks. Then she finally notices the guitar case laying in the floor next to the girl.

“OH! Waverly, as in the teacher Waverly?”

“The very same” Waverly isn’t understanding what exactly is going on. Chrissy told this girl her name, right? Wait. “Did you think that I was here to also take the class?” She asks with a smile.

Nicole lets go a quiet wow that makes Waverly blush.

“You’re going to teach me? How old are you?” Waverly feels like a bucket of cold water is being dropped on her head. She’s not going to take me seriously, she thinks, she’ll cancel, she thinks we’re trying to- “You must be super talented!”

So, she doesn’t think I’m a fraud?

“It’s not talent, I’ve been playing for a long time, so…” Waverly says trying to be modest but apparently, Nicole’s not buying it.

“Something tells me it is talent,” the redhead smiles.

They stay silent for a second. Nicole’s in awe. Waverly clears her throat and brings Nicole to the present.

“Well, it doesn’t matter, what matters to me is to show you where we are going to work.”

Waverly takes her things from the floor and walks Nicole to a room down the hallway. She opens the door and Nicole takes the little room in. Like the rest of the apartment, it smells like fresh paint and looks a little empty. It has a single window facing the street, a small sofa, a pair of chairs and a desk. And, of course, a few boxes in a corner.

There’s one more thing. A piano by the window. Nicole thinks she has never seen one this close.

“Do you play this too?” Nicole gets closer to the instrument, admiring the wood. How much more talented can she be?

“No, well, a little, I guess.” Waverly leaves her things on the floor and moves the chairs so they’re facing each other. She sits and Nicole takes the other. Waverly smiles to her and Nicole looks somewhere else trying to hide the color of her cheeks.
“Let’s start,” Waverly says.

“Ok,” Nicole responds but Waverly keeps looking at her expectantly, and she realizes that she's waiting to Nicole to take her guitar out. So she does.

“May I?” Waverly points to Nicole’s guitar. Nicole hands it to her and the other girl starts inspecting it. She moves it and checks it at different angles and looks at every corner, it seems. Nicole’s not sure what’s she’s looking for, but she doesn’t mind. She starts playing string by string and moving the machinery, stopping now a then to checks a specific part of the arm.

When Nicole tried to tune it in her house, it took her so long and she never got it quite right. There was a part of her brain that was telling her that she maybe should feel a bit jealous of Waverly’s abilities, but she was too busy admiring her to care. “It’s in good shape, you can start with it, but the strings are a problem. You should change them as soon as possible. I’m just going to…”

Waverly starts to play, like, really play.

Nicole had never listened to a guitar like this before, always in other styles but never like this. It goes through her head, just next to her hamster, that she should be listening to more classical music. The song changes, at first it was a bit heavy and kinda sad, conflictive, but then it turns more happy, more bright. She feels like she’s ten again, playing in the backyard of her grandma’s house with Gregory. But then, it returned to the gloomy feel, and Nicole starts to react to it, remembering Shae and her mom and the bet. The music is a catalyst to her emotions and she is even more impressed by Waverly.

But then, Waverly stops without even ending the song properly, and Nicole is left craving for more.

“Yeah, I don’t hear anything weird. It’s a good guitar to start.” Waverly gives it a last glance and turns to see Nicole. She can’t tell what that face supposed to mean, but it’s definitely not good. So she freaks out.

All the confidence that she’d been working on since this morning comes crumbling down and Waverly feels like she’s eight years old again, sitting on the porch of the real Earp homestead, crossing fingers, hoping that her mom comes back for her first recital and Willa stops saying cruel things to her.

Shit.

“Sorry, am I boring you?” she starts rambling, “I just wanted to check if your guitar is making any weird noises, so I played something, you know, more properly. You see, sometimes you don’t realize these things until you play something more serious. I know classical music is not, like, everyone’s first choice, but- uh- don’t worry, I'm not trying to teach you this if you want to play something else, I’ll teach you whatever you-“

“Hey! Hey.” Nicole interrupts her and Waverly realizes that her expression has changed from deception to worry. “You’re not boring me at all! I thought it was… beautiful. I mean, wow.”

This is not the first compliment to Waverly’s guitar skills but somehow it feels important. Her cheeks filled with color again.
“And, it’s not that I don’t want to learn, that-“ Nicole gestures at the guitar, “whatever you just played.”

“Prelude number one in e minor,” Waverly points out.

“Right. But I don’t know anything, I mean, I just touched this thing for the first time like a week ago, so…”

Nicole puts her hand in the back of her neck and looks away. Waverly realizes then that Nicole is as scared as she is. She gains back a little confidence but also some more understanding, empathy.

“Why don’t you show me what you’ve been doing this week? Chrissy told me that you’ve been watching some tutorials on YouTube,” Waverly hands back the guitar to Nicole, “then you let me judge if you actually know anything and if not, I’ll just teach you, ok? That’s why I’m here.”

___

For three days Waverly looks at Willa’s old journal.

She doesn’t even know why she took it when she helped Wynonna move all the rest of the boxes to Willa’s room in the apartment. Waverly had started to open the box to put the clothes in the closet but Wynonna stopped her. She can unpack her shit when she decides to show up here, her sister said in a hard tone to Waverly’s surprise. Her sister had the habit of taking the seriousness out of situations with humor, Waverly knows that, but she also knows that Wynonna hates taking orders, even from Willa. Or maybe, especially from Willa.

It’s not that Wynonna is not enjoying taking over Homestead, but she’ll probably prefer to be on the road with the Banditos on that motorcycle of hers in some faraway road to nowhere.

Wynonna Earp, you better believe that I will drag you from hell if you don’t put a high school diploma in my table before you decide to run from home again, Gus had said after Wynonna came back from juvie, but that didn’t stop her when she disappeared for six months, coming back on Christmas.

But Wynonna has changed, Waverly could feel it and she knows that Gus does too. She’s not sure what changed, but something essential in her sister turned during her last time behind bars.

It wasn’t me, baby girl, I swear, not this time, Wynonna pleaded to her baby sister to believe her and Waverly did. She looked at Mr Novick’s cold eyes and twisted smile and she knew that Wynonna was telling the truth. But that didn’t stop the cops from handcuffing her sister or the judge from sending her away two years more.

Waverly knows her sister won’t get into much trouble, at least not big enough to end up in some institution again.

The first time she left, when she put a bullet between Ward Earp eyes, Waverly thought she had been left alone, or even worse, she had been left with Willa. Wynonna screamed about demons again and again and her little sister never understood if it was true or if it was just a way to justify what she had done. The sad truth was that meds didn’t help Wynonna that much and that first institution just killed what was left of the girl’s innocence. Waverly will never forget the one and
only time Gus took her to St. Jude’s Mental Institution. You don’t need to see your sister like that. It’s not ok for you to suffer too.

Also, Waverly knows that Wynonna knows. Her older sisters might have a good relationship, as good as it can be with two very difficult personalities, but Wynonna can see behind Willa’s words and actions towards the little Earp. Even if Waverly knows that it’s selfish and shameful to think like this. She hopes that, if it comes to play, Wynonna will pick her over Willa.

*If both of us were drowning and you could only save one of us, just one, who would you pick?* little Waverly asked with the telephone too close to her ear, hiding in the little closet under the stairs.

*Baby girl, Big Deep Lake is not that deep.* Wynonna’s voice had sounded very tired through the speaker.

*It’s a hypothetical question, Nonna.*

*A hippopotamus what?* Wynonna joked.

And at that moment Willa picked up the other phone in the house demanding that Waverly hang up so she could talk to Wynonna alone. Later she called Waverly an attention seeker.

*You must be super talented!*

Like, come on, even Nicole, a girl that she just met, had been kinder to Waverly than Willa had ever been in her whole life. Well, maybe that’s an exaggeration. But an hour with Nicole had been a blessing, leaving Waverly with a warm sensation in her chest.

Wynonna is trying her best, one thing that she’ll never admit even if everyone that knows her even a little can see it, taking care of the cafe and studying in her free time. Wynonna is brilliant even if it’s not a type of brilliance that belongs in some school, like Waverly’s or Willa’s, but still bloody brilliant. So much that even people of the town that hate her are drinking her coffee and eating her food under her roof and paying to do so.

*Hey, why don’t we leave her crap here and run down to see Shorty and Doc?* Waverly agreed and they left, but something inside her, a deeper feeling in her gut, told her to take that diary that now is waiting in her desk drawer.

Waverly decides that is enough contemplation. Willa would never hesitate to open one of her diaries, so why return the courtesy?

The little notebook has little Willa’s handwriting and it doesn’t say anything too interesting, I mean, she was pretty much a kid when she wrote this thing. It tells Waverly the life before she came into life. Sometimes it mentions Ward, many times Wynonna, other times Mamma. At some point, Waverly decodes that her mom is pregnant with, she supposes, her.

*Curiosity killed the cat,* Gus used to say a lot when Waverly kept on asking too many questions.

*Dear diary:*

*Today was a bad day. I hate that they brought the baby into the house. There’s something wrong with it. Mamma told Daddy that we have to do what’s right. What does that even mean? Whatever. She’ll never be one of us.*

*Me*
Oh, come on! Waverly thinks. She knows that she was a beautiful baby, or at least that’s what Wynonna, Gus, Curtis and Shorty tell her all the time. How could someone not love a baby? It’s just human to do so. Willa mustn’t be human, Waverly thinks with humor.

It doesn’t surprise Waverly that Willa had never really liked her. But it is the way she wrote about it, the words she used: There’s something wrong about it… we have to do what’s right… one of us.

Awesome, it's not like Waverly is trying to figure out a hundred other things right now.

Maybe Gus was right but Waverly had read in some place another version: The curiosity killed the cat, but satisfaction brought it back.

Nicole is standing in the middle of her room in her pyjamas. In her hand, her savings box. When she came home from school, she took the decision to take more lessons than she had previously expected.

The reasons?

Well, first, it was clear that a few lessons wouldn’t have been enough. The exercises that Waverly taught her are so simple but somehow kinda difficult.

The second reason is that Waverly made her see how a guitar could sound. That made Nicole really want to be better at it instead of just good enough. And if she ever becomes at least a third as good as Waverly, then that would be a lot.

The hour with Waverly teaching her went so fast that Nicole felt a bit disappointed that it ended. Waverly paid attention to everything Nicole did and offered solutions to every problem and answered every question.

And the third… there’s no third reason because it’s definitely not that Nicole crushed hard on Waverly. That would be ridiculous, I mean, she just broke up with Shae. That would be weird. Waverly’s her teacher, right? Even if she’s a year younger, she's still her teacher.

Anyway, Nicole really wants to keep taking classes for as long as needed. But, then again: she needs money.

There’s no more cash lying around in her room or in her jackets, so that option is gone. She doesn’t have a job and to be honest she doesn’t want one. Who would need a 16-year-old redhead? And overall, she refuses to ask her father for money.

Does her father even have money?

Nicole notices, in the late night, her father’s Renault parked in front of the house. Why does he work that much if he’s still driving that old thing? Where does his money go? Does he have another family? Why doesn’t he pay the bills on time? More than one time, Nicole had spent the night without electricity or internet. One night, she even had to ask Sheriff Nedley, when they were sitting at the table having dinner, to let her use his internet so she could finish the movie she was
supposed to watch like a week ago to do the assignment for English class.

*Put your priorities in order, Nicole thinks, what are your options?*

She leaves the box in the corner of the desk and lets herself fall onto the bed. The box fights to keep the balance, but loses the fight against gravity and falls to the floor letting all the coins and bills spread around the floor. Nicole stands with a growl and contemplates the recent mess as if waiting for the coins to grow legs and walk to the box willingly. That doesn’t happen, so she starts picking them up one by one and throwing them back to the box.

*God, I need to clean my room more often,* Nicole thinks while picking a shirt from the floor to reach a further under the bed. And then she sees them again, the pair of headphones that she recovered last week had made their way back to the floor. No wonder she keeps losing them. At least she doesn’t use them.

*Oh, right, I don’t use them.*

Nicole realizes that she doesn’t need that pair of headphones so she looks up on Amazon to see how much they cost. And it turns out, headphones can be pretty expensive. These, in particular, were a gift from her aunt and uncle and when she thought she had lost them, Greg nicely gave her new ones on her birthday, the same model but in blue. Will it be so wrong if she sells them? She has two of them and only needs one pair.

She taps her fingers on her lower lip while thinking. She picks up her phone and touches Greg’s contact. She crosses her fingers and hopes that Greg’s still in town and still has signal. The call connects and she sighs.

“Loser” Greg greets her from the other side of the line.

“Greg! I thought you’d be with grandma by now.”

“I am but Mrs Buckingham invited her to dinner so I brought her into town.”

Nicole hears him exhale and assumes he’s smoking one of his menthol cigarettes.

“Smokin’ again, Greg? I thought you quit.”

“It’s just an excuse so I could escape. God, if another oldie asks me if I have a girlfriend again, I swear I’m gonna get me one just so I could make it with her outside the church and make them wish they never asked me.”

“Ew.”

“We can team up, bring Shae.” Nicole feels an empty space in her stomach and tries to ignore it. “Anyway, why’d you call?”

Nicole stands and walks to the window. “Remember the headphones your parents gave me?”

“The ones you lost and then the best person on the planet gave you new ones?”

“The very same.”

“Did you find them?” Nicole can picture her cousin smiling. “Where were they?”

“Don’t laugh. They were behind my bed.” Nicole rubs her free hand on the back of her neck.
Greg laughs anyway. “I told you.”

“Yeah, yeah, ok.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“Ugh, Nicole, I know you. You have something else to tell me.”

“I-I want to sell them, but, I'm not sure if it’s right. I mean, they were a gift from your parents and-“

“Nicole,” Greg interrupts, “I don’t think they even remember them, they’re very busy with their organic, artisanal bees...”

“Gluten-free.” Nicole completes.

“...to care for some headphones. So, I don’t think they’ll mind if you sell them.

“So I have your blessing?”

“To marry Shae? Kid, I think that’s something you have to ask the father.” Greg jokes and Nicole loses her cool.

“No, idiot, to sell them.” She shifts uncomfortably, feeling guilty for snapping.

“Woah, ok, calm down.” Greg sounds serious now. “You can sell them but I think my parents would be more worried that you need the money. I’m worried. Everything ok?”

“Yeah, sorry,” she tries to calm a little, “I’m just, um, I wanna take some guitar lessons but I don’t really want to spend the money I saved already.”

“Guitar? Since when do you want to learn?” He sounds surprised and Nicole can hear him moving around. He must be wearing his green windbreaker, Nicole thinks.

“A week.”

“Oh, well, I’m happy that you’re finding new hobbies.” Nicole thinks about Greg joining the woodwork workshop in high school to everyone’s surprise. “What does Shae think ‘bout it?”

“I don’t know, we haven’t talked in like, uh, three weeks or so?” She opens the window and inhales the cold air deeply. “We broke up.”

“Shit.” She can hear Greg’s hamster running in his head. “Nic, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable, you should have told me.”

“It’s ok,” Nicole closes the window and watches Sheriff Nedley’s police cruiser park in the corner of the street. “It was a long time coming.”

“Yeah, but still, I’m sorry.”

“Thanks.”

“She was nice, tho. And also: aw, your first break up.”
“Shut up,” Nicole replies but there’s no meanness intended.

They stay in silence for a long moment and Nicole wishes to be next to Greg, attending some lame church dinner and putting up with people asking her about having a boyfriend. Maybe even see if Greg lets her try some of his menthols

“Nic,” Greg breaks the silence, “maybe you’d like to tell your dad about the guitar lessons.”

“Greg-“

“No, wait, don’t interrupt me. I’m just saying, maybe he’d like to know.”

“I have some homework to do, Greg.” Nicole lies.

“Nic…”

“Call you in the week?”

“Yeah.” Greg doesn’t push the subject and Nicole silently thanks him. “But no later than 4 p.m.”

———

That Friday, Nicole finds something weird in the kitchen. A plate. And on the plate: food.

Breakfast. Eggs with bacon and a glass of orange juice. The moment she sees it, she freezes in the door and turns. She searches the driveway for any signs of her father.

No Renault. She passes her hand through her hair and changes the side it falls. He must have forgotten it, she reasons.

She gets back and watches the food closely, like it would explode. She even listens closely to check if it’s ticking, but everything seems oddly normal.

She shrugs and heads to the fridge. She takes the milk out and closes the door with a kick. And freezes again. There’s a note in the fridge door.

Nicole, I left you some breakfast, I hope you have a nice day at school.

If you need anything call me.

She puts the milk back and stands in front of the plate again. She pokes her finger in the yellow yolk. Nicole's not gonna lie, it looks good. Cold but good.

To eat or not to eat, that is the question.

Nicole’s not someone who would throw away perfectly fine food so she puts the food in the microwave and waits. She takes some bread and puts it in the toaster. Then eats, but tries really hard not to enjoy it. In the end, this is enemy food. She leaves the dishes in the sink to wash them later.

It is extremely weird, why is her father suddenly leaving her food? It’s almost like someone…

Gregory, you little snitch.
She takes her phone and writes an angry text to Greg.

Nicole, 7:26: Snitch [middle finger emoji]

She goes upstairs to grab her stuff and takes the headphones too. Today is as good as any other to start selling them.

“

“They're perfectly functional,” Nicole says while taking the headphones from her backpack.

“Whatever, I just need to replace the ones I lost in Barcelona last weekend,” Beth says naturally like everyone spends their weekends in foreign countries like Spain. She takes the headphones without checking them, pulls out her wallet and counts the money shamelessly.

“Here,” she hands the money to Nicole who’s kinda surprised by everything. It had been too easy. She just told Dolls who told Eliza, who told Perry, who told them that Beth Gardner was looking to buy ones. She was expecting to give a full review of the headphones and explain all the reasons why Beth should buy them, but it didn’t happen.

“Thanks, Beth. It’s a pleasure doing business with you,” Eliza grabs the money when Nicole doesn’t react. Beth throws the headphones to her bag and walks away. Eliza counts the money and hands it to Nicole who’s returning slowly to life.

“Who on earth carries around that kind of money?” Eliza asks, adjusting her backpack.

“Well, you never know when are you going to need it for a quick trip to Barcelona.” Dolls says flatly from behind and the two girls turn their heads to stare at him, not really sure how to react. “It’s a joke”, he clarifies and Nicole snorts.

“Dude,” Eliza turns to Nicole and together stare at the bills in her hand, “what other crap do you have to sell?”

Nicole’s already making a mental list.

Nicole’s back at her house. She took a quick trip to the music store she found on Google Maps that luckily wasn’t that far away from school. She got to the counter and asked for the exact label of strings Waverly had recommended to her. The guy behind the counter handed the little box to Nicole without a word and she felt like she just passed some kind of divine quest in her way to becoming a guitarist. She decided not to change them and take Waverly’s word to do it together in the next class. She also bought a little stool like the one Waverly has and discovered it's called a “footrest”.

Nicole’s feeling a little high on the money so greedily decides to keep looking for things to sell. There’s something powerful about easy money. She always thought that if she would become
addicted to something it would be something cool like adrenaline.

*One man’s trash is another man’s treasure* or as said by Nicole: *the crap I keep under my bed might cost a shit ton of money so I better google it.*

So she goes to the attic again and empties a box, leaving the contents on another box.

First, very deep in her closet, there’s a dress that she is sure she’ll never wear again. To the box. The vans she bought online that are too small and never returned? To the box. Heels? Definitely to the box. The stuffed cat that Shae gave her at Christmas? Maybe not to the box, maybe later.

She puts a bunch of other things in the box and sits in the middle of the room, ignoring the perfectly good chair next to the desk. She doesn’t actually know how to sell all of it, but there’s no hurry.

Nicole is in the middle of wondering how much can she charge for a box of semi-new pencil colors when she hears a loud sound coming from the attic. Apparently, the attic is not used to people coming and going so constantly and gets mad easily and throws boxes around. That’s a shit attitude, attic. (In the attic’s defense, it’s maybe just gravity.) Nicole supposes it’s better going to check what fell than waiting for some other time. So she goes up, again, and starts picking up the box that fell. There’s a lot of paper and magazine cuttings on the floor, some scissors and glue. The box seemed to contain one of the many failed hobbies her mother tried to acquire. Some things fell between not her boxes so Nicole starts to move boxes here and there.

She sneezes and curses the dust. *Stupid dust.* She makes her way between boxes and opens the little window at the end, disturbing well-crafted spiderwebs, and breathes dust-free air. She ends up moving a lot of boxes to pick up all the things that fell. What’s the point of having all this stuff here anyways?

Nicole becomes a woman on a mission. She moves some more failed hobbies, one over the other. Then she moves the Christmas stuff to a corner and declares that this would be their permanent place. A box of old toys is next and Nicole moves it near the stairs so she can get rid of them later. Except for Mr Wild, he was just too adorable. And obviously not Ms Patches, she is the love of his life. Everything else can go.

She keeps reorganizing boxes, which mostly are useless things and old clothes, some old notebooks and books, and the attic starts to feel more open and bright. She gets to the corner where she took the guitar from. There’s an old boombox and some cassettes, even some records. She takes them to the stairs so she can go through them later. She picks one of the suitcases, It feels very light so she opens it and finds just a pair of boots. Black and shiny like someone just cleaned them. Nicole knows the brand because she had been wanting a pair since she saw Daniel Vernon, a senior, kick Pete York in the shin with them when he pushed Jeremy against the lockers. Boy, that had been cool. Nicole’s pretty sure Jeremy now has a crush on Daniel.

The boots most surely belonged to her father and probably she would just leave them there, but none of that is stopping her taking off her sneakers and trying them on. They are a little big and she kinda feels like a poser, but for the most part, they are very comfortable and cool. And free. And someone abandoned them in an old suitcase in the attic. So if you think about it, Nicole’s just rescuing them.

Then her cell phone rings stopping her mind from making more excuses.

“Snitch,” she says immediately.
“Nic…”

“I told you that I didn't want-“

“It wasn’t me, Nicole, whatever you think I did” Greg interrupts sounding a bit tired.

“Oh.”

“What happened, anyway?”

“He made breakfast for me, Greg. And he left me a note wishing me a good day a school!”

“How dare he!” Greg says obviously not taking Nicole seriously.

“Greg.”

“I don’t know why it bothers you so much. What? Did you really want to make your special recipe? Cereal and milk?”

“Hey! It took me a long time to perfect the proportions.”

Greg laughs kilometers away.

“Anyway,” Nicole moves her toes inside the boots feeling the space. “How’s grandma doing?”

“Fine as of yesterday. I just dropped her home from the doctor. He said she is doing pretty fine for someone her age.”

“Nice.” Nicole stands and goes to the window to close it. “Did you cover it yourself?”

“Nah, not even in my dreams I have that kind of money. My parents send me some so now I’m going to buy that jacket that I saw at H&M.”

“Has my mom-“


“What’s up with you?”

“It’s just that…” Greg goes silent for a second. “…oh, just forget it, you’re going to get mad at me.”

“What, Greg?” She is indeed getting mad.

“See?” She hears him laugh. “Why are you so worried about her?”

“Well, she hasn’t called in a while and-“

“No, like, why? Why do you care so much if she calls? She’s the one that should be worrying 'bout you.”

“She’s my mom and-“

“And she left.” Greg completes and Nicole gets even more annoyed by the second. “Look, she's probably doing you a favor. Your dad-“

And now is Nicole's turn to interrupt him. “My dad!”’, she can feel her nails digging in her palm.
“He’s never home, Greg. He doesn’t care! My mom did and now… I just- I wish she took me with her…”

“Nic, listen to me-“

“He’s doing nothing to find her-“

“…your dad is doing-“

“Gregory!” Nicole just wishes Greg could understand what she’s going through. “Just tell grandma I love her and that I'm still coming in summer, ok?”

“Nic-“

Before Gregory could say anything else, Nicole hangs up.

Well, these family calls weren’t going great.

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One, two, silence. One, two, silence...

Waverly moves her eyes through the frets until she finds the next fingering position as her body is keeping the tempo of the song. She skillfully plays the phrase that she has been practicing this past couple of days, feeling confident, maybe too much. In the fractions of a second where her hand advances through the fretboard, she remembers flaming red hair and just at that moment of distraction, her pinky finger slides one fret more and ends up pressing the thirteenth fret instead of the twelfth. The fulminant note of the phrase ruined, just like Waverly’s good streak.

Pikachu makes a sound like he’s mad at Waverly for missing the note.

“I know, I’m sorry.” She lets out a heavy sigh and mentally crosses out the seven repetitions that she had managed to get perfect one after the other.

Her hands fall by her sides dramatically and she stands up, leaning her guitar on the chair. She walks to the window with her arms up, stretching her back. When she opens the window, the various smells of the city enter her nose and the sound of the street fills the room. She turns her torso and stretches a bit more. Finally, she lets her arms down and relaxes. She picks up her phone from the desk and unlocks it.

Chrissy, 17:38: [contact attached] here’s Nicole’s number. She hasn’t confirmed the next class, so we have to do that

Chrissy, 17:38: and i thought it’s better if you ask

Chrissy, 17:39: so now you have her number and you have hers [winking emoji]

Chrissy, 18:03: i just finished with the 5 yo kid

Chrissy, 18:03: i swear they’re just paying me to keep him occupied for an hour and it's not even easy money
Waverly, 18:17: thanks, i'll ask her

Waverly, 18:17: at least it's not the twins that Robin got

Chrissy, 18:18: easy for you to say, your teaching teens

Waverly adds the new contact and names it ‘Nicole not Hot’. To be honest, the redhead had left a weird impression on Waverly, and not because it’s creepy or anything like that, but because the sensation is new. Something is telling her that she just met someone important. They'll probably be great friends. Waverly is confident that Nicole won’t cancel the next class. She looked determined at the end of their first class; even if in the beginning she looked like a lost puppy. She noticed that the redhead became more relaxed by the minute. Nicole showed her a naturally confident attitude which had impressed Waverly.

All week, Nicole's voice saying you must be super talented kept echoing in her head. It hadn’t been the first time someone had commented on Waverly’s skills in her instrument but somehow, when Nicole said it, it was like Waverly wanted to believe it.

She’s very thankful for her kind words, but she would appreciate if they would stop ringing in her head making her make dumb mistakes.

Waverly, 18:24: Hi Nicole! It’s Waverly, hope you don’t mind that Chrissy gave me your phone number. I was wondering, are we still up for Tuesday class?

She leaves her cell phone on the bed again and the pink diary catches her eye. She ignores that uncomfortable thought in the corner of her mind once again and gets ready in the chair, guitar in her lap. She puts her fingers in ninth position and inhales deeply. Waverly thinks of the sound she wants to produce and starts feeling the tempo running through her again.

First repetition. One, two and three and...

Nicole locks herself in her room, even if there's no one else home to interrupt her. She looks at the boots and tries to pretend she's not crying. She loves these boots but she hates them.

When you’re a kid, feelings seem so easy. Either you’re sad or happy. Calm or angry. Bored or having fun. There really wasn’t an in between. Nicole wishes someone would have told her that feelings could be so complicated, two things at a time.

It was with Shae where she felt like this before. In the last moments of their relationship, they still loved each other. Nicole thinks they might still be in love, that’s why this hurts so much. But more and more often she found herself enjoying the silence between them but at the same time hating it. They would be doing something fun but at the same time, they knew the other would rather be somewhere else.

It’s weird being human, Nicole thinks. But luckily Shae, who Nicole sometimes thinks is some kind of supernatural being because she never holds grudges, knew when to put a stop to the relationship. And Nicole felt relieved but heartbroken.

And now, Nicole doesn’t know how to define how she feels.

In front of her, there's a box with the various things she got from the attic. The cassettes were exciting but at the same time, she wanted to destroy them, burn them, or do whatever thing that would let her liberate the anger inside of her.
She also has a lot of things to do but at the same time, she doesn’t want to do anything. More than anything, she feels frustrated. Her phone rings in her pocket but she ignores it for a long time until curiosity wins. Nicole's face lights up when she reads the text.

Nicole, 18:45: Yes! Same hour and place?

Nicole’s in the middle of adding the new contact when Waverly’s response comes through.

Waverly, 18:46: Ok! Practice a lot!

Now Nicole knows she feels excited.

Waverly opens her bedroom window a bit annoyed. It’s past eleven and a girl needs all the beauty sleep she can get. Well, she doesn’t need it, she just likes to sleep.

“Waverly!” Champ half shouts and half-whispers, like he didn't just make a lot of noise just throwing rocks at her window.

“Champ? What are you doing here?” Waverly rubs her hands on her arms trying to regain a bit of heat.

Champ holds up a plastic bag, showing her a food container that predictably contains two hot dogs, fries and probably two beer cans.

“Come down and have some food with me, bae.” Champ tries to display his most charming smile and, for some unknown reason, it works on Waverly. Puberty and insecurity together are a bad, bad combination.

Waverly silently makes her way through the apartment. She hopes that Gus is sleeping profoundly and gets to the door. She can hear some noise coming from the doors of her neighbors and when she goes outside the city is still alive. They sit on the building stairs and Champ offers her a hot dog and Waverly declines, picking a fry instead.

“I had dinner already, thanks”, Waverly lies. She hasn’t eaten anything since Nicole’s text came through. It left a weird feeling in her stomach. She’s also a vegan, a fact about herself that Champ tends to forget all the time, but she decides not to comment on it this time. This guy has chosen to come to see her after his shift in the store ended.

*That has to count for something, Waverly thinks, the least I can do is sit with him.*

Champ shrugs and brings the container closer to him. He proceeds to get out the drinks and to Waverly's surprise, he hands her a bottle of ice tea. He picks up his coke and starts talking.

Waverly hears him talk about joining the basketball team, about his job and how much he hates his co-worker, a guy that just came to the country from Japan. Waverly finds him very nice, but she supposes Champ doesn’t share that feeling.

After the hot dogs are eaten, the fries finished and the bottles emptied, Champ starts the same dance like any other time he comes to see Waverly. James Hardy says nice things to Waverly and just a few times those things make her uncomfortable for being either too cheesy or kinda rude. He takes her hand and at the end, he tries to kiss her but Waverly is always faster and turns her head leaving the kiss to linger in her cheek instead of her lips. If she’s going to have her first kiss with Champ, she might as well wait for a more romantic moment than being in front of Curtis’ apartment building, him smelling a little like sweat and grease, her feeling super sleepy, hip-hop
music coming from the corner store and some guy singing badly at the top of his lungs.

Waverly returns to the building despite Champ’s protests and gets to the McCready’s apartment. She carefully turns the doorknob and takes a few steps towards her room but there's something off. She doesn’t remember turning on that light…

In the living room, an angry Gus is sitting in her armchair.

*Oh, poop.*

“Can you explain to me what exactly are you doing outside this late?” Gus is still in the chair but Waverly feels like she’s looking at her from above.

“Uh.”

“UH?!” Gus repeats dramatically, Waverly would laugh if she wasn’t in fear for her life. “I think you’re a much cleverer girl and you can give me a better answer than that.” She waits for Waverly to give a much cleverer girl type of answer.

“Sorry, Gus. I was just downstairs with Champ…” Waverly starts to explain herself but Gus cuts her off.

“Champ? What is he doing here at this hour? Is he bothering you? You just wait till Curtis has a word with Mr Harries and-“

“No, wait. It was my fault, I shouldn’t have gone outside. I’m sorry.”

Gus is still not happy, though. “Waverly Earp, how can we trust that we can let you travel alone to Purgatory if you’re making these types of decisions? How can we trust that you can look up for yourself if you’re going out at midnight-“

“It was eleven…”

“just to see a boy?”

Waverly should probably wait a couple of weeks now before asking to move in with Wynonna, at least until Gus forgets this little incident. She puts her best "I’m sorry" look on her face and hopes that Gus will take pity on her. It works. Her aunt’s face dissolves into a little smile and gets closer to Waverly to put her hands on the girl’s shoulders.

“Look, I just want you to be careful. At your age, it’s easy to let a boy get too, um, *handsy*…”

*Oh, no. No. No, no, no, no.*

“Gus, it's not what you think! I swear we were just talking!” Waverly cuts her aunt off before Gus could say something she could not forget.

Gus looks at her for a moment and luckily decides that her niece is telling the truth, which is a relief. “Ok, but, I still think we should have this conversation. See, when I was your age-“

“OK! I’m going to bed. Um, alone!” Waverly starts walking fast to her room. “Love you! Night!” She says before closing her door with more force than necessary. Pikachu doesn’t seem affected by the sudden noise but the girl wonders if her uncle heard her.
That was not the conversation she was expecting to have with her aunt right now. *We have internet now, people!* Waverly thinks to herself.

She sees the pink diary in the corner of her eye. She might put it in Pikachu’s cage so he can murder it. The little thought in the corner of her mind is growing a little with each passing second. It’ll get to the point where it is impossible to keep ignoring. But tonight, she will.

She changes to her pyjamas again and, at the last moment, puts an extra blanket on the bed. She takes her phone to check if the alarm is programmed (it is) and just before turning the screen off, she opens the last text from Nicole.

Waverly sleeps with a smile on her face.

____

Nicole wakes up on the weekend with a smile on her face. She’s actively avoiding thinking of the last phone call with her cousin, hoping that with the days he will forget about it and they can live like nothing ever happened, like grown-ups.

She uses her time to investigate how much can she sell the stuff in the box, doing her homework and, even if her hands are killing her, practicing a lot just like Waverly had said.

There weren’t a lot of exercises and they were kind of boring, but they were challenging.

*One, two, three, four, jump a fret. Index, middle, ring, pinky.*

Nicole is doing them as Waverly had told her to: look at your hand, check if your movements are synchronized, do not try to do it too fast, look for quality and not speed, do not tense your right hand, do not put your thumb there, etc. It was incredible the quantity of things she had to keep in mind. And it had been just the first class.

But, for the first time in weeks, she feels something different from the pain and uncertainty that was filling her head.

*One, two, three, four, jump a fret. Index, middle, ring, pinky.*

____

The point of Nicole’s nose is freezing by the time she makes it to her street. The day had been slowly becoming colder and the sky was grey filled with dark clouds. Her old-new boots looked deeply black after she shined them again even if they didn't need it, but they’re hurting a bit. But, hey, they look cool as fuck.

She’s taking her guitar class today. Dolls offered her a ride to Homestead this morning and now, seeing the sky, she’s glad he did even if it was out of character. Or maybe not, Dolls has been spending a lot of time in Homestead, to be honest. Nicole’s being more careful in taking notes of how much caffeine is Dolls consuming. *That many cups are just not healthy.*

She gets to Sheriff Nedley’s house first. It’s on the corner of the street. *You did something in your past life to deserve this,* Eliza said when they were commenting on how inconvenient it was that she was in the same neighborhood as the sheriff. To be real, Nicole prefers it this way. She can keep disaster away from her home.
A few years ago, when she moved in, she used to feel like she lived in the same street as a superhero, a slightly fat with a big moustache superhero. Nedley’s police cruiser is parked in the street and when she passes by she notices the sheriff is standing in front of his house, apparently heading out. Nicole waves her hand and Nedley waves back. She keeps walking but Nedley stops her.

“Wait, kid.”

Nicole turns on her heel surprised, checking in her head if she has done anything illegal lately, not that she ever does.

“Sorry, it’ll be just a second.” The sheriff walks to her and Nicole watches him expectantly.

“Uh…” he starts, “I’m going to make hamburgers tonight, why don’t you come by? I promise I won’t burn them.”

“Sure. Thanks.”

“And, well, if you’re alone in your house and need anything” He reaches into the pocket of his shirt and pulls out a business card. “Here”, he hands it to her.

“Thanks,” Nicole says slowly as she reads the card. It has a few phone numbers on it to contact Nedley. She puts it in her back pocket hoping to end the conversation.

“You better wrap up, kiddo. There’s a storm coming.” The sheriff gets into his cruiser and Nicole keeps walking, passing Mrs Richardson’s house.

She stops on the cement path to her porch. Her father’s Renault is parked in the driveway. So Nicole does what any other would do: she sneaks into her own home. She can hear noise coming from the kitchen. Also some music, which she finds weird, she doesn’t remember hearing music in that house before that’s not hers. She takes off her boots before climbing the stairs carefully, avoiding the two steps that creak and gets to her room.

She checks her phone. Dolls should be here anytime so she starts grabbing the stuff she’ll need. She puts the box of strings in her backpack, the foot stand, her notebook and the yellow mechanical pencil. Nicole checks herself in the mirror and takes her jacket from the closet leaving it in the back of the chair, she can put it on when she leaves.

Suddenly, there’s a loud noise in the kitchen.

“Shit,” Nicole hears in the kitchen and heavy footsteps start climbing the stairs as she hurries to close the door. Her dad walks passing her room leaving a tomato sauce smell in the hallway. Nicole looks out of her window and she can see Dolls SUV turning in the corner so she starts picking her things up. But she’s being a bit clumsy and drops her backpack from the chair. She stops any movement and listens to check if her father heard her.

“Nicole?” She hears from the other room.

Time to fly.

Nicole takes her stuff and runs out of her room. She doesn’t want to speak with Thomas Haught about her day at school or her new classes, even if Gregory thinks it’s a good idea. She also doesn’t want to explain the boots and huge ass big guitar she got from the attic without permission. She hears her dad move in his room but Nicole’s faster and by the time she hears his door open she’s practically jumping off the stairs and opening the front door.
“Nicole! Wait! We need to talk about something!”

She goes out, slamming the door in her way, and jumps off the porch. She runs to the SUV and gets her stuff in the backseat before jumping in the front seat.

“To Homestead!”

“Is that an order?” Dolls asks eyeing her while Nicole puts her seatbelt on and catches her breath. The car starts moving and Nicole turns her head to see her father standing in the front porch, watching her go.

“It’s a suggestion. An hour at Homestead, your new favorite place, apparently. An espresso and an hour of whatever you do in that place. Like, seriously, what do you do in that place?”

“I like the view.”

Oh, la, la. Nicole can’t wait to share this brand new information with Eliza and Jeremy.

“But sadly I can't stay, I have to give Eliza a ride.”

“What? Weren’t you with her right now?”

“Well, turns out she needed me at four to pick her little brothers up”

“Dude, are you telling me you could have given me a ride home?”

“Sorry, I didn't know I was your personal driver.”

“Xavier, when you got your driver's permit you knew you were going to be everyone’s personal driver. You're mom goose.”

Dolls nods slowly. “I guess I do have a soccer mom car, don’t I?” He keeps driving. “The faster I leave you at Homestead, the faster I can get to Eliza,” he reasons.

“Be careful, the sheriff told me there's a storm coming.”

“And you didn't bring a jacket?”

“Uh,” Nicole looks down at herself and, as a matter of fact, she remembers that she left her jacket in her room warming her chair, “I hadn’t noticed”.

“You can borrow mine,” Dolls stops in the next red light and checks the backseat but turns his head again to face Nicole, “I didn't bring mine either”.

They both laugh at their stupidity.

“As long as you’re picking me up later, I'm not worried”

“As you wish, Miss Haught.”

“Ugh, don’t call me Miss.”

“I'll ask Eliza for a jacket for you, and one for me obviously.”

“I’m not trying to be rude here, but, my friend, I think you’re a bit big to fit in any of Eliza’s clothes, but I applaud that you’re experimenting more, though.”
He stops his car in front of Homestead and Nicole jumps out and picks up her stuff from the backseat.

“Do you want something from the menu for when you’re back?”

“That would be nice”, Dolls says from the window, “I have to go, I'll pick you up in an hour, Miss Haught.”

“Ugh.”

Dolls starts his car again and Nicole goes into Homestead.

Gus had questioned Waverly’s Tuesday classes in Purgatory. *It's too much traveling,* her aunt said today before she headed out. And in fact, it is. She’ll have to take the bus back to Big City today and then on Friday she’ll take one back to Purgatory and on Sunday one back to Big City again.

Waverly had a feeling in her gut that if she asked Nicole to change the day of the class to Fridays, she’ll be all right with it. Or not? She doesn’t know what kind of cool stuff a cool girl like Nicole does on Fridays.

This weekend she didn’t go to Purgatory and she was glad to spend some time with her sister before the weekend. Sadly, Wynonna is busy with Homestead so she decided to occupy some of the time before class to get some practice.

Her relationship with the waltz is getting better. She no longer wants to strangle Barrios Magore and instead, the piece is sounding a bit more complete, slightly better each day. That doesn’t mean she doesn’t have a ton of work to do.

She is about to get to the coda when someone knocks on the door. Waverly has been so concentrated that she jumps at the sudden interruption.

“Babygirl,” Wynonna’s head slips through the door, “your little grasshopper is here.”

“Let her in, Nonna.” Waverly leaves her guitar in the case and stands to greet Nicole.

Her sister rolls her eyes and leaves, leaving Nicole standing in the hallway. The redhead enters the room and Waverly feels weird, again, like she's glad to see Nicole but nervous as hell.

“Hey” Nicole waves with her free hand and Waverly finds the gesture adorable.

“Hey, are you ready?”

“Let’s get started” Nicole smiles, showing her dimples. They get the guitars out and, at the same time, the first snowflakes hit the window.

Chapter End Notes
Leave a comment if you have something to say or if you think that Mozart doesn’t make babys more intelligent.

Just three songs this time:

Everything’s Not Lost - ColdPlay  
Prelude No. 1 in E minor - Heitor Villalobos  
Vals Op. 8 No. 4 - Agustín Barrios Mangoré

Spotify playlists:

Chap. 1 and 2.
"Repeat that again," Waverly looks carefully at Nicole’s fingers.

Nicole repeats the exercise again and again and Waverly keeps saying encouraging things like *ok* and *that’s it*. Sometimes she corrects the position of her hand and sometimes she does it herself so Nicole can see how it’s supposed to look.

It’s the middle of the class already and the snow is falling on the street, renewing the white look in Purgatory and Nicole wonders if Dolls is with Eliza and her brothers already. Nicole feels like soon her sweatshirt won't be enough. In fact, her fingers feel weird pressing the strings because her hands are cold even with the heater in the room. Waverly is wearing a white coat, she must get cold easily.

“It’s pretty good! I can see you’ve been practicing,” Waverly says in a kind tone, “do you wanna take a break?”

“Yes, please,” Nicole’s hands are tired, she's finding it three times harder to do the exercises in class than in her room. Turns out she’s not been doing them fully correctly, something about arm angles.

“Ok. Relax for a moment then,” Waverly stands and looks out of the window, “the storm’s not that bad but the clouds on the horizon look *pretty* bad,” she turns her head suddenly to see Nicole with worry in her face. “Were you planning on walking home?”

“No, a friend is picking me up,” Nicole rubs her hands together trying to create some heat, “he’s actually the one who kinda got me into this.”

“Oh, yeah? Does he play or something?”

“Nah, he’s just very encouraging…” she trails off. “And you?”

“Mm?” Waverly sits again in the chair and picks up her guitar.

“How did you start playing?”

“Oh. That. My Uncle Curtis got me into it. He doesn’t play but he thought I could use some distraction when I was little,” she shrugs.

“Were you one of those super active kids?” Nicole's picturing a smaller Waverly running around and the mental picture makes her smile.
“No,” Waverly’s voice sounds less chipper, evasive, and Nicole wonders if she said something wrong, “it was just to take my mind off of things.”

“The guitar must have looked enormous on you.” *It still does*, she thinks to herself.

Waverly is tuning her guitar again and she gets closer to Nicole to pull slightly on the fifth string.

“It did at the beginning but he got me a smaller one and that helped,” she smiles as she turns the machinery, “ok, let's continue.”

“Is it too hard to play and sing at the same time?” Nicole asks at the end of the class looking out of the window.

“No really, I mean, it depends on so many things but I bet you can do it if you choose something easy. Is that what you wanna do?” Waverly is already planning on teaching Nicole a few chords next week. So far, Nicole has been doing very well, she's even jealous of the redhead’s fingers. They’re longer than hers and her hands are quite strong for a beginner.

Waverly remembers her early days playing and how hard it’d been playing the C chord for the first time.

“I thought it might be nice.” Waverly watches as Nicole checks her phone anxiously and drops it in her backpack again.

“Everything ok?” She asks instinctively.

“Yeah, it’s just that my friend is usually on time but I don’t see his car outside.” The redhead kneels down to close the guitar case.

“You can wait here if you want to.” Waverly offers and Nicole thinks for a second.

“I don’t wanna be a bother,” Nicole scratches her head.

“No, it’s ok. I can use some company.”

Waverly makes some tea and they sit in the small kitchen. The furniture is old and it contrasts with the evidently new kitchen appliances. Waverly holds a light blue mug with a little crack in the top and Nicole’s mug is tall and black with a red BAMF written across it. Waverly offered her a huge variety of flavors and Nicole ended up choosing a random one. She takes a sip of the hot amber liquid and tries to guess which flavor it is. She can’t so she looks at the tag. *Tangerine*, she reads.

The snow is no longer falling and she could just walk home, but without a jacket, she prefers to keep waiting. They make small talk for a while and Nicole's finds herself talking like she's talking with any of her friends. Turns out that Waverly is not only beautiful and talented but funny as well. And she laughs at the few jokes Nicole tells, boosting the redhead’s ego a bit.

“So what made you finally decide to take lessons?” Waverly says recalling the past conversation.

“I was watching a friend’s band play. Mattie. They all looked so cool and it was like playing was so easy for them. Actually, Wynonna was there, the girl from the cafe.” She points down.

“Oh right. Wynonna said that she met you before. How do you know Mattie?”
“She’s in the basketball team with Eliza. Are you friends?”

“Yeah, not so much now. We used to take lessons together when I was still living here. And, well, I guess Purgatory is a small town and everyone is connected to everyone in some way.”

Nicole nods. “Wynonna took classes with you?” she remembers the older girl with her leather jacket and the worn out guitar.

Waverly laughs. “Not at all. I taught her. She’s my sister.”

“Wynonna is your sister?” She starts to find similarities between the two brunettes. “Wait, then this is your apartment too?”

“Yep, what did you think?”

“I don’t know, that they were letting you borrow the space. So are you from Big City or Purgatory? Is not hard for your parents that you’re living in different places?” Nicole stops herself from asking more questions when she realizes that she’s asking very personal things from the look in Waverly’s face. The other girl keeps her bright voice when she answers.

“My parents are not around… much. I live with my uncle and aunt in Big City. It’s more convenient for all of us. And Wynonna just came back to Purgatory.”

“So you’re from here.”

“Yeah, for a few generations. In fact, we’re Wyatt Earp descendants.”

“The cowboy? Wow, that’s amazing.” It seems like Nicole can’t keep her words in her mouth when Waverly’s around. She can see how Waverly’s cheeks gain some blush with her comment, making her own cheeks blush too. “Then why did you move to Big City?”

Waverly takes a few seconds to respond and takes a sip from her cup. “My aunt decided that it was for the best if my uncle was near his doctor. He has some problems with his heart. And now they’re managing an apartment complex in the city. And I’m there so I can go to the conservatory.”

Nicole nods her head in acknowledgement and keeps silent so she can listen to Waverly.

“It wasn't too hard. One of my best friends was already in the city and my best friend, Chrissy, got in at the same time as me.”

“I'm glad it wasn't hard,” Nicole says sincerely. “I was living in Big City before.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Four years ago my parents decided to move here.” Nicole leaves out most of the story. Her dad had lost his job and her grandpa, a man that she never got to meet, left him the house and they decided that it was more comfortable and cheaper to move than to keep renting their apartment in Big City.

“Four years? We really missed each other, I moved out of here like seven years ago.”

Nicole laughs, “what part of the city are you from?”

“The north side. Where are you from?”
“South side.”

Waverly hums, classic rivalry between city sides. It’s like they’re looking at some kind of divine board where their paths are constantly near each other in a parallel movement but not touching each other. Nicole can’t avoid thinking that maybe they would have met much earlier. Maybe on a museum trip, one of those occasions where you met with other schools. Or maybe in the subway.

Her phone buzzes, taking away the pleasant atmosphere in the room. She picks it up and reads Dolls’ name in the screen. She excuses herself before picking up.

“Hey, Haught,” Dolls voice comes through.

“X, I'm so glad, are you ok? Did you guys made it to Eliza’s house fine?’”

“Yeah, it wasn't that bad. But Mrs Shapiro didn't let me drive to pick you up. And you? Are you alright?”

“Yeah, Waverly is keeping me company,” Dolls hums in acknowledgement, “so, are you coming?”

“No, sorry,” Nicole’s surprised to hear that, it’s not very Dolls of him missing a commitment, “my parents called and they want me back in the house immediately, apparently the storm is going to get worse or so they said.”

“Wait? What about me?” Nicole is panicking now. She wonders how hard would it be running home carrying the guitar, maybe she can leave it and pick it up tomorrow but she doesn’t feel in the position for asking that type of favors.

“Yeah, they told me your dad called, he’s picking you up.” Dolls says carefully, like he’s telling her that Eliza erased their chemistry project file again.

And Nicole reacts just like that. “What?! Oh boy,” she murmurs and notices Waverly is watching her with a worried expression.

“Didn't he call you or something?” Dolls wonders.

“I changed my number, remember?”

“And you didn't give it to him?!”

“Uh, no?”

“Nicole,” he sighs, “ok, look, they told me to tell you that he’s picking you up, ok? I’m sorry for not calling, I left my phone in the car.”

“Ok, ok. I'm glad you’re ok, I was a bit worried.”

“We’re fine. Gotta go.”

“See ya tomorrow” She hangs up and decides that she's not waiting around for her father.

“Everything alright?” Waverly asks, “is he near?”

“He’s not coming, so I guess I better go,” Nicole drinks the rest of her tea and hopes for the warm feeling to stay there on her way home.

She hangs her backpack on her shoulders, “thank you for everything” she smiles at Waverly, “next
“Yes,” Waverly returns the smile walking with her to the door. “wait, did you bring a jacket?”

“Don't worry. I got good defenses.” Nicole stops to give herself a couple of light punches in the middle of her chest, proving some point.

“You can wait here if you like.”

“I'll be fine. I swear.”

“At least- wait here a second.” Waverly walks along the hallway to the piano room. Nicole hears things moving before Waverly appears again in the hallway with a package in her hands. The smaller girl opens it and reveals a grey hoodie with a little guitar silhouette on one sleeve and some initials on the left side of the chest.

“Here.” Waverly hands her the hoodie. “It's from a festival but they gave me the wrong size. I hope it fits you better.”

Nicole doubts for a second but she takes it and inspects it. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. I never wear it and you need it.”

The redhead considers denying the gesture but then she thinks of the long walk that awaits her and puts it above her own hoodie. It’s a little big but cozy, not to mention that she’s thankful for the extra layer.

“Thanks, really. I promise to give it back next week.”

“Don't worry. You can keep it.”

Nicole smiles, planning to give it back anyway. She hangs her backpack on her shoulders. They go down the stairs and into the cafe. Waverly stops before walking to the main door and signals Nicole to wait a second with her index finger and thumb almost touching. She goes behind the counter and makes a coffee for Nicole.

“Sugar? Cream?”

“Oh, a spoon and yes.”

Waverly prepares the coffee and hands it to Nicole. “Hope it keeps you warm outside.”

Nicole can’t stop her lips from curling up. “Thanks for everything. I owe you.”

She throws a last smile at Waverly whose face is a little red. It must be the heat from the machines. She walks outside and starts walking.

She isn’t even three blocks away from Homestead when she sees her father’s car drive past her the other way. It's starting to snow again. She takes a sip of her coffee, keeps walking and hopes he didn't see her. But no such luck.

The old Renault stops next to her and her father, in a big jacket, comes out of the driver’s seat.

“Nicole.” He calls and walks until he’s in front of his daughter. “Sorry I'm late. I was taking an
important call.”

He studies her for a moment, making her feel weird, but he doesn't say anything about the guitar or the big hoodie that’s starting to get a bit soaked. He opens the trunk of the car and hurries Nicole to get her things in.

Inside the car, her dad starts the motor again and the radio comes to life.

*Where Hector was the first of the gang with a gun in his hand and the first to do time. The first of the gang to die.*

Nicole tries to concentrate on the songs playing on the radio station. Her head is against the window and her breath makes any vision blurry. The car is going painfully slow and all the girl wants to do is open the door to escape. She can probably jump out of it at this speed without hurting herself.

“You know you could have waited for me in the cafe, right?” Her father breaks the silence.

The little Haught doesn't respond, to discourage her father, but he persists.

“I was calling you but it kept telling me that the number doesn't exist.” Dolls voice, that is usually the voice of her conscience too, tells her that she's been a little unfair. *What? He doesn't take me into consideration*, she strikes back.

“I changed my number,” she says flatly.

“Oh,” it's all her father says until he parks the car in front of their house.

She remembers the hamburger waiting for her in Sheriff Nedley’s house and mourns the day she could be having. He opens the trunk and Nicole takes her backpack but her father beats her to the guitar.

She’s not sure if he’s mad with her for taking the guitar without permission and she is seriously hoping that he doesn't notice the stolen boots. They get into the house and before Nicole can make a run for her room, her dad tells her that the dinner is ready.

In the kitchen, her father is taking a container from the oven. The room smells like pasta and tomato sauce. She walks to the bin to throw away the empty cup but her father’s walking towards the fridge so they block each other’s way. Her dad moves so Nicole can pass through.

All is weird and uncomfortable. Even the light in the kitchen looks different with the presence of this person in it. Suddenly, the room is smaller and the proportions change in comparison to her father’s height. She looks at him open the fridge door. He contemplates one bottle of beer in his hand before putting it back in and takes two cans of soda that were definitely not in there that morning. Her father puts both cans on the counter and smiles at Nicole. There's no denying that this man has a kind face and Nicole sees the resemblance between the two of them. And she hates it.

“Wanna eat here? It seems a bit too much to eat in the dining room. It's just the two of us, after all,” he comments and starts serving the lasagna on plates.

That comment annoys Nicole. The implication of why its just the two of them. Who else is going to be here? Thomas Haught drove away his whole family and then his own wife.

She sits in one of the high chairs and her dad sits right next to her.
They eat in silence. Nicole’s not chewing and definitely trying not to enjoy the lasagna. The faster
she swallows the faster she can go to her room. The faster she can go to sleep and hopefully wake
up in a house free of Thomas Haught, but apparently swallowing faster is not one of Nicole’s many
talents. A piece of something goes the wrong way and she starts coughing like there’s no
tomorrow. Her eyes get watery and her father gives her a slight palm on her back. Nicole moves
away from him mainly because it catches her by surprise but her father’s face turns so white, like
he’s going to get sick. He recovers a little and goes up to get a glass of water. Drinking soda right
now is probably not the best idea. She gladly drinks it feeling a bit better, but only a bit.

“Sorry”, her father practically whispers.

Nicole tries to understand his reaction but lets it slip. She's not here trying to relate to someone
who’s going to leave in the morning. Then Thomas looks at her with determination in his eyes.
There’s something important on the tip of his tongue and his daughter can see that. She starts to
feel worried. Is it about her mom?

“Nicole,” he pauses and breathes deeply, “I’ll be home a lot these days. I’m hoping to be here
more, you know?”

No, I don’t know.

“I’m sorry that I wasn't here these past months. There's no real excuse.”

Nicole just listens and no words come to her mind. In a way, she feels excited, the part of her that
remembers the man that used to hold her hand on the way to the park, where she played on the
jungle gym pretending to be as tall as he was, is feeling hope. But the part that was used to not
seeing him ever, the part that would just listen to his voice arguing, is definitely skeptical. So
Nicole just nods once and keeps chopping a piece of lasagna on her plate.

“I want you to know that it’s not because… I wanted to be here, ok? But my job was so demanding
and…” He exhales and runs a hand through his light brown hair. “I’m no longer working there so
I’ll be looking for a job for a while.”

So another job gone. The young girl looks out of the window. It seems like it was true that the
storm was going to get worse.

His father clears his throat and takes a sip of his can. “I hope you don’t mind me cooking—“

“Where’s mom?” Nicole interrupts, turning to face him but he moves his eyes away.

“Washington. Last time I heard, I mean.”

You know where she is? She wants to growl.

“Don’t worry about her. You and me will work this out, ok?”

Nicole swallows a big bunch of mean words, she knows that they’ll be more harmful than
necessary, and storms out of the kitchen throwing her dirty dish on the way with more force than
necessary. It doesn’t break but it makes a loud sound.

“Nicole,” Thomas warns her but she keeps walking, “you can use my guitar, just treat her well,
please?”

She turns surprised. That throws her out of balance. Nicole nods once and walks more calmly to
pick up the guitar case.
She lays in her bed trying to understand everything that had happened on that day. She tries to hold onto that weird feeling of divine coincidence, the one between Waverly and her, when she finally falls asleep.

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Saturday comes to Purgatory and so does Waverly. She spends the morning with Wynonna and Doc. They eat greasy hamburgers for breakfast, courtesy of Shorty, to cure their colds, which is most probably just a way to say hangover. Waverly tells Shorty to just give her some fruit.

They spend the rest of the morning in Doc’s apartment above Shorty’s. She finds it funny how her sister and Doc are both working in small family business’ and living above them. So much for being free spirits and lone wolves.

Doc puts a movie in his old DVD player about a fugitive and a Jewish boy. Waverly and Doc openly cry at the end while Wynonna gives an excuse and goes to the bathroom. She comes back with red eyes, but both of them know better than to mention it.

Waverly tries to absorb every moment of the day. Lately, Purgatory is her escape space, not like a few years ago when she ran from it. It’s not that she hates her life in the city, its fine, really, but she misses this place and wants to have more days like this. Far away from the city and the noise and the smell and the fast pace of everything. She misses walking in the night from one side of town to the other without anything big happening around.

And above all, she misses Wynonna.

To be honest. Wynonna is 50% of the reason why she wants to come back to the little town. Other reasons are mostly her future. What a thing, right? Move to a small town because of her future. But it’s true. The past year, Waverly has been questioning if it is right for her to keep studying in Big City’s Great Conservatory.

Make no mistake. She loves music and playing music. She loves her guitar and everything that playing it brings her, but she's also fifteen and feels trapped at the idea of only doing that one thing her whole life. Probably a good call to give this a good reflection. Waverly is a good kind hearted kid who wants to give herself one hundred percent to everything. So you can imagine how hard it is becoming to have perfect grades in her freshman year of high school and at the conservatory. All that and still be able to keep a mildly good social life? Someone give this kid a trophy. Another one.

“You know what I been thinking about lately?” Chrissy asked while walking out of the main doors of the conservatory on Thursday, “we don’t dance anymore like we used to.”

And it was true. Sleepovers at the Nedley residence were a thing from the past. They used to sing to all the pop songs that the radio played and learn the steps from the music videos.

Waverly wanted that back, a sense of freedom. Time to dance and time to not worry that much. Just the necessary.


New lifestyle.
When Michelle Gibson arrived from god knows where, after more months than anyone could remember, like she just came back from the corner store, with the idea to sell the old Earp Homestead, everyone thought she was joking. Gus just shook her head and didn't even try to get out of Michelle where the hell had she been. Curtis, of course, found the humor of the situation even if it was obvious that it pissed him off seeing his sister-in-law apparently being ok with leaving her children for months.

A few days before, good to her word for once, she came back with a good offer from Herman, the oldest of the Tates that had just inherited the family business and was looking to expand their land, and they all saw that Michelle wasn't kidding after all. In all honesty, there was nothing anyone could really do to change Michelle's opinion. She was within her rights to do what she pleased with her dead husband property.

Wynonna didn't say anything about it when Waverly told her on the phone, just a few weeks after being released. But Waverly was pretty sure that, just like herself, Wynonna was glad that she never had to go back to that place. Willa was indifferent for the most part while she was planning her last year at college, well, that was until Michelle spoke of the possibility of buying some kind of business. Of course, Willa would be happy about it, she was just about to finish her business administration degree. So her older sister was suddenly all hands on deck before leaving for college.

Moving all the things at the homestead had been quick. Shorty, Curtis, Mama and Doc put all the important things in boxes in less than a week, closing the deal with Herman the next day and distributing all the things between houses and businesses until Michelle bought a new place before leaving again.

The boxes at Doc’s apartment are the last ones to be moved. So after a few months of procrastination, they finally decided to put them in the trunk of Doc’s old car and back seat, crushing Waverly, and drove them to the other side of town to Homestead Cafe. On the way, Wynonna keeps finding clever ways to tease Doc about his new full beard. Apparently, he’s growing it because of reasons they wouldn’t understand.

“Minimalist lifestyle is starting to look really appealing,” Wynonna groans at the last step of the stairs, dramatically dropping the lightbox she’s carrying. Waverly frowns wondering if there’s anything breakable in the box. Doc is climbing behind her, carrying three boxes at the same time while holding a cigarette between his lips.

“No smoking inside the apartment,” Waverly declares as she takes the cigarette from his mouth and extinguishes it on the sole of her boot. Doc nods once to sign I understand and I’m sorry.

They sit on the second-hand couch and start going through the boxes.

“Look, baby girl!” Wynonna throws an old picture of Wyatt Earp in her way. The younger Earp studies the old piece of history. “Holy shit! Doc! This kinda looks like you!”

Wynonna shows them a pic of another man that, in fact, looks like Doc but with a huge ass moustache.

“I do like to think that I have nicer…” He runs a hand over his face, caressing his own beard.

Waverly then opens a box full of hats. “At least this is the box you threw on the floor. Guess this is straight to the garbage,” she comments but Doc practically rips the box from her hands. He picks
up a red Stetson and puts it on turning to Wynonna with a big goofy smile.

“Red’s not your color, dude,” Wynonna comments unimpressed and resumes her scrambling around looking for something in the photo box. She picks up another photo of the same dude. “Not gonna lie, this whole thing is starting to get scary.”

Wynonna hands her the new found photo and Waverly finally recognizes the man.

“Doc Holiday.”

“At your service, miss,” Doc says automatically.

“No, like, this man’s name is Doc Holliiday, just like…”

Wynonna gasps and spends the next half hour discussing with Doc about immortality. Somehow, it ends in the middle Earp trying to prove that Doc is some kind of vampire.

Waverly keeps looking at all the old pictures from the past. There’s so much history in the boxes that she’s almost sad that Mama sold the old homestead. Almost.

She finds an album with the most recent photos of Ward and Michelle, Willa, some more of Wynonna and just a few of herself. She’s looking at this photo of the both of her sisters in a field wearing white dresses when Doc tries to take away his arm from Wynonna. She has a strong grip on it as she looks at his skin, with a magnifying glass she got from somewhere, to check that there’s nothing suspiciously sparkly.

“Wynonna, may I say that miss Willa and you look very much alike when you were young.”

Wynonna shifts her attention from the poor man’s arm to look at the picture.

“Yep. It doesn’t even seem like we’re three years apart, right?” Wynonna smiles fondly at the photograph.

Waverly gets a sting of jealousy at the look on her sister’s face and tries to put an end to the conversation pulling another picture from the box. It’s in the same field but now Waverly is in the frame, wearing a white dress just like her sisters.

“Yeah, me and Willa really looked alike,” Wynonna says. She’s now standing behind the couch with her body resting on her arms, reaching to see the picture in Waverly’s hands.

“Didn’t I?”, Waverly asks in a small voice and that little doubt in the back of her mind takes a step forward.

“Well, you always have been special,” Wynonna comments like is the most obvious thing in the world.

“Indeed.” Doc flashes her a kind smile.

Special, Waverly thinks bitterly, different, strange.

Wynonna leans and hugs her from behind like she’s sensing her sister’s mood.

“Hey,” her sister kindly says by her ear, “special,” she remarks. “Like I said, baby girl. Being different from us is good news, right? You’re not a twenty-something spoiled brat or a criminal who everyone hates.”
The little Earp holds on to her sister’s words smiling.

“Ok, ok,” She says putting the picture back in the box, closing it, “but, honestly, Nonna, not everyone hates you. They come to Homestead, right? That must mean something.”

“So innocent, Waves. They still hate me, but our coffee? Baby, they love it.” Wynonna winks and straightens her back.”Now, let's figure out where’s that stupid gun.”

Life in the Haught residence has acquired a new half unwelcomed routine.

When Nicole woke up the first morning, she almost got a heart attack when she was going down the stairs and the door opened unexpectedly. Thomas Haught came into the house wearing sporty clothes. Every morning he gets up early and goes for a run. Then, he comes back and starts cooking breakfast for both of them. They sit and eat in silence. There have been one or two attempts of making conversation, but no luck whatsoever.

Nicole’s strangely missing her perfectly proportioned bowl of cereal.

Then she goes to school where she pretends everything is normal. But not so well. The redhead can’t stop complaining about the “strange” things her father does. Her friends keep telling her that that’s just normal dad behavior.

“My dad is always trying to bond with me at dinner, but it always ends the same way,” Jeremy changes his voice making it deeper, “why can’t you just join a sports team like Xavier?”

“Ha. At this point, I have no real privacy. My door is broken and I can’t close it. And my brothers keep coming and going. Those bastards.” Eliza says at the lunch line when Nicole complains about how Thomas keeps walking into her room in the afternoons to ask her how she's doing.

Dolls doesn’t say anything. He just stares at her and Nicole understands that she’s blowing it all out of proportion.

She really just wants to hate Thomas Haught, but he’s acting like the perfect househusband. He bakes cookies and dusts all the pictures in the house. He does laundry and rearranges all the furniture in the living room. Then, Nicole has to reconnect all the cords on the TV and stereo.

She tries to spend all of the time she can outside her house, seeking refuge in her friend’s houses.

Eliza’s house is nice but always overcrowded. They squeeze another chair at the little table so she can sit with them to have dinner. She almost never goes to the Chetri’s residence, even if his dad made clear in Christmas that she was always welcome. But the pictures of his mom around the house are an unpleasant reminder of her own mother. If her mom had an accident, would they ever find out? Would someone know where to call?

They usually spend time at Dolls’ house in the rich neighborhood of Purgatory; next to the Crofts, the Gardners and the Cloties; each house separated by four Haught houses. But when the sky turns dark, Dolls’ dad appears and ask his son to escort his friends to their homes. Dolls drops Jeremy and Eliza first, making sure to spend more time than necessary driving to Nicole’s. Her father’s usually on the front porch waiting for her and waves his hand at Dolls. In those days, she
manages to escape dinner with her father.

But the other days, when she has nowhere to go, she locks herself in her room doing homework, listening to music, binge-watching some show or, well, practicing Waverly’s exercises the most silently she can play them. Those days she can’t escape dinner. In those days, she thinks about going to Sheriff Nedley’s house and having dinner with him but if her father looks for her, it would be a hard explanation to do on both sides.

Other days, they go to Homestead Cafe, where she is starting to become a regular, although, she never goes alone. When she finds Wynonna behind the bar, the older girl makes sure to get out at least one joke about Nicole’s last name and for some reason, Dolls finds them really funny. They talk to Rosita, who stops between tables to chat a bit with them but mostly with Jeremy. Chemistry really brings people together.

One good thing that happened thanks to the whole situation is that she's not crying about Shae anymore. She might see her ex-girlfriend from time to time in school and even once when she manages to sell a pair of heels to one of her friends. Shae found really funny that Nicole even owns a pair.

But the very best thing: Waverly’s Tuesday class.

Nicole sends one or two (or more) texts asking about something regarding the exercises, trying to make conversation. And Waverly answers quickly almost always and Nicole tries not to enjoy that fact too much.

She looked for Waverly Earp on Instagram but sadly it was a private profile and she chickened out and didn't send a request. But she found something on YouTube, a video of Waverly playing the guitar at some competition, looking just as breathtaking but younger.

So, two weeks after the storm, literally and figuratively, Nicole and Waverly are back at the little piano room above Homestead Cafe.

“So,” Waverly starts, “I’ve been thinking about what you said, about singing and you obviously have been studying so I think you can start with a three-chord song- It’s an easy song but, if you don't like it, we can choose something else.

“What song?” Nicole encourages.

“Knocking on Heaven's Door, do you know it? it’s by-”

“Guns & Roses.” Nicole completes at the same time as Waverly finishes her sentence.

“-Bob Dylan”

“Oh,” both girls pause for a second staring at each other before slowly breaking into laughter.

“Yeah, I think I might have heard that cover, right…” Waverly finally says after a while.

Nicole can't find a way to stop smiling at her. There is some kind of weird reaction to her presence and she's not about to start exploring that.

“Sorry, I didn’t know that was a cover.”

“Don’t worry, if you know the song and you like it then that is a good one to start. So, are you up for the challenge?”
Nicole remembers last year listening to too much Guns & Roses with Eliza. “Yeah, definitely.”

“Okay,” Waverly takes her guitar and gets closer to the ginger, “so this song is good because it uses four chords- Wait, I told you that it had three, right?”

“I think so?”

“Sorry, it’s actually four chords. Don’t worry, C and A minor are basically the easiest ones. And, in general, these four chords are so commonly used that you’re practically halfway through this playing and singing thing."

“First, the G chord.” Waverly puts her fingers in position and Nicole instinctively tries to imitate her. “You have to put your second finger on the sixth string and,” she waits for Nicole to slowly catch up, “third fret. Now, the first finger goes on the fifth string, second fret.” Nicole does it without a problem. So far, so easy.

“Then, your third finger goes on the third fret, first string.” Waverly plays the chords that she has probably played thousands of times in her life and her student struggles to accommodate her fingers. Her last finger is just not cooperating so the brunette takes her finger to help her.

Nicole's cheeks fill with color but the other girl seems not to notice.

“Don’t worry too much, your hand will get stronger and you’ll get used to it. Now play all the strings like this.” She does as she says and Nicole follows, just to find a very incomplete sound, not like Waverly’s, who’s guitar lets out a clear and sweet G chord. “Very good.”

Nicole disagrees but tries not to express it. *Be confident, Nicole.*

“Now, let’s see why your strings not sounding. Don’t move your hand.” The brunette pulses the sixth string and it makes a weird buzzing sound. “You have to press harder on this one and try to always put your finger at the end of the fret.”

Nicole does and the other girl tries again to find a much better sound. Then she plays the fifth string and apparently doesn’t find anything to correct. But then she plays the next one and it sounds muted.

“Here you're slightly touching the string with your first finger. Can you feel it?”

The redhead pays attention and feels the metal string with her index finger.

“To solve it you just have to arch your fingers more.” Waverly gets closer to look at Nicole’s fingers and unintentionally closer to her face. “Try not to put your thumb that high, at least for the moment.” Then the younger girl slightly pulls her wrist out.

Nicole wonders if the closeness is something the other girl is used to but her thoughts are interrupted when Waverley plays all her strings again. The sound is clear with all the strings sounding. It’s not as great as Waverly’s sound, not in a million years, but is so much better.

“Right, next chord?”

Waverly writes the chords chart in Nicole’s notebook and explains how to read them and some
She’s delighted by Nicole’s attention. She’s been teaching a little boy a few blocks from Curtis’ apartment and finds it exhausting. The kid is nice, but it’s obvious he’s not interested in learning. Chrissy and Robin weren’t joking when they said that they were practically babysitting. But teaching Nicole is exciting and in some ways refreshing.

It reminds her of the time when she taught Wynonna how to play, except that her sister spent half of the time joking about escaping by jumping out the window (and twice she did). Wynonna keeps insisting that she forced her, but that’s not true, she was just very insistent. By the time Curtis finally made her understand that she shouldn’t be pushing her own interests on other people, Wynonna was already asking questions and asking her to teach her some stuff, but in a way that made it seem like it was whatever. It wasn’t whatever to Waverly. Her sister might not have gotten into playing classical guitar but at least it kept her from getting into trouble for some time. Not enough, though.

The two girls start collecting their stuff when Waverly announces that the hour has come to an end. Waverly doesn't have much to do but to put her guitar in its case and wait for Nicole to finish. She watches as the redhead shoves her things in her backpack and closes her guitar case.

The days after the storm, Waverly couldn't find an explanation for the weird ball of heat in her chest. From one moment to another, she would start thinking about the redhead girl from Big City living in Purgatory. It’s like she just found a new kind of connection with her and she wants to explore it.

Last Tuesday she wanted to ask her to stay and talk with her again, but she got too nervous and tried hard not to ramble so she ended up saying nothing. She kept that nervousness till the next day when the first text showed up on her phone screen and it gets her hopes up. Nicole obviously wanted to be her friend too.

Nicole stands with her backpack on her shoulder and her case in her hand but not really making any movements to leave so Waverly takes the opportunity.

“Hey, do you wanna have something to drink before you leave?” She asks rapidly and the other girl looks dumbfounded, so Waverly naturally starts regretting her decision. But Nicole finally answers with ease.

“Yeah, if I'm not imposing,”

The scene is very much like two weeks ago. Both girls are sitting in the apartment kitchen making pleasant conversation. The water is slowly trying to boil on the stove and there are two mugs waiting to be filled. Nicole randomly chooses a tea bag from the big collection of flavors and purposefully doesn’t look at the tag. She’s hoping to make a guess correctly this time.

The redhead remembers the hoodie that she didn't return last time so she reaches into her backpack. She takes the freshly washed piece of clothing and tries to hand it to Waverly who refuses to take it back.

“I meant it when I said that you could keep it. Nobody is really going to use here so…” Waverly reassures her but Nicole is still not sure about it.
“I’ll leave it here, maybe your sister will use it,” Nicole leaves it on the back of the couch.

“It’s going to end in the back of some closet,” Waverly comments but says no more about the topic.

Nicole feels her phone buzz in her pocket so she checks it just to find a few notifications from her friends’ group chat. It’s probably just memes.

“Do you have to leave?” Waverly asks with a hint of sadness in her voice.

“Not at all, it was just a text” She puts her phone back in her pocket. “Actually, these days I’m not too eager to get back home.” She remembers Dolls face telling her to stop complaining and regrets bringing the topic up.

“Why?”

“Ah. Well. It’s been different these past weeks, nothing to worry about.” She says and Waverly smiles at her, so she keeps going. “Actually, it’s kinda making me go out more. But now I feel like I’m invading other people’s homes.”

“You’re not invading here.”

“I’m glad, I kinda pay to get in.” She throws a smile to make clear she's joking.

“No, I really like your company.”

Both girls cheeks get different shades of red. The water must be boiling by now.

“What about you? Is it hard to come and go to Big City? I can come another day if it's more convenient for you,” Nicole deflects but means what she's saying.

“Thanks, honestly,” Waverly laughs nervously, “I like that it is on Tuesdays. That way I can come here in the middle of the week. Don’t tell my aunt, I wont hear the end of that.”

“Not a word.” Nicole closes an imaginary zipper over her mouth.

“But it's worth it, you know?” They hold each others gaze for a second. “I mean, to see Wynonna, you know? But sometimes I feel like I’m interrupting her. She's so busy with the cafe and I feel like an annoyance.”

“I don’t believe you’re an annoyance for anyone.”

“I hope. I just want to spend more time with her. We haven’t spent much time together at all.”

“How so?”

“Um,” Waverly stands to turn down the stove. “Things, I guess. I find it funny how I miss Purgatory so much these days.”

“I get it. When I moved here, I hated this place. I would spend too much time wishing to go back to Big City, but, now? I kinda love it here. This town grows on you.”

Waverly nods slowly.

They keep a comfortable silence while Waverly pours the water in the pair of mugs. They prepare their respective mugs and Nicole inhales the scent of the hot beverage. She can’t place the smell.
“I want to come back,” Waverly says while looking through the window.

“What?”

“Purgatory”

“You’re already here,” Nicole says lightly sensing that Waverly has more to say.

“I mean,” the brunette turns to face the redhead with determination in her eyes, “I want to come back and live here.”

Nicole doesn’t know what to say, so she stays silent waiting to Waverly to explain. She takes a sip of her mystery tea. Meanwhile, Waverly collects her thoughts.

“I haven’t told anyone this, but,” she takes a deep breath, “I want to leave the conservatory. Oh gosh, I probably shouldn’t be telling you this.”

“No, it’s fine.” Nicole makes a movement to take the other girls hand but thinks better of it at the last second and puts her hand next to Waverly’s, closing it.

“I do love to play. You have no idea how much it has given me. Playing the guitar has carried me through hard times. It’s just that,” she pauses for a second and continues, “what if I do this my whole life and turns out that this is not what I was supposed to do? What if this is not my passion?”

“And coming here would help you with that?” Nicole genuinely wonders.

“Probably not, but if don’t start somewhere, then, when am I going to?” Waverly sighs and tries to explain the mess in her head. “It would be so easy,” she continues as Nicole moves her chair to be closer to her, “to just keep doing what I’m doing. Going to the conservatory, going to festivals and competitions, make a career out of this, whatever that means. I know I can do it, it’s already in motion,” she looks at the redhead who nods in acknowledgment, “but I don’t know if I want to. Maybe I’m just being dumb.”

“Then move back here, I’ll help you to do whatever you want to do,” Nicole says realizing that, one, her words are full of truth and, two, that maybe she’s crossing some lines that she shouldn’t be crossing.

And here they are again, staring at each other but at the same time sharing understanding.

Waverly smiles at the perspective of Nicole helping her in Purgatory. How is that she has spent years living here and hasn’t heard about the Earp girls? Their absence in town must have helped. But the redhead’s words fill her with hope and she can't help but smile.

There’s a ton of things to be done before she can come back, but having all the words out of her chest is such a nice feeling that she feels so much surer.

They sit in silence for a few minutes, drinking tea and enjoying each others company, reflecting on the said words. There’s a feeling of honesty in the air and the sound of the street sneaking in through the window and the bustle of Homestead, through the floor.

“I don’t want to go home because my dad is there,” Nicole confesses, taking advantage of the atmosphere and sudden connection. “He lost his job and now he’s spending all day home. It’s annoying.”

“Why?” Waverly tries not to think about Ward Earp to much.
“He hasn’t been home in, like, forever. And now he comes back like is nothing, like he… I guess he has the right, but I just don't like it.” Nicole sighs hoping that her words don't make her sound like a cry baby.

“And your mom?”

Nicole turns her head in other direction trying to contain the wave of feelings and the tears in her eyes at the mention of her mom. She composes herself and turns back with her eyes shining. Waverly waits patiently.

“Sorry, my mom left a few months ago.

“Oh.” Waverly takes a moment to clear her head. “I’m sorry, it seems like we have a lot in common.”

“Your mom?”

Waverly nods. “She’s usually gone. She comes back for a few days and before you know it, she's gone again. And it was hard at the beginning, but now, we are immune.”

“My mom called a few times but I haven't heard anything from her in, um, maybe two or three months.” Nicole's voice is small and it surprises Waverly.

Waverly rests her hand on Nicole’s and looks directly into her eyes. “Hey,” her voice is soft, “mine neither.”

They hold gazes and a smile slowly breaks into Nicole’s face. Her grin turns into laughter and Waverly can’t do much more than join in, finding humor in the situation.

It takes a few moments until Nicole gains some composure.

“Well, that was one way to light up the conversation.” Nicole wipes a pair of tears from her closed eyes with her free hand.

Waverly’s hand is still resting in Nicole’s, so she gives her a light squeeze and Nicole turns her attention back to her. The brunette gives her a small smile that warms Nicole’s heart.

“I hope you don’t think that I’m trying to minimize what's happening to you. I really hope your mom comes back and that you can solve whatever is going on with your dad. I’m just saying, you can talk to me, uh, if you want to,” she lacks a bit of confidence at the end but the offer is there.

It’s an unspoken invitation. Every confession has made their connection stronger and bigger. It’s turning obvious that a friendship is growing.

Nicole moves her free hand and lays it on Waverly’s hand. She half smiles showing just one dimple.

“Thank you.”

There’s something that Nicole has completely avoided these past weeks. But when Greg’s name
appears on her phone screen the next day in the afternoon, while she watches Eliza’s team practice, she doesn’t hesitate and picks up.

The call connects and Greg doesn’t even say hello before he starts to ramble.

“My god, Nic. You would never guess who I just saw when I was leaving work. Gabriel. Fucking. Torres. And he still has that stupid bike. And now he has a beard. And the worst thing is that he actually looks good. No. The worst thing is, ugh. I don't know what’s worse.”

“Greg?” Nicole tries to catch his attention but her cousin keeps talking.

“I swear he winked at me. Or did he? I mean, I was with my coworker, the one I told you about? He’s too straight, I don't know what girls see in him. He looks like just any dude-bro—”

“Greg!” She doesn’t really scream, but her voice resounds in the gym and some of the girls practicing turn their head to see her. “What the hell are you talking about?” She lowers her voice.

“Gabriel Torres, the guy from my high school, do you remember him?” Greg says more calmly.

It takes her a moment to remember the guy on the motorcycle. “Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“Isn't he the guy who…?”

“Yes.”

“And then he…?”

“Mhmm.”

“What is he doing there? Didn't he got a scholarship to California or something like that?”

“I don’t know. I’m starting to think that I imagined it…”

“The scholarship?”

“No, idiot, me seeing him.” Greg sighs and his voice sounds relieved. “Oh, well. Now that I got it off my chest, I feel so much better. Ok, bye.”

“What? Wait!”

“What?” Her cousin sounds like she's a big inconvenience but she decides he’s teasing.

She takes a deep breath and watches how Eliza, Mattie and a third girl make fun of a bunch of guys from the male team beat each other in an obvious dick measuring tournament. She tries to remember how she practiced her speech in her head but her mind is blank.

“I’m waiting.” Greg prompts.

“I’m sorry, for the other day. I might have overreacted.”

“Ugh. Ok.” Gregory says in his annoyed voice.

“That’s it.”

"Ok, so… how's it going?"
“Um. He lost his job.” Nicole doesn’t have to clarify who’s she talking about, Greg’s picks it up immediately.

“Oh. I thought he already solved that.”

“Solved what?”

“Uh. Nothing. Um. So is he at home?”

“Yes, it’s the worst. I’m trying to spend all my time with my friends and in school.”

“Oh, right. How are your guitar lessons going? Does he know you’re taking them?”

“I think so. He picked me up the other day because it was snowing. He didn’t say anything about me stealing his guitar.”

“You stole what?”

“And his boots,” she adds.

“What?”

“I can’t stand him. I don't know. He’s around all the time.”

Greg laughs. “Ok, I’m just going to say this. I think it’s logical that you’re so annoyed by his presence. You practically lived alone. Just give him a chance.”

“I’m just going to wait until he leaves again.”

“I don’t know if that’s a healthy way to see it but go on, I guess.”

Nicole hears the distinctive sound of a lighter and sighs.

“I thought you were quitting.”

“I just saw a ghost and that gives me the right to cheat, Rayleigh. Also, I can quit whenever I want.”

“Ha. Sure, Horace.” Nicole adds her cousin’s middle name in a mocking tone. Two can play that game.

Gregory lets it slide. “There was something I wanted to tell you. Um.” He exhales, “oh, right. There’s this guy I met…”

“Another guy?”

“Not like that. I met him at my last job and he told me that he builds electric guitars. I’m going to try to get a discount.”

“You’re going to play?”

“No, I’m going to give it to grandma so she can play all those Metallica songs she loves so much. Duh. Obviously it's for you.”

“Greg, you don't have to.”

“I know, but I want to. Just let me do something nice for you. I can and I will.”
“Ok.”

“Hey. Don't be a stranger, ok?”

“Ok.”


That same day, early evening in Big city, the smell of people fills the train where Waverly is with Chrissy and Robin. The three of them got lucky and got seats almost immediately, but Robin gave away his to an old woman, like a gentleman. Waverly is just thankful that she’s not carrying her guitar today, because traveling with it in rush hour on the subway is just a big pain in the ass.

“At least you don't play the double bass,” Chrissy said when Waverly mentioned it at the door of BCU auditorium. They went to see a jazz pianist that Robin seemed to love more that his own mother. He almost fainted when he got the opportunity to talk to her at the end of the concert.

“Easy for you to say, flautist,” Waverly answered and Robin laughed but didn't say anything else. He doesn’t have authority to say anything either. He’s a pianist.

A man squeezes his way through people and pushes Robin who almost falls in Chrissy’s lap. He steadies himself grabbing the upper rail. He has been gaining some height this year, a fact that Chrissy likes too much.

“It’s worth it.” He recites the same line that he’s been saying for the past few weeks. Chrissy rolls her eyes at her boyfriend but offers him a kind smile.

“I mean it. I really wanted to come and see her. She played with Michael Baker and Eddie Gomez, you know?” Robin repeats for the third time that day.

“We know,” both girls say in unison.

“And she has won Grammys and everything. Well, I know that nobody cares about those categories,” both girls nod in acknowledgement, “but I do.”

“Ok, ok.”

“I don't know. I just want to take advantage of the rest of my time in the city.” He says in a hopeless tone.

“I know, honey,” Chrissy says and grabs her boyfriend’s hand.

Robin, unlike Waverly, will be leaving Big City in the summer to also go back to Purgatory, against his will. His dad will no longer support his “hobby” and his parents want him to be closer to home and get his mindset centered on college. Robin pleaded his case but his parents just cannot find jazz as a serious career choice. At the end of the day, Robin agreed and told his girlfriend and best friend that he will just get into college and find a way to crack his parents’ system.

And Robin is a positive guy. He has been finding new positive things about getting back to Purgatory daily, and it only has Waverly wishing to go back more and more.

“At least I’ll be able to see the stars in the countryside,” he says as they climb the stairs to get out
of the subway station. The sun is gone but the brightness in the street is prevalent and the sky is that weird color that the city at night has.

Waverly breathes the cold not-really-clean air and it helps her forget the always present smell of humanity in the subway.

“If you’re not going to rely on the stars to navigate your way through Purgatory, then I don’t really know what’s that good for, love,” Chrissy teases and leaves a light kiss on his cheek.

At the end of the stairs, Chrissy suddenly stops making Waverly almost collide with them. The people behind Waverly just walk around them like nothing happened, used to the fast pace of city life.

“Uh, Chrissy?” Robin asks and they wait a long second before Chrissy talks again.

“Waverly, I think someone is looking for you?” Chrissy half asks the statement and pulls Robin to the side so Waverly can see what she’s talking about.

And it’s not something she expected at all.

Champ Hardy is resting his back on a lamp post, with his arms and legs crossed, looking at the electronics store in front of him. He turns his head, like he sensed the eyes on him, and smiles to Waverly completely ignoring her friends.

“Waverly! I was waiting for you,” he stands straight and takes her hand without permission.

Chrissy frowns at her and sends her a look that means that she would be interrogated later about this whole situation.

“Waiting for me?” She asks confused, “How did you know…”?

“I went to see you at your apartment and Curtis told me that you weren’t there so I came here. I called you and send you a text.”

Right. Waverly had turned off her phone when they got into the auditorium and she didn't bother to turn it back on when they got out. She digs into her jacket pocket and presses the button until she feels it vibrate.

“Would you walk with me?” Champ asks interlocking his fingers with hers. It feels awkward. Her hands are cold and his are sweaty, but it’s a bit nice, so she lets it be.

“I guess that’s our call. See you tomorrow?” Chrissy asks her and Waverly nods.

Robin waves his hand in goodbye before they leave together turning right on the corner and Champ takes her in the other direction and Waverly is in the frontier between being flattered and uncomfortable.

This is definitely not something she expected Champ to do, in all honesty. They usually see each other in high school and maybe in the afternoon when Champ leaves his shift at the corner store. But nothing more. She was actually thinking about ending this, the whole flirting between the lines. It’s just too much work and no reward. And she's a busy girl. A busy woman.

But now he’s making an effort, isn’t he? Is this lowering the bar? They’re young, why bother making this more difficult?
He’s handsome and popular and he’s certainly interested in her. Waverly Earp, the girl with the last name with a bad reputation in their hometown and the boring girl from a small town in the city. Not mentioning the weird girl who doesn’t listen to the top forty and plays classical music. Champ is also from a small town, that they have in common, but he’s a newly born star in school. Popular and charismatic. A bit dumb, but at this age, what boy isn’t dumb?

Robin, maybe, but Chrissy got lucky.

They go to a small park a few blocks away from Curtis’ building. They start walking slowly to the playground, empty at this hour. She’s not worried about getting home a bit late. Gus and Curtis were already expecting her to be late and she’s accompanied, right? No harm here.

They sit on the swing, still holding hands. Waverly is talking about the concert and the coming evaluations at the conservatory. For once, Champ is listening even if she can tell from his face what little interest he has. She’s really hoping she’s not boring him.

She calms herself and allows a bit of silence. Champ talks then.

“I brought you something,” he pulls out of his pocket a chocolate bar with a little red bow and hands it to her.

“Oh. Thanks,” she looks fondly at the little gift. It’s not her favorite but the gesture is there and it brightens her a little. She puts it in her pocket and remembers she hasn’t turned on her phone completely. She taps her code on the screen and tucks it in her pocket again. It immediately buzzes but she decides to ignore it.

“Hey, my text finally came through,” Champ comments. “Bae, I wanted to ask you something.” He stands in front of her and she stands up too, reducing the height difference.

There’s a weird feeling in her stomach and she can’t decide if it’s excitement or fear. Is what is happening what she thinks is happening? She never thought this day would come. Something inside her is telling her that this boy is up to no good when Champ speaks again.

"Would you be my girlfriend?” He grins and tips his head to the side, “what do you say?” He squeezes her hand.

Waverly nods and Champ smiles triumphantly.

This is not the perfect romantic moment, but it’s real and they are here. So she puts the bar even lower and when Champ ducks his head to kiss her, she doesn’t turn away this time, letting him connect their lips in a sloppy kiss.

It’s a new experience. Waverly doesn’t know what she was hoping for, probably something out of a movie. This is not. It feels nice but not super nice. She’s aware of her environment. She can hear the traffic and the people. She can smell the city, Champ’s jacket and his too strong cologne. She can feel his broken lips. It’s definitely not out of a scene of any of her books and certainly not any of her favorite love songs.

She breaks the kiss. Champ still has this triumphant smile and Waverly doesn’t know how to feel about it.

They end up in the corner store where he takes two drinks out of the fridge. He exchanges some words with his coworker, who looks uncomfortable at the idea of letting Champ leave without paying for the drinks. Waverly tries hard not to look at the price tags in the candy section.
He walks her home and gives her another kiss.

When she's finally in her room, Waverly lets herself fall onto the mattress with a heavy sigh. This was not how she expected her day to go.

She’s dating one of the most popular boys in school.

She pulls out her phone and checks her notifications trying not to think of the superficiality of her new relationship. There’s the missed call from Champ and his text. There’s one text from Chrissy asking for a detailed report of her walk with Champ. A picture from Wynonna with Doc making a dumb face.

And one from Nicole that somehow makes her forget about her whole day.

Nicole not Hot, 21:12: Hey! I was wondering if your going to spend spring break in Purgatory. We could do something together?

Nicole not Hot, 21:14: If you're here on friday we can plan something.

Nicole not Hot, 21:14: and if you don’t it's totally ok.

Waverly silently curses her Friday evaluation and answers the text. She’s about to start practicing when she looks at the empty cage in her desk.

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Those text messages were carefully deliberated. Nicole knew that none of her friends were free on Friday afternoon and she’s getting tired of seeing Dolls run and Eliza practice. Every time she’s there, she regrets not going to the tryouts, but in that time she was too happy spending the evenings with Shae and anything that could take away that time was not welcomed. She also wanted to see Waverly, so it looked like she could kill two birds with one stone.

But no luck.

Waverly apologized saying that she wasn’t going to be in Purgatory until Saturday. But, on the bright side, she said that they could plan something for some other day.

Nicole's trying to not be too happy about it.

Anyway, that leaves her with nothing to do and nowhere to go on Friday afternoon. Even the guy she was supposed to meet today asked to see her yesterday to buy her pair of Vans. At least she has money to spend in the break now.

She’s in her room about to watch some Netflix show, her list keeps on growing but she always ends up choosing some random movie or watching the same ones over and over. Nicole stands up to close her door when it opens and her father walks in.

“Nicole, I'm going to buy some things. Do you want something specific for dinner?” Thomas
Haught asks with ease in his voice and an apron on, which surprises her.

Nicole has been doing a fine job avoiding her father. She has been trying to live like he’s not in the house, apart from the fact that she cannot stop complaining. It’s to the point of being ridiculous.

But not really seeing him makes her notice the big difference between the man from two weeks ago from the man in front of her now. She remembers Jeremy saying that he looked half dead, but now Thomas Haught has taken a step into life. Somehow, he looks less thin and his eyes not as red or with big bags under them. He shaved his face and cut his hair making the color a deeper brown and making him look much younger. He looks more like the dad who used to take her to kindergarten than the man she watched from her bedroom window maybe once a week. He even looks taller.

But Nicole is not going to sit and watch this man change for good just to leave again.

She gets back to her desk and closes her laptop. “I have plans,” she lies as she throws some stuff in her backpack.

“Ah. Ok.” There's disappointment in Thomas’ voice, “homework?”

“Oh, yes.” She goes to her closet to pull out her jacket.

“Ok. It’s just that we haven’t spent a lot of time together since I’ve been home.”

Nicole bites her tongue and picks up a scrunchie. She grabs her coppery hair and makes a messy bun. Guilt is starting to crawl in her head but she’s not ready to forgive him for practically abandoning her.

“We’re going to finish a school project,” Nicole hangs her backpack on her shoulder. Thomas steps away from the door so his daughter can exit the room. He walks behind her.

“That’s fine, but if you can get home for dinner-”

“Don’t think so.”

“I would appreciate it. A friend is coming over and would like for you to meet.”

Nicole stops in the middle of the stairs and turns to face her father. She frowns and narrows her eyes.

“A friend.” She prompts.

“Michael,” her father says, seeing behind her words.

Nicole turns and continues her way down. At least it’s not that kind of friend, she thinks. She’s definitely not ready to have a fake mom. I still have a mom, goddammit.

“The deadline is on Monday, so…” Lies.

“Well, at least tell me where you are going to be.”

Nicole stops with her hand on the doorknob. She’s feeling guilty again.

“I don’t know yet. I’ll text you.”

They look at each other and she knows that both of them are trying not to mention the fact that Thomas doesn’t have Nicole's number and vice versa. She hands him her phone with the numeric
keyboard open and he writes his number. He hands it back with a small smile.

“Please, make an effort to come home on time.”

And with that, she gets out.

“Nicole? When is school break starting?” She hears her father voice from inside the house and she starts running.

Nicole ends up in Homestead alone and tired from unnecessarily running. Like any person who’s alone in a cafe and is probably going to spend quite an amount of time there, she chooses a small table in the corner and puts her headphones on. She's thankful for thinking ahead and downloading some movies. Homestead doesn’t have free internet.

Nicole keeps glancing at the door, hoping to see a familiar face.

And with a familiar face, she means a friend, even if the main three were busy right now, not her ex-girlfriend.

Nicole hides her head behind her laptop screen and prays that Shae doesn’t see her sitting alone. She had always complained about the lack of enthusiasm from Nicole to go out, mainly in the last months. To be fair, they had found a middle point in the best part of their relationship. The last thing she wants is Shae thinking that she’s going back to bad habits.

Shae sits at a table in the middle of the room, with one of her friends, the girl that bought her heels, facing away from her. Nicole sighs but then yelps when a hand touches her shoulder. She turns to see a girl mouthing something to her with her hands up in surrender. Nicole recognizes her from Eliza’s basketball team, she's the one that was laughing along with Mattie.

“Sorry, what?” Nicole takes off her headphones.

“Oh, you weren’t listening,” the girl lowers her hands, “I was saying that I didn't mean to scare you.”

Nicole feels her heart beating under her hand, “don't worry, I was distracted.”

The girl studies her for a second. “Sorry,” she repeats.

Nicole takes a moment to look at the other girl. She has seen her on other occasions, mainly in Eliza's practices where she usually had her hair in a ponytail, now, her black long hair is falling free around her shoulders, a little bit longer than hers. She’s wearing glasses that make her blue eyes look a bit bigger.

“May I?” The girl points at the chair next to Nicole’s.

She’s wondering what this girl wants as she nods her head and the girl sits.

“Andy,” the girls shake hands.

“Nicole.”

“I have seen you in practice lately, but not today.”
“Right. Sorry, I usually go with Eliza and she wasn't going today, so…”

“So Shapiro, huh?” Andy wiggles her eyebrows. “And I thought that we were going to have a fan club soon.”

Nicole laughs nervously. There are some pros to seeing the girl’s team practice, apart from admiring their skills.

“So if I'm interrupting something,” Andy says as she runs a hand through her hair, changing the side it falls, “but you looked lonely from my table.” She points to a table at the opposite side of Homestead where a pair of guys she recognizes from school are looking at them.

She didn’t notice that Andy was here before, so she takes a quick glance around Homestead. She doesn’t find another familiar face but she catches Shae turning her head like she was looking at her a moment ago.

“Yeah, I was running from the police and I chose this cafe as my hiding spot,” Nicole jokes.

“What better place to hide than under their own noses, right?” Andy responds making Nicole smile. “Running from home, then?”

The redhead looks at Andy wondering how much she knows.

“What? How do you…?”

“Honestly, girl, I think the whole team knows by now. We have to hear Eliza complain about you complaining, so…” Andy grabs a napkin from the dispenser.

“Oh, god.” Nicole throws her head back and slaps her hands over her face, trying to hide the redness appearing in it. “I should stop talking about it.”

“Hey, if it’s any consolation, at least I heard it directly from Shapiro. She’s your friend, right?”

Nicole is going to have a serious conversation with Eliza about privacy. It’s fine to gossip if it’s between them. But if Mattie spills and Gretta hears… Nicole would rather not think of that.

“Don’t worry, the team won’t talk about it.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t, I have ulterior motives.” Andy winks at her.

Nicole’s wondering what’s going on when she hears a familiar voice call her name.

“Nicole?” Shae’s voice asks. Nicole’s ex is standing in front of the table. The redhead wonders how much of the conversation she heard.

“Shae,” Nicole’s voice is low.

“Hey, can we talk?” Shae’s voice is sure, as always.

“I guess that’s my call,” Andy stands up and smiles at Nicole, “nice to meet you, Nicole.” She extends her hand and Nicole thinks for a moment that she wants to shake hands again, but Andy leaves the napkin in front of her. It’s a little figurine made from the napkin. Nicole contemplates the crane while Andy leaves and Shae sits in the same chair, carrying with her a hot cup of what looks like chocolate.
“What’s up? What you been up to?” Nicole asks awkwardly.

“Not much,” Shae shrugs, “you?”

“Nothing, really.”

“Really? Because I heard you’ve been super busy these days.” Shae takes out her phone. “First, turns out you’re selling shoes and then I found out you’re playing the guitar.” She shows Nicole a post on Instagram she made during the week. It’s the guitar lying on her bed.

“How is that you take her to bed so soon and you and me never-“

“Shae!” Nicole interrupts with her face red as her hair.

Shae laughs again.

“You’re so evil,” Nicole says even if Shae is the least evil person she knows. But she knows her well and knows how to press her buttons. Six months of relationship will do that.

Shae holds up her hands in surrender. “Ok, ok. I’ll stop.” She lowers her hands and rests one in Nicole’s. “And the thing with your dad.”

Nicole hits her forehead with the heel of her hand. “How many people know about that?” She groans.

Shae laughs. “Nic, even if no one told me about it, I notice. I know you.” Nicole sees Shae’s smile turn into a mocking grin. “But, yeah, I heard you talking about it with Dolls in the hallway the other day. You should really control the volume of your voice when you’re angry, baby.”

Nicole notices the term used but lets it slide. Had she been talking that loud? She knows that she been talking too much, complaining too much, but how many people had heard by now? Maybe she should have the privacy talk with herself. She composes herself and takes a sip from her ice tea, hoping that it helps calm her nerves.

“I wanted to apologize.” Shae says in a sincere voice and it throws Nicole out of balance.

“For what? You hadn’t done anything wrong or, I don’t know, did you tell someone about…?”

“Of course not!” Shae slaps her lightly in the shoulder with her free hand. “I’m sorry that we broke up in a bad moment. And it just got worse. You must be having a terrible time.”

Nicole nods. She’s not living her best days but since Tuesday, she's been doing significantly better and keeping her mind busy is helping a lot.

“Is that why you’re going around town?”

“Yeah,” Nicole mumbles.

“Well, you know you can come to my house whenever you want, right? You know my mom’s always around but she likes you.”

“Pressmans love me,” Nicole jokes and then speaks in a serious tone, “thank you, really.”

Shae rests her head on Nicole’s shoulder and Nicole welcomes her resting her cheek on her head. The feeling is familiar and, overall, nice.
“I miss you,” Shae says softly.

The words make Nicole close her eyes. They stay like that for a few minutes, listening to the music coming from Homestead speakers.

*I don’t think it’s me, I don’t think it’s you. It’s the universe. I can feel the change coming over us and its gonna hurt. Oh my god. It took a while…*

Shae turns her head to look at Nicole and suddenly their faces are close. The familiarity of the situation catches both of them by surprise but the magnetism is still there even after a few weeks. Nicole has been missing her too, so she doesn’t stop what's about to happen.

When they were still dating, they wouldn’t do much in public. Neither of them was out yet and it felt dangerous to display affection in such a small town. Usually one of them would stop before something like this happened. But right now, Nicole’s not thinking about it. She feels lips over lips. She smells Shae’s shampoo. She feels their hands together. But nothing really feels right. Kissing her first summer love doesn’t feel the same anymore.

The sound of the doorbell takes Nicole out of her trance and she breaks the kiss. They look at each other and from Shae’s face, she knows the other girl felt it too.

“Sorry, I don’t know what was I thinking.” Shae sighs looking somewhere else...

Nicole squeezes her hand lightly and Shae looks at her. The redhead sends her a kind smile.

“Don’t worry, it happened and it's fine.” She takes her hand from under Shae’s and rubs the back of her neck. “But, yeah. Maybe we need more time to be friends.”

“I know.” Shae stands up and shakes her head. She kisses the top of Nicole’s head. “You can still count on me, ok?”

“And you on me,” Nicole reassures. They smile at each other and Shae returns to her table.

Nicole rubs her face and looks around. It doesn’t look like anyone was paying attention to them except for two people.

Andy looks away when Nicole looks at her table. She decides to ignore that for now because the other person looking at her is standing next to the counter, with a shoe box in her hands. And a guitar leaning on the counter next to her.

Nicole realizes that the doorbell sounded when Waverly Earp walked into Homestead.

For some reason that Nicole decides to ignore, she feels the color leave her face and like someone is twisting her gut. She looks away from her little teacher and potential friend hoping that she didn't see her kissing her ex-girlfriend.

What if Waverly thinks that she’s disgusting now? What if she doesn’t want to teach her anymore? What if she thinks Nicole’s hitting on her? Because she’s actively trying not to. The last thing she wants is to make Waverly feel uncomfortable.

She looks up again just to find a Waverly-free Homestead.
Leave a comment if you have something to say or if you have an opinion in separating the artist from the art.

Musiquita:

Stormy weather - Delorentos
First Of The Gang To Die - Morrissey
Nothing Like You and I - The Perishers (this one just sounded in my head)
You and I - Toro y Moi

Spotify playlists:

Chap. 3 and 4
Despair

Chapter Summary

The break week starts. Nicole and Waverly go on a little tour.

Chapter Notes

This is the first chapter I wrote completely in English. And it shows...
Anyway, I didn't expect it to be almost 20,000 words. A lot of things happen in this one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Friday isn't going at all as planned for Waverly. First, in Thursday night, Pikachu was gone. Waverly searched for him in her room and in the apartment in general but it wasn't the first time Pikachu took vacations just to be found back in Gus kitchen. Of course, he almost died twice just escaping Gus's knife. So she decided to wait for the morning and just hope to see him in the cereal box.

Sadly, Pikachu took a turn in a bad neighborhood. And with bad neighborhood, she means that he got to the building basement, were Curtis put some rat poison for... well, rats. Pikachu was just a poor little cage animal, he knew nothing about the dangers of poison, he didn't know better and that ended his life.

Of course, Waverly lived in happy ignorance for half of the day. Waking up, she ran to the kitchen expecting to hear noises signaling her hamster presence. But not luck, obviously.

She took breakfast and said goodbye to her aunt and uncle. She got out and walked to the corner where she usually meets Chrissy and Robin so they can take the bus together to high school.

Chrissy, thank god, didn't interrogate her about the whole Champ thing. The three of them were having evaluations at the conservatory this week and it was slowly killing them inside. Yesterday had been their break day from study. And they're good students, there's really nothing to fear. It was just pre-exam panic today. So they lived their last day at school before the break as calmly as possible, studying in their free time.

For Waverly, thought, there wasn't a lot of free time. The news traveled fast and Champ stole her from her friends at lunch so he could walk around with Waverly under his arm. Everyone of the "cool kids" took the opportunity to talk with them, or more like talk with Champ and no really say a word to her. And the girl couldn't stop feeling like a human trophy. Maybe questioning your relationship the very first day is not a good signal.

Anyway, Waverly didn't have the time to think much about the situation. Her mind was busy with rhythms and melodies even under Champ arms.

They were stressed. In the way to the conservatory, the three of them were clapping patterns or
humming different exercises. They were so stressed about it that when they found out that the big evaluation had been postponed to the week after the break, they all had quite the reaction. Chrissy was hysterically laughing at any joke and Robin was so calm that it was scary. Waverly was angry.

She had said no to see Nicole just because of this evaluation. She could have jump in the 2:30 bus to Purgatory and be with Wynonna right away. Man, if they were going to do the same stupid exam in two weeks, then just please give it to them right now.

They took the bus back home in their respective moods. Waverly saw the hour in her phone and run to the apartment. If she hurried, she could take the 4 pm bus to Purgatory with spare time.

That didn’t happen either. When she got back, Curtis received her with a sad look in his face and a shoe box.

At least she barely got to the 4 pm bus.

She carried her dead friend to Purgatory, planing where to buried him. She send a text to Wynonna explaining the situation and her sister promised to call Doc so they could plan a proper burial to Pikachu together.

Then, Waverly walked into Homestead finding the most confusing situation ever. Well, the situation wasn’t the one that was confusing, just her response.

Waverly didn’t understand a thing. The moment she walk into homestead was the moment she saw Nicole kissing a girl.

The range of emotions she go through in a whole second is something Waverly’s going to decode for years. First shock. She froze in the door. Second, anger. Why is Nicole kissing that girl? Then, realization. Oh my god, Nicole is gay. Later, confusion. Why I’m getting angry that Nicole is kissing a girl? Some embarrassment. I should stop staring. Then curiosity. Are they still kissing? So she looked and, oh gosh, they’re still kissing. Then confusion again…

It went on for a long long minute that felt like years. After seen the unknown girl kiss the top of Nicole’s head, their eyes connected and Waverly couldn’t hold it for one more second. That were just too much emotions combined together so she just made her way to the apartment were she locked herself in her room with Pikachu’s dead body.

“Waves,” Wynonna’s voice is fades through the door.

There’s a light knock in the door. “Miss Waverly, would you be so kind to open the door for us?”

“Waves, aren’t we supposed to be burying a hamster?”

Waverly opens the door with puffy eyes and Wynonna’s face softens instantly. She wraps her little sister in her arms and swings from one side to the other. Doc waits with the old hat in his hands. Wynonna palaces a light kiss in the top of her head and breaks the embrace to study her little sister.

“Shit, you look terrible.” She puts a strand of hair behind Waverly’s ear. “So, what do you wanna do?”
“I was thinking maybe we can bury him in the old homestead. Next to Pikachu one,” Waverly sniffles.

“Ok.” It’s all her sister says before putting the burial in motion.

Doc leaves so he can gather some stuff from Shorty’s. Waverly does her best to place some things in Pikachu’s “casket”, making it look more appropriate. Even Wynonna manages to get some plastic flowers from somewhere before they gather the stuff and walk down the stairs to wait for Doc.

Wynonna gets a text from Doc saying that he’s already outside and both girls walk out of the door to Homestead where Rosita is running from one side to the other taking orders and placing steamy cups.

“Are you sure you can leave? The place looks packed.” Waverly says lightly and she sees from the corner of her eye a redhead in one table on the corner.

“Rosita can manage for an hour. We’ll be here before eight. I hope.”

“Ok.”

They get out with a ding from the doorbell and walk to Charlene. Doc gets out to open the door and pulls down the front seat. Waverly’s about to get into the car when she hears a voice call her name.

“Waverly!” Nicole trips with a step outside of homestead and manages to regain her balance. “Hey,” she reaches Waverly and her face changes to concern as she tugs her backpack in her shoulder, “what happened?”

Waverly swipes a tear from her eye, “sorry, its nothing.”

“Some respect here, Elmo. We’re going to a funeral, so if you excuse us.” Wynonna gestures to the car. “Waves.”

“Just a second Nonna.”

Wynonna hesitates for a moment and then she leans on the car next to Doc who’s lighting a cigarette.

“No, it’s ok, Waverly, you have to go.” Nicole looks at Wynonna and takes a step back giving that other girl a small smile. “Oh, it’s not… Well, it is a real funeral but is for my hamster.”

“Shit.” Nicole looks at the sad box and Waverly watches as her eyebrows knit in concern. “Sorry. You better go then.”

“No!” Waverly shakes her head, “I mean, yeah, but… would you like to come?” She ask and immediately wonders if it’s too weird to ask Nicole that.

“To your hamster’s funeral?” Shit, it’s too weird.

“No, no. I’ll go. Sure.” Nicole shrugs and smiles kindly making Waverly’s insides warm.
Nicole looks at the old house in the middle of nowhere. It reminds her of her grandma’s house, but super sad looking.

“That is our old house.” Waverly walks behind her while Doc, the guy with the hat, digs a small hole in the ground with a rock.

“It’s big.” Nicole comments, trying not to ask for more information. She knows this is a delicately subject and doesn’t want to push Waverly. The little girl already looks to the edge of breaking. At the moment, she’s glad that this is eclipsing the kiss she knows for sure Waverly saw. Maybe they can ignore it and live like that never happened.

“It’s empty,” Waverly comments in a flat tone.

“Didn’t you have anything bigger?” Wynonna groans.

Doc tips her hat back so he can look at Wynonna from where he’s kneeling. “Shorty did not let me borrow anything from his personal garden,” he mumbles.

“Dude, all you had to do was say that it was for Waverly.” She sighs, “I can break into the barn.” Wynonna starts walking towards the old barn but Waverly stops her.

“Wynonna. It’s no longer our property.”

“So? That’s why I’m breaking in.” She rolls her eyes but makes no movement to the barn.

“What happened to him?” Nicole asks looking at the shoe box in the floor.

“He escaped yesterday and eat poison.”

“Poor little thing.” Nicole says kindly and rests a hand in Waverly shoulder hoping it brings ease to her.

“Bigger.” Wynonna commands Doc who’s measuring the box with his eyes.

“I think is big enough.” Nicole says kindly and Doc smiles at her.

“Well, I don’t.” Wynonna says and shoves Doc to the side taking the rock in her hands. She digs the rock hard into the dirt with a groan.

“Wynonna.” Waverly says softly, making Nicole wonder how her name would sound in that tone.

“Fine.” Wynonna throws the rock to the side and inhales deeply. “Sorry.”

“Very well, then. Better let this fella enjoy his final rest.” Doc stands and Nicole's takes the box in her hands respectfully and places it in the hole.

The four of them stand surrounding the little hole and Waverly starts crying. Nicole’s heart shrinks but she doesn’t move. Wynonna does and hugs Waverly from behind.

“Doc.” She says and Doc takes of his hat and press it to his chest.
He exhales a big cloud of smoke and stands straight. “We are gathered here to pay respects to this kind soul who kept company to our dear Waverly. He was young and healthy and his death is just a tragedy to this family and to the world.” He looks at Wynonna unsure and the older Earp gestures him to continue. “Uh.”

“Red.” Wynonna urges Nicole and she panics for a second while Waverly’s little sobs fill the silence.

“Uh.” She echoes and clears her throat, “Pikachu, I didn't have the pleasure to meet you but you seemed like... a hamster. A good one. I’m sorry your gone. I’m sure Waverly’s going to miss you a lot. I hope your in hamster heaven where all the hamsters have all the sunflowers seeds they want and they can run in the heavenly wheels and…” she shakes her head, “and you’ll be missed.”

“Thank you.” Waverly says quietly between sobs and walks out of Wynonna hug to Nicole. She hugs her and Nicole can’t do anything else but return the gesture.

Nicole smells nice, is the first thing Waverly thinks when she hugs the redhead. And she’s warm, she thinks when Nicole wraps her arms around her.

She doesn’t want to let go but does anyways, rubbing her hand in her eyes. They feel hot and she can picture her face all red and puffy. Nicole keeps a hand in her back and she’s grateful for it.

They watch Doc fill the whole. It leaves a little sad bump in the ground that reminds Waverly of other times. Waverly takes the plastic flowers her sister found and places them next to Pikachu’s grave.

“Do you think Herman would get mad at us?” Waverly asks.

“The dude has a lot of hectares to use, so no.” Wynonna says with a weird edge to her tone. “And if he does, he can come talk to me.” She’s taping her right foot nervously into the ground.

Waverly then realizes that Wynonna hasn't been here probably since that night. And of course her big sister wouldn’t say anything about it. Always trying to look like the world doesn’t affects her...

Wynonna gets behind Doc and it looks like she's going to hug him the way she hugged Waverly but then she fishes a flask from Doc’s coat. She unspools the lid and takes a drink.

Waverly watches with a frown and leaves Nicole’s side to take Wynonna’s hand. She walks away from the old house pulling her sister with her.

“Sorry I made you come here,” Waverly says when they’re a few meters away from Pikachu’s grave.

“No. It’s just…” Wynonna sighs.

“Hard?”

“I can handle hard.” Wynonna winks but her face is still sad. They keep walking away.
“Guess is time to go,” Doc tries to take the dust out of his jeans and takes his hat off for a second to take some hair away from his forehead.

Nicole nods and walks with him towards his car.

“May I ask how do you know our Waverly, miss Haught?” Doc says as they get into the car.

Nicole pulls the seat up again. “She gives me guitar lessons.” She looks ahead to the two silhouettes walking away for the old house. “You?” Nicole finds the man strangely old to be friends with a fifteen year old.

“Wynonna. I rent the apartments above Shorty’s. He let me crash in when I came to Purgatory with just a few pennies in my pocket. Good fella.” He starts the engine and pulls the window down to let the smoke leave the car. She wonders how much he smokes. That’s just not healthy.

The radio comes to life and a song plays abruptly.

*Baby, baby, won’t you hear my plea? Oh, oh c’mon, just hear my plea…*

“And then, a few weeks after, Wynonna came into town. Her uncle co-owns the bar.” He takes a pull and holds it before exhaling to the window again.

Doc drives to the two girls and stops right next to them. Waverly gets into the backseat with Nicole and Wynonna sits in the front. They get into conversation about the band that’s playing.

Waverly turns to face her, tucking on leg underneath her. “Thanks for coming.”

“I hope I didn’t intrude.”

“Not at all. Your my friend after all,” Waverly says ducking her head.

Nicole heart flutters. Those words mean a lot to her. It means that Waverly doesn’t find uncormtable being with her after seeing her kiss Shae. Saying the word *friends* out loud makes it feel like is oficial. *We’re friends,* she thinks and smiles.

“So, that test I told you about? They cancelled it.”

“Did you study to hard?” Nicole asks. Waverly looks like the type of person who studies everyday after school and still stays all night cramming before the exam.

“Yeah,” Waverly sighs. “But I wont study to much during the break. Are you going to be here or…?”

“I’ll be in purgatory. I have some plans.”

“Like?”

“With friends,” *like you,* Nicole thinks. She shakes her head. “Nothing big, just hang around. I think we might spend most of the afternoons in Homestead actually.”

“I will too,” Waverly says, she looks so much better than when she saw her in Homestead and a
few minutes ago, burring Pikachu.

“Then we’ll be seeing each other.”

Waverly smiles and lights up the backseat of Doc’s car. Her eyes are red and glassy, the tip of her nose pink. Nicole thinks she looks adorable.

The song changes in the car. Doc and Wynonna hold their breaths waiting for the next song to come, like their taking a break to get ready for round two.

_Freezin’, rest his head on a pillow made of concrete..._

Apparently none of them had anything to say about the song, so the conversation in the car shifts into a sort of competition based on who can make Waverly laugh. Doc is simple and tells bad jokes and Waverly laughs at the simplicity. Wynonna comments on Doc’s lack of variety in his jokes, and Waverly seems to smile more at her sister. Nicole participates once or twice before they reach the heart of town, winning smiles from Waverly that make her feel more important than she probably is.

“Miss Haught, will you like us to drive you home?” Doc interrupts Wynonna’s banter about his facial hair.

“What’s the punch line in this one?” Wynonna asks.

Nicole thinks for a second. She can go to Homestead with them and walk home later. She has her jacket this time and she doesn’t mind to walk in the cold night, but she’s curious about the Michael guy that her father brought to dinner. She can try. _Even if he doesn’t deserve it, she thinks._

_Please, make an effort to get home,_ she hears Thomas Haught voice in her head.

She can try.

“Can you drop me near Oak avenue?”

“We can take you home, right Doc?” Waverly asks.

“Absolutely,” Doc smiles at Waverly through the visor.

“No, there’s no need.” Nicole asures.

“C’mon, Doc. Let’s drop her there, I actually have to get to Homestead. Rosita’s turn its almost over and I can’t leave the business alone.” Wynonna urges.

“Then we will leave you there, miss Haught,” Doc winks at her through the visor.

Nicole walks in front of Sheriff Nedley’s house. The lights are off and she wonders if he got mad at her for bailing on dinner for two weeks. Nedley’s not the best cook, but she rather one hundred thousand times eat some dry meat with him than a good dish with Thomas Haught. She stops to take a look at the house and her shoulders drop when she thinks about her old imperfect simpler
life.

She keeps walking. There’s a car in Mrs. Richardson house she doesn’t recognize. Her daughter must be home from college. She can see the windows in the first floor all light up. It looks happier, knowing that Mrs. Richardson is enjoying her daughter’s company.

Then she gets to her own home. The light in the first floor are all light up too. But it doesn't look happy. It still looks lonely. When she's about to walk the front stairs, the door opens and laughter fills the almost empty street.

“can’t believe you left it like that. I don't think he’ll ever forget,” a blond man says, walking out of the door backwards.

Her father is behind him, wearing a smile that Nicole hasn’t seen in ages. He notices her too and smiles at her.

“Nicole, you’re just in time,” he says with the same smile that throws Nicole out of balance. “This is my friend Michael,” he gestures to the blond man.

Michael turns and Nicole can see his face. He looks very young, almost like Doc. He’s wearing a suit that makes him look sophisticated and reminds her of the people she used to see in the subway in Big City.

“Nicole, right?” He says with a charming smile. Michael extends his hand to her and she takes it. “I have heard a lot about you.”

“Yeah?” She asks unsure. It feels weird thinking about her father talking about her. What could he possibly know about her?

“Of course.” Michael takes his hand away and takes his phone from his long coat. “Sorry, I wish I could stay but my ride is almost here. But it was a pleasure.” He winks at her.

“See you later, then.” Thomas say and they share a brotherly embrace that looks out of place.

“Remember what I said, Tom,” Michael walks down the stairs. “And if you hear something, you hang up and call me first.”

Thomas nods and a car pulls in front of their home. Michael gets inside and Thomas waves at him. Nicole watches the scene unfold and shrugs in indifference. She walks past her father and hears the door close and Thomas steps follow her into the house.

“Did you have dinner?” He asks already heading to the kitchen.

Nicole wants to say yes, she's not even that hungry. But she remembers the pair of girls in Homestead telling her how they heard about her complaining and decides to change her attitude. At least she can try.

“I haven’t.” She finally says walking into the kitchen. There are dirty dishes in the sink and a few casseroles in the stove.

Thomas serves a plate full of food in the counter and Nicole sits in a stool, admiring the food. She doesn’t like to admit it, but her father is actually a good cook. She takes a bite of mashed potatoes and curses her body for betray her.

“So,” Thomas leans in the counter, “did you guys finish your project?”. There’s a light in his eyes
and Nicole just knows that he already knows the truth.

“Yeah,” she lies anyways, “But we totally forgot that there's no school on Monday.”

“Oh, well, at least you have that solved.” He lays his head in his hand, tiling it to the side.

“That Michale guy seems nice,” she prompts.

Her father looks surprised, probably because is the first time in two weeks that she’s the one starting the conversation. “He is. I met him in my last job.”

“How old is he?”

“Thirty-two, doesn't look like.” Thomas smiles. “Just five years younger than me but he’s so wise. He’s been helping me.”

“With what?” Nicole’s curious. She doesn’t know much about her father, but who does, really?

“Here and there. So, do you have plans for the break?”

“Yeah. Nothing big.”

“Maybe we can do something together.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Nicole eats and his father drinks a glass of water slowly until her daughter finish. He doesn't push anymore and Nicole debates in her head if it’s worth giving him another opportunity.

_____  

Wynonna walks into the room looking half dead holding a cup of coffee. She sits in the piano bench and looks at Waverly with her eyes half closed, like she's drifting to sleep. She probably is.

“You’re crazy, baby girl. Mental.” Wynonna takes a swig from the steamy mug.

Waverley arches an eyebrow but smiles and returns her eyes to the sheets in the music stand. Her sister is referring to her early morning study session and she has heard the same comment a hundred times before. Of course, Willa said it in a meaner way. Wynonna says it just to tease Waverly and in some way, admiring her. Waverly has no problems getting up early, but Wynonna is a creature of the night. Willa really owns her a thousand bottles of whiskey for getting up early to open Homestead.

It might be spring break, but as a musician, Waverly can't afford lose a week of study. She keeps playing the waltz and Wynonna nurses her coffee in silence. Waverly wonders if Wynonna doesn’t get annoyed by listening to her. She repeats the same phrase over and over, making sure she commits it to memory and muscle memory.

When Wynonna finishes her cup, she's more awake and leaves the room to return with two cups
now. She leaves one in front of her little sister and drinks hers more quickly than before. Waverly leaves her guitar and takes the coffee. It’s just like she likes it.

They stand looking out of the window to the street. It a weekend morning and things in Purgatory are quiet and peaceful. This is something Waverly can get used to. In the McCready apartment, the sounds of the city are present in the background. It starts at the early morning and it ends past midnight. Of course, in reality, the city noise never ends, it just follows a countinum pattern where some moments of the day are noisier than others. Now at eight in the morning, the little town is so quiet that it’s almost scary. It makes Waverly feel like she could hear herself play from the old homestead where Pikachu’s body is resting while her little animal soul is in hamster heaven, just like Nicole said.

Wynonna rests her head against the wall, making a soft thud. The middle Earp was expecting to have the spring break free to go around town terrorizing Nedley’s rookies and Shorty’s customers. Of course, that plan went overboard when Willa called to inform her that she wouldn’t be back due to last semester projects and Wynonna would have to be in charge of homestead that week too.

So, after and hour or so, both sisters are downstairs tidying up the place to open it. Fish’s already in the kitchen getting things ready for the morning crew. Purgаторians are accustomed to take weekends breakfast outside of their homes, and since Tatty’s dinner closed due Herman putting all his resources in their organic farm, Homestead is one of the few places open to serve it.

Doc enters Homestead carrying a few crates of vegetables. Wynonna sent him in a run to Tatehill farms when Fish informed them that they were short of some stuff. Fish gets out of the kitchen and runs to help Doc unload his car. Some days, Charlene acts more like a truck and less like a fancy two door classic car.

Doc hands the recip to Wynonna who archives it Willas old laptop. Waverly is sure Wynonna does not give a fuck about Homestead making big profit, but she has manage to keep it afloat.

The clock on the wall hits nine in the morning and Waverly flips the sing in the door from closed to open. The door opens and Waverly puts her best welcome to Homestead Cafe face. But it falls immediately when she sees that is Rosita who’s stepping inside.

“Don’t be so happy to see me,” Rosita says opening her long coat.

“Sorry, I thought you were a customer,” Waverly says giving the older girl a quick hug that’s well received.

“You know you don’t have to come today, right?” Wynonna says still looking at the screen of the old laptop.

“What’s going on with this welcome committee?” Rosita leaves her bag in one table.

The door opens again with the sound of the bell and an old couple walk in. Wynonna takes their order and the old couple sit in a table nearby.

“The internet in my house is shit and I’m going to use yours.” Rosita takes her own laptop from her bag.

“Our internet is shit,” Wynonna serves three cups of coffee and Waverly takes two of them to the old couple.

“I know, can you imagine how shit is mine?” Rosita takes the third cup.
People start arriving to Homestead and soon, Waverly is running around with plates full of eggs, bacon and pancakes.

Doc comes out of the kitchen and the sound of some cheesy pop song comes out of the door until it closes. Waverly smiles giving Wynonna and Rosita a knowing look. He usually listens to that kind of music when things are going too well with his best friend Levi. The other two girls smile the same way. Doc stands next to Wynonna, giving the laptop screen a quick look, before turning on the radio that’s place down the cashier. The sound of an harmonica comes out of the speakers across Homestead and before Neil Young can start singing about searching for a Heart of Gold, Wynonna groans.

“Can you play something of this millenium?” She rolls her eyes but the smile in her face betrays her and Doc grins leaning in the counter next to her.

“I thought you liked old school,” he tips the black hat that he hasn't take off since that day in the apartment.

Rosita watches the interaction, taking a moment away from her screen, and clears her throat. “Doc, I heard your woman is looking for you again.”

His face falls as he stands straight. “Kate’s back in town?”

Wynonna smile disappears from her face and closes the laptop with force and walks into the kitchen. Waverly wants to follow her sister but a customer calls her for more coffee, so she just sees from the corner of her eye Doc leave hurriedly and Rosita giving her a shrug like she doesn’t know what she just did.

Waverly sighs and keeps running around tables filling cups and taking plates.

“Why are you here? You don’t even play,” Eliza asks Jeremy by the basketball court as she throws a bottle of water in Nicole’s direction. Jeremy’s in sneakers and shorts, like he’s going to jump and join them for a game but his too invested in his 3Ds. Nicole catches the bottle and takes a big swig. “I’m here because you’re all here,” he doesn’t take his eyes from the little screen.

Eliza rolls her eyes. Is not the first time Jeremy expresses his fear to be left behind. It’s really not his fault that his friends are too sporty.

That why he's here, Nicole knows, even if he would prefer to be sleeping until noon.

A bunch of guys from the basketball team planed a little tournament for the weekend. The word spread out and a quarter of Purgatory high is now in nearest park to school playing for fun. It’s a nice way to start the break. Nobody is taking this too seriously and the atmosphere is light. Most of the teams are terrible and it looks like the rule is to break the game rules.

Of course, some of the teams find fun in being too serious about it, like the York brothers who are teaming with a few guys Nicole recognizes from high school and a guy with wide shoulders who’s getting under her skin. Their team is not really good but they keep acting like they are. In reality, they play terribly and most of the guys keep throwing girls smiles and whistling inappropriately.
Dolls, who’s making team with Quinn and some of the guys from junior year, looks as annoyed as Nicole.

Nicole is teaming up with some of the girls from the basketball team. She’s feeling cocky about the fact that she can play at almost the same level as they. But is not like this is an actual tournament. They played against some of the other girls from the team and then against some girls that were playing just for laughs. They had fun too, trying to make it easy for the other team.

Right now, the two teams in the court are running around incoherently and kicking the ball from time to time. It’s a fun entertainment to watch, to be honest. Not that Jeremy is enjoying it too much. They see Mattie approach them.

“So, are we next?” Eliza asks Mattie.

The other girl rolls her eyes and snorts. “No idea. I think they already lost track of who win against who. Yorkie just told me to get in whenever we want.”

“There’s even a price?” Nicole asks with the bottle in her lips.

“The view, right Haught?” Andy, who is in her team and sitting right by her side, winks at her through her glasses right when Nicole is taking another swig.

The water goes through her nose and her throat protest. Her eyes get watery as she starts coughing. Andy gives her a few hits with her palm in her back laughing a little.

As she recovers, she sees Shae, who is in the second court of the park watching the other game, looking at her. Her ex-girlfriend waves at her and Nicole returns the gesture.

“Can I ask why aren’t you playing with your girlfriend?” Andy’s looking at Shae too.

“You just kinda ask it now,” Nicole laughs nervously, “also, not my girlfriend. Anymore, I mean.”

“Girlfriend?” Eliza stands in front of them while Mattie walks away, “what girlfriend? ”

“That girl,” Andy point in Shae’s direction.

“Shae?” Eliza quirks her eyebrow.

“Um, no,” Nicole tries to look somewhere else

“Yeah,” Andy talks at the same time that Nicole.

“Why would you think that she’s her girlfriend?” Eliza narrows her eyes suspiciously.

Andy looks at Nicole, evidently unsure if she should answer. Nicole takes initiative. This is Purgatory, so her friends and probably half of the school magically will know about the kiss Monday night anyway

“We kinda kiss,” she blurs.

“I know, she was your girlfriend,” Eliza says with a duh at the end.

Nicole can see Dolls looking at them from the other side of the court, squatting next to Quin. He gestures his question to Eliza, who responds signaling a later. Jeremy is studying her too, taking his attention from his console for once. Nicole wishes he didn’t, he’s too observant.
She can see Jeremy's brain connect the dots. “Holy guacamole, when?”

Nicole sighs heavily. “Yesterday?”

“Are you asking?” Eliza prompts.

“Yesterday.” Nicole repeats. “It was a mistake.” She can’t avoid feeling like her friends are ready to jump into an intervention.

“God knows it is,” Eliza says returning her attention to the game when the crowd laugh at a pair of girls colliding one to another.

“She’s just my ex,” Nicole smiles at Andy, trying to express that she didn’t do anything wrong by bringing up the subject.

“Well,” Andy sounds sure but she looks nervous and her cheeks are flushed, “good to know.”

A man sitting alone in on table catches Waverly’s attention and she goes to him.

“More coffee?” She asks already taking the mug.

“Please,” the man smiles kindly at her. There’s something familiar about him. Something in his brown eyes that reminds her of certain new friend. She fills the mug and places in front of him.

“Nice nails,” he says before taking a sip from the coffee.

Waverly laughs nervously. She has never like to explain why her nails on her right hand are long and the ones in the left hand, short.

“You play guitar, right?” He says before Waverly can start giving some quick explanation about it.

“Yeah,” she responds in a peachy tone.

“Do you have your recitals here?” the man points at the little stage.

“No,” she once did a recital in Purgatory but no one showed up, she flinches at the memorie. “I usually play in Big city. Here, we do little events,” she explains, “next Saturday we’re doing an open mic night. It’s open to anyone as long as is not scandalous or something.”

The bell sounds announcing a new customer and Waverly sees Chrissy and Robin walk in hand in hand. There’s something nice but awkward about them that always makes Waverly smile.

“Enjoy your coffee,” Waverly says to the man and walks to the cashier where Wynonna is taking their orders.

“Shit, Randy junior. Take care of those carbs or you’ll end up like your daddy,” Wynonna says as she gives back the change.

“Never change, Wynonna.” Chrissy says unaffected by Wynonna's words. So many years of friendship with Waverly has made her immune to her sisters. Even if she doesn’t have too much
practice with Wynonna, Chrissy perfected Willa and that is more than enough.

Waverly walks from behind and jumps into her friend, who annoyingly has been growing taller than Waverly. Chrissy gives a little squeal and turns to hug her friend.

“When did you get home?” Waverly asks stepping back to hug Robin as well.

“Yesterday night,” Chrissy takes Robins hand and they walk to a table. “Daddy come pick us up to the city. Well, he pick me up and I convinced him to give Robin a ride too.” She smiles at her boyfriend and plants a kiss in his cheek. Robin laughs nervously and they sit next to each other. Waverly takes their order and reads it. “Hey, I was thinking that maybe we can use this week to make connections ,” she says in a conspirational tone.

“Connections?” Waverly frowns confused.

Robin rolls his eyes. “She wants us to make friends so I don’t feel alone when I move back.” He makes air quotes in the word alone, “I already told her that I can make my own friends.”

“I know you can. I’m just saying that we can start now.” Chrissy points out.

“Oh, I know where we can start.” Waverly announces, “let me bring your pancakes first.”

She walks to the kitchen and gives Fish the new order. As she waits, she feels her phone buzz in her pocket.

Champ H., 10:49: Baby, i’m in Purgatory. Wanna go on a hot date?

It surprises Waverly how little she wants to go on a date with her new boyfriend. She already form a plan in her mind of how she’s going to spend this week and, for some reason, it doesn’t includes Champ Hardy.

Nicole is about to turn back and run home when she remembers that theres now another person living with her, so she opens her contacts and dials her home number. Internally, she wonders if it works, she doesn't remember hearing it ring since last year. She waits a second before the voice of a machine tells her that the number doesn't exist. Weird, but not to much. She half expected it. That must be the reason her mom hasn’t called. But when she change her number, she sent a e-mail to her mom informing her of her new number. In fact, she has sent a lot of mails since, but none of them has been answered. She half dams her mom for not being one of those adults getting addicted to Facebook, like her aunt.

The screen returns to her contacts and she presses her father’s name. She hasn’t use it since he gave it to her, but this is what is for, right? Making sure the house is not on fire?

She hears the call connect and soon Thomas picks up.

“Thomas Haught talking,” his voice sound wary.
“It’s Nicole.”

“Oh,” he responds relieved, “what’s up? Everything ok? You need me to pick you up?”

“No, no. I think I forgot to turn off the iron, can you check?” She looks at both sides of the street before running to Homestead corner.

“Oh, yeah. You did but I already turn it off,” he informs and Nicole stops right in front of Homestead main door.

“Uh, there’s something else? I think.”

“Ok, shoot.”

Nicole rolls her eyes. “I called home but the call didn’t connect. It says it doesn’t exist.”

“Right. Uh, I’ll see what’s going on.”

“Ok, gotta go,” she doesn’t bother to hear her father answer before hanging up.

The hour in the screen says 4:05 and she curses her vanity. She didn’t need to change her clothes twice. She was just coming to take her weekly class with Waverly. There was no need to be that careful tying her hair. But ironing her shirt took her longer than expected and now she's late. Not too late, but hanging up with Dolls has change her. Always in time.

And talking about Dolls, she sees him immediately when she gets in Homestead. He’s sitting in a table with Jeremy and they’re playing some table game she doesn’t recognize. Nicole gives them a quick smile and runs to Rosita to inform that she’s here to see Waverly. Rosita is carrying a tray with various drinks and looks conflicted about leaving to walk her to the apartment, so she tells Nicole to go up on her own in a apologetic tone. She walks to the back door and passes the guy that was teaming up with the York brothers. He winks at her, grinning in a way that may be appealing to some brainless chick and Nicole wants to gag.

She climbs two steps at a time, being careful to not hit the guitar case with the stairs, and gets to the apartment door. She knocks the door and waits tapping her foot nervously. It doesn't matter that she has seen Waverly on Friday, then on Sunday and Monday afternoon, she’s still nervous. Even if they are declared friends, she still wants to make a good impression.

Sunday and Monday, she excuse herself and leaved, so Nicole just hang out with her friends for a while before heading home to have dinner with her dad. She was trying.

Both times, Waverly looked like she didn't wanna leave. Or at least that was Nicole’s interpretation, it might as well could have been that Waverly needed to use the bathroom.

The door opens and Nicole has trouble processing what's in front of her. Waverly is in cowboy boots, high waisted skinny jeans tucked into the boots. Her hair is down, falling in perfect waves. She’s in a crop top that lets Nicole see more than she has ever expected. It’s too cold to be wearing that type of clothing, Nicole thinks, but she's not complaining. And she’s smiling, her eyes bright and Nicole doesn’t know what’s going on exactly with her, except that she totally knows.

Nicole Haught is crushing hard on Waverly Earp.
Waverly doesn’t laugh at her when she sings Knocking on the Heavens Door slowly and out of tune. Nicole’s sure her face is red and her heart is beating so hard that she’s genuinely worried that it might stop at any second. She has been singing this song all week, perfecting if it and to be honest, she has been doing a great job. But one thing is doing it in her room when she knows nobody could hear her and another is to do it in front of your crush. Her voice trembles and she chokes for a second. She confuses the order of the chords and her fingers are shaking. It’s not good.

“It's good,” Waverly says and Nicole can't recognize if she's lying to encourage her or if she’s just too nice to say the true. Or maybe, Waverly genuinely thinks it was good.

“Yeah?” She rubs her hands in her jeans, taking away the humidity from her nervousness.

“Look, it's not perfect and I can tell you’re nervous,” Waverly gestures with her hand and Nicole laughs as she scratches her head, “but you had a week to do it and I know singing in front of someone for the first time can be super scary. So, taking all of that in consideration, it’s good.”

Nicole tries not to look directly at Waverly. She’s disappointed in herself. Nicole knows she can do so much better.

“Can I try again?”

“Go ahead.”

Nicole takes a deep breath and strums the strings, it takes half a second to change between each chord but she nails it and the sound coming from her guitar is constant. She gets ready to start singing. *It's just Waverly, she thinks, and it's Waverly so don't screw this up.*

“Mama, take this badge off of me. I cant use it anymore,” Nicole sings, her voice so much better than last time.

She follows an invisible string that pulls her through the song and look attentively to her left hand, trusting her right hand to do a good job. She still nervous but at least her hands aren’t shaking so much. She gets to a point were she so into the song that it feels like its just her, the guitar and Waverly floating in space.

“I feel I’m knocking on heaven’s door. Knock, knock, knocking on heaven’s door,” Nicole continues and she lifts her head to look at Waverly. Their eyes connect and Waverly slimes encouraguelly, making Nicole’s face hot.

When she finishes, Waverly is nodding approvingly. “So much better, Nicole.”

“I know I’m not a great singer.” Nicole sifts in her seat and clears her throat.

“No, everyone’s a singer and your not bad at all,” Waverly sits in her chair again and crosses her legs.

“Finally, all those hours in the shower are finally paying off.”

Waverly laughs at her joke making Nicole’s head dizzy.
“I’m glad, but you can sing outside your shower, we don’t want a drought in Purgatory.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, then.”

Waverly sits straighter and her teacher face comes up. “Ok, here’s how you can do better.”

Waverly would love to invite Nicole to take a cup of tea, like last week, but just like yesterday and the day before, Champ is waiting for her. God, should it feel like a task to have a boyfriend? Waverly’s not sure, but it doesn't feel right to leave him waiting.

They walk down the stairs and Waverly wonders if Nicole feels as disappointed as she, she almost wish that she does. But Nicole looks unaffected, chatting with her until they’re inside Homestead again.

“So,” Nicole starts, stopping in front of her, “I was thinking that maybe we could go out on Thursday. We’re having a game night, me and my friends. We basically play cards and video games, and we eat junk.” Nicole changes her weight form one leg to the other, “you can bring your friends, you mention they’re on town, right?”

“Yes, that would be great, actually.” Waverly says chiperly. This is the perfect opportunity Chrissy was looking for. “I’ll tell them, just text me the details.”

“Right,” she can see Nicole shallow and glance around before looking back at her, “and maybe we can see eachother before and, you know, hang out, just the two of us-“

“Bae!” Waverly loses the floor as Champs hugs her for behind, lifting her for one second. The air leaves her lungs from both the squeeze and the surprise scream she lets out. “Let’s get out of here, I’m bored as hell.”

Waverly nods and turns to face Nicole, who’s looking away, clearly uncormtable. “Just a moment,” she asks him but he keeps his grip in her.

“Hey, I’m Champ,” he plants a kiss in her cheek.

“It’s that your actual name?” Nicole frowns.

“This is my boyfriend, James Hardy,” Waverly explains and almost wish she didn’t have too. This is normal, right?

“Is he?” Nicole arches an eyebrow and looks like she's about to say something, but keeps quiet.

“Yeah,” Champ stands next to her, resting his arm heavy arm in her shoulders.

“Text me?” Waverly asks Nicole and the redhead nods.

“I saw my friends here, so…” Nicole points behind with her thumb and gives her a smile, “see you, then.”

“See you.” Waverly breaths out.
“Come, bae, Pete invite us to a party in his house,” he pulls her towards the exit before she can express her opinion in the matter.

Nicole walks to Dolls table. Eliza and Andy are here now talking animatedly with the boys. Nicole sits, looking at Waverly been pulled out of the door and sighs. So much for being brave for once. What was she thinking? Of course someone like Waverly has a boyfriend. A boyfriend who winks at any girl he sees, nor the less. Some fire burns in the bottom of her stomach and she feels the impulse of reach the couple to plant a fist in his face. She wants to tell Waverly, but maybe is not her place. Nicole doesn't want to ruin this new friendship by stepping in the middle of Waverly relationship. Also, it's just winking. It's not like she saw him kissing someone else. But Waverly deserves respect, she reasons.

“Who’s that?” Dolls asks and Nicole turns to see him looking at the couple leave across the window.

“My, uh, friend? She’s my teacher,” Nicole points at the black case next to her.

“Oh, wow. She looks… young,” Dolls trails.

“She's just a year younger than me.”

“Who’s a year younger than you?” Eliza asks, leaving her conversation with Andy and Jeremy. The other two turn their attention to Nicole too.

“My teacher.”

“Teacher of what?” Andy asks.

“Guitar,” Jeremy answers for Nicole.

“She has to win a competition, right? Eliza asks Dolls.

“Yeah, that’s the deal,” Dolls gives a nod.

“What’s the deal?” Andy asks.

“If she wins, I have to complete any dare and she has free use of my car, but if she losses then I can use the footage freely forever,” Dolls explains, smiling at Nicole.

“Shit, that seems hard,” Andy mumbles.

“Are you sure is there going to be a competition? We haven't seen anything about it,” Eliza says.

“Let’s ask Rosita,” Jeremy proposes.

Dolls tries to catch Rosita attention while Nicole turns to see Andy who’s looking at her. Her cheeks are slightly pink and she gives a timid smile to Nicole.

Weird.
Since Friday, she’s been seeing Andy almost everyday. She’s usually with Eliza or hanging around Homestead too. Nicole doesn't mind. Andy’s friendly, but she finds strange her presence.

“So you're learning how to play the guitar?” Andy asks Nicole while she foils a piece of paper.

“Yeah, I mean, I have to,” Nicole says but the words feel forced. It’s not totally true, she could have done something else but she decided this. And it’s not like she's been forced to, she's very much enjoying the process. Some days, she almost forgets about the bet until something or someone reminds her.

Rosita finally sees them and walks to them.

“Hey, Rosie,” Jeremy greets.

“What’s going on, guys?”

“Our friend here,” Eliza point at Dolls who keeps his emotionless face, “heard that your guys are having a competition or something like that.”

“How did you find out?” Rosita ask, “Doc must be bluffing about it again,” she says to herself. “Yeah, I think we’re doing it, but it will probably be in mid of June or something like that. Are you guys planning to get in?”

“Yeah,” Nicole tries to sound confident and flashes a smile to Dolls. He winks at her.

“Well, if you’re interested in performing, this Saturday is open mic night. You’re all welcome to perform.” Then someone walks through the door and Rosita hurries to them.

“Let’s come on Saturday!” Eliza says, “last time Kyle York tried to rap and it was hilarious.”

Jeremy nods, “maybe you could play something too,” he wiggles his eyebrows at Nicole.

“And let you make fun of me? No thanks,” Nicole blows..

“It would be a good idea,” Andy proposes, “I had a friend how used to declaim and she said that it was important to get out there and perform.”

“I don't know,” Nicole wants to say no, but she says “maybe.”

“I'm ordering another tea,” Jeremy stands, “do you guys want anything?”

Eliza, Andy and Dolls shake their hands.

“A milkshake,” Nicole says. She wants to ask for a tea, but it only seems appropriate if she drinks it with Waverly.

“Vanilla, right?”

Nicole nods and Jeremy walks to the counter.

Andy stands up and sits in Jeremy's chair, next to Nicole.

“Wanna see something?” Andy smiles and showing her her hands hiding something.

“Sure,” Nicole shrugs.
Andy opens her hands and inside is a paper figure. She places it in the table and Nicole examines it for a second figuring out what is it.

“She’s a frog,” Andy says and Nicole sees the resemble, “and also a graphical designer, but that’s not relevant right now.”

Andy presses the bottom of the paper frog and when she releases it, the little frog jumps, falling upside down. Nicole stands it again.

“Try it,” Andy encourages.

Nicole presses the frog and when she releases it, it gives a little jump, this time falling right.

“Let me try,” Eliza asks and reaches across the table to make the frog jump. Dolls is looking attentively at the frog, a ghost of a smile in his lips.

“It's super cute,” Nicole smiles when the frog jumps again, “but she needs something.”

Nicole pulls out her yellow mechanical pencil and takes the frog. She draws two lines as her nose and two little dots as her eyes.

“There, now we're sure she can see her own designs,” Nicole winks in a playful way.

“Right,” Andy turns her head away, hiding her flushed cheeks.

Nicole grins. At least she still have it.

Nicole walks before twilight to her house, enjoying her alone time and the chill air. The wind is picking up and her eyes are a bit dry, but she’s taking a moment to herself before getting to the inevitable dinner. We’re trying, she repeats to herself.

Dolls had to be back early to his home. His dad is going on a business trip and his mom is joining. They want to see Dolls before leaving. Then, the Dolls’s house is available and to their disposition.

He left in his SUV and Andy said goodbye, leaving in the other direction with her hands in the pockets of her jean jacket and her black hair flying with the wind. Eliza and Jeremy stood outside of Homestead with her, talking about game night. Nicole tells them that she invited Waverly and some of her friends. Dolls already invite invite Mattie and Quin.

“I’ll invite Andy, then,” Eliza crossed her arms close to her body when a strong current of wind hit them. She shuddered and Jeremy took off his eternal hoodie. Eliza slided her arms inside and Jeremy buttoned up his shirt. “So much better,” Eliza slided the zip up.

“I feel like this small reunion is going to blow out of proportion.”

“Dolls is basically asking for it. I mean, he invited Mattie and Quin, and when the rest of the basketball teams hear about a reunion in an empty house, you know is a disaster waiting to happen.” Nicole reasoned and her friends nodded. “And, what's up with you and Andy?” Nicole asked Eliza. Almost every time she has seen Andy, she’s with Eliza.
“Me and Andy?” Eliza pointed at her chest, “more like what’s up with you, ” then she pointed at Nicole, “and Andy?”

“What?”

“She’s been flirting with you. She has been asking me about you since you been coming to watch our practices,” Eliza wiggled her eyebrows, in that annoying way that makes Nicole roll her eyes.

“No, she hasn’t.” Nicole defended.

“Nicky, she’s been flirting with you,” Jeremy asures and Nicole flinched at the nickname, “and you’d been flirting with her.”

“What?! How? Like- what? When?” That was definitely new information to Nicole.

“Like, right now.”

“No, I mean, I did try something but it wasn’t anything serious.”

“Girl, you’re cruel.” Eliza pointed out.

So Andy, Nicole thinks. But it doesn’t makes her warm the way it does when she thinks of Waverly. But thinking of Waverly and her boyfriend turns her insides on fire. She knows this is not good.

“This is not good,” she tells the air and keeps walking.

In the corner of the street, she can see the sheriff cruiser parked with the trunk open. Nedley’s taking grocery bags out of it and a girl is helping him. Nicole recognizes her for the photos in Sheriff Nedley’s living room. Must be her daughter.

“Sheriff, need a hand?” Nicole asks as she gets to the sheriff.

He turns surprised, “Oh, no need. This is the last bag,” Nicole sees some vegetables poking out of the bag and she tires to remember the last time she eat something green at Nedley’s house as he closes the trunk. “I haven’t seen you lately, kid.”

“Oh, yeah, sorry.” Nicole scratches her head with her finger.

She hears steps and a blond girl walks down the steps, looking between Nedley and Nicole.

She can see Nedley smile, his eyes warming.

The girl stands next to Nedley and he speaks. “This is my daughter, Chrissy.” There’s pride in his voice.

Nicole nods, “nice to meet you, I’m-“

“Nico. You’re Waverly’s Nico, right?”

Nicole blushes at Waverly’s Nico. There’s a brief moment in which the hamster in her head runs and the dots connect.

“Oh! You Chrissy, the girl from the texts.”

“Texts?” Nedley asks Chrissy.
“Nicole is taking classes with Waverly.” Chrissy explains and Nedley looks at Nicole’s right hand, where she’s holding the black case. For a moment Nicole forgot that this is Purgatory and Nedley is the sheriff. He probably knows Waverly since forever, just as he knows Nicole since she moved in.

“Such a nice girl. I’m glad they keep each other company in that city,” he flinches when he mentions the city, “and it’s nice to see you doing some extracurricular activities. They’ll keep you out of trouble. Music is good to build character.”

Just as Nicole’s about to speak, a car horn sounds and her father Renault turns in the corner, stopping behind Nedley’s cruiser. Thomas rolls down the window of the copilot side.

“Nicole, let’s go home,” his voice sounds a bit harder than usual.

“Thomas Haught,” Nedley says the same way she hears her father’s name in her head, “good to see you around for once.”

“Randall,” is all Thomas says and it annoys Nicole. The sheriff has been nothing but good to her.

“It’s Randy,” she corrects her father.

“Let’s go home,” Thomas urges and drives to their house.

“Thank you for everything,” she says loud enough so her father hopefully would hear.

“No problem, kiddo. Anything, you know where to find me.”

He and Chrissy, who waves at her quickly, walk towards their home and Nicole walks to hers. She gets to her front yard when Thomas Haught is closing the drivers door. He opens the trunk and pulls out groceries bags, from a different store than the ones Nedley had in his trunk.

He walks up the stairs, his hands full of bags, and waits for Nicole to catch up with him. She leaves the case next to her and opens the door, letting Thomas walk in first.

As she picks up the guitar, her phone vibrates in her pocket. She pulls it out and sees 6 new texts.

1. Dolls, group chat, 18:02: My dad postponed his business trip a week. I can't host the game night.

Eliza S., group chat, 18:04: probably for the best, tbh

Jeremy, group chat, 18:04: :( 

Eliza S., group chat, 18:06: Mattie was already getting buzz for the whole school

Waverly, 18:50: Hey, do you still wanna go out?

Waverly, 18:50: I'm free all Thursday :)

“You’re Champ’s girl, right?”
I’m Waverly.”

“Yeah, Champ’s girlfriend.”

No, Waverly wants to respond, I’m my own person. But she doesn’t and instead she lets Champ drag her around the house.

Waverly is thirsty and she has only seen beer all night. If she’s going to drink alcohol for the first time, cheap alcohol, she can get it from Wynonna any day. Of course, Wynonna would deny it to her. The music is loud and, in her opinion, bad. There’s some things you can go through and hearing to whatever this hip-hop thing is, it’s not one of those things. She prefers listen to a hole day of Wynonna’s most distorted metal, screaming and cursing, than this.

Champ gets busy going from here to there, talking like Purgatory is not worthy of him and Waverly forgets everything she found appealing about him. But then, they go outside and alone, he changes so rapidly that she forgets his previous attitude.

“My uncle Steve is going to the rodeo tomorrow and he wants me to go with him. He think I got a chance. He says it’s just muscle work and,” he rolls his sleeve and flexes, “I got plenty of those,” he winks and pulls his arm down, “I would be two days, probably be back by Thursday night.”

...hang out, just the two of us-, Nicole voice echoes in her head.

“You should totally go,” Waverly says rapidly. She can use a day off. Champ’s turning really needy for her liking.

“Come with me, you can see me in action, and maybe, we can get some action,” Champ kisses her cheek and Waverly freezes at the perspective.

“Right, but, I actually have to be here tomorrow to help Wynonna with inventory,” Waverly silently thanks Wynonna, “maybe you can stay and help?”

“My uncle really wants me to go with him, I really wish I could stay and help, baby.”

“Boomer,” she mutters.

“Hardy! Bro,” Pete jumps behind Champ and captures his neck in a grip pushing Waverly. “You won’t believe what Kyle is making Carl do.”

Champ gets free from his grip hitting him with his elbow. He kiss Waverly cheeks again, “just a second, babe” he says and walks with Peter to the inside of the house.

A hard current of air hits her and she adjust her jacket around her. This is one thing she does not miss about Purgatory. She pulls out her phone and reads the old texts she has exchange with Nicole before writing a new one.

Waverly, 18:50: Hey, do you still wanna go out?

Waverly, 18:50: I’m free all Thursday :)

She immediately see three dots in a bubble, signaling that Nicole is writing her response.

Nicole not Hot, 18:51: Dolls canceled game night.

Waverly, 18:51: Sorry to hear that
Waverly, 18:51: We can still hang out, right?

Nicole not Hot, 18:53: Yes. Do you have anything in mind?

Waverly, 18:53: I mean, do you? It was your idea.

Nicole not Haught, 18:54: I can show you the town

Waverly, 18:53: I’m from the town

Nicole not Hot, 18:54: Yeah, but right now you’re a city girl

Waverly, 18:54: Ok, cowgirl

Nicole not Hot, 18:55: :cowboy emoji:

Waverly contemplates the smiling face with a hat and responds with a cow and a chicken. Nicole sends a plate and a knife.

Waverly, 18:57: We don’t do that, cows are friends.

Nicole sends a cow between hearts and Waverly smiles at the screen when the main door opens, letting the sound of the house and a few people come out, making Waverly aware of where she’s. She sees Mattie walk out of the door and the other girl turns to see her too.

“Waverly, so long no see.”

“Mattie, hey!”

“Why’re you here? The wind is crazy strong,” Mattie closes her jacket.

“I’m waiting for…”

“Oh, don’t tell me you’re dating some of this monkeys.”

Waverly grins awkwardly and Mattie rolls her eyes.

“I thought you had taste. Why, if you’re in the city, did you decide to date some no one from this hell town?”

“He’s nice,” she defends but even herself is having a hard time believing it.

The wind hits again and Mattie puts on her beanie, holding her hair together. “I’m leaving, this party is lame, want a ride?”

Waverly considers it for a brief moment and decides against it. “Can’t,” she points to the house.

“Right, boyfriend. Well, then, see you around.” Mattie starts walking and then she turns again, “hey, you guys are hosting an open mic night, right?”

“Yeah, this Saturday, actually.”

“Good, see you.” Mattie walks towards the road and a motorcycle stops in front of her. Waverly recognizes Valdez and she waves at her. The older girl gives her a nod and hands Mattie a helmet. The pair drive away from the house and Waverly debates between trying to socialize or calling Wynonna to pick her up.
Waverly wakes up in Thursday morning shaking. The sky is a deep blue, getting brighter by the second, signaling that the sun is about to come out. She remembers that she once read that this is the coldest time of the day. And sleeping with Wynonna doesn’t help. Her sister is a kicker and there’s just one bed in the apartment. For the moment. So they share bed and Wynonna always ends up kicking the blankets away.

She puts them back on but she can’t go back to sleep now. There no use in trying. So she lays there, still shaking, but for one more reason. Today she’s hanging out with Nicole all afternoon.

She stays in the bed for a few more minutes, staring at the roof, trying to calm herself down. Waverly doesn’t understand why she’s so anxious. They’re just hanging out. Two friends hanging out.

She rolls off the bed and makes shure Wynonna is well covered before heading out of the room. The wood creaks behind her feet and she can hear Doc snores coming from the couch. A rooster sounds from far away, reaffirming the small town status.

Not that Purgatory is so small anymore. With the years, Waverly has come to notice new houses, places and faces. In the Earps absence, Purgatory has become a more welcoming place. She doesn’t like to think that this development is because of them, but she knows that the death of Ward Earp did had something to do with it.

The days of distrusting newcomers is gone and Nedley has transformed Purgatory in a much picturesque place. He drove away the gangs and reduced the crimes. He even lowered the alcohol consumption in town. Which is very impressive.

New people like Doc would have been drive away the minute they put a foot in the town. Luckily, Nedley pointed him towards Shorty’s where the old good-natured man received him and offered him a job. When Wynonna come back to town and started getting along with Doc, Shorty cornered him and told him to behave.

“Wynonna doesn’t need bad influences around her,” Doc repeated in Shorty’s voice last night in the bathroom where the three of them were lump together, “you better behave, boy.”

Wynonna snorted as she turned on the brand new electric razor Doc just bought.

“Clearly, he should had warned you about the bad influence Wynonna is,” Waverly joked before Wynonna pressed the razor against Doc’s cheek.

Waverly stands by the couch, watching Doc’s face in his sleep. He looks significantly older with his new mustache and goatee he had to fix after Wynonna murdered the rest of his beard. He was so upset at the beginning, but by the end of the night, he was moving his lips from one side of his face to the other, making the mustache dance for Wynonna’s amusement.

The little Earp turns on the stove and puts some water to boil. Meanwhile, she picks her nail file from the piano room and starts fixing her nails. She does her job carefully, getting rid of any small
Wynonna appears after a few minutes. The coffee is reposing on the stove and Waverly is drinking from her mug while reading a book she found on one of the boxes.

"Nothing like waking up to the smell of coffee," Wynonna walks with her eyes practically closed. She reaches the chair and slumps in it. Waverly prepares a cup for Wynonna.

"We should get another bed," the small Earp comments.

"Why?" It takes Wynonna a minute to respond, "there's just me and, just occasionally, someone else shares my bed."

"Please tell me it's just me."

"Also, mattress are so expensive."

"For when I come," Waverly explains, debating when would be a good time to bring up her moving back to Purgatory, "and maybe Doc can borrow it. He’s going to ruin his back if he stays in that couch every time he sleeps here."

"Nah, he can stand it, right Doc?"

The man in the couch is oblivious of the conversation and lets out a loud snore.

"We'll figure it out when Willa comes back," Wynonna rubs her eyes and closes the sentence with a long yawn.

"Please, I don't think she'll let me sleep in the same room that her."

"Don't worry, kid. You won't have to see her too much now. You'll keep living in different places. She'll be here trap, and you'll be free in Big city."

"Right."

"Now, please, give me that coffee so I can open and serve coffee to all those ass-"

"Wynonna."

"All those nice clients who kindly come super early because of their stupid-" Waverly gives her a look before she can finish the sentence. "Just give me coffee, you cruel little cute monster."

Waverly puts the mug in front of her sister and takes the eggs out of the fridge. She puts a pan in the fire and takes the bacon out too.

"I'm going out today," she says as she puts the first piece of bacon in the pan.

"A date?" Wynonna asks wary.

"No," luckily, "i'm just going out with friends, friend," she corrects herself.

"Great, I don't like Hardy. No offense Waves, but you can do so much better.

Waverly sighs but chooses to not say anything else.

"Chrissy?" Wynonna asks.
“No, Nicole.”

“Oh.” Wynonna takes another sip, “you’re hanging out with your student?”

“Uh, yeah. We’re becoming friends, she’s really nice.”

“She and her friends look like a little police force. Even the little one.”

Waverly remembers Nicole’s friends. She met Jeremy and Dolls on Sunday afternoon and Eliza on Monday. Nicole hasn’t introduce her girlfriend yet. The curiosity is eating her from inside.

“Jeremy? I find him super nice.”

“Super nerdo, you mean.”

“Wynonna,”

“I just can’t believe that the big guy is just seventeen. Are you sure he’s not an undercover cop or something like that?”

“Not really.” She thinks in the tower with a expressionless face that Dolls is.

“Ok. Have fun and things, I guess.”

Nicole walks fast all the way to Homestead. She stops before crossing the street and finds herself biting her nails. She takes her hand away from her mouth. This is ridiculous. She’s behaving like this is more than just two friends hanging out. Almost like this is a-

But is not. Waverly is the most girly girl she knows. It’s almost painful how obviously straight she is. And she’s in a relationship. And she’s super pretty, and- and…

She shakes her head, making her long hair dance. Deep breaths, she thinks and chokes with her saliva. A bunch of kids stare at her as she tries to recover. They exchange whispers and run in the sidewalk, leaving her alone. Nicole stands straight and smooths the front of her striped t-shirt. 

Hanging out with your friend, she reminds herself when she stands in front Homestead. She’s about to walk in when the door opens and Waverly gets out in her high waisted jeans and a cute white blouse.

“Hey-ya”, Nicole clears her throat, “hey, I was about to--” she points at the door.

“Yeah, I saw you for the window and came down.” Waverly points at the window in the second floor, the one Nicole knows is right next to the piano. Meaning, Waverly probably watch her choke and pep talk herself.

“Oh, so. Wanna go for a walk?”

“Lead the way, cow girl.”
“I know your form here and everything, but I thought I could show you the new parts of town,” Nicole says in her sure voice as they get to a park near the schools.

Waverly contemplates the place remembering how it used to look. A few years ago there was almost nothing, just a few benches and picnic tables; a broke swing and a rusty slide. Now it looks so different.

“They renovated it three years ago,” Nicole continues as they reach an empty bench. “Eliza’s little brother broke his leg in the slide and some of the mothers from the elementary school got together and forced Cyderman to renovated it.”

“Nothing like a bunch of angry mom’s to change the world.” Waverly sits and crosses her legs.

“Yeah,” Nicole chuckles lowering her head for a moment as she joins her. “We used to hang out here all the time last year in the basketball court,” she points at the long space with two basketball courts surrounded by wired mesh.

“Did you guys get any good?” She asks picturing Nicole and her friends. All of them are pretty tall (except Jeremy) and Dolls is most likely to keep growing up.

“Yes,” Nicole nods, “Eliza got into the girl’s team. Dolls is in hokey, thought.”

“He looks more of a football guy.”

“They wish, but he reject Coach Brown’s invitation when he realized he’ll be stuck with guys like Pete York and Carl Junger.”

*Champ’s girl* resounds in Waverly’s mind and she rolls her eyes. “Are hockey guys any better?”

“They’re mostly inoffensive,” Nicole shrugs, “they haven’t won anything in like a hundred years, so they have nothing to be cocky about.”

“And you?”

“Have I won anything in a hundred years?” Nicole arches her eyebrows teasingly.

“No,” Waverly smacks Nicole’s arm, “are you in a team?”

Nicole takes a free strand of hair and tucks it behind her ear. “No, I was busy and I didn’t go to the try outs. And, well, I think I already found something to do with my free time,” She flashes a smile to Waverly and stands. “Next stop?”

Nicole extends a hand to her and Waverly takes it. Nicole pulls and she stands easily. They let go before Waverly can marvel in the soft touch.

“Yes.”

“You probably know this one already,” Nicole mentions in the middle of their conversation.
Waverly looks around, mapping the zone in her head to guess Nicole’s next stop. They turn in the corner and the tall building Waverly used to dream about when she was little appears. There are more plants around it and the windows are cleaner.

“The library,” Waverly breathes out as she takes in the new color of the building.

“See, we should’ve skipped this one,” Nicole scratches her head.

“No! I never got in when I was here.”

“Really, why?” They stop in the corner, waiting for the traffic light to change color.

“It used to intimidate me,” she confesses. “My older sister used to tell me that they didn’t let in kids because I had to at least be one fifty. You know, to reach the bookshelves.”

“Then we should return next year, see if you can get in then,” Nicole puts a hand in her head, studying her height.

“Ha, ha. Very funny,” Waverly smacks Nicole’s hand away.

The street light changes and they cross the street. They stop in front of the main door. She can peek a little from the door window. There’s no much people but she can recognize Levi in a far table.

“A kind of program got to Purgatory a year ago and they donate books. The fire department made a bake sale with the library staff and they got money to also renovate the building,” Nicole explains pointing at a plaque next to the door. Waverly reads it carefully and looks at the logo from the organization.

“Athenea,” she recognizes the word from one of her books.

“You know greek?” Nicole is looking at the plaque too and her voice sounds loud and clear from the proximity.

“No,” she admits, “but I picked up a few words from my books.”

Nicole leans in the wall and crosses her arms. “Doesn’t surprise me. You look like the book type.”

Waverly laughs, biting her lower lip. “What does that even mean?”

Nicole shrugs, “have you read a lot of Greek stuff, then?”

“It was my obsession when I was ten,” Waverly puts her hands in her back pockets.

“Yeah? Big fan of polytheism?”

“Yeah. The first year I was in the conservatory, they made us read Orpheus myth. I ended up reading book after book. My uncle Curtis bought them until my aunt made me get a library card so we wouldn’t go broke.”

“I’ll give them a try, then,” Nicole leans a little to look at the interior of the library.

“Really?” Waverly tilts her head to one side.

“Yeah,” Nicole turns to see her again, “you make it sound fun.”

“You can borrow the few I got, if you want. I actually have Orpheus myth in the apartment, it’s
special to me. Or if you want I can ask Robin to send you the pdfs he got, you know, if you prefer
the digital version,” Waverly blurts her offer, excited to finally hear someone apart from Robin
take interest in Greek mythology.

“I think I’ll borrow it from you,” Nicole pushes herself form the wall and stands.

“Ok then, we can go right now if you want.” Waverly regrets the words as they came, it might
sound like she wants cut short Nicole’s tour.

“Later, maybe?”

They stop in a few more places in the heart of town. Nicole shows her the improvements of
Purgatory like she did it herself, proud and happy. Waverly feels welcome and all the places she
already knew somehow look brighter and more colorful than how they looked in her memories.

They stop after a couple hours of walking and get to a store. Waverly picks a bottle of water and a
bag of salted nuts and Nicole picks a soda and a bag of chips. They’re in line to pay when she gets
a text and asks Nicole to hold her stuff so she can check her phone. When she finishes to text back,
Nicole has already pay for everything. Waverly wants to argue but Nicole says that next time is on
Waverly.

They sit in the sidewalk outside of the store, looking at the cars drive by.

“I think my friend Dolls has a crush in your sister,” Nicole says before opening her soda can.

Waverly snorts, “really? Wynonna?”

“Yeah,” Nicole nods, “that or he is seriously in love with your coffee.”

“We have good coffee, though,” Waverly shrugs, “Wynonna got the contact for that, actually,
some guy she met in when she was on the road. Everything else is Willa’s work.”

“Was she in a band or something?”

“No, she was, um, backpacking, I guess,” she chews some nuts before continuing. “We all tough
that her contact was not trustworthy but then the guy got here and gave us a try of his coffee and
the rest is history. I didn't use to like coffee, but after that I always drink at least a cup in the
morning. I’m still not sure if he puts something in it,” she admits.

“Willa is the eldest, right?”

“Mhmm. She's in her last year of college. She's supposed to get back and run Homestead. Wynonna
is only doing it temporarily.”

“Wow. That’s impressive.” Nicole lets out and Waverly feels proud of Wynonna.

“It is.”
“I’m afraid this is the last stop in Haught’s Purgatory tour,” Nicole announces.

They are near where they left Nicole on Friday night, Oak avenue. In the same neighborhood where Chrissy house is. The sun is far past the middle point and the wind is slowly picking up, making the new leaves of the trees dance and Nicole’s long red hair fly.

“I’m also afraid that I’m not cool enough to spend my time here,” Nicole says as they turn in a corner.

A skate park comes into view. It’s little but there’s some people skating. She can hear a danceable song coming from somewhere.

_I can't think to straight, I'm all confused. You must have put a thing on me._

As they get close, she recognizes Perry Croft dancing with a group of guys. It’s a contrast from the Perry she has in her head, clean looking and too polite. God, she used to have a huge crush on him. There’s color everywhere and she recognizes one wall with a design similar to the one in Homestead wall.

“I think Perry’s family promoted this one,” Nicole says as they stop in the corner of the park, looking at the few people skating and biking.

They walk around the park, chatting, and when they return to the beginning Waverly knows it’s over.

“Well, I must say that you made look Purgatory like a dream town,” Waverly congratulates.

“Yeah, I should really get into the real estate business.”

“Totally.”

Nicole takes a glance to the park and pulls out her phone. Waverly sees as she takes the case off and pulls out of it a piece of paper.

“I saw this the other day and thought of giving it to you,” Nicole shows her the piece of paper. “It’s a sticker.”

Waverly can’t find words when she looks at the small sticker. It’s a cute hamster running in a wheel, a reminder of her little friend. It’s not the exact same color as Pikachu was, but it’s close.

“Nicole,” her voice breaks and her vision gets blurry when a few tears appear in them.

“Oh, no. I’m sorry,” Nicole looks at her with worry and puts a hand in her shoulder.

“No. No, it’s perfect. Thank you,” Waverly wipes her eyes and composes herself, taking a deep breath. “Hey, let’s take a photo.”

Nicole nods and opens the camera in her phone and they get close to fit in the frame of the photo. They take a few before Nicole takes a step away from her to look at the pictures.

“Will you send me those?” Waverly points at her favorites.

“Sure,” Nicole winks, “and, I have a text from Dolls. He says they’re in Homestead and that you’re welcome to join. Wanna go?”

Waverly shrugs one shoulder, “I was going there anyway.”
Waverly invites Chrissy and Robin to Homestead too, when Nicole lets her know that they’re welcome to join. They put together two tables so all they can fit in. She finds herself talking freely to Nicole friends. It must be true that thing about the people you walk with, because they’re all banter with them easily. Even Dolls starts to look less intimidating when he loses a game against Jeremy. They all drinking from a big jar of ice tea Rosita brings to the table and continually refills. When Waverly goes to the bathroom, Wynonna intercepts her to let her know that her new friends can order whatever they want.

“Just this one time,” Wynonna lifts one finger, “don’t let those kids get used to it.”

They give up in the deck of cards when the group grows, there are not enough for everyone to play. So they play different games until the night comes and Homestead starts to get emptied of people.

“Am I a composer from the twentieth century?” Robin asks with a piece of paper in his forehead. In Waverly’s opinion, he’s the most close to his answer.

“No,” Waverly responds.

“Yes,” Chrissy says at the same time.

“I can't even tell if you cheating,” Eliza comments.

“Yes or no?” Robin asks, looking between Chrissy and Waverly.

“No idea,” Nicole says with her lips in her glass of tea.

“I mean, he was born at the end of the nineteenth century,” Chrissy explains, “but his works are from the twentieth.”

“Oh,” Waverly concedes.

“Ok,” Jeremy says, “my turn. Have my book series been transformed into a movie?”

“Yes,” almost everyone responds.

“O well, now that I think about it, that can be any book.” Jeremy says.

“You turn, Waverly,” Eliza prompts and takes her phone from her jacket.

“Put that phone back,” Nicole and Dolls say at the same time.

Eliza puts her phone in the table, face down, and then her hands in surrender. “Shit, sorry.”

“Why?” Chrissy asks.

“She has cheated before,” Jeremy starts.

“She reads the character’s name in the reflection of her phone,” Dolls completes.

“Oh, I didn't think of that.”
“Waverly,” Nicole indicates Waverly to ask. She gives her a little wink and Waverly asks her directly.

“Ok. Am I married to a major god?”


Eliza looks at all of them, “boy, I really need to read more.”

Waverly thinks of the conversation she had with Nicole in earlier that day. She has a very good guess of the name in her forehead.

“My turn,” Nicole takes a second before asking, “Am I in American Horror Story?”

“Yes,” Eliza groans.

“I know who I am,” Nicole laughs, “I’m Sarah Paulson.”

“Yes,” everyone says and Nicole takes the piece of paper from her face.

“What?” Waverly asks. She was sure Robin would be the first in guessing right. She shouldn’t had put her money on him. Ok, she didn't, but if she had, she would have lose.

“How?” Chrissy asks, “that was weirdly specific.”

“Eliza always chooses gay celebrities for Nicole,” Jeremy explains and Waverly cheeks fill with color as her mid paints the clear image of Friday afternoon.

“Big deal, you won,” Eliza rolls her eyes at Nicole, who’s laughing at her. “Am I an actress?” She asks loudly, above Nicole laughs.

“Yes,” everyone responds.

“Fine.”

Dolls clears his throat. “Are my movies recent?”

“No,” the crowd say and they turn to Chrissy.

“Am I in this room?” She asks and Waverly knows Chrissy already guessed right.

“Yes,” Robin narrows his eyes at her.

“I’m Waverly, right?” Chrissy half asks and she receives a mixture of yes and nods. She extends a hand to high five the only other person who has guessed. Nicole responds and sends a testing smile to Eliza. “It was too easy,” Chrissy tells Robin and he sighs.

“I am know for my compositions or my work in other areas?” He asks.

“Other-“ Chrissy stars.

“No!” Jeremy interrupts, “It has to be a yes or no question.”

“Right, sorry,” Robin snaps his fingers as he thinks. “Ok, did I do work on ethnomusicology?”

“Yes,” Waverly and Chrissy respond.
“Maybe,” Eliza breaths out.

“Béla Bartók,” Robin says and they all nod.

“Ok, just four more,” Jeremy says exited. “Am I a human?”

“No,” Nicole says and Dolls shakes his head.

Eliza points at Waverly and she turns to see Nicole with a smile, “am I the queen of the underworld?”

“God, that sounded cool,” she hears Robin say as she looks at Nicole smile and nod.

“I am Persephone,” Waverly declares and takes off the piece of paper from her forehead and reads Persephone in Nicole’s handwriting. She folds the piece of paper and saves it in her pocket, next to the sticker. When she turns her attention back, Nicole is suppressing her laughter as Eliza frowns at her.

“Am I gay?” She asks and Nicole breaks. Jeremy and Robin are laughing too and Waverly even hears a small chuckle from Dolls.

“You asshole!” Eliza points at Jeremy, who was the one who write Eliza’s character. “My own medicine!”

Jeremy lifts his hands, “I know you know the character so I wrote it,” he defends.

“Are my movies in black and white?” Dolls asks and Waverly nods. She’s starting to feel bad, she wrote Doll’s character but she doesn’t know him well. She only hopes he won’t get angry.

She feels Nicole get close to her. “Don’t worry,” she whispers to her, “Dolls is a good sport, he won't get mad,” Nicole says by her ear making her shiver. How did she know?

“Am I small?” Jeremy ask meanwhile.

“Yes,” Robin responds.

“Am I Frodo?” Jeremy asks and Dolls shakes his head.


“Yes!” Jeremy shouts and Eliza reaches to give him a high five.

“Go, Dolls!,” Eliza hurries Dolls and he gives a shorts nod.

“Do people speak in my movies?” He asks Waverly and she shakes her head.

“Am I, uh, Dobby?” Jeremy rushes to ask and everyone cheers gaining the dirty looks from the few people that are still in Homestead.

Dolls takes off the paper form his forehead and reads the character out loud, “Charles Chaplin.”

“Sorry,” Waverly grins apologetically. Dolls smiles kindly at her making her feel less bad.

“Well,” Eliza cheeks her phone, finally, and stands taking her jacket, “I have to go. Nice meeting
“you,” she says to Chrissy and Robin.

“I’ll drive you,” Dolls stands to and Jeremy follows.

“Bye, guys,” Jeremy waves enthusiastic.

Dolls stops to look at Nicole a brief second. They hold a silent conversation. He nods before walking out of Homestead without a word.

“That was nice,” Chrissy stretches her back and then leans her head in Robin’s shoulder. “We should go too.”

“Oh,” Robin pats Chrissy’s leg and they stand. Robin helps Chrissy put her jacket on.

“Do you want to come with us?” Chrissy asks Nicole. “We’re going to the station so my dad can give us a ride.”

Nicole looks between Chrissy and Waverly, “uh, no. No, I’ll just ask my dad to pick me up.”

Waverly see the conversation unfold. Why is Chrissy offering Nicole rides? But before she can ask, Chrissy traps her in a hug.

“Let’s do something tomorrow!” Chrissy kisses her cheek.

“I can't, sorry,” Waverly apologizes, “I have to help Wynonna for Saturday’s event.”

“We can come and help you,” she offers, “anyway, text me.” She pulls Robin out of the cafe.

Waverly walks them to the door and when they get out, she flips the sign in the door from open to close.

Homestead is almost empty now. There’s a guy in his laptop and a pair of woman finishing their coffees. Rosita is flying around, cleaning tables and carrying dishes. Wynonna is concentrated in her laptop screen, doing her annoyed face that’s usually dedicated at her school work.

She returns to the table were Nicole is on her phone, texting. Probably her girlfriend. So she waits until Nicole tucks her phone back in her pocket to sit next to her.

“I have to ask you something,” Nicole starts, “I kinda left my jacket at home, so, would you let me borrow that hoodie aging?”

“See? I told you to keep it,” she stands and Nicole follows.

They walk to the back door and up the stairs. It takes her a while to find the switch light, she’s still not accustomed to where the things are in the apartment.

“To be fear, if I had take the hoodie, it would be in my house still,” Nicole says as they enter the apartment.

“It’s not like you can't borrow anything else. Wait a second here.”

She walks fast to the piano room, where the sweatshirt is neatly tucked in one box. She remembers their talk in the afternoon and scrambles around until she finds the torn out book. She takes the sweatshirt and the book and gets back to Nicole, who’s looking at her phone again.

“Here,” she waits to Nicole to shove her phone in her back pocket. “Keep it this time.”
Nicole smiles and contemplates the grey sweatshirt for a second. “Fine, but only because it looks good on me.”

“You’re so full of yourself,” Waverly arches one eyebrows but her facade flatters when Nicole winks at her playfully.

“You should had taken Chrissy invitation, I bet Sheriff Nedley would drive you across town just to be sure that you get home ok.” Waverly knows this for experience.

“No, I’ll just bother my father,” Nicole admits leaning in the wall behind her.

“Oh, how’s that going?”

“Fine, I guess. I accepted that we’re living together now, so I might as well try to get along,” she shrugs.

“That’s great,” she puts a hand in Nicole’s bare arm. She sees Nicole shiver, her skin filling with goosebumps. “You’re cold. Put that on.”

“Yeah, its cold,” Nicole puts the hoodie on, messing her hair in the process. She pulls the sleeves back, leaving her wrist free.

“Better?”

Waverly laughs shakes her head. “You don’t rock that style so well.” She points at her own head.

Nicole combs her hair with her fingers, “now?”

Waverly pulls a thumb up. “Just one thing more,” she hands Nicole the book and the redhead takes it.

“Orpheus myth,” she reads out loud.

“I hope you like it.”

“I’m sure I will,” Nicole pulls her phone out of her jeans and reads the screen.

“He’s here.”

“I’ll walk you outside,” Waverly gestures to the door and they walk together.

“Thank you for the ride,” Nicole says in the car. An old rock song she doesn't recognize is playing on the radio. She has notice in the time her father has been home, that he’s always listening to the same radio station that is always playing old songs. He must be the only one listening to the radio, she thinks but the true is that the music is good.

She’s moving her head following the beat, imagining how it would be to play it in the guitar.

“Thank you for calling me, I really appreciate it, he says as they stop in a red light. “How was your day?”
“Great,” She can’t stop her enthusiasm. It had really been a great day.

Thomas smiles. “Great,” he repeats.

A deep voice tells the audience what’s the next song and an electric guitar starts. Thomas reaches to the radio, raising the volume in the car.

“I used to play this song with my buds back at college. We were terrible,” he laughs.

“You were in a band?” She ask. Thomas Haught, with his well ironed shirts and soft attitude is not the type of person she imagines in a band. To be fair, when she imagines someone in a band, she thinks in Mattie and Wynonna, and that’s a very high bar.

“Yeah. It was terrible. We played like five times and we simply decided to quit,” he stops and sings lowly, “You don’t have to put on the red light. Roxane.”

Nicole laughs at him making him lose the note. She’s glad they’re alone. Is this what have a father is like? Is this one of those embarrassing moments everyone complains about?

“By the way,” he says abruptly, cutting the phrase in half, “are you gonna use the guitar tomorrow?”

“Um, just a little, I guess?” Am I bothering him? Am I really that terrible at singing?

She’s feeling self conscious all the sudden.

“Can I borrow it when your not using it?”

“I mean, it’s yours. You can just take it,” she shrugs like it’s nothing. But really, she’s afraid that he’s going to take the guitar away.

“I’m glad because I’ve been using it all day. Don’t worry, you can keep using it,” he says as he parks the car in front of their house.

_____

Everything’s about open mic night in Nicole’s social media. It’s the most exciting thing happening in Purgatory this week. Every teen in Purgatory who could go anywhere else in the break is assisting. Everything was about who was going with who, who would participate because they wanted to and who would do it for a laugh. It’s making Nicole really nervous.

This is just a little thing, there’s nothing in game. She even told her friends she might participate but, why? She only knows how to play one song.

“Well, you only have to play one,” Greg reasoned in the phone.

But she wasn’t ready. What if she’ll never be ready? What if the competition arrives and Nicole can only play Knocking on the Heavens Door slowly and stupidly?

Saturday morning, she wakes up panting and sweating. In her dream, just like in some dumb
movie, she was in the middle of Homestead’s little stage that looked cartoonishly large. And of course, she was naked. And everyone was looking at her because her subconscious is an asshole.

She takes deep breaths and texts Dolls asking him to go for a run with her. Half and hour later, he meets her outside her home ready and they start running. They pass the skate park and the old church when Nicole gathers courage to talk.

“So, the bet,” she says, her legs burning.

“What about it?” Dolls asks easily, without losing his breath. He makes it look so easy, dam him.

“What if we bet for something else? A race or maybe Mario Kart?”

“No,” he keeps his pace and Nicole’s flatters a little.

“Push ups?” Right, like I’m going to win that one against him.

“No.”

“Eating burritos? Or maybe who can eat more peppers?” This was exactly what she didn't want to do that first week, beg. But here she is, afraid of one bad dream, saying stupid things.

“No.”

At least she tried.

“Look,” Dolls stops and stretches, “you heard Rosita. The competition is far away in the future,” he gestures with his hand at the hypothetical future in the horizon, “so you have a ton of time in your hands. Stop being a coward and run faster.”

He starts running again and Nicole follows, her lungs contracting and her mouth dry. *I need to exercise more*, she thinks to herself and pushes herself to run at the same pace Dolls is going.

“Tell you what,” he says a few minutes after, still running, “let’s go today and look the other people perform. Some of them are probably going to participate in the competition. You’ll see they’re not that good so you can stop freaking out about it.”

“We’re going already,” she jumps a dog poop in the middle of the sidewalk.

“But now your going with a goal in mind. Put your head in the game,” he speeds up.

“Fine, Troy Bolton.”

Homestead is closed all day so they spend the morning enjoying bad shows on T.V. at Shorty’s. Gus and Curtis are here spending the weekend and it feels like a holiday, but without Willa. So, very nice to Waverly.

After noon, they go to Homestead to get ready for the night. Wynonna goes lazyly around the cafe doing little to prepare while Doc, Rosita, Fish, Levi and Waverly run around, getting everything else done. One day that they hosted a little concert and things got out of hand in the kitchen so they decided to only serve coffee, sodas, cupcakes and hotdogs for the night.
Willa tells Wynonna over the phone how glad she’s that the event is going to be a success.

“It hasn’t happened yet,” Wynonna reminds her.

*But it would be,* Waverly thinks. For once, she agrees with Willa.

“But, yeah. Ba-ding, Ba-ding can kiss my ass,” Wynonna ends up saying.

Chrissy and Robin get to Homestead later and she takes a break. They spend their time in the piano room where Robin starts playing show tunes. Chrissy and Waverly perform “Sing” from a Chorus Line and Robin tries to follow with the armory, stumbling a little. They talk about the exam and somehow ends in the conversation Waverly has been avoiding.

“I just don’t understand how it happened,” Chrissy starts, “you told me like a week before that you were going to stop flirting with him.”

“I know, but he-“ she tries to find an explanation that doesn’t sound like she’s being superficial or dumb.

“He has nice arms,” Robin says casually, playing a easy sonata. The two girls stare at him and he stops playing. “I mean, he’s good at sports?” He shrugs and resumes the tune.

“Right,” Chrissy frowns at him and returns to Waverly. “That’s not enough, though. Are you sure you want this?”

Waverly wants to say yes, so she can take Chrissy out of her back. But the true is that she knows what she wants in a lot of things, but not with this, not with Champ. As in queue, a text arrives in her screen.

Champ. H., 15:47: Are you done? Can I come over?

*What part of I’ll be busy all day he can’t understand?,* she sighs and turns of the screen. “I don’t,” she admits.

“Oh, geez. Let it out, girl.”

Waverly breathes deeply. “I feel like im a trophy when I'm with him. When we’re alone, he’s all nice and he listens, sometimes. But Friday, he walked me around high school showing me off. At first it was like he was proud, but then it felt like he was just showing off his new toy.”

“Let it go,” Chrissy prompts, used to Waverly’s rants.

“And then this week, he’s following me around like a leech. I wanted to spend more time with Wynonna and whit Ni- with you, guys. But he’s so needy.”

“This is not good,” Robin says when he ends his sonata, turning in the piano bench.

“He even invited me to, basically, have sex.”

“Wait, what?”

“But we have been dating for one week. What is he thinking? And all of you keep acting like I’m crazy for dating him. The worst is that I’m feel like that too.” A realization comes to her head, “oh, my god. I need to break up with him.”

“That was-“ Robin mutters.
“Great. Let’s get you out of that mistake,” Chrissy announces.

Eliza, Dolls, Jeremy and Nicole get early to Homestead. The event is starting in a hour or so and People are starting to arrive. There’s more chairs spread around the cafe and a few less tables. Above the cash register tha says that today their selling just four option. It works great for them. They sit in a table near the stage and Nicole looks around. She can see some familiar faces. Wynonna is in her usual spot in the cash register and Doc is next to her, ready to register the people who would get in stage. He shaved his beard and now is showing a big mustache that makes him look ten years older. Rosita is in the counter too, today she not waiting tables and instead you have to get up and go for your food. Some people from high school are there too and she can see Mattie carrying her guitar, Gretta following her. This must be one of those days were they’re in good terms.

“I though you’ll bring your guitar,” Eliza says as she arrives with three sodas and a paper cup of coffee, Jeremy behind with the food.

“No,” Nicole takes one soda and opens it.

“Why?” Eliza sits next to Dolls, who takes a sip of coffee.

“I don’t know, I’m still not good enough, I guess,” she shrugs.

Eliza and Jeremy share a look that makes Nicole know that their holding something.

“What?” She demands.

“Nothing,” Eliza opens her soda too.

“Jeremy,” she targets him, “what is it?”

“Uh,” Jeremy look between Eliza and Nicole, “nothing?”

“Why are you asking?” Nicole presses.

Eliza groans. “You’re going to get mad at us.”

“I’m already mad. Just tell me.”

“Is just that-“ Eliza starts slowly.

“You always chicken out.” Jeremy completes abruptly.

“What?” She looks at her friends, angry as they predict.

“Look,” Eliza rest her head in her elbow, “we love you, you know that. But you always find excuses so you don't do things.”

“Like?” She doesn't, or does she?

“Like when you were with Shae and didn't go to the tryouts ‘cuz you tough that you couldn’t manage the time.” Eliza says.
“Or when you starting selling your things because you were afraid of getting a job.”

“Or when you didn’t break up with Shae so you waited until she did.”

“Or when-“

“Ok!” Nicole shouts, gaining the attention of some people around them, “I just wanted to spend time with my girlfriend and,” she points at Jeremy, “I’m doing very good selling the stuff I don’t need.”

“Tell her, Dolls,” Eliza looks at Dolls.

He shrugs and looks at Nicole, his eyes honest, “you wanted to call off the bet his morning.”

Nicole stands up, making a high noise with the chair. “I can't believe you.” She walks away, her fist clenched.

“Hey!” A guy calls after she push him in the way.

She gets to the door and gets out of the cafe, inhales deeply and holds her breath. She counts to ten before letting go and watch people come and go on the sidewalk, most of them walking into Homestead.

Maybe she’s scared. It always petrifieds her the unknown.

She doesn’t want to get up there and have a bad experience. She can hold on until is completely necessary and then just get over with it.

“At least try to have fun,” her mom said when she was eight and she was practicing gymnastic. It was her first competition and she was uncomfortable in the pink leotard her mom bought her. “We know you wont make it far, so no pressure,” she stroked her hair and leaded her to were the rest of the girls were.

Nicole begged her to drop out after that and she spend a few months, enjoying her free time, until her mom singed her on swimming classes. An improvement, in Nicole’s opinion.

“We’ll do this until June and then I can leave it behind,” she says to herself.

“What?” She hears from behind. She jumps and turns to find Waverly, Chrissy and Robin, all of them with big smiles in their faces.

“What’s up?” She asks.

“Nothing. We’re just-“ Waverly starts.

“Waverly dumped her boyfriend, well, ex-boyfriend,” Chrissy says abruptly.

“What?”

“It was awesome,” Robin says.

“You should have seen his face, I don't think her mom ever said no to him,” Chrissy laughs and Robin joins in.

“Chrissy!” Waverly scolds but she’s smiling too.
“Sorry, we’re just, like, high. What are you doing here, Nicole?” Robin asks.

“Just,” she looks around and point to the sky, “air.”

“You should get in, get good seats,” Robin says.

“I already have seats,” Nicole says, thinking of the table she just left angrily.

“Let’s go,” Waverly links one arm with her and they walk through the door.

Nicole takes a glance when they’re inside to her friends table. The three of them look at her and she can see worry in their expressions. But right now, she’s with Waverly.

“Hey, are you ok?” She asks the small girl as Chrissy and Robin leave to get seats.

“Yeah, great actually. Don’t worry, I broke up with him. We just dated for a week.”

“Wow. Well. I’m glad your feeling fine, then,” she smiles.

“I feel free. I didn't want to see it, but Chrissy made me see it.”

“Hey, Nic,” Shae walks next to them, waving at Nicole. The redhead waves back.

“You should go with your girlfriend,” she hears Waverly say.

“Shae? No, she’s not. You saw-,” she scratches her head, “she’s my ex.”

“Waverly, guess what?” Wynonna gets from behind, putting an arms across Waverly shoulders before the brunette can answer. “I dare him to sing tonight,” she says excitedly and points to Doc behind, leaning the counter. He nods once.

“Oh no, Doc. Don't let her push you around,” Waverly rest one hand in his arm.

“No worries, Waverly. I must defend my honor,” he straights up, his chest out.

“There’s no honor in that mustache,” Rosita comments when she walks by with a package of napkins.

“Wynonna, it was your idea,” Waverly scolds, making a face that Nicole has ever seen, “now people are gonna make fun of him.”

“Please, Henry loves it,” she smiles maliciously.

Waverly looks at Doc and he avoids eye contact, pursing his lips.

“I’ll play with you, just tell me what you’re singing,” Waverly sighs.

“Chasing pavements by-“

“Adele?” Nicole tilts her head. Doc and Adele make no sense together.

“Man, you gotta work on that obsession,” Wynonna leans on the counter.

“My pardon, but Adele is most certainly one of the best-“ Doc starts.

“Ok. We get it,” Wynonna runs to the cash register were a group of people are waiting to make their order.
“How many people have sing on already,” Nicole looks at the list. There’s just six names written. She just recognizes Mattie and Pete York.

“How many people have sing on already,” Nicole looks at the list. There’s just six names written. She just recognizes Mattie and Pete York.

“Seven,” Doc says as he writes his own name.

“You don't have to do it, do you?” Nicole sees John Henry Holliday written neatly.

“No, I suppose I do not,” he shrugs, “but what is life if you do not dare to adventure?” He tips his hat and winks.

“Charming. Let me go upstairs to get my guitar,” Waverly says and turns to Nicole, “see you around?”

“Yeah,” Nicole smiles at Waverly, “I’ll be over there,” She points at the table were Mattie, Gretta and Andy are now sitting with the rest of the group.

When Pete York finish his terrible comical number, the crowd gives a sympathetic round of applause. He walks down and his friends receive him like he actually did good.

Waverly gets up the stage and announces Mattie as the next performer. The girl sees from the stage Mattie get up from the table she’s sharing with Nicole and her friends.

Mattie connects her electro acoustic guitar and stands in front of the microphone as Waverly walks to Doc, who’s still in charge of the list.

When Mattie starts paying the very indistinguishable riff of Come As You Are, the people of the cafe keep silent. Waverly sees that Gretta screams a who from the table as Mattie starts singing. She has always envy this from Mattie. The girl has a great stage presence and she has become just cooler with her age. Some people start clapping to the beat, compensating the absence of drums. Waverly sighs and stands next to Doc who has his cellphone out with the lyrics of the song he's about to sing. She takes a coffee from Rosita stack and gets comfortable, Mattie surely is going to use the full ten minutes they give to each participant. From the corner of her eye, she sees Doc start to hyperventilate.

“Doc, just go to the kitchen, I’ll call you when you’re next,” she offers and Doc nods before walking to the kitchen door.

Mattie ends her song and receive a good round of applause. She talks a little before she starts playing other song Waverly doesn’t recognize.

“Hey,” a tall guy whispers to her when Mattie starts singing. “Where do I sign up?”

“Here,” Waverly takes the list and gives it to him with a pen.

“Don’t despair, you’ve always been there, you’ve always been there,” Mattie sings as Waverly waits.

“Here, thanks,” he whispers again, smiling at her.

“Great. You’ll go after Tom Haught?” She looks at the name in the list. Is this Tom related to Nicole?
“Ok, thanks,” the guy tugs the strand of the guitar has carryin on his back.

“No problem,” she reads the name in the list, “Charlie.”

When Mattie gets back to the table, everyone congratulates her.

“That was fun,” Mattie says as she sits next to Gretta.

The twins are constantly changing drummer and guitarist in their unnamed band. When they get together with Constance, the three of them become spectacular. But everyone knows that Mattie is the hearth of the little band.

“I feel sorry for anyone who plays after you,” Eliza comments and they pay attention to stage as Waverley announces an old couple. “Except them,” she puts her hand over her heart, “they’re adorable.”

They all pay attention to the most adorable thing they had seen in their life. But Nicole’s head is away.

Pete York might be an asshole but he got the guts to get up on the stage and play fool, even if was just for his friends amusement. They were a few other people who were bad, too. Well, not bad, but they made mistakes and the people treat them kindly. She wonders if they would have been nice with her too.

…but what is life if you don't dare to adventure, echoes in her mind.

When she realizes, Waverly is on stage with her guitar, accommodating a music stand with a music sheet, and Doc is standing in front of the microphone. He looks like a lost kid, a lost kid with facial hair.

“Show them, Holliday!” Wynonna shouts from the cashier.

He gives Waverly a short nod and covers his eyes with his black hat. Waverly starts playing note by note and Doc starts singing. He’s definitely not Adele, but he sings all the words right. He keeps his fist clenched and his arms pressed against his body through all the song. By the end, she can see him sweating and when the song ends, he looks so relieved. Waverly starts clapping and the crowd follows her lead and they get off the stage.

One thing's for sure. Nicole respects Doc Holliday so much now.

She debates as they see participant after participant if she should ask Mattie to borrow her guitar, or maybe Waverly. But the small girl announces that the list is closed and calls up the next participant.

She can see Waverly looking at her when she reads the name in the list.

“Next, is Tom Haugh,” Waverly’s words sound in the speakers and all the people in her table turn to look at her.

The color leaves her face as she see her father carrying the same guitar she had been playing a few hours ago. Waverly helps him with the microphone for the guitar and leaves the stage, leaving her
father alone in the stage, looking like she felt that morning in her nightmare.

“Is that your dad?” Andy asks and she nods slowly. “He looks young.”

“He looks so different,” Jeremy comments as Thomas Haught clears his throat.

“Good night,” Thomas says and someone responds in the back of the cafe, making the people laugh. “I hadn’t play in a long time, so I hope this goes well.” He pulls the collar of his t-shirt and Nicole slumps into her chair remembering the bit of song he sang out of tune in the car a few nights ago. He catches her eyes and gives her a thumbs up and some people turn to see her.

This is definitely one of those embarrassing moments everyone keeps talking about.

Someone shouts a *woo* much more loud than the one Gretta shouted when Mattie was up. Nicole turns to see the person responsible for encouraging her father to do something like this and sees Michael and another guy, cheering like it was their father, not hers.

He starts strumming the strings and somehow, he looks so much different from the guy that lives with her. She can’t catch the song but Mattie and Gretta share a look and sing in sintony with her father.

“*How many special people change? How many lives are living strange? Where were you when we were getting high?*” Thomas sings and it takes Nicole one more second to place the song.

His voice is not like Liam Gallagher and it’s different from his soft voice he always use around the house. It’s not the same way he sang *Roxanne* in the car and it makes a part of her brain get itchy. She remembers a time, long long ago, when he used to sing her to her sleep.

“*Someday you will find me, caught beneath the landslide in a champagne supernova, a champagne supernova in the sky,*” he strums with ease and Nicole smiles without knowing.

It's not that terrible after all. Somehow, Thomas Haught has her wishing to be on that stage.

After a few minutes, the song ends and he gets off the stage. Nicole stands up and walks to see her dad. She leaves her friends in shock, but Dolls gives her a kind smile that tells her to go.

Waverly announces the next participant, a guy named Charlie Oriel.

When she gets to the stage, Michael and the other guy are already waiting from him. Thomas walk to them and when he sees Nicole approaching, he immediately turns to her.

“Hey!” He sounds excited, “did you like it? By the way, you bought good strings.”

“It was awesome,” Nicole admits.

“I hope I didn’t embarrassed you,” he scratches his head.

Nicole shakes her head as Michael and the second guy reach them. She can hear the guy in the stage present himself.

“Sorry, Nicole,” her dad says, “I’m giving this guys a ride to the bus station, I’ll be back later, ok?”

Nicole nods and waves goodbye to Michael and the second guy. In the counter, next to Wynonna and Doc, she locates Waverly, watching the guy perform. She hears him play the guitar as she gets to Waverly.
“I think I met that guy before,” she hears Wynonna say, narrowing her eyes, “but he looks too good to be someone I’ve know before. He look so familiar.”

“Hey, Waverly,” She says as the guy in stage starts singing.

“Are you calling for our last dance? I see it in your eyes.”

“Nicole, do you want a reject cupcake?” She gestures to the tray full of burned and weirdly shaped cupcakes, “I made them myself,” she whispers proudly.

“Sure,” Nicole takes one. She gives it a good look and then see that Waverly is waiting for her to take a bite. So she does and nods as the flavor invades her mouth. “Great,” she gives her verdict with her mouth full.

They see the stage and Waverly gets close to her. “Was that your dad?” She whispers only to her. Nicole nods, her mouth full. “I thought so, I was surprised when I saw him with your guitar.”

Nicole shallows, “it’s actually his.”

“But you use it most of the time, right?”

“I guess,” she says and they keep quiet, listening to the song and the small sounds all around Homestead. People whispering and chairs creaking. Nicole thinks about all that has happened this week and smiles. It was so much different from winter break, were she spent all her time being sad and inactive. No wonder why Shae decided to break up with her. But this week has been amazing, mostly because of Waverly. She knows that they will return to the normal routine. Seeing each other once or twice a week, living an hour and a half apart. She almost wish Waverly would stay here since today.

“When are you going back to Big city?” She asks watching Waverly in the low light. She looks happy, so much different from last friday.

“Shine on, shine on. Close your eyes and they’ll be gone.”

“Tomorrow morning,” Waverly says, he voice low.

“But we’re seeing each other on Tuesday, right?”

“Of course,” Waverly smiles brightly and Nicole dams her stupid hearth.

“Which your smile just as bright as the sun…”

Chapter End Notes

Leave a coment if you have something to say or if you had an emo phase.

A lot of oldies in this one:

Despair - Yeah Yeah Yeahs
Brand New Cadillac - The Clash
Even Flow - Pearl Jam
Knockin’ on Heaven's Door - Bob Dylan
Every Little Step - Bobby Brown
Roxanne - The Police
Come As You Are - Nirvana
Despair (Acoustic Version) - Yeah Yeah Yeahs
Chasing Pavements - Adele
Champagne Supernova - Oasis
Shine On - James Blunt

Spotify playlists:
Chap. 3 and 4
Now is Exactly The Time

Chapter Summary

Time goes by and Nicole buys trash.

Waverly is sad because Wynonna is not going to her recital.

Chapter Notes

I always confuse the words before and after.
There was a italian teacher that used to give me lessons and her spanish was good. But one day, she confused the words "traer" (bring) and "llevar" (take away). So I guess this happens to everybody.
Anyway. I cut this chapter in two, because I can.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“It’s trash.”

“Aw, c’ mon. Give it an opportunity,” Andy says, shoulder bumping Nicole.

“It’s literally trash,” Nicole kneels down to look at the literal trash in front of them.

The sun is up, in an angle that hurts your eyes if you walk in its direction. The days have become warmer and longer through April and they’re no longer carrying big jackets around the school, just some lighter ones. It’s not really warm. This is Purgatory and the really hot days are reserved to a few weeks in summer, accompanied by rain. The air’s dusty in Atlantic street. It hasn't rain or snow in a while, so the houses keep the doors and windows closed in the afternoons when the wind currents run wildly between the streets. There’s hope that May will bring better conditions when the first rain arrives.

But right now, Nicole adjusts the brown cap she found in her last visit to the attic. That not-so-dusty-anymore attic that has been providing Waverly’s lessons, Nicole’s visits to Homestead and other things. She sold her last item last week. To Andy, actually. A brand new set of pencil colors she found next to a bunch of new coloring books her mom left. Mandalas mainly. She contemplated them for a long minute, debating with herself if someone was going to miss them.

Andy laughed at her when she offered her the coloring books.

“I’m not seven anymore,” she commented.

Nicole pointed out the cover of the books, where clearly said “for all ages” but Andy didn't bite. So she shrugged and gave the pencil colors to the blue-eyed girl. Then, in Homestead, they were doing homework and Nicole saw Andy’s notebook full of color, doodles and real drawings. Good drawings. After that, Nicole saw the coloring books with disdain and made a mental note to add Andy to her team at Pictionary.
It wasn't surprising to find out that Andy was good at drawing. She has been making Nicole a full zoo of paper animals. Ok, maybe not that many. But a few. Some are made of napkins, like the first one, and some are made of notebooks pages, like the little jumping frog. She has given her cats and dogs but mostly, birds.

And every time her friends see one of those origami figurines, they smile teasingly to Nicole.

Since Eliza gave her the heads up about Andy’s obvious crush on her, Nicole has been taking care of not doing anything too encouraging. Which is hard because Nicole has no idea if her friendly gestures can be taken as something else. And it’s difficult because Andy’s around a lot.

Not like that first week, fortunately, but, yeah, a bit lot. She shares a bunch of classes with Eliza and Dolls, and of course, she’s in the same team Eliza’s in. But Andy’s outgoing, funny and no one has much to complain about her.

“It’s not trash, it’s an opportunity,” Andy recites Jeremy’s new motto for Nicole.

“It’s an opportunity,” he said, pushing Nicole to Homestead little stage.

“No, Jeremy, let go,” Nicole hissed trying to walk back to the table.

It was an early afternoon in the cafe. Nor Rosita or Wynona were in Homestead. Instead, a scared-looking guy with long hair gave them the green light to get up the stage.

“I guess,” he shrugged.

There were close to no one that early afternoon. It was just them, Andy and a bunch of her friends, a few of cops and firefighters that were animatedly talking in a corner, a middle-aged guy with headphones and a young couple. But to Nicole’s eyes, it was as full as that night at the beginning of the month, where she saw her dad perform an Oasis song.

She heard the click of the locks and soon enough, Dolls was giving her the guitar and Eliza was dragging a chair to the center of the stage.

Nicole was all red. Her hair, her brand new Chuck Taylors, that t-shirt that fits her too tight to her liking and her face. Red.

Before she knew it, she was sitting on the chair, crossing her right leg and putting the guitar in her thigh. She played an open chord to see if the guitar was untuned, just like Waverly had taught her. It wasn't tuned but she wasn't good at doing it by ear, so she acted like everything was ok.

There was no need for a microphone. The cafe was silent, every pair of eyes were on her. How she wished they were focusing somewhere else.

It's an opportunity, she recited for herself. You can’t be brave if you don't take opportunities. The bull by its horns.

So she played and sang the same song her dad played that night, but significantly worse. At least in her insecure mind. She was super focused in her left hand and her voice was low. Nicole avoided looking at Andy and her friends. She could hear the group of men resume their conversation and the guy with the headphones was taping his table in a different rhythm. The couple was looking, for sure.

Fake it 'till you make it, she thought and tried to kept a calm face but Nicole was sure her face was shiny and her voice breaking.
When she finished the song, her friends exploded in cheers, Andy's table and the rest were clapping too. It wasn't the best experience she had, but she took the opportunity. Finally, she stepped forward.

Nicole walked around the rest of the day with her head up, proud of herself and surprisingly thankful that her friends pushed her to do something she was afraid of.

*So taking all that into consideration, it's pretty good*, Waverly’s voice repeated in her head and she mentally gave herself a pat on the back. Then, the next Tuesday in the piano room, Waverly congratulated her with a big tight hug and many compliments. It was awesome and it made everything worth it.

“An opportunity for *what*?” Nicole picks up the frame, putting the old bicycle upside down.

“I don't know,” Andy shrugs, putting a hand in the other bike, “learn something new. Maybe you can restore it and sell it.”

Nicole looks at the bicycle crooning her head. She pictures the same bike painted black or red, maybe yellow, with new tires and a decent seat. How much can she charge for that? It’s profitable?

“Are you interested in those?” Mr. Kowalsky, an old man with no hair that walks around with the help of a handmade crane, asks them. “They were my son’s, but they live now in Vancouver. I’ll give them to you but my wife will get mad if she finds out that I'm giving away our sons things again.”

“How much for this one?”

“Ten bucks for both of them,” Mr. Kowalsky offers.

It’s a great deal, she can google later how much can she charge for a fully restored bicycle but surely it’s more than ten bucks.

“I’ll just take one,” she says, standing up and pulling her money from her back pocket.

“I’ll take the other,” Andy says rapidly before Mr. Kowalsky can object.

Nicole pays for the bicycle and the other things she found around. They walk down the street, pushing the bikes through the sidewalk. Nicole swings the guitar case, making sure that it doesn't hit the ground. She has been carrying around the guitar lately, not only Tuesday (the best day of the week) when she meets with Waverly. She has to admit, it has given her a reputation even if it’s purely based on appearances.

After that night in Homestead, Gretta spread the word that Nicole’s dad was the guy that played that night. Nicole and her friends spend a full week explaining to people which one of the guys that played that night is, in fact, Nicole’s dad. One day, she was talking with Wynonna and Doc by Homestead’s cash register when a bunch of freshmen referred to Doc as Mr. Haught.

Wynonna spent the afternoon beating the shit out of that horse.

So now, everyone thought Nicole’s family was full of musicians, pianos around the house, famous relatives, when in reality it was just her dad and her.

It doesn't bother Nicole, thought. Been associated with Thomas Haught. Tom Haught. Since that week, the things in her home were getting better. It really made a difference when she stopped avoiding her dad. It wasn't perfect yet, and it probably never will. But now they talked at dinner
and she was in her house more, which lead to some very needed conversations. She talked with him about boundaries a day when he walked in the room when Nicole was watching a, to her opinion, very explicit video. It wasn’t porn, but it was... close. Luckily, Tom didn’t see it.

Not that the day’s running around Purgatory had stopped. Nicole is more active than ever, taking opportunities. The same heavy feeling that she got when someone suggested to go out was gone and replaced with excitement. And her dad didn’t tell her anything about being out most of the days. She always makes it to dinner.

It’s curious, to Nicole, how her dad is always telling her where he is or where he’s going, how late will he arrive; and yet, he doesn’t ask for the same in exchange. She’s not sure if this is some kind of tactic to make her like him. If it is, it’s kinda working.

Nicole’s dad is away in Big City, attending a job interview in some architectural firm, so she shrugs and they walk to the porch, where they sit in a set of white chairs.

“My dad is very handy,” Andy diverges from the topic after a few minutes, “I bet he can show us how to deal with these things,” she gestures to her bike. “Do you wanna take a look? He has like a million tools.”

“Sure.”

They stand up and drag the bikes again to the right side of the house. Andy opens the door and reveals the wide space. The garage is big and messy, but in a corner, there’s a work table with tools hanging from it. And from the wall and tucked in various shelves. It reminds her of Greg when she visited more than a year ago and he was slowly building his own little carpentry shop. Now, from what he says in the phone, Nicole knows the shop is not that little anymore.

“Your dad would get along with my cousin,” she comets as they approach a shelf. The smell of oxide, oil and metal reach her nose, separating her cousin’s shop from Andy’s garage.

Andy laughs. “He doesn’t even get along with my mom,” she says with humor and then she blows at the table lifting a little cloud of dust that she can see floating in a ray of light.

“And you want him to teach us?” Nicole watches as Andy lifts herself an sits in the work table.

“Well, you don't have to get along with your teachers in order to learn, do you?” Andy pats the spot next to her.

“I suppose not” Nicole breathes out and lifts herself too.

But I get along with Waverly, she thinks, and that makes her the best teacher.

That and a million reasons more. At this point, she’s just reaching. Since she let herself accept that she was crushing on Waverly, Nicole lets her mid maunder around. She thinks of Waverly’s laugh when she told her that one joke she worked on for a full week, or in the way she changes her demeanor when she’s explaining to her how to properly pulse a string, in the way she treats the customers in the weekends when she's waiting tables at Homestead, in the way she connects with
Jeremy the way she hasn't seen since Eliza came around. Sometimes her mind rambles to Waverly’s pretty hair when is up and down, her hazel eyes and the way they wrinkle when she smiles, in her fingers and how they look when Waverly plays her guitar.

Nicole’s completely enamored, which is tragic. Because she never lets herself manger around too much thinking of their building friendship and how she’ll never do anything to damage it, or in the distance between them in so many ways, or when she thinks in her ex-boyfriend and how it’s impossible that Waverly would ever feel the same type of attraction to her.

And when she’s with Andy, she wonders if she should be giving her an opportunity.

It’s a Thursday in the middle of May and all Waverly wishes for is for Friday to come so she can leave the city. So she can leave the concrete jungle and breath Purgatory’s air and Homestead’s coffee. The bottled tea she’s drinking it’s so sweet and warm and she curses her own self for leaving her own tea in the kitchen counter this morning. The air feels hot and the light too bright in the high school courtyard which is a not so big space rounded by tall walls of the buildings and wire mesh.

At least the conservatory has a lot of green areas, so even if they get there in the hottest hour of the day, they feel refreshed by the vegetation. But right now, sitting in a table outside, sharing lunch with Chrissy, Robin and Mark, a guy from their biology class, she feels like dying.

April had been real torture when she came back from Purgatory. When she broke up with Champ, she should have known that it wasn't the end of it. First, he begged to go back together and when he ran out of nice guy tactics, James Hardy showed his true colors. It didn’t even make sense that he was talking trash around the school when he started dating Emma Waters, but he made sure that his own side of the story was the one circulating between classrooms. Everything from Waverly taking somehow advantage of him to he dumping her because he deserved better.

Luckily, even if Waverly’s not a popular girl, she’s kind with everyone so most of the kids didn’t believe Champ, but the bunch that did make Waverly’s life’s at school a bit unbearable.

Waverly takes a sip of the too sweet tea and flinches. Chrissy pushes her water bottle to her and smiles to Waverly. The brunette takes a drink and sighs, feeling the water cooling her down.

“What are you going to wear tomorrow?” Chrissy takes her bottle back and rolls the cap.

Waverly shrugs one shoulder, “long black skirt, black blouse, the usual.”

“You were wearing that last time,” Chrissy makes a face of disappointment. Her face lights up suddenly.

“Uh oh,” Robin indentures the face of trouble in Chrissy’s face.

Mark keeps his eyes on his juice box, uninterested in what's unfolding in the table.
“We should go shopping, today!” Chrissy grabs Waverly’s arm a little too hard. She looks at Robins and then Mark, whose eyes are still glued to the same spot.

“Don’t look at me, I can’t. Gotta see the twins,” Robin leans his head on his elbow, smiling.

“No, it’s too late. We’ll spend the whole afternoon at it and I need to practice with the clothes on,” Waverly argues.

“C’mon, we’ll find you something pretty,” Chrissy takes her hand instead and turns in the bench, to completely face her, “you’ll be playing in the big auditorium. That calls for a new outfit.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean that more people would show up, just parents. It’s just a bigger space, honestly.”

“More empty chairs,” Robin says lightly and wins an angry stare from Chrissy.

“Didn't you invite someone else?” She asks returning to look at her friend.

“Apart from you and Robin? Only Wynonna and Doc, but they won’t come,” Waverly remembers last Tuesday when Wynonna told her that Fridays were busy days at Homestead.

“What about Jeremy?” Robin asks with the straw of his juice box between his lips. “And the rest, of course” he adds.

Waverly did, but she doesn't expect them to come all the way to Big City to see her play.

“Wow, this Friday?” Jeremy asked reading the invitation, Dolls reading it from his seat. It was a pamphlet with the events from the week at the conservatory. They’re a pair of big concerts, one right after Waverly’s recital. In fact, the little concert Waverly’s participating at is the smallest event of the week. Friday, from 4 pm to 6 pm so the auditorium can be ready for the concert at 8 p.m. She highlighted it so they wouldn’t get confused.

They weren't many people in Homestead that day, and when Waverly and Nicole walked down, Eliza and Andy, a girl they introduce her one afternoon, were leaving.

For a few weeks now, Waverly was spending the Tuesday afternoons with Nicole and her friends. It’s a nice change of routine, even if it puts some extra pressure in Waverly’s routine. They’re usually playing, but now and then, they do some homework together and since all of them are in one or two courses over her, they are a good help.

“It’s really nothing big,” Waverly said waving her hand dismissively.

Nicole, who has stood right next to her, looked at Waverly for a quick second. “I’m sure it’s a big thing,” she stepped closer to read the one in Waverly’s hands. “Didn't you mention that this is the biggest auditorium in your school?” She pointed at the name of the auditorium.

“It is,” Wynonna said as she stepped between Waverly and Nicole. They moved so Wynonna could fit in. She put her arm over Waverly’s shoulders and gave her a weird side hug. “So bad that is so far away,” her sister said in a weird tone.

“It’s not that-” Nicole was interrupted by a groan and when Waverly turned her head to see her, she was rubbing her arm and looking accusingly at Wynonna.

“Shit, sorry, kid,” Wynonna said unconvincingly. “hey Waves, can you bring me the- uh- the
“laptop charger? I left it in my room.”

“I did, but you know,” Waverly shrugs and both of her friends nod.

All of them have had this particular problem. Chrissy’s dad always tries to attend every concert, competition or recital she’s in, but sadly being the sheriff of a growing town is a demanding job. And Robin parents have never taken too seriously his presentations, so when they find it too complicated to attend, they apologize and their pretext is always the distance. At least there’s always someone that goes for every one of them. To Waverly, is Curtis and Gus; for Chrissy, is her mom; and for Robin, is his uncle, who is far more supportive about music than his parents.

“Well, you don't need a reason to get yourself some nice things,” Chrissy concludes.

“But I don’t want-” Waverly starts.

“So it’s decided!” Chrissy cuts her off, “we’re going shopping.”

Waverly frowns but sees the look in Chrissy’s eyes and knows that she’s not changing her opinion.

“Fine,” she looks at the fourth person in the table, “wanna come with us, Mark?”

“Mark,” Robin pats him once in his shoulder and the boy returns to reality from wherever he was.

“Uh?” he asks, lifting his head.

“Wanna come with us? shopping?”

“Oh,” he runs his hand through his shaved head. the long sleeves of his shirt move a little and Waverly can see for a moment the bandages in his wrists. “Can’t, sorry. I have to be supervised.”

“Other day, then,” Chrissy smiles kindly and Mark returns his eyes to the table.

It makes Waverly feel useless when Mark fades away. He used to be such a bright guy, but then something happened but no one noticed and after a few years, not even them noticed him. And Waverly was no stranger to that kind of darkness. When she was little, just after Ward died and Wynonna was taken away leaving her alone with Willa, Waverly was like that. Isolated, quiet and absent until Curtis pushed her to play the guitar. When they moved to Big City, Waverly was almost as bright as before, just almost.

Waverly looks at the street from the window. The T.V. is playing in the living room and Curtis is constantly changing the channels, hoping for something better to watch. Chrissy shouldn’t take too long to arrive and then they’ll go shopping.

Waverly can't deny that after a full day of planning her new outfit with Chrissy, she’s excited to go out this afternoon. She has her money ready and a few stores in mind from the nearest shopping mall.

“Sit down, baby girl,” Curtis says from his armchair leaving the T.V. playing an old movie. “She’ll be here in a few minutes.”

Waverly takes a last glance to the street and sits in the nearest chair. The movie is basically
Cinderella. They watch the young beautiful woman being tormented by her sisters and mother. This type of stories always bring memories to Waverly, but in her case, it’s just one sister and a long-gone dad. At least, when they moved to Big City, Willa turned down the level of cruelness.

“So,” Curtis interrupts her her train of thought, “is Wynonna coming tomorrow?”

Waverly lets out a long sight, “no.”

“Too bad, I wanted to take you out to that steak place downtown,” he says and Waverly frowns at him. “They have salads,” he gestures with his hand.

“It’s nice that you think of me, but I’m sure that not even Gus is going to let you get one of those hamburgers you love so much,” Waverly points and Curtis makes a sad face.

“Where did you even take out that whole being a vegan idea?”

“T.V.” she shrugs and the screen changes to play a McDonald's commercial.

“Right,” Curtis laughs. “I used to be so healthy. Shorty and I used to play—”

“Football,” Waverley mutters, remembering the story by memory.

“No, I’m talking about something else,” he lowers the volume of the T.V. “We used to play a lot of pool at Shorty’s. We were so proud of that stupid table. It was the only one at Purgatory, apart from Pu- uh- another place.”

Waverly don't recognize this particular story, so she keeps quiet and relaxes in her chair.

“So, we bought another one and everyone hung out there. We noticed that people left to eat somewhere else, so we added hamburgers to the menu. And everyone was happy until this new guy came to town and compiled. He started hanging out with your mom, actually, and she was always in Shorty’s, despite having two daughters at home,” he says the last part bitterly. “Anyway, this guy goes to Shorty and complains because he doesn’t eat meat, so there was nothing he could eat at Shorty’s, or anywhere in the town, really.”

“I know the feeling,” Waverly says making Curtis laugh.

“Yeah. He was miserable. But Shorty and I just laughed at him. Called him not very nice words. But he insisted and one day he came early and lecture Shorty in how we were killing the Purgatory’s population with our only meat and beer menu.”

“So you changed it?”

“No,” he shakes his head lightly. “The guy left town a few weeks after. I think Ward wasn’t so happy about him hanging out with Michelle. And you know how that town was before. They didn't accept anyone new. We.”

“Ok, so,” Waverly prompts, “what's the big ending?”

“Well, one day Shorty started to have nosebleeds and headaches. Turns out his pressure was all wrong. He got it under control and lecture me. But, then again, I didn’t listen. And you know how that turned out.” He points at his chest. “That boy was right all along. So, what I’m trying to say is that I’m happy that you’re making clever decisions and that you stand by them.”

Waverly smiles at her uncle and they return their attention to the T.V. until the bell rings and
There’re a few rooms at the backstage of the big auditorium. The hallway connecting them is isolated by a big door that leads to the stage, leaving a small space to sand by. She’s looking from the small window in the door, next to Leo (an 18-year-old taking the first year of career) and Mary (a twelve year old that’s about to go out), trying to identify Gus and Curtis in the small crowd. They watch Baez (an adorable 10-year-old) stand up, give a small bow and walk to the door. They're giving Mary some words of encouragement when they see Baez face in the edge of tears pushing the door open. Mary looks at him scared and Mrs. Moreno (their guitar teacher) is already hurrying her to stage.

When the door closes, Baez explodes into tears.

“What happened?” Waverly puts a hand in little Baez shoulder trying to calm him down, “everything’s ok.”

“I screwed up,” he sobs, “I lost the tempo and then I freeze and now Mrs. Moreno is going to kill me and my mom is no longer going to bring me here and- and-” he resumes his crying.

“Calm down, little dude,” Leo kneels in front of the boy and takes out of his pants a napkin, offering it to Baez.

They hear a pair of footsteps approaching them and suddenly a young woman hugs Baez. She starts to console him. Leo and her look at each other. Leo shrugs and takes a glance out of the window.

“You should tell Yamir to hurry up. Looks like Mary is almost done,” Leo tells Waverly and she walks to the boy’s room to knock. She walks carefully to not step on her long skirt.

Yamir opens the door, ready with his black shirt, his guitar and footstool.

“You’re next,” Waverly says and Yamir nods. He looks far calmer than Baez or Mary.

Baez and her mom leave just as they arrive at the door. Yamir gives a last check to his nails before Mary enters. Her face is calm and happy. She gives a high five to the three of them, winning a stare from Mrs. Moreno. They realized that the door was still open and their high fives were probably heard by the whole auditorium.

Yamir cracks his neck before walking out of the door.

“Who’s next?” Waverly looks out of the window once more but she can’t place Curtis’s hawaiian shirt in the crowd, which is weird taking in count that is the most visible thing in the whole room.

“You,” Leo says looking at the list that Mrs. Moreno left.

“Poop,” Waverly hisses and hurries to the girls' room where Mary is sliding the zipper of her backpack and Hanna (a 21-year old that’s closing the concert) is practicing quietly.
Waverly takes out her guitar and tunes it quickly. She’ll do it on stage again, to be sure. Her nails are fine, but just to be sure, she rubs them in her nail file. She adjusts the guitar rest and gives herself a last look in the mirror.

Chrissy made her try every long skirt they found at the mall and they finally settle in a vibrant red one that makes her look like she’s about to dance flamenco when she walks. Most importantly, It’s comfortable to play wearing it. Her top is a long sleeve black blouse that they found in the back of the store, hiding between a bunch of black shirts.

When Waverly arrives at the door, Yamir is already walking in.

She hurries and when she enters the stage, the lights blind her for a moment. The sound of her shoes resounds in the auditorium mixing with the sound of the crowd that is clapping lightly to welcome her. As she seats, Waverly scans the rest of the crowd that was invisible from the little window door. Curtis hawaiian shirt catches her attention.

Her heart stops because what was supposed to be just her uncle and aunt, is now a bigger group. Wynonna is smiling at her next to Doc and his big mustache. Behind them, Chrissy and Robin. Next to Robin is Jeremy, his face excited. And next to Jeremy, Nicole, her hair contrasting against the blue seats. She connects eyes with the redhead and she feels her heart do a little excited jump.

Someone coughs pulling Waverly into reality and she starts tuning her guitar again. When she finishes, she takes a deep breath and thinks of the music she wants to create. The songs already playing in her head and her whole body is sure. She knows the pieces by heart and has practiced them more than enough. Her guitar can bring the feeling she wants to project so there’s nothing to make her fail.

She counts to three in her head and plays skillfully the beginning of the waltz.

One, two, silence. One, two, silence...

Waverly moves her eyes through the freets until she finds the one where she’s supposed to go in the next part as her body is keeping the tempo of the song. She plays the phrase that she’s been practicing this past couple of months, feeling confident. As her hand advances through the freets, she remembers her friends and family watching her, that red hair, but she doesn't let it distract her and she arrives to the note perfectly. The fulminant note plays beautifully and she lets the song direct her.

When Waverly walked to the apartment last Thursday, Nicole kept rubbing her arm.

“I didn't even hit you that hard,” Wynonna rolled her eyes.

“I’ll spread the word that you hit your customers,” Nicole arches an eyebrow.

“And your sister’s customers,” Jeremy adds.

“As if, it will not be the first complaint Nedley has ever received about me,” Wynonna shrugged one shoulder and Dolls let out a low laugh. Nicole frowned at him as Wynonna spoke again. “Listen up, losers. I’m making Waverly believe we can’t go to her recital-” she says in a conspiratorial tone.

“So we can surprise her,” Wynonna continued. “Looks like she has invited you too, so if you, ya know, wanna get in the plan,” she shrugged again.

Dolls excused himself saying he had to attend practice. Eliza said that too, so that meant Andy couldn’t follow. At the end, Jeremy and Nicole ended up in an hour and a half road trip to Big city, plus an hour to get to the conservatory. Jeremy and she skipped their last period to make it to Homestead just in time, Wynonna was already pressuring Doc to leave them behind.

When they drove across the city, Nicole felt a weird sense of nostalgia. It was weird because she actually doesn't miss it. Her life in the city was ok, but she loves her life in Purgatory. The freedom, the air. There’s just one thing in Big City that she constantly misses.

Nicole was a ball of excitement all week. Waverly once told her that it was completely different hearing a song in a small room than a big auditorium. Also, she had never heard Waverly properly play. There was that one time when she played with Doc on stage, or the first class when she didn't finish the song. Also, when she walks to the apartment and hears her practicing across the hallway. Just by the simple fact of seeing Waverly has her swooning, the opportunity to see her play is- is...

The best thing that Nicole can imagine.

But her imagination is not very good. Evidently, seeing Waverly in black and red is not something she’d ever imagined. It’s making her temperature drop, her mouth fall and her heart explode. She's clapping so hard that her palms tingle when the auditorium falls into silent.

We should have sit in the front, she laments as Waverly sits. Then her eyes connect for a second. Stupid hearth, she curses her vital organ at the fear that Waverly can hear it from her chair in the stage across the whole auditorium.

Waverly prepares herself and Nicole admires her. As always. Not just her shining hair and the way her face is brighter than the auditorium lights, but everything. From the way she tunes her guitar to the way she moves her whole body when she starts playing. The way her guitar fills the auditorium. The way she paints images in Nicole’s mind with music.

Waverly enchants the whole crowd and when she prepares for the next song, everyone in on their toes. Nicole hears the familiar tune, but she can't place it from where. She just listens, because no matter where she heard it before, this is the best she’ll ever hear it.

Waverly bows at the crowd and leaves the stage, smiling hard. when she passes Mrs. Moreno, the woman nods at her once, approvingly. Leo gives her a quick hug and congratulates her. She puts her guitar down and closes the top of the case.

Nicole’s sticker is in the case and Waverly runs a finger through it, assimilating that the redhead is here. Uh, Waverly’s taken by surprise by this piece of thought and she pulls her hand back like the sticker just burned her. Not just her, she reminds herself, Wynonna, Doc and Jeremy too.

Hanna keeps playing quietly and Waverly wishes her good luck before heading out of the backstage from the backdoor.

The way to the main door of the auditorium is deserted and the hallway cold. She puts on her
sweater before getting on the right side of the auditorium.

Jack (a blind 17-year-old) is already playing his third piece. She sits quietly in the row of seats next to the door where Mary and Yamir are already watching. Baez is with his family near the stage. More than two-thirds of the seats are empty, but the ambient is familiar and warm.

Waverly hears Jack play and then Leo. The rest of the participants play through the hour and Waverly just listens to them, but her eyes are on her family, studying their reactions.

Gus and Curtis are the ones she knows the best and she knows how Curtis starts drifting off and Gus keeps elbowing him to keep him awake. Chrissy and Robin discuss for a moment after every person plays and Jeremy hears Robin talk attentively. Waverly knows they’re discussing musicality and performance. Always so critical. Doc seems to be paying attention to every one of them, enjoying the music and Wynonna is fidgeting with his hat, probably too restless from being still for so long.

But Nicole, she’s a whole show. She moves along with every song, trying to keep the beat with her hand or leg. Her head swinging and her ponytail dancing. Sometimes, she tries to imitate the positions that her classmates are doing, studying their hands and comparing them with her own, just like she does in class with her. It makes Waverly smile.

When Hanna gets out of stage, Waverly and the rest take advantage of the applause of the crowd to get out and return to the backstage. Hanna, meanwhile, gives a little speech thanking the people in the crowd and their teacher, Mrs. Moreno.

When she finishes, every one of them (minus Baez who decided to stay with her mom) get in the stage and they give a final bow.

Just as she steps out of the backstage, Wynonna traps her in a tight hug.

“You did great, baby girl,” her sister gives her a long kiss in the top of her head. Doc takes her things and together they walk to the lobby, where everyone’s reuniting with their families and friends.

Gus is the next in hugging her, then Curtis. Chrissy beams as she comments on her skirt and how it looked so much better on stage. Robin hugs her and then Chrissy pulls him out of the lobby after saying their goodbyes.

Jeremy and Nicole are sitting in a bench, talking animatedly and when Chrissy and Robin leave, they waved them goodbye before approaching her.

“I have never been on a real concert,” Jeremy comments first.

“Don’t say that in front of Mattie, though,” Nicole laughs.

Jeremy shrugs and hugs Waverly unexpectedly. “It was,” he nods energetically, “I don't know, very cool.”

“Thank you, Jeremy,” Waverly says and looks at Nicole who’s standing awkwardly.

“Should I? I mean, should we…?” Nicole’s face is red and Waverly giggles quietly, finding
Nicole’s reaction funny and adorable, which is weird for someone so tall.

Waverly steps forward and hugs Nicole, filing the fabric of her shirt under her fingertips and the heat from her body irradiate. There it is, Nicole’s smell in her nose again as she inhales before pulling away.

They go out of the conservatory, felling the afternoon chill when Curtis proposes to go to a restaurant to celebrate. He assures Jeremy and Nicole that they’re obviously invited. So they split in the cars. Waverly and Wynonna drive with Curtis and Gus, leaving Jeremy and Nicole with Doc.

“You should have seen the look in your face when you saw us. I thought you were going to pee yourself,” Wynona laugh fills the car.

“Wynonna!” Gus scold her as the four doors close almost simultaneously.

“Aaw, c’mon, it was funny,” she takes her sister’s hand and they lace their fingers together. “Of course I was going to come,” Wynonna says with her voice low, trying to exclude Gus and Curtis from the moment, “as long as I can, I’ll be there. I’ll always try my best to be there.” Wynonna squeezes her hand one time and let’s go.

Waverly can see Curtis smiling in the mirror through her teary eyes, proving that the car is too small to have secret conversations between them. He starts the car and signs Doc to follow him through the parking lot. They wait in line of cars.

“Dude,” Wynonna leans to the front, resting her head in Curtis seat, “where are we going, I’m starving. Steak house?” She asks dreamingly.

“We’re celebrating Waverly, so she should pick,” Gus says, lowering the radio where a deep voice is advertising some product.

Nor Curtis or Wynonna object, both pretending to be interested in something else. Waverly would like to go to that Indian place Robin and her find one day by accident. He was doing research in Raga, an Indian scale, and they legit thought that it was a temple or something. When they got in, a pair of woman greet them by saying “hare Krishna” and when they realized, they were ordering.

Just by the thought of it, her mouth is melting. Waverly knows that no one would complain about it, but she’s so not sure if Doc, Jeremy or Nicole would be so happy with that decision. So she nods.

“I think steak house is fine,” she says chipperly.

Curtis gives Gus a pleading look and her aunt sighs. “Fine, but just because they have salads.”

“I’ll like to propose a toast,” Curtis says, lifting his glass of sugarless lemonade Gus made him ordered.

Everyone take their glasses and bottles from the two tables the staff had to put together when they informed them that the big tables were all full.

“Waverly,” he stands and some people for the near tables give him a look, “you never cease to impress us. I know you’ll never do. I hope to keep going to your concerts for as long as I can. Cheers!”
“Cheers!” the rest say and they drink in Waverly’s honor.

After a few more moments of banter, Doc resumes his story from the time when he joined Wynonna in her road trip for a few weeks. Wynonna doesn't look so eager to hear that story but Jeremy is hanging from every word coming from his mustache.

“I swear we all thought she was in the back of the truck,” Doc says and everyone laughs at the image of Wynonna been left behind at a gas station.

Waverly listens while moving around a piece of lettuce soaked in salad dressing. The steak house might have salads, but they’re bad. Like, so bad that she and Wynonna convinced Gus to let Curtis order the healthiest hamburger in the menu instead of the salad. Doc and Wynonna ordered a big piece of steak each. Waverly ordered the only salad without pieces of bacon or chicken breast but turns out it came so soaked in dressing that she’s finding hard to finish it. Jeremy, who ordered the same salad, is almost done with it.

Nicole, who’s sitting by her side at the end of the table, leaves her not so healthy hamburger in her plate gets closer to her. “Hey,” she whispers in her ear, making her jump, “are you ok?”

Nicole pulls always as the table burst into laughter again. Waverly nods and the redhead arches an eyebrow. “You're sure?”

Waverly sighs as Wynona punches Doc in the arm hard, making his laughter stop. “Yeah, it’s just that the salad is a bit….” she makes a gesture with her hand.

Nicole laughs. “You should know better than order a salad in a place that sells a plate full of meat and cheese in the child’s menu.”

Waverly rolls her eyes. “Yeah, I should have thought about that.”

“Why are we here, anyway? I thought that we’ll be going to some vegan place or something like that.”

Waverly shrugs, “this was better for everyone.”

Nicole takes a bit of her hamburger and hums. Wynonna, meanwhile proceeds to tell her side of the story, throwing daggers with her eyes at Doc.

“You shouldn't do that,” Nicole whips her mouth whip a napkin, “I would have been happy to try something vegan. Nedley used to serve me only meat when I took dinner at his house,” she crooks her head.

“Yeah, I remember that,” Waverly giggles. Memories of Chrissy’s dad being scolded by Mrs. Nedley for not putting something green in their plates. “They need vitamins, Randy!” She used to say.

“Now that my dad cooks for both of us, I find myself craving more meat. I’m already too fat.” She gives a few palms in her belly.

Waverly scoffs. “As if. You don’t store fat, you just use it to keep growing. By the time you're done with that hamburger, you’ll have to get out of here crawling.”

Nicole exaggerates a gasp with her hand in her chest. “It’s not my fault that God made me this awesome. And look who’s talking, Miss Conservatory.”
Waverly blushes. She looks at her feet and snorts when she sees Nicole’s socks. “Look, your jeans don't even cover your ankles.”

“They’re not supposed to,” Nicole defends, kicking slightly Waverly’s skinny shoe.

“I bet they did when you bought them,” Waverly kicks back. Nicole doges it, hitting the table with her knee.

“Shit,” Nicole takes her hand down to rub her leg, but she hits her almost empty glass in the way and the remaining soda falls in her right leg.

Waverly burst into laughter while Nicole, with her face red, tries to dry her jeans with her used napkin.

Waverly feels a little tap in her shoulder and when she turns to see, everyone in the table is looking at them. The waiter is next to Gus waiting with his pen in his fingers.

“What?” Waverly asks Wynonna.

“We were asking if you want some ice cream,” Wynonna offers her a little dessert menu.

“No, thanks,” Nicole says and Waverly shakes her head.

Gus smiles at them as the waiter takes the rest of the orders.

“Eggs and milk, right?” Nicole takes more napkins from the dispenser. “But really,” she clears her throat, “next time you should ask for what you want.”

“I’ll have that in mind,” Waverly smiles and takes a bite from her salad.

“Do you think Willa still have my Buddies movies?” Wynonna asks and before Waverly can answer, she disappears into Willa's old room.

“Buddies?” Nicole asks in the unknown hallway of the McCready apartment.

“The dogs' movies?”

“Oh, right.”

“Wynonna loves them.” Waverly walks in front of her and opens the last door in the hallway, revealing a dark room with a window facing the next building.

Waverly walks in and turns on the light. The room is tied up, well decorated and somehow screams Waverly.

“Ok,” Waverly walks to the light blue desk, Nicole behind her, where there's a tall pile of books and carpets. “Can you take this down? Be careful, it’s hea-“ Before Waverly can finish the sentence, Nicole is already lifting the pile. “Oh.”

“Anything else?” Nicole turns a little so she can see Waverly.

“Yes, this other pile and that amplifier,” she looks distracted at Nicole, making her nervous and
more aware of the space. She’s in Waverly’s room, her crush, and she’s still wearing the beautiful red skirt and the black top that make her look like a professional dancer, about to put a rose between her teeth and snap her fingers.

“Ok,” she walks slowly to the door, “I’ll be back for those.”

Nicole walks out of the room and she can hear Wynonna moving things in the other room. When she appears on the living room, Doc (who wasn't allowed by Gus to go to the girls' rooms) runs to help her. He takes the pile with one arm and gives her the keys so she can open the trunk. Jeremy stays, drinking a cup of tea with Gus. Nicole can’t imagine what can they possibly be talking about. After they place the pile in the trunk, they hurried back to repeat the process. Except that when she reaches Waverly’s bedroom door, the lock is on. Nicole knocks twice and Waverly’s voice comes muffled.

“Coming, sorry. I’m changing.”

Nicole’s face turns red. “Ok,” she chokes out.

She looks around and a framed picture on the wall catches her attention. There's a much younger Waverly playing a different guitar. Nicole recognizes the place where she's in. Her school once did a play and they used the same auditorium. It’s near the karate dojo she used to attend. In her own home there's a similar picture, except that there's a little redhead kid surrounded by a lot of other kids.

There it is, again. That same weird feeling. They were so close, in the same city, the same town and somehow they never met until February. She can’t thank Dolls enough. Maybe she should thank Shae too. Thanks for breaking up with me.

She concentrates on the innocent picture to take her mind out of the fact that there's just a door away from Waverly’s putting on clothes. Or maybe she’s taking off clothes. Or maybe she’s nak-

The door lock clicks and Waverly opens the door. She’s in leggings and a white sweater.

“I’m ready,” Waverly moves to let Nicole in.

The redhead moves to the pile and kneels down to take them from the floor. Something pink catches her eye in the floor under the desk. She reaches and picks up a little notebook with one of those plastic locks.

“I think this fell over,” she says as she stands up again.

Waverly jumps when she sees it and snatches it from Nicole’s hands. At the same moment, Wynonna enters the room with a bunch of DVDs stacked under her arm.

“I’m here, what do I have to carry?” She stops and looks at them. “Uh, is that, isn’t that Willa's old diary?”

“No,” Waverly responds quickly, shoving the diary under the pillow on her bed. “Can you carry the amplifier, Nonna?”

“It is,” Wynonna walks to the bed, but Waverly stands in the way, blocking her.

“Nicole, can you take that down?” Waverly point at the pile of books, ignoring her sister.

“Let me see it, wasn't it on the homestead?” Wynonna doges Waverly, but her sister traps her and
in the struggle, they fall to the bed.

“Sure,” Nicole takes the large pile and walks carefully to the door, leaving the pair of sisters struggling in the bed.

“Don’t-“ Wynonna rolls and falls to the ground. She stands quickly and hurries to the pillow.

“No-“ Waverly jumps over her sister, grabbing onto her leather jacket.

“Let me-“ Wynonna breaths out and it’s the last thing Nicole hears before she walks into the living room, where the T.V. muffles the fight in Waverly’s room.

Wynonna bobs her head on the beat as Doc sings under his breath. The inside of the car is dark and silent. There has been little conversation since the sisters came down from Waverly’s room. There was a little scrap under Wynonna’s eye and her hair was messy. Waverly appears to be fresh as Doc’s old air freshener.

Curtis and Gus walked the five of them to Charlene. Nicole and Jeremy put Waverly’s things in the trunk and got up the car. Gus made Wynonna promise to take care of her sister and gave them a bunch of Tupperware full of food. Nicole saw from the corner of her eye, when she was already sitting in the back seat, Doc nod respectfully with his hat in his chest while Curtis spoke to him.

Waverly promised to be back by Sunday afternoon before Doc started the motor.

When they were leaving the city, he tried to start the conversation but none of the sisters were cooperating, so after a while, they settle on listening to music. Turns out Doc listens to the same radio station as her dad does.

I went down to the crossroads, tried to flag a ride. No one seemed to know me, everybody passed me by.

Jeremy falls asleep quickly. It’s late and the road to Purgatory is deserted. Nicole’s feeling sleepy too, the weight of the day on her eyelashes but the presence of the girl by her side keeps her awake. Greg once made her know that she drools when she sleeps. It only happens sometimes but she’s not willing to take the risk to do it in front of Waverly. Or worse, in front of Wynonna. The wind gets in the car by the half-closed windows and she takes advantage of it.

After the song is over, a voice announces the next one starts. The guitar plays a blues and soon the voice comes in.

Nicole feels Waverly’s head in her shoulder for an instant, but the small girl straightens up, shaking her head.

“You should sleep,” Nicole whispers.

The brunette turns to see her. Waverly’s eyes are closing but she keeps her head up. “I’m fine,” she whispers back, but after a minute, her head falls again, the sudden movement awaking both of
them.

When the moon peeks over the mountains, I’ll be on my way.

Nicole suppresses a laugh. *This is an opportunity*, her half-dead brain tells her. She pats her left shoulder, “here.”

Waverly leans her head there and quickly drifts away. Nicole enjoys the warms of their body’s pressed together in the darkness of the night and the song lulls her before she, too, falls asleep.

“Thank you for driving her,” she hears her dad’s voice in the middle of her dream.

“My pleasure, Mr. Haught,” Doc’s voice responds.

Nicole slowly opens her eyes and jumps when she sees Wynonna’s face right in front of her.

“Ew, you’re drooling,” Wynonna comments pulling away.

“What?” Waverly's voice is soft from just been awaken.

“Nothing,” Nicole wipes her mouth quickly.

“Don’t worry, baby girl, we’re just dropping Nicole at her house,” Wynonna gets out of the car and folds the front seat.

“Oh,” Waverly rubs her eyes, making Nicole wonder if she’s still dreaming. It’s such an adorable image.

Nicole takes a moment more to fully wake up. When she turns her head, she notices that Jeremy’s gone and Waverly is blinking slowly looking at her lap. She recognizes Mrs. Buckingham ugly garden gnome in the distance and picks up that they’re in front of her house already.

When she's about to slip out of the car, she feels Waverly pull her jacket.

“Wait,” Waverly shakes her head quickly one more time before looking at her. She takes her hand and gives it a squeeze. “Thank you for coming.”

Nicole squeezes back. “Thank you for playing. See you tomorrow?”

“Yeah. Goodnight.”

“Night.”

Nicole slips out of the car and Wynonna gets back in quickly. Doc tips her hat before getting in and starting the car.

“Did you have a good time?” Tom asks her as they walk to the porch.

“Yeah, it was really great.”

They walk to the kitchen and Nicole breaths in the sweet smell. She sits in one stool while her dad serves two cups of chocolate. They drink in silence until a question pops into Nicole’s head when
she takes a glance at her phone.

“Why don't you get mad when I come home late?”

Thomas takes his time, drinking from his mug. “I guess I feel like I don’t have the authority to be mad.”

“But you do?”

“Well, yeah. But I used to come home late all the time and your mom, well, she didn't like it.”

“I remember,” Nicole does. There were a lot of times when she woke up late at night at the sounds of her parents fighting downstairs.

“Lets talks about this later, ok?” He takes his mug and places it in the sink. “Turn down the lights when before going up, ok?”

Nicole drinks the rest of her chocolate while looking at the few pictures she managed to take through the afternoon.

“Thank you, Doc,” Waverly says as Doc closes the trunk.

“Goodnight, darlin’,” he says before getting in the car one last time. Waverly’s not sure if he referred it as a nice goodbye to her or as a real endearment term to Wynonna. She doesn’t really know the nature of their relationship but is sure not just a simple friendship.

Wynonna looks so much calmed as they make their way through the cafe to the back door. The place is clean. Rosita must have had spent a long time cleaning the cafe tonight without Doc’s help. She makes a mental note to bake something nice to Rosie.

In the apartment, Wynonna takes off her leather jacket and throws it to the couch, but she misses and it falls in the floor. Waverly picks it up and then she carries in parts the pile of books and the amplifier to the piano room while she hears the fridge door open and close. When she gets to the kitchen with the Tupperware, Wynonna is nursing a beer and chewing a raw hot dog.

Waverly opens one of the containers to smell Gus’s food. She serves herself on a plate and starts eating.

Wynonna, on the opposite side of the table, empties her bottle.

“I’m sorry,” she mutters.

“No, I’m sorry,” Waverly sighs. “I shouldn't have reacted like that. Is your cheek ok?”

Wynonna shrugs. “You should see the other guy.”

Waverly keeps eating. She’s so hungry that, even cold, Gus’s food tastes amazing.

“I don’t understand, though. Why did you keep that thing?”

“Why did you try to take it?”
“Well,” Wynonna leans on the table, resting her head on her elbows. “Willa can be… cruel. I don’t want you obsessing over something she wrote a hundred years ago.”

Waverly drugs one shoulder. “I didn’t find anything special.”

She finishes her plate and Wynonna brings her a glass of water. Waverly drinks from it immediately, putting it down with a satisfying sigh.

“But you find something, right?”

Waverly stays still, trying to shove to the back of her mind that piece of thought that has been growing in her mind, but it’s too big and it has one foot outside. She feels her eyes burn and suddenly she’s crying.

“I don’t think I’m your sister.”

Chapter End Notes

ha,ha.

Olé:

Now is Exactly The Time - Noah & The Whale
Vals Op. 8, No. 4 by Agustín Barrios Mangoré
Gran Vals - Francisco Tárrega
Crossroads - Cream
Key To The Highway - B.B. King & Eric Clapton

Spotify Playlist:
Chap. 5
Museum of Flight

Chapter Summary

They go to the museum!

Chapter Notes

How do you cut a chapter in two and then you wait four months to update it, you ask? I can't give you answers, sorry.

It was for a good cause, though! Now In the blood has a beta reader and a lot fewer mistakes! *clap clap* Chapters 1-3 are now updated, but nothing storywise change, so don’t worry. 4 and 5 are soon to be updated, just so you know. (also now there's playlist at the end of the chapters, just because I can.)

Totally unrelated, but when I was writing this chapter I found a few words that don't have a translation to English, one of them is "algarabía" and it's basically a group of sounds that are happy/joyful.

It's been a crazy few months, right? I hope your doing fine through the #FightForWynonna

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s warm between the blankets in the only bed in the apartment. Wynonna’s holding Waverly tightly in her sleep. In the dim light, she can see that her sister is still in her ripped jeans and belt through her eyelids, swollen and heavy. Damn her early routine, even after being awake until early morning talking with her sister, she still can’t get up late.

She snuggles closely to her sister, pressing her face against Wynonna’s shoulder and her sister mumbles something about someone stealing her whiskey.

Waverly spilled all the beans last night. Something came to her and after letting the first truth out, the rest came running through her mouth. And of course, her sister tried to calm her and assure her that it wasn’t true, that Willa had always been a bitter kid.

“Not with you,” Waverly cried.

“Not the same way.”

There’s not much they can do about it, though. What can they do, really?

Together they talked about the whys and hows it could be possible and the whys and hows it couldn’t.

“Sure, he changed,” Wynonna said when Ward Earp came up in conversation. It was a difficult topic for both of them. Ward Earp, in Waverly’s mind, had always been worse than the monsters
under her bed. He was always pretending like Waverly didn’t exist, those were the good moments. Because when he remembered the third child in the house, it got ugly. There were days when even Willa helped her hide, when she took Ward’s anger in the form of mean words or angry hands.

“I can’t tell you why he changed,” Wynonna whispered like there were spirits in the house ready to take the message to Ward. Like she was hiding Waverly again. “He was nice, decent. But then he started to be less and less in the house. Mama said he was too busy because of the promotion. I called bullshit.”

Waverly didn’t live those good days, the days that made her bigger sisters look at Ward differently. Look at him with respect until he lost it, lost them and then himself.

“We can ask Willa, but I don't really know if she actually knows anything about it.”

“She’ll get mad.”

“That’s her thing. I'll tell her that I read it, not you.”

“Maybe we could ask mom,” Waverly suggested and Wynonna gave her a look. “Yeah, not an option.”

The last news they received from Michelle was an envelope in the mailbox directed to Wynonna. When Waverly returned home last weekend, they opened it together, hoping for a card or something, but it was money. Almost as disappointing as when mama sent a Happy Christmas card when Wynonna got out of St. Jude. They looked at it quizzically wondering what kind of illegality Michelle did to get it.

The bills smelled like smoke and gasoline. Waverly put it away from any source of fire, hidden so they would use it only, repeat only, in an emergency. Then she had to hide it again when she discovered Wynonna taking a bill to pay for pizza.

“It doesn’t change anything,” Wynonna kissed her head in the night when they were sitting on the bed, legs crossed, facing each other.

“It changes everything.”

“No, it doesn’t, dummy. You’re still my baby sister and you’ll always be.”

They kept talking through the night, each one letting out those things that can only come out in that rare atmosphere of the early morning, through a few cups of coffee and empty apartments.

It was the perfect moment, so Waverly just asked it.

“Can I move in with you?” She whispered, expecting a million questions. Expecting to explain the whole process she’d been through to get to this conclusion.

“Of course,” is all Wynonna said. “But you’ll have to deal with Gus,” she also said that.

Waverly groans again at the memory. They’re in the middle of May and she hasn't told Gus and Curtis. And worst of all, she hasn’t told Chrissy.
Dolls and Nicole run some mornings together. Or more like Dolls runs and Nicole does her best to drag herself behind him.

He had proposed to do it as a routine every Saturday. “Just in case you want to join the team in September,” he said ten steps ahead of a very tired Nicole. Then she made him promise to do it only if they stopped at Homestead for breakfast. He acted like it was an inconvenience but then, every Saturday he kept glancing at the cash register every now and then. She had noticed because she does the same in the mornings when Waverly’s helping.

But as they approach the corner, from the distance, Nicole doesn’t see any activity in the windows or Charlene parked in front of Homestead. They run past the cafe and keep running until they get a call from Jeremy inviting them for breakfast.

Nicole doesn’t see Waverly that Saturday.

Nor the Sunday. But she thinks about calling or texting or sending a smoke signal or something, a pigeon, maybe. It’s not like they promised to see each other on the weekend, but she was hoping for it.

She takes a glance at the clock in the wall of Andy’s garage and sighs. *There’s still time*, she hopes for her phone to vibrate.

The smell of metal and Coke fill her nose as she breathes again. She keeps rubbing the rust out of the bike frame, slowly bringing the shine back.

“It makes you think, right?”

“Huh?” Nicole looks at Andy. They’re sitting on the floor of the garage, both working on their respective bikes, with dirty hands and clothes. The first day they worked on them, Nicole showed up with a white t-shirt and Andy laughed at her. Luckily, Andy’s dad just explained to them some of the basics and then they made an inventory of which parts of the bike worked and which ones needed to be replaced.

Andy reaches for her phone and lowers the volume of the music. “I said that it makes you think, you know, the Coke?”

“Oh, right.” Nicole dips the paper foil in the bowl of Coke they’re using to wash the rust off. “I’ve never been a big fan, anyways.”

“Well, I’m not drinking it again for sure,” Andy turns up the music again. The song changes and Andy bobs her head to the music.

They’d spent a few days now fixing the old bikes. It’s nice, she has to admit, working on something manual. It keeps her head clear and lets her concentrate on something for a while.

Her dad has been out on his work search so the house is lonely again and she prefers to be out doing something more. Not that she doesn’t enjoy an empty house. It’s a good thing that Mrs Buckingham’s hearing is not that good, because lately she has been singing too enthusiastically in her room, playing chord after chord. Waverly was right, learning how to read chords has opened
the door to multiple songs. She has been getting better at it, playing the guitar. The singing part, not 
so much. But who cares.

Well, Nicole does. It’s the last week of May and Homestead hasn’t announced the competition yet 
and she hasn’t been brave enough to ask Waverly or Rosita. But it’s close and she’s feeling more 
confident. Confident that she’s not going to embarrass herself, not that she’ll win.

If the same people who played at the open mic night are competing too, she doesn't have a chance. 
If Mattie decides to sing, she’s fucked.

At least she’s not competing against Waverly or her classmates. *Gosh, that’s talent.* The 
auditorium, the stage, Waverly in her red skirt and her hair in the stage lights, it’s all painted in 
Nicole’s memory. The smell of the seats, the soda cold on her leg, Waverly’s head on her shoulder. 
A day to remember, for sure.

Andy starts singing lowly, “*Let’s grow old together and die at the same time.*”

“A dead love's buried beneath the mud,” sounds in the speaker of the phone.

“Seems gloomy,” Nicole flinches.

“It’s art,” Andy arches an eyebrow. It’s not the first time she’s defended the White Lies to Nicole. 
Not that Nicole had said anything mean about them, it’s just that Andy is a big fan. “Hey, speaking 
of art, have you talked with Eliza?”

Nicole tilts her head. “I’m not sure if I connect those two things in my mind.”

Andy laughs as the song changes. Another White Lies song. “No, I mean. It’s just that the history 
teacher gave us a chance to score some extra points. And, well, she needs those.”

“So that means she didn't do so well in the last test?” Nicole arches an eyebrow. She knows that 
Eliza is not someone who would fail a test, that is why she didn’t even bother to ask her about it.

Andy shakes her head as she keeps rubbing the frame.

“Shit.”

“You should talk to her, you know how stubborn she is.”

“I’ll do something better. I’ll make Dolls talk to her.”

Waverly checks the time on her phone, calculating the hours she has left in Purgatory when the 
doorbell rings. Both sisters look at each other. Wynonna closed the cafe for the weekend and gave 
Rosita and Fish two days off. She even drove Doc away in the morning. She kicked him out not 
long after he dropped off a box of donuts. They silently decided to have a sister’s weekend and 
weren’t expecting anyone.

The doorbell sounds again and Wynonna groans. She stands up, shaking away the crumbs on her 
shirt and walks away to answer.

Waverly keeps searching on the laptop for another movie to watch. Something bloody (but secretly
cheesy) for Wynonna.

“I served my time!” She hears Wynonna scream from downstairs and her legs respond immediately. She's at the door when she hears a man’s voice.

“Miss Earp, I just want to—“

“Are you the police? I will not speak without a lawyer!” Wynonna slams the door as Waverly gets to the last step of the stairs.

“What’s going on?” She urges.

“I don’t know, baby girl. Time to fly,” Wynonna runs upstairs and Waverly freezes not knowing what to do.

“Miss Earp, I’m from Purgatory’s Culture Department. We would like to make you an offer,” the man speaks from the other side of the door.

Waverly hears her sister running around in the apartment.

An old man in a wrinkled shirt and crooked glasses is standing outside when she opens the door.

“Oh, hi. I was looking for Willa Earp?” He says with a confused, shiny face.

The small Earp rolls her eyes. “They’re looking for Willa!” She screams so Wynonna can hear her in the apartment.

“Thank god,” she hears her sister say. Wynonna appears at the top of the stairs, “my plan to run away was lacking a lot of things.”

“Were you going to run away?” Waverly frowns.

“What? No, we were,” she raises her right hand to show her the duffle bag she brought from the weekend and the old camping backpack Wynonna took on her road trip.

Waverly suppresses a smile arching one eyebrow. “She’s not here, sorry,” she says, returning her attention to the man.

“Is there someone I can talk to about Homestead Cafe?” He adjusts his glasses.

“Wynonna! They wanna talk to you!” Waverly screams and Wynonna appears again.

Her sister pouts. “Is it too late to run?”

______

Ding!

Nicole turns her head quickly towards the door on Tuesday, like she’d been doing the whole hour they had been in the cafe, but it’s not Waverly, just some guy. She sighs and returns her eyes to her notebook. Numbers and signs are all she sees but she can’t make sense of them. Mathematics is something she’s not bad at, but today she hasn’t been able to concentrate at all.
Jeremy keeps pressing buttons on his calculator while blindly reaching for his glass of ice tea. He hits the glass with the back of his hand and the glass dances, dangerously close to falling before Dolls catches it.

“Dude!” Nicole takes her notebook before it gets drenched in tea.

“Jeremy,” Dolls says in his monotone voice and Jeremy finally looks up, “what did I say about not looking?”

“To look?” he smiles awkwardly and Dolls keeps staring at him. “Sorry, sorry.”

They return to their work, so Nicole returns to staring blankly at the third equation. She reaches for her coffee, drinking the last of it. Her leg keeps bouncing and suddenly she feels restless. Nicole groans as she stretches her back, then sighs in relief. “Do you guys want something?” she asks as she stands, dropping her mechanical pencil on the table.

“Another tea,” Jeremy says as his eyes keep shifting between his calculator and his notebook.

“Jeremy,” Dolls says sternly.

Jeremy glances up this time. “I'll look up,” he promises.

“And no more coffee for you,” Dolls points at Nicole and gives her a look that says you’re already too anxious, or maybe it means that he needs to use the bathroom, who knows.

“Fine, dad,” she says as she walks away.

The door opens again, catching Nicole’s attention. A firefighter walks in, the same guy from the open mic night heading straight to the cashier where Wynonna, Doc and Rosita are talking.

Nicole stands behind him and waits.

“Hey, Wynonna,” she hears the firefighter say.

“Charlie,” Wynonna leans one elbow on the counter and throws her hair back, “coffee, black to go?” She says with a smile Nicole has never seen before and ignoring Doc who’s finishing his unheard sentence.

“Yes, please,” Charlie’s voice sounds friendly. “Ah, and Ewan asks if you can send him a few sandwiches."

“Sure thing,” Wynonna winks.

She moves behind the counter and walks into what Nicole knows is the kitchen, leaving Doc alone when Rosita walks to tend a table. Doc nods once and Charlie nods back. The exchange makes Nicole want to run back to the table. Doc gives her a nod and smiles with all the kindness he didn’t direct to Charlie. They stay in silence waiting for Wynonna to return and Doc checks the clock on the wall.

The bell sounds again and Nicole turns once more and, again, it’s not Waverly. She's not going to be here for at least one more hour, she reminds herself. A guy in work boots and a red vest walks to the cashier leaving a pat of dirt on the floor. He stands next to Charlie and takes off his cap.

“Hey, Doc, is Wynonna here? I brought the rest of the crates,” he points at the window where Nicole can see a black pick-up.
Doc opens his mouth but Wynonna walks back with a coffee ready to go and a bag. She grins and leaves the coffee carefully in front of Charlie and the bag next to it.

“Thank you,” Charlie accentuates the *you* and gives her a bill.

“Hey, Wynonna,” the guy in the vest says and finally Wynonna acknowledges him.

“Stevie, did you bring my stuff?”

“In the truck, I just need a little help getting them down, I bust my ankle.”

“Excuses, excuses,” she turns to Doc. He has his eyes glued to the clock, “would you-?”

“Sorry, Wynonna, I have to go. My shift starts in a few minutes,” his moustache dances as the words leave his mouth. He puts his hat back on his head.

Nicole is about to offer herself to help, but Charlie steals the words from her mouth. “I can help,” he says as Wynonna gives him back his change.

“That would be great,” she smiles, “seeing those muscles in action.”

Doc stops for a second but continues his way to the door, spinning his keys on his index finger.

“I can help too, if you need a hand,” Nicole finally says and Charlie moves so Wynonna can see her.

“Oh, Chuckie.”

Stevie looks down at her, arching one eyebrow, “don’t think so, those things are pretty heavy.”

*So what*, Nicole thinks.

Charlie gives her a small smile and puts his hand on her shoulder. Somehow, it makes her calmer. “We could use a hand.”

Stevie snorts and rolls his eyes. “Your call. If she drops something, I’m not responsible.”

“Don’t be a dick,” Wynonna says.

They walk through the door, and Nicole avoids the questioning look Dolls is giving her. He walks behind them and offers his help too. Of course, Stevie doesn’t protest, just one look at Dolls’ arms is enough assurance. Stevie opens the back of the truck and Charlie gives a sack to Dolls and then he takes a big box.

Charlie winks at her as he gives her the box and doesn’t let go all the weight until he’s sure Nicole has a good grip. Her legs almost give up as the weight of the box fully falls into her arms, but she manages to stand firm. Charlie grabs one box and Stevie puts a second one over the first.

They start walking to the back door slowly. Nicole carefully watches her steps, making sure not to trip or give Stevie an excuse to say *I told you so*. The clattering of glasses sounds from inside of the box and Nicole wonders what exactly she’s carrying.

“Nicole!” the voice of Nicole’s dreams sounds in the distance and she manages to find Waverly crossing the street. She’s just carrying a backpack and she looks like she’s flying from the way her hair dances in the air.
Nicole's stops next to the wall as Waverly catches up. She leans the width of the box on one thigh and shakes one arm, feeling her muscles relax. As Dolls and Charlie get into Homestead, Waverly reaches her.

“Hey!,” she says in a more chipper tone than usual.

"Hey,” Nicole breathes out.

“Oh. Hey, Stevie!” Waverly waves at Stevie who's limping back into the main door with a few papers.

“Hi,” he points to the door, “I just need Wynonna's signature on this.”

Waverly smiles to him as he makes his way into Homestead. Nicole straightens up, lifting the box again.

“Need some help with that?” Waverly asks.

“Nah, I got it,” Nicole smiles as her arms get tired.

“Ok,” she smiles.

Waverly runs to Wynonna who’s talking with Stevie by the door, probably signing the papers he brought, but Nicole’s too concentrated on not dropping the box, so she can't be sure. The sound of the sisters talking is interrupted when the door closes behind her. Charlie and Dolls are helping a third guy to place the things next to the freezer. She locates a free space on a table in the middle of the little room and leaves the box there. She shakes her hands, feeling the blood flowing again.

“Thank you,” the guy in the apron says to Dolls and Charlie.

“I’m going to place our order,” Dolls walks by her and gives her a look that says the thing you were supposed to be doing. Nicole just rolls her eyes, knowing that he would have probably jumped at the opportunity to help Wynonna.

Charlie walks behind him and gives her a light slap on the shoulder accompanied by a kind smile before walking out, but the door opens before he can pull it, making him jump to avoid it.

“Oh, sorry!” Waverly says as she steps in.

“Waverly, it’s nice to see you,” Charlie nods politely. Nicole wonders if all the firefighters are as friendly as him.

Waverly moves out of the way so Charlie can walk out and she stands next to Nicole.

“You’re early,” Nicole comments, “are you that eager to get out of the city?”

Waverly shrugs her shoulder, “I ran to the station directly from high school, so you could say that.”

The guy in the apron closes the freezer and claps twice before turning to them. His hair looks pretty good for someone who’s been in this room for a while. The air is hot, filled with the smell of coffee and the sound of a small radio playing a poppy song at low volume.

“Hi, Fish,” Waverly waves her hand.

“Hi back,” he smiles and he looks at Nicole, “hello, I’m Fish.” He extends his hand and Nicole shakes it.
“Nicole.”

“You guys got my honey?”

“I think so.” Waverly takes a small knife from a drawer and cuts open the box Nicole left on the table. Inside there are tall jars of unlabeled honey. Fish takes one jar and opens it in one easy movement.

Nicole takes one out and examines it. The jars are slightly different from the ones her aunt and uncle used for their honey. A little sting of nostalgia pinches her mind and suddenly she really wants to talk with Greg.

“Fancy some?” Fish takes three little spoons from the same drawer Waverly took the knife. He gets some honey on every spoon and gives it to them.

“Fish! One chocolate milkshake and an order of nachos!” Wynonna shouts from the door, leaves a ticket and leaves immediately.

Waverly flinches. “She knows that she can just leave the order, right?”

Fish puts the spoon in his mouth and smiles. “Yes, she just likes shouting at me,” he gets the ticket and immediately starts to work.

Waverly laughs and she puts the spoon in her mouth too. Nicole mirrors her actions and marvels at the sweet flavor.

“Nice, right?” Waverly says as she takes the spoon out of her mouth. “Stevie brings it from a market in Big City.”

“The one near the post office?”

“Yeah! You been there?” Waverly leans on the table and takes one jar out of the box.

“Mhmm,” Nicole nods remembering the last time she saw her uncle. They had come to Big City to make arrangements to sell their honey in new locations and they went to that market to talk with a business partner and to taste the competition’s honey. It’s the only time she got to hang out with Gregory in the city. They never came back after her aunt got into a fight with her mom.

Waverly looks at the jar she's rolling in her hands. “So, any chance you want to start early?”

“Sure,” Nicole responds like it’s not the best thing that has happened to her all day.

They end up talking for thirty minutes in the piano room instead of starting early.

Dolls gave her a pointed look when she left them, grabbing her things, eager to get upstairs with Waverly. The room has been improving with time and is starting to look a bit like Waverly's room back in Big City. The amp is now in a corner; the papers and books they brought last Friday are now neatly put on a brand new shelf.

“So she's grounded?” Waverly asks her when Nicole finishes telling her about Eliza's failed history test.
“Yes, her mom even forbid her from bringing Dolls home, which is amazing. She loves Dolls. Every parent does, I think.” Nicole sighs remembering that little incident a few weeks ago.

It was late on a Thursday night when Mr Dolls asked his son, as usual, to escort his friends back to their homes. Normal procedure for an afternoon at Dolls’. After leaving Jeremy at her house, Dolls drove to Nicole’s while the three of them were bantering about Eliza’s new conquest: Skip.

“I just don't see it, dude,” Nicole commented as Dolls parked in Nicole's street.

”Well, believe it,” Eliza laughed. That whole week she had this eternal dumb smile on her face. “He's actually super nice.”

Dolls looked at her.

“Fine, he's kinda dumb,” she breathed out and the three broke into laughter. “But you and Perry trust him, right?” She asked Dolls who shrugged in affirmation. “Seal of approval.”

Nicole said goodbye, opened the door and stepped outside. Eliza immediately jumped to the front seat, probably kicking Dolls on the way judging by the way he grunted.

As usual, Nicole’s dad was waiting on the porch for her. This time, he was playing the guitar, a bluesy tune. He had been doing that. Some days, he takes his guitar from Nicole's room and uses it while Nicole is away. Which also means Nicole’s trying to keep her room tidier.

When he saw her get down from the car, he stood up and waved to Dolls’ car. As usual.

“So sorry, I ate without you,” Tom said taking the guitar and opening the front door to let Nicole walk in first.

“It’s fine,” she left her backpack at the bottom of the stairs, something that her mom used to hate but Nicole never got rid of the habit, and headed to the kitchen to take out something to eat. The plate rotated inside of the microwave, heating, and Nicole stared at it as one does.

The blissful feeling Nicole had from spending her afternoon with her friends broke as Tom cleared his throat. She turned to see him, finding him standing with a weird face.

But it wasn’t as weird as what he said next. “You know,” he scratched his head as he turned to see the sink, like it was suddenly very interesting, “you should invite your boyfriend over, so I can give him the shovel talk.”

Nicole choked on her own saliva at the same time the microwave alarm went off.

He gave her a few palms on her back as Nicole recovered. “Breathe,” he laughed, “fine, I won't, but I wanna meet him.”

“He's not- Dolls isn't- he's just a friend,” Nicole finally said. She didn't know what was worse. The idea of Xavier Dolls and her being a thing or the realization that Tom Haught didn't know that she was very gay.

“Thank god. He looks so big.”

“He's just a year older than me,” Nicole turned around to take her food from the microwave.

“Well,” he started visibly uncomfortable, “do you have a boyfriend?”

“Ew, no,” Nicole automatically responded.
“Good,” he smiled, giving her a few pats in the shoulder, “you’re too young for that stuff. Just focus on school.”

He walked to the living room and turned on the T.V., leaving her wondering if she should explain right now why she hadn't and would never have a boyfriend. But she chickened out. She was supposed to be over with this when she told her mom and now she had to do it again.

“I guess my dad likes him since I told him he wasn't my boyfriend,” Nicole scratches her head, laughing at Waverly’s red face. “Anyway,” she clears her throat and thinks of a way to move the topic, “we’re trying to convince her mom to let her go out to get her extra credits.”

Waverly clears her throat. “Why do you need to get her out to do that?”

“Oh, apparently her history teacher is giving them some extra points if they go to the museum and write an essay about it.”

Waverly’s face lights up, the same way Jeremy’s did when the idea of going to the museum came out. “Oh my god, I love museums!” She repeats the same words Jeremy said yesterday.

Nicole laughs at the similarities of their energy. She loves the museum too, but not as passionately as these two.

“But, well, we wanna go to Big City because, well, there’s literally just one museum here, so.”

“Aw, but it’s cute,” Waverly replies in a little voice that makes Nicole melt.

Purgatory’s little museum is a wide room in the town hall. It has a little permanent installation talking about Purgatory’s foundation and their little historical figures, which is not a lot, to be honest. It’s close and free, though.

A little invisible light bulb lights up above Nicole’s head and she recognizes the sudden opportunity.

“We were actually hoping that you could recommend us a museum,” Nicole says in an attempt of a casual tone.

“Yes! Yeah, actually, I wanted to go to an exposition last week but with the recital, I didn't have time. I mean, I can look for something else if you want. The nature museum has a great permanent exposition, or maybe you want something that has to do more with history. The one I want to see is about music but I don’t want to bore you. Not that I assume that I’m going with you, I don't mean to invite myself. I’m just-“

“No, you’re invited, for sure.” Nicole interrupts, knowing that Waverly can go for a long time if no one says anything. “Well, more like we’re hoping that you’ll guide us through the city.”

“I would love to.”

“Great.” Nicole smiles while she builds a plan to get her friends to agree to that museum trip to the city.

“I think that the rumor has been spreading out since we opened the cafe,” Waverly starts, “but
we’re working on it now. Well, my sisters are.”

“Yeah, I heard about it a while ago,” Nicole responds with her guitar in her lap, her eyes looking at it.

“I think it’s Doc’s fault,” Waverly sighs, remembering that very intense afternoon when everyone involved in Homestead cafe got together and pitched ideas to make the business grow. Doc pitched the idea of making a contest but it was too early to even consider the logistics that would take to make something like that happen. Most of them liked the idea but it never got resolved and they settled for easier events. Of course, Doc and Wynonna tend to have loose lips when they’re a few drinks in so no wonder the rumor got spread around.

“Anyway, it’s going to be in the last week of June, maybe. Around those days.”

Nicole lets out a wow. “That soon?”

“Yeah, actually someone from town hall came to see us. I don't really know what they talked about but I think they want to use it to promote Purgatory as a touristic place.”

“Really?” Nicole tilts her head to one side, “there’s, like, nothing here.”

“That’s so not true,” Waverly protests and Nicole arches one eyebrow inviting her to elaborate. “It’s nice and calm. There's a lot of activities like hiking and horse riding and, I don’t know. Cowboys?”

“You’re really selling this town, huh?” Nicole lets out a laugh.

“Fine. But it can be. I like it here.” Waverly as she crosses one leg over the other.

“Yeah, me too.”

“Where were we going with this?” Waverly leans her head in her fist and looks at the air, searching for answers. “Ah! that- that maybe you would like to participate. I can help you beat their musical asses,” she cringes at herself for using that phrase.

“Hmmm,” Nicole smiles but it doesn’t seem as genuine as it always does. It makes Waverly feel like she’s pushing too hard.

“I mean, it would be just for fun. No one is forcing you. You don't have to do it.”

Nicole laughs again. “Are you going to be one of the judges?”

“Me? No. Shorty would be one, I think. I don't really know who else. It’s not like they’re sharing the process with me,” Waverly lets out as she remembers the long video call that Wynonna had with Willa after the guy from the town hall left, occupying the last hours she had in Purgatory with Wynonna.

“Yeah. I’ll do it,” Nicole says as she keeps her eyes on her guitar.

“Yeah? We have to choose a song, well, you have to choose one. There's going to be a few categories, actually. But we can work on it. Well, if you want to-”

“I want to, believe me. I don’t know if I can do this alone,” Nicole’s face twists in worry.

“Hey, it’s going to be fine,” she waves her hand dismissively. On the inside, she knows that the first time you compete in front of an audience can be scary as hell. The first time she did, she was
on full panic mode and ended up losing a lot of notes because her hands were shaking like crazy. But she also knows that it does no good to make Nicole worry. It doesn’t suit her well in Waverly’s mind where she always pictures her with her natural confidence.

She must admit she looks cute, though.

After the hour, and a few minutes extra, they end up in their usual spots at the kitchen table with their usual mugs. Through the weeks, Nicole has acquired a special kinda love for the BAMF mug and has become quite good at the guessing game. She even avoids the tea aisle on the supermarket just to be sure she can’t cheat. Today’s random choice is mango and is surprisingly not that good.

They’re drinking in relative silence. After a few hours of talking, the conversation is not as hurried but neither is it awkward. It feels natural now, this after class thing with Waverly. The routine will keep its course as usual and Nicole will leave so Waverly can spend some time with Wynonna. Then she’ll pretend not to be sad when she sees her leave to catch a bus to Big City.

“When you left Big City, what happened with your friends?” Waverly asks suddenly and quietly. It makes Nicole’s heart feel tight. “Are you worried about Chrissy?” She speaks quietly too, like they’re sharing secrets.

Waverly nods slowly while taking another sip of her tea. Nicole thinks for a second and tries to be as sincere as she can.

“In all honesty?” She watches Waverly nod again. “I just forgot about them. I didn't have, I don’t know, deep connections? We weren’t such good friends, I mean. I did miss a few of them, but Jeremy and I hit it off from the very start and everything came into place. I just got lucky and you will too,” she smiles at the smaller girl.

Waverly hums and looks at the window, tapping her fingers on the mug with impeccable rhythm.

“Have you told Chrissy yet?”

“That’s what I’m worried about. With Robin leaving, I don't know how she’ll take it,” she groans and leans her head on the table. “What if she thinks we’re abandoning her? What if she thinks I’m following Robin?”

“Why would she think that?” Nicole frowns.

“There was this one time when we had an argument about a boy,” Waverly lifts her head again. “It was terrible, we didn't speak for an hour and thirty-six minutes.”

Somehow, hearing Waverly talk about a boy makes Nicole blush. It’s a little reminder that this is a silly crush. She hides her face behind the mug and speaks again, focusing on the topic.

“Maybe, try not to drop the news on her. Be subtle? Make sure to explain why you’re doing it.”

Waverly doesn’t look as convinced by it, so she tries another angle.

“Ok.” Nicole breathes, trying to order her mind. “She’s your best friend, right?”
Waverly nods.

“I mean, do you trust her?” She waits for Waverly to nod again, “I’m sure she trusts you as much as you do, and I’m sure she will forgive you if it goes badly.”

“What if she doesn’t? What if we grow apart and she asks Stephanie Jones to be her maid of honor? What if-?”

Nicole takes Waverly’s hand. “Waves, she’s not mad yet,” she smiles to the girl, “and she won’t be, this is about you, she’ll understand that.

“You sure?” Waverly asks her squeezing her hand.

“Yes.” She squeezes back, “it’s just that change is hard, but it will pass, everything does, with time. People take time to process news that they don’t expect.”

“I guess it has to be sooner than later, right?” Waverly makes a pained face, looking just through one eye.

“Well, It’ll be weird if one day you just disappear from the city.”

Later, when Nicole decides that it is time for her to leave and see if her friends are still in the cafe, Waverly hugs her rapidly without warning. Is evident that Waverly has no idea that Nicole’s heart stops and restarts between her arms.

“Thank you for the advice,” Waverly says at the door, each one on one side of the arch.

Nicole scratches her head and shoves one hand into her back pocket. She feels the few bills and takes them out to give them to Waverly.

“I almost forgot to pay,” she laughs as Waverly takes the money.

“I feel like you're paying me to talk,” Waverly smiles.

“I’ll be happy to pay to talk to you any day,” Nicole says far too sincerely. She cringes at herself and points with her thumb to her back. “Gotta go.”

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Saturday comes and Dolls’ SUV is full with the four of them. Eliza is in the front seat after she won a staring contest with Dolls (very impressive thing to do) and Jeremy’s in the backseat with Nicole, sleeping happily.

It took some work over the week to convince Eliza's mom to let her go out to the city. Not even Dolls’ diplomatic charm was capable of taming the fury of an angry mom. But they made it and they have a few hours ahead of them. They agree to meet Waverly at her home and they would leave Dolls’ car there, given that it is easier to move through the city using the subway.

The day ahead couldn't look better for Nicole. She gets to spend the day outside with her friends and Waverly, who is also a friend. Just a friend.

Andy pointed out the fact that Eliza is the only one who needs the extra points and that it was a big
congregation for just one essay.

“How did you do on the exam, then?” Nicole questioned while they were checking the tires of the bikes. History was one of those classes Andy shares with Eliza and Dolls.

“Me? Great, actually. No need for extra points here,” Andy pointed at herself with a smug smile. “You know,” she said after a while, “my dad has tickets for a game this Saturday and my mom's not coming. Wouldn’t you rather spend the Saturday with me?” Andy hid her face behind a curtain of black hair as she leaned down, but Nicole could totally see her blushing face.

She had to admit, Andy was really trying with her.

“Sorry, I already promised a friend to see them in the city,” Nicole scratched her head, feeling somehow a bit guilty.

“A friend,” Andy repeated.

A friend, Nicole thinks when they’re halfway to the city.

“...and a friend,” she told Gregory on the phone yesterday.

“You’re a bunch of nerds. Who on earth uses their weekends to hang out at the museum,” he said, exhaling profoundly, “you should be getting wasted or something like that, I don't know, don't kids do that anymore?”

“Kids? What are you? Forty?” Then Greg started coughing like an old man, surely inhaling smoke the wrong way, if there's even a right way to inhale smoke. “Wow, you certainly sound forty.”

“Shut up,” Greg said after a while and cleared his throat once more, “it can happen to anyone.”

“I wouldn’t be happening if you’d quit it like you said,” Nicole rolled her eyes knowing exactly what he was going to say next.

“I can quit whenever I want, ok?”

“Anyway, I was counting my money and I already got enough for the ticket, but I’m falling short... so, I know that you, like, don't make a lot but can you let me borrow enough for the ticket back? or, I was thinking that maybe I can work with you over the summer,” she said, almost embarrassed of asking this of her cousin after she bragged about getting enough money to cover all the cost of the trip.

“Oh, yeah, this summer. Grandma’s practically counting the days until the school is over,” he laughed. “Like a child.”

“How does she even know that?”

“Don't ask me,” he said like he wasn't the one in charge of taking care of their grandma, literally the person she should be asking, “I guess she asked someone at church. You know how these old women can be. But, yeah- we can work it out when you get here. Don’t worry so much,” he said lightly. “By the way, how’s Thomas doing?” He asked casually but Nicole could hear the caution in his voice.

“Fine. He’s going to a bunch of jobs interviews.”

“Still no job?” Greg sounded legitimately worried.
“No, but he’s fine. I promise. He actually looks, I don’t know, happy?”

“That’s great. Hey, any chance you can give me his number.”

“You have the house number, don’t you? You can call him there.”

“But I don’t have the new number.”

“New?”

“Mhm,” Greg exhale again, “he changed it, right? In January?”

“What? no,” she thought about that day when he promised to get it fixed, apparently, he did more than just fix it. “Last month, I think,” she said.

Nicole ended up texting Greg her dad’s phone number and later she called her cellphone from the house phone and discovered that, yes, in fact, it was a new number.

“Stop doing that,” Dolls slaps Eliza’s hand. She’d been playing for a few minutes with the A.C. controls and honestly, it was driving Nicole nuts too.

“I’m bored,” Eliza groans and lays her head on the window. “How much longer?”

Nicole looks attentively out of the window as Dolls checks the map app on his phone. She can recognize where they are from last week when they drove to Waverly’s recital but she doesn’t know how much time it will take them to arrive at Waverly’s apartment. Last week, Doc drove straight to the conservatory.

“About thirty minutes, according to this thing,” he says and Nicole feels the anticipation. “Nicole, you should text Waverly that we’re almost there,” Dolls looks at her in the rearview mirror and she nods.

Nicole not Hot, 9:57: Hey! We’ll be there in thirty if Eliza doesn’t manage to drive Dolls crazy first.

Nicole not Hot, 9:58: [image attached] I wish we all could fall asleep as easily as my boi *sleeping emoji.

Waverly looks at the picture Nicole just sent her and it takes away some of the panic she’s feeling. In the picture, Jeremy is sleeping with his head hanging and his headphones well attached to his head. She can’t tell, but it looks like he’s drooling a little. Nicole sends another with the view of out the car window. Waverly, as someone who takes that same road a few times every week, calculates the time it will take them to arrive at the apartment and she knows that on the weekend, the traffic is lighter and they’ll get there sooner than thirty minutes.

She doesn’t know why she’s panicking, but she is. Ok, maybe she does, but not completely. Maybe it’s a mix of everything that has happened over the week or the anticipation of spending the day with a group of people she doesn’t know that well. If she’s being honest, Eliza and Xavier intimidate her a little. At least she knows she can always talk with Nicole and Jeremy. Maybe she just hopes that she doesn’t disappoint them with her selection of museum or that she can’t guide them through the city and they’ll end up getting lost and-
“Baby girl,” Gus stands in the door with the laundry basket and the interruption lets Waverly’s brain breathe. “Do you have your things ready?”

“Yes,” she points at the box of things she packed to take to Purgatory. She’s taking advantage of this trip to move some of her things with the pretext that they’re things for Wynonna.

“It’s so nice from you to take that study material to Wynonna, god knows she needs it.”

Waverly stands up from her chair and goes to Gus. “They’re almost here.”

“Are you sure they can give you a ride? You know we can drive you if you want.”

“Yeah, Dolls says it’s ok,” she smiles to her aunt hoping to take some worry away.

“Who are these kids again?” Gus adjusts the basket on her hip.

“Friends from Purgatory, you already know Nicole and Jeremy?”

“Oh, I thought that you were going out with kids from high school or from the conservatory. Well, you call me if you need me to pick you up, ok?”

Waverly nods and gives her aunt a kiss on the cheek.

As Gus leaves, she enters the room and checks her reflection in the mirror. She wants to look nice today, make a good impression. They know each other already but she feels like a host in the city. But there’s something more she can’t put her finger on. This feeling of wanting to look good for them. It’s not like she has to impress them, but she wants to.

“Honestly, Waves, you’re probably just excited to hang with people who want to go to the museum. Like, they actually want to go,” Chrissy said as they were sitting on the grass on the conservatory yesterday afternoon.

On Friday afternoons, Waverly would usually run to the apartment to get her stuff and catch the bus to Purgatory but because she was going to see Nicole and the rest tomorrow, she had some free time to spend with Chrissy. And it was the opportunity she needed, some time alone with her best friend in a nice place. The perfect time to drop the news. Well, not drop. She just had to drive the conversation to where she needed it and slowly get into what she needed to say.

“You guys like the museum,” Waverly said.

“Yeah, but we’re not exciting anymore. The passion died here like an old marriage. And, we can go whenever we want,” Chrissy shrugged but the smile on her face died, “well, not whenever. Robin won’t come back after the summer; I guess it’ll be just you and me.”

“Right.”

It was Chrissy. Her best friend. She would understand. She knew that. She would get over her best friend and her boyfriend leaving the city, right? It would have been easier if she hadn't talked with Robin first.

On Wednesday, Waverly was literally shaking with nervousness in the bus when they were going back home. She had almost told Chrissy, but they were interrupted (by Champ, nonetheless, trying to talk to Waverly for some reason) and then, the blonde needed to check something with one professor at the conservatory, so it was just Waverly and Robin.
He kindly took her hands in his so she would stop shaking. “You're tense, Waves. You can get hurt if you keep shaking like that,” he took his hands back and Waverly took a deep breath.

“Sorry.”

The bus stopped suddenly and the bus driver screamed some mean words to a car she cannot see from her seat. For a few minutes, the street filled with car horns and a dry drivers screaming. Between the chaos, a car hit the back of the bus slightly and everyone in the bus groaned.

The driver apologized and asked the passengers to get off the bus. Luckily, they weren’t so far away from their block.

“Wanna walk?” Robin asked and they made their way to the sidewalk.

“God, I’m glad we won't have to do this anymore,” Waverly breathed out as they stood in an intersection, waiting for the light turn red. “I’m sick of the city’s noise.”

“We won't have to do this because summer’s coming?”

“No, because we’re moving away,” Waverly said without thinking. The light turned red and she started crossing the street.

Robin stood still for a moment and had to run to catch up with Waverly who was in the middle of the street already. “What? What do you mean?” He asked and they reach the sidewalk.

“What?” Waverly moved so a man could pass by.

“What do you mean what ‘we’re moving away’?” Robin asked and Waverly understood her mistake.

“Uh, I mean, we’re going to Purgatory for the summer, right?” She let out an unconvincing laugh. “I can’t wait for summer break.”

“You’ve been acting weird the whole week. Are you sure you’re ok?” He asked, tugging his backpack strap.

And Waverly could have lied, but she’d already messed it up so…

“Fine,” she breathed out. “Here it goes,” she smiled at Robin who had a concerned face on, “I’m moving back to Purgatory too.”

Wow, she thought. She felt a little bit better.

“What? What do you mean?” Robin was frowning in confusion.

“I’m moving back!” Waverly smiled delivering the good news.

“No, you can’t do that, Waverly!” Robin’s voice sounded desperate. So much for delivering good news.

“Why not?” She was a bit confused over his reaction. “I thought you’d be at least a little bit happy.”

“What about Chrissy?” He took her by the shoulders like he was about to shake her into reason.

“She’ll be fine,” she said trying to assure Robin and herself. “She’s a tough cookie.”
“No! No, no, no. I need you to be here with her, Waves.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m going to break up with her!” He said between his teeth, letting out his own secret.

“Are you ok?” Crissy asked while they were laying in the grass, “you’ve been odd lately.” She reached and grabbed Waverly’s hand.

And under the afternoon sky and the buildings of the conservatory; surrounded by the sound of steps in the halls and instruments playing different tunes, Waverly decided to lie and leave it for other time.

“I’m fine,” she finally said, giving her best friend a reassuring smile.

“I’m sure you’ll impress them. You have always been good at history, they’ll love it,” Chrissy squeezed her hand the same way she has been doing for years and Waverly tried to form a plan where she could get what she wanted and not hurt her best friend in the process.

Now, as she waits in her room with her guitar between her legs, she knows that she has made zero progress in her plan. She tries to play for a while, but she can’t concentrate enough and she keeps glancing to her phone and to the window for any signs that they had arrived already. The minutes seem to drag one after the other and the same weird feeling in her stomach arrives again. For a second she worries, what if she’s sick and ends up throwing up in the subway or over Dolls or what if-

The screen of her phone lights up and Nicole’s name appears in it. She grabs her phone with the guitar still over her and composes her voice before picking up.

“How do you do this every day?” Eliza asks Waverly as they examine the map of the subway and Waverly explains the transfers they’ll have to do to get to the museum.

The subway on Saturday is a constant flow of people and the trains are not very crowded. It’s not like workdays where the rush hour seems to get the city into chaos. The station feels empty but the air isn’t cold, it never is.

“She doesn’t,” Nicole responds, “you take the bus, right?”

Waverly looks at Nicole, tall confident Nicole and wonders when she mentioned that. “Yeah, but don’t worry. It’s easy once you get used to it. Most of the people do it automatically here.”

They buy the tickets and Waverly recharges her card. The train arrives promptly and the five of them get seats. Jeremy sits next to her and they engage in an energetic conversation about Jeremy’s video game. It’s something about Templars and Rome, so she can follow Jeremy easily until they get off the train to do the transfer.

She and Jeremy step out first, then Nicole and Eliza, but when Dolls is about to get off the train, a guy pushes him so he can get off first, and when they realized, the doors close leaving Dolls inside.

She panics for a second but then she looks at Nicole making signs to him. Eliza laughs and Dolls rolls his eyes and waves at them as the train leaves the station. Waverly’s confused when she sees
the three friends completely unaffected by it and Nicole laughs when she looks at her.

“What?” Nicole asks her.

“Aren’t you worried? Should we go for him? I don’t-” she checks her phone, “I don’t have any signal.”

“Don’t worry,” Nicole smiles, popping her dimples, “he said that he’ll just take the train back.”

“Did he say that?”

“Oh, kinda? He talks so little that we understand each other without words, sometimes,” Nicole shrugs.

“We have psychic powers,” Eliza says in a conspiratorial voice, by her ear, making Waverly jump.

“That doesn’t exist,” Nicole comments.

“Do you wanna join our coven?” Eliza offers her hand to Waverly, ignoring Nicole.

“Isn’t that for witches?” Jeremy asks as Waverly shakes Eliza’s hand, hopefully gaining psychic powers.

“How long does it take the train to come back?” Nicole asks, looking at their hands separate.

“If he gets off in the next station, I think just five minutes max,” Waverly says.

They lean on the wall of the station until the train on the other tracks arrives and Dolls gets off. They meet each other as they walk to catch the next train on the other line.

“Waverly was worried about you,” Nicole tells him and Dolls smiles to Waverly, looking less scary. “See?” Nicole hits Dolls in the back hard, judging by the sound it makes, but Dolls doesn’t flinch. “Nothing happened to him.”

“Ok, we just have to take the next train and our stop is in five stations,” Jeremy announces after studying the subway map.

“Let’s do this,” Eliza says and puts one arm over Waverly and the other over Nicole and they start walking.

In the next train, there’s an advert announcing the game Andy invited her to. Nicole looks at it as she stands next to the seat where Eliza and Waverly are sitting. Dolls, Jeremy and she are now standing given that the wagon is getting fuller as they approach the center of the city. Eliza catches her looking at it and gasps.

“Is it today? I thought it was next weekend,” Eliza carefully reads the announcement. It’s a friendly game between the local basketball team and the big rival, so not very friendly. “I heard that Andy was going, did you know?”

“Ah, yeah, she must be leaving Purgatory by now,” Nicole comments and Waverly turns her attention to the advert too.

“I heard that she had another ticket,” Eliza says and it doesn’t take Nicole much to guess that her
friend really wanted that ticket.

“Oh, yeah, she invited me,” Nicole says casually, making it sound like not a big deal. She can feel Waverly’s eyes on her but she just smiles at the girl as her friends flip out.

Eliza gasps. “She invited you? Why are you here?” She whispers like they’re discussing Nicole committing murder. Dolls looks at her too, disbelief in his eyes.

“I wanted to come?” Nicole shrugs.

“If you leave early you might catch them before they get in,” Eliza urges, still whispering.

“I bet you can get to first base,” Jeremy says and Nicole looks at him, scandalized, making him back off, literally. Dolls gives her an accusatory look, scolding her for being mean to Jeremy. Classic mom behavior, always protecting his favorite.

“Can you not?” She hopes her face is not red and wishes to not be talking about this in front of Waverly. “And they probably sold the ticket already, or gave it away, I don’t know.”

“Yeah, I suppose,” Eliza crosses her arms and leans her head on Waverly’s shoulder. “Ugh, I was aiming for that ticket, maybe next time we can go to a game or something.”

Waverly pats Eliza’s head and Nicole feels an uncomfortable feeling in her stomach.

“But the museum will be fun,” Jeremy says, his enthusiasm still high.

“Oh, yeah,” Eliza straightens up. “No, I’m not saying that I’m not going to have fun,” she turns to Waverly and takes her hands in hers. “I swear, Waverly, I’m counting on you.”

Waverly just laughs and says a quiet ok. It comes to Nicole that Waverly’s uncomfortable at the sudden closeness Eliza is displaying. Nicole certainly is uncomfortable at it. Waverly smiles shyly at Nicole, and she gives her an encouraging smile in return.

“Aw, don’t be shy, you’re in god hands,” Eliza bumps into Waverly, “I won’t let that mean redhead bother you.”

“Very funny,” Nicole kicks Eliza’s closest foot.

“The next one is our station,” Jeremy announces.

The museum is a big old building in the middle of the city with a nice plaza in front. There’s a banner hanging announcing the exhibition they’re here for. Jeremy and Eliza are glued to Waverly as the girl explains a few things about the building.

Nicole can recognize some of the landmarks around it, but her memory is not very good. Her mom didn’t take her to this part of the city often, being so in the north. She wasn’t allowed to go out on her own either. It’s too dangerous, her mom used to say, as she dropped her in some park so she could go to soccer practice even if Nicole swore she could go on her own. That didn’t make her very good at making her way through the city. It doesn’t bother her so much now that she can use it as a pretext to hang out with Waverly.

Waverly who can make Eliza interested in a museum without even being in it yet and who can
keep up a conversation with Jeremy like it’s nothing.

How can she look so stunning in such simple clothes? Waverly’s wearing a white short sleeve blouse and cowboy boots that make her want to get back at her for all those times that Waverly has called her a cowgirl and it now turns out that she actually owns a pair. And those denim shorts. *Gosh,* Nicole thinks, *keep it in your pants.*

Eliza and Dolls go to get the tickets and they get ready to enter the first room.

They can’t really see what’s inside until they turn a corner and they see an enormous white ear with a trumpet coming out of it. Eliza and Jeremy walk straight to it and stand close, comparing their heights with the size of the ear. Nicole laughs at her friends and she walks in with Waverly, who immediately goes to read the description of the piece.

She can feel Dolls following them and being pulled by Eliza to measure him too and snap a few pictures.

Waverly straightens up and Nicole stands next to her as they contemplate the ear.

“What did you find out?” She asks Waverly, trying to be quiet, not that her friends are doing so.

“It’s called Beethoven’s trumpet. It’s really something right?”

“It is, they really know how to make a good first impression.”

“Waverly!” Eliza calls and they walk to their friends.

They’re looking at a few objects inside a showcase. They seem to be ancient instruments, rudimentary drums, whistles and flutes. Waverly gives them a small explanation about how music was created by the first tribes, where these were the easiest instruments to build. She explains how music was a social activity and how it transformed into rituals and then traditions to later be structured as techniques.

There are a few more showcases with more instruments and figurines representing people singing or playing and Nicole keeps feeling amazed by Waverly. She has something to say or explain about everything and Dolls and Nicole find it amusing the speed Eliza is writing in the notebook she brought to make notes for her essay. Sometimes, Jeremy adds something to Waverly’s explanation and Nicole gets a sting of jealousy. Why is she so ignorant? She wonders if there will ever be a time where Nicole can impress Waverly as much as she impresses her all the time.

In another room, the ancient figurines and instruments get switched for beautiful paintings of myths. Jeremy starts explaining a myth to Eliza, so Nicole takes the opportunity to walk around with Waverly for a minute.

“Oh, look,” Waverly points at a painting.

“Haven’t they told you that’s impolite to point?”

“Sorry,” Waverly retrieves her hand quickly, making Nicole giggle.

“I’m joking, what’s up?” Nicole stops to look at the painting and finds a beautiful landscape where a couple is walking hand in hand. It takes her a minute to get what she’s seeing, “Oh, is that our old friend?”

“Yeah, and Eurydice,” Waverly says and Nicole observes the painting with more care. Orpheus is
holding an instrument with his hand and his eyes straight ahead.

“So sad knowing the end of that story,” Nicole sighs.

“I know, but the painting is beautiful.”

“It is. I pictured it differently, though. The cave and all that.”

“Yeah, but I feel like this is as mystical as it was described in the text. It gives me the chills.”

“Are those supposed to be the people in the underworld?” Dolls ask from behind and Waverly jumps for the second time in the day.

“Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to scare you,” he apologizes.

Waverly puts her hand in her chest as she laughs. “Did he not scare you?” She asks Nicole.

“No, I knew he was behind us,” she shrugs.

“My god, you’re actually mentally connected,” Waverly says and they keep looking at the paintings in the room until Jeremy and Eliza join them again.

Eliza lowers the number of words she’s writing per painting and they move a bit faster, but not so much. Waverly is fascinated by how seriously they take each painting they choose. At first, they stop at almost every piece in the exhibition, but now, they stop to look at the ones that catch their eyes. Eliza stops at a painting and Waverly joins her. Maybe, if she has a question, she can help her.

The scene on the painting is joyful and the violets, blues and whites contrast with the gray of the city. It reminds Waverly of that time when she and Gus walked by the pride parade and how everything looked so much brighter that day.

“Italian procession,” Jeremy read as he and the rest approach the painting. “But it doesn’t look much like Italy, does it?”

“It’s because it’s New York,” Waverly points at the information about the painting where it states New York as the place where it was painted.

“So, I’m guessing they’re trying to keep their traditions even when they moved so far away?” Eliza ends the sentence in a question and looks at Waverly for approval like she’s participating in class.

Waverly smiles and nods. “It’s nice, trying to keep a piece of home.”

“Moving away is hard,” Nicole comments.

“Yeah,” the rest respond and it hits Waverly the fact that they all moved to Purgatory from somewhere else.

“Where are you from?” she asks Eliza, who’s still looking at the painting.

Eliza turns to see her and gives her a kind smile. “Toronto.”

“I’m from Toronto, too,” Jeremy comments.
“He’s from Arizona,” Nicole says pointing at Dolls.

“Rude,” he comments and Nicole realizes that she's pointing at him.

“Sorry.” Nicole pokes him in the stomach and walks away before Dolls can get her back.

Waverly entertains herself watching a painting of a girl playing the piano; a sonata, judging by the title; and tries hard not to think too much about Robin.

It’s not that they fought after he confessed what he confessed, but after that, it was weird. The both of them just walked home together and didn't say much, even if the words were on the tip of Waverly’s tongue, and by the way Robin kept opening his mouth from time to time, she could tell he had them too. But it was a heavy subject, so they avoided it. And then, on Friday, they didn’t really talk.

She takes her eyes away from the piano in the painting and she glances around to locate the rest.

Eliza, Jeremy and Nicole keep talking over a Dalí painting and Dolls was far to the right in the room, looking attentively at something. She walks to him and looks at the picture in the frame. It’s a photograph of a woman in a desert with a boombox. It looks pretty surreal in black and white.

“Do you miss the desert?” Waverly asks him, hoping she's not annoying him.

“I don't mind,” he responds quietly with a little smile on his face that makes him look so much more approachable than usually. “Also, I don’t remember it too much.”

Waverly hums as they keep staring at the picture. Dolls turns to her and looks to the direction where the rest are, turning themselves to listen to the headphones next to the painting.

“But I do remember you,” he says casually, “Jeremy and I were already in Purgatory when you moved away, you know?”

Waverly looks at him and she quickly wonders if these are the most words she has ever heard him say. “Oh, but I- I don't remember you,” she starts making a mental picture of the kids in school that year, as she touches her lower lip, but her memory from those days is fuzzy and empty. Too mixed up with so many other things that were happening at the time.

“I figured. I didn't either until the other day when I was looking at a picture my dad took. Look, I have it on my phone,” he scrolls on his phone and finds a picture. “See?”

He points and makes the image bigger and Waverly kinda recognizes herself behind a smiling kid, Dolls, in a school ceremony she doesn’t remember, for sure. She’s in the front of the line as always, and she looks so little, sad and fragile. She taps twice on the screen to show the full picture. Dolls’ smiling at the camera, standing straight with his arms behind his back and her white shirt seems to shine against his skin beautifully.

“Aww, you look adorable,” she says in a high pitch.

Dolls shrugs a shoulder and Waverly wonders how a kid so small can grow so much. Eliza reaches them and puts an arm over Waverly’s shoulders as Dolls turns off the screen of his phone.

“Is this big man bothering you, miss?” She asks playfully but then the photo on the wall catches
her attention. “Wow, rad.”

Nicole doesn’t know why she even bothered to ask for the headphones first if she already knew what was going to happen. First, Eliza would get her hands on them and then they would let Jeremy have them next. That’s what always happens. Sometimes, Nicole asks herself if maybe they’re indulging him too much. Usually, Dolls will let her use them first and he’ll be the last, but he’s somewhere else looking at something else. So now she’s the last one listening to the headphones.

A piano song starts but her attention quickly drifts away from the music as Waverly catches her eye. She’s talking with Dolls on the other side of the room and Eliza is walking to them. Her stomach twists uncomfortably as Eliza puts her arm across Waverly’s shoulders.

The song keeps playing in the headphones. Nicole is about to take them off and put them back on the hook on the wall when she feels her phone vibrate in her pocket. On the screen, there’s a text message from Andy.

Andy, 13:19: Hey! How’s everything going at the museum?

Andy, 13:19: We’re heading to the city now

Andy, 13:20: Catch me on the TV when the game starts *basketball emoji*

Nicole, 13:20: It’s going great. I think Eliza's essay will be like 20 pages long judging by the amount of notes she's taking

Nicole, 13:21: There’s going to be hundreds of people in the stadium, finding you will be like finding Waldo

Andy, 13:23: Shit, I forgot to bring my striped t-shirt

Andy, 13:23: see? If you had come with me, anyone could have spotted us miles away

Nicole, 13:25: the hair. Very original *unamused emoji*

“Nicky,” Jeremy’s voice sounds across the headphones. He touches her arm and Nicole takes the headphones off. “We’re going to the next room, you coming?”

“Yes, yeah,” Nicole closes the app after seeing the laughing emojis Andy just sent. “But don't call me that, dude.”

The style of the art starts to change radically as they advance through the rooms. It goes from French posters to paintings in very solid colors to pieces made with album covers. They’ve left behind, in the past rooms, all the old instruments and manuscripts; all the very carefully crafted landscapes and pictures of important people. They have passed the paintings of artists who didn't care for portraying the life of the wealthy and focused on the common people, the working class and life on the streets. They looked at the different types of lifestyles and music all over the world, from India (where Waverly explained to them the differences between the occidental scales and the multiple oriental scales) to Asia and South America. The complex rhythms of Africa to the
complex harmony of jazz.

Nicole almost wishes she had to do the essay too, with all the information Waverly’s giving them. Eliza is going to impress the teacher, that’s for sure.

She walks to Waverly, silently, as Eliza uses Jeremy’s back as a table to write on her notebook. The painting in front of them is huge and occupies the whole wall. It’s easily the most impressive piece in the room. She takes a moment to contemplate it and finds out that they’re five big panels put together to make a complete piece. It’s a mix of wind instruments, strings and drums.

They’re standing together, watching, as Nicole’s phone buzzes. She ignores it, but it buzzes again. She gets it out of her pocket and silences it completely.

“Aren’t you going to answer?” Waverly, arms crossed, asks as she bumps hips with her.

“Nah, it’s just Andy sending me pictures of the stadium,” Nicole shrugs but looks at Waverly’s smile flatten.

“I’m sorry,” she says quietly.

“Why?” Nicole asks, confused.

“You’re going to miss the game.”

It makes her snort. “Not at all, I’m not that into it. Eliza, however…”

Waverly seems to relax and looks to the five panels again. “So are you, like, a thing?”

Nicole laughs. “Don’t think so, they’re trying to make it happen, though,” she jerks her head pointing at her friends. “It’s getting annoying,” she confesses.

“But, do you like her?”

“Um,” Nicole thinks seriously for a moment. It’s not that she doesn’t like Andy, but she doesn’t like her that much. She can't deny that she has been becoming fond of her, but, who knows. “Not really,” she finally says.

“Does she likes you?” Waverly wiggles her eyebrows, a little smile in her face.

“Umm,” Nicole scratches her head and changes the weight of her body to her other leg. “I think so, but,” she crosses her arms, “I don't know.”

“So, she does,” Waverly covers her mouth with her hand as she laughs.

Nicole is sure her face is red. It’s one thing for your friends to bother you about it, it’s another when your real crush is commenting on it. It’s nice, though. Knowing that Waverly doesn't mind talking about this subject.

She makes a show of rolling her eyes, but her facade falls when she can no longer hide a smile. “Thank you for asking.”

“Why?”

“I guess I was afraid that you’ll be, I don't know, uncomfortable with me. I never know how people are going to react to me, you know, being gay.”
“Well, I'm not. I would never.”

“Thanks, anyways.”

“Look, I have no idea what this means but it looks cool as fuck.” Eliza says as the five of them stand in front of a showcase with three cellos cut apart and painted in solid colors. One is pink, one blue and the other golden.

“I honestly don't have anything on this,” Waverly breaths out, observing the color in each instrument.

The five of them stand there for another minute, contemplating the piece until Jeremy’s stomach rumbles and they laugh at him.

“Sorry,” he says, rubbing his belly.

“Didn't you just eat a hot dog before we got in?”

They decide not to take too long in the last pair of rooms, given that Eliza swears she has enough to write three essays. Either way, Dolls makes her write about the last room, just to be sure. Nicole follows Waverly around, making small comments about the last pieces. It’s a mix of colors and styles, marking the big diversity in both music and art in modern times.

They stop in front of a painting. It says Sex Pistols in the middle of a mostly pink background. The words jump disruptively in the room. Waverly puts on the headphones next to the piece and boobs her head to a rhythm Nicole can’t hear. It makes her smile, the way Waverly looks completely natural in the museum, in her full element surrounded by music, art and history.

“Good stuff.” Waverly takes off the headphones and stands on her tiptoes to put them on Nicole’s head.

“Yeah?” Nicole ducks a little, so Waverly can put them easily, and tries to control her breathing as Waverly gets close. But as soon as the headphones are in place, confusion strikes her. It’s definitely not something she had ever imagined Waverly would describe as good stuff. Either way, she likes it. It sounds like music she and Eliza would enjoy. It’s also familiar. Maybe she has heard it with Eliza.

How many ways to get what you want. I use the best, I use the rest, the song goes and it’s so far from the sonatas and chorales from the past rooms that it really brings the whole experience to an end.

“Wow,” Nicole takes the headphones off and puts them back on the wall. “Do you listen to that music?”

“Not at all, but Wynonna loves it,” Waverly shrugs one shoulder.

“It really suits her,” Nicole laughs and catches Eliza’s eye. She signals her to come.

“The Pistols!,” Eliza looks excited at the painting, “I love them.” She takes the headphones off the wall and taps her foot with the music.

“We lost her,” Nicole whispers conspiratorially to Waverly and looks around to see if anything else
catches her eye.

Waverly touches her shoulder and she turns to see her. “Look,” she points at the corner of the room where a security guard is standing next to a curtain conducting to what seems like a room. A couple walks out of there and a light flashes before the curtain closes again.

“Must be an installation,” Waverly doesn't wait and pulls Nicole by her shirt to the direction of the curtain.

As they approach, the guard sees them and pulls the curtain so they can get in. They are just stepping into the little room, but to Nicole, it feels like she’s stepping into another dimension.

In the middle of the little room there's a big disc on the floor. The perimeter is full of maroon bottles. From the center, a big clock hand is spinning making a little hammer at the end hit the bottles. Every one of them makes a different pitch and a light in the clock hand hits the glass, making the shadows project on the white wall as it spins.

Nicole feels like in this little world, it’s just her and Waverly. The light spins until it faces them, projecting the shadow of the glass on their faces. Waverly gives her a smile as her face illuminates.

They wait there until another group walks in, breaking the private atmosphere.

As someone who studies music, Waverly has seen all kinds of things with musical motifs. Purses adorned with piano keys or keychains with musical notes; belts with pentagrams or guitar frets; little souvenirs of all kinds, really, so she's super excited about the gift shop. Maybe she can find something that she hasn’t seen already and it’s not so obvious. She even anticipated and got some of her money ready to spend.

“What about this one?” Jeremy shows her a metal lighter with one of the paintings impressed. It looks cool, but why would she need a lighter?

“I was thinking of something more useful,” she says and Jeremy returns the lighter to its place.

“A lighter can save your life,” he points out.

“But you have to refill this type of lighter, right? Not so useful if it’s empty. It looks cool, though.” Eliza follows them as they make their way through the gift shop.

They get to the prints and Eliza finds a print of one of the paintings she liked, to put in her room. Jeremy ends up not picking anything when he remembers that he's saving for the new video game title he wants. Waverly searches hoping to find something from the installation she saw with Nicole but ends up picking a notebook to use as a practice diary when she doesn't find anything else.

When Eliza pays for her poster, she picks a random postcard to give to the professor. “What? Maybe she’ll give me another point,” she shrugs when Dolls gives her a look.

As they get out of the gift shop, Dolls and Nicole have their heads together looking at the phone. Dolls informs them that there's a restaurant nearby they can try and no one protests. They took longer than expected and everyone’s hungry.

Waverly feels a bit weird. She doesn't know why she felt like asking Nicole about Andy. They’re
friends and she should be free to ask right? Then why does she feel so relieved when Nicole said it was nothing. She doesn’t want to be one of those girls who tries to get control over their friend’s lives. Not that she has ever done that. Well, it turned out ok.

They get out of the museum and the heat of the city hits them. Eliza walks by her side, asking her things about the exhibition. At first, she thinks she’s asking to write her paper, but as they keep talking, Waverly gets that Eliza’s genuinely interested. She lets herself go and dives more into the subject. When they reach the restaurant, she notices she’s holding the conversation and apologizes.

“Sorry, I got excited.”

“No need,” Dolls holds the door open and everyone walks in. A waiter greets them and leads them to a table.

“Come, sit next to me. I want some of your intelligence to rub off on me,” Eliza tells her. “I’m impressed, who knew that so much information could fit in something so small.”

The jokes Nicole has told about her height come to her mind and she turns to the redhead. “I can see why you’re friends.”

“Has she been telling you the tall-person-small-person jokes?” Jeremy asks and sits in front of her, next to Dolls. “Classic Nicole.”

“Yeah. Tall people stick together,” Nicole extends a hand behind Waverly so she can high five Eliza and then Dolls.

“What about Jeremy?” Waverly asks, arching one eyebrow.

“What about me, then?” Jeremy asks at the same time.

“Inclusion,” Dolls states.

“Pity,” Nicole says with a smile.

“He’s cute, look at him,” Eliza reaches him and tries to give him a pat on the head, but Jeremy dodges it.

“I am,” he lifts one finger, “but no touching.”

“Seriously,” Eliza rests her head on her elbow, “when you were explaining things to us in the museum, sometimes people gathered behind you. I bet they thought you were, like, the youngest guide in the museum or something.”

Jeremy nods and the waitress returns with the menus and a plate of chips she leaves in the center of the table.

“Thank god, I’m starving,” Jeremy shoves a few chips in his mouth but slows down when Dolls gives him a look.

“By the way,” Eliza points to Nicole, “she’s just been growing this year, she wasn’t that tall until recently.”

Waverly turns and grins at Nicole, “do you miss being compact, then? Is this what this is about?” Nicole rolls her eyes and shakes her head.
“I still have some years to grow, I bet I’ll be taller than Dolls,” Jeremy comments as he takes another chip.

They keep bantering as they read the menu of the restaurant. Waverly usually searches in every section until she finds something she can eat, but in the middle of the city, there are so many more options for her. This menu, though, not only has a couple of options, as there usually are, but a whole lot of them, in fact, everything. She lifts her head to look at the rest, expecting to find faces of discomfort, but they seem eager to try the vegan hamburgers, but that doesn't ease her completely.

“Hey, did you know this place was vegan?” she whispers to Nicole.

The redhead smiles at her as she sets down her menu. “Of course, we looked it up for you.”

“Really?” something in Waverly’s chest feels warm. “You didn't have to.”

“Yes, I did. Now, do you think I should get the portobello hamburger of the Hawaiian quinoa one?”

The music in the restaurant stops when they’re finishing their hamburgers and it’s replaced by the narrators on the T.V. presenting the lineup for the game. Dolls’ and Eliza’s attention is drawn immediately as the commentators start talking about the lineup for the game. To be completely honest, the game was wiped out of Nicole’s brain after the room with the bottles installation. She checks her phone to find a few texts from Andy. They say that they’re in their seats already and a picture of the court from where Andy is. There’s another from Andy making a face to the camera.

Nicole leaves them unresponded, she keeps talking with Waverly and Jeremy while they finish the milkshakes they ask for at the last minute. Besides, Andy’s probably busy watching the game.

Waverly invites her to try her banana milkshake and Nicole tries not to blush at the thought of an indirect kiss. She moves her straw from her vanilla milkshake and nods in approbation as the flavor is replaced by the banana one. But the picture of the both of them drinking from the same glass is printed in her mind and wonders if there’s a universe where she's that lucky.

They stay in the restaurant for a bit longer, but eventually, Dolls makes Eliza return to reality and pays for the full bill despite what everyone says. It’s a common thing to them to argue about it even if most of the time Dolls ends up getting away with paying. Waverly argues for a bit longer but Dolls assures her that it is a way to thank her for the day and reminds her of that time where Wynonna served them ice tea the whole afternoon.

They take the subway back to Waverly’s apartment chatting animatedly and sometimes laughing too loudly. Some people throw them dirty looks but most of them don’t mind, used to all kinds of occurrences in the subway. They make Eliza forget about the game for a while, but as soon as they’re outside, she checks the current score. They catch the end of the game in Waverly’s living room and Nicole walks with Waverly to her room to retrieve her stuff for the weekend.

The door next to Waverly’s is open and Nicole takes a peek. It looks clean but uninhabited, it has a bit of personality, a few posters of dated movies on the wall and a stuffed horse in the bed. She doesn't know much about the third Earp sister and she can’t picture her. All the siblings she knows are so opposite of each other: Eliza and all her brothers, Jeremy and his little sister, the Perley twins, the Earp sisters. Sometimes she wonders how having a sister or a brother would be. I guess
it's too late for that, she thinks as she steps into Waverly’s room.

“Can you help me get this box down?” Waverly grabs a box sitting on a chair and walks to Nicole.

“Are you moving already?” She takes the box, expecting it to be light by the easiness Waverly is carrying it, but it’s almost as heavy as the honey box. Is everything getting heavier now or is she just getting weaker? Maybe she should listen to Dolls when he says that she should exercise other ways apart from running.

“No,” Waverly takes a step back, “I’m just taking some stuff there so when I do move out I won’t have to carry that much stuff.” She walks to her case and lays it on the floor to open it.

“Have you told your aunt?”

“No,” Waverly whispers like her aunt is right in the hallway. “but I will, soon.” She closes the case and stands up to pick it up.

“Chrissy?” Nicole asks.

Waverly groans and fills Nicole in on the latest development.

Waverly’s aunt doesn't comment on the quantity of things her niece is taking for the weekend and she adds a container with food that Nicole takes with her free hands now that Dolls is helping with the box.

“Take those to Wynonna, god knows what she's been eating,” Gus tells Waverly as they walk to the door.

“Fish is a good cook, Gus,” Waverly responds and gives her aunt a kiss on the cheek. “See you on Monday!” She coos.

They say goodbye to Gus and Curtis escorts them to Dolls’ car that is parked in front of the building. They get in and wave goodbye to Curtis as Dolls pulls away. Waverly ends up in the middle seat, between Jeremy and Nicole, just like last week.

The sun is still shining over the city, but Nicole feels tired. It’s been a long day and she wonders if her dad is making anything special for dinner. Maybe she can stay a little longer with Waverly at Homestead. But maybe Waverly wants to spend the rest of the day with Wynonna.

They don't chat a lot as they leave the city and the only sound in the car is the music coming from the speakers and Jeremy’s light snores when he falls asleep.

For a while Nicole looks out of the window, trying to avoid looking at Waverly, just enjoying having her close. But the other girl’s head falls over Nicole and for the second time, Waverly falls asleep on Nicole’s shoulder.

We can make a habit out of this, Nicole thinks as the music lulls her to sleep too.
Nicole knows she's dreaming from the moment she realizes she’s in the old apartment. It’s one of those annoying dreams that feel too real, but she can’t really control what's happening. All she knows is that she’s a kid again.

“Why can’t you take me to school?” she pouts as her mom runs around the kitchen packing Nicole’s lunch in a very familiar way.

“We talked about this, love.” Her mom shoves a juice box in her lunch box. “Mom has to make sure daddy’s ok.” Her mom’s blonde hair is too shiny and more curly than she remembers.

She can’t avoid feeling worried and disappointed on this fake morning.

“Is his stomach bad? Does he feel cold? Was he sweating?” Nicole goes through the list, wanting to ask more, but it’s like her dream brain can’t act accordingly to her real age.

“No, but he was far too happy,” her mom’s voice sounds annoyed and Nicole wishes for her subconscious to be kinder with the image of her mom. Why can’t she dream of nicer situations? “What does he think?” She voices and Nicole recognizes the tone. Its the one she used to use when she was no longer talking with Nicole but with herself. The one she used when she was super annoyed. “That I don't notice how happy he is when he's back from work? I bet he’s not doing those extra hours he’s always talking about…”

“Is it bad that daddy is happy?” Nicole asks in her child voice.

“Love, Mrs Davis is going to take you to school.” Her mom ignores her question. “I don't want you bothering her,” she gives Nicole her lunch box and wipes something from her cheek.

“But I don't want her taking me,” little Nicole starts. “Her car has leather seats and Massie always wants to talk about her Barbie movies and-”

“It’s not a discussion,” her mom stands up and takes the car keys from the table. “I have more important things to do…”

“Things to do…” echoes in Nicole’s head and the scene goes to black as she feels like something pulls her from the room. There’s a distorted guitar sounding from far away.

“Things to do…” she’s suddenly in her room, sitting against the door and hugging Mr Wild.

“What?! Do you have more important things to do?!” Her mom’s voice is muted by the door and the walls, but she can hear them arguing. “What is so important that I can't see for myself?”

“I didn't say that!” Thomas’ voice sounds exasperated. At least she’s dreaming of times when he came to the apartment to sleep. “But you can't follow me to work just because you feel like it. Aby, my boss is not very happy with me right now and you know I can’t screw this up-”

CRASH

Metal music invades her head, making her old room much smaller and darker.

But I'll never survive with dead memories in my heart. Dead memories in my heart! sounds too loud.

Nicole wakes up confused and it takes her a moment to her eyes to adjust to the light. The music
makes her understand why she was having nightmares. She turns to see if she woke up Waverly, but the girl is peacefully breathing on her shoulder, so she tries not to move too much.

“Can you skip the song?” she asks over the guitar solo and Eliza turns to see her, surprised.

“Welcome back,” she smiles and skips the song on her phone. A calmer song starts.

A flash of light hits her eyes, followed by another. “She is so cute!” Eliza snaps another picture of Waverly sleeping on Nicole’s shoulder and then one of Jeremy drooling.

“Dude,” Nicole whispers, “you’ll wake them up.”

“Sorry,” Eliza turns back sounding not sorry at all.

She wants to rest her head over Waverly’s but she fears that is too personal. She can tell they’re close to Purgatory now so she sits and listens to Eliza's music and enjoys Waverly’s presence next to her.

Maybe she can ask Eliza for the picture later.

As they reach the “Welcome to Purgatory” sign, everyone is wide awake and chatting again. Waverly was a little embarrassed when she woke up against Nicole’s shoulder, but the other girl didn’t seem annoyed by it, which gave her a little ease, otherwise, Waverly would be spiralling out right now. Nicole seemed a little tense at the beginning, but as they started chatting, waking Jeremy in the process, she went back to the confident-funny Nicole that Waverly knows.

The day had been fantastic. It made her week so much better, despite the things in her head still bothering her. There’re a lot of things she needs to face up to in the coming weeks and a few others that she can just put aside and pretend they don’t exist. So she’s doing just that. One step at a time.

When the first houses start to appear in their view, Dolls interrupts the conversation to ask what to do next. Eliza has to be home immediately, one of her mom’s conditions, so that’s the only thing on the agenda. There’s this feeling of guilt from the other three friends so they decide to go home, so Eliza doesn’t feel like they are excluding her. They don’t say it out loud but Waverly can see that that’s what’s happening.

Dolls drives around town to Eliza’s house, where a tall blonde woman, very much like Eliza, with two little boys by her legs thanks Dolls and quickly introduces herself to Waverly before pulling Eliza into the house. It’s a lot like when Gus dealt with teenage Wynonna. But Wynonna was another level.

They go to Homestead next. They park behind Charlene. Waverly can see that there are ropes attached by the windows to the roof of the two-door car, so she assumes that they were used again to carry something around. They get out of the car to help her get her things out, but as Waverly steps onto the sidewalk, Wynonna comes out of the cafe and bear hugs her. Doc comes out behind Wynonna and helps to get the things out as Waverly hugs her sister back.

Wynonna pulls away before giving Waverly a kiss on the forehead and acknowledges the other three teens standing around.

“We can take care of this.” Wynonna takes the guitar from Jeremy, one could say that she ripped it away. “Less important kids,” she salutes them and turns away, pulling Waverly with her. “Thank
you, bye,” she coos.

“Hey,” Waverly slaps her sister on the arm and breaks away from the grip.

“Fine,” Wynonna turns again. “Thank you for bringing her in one piece. Now go away, I need some quality time with my baby sister.”

Waverly says thanks and goodbye properly. She hurries, though, not because she wants to, but because Wynonna seems excited and it’s contagious and Waverly can’t remember her being this excited since, well, she doesn’t know.

The warm ambience of Homestead welcomes her. The chatter of the tables, the music coming from the speakers and the smell of coffee filling the air in a very familiar way now. It’s comforting to all Waverly’s senses.

Rosita walks by them with a tray full of cups and glasses, and maneuvers so she doesn’t hit anyone or anything. “Hey, Waves!” she smiles to the sisters. “One americano and an espresso?” she asks to the people at the table as they keep walking to the backdoor.

There’s no one ordering at the cash register and Levi has his eyes stuck to his little laptop on the counter, connected to his camera. He gives them a nod in acknowledgement before returning his eyes to the screen where Waverly can peek a photo of Fish, but he minimizes the window when Doc manages to pat him in the back without dropping the things he’s carrying.

Wynonna keeps pulling her until they get inside the apartment. Her sister flips the light switch on and the light of the afternoon entering from the windows is replaced by the lamplight. Waverly doesn’t catch what's different at first, but then she sees her piano in the corner of the room, where an almost empty bookcase used to be. The rest of the apartment looks so much cleaner than it usually is and there’s a smell of some cleaning product Waverly doesn’t recognize. Also, there are now a few pictures on the wall, including one of Waverly’s first recital.

“So? Do you love it or what?” Wynonna smiles to her but she doesn't wait for an answer before pulling her again.

“Wynonna!” Doc says from behind, “you are going to hurt Waverly if you keep pulling her like that.”

“She’s tougher than that, old man.” They reach the little room where the piano used to be.

“I am not old,” Doc grumps.

“Be nice,” Waverly scolds her.

“But that's not what I wanted to show you.” Wynonna opens the door to reveal a brand new bed. “I thought that if you were going to move here, you’d have to at least have a bed.”

The bed is smaller than the one in her room in Big City, but so is the room. Wynonna managed to fit in a closet, the old bookcase and a little desk too.

“Wynonna, you shouldn't have,” Waverly steps in, absorbing the space.

“See?” her sister leans on the door frame with arms crossed, smug smile on her face. “I’m nice.”

“Wait. I thought mattresses were too expensive,” she looks at her sister suspiciously.
“Umm, well…”

Waverly rolls her eyes and walks to her sister. “You found the money, didn't you?”

Wynonna opens her arms and Waverly embraces her, “it was for a good cause.”

“How did you even find it?” she asks her sister. She thought she had picked a good hiding spot.

They separated but Wynonna keeps her hands on Waverly’s shoulders. “I got help from my best tracker.” As if on cue, Doc steps behind Wynonna and winks at Waverly. “I think he’s half dog,” her sister whispers loudly, intentionally, “I’ll train him to find drugs.”

“I hope it is ok that I helped,” Doc says.

“Yeah, it’s super ok,” Waverly says as she turns to see her new bed.

“Well, let’s try it,” Wynonna takes a step back and then she launches herself to the bed, bounces and falls on the floor with a loud thud. “Fuck.”

“Oh my! Wynonna!” Doc jumps and hurries to help Wynonna.

Waverly laughs at her sister and then jumps to the bed too.

_____ 

Things go south quickly on Tuesday.

But in the meantime, everything is great

It’s a long weekend and Waverly almost wants to skip school on Tuesday (a thing she has never done) and stay in Purgatory until she gets forced to take the last bus to Big City. But she has really outdone herself doing homework on Sunday and she has, no, needs to turn it in. She didn’t work her ass off for nothing. Also, that diagram she made for biology looks pretty neat and needs some validation.

She has been doing homework on Sundays since she discovered that Wynonna felt guilted out by her and started to work too on her own homework. Wynonna is almost finished, a few more weeks and she can say goodbye to her online classes and they’ll mail her her high school diploma.

“Then Gus can shove it in her-” Wynonna started saying one night when they were closing Homestead and she was catching up with her school work.

“Wynonna.” Waverly, Rosita and Doc tried to interrupt as they were cleaning tables and mopping floors.

“-ass,” Wynonna said anyways.

After the weekend, Waverly was feeling confident. Happy. Peachy. It was overall a great weekend. She hung out with Nicole and Jeremy again on Sunday and then Monday morning with everyone else. There was a kind of excitement in the air, the kind that fills you when you wake up on Monday and you don't have to go to school.
There was something, though, later that day when Homestead was at its full capacity. Nothing big, just weird. Little bit odd.

Waverly was talking with Wynonna behind the counter an hour or so before she had to take the bus back to the city when in the corner of her eye she saw Andy lean closer to Nicole and put an earbud in the redhead’s ear. Their heads were close as Andy pointed out something on her phone to Nicole. Waverly didn’t know why, but she felt the sudden need to go and step between them. To cut the wire that connected them. She even lost her train of thought and Wynonna had to snap her fingers in her face so she could return to the conversation.

“Sorry,” Waverly apologizes when she bumps into a man in the sidewalk. The man seems bothered by it so Waverly keeps running to the apartment. If she hurries enough she can make it early like last week. But she really wants to reread the history assignment and she left it in her room.

When she arrives at the apartment, she tries to go directly to her room but Gus hears her and calls her into the kitchen, where she’s sitting reading.

“Are you in a hurry?” Gus asks as she puts her book down, opened to the page she’s reading.

“Yeah, I want to get to Purgatory early,” Waverly stands in the arch of the kitchen, rocking on her heels, anxious to leave to her room.

“Oh, I didn’t realize you were going today,” Gus says, nonchalantly. They hear Curtis’ heavy steps. He enters the kitchen, dirty overalls and hands.

“Why? I always go on Tuesdays,” Waverly takes a quick look to the little clock in the wall to make sure she’s still on time.

Gus shrugs. “I guess I didn’t think you were going since you were there yesterday.” Curtis walks by her and stops to give her a kiss on the head. “You spend so much time out now. We miss you here.”

“Yes, we do,” Curtis winks to his niece and goes to the sink to wash his hands.

“I like spending time there,” Waverly says.

“As long as it doesn't affect your grades,” Gus picks up her book again.

Waverly’s about to walk to her room now, but the moment feels calm and nice. And the subject is the right one in order to bring up what she’s been wanting to say. She hesitates in the door, deciding between talking or leaving. She has been practicing different scenarios in her mind, on how this is going to go, but now that the opportunity is real, her anxiety is crawling in her mind.

Curtis closes the faucet and shakes his now clean hands. He turns around and exchanges a smile with his niece. It makes Waverly calmer.

“Something to say, baby girl?” He takes a towel to dry his hands and Gus peeks up from her book.

“I just, um,” she looks at her hands for one second, noticing that her nails on the left hand are too long. She looks up again to find her aunt and uncle looking at her. “I really, really, like spending time there. In fact, I would like to spend more time there.”


“At this rate, you’re going to lose more money coming and going that what you make giving
lessons,’’ Curtis says lightly as he opens the fridge and gathers some things to apparently make himself a sandwich.

Waverly breathes deeply and tries again. “Actually, I was thinking that maybe next year I could change schools and go to Purgatory High and, um,” you can do this, “live with Wynonna.”

Gus lets out a little laugh and returns to her book but Curtis closes the fridge door and looks at her, his arms full of food. The moment of silence stretches and Waverly waits for her words to sink in. Gus looks up again to look at Waverly, then Curtis, then Waverly again.

“Are you serious?” She asks, finally closing her book.

“Yeah,” Waverly’s voice is small, almost a question. She fiddles with the hem of her shirt, feeling suddenly like this was a bad idea.

“Then, no,” Gus says seriously. “Of course not, you’re not moving in with Wynonna,” she says like it’s the most obvious thing.

“But-”

“No buts, I said no, I don’t know where you got this idea from, but no. There’s-”

“Ok, ok,” Curtis intervenes and puts the food on the counter. “Let’s take this slow,” he says to the both of them. “What about the conservatory?” He asks Waverly, calmly.

“I don’t want to go anymore,” Waverly states.

“Why not?” Curtis asks, frowning and tilting his head to one side.

“No,” Gus says, scandalized. “You’ve worked so hard for this. I’m not letting you throw it away just so you can live with your sister.”

“It’s not that,” it kinda is but Waverly tries to remember what Nicole said, “it’s for me.”

Gus scoffs. “You have no idea what you’re talking about. Did you even think this through?”

“Of course I did.”

“Really? I don’t think so, if you had-”

“I did. I have been thinking about this for months,” Waverly says as her aunt keeps speaking.

“-you wouldn’t have- don’t interrupt me, you wouldn’t have come to this conclusion-”

“Look,” Curtis tries to calm Gus, he puts a hand in her shoulder, “If she doesn't want to go, we can’t force her.”

Gus shakes her head and stands up, one hand on her hip and the other on her forehead, massaging it. She looks like her head is hurting again and it makes Waverly feel guilty.

“Look, baby girl, we can talk more about the conservatory, but, well, I don’t think- uh- I don’t think moving to Purgatory is such a good idea,” Curtis says, apologetically.

“Why?” she asks, trying to remember how she practiced the answer to every question and the different scenarios, but her mind is blank.
“Well, who is gonna- who is going to take care of you? Where are you going to stay? We, your aunt and I, we have to stay here,” he says, worried.

“I know, but Wynonna can take care of-” Waverly starts.

“No,” Gus shakes her head, “I can't trust her, not with you.”

“Why are you so against me living with Wynonna?” Waverly asks, suddenly defensive of her sister. “She’s responsible enough, and even if she wasn't, I am. I can take care of myself.”

“No, not when she’s around. She’s always one step away from creating chaos. If it were up to me, I wouldn’t have let Willa leave the business to her. Good thing she’s finishing college soon.”

“She can stay there,” Waverly huffs.

“Look,” Gus sighs. “You know I love your sister as much as I love you-”

“Really?”

“Baby girl, you shouldn’t put that on your sister, you should’ve asked her first,” Curtis says.

“I did ask her first, and guess what? She said yes, she even bought me a mattress,” Waverly explains, trying to make her aunt see that moving away is not such an inconvenience.

“With what money, exactly?” Gus asks, frowning.

“My mom-” Waverly starts.

“Oh,” Gus laughs again and closes her arms. “I see. One mattress is what it takes.”

“No, that’s not what I mean,” Waverly regrets bringing up her mom. It’s not her intention to make them think that she doesn’t appreciate all that they had done for her. She tries to work in her mind what to say next, but everything is going so badly and her head doesn’t seem to be working well.

“No, that’s the final answer,” Gus says, her voice authoritative.

“But-”

“I said no.”

*Something,* she thinks, *you have to think of something to say, to make it right.* But nothing comes. She takes one step back and decides to leave the room.

“Don’t walk out on me, young lady,” she hears Gus say from behind, but she’s still moving and before she knows it, she’s at the door.

“Where are you going?” Gus follows behind.

“Out!”

“Waverly!” Her aunt says, trying to stop her.

“Love, let her,” she hears her uncle say as she steps out of the door.

“Waverly!”

Before she knows it, she’s in the park, the one that’s just a few blocks away from the apartment.
She sits on a bench, not far from the jungle gym and the swings, where a few kids are playing, their moms watching them from the distance. It’s the only nice sound around, the rest of the air is filled with horns of cars, traffic jam. The greasy smell of cooked meat, from a burger stand nearby, is mixed with the dirty air coming from the cars and the garbage bin near the bench.

She checks her phone, after a while, and realizes she can no longer get to Purgatory early. She can’t even get there in time for Nicole’s class, which is a big let down. She considers her options for a few minutes. Technically, she could run to the apartment to get her things, but there’s a big chance that Gus is going to be waiting for her, pissed and Waverly didn’t feel like getting into another argument. For a moment she thinks that she can just go with what she has on, but that would look like she’s running away and even if she tries, she doesn't have enough in her pocket to pay the bus. Damn that moment when she put her wallet in her backpack.

In reality, her only option is to cancel the class. After a few tears of frustration, she sends, with sorrow, a text to Nicole, apologizing for cancelling the class. Nicole responds quickly that it’s ok. Then she sends one to Wynonna, half explaining why she won't be going but her sister doesn’t seem to read it.

Then she stays in the park, people watching. She doesn’t have much to do. Waverly’s ahead of schedule, as usual, and she doesn't have a lot of homework to do and even has all the pieces she needs to present in the final exam of the year. It should be relaxing, taking an afternoon off, but it’s not. There’s a lot on Waverly’s mind.

But it’s wiped away when she sees Chrissy walking down the sidewalk.

“Chrissy!” Waverly stands, gladdened to see her best friend. Chrissy doesn't look so delighted, her eyes are red and her head and shoulders down.

“Hey,” Chrissy mumbles and goes for a hug. Waverly immediately embraces her.

“What’s going on?” Waverly says as they separate, examining her friend and putting a strand of blonde hair in its place.

The corners of Chrissy’s lips go down and her eyes fill with tears. Waverly hugs her again, feeling her heart tighten.

“Robin broke up with me,” Chrissy sniffles into Waverly’s shoulder. “I’m not even surprised, just fucking sad,” Chrissy laughs, “I think he was never that into me, anyways. But, I-I thought we were fine. I don’t know.”

“I’m sorry,” Waverly tightens up her embrace, not finding anything better to say.

“It’s not your fault,” Chrissy takes one step back and holds Waverly’s hand. “Weren't you supposed to be in Purgatory?” she tilts her head to one side.

Waverly shrugs and wipes a few tears from her best friends face. Hopefully they’ll avoid the subject that’s pressing on her mind.

“Did Nicole cancel?” Chrissy tries again.

“Um, no, I did, actually. I was kinda late,” Waverly admits.

“Late? I thought you were leaving early.”

“Yeah, but,” Waverly smiles, “you know what? Forget it. I don’t wanna bother you with my
problems. Let’s focus on you. Do you wanna do something?”

“Just shoot a few rounds at Robin’s pictures,” Chrissy smiles sadly. “You have me intrigued, I wanna know. Distract me, I don’t want to talk about Robin right now.”

“Come on, let’s go for chocolates or something,” Waverly pulls Chrissy by her hand and they start walking, dodging the question. Her friend doesn’t need more stress right now.

“Fine, I can use some zits on my face.”

They walk hand in hand to the 7/11 on the next block. Chrissy scans the aisles and makes Waverly hold every piece of candy she feels like eating. In the end, she’s holding a considerable pile of calories.

“Seriously,” Chrissy asks taking a bit of a twizzler outside of the store, “what’s going on with you? You’ve been acting so weird. Are you going to break up with me too?”

“No,” Waverly takes a random candy out of the plastic bag. “We’re married, remember?”

“Right,” Chrissy holds the bag so Waverly can open the chocolate she fished. “Divorce, then.”

“It’s nothing, really. I just got into an argument with Gus,” Waverly takes a bite of the bar.

“You? I thought that was Wynonna's thing.”

“I guess it’s an Earp thing.”

“Waves, seriously, tell me. You’re freaking me out,” Chrissy’s eyes are pleading and she knows that she can’t avoid the subject further.

“She doesn’t want me to move to Purgatory,” she says slowly, studying her friend’s reaction, Chrissy frowns. “Purgatory?” Her eyes move as she looks at her and Waverly can see her brain working, not in her favor. “What the hell, Waves?”

Waverly bites her lip, trying to avoid her mouth from rambling, but it’s a lost battle. “I wanted to tell you, but I didn’t find the right time and then I chickened out and-and Robin said that he was thinking of breaking up with you and I couldn’t.”

“He what?” Chrissy interrupts her, disbelief in her voice, and Waverly covers her mouth, realizing what she just said. “You knew?”

“Ah, well,” Waverly takes a step back, “yeah, he told me, but-”

“But what? huh?” her friend dares her to respond. It’s happening again, Waverly can’t find words now that she has fucked this up too. “You thought you could leave me here? Like an idiot?”

“No, Chriss, listen-” Waverly takes a step toward Chrissy, but her friend pulls away.

“Don’t,” Chrissy throws her candy at Waverly, hitting her lightly on the shoulder but Waverly feels like she’s been shot. “I’m so done with you two. We were supposed to be a team. I guess I’m the one out of the group, right?”

“Chrissy, please,” Waverly begs.

“Have fun together,” Chrissy starts walking. “And I’m taking the candy!”
Chapter End Notes

leave a comment if you have something to say or if you're updating your fic instead of leaving for your very important exam (like me)

Edit: Also, here's a list of the art pieces that appeared:
Anyway, here's Wonderwall:

Museum of Flight - Damien Jurado
To Lose My Life - White Lies
Piano Sonata No. 13 in A Major, D. 664 by Franz Schubert
Anarchy In The UK - Sex Pistols
Dead Memories - Slipknot

Spotify Playlist:
Chap. 5 and 6
A current of fresh air runs through the big windows of Constance’s house. The living room is full and the constant jumping and dancing as the band plays is getting the room hot. Nicole enjoys the cold breeze on her face and keeps moving along the people and tries not to spill the drink in her hand.

In the middle of the song, Gretta is left alone playing the bass line, as the guitars and drums jump in again. It’s the last song of the night but Constance’s voice is fresh as spring. Mattie looks good and free on the side as she plays the guitar, but Nicole misses her voice in the front.

It’s her first time watching the full band play, not like other times when one of the members (usually Constance) is absent and finally, she can hear the full power of their sound.

“But you just cannot get angry in the same way. No, not in the same way ,” Constance sings as the intensity of the song increases incrementally.

Eliza jumps with her hands on Jeremy's shoulders, making her reach higher and Dolls and Nicole laugh at Jeremy’s constant flinching, probably afraid that Eliza is going to fall down on him. The song ends and everyone in the room cheers, sounding like a roar. Dolls whistles, making Nicole cover her ears to protect them.

The band turns down the amplifiers and soon, the music resumes as Hall & Oates’ Maneater starts in the speakers. Conversations resume and the masses move outside in search for fresh air and others go looking for drinks. They find a place near a window and hang there as some people join them. Quinn and Yorkie bring them some drinks that they accept happily. Dolls gets a cup too, but Nicole knows that he's only going to hold it until he finds a way to throw it away.

The guys start talking about the hockey final game that took place earlier that day, a final they were not in, since they were out of the season long ago. Most of them are really optimistic about it,
but some of them (especially the seniors) are feeling down.

The group grows and Nicole feels glad that she accepted the invitation to come. It had been a long week, with all the finals approaching and Waverly’s absence. It feels nice just to go outside and forget everything for a while.

And from the looks of the party, everyone has a similar idea. Teens are getting a bit careless and Nicole can count in her head the minutes until a police cruiser drives along the street to stop the party. It’s usually like that when a party goes down in this neighborhood.

After an hour or so, Dolls drags Skip out of the house and asks them to wait for him to get his car.

“I’m fine,” Skip mumbles as Quinn and Dolls leave him sitting on the stairs of the porch.

“Sure thing, dude,” Dolls says as he gives him a palm on the cheek. Skip tries to dodge it and starts falling, but Eliza catches him and sits next to him, placing his head on her shoulder.

“Just sleep a while, champion,” she says and gives him a kiss on the forehead. Nicole sits next to Eliza and Jeremy leans on the railing and pulls out his phone.

Skip whines and snuggles into Eliza. “Next year we’re going to be in the final, I swear.”

“Mhmm,” Eliza says and rolls her eyes at Nicole. They share a smile, knowing that it would take a miracle to win since it looked like Purgatory teams were cursed and never made it to the finals. Well, the football team made it last year and even if the other team swept the floor with them, the York brothers wouldn’t let anyone forget that they at least got to the final.

Mattie steps out of the door and stomps her way to them. “Have you seen Valdez?” She asks and lets herself drop next to Nicole after they shake their heads in response and sighs heavily.

“Fuck, I wanna leave and that bitch disappears. She’s probably somewhere getting wasted with Wynonna.” She groans and leans back.

“Wynonna is here?” Nicole asks, her eyes scanning her surroundings, looking for sandy, wavy hair.

“I don’t know, I guess,” Mattie says. “I brought alcohol to this party, so I assume.”

“Oh,” Nicole scratches her head and tells herself to calm down. If Wynonna is here, that would mean that Waverly’s not in Purgatory, but if Wynonna isn’t here, that would mean that she’s in Homestead with Waverly, or alone. Either way, the probability of Waverly being at this party is low.

“What are you doing here?” Mattie asks as if just now she realized that they’re sitting outside.

“Waiting for Dolls, he’s our designated driver,” Jeremy says as he taps the screen of his phone.

“Is there a time when he's not your designated driver?” Mattie asks, humor in her voice.

“Hmm, no,” Nicole admits.

“Nope,” Eliza says at the same time.

“What's up with him?” Mattie points at Skip looking at Eliza’s hand like is the weirdest thing he has seen in Purgatory, which is something.
“I’m sad,” he tells Eliza’s hand.

“He’s sad because the Devils didn't play the final,” Eliza explains.

Mattie snorts. “Try to be the captain for two years, you’ll get used to it,” she rolls her eyes.

“Hey, maybe you’ll get a chance in college,” Eliza says.

“I’m not going to college,” Mattie drops casually.

“What?” Nicole asks confused.

“What?” Eliza asks too. “I thought you and Gretta were going to BCU.”

“Gretta is,” Jeremy deadpans as he keeps his eyes on his phone.

“Gretta is,” Mattie says, eyeing Jeremy. “I decided not to go. Let’s not talk about it, long story.”

“Ok,” Nicole concedes. She doesn’t feel like talking about colleges now. Too early for her, too late for Mattie and too soon for Eliza.

“Haught, get on the team,” Mattie orders and gets a pack of cigarettes out of her jacket, “you look like you can keep your head cool and we need someone to step in between when things get tense.” Mattie gets out a lighter and lights up a cigarette.

“Oh, ok?” Nicole scratches her head.

“If not,” she inhales and holds her breath as she speaks, “this idiot will get kicked out of the team for fighting.” She jerks her head in Eliza’s direction and exhales to the sky.

Eliza rolls her eyes, “It’s not my fault Andy can’t share the ball and if Hetty kept her mouth shut for like a second, I wouldn’t be so annoyed.”

“Ok,” Nicole says, not very sure if she can contain Eliza in any situation. If she has seen someone almost throw Dolls to the floor, it is an angry Eliza Shapiro.

“Good, the team is in good hands then.” Mattie stands up again, “I have to find this bitch, see ya later.”

They wait for a little while until Dolls’ SUV appears in the driveway. Perry catches them and helps Dolls drag Skip to the car which hypothetically shouldn't be so hard if Skip would play his part. Halfway down the front yard he changes his opinion about leaving and they have to sort of wrestle him and Eliza kneels down to try to convince him.

Nicole and Jeremy stand next to the car, observing the event unfold when she sees Andy running to them.

“Nicole!” Andy waves a hand. “You leaving?” She stops a few steps away from them her cheeks flushed.

“Hey, Andy!” Jeremy greets.

“Yeah, we gotta drop off the prince here before midnight,” Nicole puts an arm across Jeremy’s shoulders. “And the drunk peasant there.” Nicole points to Skip, currently laying in the grass as Perry tries to pull him by the arm.
“I’m the prince,” Jeremy points, and Andy returns her head to them, after laughing at the scene.

“Your majesty,” Andy says as she bows.

“We’re just going to drop him at Dolls’ and then he’ll give us a ride home. Wanna come?”

“It will be an honor, your majesty,”

“Ok, stop with that,” Nicole says.

Jeremy holds up a hand to shut down Nicole. “I will say when to stop,” he says with all the authority of a prince.

“But Lady Haught,” Andy says.

Nicole frowns. “Lady?”

“Dame?” Jeremy suggests.

“Knight?” Andy offers, with a certain twinkle in her eye.

“Ok, stop,” Nicole says and sees that Dolls and Perry are finally getting Skip in the car. “Time to go.”

Eliza insists on staying with Skip in Dolls’ room, so she can keep an eye on him. She calls her mom and passes the phone to Dolls to assure her that is not an imposition and that, yes, Eliza is very welcome to stay the night. After all, they are still not done with the fake work they’re supposed to be doing and Eliza is no longer grounded now that the teacher praised her essay (and asked her to read it to the whole class).

Dolls takes Nicole aside for a second to show her his brand new camera that he’s going to use to record her in the contest. He even bought a microphone so he can get the sound of humiliation crystal clear. Nicole swats him and tries once more to change the bet, but she knows that Dolls can see in her eyes that this time it’s just for banter. To be honest, she doesn’t feel like she can win, but at least she’s good enough to not make a fool of herself. And, of course, she’s counting on Waverly, even if she hasn’t heard a word from the brunette since Tuesday.

After drinking some water, eating some snacks and taking some gum, the rest get in the car and Dolls drives to Jeremy’s house. Neither of them planned ahead so they could stay at Dolls’. Jeremy can’t have sleepovers because his dad thinks it sets a bad example for his sister, somehow. Nicole is supposed to be sleeping in her bed right now, so she better be there by morning.

Nicole and Andy sit on the backseat and Andy puts one end of her headphones in Nicole’s ear as she suggests songs for her to play in the contest. Nicole approves a few of them, but she tells her that she’s still not sure of any of them. Andy says that it’s ok and that she will look for some others.

It’s midnight when Dolls parks in front of Nicole’s with the lights off. They say goodbye and Nicole makes her way into the house as silently as possible. All the lights are out, but the Renault is in the driveway, so her dad is home. She takes off her jacket and shoes in the entrance but as she puts one foot on the first step of the stairs, the phone starts ringing, breaking the silent night.
Nicole runs in socks to the phone and picks up. She puts the phone to her ear. “Hello?” She asks as her eyes are drawn to the stairs, now illuminated from the light above. She can hear the sound of a street and the far off voice of a man, but not a real answer. “Hello?” She repeats, but as she sees her dad walking down the stairs in pajamas, the other side of the line hangs up leaving her listening to the beep beep.

“Who’s calling?” Thomas asks from the middle of the stairs, his short hair pointing in all directions.

Nicole looks at the phone and hangs it up. “Don’t know, they hung up.” She shrugs and yawns, feeling tired all of a sudden.

Thomas seems to be lost in his mind for a few seconds but then he turns his head to her and studies her for a second. “Did you just get home?” He walks down the rest of the stairs and stands in front of her.

“Hmm, no?” She says, hoping to sound sure.

Thomas sniffs close to her. “Have you been drinking?”

“Of course not,” Nicole says, feeling more confident this time.

Thomas frowns and puts his hands in her shoulder. “You sure?” He asks, sniffing again.

“Ok, fine, I just got here,” she admits, “but I was with Dolls and we accidentally dropped a bottle of beer from the fridge, that’s why, you know... the smell.” Nicole finishes and waits to see if her lie worked.

Thomas smiles, arching an eyebrow. “Ok, let's pretend we believe that. We’ll talk about this tomorrow,” he sighs and pulls her in for a hug that takes her by surprise and then walks to the stairs, but he stops midway and goes to the phone. She stands next to him as he recovers the last number that called and writes it down in the notepad that always stays next to the phone. They stare at the random number before Thomas rips the page and folds it in his hand.

“Go to sleep,” he says before climbing up the stairs with the piece of paper in his hand.

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It’s too sunny, Waverly thinks as she looks out of the window from the first floor of the high school. It’s indeed a very sunny Monday and the temperature is high. All the concrete walls absorbing the light and efficiently turning it into heat. She doesn’t hate warmer weather, but there’s a difference between nice warm weather and the heat of noon in the concrete jungle. The lack of trees makes the thought of staying in the city for another three years almost unbearable. Not that she has another option, apparently.

She’s been walking around the halls since she's avoiding the cafeteria where Chrissy is eating with Stephanie Jones and other girls Waverly’s not very fond of. That, and because it’s not as hot here. Just like every day for the past few days, Waverly woke up with the determination to solve this nonsense with Chrissy. But every day, she had chickened out either due to the murderous looks Chrissy gives her every time she tries to approach her or the murderous looks Gus gives her every
time she tries to go out of the apartment.

“Of course you’re not grounded,” Curtis had said. “We can’t exactly ground you for asking for stuff, right?”

But by the attitude Gus has been carrying all week, she wasn’t so sure about it. So she just avoided going to Purgatory at all, at least for a few days, just so Gus can cool off.

She told Wynonna over the phone the same Tuesday everything went down. She wasn’t so sure what her sister’s reaction was going to be, but it certainly surprised her to hear her sister laugh.

“Baby girl, of course, I want you here with me, but, you do realize how Gus sees it, right?” Wynonna said. Waverly could hear the soft music in Homestead and the low chatter of the few people left in the cafe.

“No?” Wynonna sighed. “You’re fifteen years old asking to move away and drop out of school. Like, fair, you go to two schools at the same time, but, I mean, you just kinda normalize that for Gus. No wonder why she’s so annoyed by me. You’re top of your class, Willa is graduating college and I just ate a box of donuts and a finished a bottle of whiskey. I know, I'm the winner here, but, you know, Gus doesn't see it that way.”

Waverly rolled her eyes, lying in her bed surrounded by the darkness of her room. “Give yourself some credit, Wynonna.”

“I mean, I’m technically an adult but I’m still nineteen. Imagine your little fifteen-year-old star asking to move in with an ex-convict.”

Waverly groaned and wished other people could see things the way she does. It would be so much easier. Maybe if she could explain herself properly.

They kept talking through the night and Wynonna asked her for help so she could finish her homework. Waverly tried to remind her sister that she was a few courses behind what she was asking her.

“Like you haven’t read that textbook yet.” Waverly rolled her eyes, she hasn't read it yet, but she might have taken a look.

Wynonna promised to ask Rosita for help after telling Waverly that there was no way she would ask Willa for help. “She already thinks of herself as the head of the family, we don’t need to boost her ego more.”

From the window, she can see Mark laughing at something Robin says. She smiles at the scene, but Robin somehow catches her eye, making her turn away and keep walking. They haven’t talked since last week. Waverly feels like Robin is avoiding contact since it might make Chrissy more angry with both of them than she already is.

She takes another sip of water, wishing it was colder on this hot day. She’s not hungry, which is good since it gives her more excuses to not go to the cafeteria. All day, she has been feeling a little sick. It’s probably the fault of the envelope that arrived this morning.

As soon as Gus opened it, she was bursting with pride and excitement. Official invitations for Willa’s graduation this weekend. There were four of them and it didn't even cross Waverly’s mind that one of them was for her until Gus told her that Willa called her to tell them that the invitations
were for her, Curtis, Wynonna and of course you, silly.

There has to be some kind of mistake, though. She was fully expecting to be ignored again as it usually goes when Willa is involved. Maybe Willa got confused and she meant that the fourth invitation was for Shorty or something.

“Do you have something else to do this weekend that makes it impossible for you to be at your sister’s graduation?” Gus asked, a bite in her tone.

“No, Gus,” she said before grabbing her backpack to catch the bus, fifteen minutes early so she wouldn’t cross paths with Robin or Chrissy.

The clock tells Waverly that lunch break is almost over. She makes her way to the closest water fountain to refill her bottle humming to herself. Just a few more hours, she reminds herself. A few hours of sitting in class while Chrissy ignores her and Robin avoids her. A few more hours of heat and a few more hours until the day is over. A few more hours of homework and then she can practice. Then she can play her guitar and forget about everything for a while in her room. Her own space, her little refuge in the city.

Maybe today Gus won’t be as mad and tomorrow she can go to Purgatory. It hasn't been that bad, being away from Purgatory. Yes, she was down due to not seeing Wynonna. And she felt like something was missing when she couldn’t hang out with Nicole on the weekend, but, you know. Life happens, Waverly supposes. At least she got extra time to work on her school work. Finals were approaching and she had a lot of stuff to do. From math problems to solve and final papers to write, to rhythms and studies to play.

She keeps humming while she fills her bottle, happily until someone leans against the wall next to the fountain. Champ gives her one of his cocky smiles that she used to find oh so charming. Right now, she just finds it annoying.

“Hey, Waves,” he says, casual and in the same tone that he uses when there's no one else around. She can tell this is the nice version of him.

"Champ," Waverly responds dryly and takes a sip of water.

"Hey, I was thinking, there’s a party on Friday, we should go. Pick you up at seven?"

Waverly tries not to choke. “Excuse me?”

“You, me, going out, dancing,” he does a little dance, to give an example.

Waverly stares at him for a while, trying to decipher his intentions, and Champ just waits. “What about Emma?” she asks instead of: what about the way you treated me for weeks? Honestly, she's just tired and the last thing she wants is to get in a confrontation with Champ of all people.

“What about her?” He asks as if they haven't been eating each other’s faces around high school. “She doesn't matter,” he steps closer and moves to take her hand. It makes her cringe but she doesn't move away. “It’s you and me that matter. We look right together. Don't you want this face next to you? It's a very nice face,” he smiles, pointing at himself, proudly.

She looks around while she thinks of what to say next to get out of this situation. Maybe it's written on the walls, “redrum” style, who knows. The bell sounds across the school as a blessing from all the gods. "The bell," she says, pointing to the roof, where other answers might be written too, "I better get going."
"OK," Champ says, a dumb smile still on his face. Behind him, she sees Chrissy walking down the hall. The blonde stops when she sees her, probably surprised to see Waverly talking with Champ. “See you around?”

Waverly nods, dumbly. Chrissy just walks to her classroom on the other side of the hall and Waverly hurries to her own destination. She exhales, glad to be out of the situation when Robin’s voice speaks right next to her.

“Waves,” he walks next to her. He looks around like he’s about to spill all the government secrets he keeps inside his piano.

“Robin,” she turns to see him, surprised to hear him. “What’s going on?”

“Hey, we- I was thinking that maybe- uh.” They stop next to Waverly’s desk, behind the one Mark and Robin share. “Maybe we should talk to Chrissy. I mean. I know she’s mad with the both of us, but if we, you know, join forces. Maybe she would stop and hear us.”

“There’s not much to tell,” Waverly says as she leaves her books in the desk.

“C’mon,” Robin pleads. “I don’t want to leave like this. I really- she- she’s my best friend.”

“Ouch.” Waverly pretends to be offended. She sits and Robin follows, turning back to face her. Mark walks behind him and sits next to Robin.

“You know what I mean,” he leans on the back of his chair, holding his head on his fists.

“Yeah, yeah,” she smiles at him.

“I just didn’t get the chance to explain myself, you know?”

Doesn’t she know? Waverly doesn’t say anything else. The room starts to fill with people and she opens her binder and carefully places her pens next to it, ready for action.

Mark turns back to face her too. “Hey, what did Champ want?” He asks in a good mood.

“You saw that?”

Robin and Mark nod, synchronized.

“Does he needs you to explain to him how to add numbers or something?”

“Apparently he wants to take me out,” Waverly says.

“Really? What a dick!” Mark says too loud. Everyone around turns to see him, half of them surprised to see him show such emotion.

The professor enters the classroom, automatically turning the volume down on all conversations, and starts writing something down on the blackboard.

“God, please tell me you said no,” Robin whispers.

Waverly gives him a look of indignity. She’s about to tell him she said no, of course, when she realizes that she actually didn’t give Champ an answer. Her desk partner, a nice quiet girl that is a bit too slow finally arrives. They share polite smiles.

“Why are all the cute guys always dicks?” Robin asks. Waverly, Mark and the girl look at him
with puzzled faces. “I mean- uh-“

But they get no chance to keep talking. The teacher clears his throat and Robin and Mark turn to face the front of the room. Waverly sighs and counts the hours to finally be in her room, playing her guitar.


Jeremy jumps. “Please tell me I didn’t roll a one!” He says loudly. It’s not a scream, but in the silence of the library, might as well be. People nearby, mostly other high school students, throw them dirty looks. Jeremy looks around and finally returns to the world of the living, catching on the fact that they’re in the library and not whatever place he was dreaming of. “Oh, thank god,” he says, and makes himself comfortable on the table to sleep again.

Nicole swats him on the shoulder. “Dude, you’re not even halfway through the problems,” she scolds him. “And it’s due Friday.” Meaning, tomorrow.

Jeremy groans and takes his pencil. It takes a good five minutes for Nicole to end the problem and when she turns to see her friend, his head has fallen down on the table again and he’s peacefully sleeping. She pokes him again and he sits straight, pretending he has been awake the whole time.

“I’m solving them. I swear,” he slaps himself lightly twice and shakes his head. “Ok, so the X is…”

They manage to work together for an hour. Jeremy solves the problems quickly but the sleep deprivation catches up with him and he falls asleep once more. He stayed awake the whole night doing god knows what. The only thing that she knows is that he showed up this morning to school with just one hour of sleep, which, by common knowledge, is not the recommended amount of hours for a human to be functional. So Nicole decides to let him sleep. It won’t do any good to wake him up. He would just be tired and stressed. She’ll give him at least an hour before leaving for a very large cup of coffee.

Nicole is not super worried about this homework. She started it a week ago and had a lot of free time on the weekend to do it. She’s just a few problems away from finishing, so she’s concentrating more on understanding them so she can ace the final. Of course, this free time came from the absence of a certain brunette that has been away for two weeks now.

Waverly finally texts her on Tuesday morning. Nicole lightened up when she saw the notification but the happiness was quickly replaced with disappointment when she read the text. Another week that Waverly’s going to be away from Purgatory. The girl promised her that she would be in Homestead next week and asked her to choose a few songs so they can decide what Nicole is going to play at the contest. Nicole wanted to make conversation, but then she thought that maybe Waverly was as busy as they are with the finals. Probably more.

The same Tuesday, in the afternoon, when she and her biology lab group decided to stop for something to eat at Homestead, she saw a flashy poster in front of the coffee shop. Finally, the
contest was announced, the rules for it were written down and the date was set. But she just felt like throwing up at the idea of being on stage again. She could already feel the eyes on her, the trembling of her hands, the words wiped out of her mind…

What would her mom think? Would she think this is the one thing she has finally succeeded at? Or she would she say to drop it and try something else? Something she’s actually good at.

Nicole closes the book she has been using for reference. It’s not really helping at this point. She has the basics right but this isn’t a question of negatives and positives or the use of the formulas but a question of thinking of the right way of obtaining the solution. She just needs a clever person for this. That usually would be Jeremy, but he’s unavailable right now. Being sleep and everything.

Eliza is pretty good at math too, but sadly, she and Xavier are currently studying at Bryce Cooper’s house or a chemistry test the next day.

Nicole shakes her head and sets her eyes on the page of her notebook. She writes down the basic facts of the problem and tries to make sense of it. The answer is on the tip of her tongue, she can feel it coming out of her brain, but the hamster in her head stops to take a break, drink a little from his tiny imaginary water fountain, and the solution flies away. She groans and rests her forehead on the notebook.

Maybe it’s the pressure of turning this in tomorrow or the general tiredness that the end of the course has them living in. Maybe it’s the fact that she can feel Summer break around the corner and the inevitable contest she’s not ready for. Maybe she’s just dumb. (Maybe she just needs to see Waverly to recharge her energy.) But somehow, she can’t think of the solution.

Just five more problems, she begs her hamster, just run on the freaking wheel.

She stands up and stretches her back. One or two bones pop and she feels the relief. The library is relatively quiet, but the air is heavy. Mattie would be talking about bad energies if she was here. She starts searching for someone from her algebra class as she walks around the library holding her notebook.

In the distance, she spots Kyle York with his group of friends and from the look on their faces, they have no idea what they are doing. She can bet they’re not even on exercise five. She makes her way to the stairs, but she hears a quiet laugh she can recognize.

Shae and some other juniors are at a table behind a few bookcases, all with their heads down, either looking at books or screens. They seem to be studying for the same chemistry test that Dolls and Eliza are. Shae is sitting at the end of the table, earbuds on, biting her lip the way she does when she’s deep in concentration.

Nicole hesitates, not wanting to disturb. But then she says fuck it under her breath and walks to the table.

Shae doesn’t seem to be in a terrible mood, but her hair is a bit disheveled. She has the tendency of burying her fingers in her hair to help herself relax. As soon as she spots Nicole walking to her, she smiles warmly. “Hey, Nic,” she greets quietly.

“Hey,” Nicole returns is a whisper. “How’s it going?”

“Oh, you know,” Shae sighs, returning her eyes to her laptop where she has a few diagrams open. “The usual nightmare of finals.” She opens the music player and pauses the music, taking both earbuds out. “You?”
“Same,” Nicole says, resting her notebook on the table and sitting on the empty chair next to Shae. A few girls, Shae’s friends, whisper hello to her, which she returns.

Shae takes the notebook and studies Nicole’s notes. “You need help with this? You’ve never had any problems with math, I’m surprised.”

Nicole shrugs and scratches her head. “Ah, well, there's always a first.”

“Is there?” Shae asks, a bit absently as she keeps her eyes moving on the page.

“In my defense, I’m just five problems away from finishing, so…”

“Shae,” Shae’s friend interrupts, “sorry,” she tells Nicole. “Can you explain to me the ionic bonding again?”

Shae nods to her. “A minute,” she tells Nicole and stands to circle the table to where her friend is.

The clock on Shae’s laptop reads a few minutes past five. It’s not super late or anything, so she decides to take a few more minutes for a bit of slacking. On the screen, she sees that Shae left the music player open, so Nicole takes one earbud and puts it in her ear. She jumps the current song and presses play to the next one as she looks at the tip of her fingers on her right hand. They seem to be getting rougher and stronger. The song changes and Nicole takes the other earbud and puts it in.

The melody starts and Nicole just knows it. This is it. The song. She doesn’t stop to pay attention to the lyrics, she’s more concentrated on the fingerstyle of the guitar. There’s still time, she tells herself, suddenly confident in her skills, I can learn this in a few weeks. Waverly can teach me this. She opens her phone to add the song to her music app. And repeats the song on Shae’s laptop.

A few minutes go by and Shae and her friend are deep in their whispered conversation. Nicole decides to use the time to stretch her legs. Shae looks at her, apologetically, and Nicole makes a sign to say that she’ll come back.

And it’s just in time. Her phone buzzes in her pocket. Greg’s name is on the screen and a weird feeling in her stomach tells her this call is not good. Her cousin doesn't usually have signal at this hour of the day. He should be at grandma’s now.

Nicole jogs to the exit and exits the library to pick up.

“Greg?” She asks, worried.

“Nicole, hey,” her cousin says, his voice different from the usual banter tone he uses to call her.

“Is everything ok? Is grandma-“ Nicole starts, her hamster now running a hundred kilometers per hour.

“She’s fine, she’s fine,” he says, but his tone doesn’t convince her. “She gave me a scare, though.” He laughs, no humor in it.

Nicole’s heart picks up. “What happened?”

“Um, well,” she can hear the sound of someone, a nurse probably, calling a name. “Sorry, I’m still--” he clears his throat. “She’s fine. The doctor told me that she’s out of danger but that I should keep an eye on her to see if it develops. It’s her breathing again. She was breathing weirdly this
morning but she swore to me, Nic, she swore that she took her medication.”

Of course, Nicole thinks as she rubs a hand over her face. Grandma Lucy doesn’t like to be taken care of. She has always been like that. Independent, but too stubborn at the same time.

“Turns out she didn’t. Her inhaler was empty and she, apparently, you know how she is. That old lady. She said that she didn't want to worry me so she just said that she took it and instead tried to treat herself with tea.”

“But is she ok?” Nicole presses, after a brief moment of silence.

“Yes, she seems fine. A little bit annoyed by the nebulizer,” they laugh, lightening the humor, “but otherwise, fine.”

“Thank god.”

“I’m such an ass. I should have checked if she took it, but I was so preoccupied in getting on time to do a delivery, that I just- I just left.”

“Greg, it's not your fault,” Nicole says, leaning on the wall opposite of where the little golden plaque is shining.

Greg clears his throat. “I didn't want to worry you, just thought that you would like to know.”

“Thank you, Gregory,” Nicole says, sincerely.

“Oh, full name and everything.” She can hear him smiling. “You’re welcome. Hey, is your dad around there or should I call him?”

“Hmm, no. I’m in the library, actually.” She remembers Thomas saying something about where he was going to be today, but she wasn’t listening, so. “I think he's doing something about something for a job. I don’t know.”

“Ok. Tell him,” he says. “Ah, and my mom is on her way, so don't worry, everything’s going to be fine,” he says both to her and himself.

“Ok, I’ll tell my dad,” she pushes herself from the wall. The thought of her own mother crosses her mind. If she knew that grandma Lucy was in the hospital, would she show up?


“Me too, kinda. Take care of grandma.”

“If she lets me. Call you later.”

Miraculously, Jeremy’s awake when she gets back. And as always, he’s very perceptive. He lets her be in silence, her leg bouncing, while he solves exercise after exercise, too damn quick, but he’s still a few exercises behind when Nicole's nerves get to her and she stands up.

“Are you ok?” He asks.

“Yeah,” she lies, “I'm just-“
“Ok,” Jeremy smiles to her and she takes off to walk around the library, her notebook in hand.

In the far corner, Shae’s group is now gathered together, heads close as one of them is explaining something on the screen of a laptop. Nicole decides to let Shae study and just wait for Jeremy to catch up with her so they can solve the exercises together. Strength in numbers and so on.

With her grandma on her mind, she walks around the second floor, peeking in the individual cubicles to see if she recognizes someone for class. To her surprise, Thomas Haught is in one of them, reading a book whose cover she can’t see. He’s resting his head on his fist, the desk lamp illuminating his face.

Nicole doesn't know how he does it, but as she tries to escape his sight, he sees her and calls to her. “Nicole,” he smiles.

“Oh, hey,” she puts surprise in her voice as if she wasn’t trying to escape.

“Hey,” he smiles and closes the book, leaving one finger between the pages. On the cover of the book she reads the word “structures”. “How’s studying? Finals are around the corner, right?”

“Uh, yeah.” She holds her notebook between her two hands, tapping rhythmically on the cover with her fingers, looking around. She wants to leave, given that she has never expected to find herself in this situation. Then, she remembers that she promised Greg she would tell Thomas about grandma. “Greg called,” someone nearby does a “shh” and she lowers her voice. “Greg called. He told me grandma Lucy is in the hospital,” she says.

Thomas sits straighter, taking his finger out of the pages and leaving the book on the table, and frowns. “Oh, no. Is she-”

“But he said that she’s ok now,” Nicole interrupts him and Thomas visibly relaxes. “Greg says that his mom is going there to, uh, help,” she says. Maybe, if Thomas can get in contact with her mom, he can tell her.

“That's good,” he tugs the collar of his shirt. “Greg is a good kid.”

Nicole rolls her eyes. “He’s twenty.”

“I was very glad that he could be here with you on winter break. You know, when I couldn't-”

She hums, breaking eye contact with him. Remembering how terrible winter break was isn’t much fun. But, yeah, at least Gregory came and spent some time with her.

“We can go in a few weeks when school is over. To visit your grandma, I mean. I can’t stay too long, though.”

“Oh, I'm going to spend the summer there, actually,” Nicole says like a statement. Asking for permission could set a bad precedent.

“Oh, I- I didn’t know that,” he tilts his head to one side and scratches his head. “Is Lucy ok with that?”

Nicole nods.

“Oh, then,” he says and someone in the next cubicle does a very strong shh. “We can talk about this later,” Thomas says, lowering his voice again. He looks over the separation and takes a bill out
of his pocket. “Kid, do me a favor and go buy yourself something and let me talk to my daughter, ok?”

On the other side, a guy that Nicole recognizes from high school stands up and takes the bill that Thomas is offering him. He looks at both of them suspiciously but takes his stuff and leaves.

“Here,” Thomas cedes his chair to Nicole and she hesitates a second before accepting it, thinking of excusing herself and returning to Jeremy. Thomas pulls one chair from the other side and sits next to her.

“What are you reading?” She takes the book from the table, after deciding to stay for a few minutes, and opens it to a random page. There’s a bunch of diagrams of beams and formulas she has never seen before.

“Oh, just making sure I have all the basic concepts right,” he takes the book and passes the pages, “I’m applying for a teaching position.”

This information surprises her. As far as she knows, he has always been a company man. “In what?”

“Architecture, well, introduction to architecture and basic drawing and stuff,” he shrugs but there’s a spark in his eyes she hasn’t seen before.

“Oh, ok.” Nicole contemplates the cover of the book, her mind suddenly curious about her father. “Where is this teaching position?” she asks, afraid that he’s going to tell her that they have to move again.

“Community college. Next town over. It’s a good job, it comes with benefits and everything. Michael has been hooking me on a few jobs around, but we need something more stable. My savings won’t last forever and the last thing I want is to touch your college money.”

“I have money for college?” she had never considered that.

“Of course,” he says. “It’s not like a crazy lot but is something.”

“Mom never mentioned it,” she comments.

“Because she doesn’t know about it.” He rubs the back of his neck. “Anyway, I actually always wanted to be a teacher, but well, you know.”

And she knows. Her mom would always tell her that they had just started dating when she got pregnant. As far as she knows, her dad hadn’t even finished college. She always felt like it was a roundabout way for her mom to tell her that she was, basically, an accident. Not that it bothers her. Eliza and her brothers took away the bad connotation to that word when the younger of the Shapiro family was born.

“I thought it was never the right time,” Thomas closes the book again and puts it aside.

“And now is it?”

“Hmm. It had always been the right time. I just didn't think it was. At least I got more experience in my past jobs.”

Maybe Thomas didn't even like his old jobs, she considers. It’s a bit weird to think of that. She realizes that she kinda has always seen the world through her mom, naturally, she was there when
he wasn't.

“What do you have there?” he asks.

“Homework. I’m stuck on this problem,” she tells him. No harm in letting him in a little. She opens her notebook to the last problem and gives it to him.

“Ah, yeah,” her dad studies the page for a few seconds. “I can help if you want,” he offers.


“Just give me a second,” Thomas takes a piece of paper and starts to scribble.

The light of the lamp illuminates Thomas' face and Nicole takes a moment to study his face closely. They have been living under the same roof, like really living together, for a few months now, but they hadn't been this close, at least not with Nicole paying him attention. Not much has changed since he started to look more alive. He has been keeping his hair short and face mostly shaved, although his stubble is always present. Now, in the light and closeness, she can see the wrinkles in his face and marks here and there. On his left cheek, under the shadow of his beard, she can distinguish a long scar crossing his face. She wonders.

Turns out, Thomas is a good teacher and in a few minutes, she finally manages to understand the problem and he watches her complete the rest of the problems. By the time she gets back to Jeremy, with Thomas following behind, her friend is pretty much sleeping again.

Thomas takes them to Homestead to drink some coffee and help Jeremy with the last of the exercises. It’s surprisingly not that uncomfortable once they set their minds on the homework. Then Thomas invites him over for dinner, which is slightly more awkward but a nice gesture considering all the times she has had dinner with the Chetris. Then, Thomas drives him to his house, where Mr Chetri shakes hands with her dad.

That night, Nicole lays in bed listening to the song she discovered on Shae’s laptop and wonders, for the first time, if she has been rooting for the wrong parent.

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"C’est la vie", say the old folks, it goes to show you never can tell, sounds on the radio and Waverly tries to concentrate all her being on the music.

The speedometer is static and Curtis doesn't look like he’s going to touch the gas pedal to go even just slightly faster.

“... and this is me and Margo when we were doing our practices at the company I was telling you about. The manager was such a bitch, Wynonna,” Willa’s voice manages to get to Waverly’s ears. “But Lou always knew how to convince her to let us go out early. He’s so charming, Wyn. Ah! Here’s one of Lou and me in the stadium. Oh, but Vinnie is behind, he’s such a dick. I’m glad I won't have to see him again.”

“They had a hi-fi phono, boy, did they let it blast,” the smallest Earp sings to herself, forcing her mind to tune out Willa.
“I see,” Wynonna repeats for seventy-second time, nodding, not that Waverly is counting.

“Willa, watch your language,” Gus reminds the older Earp, in a very affectionate way for scolding. The way Wynonna frowns tells her that her sister is thinking the same. She would know.

Willa keeps scrolling through her photos, explaining everything from her last semester to Wynonna, who’s in the middle seat of the back of the pickup. Waverly wants to lay her head down on Wynonna’s shoulder, but the sun burned her yesterday when they attended the long graduation ceremony. It had been a beautiful sunny day and she made the mistake of wearing black. It was a tragic day for Waverly, it deserved the appropriate attire for it.

Maybe not, she thinks as she shifts in her seat to avoid the constant friction of the seat with her back. She’s been dramatic and she knows it. But she’s fifteen and cramped with her two sisters on a long drive to get her least favorite relative home. Her aunt is still pretty passive aggressive with her and Curtis seems to be oblivious to all the silent conflict. The kind of happiness that ignorance carries with it. A blessing, really.

Willa still has to be back in a few days, to finish sorting out the last things at university. But as far as everyone is concerned, Willa is now happily graduated. Too happily for Waverly’s opinion. She hasn’t even made a mean comment to Waverly the whole weekend, which is so uncharacteristic of her. She almost misses it.

“Honey,” Gus says, referring to Willa when they’re reaching familiar roads. “What do you want to do? Should we go home or do you want your uncle to drive you to Purgatory?”

Waverly’s little antenna straightens up at the prospect of being near Purgatory and leaves her attempt to translate every word on the radio to Latin to return to the conversation inside the car.

“Purgatory, Gus,” Willa says, leaning to the front. “I would like to talk to Shorty before signing anything.”

All four of them start talking about business. Willa, after all, is the legal owner of Homestead Cafe and since the town hall brought the proposition to make the music contest a bigger thing to advertise Purgatory; Willa, Wynonna and Shorty had been talking with them to make it happen. Apparently, they agreed on a meeting this week. Not that anyone informed Waverly, of course.

She doesn’t tune out the conversation again. It would be useful to help Nicole. Although, maybe that would be a little like cheating.

“Are you staying in Purgatory all week, then?” Curtis asks, later. “I’ve been meaning to spend some time together, you know, celebrate.”

“Yeah, It would be better if I stay in town. Maybe at the end of the week, before returning to campus. Then, I’m all yours.”

“But you’ll be more comfortable in your room, home,” Curtis insists.

“Don’t worry,” Gus puts a hand on Curtis’ shoulder, as he takes the turn right, to Purgatory. “She can use the new mattress.”

The blood boils inside Waverly, as she tries not to say anything. Wynonna gives her a quick look and takes her hand.

“Actually,” the middle Earp says, “you can stay in the big bed, the new one is so small.”
“No. I don't want to kick you out—” Willa starts.

“I insist,” Wynonna says as she squeezes Waverly’s hand.

“Ok, ok,” Curtis laughs. “You can sort that later.” He sighs and smiles to the three of them through the mirror. “I’m just happy to have all my girls together.”

Waverly smiles back, because how can you not. It’s quite nice seeing Willa not being all Willa with her. She can sense a shift in her behavior. But who knows how much longer it will last. Waverly shall remain cautious.

“By the way,” Willa says to Wynonna after a while, “do you want to go back with me to campus next week? I could use some company and I would love for you and Lou to meet.”

“Ah… But,” Waverly can feel Wynonna tensing up, “someone needs to be in charge of Homestead, I can’t leave it alone.”

“C’mon,” Willa bumps shoulders with Wynonna and it reaches Waverly on the other side. “It would be fun, we can go out one night.”

“No,” Wynonna says, maybe too quickly, gaining a dirty look from Gus through the mirror. “I mean, I don't think that’s my scene, you know?”

“Don’t be dumb,” Willa rolls her eyes.

“She’s not dumb,” Waverly says, just high enough that hopefully, Wynonna would hear.

“There are all kinds of people at college. I can show you around, see if you like the campus. Maybe you can apply next year, there are all kinds of programs and if—”

“What’s Lou studying again?” Wynonna interrupts. It’s so obvious that her interest is fake that it amazes Waverly that Willa eats it up. Maybe it’s just Willa’s always present love for herself.

“Ah, psychology, actually, he’s a double major. He’s smart like that…” Willa starts dreamily.

Wynonna turns her head to see Waverly and rolls her eyes, making her little sister giggle. They hold hands until they finally reach Homestead.

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Nicole felt like her heart was going to explode or something when, finally, she got a text from Waverly confirming their Tuesday class. It was like taking a big breath after being underwater, drowning.

She has been feeling like that. Everybody has been feeling like that, she supposes, at least at Purgatory High School. It’s the last two weeks of school and they’re all slowly dying. The usual drill.

Stressful days had been filled with lots of homework and study. Projects have been made and papers written. Nicole has been spending most of her time with Jeremy, being study buddies and all. They had barely had seen Eliza or Xavier for days. Nor Andy. There are two very incomplete bikes waiting to be repaired in Andy’s garage and Nicole is craving some free time to do that too.
In better news, Gregory’s updates on her grandma’s health had been good. He even let her talk to her on the phone. But grandma Lucy doesn't hear much anymore so that call consisted of Nicole asking her grandma things and her grandma responding with totally unrelated stuff. It had been fun.

Anyway, this afternoon, everything can be damned. She has been studying enough that she can take one afternoon off, at least for a few hours.

She takes a sip of her coffee and looks at her notebook on the table. She’s not actually reading the notes, she’s just staring at them as her mind circles around Waverly. She couldn’t shake off the feeling like Waverly was avoiding her, last week. She knows that that’s most probably not true, but inside her mind, a few thoughts of insecurity started to rise like daisies.

She wonders if the other girl talked with her aunt or Chrissy, or if she suddenly changed opinion and wants to stay in Big City. Maybe Waverly found out that it wasn't worth it giving up her classes. Maybe she was busy because she met a great guy to hang around or maybe, somehow, Waverly found out that Nicole has a medium (actually massive) crush on her.

“Do you mind if I sit?” A voice asks and Nicole jumps a little.

“Go ahead,” she says after clearing her throat and looking at the person in question.

Charlie, in his firefighter black shirt, smiles. “Sorry. The place is full. I promise I won't talk,” he sits down in the chair next to her, a cup of coffee in hand, and leaves a bag of cookies in the table.

“It’s ok, I wasn't even studying,” she shrugs and moves her notes to the side to take her cup of coffee.

“You must be the only one,” he looks around at all the tables. Most of them are full of people from school. All doing homework. Books, notebooks, laptops, coffees fill the surfaces of the tables and you can smell stress and fear in the air. And coffee, of course. “Gosh,” he laughs, “they make me feel guilty like I should be studying too.”

Nicole laughs because she knows she should be studying. But honestly, this is her biggest secret when it comes to studying. The fact that she can leave everything aside and take some time to relax has proven effective as a method. Not that she's relaxing too much right now. Every minute that passes is a minute closer to seeing Waverly and maybe, just maybe, the caffeine is not helping.

“But four years are more than enough,” Charlie says as he returns his eyes to her. She can't imagine that it was too awful being Charlie at his school. He looks like he was captain of at least three athletic teams and has the charisma to be prom king. And a musician. Popular kid and all that.

He pulls open the bag of cookies, the ones that are always selling at the counter. She has never had one. Mostly because she knows that if she buys a bag, most of them would end up in Jeremy’s stomach.

“Want some?” Charlie leaves them in the middle of the table. Nicole takes one and eats it while Charlie takes a sip of his cup. He sighs, pleasantly. “I swear this coffee has something in it,” Nicole remembers that time when Waverly told her something similar. “We have a coffee machine in the station, but they always make me come all the way here for more. But maybe it’s just a way to bother me.”

“Why would they want to bother you?” Nicole asks.

“I’m the new one. So...”
Rosita walks to their table and apologizes to Charlie telling him that his order is going to take a little bit. He reassures her that is ok and Rosita leaves not before offering Nicole more coffee. She says no after she notices how her leg is bouncing.

“How much did they ask you to get?” Nicole asks.

“Um, coffee, sandwiches, nachos. I called but,” they watch Rosita go around the tables masterfully, carrying mugs and plates, “I think they forgot. It’s ok, though...”

Nicole looks at him, smiling kindly. It seems to be natural for him. It kind of reminds her of Waverly, the way his eyes crinkle a little. “It gives me a moment of tranquility. And to hang out with you, of course. So,” he leans on the table, “what are you doing if you’re not studying?”

“Waiting,” she points at her guitar leaning on the wall bending her. “I’m taking guitar lessons.”

“Ah, yeah. I’ve seen you around with the guitar,” he snaps his fingers and takes another cookie. “How long have you been playing.”

“Uh,” Nicole counts in her head. “Four months? I think.”

“It’s fun, isn’t it? You take classes here?” Charlie says while chewing. “I didn’t know that they gave classes here.”

“Yes, Waverly gives them.”

He sits straighter, his eyebrows up in surprise. “Waverly? I didn't know- Wait, she's like twelve.”

Nicole snorts because of course, people would think Waverly is that young. “Fifteen,” Nicole corrects.

“Still a kid,” Charlie laughs.

“She’s good. She takes classes in the conservatory in the city.”

“Really? Wow.” He leans on the back of the chair and looks to the roof. “Shoot, I guess we have more things in common than I thought.”

Nicole wants to ask what he means but he speaks again before she can express anything else.

“Do you think she would give me classes?” He points at himself.

“Classes?” Nicole’s brow furrows. “But you-you already know how to play. I mean,” she scratches her head, “I’ve seen you play.”

Charlie laughs and hangs his head. “I’m not that good. I know like five songs that I play very well. But apart from that, I’m terrible. But, I actually want to learn how to read. Music, I mean. I know how to read words, I swear.”

“I guess,” Nicole shrugs, unable to give another answer. “She’ll be here in a few minutes.” I hope. “You can ask her.”

“I have a few minutes,” Charlie says and takes another sip of coffee.

Charlie tells Nicole about being a firefighter and a first responder. She finds it fascinating. He even promises her a ride in the truck and Nicole feels like an eight year old by the excitement that provokes. In the middle of all, Rosita walks to them and tells Charlie that Fish is almost over with
his order. She apologizes again and refills his cup.

When Nicole looks at her phone a while later, she watches the minutes change for 3:44 to 3:45, and as if in a queue, the bell above the door rings and Waverly walks in, in all her glory. Her long hair dressed beautifully, cute outfit as always and her guitar hanging on her back. Nicole’s heart dances the cucaracha or something weird and it makes her feel like her stomach is spinning. Their eyes connect and she swears all Homestead gets brighter.

Waverly walks into Homestead and the smell of coffee hits her. It’s nice the same way it’s nice arriving home after a long long day outside. She looks around, looking for Wynonna, even if she knows that her sister is probably with Willa somewhere else, and she just finds Levi behind the counter, taking orders off the little line that has formed at the cash register, and Rosita running around with a tray in her hand.

Internally, she knew that Wynonna wouldn’t be at Homestead when she arrived, but nothing can stop her for looking anyway. Her sisters are in some kind of meeting with the people of Purgatory’s culture department (that they have come to know that only consist of two individuals who volunteer). The poster for the contest is already out and as far as Waverly knows, it’s hanging around Purgatory and a couple of other towns, hoping that it will attract people into town. Of course, Waverly doesn't know much about everything else, and to be honest, she hasn’t had a lot of time to find out.

The end of school is near, and being in two separate institutions is slowly driving Waverly crazy with work. Apart from her other student, who is starting to be a pain in the ass because he seems to touch the guitar once a week, school is mostly her source of stress. It’s one thing to study history and math and things you can comprehend in one sitting; but to be able to play or sing or read music, that takes time and a large amount of mental effort she’s sure no one but Robin and Chrissy can comprehend. But to top off the stress mountain she's currently living in, she and Robin had made the effort to communicate with Chrissy, but it led where they knew would.

Chrissy might be a beautiful bean with a kind soul, but man, if you cross her, she can be cold as that winter when Ward refused to turn on the heating system because they had a lot of good wood lying around and her fury as hot as when Wynonna decided to turn it on in the middle of summer, in the apartment building, just for the heck of it.

A lady walks to the door and Waverly steps aside to let her pass as her eyes keep looking around homestead, easily finding Nicole in a far table in the corner. The redhead looks surprised to see her for a quarter of a note in a vivace tempo, but then she smiles in that open way of hers and Waverly feels immediately so light. She floats to the table to say hello and she notices Charlie on her way there.

“Hey, Waverly,” Charlie greets first, lifting his hand.

“Hi,” she responds, smiling at Charlie. Waverly has seen him constantly when she’s in Homestead. He seems to be a usual customer.

“Hey,” Nicole stands up and Waverly goes to her and hugs her, glad to be with her friend again. “Oh, we’re huggin’!” she hears the redhead mutter and a long arm returns the hug.

“Want a cookie?” Charlie offers and Waverly steps always to accept the cookie. She knows Fish
makes them in his free time and she has always loved them.

“Thank you!” She tells him and turns to see Nicole again who looks a little redder than usual.
“Ready?” She asks her, eager to go upstairs to hang for a bit more than to give her the class.

“Yes, yeah,” Nicole nods and starts gathering her things.

“Nicole was telling me that you give her music lessons?” Charlie intercedes as she sees how
Nicole shoves her notebook into her backpack.

“She’s good,” Nicole directs her a lopsided smile, taking her pencil and putting it behind her ear.

“I do,” she tells him a little bit proud of herself.

“Do you think you can fit me in your schedule?” Charlie asks and it takes her by surprise. Usually,
people older than her don’t ask her for lessons. She has been teaching people her age and younger.
Though, Charlie doesn’t look that old.

“Sure,” she says, after a second where she fights the voices in her head telling her that she’s not
good enough to teach Charlie anything. “Just, in a few weeks if that’s ok. I’m kind of busy,”
Waverly gives him an apologetic smile while she swings on her heels.

“School?” He asks.

“Schools, actually,” she tilts her head to the right.

“Yeah, sure,” Charlie shrugs.

“Let me give you my number,” she pats her pockets, looking for a pen and paper.

“Wait,” Nicole opens her backpack again and rips one page from a notebook and takes her pencil
from behind her ear. “Here,” she hands them to Waverly and she hurries to write down her number.

“Thanks!” He says as he contemplates the piece of paper.

“What do you have in mind?” Waverly asks as she waits for Nicole to close her backpack again.

“Anything specific you want to learn?”

“I want to read music,” he states simply and then continues. “My dad, he directs a small choir in
his church, but I was always too stubborn to let him teach me,” he scratches behind his ear, making
a face.

“You want to surprise him or something?” Nicole asks and hangs her backpack on her shoulder.

“Ah, not, not really. I just think it’s time to learn,” Charlie shrugs.

“Sure, but I’m not really a singer,” Waverly explains. She knows how to read and sing but she
doesn’t actually know much about techniques or methods and somehow what Charlie is asking her
feels important. She has a few friends in the conservatory studying singing, maybe they can take
the job. “I can tell someone else from school if you like,” she offers.

“No, no,” he brushes off, shaking a hand in the air.

“You sure?” Waverly insists. “They can probably teach you more than I can-“

“Here’s your order,” Rosita arrives with a pair of bags full of containers, Levi just behind with a
bunch of coffee cups that Waverly’s not sure how Charlie’s going to carry. “Sorry for making you wait.” She gives him the bags and Charlie says thank you.

Rosita hugs Waverly quick, planting a kiss on her cheek and then leaves to wait the tables.

“I’m asking you,” Charlie says then. “I don’t need to be a professional singer or anything, I just want to read notes. And Nicole vouches for you, so,” he lifts his eyebrows, waiting for an answer.

It’s Nicole’s smile what makes her finally say yes. She always has the power to give her confidence. She needs a pocket size one to carry around.

Charlie leaves, managing to carry everything to the door, at least. Waverly tugs Nicole’s hand and they walk together to the apartment.

They sit in Waverly’s living room. She can no longer give Nicole classes in the little room since the space is mostly occupied by a brand new mattress and it’s a reminder of the impossibility of moving here, to this town. Sad, right?

She shakes the feeling off and decides to jump right into the class, so then they can have some time to talk later. Waverly wants to tell Nicole everything that has happened in the week, but that can wait. She searches for the few songs that Nicole has selected and then listens to them. She analyses them and Nicole tries to decide which one she likes the most.

It was a team effort to put together the rules for the contest. A team where Waverly wasn’t included, which was fine. Wynonna, Shorty, Doc and Willa decided on them and Levi made the final poster. Wynonna told her later that she was able to understand what they needed to do for the contest because she has seen her participate in a few of them. Of course, the contests where Waverly had participated were for classical music and they tended to be much stricter. This one is for mere fun. Or at least that’s how Waverly sees it.

The contest is now divided into three categories: Groups, solos and original songs. In the first two, you need to sign up with two songs. In the elimination round, you sing one and the other is just in case you make it to the final. They decided it like this so the last day of the contest, the big day, the concert can last a good amount of time and attract a good amount of people.

So now, Nicole needs to decide between the songs she considers, just two of them. They’re listening to the final song and Waverly is taking note of the difficulty of each one. Three of them are relatively easy but there are two fingerstyle songs that can take some time. Although, it’s really not her decision but Nicole’s.

The last song ends and Nicole looks pensive at the cellphone, curved on herself. She straightens up and looks at Waverly. “What do you think?”

“I don’t know. I think you should choose wisely.” Waverly says and looks at the list of five songs. “For example, I think you should choose something that makes the judges remember you. And, it has to be a song that fits you and that makes you shine. And, of course, one you really like.”

Nicole looks at the list again and crosses a name. “This one is kinda slow,” then she crosses another. “This one feels too short, or, I don’t know. I guess now I think it doesn’t feel right.”

“Ok,” Waverly looks at the list. Now there are three songs. Two of them are really easy and the other one is trickier. “Which one you really want to play?”
“Hmm,” Nicole tilts her head to one side, her long red hair falling on her shoulder. “I really like this one,” she points to the one that has fingerstyle, “but…”

“But?” Waverly prompts.

“I think it’s too difficult,” she looks at Nicole lift one hand and scratch her head with one finger.

“Tell you what. Let’s prepare the three of them and if that one is not ready for the contest, then you sign up with the other two,” she offers. After all, they have some time to sign up.

Nicole blows air and claps her hands together, now determined. “Let’s do this, then,” she says and takes her guitar.

“This is gonna be fun, don't worry, It’s not like you have something to lose,” Waverly says and something crosses Nicole’s eyes.

Waverly manages to find a music sheet for the hard song, as Nicole is starting to refer to it, and she tells her that this would make everything so much easier. Waverly takes a minute to compare the music sheet to the original song, just to make sure it’s correct, as she said.

The things that Nicole has been learning for the past months finally come into play and Waverly seems in her element, teaching bit by bit how to read tablatures.

“As long as you know how a song sounds, tabs are easy to read,” Waverly assures her and Nicole believes her. It’s surprisingly easy to understand them but the fact that there are music notes written above it, makes her feel intimidated by it. She’s starting to admire Charlie for wanting to learn it.

The progress Nicole has made shows now, but she still doesn't feel like it's enough. Every time she makes a mistake, she feels more pressured and nervous which leads her to make more mistakes, in a vicious cycle. At the middle of the class, Nicole is about to throw herself out of the window. But that would make her look bad in front of Waverly, which is worse than death.

Also, today is one of those classes where Waverly gets too close to correct things. She has been getting better at not get too flustered, but after two weeks of absence, she feels out of practice and Waverly looks prettier. She tries to calm herself, play the notes correctly and not be so gay.

She starts to feel calm as the first part of the song starts to sound a bit like an actual song, even if she’s playing it so, so slowly. Nicole is about to play it right for the first time in all the class when the apartment door opens loudly and a heated argument walks in the living room, making her make a mistake and stop playing.

“...I’m just saying that you can go and take a look around. It’s not like they’re going to matriculate you as soon as you put your foot on the campus,” a woman Nicole has never seen walks backward, talking to an annoyed looking Wynonna.

“And I’m telling you that I don't want to go !” Wynonna hisses stomping past the other woman.

Waverly clears her throat making the two other to stop on their tracks.

“Baby girl!” Wynonna’s demeanor changes completely as she lets her arms fall to her sides and goes directly to hug her little sister. Nicole feels so out of place as the other woman’s eyes go from
her to the two sisters hugging. “I totally forgot that you were here teaching Molly Ringwald,” Wynonna takes her sister by the shoulders and gives her a kiss on the forehead.

Nicole is not sure who this Molly is, but she stands up, holding the guitar and offers a hand to the other woman. “I’m Nicole,” she introduces herself.

“Willa.” They shake hands. The third sister is everything that Wynonna and Waverly are not, but they do look alike. She looks well put together and has a mature aura. Her expression is not what you would call friendly, but neither is it rude. “Sorry for interrupting your reunion, Waverly,” she says even if she doesn’t sound very sorry.

Wynonna separates from Waverly and nods to Nicole, saluting with two fingers before leaving the room. The other two sisters head to the kitchen and Waverly apologizes too.

“It’s ok,” Nicole tells her, sensing that there's more going on than she can understand. “I’m the one intruding.”

“No, you’re not,” Waverly says, her tone a bit hard and she wonders if there’s something bothering her. Then Waverly shakes her head and smiles that thousand watt smile of hers making Nicole feel at ease. “Let’s just keep working.”

“You done?” Willa leans out of the kitchen.

Nicole and Waverly had been talking for a few minutes after she finished with her exercises. She feels confident that Nicole is going to get the songs fine by the contest date, but for that to happen, they have to work hard. Waverly proposed to Nicole to see each other on the weekend so they can keep working after Nicole assured her that she was not going to get behind on school work.

“Most of us mortals go to just one school,” Nicole reminded her.

“Yes,” Waverly answers. Maybe Willa wants to throw them out or something. They can go to the cafe or somewhere else to talk, it’s no biggie. She waits for Willa to say something mean like she has done for years to Chrissy and Robin.

But her older sister doesn’t make any of her trademark comments. “Ask your friend if she wants some ice tea,” she says simply as she goes back to the kitchen.

“Oh, ok,” Waverly breathes out.

“Thank you,” says Nicole to Willa when her sister puts a big glass of tea in front of her. It’s nice to see her sister not treating her friend badly, but she's still wary of her. Waverly feels like Willa is going to take off her mask and reveal that she’s, in fact, Scrappy Doo or something.

On the other side of the table, Wynonna is on the laptop taking notes in a very worn out notebook and she has a very folded periodic table out. She doesn't seem to notice Willa’s new behavior towards Waverly while doing school work.

The doors of the cabinets are opened and closed by Willa as she scrambles around the kitchen. “Do we have cookies or something?” She asks, to Wynonna, mostly.

Wynonna lifts her eyes from the laptop. “Oh, yeah,” she says, searching inside her leather jacket
and pulling a bag of cookies from Homestead. “Here,” she drops them on the table, unceremoniously.

“Oh, thanks,” Waverly says, taking the bag and immediately opening it.

“Wynonna!” Willa groans, but there’s humor in her voice. “Don’t steal from our own shop,” she swats Wynonna’s shoulder, but the middle sister doesn’t seem bothered by it.

Nicole takes a cookie out of the bag, looking entertained on the events unfolding. Waverly can’t blame her.

“It’s ours,” Wynonna rolls her eyes and writes something down in her notebook. “It isn’t stealing if it’s ours.”

That’s one way to see it, Waverly thinks.

“This is bad business,” Willa says.

That’s another way to see it, Waverly suppresses a laugh and shares an amused look with Nicole while both of them chew on their cookies.

“Sorry,” Willa says to Nicole. So uncharacteristically that Waverly fears that her sister is going to explode. “You guys can take the cookies.”

“Ok,” Waverly stands up and takes the bag. Nicole looks at her, startled. “We’re just going to take this to my- ah, the room,” she tugs Nicole’s shirt and the redhead stands up too. Waverly makes her escape with Nicole following behind.

“Here’s another one,” Wynonna says as they leave the kitchen.

“How many did you take?” She hears Willa say before they enter her room.

“That was funny,” Nicole comments, looking around the room. It occurs to Waverly that Nicole is the first person she has invited to this room since she unofficially reclaimed it and decorated it a bit when she hoped that she would be moving here. It feels right, maybe because Nicole has been here so many times before. But it feels wrong that soon this won’t be her room.

“Sorry, it was weird,” Waverly leaves the bag of cookies on the bed and she sits leg crossed, careful to not spill the content of her glass. “She’s usually more mean.”

Nicole mimics her posture and sits facing her, her glass of tea in her hands. “People usually apologize when their relatives are mean, not the other way around,” Nicole hides her smile behind her glass as she drinks.

After Waverly sighs, she starts to fill Nicole in the news of her life. It’s a bit too much and too long but Nicole listens to it all as they work on the bag of cookies. The redhead comments when necessary or makes a joke to lighten Waverly up. And it works. When she’s done, she feels like her problems are behind her and she’s protected in the little bubble that is this room.

They stay in the room for a couple of hours and Nicole doesn’t offer a lot of solutions to her problems. “I don’t want to give you some half baked advice. Seems complicated, the thing with your aunt. I admit that I’ll be sad that you won’t be here next semester,” her tall friend says as she leaves her empty glass on the floor, next to Waverly’s.

“Maybe Chrissy just needs time,” Nicole says when they talk about Chrissy and Robin. It charms
Waverly that Nicole is consistent with her advice when she says that. It’s mostly what she said last
time and Waverly thinks that it’s herself that wants to have the problems solved immediately.
Maybe all Waverly needs is a bit of patience.

Instead, Nicole entertains Waverly all afternoon and it’s, honestly, just what Waverly needs. They,
slowly, slump on the bed as they talk and the sun begins to set on the horizon.

At one point, Waverly is crying with laughter when Nicole tells her about the time Eliza and Dolls
had to rescue Jeremy and Nicole from Nicole’s roof after an attempt to watch an eclipse that wasn’t
even that day. Between tears, Waverly wonders if the story is that funny or if she’s just high on
Nicole.

“Stop,” Nicole pokes her in the ribs, only making her laugh more. “We were in actual danger, it
was January!”

With one big breath, she starts to regain composure. “Sorry, that was funny,” she rolls on the bed
until she’s facing Nicole, lying on the other side of the bed. The remains of sunlight entering from
the only window in the room hits Nicole’s hair, making it look like it’s in flames. It marvels
Waverly and she keeps staring at it.

“Your hair is so pretty,” she reaches to touch it.

“I grow it myself,” Nicole says quietly, throwing her a smug smile that quickly disappears when
Waverly moves one strand of hair from Nicole’s forehead and places it behind her ear. Nicole
tenses up and Waverly looks at her to apologize, but when their eyes meet the air of the room gets
socked out and replaced with something else.

It feels different from anything Waverly has ever experienced and she doesn’t know how or where
to classify it. So she just keeps staring for what seems to be a long eternity. Nicole’s eyes locked on
hers look brighter than usual, the light of the window illuminating half of her face. There’s
something warm that is not product of her body heat or Nicole's or the bed and Waverly want to
hold it close.

Internally, she knows that the normal thing would be to break eye contact but she seems unable to
do it until she hears the door open and, somehow, she manages to jump off the bed and fall on her
ass.

“Baby girl,” Wynonna looks at her on the floor, cell phone in hand, unimpressed. “Woah, relax
dude.”

Nicole looks down at her from the top of the bed. Her face as red as she imagines hers is. “Are you
ok?” It soothes her that Nicole is not laughing at her, making fun.

“Yeah, yeah,” she sits and looks at Wynonna expectantly.

“I just wanted to tell you that you should get going, Gus called to make us promise that you’ll be
there by eight,” Wynonna drops and looks at her phone. “Doc will be here in a few to give you a
ride to the bus station.”

Her sister leaves and Waverly stands looking everywhere but at Nicole.

“I- I should get going then,” she hears Nicole shift off the bed.

“Are you ok?” She asks again and Waverly looks at her. Nicole looks worried and Waverly’s
embarrassment reduces.
“Yes,” she answers honestly. “I’ll walk you downstairs.”

Nicole leaves after they make plans for the weekend. Then she tries not to over analyze the events of the afternoon and just enjoys the feeling of easiness Nicole left her with.

“I’ll be back in a second!” Thomas tells her when she finds him leaving the house. He stops to a halt for a second when she sees her. “You look happy,” he smiles. “I left the food on a low heat, but keep an eye on it!” He gets in the car and pulls away.

Nicole waves him away and enters the house, leaving her things on the floor, and leans her back on the door, sliding down. With her head between her knees, she muffles a scream in her hands, one that she’s been dying to let out since leaving Waverly’s room. She sighs, throws her head back, making a muted thud on the door and smiles widely to the roof.

That was something. Her poor heart hasn't been able to work at a normal velocity all the way back home. Her body buzzes with electricity and her lungs seem to absorb too much air for the number of times she has sighed in the last few minutes. She could be dying, but what a beautiful way to die.

No, you idiot, she tells herself. She can’t die now. Now that Waverly has shown interest. That was interest, right? One does not just simply stare at her friend's eyes while the sun draws a beautiful aura around them and the magnetism is pulling them together.

What should she do now? Apart from dying. She should invite her out, but maybe not now in the middle of finals. Maybe later, as soon as the contest is done. Fuck consequences. This is an opportunity and she for sure is going to take it. If there’s a tiny possibility that Waverly likes her too, then…

But what if it’s not, a voice creeps from behind her head. What if Waverly is just touchy with all her friends? The consequences are actually really bad if this goes south. Waverly might not want to be friends with her. Not after she finds out Nicole sees her as something more. And she really, really enjoys Waverly’s company, even as a friend. She might be misinterpreting things here.

But, no. She’s sure. Nicole is sure. This is a question of patience. Slowly cooking like the food Thomas left on the stove.

Nicole stands up and walks to the kitchen to make sure they won’t have to eat ashes for dinner when the phone rings loudly, for who knows what time this week. She debates with herself if she should pick up since every phone call has been a prank call. But there’s always the possibility that Greg is on the other side with bad news about grandma Lucy’s health.

She drags herself to the phone and picks it up. “Hello?” She doesn't even finish the word when there's a click followed by the beep beep in her ear.

With a groan, she places it back in the receiver. But the accumulated annoyance of too many prank calls eats away at her and she presses the button on the phone to recover the number like Thomas did that time. She dials it again and after a few rings, someone picks up.

“Four Seasons hotel,” a male voice says. “It was in room 206,” the man says to someone else. “Sorry. How can I help you?”
“Uh, hi. I just got a call from this number,” she explains, not really knowing how to proceed now that someone picked up.

“Oh, yeah. Wait a second, please,” the guy says. He sounds young. “Hey! Where did that lady go?... tell her that... She's gone?” Nicole hears distantly. “Sorry, miss. The woman left. Anything else I can do for you?”

Nicole has a feeling in her guts. “Do you have her name?”

“I’m afraid I can't give you that information, miss.”

“Can you tell me how she looked like?” She asks, hesitantly.

“Oh, I guess. She was blonde and, ah- funny nose. She was wearing a green coat. Was she a criminal or something?”

“No, no. Thank you, sorry for bothering.”

“No worries. Good afternoon, miss.”

Blonde, funny nose, green coat. It could be, or not? But why would her mom call just to hang up? It makes no sense.

She shakes her head and decides to let it slip. Nicole doesn’t even have to try to get back the feeling of happiness and soon enough, Waverly’s face in backlighting and the feeling of falling are there again.

Thomas finds her swaying to no music in the kitchen as she looks over the stove.

Nicole not Hot, 10:03: [image attached] babys

As she chews on a granola bar, Waverly looks at the picture Nicole sent. There’s a pair of kittens laying in Jeremy's lap. Andy is next to him, both sitting in the grass. This is what has been keeping her afloat during finals, until the last one both in high school and at the conservatory. Little interactions with Nicole that would brighten her days. And make her cringe, too, when she inevitably remembers that little incident. Falling out of bed. But it's what happened before that makes her, not exactly cringe, but it embarrasses her.

Anyway! Waverly shakes her head and smiles at her cell phone, wishing she could be there. Mostly for the grass, of course. She’s enjoying the shadow of one of the only trees in the school with Robin and Mark, but the place could use some more green.

“Look,” she shows the picture to Robin, by her side. He lets out an aww and shows her his own phone with another picture of the same kittens.

“Who sent you that one?” She takes the device to look more attentively. This one has Nicole, with her fiery hair, and Eliza kneeling on the grass, seemingly playing with the cats. Waverly giggles a little. She can tell they’re in some part of the school, probably just killing time now that the year is over like they’re doing right now.
“Jeremy,” Robin takes her phone back and Mark moves to look at the picture too, on the other side of Robin.

This surprises Waverly. She doesn’t remember Robin saying anything about texting Jeremy.

“Well,” he laughs, taking his phone back again from Mark’s grip. “That was the plan, right? Make friends before moving?”

Mark puts on his headphones again and leans against the trunk of the tree, not interested in much today but his peanuts.

“What do you talk about?” Waverly wonders. She can’t really pinpoint much that the two boys have in common.

“Uh,” Robin clears his throat. “Nothing, really. And, everything. I don’t know, he’s just nice,” he shrugs and starts typing on his screen.

He’s certainly the least intimidating of Nicole’s friends, Waverly thinks and wonders if she includes Andy in that category too.

After texting back, in the light of the morning sun, she checks her fingernails on one hand and then the other. She decides to file them a little while her two friends sit next to her doing nothing but enjoying their free period. Not that the next periods will be full of work. They’re done with all the classes and they came just to keep their perfect attendance clean. Mark says he came just because he’s not allowed to be alone at home.

“Which is ridiculous,” he said in the morning. “Coming to school makes me more depressed that staying at home.”

Robin then proceed to smack him in the head. They’re trying to make him stop telling self-deprecating jokes. Although, Waverly doesn’t agree with violence as a way to control it.

“She’s staring again,” Mark interrupts the tranquility. The three of them turn their head to Chrissy, who quickly looks away. She’s sitting with Stephanie Jones on the other side of the patio. A blondes club meeting, Waverly supposes.

“Do you think she’s losing her touch?” Robin asks her with a straw in his mouth. She arches an eyebrow in question, while he drinks from his juice box.

“What touch?” She takes another bite of her granola bar.

“I don’t know. I feel like she’s been staring at us with less hate lately,” Robin shrugs. “Less fire in her eyes.”

Chrissy looks at them, then, and Mark waves at her energetically. Chrissy lifts a hand and then returns to Stephanie without making an expression. “That’s progress,” Mark comments and then throws a peanut to the air to catch it with his mouth.

“That’s because she’s waving at you,” Robin steals a peanut from Mark.

“No, I’m pretty sure she’s mad at me too,” Mark leans on the tree, clutching his bag of peanuts to his chest and throwing Robin a dirty look. “How long is this going to last, anyways? She doesn’t even look mad anymore.”

True, Waverly thinks. They tried again last week, to talk to Chrissy. But it was another
unsuccessful attempt. It didn’t go as terribly. Chrissy just walked away when Champ intercepted them.

“Waverly,” he called her and walked in front of them, blocking Chrissy from their sight.

“If you excuse us,” Robin tried to make him move, but Champ didn’t pay him attention, not even when Robin stumbled with him.

“Hey, you weren’t answering my texts,” he said referring to the bunch of texts she received on Friday night when he thought she was going out with her. A thing she never explicitly agreed to. It had made Waverly laugh when she first received the first text asking her to come down. Apparently, he stood outside her building for half an hour, waiting. The image was fun and she ignored the trail of messages that follow until she had to silence the conversation when he wouldn’t stop texting her during the rest of the weekend.

Waverly had a good pretext then, not that she needed one. She was away, going to Willa's graduation, she told him, but then Champ kept insisting on going out. One would think that a simple no would be enough for him to go away, but he was very… persistent?

“Stalkerish is the word,” Mark said yesterday when they spotted him outside of the classroom and managed to avoid him.

“Let's try today,” Robin proposes when their free period ends and they walk in a group to the next class.

“The janitor says that he cleaned up a, well, a cat yesterday in the parking lot,” Mattie informs everyone when she and Skip find them behind the bleachers. She sits between Andy and Quinn. Mostly everyone is free so all the student body is wandering around the school.

Nicole's group of friends react to the news, looking at the little kitties with sad faces and sad aws. Except for Quinn, who sneezes loudly, but he keeps patting one of the kitties heads even when Andy told him that he’s probably allergic. Dolls hands him a packet of Kleenex.

“Poor little kitties,” Andy coos, petting the one sitting in Jeremy’s lap. “I would take them but my mom would murder me.”

“My dog would murder them if I take them,” Skip laughs and sits behind Eliza, wrapping her in his arms. It’s still weird seeing them together, but Nicole’s fine with it since Skip is mostly inoffensive.

“You don't want to get murdered, do you?” Andy asks the kitty in a high pitched voice.

“Wouldn’t it be hilarious if he said yes?” Eliza says and everyone looks at her, frowning. “Not funny, then,” she mutters and rolls her eyes.

“I can take them,” Mattie reaches to the one in front of Quinn.

“No,” he pouts, “give him back.”

“Dude,” Dolls says and throws him a look that says you can’t even breathe.
“It’s time,” Eliza says and all the still juniors groan. Slowly and unwillingly, they start to gather their things.

“What class do you still have?” Mattie asks them as she lays her back on the grass.

“Mr Kovalenko,” Dolls says over the sound of Quinn sneezing again.

That’s a name, not a class, Nicole thinks.

“Oh yeah. Never gives a single free day,” Mattie closes her eyes, looking all too pleased to receive the sun in her face and have no more classes to attend. “Good luck.”

While everyone moves in the circle, taking their stuff and chatting, Andy kneels next to Nicole, as she hugs one of the kitties. “Do you wanna hang out later?” She asks in a low voice, clearly meant just for her.

Might be the familiarity that has grown between the two of them or maybe Andy has been becoming better at asking, but Nicole doesn’t feel forced or uncomfortable when Andy requests her company. She feels like she’s spending time with another friend. Even if she knows that Andy wants more.

“I can’t,” Nicole hugs the kitty against her chest, keeping him from escaping. “We’re going to babysit Eliza’s brothers.” She’s about to propose that Andy join Jeremy and her, but Andy makes a disgusted face, so she keeps quiet.

“Another day, then?”

“Sure.”

They watch their friends walk away, leaving Nicole and Jeremy free to hoard the kitties attention. But the kitties seem to have a different opinion and they crawl to Mattie’s side. Even the kitties know she’s the coolest of the three of them. She gives up and checks her phone again, pleased to find that Waverly texted back.

Waverly, 10:06: :( why do you guys have kitties in your school

Nicole not Hot, 10:24: we’re better :)

Nicole not Hot, 10:25: hows your day going?

Waverly, 10:28: It will go better when my complaint for more kitties reaches the pertinent authorities

Her fingers move on the screen to text her back when she hears Mattie speak.

“Hey, Haught, are you going to sign up for Homestead’s contest?”

Nicole groans, remembering her impending destiny.

Mattie props up in one elbow and laughs. “Who’s forcing you?”

“Dolls,” Jeremy responds for Nicole, trying to catch the kitties attention with the tip of his shoelace.

“Scared? It’s your first time, right?”
“Yeah, and yeah.” Nicole sighs and scratches her head. “I don’t even remember why I’m doing this.”

Except that she actually remembers. It’s all very idiotic now. The whole thing was about Shae and now that seems so irrelevant. Nicole hasn’t paid real attention to her ex in the past few months. Since Waverly, really.

Waverly, the one good thing that has come out of this experience. And, of course, that she really enjoys playing the guitar. And that she’s not being all sad and dramatic all the time. Oh, she stops to think for a second. Actually, this whole experience has been really good. It’s just this stupid bet that she wants to win out of pride. She just needs to get past it and that’s it.

“Any advice?” She asks Mattie, watching the kitty ignore Jeremy and return to Mattie’s side.

“Hmm, just push through it,” Mattie pets the kitty with one finger. “The first time I was on a stage, it was with Greta and we were performing in front of just a few people. But you’re going to just do it. Respect.” She grins but then her face becomes more serious and she sighs like she’s remembering something good as she looks at the kitties. “Just breathe and concentrate on the important thing, the music. Have in your head that you’re going to commit mistakes, but as long as you keep your head up, no one’s going to pay attention to that. Believe me.”

“Should you be giving her advice? She’s technically your competition,” Jeremy states and Nicole glares at him, prompting him to shut up. He puts his hands up in surrender.

Mattie studies her, arching one eyebrow, “Please,” a scoff leaves her mouth. “There’s no competition.” She lays down again, letting the kitties start climbing her.

Nicole wishes she had that confidence. And that magnet for kitties. She observes the girl. Always looking like she’s above all things. A certain cunning that she carries around. She’s going to miss seeing her in the halls next year.

Certainly, it’s going to be sad to not see the familiar faces she is accustomed to seeing around the school. Jeremy definitely will be sad not to see Daniel Vernon intimidate Pete York anymore. Not that he needs so much protection now that he somehow has befriended half of the hockey and basketball teams.

And then, it will be Dolls and Eliza’s turn to leave, then it will be theirs. Nicole shakes her head from that train of thought and she promises herself to make the most of the experiences they still have. She snaps a few pictures of the kitties, but mostly of her friends the rest of the morning.

Robin and Waverly run toward the gate of the school as soon as the bell rings. They have been pumping themselves up to talk to Chrissy and they don’t want to waste all the mental effort put into it. It had been a few tough weeks without the third of their party. Chrissy is usually very good at lowering Waverly’s nerves and at forcing Robin to keep up with his schedule. It’s a nice balance they had managed with the years and Waverly’s sure that if they are suffering now, next year they’ll have to adapt to whatever comes.

She was ready to adapt herself to living in Purgatory, but now she realizes that she hasn’t been taking into account what it is going to be like if she stays in the city. She can leave the conservatory, but it doesn’t seem worth it now that she’s staying in the city. Right now everything
feels like a compromise. A need-to and not want-to.

They lean on the railing of the stairs, after leaving Mark in the usual far corner where his mom waits for him, and watch the sea of students pass by.

“I think I see her,” Robin gives her a slap on her arm to catch her attention and she looks in the direction he’s indicating. “Wait, no.” He leans in the railing again. “It’s that girl Porter from P.E.”

“You didn’t have to hit me.”

Robin only shrugs as he keeps scanning everywhere. “I’ve never noticed how many blondes come to school.”

Then, after a few minutes, when the entrance isn’t that full, Waverly sees her. Walking alone to the gate, Chrissy catches her eyes and immediately turns back, as to avoid them.

Waverly returns the slap, with a bit more force so Robin can see Chrissy escaping. “There.”

They are so concentrated on the task at hand that they totally miss Champ walking towards them. He reaches them as the two friends make the move to chase Chrissy and takes Waverly’s wrist, making her stop. Robin stops too, surprised by the intervention and looks between the blond walking away and her friend who has been intercepted.

Waverly knows he’s debating, so she decides and mouths to him “go” and the boy runs to Chrissy leaving her to deal with whatever Champ wants.

Turning to Champ, Waverly tries to take her wrist back, but his grip is solid. “Champ,” she says, hoping he would let go.

“Hey,” he smiles crookedly. “So, I have the afternoon free,” he says as if this means something to Waverly.

“Ok?” She tugs her arm again, but he still holds her.

“And I was thinking that we can watch a movie. My place,” Champ steps closer and Waverly retreats a little. Behind her, she hears laughs and mumbling and when she looks, sure enough, Champ friends are watching them, amused.

“I have plans,” she says. Her plans consist of not being near Champ.

He rolls his eyes. “That can be arranged,” he says in a quiet voice and Waverly’s discomfort grows. The school gate is not as full anymore, but she knows that they’re catching the attention of the remaining people. “C’mon, my parents won’t be home.”

Waverly looks around, avoiding people’s stares, looking for a way out. “Look, I have to go,” she takes a step back.

“Hey, I’m serious,” he pulls her back with force making her stumble into him.

“And I’m serious when I say no,” she tugs her arm back, finally free from his grip, but he moves fast and takes her by the elbow.

“Don’t make a scene,” he says in her face, smile gone. The laughs around them have stopped and she hopes that someone intervenes soon. “I’m just trying to be nice. You should be grateful that I’m giving you a second chance.”
That makes Waverly scoff. “You are giving me a second chance,” she repeats humorously. “Do I have to kick your balls again?” Waverly reminds him of that time when they were kids and Waverly was less afraid to punch him.

It seems to work for a second when Champ face gets red and she hears the people around laugh. But then he grins and moves to take her hand. “What? You want some of this?”

Waverly can feel him moving her hand lower and she starts to feel nausea. Everything goes slow, so slow. It’s almost an unmoving picture, the only motion is his hand grabbing her.

That’s why it’s so impressive when Robin manages to get between them and shove him away.

“Hey, asshole!” It’s all Robin says before throwing his fist at Champ’s jaw.

The sound of all of it is amazing. First, the smack of Robin’s fist when it meets Champs face. Immediately after, a collective gasp and oohs just before Champ’s body flies down the three steps of the entrance, crashing into a garbage can. All that draws attention from Robin who muffles a pained scream with his very worthy fist against his mouth.

“Holy shit,” someone exclaims. “Robin Jett just punch the hell out of Hardy!”

Behind Robin, Chrissy laughs loudly and grabs Robin by his good hand, a grin on her face. She tugs him and leaps to Waverly, taking her hand, too. She pulls both of them and starts running away from the school just in time to hear the stern voice of a teacher asking what is going on.

Six blocks later, they stop in an alley to catch their breaths. Robin has tears on his eyes and he’s holding his right hand in front of his chest, evidently in pain. But instead of complaining, he laughs, prompting the two other girls to laugh too. It gets even more difficult to breathe.

“I can’t believe I did that!” He smiles widely to Chrissy and Waverly.

“Robin,” Waverley stops laughing as soon as it hits her. “Your hand,” she steps closer and holds his hand carefully in her own. A simple injury can be the end of a musician.

“Shit,” Chrissy smiles gets whipped away and she gets closer to examine his hand too. His two middle knuckles look reddish, it’s definitely swelling and it’s shaking.

“Don’t worry,” he smiles kindly. “It’s ok, just needs some ice.”

Waverly’s heart fills with love for her friend. She’s so damn grateful and all she can do is throw her arms around him and hold him as the shock from earlier hits her again. And even though she so badly doesn't want to cry, Waverly hides her face in his chest and lets herself go. Robin hugs her with his good hand and soon Chrissy joins them.

“Here,” Curtis hands Robin a bag of frozen vegetables, smiling to the boy. “Just hold it there and wait here. I’m gonna call your uncle.”

Curtis leaves the room, leaving the three of them in the kitchen. Robin puts his hand against the cold and hisses at the contact.

“It’s ok,” he breathes deeply and closes his eyes. “If Louis Armstrong could do it so can I,” he
mumbles to himself and bends into himself.

“Cry baby,” Chrissy rubs his back, a proud smile on her face. “I’m sure it’s not broken,” she assures her.

“Well,” Waverly feels the guilt accumulating inside. “We won't know until you get to the doctor.”

“I bet Mark is so mad right now,” Chrissy keeps rubbing Robin’s back as he shakes with laughter.

“Please,” he sits up. “Surely, someone recorded it.”

Chrissy and Robin laugh but they stop at the look of Waverly’s face. She knows it’s all wrong for this happy moment, but she can’t laugh knowing that a video of Champ harassing her is out there for everyone to see. She feels ashamed and all wrong. So exposed and confused. Her vision gets blurry when the tears return to her eyes and she wipes them quickly with the sleeve of her shirt.

“Hey,” Robin throws her a smile. “I’m glad I hit him. No regrets.”

“But what if you can't play again? What if this ruined your career!”

He laughs and walks to sit next to Waverly. “Dummy Wavy,” Robin embraces her with his left arm, still holding the frozen vegetables. “I have time to heal. It’s going to be fine.”

With a sigh, Waverly lets her head fall to his shoulder and takes the bag from his hand. She helps him to hold it and he puts his swelling hand in the cold bag.

They sit in silence and hear Curtis exchange words with Robin’s uncle. Curtis informs them that he will pick Robin up in a few minutes and Robin thanks him. Then Chrissy lets out a big sigh that Waverly is sure it’s going to start a hurricane in Japan.

The blonde crosses her arms and the two friends look at her expectantly, knowing her well enough to notice that she has something to say.

“I’m sorry,” Chrissy mumbles.

“Ah?”

“I was so mad that you broke up with me,” she looks at Robin, who stiffens, “without an explanation that I let out all my fury at you, Waves. And then days went by and I felt guilty but I was also ashamed and now school is over and I wasted all our remaining days being an idiot and hanging around Stephanie and those girls.”

“Yeah, I’ll resent you for that for eternity,” Waverly says to her, jokingly. Chrissy’s face tells her that she took it for real, so she adds: “Fine, just a few minutes.”

“For real,” Chrissy sits in a chair, slumping. “I was even a dick to Mark.”

“If it helps, I won't be going far.”

“What do you mean?” Chrissy asks her and she looks at Robin, who just waits for Waverly to respond.

“I’m not moving. Gus won't let me, so,” Waverly shrugs, defeated.

“Oh. Well, now I feel dumb,” Chrissy laughs and rubs the back of her neck. “But, just so you know. I would be ok if you ended up going. I’m sure you have your reasons.”
The two girls smile at each other, knowing their friendship is going to be there even if life puts it into question.

“About that explanation…” Robin interrupts their moment, but then he stops when Gus walks into the kitchen.

“Robin,” her aunt says, leaving a grocery bag on the table. “Your uncle is waiting downstairs,” Gus walks to him and puts a reassuring hand on his shoulder, probably avoiding thanking him out loud for protecting Waverly. It doesn’t set a good precedent to thank a kid for punching another, Waverly supposes, but it wouldn’t be that bad to do it. Besides, it’s not like Robin will suddenly gain the need to start a fight. Anyway, she’s glad that he’s receiving the silent support he deserves for helping her.

“Thank you, Gus.” Robin stands and Waverly gives him the bag of vegetables. “See you tomorrow?” He asks before leaving the two girls in the apartment to talk like they have been doing for years.

Both of them sigh in relief when they find that the video starting to circulate just shows Robin hitting Champ. No single second of Champ harassing Waverly. Just glory for Robin, as it should be.

“My god,” Jeremy whispers as they watch the video of Waverly’s ex-boyfriend being punched by Robin on repeat at Eliza’s home. “He’s so hot,” Jeremy breaths out and Nicole thinks he might have a thing for bad boys.

In the joy of watching justice being done, she can’t do anything else but laugh. She makes a mental promise to be in Robin’s corner for eternity.

Chapter End Notes

I was overhearing a conversation about a girl who had a friend who is a pianist and punched a wall and I was like "please, tell me more, I need it for my fic."

Anyway.
Very few songs:

If I Ever Feel Better - Phoenix
A Certain Romance - Arctic Monkeys
You Never Can Tell - Chuck Berry

Spotify playlist:

Chap. 7 and 8
Absolutely Positive

Chapter Summary

Finally, the contest is here and Nicole has far too much in her mind.

Chapter Notes

I never thought we will get here. The contest was one of the principal ideas of this fic. Believe me when I say that when I first thought of this story, it was sooo different from what it is now.

Anyway.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Thomas invites Michael to come over for dinner on Saturday and this time Nicole promises to be there. She has been collecting information about this Michael who apparently is her dad’s best friend and fairy godmother.

Here’s a list of what she has managed to gather:

One. Michael is younger than her dad and they met in Thomas’ past-past job. But, no, he’s not an architect.

Two. From the cars that pick him up and the nice suits he wears, he has money. And somehow, he managed to get her dad a bunch of informal jobs over the past months.

Three. He’s not in the mafia. “Are you sure?” She asked Thomas and he laughed at the idea.

Four. Thomas is not that open to talking about him. He just shrugs it off and always changes the subject.

Five. “No, he’s just a friend.” Thomas rolled his eyes when she suggested that they were secret lovers. But, yes, Michael is gay. This piece of information is good taking into account that she has to come out to Thomas at some point in time. Hopefully, never.

Ok. Maybe one day.

So, in an effort to make a relationship with her father, Nicole takes this dinner as a sort of reconnaissance mission. Maybe Nicole has been asking the wrong questions and the way to know more about her mom’s whereabouts is to get to know Thomas better. Or maybe she’s just wasting her time and the man would leave again.

Honestly, she’s almost sad at the thought. She’s been growing fond of her father. Life with Thomas Haught is so different from life with her mom. She’s a weird woman, Nicole has to admit. And she wonders if living with her mom was more like living with a parent and living with Thomas is more like having a roommate. There’s not a constant eye on her, and what she does or who she hangs
with. Was her mom too controlling or is her dad too lax in discipline?

“Can you get the dough out of the fridge, please?” Thomas asks as he checks on the tomato sauce he insisted on preparing even if Nicole told him that she just liked the store bought one. What’s the point of going from so much trouble if you can just open a bottle?

Nicole takes the two balls of dough and set them on the counter. Thomas gets close to examine them and then he checks the time on his wristwatch. “He must be close,” he leans on the counter with his arms. “Let’s wait for him,” he tells her and she nods, fighting a groan.

If only Thomas hadn’t decided to have this dinner this weekend she could have taken a few extra hours with Waverly today to practice. Although, if things go right in the playoffs, Nicole might not be available next weekend either. She doesn’t even know if she wants to get to the finals.

The stakes are now higher. Homestead informed everyone that the finals are not going to be hosted in the cafe but in an impromptu little fair that the people of the Culture Department decided to throw. It’s a nightmare. Any other time, she would be bursting with excitement about a fair in town, but if there’s a bigger stage with more expectations she doesn’t even know about fairies anymore.

Even Dolls now seems more compassionate towards her. When she found out yesterday, as they were walking into Homestead to wait for Waverly to arrive, he even asked if she was sure about going ahead with the bet. Of course, Nicole said yes. She’s not a coward.

Except that she is and now she is silently freaking out and proceeds to spin on the stool, replaying the lyrics of the songs in her head until the doorbell rings and she remembers the other task at hand.

Thomas stops cutting the ingredients for the pizzas and wipes his hands on his apron and walks out of the kitchen. She hears them talking a little in the doorway and then Michael appears in the kitchen with a grocery bag and a Colgate smile.

“Hi again, Nicole!” He greets her and leaves the bag on the counter. “I didn't know what to bring, so I bought mozzarella sticks and ice cream,” Michael takes out the things in the bag and Thomas informs them they can start to prepare the pizzas now. He looks far more casual in jeans and a short sleeve shirt than when she has seen him in suits.

“I would usually bring a bottle of wine but…” Michael trails off his sentence and Thomas puts a hand on his shoulder.

“Ice cream is ok. Right, Nicole?”

She smiles and nods, feeling awkward. Michael seems to notice and proceeds to carry the conversation. The three of them work side by side preparing the pizzas and munching on the ingredients while Michael talks about his latest trip to London and then diverges to all kinds of stuff.

Here’s a list of the things Nicole learns:

One. Michael is funny, easygoing and far too interesting and Nicole doesn’t understand how he became friends with her dad.

Two. Thomas and Michael seem to sometimes carry on a silent conversation that reminds her of Dolls’ meaningful stares and makes her wonder how they got to that stage of friendship.

Three. “Possums actually pass out when they’re scared,” Michael throws a piece of cheese into the
air and catches it with his mouth. “They don’t play dead.”

Four. It was at Michael’s apartment in the city that Thomas spent the nights when he didn’t come home and Michael insisted he tell her that Thomas did it for his sake even if he always told him to go home to her.

Five. “I’m telling you,” he stands with the tray of pizzas and waits for Thomas to open the oven. “If it wasn’t for him, I’d be dead by now.”

Nicole sees her dad turn and roll his eyes at this and her curiosity gets the best of her. “How come?”

“Well,” Michael stands up after closing the oven door. “Let’s just say that I’m very bad at holding my alcohol. Don’t start drinking, I’m telling you.”

She gets a pointed stare from Thomas.

When the pizzas are finally ready and the mozzarella sticks cooked, they move to the dining room. They can see the T.V. from here, playing a family movie but Michael’s eyes and hers are on Thomas, standing in front of the pizzas with a pizza cutter in hand.

“So,” Thomas clears his throat and smiles happily at the both of them. “I want to say something first.” He makes a victory pose and shouts, “I got the job!”

While Nicole tries to work on a reaction, Michael sets the example clapping and cheering. She imitates him and Thomas cuts the pizza as if he was cutting the ribbon of a new monument and takes the first slice as if he was receiving the key of the city. The energy is contagious and Nicole feels great.

Or maybe it’s the pizza.

“I offered him a job in the new office we’re opening, but he declined it,” Michael tells her after a few slices. “I guess this suits you better.”

“New office?” Nicole asks.

“Yeah. But he said he didn't want to move to Vancouver.”

Nicole’s heart stops at the idea of moving away. Her whole life is here and the last thing she wants is to leave.

“Nicole has school here,” Thomas just shrugs.

Michael rolls his eyes and laughs with the slice of pizza still between his teeth. “There’s school all over the country, Tom,” he manages to say before swallowing. “I could have put a good word in for her at a good school.”

”Stop,” Thomas huffs. “My daughter already thinks you're in the mafia. You’re just confirming her theories.”

“Maybe I am. What do you know?” He takes a mozzarella stick and puts it between his fingers and on his lips like he’s smoking a cigar with a serious face that doesn’t last and gets replaced with a grin. “I’m kidding. My family owns a small construction company. He was working for us until-“

“It’s not a small construction company,” Thomas interrupts.
“I’m trying to be humble here,” Michael shoves her dad slightly in the shoulder.

“You? Humble?” Thomas just keeps diving into the pizza while Michael interrogates Nicole about school.

“I would like to make a toast,” Michael stands from the couch, catching Nicole’s attention that has been fully invested in the movie since Thomas and Michael turned the conversation into stuff that was less informative, for her purposes, and more boring. Adult boring. Her spoon with ice cream stops mid-air, and she puts it back in the bowl Thomas just handed her.

“With ice cream?” Thomas asks as he passes another bowl to Michael, who nods.

“I’m original like that,” he shrugs.

Pulling on the collar of his shirt and clearing his voice, Michael stands straight in front of the couch. Nicole feels like she needs to stand up to so she hurries off the couch and tears her attention away from the T.V.

“Ok, for Thomas and his new job as a professor,” Michael raises his bowl of ice cream to Thomas scratching his head. “Make them suffer, Tom.”

As their cups clink against each other, the phone rings.

“I’ll get it,” Thomas moves immediately in long steps.

“Don’t worry, dad-“ Nicole starts saying that it’s probably another prank call, but he’s already picking up.

They sit on the couch, watching the movie and waiting for Thomas to come back. Nicole feels at ease in her home right now. she’s not even mad about the hours she could have spent with Waverly. She likes this Michael guy. He’s better than the people her mom used to bring to the house sometimes and he reminds her of her own friends, but a hundred years older. To be honest, he does look young and even makes Thomas look as young when they're together. She’s relieved, Nicole realizes, that Thomas is not as terrible as she painted him in her head, but that does speak volumes about her mom.

In the movie, there's a moment of silence in a tense scene and that makes the house almost silent except Thomas, hushing on the phone, and soon his voice grows louder than the volume on the T.V. She directs a look to Michael on the other side of the couch, and he looks both worried and uncomfortable. Or maybe that's how she feels.

“-don’t get to call out of nowhere and ask me for stuff like that! I’ve been worried sick!” Thomas' voice grows until he’s screaming at the phone. Nicole feels a chill run down her spine. The only time she has heard him use that tone of anger is when she heard him arguing with her mom.

“Tom?” Michael stands from the couch, leaving his bowl on the coffee table.

“You can't keep doing this. I’m- I’m done letting you treat us like this!” Thomas' voice breaks in
the middle, making them both walk to where he’s shaking on the stairs. He looks on the verge of tears and he is taking deep breaths.

Michael walks to him, but he keeps his distance. “Give me the phone, Tom.”

Her dad shakes his head and turns away, as if to avoid them. In the closeness, she manages to catch the voice on the other side of the line. Her body freezes but her mind runs.

Why is she calling? Is she ok? Where is she? How is she? Is she with someone? Why did she leave? Why hasn't she called her? Has she been calling? Is she avoiding her? Why is he so mad? Is she mad too? Is she angry? Disappointed at her? Does she miss her? Or she doesn't care? Does she want to talk with her now?

Then Nicole takes steps to Thomas. “Let me talk to her,” she demands.

Micheal stops her, holding her arm. “Nicole, wait-”

“And what do you want me to do?” Thomas keeps his voice low, but she can't hear the tension in his voice as well as the tension in her own body. “Where am I supposed to get that from?”

“Tom, the phone,” Michael extend his hand, his body shielding Nicole. “We talked about this.”

“Just let me talk to her!” Nicole tries to pass Michael but she stops when Thomas screams again.

“How about you come back, huh?! Or go to Lucy’s, she’s been sick and they can’t even reach you,” there’s a heavy moment of silence and before Michael or Nicole can say anything else, Thomas speaks low, his voice trembling. “It’s your mom, for god's sake.”

Nicole watches him, astonished, walk to the phone receiver and smash the phone down to then rip the cable from the wall. Michael just lets out an oh, and even Thomas looks shocked by his actions.

“Why would you do that?!” She screams after recovering, now angry. “I wanted to talk to her!”

Thomas turns to face her and passes a hand through his hair. “Nicole, you don't understand,” he speaks slow and calm, contrasting the intensity of his voice from seconds ago.

“Tom, just tell her,” Michael says, frustration on his voice.

“Don't,” Thomas glares at him.

“I just wanted to talk to her,” Nicole clenches her fists and looks at the floor, fighting the burning in her eyes

“I'm just saying-” Michael starts but Nicole passes him and runs up the stairs.

When she reaches her room, she slams the door shut and takes her headphones from the desk and puts them on right away, pressing play. For a second, she considers running away, but she’s not sure where can she go, or if she can go without being stopped, and not be interrogated because, honestly, she doesn't feel like talking. She feels like screaming and that's not good.

And now spikes will keep on falling from the heavens to the floor. The future was our skin and now we don't dream anymore. No, we don't dream anymore.

She feels like it’s finally hitting her hard and to the bone, like she's finally accepting the facts. Her mom left and probably doesn't want anything to do with her. Her mom left when she knew that her dad wasn't here for her. Her mom left to leave her alone and she didn’t care. Her mom left after
feeding her lies. Her mom left and Nicole decided to overlook all the bad things.

Because the truth is hard and cold and cruel as winter.

Oh, I said I could rise from the harness of our goals. Here come the tears, but like always, I let them go. Just let them go.

Nicole turns up the volume and drowns herself in the music, hoping that the mattress swallows her into another dimension.

Her headphones run out of battery eventually, but she’s asleep when they do, so in the morning, when the Tallest Man on Earth is no longer singing in her ears, she hears the creak of the door being opened after the knocking. The sun is shining already, probably has been for some time, and it hits her in the eyes until she buries herself in the blankets, listening to steps approach her bed.

“Nicole,” Thomas' voice is muted by the headphones and the blankets and her brain going back to sleep. Her consciousness slips away but then she feels the bed dip and groans, knowing that there’s no escape. She pulls the blankets just low enough to look at Thomas sitting by her hip. “How are you doing?”

Honestly, she feels drained, even if she slept for more hours that she physically needed. But at least she got some time to think while she blasted her ears with sad ballads. As the night went on and she cooled down, the picture became clearer and her anger turned into uncertainty. Not all anger, though, some of it prevails in the fact that she’s been kept in the dark, if not by her mom, then by Thomas. And by Greg, she’s sure. She wants to ask right away, demand information or call her cousin and scream at him for not telling her. There’s supposed to be some kind of loyalty between them.

Instead, Nicole settles for an “ok” that she mumbles out.

Thomas examines, with a frown, her eyes and forehead and hair, mainly because that's all he can see of her. She examines him, too. His red eyes and the bags underneath them, his dishevelled hair and his old Bruce Springsteen t-shirt he uses to sleep. She wonders so much about him, and her.

“Are we going to have a talk?” she asks, her voice raw from just waking up. He just nods and moves to take the headphones from her. The sound of the birds and the old music from Mrs Buckingham’s old stereo she likes to listen in the mornings reaches her ears. “But not the talk, right?”

A smile manages to break over her father’s face as he shakes his head. “Breakfast first?” he stands up and leaves her in her room. She falls asleep for a few minutes but then the smell of bacon and eggs enters her open door and she stands up to face whatever has to come. But after breakfast.

In Homestead, the team moves around, getting all the things set for the night. They’re preparing
everything like they have been doing when they have had these type of events. Just that this time they’re sure more people will show up. But Willa doesn’t have the same idea of how things must be done.

The older Earp moves the last chair of the line that they put together earlier. This is the second time she has moved it. Then she leaves to prepare other stuff. Waverly watches Wynonna appear, a little later, and look at the same chair and move it back to the last place.

Rosita laughs in amusement, watching with her while they keep organizing chairs. She joins her, silently.

Later, as they take a break with Levi and Fish, eating Oreos, it happens again. Willa appears, moves the chair, leaves. Wynonna appears, moves the chair, leaves. Willa appears, groans, moves the chairs with force, stomps away. They laugh.

Wynonna appears, moves the chair, leaves.

“Wynonna!” Willa walks out of the kitchen, catching Wynonna red-handed. “I just moved that chair.”

Wynonna seems to not get the problem. “I’m just returning it to its place,” she shrugs.

“That’s its place,” Willa points to the last stop of the chair.

The middle Earp rolls her eyes and crosses her arms. “You don't have to change every little detail. We’ve done this a few times, it will go smoothly.”

“Just because things go smoothly, doesn't mean they can’t improve.”

At this point, Fish and Levi start walking out of the cafe, silently. Rosita, on the other hand, seems to be entertained.

“Maybe things don't want to improve.”

“Maybe they should try.”

Ah, this again, Waverly thinks.

She has been spending the week at Homestead, under the pretext that she wants to spend time with her sisters and help Robin move since his hand is in a splint for fissuring his knuckle. And it has been like this all week.

Willa went back to college alone to collect the last of her stuff and do some paperwork. This was after fighting with Wynonna about going with her. It wasn't a secret that Willa wanted Wynonna to be more interested in colleges and it wasn't a secret that Wynonna was avoiding the subject.

“People can survive perfectly well without a college degree,” Wynonna said in frustration to Waverly, when Willa was out. “Not you,” she added, “you won't survive, so do college.”

Waverly laughed. But then it wasn't funny when Willa came back and the subject did not die. The argument is becoming more aggressive than passive at this point.

The bell above the entrance sounds and Doc walks into Homestead holding a box.

“Where would you like me to leave this?” he throws out the question, to no one in particular.
“Here is fine,” Wynonna says.

“In the kitchen,” Willa says at the same time.

Doc stays in place, alternating his eyes between the sisters.

“The kitchen,” Wynonna cedes.

“Here then,” Willa says at the same time.

“I’m going to leave this here,” Doc leaves the box in the counter.

The two sisters walk in different directions. Willa back to the kitchen and Wynonna pulls Doc behind the counter and starts taking with him, whispering and gesturing in clear frustration. Good old Doc, letting Wynonna vent to him.

“If it’s going to be like this, I’m quitting,” Rosita takes another oreo.

“They’re adapting,” Waverly bites on a cookie, not giving weight to Rosita’s threats. She enjoys working here too much.

“Can they, like, adapt faster? I don’t want to be in the middle of Earp drama.”

Me neither, Waverly thinks. She signed herself up for this. Waverly knew that this was going to be the picture for the week, and she could just go back to the city, but apart from all the drama between her sisters, she’s having a great time. Since Friday.

On the last day of school, they went back without knowing what was going to happen. Robin was a bit scared, but he was carrying his splint proudly and his chin up. Turns out Champ’s ego was more hurt than his face and he didn't show up for the last day, causing all the gossip in school to lose control. It was like wildfire, everyone was staring at them, mostly at Robin who had just ascended to hero level.

“I think that girl is about to throw you her underwear, dude,” Mark said as they walked in a group around the school. He was disappointed, as they expected, that he didn't get to watch Robin punch Champ.

“Can we go to his house so you can punch him again and I can see?”

“No. Just watch the video.”

Fortunately, all the talking was about Robin and Champ. Waverly’s part on the event was mostly forgotten. People even thought that the punch was about Chrissy. You can trust the whole student body to draw the wrong conclusions. It didn't really matter. Robin left school like a legend and that set the mood for the rest of the days. They promised Mark that they would get together during the break and assured him that they're not going to punch anyone else in his absence. He's even going to come to Purgatory for the big final, only after Chrissy assured his parents that her dad is really the sheriff and Mark assured them that he was capable of being away from home.

Chrissy and Robin talked in the weekend and now they seem to be friends again. Chrissy didn't tell her much about what they talked about, but as long as everyone is on good terms, Waverly doesn't mind. It’s between them, she supposes. They have been hanging together in Purgatory and sometimes they join Nicole’s friend group. It’s a new dynamic. They’re accustomed to being just the three of them. Mark is a nice addition, but to add a whole new group of people is strange.
But it feels ok. Waverly knew that Nicole’s friends were welcoming, but they seemed to accept anyone. Or maybe people are less elitist in Purgatory.

“As long as they’re nice,” Nicole told her when she commented on this to her.

“Good to know we’re nice.”

“You won points helping Eliza. And we trust your judgment in friends, they’re cool,” Nicole pops out her dimples and Waverly feels a weird pull in her stomach. Her sugar must have been low or something.

She had got over the embarrassment of that time in her bed. God, that sounds- Anyway, Nicole didn't mention anything about it, so Waverly put it in the past. Or she wants to, the memory keeps flashing in her mind from time to time. Nicole would smile or say something or move a certain way and the memory was there all the sudden. Very weird, for Waverly, of course.

Nicole was being a little odd, too. In the week, as they worked on the songs for the contest, she could notice how Nicole would space out. Waverly didn't want to press her about it. She figured that if Nicole wanted her to know, she would just say it. But it worried her, a little. They just kept working on the songs, trying to avoid her sister's fights and hanging in Homestead with their friends.

Once again, Nicole impressed her with how fast she got the songs out, taking into account the short time she has been playing. It took longer for Waverly to get that far. And it’s impressive that she decided to go for it and sign up for the contest. She’s excited to see Nicole perform tonight.

When she noticed that Nicole had all the technical aspects of the song figured out, she started to give her advice about musicality.

“It’s the next step to elevate your performance,” she said Tuesday morning when she invited Nicole over because she knew that her sisters were going to be out. “Well, there are people that say that you should take it into account from the beginning, but I'm more up for this method. Sometimes, when you're playing, you have so many things in your head that you forget to make music and lose yourself in the technical aspects, but no one should play like that. Music is something that demands to be felt, not just listened to. That’s what elevates art, you know? Or, well, that’s my opinion. I know it might sound snobby but-”

“No, no. I get it,” Waverly looked at Nicole, still thinking, after all this time, that she would find annoyance in her face. But Nicole looked attentive and interested as always. And there it was, the pull in her stomach, the heat in her cheeks. If she didn't know better...

All things in time will fade away, but I by design will never stray from knowing this life is not the one for me, sound the speakers of Nicole’s laptop, making Eliza dance, swinging from side to side as she moves through the room.

“What up or down?” Eliza stands behind the chair she sat Nicole at and shows her the hairbrush in the reflection. She has taken the task of getting Nicole camera ready, as she said, and to have some time together. “Should I cut it?” Eliza moves Nicole’s hair to see how her hair will look shorter.
“Don't even think about it,” Nicole moves her head again to get away from her.

“I don't know, think it'll suit you,” Eliza starts to brush her hair when Nicole sits properly again. “Down, then?”

“Sure,” Nicole shugs in indifference. She would honestly prefer to get up on the stage with a paper bag on her head.

Eliza puts her hands on Nicole’s shoulders and lowers her head to speak into her ear. “Bangs?”

“Stop,” Nicole rolls her eyes.

Tilting her head, Eliza resumes her work. “What? You don't trust me?”

“I know you can cut my hair,” Eliza’s mom has been cutting her hair for years and Eliza has been learning a few things and putting them into practice with a few girls from the basketball team. “But not now, I don't want to worry about a new haircut today,” Nicole sighs, her leg bouncing rapidly.

“Fine,” Eliza crosses her arms in her chest. “Can I at least curl it a little? It’s just so straight,” she puts a pained face and lets her arms fall to her sides.

A few gay jokes come to Nicole’s mind, but she just laughs and keeps them. “Ok, but just a little.”

Oh, I'm ready to be somebody else. I'll forget how to feel the things I've felt. The song ends and Foster The People starts playing an upbeat song as Eliza works on her hair.

Any other time, this would relax her. But her head is so full with worries making her feel like throwing up any minute. She hasn't even eaten today out of fear. It’s just a general feeling of discomfort that she’s been carrying since the Sunday when she talked with Thomas.

“I didn't want to tell you,” he said later when the heaviest stuff had been said. “I wanted you to form your own opinions about her. I know she was always better with you, but maybe she wasn't.” He shifted in his chair, looking at his hands, “and I was so caught up thinking that I would just be in your way and that you didn't need me. I still don't think you do,” Thomas lifted up his face to look at her, eyes red and a sad smile on his face. “You’re so grown up now, so intelligent and independent. But she convinced me that you were better off.”

She sure did, her mom. She used to talk bad about her dad, but it was understandable. He was always out, but she never thought that the reason was that she kept throwing him out.

In the middle of her chest, she feels a big ball of air, begging to come out in a scream. But she doesn’t want to talk about it. Not with Eliza or Dolls. She doesn’t want Jeremy finding out with his weird third eye and she doesn’t want to talk with Gregory either, over the phone, kilometers away. She doesn’t even feel like telling Waverly either, even if she knows that they have always felt comfortable sharing this kind of stuff with each other. A connection that she doesn’t know how to interpret yet.

“I was so ashamed,” Thomas said. Thomas, an adult that talked like he was confessing a devilry he did behind his moms back.

“Nicole?”

What was she supposed to do with this information? Feel angry at her mom? Sure. But Thomas, looking at him, she doesn't know if she feels sorry for him or if she feels more affection and understanding.
“Nicole,” Eliza shakes her a little and Nicole snaps out of trance.

“Sorry, what?” She blinks twice and looks at her friend through the mirror’s reflection.

“Should we do a little makeup? I know you’re not crazy about it, but maybe just a little?” She gives Nicole a smile, trying to be convincing.

“I don’t see why I have to dress up for this,” Nicole sighs after agreeing.

“This is not dressing up, it’s just a little of self-care.”

“I’ll be on the stage five minutes max.”

“The video is forever,” Eliza grins.

“Not if I destroy all the copies,” Nicole mutters, wondering how hard could it be to sneak into Dolls’ computer to delete the video.

“What, you don’t want to look nice for the girls, stud?” Eliza shoves her lightly before moving to get her cosmetics bag.

Nicole frowns, moving from the chair to the bed. “What girls?” She asks, but her mind immediately flies to Waverly. Does she like Nicole’s hair down or up? Will she be weirded out if she sees her with makeup or will she think that it’s just normal girl behavior?

“Andy,” Eliza says, moving the chair to sit in front of Nicole.

“What?”

“Oh, c’mon, Nicole. Throw that poor girl a bone,” Eliza gives her a pointed look. “You seriously don’t like her?”

“No,” she responds immediately. “Not like that.” Andy is a friend.

“But you spend so much time together,” Eliza leans her chin on the heel of her hand and her elbow on her leg. “When we were studying, she wouldn’t shut up about you. I’m telling you. I thought, maybe...”

Nicole groans, this is exactly what she’s trying to avoid. “I’m just trying to be friendly. I swear.”

Eliza just keeps looking at her, like she expects that a hidden truth will suddenly be written all over her face.

“For real, I don’t like her like that. I swear,” she puts her right hand over her heart and the other up.

“Ok,” Eliza says after a while. “I believe you,” she stands and looks for something in her bag. Then she stops and looks at Nicole, hands on hips, studying her. “But you- you like someone, don’t you?” Eliza lifts one eyebrow, a smile breaking her face.

“What? no.” Nicole says but Eliza reacts like she said the contrary.

She gasps and sits leaning a little like she’s going to spill her secrets. “Don’t tell me it’s one of Andy’s friends,” she sounds scandalized.

“No,” Nicole deadpans.
Then Eliza’s expression turns to horror. “Don’t tell me it’s Shae again.”

“No! Stop guessing,” Nicole’s face feels hot. “I don’t like anyone. I’m just, you know, here, not liking anyone while I spend my time liking no one,” she says quickly, trying to keep eye contact, so her words get into Eiza’s head.

Sadly, Eliza doesn’t seem to buy it, and she starts to work on Nicole. But she can see the gears of her brain working. Then she stops, with a big smile on her face.

“Aha!” Eliza sounds triumphant. “Ok, ok. I see you, Nicole Haught. Falling for the cute artsy girl-“

Nicole interrupts Eliza before she nails it more. “Shut up and keep,” she gestures to her face, “doing this. I need to get other things ready. Jesus.” She feels her face on fire.

Eliza keeps giggling until she declares that Nicole is ready. “For no one in particular, of course.”

People. There are a lot of people. That’s normal, there should be people. And there are familiar faces. It’s ok, they know she’s going to play and they know she’s just a beginner. Not a surprise if she messes up. There are strangers, a lot. But that’s ok, too. They don’t know her and they’ll forget her. She’s just one more between the sixteen other participants. She’s just one more person with a guitar. No biggie.

Nicole takes a deep breath and does her best to not look like she’s freaking out and takes a sip of the soda Dolls convinced her to drink when Jeremy guesses that she hadn’t eaten all day. They sit in a corner of the cafe. There are no tables this time and there are speakers outside of the cafe so the people on the street can listen to what’s happening since the inside is packed. The street is actually closed and there are a lot of cars parked and a lot of people hanging out. People come and go when the person they came to see sings.

Because there are a lot of people. Has she mentioned the number of people that are in the cafe?

“There are a lot of people,” Nicole says as the next participant gets up onto the stage and she does the mental count to know how long she has until it’s her turn.

“Yeah? I felt like there were more yesterday,” Eliza comments as the girl on stage presents herself.

No, there weren’t, Nicole thinks. Or maybe it’s her mind playing tricks. Yesterday, the contest opened with the groups’ category and the original songs. It was a good taste of what was to come.

There were good bands and terrible bands, but the most noticeable thing about the category was the absence of Mattie’s band, at least for anyone who goes to parties in Purgatory. Some people approached Mattie to ask her about it and Mattie just brushed off the question but she seemed disappointed too.

There were good songs and bad songs. Apparently, you don’t have to be a good writer to sign up for the original song category. But of course, there were surprises. Like seeing Mr Johnson sing a bluesy song on the familiar piano that the Earp sisters brought down for the contest.

There were great performers and people that froze on stage. Today too, and Nicole silently prays to all the divine beings out there to help her remember all the lyrics. The girl on stage, though, is not
that lucky. She stutters and loses the flow of the song, she sings the same verse twice and her voice gets quieter. The public is forgiving and claps for her anyway, not letting the girl feel down.

It gives Nicole a little hope. But there’s still a lot of eyes and ears. She hears the next few names be called “backstage” and she crosses her arms so her hands don’t shake that much. She relaxes her face and chats with Jeremy and Eliza like the fact that Dolls is preparing his professional camera to film her is not affecting her.

From the chairs, while they prepare the stage for the next person, Nicole scans the crowd and catches familiar faces. Kids from school that she sees around the halls, and teachers. She sees Andy on the other side, sitting with her friends, with her long dark hair in a ponytail. She is scanning the crowd too, so Nicole looks away before their eyes connect and Andy takes it like some kind of signal. Then she sees Shae walking out of the cafe, arms interlocked with her friend. They acknowledge each other and Shae mouths a good luck. Mattie is sitting next to Greta, probably being the most relaxed person right now. Charlie is leaning on the counter, chatting with a few other guys in their firefighter uniforms. He’s in black jeans and a tucked black t-shirt and black pointed boots, looking like a rockstar. It makes Nicole feel inadequate even if she’s wearing basically the same, except that she’s wearing a white shirt that Eliza convinced her would make her look great. God, she hopes Eliza achieved her goal.

Nicole can see Thomas and Michael sitting in the front, sipping coffee. She wonders how her life would have been if Thomas was the one that accompanied her to her extracurricuals instead of her mom. Maybe she would be good at something by this point in her life.

She hopes she’s good enough to not make a fool of herself now.

The next guy sings the third Ed Sheeran song of the night while Nicole tries her best to keep her leg from bouncing. She replays the lyrics in her head and imagines the sequence of finger movements. It helps her relax her hands. She finishes her own song in her head when her name is called next to Charlie’s.

Like it’s whatever, she stands up and gathers all her confidence in a smile that she directs to her friends, especially to Dolls, whose camera is already rolling. She receives a thumbs up from the three of them (and Skip) and walks with her chin up to the side of the stage, where a curtain is separating the “backstage” from the eyes of the public. She can feel eyes on her back already as she walks past the curtain with Charlie behind her, both of them carrying their guitars.

A smiling Waverly and a neutral-faced Willa receive them.

“Nicole Haught?” the older Earp looks over her list and checks her name after Nicole nods.

Waverly signals her to pass and immediately takes her hand. “How are you? Ready?”

Nicole clears her throat from the nervousness and the shock from feeling Waverly’s hand holding hers. “Yeah,” she hopes she sounds confident.

“Hi, Waverly,” Charlie walks to them, he looks nervous and he gives a few jumps, shaking his hands like he’s getting ready to run a marathon or get into a boxing match.

“Hey! Nervous?” Waverly lets go Nicole’s hand and looks to the stage where the next person is about to start playing the piano.

“Yes. There’re a lot more people than I expected,” Charlie whispers and breathes deeply. It makes Nicole wonder if he’s showing more confidence being completely honest with his nervousness or
her, trying to look brave. Because it feels like Charlie wins here.

“Don’t be. You two look like rockstars,” Waverly whispers back, looking at the both of them.

Charlie poses a little and Nicole finds nice that Waverly decided to include her in the compliment.

The guy on stage starts to play the piano, but he’s howling more than singing. Nicole uses the time to convince herself that she would do better and takes her guitar out. She rubs her palms against her jeans, hoping the sweat disappears and wonders if her face looks shiny. A few discreet deep breaths and a mental pep talk later, Willa is informing her that it’s her turn.

She takes a last look at Waverly, who is smiling a hundred words of encouragement and climbs the three steps to the stage. She can feel the wood vibrating under her boots as she walks to the stool in the middle of the stage. There’s clapping and cheering and some laughs that she hopes are not at her expense. The guy that is sometimes in behind the cash register asks her if she needs a cable for her guitar and when she shakes her head, he puts a microphone next to the mouth of the guitar and one in front of her own and then leaves.

The lights directed to the stage make it hard to look at the public, and she’s infinitely grateful for that. She checks the tuning of the strings real quick in the tuner attached to the head of the guitar that Waverly let her borrow. Then she places the capo she bought a few weeks ago on the respective fret.

Ok. Don’t rush, she reminds herself and takes a deep breath before placing her second finger on the third fret. Her thumb shakes a little, but she starts pulsing the sixth string and the whole cafe falls silent. She alternates between looking at her right hand and the left, making sure she does everything right. Then she finishes the intro and hopes all the words come out right.

“Her eyes and words are so icy. Oh, but she burns like rum on the fire,” Her voice shakes a little but she tries to imagine the words being projected out of her mouth, making her voice clearer. In the process, she misses a few notes, but she ignores the mistake and keeps playing.

“Hot and fast and angry as she can be. I walk my days on a wire,” comes out clearer. Then she strums the strings. “It looks ugly, but it's clean. Oh, momma, don't fuss over me,” she starts to feel more confident as she reaches the chorus.

“The way she tells me I'm hers and she is mine. Open hand or closed fist would be fine,” she hits the two high notes fine, finding that she’s enjoying herself. “The blood is rare and sweet as cherry wine.”

Now, she’s letting the song drive her and she remembers Waverly’s words about music and feeling. She knows what the song is about, but she hadn’t fully understood it until now.

“Calls of guilty thrown at me, all while she stains the sheets of some other,” against the lights, she finds Thomas, looking at her, his eyes shiny. “Thrown at me so powerfully, just like she throws with the arm of her brother,” his face well shaved and the scar crossing his cheek almost invisible. “But I want it. It's a crime that she's not around most of the time.”

She returns her eyes to her hands as she reaches the chorus again and then she enters the little bridge, and she concentrates on her fingers moving. The slide in the strings feels easy after much practice and the part goes smoothly. She zones out everyone in the room and sits on the stool with her guitar, feeling in control.

Nicole conveys all her feelings and sings the last verse. “Her fight and fury is fiery. Oh, but she loves like sleep to the freezing.” She makes a long pause before the next line, feeling the tension
dissolve as she continues. “Sweet and right and merciful, I'm all but washed in the tide of her breathing. And it's worth it, it's divine. I have this some of the time.”

The last chorus comes, feeling like it's resolving the whole song. “The way she shows me I'm hers and she is mine. Open hand or closed fist would be fine.” She makes the tempo slightly slower as she reaches the last line. “The blood is rare and sweet as cherry wine.” Then she picks the rhythm again and plays the intro once more, slowing at the very end, letting the last note linger, feeling the weight on her shoulders leave.

It’s done. She played in front of everyone and the world is still spinning.

She gets off the stage, trembling like never before and her first instinct is to look for Waverly. There she is, talking with her older sister. Nicole is running on adrenaline and she can't hear the clapping that’s happening in the back, or her friends cheering her on. But she can see her, beautiful as ever with her natural brightness that calls Nicole to her. Waverly senses her and turns back to see her with a big smile. Her heart beats fast, and she tightens the hold she has on the neck of the guitar.

The other girl moves and wraps her in a hug, her arms in the middle of Nicole’s torso. Nicole responds immediately, wrapping her free arm around Waverly’s shoulders, squeezing as hard as she can because she did it. All thanks to Waverly.

“You were great,” Waverly pulls back and Nicole lets her go. “It sounded great!”

Nicole looks at Waverly, her hazel eyes in the dark. She just pulls her in the hug again and says thank you. Waverly responds hugging her tighter.

Eventually, her ears recover their capacity to hear, and Charlie’s voice fills the space as they stand together in the back, hearing him sing and watching him display all his boy-next-door charm.

“Forgive the urgency, but hurry up and wait. My heart has started to separate.”

They stand together, Nicole’s arm over Waverly’s shoulder and Waverly’s around Nicole’s torso until Jeremy comes looking for her so her friends can congratulate her.

The judges get up on stage and Shorty, an old man in a hawaiian shirt that is like Waverly’s uncle or something like that walks to the microphone with a card in his hand. He proudly announces that they have decided on the finalists and that it was very hard to choose because everyone was very talented. Everyone claps and he reads the names of the five finalists.

Nicole is in shock when she hears her name has been called. Her friends move around her, celebrating and she joins them after she recovers.

Mattie passes too, with a Paramore song and casting a spell on the public as she always does. An old man that did a great performance of an old country song passes too and a teen Nicole has never seen before with a ukulele cover of Elvis Presley that didn’t impress her at all, but, hey, that’s her opinion. And of course, to no ones surprise, Charlie.

Thomas hugs her when they finally get together to go home and Michael promises to be back for
the final and to force her father to play fair games with him. On their way to the car, Sheriff Nedley congratulates her and gives Thomas a cold look. Now that she knows the depths of her dad’s history, it makes her feel uncomfortable that Sheriff Nedley has a bad image of her dad. Not that there’s much she can do about it.

Laying in bed, she buzzes with the last of the adrenaline in her body and her phone keeps vibrating with texts from her friends. Eventually, Dolls sends the video of Nicole playing followed by a thumbs up emoji. It makes her cringe when she notices the mistakes she made, so she only watches it one time. It also gives her ease in her mind, because if she doesn’t win the contest and the bet, it’s not such a bad video to be out in the world.

The people of the fair and the Culture Department are in charge of most of the logistics for the final, which gives Homestead a break from two very chaotic days. They return to almost normal functioning, serving Sunday breakfast under Willa’s watch.

“More people come here than to church,” a woman, the first customer of the day, complains but orders pancakes for her and her husband.

Waverly looks at the clock to make sure she’s on time and meets with Chrissy and Robin. Together, they pick up Mark from the bus station. It’s too early for Robin’s liking, but Mark insisted on being early, so they can take advantage of the whole day. They walk to Chrissy’s house, taking the time to show Mark around and it reminds Waverly of Nicole and the striker that now is in her guitar case.

The song came out great at the end. Waverly wishes that she could have seen it from the public’s perspective. She might have seen Nicole play the song a few dozen times in all the time she helped Nicole prepare, but seeing the final product properly would have been amazing. Not that didn't look great from the site she was in. Her voice sounded clear and the guitar, great. Nicole didn't even look nervous before getting up on stage. Tall and confident, looking like Patti Smith on the Horses album, her red hair pretty as that time in her room.

Mark walks in every room with Chrissy following him behind in her home. Robin is in the bathroom, leaving Waverly waiting for them in the porch. She taps her foot against the wood and looks constantly to the direction of Nicole’s home. She has never been there, but she knows where it is since her best friend is Nicole’s neighbor.

How does it look like inside? Is her room tidy? Probably, it goes with Nicole. She guesses it smells like Nicole. Vanilla. Or maybe Nicole smells like that because her room smells like that. Maybe she can go and-

“Where are you going?” Robin stops at the top of the stairs of the porch, the door closing behind him. She realizes that she’s halfway through the front yard.

“Just.” What was she doing? She points to the sky. “Taking in the sun.”

The door opens again and Chrissy walks out, pulling Mark. “You’re not going to say that at the end of the day.” She lets Mark go and he straightens his twisted long sleeve shirt. “So,” she says in her
leader’s voice, “the plan is to get there early and take advantage of the rides. Then, games and food so we have all night to watch the full final.”

“You almost make it sound like a task,” Robin laughs.

“Can Robin even get on the rides?” Mark puts on his sunglasses.

“It’s not like a have a cast on my leg,” Robin shows them his splint and moves his three free fingers.

“We’ll work our way around it if necessary,” says Chrissy, hands on hips.

Sheriff Nedley arrives in his cruiser shortly after. He throws a look at the boys and gives a hug to Waverly and then he drives them to the fair.

Thomas takes a sip from his steamy cup of coffee and sighs. “The coffee here is amazing.”

“I know,” Nicole says, not really paying him much attention. She pats all her pockets, but she doesn't feel her phone. It must still be connected in her room and it leaves her anxious. She wanted to call Greg to tell him the good news and she knows that he has a connection on Sunday’s mornings when he takes grandma to church.

And she wanted to see Waverly before tonight. She looks around Homestead, but no sign of Waverly and no way to tell her she’s here. Maybe she’s still sleeping.

Homestead looks like nothing happened there. All the tables and chairs are in place again. Rosita and Willa are going around the cafe serving plates while Wynonna looks about to die of boredom at the cash register.

“Do you wanna do anything today? Before tonight?” Her dad asks when they bring the pancakes to their table.

“Oh, not really,” she cuts her pancakes with the fork. “I guess I can see the fair after I perform.”

They were informed yesterday that the solo numbers are going to play first tonight. Nicole really feels confident today. Her fear is mostly gone, but she’s still a bit nervous. She didn’t imagine that she’d get this far so Nicole doesn’t really mind if she wins or loses.

She just wants to take the day to relax, as Waverly suggested.

“It’s never good to stress yourself before a concert,” Waverly said in amongst a bunch of bits of advice when they said goodbye yesterday.

“And Eliza is coming today to help me get ready.”

“Ok. Then I’ll prepare something for you. Maybe you can invite your friends and celebrate.”

“I haven’t won yet, dad.”

“Little details, who cares?” Thomas shrugs and smiles. “I’m proud of you,” he says, leaving her
with a knot in her throat she tries to swallow.

The sky is clear and the air is hot when they get out of Homestead. They get in the car and Thomas starts the engine, the radio coming to life. But when a song starts, her dad’s phone rings in his pocket and he turns off the radio before answering. She reads Greg’s name on the screen as Thomas picks up.

“Greg, how are-“ her dad stops and his relaxed face changes to worry. “Is your mom with her?” There’s a pause in which Thomas nods tapping his fingers on his lips. “Can you give me her number?”

Grandma Lucy, Nicole guesses and her head starts to go to the worst possibilities. Greg said she was doing fine last time they talked.

“Yeah, she’s with me,” Thomas turns to her and hands her the phone. “It’s Greg.”

She takes the phone and puts it against her ear. “Nic?” She hears Greg say.

“How is she?” Nicole immediately asks, feeling her heart drumming in her chest.

“Holding up. Apparently, she has an infection and it spread, but we caught it in time. She’s in the hospital again, I just left.”

“Is it bad?”

“They said that she will-“ the call gets interrupted for a second, “-over, but they would rather have her under observation.”

“She’s been getting very sick lately.”

“She’ll be ok. Don’t stress out, ok?” his voice gets distorted by the signal.

“Ok,” she says as she does the contrary.

“I’m losing signal, say bye to-“, is all Nicole hears before a long beep sounds.

“The call got cut off,” she gives Thomas the phone back.

They sit in silence as Thomas drives home.

“Do you have anything planned during the break, Nicole?” He asks when they park in front of the house.

“Is your red friend here? Willa is about to bite someone if she doesn't appear,” Wynonna chews on a corn dog, talking to her little sister conspiratorially next to her ear. Waverly jumps from the sudden appearance of her sister and stands from the chairs they moved earlier to sit next to the stage. Her friends jump too but seem to relax when they see that Wynonna is the reason.

Leaving her friends conversations about the couples in the Ferris wheel, that is very close to the stage, Waverly turns around to look at the older Earp in the distance. She does look about to explode or something. She might have her hair perfectly done and her outfit impeccable, but she
has lived with her enough to know how she looks stressed. You know, because it usually meant that Waverly was going to be her target. But if the last week of sharing the apartment tells her something, she’s out of danger. That doesn’t stop her from shielding behind Wynonna.

“Why?”

“The show is about to start and all the participants were supposed to be here like an hour ago.” Wynonna hides her mouth with a corn dog like that’s going to protect them from activating the Willa bomb.

Waverly takes a look at the time on her phone. She must have lost track of time talking with her friends. An hour has passed since they got to the side of the stage where she has access since she’s considered part of Homestead’s staff. The perks of knowing people.

Chrissy’s plan flowed perfectly. They got to the rides early and got to enjoy them almost alone which proved to be a mistake when Mark and Robin almost threw up their breakfast when they got into the cups more times than necessary and spun like there was no tomorrow. Chrissy and Waverly made them take a break and forced them to sit for a few minutes before trying their luck at the games.

Robin complained that his good hand was unusable but still got a regular size plush that he gave Chrissy for the good times. When they saw the shooting game, Chrissy and Robin pushed Waverly to it, to Mark’s confusion. Waverly got a perfect score and chose a big plush of a carrot for Robin as a thank you for punching another human being. If there’s an inborn talent in the Earp family, it’s guns.

Waverly looks at the people around the stage and the near stands, looking for Nicole. Finding a tall redhead shouldn’t be so hard, but there is no sign of her. She pulls out her phone and texts her a where are you?.

“How are you, guys? Good to see you!” Shorty arrives with the rest of the judges. He shakes hands with her friends and gives her a bear hug. “Everyone ready?” She asks Waverly as the other two judges talk with Willa.

“No, there’s one participant late. But I’m sure she’s on her way,” she adds. What if they disqualify her for being late? She gives another look to see if maybe she arrived when she wasn’t looking, but no. She catches Charlie waving at her, walking with the other participants to the little tent that’s functioning like backstage. Mattie waves too.

“Who is that guy?” Shorty asks, looking in the same direction as her.

“Charlie? He’s a firefighter,” Waverly looks at Shorty squint his eyes. “Why?”

“He just,” he tilts his head to the side and then shakes his head. “He looks familiar. But I haven’t seen him around town.”

“You mean you haven’t seen him in the bar.”

Shorty laughs. “Everyone comes to my bar.”

“Sorry! Sorry, I’m late!” Nicole arrives running, carrying her guitar case in her hand. She almost collapses with the fence separating the space from the rest of the public, but stops in time. Today she’s not wearing makeup and her hair is in a ponytail. She looks more natural and it suits her.

Willa stomps to her and opens the gate to let her in. Waverly gets scared for an instant that her
sister is going to punch her friend.

“One minute more and you were out,” Willa scolds her and she looks at Nicole scratch her head.

“Sorry.”

Her sister makes Nicole sign a sheet of paper and tells her the instructions while Waverly waits beside her. Nicole smiles at her while she listens to her sister and she feels her face get hot. Sometimes Nicole has a glint in her eyes Waverly can't explain.

“Hi.”

“Hey!” Nicole is still catching her breath.

The voice of a man runs through the speakers announcing the start of the big event of the night. They stand side by side to look at the stage. The first participant gets up on stage and the public applauds as he introduces himself and the staff makes sure everything is well connected.

“So, when am I playing?” Nicole asks her over the loud sound of the speakers when the man starts to play the piano.

“After him, goes Mattie, then you, then-“

“I’m playing after Mattie?!” Nicole's eyebrows shot to her hairline.

“Do you wanna play before her?” She says, amused.

Waverly follows with her eyes how Nicole taps her lower lip with her index finger. “That would probably be as bad.”

“What's wrong?”

“Nothing,” Nicole shrugs. “Just that,” she laughs. “Now I know for sure I’m not going to win.”

“Hey, I thought you didn't care about winning,” she teases.

“I don’t,” Nicole shows her a dimpled smile. “I’m happy with just being here.” She takes her hand quickly and squeezes it before letting it go. The movement surprises her and it leaves a tingling sensation lingering. “I should probably get ready,” Nicole takes a step away in the direction where the rest of the tent.

“Break a leg,” Waverly looks at her go and say hi to Mattie and Charlie. Nicole turns to look at her as she takes her guitar out and shows her a thumbs up.

Waverly heads back to her friends to watch the performance. In the time he plays the two songs, the amount of people in the public doubles and the energy increases. She can see Nicole’s friends near the stage, Dolls carrying a camera ready to record.

Mattie's name is called and a lot of people in the public cheer. Waverly forgot that Mattie has certain fame in Purgatory, if not for the band, for bringing alcohol from god knows where to parties. Mattie high fives Nicole before putting the strap from her Gretsch around her neck and getting up on stage.

After her pedals and guitar are connected, she goes straight to the song, no introductions.

“All I can ever be to you is a darkness that we knew and this regret I got accustomed to.” Mattie
sings and Waverly remembers why she was always so intimidated by her when they took classes together. “Once it was so right when we were at our height waiting for you in the hotel at night,” the chord progression sounds great and far more jazzy than the original. The electric guitar gives it a new vibe. Her voice is no Amy Winehouse but is Mattie Perley with all the attitude she always carries around and the public cheers as she gets to the chorus.

“He walks away, the sun goes down. He takes the day, but I’m grown. And in your way, in this blue shade, my tears dry on their own,” Mattie moves on the stage, looking in her best element.

“This girl slays,” Mark says as the second verse starts and Mattie turns up the energy, somehow. Robin and Chrissy maintain their judgmental stare and poker faces as they always do when someone else is playing.

In the corner of her eye, she sees Willa move and goes to the rest of the participants. Nicole already has her guitar hanging on her back and pays attention to her sister.

Soon, Mattie is about to end the second song and Nicole stands ready to hear her name being called to the stage. She looks more nervous today, but her head is up and she looks full of concentration. Waverly is about to walk to her and give her a word of encouragement, but someone yells Nicole’s name and the redhead turns to the gate to see Andy, Eliza and Jeremy.

Nicole jogs to them and they exchange a few words as Mattie walks off the stage, fresh as the morning. When Nicole moves to walk back to the stage as her name is called over the speakers, Waverly sees Andy pull her back by the arm and hug her with the fence between her bodies. She tears her eyes away, feeling uncomfortable, but then Nicole is walking beside her, climbing the stairs as the people in the public receive her with cheers.

It feels far more impersonal, Nicole thinks. The public is bigger and the stage larger. But it’s less scary. She can’t find her dad or Michael in the public nor Dolls’ camera. She catches some familiar faces, but no one particularly important. She knows her friends are near the stage, but she’s too busy presenting herself and doing the mental preparation to start playing and doing her best to not let go and freak out, so she doesn’t bother to look at them.

She plays the first song with her head divided into too many trains of thought that she forgets to put attention to the song. Her dad, somewhere in the crowd; her mom, somewhere in the world; her grandma, somewhere in a hospital bed. So, the song probably doesn’t sound as good as it did yesterday, but hopefully, her muscle memory helps her do a decent job.

For Waverly, she thinks, and all the effort she put into helping her, she has to do this right. So she tries to put all her heart into the second song and evokes all the times she played the song in the apartment above Homestead, ignoring the lights hitting her in the face and the hundreds of eyes on her.

The rain came softly and they barely noticed the tapping of raindrops against the window in the early afternoon. They had been in the living room, splitting the time between chatting and playing music.

The confession of her dad was still fresh and imprinted on her mind, but she felt fine now that she was with Waverly. Nicole forgot about the bad stuff that happens around them and got to enjoy the
afternoon. Sometimes her head betrayed her and made her remember, but in general, she was ok, almost normal.

“I like this song,” Waverly said when Nicole finished playing it to show Waverly that she had it memorized.

“Me too.” Nicole stood from the chair and stretched her back. “I know it sounds sad, but it makes me feel hopeful.” Her guitar slid a little, hanging from the strap as she put her hands in the pockets of her pants.

Waverly pushed up from the wall she’d been leaning on and walked around the coffee table to let herself fall on the couch. “Play it again,” she took a cushion and hugged it. “I don’t think it needs a lot more work, but I like it. I like how you play it.”

She cleared her throat and said an “ok”, looking down at the guitar. She didn't sit back and instead started playing the chords, avoiding to look at Waverly because she knew that the other girl’s eyes were on her.

Playing with Waverly in her apartment had started to feel familiar. It felt like she could keep doing it forever. She wondered if Waverly really meant that she liked how she played it. Maybe Waverly did. Maybe Waverly could like her.

“**This my excavation and today is Qumran.**” She dared and looked to Waverly, finding her looking at her attentively, a small smile on her face as she leaned her elbows on the cushion and her head on her palms. “**Everything that happens is from now on, this is pouring rain, this is paralyzed,**” Nicole looked at the window, watching the rain as it picked up its intensity.

A flash of light illuminated the room and the lights flickered, then loud thunder resounded across town. It made her smile. Nature conspiring with her at that moment to make the song better, creating a magical atmosphere.

“I keep throwing it down two,” she took a deep breath, “hundred at a time. It's hard to find it when you knew it when your money's gone and you're drunk as hell.”

The rain kept tapping on the window and Waverly went to look down at the street. Nicole wanted to walk there and see too, but she just continued to play the chords, afraid to mess it up if she moved.

“**On your back with your racks as he stacks your load,**” she repeated as Waverly turned back to look at her, leaning her hips on the window frame.

Nicole went through the song as she shared the space with Waverly. At that moment, it really felt like they were the only ones existing under the rain pouring down on the town and all Nicole could think was that she really liked her, Waverly, and she hoped that Waverly liked her too with all her strength while she sang the next verses. She might, she reminded herself. The signals were there, but she didn't want to push. The fear of misinterpreting them was too big to act on her desires.

Maybe in another world, in another universe. But maybe in this one too.

Another thunderbolt hit somewhere near and that time, the few lights they had on went dead. The cold light from the window was the only thing illuminating the room. Nicole could feel the humidity in the air, the cold from the window and the warm emanating from the kitchen, where Waverly had boiled water to make the tea that now stood on the coffee table.

Waverly started to swing with the music and it made Nicole feel full and happy. Christ, she really
was a goner.

“This is not the sound of a new man or a crispy realization,” she sang in the final verse and noticed Waverly’s voice singing too, under her breath.

“It's the sound of me unlocking and you lift away. Your love will be safe with me,” they sang together and Nicole played the last chords, letting the last one last so the moment could stretch.

Biting her lip, Nicole stared at her fingers on the guitar, hoping that Waverly couldn’t read her feelings in her eyes. She heard footsteps walking to her and then Waverly was in front of her, hands in her back pockets, looking pretty as usual. She wasn't very close, but after a moment like that, Waverly might as well be on her lap.

“Perfect,” was all that Waverly said and Nicole felt like that too at that moment.

The crowd erupts in claps and cheers, making Nicole remember where she is. The hot air and the smell of corn dogs hit her and the cold air of the rain disappears in her memory.

Waverly watches Nicole walk down the stage and the redhead immediately goes to her. This time, Nicole is not trembling and the hug is soft and warm and nice. So nice.

“I feel liberated,” Nicole steps away and her smile makes her dimples show.

“Hey, not bad,” Chrissy says as her friends get close. They congratulate Nicole as the next participant is called up to the stage.

They don't have much time to chat, soon Nicole’s name is called by her friends gathering on the other side of the fence. The group is bigger this time. Dolls, the Perley twins and a few other people she recognizes are hanging there too, so Nicole leaves her to talk to them, but she doesn't exit the fence.

Waverly joins her friends as they watch the stage until Nicole returns.

“Waves, I’m going for something to eat,” the redhead is carrying her things, looking ready to go.

“You’re not going to stay and watch the rest?”

“Nah, I’ll just get restless if I stay, but I’ll be back, promise.” She turns to see her friends as they shout her name to hurry her. “We’re just going to walk around the fair a little.” Nicole tugs the collar of her shirt and looks around. “Wanna come? We can go to the Ferris Wheel or something.”

Waverly laughs remembering all the banter about the Ferris Wheel her friends got into earlier. “That’s like a couples thing,” she says but considers it, but she promised to be there with her friends. Robin has one arm over Chrissy’s shoulders, both laughing at Mark doing an over exaggerated lip sync. “I can’t,” she flinches and Nicoles gives her a sad smile.

“It’s ok, another time then,” Nicole takes one step back.

“Sure.”
She watches Nicole turn on her heels and walk away to wish Charlie good luck and then walk out of the gate. She feels regret when she watches how Andy walks next to Nicole and interlocks her arms together and later after Charlie sings Belle & Sebastian and she thinks she can see Nicole on the Ferris wheel with someone else.

The original song category goes by fast, but the bands take longer. They had to set up every band and connecting the instruments takes a while, so the time drags between bands but the crowd doesn't lose interest and receives every band with energy.

When they're setting the last band, Waverly feels someone poke her in the ribs and she jumps. Her friends laugh at her reaction and when she turns around, Nicole is standing there with Mattie.

“Is this the last band?” Mattie asks and Waverly nods. Nicole stands next to her and gives her a goofy smile that she returns as she does with the poke that Nicole almost dodges.

Waverly introduces her friends to Mattie and vice versa. They stand together, telling Nicole and Mattie what has happened in the other categories. The two girls affirm that they heard the performances from the distance and Mattie tells them that she knows the next band, that’s why she dragged everyone back.

Mattie points to the big group of teens hanging in the distance. Waverly wonders how they managed to collect so many people, but then she guesses that there’s not much happening in Purgatory, so most of the town is probably here.

As the conversation progresses and the band begins to play, Nicole and Waverly separate from the group as they keep poking each other until it becomes a competition. Nicole manages to dodge most of Waverly’s attempts, so she starts chasing her in the space, gaining a few looks from the people there.

“Stop! I surrender!” Nicole traps her wrist gently before she can reach her middle. They’re a bit further away from the stage now, near to where all the trucks and cars are parked. Nicole lets her go and they recover their breaths, but it’s hard since they start to laugh from one moment to another.

“I thought that you were going to get disqualified,” she says, remembering earlier in the night.

“Sorry,” Nicole scratches her head with a finger, “I lost time packing.”

“Packing?” Waverly interrupts, confused.

“Yeah, I’m leaving tonight. Well, technically tomorrow since the bus leaves at midnight.”

“Why? Where? How- how long?” Waverly looks at her friend asking for answers. She thought that she had all summer to spend time with Nicole. She had plans, expectations for the summer that now are all gone.
“To see my grandma, she’s sick,” Nicole gave her a sad smile. She can tell this is worrying her. “I was going in a few weeks anyway, but, you know, I’m going now.”

“What happened?”

“Uh, basically, my grandma doesn’t like to be taken care of so she doesn’t say anything when she feels bad. And now she has an infection that spread to her lungs. She’s in the hospital right now. I wanted to leave earlier, but I didn’t want to ditch this. We worked pretty hard on this.”

“You worked hard on this.”

“You helped.”

“I hope she is ok,” Waverly hugs her friend and squeezes hard.

Nicole hugs her back and speaks to her hair. “Me too,”

“How long are you going to stay there?” She asks again as she takes a step back.

“Ah… a few weeks, I suppose. I was planning to stay most of the vacation there, but there’s, uh, things here that I want to do,” the glint in Nicole’s eyes is back.

“Thank you, thank you!” The vocalist of the band says when they finish the first song. “The next one is called Dance Number, enjoy!”

“Wanna dance?” Nicole pokes her in the ribs, approaching slowly, but Waverly jumps anyway.

“In between the notes of your favorite song, you try to figure where it went wrong,” the music starts, but it’s something like rock-punk.

Waverly laughs. “This is not very danceable.”

Nicole shrugs. “There’s a beat, right?”

“Clever,” Waverly rolls her eyes at her and catches Nicole unprepared, poking her with more force than she intended.

The redhead bends like she’s in serious pain. “How could you!” She lets herself fall to her knees, dramatically. “I thought we had a truce!”

“Don’t you know history?” Waverly mocks, arching an eyebrow. But then Nicole jumps from her position and opens her arms to catch her. Waverly reacts fast and jumps away.

“Of all the times you try and lost, all your wasted yesterdays,” the band sings and Nicole starts to run after her to catch her.

Waverly might be small, but she’s fast, so she manages to dodge Nicole a few more times until the redhead’s long arms manage to reach her and grip one belt loop. The movement makes them collapse into each other and it’s there again when Nicole holds her so she doesn’t fall. The warm feeling.

“I find meaning in this life when I wake up every day,” sounds in across the fair, but it feels like it’s just between them.

This close, Waverly can see Nicole’s eyes perfectly, the glint is back in her big brown eyes. Her eyes go to Nicole’s eyes, to the beauty mark on her left cheekbone, to her lips.
Her lips. Why can’t she stop looking at those lips?

They’re close. They’re too close and Nicole should probably move away before she does something dumb like lean down and kiss Waverly. But she can’t move.

How much time has passed? Why has Waverly not moved yet? Why is she looking her like that? What does that look mean? She can’t tell if she’s making her uncomfortable. She should probably move. Move, she begs to her stiff body.

Thankfully, the song ends and breaks the spell. Nicole finally moves away, clearing her throat and shoving her hands in her pockets.

“We should probably head back,” her voice trembles a little.

“Yes,” Waverly says but Nicole can’t read her face. Waverly shakes her head and seems to return to normal. It frightens Nicole a little, she wishes she could know what Waverly’s thinking in that amazing brain of hers.

Waverly pokes her again and Nicole lets her, jumping just a little. They head back to the stage as the last band says thank you and someone announces that the judges will take a few minutes to deliberate.

Thomas and Michael are standing next to the fence, holding her guitar, and Nicole feels relieved when she sees them. It gives her an opportunity to get away from Waverly to clear her head. She walks to them while Waverly keeps going in the direction her friends are.

“Do you think they’ll take long?” Thomas asks her and Michael swats him on his arm.

“Let her enjoy this.”

“Oh, sorry. I just mean that we really should get going. But, we can buy a ticket for tomorrow if—“

“No, I wanna leave today,” Nicole says and Thomas squeezes her shoulder. She stands with them until the judges get up on stage to announce the winners.
ha, ha in Spanish is ja, ja.  
Tell me something in the comments. Maybe?

There was a lot of more song originally, but these ones are enough:

**Absolutely Positive - Radiator Hospital**  
**Love Is All - The Tallest Man on Earth**  
**Apollo - Last Dinosaurs**  
**Cherry Wine - Hozier**  
**Look After You - The Fray**  
**Tears Dry On Their Own - Amy Winehouse**  
**re: Stacks - Bon Iver**  
**Dance Number - Radiator Hospital**

Spotify playlist:

*Chap. 7 and 8*
Summer

Chapter Summary

Nicole leaves, Waverly stays and there's poor reception.

Chapter Notes

Hey, real talk.

I'm so grateful if you're reading this. It's so cool to be able to share the thing one does with the world and I really love doing this.

Very cool!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

How many hours has Nicole been in a vehicle today, she can’t tell. Her body is killing her. Between the bus, the ride to the hospital, then adding the time she was sitting in the waiting room, she’s so tense that she can identify the individual muscles in her back contracting. Maybe it’s the remains of the adrenaline she burned last night, maybe not. Maybe is the remains of the amount of worry she held until she saw Grandma Lucy at least.

Despite her age or the fact that she was in a hospital bed, she sure held Nicole’s hand really tight when her granddaughter sat next to her bed. With shaky hands, she separated the mask from her face and lovingly said Nicole’s name before getting scolded by the nurse and putting the mask back on, not after rolling her eyes and make sure everyone knew how much of an inconvenience it was.

We’ll she said “Ray”, but Nicole doesn’t mind her grandmother using her middle name.

Greg in the other hand rolled his eyes out of orbit at how Grandma Lucy only had eyes for Nicole.

“You would think that living together and caring for her daily would make me the favorite,” he said when they walked out of the hospital to find some food while Thomas and Aunt Sarah caught up.

Apparently, her dad hadn’t seen Aunt Sarah or any of her mom’s part of the family in ages. Sarah almost called security before realizing the man that wasn’t leaving was, in fact, Nicole’s father.

Looking out of the window of Greg’s pick up, she starts to feel more relaxed. Or maybe it’s the fact that the doctors considered that Grandma Lucy was well enough to keep recovering from her home. But the view helps, too.

It’s summer and everything looks green, alive and breathtaking. She can tell the difference from the last time she was here, but overall, it feels familiar. Like another home. The same trees indicating the start from the old highway to the ranch. The rocks on the right of the road in the
distance that looks like a lion sleeping at the top. The old rock bridge that Nicole believes is stronger than anything made in modern times. The smell of the river, flowing by the grace of summer. That part of the road that always smells a little like a skunk just farted. The houses isolated by each other by long distances. Nice and familiar.

Nicole takes her cellphone out to take a photo of the road to show to her friends. To Waverly. She snaps one of the mountains in the distance and one of the river, then one of Gregory making a face. As she inspects the pictures, she looks at the corner of the screen where the symbols show her, little by little, how the reception starts to die as they go further along the road.

Usually, she would be fine with it. Every time she spends a school break here, it means that Nicole is isolated from the rest of the world, which is nice in a way. She has learned to enjoy her time away. She reads, walks and helps out around the place. Overall, she enjoys spending time with Grandma Lucy and Greg. She loves watching him work in his little workshop behind the house.

But now, losing signal means losing contact with Waverly. She doesn't mind spending some time away from her friends. Sure, sometimes it feels like she's left out of the stuff that happens in Purgatory, but it's worth it and when she goes back, her friends fill her in and all goes smoothly. She tells herself that it should be the same. She shouldn't be mourning the absence of Waverly.

But she does.

It was all going really great. It felt like something was happening, like something was shifting between them. And then she left in a hurry and what if this changes everything. What if Waverly meets someone over summer? Some Danny Zuko.

“You ok?” Greg asks as he lowers the volume of the stereo, which is mostly static, making Nicole snap out of her head.

Nicole shakes her head and blinks twice. “Yeah, sorry.”

“Long day,” he sighs.

Nicole looks at the bags under his eyes and tries to get in focus. She needs to be here for her grandma and stop over-worrying about imaginary scenarios in her head.

“Were almost there,” Greg keeps following her mom’s car, where Thomas and her grandma are.

Nicole can tell they’re close to the house, so she decides. If she wants to send something, it needs to be now, so she writes a text for Waverly and presses send, hoping that the last line of reception works in her favor.

Nicole, 16:03: Hey Waverly! How is everything going? I’m with my grandma now and she seems to be doing well. I don't have a lot of reception so I might not be able to text a lot, but i’ll try!
[Message not sent]
In the night, staring at the error message, Nicole deletes the text and buries her heated face in the pillow.

_____

Waverly feels like a little ball of energy charged to nowhere. Pure power but no purpose, she leans on the counter of Homestead, looking at the customers in the early afternoon, which are not many but enough to keep Rosita busy enough that she needs to request help from her. Waverly taps her fingers on the surface of the counter following the rhythm of the song in the speakers without giving too much attention to it.

She wants to do something. Needs to.

Now that the school year has ended and the contest is over, she has been left without things to do. It’s like she kept all this energy that her body stored after such a busy June and now is demanding to be let out. Yes. The first days of no school help her enjoy the peace of freedom, but now so much relaxation is leaving her restless.

And not having anything to concentrate her brain on is making the gears in her head turn and turn and little by little, they open all the little boxes Waverly uses to store things she would rather not think about.

Really, It doesn't take much to initiate her train of thought. As her fingers keep hitting the counter in perfect time with the song, she notices the pink case of a customer's phone.

Pink, you know, like Willa’s diary she keeps tucked under her mattress back in Big City after she got scared that Willa would find it when she got bored and nosy. It wouldn’t be the first time Willa goes through her stuff.

She has always been like that. Back in the good old days (terrible days), Willa liked to make sure she had control over the apartment through different methods. But Gus always managed to keep her in check and Curtis always managed to calm Willa’s thirst for power. It didn't mean that she didn't get away with things from time to time.

Call it practice or instinct, but Waverly has always been good at sensing when Willa has an ulterior motive. That’s why she felt so at unease now that Willa has magically become sort of nice. Like, not completely nice. She always manages to make every comment a little mean. You know, to be in character. If not, Waverly could swear someone had replaced her sister, in which case, they can keep her. Thank you very much.

Kidding, Wynonna would be sad if she ever finds out. Fine.

All this makes Waverly think that maybe her big sister is more, um, approachable? Like, maybe she can ask some of those questions that are burning in her mind and maybe, hopefully, she can get an answer.

Willa was a kid when Waverly was born. Sure, a very young kid, but a human that can retain information and create memories. She might know something in that college brain of hers she’s so adamant of show off.
Waverly looks at her sister, next to the cash register. Crouched in front of her laptop, Willa taps numbers quickly on the number pad. She squints, looking attentively at the records Wynonna has been keeping. Waverly steps closer, little by little and Willa seems to not notice or ignore her.

Moving the notebook in different angles, Willa frowns. “What the fuck is this?” Willa asks and it takes a long second to Waverly to understand that it's directed to her.

She gets closer to look at the page Willa is asking about. Wynonna’s crooked numbers on the page are unintelligible.

“it’s that a fifty-nine or a fifty-four?” Waverly squints, too.

“I think it’s sixty-four?”

“Maybe she was laughing when she was writing it,” Waverly contains a smile breaking over her face.

“So a sixty-nine,” Willa says and taps the numbers in the computer. Waverly looks at it for a second but there’s a reason she is a musician and not math nerd, so she looks away and decides to leave the numbers to Willa.

“So,” Waverly starts. “Everything in order?”

Willa shrugs without taking her eyes from the screen and adds the next number. “She does a decent job.”

Waverly looks at a page in the side and notices the big number in the bottom. “Golly, is that what we made last weekend?”

“Do you mind?” Willa finally turns and gives her an annoyed look. “I’m busy.”

Feeling eight again, Waverly takes a step back. “Sorry.”

Willa rubs her temples and after a few seconds, she speaks again. “No, I’m- I’m sorry,” she lets out the words like it’s sandpaper going through her throat and her face turns a tone of red she has only seen that one time when she found out that Waverly had mistakenly washed her favorite sweater and made it shrink. But this time it’s not from anger.

It catches Waverly by surprise. She tries to remember if she has ever heard that from Willa without Gus in the back supervising that her big sister did the right thing. Waverly doesn't say anything and Willa just goes back to her work.

Luckily, the bell sounds and Waverly’s attention goes to the group of girls entering the cafe. her stomach does a flip in anticipation before she remembers that Nicole is not in town and Waverly looks at the faces. She can identify some of them now, including Andy’s and Eliza’s. All of them are in sports gear.

“Hi, Waverly!” Eliza smiles widely as she walks to the cash register with another girl and the rest go to move a few tables to sit.

“Hi,” Waverly says and get ready to take their order as Willa moves a little to the left to give her space.

“We would like, uh. Nachos. Four orders?” Eliza asks the other girl.
“Five, and can I get a bottle of water?” she asks, leaning on the counter.

“Five orders, then,” Eliza says as Waverly moves to take a bottle of water from the small fridge they have under the counter. “And ice,” Eliza says and both of them watch the girl swallows half of the bottle in one go. “Maybe put some tea in the ice.”

The girl offers the bottle to Eliza and the blonde drinks the rest of the water. “And sugar,” she adds.

“That too,” Eliza wipes her mouth with the back of her hand.

“For uh,” the other girl turns to count the people at the table where they’re shuffling the UNO cards. “Six.”

“Eight, you’re not counting us,” Eliza says.

The girl points at Eliza. “Right.”

“Ok,” Waverly writes down their order and places it in the cash register too, mildly amused by the exchange. “Coming right up.”

Waverly goes to give the order to Fish in the kitchen after they have paid. He leaves the tray where he’s placing cookie dough to prepare the food and Waverly gets back to the cafe to find that Eliza is still standing in front of the counter.

“You guys need something else?”

“Uh, no. We’re good! Tired. We were playing,” Eliza lifts her right arm where she has a net with a basketball in.

Waverly remembers that Eliza is in the basketball team. Maybe that’s why she’s so popular. At least nice popular. “They’re the team?” She asks.

“Some of them,” Eliza shrugs. “Actually,” she leans on the counter, “I think Nicole’s gonna try out for the team next year.”

“Oh,” Waverly perks up at Nicole’s name. “I didn’t know that. That’s cool.” She can picture Nicole doing that.

“Yeah! It’s cool,” Eliza nods. “She’s cool. You know, she actually has one of the best scores in her year, really good at math.”

“Oh.” Waverly could use her help next year.

“Yeah. And she’s always helping others when she can. Real nice of her. And she’s really pretty! Right?” Eliza reaches to squeeze her arm.

“I guess?” Waverly says, even if she knows Nicole is, in fact, really pretty. It’s just that this whole exchange feels odd.

“And now she plays the guitar! Well, I guess that’s not that impressive taking into account that you taught her.”

“Are you talking about Nicole?”

Waverly and Eliza jump a little when they notice Andy approaching.
“Hi, Andy!”

“Hey! Are you talking about Nicole?” Andy puts a strand of her dark hair behind her ear. “She’s so cool!”

“No, she’s lame,” Eliza alternates her eyes between her and Andy.

“What?” Ok, this is really odd.

“Don’t be mean,” Andy shoves Eliza lightly. “Where is she, tho? I’ve been trying to contact her so we can keep working on the bikes.”

“She’s visiting her grandmother,” Waverly responds automatically.

“Real busy,” Eliza adds.

“Really?” Andy looks disappointed, not as much as how Waverly felt when Nicole told her. “Oh, well. I’ll call her then.”

“Oh, she doesn't have reception there,” Eliza says, pity in her voice.

“But, she talks with her cousin at certain hours, right?” Waverly says, remembering it herself. “Maybe you can call her then. But I don’t know what time...”

“At noon,” Eliza tells her and then she turns to see Andy. “I mean. No. I don’t know?”

“Do you know or not?” Andy asks her, confusion on her face.

“Oh- Oh, look!” Eliza grabs Andy by the shoulders and turns her around. “I think they’re dealing the cards! Let’s go, Andy!” She pushes Andy to the tables, leaving Waverly confused.

Ding!

Wynonna storms into Homestead later in the day as Waverly makes some notes in the new music sheet she’s reading.

She's doing some work while she waits for Robin. She's going to help him decorate his room and be that right hand he needs so much. He doesn't complain, but Waverly still feels a little guilty about it.

She puts her pencil down as Wynonna walks to her. Her sister looks in a good mood, contrasting last week when Willa and she wouldn't stop fighting. Maybe it's because she has been out of Homestead over the last few days. Where? Apparently with freshly shaved Doc who walks through the door, adjusting his hat.

"Baby girl!" Wynonna leans down to hug her. "Guess who got lucky?" she pulls the other chair in the table and sits while Doc reaches them.

Waverly's eyebrows shot to her hairline while she looks between the two.

"No, not like that, you weirdo," Wynonna scrunches her nose. "I got lucky, not him."
“You sure have a lot of luck, darling,” Doc rolls his eyes and pulls a chair from another table to sit, taking off his hat.

“What? Are you still angry? It was a fair game Doc, It’s not my fault you got a shitty hand,” Wynonna puts a smug smile and glances at Waverly's papers. "It's summer, you're supposed to have fun in summer, Waverly."

"It's not boring," Waverly defends and collects the pages.

"Whatever,” she leans her elbow on the table and her head in her hand for a second but straightens up while her eyes shine and Waverly knows a bad idea is coming. “You know what?” Wynonna takes her arm. “We should go out! What do you wanna do? I got money, baby!”

Waverly flinches. “I kinda promised Robin I’d help him with something, he's picking me up.”

“Waverly! No!” Wynonna pouts. “You're just going to end up watching that lame movie again.”

“Willy Wonka is not lame, and the original one really-“ Waverly starts.

“Why did he punch that kid, again?” Her sister interrupts her and the question makes her heart miss a beat. She hasn’t told them the full story due to the fear that Wynonna might do something Wynonna. “I mean, respect,” she salutes, “but at least learn how to throw a punch.”

For lack of a better answer, Waverly just says “I guess”.

Wynonna looks at the roof, thinking and then looks at her with decision on her face. “We should teach you.”

“Teach me what?”

“To throw a punch.”

“We? As in me too?” Doc points to himself.

“I’m not going to hit anyone,” Waverly crosses her arms.

“It’s basic knowledge,” Wynonna insists. “You can’t go around without knowing how to defend yourself. Right, Doc?”

Doc shrugs and nods. “I can see the importance.”

“You know what, I’ll do you both a favor. Just tell Robin that I’m driving you there. We’ll teach him too.”

“His hand is broken,” Waverly reminds her.

“He has another,” Wynonna waves her off with a hand and stands up, her chair gnashing against the floor. “Ok, let me just go for something real quick,” she says before jogging to the backdoor.

“Wynonna, no-“ Waverly tries to stop her, but Wynonna is already gone. “She’s not going to change her mind, is she?” She asks Doc.

He shakes his head, a little smile on his lips. “I am afraid she will not, baby girl. Now,” he rubs a hand on his chin, “do you think I look better shaved or-“

A voice cuts through all Homestead, making them both jump. There’s clattering in the tables and
someone’s cup hitting the floor. “Doc Holliday!”

Kate walks between the tables to them as Rosita moves to help the poor guy that now has a big stain of coffee all over his white shirt. She makes sure to throw Kate a dirty look.

“Sorry,” the guy says as Rosita starts to clean up.

“Don’t worry. I’ll bring you another.”

Kate finally reaches them, while everyone in the cafe resumes their business, and puts her hands on her hips. “I’ve been looking for you all over town!”

Doc puts back his hat. “Kate, how was home?” He asks, his tone polite.

“Home is still there, Doc.” Kate sits in the empty chair and throws a smile to Waverly. “Hi, Waverly!”

“Hi, Kate,” Waverly smiles back, feeling very in the way of their conversation. She hopes that Wynonna takes longer in the apartment or she’ll get all pissed at Doc and Kate. For someone that swears that Doc is only a friend, she gets jealous too easily.

“Your dad’s been asking for you, love,” Kate returns to look at Doc, who looks just a little uncomfortable. “He wants to know when you're going back to college.”

“Kate,” he breathes out. “He knows damn well I simply cannot afford it.”

“I know, love,” Kate moves closer to him to put her hand over his, but Doc moves away smoothly.

Waverly stands up, taking her pages. “I’m just going to put these away,” she points to the counter and walks away, but she can still hear them talk in a hushed voice as she writes a text to Robin.

“Kate, we’d talked about this.”

“Fight it, but I read it in my cards, love. Time is ticking,” Kate croons.

Hitting send, Waverly lifts her head and finds Wynonna standing at the end of the counter, frowning at Kate and Doc who are unaware of the lasers Wynonna is shooting from her eyes.

Waverly moves slowly to not draw attention to them and leave before Wynonna can start her thing with Kate, but her hands are slippery and her phone falls from her hand with a dull thud when she tries to put it in her pocket, making Doc look back at her and, subsequently, to Wynonna.

Her sister makes a show of ignoring him. She walks to her and takes her by the arm. “Waverly, we’re leaving,” she says, turning their backs to Doc.

“Wait,” Doc stands up, trying to follow.

But Wynonna pulls her through the back door, leaving him behind.

A quick motorcycle drive later, they’re in Robin’s backyard. How to properly deck someone 101 goes smoothly and Wynonna seems to enjoy punching the laundry bag they improvised as their punching bag. Robin takes in all Wynonna teaches them and seems to understand that Waverly
hasn't told her sister the full story. Waverly punches the bag too, once or twice, afraid of breaking a nail, but Wynonna seems satisfied about it so she declares the lesson almost successful.

“I won't give you nerds a grade until I see you in action,” she says, helping Robin carry the bag back inside.

Robin tells Waverly that she can help him another day and Wynonna takes her for a longer ride.

They get back at night and Willa seems to be in a good mood that extends the rest of the week. Her sisters don’t fight for the rest of the time Waverly is in Purgatory and she leaves for the city feeling just fine.

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Saturday morning, Nicole wakes up out of pure Pavlovian response, feeling Dolls’ presence outside until she remembers where she is when she can’t find her sneakers in the usual spot under her bed. But it’s morning and she’s already awake, so Nicole sits up and contemplates the room while she waits to see if her will to be awake lingers.

The air carries the freshness of the dew and the sun shines in that pretty way that it only does in the mornings, and Nicole is not very fond of it, mostly because she would rather not see it and be sleeping. But she appreciates its beauty. The room itself is not very special if we talk about looks. The furniture is old fashioned, proper for a grandma’s home, and holds very little in the small space, the only things that seem out of place are Nicole’s. Might not have much, but it feels like it’s her room. Out of sentiment, at least.

It’s the same room she’s been using since, well, forever. It has changed, of course, but at the same time, it’s the same. Just like this house and just like this town. Little things always change and when Nicole realizes it, she has already assimilated them as normal. But she can feel herself playing with her stuffed animals and toys on the carpet. She can feel like fifteen-year-old Greg is going to come in the room to play a prank on her, or like her mom is going to come in calling her for breakfast and toy with her clothes until she decides that Nicole looks presentable.

The circumstances couldn’t be more different. Instead, she savors the sounds of the morning: the chickens cackling in the pen, the croaking of the wood, the snores of Thomas coming from downstairs, the birds that are far more eager to be awake than her. It’s nice, regardless.

She stands from the bed and takes her phone automatically and walks outside the room and into the hall. The door of grandma’s room is open and she peeks inside to find her and her aunt sleeping and when she walks in front of Greg’s door, she can't hear a single thing.

With a shrug, she goes back to her room to dress up and tie her hair. She walks slowly down the stairs unceremoniously, not afraid to wake up Thomas and walks out of the house.

Nicole can feel Xavier’s energy from Purgatory, commanding her to start jogging and silently curses him for imposing this kind of terrible behavior on her.
Even if she runs mostly the same amount she does in Purgatory, it feels eternal. Maybe it’s because this time Dolls’ voice is not constantly scolding her for not being faster or because the road is different and somehow new or because she loses the motivation a few minutes in when she remembers that there’s no visit to Homestead afterward. It’s probably the fact she keeps getting distracted by the most simple things.

The light of the sun penetrates the foliage of the trees and Nicole stops because it reminds her of the color in Waverly’s eyes. Is Waverly awake yet?

She passes a crooked tree that looks like that ugly chair in Homestead and Nicole slows her pace. Is Waverly working today?

Knocking on Heavens Door comes through her headphones and she trips over a rock. Who put this song in her running playlist anyway? Nicole wonders what kind of music Waverly would like to hear if she were running while she agonizes for a bit in the dirt.

You get the idea. She’s distracted and a little scratched from her fall, but at least her serotonin is high.

When she’s back in the house, it looks far more alive than it did earlier. She barely steps in the house when Aunt Sarah asks her to tell Greg that breakfast is almost ready, but first Nicole splashes her face in the kitchen faucet and plants a kiss on grandma’s cheek. Thomas smiles to her, lifting his eyes from his book and comments that he’s vacationing from running too after complimenting her for her good habits.

Content from watching grandma Lucy look healthier every day and beaming at the prospect of food, she walks across the yard to Greg’s workshop.

Hunched over his work table, Greg is drawing something on a piece of wood that Nicole can’t make out. She leans next to him and he barely lifts his head to see her as he traces a line, just to acknowledge her presence.

“Why do you look like that?” He says, getting even closer to the wood as he takes the compass and spins it to leave a neat circle.

“Like what?”

Greg moves the wood to have a better angle to trace the next line and Nicole can start to make out what he’s drawing. “Did you go running?” There’s a bit of teasing in his voice that makes Nicole roll her eyes.

She hums and Greg finally leaves his pencil and straightens up, making him look like a tower. “Oh, cool then,” he says, looking down at her. “Waddup.”

“Your mom says that breakfast is almost ready,” Nicole tries to stand straight so she can level up a bit with Greg

“Ok,” he takes off his cap and passes a hand through his hair and puts it back again. “Just lemme finish this real quick,” he hunches over the table again and Nicole relaxes her posture. She misses the time when she thought she could get as tall as him. Those were the days.

Looking at him draw, she suddenly remembers Andy and the fact that she never actually told her that she was leaving. They had promised to finish the bikes during summer and she totally forgot. She guesses that she must know by now. Her hand reaches automatically to her phone before she remembers that there’s no signal. A groan slips out of her throat.
“Almost done,” Greg says, thinking that she’s being impatient. “There,” he lifts the wood to show her. “Does this looks like…” he takes a picture from under a pile of notebooks and puts it next to the wood, “-this?”

Nicole tilts her head, comparing Greg lines in the wood to the carved wood in the picture. It looks like a bunch of flowers and vines. “Actually, it does.”

“Great,” Greg beams and puts them on the table. “Hey, I need to do some deliveries this afternoon. Wanna come?” He says as they walk to the house.

“Yeah,” Nicole says enthusiastically and then clears her throat, “I mean, sure,” she tries to look less desperate for internet.

Greg throws her a big smile and even if they definitely not kids anymore, she feels like they’re going to start playing cops and robbers in any minute.

This weird place that felt like home more than anywhere else warms Nicole’s insides. Or maybe is the smell of food coming from the kitchen.

Despite Waverly’s wishes, she gets back to Big City on Friday. Willa tags along, leaving Wynonna in charge of Homestead for the weekend.

It’s fine, Waverly thinks, Willa has been keeping her nice mode on, most of the time. Sometimes she looks like she’s going to snap but instead of saying some mean remark to Waverly, she seems to breathe very deeply and closes her eyes for a few seconds. It’s, honestly, scary.

And it’s fine because Robin is in town too since he has to go to the doctor to see if everything is going well with his broken knuckle. He texts her that everything is ok on Friday night and they make plans to rescue Mark from his room that apparently he hasn’t left in days, according to his mom.

"Seasonal depression is a thing, you know," Mark grunts, narrowing his eyes at the bright day as they drag him out of his building. He tugs at the sleeves of his shirt to cover his arms.

"Yeah, and it’s supposed to happen in winter," Robin says and takes away Mark's cap. "You need sun."

"Waverly," Mark pouts and leans his head on her shoulder, bending his body to reach. "Protect me."

Waverly pats his back sympathetically and Mark lifts his head when he hears the sound of Robin taking a picture of them with his phone. He groans and complains for a while until they reach the park and Mark start to loosen up when Robin starts teaching him a body percussion pattern they learned in class. Waverly has to continue the lesson when Robin realizes that he can do it completely because of his hand.

Props to him, he only lets a little bit of frustration be shown.

It’s a nice morning and Waverly barely wonders what’s Nicole doing. And by barely she means a lot.
An attempt to contact her had been done earlier in the week, when she was just a little bit bored in the apartment, lying in her bed. Chrissy had been texting her from whatever beach she was at and Waverly opened Nicole’s chat every time she ended texting Chrissy and re-read all the old texts. Of course, it said that Nicole hadn’t connected since last Sunday and that was just a little bit disappointing. But then she remembered the conversation with Andy and the possibility that Nicole had signal, just not internet and she dialed.

It was very disappointing when her call went straight to voicemail.

It took a whole lot of courage and her heart started to beat so fast she worried she might have the same thing uncle Curtis has. And she’s not about to explain her heart behavior right now. Or soon. It’s a lot, ok?

They arrive back to the apartment a little later, when the heat of the city starts to get a little bit unbearable. Curtis happily receives them and Willa happily ignores them and they happily enjoy the air conditioning. After a while, they go out again just to the convenience store to buy some ice cream.

A chilly feeling fills Waverly’s chest as they approach the store, hoping that Champ is not working today. Luckily, behind the counter is only Satoi reading a magazine. He greets them with a smile on his face and they chat while they debate what flavor of ice cream to buy.

Robin takes a bag of frozen vegetables and shows it to Waverly with a not so bright smile. “Should I bring one to Gus? You know, to replace the one she got me.”

“I don't think she minds,” Waverly shrugs as they walk to pay. “Hi, Satoi!”

He puts his magazine down and waves a hand. “Hi, Waverly! Hi, Robin!”

"Meet Mark, Satoi."

"Hey," Mark waves awkwardly his hand and returns it to his pocket.

"You seem in a good mood, Satoi," Robin comments as Satoi beeps their ice cream through the cash register.

"Very good week!" Satoi smiles. "Young Hardy is not problem this week. Working harder."

"Champ is being nice?" Robin asks in disbelief and Satoi nods energetically.

"Oh, you really punched the ego out of him," Mark laughs.

"You punch Hardy?" Satoi asks, his eyes wide open.


Waverly snorts and Robin groans.

"Oh! Thank you!" Satoi does a little reverential display. "Courage!" he punches the air.

Mark punches the air too. "You wanna know the story," he asks to Satoi, "oh! You wanna see the video?"

"Is there a video?"

Mark pulls out his cell phone and plays the video to Satoi and Waverly and Robin join, just a little
uncomfortable as the video plays on a loop.

They hear someone entering the store, but Satoi seems to be entertained by the video. He tears his eyes away to look at Robin with a little bit of awe. "Why you punch him?"

"Uh. He was," Robin looks at Waverly, seeking for permission and she shrugs. She trusts Satoi. "He was being inappropriate."

"With Waverly?" Satoi deduces, his eyes a little darker and Waverly wonders if Champ is going to get punched again.

"Who did what to Waverly?"

Robin, Mark, and Waverly freeze at the cold voice of Willa coming from behind. Satoi puts on his best customer service face.

"Willa!" Waverly turns around to see Willa with her arms crossed and arching an eyebrow. "What are you going here?"

"Gus sent me for some butter," she shows them the butter bar she has in one hand. "What are you talking about?"

"Robin defended Waverly’s honor!" Satoi punches the air again, unaware of Waverly’s panic.

Willa frowns. "What does that mean?" She demands and then rips Mark’s cellphone from his hands, where the video is still playing in a loop.

“Hey, that’s mine,” Mark protests.

“What did he do to you?” Willa ignores him and takes a step closer to Waverly, towering over her.

Feeling on the spot, Waverly finds herself tongue-tied. She doesn’t know what she’s supposed to say.

“He was grabbing her,” Marks snaps, taking his phone back from Willa's hands, “he had it coming.”

“Do you want a bag?” Satoi asks, finally reading the situation and trying to draw attention to him.

“How long has that been happening?” Willa demands.

“For a while, I mean, no." Waverly shakes her head, trying to put her ideas in place, she had always have trouble talking when Willa gets in this mode. “He- Champ is always annoying but, come on, he’s inoffensive. He never did anything like this until that day and Robin-“

“Are you defending him?” Mark asks in disbelief.

It makes Waverly stop, because yes, she’s defending him. Her stomach fills with guilt and she looks at her feet, unable to look at Willa’s cold eyes or the anger in Mark’s, the awkwardness in Satoi’s or to look at Robin, who broke his hand on her behalf.

“What the hell, Waverly.” Willa puts down the butter and slapping a bill in the counter with force, making Satoi jump a little. “Does Gus know?” She asks as Satoi moves behind the counter.

“Wynonna?” Willa doesn't look at her, instead, she eyes Satoi, waiting for her change.

“No, I didn’t- it’s just that-“
Satoi gives Willa the change and she turns to give a cold stare to each one of them to then leave without a word.

“She’s so intense,” Robin breaths out and Waverly feels relieved to find his kind eyes instead of the judgment she was expecting.

Mark, picking the icecream from the counter, does looks angry. “What’s the damage with your sister?”

“She’s an Earp,” Waverly says as Robin pays Satoi.

They leave the store and Waverly excuses herself. Mark and Robin don’t ask. By the terror in Waverly’s eyes they understand that she needs to head back. They hug her and assure her that they’re going to be at Mark’s for the rest of the day, in case she wants to rejoin.

Waverly walks fast to the apartment. She knows the signs, the way Willa walked away without saying anything and that distinctive shine in her eyes like she hit the jackpot. Waverly knows what that means.

She’s going to tell Gus.

Nicole’s phone freezes the second she gets full reception as they get near town. Overloaded with data, the phone starts to bloom with notifications and Nicole watch the list grow with every vibration of the phone.

“So famous,” Greg laughs from the driver seat as Nicole starts to read them.

“Shut it.”

There’s like a thousand texts from chat groups Nicole’s in and a few individual texts, mostly from Jeremy and Eliza, keeping her up with all that’s happening in Purgatory which is not much. But the pictures and memes put a smile on Nicole’s face.

Andy, Mon 14:22: Can’t believe you left without telling me

Andy, Mon 14:22: Don't worry

Andy, Mon 14:24: I'll keep an eye on the bikes

Andy, Mon 14:32: Call me when you can th

Andy, Fri 12: 41: When are you coming back?

Nicole read the texts but don't respond, instead, she moves to her social media. On Instagram, she feels a sting of jealousy when she sees that Robin posted a picture of Waverly, hugging a guy she doesn’t recognize. She thinks it might be Mark, but she’s not sure.

No, it must be Mark. She liked him when she met him and he seemed nice and he didn't seem like he was especially friendly with Waverly. So no need to panic, Nicole thinks as her insecurities start to crawl inside of her. It’s just that whatever is happening between Waverly and her doesn't seem to
be completely clear, so yeah, Nicole is a little spooked that the progress will disappear while she’s away.

She can’t see why someone wouldn’t pass up the opportunity to be with Waverly. If Nicole were surer of herself and she was sure that Waverly might reciprocate her feelings, she might have done something already.

It was easier with Shae, she thinks. And it might be simple with Andy, but Waverly is just something else. She makes Nicole spark in a way nobody has before and she hopes, begs the universe, that she actually has a chance.

“We’re here,” Greg stops the car in front of an old house and she puts her phone away in order to help Greg bring down the things from the bed of the truck.

No wonder Greg has gotten so big. Her muscles protest as she tries to carry down the closet on her own. Greg hurries to help her and lifts the whole weight on his own while Nicole settles to bringing down the set of chairs. She really needs to do some extra push-ups.

As the owner of the house and Greg go into the house to put away the furniture and talk business, she stays in the back of the truck, taking advantage of the reception.

The phone rings in her hands while she’s in the middle of watching a YouTube video, Andy’s name on the screen.

“Hi?”

“I can’t believe you left me on seen,” Andy says on the other side of the line, a teasing tone in her voice.

“What?” She asks and then remembers that she actually left the text Andy sent her on seen. “Oh, right. No, I was going to write back in a second.”

“Hmhm. So, how are you? How’s your spiritual retirement. Reach Nirvana yet?”

Nicole laughs. “It’s going fine and yes, I have been enlightened. You will only hope to reach this level of spiritual power in your dreams.”

“Wow,” Andy laughs and then leaves a second of silence that Nicole uses to worry about mixed signals. “You didn't tell me you were going away.”

“Oh, I just forgot,” she scratches the back of her head as she sees Greg get out of the house, still talking with the owner.

“It’s ok, you can make it up to me. When you get back, do you-“ Andy clears her throat and Nicole can sense what’s coming. “Would you like to hang out?”

“Yeah, we still have to finish the bikes, don’t we?” Nicole says, hoping that that’s still friendly territory.

“I meant like- No, yeah! Yes. The bikes!” Andy laughs and Nicole feels relieved that she dodged that one.

Greg shakes hands with the man and starts walking toward the truck, putting on his cap backward. “I gotta leave, I’ll text you when I get reception again,” Nicole promises.
“You better,” Andy says before Nicole hangs up.

“How did it go?” She asks Greg as he leans on the truck, arms crossed.

“Great, he wants me to redo all the flooring upstairs.”

Nicole jumps out of the bed. “Cool.”

“So,” Greg says once they’re driving away to pick up some things from town, “do you still want that job or...?”

Nicole lifts her eyes from her phone where she’s just stalking Waverly a little, making sense of what she has been doing during the week and debating if she should call her or text her of something.

Making a quick recount of her savings in her head, she considers if she wants to work with Greg. She needed the job to pay for her bus ticket, but now that Thomas paid for it, she has enough to pay for her ticket back. Although, she wouldn’t mind having a job now that Grandma Lucy is healthier and there’s less to do at the house. Also: money. “Sure.” She shrugs, “why not?”

“Cool.”

“I’m going to have a few words with him,” Curtis walks around the kitchen table, his face red and his fists clenched.

“Curtis,” Gus says as he is halfway through the living room. “He’s a kid.”

“Right,” he stops and turns on his heels to walk back to the kitchen, not looking anymore relaxed. Standing in the threshold, he groans and turns around again, stumping his way to the door. “Then with his parents,” his voice muffled by the distance. “I don't care. Someone has to- Or I will-“ they hear the door slam behind him, the three of them wincing.

“Shouldn’t we, like, stop him or something?” Willa turns on the light of the oven to check on the bread, looking not even remotely guilty for throwing this bomb in the apartment.

Waverly, meanwhile, is conflicted. She didn’t want to tell Gus and Curtis because she knows that it would just mean trouble, unnecessary trouble and attention she was happy to not have on her. Thanks to all the gods that this happened in the last days of school and that Robin ended up taking the spotlight instead of her.

And she didn’t want to tell Gus specially, because, I don’t know, maybe because she feels like she’s screaming into a void everytime she wants to talk to her. Even if deep down, she knows that her aunt really cares, Waverly is just annoyed by her and she refuses to tell her everything that goes by in her life. She’s grown up enough to have some sort of privacy. And this whole thing is going to end up making Gus feel like they have to have the talk that Waverly has been avoiding for a lot of months now.

“Nah,” Gus shifts in her chair, crossing her arms. “He’ll change his mind before he gets to the Hardy’s. Men,” Gus rolls her eyes.
The silence extends in the kitchen between Gus and Waverly, each one in one end of the table, while Willa just goes around the kitchen and pulls the banana bread out of the oven. She leaves it on the table, steaming, and sits down, unconcerned by the situation.

“They're always acting like they’re entitled to get whatever they think they deserve.” Gus looks at Waverly, expectantly. “So. Why don’t you tell me your perspective of the story?”

Tearing away her eyes from her hands in her lap, Waverly meets Gus eyes and bites her lip.

“Don’t make me go to Robin and get the information out of him. I’ll waterboard him.”

“Champ didn't.” Waverly breathes deeply and closes her eyelids. There she goes again, trying to defend Champ’s actions even if she knows he’s the one who did wrong. “He did. I just- I didn’t think he was capable of that. He’s always acting so different, like, one day he's nice, then he tries to gaslight the whole school into thinking I am some kind of-“ Waverly bites her tongue, but her frustrations is getting the best of her, “and then he tries to take me to the dance and go out with him again.” She shakes her head. “I’m sorry.”

“Why, baby girl? You don’t have to be sorry.”

“It’s just that I keep falling into his game and-“ Waverly’s eyes return to her nails as she fiddles with her fingers. “I just hate it so much. I thought I could just avoid him but then he started to get so- clingy…”

“Did he corner you?”

“Kinda,” Waverly shudders, feeling cold all the sudden. “It was” she rubs her hands over her bare arms, “like a show to him, like he was trying to prove a point to his friends. I’m sorry-“

“Waverly, Jesus,” Willa whispers in frustration, gaining a pointed stare from Gus.

“No, I’m not sorry,” Waverly corrects herself. “But I am. I’m sorry that I thought I had it under control and I’m sorry that Robin got hurt and that now Curtis is mad and you and-“

“Oh my god, Waverly,” Willa groans, standing up. “It's not your fault,” she says facing the wall as she scrambles around for something in a drawer. “This happens and it’s all sorts of wrong and gross and unfair but it’s not your fault. Don't be dumb.”

“Willa,” Gus scolds her.

“What?” Willa turns around with a knife and sit again to cut a slice of bread, even if it is probably still very hot. Her face is a little red and Waverly is taken aback not just because of the knife in her hands but for the sudden display of support.

“Baby girl,” Gus stands up and sits in the chair next to her, so it doesn't look so much like an interrogation anymore. “Look, I am sorry too. I’m sorry that you felt like you couldn’t come to me-to us,” Gus takes her hand from her lap and holds it between her warm ones. “I know I’ve been hard on you these past weeks, but I do want the best for you. We do.”

Gus looks at Willa, expecting her to say something but her sister just rolls her eyes and shrugs, then bites on the piece of bread.

“We do,” Gus concludes. “So let’s see if we can contact the school to see that they take some disciplinary action. If Curtis doesn't beat up Mr Hardy. Unless, you have a different opinion. We can use the next days to go over our options. Ok?”
“Ok,” Waverly feels eight again and Gus and Curtis are explaining that they’re going to move away and how that’s going to make things better for them.

“Does Wynonna know?” Gus asks.

“If Wynonna knew, Champ will be left without descendants and Wynonna would be crossing Mexico’s frontier by now,” Waverly says, trying to lighten up the conversation.

Gus laughs and Waverly can see Willa containing a smile.

“I knew Robin wouldn’t do something like that without a real reason. Do his parents know?” Her aunt asks.

Waverly shrugs and they hear the door opening and Curtis’ heavy steps marching into the apartment. He drops in the empty chair and tosses his keys on the table. The three of them look at him expectantly.

“I changed my mind,” he grunts and Willa cuts a piece of bread for him.

Curtis walks Waverly to Mark’s home later even though she tells him that it’s absurd and that nothing bad is going to happen to her on the way there.

Mark has a little keyboard with four octaves that they pull out of its misery, gathering dust in his closet and Robin tries unsuccessfully to play Bethena with only one hand and without a pedal. Waverly tries to help him but at the end of the day, she’s not that good at sight-reading for the piano. Then it becomes an effort of three until Mark decides to try on his own, making Robin frustrated when he ignores his instructions as he tries to teach him the minuet in G major.

She's happy just watching them and grateful that they seem to understand that she doesn't want to talk about the talk she just had. Not that she doesn’t want to talk, but not with them. She would rather talk with Wynonna, but she can't do that without risking Champ’s life. The other option is Chrissy, but she's getting a tan on the beach and Waverly really doesn't want to disturb her quality time with her mom.

There’s another person she could talk to, but who, sadly, is unavailable. Or not? Waverly checks her phone to find that Nicole liked a picture Robin uploaded of Mark and her just this morning.

That’s the window, she thinks as she opens the chat and reads that Nicole was just online. The little window of the day where Nicole might have reception. She writes a hey but she erases it and then her mind goes blank on what to say.

She hasn't opened that box yet. Since the day of the contest, she has been avoiding it like the plague. It carries too much meaning in it and it scares the shit out of Waverly. And what is she supposed to say? What do you say when you don't understand yourself?

Swallowing her doubts she writes a simple text and with the last bit of courage, she taps the send button.
Nicole knows she’s sort of a coward and she has been sort of ok with it. But to not have the guts to text Waverly or call her is really annoying. Here she is, mourning the time she’s away from Waverly and ignoring the first opportunity she has to contact her in days. The bravado she had on her the first day is completely gone.

So she sits in the cabin of the truck as Greg drives back to the house fidgeting with her phone, disappointed in herself.

Then. It buzzes.

Waverly, 15:50: Hey! :)

She manages to not drop her phone and stares at the pixels on the screen. Then she snaps out of her trance and taps the screen, writing back.

Nicole, 15:54: hey!!! [Message not sent]

Nicole manages to not throw her phone out the window out of pure fury, containing a scream, and Greg eyes her, mumbling something about internet addiction.

Chapter End Notes

What do you mean I didn't say who won the contest? Weird, it's almost as if I had reorganized the chapters and I didn't get to that point. Oh boy.
There's always music around. Stay vigilant:

Summer - Courteeners
Bethena - Scott Joplin
Minuet in G major, BWV Anh 114 - J. S. Bach

Spotify playlist:

Chap. 9 and 10
The Sun The Trees

Chapter Summary

There's a lot of texting.

Chapter Notes

so, this is summer part 2.

Last chapter and this was supposed to be some kind of interlude before what I consider the next part of the story begins.

When I was writing this I was thinking a lot about the last volume of Death Note that has interviews with the artist and the writer. Anyway, in the interview, Tsugumi Ohba, the writer, said is that his method of writing for Death Note was putting Light Yagamy in trouble and then force himself to figure out the solution. I understand him now lol

As always, this wouldn't be possible without my lovely beta.

By the way, there's always YouTube links and a Spotify playlist in the end notes, just so you can find the songs easily if you get curious about it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Even if she's a bit tired and down and has a hundred doubts in her head, Nicole doesn't want to give up so easily. Staring at the roof in the dim light of the morning, tapping her fingers on the covers, she decides to use this sudden surge of bravado and just go and do it, damn it.

She ties her hair, ties her shoelaces, gives three small jumps on the porch and goes for it. She runs feeling the cold air in her face that soon will disappear into the heat of the day and savor the humidity and runs with purpose. Nicole climbs, falls a few times, get lost a little and reaches the point where her phone finally signals a bit of reception. She grinds to a halt and writes a text and then waits, feeling half proud of herself and half terrified and very, very exhausted.

Nicole not Hot, 7:49: Hi Waves! I don’t have a lot of reception here, sorry! Right now I’m on the top of a hill so i can get some and i’ll be going into town more often to work with Greg. How’s Purgatory? Or are you in the city?

Waverly almost drops her guitar as she snatches the phone from her desk and hits the music stand in the process, her music sheet falls all over the carpet.

For a moment she thinks it is a vision, but she’s very much awake, she can feel it in the fingertips
of her left hand and on the right side of her back, sore from not playing in the right position, slightly crooked to one side.

She bites her tongue, trying to suppress a smile that’s blooming over her face like she’s afraid someone would see it and guess the meaning behind her tainted cheeks before she figures it out herself. Maybe it is herself who she’s hiding from.

Waverly, 8:56: hey! Don’t tire yourself out or you won't grow up! I’m in the city right now but I’m going back to purgatory soon. Bet you're having a blast there must be nice. How’s your grandma?

In different parts of the country, but under the same sun, they text non stop for an hour. Waverly just lays her guitar on the bed, forgetting about the hours of study she needs to complete, and Nicole lays in a patch of grass, the dew penetrating her clothes and cooling her down.

It’s not until Nicole decides she actually needs to head back before they get worried and Waverly starts to feel the need to take breakfast that they say goodbye, promising to text as soon as Nicole gets reception again.

Sunday is a better day.

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Monday not so much.

The muffled screams coming from the principal's office drill into Waverly’s head as she tries to relax on the bench in the hall. The school looks so empty and cold and uninviting, so like every day but with fewer people. She has never been a big fan of it, mostly because the conservatory is in a beautiful old building and going to the two schools on a daily basis, she is prone to compare and choose a favorite. With green areas, tall roofs, wood floor, the constant mix of sound and auditoriums, it was an easy choice.

The real bad thing about the conservatory was the amount of work they imposed on her. It’s not like Waverly is some amateur guitarist with big dreams. She had won two internal contests in the school and another two in the country. Maybe that's why Mrs. Moreno was pushing her to study that many hours and it didn’t used to bother her or anything until normal school work started to get heavier too. They managed to get through it, but she’s not as sure as Robin and Chrissy are. Chrissy is the most dedicated to classical music, she breathes it and eats it for breakfast. Robin, not that much, but he really has a true fascination for jazz. That’s why he’s not so devastated to leave, classical music was never his forte and he has always believed more in the power of individual work than school. But Waverly, she wonders if there’s more, what more could she do if she had the time to invest? If she had the opportunity to explore more areas before committing herself for life.

So, Waverly still wants to leave the city, as lovely as it can be, sometimes, some places. Somedays, she really understands Wynonna and what drives her to disappear for months. And now Gus engaging in a two-hour argument with the principal, she wants to run out of this high school and
never come back.

She agreed to come forward and they came to see if the school could- should do something about it since it technically happened inside the property.

“They should,” Robin said as they talked at the bus station while they waited for his uncle to buy the tickets back to Purgatory.

“But, if I say something, wouldn’t that mean that you could get in trouble?”

He laughed. “I have a clean record. I doubt they even believe it was me.”

“But the video…”

“Shit, right.” He thought for a moment before his face broke into a smug smile. “Whatever. What are they going to do? It’s not like I’m attending that school anymore.”

Gus stomps her way out to the hall, a furious look on her face, the principal on her tail.

“...Mrs. McCready, you gotta understand that those kind of accusations,” he says in a condescending tone. “He’s just a boy-“

Gus turns on her heels and plants a finger in front of his face. “If you don’t do anything, you can expect legal consequences,” she states in a tone that not even Wynonna has gotten out of her and walks to Waverly to grab her by the arm.

In the car, she can feel Gus fuming in the driver's seat as they sit in silence in the parking lot. Her aunt’s knuckles are white on the wheel and she hasn't even started the car yet.

Waverly feels her phone vibrate in her pocket, but she ignores it.

“Uh,” she starts, “are we really suing the school?”

“No,” Gus says closing her eyes. “But it sounded good, right?” She looks at Waverly, relaxing a little. “We can always transfer you to another school. With your grades, any school would be lucky to have you. Maybe something nearer to the conservatory.” She looks out of the window and finally starts the car. “I just don't want you near that boy again.”

*Maybe something further away*, Waverly wishes and pulls puts out her phone and forgets about everything for a while.

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Nicole not Hot, 8:58: I’m just saying that if i had to choose between my friends to team up in a zombie apocalypse, Jeremy is the right option. He knows stuff. Dolls is too big to feed and Eliza would drag me into danger. Jeremy and I would make a great team

Waverly, 9:02: Didn’t you guys get stuck on the roof in the middle of winter?

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Waverly, 8:46: For real! You have to try it!
Nicole not Hot, 8:47: A crime. Blasphemy. Soup with peanut butter is a crime punishable with death

Waverly, 9:30: Seriously? And you’re critiquing my choices of food?
Nicole not Hot, 9:31: Pineapple on pizza is a gift from the gods. I close my case
Waverly, 9:31: I beg to differ.

Waverly, 9:15: (°)<>
Nicole not Hot, 9:18: (=*w*=)
Waverly, 9:18: Get it away from my fish.

Eliza S, 17:35: Hi Waves! We’re doing a little something tomorrow for my birthday at my house! I hope you can come! It’s in the afternoon! Let me send you my address.
Eliza S, 17:35: [Location shared]

Robin, 17:42: Waves! Jeremy is inviting us to a party! Tomorrow afternoon! Let’s go!

Chrissy, 17:49: Are we actually getting invited to parties? Suspicious.
Chrissy, 17:50: Does this mean that Robin is already popular in his new school? I feel attacked

[Unknown. number], 19:27: Hi, Waverly. It’s Charlie. I was wondering if you’re still able to give me the lessons we talked about.
As insecure as Waverly is when she gets to the party, a little bit too early with her two best friends and an improvised present under her arm, by the time the sun is setting, she’s feeling pretty good.

She felt like an intruder at the beginning of the party. The three of them stood awkwardly in a corner while people started arriving, but Eliza made good use of them and asked them to help. Chrissy and Waverly ended up blowing balloons and quickly were joined by some other people, including childhood classmate Perry Croft. It was bizarre to talk with him, Chrissy was doing a much better job than Waverly, but Perry was polite as always and ended up dancing with them later in the afternoon. Waverly is not a bad dancer either.

It is a fairly big group of friends that Eliza gathered in her backyard for her birthday. There are a lot of conversations going around and food being eaten (with vegetarian options and everything). Chrissy sits next to Robin, but her attention is on Quinn and Hetty as they fight over the right way to roast a marshmallow.

Making good on her word, she sits between Jeremy and Robin in front of the bonfire at a non-dangerous distance while Robin tries to explain the beauty of non-functional harmony to Jeremy,
and despite the extremely boring subject (and the fact that Waverly doesn’t even fully understand it), Jeremy hangs from every word coming out of Robin’s mouth like he’s telling the most exciting thriller.

Most of the basketball team is dancing to the song coming out of the sound system that looks from another era but fills the backyard successfully. The real star there is Perry, though, as he goofs around, dancing around the group with enthusiasm. And even if there’s not that much space, a few people manage to find a place to play soccer in a corner of the backyard. Of course, the match is not very competitive. They’re playing with Eliza’s little brother, around seven years old, and Waverly can see from a distance how Dolls exaggerates his movements to stop the ball from going into the little net. Eliza’s brother scores and the rest of the boys explode in celebration. All very cute.

Soon, Eliza’s mom comes out with a big cake that looks homemade and delicious. Everyone gathers around as Dolls and Skip hold the cake while everyone sings happy birthday and Eliza blows the candles with a big smile on her face.

The cake is, indeed, delicious. Or so they say. Waverly eats a little tower of Oreos instead.

In the corner of her eye, she sees Robin laughing with Jeremy and Dolls and she knows he’s going to have an easy time adapting to life in Purgatory. Waverly feels like she belongs and not for the first time, she wishes Nicole was there.

Waverly, 8:11: I’m happy to inform that Jeremy didn’t suffer any kind of accidents related to fire and that Eliza’s little brothers are super adorable

Nicole, 8:14: I know!

Nicole, 8:15: Don't distract me. I’m at church lol

Waverly, 8:15: :o

“Dude,” Greg elbows her making her drop her phone She barely catches it before it hits the floor and straightens her back to glare at Greg. He presses his lips together to contain a smile and Nicole ignores the dirty looks of the people sitting around.

Nicole is restless. It’s the first day she isn’t running and she has to stop her leg from bouncing every time she realizes she’s doing it. With her hand interlocked in her lap, she contains the need to pull out her phone and text Waverly. After all, it’s not like she’s paying much attention to the sermon. She has never been a religious person.

But her grandma is. A very devoted woman so she has no problem enduring a few visits a year just to accompany her. How Greg does it all the time, she doesn’t know.

Grandma Lucy used to take her to church every Sunday that she was visiting when she was little. Nicole remembers her mom discussing with Grandma Lucy, once they were over one warm December.

It never bothered Nicole much, it was usually just she and her grandma, sometimes with Greg
when their visits coincided. It was a time where her grandma was well enough to take care of the
two of them for a couple of hours. She would dress them and wait for Mr. Doherty to arrive in his
truck to give them a ride (Nicole always wondered if they had a thing). After leaving the church,
she would take them grocery shopping and they would help her to make a pie later. Or more like
they felt like they were helping but in reality, they were just slowing the process while it took her
grandma longer than needed to prepare it. But it felt like it was especially delicious because of it.

It all stopped after that one argument.

“I just don't want her to get your ideas,” her mom said while she packed their things to go back to
the city for Christmas. Nicole wanted to stay, like always, but she said nothing and picked up her
/toys. Her mom was usually right.

Fair enough, she thought, but it was never about religion. It was about spending time with her
grandma. It changed after that. Nicole felt bad but she didn't want to make her mom angry or get
her grandma in trouble, so she just stayed at the house on Sundays, when they got back, always
feeling bad that her grandma had gone alone or jealous that she had gone with Gregory.

Now, she thinks, she can do whatever she deems correct. So she sits quietly and looks at the detail
in the architecture of the church. The stained glass, the columns, the arches, and the domes. The
gold details and the old wood of the benches. The clothes everyone’s wearing and the shine on
their shoes. She hears the voice of the priest travel through the space and the echo of the little
sounds. And waits for it to end.

“Are you doing better, Lucy?” Mrs. Martin asks Grandma Lucy outside of the church.

“Yes,” her grandma responds, a little bit louder, “the weather is really nice today, really nice. How
is your son doing? Has he married yet?”

Mrs. Martin’s face gets a little confused but tries to keep up with the conversation as Gregory joins
them, smelling a little bit like cigarettes. “No, he hasn't married yet. He hasn’t finished college
yet,” she talks a little bit louder this time.

“What collage?” Grandma Lucy asks, confused.

“No, grandma,” Greg leans down to speak next to her ear. “He hasn’t finished college. He’s
studying to become a nurse. Remember?” He says clear and loud.

“A nurse? Why not a doctor?”

Greg rubs his neck, giving Mrs. Martin an apologetic smile. She doesn't seem to mind the direction
of the talk, though. “Grandma, there’s nothing wrong with being a nurse.”

“Ok, ok. I’m just asking,” Grandma Lucy dismisses him and turns to Mrs. Martin. “I’m glad he’s
doing well, dear. You should bring him to dinner when he comes to visit. Is he gay?”

Mrs. Martin’s face gets a little red but laughs it off. “No, well, I don't think so?”

“Grandma, be nice,” Nicole tells her, squeezing the hand she has on Nicole’s arm.

“What? Is there something wrong with it?” her grandma lifts her eyebrows, a little defiant.
“No, but-”

“No, but-”

“Then. It’s just a question.” She squeezes back and turns to Gregory. “He’s a good prospect, Greg,” she whispers loudly and Greg's face goes super red.

The woman and Nicole laugh at the bluntness of her grandma and they say goodbye. Walking to the truck, Mr. Warren, the owner of the house Greg has been working at, intercepts her cousin and he gives her the keys. She helps her grandma get in the cabin and she rounds the truck to get in from the driver's seat and settles in the middle of the bench, starting the car to connect the aux cable and put her music on shuffle.

“What are you looking for, gran?” Nicole asks after she hits play and turns to see her grandma.

*That's the way everyday goes. Every time we have no control. If the sky...* sounds from the old speakers of the truck.

Lucy scrambles in the glove compartment until she pulls a box of cigarettes. She gives them to Nicole and keeps scrambling. “Throw those away.”

Nicole examines the box and opens them. They’re the same Greg bought outside the hospital. The box is missing just two cigarettes. Maybe he’s finally quitting. As she shoves the box in her jeans, Greg opens the driver’s door and jumps inside.

“Good news! We’re starting tomorrow!” He fists pumps the air and then starts the engine.

“Starting what?” Nicole asks, confused, and they both turn to see Grandma Lucy produce a lollipop from the compartment.

“Work! You still wanna work, right?” He pulls out of the parking lot.

“Yeah, sure.”

“Well, next week. It's nearer the town, so you can stop climbing mountains to text your girlfriend.”

“I don’t- It’s not-” Nicole turns to see her grandma, but she seems oblivious of the conversation as she takes the lollipop’s wrapper off. Who knows if she’s hearing them talk. “I- I don’t have a girlfriend,” she whispers.

“Hm-hmm.” Greg faces turn into a smug smile. “Sure.”

“I don’t.”

*It's all downhill from here...*
Nicole escaped for a second from Greg and Grandma Lucy. She was taking forever to choose what
vegetables she’s going to buy, taking each one in hand to consider it and comparing it to the next.
And her cousin is flirting with the vendor. It was making Nicole sick. So she walked away,
glancing back every now and then to see if her grandma needed something.

Looking for a present for Eliza, she found the pendant in a tent with a lot of jewelry and those
chakra rocks or whatever they’re called. To be honest, she just saw their pretty color and stopped
when one particular crystal reminded her of the color of that one top Waverly owns that makes her
eyes pop. But the vendor started to explain the properties of the crystal and the energies and, for
once, Nicole isn't buying the explanation. She just thinks the rock looks pretty. But maybe Waverly
likes it.

She puts the crystal down and walks away as the vendor is talking to another girl and types back,
sending a picture of the stand too. She wonders what can she say to make Waverly tell her if she
likes something and not sound too obvious.

Nicole not Hot, 11:36: I feel like Mattie would appreciate them more than Eliza.

Nicole not Hot, 11:36: Yeah it is!

Nicole not Hot, 11:36: [image attached]

Waverly, 11:38: haha are you taking advantage of the full reception to send pics now?

Nicole, 11:39: [image attached]

Nicole not Hot, 11:39: you better have space on your phone

Waverly, 11:40: [image attached]

Waverly, 11:40: Two can play the same game.

Nicole stops to a halt as the picture Waverly sent her load on her screen. It’s only her, squinting her
eyes in what Nicole thinks Waverly thinks is a threatening look, but in reality, it’s cute as fuck. The
people in the market circle around her, avoiding her as she stares at the picture.

It feels like they haven’t seen each other in a decade. It warms her heart the reminder that Waverly
exists in some other part of the country and that she sends selfies to her and that she probably likes
her back…

Or maybe not?

Shaking her head, she resumes her walking, but first, she snaps a picture of her Gregory and
Grandma Lucy to send to Waverly.

Nicole not Hot, 11:44: [image attached]

Nicole not Hot, 11:44: That’s my gran <3 next to her is Greg

She walks to another tent where they selling meat and leather products. Definitely not something
she wants to show Waverly. Her phone buzzes.

Waverly, 11:46: What?! Your cousin is two times the height of your granny!

Nicole not Hot, 11:47: I know, he’s a freak. I got all the good genes :smirking emoji:
Waverly: 11:47: Is that big head part of those genes?

“Nicole!” She startles at the voice of Greg calling.

He shakes his arm in the air like he’s not the most visible thing in the market, and Nicole walks back to them and gives a hug to her grandma.

“Where did you go, Ray?” Grandma Lucy asks.

“I was just walking,” Nicole says next to her ear, so she’s sure that her grandma hears her. “I was looking for a present for my friend Eliza.”

“How nice,” her grandma. “Elijah, you say?”

“Eliza,” Nicole repeats slowly.

“Eliza? I thought you were looking for something for your girlfriend,” Greg teases as he sorts the bags in his hands.

“I don’t have a girlfriend,” Nicole repeats, lower so her grandma doesn't hear.

“Oh, what happened with that girl Shae?” Her grandma asks and Nicole's eyes open wide. Sometimes it seems like her grandma just chooses what to hear and what not to.

“They broke up,” Greg says, loudly. Some people around glance at them curiously and Nicole feels her cheeks get hot.

“What did you do, Ray?” Her grandma looks at her worryingly.

Nicole scratches her head. “Nothing.”

“Young love,” it’s all her grandma says.

“Lets just go to the truck, ok?” Nicole hurries them to walk.

They walk at her grandma’s pace, so Nicole still has time to glance around for something for Eliza. She spots a tent selling water bottles and metal straws. Maybe it’s time for Eliza to change her worn-out pink bottle.

“I’m going to see something real quick. See you in the car?” She says to Greg and stalks walking away before hearing his response.

“Sure. Make sure she likes it,” he says, his teasing tone still there.

It’s not a hard pick. Nicole spots a bottle almost immediately that screams Eliza Shapiro and pays for it, but as she walks to the truck, she stops in a table that has handmade notebooks, and on an impulse, she buys one.

Maybe she’ll give it to Waverly. Maybe not.

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Nicole not Hot, 8:02: I’m starting work today. Wish me luck!
Waverly, 8:05: Good luck! :)

Nicole not Hot, 18:35: I’m tired but not tired enough to skip a day of running :arm flexing emoji:
Waverly, 18:36: I just got tired by reading that

Waverly, 12:22: I told you to pay attention and stop texting!
Nicole not Hot, 13:22: It’s bleeding :( :( :( :( :(
Waverly, 12:23: Fingers tend to bleed when you get a splinter in them :( 
Nicole not Hot, 12:29: Greg is looking at it. But I’m afraid he’ll just cut my finger off.
Waverly, 12:29: Oh! We can't have that! We need those fingers
Waverly, 12:29: or how else are you going to play the guitar?

“...sol, la, sol, uh-,” Charlie misses the note. Waverly doesn't stop the claps as she keeps the beat to see if Charlie can catch up, but he slows down and stutters when he says the notes wrong. Throwing his head back, he scrapes a palm down his face in clear frustration, almost too dramatic.

“It’s ok,” Waverly reaffirms once again.
After a few classes, Waverly can't decide if Charlie learns quickly or very slow. It seems inconsistent. But music is like that. One day you feel like a prodigy, nailing every note, and other days is like living in one of those dreams where you run but you can’t move forward. Even if she knows that, something doesn't feel quite right, something in her gut tells her that there's something fishy going on. Which is ridiculous. Charlie is so nice.

Wynonna seems delighted to have him around. Kate has been in town most of the summer chasing Doc around, who is chasing Wynonna around, who is hiding from Doc. It’s good, though. For Waverly. At least.

When Waverly is in Purgatory, Wynonna steals her for the day and drives her on the back of her motorcycle from place to place. She even spends a full week in the city with Waverly. That was kinda hard. There’s this silent agreement to not tell Wynonna about the Champ thing. Luckily, Gus took a break to go and scream at the school board that week. Other times, Wynonna takes her out for a drive through the woods or to the river. They don't tell Gus about it. Surprisingly, Wynonna knows a lot of survival skills and swears she learned with mama, and some with the motorcycle
gangs she met those months she disappeared after getting out of juvie. She doesn't brag about it, but Waverly can sense a little pride when her sister quickly lights up a fire when they go camping with Rosita, Fish, and Levi.

For Doc, though, it’s a different story. Waverly really feels sorry because she really likes Doc. He can be a little hot-headed and old fashioned but the guy really grows on you. And she feels so bad every time she can see his car drive slowly outside of the cafe, or his poor attempt to go undercover to Homestead (hoodie, beanie, sunglasses and freshly shaved). Even worse when he directly asks Levi or Fish or Rosita, trying to get a hold of Wynonna while her sister flees from the cafe out the back door (and one memorable time, out of the window of the apartment).

She truly is a criminal.

But Waverly doesn't know if it’s her place to intervene. Really, how hard can it be to just go and say what you feel and assure the other party that they have nothing to worry about. Then she changes her mind when she remembers all the crap she’s been harboring inside her, like a ticking bomb full of an identity crisis.

Charlie's phone rings, a little past seven, making them acknowledge the hour and summoning Wynonna from one of the rooms. At least her sister waits until the class is done to subtly harass Charlie. They stand up from the piano bench, stretching a little, and Charlie starts to pick up his things after he checks his phone for whatever text he just got.

“Ok, so,” Waverly starts as Wynonna sits on the couch and crosses one leg over the other, “for the next class practice exercises ten to fifteen on the modus novus and practice the same exercises we did today,” Waverly tries to stay professional as her sister rests her elbow on her knee and her head in the heel of her hand and throws a dopey smile at Charlie, who is completely ignoring her in favor of paying attention to Waverly. Fortunately.

“Sure,” he puts his notebook and his folder between his arm and torso. “So, I'll text you when I get my schedule. Ok?"

Waverly nods and Wynonna clears her throat loudly. He finally turns to see her and just offers her a polite smile before returning to Waverly.

“Then I’ll see you around.” He gets close and gives her a polite handshake. “I’ll see myself out.”

Waverly waves him goodbye and starts putting her papers in order. She hears Wynonna and looks from the corner of her eye at how she deflates on the couch.

The main door clicks open and Charlie's voice resounds around the apartment. “Hey, Doc. If you’re looking for Wynonna, she’s in the living room with Waverly.”

Wynonna shoots up off of the couch, looking at the nearest window but Doc marches his way up to the living room, his fist clenched and jaw tense, before Wynonna can make the jump. Waverly drops her papers but lets them spill on the floor in favor of seeing the scene unfold.

Her sister simply plays it off and sits on the couch again, very casual like she wasn't about to jump from a window and takes the electric guitar that's always lying around in the living room.

“Oh. Hi, Doc.” Wynonna doesn't look at him, instead, she puts all her attention on her hands as she starts to play a simple twelve-bar blues. “How’s life with the wife?”

“Why are you avoiding me? Pray tell,” Doc words get out measured, contrasting with his tense body.
Waverly decides to pick up the pages.

“Avoiding you?” Wynonna doesn’t stop playing, but Waverly can hear how she plucking the strings harder. She wonders if they're about to snap. They haven’t changed them in a long time. “I’m just giving you space to hang out with your wife?”

Waverly wishes to disappear.

“My- You-” he takes off his hat to place it in the coffee table and passes a hand through his hair. “Wynonna.”

“John Henry.” Wynonna finally looks at him with defiant eyes.

“You know I’m not married.” Doc puts his hands on his hips, his head crooked.

“Well. I don’t know what to tell you, Doc.” Wynonna stands and turns around to leave the guitar on the couch. “Kate's story seems a little different.”

“She just likes to tease me.”

“I don't wanna know those details.”

Waverly finally picks up the last page and stands, hoping to blend in with the room. Not that any of them are paying her attention.

“So you were avoiding me because-”

Wynonna turns to face him and cuts him. “I wasn't avoiding you.”

“Wynonna-”

“Fine.” She throws her hands to the air. “You caught me. I was busy helping Willa with the cafe. You know how it is to run a business. I didn't want you to know that I can work.”

Doc looks at her, reading her bullcrap. “Oh, but you have time to hang out with Charlie.” The name leaves Doc's mouth like its sour.

“Why do you care so much?” Wynonna rounds the couch.

“You know why.” Doc crosses his arms.

Wynonna crosses her arms, too. “Actually, no.”

“Uh,” Waverly intervenes and puts a hand up, like some kind of kid participating in class. She puts it down, a little bit intimidated by the two pairs of eyes on her. “He was here to see me, actually.”

“Why on earth is he seeing you?” Doc squints his eyes.

“I’m giving him lessons.” Waverly shrugs.

“Of course you are.”

“What does that mean?” Waverly frowns.

“What does that mean?” Wynonna echoes and takes one step to Doc, glaring.

Doc takes a step back, shoulders down. “Look. I was- I just wanted to see if you were ok.”
“Well, I’m fine.” Wynonna walks to the table next to the door and snatches her keys.

“Fine.” Doc sounds calm now, too calm.

“Never better, actually.”

“I see.”

“Awesome!” Wynonna takes her helmet under the table and puts it under her arm.

“Great.”

“Now, if you excuse me.” Wynonna opens the door but before she steps outside, Doc speaks again, his head down and not looking at Wynonna at all.

“She left this morning. Just so you know.”

Wynonna walks back to him until they’re toe to toe and Doc lifts his head. “Aw,” she says condescendingly, “don’t be sad.” She gives him a playful slap to his cheek. “Til death and shit, right?” Then she pivots on her heels and leaves, not even bothering to slam the door on her way out.

For a few seconds, Doc just stands in the middle of the room, looking at the ceiling. Then he walks to the coffee table and picks up his hat.

Waverly lets herself fall to the piano bench and puts her papers on the piano, making sure to align them perfectly while Doc takes an invisible fluff from his black hat.

She arranges her fingers on the keys, thinking the notes in her mind before pressing down. “You know,” she says as she holds the pedal down and arranges her fingers in the next chords slowly, “you could just tell her how you feel.” That’s what Waverly says.

She wonders as the notes linger in the room if she would be capable of doing what she’s suggesting. If when the time comes, and the right person comes, if she would be capable of following her own advice.

Doc’s heavy boots walk to her side and he puts a hand on her shoulder, squeezing tenderly. Waverly turns to see him, to see his sad eyes and a kind smile.

“She could, too.”

Eliza, 11:06: Not to be that bitch but when are you coming back?

Nicole, 11:09: I still don't know, sorry. What? Do you miss me or something? :)

Eliza, 11:09: You wish

Eliza, 11:09: its just that theres some things i wanna talk about that im not like 100% comfortable talking with Dolls or Jeremy

Nicole, 11:12: do you want me to call you?
Eliza, 11:12: nah. Just bring your ass here

Nicole, 11:14: you sure? Are you ok?

Eliza, 11:15: yes. Don’t worry. Just things about Skip, personal stuff but nothing bad! I swear

Nicole, 11:16: personal personal as in you know?

Eliza, 11:16: yes.

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Turns out taking off the rotten wooden floor is the hard part of the job. The second day into it, they decide to call in one of Greg’s friends to come and help. So today Nicole’s job consists of taking out the planks and passing around tools.

That’s why she gets some time to snoop around the house. She finds a picture of a nest of birds on a wall. She naps a picture.

Nicole, 14:05: [image attached]

Nicole, 14:05: It reminds me of that one drawing you did. They’re the same type of birds? I think?

Andy, 14:08: They are! Look at them! How cute! <3

Andy, 14:09: HEY! You have reception! Welcome back to the twenty first century!

Nicole, 14:09: :P

_______

Waverly, 10:38: Wait a minute! Do you make fun of short people because your cousin is taller than you?

Nicole not Hot, 10:39: Why do you have to expose me like this? What did i ever do to you?

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Andy, 12:47: Eliza says that you’re going to try out for the team. True?

Nicole, 12:52: yeah :) It looked like you guys have more fun training that what i had watching haha

Andy, 12:53: lol are you training yet? We take this team very seriously

Nicole, 12:53: totally

Andy, 12:54: I can smell your lies from here haha

Andy, 12:54: When you get back i can help you train, we got a hoop in the backyard.
Andy, 12:54: or we can go to the park with the rest

Andy, 12:55: Btw! I already bought all the pieces we were missing! We can finish those too when you get back

Andy, 12:55: what I'm trying to say is that I miss you but mostly I just want to finish the bikes lol

Nicole, 12:58: you know you can finish yours? Right? Haha i can finish mine when i get back

Andy, 12:59: nah, i can wait :)

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“No!” Chrissy says as she struggles with Mark in the bed, trying to take the tv control out of his hands.

He completely extends his arm, as he tries to put distance in between them. “Robin! Take it!”

“I’m not helping you,” Robin says and takes some popcorn from the bowl in Waverly’s lap. They’re sitting on the floor, watching Chrissy and Mark fight, amused. Chrissy has never been someone who gives up.

They’re about to start the third movie of the day and the sun has finally set. They started with Whiplash just so Mark could be in the conversation every time they do some reference to it. Then everyone shut off Robin’s petition to watch La La Land for who knows what time. He’s a little obsessed. So they watched Donnie Darko, Waverly’s choice. Nicole had talked about it that morning and Waverly was curious. It was good. Then Mark insisted on watching something scary, that lead them to this fight when Chrissy said no and stood her ground.

“Mark, I swear to god.” Chrissy tries to jump on him, but Mark rolls out of bed and onto the floor. Waverly can feel the vibration on the floor. He tosses the control in their direction when Chrissy falls over him. It lands on Robin's lap.

Robin pushes it to the floor like it burned him. “Don’t drag me into it, dude.”

“Traitor!” Mark groans and Chrissy quickly crawls to them and finally takes the control in her hands. She lifts it in the air, victorious.

“Suck it, Mark!” She points it to the TV and starts looking for another movie.

“Not fair.” Mark finally stands up, his shirt all twisted and sits on the bed, defeated. “We saw Donnie Darko. Wasn’t that like at least a little scary?”

Waverly shrugs and stands to sit next to him, offering Mark some of the last popcorn.

“No,” says Robin, turning on the floor to see the screen and gives his opinion on what to watch to Chrissy.

“They’re mean.” Mark pouts and leans his head on Waverly’s shoulder. She just gives him pats on the back. They stay like that, eating the rest of the popcorn and watching Chrissy and Robin discuss what movie to watch.
It’s nice, Waverly thinks, that they get along so well after their break up. After the punch, Chrissy seemed to forgive Robin easily. She knows they talked after that, Chrissy told her, and Waverly doesn’t know what they talked about, but after that they seem to be in a very good place. It is such a relief. When they started dating she was so worried that it was going to break their friendship. Sure, for a while, she felt like a constant third wheel. Those were some lonely weeks. But overall, it didn’t feel much of a change.

Her thoughts are interrupted by the loud sound of her cell phone vibrating on the TV table. Waverly shoots from her seat, making Mark fall to the bed and the bowl of popcorn fall to the floor. She grabs the phone and checks the screen, but it’s just a text from Gus.

“Hurry much?” Chrissy lifts one eyebrow. In the back. Mark is picking up the remains of popcorn from the bed and the floor.

“Sorry, I thought…” She thought it was Nicole who sometimes texts in the late afternoon when she goes for a run, but it’s usually earlier. Running in the woods at night is not a great experience, or that’s what Nicole told her the other day when she got a bit lost. Waverly shakes her head and opens the notification. “It’s just Gus, she wants to know if they’re picking me up.”

Chrissy keeps her eyes on her, studying her but Waverly tries to ignore her and not give any weird signal away that she can misinterpret. “You can stay if you want to,” Chrissy finally says with a shrug and returns to her task of choosing a movie.

“Yes. Let's watch movies all night.” Robin gets up and sits next to Mark.

“Can I stay too?” Mark asks a little shy.

“No,” Chrissy simply responds. “Just us girls,” she turns and puts her tongue out to Mark.

“Seriously?” Robin pouts and Chrissy laughs and tells them that they can stay.

They end up watching Psycho after Robin and Mark convince Chrissy that it’s suspense, no horror. Chrissy still hides her face behind Waverly’s shoulder for most of the movie.

“Hey,” Waverly hears Chrissy’s voice in a whisper waking her up. Chrissy’s room is illuminated just by the screen, but she can see the movie on pause and hear snores coming from the end of the bed. Her neck is a little stiff and she doesn't know what time it is.

“Hm?” Is all she says. She moves to a more comfortable position on the bed and turns her head to Chrissy, feeling herself dozing away.

“If you were seeing someone, you would tell me right?” Chrissy whispers, pulling Waverly to consciousness again.

“Sure.” She frowns, her eyes still close. “Why?”

“You’ve been all over your phone,” Chrissy prompts.

“Oh.” Waverly forces one eye open to look at her friend on the other side of the bed. God, she wishes Chrissy would ask her this in the morning. “No. It’s just Nicole.”
Chrissy hums and frowns, studying Waverly as she did earlier. “Are you sure, cause I could swear you…” Chrissy turns to see the ceiling, illuminated by the light of the screen. Waverly can hear her thinking and forces herself to stay awake. “But…”

“What?”

“No, nothing.” Chrissy turns her head to face her again and moves to be closer. “You like her a lot, right?” She whispers even lower. Waverly wonders of the guys are already sleeping too.

“Yeah, she’s my friend.” Waverly takes Chrissy’s hand in hers and squeezes. “But you’re my best friend,” she assures her.

“I know, those bitches got nothing on me.” Chrissy shoves her slightly, but in Waverly’s state, she feels like she’s falling, making her wake up a little more.

“Be nice.”

There’s a playful smile in Chrissy’s face that Waverly has known for years. “I think you like her a lot.”

“Yeah, I just told you.”

“No, Waverly-“

A loud snore fills the room and both of them break into giggles.

“Maybe we should move them,” Waverly sits and looks at Robin leaning his back on the bed and Mark fully laying on the floor.

“Let me grab some blankets,” Chrissy stands up, her movements slow. “You wake them up.”

“Okey-dokey.”

They end up having to turn up the lights to arrange the blankets and cushions. Robin and Chrissy start to argue about who should sleep on the bed (one advocating for the other) while Mark just lays on the floor, already falling asleep.

While they decided, Waverly takes her phone and looks at her social media. In a moment of curiosity, she opens the web searcher and looks up the name of the town of Nicole’s grandmother. The main information contains a few pictures of landscapes and the point on the map. She reads the small description and then clicks on the climate section where they promise clear skies through the night and the day.

She idly looks out of the window to the orange tainted night sky and wonders if the stars look beautiful and if Nicole watched them today or if she saw movies with her cousin all night as she did with her friends. Maybe Nicole sat to read with her grandma as she told her she does often or maybe she sat through dinner with her dad and aunt, feeling just slightly under interrogation. Waverly wonders if Nicole wonders about her too.

“Waverly,” Robin says, exasperated. “Please just tell Chrissy that I’m fine sleeping on the floor.”

Nicole not Hot, 10:43: the weather? I guess its been nice. Hasn’t rained much
Waverly jumps out of Gus’ car not even waiting for it to get to a full stop and runs to Homestead, where Wynonna is behind the counter, talking to Rosita. There are a few people in the cafe but Waverly doesn’t care. She just rounds it and avoids hitting Rosita and tackles Wynonna, who is totally not expecting it and stumbles, her back bumping with the counter.

“Whoa there,” Wynonna groans but returns the hug, if not with the same intensity, with the same feeling. “What are you doing here? I thought you were supposed to stay with Gus until Saturday.”

“I brought her earlier,” Gus walks in and Wynonna steps away so she can turn and look at their aunt.

“That’s my call,” Rosita says and hugs Waverly quickly before making her way to a table.

Wynonna doesn’t seem too excited to see Gus, but she puts on a good face and leans on the counter.

“Did it arrive already?” Waverly rounds her sister’s waist with an arm, giving her a side hug.

“It hasn’t,” Wynonna tells to Waverly. She places a kiss to her head and turns to her aunt. “It was supposed to be here on Monday, I swear they confirm that they sent it.” She puts her hands up in surrender.

“Have you tried talking to the delivery company?”

“Maybe Willa already mailed it to the college,” Waverly teases.

Wynonna turns to see her, horror in her face. “She can’t do that, can she?”

“I’m joking.” She pats her sister’s back. “You know that’s not how you apply to college, right?”

“How the fuck I’m supposed to know?”

“Language,” Gus scolds. “Talking about Willa, where is she? I need to have a word with her.”

“Oh, upstairs I think,” Wynonna says, pointing at the door connecting the cafe and the stairs to the apartment. Gus leaves without another word, she just sends warning eyes to Wynonna, as she always does.

“What’s her deal?” Wynonna leans her head on Waverly’s. “I thought she was here to scream at me.”

“So, it hasn't arrived yet…” Waverly prompts.

“No.” She can feel Wynonna rolling her eyes. “Whatever, it's not like I need it.”

Waverly separates herself and makes sure to look at her sister, who looks bothered by the subject. “But you worked so hard for it.”

“It’s whatever.”
“It’s not. There must be a mistake and they sent it somewhere else.”

That rips a laugh from her sister. “Knowing my luck, my diploma is being used as toilet paper by some UPS delivery guy.”

“Hey!” She slaps Wynonna’s arm.

Her sister doesn’t flinch, she just pulls a good face. “So, what are you doing here? Not that I don’t like it but Gus is usually more strict about what days she lets you spent here.”

In lieu of an answer, Waverly shrugs her shoulders. She doesn’t know why, but she suspects.

Things hadn’t been easy with the school board and it looked like ultimately Champ was going to get away unscathed, with the exception of a heartless forced apology and his parents grounding him for a few days. Gus was about to break somebody’s face when she saw the principal laughing outside of the building with some people from other high schools they were looking into to transfer Waverly.

There’s no clear answer to where Waverly is going to spend her next year and she has no idea what Willa has to do with it.

Regardless of her unclear destiny, she kisses Wynonna’s cheek when her sister promises to take her to the river the next day and texts Nicole about Frank the rabbit.

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Nicole had never stayed very long at grandma’s, at least not in a long time. That’s what she thinks as she quickly calculates the number of days she has spent at Grandma Lucy’s house. She hadn’t really checked the date on the calendar, not really. Inside, she knew that it had been a few weeks, but she didn’t even stop to think about it too much.

It’s been a really happy summer so far, taking everything into account, and she had made herself busy. Finally got to read a book series Jeremy lent her and binge with Greg his Parks and Rec DVDs. And she has been learning a lot working with Gregory and also learning to cook with Thomas and her grandma. She even reconnected a little with her aunt (and her uncle the days he came to visit.)

Time is flying by and Nicole just internalized that fact. Again, she had never stayed with grandma for long. No that she didn't want to, but mostly because that's what her mother used to decide.

“Just a week, at most, there’s so much to do at the apartment,” she said when Nicole asked how long could they stay. So they left and there was never anything to do at the house, not really. Made up activities and made-up reasons, it made Nicole wonder, for a guilty second, if her mom didn’t like visiting her granny.

But that couldn’t be. It was awesome at grandma’s. There was so much space and she could go playing around in the grass, under the trees, and it was so different from the city. She could go around and walk far away without having to take her mom’s hand and look at both sides of the street. There, she could see the stars at night and the air did not smell like the back of her dad’s car and there was no school and no homework and her room was so much bigger and she could go biking and eat the cookies her gran made and-

“And nothing,” her mom would say. “Your soccer practices start next week.”
The word soccer would change in this particular sentence. Sometimes it was basketball or swimming or some summer camp that took place in the city and, really, why call it a camp then? These were the ones that Nicole actually wanted to attend. So she would ask her granny to make her some cookies to take home. Said cookies would never arrive at the city, Nicole would always eat them on the bus.

There were other times when the word soccer would change for something worse. Like gymnastics or math or some weird program, designed to make her do homework in summer. A real insult to summer. Or that memorable time when her mom dragged her to a ballet studio. Worst week of her life.

Sometimes it was better; sometimes, worse. Either way, they would stay no more than two weeks and Nicole would long for clean air and the forest and the long fields.

Eventually, Nicole won the battle against her mom and finally got free of getting enlisted into random classes and extracurricular stuff just in time to move to Purgatory where she had some of the things she missed so much about being at her grandma’s. Nicole then understood it wasn’t the green fields or tall trees or all that stuff what she missed, but her grandma. Surely her grandma missed her too.

Grandma Lucy was so alone in her home. The years were starting to weigh on her and Nicole would notice every visit that Grandma Lucy wasn’t as active as before. Nicole had to speak louder and louder so her granny could catch what she was saying. She would take longer naps, walk slower and she was getting so small. To be fair, Nicole was always getting a little taller.

Then, anytime she could visit, Nicole would focus more on being with her granny rather than going outside and doing whatever she did before. She was at that age where she was losing interest in playing with toys and apparently starting to gush about boys, after all. Or that’s what they said, the teacher, the parents, the TV.

To everyone’s relief, her aunt and uncle moved back to take care of Grandma Lucy and Nicole envied Gregory for a long long time. She wondered if her mom was as relieved as Nicole was that her granny wasn’t alone anymore. Although, she never actually looked very bothered by that fact.

Last year, Nicole was ecstatic for the summer. Some weeks passed after the end of the school year and her mom didn’t say anything about when they were going to leave. Nicole knew better than to press the subject so she waited a few more days looking sadly at the calendar in the kitchen and planning what she was going to pack. But her mom had a newfound habit of disappearing in the day so Nicole couldn’t really ask if they were going. It was always better not to press on these subjects with her mom.

After understanding that they weren’t leaving and starting to cope with it, Nicole didn't much mind her mom’s absence. Except that the house was so lonely during the day.

No problem, she thought. Spending the day at Eliza’s or Doll’s was better.

There was this one thing, it was like summer classes at the library but they tried to make it sound fun and Jeremy was going and Dolls was out of town and Eliza’s relatives were visiting and her house was super full and Nicole’s was empty, so Nicole signed up.

She felt like a total nerd and like she was betraying her younger self. But at least she wasn’t alone. She teamed up with Jeremy for everything, much like at school.

That’s how it happened, actually. That’s how she met Shae. Nicole was never super good at
acknowledging the faces of her classmates, even less from older kids, with the exception of Dolls and Eliza, clearly.

She was busy pretending to solve a puzzle with Jeremy when this super stunning junior girl sat up with them and actually tried to help Jeremy, who, to be honest, didn't need any.

It hadn’t been long ago, at this point, that Jeremy and she had had a whispered conversation in Dolls’ kitchen (while Dolls and Eliza where were deep smashing buttons on the console) and had basically come out to each other. Jeremy was far more conflicted than Nicole about being gay. Not that she wasn’t conflicted at all. Gregory was out already and everyone took it pretty fine, all things considered. They were taking it so much better than when he told everyone that he wasn't going to college after all.

Jeremy was on the verge of a mental breakdown, but they went through it together.

And when she met Shae, Jeremy was the worst and best third wheel ever. He was more talkative than Nicole and kept throwing these awkward comments that made Nicole want to kill herself on the spot. He was so obvious in his efforts to be her wingman.

Shae liked her, though. Nicole thinks that's the only reason his wingman abilities worked. To be completely honest, if Jeremy hadn’t taken the initiative for her, it probably would have never happened.

After some weeks, Nicole was more comfortable around Shae and Shae taught her how to play chess. Nicole wasn't very good at it. Some weeks later, Nicole was flirting back and Shae taught her how to kiss. Nicole was better at this one.

Eventually, she told her mom about it, about Shae over dinner. It had been a few weeks since she started disappearing and she had another new habit of agreeing with Nicole. It was confusing and scary. Nicole took it as her mom accepting her opinions because she was older and accepting the person Nicole was discovering herself to be, but in retrospect, maybe it was the beginning of her leaving.

Nicole lets herself fall into the mattress, exhausted by both the physical work and all the thinking. So much thinking. Tomorrow is another day and she just wants to wake up forgetful about all the mess between her and her parents and just exist in this temporal lapse of bliss.

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Waverly, 13:11: I do believe! I’m just saying that if extraterrestrial life exists, it doesn’t have to be green humanoids carbon based. Maybe they’re small like bacteria or weird insects or just plants

Nicole not Hot, 13:13: “I'm Pretend” Waverly! Theres evidence! Believe!

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“I've never seen nobody quite like you. And if you ever change your tune. Oh, the world's got the best of you...” The music sound from Nicole’s phone as she sits in an old crate, the music keeps her distracted enough to not notice the steps walking down the stairs.
“What are you doing?” Greg says at the bottom of the basement stairs, startling Nicole. She presses the photo she was looking at to her chest, next to the strong beat of her heart. “Are you looking at porn? Because that guy is watching you.” He points at the cross hanging on the wall in the hallway.

“Of course not,” Nicole breaks eye contact and moves the picture from her chest so Greg can see it as he walks to her.

“... And I woulda gave all of my best to you. So, if you ever need a fool...”

“Oh.” Greg tilts his head and sits next to her, as they both look at the picture. It’s a picture of her mom, Thomas and baby Nicole standing in front of the church. Her mom smiles at the camera while Nicole's little arm is reaching to take Thomas' shirt. Her parents were in their early twenties and look so different from their faces in Nicole’s mind. Thomas looks so relaxed and her mom looks genuinely happy, almost childlike.

“I feel like I don’t know them. I was with my mom for so long and I'm worried that I just- I don’t know. That maybe I got used to being around her, you know? Thomas told me things,” she looks at Greg who is uncharacteristically quiet and has concern in his face. “Things that she has done and said and I keep changing opinion and I’m afraid that if I didn’t notice what she was doing to him, that I didn’t notice if she did anything to me, either.”

“You’re gonna be somebody’s brand new love, mama. Who’s gonna feel you like it always do...” Nicole presses pause on the music.

Greg takes off his cap and scratches his head, breaking eye contact. She can see how he shifts in his seat and just mutters an “oh.”

“I know you know,” Nicole says, and Greg returns his eyes to her, letting a little smile appear on his lips.

“Sorry,” He says earnestly. “No one told me. But, you know, I could hear what my dad and mom talked about and my mom can be very vocal about the things she doesn't like.”

“Like my mom.”

Greg nods. “And, well, last time, when I was visiting you guys. I caught- God, I don’t even know if I should tell you this.” He passes a hand through the scruff on his jaw, looking at the stairs, like he’s expecting Thomas to walk down.

He clears his throat and straightens his back, looking more sure of himself. “I know I was asked to not tell you this and I’m an idiot for agreeing because I don't see why you can’t know.”

“Thomas told me a lot of shit, so maybe I already know,” Nicole prompts him. They’re both on the spot, none of them used to being sentimental with each other.

“Ok, so I know your mom was in touch with your dad during the first months she was gone. I don't know where she was either, but my mom would talk. I don’t think she knew either. She thought your mom had an affair or something, but who knows. Apparently, she started calling your dad constantly until he had to stop answering his phone and he had to change your house number.”

“He changed it in January.” She says, but it’s a guess. Thomas didn’t tell her this.

Greg nods. “Yeah, apparently she got mad and started calling him at his job. My mom said that that's how he lost his last job. Your mom would show up at his office and demand to see him.”
“She thought he was having an affair.”

“Maybe she was projecting.” Nicole gives him a look but doesn’t discard the possibility.

“What?” He shrugs, unbothered.

“It makes me sick.” Nicole looks at the photo, at her mom’s smile, holding her to her chest. “She always made me believe that our problems were created somehow by him. Money, time, anything somehow was his fault.”

“That's fucked up.”

She leaves the photo on the side and contemplates her hand. “Apparently she was mad because Thomas asked her for a divorce. When she left, I mean.”

“Oh. I mean she left, what's the difference?”

“I don’t know. She didn't have to leave me.” Nicole feels her eyes start to water, but she fights against it.

“She’s the one wrong, not you,” Greg says without missing a beat.

“Thomas told me she hit him, more than once.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah, the police got involved once. With a bottle of wine, she hit him and it broke. Thomas said it was an accident, but with the constant calls, someone in his office figured it out and they made fun of him. At least he had one friend who supported him, but he ended up quitting.”


Nicole lifts an eyebrow, slightly amused.

“We’re the worst.” Greg shrugs.

Nicole swats him on the arm and they laugh, breaking the tension. The wood creaks over them and they stay in silence to see if anyone is coming down, but the steps leave in the direction of what Nicole thinks is the living room.

“She got our number again,” Nicole says. “We don't know how, but I think it was she who kept calling and hanging up on me. She didn't want to talk to me.”

“At least she’s ashamed.”

The heat in her eyes defeats her and tears start to fall over her cheeks making Greg put a panicked face that almost makes Nicole laugh. Almost.

“Hey! Don’t. You didn’t do anything wrong. She’s the shit one,” Greg reassures her.

But Nicole feels so shit for being such a fool. She bends down to hide her face from Greg as she tries to control herself. This is stupid, so dumb. “Sorry,” she mutters.

Greg pats her back awkwardly until Nicole feels like lifting her face. “Should we talk about boys?” He wiggles his eyebrows, a crooked smile on his face, trying to lift her spirit. It’s an honest try, so Nicole lets him.
“Fine.” She clears her throat and wipes her eyes one more time. “Tell me about your newest conquest.”

“It’s a girl this time, actually.” He winks.

“Oh my god, let’s talk about girls,” Nicole imitates an overly excited girl voice, ripping a laugh from Greg.

“I bet you got a shit ton to say.”

Nicole wants to shove the comment away but decides against it. “Yeah,” she admits, feeling her face feel hot.

Greg rolls his eyes. “I knew it. I know you.”

“Tell me about your girl,” Nicole presses. She’s still not ready for another charged conversation.

“I met her at the hardware store,” Greg begins.

“This sounds romantic, keep going.”

“She was shopping for nails to fix her desk chair and she showed me the picture. Then I told her: gurl, that’s some fine wood,” Greg does a mannerism with his hand to amuse her. “You don't want to put nails in it, dear, I told her. So, she tough I was full gay and trusted me and then she invited me to her apartment and-

“Ok, stop.” Nicole tries to stop him but he keeps talking over her.

“-and I fixed her chair like the gentleman I am.”

She gives him an exasperated look.

“And I asked her on a date and she refused,” Greg finishes.

“Really?” Nicole asks, a bit disappointed. She hasn't seen the girl around when his friends had come to visit the house or at his workshop.

“She said she prefers guys that fit through a door. It was very mean.” This makes Nicole break into laughter and Greg lets her finish to continue. “Then she asked me if I had read Gerard Way comics and I said yes. And then we made out.”

Nicole puts another exasperated look, not believing him. “What really happened?” She demands.

“I’m serious. We owe Jeremy this one too,” Greg says. Last December, Jeremy lent them the Killjoys comics and Gregory got more invested in them than Nicole. “He’s good at getting people together.”

“If he could only get himself together with someone,” Nicole smiles remembering fondly both Jeremy and Shae.

“Wait,” Nicole interneves. “You were flirting with someone else at the market. Are you already cheating?” She socks him on the arm.

Greg frowns and paws the spot she hit. “She’s giving me the cold shoulder.” He shrugs. “I don’t plan on following her until she dates me. I don't even know her that well. If she wants something with me, then she has to tell me. I don’t like people playing with me. That’s why I didn’t go out
with Gabriel again, he just wanted me for my looks.” He frames his face with his hands.

“Fair enough.”

“Your turn. Tell me about the girl.”

Nicole sighs. “It’s complicated.“

“That’s why I want to know. I love drama.”

“Liar, you’re such a zen person. Look at your hermit life.”

“I need to isolate myself. I’m too powerful to be out there.” He flexes an arm.

“Fine.” Nicole cedes and starts to explain about Waverly and a bit about Andy to Greg. It keeps her mind away from other subjects for the rest of the afternoon.

———

Waverly, 8:53: I know we’re avoiding the subject, but are you practicing? I don't mean to bother you or anything, but you know that it doesn’t mean anything, right?

Nicole not Hot, 9:02: I’m sorry :( I’m your worst student. I haven't

Nicole not Hot, 9:02: I didn't even bring the guitar. I kinda miss it

Waverly, 9:03: Top five on your first try? It’s excellent!

Nicole not Hot, 9:06: I’m still bummed about it :/

Waverly, 9:06: Don't be!

Waverly, 9:07: Ok, when you come back we’re going to get to it. Ok?

———

Weirdly, Waverly wakes up in Purgatory one morning to find Gus and Curtis in the apartment, taking breakfast with Willa and a half-conscious Wynonna. Even if it should be a normal sight, it weirds her out. They’re almost never together.

“Good morning, baby girl,” Gus says when she walks to the kitchen and sits on a chair that she can tell they took from the cafe. Gus puts a plate of egg and bacon in front of Wynonna and her sister barely registers it. Curtis smiles to him and Willa just directs her a look that is neither mean nor meaningful before continuing with her cereal. Gus passes her the almond milk she always keeps for herself in the fridge, a cereal box, and some fruit to then sit with her own plate. On the other side of the table.

No one is really talking and there's no TV or radio in the apartment, so they eat in silence while Waverly tries to decide if this is a dream or not. Wynonna sips slowly her cup of coffee and by the time she looks some kind of awake (and slightly suspicious of the morning situation), Gus is
finishing her eggs.

Her aunt leaves her silverware neatly on the clean plate and directs a look to each one of them. “So,” she starts and they leave their food for a moment to pay attention to her. “We need to talk about living arrangements.”

Ok, Waverly is definitely dreaming.

“Well, you can’t sleep on the couch forever,” Gus reasons, but it still makes no sense to Waverly or Wynonna. “I already spoke with Shorty and he has a free room over the bar,”


“Shorty said that he’s going to keep an eye on the girls, too,” Curtis adds.

“Wait,” Waverly finally says. “What is going on?”

“Well. We thought about it very carefully, and this is just happening because we trust you and because we don’t want to force you to do anything you don’t want,” Gus starts.

“And because your sister promises to keep an eye on you,” Curtis continues, lifting his index finger to the ceiling.

“Me or...?” Wynonna points at herself and then to Willa.

“And it will only last as long as you keep your good grades and we don’t want any funny business,” Gus’ tone is stern.

“And no boys are allowed in your room-“

“Would you tell me already?” Waverly interrupts Curtis. She looks at them, begging for an explanation.

“We decided that you can transfer to Purgatory High. Under those conditions-“

Waverly rounds the table and throws herself to Gus, interrupting her with a hug. Her aunt laughs and pats her back.

Waverly, 8:32: guess what?!!!!!!!!!!

_________
Next chapter has a lot of stuff I've been craving to write. Yes, they see each other again :P

You can tell me things in the comments, even your darkest secrets.

The moon, the sea:

The Sun The Trees - Russian Red
Pink + White - Frank Ocean
Where The Skies Are Blue - The Lumineers

Spotify Playlist:

Chap. 9 and 10
m'lover

Chapter Summary

Nicole returns.

Chapter Notes

Tarde pero seguro!

Here's another chapter, I don't really know what else to tell you.

All this is possible because of one great beta, so send some good vibes!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*It isn’t right to sit around and think about the awful things that get you down...*

From inside of the bus, Nicole wakes up to a slight pull on her hair. She didn’t tie it before getting on the bus and couldn’t find anything to tie it up with in her bag later. She takes one earbud out and takes a glance behind their seats. There’s a woman with her small child who has been a bit of an annoyance, kicking her seat and similar stuff, but Nicole gets it. She was once that child. Though, she would rather if he didn’t pull her hair or kick the back of her seat.

She pulls herself up and looks out of the window, flinching at the afternoon light. By the distinct outline on the horizon, she can tell they’re already in Purgatory. They must have passed the “Welcome to Purgatory” sign a few moments ago.

It had been a long day of nothing. Most of the trip, she just sat down and listened to music. She tried to read for a while, but Nicole has never been great at avoiding motion sickness. It happens. She avoids kicking the little pot between her legs as she stretches them, turning to see her dad asleep in the next seat. She passes a hand through her hair at the top, finding it a little knotted and feeling sticky from her sweat. The bus has gotten a little hot as the afternoon sun hits them and it has those annoying windows that get stuck.

It had been a bittersweet morning, but for the first time, she felt at ease at leaving. She hugged her aunt and Gregory joked about finally getting rid of her and that he was glad that he could finally get someone qualified for the work, even if the work was practically finished. They did hug each other, but quickly to not make it weird.

Grandma Lucy, god bless her, gave her a bag of cookies to keep up with tradition and for once, Nicole was holding them in her bag for later, next to some other stuff she collected through the weeks. Thomas said goodbye politely, and before she got on the bus to Big City, her grandma summoned out of nowhere a little pot with some mint that aunt Sarah and Nicole had helped her get separated.

“Put it in a larger pot,” her grandma instructed, “and don't let the soil get dry.”
Oh, Lauren Marie… Oh, Lauren Marie...

Nicole feels happy to be back as she feels herself swaying with the music. Happy and extremely nervous. She hasn't told anyone that she was coming back today. She figured it could be a nice surprise to show up at Homestead, see how Waverly reacted. Test the waters and then proceeded.

“Oh, c'mon,” Greg said one day as she joined him in his workshop. He was sanding some planks of wood and he didn't lift his eyes from his work. The smell of sawdust made this place her favorite to read. “She’s into you. Totally.”

“You think?”

“I mean, from what you told me, yes. And, you know,” he lifted his head and whipped his forehead with the back of his hand, “don't be a useless lesbian and just tell her. Woo that girl.”

That’s the plan now. To woo Waverly. Pursue her. Easier said than done. She had no idea where to start. When. How.

As they enter the town, Thomas finally wakes up and smooths the front of his shirt. Everyone inside the bus starts to move, collecting their belongings and filling the space with murmurs and noise.

“Where did you get that?” Nicole hears behind her seat. “No! Stop putting it there!”

She feels a pull of her hair again and moves away quickly. Thomas peeks up to the other side. “Everything all right?” He asks.

“Sorry, my kid got gum all over the place. I think he put it between your seats.”

Thomas checks the back of his shirt, finding nothing, to then look at Nicole. “Oh, no,” he says.

“Oh, my gosh. Did he get you?” The woman stands to look at the other side of the seats where Nicole is looking at her shirt, finding nothing.

“Where?!”

Thomas points to her hair and Nicole moves her hand to touch her hair carefully where she finds a sticky mass.

“Shit.”

Waverly’s phone lights up, taking her attention away from her book. She puts a finger between the pages to look at the screen. There’s a notification saying that Nicole Haught is in town, it makes Waverly a little excited, only for a second before she remembers that Nicole is at her grandma’s house still. “Weird,” she mutters and returns to her book.
Nicole, 17:15: Are you or your mom at home?

Eliza, 17:16: why?

Nicole, 17:16: I really really need your help.

Nicole, 17:16: Can i come over?

Eliza, 17:16: what? You're in purgatory?

Nicole, 17:16: can i come over or not?

Eliza, 17:17: sure! Jeremy is here. Come!

Eliza, 17:17: What kind of emergency?

Nicole, 17:17: Hair emergency

Eliza, 17:17: !!!Oh! I can’t wait! :hands clapping emoji:

“Oh, no,” Nicole hears Eliza and Jeremy say in a chorus when she turns around to show them the back of her head as soon as she enters the house. She hasn’t seen it, at least not completely. A small glance at the mirror in the bus station bathroom and the sticky feeling on the back of her head is all she has to go by.

The woman tried to apologize and offer her to pay for a haircut, but Nicole decided that she had to at least let Eliza’s mom try to fix it. Thomas paid the taxi driver to take them to the Shapiro’s home and then told Nicole that he had to take the suitcases (and her little mint pot) to the house and that he’ll be back to pick her up.

But her friends are babysitting which means that Mrs. Shapiro is not home, so Eliza has to do for now.

“Tell me you can do something about it,” Nicole begs, spinning on her heels to face them again.

“I guess we can try.” Eliza walks to the living room, where the kids are glued to some movie on the T.V. There’s music coming from Eliza’s twelve-year-old brother’s closed door and there’s a tint of a burned smell in the air. Nicole moves, following Eliza as she avoids tripping on the toys scattered on the floor. It feels a lot like home.

“How did you do this?” Eliza asks as she pulls a chair from the dining table.

“I didn’t exactly do it on purpose. A fu-“ Jeremy swats her in the stomach and gestures to all the little ears in proximity. “A freaking kid put it there,” she says between her teeth.

“Well, at least he gave you the opportunity to get a makeover.” Eliza moves the chair in the direction of the bathroom, Nicole and Jeremy following her.
A surge of panic attacks Nicole as a weird instinct tells her to keep the integrity of her hair. She can still see Waverly laying next to her, saying *your hair is so pretty*. “Can’t we put ice on it or something?” Nicole asks.

“Nic,” Eliza throws her a condescending look, throwing the scissors and combs she has gathered in the sink and circles her to take a picture of the back of her hair. “Not saying it’s not possible,” she gives Nicole the phone, ”but it’s going to take us ages. And like, c’mon! You’ve had that look since I met you.”

It looks terrible. Somehow the gum spread across a big section of her hair and Nicole groans. It really would be easier to just cut it and, deep inside her, she wants to. But the memory of being scolded by her mom that one time she suggested to dye her hair resurges and she feels ten again. Her mom always liked her hair long and Nicole didn’t care much to go against her. It was easier and familiar.

And Waverly likes her hair like this.

Nicole shakes her head as she realizes that she’s basing her choose on other people’s opinions. It shouldn’t matter what her mom thinks or if Eliza wants to cut her hair or if Waverly said it looks pretty like that (although, that last one weighs on her). It’s not like she’s going to get home and her mom is going to be there to reprimand her or if Waverly going to like her less just because of a haircut. She hopes. What does *she* want?

“OK, then.” She breathes deeply and then proceeds to take a seat on the chair.

“Really?” Eliza’s eyes open wide, definitely not expecting that answer. She squeaks and stands behind her, touching her hair, looking happy in the way it worries Nicole a little.

Nicole hears a beep coming from behind. “Are you filming?”

“No, just taking a picture for Dolls,” Jeremy responds. “He’s missing such an important moment of your life.”

“Are you gonna cut my hair too, Liza?” Eliza’s little brother stumbles his way into the bathroom and looks at Nicole. Her heart squeezes at his voice.

“No, baby,” Eliza responds. “Why don’t you go see what’s on tv?”

He ignores her and walks to Jeremy’s leg, “Oh, ok.” Jeremy lifts him from the floor. “Now we can both see the action.”

“Jeremy, this is not-” Nicole groans but her annoyance melts at the giggles of Eliza’s brother. “Fine.”

“Nic,” Eliza pulls up her eyebrows in question while Jeremy walks out of the bathroom chatting with the kid. She opens and closes the pair of scissors in her hand.

Nicole flinches. “Just do it.”
When Thomas arrives, Nicole’s head feels light and she can feel the fresh air of the night on her neck. It’s great. He shakes hands with her friends and asks if they need something when he realizes that they’re alone with all the kids. Eliza reassures him that they’re fine and they make their way to Thomas’ old Renault, and then to the house, finally.

She lets herself fall on her bed, bouncing a little, and she takes in the familiarity of her room for a few minutes, dozing off for a few minutes before deciding it’s too early to go to sleep. Not that she doesn’t want to.

Sitting up, she looks at the guitar case, leaning in one corner of the room and decides to just rip the bandage and take it out. Opening the case takes her back to the day she took it from the attic. It seems like an eternity has passed. She was so angry and sad back then.

And then, the day of the final, she put it back there with so much resentment. It was disappointing when she didn’t hear her name being called to the stage. She just left with Thomas and Michael without saying goodbye to her friends. After all, they were celebrating Mattie, first place. It hadn’t even been a childish decision to leave the guitar behind when they came back to the house to pick up their suitcases. It was just inconvenient to carry it on the bus. Now, she thinks there was maybe just a little resentment in leaving it behind.

No, she wasn’t just mad at losing the contest and the bet, but mad at herself for letting Waverly down. Not that Waverly would ever say that, but the amount of time she had dedicated to helping Nicole was ultimately a waste of time. To be honest, for a few days, she thought that was it for her. No more guitar. After the second week away, Nicole was craving it. Nicole wanted to play so badly, she could feel her fingers tingling every time she heard Greg’s stereo playing *Knocking on Heaven's Door*.

Nicole wants to play. Just to take the guitar and strum the strings. There isn’t anything pushing her to do it. No bet, no contest. It’s not even an excuse to spend time with Waverly, not anymore. Now it is just something that they share in common.

The wood feels natural in her hands, but her fingers are out of practice. She spends a few hours getting used to the feeling again and an extra hour in bed wondering how to go about tomorrow.

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“Oh, my- is this…?” Wynonna beams when Fish takes a plate with brownies out to the counter. He rolls his eyes, good naturedly. “They don’t have anything funny. Just love.” He presents his brownies and Waverly breathes deeply, her mouth salivating.

“Disappointing,” Wynonna says but steals one to then return to the cash register as one officer enters the cafe and approaches the counter.

Waverly follows Fish back to the kitchen, checking her phone on the way. It’s already past nine and she hasn’t got a single text from Nicole, so she takes initiative and writes her about the brownies, just to say something, as she leans on the table where Fish has already a few sandwiches half done. It’s not a big deal if they don’t text one day, she thinks as her day gets a little bit gray.
“I did a vegan batch for us,” Fish says, making Waverly lift her eyes. He takes one baking dish from the oven, steam coming out of it. “But they need to cool off a little.”

Waverly pouts and directs a dreamy look to the brownies, yet to be cut.

“In the meantime.” He walks to the little adjacent room to his bag and takes something out, hiding it behind his back as he approaches her. “I got a little something for you.”

“What is it?” Waverly demands. “Is it more food?”

But it’s not. He gives her a bunch of photographs from the day they went camping. “I convinced Levi to print them,” he says softly as he reaches Levi’s name and he leans next to Waverly to look at the pictures. “He thinks they’re not good enough to be printed.”

“That’s crazy. They’re beautiful,” Waverly says, looking at one of Wynonna and her in front of the campfire.

“That one is for you,” Fish takes it and puts it apart. “And I’ll hang this one here.”

He pulls one Rosita insisted on taking. It’s the five of them posing next to the campfire in the morning before they had to leave. She insisted on it because since Levi was the one taking the pictures, he didn’t appear on any of them so they balanced the camera over an improvised stand and posed awkwardly until Wynonna pointed it out with one of her Wynonna lines, just before the camera went off, so the five of them have pretty genuine smiles.

“I’ll give Wynonna hers later.”

“She’ll love it. She’ll pretend she doesn’t, but she will.” Waverly keeps looking at the pictures, one after the other, impressed by Levi’s hidden talent.

“I know,” Fish says and gets back to do the sandwiches. Wynonna opens the door and unceremoniously shouts a new order to Fish, so Waverly helps him with the sandwiches as Fish cooks eggs and pancakes.

After maybe half an hour, Waverly checks her phone again to see that she has no reception. She wonders why they always lose reception in the kitchen as she walks out of the back door, telling Fish that she’ll be back. Rounding the building, she alternates her eyes between her phone and the floor, to make sure she doesn’t trip on something. The reception bar gets full when she reaches the sidewalk in front of the cafe and she waits a pregnant moment to see if anything comes up, but no such luck. She tips her head back, looking at the morning sky as she could see the text coming down.

What she ends up seeing when she gives a quick scan to the street, before she gets back to the cafe, is a silhouette on the distance that looks familiar. Mostly, she sees a head of red hair and wonders if maybe Mercedes Gardner is back in town. But the height and the way she moves- it’s not Mercedes.

Finally, the person in question lifts her head and Waverly can detect the recognition in her eyes, even from the distance. They lock eyes and it takes her a good second to finally recognize Nicole’s dimpled smile. Without thinking, Waverly starts walking towards her, crossing the street without even looking if there’s a car coming. She can feel her steps getting quicker and the muscles in the face move to form a smile. Nicole is smiling too, and there’s something about her in the light of the morning sun and about the way she walks towards her, probably more relaxed than her own quick pace.
“Hey-” Nicole barely gets out before Waverly collides with her, throwing her arms around Nicole’s torso, squeezing just to confirm that she’s really here.

And, wow, the total sum of feelings. The smell of vanilla that Nicole carries around. The perfect way she puts her long arms around Waverly’s shoulders and they swing from side to side, almost trembling. The way it hits her how much she has really missed Nicole. And, god, the way her boxes open just a little to let out the memories of- of-

“I missed you,” Waverly says against Nicole's shoulder so she can shut her brain from going places.

She can feel Nicole squeezing her once more before pulling away. Has she always been this tall? “We talked all the time,” Nicole says in her perfect voice and Waverly finally looks at her properly.

“Your hair,” she whispers as she reaches with one hand to touch the tips of red wild hair.

“Yeah,” Nicole chokes out, taking a step back. Waverly realizes how close they are and takes one step back too, hoping the heat in her cheeks doesn’t reflect much in color. “It wasn’t really planned. You like it?” Nicole scratches her head in a familiar way Waverly finds endearing.

“You look- It looks cool,” Waverly lets out. Her brain is catching up with Nicole. She really looks taller and bigger, somehow, a little tanned. Her face looks sharper and so much more relaxed than the last week they hung out together. And her hair.

Nicole ducks her head, smiling as if Waverly’s words affect her the same way it affects Waverly to let them out. “You don't look bad yourself,” Nicole says as if Waverly looks any different from the same way she has looked all summer.

“It’s innate.” Waverly shrugs one shoulder.

“I’m sure,” Nicole lets out with sincerity. It makes Waverly feel- “So,” Nicole clears her throat, “you said something about brownies?”

Nicole is not freaking out because she prepared mentally for this kind of scenario. She did, really. But at the first contact of Waverly’s hand with hers, she just forgets whatever pep talk she did in front of the mirror this morning.

For a fairly quiet morning, Nicole was losing it inside of her head and a little bit outside when she saw her hair was spiking in every direction, wilder than ever thanks to her brand new haircut. Hoping that it would calm her nerves, she went out for a run. It didn't really help much. As soon as she was back to take a shower, her brain overloaded again. She just put on her best pants and pulled a clean t-shirt out of her drawers. Giving herself a look in the mirror, she decided to change, repetitively until she got Waverly’s text and she decided to just go for it.

Thank god she didn't tell Waverly she was coming because with the face she showed and the hug Nicole received, Nicole can die happy. And if it isn’t enough, Waverly takes her hand and pulls her to Homestead as she asks her about the bus ride. She expects that Waverly would let go of her, but
their hands remain together until Waverly walks her by the back door to Homestead’s kitchen. Fish

gives them a brownie and Waverly keeps her eyes on her, expecting her reaction. Nicole wonders if

it means something.

Every time Waverly throws her head back to laugh at a joke Nicole throws around, every time she

looks at Nicole’s hair, every time Waverly touches her arm or hand or just the slight rose of skin,

Nicole wonders if it means something. God, she hopes it does. But then again, every time Waverly

hugs Wynonna or kisses Rosita’s cheek or squeezing Fish’s arm, she wonders too if she’s anything

special. If maybe she’s just mistaking the natural touchy way Waverly acts with the people around,

and the way she is just so caring of everybody, for flirting.

But Nicole is not crazy, ok? There must be intent behind actions, there’s something different.

Because if not, then the universe really likes to play some kind of sick game. How can she feel like

this while Waverly feels nothing of the sort towards her? How is that possible or fair or

fathomable?

Waverly talks and Nicole listens and vice versa. Even after all the text exchanges through the

summer, somehow there’s more to say, more to know. It feels like there’s no real-time. The only

real indication that it moves is the change in the angle of the light entering the cafe, the sudden

wave of people at rush hour and the constant buzzing of Nicole’s phone. She could spend an

eternity just sitting in the cafe, talking to Waverly and marveling at her presence.

It’s like her mind is slowly reabsorbing every little detail about Waverly after so many weeks of

absence. Not that Nicole could ever forget anything about her, but her memories, or the photos, or

Waverly’s personality shining through the text messages just don’t do justice to having her in front

of Nicole, so real.

They sit at the end of the cafe for the rest of the morning, just talking and people watching. A little

after noon, Waverly takes a deck of cards from the stack of games and teaches Nicole how to play

Kings in the corner after Nicole shows her the only magic trick she knows and “guesses” the card

in the middle of the deck.

Nicole ignores her phone twice before Waverly forces her to pick up, even if Nicole tells her it’s

nothing important as soon as she sees Eliza’s name on the screen, next to the hundred notifications

of their group chat.

Eliza coaxes her into going to Dolls’ house and after a little deliberation, the empty promise that is

not a party Nicole agrees to go. It also helps that Waverly has been invited too.

“I didn't bring your present,” is all Nicole manages to say before Eliza pulls her over the threshold,

disappearing into the house, leaving Waverly at the door with Jeremy and Robin.

“Oh, that seemed urgent,” Robin comments.

“Hey, Waverly! Come in!” Jeremy steps aside to let her, natural like this is his own home. Robin

puts an arm around her shoulder like he often does, and they walk inside the huge house.

Living in her part of the city means a lot of apartments and that shapes your conception of space.
She remembers going to a birthday party at the Croft’s, but it was so long ago, she kinda forgot how big the houses in this neighborhood were. But, boy, this place is big.

True to Eliza’s words, there are not many people, but for Waverly and Robin, it feels overcrowded. They haven’t gotten used to this whole having lots of friends thing yet. It feels right, though, the way everyone seems to accept them without comment. They even find them interesting, while kids found them boring back in the city. It’s nice but she wonders if they just happened to coincide with the nicest teens in Purgatory.

“We were about to start the game,” Jeremy says as they walk to the kitchen to pick up Jeremy’s bowl of Cheetos, leaving Dolls and the Perley twins playing Mario Kart on the big screen hung in the wall; Quin, Hetty and Perry watching and cheering.

They sit at the dining table and Jeremy starts explaining the rules of shithead. Waverly tries to follow and Robin assures her that she’ll get the rules better if they just play. After the first game, Waverly already has a sense of the game and turns on her Earp cunning to play poker.

As Jeremy is shuffling for the third round, and just as Waverly starts to wonder about the whereabouts of Nicole, she hears her laugh approaching the kitchen. To her surprise, she doesn’t arrive with Eliza, but with Andy.

Nicole brightens when she locks eyes with Waverly. “There you are!” She walks to them, Andy following behind. She sits next to Waverly and Andy sits across from Nicole.

“What are you guys playing?” Andy asks, eyeing as Nicole puts an arm behind Waverly, on the backrest of her chair. Waverly feels herself flushing under Andy’s gaze.

Jeremy distributes the cards on the table and they start to play.

Winning at shithead is fun and everything, but the real excitement is in the last two people. In the fourth game, those are Waverly and Nicole. Nicole just has one upside down on the table and Waverly has shitty cards in her hands and it’s her turn. So she puts down a queen over the five, hoping that Nicole doesn’t miraculously pull out a king or an ace. It’s luck, after all, what’s going to decide the loser.

Nicole scratches her head with a nervous laugh and moves her other hand to reveal her last card. A ten which immediately swipes all the cards on the table, making Nicole win over Waverly.

Between cheers and oohs, Nicole jumps out of her chair and punches the air while Waverly dedicates her an annoyed look that breaks into laughter because she’s just having such a good day.

“Hey,” Nicole wraps her in a hug. Waverly forces herself to relax. “You wouldn’t let me win in kings on the corner. Let me have this one.”

Waverly feels like she could let Nicole win at everything if it means having her this happy, even if it makes her giddy.

Dolls stands in the middle of the living room when they get bored from Mario Kart, but before he puts on another game, and as more people arrive at the house, he catches Nicole’s eyes. He smiles and Nicole knows she is fucked.
She flinches in anticipation and Waverly directs her a confused look from where they’re standing, talking with Perry and Robin.

Dolls presses a button and Nicole appears on the screen. She’s on the stage at the fair, clearing her throat as she looks to the crowd. She looks lost and mortified and plays a pretty poor rendition of Cherry Wine, or at least pretty poor compared with how good she knows she can play it. But she keeps her head up, full of pride, or at least acting like she is.

Lots of people stop to look at the screen, commenting and cheering, or laughing and whispering. Nicole holds Dolls’ gaze, the corner of his lips lifted in a defiant way, but Nicole doesn't back off. He tears his eyes away and closes the video to put on Ultimate Chicken Horse and Nicole relaxes.

Perry laughs. “That’s what you get for losing a bet against Dolls,” he says.

Waverly and Robin squint in confusion and Nicole feels exposed. She fakes a laugh and socks Perry in the head. “It’s nothing,” she tells Waverly and it seems to do.

The not-a-party obviously turns into a real party and soon enough Mattie arrives so the alcohol arrives and it gets, uh, messy. Nicole doesn't notice much of it. She spends most of the afternoon and night with Waverly in the backyard. She feels hope.

There are days where Waverly wonders what the heck is going on with her. Why does she act the way she does and why she reacts the way she does. She has read enough philosophy to know that people question their nature, and human nature in general, for ages and ages. She’s not the first and she won’t be the last.

Maybe and very probably, someone has found themselves in this same situation. How Waverly wishes she could ask for their conclusion because she really doesn’t know what on earth possessed her this morning to get out and walk to Chrissy's home to return the book Chrissy lent her last week. More than that, she doesn't even know if Chrissy is awake or in what state. She got to the party yesterday and left so much later that Waverly did. And, of course, Waverly left her phone charging like the genius she is. Seriously, and like this she’s one of the top students in her school district?

It’s unnecessary and plain dumb to return the book now. She can come later or call Chrissy to pick it up. But Waverly is already halfway there and she’s far too proud to turn around and go back.

Truth be told, deep down, she knows that the fact that Nicole lives in the same street has something to do with it. But, no, that would be ridiculous. If she wanted to see Nicole, a text would be enough. Also, they hung out yesterday. All day. Surely Nicole would like to spend some time with her other friends. Waverly is not the only one that missed her.

Nicole has other things to do with other people that are not Waverly. For example, Andy, who yesterday kept saying and hinting in various ways that she wanted to hang out with Nicole. Go out. This and that. Like, come on, it was so obvious how she looked at Nicole and the things she said and everything. Obvious for everyone that wasn’t Nicole, who kept pouring her attention on
Waverly.

It was great. She has to admit, Waverly really enjoyed it, but it makes her question herself. Makes her wonder.

There’s something inside of her that goes cold every time there's the suggestion that Nicole likes someone. Which shouldn’t be, everyone likes someone, sooner or later. Maybe it’s Andy; maybe Nicole’s ex, the pretty girl that sometimes says hi to her in the cafe. Maybe Nicole found someone back in her grandma’s town that she had failed to mention. It’s understandable that someone would like Nicole. For some crazy, weird, nonsensical reason, Waverly doesn't dig that idea and also doesn’t like the fact that she doesn't know why she doesn't dig the idea.

Nothing makes sense. It’s irrational and Waverly is not irrational. She’s actually, clearly, certainly, very rational, thank you very much.

What she should do is just go and knock on Chrissy's door and give back the book and turn around and get back to Homestead and look for Wynonna to see about the concert tonight. Straight to the point and that's it. Easy.

She puts one foot after the other, marching with determination until she’s almost there. Turning on a corner, she hears the quick steps on the other side but she can’t really see the person approaching because of the tall bushes. Sure enough, a body collides with her and she feels herself lose balance and head to the floor before a pair of arms catch her.

“Waverly!”

Nicole is looking down at her, her face blushed and her forehead sweaty. In the morning sun, her hair looks so bright and even if Nicole caught her in time, Waverly feels like she’s falling.

“Nicole!” Waverly steps away and wonders if she should have taken more than tea for breakfast because she feels dizzy.

“What are you doing here?” Nicole breathes heavily, and puts her hands on her hips, looking spent. It’s a little distracting.

“I- ah- I…” Waverly mumbles, her mind on white until she remembers the book in her hand and lifts it for Nicole to see. “Book.”

Nicole laughs her pretty laugh and takes her headphones off, letting them hang from her neck. “I can see that.”

“I’m returning it,” Waverly finally says.

“You’re a little lost. I thought I showed you where the library is that one time, remember?”

“To Chrissy. I’m returning it to Chrissy.” Waverly breathes deeps and puts her thoughts on order. Walk to Chrissy’s house and return the book and turn around and walk to Homestead and-

“I’ll walk you,” Nicole offers and looks at her phone. “A little early, don't you think?”

“Says the one running for fun.”

“I’m training. When the apocalypse comes, we’ll see who laughs,” Nicole winks and Waverly tries to contain a smile. Irrational.
They walk to Chrissy’s door, Nicole still catching her breath and Waverly trying to not stare at Nicole. Sheriff Nedley’s car is not in the driveway, so she’s not surprised when she knocks and there’s no response. She knocks again and after no life, she bangs at the door, Nicole giggling behind her. Waverly feels dumb and doesn’t know what to do.

Then, the door opens and an angry-looking Chrissy stands with her blond hair tousled. “What?!” Chrissy squints as she alternates looking between Waverly and Nicole.

“I just came to give you back this.” Waverly extends her arm and gives Chrissy the book.

Chrissy takes it and arches an eyebrow while she stares at Waverly like she’s analyzing her. “Hmmm,” she hums. “I’m sure you did.” She leans on the door with her arms crossed. “Hi, Nicole,” she says as she contains a yawn.

“Hey, Chrissy.” Nicole’s voice resounds with a hint of humor and Waverly feels a little trapped.

“Ok, bye.” Chrissy takes a step back and slams the door.

Nicole keeps giggling behind. “That was something.”

Waverly sighs. “That’s a pre-breakfast Chrissy if I ever saw one.”

“Hey, Chrissy.” Nicole’s voice resounds with a hint of humor and Waverly feels a little trapped.

“Ok, bye.” Chrissy takes a step back and slams the door.

Nicole keeps giggling behind. “That was something.”

Waverly sighs. “That’s a pre-breakfast Chrissy if I ever saw one.”

Waverly shoves her hands into the pockets of her joggers. “So, you’re heading back now?”

“I guess.” Waverly starts walking back to the sidewalk, Nicole following. “Are you going to resume your apocalyptic training?”

“No, I’m done for now. I think I’m just going to head back to take a shower.” She points to the back with her thumb and then puts her hand in the back of her head, scratching. She looks down at her sneakers. “Wanna come?”

Waverly’s brain short circuits. “What?”

Nicole’s head snaps back to her. “Breakfast at my place.” Nicole laughs, her face looking as red as when she collided with her before. “I’ll shower real quick. Promise.”

“Oh. Yeah, why not?” Waverly bites her bottom lip and wonders why she keeps doing these things.

If only Nicole planned things better before opening her mouth. They were just a succession of happenings and quick decisions that lead her to be having breakfast with Thomas and Waverly while her hair was pretty much damp from the quickest shower in the west. The conversation is flowing easily and Thomas asks Waverly question after question while Nicole begs with her eyes for him to stop interrogating her.

“What? You never bring your friends home. Let me get to know Waverly.” Thomas smiles and asks Waverly to continue her story about that time she won the junior contest at the conservatory.

It’s not that Nicole minds Thomas interacting with Waverly, more that she was hoping to be alone with Waverly. In fact, things were looking pretty great when she found Waverly on her block, of all
places and it’s really not necessary to say that she wasn't expecting to find her that close to her home that early, but she wasn’t expecting to find her that close to her home that early. In fact, she was hoping to clear her mind that morning to pep herself up to go, casually, to Homestead and, casually, find Waverly there. Because Waverly, casually, happens to live there. Permanently now. (Hurray!)

“I still have some stuff to pack and bring over,” Waverly says between bites of banana pancakes that Thomas prepared after learning that Waverly is vegan. Honestly, sometimes he’s just annoyingly likable.

“Well, I hope you find the transition easy. Nicole was fast to adapt to Purgatory’s life when we moved,” Thomas says, which is weird since Nicole doesn't remember him being around much for that part of their lives. Although she knows now it wasn’t completely his fault, there’s still a part of her that feels a little bitter, a little angry.

Nicole hums and swallows the last of her pancakes.

“Well, I have to get going,” Thomas says, looking at his wristwatch like the adult he is. “I need to head to the city to do some legal stuff and paperwork. Won’t be back until late,” he tells Nicole and directs her that look she’s getting used to that means that he’s going to ask her something seriously (that Nicole would probably ignore.) “Don’t get back late, ok?”

Slurping the last of her coffee, Nicole just stares back at him without actually giving an answer. She’s not about to start making those kinds of promises.

“Actually,” Waverly says, mostly to Thomas, and clears her throat, suddenly sounding extra polite. “Mattie’s band is playing in the next town over and,” she looks at Nicole now, “I was wondering if Nicole wanted to come. Because it’s kind of far, we won't stay long so we’ll be back early.” She seals it with her pretty smile that Nicole feels herself mirroring.

“I would love to,” Nicole says, sounding dumb for Waverly, because she is.

“I don't know,” Thomas passes a hand through his hair, messing it a little.

“Mattie and the band are really chill,” Nicole says because they are and she is not legally obligated to inform Thomas that Mattie provides the alcohol for most underage parties in Purgatory or that there’s all kinds of urban legends about Valdez or that Gretta would drop her in the middle of nowhere if she gets on her bad side or that Waverly’s sister is sort of a criminal. “I’ll call you if anything happens,” Nicole says and hopes that Thomas hasn't got out of that stage where he allows her things because he still feels guilty.

“Is there an adult or-?”

“My sister,” Waverly blurts and pats her pockets before flinching. “I actually forgot my phone, but I can give her number to Nicole and she can text it to you, so you have it.”

“Fine,” Thomas says and pulls his wallet out, taking a card from it. “But I want her to have my number too.” He takes a pen from his shirt and writes something.

Professor Thomas Haught reads in the card and under, there’s a list of the university lines and the address. On the other side, in Thomas's long handwriting, his personal number.

“I’ll give it to her. Don't worry Mr. Haught. She’s very responsible,” Waverly says with such conviction that Nicole manages to swallow her laughter at the idea of Wynonna Earp being
described as a responsible adult.

Thomas smiles, almost looking young and straightens the collar of his shirt. “Ok, girls. Take care of each other. Nicole,” he directs her another of his looks, “be smart. Ah, and no boys,” he states, pointing his fingers at her daughter.

Nicole cringes inside. “I would never,” she mutters and Thomas leaves, finally. She taps her fingers on the table, while Waverly eats until she hears the Renault take off the driveway. “Did you just call your sister responsible?” Nicole asks, resting her head on the heel of her hand and her elbow on the table.

“I mean, she is.” Waverly shrugs one shoulder, takes her cup of coffee and mutters inside of it, “sometimes.” She puts down her mug, displaying a teasing smile. “He doesn't need to know that, does he?”

“I knew I liked you for a reason,” Nicole breaths out loud, like the idiot she is and then it hits her how much of an idiot she is. She looks at the window, at the table, at her hands, at the ceiling hoping that the heat she feels doesn't reflect on her face.

“Oh,” she hears Waverly say.

They stay at Nicole’s house for most of the day. At the beginning, Waverly says that she’s just going to stay and wait for Chrissy to wake up and it ends up being an excuse because Waverly doesn't really mention Chrissy again, at least not to leave to see her best friend and Nicole doesn’t say anything about it either while she listens Waverly talk about all the books she’s read in the past weeks, which are a lot.

Sometimes, Waverly stops for a few seconds to examine Nicole and see if she has bored her already, expecting her to change the subject, but Nicole just asks another question about the book and the plot, but not so much so she can’t read it later. It makes clear to Waverly that she has been really listening. It’s… something. It makes her aware of all the things she’s been trying hard not to think of and awake to how close they’re sitting.

When Waverly feels like she has monopolized the conversation enough, she changes the subject and asks Nicole about her summer as she finds herself wanting to know everything that Nicole had failed to mention in her texts. It’s almost amazing that there are still things left to say, but the conversation flows effortlessly between them that sometimes a simple detail of Nicole’s summer ends up being a completely different conversation about themes that Waverly had never talked about with, well, anyone.

Nicole pulls out her cellphone and shows her the pictures she took. She shows Waverly her grandma who looks tiny standing between Nicole and her cousin and even if her hair is white, it shines in the same way Nicole’s hair does. A picture of Nicole and her dad working side by side as they tend the trees, and one where they’re cooking together. It makes Waverly happy for Nicole because even if Nicole doesn’t express it, she can see that things are better between them. She shows her pictures of the hardwood floor they replaced and the furniture her cousin restored, of the fruit they harvested, the room she slept in and a lot of pictures of flowers Nicole found next to the trail.
She shows her the place she went to text with Waverly and even if Nicole tells her that it wasn’t far from the house, something in the height of the trees, the sight of the valley and the clouds tells her otherwise. It makes her chest expand and her eyes burn. Just a little.

They get back to the kitchen, after spending all the morning on the couch. Nicole scrambles around, trying to figure out something to cook that Waverly can consume. They end up cutting a bunch of vegetables to make a salad. Waverly tells Nicole that she can eat whatever she wants, but Nicole refuses to eat meat in front of Waverly as if it was an offense.

“Actually,” Nicole says when they sit to eat at the kitchen island, “not that I don't love my grandma’s cooking, but she served us so much meat. No wonder Greg got so freaking big.”

Waverly laughs, but she can’t seem to stop her eyes from lingering on the way Nicole’s shirt clings to her shoulders or the pretty way the white contrasts what her slightly tanned skin.

“What the fuck is this?” Wynonna eyes Thomas’ card weirdly after Waverly presses it to her chest as soon as she steps in the apartment.

The Perley twins arrived in Mattie’s old sedan not long after Waverly and Nicole walked to Homestead. The truck was filled with equipment and they told them that they sent Wynonna and Mattie on a mission to find someone who would drive them and the rest of the equipment. So they sat and waited while Gretta talked excitedly about college while Mattie mostly whined about the state of the band now that Gretta is leaving for college and Constance officially left the band and Purgatory after some guy offered to launch her career in the States.

“Whatever,” Mattie sighed looking defeated, “she was a fucking diva.”

Nicole doesn’t see the point, really. Clootie was never with the band, not really. Mattie was always looking for someone to fill the place or they just played with one member less. Also, Nicole always preferred hearing Mattie’s singing to Constance’s. There’s something in the ring of her voice that Nicole simply prefers.

“Fucking finally,” Mattie says as she stands from the couch, where she has been staring at the clock on her phone for the last hour. Wynonna ignores her as she reads the card while Valdez puts her hands on her shoulders and moves her aside so she can step in the apartment.

“Why do we need an architect?” Wynonna asks Waverly. “Don't you have a lawyer one? That seems more useful.”

“What took you so long?” Mattie stands and takes her jacket from the couch. Gretta follows her, leaving the piano where she has been playing. Nicole stands too, just because everyone else is on their feet. It just seems right.

“It’s Nicole’s dad’s card. I asked her to come.” Waverly says.

“Don't look at me. Wynonna was the one refusing to ask Doc for a ride,” Valdez points to the woman in question.

“We’re babysitting your friend?” Wynonna frowns like the idea is repulsive. Waverly smacks her in the arm.
“Wynonna!” Waverly scolds her.

“Wynonna, we don't have time for your boy drama,”

“Jesus, what's gotten on all of you?!” Wynonna pulls the lapels of her leather jacket and moves her neck to pop it. “And it’s not boy drama,” she says between her teeth and tries to smack Mattie, who moves to avoid her, but not quickly enough. “I just thought he was busy, ya know?”

“Sure,” Mattie mocks her walks out of the apartment as the rest follow and Wynonna saves the card in her jacket and closes the zipper.

Waverly directs Nicole an apologetic smile but Nicole just laughs as they get out of the apartment and get into Doc’s cherry car.

“This is going to be interesting,” Waverly tells as they wait for Doc to get in the car. “They’re not really speaking.”

“Oh shit,” Nicole sighs. “Is this going to be awkward?”

“No, if we don't want it to be.” Waverly wiggles her eyebrows and whispers in her ear.

“No, no my child, this is not my desire and then she said, ” sounds on the radio as Doc taps in the steering wheel. “I'm digging for fire…”

He turns to look at Wynonna on the other side of the bench. Nicole looks at Waverly expectantly. Waverly arches an eyebrow and they wait in anticipation as the Pixies keep playing. Doc turns back to look at the road. Nicole curses internally.

Wynonna swings from side to side, hooping her head at the beat. She clears her throat and Waverly kicks Nicole’s foot, telling her to pay attention. Nicole suppresses a laugh as Wynonna eyes Doc.

It can’t be, Nicole thinks as she sees Wynonna’s face change as she licks her lips to then bite her lip. Wynonna sighs and turns to look at the window. Nicole looks at Waverly and smiles smugly. She’s going to win this one. Waverly shakes her head, definitely, biting her tongue and Nicole feels like passing out.

Then Wynonna turns to look at him, a devilish smile on her lips and Nicole can see Waverly in the corner of her eyes covering her ears with her hands. That’s all the warning she receives before Wynonna extends her arms and turns the volume dial on the radio and blasts the music as she shouts her lungs out with the song, “ARE YOU LOOKING FOR THE MOTHER LODE?”

Doc jumps as a scared cat and the car moves violently as he recovers control. Nicole doesn’t know if she should use her hands to steady herself or she should cover her poor ears.

Doc turns the volume down as Wynonna and Waverly laugh their asses off. “Wynonna!” He groans looking angry until his face breaks into a smile and both Nicole and Doc join them in their laughter.

After that, the ride is filled with chat and jokes. Wynonna and Doc seem to fall into the same old
banter and Waverly whispers to her that Wynonna hates awkward silence. Honestly, Nicole should have known better than to bet against Waverly Earp. Or any Earp, she thinks as she looks at Wynonna.

It’s mind-blowing how Waverly’s energy can change. Nicole has experienced her as Waverly her friend, Waverly the teacher, Waverly on the stage, Waverly the little sister, etc. It’s like she can mold into what she needs to. And you know how sometimes you think you know someone completely and out of nowhere, they tell you a crazy fact about themselves that shocks you and changes your perspective of them completely? Nicole feels a little like that watching Waverly shout “you get up, you get down and you try again”. She jumps, screams and just moves with the last song of the set.

It’s not Purgatory and the crowd doesn’t really know them the way Purgatorians do. It doesn’t matter, Mattie takes power from the microphone, a little bit like she’s proving to the world they need no Constance Clootie and catches the attention of the crowd progressively until the last song where Nicole is sure everyone is glued to them.

Wynonna takes advantages of the second chorus, leaving Mattie to play on her own on guitar, and takes off her leather jacket, throwing it to Waverly. It’s a practical move, but it looks so cool and refreshing when then she takes a sip of her beer standing on an amplifier, lets it fall to the floor, and continues to play like it’s the natural thing to do. God, it’s so cool.

“Up from the floor on the count of ten! Oh, you get up, you get down and you try it again!” Mattie sings loud into the microphone as only Valdez keeps the beat, and then Gretta and Wynonna join her in a jump as they strike their strings and the chorus begins.

But then Nicole's eyes fall on Waverly putting on the leather jacket, as if it’s not a hundred degrees in the bar and Nicole can’t see Valdez hitting the drums or Gretta looking powerful as she moves on the stage, prompting people to jump and clap and participate.

It’s just Waverly, looking wild. Shining in the darkness of the crowd, Waverly jumps and dances and Nicole just stands there, getting pushed on all sides as she stays there, dumbstruck. Waverly’s hair flies as she shakes her head and then turns to look for Nicole. Nicole’s standing behind her and the lights from the stage illuminate Waverly, leaving her backlit, but she can tell Waverly is smiling at her as Nicole finds her. She interlocks arms with Nicole and leads her to jump and scream. Waverly’s energy flows into her making her feel indestructible.

And that’s why she doesn’t notice her phone vibrating in her pocket. They are just ten missed calls and a dozen text messages from Thomas. No big deal, really, Nicole thinks as they stand in the back of the bar, the cars already packed with their equipment since they're not staying on the bar because:
“The next band sucks and Jonas can suck my dick,” Mattie said as they disconnected cables.

And also because:

“My parents are taking us to college tomorrow so I can look for a place in advance and,” Gretta gets close to Waverly and Nicole and drops her voice, eyeing Mattie, “to see if Mattie changes her opinion about college.”

Nicole sighs and dials Thomas while they wait for Valdez and Doc to retrieve Wynonna from the bar, Waverly leaning next to her on the car. It doesn’t even beep once before Thomas picks up.

“Nicole?” Thomas asks in a worried tone as if anyone else would dial from her phone.

“Yeah.”

“Oh, thank god. I’ve been trying to- Why didn’t-“ The line cuts and Nicole looks at her phone quizzically until it rings again. “Sorry, my reception is bad,” Thomas sighs into the speaker. “Look. I- ah- I have a problem here. My car died on the outskirts of the city and I think I’ll spend the night here. Michael is picking me up. I just want to be sure that you got home ok.”

“Oh, yeah. Er- yeah,” Nicole says in lieu of something coherent as Waverly looks at her expectantly. “He’s not coming home,” she mutters to her.

“Nicole?” Thomas asks when he doesn’t hear her anymore.

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“Are you home yet?”

Nicole considered to lie for a hot second, but then decides against it and tells him that they were just about to head back, hoping that this late is not very late for Thomas.

“Alright then,” Thomas seems ok with the hour. “Can I talk to your friend’s sister?”

“Oh, ah…” Nicole looks around panicked and luckily Doc and Valdez are dragging Wynonna from the backdoor of the bar. “Yeah, just a second,” she tells her father before Waverly catches on what Nicole wants.

“Wynonna!” Waverly calls as her sister downs the remains of her bottle. She looks sober enough, Nicole thinks. Waverly must think the same because she tells Wynonna something Nicole can’t hear and then they’re handing Nicole’s phone to Wynonna.

“Mr. Hot,” Wynonna says to the phone. “Yeah, you know how it is.” She says, her voice sounding comically grown up. “Ah! And in this economy?”

Mattie rolls her eyes and tells them that they’re heading back and talks to Doc in a lower voice, but Nicole is paying attention to Wynonna.

Wynonna laughs and Nicole cannot even begin to understand what could they possibly be saying. “Don’t worry, I dropped my sister when she was a baby and she seems to be doing more than fine!” Waverly puts her palm on her face. “Yes, sir. A pleasure.” Wynonna hangs up the phone and tosses it back to Nicole. “Done,” she says and takes a flask out of her back pocket to take a sip.

“What did you-?” Waverly fails to complete her sentence as she and Nicole look at each other in confusion while sound starts blasting through the walls of the bar.
“What’s done?” Nicole demands, worried about the consequences of Wynonna's lack of seriousness at all times. What if she just got Thomas more worried? What if he prohibited her to hang out with Waverly? What if-?

“Calm down,” Wynonna twists the lid of her flask and waves her hand at Mattie's sedan as it takes off. “He just said that he was busy or whatever, I didn't really pay attention to that part. Ah! And he said that- uh- ah, that, well basically, that you can stay with us if you want and if not we’re driving you back. Whatever, as long as you leave my couch alone and, you know, I’m not the one driving.” She smacks Doc in the stomach. “That’s cowboy here.”

Doc keeps an arm in Wynonna's back as he leads her back to the car. Nicole and Waverly get in from the driver's seat. Not even five minutes on the road and Wynonna is snoring on Doc’s shoulder.

Then, as they’re driving on the highway, Waverly scoots closer and mirrors her sister on the front seat. Nicole feels deja vu but it doesn’t take away the way her heart flutters inside her chest. Doc smiles to her through the rearview mirror in some kind of camaraderie because they know. Doc knows as he hums with the radio low and Nicole knows as she does her best to keep still and comfortable for Waverly.

The polite thing, Nicole thinks, would be just to tell them to drop her home. She knows the little apartment is overcrowded and she really doesn't want to overstep. Things seem to be going great between them. It’s making her feel sure and confident. She’s even starting to think that maybe it’s possible that something can exist between Waverly and herself. Something more than friendship.

But, like every human, Nicole is a little bit selfish. She doesn't want to leave Waverly, not yet. If it was up to her, she wouldn’t leave, not until Waverly tells her to. So she doesn’t tell Doc to take her home and no one really questions when Nicole gets out of the car with Waverly.

The lights of the cafe are off and the street is deserted. The street light in front of the building flickers, but Nicole’s mood stays intact as Waverly takes her hand and leads her to the front door, leaving Wynonna and Doc standing closer next to the car, speaking to each other. Wynonna has her arms crossed and Doc has his hat in his hands, in front of her stomach. Nicole pretends to not see how Wynonna’s eyes shine and just follows Waverly up the stairs.

Waverly puts a finger in front of her lips and shushes as she carefully steps to the kitchen and turns on the light. “Willa gets super mad if we wake her up,” she whispers as soon as Nicole enters the kitchen. Waverly puts some water for tea in a way that feels too familiar and Nicole chooses another bag of tea, without looking. Waverly smiles as she always does since she discovered Nicole’s personal game. They lean on the counter as they wait for the water to boil, next to each other, and Waverly leans her head on her shoulder. Nicole doesn't know if Waverly likes to be there, but Nicole sure does.

The tea gets prepared and Waverly summons a bag of cookies, but before Nicole can sit on a chair, Waverly walks to her room, so Nicole follows with her own mug. Waverly puts hers on the little desk, next to a framed photo of Wynonna and Waverly, and leaves the room to return shortly with more blankets. She starts to build a makeshift bed on the floor.

“Let me,” Nicole kneels next to her.
“No, you take the bed.”

“I’m not going to let you sleep on the floor, Waves.” Nicole takes the pillow from Waverly’s hands and starts putting it down anyway.

“It’s fine,” Waverly says, looking a little bit defeated by watching Nicole help her. Nicole flops on the floor to show her that the bed is completely ok.

“IT’s comfy.”

“Then move, go to the bed.”

“But it’s so comfy here.”

“I know, that’s why I want it. Move.”

Nicole moves just a little. Waverly smacks her on her knee. “Let me get you some pajamas.” She hands a pair of sweatpants from a drawer and a t-shirt she has never seen. It says Niagara Falls and it has a little cascade with a rainbow. Nicole snorts. How appropriate.

By the time they’re both in pajamas and ready for bed, Wynonna hasn’t come upstairs and they had two scares when they thought they woke Willa up, they get their third scare as they both basically launch themselves to the floor in order to take property of the makeshift bed. Nicole can feel some part of Waverly digging in her ribs. She makes a noise between a whine and a scream, not for long.

Waverly moves fast to put a hand over her mouth. They both freeze to hear for activity in Willa’s room, but nothing comes so they relax, of course, until they realize their positions.

Waverly is pretty much straddling Nicole and Nicole’s hands, somehow, totally without her permission, are situated on Waverly’s waist. Not to mention Waverly’s hand over her mouth. Nicole’s body goes super cold before jumping to hot in a second and in the next second Waverly jumps and gets off her.

“Ghosts!” Waverly says too loud to then cover her own mouth. They freeze again, but nothing comes.

“What?” Nicole asks, barely recovered, as she sits up.

“Ghost stories,” Waverly says turning off the light and turning on the flashlight on her phone. She illuminates her face in that way they do in movies.

The door opens and Waverly jumps, dropping her phone to the floor with a scream. The silhouette gets illuminated by the phone on the floor and it looks time tens scarier than anything in a movie as it reveals Waverly’s older sister arms crossed on the threshold. “What the hell are you doing?” She groans, fulminating them with her eyes.

“Sorry. We- uh- we were just-“

“I- I- ah- we…”

“Just shut up and let me sleep,” Willa says and it somehow sounds like a threat before turning around and marching to her room.

Waverly closes the door carefully and goes to sit on the floor next to Nicole. They both look shocked at each other for a moment before breaking in a burst of silent laughter.
“No more scares for the day,” Nicole whispers, feeling light again. “But, have I told you about the ghost in the elementary parking lot?”

Exhaustion gets to them as Waverly tells the story of Jack of the knives. Her voice gets quieter and quieter as Nicole dozes off. Waverly notices, but her eyelids are too heavy for her to move and Nicole looks too peaceful to wake up. Gathering what's left of her strength, she puts blankets over both of them and moves closer to put her head on Nicole’s shoulder. She wonders if Nicole would mind, but she’s not conscious enough to question her decisions.

It’s funny, it’s the last thing she thinks before falling asleep, how neither of them used the actual bed.

Hmm, weird. Nicole feels strangely comfy. She wraps her arms around whatever she’s holding tighter and nuzzles her face on it. What a nice smell.

Chapter End Notes

I would like to take this opportunity to talk about music, which, if you haven't guessed yet, is one passion of mine. Most of the songs I made them play on the fic, I check them to see if they're not like crazy difficult. So, if Wynonna is playing, the songs are really easy because Wynonna doesn't practice much. Nicole's are easy ones too, but
because she's a beginner. Waverly and Mattie are both good and can play more complex things, but they play different styles.

Lovely songs:

- m'lover - Kishi Bashi
- Lauren Marie - Girls
- Dig For Fire - Pixies
- Try It Again - The Hives

Spotify Playlist:

- Chap. 11 and 12
Summer didn't change a thing

Chapter Summary

Everything goes right until it goes wrong.

Chapter Notes

Just a silly chapter!

One great beta helped me with this, and that's very cool!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Waverly doesn't move. Not because the arm she's lying on has zero circulation happening. Not because the sun has been rising for a long time now. Not because it's getting a little hot inside the blankets. It's not even because she might wake up Nicole.

It's because she's definitely brain dead. Or something along those lines.

She just can't move, but it's not panic that has her immobilized. If anything, she feels peaceful, good. A reflection of Nicole's face as she sleeps, her head slightly inclined to her. Waverly can almost see the air come in and go with every breath Nicole takes and she feels it on Nicole's abdomen where her hand somehow ended up under Nicole's hand.

God, she probably should stop looking. It's creepy, right? But it feels nice. No, bad Waverly, she scolds herself and tries to move her hand, but Nicole, in her sleep, adjusts her hand over hers so she stops to check if she has woken her up, but Nicole breathes in and then snores quietly.

Well, she tried.

No. Waverly tries again and successfully retracts her hand, moving it slowly until Nicole lets her go.

In school they gave them one of those boundaries and consent talks at the end of the year. No one mentioned anything about staring at your friend while she sleeps, but she's sure that it's up there somewhere. Of course, Waverly would never do any of those things they talked about. One, because she's not a pervert, and two, because, well, because they're both girls. Right? And, you see, Waverly, well, she's pretty sure that, er, that she likes boys. Yeah. She does. Like, she has always liked them. I mean, not all of them, but every person she has liked, like liked-liked, has been a boy.

Right? Right.

There was Eric Drexler in kindergarten, Perry Croft in elementary, she always had a naive crush on Levi and, well, Champ, obviously. And she always had that thing for Orlando Bloom in Pirates of
the Caribbean. Although, Keira Knightley as Elizabeth Swann... er, but it’s not the same.

Or is it? I mean, ah, she has had girl crushes before. But those are normal. Completely normal. Chrissy was always gushing about Natalie Portman. Waverly has always liked Dolores O'Riordan and she was always looking at Wynonna’s Janis Joplin poster when she was a kid. But. Again. Not the same.

Not the same…

Not the… Has Nicole always had those long lashes? Waverly sits up, careful to not move much, and inclines to look at them. She can even see a tint of red in them. Are they soft? Her hand moves, and it’s not until she’s about to touch them that she realizes what she’s doing and takes her hand away like she was about to burn herself.

Oh, god. Sitting up again, she joins her hands and interlocks her fingers to keep them from wandering around. Why does she have to start thinking this stuff when she’s lying down next to Nicole and not when she’s, you know, alone and free to go through this?

Ok. Fine. Just relax and let it go and we’ll deal with this later, she thinks. But, no. She sighs. Waverly has been doing this leaving-things-for-later thing for too long. Honestly. But, what about soon? Instead of later. That seems better.

Contemplating her room for a second, she decides to get out of bed. She takes her phone, finding it completely dead and connects it in the living room. She stops for a second when she doesn’t find any sign that Wynonna slept in the apartment. Trying not to dwell too much on it, Waverly heads to the bathroom to take a quick nice relaxing shower.

When she gets out of the bathroom, after finally calming down from her little lapse of panic, Waverly jumps and swallows a scream when she sees Chrissy and Robin looking through the door of her room. Directly at Nicole sleeping on the floor. “What the heck?” She puts her hand on her quickened heart. So much for a relaxing shower.

“Sorry, Willa let us through and the door was open,” Chrissy says, adjusting her bag on her shoulder.

“Is that Nicole in your room?” Robin asks, biting on a croissant.

Waverly moves to close the door to give sleeping Nicole some privacy. “Yeah, it got kinda late yesterday and, uh, she stayed here,” she says because it’s the truth, but for some reason, she feels like they caught her dancing in her underwear.

Chrissy hums, biting on her own croissant as she looks between the closed door and Waverly like she’s suspicious about something. If she knew Waverly is suspicious too. “Ok,” she shrugs and turns around to the couch.

Robin walks to the piano like he lives there and pulls a music stand from behind it, Waverly stays next to it to unfold it.

“So, uh, what are you doing here?” Waverly asks and crosses her arms in front of her, feeling extra exposed since didn’t bring a bra to the bathroom. Look, she was hoping that Nicole slept a little longer so she could wake up to a completely calm, rational and clean Waverly that didn’t look like she was questioning her life.

“We said that we were going to practice today, remember? I even brought a page-turner,” Chrissy points at Robin as she places her case in the cafe table and starts assembling her flute.
“Hey! I’m doing it because I’m nice,” Robin protests from the piano bench. He prepares his hands over the keys and Waverly can see him breathe in preparation to start playing but Waverly shushes him before he can start. “What?” Robin puts her hands up and Chrissy stops with her lips over the embouchure of the flute.

“Nicole is sleeping,” Waverly hisses.

Chrissy rolls her eyes. “Waves, we pretty much slammed the door getting in and screamed when we saw her. She’s a heavy sleeper.”

“Did you drug her or something?”

“What? No, I didn’t-“ Waverly takes a deep breath. “Fine, just let me-“ she points at herself as if that really means something, but her friends understand and Robin resumes his piano playing, pressing the keys gently while Chrissy gets the sheet music out of her bag.

In the room, she closes the door and relaxes a little, just a little. She looks to Nicole, still snoring peacefully and feels a little trapped. By herself, no Nicole or Chrissy or Robin. She feels trapped by herself.

Ok, ok. She shakes her head and takes some clothes before leaving for the other room to change.

This is just a weird lapse.

“What?” Nicole asks confused as she sits up. There’s music coming from somewhere. A flute and a guitar… This is so surreal. This is not her bed and that is not how the light enters her room. Did she ever leave her grandma’s house? Were all those past days a fever dream? Wait. It takes her a few seconds to remember that she slept in Waverly’s room.

Right. Her face immediately flushes remembering how she fell asleep while Waverly was talking about some murderer. How romantic, casanova. It’s amazing that she didn't have nightmares about it. In fact, it was a dreamless night and she feels completely rested. What a nice floor! The light coming from the window tells her that is late. Her phone confirms it. Past ten, actually. There’s a text from Thomas telling her that he’s on his way back. She texts back, just in case.

Nicole takes her time to look at the room, after dressing in her clothes, hearing the music from outside. Feels like every time she visits, the room is a little bit more Waverly. There are more pictures now and music motives. The bookstand is practically full and Nicole can pinpoint the titles Waverly read this summer. She looks at Waverly’s guitar case and finds the little sticker that she gifted her.

“Have you taken care of her?” Nicole asks the little hamster and wonders if Waverly is going to get another one. Nicole had always wanted a pet but her mom always said no. Sighing, she hears the music stop and Chrissy's voice saying something about phrases.

That’s her moment to head out, she thinks. As she opens the door, the music resumes and three pairs of eyes fall on her, but Chrissy and Waverly don’t stop playing. Robin waves at her and
Chrissy returns her eyes to the paper in front of her. Waverly smiles. That’s nice. Nicole points to the direction of the bathroom, smiling. Because her face does that when she sees Waverly. It’s just how it is, man.

After refreshing herself and making sure her hair is somewhat presentable, she gets back to the living room and walks silently to sit on the couch to watch and listen. Mostly to Waverly. No offense to Chrissy, but like, you know.

And Waverly smiles to her too. She lifts her eyes from the music stand and they lock eyes. She smiles. Nicole smiles back. Waverly’s cheeks have a pretty shade of pink and Nicole doesn’t look away. She wants Waverly to know she’s looking, that she listens, that she’s here. Waverly returns her eyes to the music sheet and keeps her slender fingers walking through the fingerboard like it is her second nature. Probably it is.

Chrissy stops from time to time to point out a mistake or just something they can do better. Robin gives feedback too and after a while, Thomas texts her that he’s almost there. So Nicole says goodbye, trying to not interrupt and walks out silently, feeling great.

There’s a knock on the door in the afternoon. Waverly finds Charlie on the other side and stays in the doorway until she remembers she’s supposed to give him a class. Can Waverly remember anything today?

“You forgot?” Charlie asks after Waverly moves to let him through as she tries to tidy up the living room.

Chrissy and Robin left like an hour ago and Waverly immediately started to look for things to keep herself busy. She must have chosen cleaning up instead of sitting up to read her biology notes from the last course. Wynonna would call her a nerd, but her sister hadn’t appeared in the apartment all day, so Waverly is free to do it without judgment. Biology is one of those subjects Waverly’s not the best at but it’s interesting enough that she can do it painlessly. And she really doesn’t want to think about… just about stuff and things.

“I can come back another day if you’re busy,” Charlie suggests when he sees her move her binder and her pencil case.

“No, no. I’m fine.” Waverly walks to her room and drops her things unceremoniously on the bed and pops her head back out. “Dandy!” She says and looks for the class material in her room. When she gets back with it, Charlie is looking at the few pictures on the wall, his hands in the pockets of his jacket as he inclines forward, squinting his eyes.

“Got it,” Waverly says to announce herself.

Charlie straightens up quickly, like he was caught stealing the cookies, but doesn't move to the piano. Instead, he points to the frame with one hand as the other rubs the back of his neck after moving them like he didn’t know he had them. “That you?”

“Yeah, on the right.” Waverly points to her little self in the field. Those pictures always carry some bittersweet sentiment to her. They were kids, it was a nice day, but she knows the things that were
happening at the time and the things yet to come.

Charlie smiles, inclining again as he studies the picture again. “Look at you. You really look alike,” he ends in whispers.

“Alike?” Waverly asks.

“Yeah, I mean.” He straightens up, shoving his hands in his pockets. “To yourself now.” He lets out a laugh that sounds a little nervous and gestures to the piano. “Shall we?”

Of course, when Wynonna arrives back, as Charlie is getting ready to leave, she does it with a bang. A literal one. The door swings back after hitting the wall and Waverly and Charlie let out an identical squeal as Doc walks in, carrying Wynonna on his back.

“Hey!” Wynonna opens her arms wide as she sees her sister, a bottle of whiskey in one hand, an envelope in the other. Doc barely avoids getting hit by the door swinging back and manages to not drop his precious cargo. Wynonna jumps down and goes to bear hug her sister. She’s in yesterday’s clothes and looking a little tipsy, though Waverly can see that the bottle is full and she doesn’t smell a single hint of alcohol.

Pulling away from the hug and throwing the bottle to the couch, Wynonna catches Charlie putting on his jacket and slaps him hard on the back. Waverly has to give it to Charlie, he doesn’t even flinch. “Muscles!” Wynonna says and walks to launch herself on the couch.

Charlie lets out a chuckle and finishes putting on his jacket. “She looks happy,” he says to Waverly.

“I know,” Waverly responds, looking at Wynonna moving on the couch to make space for Doc, as he fans himself with his hat, looking sweaty from carrying Wynonna who knows how long.

“Bye,” Charlie says and walks out of the apartment, taking a last glance at the pictures on the wall on his way.

Wynonna hums, scooting closer to Doc. “Doc,” she slaps his thigh, “take out the good whiskey,” she says with a grin on her face.

Doc takes the whiskey bottle sitting next to him and starts to open it when Wynonna puts a hand on his to stop him. “I said the good whiskey.”

“Sorry, darling. I do not-“

Before he can muster something else, Wynonna stands up and takes one cushion off from the couch to dig inside of the cover. She pulls out an old-looking bottle with an ah-ha! and twist the cap to smell it.

No wonder that the couch is so uncomfortable.

“We’re going to celebrate!” Wynonna announces. “Waverly, glasses! And get yourself a Capri Sun in the way,” she orders. Waverly quirks her eyebrows with her hands on her hips. “Please?”
“What exactly are we celebrating?” Waverly asks as Wynonna takes a little sip from the bottle.

“It arrived!” Wynonna unceremoniously throws the envelope in her way, putting a smug smile. “Now Gus can’t bother me anymore.”

Waverly opens the envelope to see Wynonna’s high school certificate. It feels like a dark omen and Waverly swallows heavily.

Wynonna wouldn’t leave, she thinks as Wynonna walks to the kitchen to get the glasses herself. She wouldn’t, Waverly tells herself looking at Wynonna laugh with Doc and soon with Willa, when she comes back to the apartment after closing Homestead. She’s happy here, she reaffirms to herself when Doc eventually leaves and Wynonna dozes off with Willa on one side and Waverly on the other.

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Blue moon, you saw me standing alone without a dream in my heart...

The afternoon sun enters Homestead on its golden hour and Nicole notices she’s on her fifth hour in the cafe. It’s a warm day and the windows of the cafe are wide open, the music is low and she wonders if Waverly has a hand in the music today. When Rosita is in charge, she puts on songs from the top forty. Wynonna usually puts on rock, no heavy metal since Nicole witnessed her get scolded by Rosita because she was driving away customers with Napalm Death. Willa seems more disinterested in it, the few times Nicole has been in the cafe when Willa has been in charge, the radio is playing on the speakers.

I heard somebody whisper ‘please adore me’ and when I looked the moon had turned to gold.

Making circles around the tables, leaving drinks and taking plates, Waverly looks stunning as ever. Nicole watches her return to the counter and leave the tray, adjusting her apron. She lifts her head and she sends a smile Nicole’s way, then she walks to the back of the counter to talk with Wynonna, currently attending the cash register looking extremely bored. She lights up when Waverly hugs her and Nicole can see Wynonna moving her lips, making her sister laugh with ease. There’s a slight sting of jealousy, but Nicole dismisses it immediately. It’s just that Waverly usually pays her a little more attention. Maybe Nicole is getting greedy.

Waverly plants a kiss on Wynonna’s cheek and goes to the kitchen. The cafe is packed and Waverly looks stressed. Nicole would help but she would probably end up doing more harm than good.

Her foot taps on the floor with the beat of the song and she remembers helping her grandma clean up with the same song playing. Grandma Lucy swipes every surface of the kitchen every day and tries her best to keep every room clean in the house, going through them day by day. Nicole finds it unnecessary, but grandma Lucy manages to find dirty spots here and there every day.

“I’ll do it,” Nicole said when she saw grandma Lucy trying to move the couch on her own. It was
the day before coming back and Nicole was worried about what unnecessary things her grandma would do in their absence. She wasn’t even allowed to sweep, not that grandma cared.

“‘It’s fine, it’s fine,’” her grandma waved her off, but Nicole was already taking the broom from her. Grandma Lucy sat on the armchair and let out a tired huff. After a while, as Nicole was finishing with the floor, grandma Lucy was singing quietly, watching every movement Nicole did.

“My Ray, you’re getting so big and I’m just gettin’ smaller,” her grandma said as she extended her hand, asking Nicole to help her stand up. She cupped Nicole’s face when she got up. “I’m always amazed how quickly you grow,” she said and Nicole wasn’t sure she was just referring to her for the touch of nostalgia in her voice. “Before we know, you’d be gone, building a home on your own and I’ll just wait to see the next child part.”

“I’ll always be back, gran,” Nicole promised with a chuckle, trying to take the weight of the conversation. “And if you keep feeding Greg, he won’t leave.”

“Oh, he’ll leave, someday.” Grandma Lucy patted Nicole’s cheek and started walking towards the kitchen. “That’s just life, Ray. It’s the right thing to happen. Seeing your kids gone and messing up their own lives. You’ll see one day,” she said, starting to get pots and containers from the cabinets and putting them in Nicole’s arms. “And then you’ll see them part too.”

Nicole left the things on the counter not knowing what to think of her grandma’s words.

“You’ll do. Despite what they’ve done, you’ll be there for others even if they weren’t there for you. You’re braver and stronger than you think.”

“Blue Moon, now I’m no longer alone without a dream in my heart,” the speakers resound as Waverly comes out of the kitchen, carrying even more orders.

“Without a love on my own,” Nicole sings under her breath.

“What?”

Nicole jumps in her seat, finding Dolls sitting next to her. “What- When did you get here?”

Dolls smiles under his black cap, his head on his fist as he watches Nicole. “A while. You were distracted.” His eyes follow Waverly moving around, but it feels like he’s observing Nicole.

“I was just thinking,” she defends herself.

He looks at her for a long second and stands up. “I’m going to order, want something?”

“No, thanks,” Nicole says, although she’s starting to crave some nachos.

“Nachos, then,” Dolls says and leaves.

Nicole sighs. Her friends know her too well. Eliza figured it out quickly and Jeremy probably knows, like he seems to know everything. She’s considering seeing if Dolls knows when he comes back to the table and sits across from her. He takes out his phone and starts tapping the screen. Nicole looks at Waverly over his shoulder. They lock eyes and Waverly smiles again, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. So charming.

When Waverly turns away, Nicole catches Dolls staring at her. “So,” he says.

Nicole holds his gaze for a few seconds. “Fine, I was distracted.” Dolls looks in Waverly’s
direction and returns to Nicole. “Not because of Waverly,” she says like it’s ridiculous.

“Ok,” he says and gets back to his phone.

Nicole taps her fingers in the table. “Maybe it’s because of her.”

Dolls shrugs. “So, I was watching this show on-”

“Fine, I’ll tell you.”

He locks his phone and leaves it on the table, then, he interlocks his fingers on the table like he’s in some meeting or shit. He reads her well. “What are you going to do about it?”

Nicole scratches her head. “I don’t know. I just-“

“Pussy,” Dolls says.

“I just-“

“Pussy,” he interrupts again.

Nicole shushes him eyeing the next table, apparently unaware of them. “Real mature, Xavier.”

“Pussy.”

“I’m not-“

“Pussy. I’ll ask her if you’re not gonna.” He shrugs, a cocky smile on his lips.

“What? You don’t even like her,” she says between her teeth.

“How do you know?”

She inclines forward, feeling like throwing a punch. “Xavier, I swear to god I’ll break-“

“Here’s your coffee, Dolls,” Waverly arrives with a mug and Nicole sits up quickly to make space for her to put it down and to not look like they were about to have an argument. Waverly then pours some coffee in Dolls’ mug and then in Nicole’s.

“Oh, hi, Waverly. Hi,” she says, dumbly, watching the coffee fill the mug. “Hey,” she adds for good measure, smiling and cupping the steamy mug.

Waverly chuckles. “Hey.”

Dolls looks at her expectantly. Nicole bites her tongue.

“Thanks for the-” Nicole gestures with her hand to the table. “Uh, thanks.” She kicks herself internally and then Dolls under the table.

Dolls frowns at her and then turns to Waverly, looking innocent and charming. “Are you free tomorrow, Waverly?”

Waverly seems to be a little distracted, as she looks to the cash register where Wynonna is attending customers. “Hmm?”

“Are you free tomorrow?” He repeats with all the calm Nicole doesn’t feel.
“Ah, I don't know, sorry. I’m moving some stuff back from the city.” Waverly tucks the same strand behind her ear again and Nicole feels relief hearing her words, as she follows the movement.

“That’s ok,” Dolls shrugs but doesn’t give up. “What about-?”

Nicole grits her teeth and kicks Dolls under the table. “Waves,” she says without really knowing what to say next. Waverly looks at her, waiting. Dolls returns the kick but, boy, it hurts. She controls her reaction, but just barely.

“Excuse me, miss,” someone calls from another table and Waverly turns. Nicole takes the moment to make a face of pain and throws an accusatory look to Dolls.

“One second,” Waverly responds and returns to Nicole as she composes her face. “Yeah?” She prompts.

“Do you wanna…” Nicole swallows. Here goes nothing. “Do you want to see a movie?” She stops her hands from going to her head. “With me?”

“Yes,” Waverly responds, her voice too high. She clears her throat. “I mean, sure,” she bites her lower lip.

“Oh, ok,” Nicole says, somehow surprised by the response.

“Miss?” The voice calls again.

“Sorry, I gotta…” Waverly points to the back with her free hand.

“Oh,” Nicole says as if it’s a coherent response. She can see Dolls containing his laughter in the corner of her eye.

“I’ll text you?” Waverly says as she leaves, not waiting for an answer.

As soon as Waverly is busy again, Dolls lets it out and openly laughs at her.


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Andy keeps looking funny at Nicole over her bike as she assembles the wheels. She doesn’t blame her, Nicole has been smiling so much that her face hurt. Thomas did the same and tried to get a confession out of her, just that he was far off talking about boys. Ugh, so far off. But she doesn’t care much, she doesn’t feel obligated to tell him much. Even if it makes her feel a little guilty and it probably will come back to bite her ass in some way.

Whatever, she’s too happy to be bothered. Nicole puts the handlebar in its place and watches the bike take form. It feels nice to build something. The bikes really took a one-eighty and now look almost brand new. There are still some pieces they can replace so they look shinier, but it would be just for the looks.
Andy took the initiative and got all the pieces they really needed to replace. So when Nicole woke up and remembered that Waverly had left town for the morning, she decided to give in and go to finish the bikes at Andy’s house. They had everything they needed and she had a full morning to fill until Waverly came back. And she was feeling great. Had she mentioned that?

Apparently, Andy had been teaching herself over the past weeks and looks like an expert as she explains to Nicole how to put what where and the names of, well, everything. She even gets a little behind on her own bike as she helps Nicole with hers. She looks so eager to finish them that Nicole wonders how she held back finishing hers while Nicole was away.

She would be lying if she said that it didn’t worry her a little to spend time alone with Andy. Not that Andy is going to kill her or something like that, but Eliza pulled her away at the party the other day to talk about it, between other stuff.

After having to sit in Dolls’ room to hear all about Eliza’s first time with Skip and begging Eliza to stop, her friend pretty much informed her about all the things that had happened in her absence, as was the tradition. Eliza’s college brother’s week-long visit; Dolls’ little love affair with Cora; Perry’s short attempt to teach Jeremy to dance; Waverly, Robin and Chrissy’s addition to the friend group; the rumor that Constance Clootie was leaving town to participate in a reality show; and, the one that Eliza urged the most: Andy’s continuous interest in Nicole.

“I know that that's not your intention, but, dude, I’m starting to feel bad,” Eliza said that afternoon, lying on Dolls’ bed, hanging her head upside down, next to Nicole in the same position. “Please don’t break her heart. Or do it but, like, nicely.”

Nicole groaned and rolled over to sit up. “I’m not going to break her heart. I really like her, actually.”

“But you don’t like her that much.” Eliza sat up next to Nicole, fixing her hair. “So don’t go around saying things like that.” She smacked Nicole’s arms. “Look, you’re my best friend. I trust you with everything—“

“Sometimes I wish you didn't,” Nicole said, remembering the things now she could never forget about Skip.

“-but Andy is my friend too, and she’s on my team and the last thing we need is drama. More if you’re really considering getting on the team. I’ll kill you if you bring unnecessary drama into the team.”

“I won’t.”

Eliza glared at her for a long moment like a threat and proceed to keep filling in Nicole with everything she had missed. Then, Skip came looking for Eliza and Nicole fled out of the room only to encounter Andy coming out of the bathroom in the hallway. The smile on Andy’s face was a testament to what Eliza had said, Nicole just tried to mirror the excitement and went looking for Waverly.

They keep working on assembling the bikes as music fills the garage, coming from the speakers Andy brought from her room and Nicole checks the hour on her phone, calculating how much more until Waverly comes back to Purgatory. For once, Andy isn’t listening to White Lies and Nicole finds herself liking Andy’s music taste.

The song changes as Andy is helping her with the brakes, the final touch. “I try, I try to make you cry and make you love me. Oh, I would say yes...”
Nicole pushes the pedal of the bike and watches the chain fall into place and the wheel spin as she holds the bike up. Andy presses the brackets and the wheel stops. “Look at that!” Nicole says, putting the bike down and extending one arm.

Andy high fives her, looking almost as happy as Nicole feels. Her hair is tied in a ponytail and she has a stain of grease on her cheek. Nicole assumes she looks sort of the same as she contemplates the state of her jeans and the black under her nails. She needs to change before Waverly comes back.

“See, my wait is you. My wait is you…”

The bike looks great, so different from the piece of garbage they bought at that garage sale. Nicole already loves the yellow she chose. Andy even got some of those things that allow someone to stand on the back. She wonders if they spent almost as much as if they had just bought new bikes. But, man, it’s the friends you make along the way, right?

Nicole moves directly to Andy’s bike, as she checks her phone. She asked Waverly to text her when she was on her way, so Nicole can prepare for their date.

Oh, my god. She asked Waverly on a date. And Waverly said yes. She said yes, right? Andy kneels down and Nicole helps her put the bike upside down to assemble the wheels. She thinks she feels her phone vibrate in her pocket, but there’s still no text from Waverly. She’s nervous and part of her is still preoccupied with the thought of Waverly herself mistaking it for something else. Maybe she should throw the word date around, just to see.

Then she notices Andy speaking.

“- like we’re building something from scratch. It kinda makes me feel what drawing makes me feel,” Andy says as she spins a nut into place.

“Sorry, what?”

Andy lifts her eyes to see her, a little red. “Ah, that... It doesn't matter.” She puts an invisible strand of hair behind her ear.

“No, come on. I’m all ears,” Nicole encourages her, squatting next to her.

“Just that, it feels good seeing the bikes completed.” Andy gives the wheel a little punch and it spins slowly.

“Yeah, it's cool,” Nicole admits, looking the paint on Andy’s bike. She chose a bright red.

“We make a good team,” Andy says, looking at her shyly. Nicole wonders if she misses the curtain of hair she often uses to hide when she says things of this tone to Nicole.

“I suppose,” Nicole says, feeling something coming and turns her eyes on the cement floor.

“My wait is you and I won't go on.”

“You know, Nicole. I-“ Andy spins so she’s facing Nicole and she’s forced to look at her. Her face is full red now and Nicole feels a little sorry. “I know you don’t-“ Andy shakes her head and looks at her with more determination. “What I want to say is that I-“

But the song ends at the same time Nicole’s phone rings. It feels a little like been saved by the bell but the air tastes like disappointment. It changes when Nicole sees Waverly’s contact on her
Nicole rushes out and takes her bike for the first ride home. She stumbles a little as she pedals out of the driveway, but when she regains her balance, she looks behind and yells to Andy. “See?! Like they’re brand new!” She can see Andy smiling and waving goodbye, but she can see a little tear slide on her cheek too. She pedals faster.

“Aw, I hadn’t seen this one.” Wynonna leaves the box of her textbooks on the bed and gets close to the frame where Waverly put the picture Levi took of the both of them. “I look great, look at my hair.” She points at the picture as Waverly leaves another box on the desk. “You on the other hand…” Wynonna gestures with her hand with a teasing smile on her face.

Waverly shoves her hard enough that Wynonna falls on the bed. She sits up, her hands in surrender. “Look angelical,” Wynonna completes. “Oh!” She puts her index finger up like she just remembered something. “Wanna see mine?” she looks inside her jacket that for some crazy reason she wears religiously even at this time of year. From it, she puts out a piece of paper and reveals a photo Waverly recognizes from the stack Fish showed her.

Waverly inspects it with awe. “You carry this on your jacket?” In the picture, Wynonna and Waverly are sitting inside the tent. Wynonna is flipping the bird to the camera and Waverly is pulling out her tongue.

“Where else I’m gonna put it?” Wynonna says like she can’t fathom hanging it in the living room or putting it on the fridge, like it’s too precious to not be carrying at all times.

Waverly jumps over her to plant a few kisses on Wynonna’s face. Her sister grunts when their bodies collide and then tries to get away like Waverly has the plague. But Waverly feels happy. She has been looking Wynonna closely to see if there’s any sign of her sister leaving. So far, she looks pretty much the same. Bored when she has to work at the cafe or endure Willa’s college talk, but happy and relaxed the rest of the time, when she’s with Waverly or when Doc comes to steal her for a few hours.

“Where’s Willa? I didn’t see her downstairs.” Gus walks in, ignoring their antics as she brings in a suitcase with Waverly’s clothes.

“I don’t know,” Wynonna breaths out when she manages to get herself out from under Waverly. “It’s her free day. I’m supposed to be in charge today,” she says, slowly realizing her mistake. “I mean, of course I’m in charge!”

“Did you leave the cafe alone all morning?” Gus puts her hands on her hip, meaning trouble for her sister. “Wynonna, you can’t do that!”


Gus looks like she’s going to start lecturing Wynonna, so Waverly sits up and claps her hands.
“So!” She says with a hopefully not too forced smile. “Something came in the mail the other day. Right, Nonna?”

But they don’t really pay her attention. Looks like Gus and Wynonna are having a staring contest or about to have a Mexican standoff.

Wynonna gives in. “If you excuse me,” she says as she circles Gus and leaves the room.

“She’s really trying her best,” Waverly says on behalf of her sister.

Gus shakes her head. “She’s not. She’s capable of so much I just don’t get why she doesn’t try.”

She starts to put Waverly’s clothes in the drawers and hangers while Waverly meditates on a way to make both of them get along. To make them see each others perspectives and hopefully, making her sister feel like she has a home here and take away that I’m-trapped-in-this-town mentality.

But then, Gus’ Casio wristwatch beeps announcing three o’clock and it hits her again, like it has been hitting her all day, that she has a… um, a thing with Nicole today. Holy guacamole. Oh, shit. It’s not a date, is it? Like, Nicole would have said that it was a date if it was one, right? Because Waverly has not got out of the might-be-not-so-straight crisis and she’s not sure she can do a date. It’s probably not a date.

It’s just a movie, though. Waverly is going to watch a movie with Nicole. Which is a completely normal platonic thing to do with a friend. She breathes in and breathes out. Normal. She watches movies with her friends all the time. Wynonna watches movies with Doc and they’re not- well, maybe that’s a bad example. She’s still dwelling on it when Gus finally leaves with a half-hour talk about being responsible and stuff that Waverly already knows, to talk with Wynonna, hopefully, about nothing that upsets her sister.

What does it really mean? If she liked Nicole in a different way than she thought. What other things doesn’t she know about herself? Well, there’s the father thing, but whatever, this is not the time for that. And she doesn’t know what she wants to do with her life, but that’s why she left the city. She doesn’t know if this was a good decision, but she was brave and firm and she made it. Now she’s here, soon to start school in a new school and will have free time to find herself. Maybe this is just part of that, one that she definitely was not planning on, but that’s life, she guesses.

And she knows it isn’t bad. It’s not a bad thing. If she does. You know? It’s just a little thing she didn’t know and now she does. Because, well, she mostly sure does. She knows she kinda does. It’s there and it feels strangely familiar to the other times she did and even more profound and strong if it’s what it is. It’s just something she started doing without noticing and now it’s probably there and she can’t ignore it.

She just does it. She does it. She likes Nicole. She likes Nicole. She really likes Nicole.

“Shoot,” she whispers into the space of her room.

Holy guacamole, she likes Nicole. Oh, boy. What? When? Like, why? Really? How on earth did she ignore it? How did this happen under her nose? Now that it looks ready to be accepted it, it’s overwhelming. It’s everywhere. In the room, in the guitar case, on the sticker, in the books, in the pictures, on the bed, on the floor, reflected in the mirror, coming through the window, banging on the door, on the walls as they move around Waverly. Wait. The walls are moving and Waverly can’t breathe. Her chest feels tight and she feels cold. A bit dizzy. Is her pressure down? What’s that sound? Is it her heart.
No, think. Waverly takes a deep breath and moves to the window slowly, being careful with every step. She opens it and tries to take air in and hold it in before exhaling. She starts reciting on a tempo largo the Fuge aus der Geographie until she feels a little more in control.

She lies on the bed, contemplating the ceiling for a while, even though she should be going.

Maybe she’s just not ready. This is all happening at a pace Waverly can’t take. And what do you do when a piece is on a faster beat than what you can manage to play? You slow down. A lot. She needs to slow down. What is she even supposed to do? She has never been on a real date and has only kissed one person. It doesn’t count, though, it was Champ. Oh, my god, her only experience is Champ. Wait, wait, wait. No one is talking about kissing yet. Slow down your horses.

It’s just a movie and it’s just Nicole.

Nicole is cool and interesting and funny and… and there’s no reason Waverly should feel nervous around her. Nicole is respectful and she listens and if Nicole happens to feel like this is a date, she wouldn’t pressure Waverly into anything. She knows that. It’s Nicole, after all, and Nicole is safe.

And Waverly probably doesn’t like her that way. Maybe it’s just a thing of perspective. Maybe if she’s with her, she can realize that that’s not the case. Waverly conjures all her bravery, sends a text and takes some DVDs from her collection, proposing herself to make up her mind and take it slow.

The doorbell rings when Nicole is putting on her red Chuck Taylors she washed in the morning. She sits and debates between going to answer it or to just ignore it because she has to be ready soon to go to pick up Waverly. She feels nervous and she’s just in time to go. She wouldn’t be so hurried if the grease didn’t leave a weird odor on Nicole that took forever to get rid of. She kinda feels like it’s still on her and hopefully, a little lotion can cover it. Just a little, the last thing she wants is to fumigate Waverly because of an odor that it’s just in her head. Or perhaps, just perhaps, what she can’t rub off herself is the guilt she feels in her stomach because of Andy. Going there was a bad idea. Eliza is going to be mad.

Groaning, she ties her shoe just in time for the doorbell to ring again. Her other shoelace is not tied up yet, she just walks down the stairs, buttoning up the shirt she just ironed and trying not to fall to her death. She opens the door, a little bit annoyed until she sees Waverly on her porch.

“Waverly? I was just about to head out to-“ Nicole starts as she tries to figure out what’s happening. “Sorry, am I late or-?”

“No! No, not at all,” Waverly says, looking nervous or uncomfortable. There’s something wrong and Nicole can sense it even if Waverly keeps a good face. “I just, uh, I thought that I could just come here myself.”

“Oh, ok.” Nicole watches Waverly bit her lip as she rearranges the plan for the day in her head. This is not how she envisioned it, but it’s just a little detail. Everything is fine, she reassures herself. “Well, give me a minute and we can head out.” She moves so Waverly can get into the house, but Waverly stays in the threshold.
“Actually, uh- well, I kinda feel- I don’t feel like going out, er, today.”

“Oh.” Nicole shoves her hands in her back pockets. This feels strangely like the rejection she was expecting to receive when she asked, not now. But also, Waverly looks extremely nervous and if she doesn’t want to go out, then they won’t. It doesn’t have to be the end of the world. “All right, then,” she says, rocking on her heels.

“But I thought that maybe we can watch something here. Not that I’m inviting myself to your home, but, uh- I would invite you to the apartment but we don’t have a TV and watching them on the laptop is, ha, ha, kinda lame. Although, if you want to go we can go, I just thought we can watch it here. And I brought some movies, in case you feel like seeing one of them, but we can watch whatever you want, or none and I can go... if you want me to, I mean-”

“Waverly,” Nicole stops her and puts on a calm smile. “Yes, I want to watch a movie with you here or whenever you want. But if you don’t want to, we can do this other time. Go out any other day if that’s what you want, ok?”

Waverly visibly relaxes. “Ok.”

“Just- are you ok?” Nicole asks because she wants to and because she cares.

“Yeah, I just didn’t feel like going out today.”

Nicole shrugs even though her head is starting to fill with questions. “Alright.”

“I just want to see a movie with a friend,” Waverly says, quietly.

Closing her eyes and ducking her head, Nicole laughs and bites her tongue because of course this is happening. But Waverly looks so relieved now and they laugh when Waverly notices that Nicole has her shirt buttoned up all wrong. Nicole can’t feel angry or even too disappointed when Waverly doesn’t hug her or when she maneuvers her way around Nicole when they prepare popcorn. She doesn’t. And even if her heart fissures a little and her ego bruises, Nicole feels lucky that she gets to hear Waverly talk about composers and show tunes and all the great things she harbors in her mind.

It starts raining as Tony starts to sing about Maria’s name. The clouds come from the horizon and spread fast, just as fast as the rain covers like a blanket all Purgatory. It dims the light in the living room, creating an ambience that at any other time would soothe Nicole, but something is off and she can’t pinpoint it.

Waverly had been watching Nicole’s reaction to each scene of West Side Story from the other side of the couch but has slowly gotten more into the movie, singing under her breath and getting entranced every time Tony and Maria are on screen. So when Tony comes looking from Maria, Waverly is lost on the screen and it warms Nicole’s heart.

“Just for a minute ,” Tony pushes as Maria tries to let him know that is not possible, she tries to quiet him up as her father calls. “I’m coming up!”

“Momentito, papál ” Maria says and Waverly echoes. “See what you done?”
“Momentito, Maria!”

“Cállate,” Maria says.

“Cállate?” Nicole asks and Waverly shushes her at the same time as Maria does. “I’m sorry. I’ll keep quiet.” She closes an invisible zipper over her mouth and throws the invisible key over her shoulder.

Waverly laughs. “No, it means shut up. Cállate, I mean.”

“I got it, I’ll keep quiet,” Nicole says like she’s being scolded.

“It’s what the word means,” Waverly insists, looking worried that Nicole is offended. Nicole laughs and Waverly gets that she’s being teased and throws her a dirty look that is more cute than anything.

Nicole cuts the distance and pokes Waverly’s side, making her jump. “Stop,” Waverly catches her hand again as she’s trying to reach. “Pay attention!” She says, and then lets her go.

“I like it,” Tony says on the screen, “and he would like me!”

“No,” Maria laments, “he’s like Bernardo, afraid.” Nicole keeps watching Waverly move her lips in synchrony. “Imagine being afraid of you.”

“You see?”

“I see you.”

“Oh, Maria, see only me,” Tony says, so dreamy, Nicole starts to guess why Waverly likes this movie so much as Maria starts to sing, but Nicole has her ears tuned to Waverly’s low singing.

“...In my eyes, in my words and in everything I do. Nothing else but you, ever. ..”

Waverly stays on her side of the couch and Nicole on hers like there’s a wall in between them and Nicole is dying inside. She wants to reach and touch and not feel so far away from Waverly. But if that’s how Waverly wants it, then who is Nicole to go and say no. It’s so distracting she doesn’t really feel the weight of the events unfolding on the screen.

And it’s a little bit confusing because Nicole doesn’t know what it means. Waverly shifts in her seat and puts her hand in the space between them next to Nicole’s, just an inch away. Nicole feels a pull and can see the air between them. Then Waverly takes her hand away, clenching her fist in her lap as Nicole taps her fingers at the rhythm of the song. Then she glances in Waverly’s way and catches Waverly looking at her. They both move their heads away like it’s a dirty thing to see each other. Like they hadn’t been doing just that yesterday. It’s so confusing and Nicole doesn’t know what it means.

What does it mean that Waverly calls off their date that was probably never a date in the first place? What does it mean when she throws glances and smiles across Homestead? What does it mean when she gets closer and it feels like they’re about to stumble into each other? What does it mean when Nicole invites her to the ferris wheel and Waverly says that that’s like a couple’s thing like it’s impossible for them to do it? But then she looks at Nicole’s lips like she’s going to push forward? What does it mean that she keeps throwing the word friend like it doesn’t hurt Nicole every time? What does it mean that Nicole lets her?

Because words have meaning; and actions, consequences. Then why is it so confusing? Nicole is
almost there, always just about to reach a conclusion and then suddenly Waverly acts or says and it’s like every variable of the problem changes and Nicole has to start figuring it out from zero. Maybe it’s her and maybe it’s Waverly, either way, is a little bit like torture and a little bit like normality at his point.

Then, a dark though comes to her mind and she already hates it. What if she’s being toyed with? Maybe Greg was onto something when he was talking about extracting himself from relationships when the other party wasn’t serious about it. But, Waverly, she’s not like that, Nicole knows it. She exudes goodness and shines like innocence. Maybe Nicole has been blinded and she got herself onto something she should escape or maybe she’s being dramatic and selfish and she’s only thinking about herself. Maybe Waverly does all these things naively. Nicole doesn’t know what’s better and what’s worse.

The movie unfolds and the inevitable comes and something new happens inside Nicole. She wants Waverly to go so she can’t see her right now, now that she knows her own mind is all messed up and she’s frustrated and disappointed and sad. She’s sad. Ok? Sad. The movie is sad, the rain is sad, the popcorn is a little bit burned and Nicole can feel Waverly feeling uncomfortable and it’s making her crazy.

The rain stops as Waverly starts to talk about the movie score, as she wipes the few tears from her eyes with the back of her hand. Nicole hates that she wants to hug her, but Waverly would probably just back away from her. Because she doesn’t like her and that just the truth.

No, she tells herself, no, you’re just in a bad place. Don’t go there. She breathes deeply wishing to exhale her anxiety.

“Are you ok?” Waverly asks and Nicole, for the first time, has no idea what she was saying before.

“Yeah, I just-“ She forces herself to put on a good face because it is not Waverly’s fault she’s gotten herself into this position. “It’s late,” Nicole says.

“Oh, yeah. I should probably go, then,” Waverly says with a nervous laugh.

“Yeah, you should probably go,” Nicole says and she hates it and hates that Waverly looks taken aback like she was expecting Nicole to beg her to stay. Part of her wants to. “I’ll walk you out,” she says, trying to take the sting out.

Waverly takes out the disc and picks up her things. As they go out, Thomas walks down the stairs.

“Hey, girls, how was the movie?”

Waverly looks at Nicole expectantly. “It was good,” she says and then clears her throat, feeling like the words came out strangled in contrast with the normality in Thomas voice.

Thomas nods. “Hmm, a classic, eh?” He leans on the stair rail noticing Waverly with one hand on the doorknob. “You leaving, Waverly?”

“Yeah, it’s getting late.” Waverly tugs the strap of her bag and laughs, although no one said something funny.

“I’ll give you a ride,” Thomas offers.

“No,” they both say at the same time and then look at each other, expectantly.

“I’ll walk her home,” Nicole completes.
“No, let me drive you, it’s no problem.”

“It’s fine,” Waverly says, taking a step closer to the door. “I walk fast.”

“I’ll take my bike to get back quickly,” Nicole says just wanting the conversation to end, but she knows it’s not a good idea. She needs a moment alone to order her thoughts and being with Waverly is not going to help.

Thomas seems to think about it, unaware of Nicole’s inner debate. He looks at his wristwatch and nods. “But don’t take long, it might rain again.”

It doesn’t rain while they walk to Homestead, but it’s a bit cold for a summer night, accentuated by the humidity and the puddles of water on the sidewalk. Maybe it’s chilly because they’re not talking. The night is quiet and the only sound is the clicking of the wheel of Nicole’s bike as she pushes it next to her, in between them and the sound of the heels of Waverly’s boots. Waverly has never minded silence, she actually likes it. It’s very necessary, in her opinion, but she’s hating this silence. It feels like drowning. Eventually, it starts to get unbearable, as her mind starts to go on a hundred directions, and she breaks it.

“I’m sorry,” Waverly blurts out as she crosses her arms and stops. “You probably really wanted to go to the movies and I made you watch a cheesy movie from the sixties.”

“What?” Nicole stops to look at her for the first time since they left her house. “No-“

“And you said yes because you’re so cool and nice and-“

“No, no! Waverly-“ Nicole leaves the bike on the ground as she stands in front of her to hold her by the shoulders. “No, you didn’t,” she says with such conviction, Waverly’s brain can’t understand it.

“But you’re mad at me,” she says, “just, you can tell me if-“

“I’m not- ah, it’s just,” Nicole shakes her head, letting her arms fall to her sides. “No, I’m sorry, I’ve been in my head all afternoon.” Nicole takes one hand to her head to scratch it and then looks at her with her big brown eyes. “I’m sorry, ok?”

“No, I’m sorry.”

Nicole burst out a laugh. “Ok, we’re both sorry.” She smiles and Waverly melts. How did she not notice?

“Ok.” Nicole moves to pick up her bike again and they start walking again, now the bike on the other side of Nicole. It’s dumb but it makes Waverly feel better. “Something happened with Andy and it’s been in my head all afternoon.”

“I’m sorry,” Waverly repeats.

“Waverly.”
“I thought you were mad at me. God I’m making this about me, aren’t I?”

“Definitely not about you,” Nicole says, looking down to the bike.

It hurts a little, because it’s not about Waverly, but about Andy. But they’re friends and that hasn’t changed despite Waverly’s new revelation. “Something?” Waverly asks, hating herself a little.

“Nothing, really,” Nicole responds, but it doesn’t sound like nothing.

“Nothing more?”

“Nope, just me.” Nicole laughs. It sounds in a way that makes Waverly distrust its authenticity.

“So Andy-“

“Your turn,” Nicole cuts her off, looking at her expectantly.

“To what?”

“Something’s been bothering you, if I-“

“No, no.” Nothing is going on with Waverly. No sir. “It’s Wynonna,” she says and it’s not a complete lie, because it’s what has been keeping her busy when she’s not freaking out about Nicole.

“Oh.” Nicole keeps pushing the bike for a few meters more. “Is she ok?”

“Yeah, just. I think she might be getting bored of living here,” Waverly explains, a little glad that she picked a subject that can keep her head clear. “And a bored Wynonna is an impulsive Wynonna and an impulsive Wynonna, well...”

Nicole hums. They cross one street before Nicole speaks again. “Are you sure it’s not me?”

Waverly’s insides twist and she fears Nicole can read minds. “No, no, you’re perfect.” She laughs to look calm and natural. “Cool.” Waverly bites her tongue.

“Wow,” Nicole laughs and the air feels lighter. She puts on a smug face and bumps into Waverly. “You think I’m perfect and cool?”

Waverly keeps her balance and giggles half embarrassed and half glad that they’re back to bantering. God, why did she say that? But in the back of her mind, next to where she stores the lyrics from Breaking Free, she thinks she might be on a good track. Maybe Nicole knowing she likes her is not that bad. It doesn’t have to mean anything more than a simple fact. Despite the implications, it’s clear she likes Nicole in one way or another.

But there’s also the fact that she’s not ready.

“Yeah,” Waverly says, measuring her voice. “Don’t let it go to your head, that red is enough to catch everyone’s attention. Making it bigger would be too much.”

Nicole grins and rolls her eyes as they reach another corner. The streetlight flickers and Nicole looks at it as they stop for a second. “I think you’re perfect and cool too,” Nicole says to the light, but Waverly is sure that it’s for her.

“Yeah?” She breathes out.
Nicole directs her a quick glance before pushing her bike again. “But you can totally let it go to your head, might gain you a few centimeters.” Nicole runs to the other side of the street to avoid Waverly’s hand, ready to smack her.

Waverly runs behind and then they’re suddenly Homestead’s street. There are no many people inside and Waverly can make Wynonna’s and Rosita's figures through the windows. The cafe looks warm and inviting but Waverly wants to stay out with Nicole a little longer, just a little forever if that’d be ok.

“We have arrived at your destination,” Nicole states the fact and presents the street.

“It looks like it.” Waverly tugs on the strap of her bag and alternates looking between the cafe and Nicole, feeling a hundred words stuck in the back of her throat. “Then, see you?” It’s all she lets out.

“Yeah.” Nicole smiles as she scratches the side of her head with one finger. It’s cute.

Waverly turns around to not contemplate it, in the direction of Homestead and gives one tentative step, slowly. She can her Nicole tapping her foot on the pavement as she gives the second and the third and the fourth…

And she turns back, ready to say whatever comes out of her mouth.

“Nicole, I—"

“Maybe we-“ Nicole says at the same time. They both stand there waiting for the other to talk.

“What?” Waverly prompts.

“Nothing,” Nicole laughs and there goes her hand to her head again, passing it through her hair. “Maybe we can hang out tomorrow?”

“Yeah, sure,” Waverly says because she wants to. Then they’re standing, staring at each other again like it’s a hobby.

“What were you going to say?” Nicole finally prompts, after the seconds had dragged on.

“Ah, right.” Fuck, what was she going to say? “I think you’re cool?”

“You already said that?” Nicole's hair is all messed up by the number of times she has rubbed her hand in her head by now. It’s so distracting.

“I think you have nice hair.” Fuck.

“Oh,” Nicole takes her hand off her head.

“And you’re funny and nice and-“ Waverly lets out like it’s being pulled from her insides. “And tall and kind-“ Nicole’s face gets progressively redder as she goes. “And you look cute when you blush.”

Open wide, Nicole’s eyes are piercing into Waverly. It’s hypnotic and it calls her. Go nearer, get closer. She gives one step forward, Nicole gives another like they’re both feeling the same and then they’re in each others space. And she must feel it, she has to. If not, then what’s the point? What if she’s not feeling it? What is Nicole doing when she lets her hands hover over her hips? Why is Waverly shaking? This is it, she thinks. Is this it? Is this happening? Is Nicole real? Is she
And then Nicole is too close, Waverly feels like the world is coming down over her, and she feels it come as she feels her lungs contract just as Nicole whispers her name, asking something Waverly can’t understand because of the humming in her ears and the throbbing of her heart. She’s not ready, she’s not sure. She can do it. She can do it. She can-

“Is that Waverly?” She hears Jeremy’s voice cut through the street and air and time and space.

Shoving Nicole away, Waverly turns her head so she can pull in some air and maybe keep the floor from spinning. It also helps her to see Jeremy and Robin walking towards them on the sidewalk, making her aware of the night.

“Hey, Waves!” Robin's voice calls from the other corner of the block as they approach. She keeps her eyes on them, trying to not look at Nicole out of embarrassment and fear. Stupid, stupid Waverly. What the hell is going on with her?

Robin looks completely unaware but Jeremy’s eyes are on Nicole and he looks a little concerned. How does Nicole look? She can only hear her from behind clear her throat and Waverly controls her impulse to turn around to see her.

“Hey, guys!” She’s sure her voice sounds overly happy. Has her voice always been this high? How does she normally sound again?

“Hey!” Robin walks to hug her immediately out of habit and keeps one arm across her shoulders. “Hi, Ni- uh- Nicole?

“Hey,” Waverly hears Nicole mutter in a weird tone. It’s killing her.

“You’re leaving?” Jeremy asks, his face with more worry than before, it makes her give in and look.

Nicole is throwing one leg over the bike as she keeps her head down. “Yeah,” she chokes out before clearing her throat again. “I promised my dad I wouldn’t take long.” She puts her head up to give them a last smile before pedaling off, but her eyes look watery and- fuck- Waverly fucked up, didn’t she? Fuck.

Jeremy calls her back, following her for a few meters, but Nicole rides around the corner and disappears from view. However, the image of her face doesn’t leave Waverly’s mind. It’s there. The sad smile, her red eyes, her messy hair imprinted in her mind in oil marker, penetrating all the layers.

“What’s her deal?” Robin asks without malice and squeezes Waverly in the brotherly way he does.

“I don’t know,” Waverly says but she’s going through a million options in her head. Mostly regarding her blame for Nicole’s mood.

Robin calls Jeremy back. He deliberates a little but ends up coming back and composing his face into something less worried. “She must, uh,” he gestures with his hand not making sense, “you know?”

“Waves, I wanna ask you a favor,” Robin says as they start walking towards Homestead.

“Yeah, sure,” she says, but she can’t stop thinking about Nicole. She should call her or go to her and apologize and just tell her that- that- She doesn’t even know what. Poop.
“Would you let me use your piano? Jeremy doesn’t believe that I can play it laying on my back. And you know my dad loses it if I play after seven.” Robin looks at her and finally catches onto her mood. “Are you ok?” He studies her with a frown, but before Waverly can respond, there’s a commotion coming from inside of the cafe, prompting Waverly to get out of her head and walk fast to see what’s going on.

“Get your fucking ass out of my fucking establishment,” Wynonna shouts as she drags a body to the floor from the door of the cafe. Pete is being shoved out of the door by Rosita and they finally see that is none other than Champ Hardy in Wynonna’s angry hands. Robin immediately puts himself in front of Waverly as she feels a cold blanket fall over herself and her heart pick up the pace.

“Let me go, you bitch,” Champ grunts, trying to get off Wynonna’s grip. Wynonna opens her hands and Champ falls to the floor with a loud thud. The scene is so familiar, Waverly feels that panic starting to rise.

“Hey!” Pete argues and he tries to put himself between Champ and Wynonna. “We weren’t doing anything!”

“Shut your stupid mouth unless you want me to break your stupid face, moron.” Wynonna plants her finger in Pete’s face as he visually recoils.

“Hey, you can’t talk like that to us!” Champ yells from the floor. “And give me back my phone!”

Then Willa comes running out of the cafe, in what looks like pajamas. “Wynonna, what the hell are you-“ and then sees Wynonna, very ready to throw a punch, then Pete, scared and Champ on the floor and then to Waverly. She connects all the dots wrong and her face turns into a stage of anger Waverly has never seen before.

Champ looks smug like Willa is about to take his side, but only for a second before Willa marches to him and lifts him from the collar of his already stretched shirt. “You son of a bitch! What the fuck did you do to my sister?! If you put your hands on her again-!”

“No!” Waverly intervenes and moves around Robin before he pulls her back again. But he doesn’t realize that he should be pulling Willa and Wynonna off before the Earps gain their bad name again. “Willa, I just got here!”

Willa lets go of Champ, very much like Wynonna did and Champ, to keep with tradition, falls to the floor again. “Leave,” Willa groans, cold and murderous.

“What?!” Wynonna tries to get Champ again before Rosita pulls her back by the jacket and Willa grabs her too. “He was taking pictures of a girl under a table, fucking pervert.” Wynonna tries to kick Pete, who is still standing in her range.

“Fucking crazy bitches,” Champ says, trying to get on his feet.

“What do you mean again?” Wynonna asks, looking intensely at Willa.

“Dude, are you ok?” Pete helps Champ on his feet.

“Lets fucking go.” Champ shoves him. “This fucking town is full of crazy bitches like you!” He directs to Waverly with such hate on his voice, she feels genuinely scared.

“Hey!” Wynonna groans, struggling in Rosita’s and Willa's grip.
“Wanna go again?” Robin steps confidently in front of Waverly and Champ backs off, a bit of fear replacing his anger.

“Oh my god,” Jeremy lets out from behind, his voice all airy.

Champ grabs what he has left of pride, if it's any, and runs away, Pete following behind.

“Don’t you ever talk to her again and if we see you here again-!” Willa shouts as they disappear on the street until she finally lets Wynonna go.

Rosita shakes her arms. “I’m going to check on the girl,” she says before getting on the cafe again and flipping the open sign to closed.

“Fucking kids,” Willa sighs as Wynonna straightens up her jacket and Robin checks on Waverly and Jeremy.

“What the fuck do you mean again?” Wynonna plants herself in front of Willa, still furious.

“Nothing,” Willa ignores her and with a glance at Waverly and tries to walk to the cafe door, just to be cut by Wynonna.

“I asked you a question, Willa. Fucking answer me.”

Willa crosses her arms. “It’s none of your business.”

“If it’s about Waverly then it’s my fucking business, for fuck sake!” Wynonna shouts, throwing her arms in her air in pure exasperation and then she directs herself to Waverly. “What happened, Waverly?” She shoves Robin away, making him almost fall if it wasn't for Jeremy.

“Hey,” he protests.

“I- he- it wasn’t anything, really-“ Waverly starts but Robin mutters at Waverly and she remembers to not defend Champ again, but she doesn’t really know how to explain what happened. “Well, he-“

It’s enough for Wynonna, though. “I’m gonna fucking kill him,” she roars with real intention in her voice and marches in the direction Champ left. Her sisters are fast, luckily, and catch her almost immediately.

“Wynonna!” Waverly pleads as Wynonna tries to advance despite her sisters.

“See?” Willa struggles as Wynonna tries to escape. “This is why we didn’t tell you! We knew you were going to get all like this?”

“We? Who the fuck is we?” Wynonna frees herself and turns abruptly. “Who else knows?” Her face shifts from anger to confusion as she thinks for a moment, before moving to sadness. “Gus? Curtis?”

Nor Willa or Waverly respond and the silence stretches painfully.

“Maybe we should go,” Jeremy says, pulling Robin from his sleeve to walk away, sending an apologetic look to Waverly.

“They know?” Wynonna asks, hurt.

“Well-“
“Ah.” Wynonna laughs, looking at the floor with her hands on her hips. “The punch. It was because of that that he broke his hand, right?” She lifts her head to see Robin leave in the distance. “Fucking incredible. I have to give it to him.”

“Wynonna…”

“And that’s why you’re coming here, not because of-“ Wynonna’s voice breaks and she sniffs, looking at the sky. “Of course Gus was lying when she fucking told me that she was proud, of course she’s not. It’s always the same.”

“No, Wyn, It’s not like that.”

“Calm down, Wynonna,” Willa says but it sounds like a warning and the only thing it does is to fire Wynonna up.

“Fuck off, Willa. Just go rub your fucking degrees somewhere else,” she spites. “Oh, you can’t because mama trapped us all here and you fell for it. Now we’re stuck here, again.” Wynonna extends her arms, showing Homestead, mocking it. “You fucked up, for once! Not me! I’m leaving!”

Waverly jumps at that. “No, Wynonna! Wait!”

“Why?! It’s all always the same shit. We’re the fucking same kids when we’re back here. We’re Earps and we don’t change. Willa is the same frigid bitch she has always been and I’m the same untrustworthy piece of shit. We’re fucking scum, Waverly! Can’t you see?” And if that wasn’t enough, she adds in a calmer tone, aimed to the heart, “you should be relieved that you’re not one of us.”

Wynonna enters homestead, leaving Waverly feeling like she slapped her, like she burned her and cut her and kicked her and-

“Wynonna!” Willa follows her.

-and ripped her apart and drowned her and spit on her and put a bullet in her head and...

“Are you ok, Waverly?” Rosita asks, but Waverly doesn’t listen, like she doesn’t listen to the roar of Wynonna’s bike or Willa shouting her name on the street as Wynonna fades into the distance.

Waverly doesn’t sleep that night, not really. She’s too worried and sad and angry and- and she only wishes she could turn off herself and be unaware of everything for a few hours. She can’t. Wynonna might come back any minute and apologize. She didn’t mean it. She loves Waverly. She does. She does. She does.

Sometimes her eyelids close but she forces them open. It feels like lifting a freaking car. Her body is so tired and it doesn’t help that when her fears get the best of her, the room spins again and the walls contract and her chest reduces until she can gather more air. All over again. It’s so
exhausting. Waverly feels like dying when the sun rises and Willa, who doesn’t look better than what Waverly feels like, opens her door and commands her to put on some clothes so they can go look for Wynonna.

The hope of her sister coming back on her own is getting slimmer and when it occurs to Waverly to look for the secret stash of money mama sent them and she doesn’t find it, they disappear.

In any case, they go to Shortys hoping Wynonna chose it to escape to and if not, to get Doc’s help to find her. It’s really early, so when they hear music coming from inside, they frown at each other and try to go in by the front door, but it’s locked. Waverly bangs on the door three times while Willa directs her a look that conveys how much she thinks it’s going to work. Waverly tries one more time, with more faith than Willa, and once more for luck.

And luckily the door opens. Er, actually the door opens because Doc opens it with death on his face. Death in the sense that he looks like dying, and that he looks outside like he’s ready to duel to death whoever is banging on the door. Nevertheless, none of the sisters back off because, you see, Willa is Willa and Waverly knows that Doc is a cute puppy on the inside. Knowledge is power.

“I told you it’s closed!” He screams to the outside before his eyes focus on the Earp sisters. “Oh.” He turns around and stumbles back into the bar where the music is so loud Doc doesn’t hear them calling his name.

*My love is like a river…*

“Doc, is Wynonna here?” Willa runs behind him, following him close. “Doc?”

Waverly, meanwhile, moves to behind the bar to turn down the volume of the music as Doc serves three shots of alcohol and takes one when he directs a glance to Waverly, like remembering she’s underage.

*No man ever can keep that girl from moving on…*

“She is gone,” Doc strangles out and throws down another shot with his face controlled and cold. “She came to bark out her frustrations and then she left.”

“For fuck's sake,” Willa pulls Doc by his vest. “Did she say where she was going, Doc?” She repeats, slowly and dangerous.

“It is not my job to know, Willa Earp! Or to keep her happy. It is not.” He slams his hand on the bar after ripping himself from Willa’s grip.

“Doc.” Willa sends daggers to him and Doc remains quiet, not breaking eye contact.

*Lay my burden down, down by the river’s edge.*

“She insisted on leaving and I said no. I do not know more.” He barks out.

“Doc?” Waverly takes him by the wrist to catch his attention. He turns and his anger melts as he looks into Waverly’s sad, sad face.

“I am so sorry, baby girl,” he puts his hands on her shoulders, his face finally showing the pain that looks very similar to Waverly’s. “I tried for us, but you know how she is. I just can not find a way to hate her. We cannot hate her for the same nature we love her for, ok? She will be back and she will be sorry. This ain’t your fault.”
Waverly cries and Doc embraces her, doing his best to replace the irreplaceable, and feeling pretty much like it’s her fault. She should’ve stayed and kept Wynonna company and told her what’s going on. Shown her that she has all Waverly’s trust and that they’re all proud of her. She shouldn’t have gone out with Nicole when she should have been with her sister.

When Willa and Doc leave to track Wynonna and they force Waverly to stay at the apartment, the sadness dangerously starts shifting and anger overtakes Waverly. She hates that she didn’t do more. Hates that Wynonna said what she said so easily. Hates Willa and Gus for making her keep things from Wynonna. Hates Robin for making her feel guilty that he broke his hand on her behalf. Hates that she decided to date Champ and she didn’t see the piece of trash he’s on the inside. Hates the silence and she hates that Nicole distracted her from what was really important.

If there’s something Nicole has learned in these past months is that things don’t happen if you don’t give them a little push first, or if you don’t ever take the first step. Well, Nicole tried to take that step yesterday. She thought it was the next step but she was wrong. Waverly moved away and Nicole, well, she fucked up. For acting without really knowing where she was standing, she went and did something she never wanted to do with Waverly. She tried to kiss her and that wasn’t what Waverly wanted.

Her eyes were burning when she pedaled back home, tears were falling down her face and the air was hurting them from the speed she was going. She ignored Thomas on the way to her room and pretended to be asleep when he went up to see if she needed anything and she cried into her pillow while she ignored her phone buzzing. There were no texts from Waverly, only Jeremy and he was being really annoying. Nicole didn’t want to hear from him, or anyone, so she got frustrated and threw her phone at her desk in a surge of frustration.

There are times in life when one sees things happen in slow motion, knowing there’s nothing you can do to stop the terrible ending that one calculates from the first moment that things become inevitable. Nicole had two of these that night. First, when Waverly’s eyes clouded with nothing good as Nicole was leaning to kiss her and she started to feel the pressure of her hands on her shoulders as Waverly moved her head away. The other, when she saw the trajectory of her phone as it bounced on a book on her desk and took the perfect angle to skip through the few inches the window was opened and fall to the void. Well, not the void, but the hard cement pathway in the front yard.

Without a phone or the will to find a way to contact anyone, Nicole allowed herself a night of self-pity. A night where she could hate herself and let the pessimism cover her and lull her to a poor sleep just to wake up to a new day and a new perspective where the deal was over and it was time to face whatever came after walking to Waverly’s home and do whatever it had to be done. Being alone, far from Waverly, Nicole sat to think.

She puts the facts in order, and the assumptions, and her yearning and tries to understand it in a logical way. Almost with the scientific method. However, Nicole has never been good at applied logic when it comes to her heart. So she blows hard into the ashes inside of her and revives the flame and puts out what its left of her will to go and try to make things right between the two of them. She just needs to say she’s sorry and explain to Waverly what her heart craves for and that she would wait a thousand years if Waverly says so. If Waverly tells her that she never meant
anything bad and that she can come to want her too, even if it’s a lie, Nicole would sit in the flames of hell to wait patiently. And if she doesn’t, fine, Nicole tried and now they can move on with their lives and work on leaving behind these terrible feelings that can only build fragile dreams and destroy her sanity.

So she improvises a basket for her bike and puts the mint pot, hoping it serves as a sign of how sorry she is and hopefully Waverly didn’t tell Wynonna and she’s not getting her face rearranged, because Nicole likes her face. Sometimes.

What she doesn’t expect is to find Homestead closed and music coming from the apartment when she walks up the stairs and knocks. She can only imagine Wynonna on the other side, so she knocks again and gets ready to get whatever treatment she’s going to receive from the other side.

But is Waverly who opens the door and Nicole can see a moment of hope in Waverly’s eyes die as soon as Nicole is in focus. “Oh, it’s you,” Waverly says with disappointment. Not a good sign.

“Er, yeah. Hey, uh-” Nicole clears her throat. “You look-“

Waverly looks bad, but like, bad bad. Her eyes are red and her face is puffy. She looks devastated and if Nicole didn’t know that it was her that caused this, she would go out and break whoever’s face did this. Panic starts overcoming her and the hamster in her head runs like on those videos where the centrifugal force wins over them and they spin out of control. This is because of Nicole. She fucked up so bad that Waverly probably hates her now and she won’t even want to be her friend.

“What do you want?” Waverly asks without any real feeling on her voice. It’s monotone and low and it’s worse than the punch she was expecting from Wynonna.

“Ah, well- I just-“ Nicole scrambles for words, but come short and stays in silence as she keeps looking at Waverly.

“Look.” Waverly sighs and rubs her face. “This is not the right moment. Can we talk later?”

“Oh- ah- ok,” she says, but she doesn’t move. She can’t leave Waverly like this and if saying sorry can make it better, she has to try. And if she doesn’t say it now, she’s afraid she would never get the strength to do it again. “Actually,” she hugs the pot closer and shifts where she stands. “I’m sorry if you’re sad or angry because of me-“

“This is not about you,” Waverley interrupts, sounding irritated.

“Oh. Ok, well-“ Nicole scrambling for words, but come short and stays in silence as she keeps looking at Waverly.

“You can tell me if-“

“Are you ok?”

“Yes,” Waverly breathes out, sounding not ok at all.

“You can tell me if-“

“I don’t want to talk about it, Nicole,” Waverly cuts in, sounding even angrier. Nicole feels taken aback. This Waverly, she has never seen this Waverly. “Leave. I don’t need you here, you or anyone. If I hadn’t been out with you I could- I shouldn’t- We shouldn’t have gone out yesterday.”
Waverly turns to see the wall like it’s just better than seeing Nicole.

And, well, that’s Nicole’s answer. Isn’t it? She can’t kid herself.

“It’s ok,” Nicole manages to croak out, feeling her eyes burn and her insides twisting. “If that’s how you feel-

“That’s how I feel,” Waverly cuts in again, now looking to the floor.

“Hey,” Nicole tries. “I just want to apologize-

“And I don’t need you to. Just-- just leave.” Waverly takes a step back and shuts the door like one tears a band-aid from the skin and like one pours alcohol on an open wound.

That’s it, she thinks as she walks down the stairs and stands on the sidewalk, looking at the people on the street live with their hearts intact, unlike Nicole. Nicole swallows and keeps her head up as she hugs the mint pot with all her heart. She’s braver and stronger than she thinks and she doesn’t need Waverly. Not at all.

Calmly, she puts her mint pot in the basket and pretends like her eyes are not welling up with tears and pedels away, willing herself to not look back.

So she looks ahead until she realizes that she’s riding to Andy’s street. She stops in front of the white fence and Andy’s mom waves her from the porch and points to the garage.

*Eliza is going to be so mad at me*, is what she thinks as she walks in, finding Andy sitting on a stool, hunched over her sketchbook, unaware of Nicole and singing First Time Caller on point with the speakers. The light of the morning comes from the only window and it feels like a safe place, away from her worries and away from Wa- She shakes her head and walks silently until she’s behind Andy and she can hear her freely singing “I’ve been waiting a while to talk to you.”

She jumps when Nicole leaves the pot on the work table and hunches over to look at Andy’s cartoonish rendition of the painting with the girl on the swing. “Oh my god, Nicole. You scared the shit out of me.” Andy shoves her and then takes a good look at Nicole, holding her by the arms. “Are you ok?” She crooks her head.

“Yes,” Nicole says and ducks her head to kiss her and so Andy can’t see her broken heart.
my apologies! you can always tell me what you think with a comment, even if you're thinking of murder :)

Aren't you glad you didn't get this for Christmas?

Btw I just notice it's been a year since I published the first chapter. How cool!

oh la la:

Summer Didn't Change a Thing - White Lies
English Suite Nº 4, mov I - John Duarte
Blue Moon - Billie Holiday
Symphonia IX - Current Joys
Tonight - West Side Story
Love Like a River - Girls
First Time Caller - White Lies

Spotify Playlist:

Chap. 11 and 12

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!