Broken Parable

by gentlemanadventurer

Summary

A prophetic dream shared between the seven "survivors" forces them to face the possibility that Josh was left alive on the mountain. As Sam and the others rush to save him, they discover that there is more unfinished business on Mount Washington than they realized. Everyone will be forced to face their demons. At least they have each other. And hey, what are friends for if not to keep you alive?

Notes

The title of the story come from a Bear's Den song. This is based primarily on the relationships and characteristics I saw from my playthrough, as well as the fact that Bisexual Sam is very important to me. When I played for the first time, I tried to make the choices that were as true to characters' starting stats, relationships, and their three main descriptor words as possible. This means that most of the characters are not quite as awful as you can potentially make them. I love them all and they're all trainwrecks, so... yeah.

This was initially intended to be a very short piece dealing with the immediate aftermath of
the night of the game. Instead... I got a bit carried away.

Not everything in this story is in the tags, since when I tried that it ended up a million miles long. Instead I tried to keep the most prevalent things and biggest risky things. All ships that existed in the game (Matt/Em, Mike/Jess, etc.) do exist for the purposes of this story, which is as canon-compliant as I could make it, but may not feature as heavily as the others in the tags. I tried to tag especially sensitive things, like the drug use, etc. Every character from the game is in the story to some extent (including the Washington parents) and there are a few OCs, but they're very minor.

This will likely have graphic violence and explicit sexual content later on. I'll be sure to put warnings in the chapter notes when it happens, in case that's not your jam. I'll be updating as frequently as possible, although life sometimes gets in the way. Rest assured, this is not abandoned and will not be abandoned. I love it too much to do that.
Come Into My Lair

Sam had learned to tell when she was dreaming, to remember to look for the things that gave it away. It didn't make the nightmares easier to bear, but it helped her to keep from screaming aloud. The trick was to assess the reality of the situation, to ask yourself if it was possible. What was true? What was real?

The mines were cold, yet warmer than the woods high above. That was true, especially in winter. Her hands were dirty from her journey into the mine but she was at least wearing shoes. Her old trainers, filthy from what they had been through. That had been true and could be true again.

And Josh was standing five feet from her, watching her silently, back straight. He was wearing jeans and a dark green sweater. His face was clean and there was no blood on him.

That had never been true. It couldn't be true. Proof. She was dreaming.

"Hey Sammy. Finally decided to come visit my new digs?" He looked around at the tunnel, spreading his arms expansively. "Nice, right? Much better than a burned-out ruin. Or a padded cell."

"This isn't real." Her voice was flat. She put her hands on her hips, standing firm.

Josh shrugged. "Probably. But then, not much is real these days. Was anything ever real?"

"Shut up."

"I'm not real, remember? So I'm not here. So there's no one to shut up, right?"

"Shut up!" She pressed her palms against her eyes, willing herself to wake up.

Silence.

She glanced up. There was no one there: just an empty, echoing mine and the sound of dripping water. Much further down the tunnel something clanged, making her twitch. Sam looked around, trying to figure out where in the mine she was and to find another piece of proof that this wasn't real.

"Hello?"

The mine echoed it back. Then, from far away, another clang. Instinct seized her and she took off, feet pounding on the rough ground as she hurtled towards the sound, heart pounding. There was someone down there, someone who needed her. She could feel it in the pit of her stomach.

"Fuck! Hello?" Her feet were loud enough. Anything down here could hear her, whether she spoke or not.

She rounded a sharp corner and slid to a stop, sending a shower of pebbles skittering down the tunnel. There, next to the elevator shaft and barely visible, was someone lying on the ground. Sam approached carefully. "Hello?"

"Another fucking hallucination, huh?"

Her heart lurched painfully in her chest. "J—Josh?" He lifted his head to watch her approach. The Psycho's overalls were nearly rags, hanging on a skeletal frame. That would be right. As much as she wanted to find evidence that this wasn't real, she couldn't pinpoint anything as a red flag.
"Will you warn me before you dislocate your jaw and start shrieking, please?" He laughed wildly and shoved himself up to sit against the cage support. "Or if you're planning to melt this time, try not to get it on my clothes. They're designer, you see."

"Josh, you're alive?" Sam took another step, every muscle in her body trembling. Not real, right? It couldn't be real.

"Am I? That's surprising. I figured I'd be dead by now."

She gave in and darted forward, crouching next to him. "Josh? Look at me, Josh."

His head rolled around to the other side and he opened his eyes, watching her lazily. An amused smile twisted his lips. It was so familiar. She searched for something to prove that this couldn't be real. "Josh, you've been gone for weeks. How are you alive?"

He didn't answer and she touched his shoulder gently. Josh jerked violently at the contact and his head came up. He stared at her. Slowly, ever so slowly, he lifted a hand towards her face. He hesitated, then rough, dirty fingertips brushed a blonde tendril of hair out of her face to touch her cheek. Emboldened by the contact, he cupped her face with his hand. "I can touch you." His eyes widened. "I can touch you."

"You're alive," Sam said again, unable to quite believe it. The words felt alien on her tongue.

"You're here," he said wonderingly. "Actually you. Not the you in my head. I can touch you."

"Josh, how are you still alive? I need you to tell me."

He shook his head, still staring at where his fingers met her skin. "She didn't kill me."

"Who?"

"Hannah. Fuck. Sam, Hannah, my sister, the monster. She didn't kill me. She just dragged me back in the tunnels and left. There was… I found food, barely. But I thought—I thought you were all dead."

She let out a startled laugh at that. It had never occurred to her that he wouldn't know what had happened or that she would have to explain. "No, Josh, we all got out. All of us, actually. I don't know how we got so lucky. We – Mike and I – we burned down the lodge with the wendigos inside."

"Good." His head fell back against the post again and he closed his eyes.

"Josh, we had no idea you were still down here. We thought you were dead. They did a cursory search, but they called it off pretty quick because of the weather and what they found, but you were down here the whole time. I'm so sorry."

He was quiet for a long moment. His hand dropped back into his lap.

"Sammy?" He didn't open his eyes. "Sam, how did you get here?"

"What?"

He cracked his eyes open and looked out at the mine, the broken equipment and rocks. "You aren't here. I'm just crazy and desperate enough to imagine touching you."

"No, I'm here. Don't do that."
"Then how did you get here, Sammy-bird?" His voice turned teasing, sing-song, babbling. "Sammy-bird, Sammy-bird, fly away. Get out of my head and go away."

Sam sat back on her heels, tears stinging her eyes. She was losing him. She had to get him out of here and the best way would be to prove him wrong. Look for something unreal, prove to herself at least that this wasn't a dream. How had she gotten here? The bus, right? Like last time?

"Sam?"

The voice came from behind her and she jumped to her feet, spinning. Mike – overly tall, newly-scarred Mike – stared at her. "Sam, how did you get here?" He seemed confused.

How had she gotten here? Why was Mike here? Josh's laugh echoed around them. Not real.

She woke up with a start.

Her room was warm and dark, lit only by the orange glow of a streetlamp outside the window. A soft sound made her look over at her bedside table. A butterfly fluttered against her lampshade before landing on her book.

Her roommate was still out. Sam flicked the light on and climbed out of bed, collapsing into her desk chair. She wanted to crush the butterfly more than she'd ever wanted to hurt anything. She clenched her hands at her sides, knuckles turning white as she fought the urge. She believed in peace, she reminded herself rather pointedly. She valued life and that butterfly had done nothing to deserve her anger.

And yet.

It wasn't clear how it had gotten inside her bedroom. The little butterfly fluttered at the closed window, round, butter-yellow wings beating furiously as it tried to reach the dark campus outside the window. Sam glared at it. Yellow. Yellow was guidance, not that it had really helped her much. Sure, she'd come down from the mountain alive, but that didn't feel like much of a victory at this point.

She slumped back in the chair, digging her fingernails into the seat cushion. The butterfly landed on the sill, wings occasionally rising and falling. She'd read up on butterflies in the aftermath, although she couldn't put her finger on why she'd wanted to know. Call it a compulsion. The movement of their wings while at rest could mean many things: preventing the muscle exhaustion, adjusting internal temperature, or some experts even suggested they did it for fun. She saw the slope of its wings, the small markings breaking up the yellow. It was a California Dogface, she thought. A female one.

Hannah. Josh.

Beth.

Her stomach twisted, even now. All of it was lost to her: Hannah's easy laugh and passion, Beth's soft smile and warm hands, Josh's teasing voice and scary stories. As if having constant dreams of them wasn't torture enough, now she had to deal with the universe taunting her with butterflies.

The chair hit her desk as she shoved it backwards to stand. The noise startled the butterfly, who launched once more into the air. Sam snatched an empty glass from her roommate's dresser and trapped the butterfly, using an index card to separate it from the window. She opened the door with her elbow, nudging a shoe into place as a doorknob before she padded down the cheap carpet of the hallway. How was it that even in a stock, boring hallway, lit by overbearingly bright fluorescents and
lined with identical and evenly spaced doors – possibly the furthest possible design from the lodge – she still couldn't shake the feeling of being stalked? Even knowing that it had been Josh the entire time did nothing to diminish the sensation.

She hit the crash bar on the exit door with her hip and slipped out into the southern California night. Her roommate had complained about it being freezing and it was all she could do not to laugh in the girl's face. Clearly, Tess had never truly been in the cold.

"Try wading through a pond in the middle of the Canadian winter at night," Sam had told her.

"When were you –" Tess had cut herself off, realizing.

They didn't talk about it, although it was common enough knowledge. Headlines had been everywhere in the weeks after their return. Sam had deleted her Facebook account entirely, unable to bear the messages from friends and strangers alike. She'd changed her phone number and email. She'd even toyed with the idea of changing schools. She knew it wouldn't really help, though. People knew her face now. They knew her name.

At least Tess knew better than to bring it up.

The school had offered Sam a single-occupant room, a rare luxury for an undergraduate, but she had turned them down. She didn't want to be alone. With a roommate, even one who wasn't a close friend, there was reassurance.

The cement of the landing was cool under the soles of her feet. She went barefoot often these days, tucking her shoes into her bag or tying them to her belt. She went running barefoot, ignoring the odd looks she got. Her feet had grown hard with callouses that she found as comforting as Tess's soft snores. If she was to be barefoot in a ruin ever again, she would be prepared.

She released the butterfly into the air and laughed softly at the thought. "It won't happen again," she announced to the night, turning sharply and heading back inside.

Because of course it wouldn't happen again. How could it? They were all gone now, even the damn lodge.

"Good," she whispered to herself, turning off the light again and curling up in the dark.
These days, Sam always woke before sunrise. She'd fallen back into a restless but thankfully dreamless sleep around midnight and Tess had returned some time after that. Sam slid out of bed in the blueish predawn light and dressed as quietly as she could. Tess was a lump under what seemed like a dozen blankets and Sam didn't think she could face even a sleepy greeting right now. Pajamas were shed in lieu of running gear. She hesitated, then shoved a pair of flats into the front pouch of her sweatshirt. They were there if she needed them, but the idea of putting on her trainers reminded her too much of her dream.

It was chillier out than it had been when she'd set the butterfly free. The campus was dead. The earliest classes wouldn't start until seven and it was a Friday. With most classes running Mondays and Wednesdays or Tuesdays and Thursdays, fewer students had classes on Fridays too. She stretched, her back giving a satisfying pop. The cool, clear air helped clear her head, driving away the cobwebs left by the night before.

With a little jump down the steps, she was off and running. She knew well enough how to warm her body up, but the easy pace she normally set wasn't enough. Her feet hit the pavement lightly as she bolted, throwing herself forward down the path from the dorms towards the center of campus. She hopped onto a bench to hurdle a planter, a breathless laugh escaping her as she felt a twig catch at her shin. Fuck all of this.

How dare she still be dreaming about all this shit? Why couldn't she just shake it, heal, let it go? Maybe she should find out about meds. Dr. Hill had mentioned medication as an option briefly before she had waved it off. Sam didn't need them. Or didn't want to need them. What had happened to her had been so easy, compared to some of the others.

She leaned into the curve of the path, rounding the sociology building. What had really happened to her, after all? Josh had stalked her through the lodge. That had been awful, it was true, but compared to forcing Chris to choose between the girl he'd been in love with for ages and his best friend? Or making Chris choose to shoot himself or Ashley? And Ash had had to live through that, to watch Chris make those decisions and know that she could die at any moment. Josh had gone easy on her.

And Hannah an inch from Sam's face, ready to kill her if she made the slightest movement? It had been horrifying and heart-wrenching, but Jess had been dragged, screaming and nearly naked through the frozen woods by one of the creatures. Matt and Emily had survived a collapsing tower and the mines. Even Mike had cut off his own damn fingers and survived being stalked through the sanatorium.

Next to that, Sam had no right to complain.

The park at the center of campus was even emptier than the paths near the dorms. She took to the road that ran around it in a lopsided circle, wincing as the occasional rock bit into her foot.
Sam wondered if she should tell Dr. Hill about her dream. She hadn't seen him in a while. Her parents hadn't wanted her to see him at all, actually. They'd had a list of recommended doctors for her to speak to, but his name wasn't on the list.

*Hi Josh, it's Alan.*

He had known Josh. Been on a first name basis with him. She couldn't talk to a complete stranger about Josh. They'd never understand. Even she didn't really understand why she wasn't mad at him. All she could do was miss him. Josh's death had only dug further at the gaping hole in her chest left by Hannah and Beth. But Dr. Hill had known Josh. If there was ever a doctor who might understand, it would have been him.

But he'd still tried to fix her. Dr. Hill hadn't understood that she wasn't looking for fixing. She was looking for answers, at something to help her understand why Josh had done what he did.

She should have asked Josh herself, Sam thought for the millionth time. She'd known when he got out of the hospital. Beth had been the one to find him in their garage, muttering to himself in a furious despair and tossing a box cutter casually in the air. She had called Sam, crying, after their parents had taken him away. Beth wasn't one for tears; emotional volatility had always been Hannah's way, not hers. She had cried that night, though.

Sam's steps faltered and she stumbled to a halt on the asphalt. She hadn't thought about that night for a long time.

She'd driven to the Washington's house in a daze, numbly negotiating turns that by now were second nature to her. She'd parked outside the gate and texted Beth. The other girl had been there seconds later, slipping through the side door in the fence and into the passenger seat of Sam's car.

"He wants to die, Sam." Beth had said, face crumpling.

How can you comfort someone in a moment like that? Sam had been hesitant. Beth was like a cat. When she was hurting, she didn't want to be touched or seen. She didn't like for people to know she was vulnerable. She was a doer, a diplomat, the level-headed savior of errant ever-so-slightly-older sisters. Hannah was the fragile one, Beth had told Sam once. Beth didn’t need saving. That night, Sam had taken her hand anyway.

And Beth had collapsed into her, sliding sideways across the bench front seat. Her shoulders shook as she sobbed, clutching at Sam's sweater with her free hand. Sam had pulled her closer, cradling Beth against her chest.

That had been the night they finally kissed.

Sam shook her head hard and forced herself to start running again. There was no point to remembering. All it did was drive home what she'd had and what she'd lost. Sam prided herself on being logical and honest with herself and some facts were undeniable: Beth and Hannah were dead, she hadn't reached out to Josh in time, and now he was dead too.

The sun had come up fully and it was getting hot already. She jogged in place as she stripped off the sweatshirt and tied it around her waist. Silently she ran through her schedule for the day, trying to focus on something concrete as she headed back towards the dorm. Integrated Systems Ecology at 9 and Fresh Water Systems in the afternoon. She almost wished she had work that night. It would be a good distraction. Maybe she'd go to the gym and climb for a while. Even if she had no one to belay her, she could boulder.
The asphalt transitioned back to cement as she got to the main campus road and saw the dorm ahead. It was warming under her feet. She was tempted to lie out on a bench and sunbathe like a lizard. "Nope," she said sharply. "Stuff to do, Sam. Homework to get done. Showers to take. Breakfast to have."

Tess was leaving the room as she arrived, looking exhausted and slightly hungover. "Sorry I got in so late, Sam. It was Alex's birthday and she just had to go get hammered at Jason's house. I had to make sure she got home safe."

"No apology needed." Sam smiled. "You look like hell though. At least you don't have class today."

The other girl snorted. "Oh thanks. Nah, I still have to meet with my Calc professor about that last quiz. I tanked it pretty hard. I wish it didn't have to be so early though."

"Oof. Good luck."

"Thanks. I'm gonna need it."

Sam flopped onto her bed and stared at the room. She should get some posters or something. Her side of the room was almost pointedly bare and Spartan. The most colorful thing she had was her comforter, which was mottled shades of blue. When she'd moved in after winter break, it had seemed tacky and overwhelming to have too much. She'd sent most of her stuff home with her parents. In comparison, Tess's side was an explosion of color.

Someone knocked on the door.

"Did you forget your keycard?" It wouldn't be the first time Tess had locked herself out. At least Sam was here to let her back in this time. "I should attach it to one of your piercings. Then you wouldn't—"

The door swung open and the words died in her throat.

Mike was standing in front of her. Mike Munroe, the same figure who had so thoroughly proven the impossibility of her dream, who she hadn't seen since the immediate aftermath, was in her dorm, right in front of her. Mike fucking Munroe, with a red plaid shirt and stubble, with dark circles under his eyes and a sheepish, uncertain smile, was here.

He rubbed the back of his head with his injured hand. "Hey Sam. Can we talk?"

She stared at him for a moment, then slammed the door in his face.
"Sam?" He knocked again, harder. "Sam, we have to talk."

She backed away from the door, fighting the urge to launch herself through the window. He shouldn't be here. He couldn't be here. She had a class at 9. She had another class at 1 and plans to go climbing. She was going to get breakfast and shower and study and he couldn't be here.

"Go away."

"I can't. I need to talk to you."

"I'll call my R.A. We're not supposed to have boys in the dorm."

"It's during the day and I saw three other guys on my way up here. Is your R.A. that super tall redhead? I think she's the one who let me in the building." The knocking stopped and there was a soft thump from the other side of the door. "Please, Sam. I don't know what else to do."

Sam had almost managed to forget that Mike went to school here too. It was the two of them and Jess. The others were scattered. Chris was in L.A. and Ashley was in Northridge. Emily was at her Dad's place in New York the last Sam had heard. Matt was in Seattle. But she never saw Mike. He was studying business and political science, still supposedly in pursuit of his presidential ambitions or something. He lived off-campus with some friends and they never crossed paths.

"No one home," she said weakly, the energy draining out of her.

"An empty room can't talk." 

She sighed and opened the door again. He'd been resting his head against the closed door and he straightened, leaning heavily against the frame. "I know," she said flatly. "I was hoping you would take the hint. The very direct, non-subtle hint. One could even call it an order."

"Look, I know you don't want to see me. But I still need to talk to you. I'm sorry, but I do."

"Fine." Same moved back to let him into the room and let the door swing shut with a bang. She perched on the edge of her unmade bed and watched him. He looked too big for the space. Tess wasn't much taller than Sam and they never had people over. Mike looked awkward and out of place, or at least as out of place as he ever looked. He still had that easy innate confidence that she'd always found slightly annoying. Other than that, though, he looked awful. He hadn't shaved and looked drawn and tired.

He sat in her desk chair for a second, then rose and started to pace. "I'm not sure what to say."

"You're the one who showed up at my door."
"I know, I know." He clenched his fists and shook out his shoulders, air whooshing out in one long breath. Sam almost smiled at that. He'd started doing that when they were in 9th grade. He'd had to take an elective and had ended up in choir with her. Mister Always-Confident had turned out to have rather awful stage fright and had come up with what he'd termed 'blowing out the jitters.' He turned to look at her. "I had a dream last night."

Her stomach clenched painfully. "...okay?"

"You were in it."

This was ridiculous. "Mike, I'm sure you've had lots of dreams with me in them. Probably some I do not want to hear about."

The quirk of his lips didn't reach his eyes. "I'm serious. I had a dream last night and you were in it. We were in the mines."

"And I'm sure you've had lots of dreams about that too. I have nightmares all the time. But it doesn't mean you show up unannounced and-"

"Shut up, Sam." She stared at him and he raised his hands in defeat. "Sorry. I just need you to listen to me and I know you don't want to, but this is too important. I saw you. In the mines. With Josh. And I know you saw me too."

Sam groaned and scooted back on the bed to sit against the wall, drawing her knees into her chest. "I don't know what you're talking about."

He sat down again, sighing. "Fine. Let's get more specific. Josh was there, alive, but weak and a full 10 on the crazy meter. Or maybe an 8. He thought he was hallucinating you. You were wearing a green jacket and leggings and tennis shoes. There was an elevator shaft."

"No." She glared at him. "I'm sorry you had a dream, but you're wrong. I need you to leave now. Stop talking."

"Was there a butterfly?"

"What?"

"Was there a butterfly when you woke up?" The look on his face was unbearable, wavering somewhere between fear and sadness and pity. "There was for me."

Sam hesitated. "No." Her voice shook and she took a deep, shuddering breath. He smiled weakly. "You're a bad liar, Sam. You always were. It's one of the things I always admired about you."

"You admired that I was a bad liar?"

"Because you're honest. You're more yourself than anyone I know. You're more you than I'm me. So I can tell you're lying. There was a butterfly, wasn't there. A yellow one." Mike couldn't keep himself still; he stood and crossed to her window, looking out on the campus. "A guide, right? That's what the yellow meant. Potential."

"It was just a dream, Mike. Josh is dead."

He rounded on her eagerly. "You did have the dream! I could feel it. I just knew, you know? What if
"We were wrong? What if he's still there?"

"You told me he died."

"I—I thought he did. Hannah dragged him away and I—I let her. But that doesn't mean he's dead. He could still be down there."

"It's been weeks." Why was he doing this? Sam felt nauseated. Maybe he would leave if she threw up on him. "If she didn't kill him, he'd be dead by now anyway."

"Not necessarily," he insisted, sitting on the bed next to her. He reached to take her hand and she flinched away from him. Pulling back, he stared down at his maimed left hand. "There were all kinds of openings in the mine. Even if he couldn't get out, there was water and there could be animals and stuff down there to live on. Sam, if he's alive… I want to go back."

She burst out laughing. She couldn't help it, the laughter catching in her chest and making her whole body shake. "You had a dream and saw a bug and now you want to go back into hell for nothing. You know what we're going to find? We're going to find a body, if we're very, very lucky. A corpse. And a burned-out shell of a building. Maybe some leftover pig guts. Or a—" She couldn't stop talking. She couldn't stop laughing. Why couldn't she stop?

"No... No, Sam, don't." This time he caught her hands and held them tightly, tugging her towards him. She half-fell into him, hiccupping slightly. He smelled different than he used to: no more fancy cologne, just soap and a vague hint of peppermint. He also smelled like blood and smoke, but maybe that was just her imagination.

"Maybe another clown mask! Or maybe some more creepy dolls. Did Ashley tell you about the creepy dolls? There were creepy dolls, apparently." She was babbling into his shirt.

Mike's arms were trembling slightly as they closed around her shoulders. "Sam, Sam stop. Shh..." He took a deep breath, his chest shifting. "Yoga breaths, right? You do yoga. Do your breathing."

Nodding, she tried to get herself back under control. Her laughter died slowly as she counted in her head. Eight counts to inhale, hold for four, back out for eight. She wasn't sure how long they sat there, but finally she pushed away from him. Mike let her go and moved back on the bed, giving her space. She scrubbed at her face. She hadn't realized she had been crying.

"Are you okay?"

She choked, trying not to laugh again. "Yeah, absolutely fantastic. Thanks."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to... hurt you?"

Sam felt empty, utterly drained and numb. "So you were really in my dream." She ignored his undefined question.

"I'm not sure if it was a dream. I think it was a vision, like what was happening on the mountain with those carved pieces."

"Totems."

"What?"

She grabbed her water bottle from the floor beside the bed and took a long swallow. "They're called totems. Beth told me about them once. They found them when they were kids sometimes."
Supposedly they're physical manifestations of prophetic dreams. You saw the butterfly sign when we were up there, huh?"

"Yeah, it was hard to miss." Mike tugged his shirt down where it had been riding up slightly and Sam saw the wet spot she'd left behind. He didn't say anything about it, just watched her and waited.

"And you think that this dream and the butterfly in your room means that this happened."

"Or is going to happen. Could happen."

"You're nuts," she said flatly.

"Fine." He pushed himself to his feet. "Sorry. I'll get out of your hair, I guess." He headed for the door.

Sam threw the water bottle across the room as hard as she could. It smacked into the opposite wall, the blue plastic giving way with a sharp cracking sound. Mike froze in place. She glared at the bottle as the last bit of water it held slowly leaked out, spreading a dark circle on the carpet. "If we're wrong, I don't know if I can do it."

Her friend rested his hand on the wall and waited, not turning.

"If he's not alive—if all we're doing is confirming that he died, I'm not sure if I'll make it back. I feel like I'm falling apart. All that's getting me through this is not seeing you guys. I know that's awful and I'm sorry, but I can't talk about it. I can hardly think about it."

Words failed her and she fell silent. Mike still didn't turn around. His voice, when he spoke, was very soft. "I understand. I do. But you're the one I trust the most to go with me. You're stronger than you give yourself credit for, Sam. You saved me. So many times. And if that's all we find, I won't let you fall. I will carry you back if I have to."

He opened the door. "Just think about it. Please." He didn't give her a chance to answer. He didn't look back, just walked off down the hall.

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Mike didn't slow down as he left the dorm. He didn't know if Sam was looking out her window and he couldn't afford for her to see him falter. Seeing Sam like that, though, had shaken him. He'd expected her to be bright-eyed and ready to man a rescue mission, not looking like the wrong word would shatter her into a thousand pieces. His hand was throbbing and he rubbed at his injury as he walked.

His phone vibrated. Jess. What r you up to?

The holdover typing from high school still made him smile. She'd moved away from most of it, but it still slipped through here and there. It used to be 'What r u up 2?' He couldn't decide which he preferred.

Had to go see Sam. His thumb hovered over the send button. Should he tell her? He hadn't been with her the night before and hadn't had the chance to tell her about the dream. Hell, he wasn't even sure if he wanted to tell her. She was hard to predict. He didn't want to send her spiraling. He deleted the draft. Grabbing a coffee. You? That was safer.

He stopped at the coffee cart near the parking garage. This way it wasn't a lie. He dosed the coffee liberally with sugar and tossed back one of his pills. His hand hurt like a bitch, even more now than it
had the night he'd cut off his fingers in the first place. It was totally unfair. Sam was supposed to be the strong one. Strong like him, right? He took a second pill. Strong. Sure. He understood Sam's laughter more than he cared to admit.

*Can I see u?* Jess asked.

*Sure. My place?*

*I can be there in 10.*

*See you then.*

The house was deserted when he got there, which was a blessing. He liked his housemates but they were so loud. It had been awesome before the visit to the lodge, like a nonstop party. But after everything… sometimes he just wanted quiet. He tipped some cheap scotch into the coffee and stowed it back in the cabinet under the sink.

His phone buzzed on the counter. *Here.*

Jess smiled at him from the stoop. The sunlight caught her hair and turned it almost white, shining and bright against the lavender of her cardigan. *"Hi Hot Stuff. Can I come in?"*

*"Of course."* He welcomed her into the cluttered living room.

*"Did you get me a coffee too?"*

He smacked is forehead with his free hand. *"I completely spaced. It didn't even occur to me."*

She giggled and nudged him with her hip as she passed. *"I'm kidding. If I'd wanted a coffee, I would have asked. I'm a big girl. I can use my words. Are the guys home?"

*"Nope."*

*"Ooh. The whole castle, all to ourselves."* She faltered and leaned heavily on the arm of the couch. Mike bit back the impulse to rush to her side and after a moment she shot him a grateful smile. *"I'm good. Just my head. It doesn't happen too much now and the doc said it should stop completely soon."* She didn't like when he started to hover. She'd told him once that she'd rather no one even noticed her dizzy spells at all.

*"Head trauma is a bitch."

*"Head trauma is a bitch,"* she agreed, perching on the edge of the worn sofa. *"But yeah. Um. I need to talk to you about something."*

Mike took a drink of his jazzed-up coffee and settled into the recliner. *"Of course."*

Tugging lightly at her necklace, she took a deep breath. *"Okay, so I had a really weird dream last night."*

-0-

In a small, warm kitchen in Seattle, a phone rang. Matt set down the spoon he'd been using to stir the stew and wiped his hands on a towel, then grabbed the phone from its cradle and tucked it under his jaw. *"Hello?"

*"…Matt?"*
He swallowed hard. "Em?"

"Hi. Sorry to call like this. I know it's been a while."

"Yeah. Yeah it has."

"I didn't mean to run off like that. I just had—"

Matt did not want to hear any excuses. Not now. "Hey, Em, not that it's not nice to hear from you, but—"

"Oh. Yeah, sorry. I just… I needed to talk to someone and you were the only one I wanted to call."

"What happened?"

"Well I've been having nightmares, of course, and it's hard to sleep. But then last night, I—"

He interrupted her. "You had a dream about Josh?"

Emily scoffed. There was the familiar click-and-whoosh of her lighter and he knew she'd lit a cigarette. "What, are you a mind reader?" she asked, voice heavy with sarcasm.

Sighing, he turned down the heat on the stove slightly. "Emily…"

"I'm sorry. Um. Yeah. Really though, how did you know?" She continued before he had a chance to answer. "And then when I woke up, there was this butterfly in the room. I'd fallen asleep on the chaise, reading, and then when I woke up, it was on my leg."

Matt tried to swallow around the lump in his throat and could barely manage it. "I… That's…"

"And it just made me think of up on the mountain and how there were always those butterflies and it just sort of threw me for a loop, so I wanted to talk to you. I don't know why." She sounded almost angry about it, as though it was his fault that she had to call him. That meant she was anxious. Emily had always been like that: turn it into annoyance, into aggression, so no one would see you were upset. "I guess it just made me want to hear your voice. Made me think of your letter jacket and my bag, which is still missing, by the w—"

"Emily." He cut her off again.

"What?"

"Was the butterfly yellow?"

"What? Why?"

"Because mine was yellow."

-o-

It was beginning again. Ashley could feel it. She wrapped her quilt around her shoulders and huddled into the corner. She wished she could melt into the wall. Across from her, the butterfly had landed on the bathrobe draped over her closet door. It stood out, almost painfully yellow against the faded cream terrycloth. It had been in her bedroom since she woke up hours ago and she couldn't bring herself to go anywhere near it, even if that meant just staying in bed.

She hated it.
She didn't need this. She didn't want it. She wanted to still find butterflies cute, not hate the stupid fucking thing. With trembling hands, she lit her pipe, pulling at it until the bowl glowed red. Ashley held the smoke in her chest and then blew it, almost vindictively, towards the butterfly. Too far away to reach, she knew, but the small action still made her feel a tiny bit better. It was breaking her rule anyway: no smoking before 5 p.m. Oh well. It was a stupid rule. She should go take her medication, but that would mean getting up and going near the butterfly. Better to smoke a little and try to breathe.

"I don't like you," she told the butterfly.

The butterfly did not respond.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up soon: Sam makes a decision, someone buys a plane ticket, and people who haven't seen each other in a long time are reunited. Chris is... Chris.
Someone Chooses You

Chapter Summary

Josh is having a rough time.

Edited to add the end of the chapter, which didn't copy over correctly the first time.

Ugh.

Chapter Notes

The chapter title is from the song "One More Soul to the Call." I know I originally slated a different focus for this chapter, but I was just feeling it.

Why in the ever-loving fuck hadn't he thought to put more cameras in the old hotel? Josh was sure that was where she was. It was the only possibility. He leaned forward, gaze jumping from monitor to monitor as he searched for her.

Despite himself, he laughed in satisfaction. "Good girl, Sammy. Good girl." His head ached from where she'd hit him with the bat. He'd thought about that when she'd found it earlier; he'd considered putting it away and locking the cabinet. But there was so much already down in the basement. If she made it that far, surely there were other options anyway. He couldn't possibly lock away all potential weapons without arousing some suspicion.

The mask itched the side of his jaw and made it hard to breathe. He shoved it back on his head. Ashley and Chris were making their way through the portion of the old hotel he had thought to set up. At least that part was going to plan.

He grinned. He should have expected more from Sam. Somehow he'd thought that wet and cold, in only a towel, pulled straight from the comfort of a bath and good music, she'd be vulnerable. She'd looked so peaceful with her eyes closed, surrounded by candles. What would she have done if he'd taken off the mask and joined her?

Instantly his stomach started to roil and he swallowed back his nausea. He wanted it – god, he wanted it more than anything – and that made him disgusting. In the faint, distorted reflection on the monitors, he could see them behind him. Beth and Hannah, standing to either side. If he turned, they would be watching him. They were always watching him. "Go away," he hissed. "I'm doing what you wanted."

"It's not enough." Hannah's voice was cold from behind his left.

"Find her, Josh," Beth whispered in his ear. He flinched, yanking the mask back down. "Go find our Sammy. Make her pay. Make them all pay. Show them how we felt. No one here is innocent."

-o-
He'd made a bed.

That could be taken many ways. He had made his metaphorical bed and now he had to lie in it.

But putting aside the karmic justice of being stuck in this hellhole, he had, in fact, made a bed. It wasn't too hard to do. Here and there, he found caches left by that old guy with the flamethrower and he scavenged shreds of sacking, the odd miner's coat, and even an emergency blanket that only had seven holes in it. The fabric was shoved into a narrow nook behind a capsized mine cart; it was like the rat's nest he'd found in the lodge basement.

No one was coming for him. He'd seen to that himself. After what he'd done… He smiled grimly. None of them would come for him now.

If he had the courage, he would let himself die.

Josh huddled into a smaller ball, staring out into the dark. He had thought it was quiet when he first ended up alone and Hannah had scrambled off to who-knew-where. Every sound had seemed loud and invasive. Now, after days he'd lost count of, he'd found that the mine had its own soundtrack: a quiet chorus of drips and scuffles and clanks. There was even the occasional breeze, which taunted him. If he could only pinpoint where it was coming from, he would have a chance to get out of here. But he never could.

On a fold of burlap near his hand, a small shape landed. He watched it, unmoving. A butterfly.

Another fluttered down to rest near where his knee was tucked to his chest. And another. More and more landed, their shades of white, yellow, red, brown, black barely discernable to his adjusted vision. Were they real? He couldn't tell anymore. Ultimately it didn't matter.

Josh's eyes closed and he slept, blanketed in butterflies.

-o-

"I'm dating Sam." Beth's words came out in a rush, as if she'd been holding her breath.

Josh blinked. "You're... what?"

"Sam. And me. We're... together?" She shifted from foot to foot, looking anywhere but him. "I thought you should know."

"I didn't realize that you, well, liked—" He shook himself and threw his arms around her in a hug. "It doesn't matter. That's great, Beth. You couldn't've picked better. Sam's pretty awesome."

She laughed and nodded against his shoulder. "Yeah she is. She's great."

He pressed his lips to her hair. She smelled like home, like her vanilla soap and green tea. Beth and Hannah sometimes liked to pretend to be each other, to try to mess with their parents or teachers. It never worked on him. They never thought to switch their soaps. Perfume, sure, and Beth would put on glasses while Hannah wore contacts, but the soap was a dead giveaway. Beth was vanilla. Hannah was lavender.

Beth told the story of how they got together, although he had a feeling she was leaving out a few details here and there. Now that it had been pointed out to him, it seemed so obvious: all the physical contact and glances between the two. He'd just never put it all together. Sam had always been fond of physical contact; she was so comfortable in her own skin. She'd clap him on the shoulder, hug him, jump on his back. Once or twice he'd thought maybe there was something more to it, something
deeper in the way she looked at him and touched him. But she was a friendly person.

He ruffled Beth's hair and she shoved away from him, laughing. "I'm happy for you, Beth. Really."

He was. Beth deserved it. And so, when they reemerged from the kitchen and saw Sam in the living room, he'd just smiled. She had grinned and tackled him with a hug. He pulled her tight to him. "That's so great, Sammy. Congratulations," he murmured, ignoring the way his chest tightened painfully.

-o-

It was hard to distinguish between day and night down in the mines. Josh slept and woke and slept again, an endless cycle that distorted time even further. He had the nagging sense that if he could just get his focus together, he could find his way out. It couldn't possibly be that difficult. He knew from experience that the mine had countless entrances. But he just couldn't.

The butterflies were gone. Then they weren't. Then they were. He wondered if he could eat them. Were butterflies edible? He was hungry. He was always hungry, and the raw gnawing ache of starvation that lived deep in his gut was starting to feel like a friend.

-o-

He went to his formal with Sam. It hadn't been the original plan – she was supposed to go with Beth and, at the last moment, Beth had gotten sick. Sam wanted to cancel entirely and stay with her, but Beth wouldn't hear of it. So instead Josh, also at Beth's insistence, had been forced to take her ticket.

"I don't have a suit. This is all stupid anyway. No one cares about dances."

"You'll fit into one of Dad's," Hannah commented with a sly smile.

Josh made a face at her and scrambled for another excuse. "I can't dance."

"It doesn't matter." Beth coughed into a tissue. "You don't really dance at formal anyway. Just kind of jump around. Or people rub up against each other."

He blanched. "I'm not going to 'rub up against' anyone."

Beth's laugh turned into another nasty-sounding cough. "You don't have to. I just don't want Sam to be alone. Plus the tickets were expensive. Someone should use them."

"Someone else." Josh folded his arms over his chest and glared at them both, mutinously.

"Please, Josh?"

He could never say no to Beth when she looked so pathetic. When she was eight she had broken her arm and used it so effectively that he'd practically been her slave. Finally he shrugged. "Okay, fine. Go find me a suit that won't make me look like a penguin." Hannah had yelped with glee and raced off to raid Bob Washington's award ceremony wardrobe.

Josh was willing to admit, later, that the suit wasn't half bad. Charcoal grey with a dark blue tie that Beth said would match Sam's dress. He'd rejected the idea of wearing a cummerbund. "Just a normal suit, Han. That's it."

And then he'd gone to pick up Sam.

She'd come down the stairs slowly, looking a little awkward. Her dress was dark blue silk that
dropped from two narrow straps to gather under her breasts and fall in voluminous folds around her legs. The color made her pale skin gleam and strands of her gold hair escaped its elaborate coif to fall around her face. "I—um… You look nice, Sammy."

The tension broke and she skipped down the last few stairs. "Nice? I look nice? That's horrible!"

He rubbed his shoulder awkwardly and forced a laugh. "You know you look beautiful. Shut up."

"I'm going to count that as a compliment." She grabbed his lapels and made him stand straight so she could look at him. "You don't look half-bad yourself, Washington. Did Beth dress you?"

"Hannah. It's one of Dad's old suits. I wasn't really planning on 'formal'."

"Well I appreciate it. Since Beth wouldn't let me not go, this is the next best thing!"

"Thanks. I'm so glad I'm your second choice."

"Well, third choice. First would be going with Beth, second would be staying home completely…" Sam grinned cheekily at him and he looked away quickly, cheeks hot.

"Wow. We should go before you destroy my ego completely."

Sam laughed and took his arm, her slender hand resting lightly on his bicep. "No one could do that. Your ego is a beast of its own."

It was perfect. So of course it wasn't meant for him.

-0-

"Liar!"

Josh opened his eyes blearily and pulled himself to his feet. The edge of the mine cart bit into his hand, but he only registered it as cold. "Shut up."

"You're a liar and you always were. A piece of trash, picked up at the wayside by parents that didn't think things through. They were so desperate they didn't care what they got as long as they got something."

He didn't look at the elevator shaft. She would be there. That's where Beth liked to hang, long, rotting fingers clinging to the metal grate as she chattered at him. "Then they finally got what they wanted. Us. Two perfect girls and you were extra. Superfluous. So you had to let us die, didn't you? Jealousy does not become you, Joshy-Joshy-Josh."

"You can't ignore us, brother-mine." Hannah was behind him. Of course she was. She always was. Not the monstrous thing she had become, but his old, beloved Hannah. "You keep trying, but you know you're going crazy. Just lean into it."

He tried not to think about what he was eating. It didn't matter, really. Just what would keep him alive.

-0-

One of the girls was crying. They'd left the bedroom door open a crack and Josh approached carefully, peering through the gap.

"I know it hurts. But Mom said we have to do this when something breaks the skin. Shh, Beth. It's
okay." Hannah, a mirror image of her gangly 10-year-old twin, pressed a cotton ball to a cut on Beth's hand. Beth whimpered softly, tears rolling down her face.

He knocked. Both of his sisters jumped at the sound. Not bothering to wait for them to answer, he slipped inside and shut the door behind him. "Hey. What happened?"

"Nothing," Beth said fiercely, glaring at him. "I fell."

"Yeah right."

"I fell."

Hannah shook her head. "She fell because Brian Johnson shoved her."

He sat on the bed next to Beth and looked down at her hands. They were torn up with gravel and a long cut ran along the edge of one palm. It looked like she'd fallen and then slid, using her hands to shield herself. "Why did he shove you?"

Beth mumbled something inaudible. Hannah nudged her gently and answered for her. "He was being mean to me and so she called him an asshole and then he shoved her."

He laughed. "That's awesome!" The rest of Hannah's sentence hit home. "Wait, he was being mean to you?"

She looked embarrassed. "It's not a big deal. It happens all the time."

"What? It happens all the time?"

Shrugging, Hannah went back to cleaning Beth's hands. "It's not a big deal. And whenever it gets too much, we just go to the other part of the yard."

"And today?"

Beth sniffled. "He wouldn't leave her alone. He tried to push her off of the playset. We were sitting up by the slide. No one uses it anyway. It's for babies. So we were just sitting there talking and he came up behind us and tried to push her off."

"He wouldn't have. He's a chicken. He doesn't want to get in trouble. He never does anything really bad." Hannah wet another cotton ball with iodine and moved to Beth's other hand. The chemical stink of it filled the room.

"He did today," Josh pointed out. "He pushed Beth, right?" His fingers tingled. He wanted to do something. Brian Johnson. He was in his year, but a different class. "Don't worry, Beth. You did the right thing. And I'll take care of Brian."

Both girls looked at him, Beth's face red and blotchy with tears, Hannah's pinched with worry. "You will?" Beth asked.

He slung his arm around her shoulders. "No one messes with my sisters."

A few days later, Beth's good set of pens went missing. So did several other items from students in the fourth and fifth grade. After some investigation, they were found in Brian Johnson's desk. The boy may not have wanted to get in trouble, but at a certain point, teachers agreed, actions had to have consequences.

That was the rule of the universe, after all. Actions had consequences. And people always had to
face their just desserts.
The chapter title comes from the song "Don't Let the Sun Steal You Away" by Bear's Den.

Jess fell silent, watching Mike nervously. She looked like she was on the verge of speaking more and bit her lip to keep herself from talking. They hadn't talked about it much. He'd never known what to say, exactly. After the endless questioning had finished, there had been doctor's visits and psych appointments and they'd found each other again.

It was different than it had been before. He'd always suspected that she'd been with him largely to annoy Emily and, truth be told, it didn't bother him. In fact, it gave him a certain vindictive satisfaction to see Emily scoff and squirm. But after everything, he'd thought they would be done.

Instead Jess had shown up unannounced at the house late one night and kissed him. There was a taste to her now, a comforting warmth that reminded him of a time before they'd all been broken. There was no thrill, no possessive air of conquest, or even the rush of bubbling euphoria that came with what he knew of love. Of course he did love her. Of that he was certain. And she loved him. But it wasn't the same. It was comfort. A security blanket that neither was willing to give up without something better to take its place.

"Mike? Please say something."

He cleared his throat and took a sip of coffee, savoring the warmth of the booze as it settled in his stomach. The meds had kicked in and the pain in his hand had eased.

"Okay, seriously Mike. Say something." She smiled awkwardly. "Before I go crazy?"

"Sorry. I was just thinking."

"Yeah, of course." Jess fidgeted on the couch, then started to plait her hair back in one long braid. "It's kind of… a lot."

He straightened and sighed. "I wasn't sure if I should tell you, but I had the same dream."

"Really? With the bug and everything?"

"Are butterflies really bugs?"

She rolled her eyes, fingers flying as she reached the bottom of her hair and tied it off with a thin black elastic. "Seriously? Does that matter? Do you think it's real?"

"I'm not sure. I think… maybe." Should he tell her about Sam having the dream too? He took another drink, trying to keep his face neutral.

"I recognized the part of the mine he was in," she said hesitantly. "I know we never talked about it, but I was down there for a long time. I mean, I think he was maybe on a different level than I was,
but he was by the elevator shaft and there was this sign that I sort of recognized, so... if he was there, I think we could find him."

"You think he's alive?"

"Don't you? And, I mean, really—" Jess paused, then plowed ahead, leaning forward resolutely. "Even if he's not. I think I want to go back."

He stared at her. "You do?"

She nodded forcefully, eyes serious. "I know it must sound nuts, but I was so out of it. I still don't know if what I saw was in my head or what. But something pulled me through the window and if you hadn't been so quick, I think I'd be dead. And by the time I woke up, I was such a mess. All I could do was stumble along after Matt. I need to see what happened. Does that make any sense?"

Mike wished it didn't. He wished he could honestly tell her to stay, but he had no right to keep her from finding answers. "I already asked S—" He cut himself off. He didn't want to bring Sam into it any more than he had to. Not until she decided what she wanted to do. "—somebody. I asked somebody about the possibility of getting back up there. The whole thing's closed off right now. We could get to the base, but the cable car is probably off limits."

She raised an eyebrow at his phrasing. He forced a smile, but she didn't look at all convinced. Finally she nodded again. "Okay. Do you think anyone else had the dream too? I mean, if you and I had it, then it's possible that someone else had it too."

"I'll ask around if you want."

"Yeah. Um... good. You should ask..."

"Do you want me to ask Em?" Mike asked her, as gently as he could.

Jess looked away. "Do what you want." She checked her phone. "I have to go. I have class. Let me know what you find out?" She hopped up and was gone.

"But you don't have class on Fridays," he said quietly to himself, watching head down the front walk.

-o-

Chris rolled over and pulled the other pillow over his face, blocking out the light. Why was it so bright? Daytime was stupid. Why was he even awake? He didn't want to be awake. Not after being up until 4 a.m. the night before. Fuck.

A dull, irritating buzzing made its way through the barrier provided by the pillow and he braced himself, then lifted it to look around. Nothing on the bed that he could see, or the nightstand. The buzzing came again and he shoved himself awkwardly forward to hang over the side of the mattress and spotted his phone. He must have dropped it the night before. The little LED indicator at the top was blinking green. Who was sending him multiple texts at such an ungodly hour? He scooped up the phone and retreated back under the blankets.

Okay, so maybe 11:30 couldn't really be called an ungodly hour, but still. It was Ashley. It was like he'd chugged a Demon energy drink, his heart thudding happily in his chest. Chris curled up tighter under the blanket and unlocked his phone eagerly. He loved that – loved that she still set his heart pounding whenever he heard from her. He'd worried that maybe the so-called magic would fade if they actually got together, but it hadn't.
And maybe it was because they weren’t really together, but still. They’d kissed. They'd even kissed a few more times after they'd gotten back from the mountain. It had been great. He wanted to do it again. More. Maybe even constantly. They could take breaks for pizza and then go right back to it.

_I had a dream about Josh and there's a butterfly in my room._

…that was not what he had expected. He stared at the words, Josh's name seeming to pulse on the screen. They didn't talk about him. Ashley knew that. That was one of the unspoken rules. They didn't talk about his best-friend-turned-insane-sadistic-tormenter-who-then-got-killed-by-wild-animals. Fuck, Ashley. What a thing to wake up to.

But there was more than one text.

_He was still alive. He was so scared._

_This stupid butterfly won't go away. I don't want to touch it._

_It's like it's making fun of me. GO AWAY._

_Are you asleep or did your phone die again?_  
_Wake up? Please?_  
_Or charge your phone._

_You know, for someone who spends so much time with his electronics, you'd think you'd keep them charged._

_I shouldn't have to keep dreaming about this stuff. It's not fair._  
_You're going to wake up to a million texts but I don't care._  
_I wish you were here._

At least that last one was nice. He responded quickly. _Sorry Ash. I was asleep. Are you okay?_  
_This stupid butterfly keeps looking at me._  
_Can't you just kill it?_  
_I can't kill a butterfly, Chris. Are you nuts?_  
_Sure you can. Just grab a book and squash it. I know you have at least five books within easy reach right now._  
_But then I'd have to go over to it and I don't want to._

He shoved himself out of bed. No way he was getting back to sleep now. He tugged on a pair of sweatpants and ran his hands through his hair. _It sounds like you're freaking out. Did you take your Ativan?_  
_It's in the bathroom and I'd have to go by the butterfly and it's going to land on me and I don't want to touch it._

Chris put on his glasses and did the mental math. It would take him at least 45 minutes to get to Ashley and… no, wait. At this time of day, it would take less. He sighed and grabbed his shoes. _I'm_
He grabbed his keys and glanced around the room one more time, checking for anything he might be forgetting. There was movement by the narrow window over his bed and he leaned closer. A small yellow butterfly hovered near the glass. He watched it for a long moment, then crushed it under the heel of his hand and headed out the door.

He didn't particularly like to drive. It gave him too much time to think. After the ticket he got last time he was caught on his phone while driving, Chris was careful not to do that again, which left even less distraction. And he really didn't want time to think about the stupid dream.

As if it wasn't enough that he'd had to go through extensive therapy and be questioned by the police, as if it wasn't enough that his friends hardly spoke to each other or himself, as if it wasn't enough that his almost-girlfriend had to take medication to prevent panic attacks and still had breakdowns over fucking butterflies – he still got to dream about his best friend being alive. It was the universe taunting him, punishing him for hubris or cowardice or whatever sin he was guilty of this time.

Chris eased his beat-up white truck between two other cars towards the fast lane. Josh was dead. Josh was dead and good fucking riddance to that piece of shit he'd thought was a friend. He still missed Josh, of course, but he missed the actual Josh, not whoever it was that had tortured them and gone babbling batshit crazy. "C-can we order pizza?" The heel of his hand smacked into the steering wheel with a satisfying thud. That fucking asshole. He still couldn't quite wrap his head around the knowledge that Josh was dead, torn to pieces by that rabid mountain lion that had stalked them through the woods.

He suspected that the Josh he loved had been dead long before he ever stopped breathing, though. There was no other way to explain it. His best friend would never have done that to him.

School helped. The classes were getting harder, so Sam had to focus more. It was a welcome distraction at this point. She'd showered and eaten in a daze. Class had gone by quicker than she had hoped and then she had buried herself in the library until the next one. It was all over too fast.

She normally hated going to the gym in the afternoon. It was open until 2 a.m. most nights, and going later meant less people. But today she'd take what she could get. She wanted anything. Anything to distract her from Mike's words.

So she dodged through the crowd at the entrance and dropped her bag by her street shoes, considering her options. The climbing wall was busy and she had no partner to belay her. There was probably someone willing to help her, but it would still mean waiting. Right now, she didn't want to wait.

Sam slid on her climbing shoes and laced them tightly. If she bouldered, she could go at her own speed. She was just clapping the excess chalk off her hands when she heard her name.

"Sam?"

She blinked, surprised, and looked around. Jess was standing behind her, looking just as taken aback. "Oh. Hi Jess. Sorry, I didn't see you."

The other girl laughed. "Yeah, I figured. I just felt like I should say hi, I guess. I didn't mean to interrupt."
"You're not interrupting."

Jess hesitated, then came over. "I am. I know I am. I'm sorry. I just... I didn't expect to see you and, well, now that I have..." She laughed again. That had always struck Sam as a nervous habit. 'I'm laughing,' Jess's laugh said. 'If there's a joke, I'm definitely in on it. It's not about me.' The girl fidgeted for a moment and then the words burst forth. "I really didn't mean to interrupt anything, but last night I had this dream and I've just been kind of off all day so far, so then I saw you and I wanted —"

"Mike sent you?"

"What? No, of course not. Wait, you saw Mike?"

"This morning. And he, what, recruited you to help pester me? I don't need any of this, Jess. This is really not cool of you."

"No, no, seriously. You've got the wrong idea!" Jess raised her hands defensively. Her knuckles were reddened and splotchy, the occasional line criss-crossing across the backs of her hands.

Sam's instincts went on high alert and she narrowed her eyes, frowning at the marks. "Are your hands okay?"

Jess pulled her hands down, hiding them behind her back. "Oh! Yeah, they're fine. They just..." She sighed and dropped them back into view again, giving up. "Okay. Busted. I've been boxing."

"Boxing?" That was about the last thing she'd expected.

"Yeah." The girl's cheeks colored. "I just had to do something, you know? After what happened. I need to be able to fight something. Don't—don't tell Mike, please. He still thinks I'm breakable. But that's what I mean! That's why I'm here. I'm just wrapping up for the day and heading out." She lifted her gym bag from her shoulder slightly to show Sam.

"Oh. Sorry. You, ah, don't need to be worried. I won't tell Mike. We don't really talk."

"You said you saw him today though, right? Just now?"

Sam sighed and rubbed her forehead, absently smearing chalk across her face. "No, more like this morning. I don't know... seven or eight? Pretty early."

"That's... nice." Jess looked like she was on the verge of asking something, but finally just settled on a decisive nod.

"I guess?"

"No, it is. Seven or eight you said? And I saw him... doesn't matter. I'm glad you guys were talking. But I'll leave you alone now. Sorry for being so nosy! Hey, um, Sam?"

"Yeah?"

"Can we get a coffee or something soon? I mean, I know you don't like me very much—" Sam opened her mouth to protest and the other girl waved her down. "No, it's fine. It's not like we're close or anything. But I'd just really like to talk to you. I think we have stuff we should talk about."

Without bothering to wait for a response, Jess dug a piece of notebook paper out of her bag and scribbled down her phone number. "I know you got rid of your online stuff and I'm not sure you
have my number. Here. Call me some time soon okay? I think we could both use it." With a little wave, she turned on her heel and vanished back into the stream of people heading for the door.

After all that, Sam looked at the boulder wall and couldn't muster the energy to climb.

Dammit.

She sat in the sauna for a while, eyes closed, willing the steam to pull every thought from her head. Her muscles trembled with tension, but she had no will to move. "You're more yourself than anyone I know," Mike had said. Sam let her head fall back to thump against the wall. She didn't feel like herself.

She hadn't felt like herself since she came down off the mountain. She remembered smiling as she talked to the police, and even now she couldn't identify why that had seemed appropriate. And falling apart like that – to Mike, of all people – was unthinkable. She was Samantha Giddings. She didn't fall apart. She got things done. She ran and climbed and thought and rescued. She wasn't this miserable, dull mess.

For the first time that day, she let herself really consider it.

What if Josh was alive?

The moment she thought it, the air of the sauna seemed to grow even warmer around her. Under her fingers, the wooden bench seemed intensely vivid, the grain almost painfully distinct. His voice was in her ear, in her mind: *It really means a lot to me that everyone came back this year and you know, that you came, Sam.*

So he could torture her? She still couldn't quite believe it. But the memories were real. The fear was real. The cut on her foot from the rebar in the old hotel, the contusion on his head from where she'd hit him with the bat... all that was real. A small, bitter part of her wanted to know why her. Why was she the one chased with a gas canister? Why not Jess or Emily or Mike? She hadn't even been involved in that stupid fucking prank.

She turned to lie out on the bench, folding her hands over her stomach. She was probably over the recommended time limit for the sauna, but she couldn't be bothered to care.

Actually, why had Chris been targeted so much? Sam, Chris, and Ashley had felt the brunt of Josh's sadistic prank, but only Ashley had been involved in what happened to Hannah. Even then, she was just a participant, not a planner.

"Ugh. This is stupid." Wandering in mental loops wasn't going to help anyone, least of all herself. Sam shoved herself back to sitting and stretched forward, feeling her spine lengthen. "And if the dream is real?" she asked herself in the empty sauna. Could she find him?

"I'm so glad I have you, Sammy," he had said back in November. His head had been in her lap as they watched a movie in his parents' rec room, his voice a sleepy lull. "At least you listen to me." She thought about her dream and the way he'd touched her face. "You're here. Actually you. Not the you in my head."

She shook herself and left to get dressed.

-o-

"Ash, it was just a dream. It doesn't mean anything."
Ashley paced back and forth, crossing from the closet to the bed and back quickly. At her insistence, he'd taken the butterfly outside and he hadn't killed it. Now he was sitting on the floor, watching as she walked in endless loops. "You don't know that! It could be something more. Like how we used to find those vision thingies."

"'Vision thingies'?"

She shot him an exasperated look. "Yeah. I know you remember them. The wood pieces that were painted and had holes in them."

"Oh the totems?"

"Yeah, Chris. Duh. The ones that would give you visions when you looked at them."

"...I think we are remembering different totems."

"Oh my god. Do you seriously not remember?"

"Okay look. I remember neat indigenous artifacts. But I don't know about these visions you're talking about. Sure, we might have had some crazy ideas, but that's only to be expected."

Grumbling under her breath, Ashley snatched a squishy purple stress ball from her desk and started working it furiously as she walked. "Crazy ideas? How do you explain knowing that Mike was going to lose fingers before he lost them?"

"I didn't know that. I just was imagining all the bad shit that might happen and I thought there could be injuries. If you think this was all real, then why is Emily alive? Didn't one of those 'visions' involve her being shot? Or any of the countless other horrible things people kept expecting to happen?" He clambered to his feet and caught Ashley's hands. "Ash, that you had a dream sucks. And I totally get why the butterfly throws you off too. But you talked to Dr. Jocelyn about this, right?"

Ashley bit her lip and nodded, not meeting his eyes.

"And what did she say?"

"That focusing on fantasies about what happened won't help me heal."

"Right. We have to face the reality of what happened on the mountain. It's awful. I know how shitty it was. But you have me. And I have you. And we'll get through this, okay?"

She nodded again. "Okay. I'm sorry."

Chris drew her in against his chest and hugged her tightly, pressing his lips lightly to her hair. "You have nothing to be sorry for. And it's over now. It's all over."

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By 10 p.m. she couldn't take it anymore. Sam typed out her text with shaky fingers, letting autocorrect hide any nervous misspellings. I want to talk to you.

The response came almost instantly, as if the phone had already been in his hand. Who is this? Sam?

She'd forgotten that she hadn't told everyone when she changed her number. Yeah. It's me. Are you busy?
meet by the big oak?
sure. i'll head over now.

sam wrapped her arms around her as she walked, feeling out each step under her bare soles before she took it. it felt like the ground might give way if she wasn't careful. she didn't think she was walking particularly slowly but by the time she reached the tree, he was already there.

"hey mike."

he looked up from his phone and smiled at her, that same quick flash of a smile that he'd always used on her. sam used to think she understood what it meant. she wasn't so sure anymore. "hey."

"jess had the dream too, huh? i saw her today and she didn't go into detail, but i figured that after what you said…"

"i guess so. she came by to tell me about it."

"today's just full of old friends, isn't it?" she didn't mean to sound bitter, but it came out that way all the same.

"sorry again. i shouldn't have just shown up at your door. but i didn't know what else to do. you were, well, you were the first person who came to mind when i thought about it."

she leaned against the oak next to him. it was huge; the two of them, arms outstretched, wouldn't be able to clasp hands around it. "and the others? did anyone else have the dream too?"

"from what i can gather. i was able to confirm with em and she said matt did too. ash wouldn't answer her phone but she finally texted me back about an hour ago. chris i don't know about. ash said something about him but it was weird. i'm not sure what she meant."

"all of us shared the same dream. that's pretty hard to roll your eyes at."

"and you are an expert at that, so i know it's true."

sam snorted. "i'm only an expert when it comes to rolling my eyes at you, munroe. you make it so easy."

"oof. wounded to the core." he slapped his chest in mock pain. "you should be nicer to me. you almost killed me with your water bottle this morning."

"sorry about that. all of it."

"nothing to be sorry for. i get it."

the night was quiet, although plenty of students were making their way along the circle path. the oak was separate, in the middle of a large patch of grass. it was ancient, with raised roots that jutted from the ground. sam loved it here. it had been her favorite place to sit and think, a quiet piece of nature in the center of the bustling school. "do you really think he's alive?"

"i think that there's enough of a possibility that i can't not check, you know?" mike's voice was firm. "but i'd feel better if you came with me. i'm not going to push though. i understand. either way, i understand."
She steadied herself on the tree, letting the rough surface of the roots under her feet comfort her.
"Okay. I think… okay."

"Really?" From the corner of her eye, Sam saw him turn to look at her. She took his hand. His remaining fingers curled around hers, warm and strong. "You'll really go?"

"Yeah. I'm in it now, Munroe. Let's do it."

He squeezed her hand. "Thanks."

Chapter End Notes

Oh dear, Chris. What on earth is going on with you? Josh would tell you not to listen to your therapist, but then I don't know that you'd listen to Josh at this point.

Thank you to everyone who left kudos and (most especially) comments! It's been a long time since I've posted anything fanfiction-wise, so I love getting feedback.

Coming up: Plane tickets and planning, although not everything goes smoothly. Some old friends are not ready to see each other again and the Washingtons are more than a little wary about this entire endeavor.
A series of memories in no particular order

"I got in!" Beth tackled Sam the second she opened the door. "I got in – in – in!" She sang the words, lifting Sam up off her feet. "I got in!"

Sam laughed and freed herself. Beth spun giddily, clutching a dark blue folder to her chest. "You got in?" Sam asked breathlessly.

"I got in! I did it! Me!" She bounced in place.

"I thought you weren't going to find out for a few more months!"

"Early admission! I didn't want to say anything just in case I jinxed it, but I sent in my stuff for them early and I just got my packet!" She grabbed Sam's face and kissed her soundly. "I did it."

Sam rested her forehead against Beth's and smiled. "You did it. I knew you could do it, you genius, you."

The other girl closed her eyes and sighed happily. "How could you be so sure? I wasn't."

"You should have been. You know what? Forget what I said. You're not a genius. A genius would recognize how smart and talented and freaking awesome she is."

"No, you're thinking of a narcissist. A humble genius like myself would have enough self-doubt to secure herself support personnel who could tell her how awesome she is on a daily basis."

Sam perked up. "Is that my job?"

"That is, in fact, your job."

"Do I get paid well?"

"Nope!" Beth kissed her again, her lips soft and sweet. "But you get some killer perks."

The empty restroom echoed with her exclamation: "You're dating Mike Munroe?" Jessica couldn't have crammed more disbelief into her tone if she tried. And she tried.

Emily smiled smugly at her reflection. "Yep! And Mister Student Body President is going to winter formal with me." She leaned forward, studying her eyebrows in the mirror. "Really we're a perfect match for that sort of thing. The pictures are going to be great. Much better than if I went with
someone else. And if it goes well, maybe we'll hit up prom together too."

"I… wow." The blonde girl fiddled with her phone case, popping the silicone and plastic on and off. "I thought we had said we weren't going to do dates this time."

"Are you kidding?" Emily laughed. "Senior year winter formal – stag? No way. I mean, it's not like I'm going to do nothing but cling to his side all night, but I definitely want a date. Plus Mom would kill me if we didn't get good pictures. She keeps talking about her senior year dances and showing me this dried up nasty corsage her date got her."

"Of course," Jess said, smiling as brightly as she could. "That's what I was thinking too. No date? Ew. I just wanted to make sure you had a date before I told you I had one."

"Who are you going with?"

Jess cast about for a name. Someone of the same caliber… "David. You know, David from the football team? He asked me a few days ago and just wouldn't stop bugging me about it. So finally I said yes. He's okay, I guess." She couldn't have been clearer in her refusal but she was sure he'd forgive her. After all, he'd expect a girl like her to play hard-to-get, right? She quickly sent a text.

*changed my mind. formal it is! ;) ;*

"He's pretty cute," Emily agreed, not noticing Jess's quick typing. "Good call. Plus—" She spun away from the mirror and grinned at Jess, clapping her hands together eagerly. "Once we get pictures, it doesn't really matter. Then we can just go do whatever we want to anyway!"

"Hell yes we can!" Despite herself, Jess giggled and clapped as well. "This is going to be so much fun. Now we have to go shopping!"

Ashley closed the door and beamed around at the room. "Hi everyone! Thanks so much for coming to our first club meeting! With Mrs. Arnold's help, we're going to make this Archibald High's first official Model United Nations! I hope you're all as excited as I am!"

From the looks on their faces, they were not.

Mrs. Arnold looked the most excited of anyone in the room. Keeping her smile going, Ashley started passing out the packets she'd printed. There were only seven people so far, but she had high hopes of getting more. Especially since some of the people were big names on campus. That was always good for a club’s popularity, right? She wasn’t sure why they were there, but she wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth at this point.

She handed Michael Munroe a packet first. They might only be sophomores, but he was already super popular. Way more popular than she could dream of being at this point. Next was Matt Taylor. The two were good friends, from what she'd heard. Or at least they were on the junior varsity football team, which made them, like, sports brothers or something. Wasn't that how the football team worked?

Following the circle around, she handed packets off to a few kids she recognized but didn't have names for, plus Beth Washington (who looked at least marginally more interested than the others) and the blond guy with glasses sitting next to her. Oh, he was cute. Not cute in the same way Mike and Matt were, but he grinned at her when he took the pages and she looked away quickly to keep
from blushing.

Not good, Ashley. Not good, not good, not good. She caught Beth's eye and the other girl bit back a smile, glancing between Ashley and the blond guy. Ugh. Smooth, Ashley. Focus up.

"Alright!" she said brightly, using the packet to guide her forward. "We're looking for the club to meet every Wednesday—"

-o-

Hannah hugged her knees and nervously rocked back and forth. She giggled, blushing furiously. "Michael Munroe," she finally said quickly, then tucked her face down and out of sight.

Sam sputtered into her juice. "Michael Munroe? Mike? Like, in-show-choir-with-me Mike? Seriously? Why?" Hannah had been making semi-obscure references to the guy she had a crush on for weeks, but they'd always been just vague enough that Sam hadn't been able to pinpoint who it could be. Her current guess had been Carlos, the cute guy on the Student Council and the basketball team.

"Because he's just so… ugh!" Hannah threw her head back and it hit the wall with an unexpectedly loud thump. Both girls burst out laughing.

"Yeah, that seems about right. Mike is so 'ugh' and a head injury." Sam stretched her legs out in front of her, tapping Hannah's ankle with the toe of her shoe. "Really though, when did this happen?"

She wouldn't have thought it possible, but Hannah turned even more red. "He, um, I don't know exactly! He's just so nice. And he's so gorgeous, Sam, come on. You have to see it too, right? He's got that smile that's just…" Hannah sighed dreamily. "I was supposed to do a piece on the concert, so I went to the choir room to talk to you, but he was there and he was just so nice."

"Han, he's a huge dork! And he's got, like, four thousand girlfriends at any given moment!"

"He's not a dork!" Hannah said defensively. "He's smart and he's funny. He told me he wants to be president one day. If he's willing to work that hard, he's definitely not just some dork."

Sam rolled her eyes. She'd heard Mike ramble about that on more than one occasion. She suspected it might even be part of his pick-up routine. "Just ask him about his stance on foreign debt relief. Then you'll see," she muttered.

"What?"

"Oh never mind. And all the girlfriends? Why would you want to be with someone who dates around like that? I bet he can't even keep track of who he's dating."

Hannah laughed. "He doesn't really have that many girlfriends. Not at the same time, at least. And besides, it wouldn't be like that if he was dating me. Then it would be just him and me and he'd know it was real."

"You're so ridiculous, Han. Why can't you pick someone, well, better?"

"Because there isn't anyone better!" Hannah beamed at Sam. "Soon I'll get my chance. I just know it!"

-o-
Hannah nearly tripped over Josh in the dark. "Josh, what are you—"

"Shh…" He reached up and tugged her down to crouch next to him. "I'm listening."

"Listening to what?" she whispered, sliding to sit against the wall.

But it was immediately apparent. "—it's not a big problem. This sort of thing happens to students all the time."

"Oh!" They didn't have to see the scene to imagine the choreography. This was where their father threw his hands up in exasperation. "Stop making excuses for him! That's why we can't get him to stop all this nonsense. We can send him to doctors until the cows come home, but it won't make a damn bit of difference if we don't hold him to some kind of consequences."

"What do you want to do then? You want to ground him for getting held back? Isn't that a bit ridiculous? He's already being punished by being held back in the first place."

Hannah could feel the tension in her brother and leaned over to rest her head on his shoulder. He took a ragged breath. "I'm sorry," she said, voice barely more than a breath. Josh didn't move, frozen in place as their parents continued to fight.

"Josh, stop listening," Hannah said, grabbing his arm in the dark. "Let's go."

He shook his head.

"Hannah, where did you—"

Beth was pulled down to join them before she could alert their parents to their eavesdropping presence. "Shh. We're listening," Hannah told her softly.

"So you admit it's a punishment! I mean, fuck, Mel. What do we do here? Our kid has to repeat the eighth grade, for fuck's sake. Are we just supposed to pretend like it doesn't matter when we talk to him?"

"Oh Josh…" Beth reached across Hannah to hug him awkwardly. The three of them stayed like that for a long moment, a puppy pile tangle. "At least you'll get to be in class with us, right?" Her near-silent voice came from somewhere near his ribcage.

"And Chris, too," Hannah supplied helpfully. "It'll be good."

Beth straightened back up. "Come on. You don't need to listen to this."

"That's what I was trying to tell him," Hannah complained in a whisper.

Josh refused to budge. "I'm not going. I want to hear what they say."

Beth hissed slightly in annoyance. "Josh, if you don't get up and come with us, I will tickle you and then Mom and Dad will not only know that you're out here, but that you yelp like a Chihuahua."

He glared at her, but finally let them pull him to his feet. He'd have to deal with his parents soon, but at least for that moment he let his sisters comfort him.

-0-

Josh flung the double doors open wide. "Welcome, losers, to Castle Washington!" he announced to the small group gathered on the front step. Spotting Chris, he grabbed him by the forearm and
yanked in forward. "Cochise! You made it!"

The others filtered, laughing and talking. Chris shoved his glasses back up and shrugged. "Like I could get away with ditching."

"You would be a sad and tragic man indeed," Josh leaned slightly closer and dropped his voice. "Especially since I asked a certain redhead we both know to come and she happens to be here right this very moment."


Josh winked and spun to address the group again, closing the doors behind him. "And when the cat's away, the mice shall play! Ladies and germs, kittens and dogs, we've got beers and snacks in the kitchen and movies going upstairs. We've also got some board games and pool in the lounge room through there. Have fun, children."

There were ten of them total. Josh had been to ragers before and, from what he could tell, the only common factor between them had been too many people. Ten was better, more manageable. Chris had been a given, as had Sam. Then the group had just formed naturally from there. Since Hannah was going, he'd invited Mike to keep her happy. With Mike, of course, came Emily. And Matt Taylor, who Josh didn't know quite as well. With Emily came Jessica Riley, since they were attached at the hip. And Ashley had been more or less a gift to Chris, though Josh liked her well enough anyway.

"If this was a movie," his father was fond of saying, "it would write itself."

Upstairs in the movie room, the girls were lying across every surface available. Sam's head was in Beth's lap while his sister set dozens of tiny braids into the girl's silky blonde hair. Ashley had perked up the moment she'd heard the knock on the door and was pretending like she wasn't waiting to hear Chris's voice. Amusingly, Hannah was the only one who seemed genuinely absorbed in the movie. They'd picked the first *Indiana Jones* movie as a good starter film.

The party rolled out perfectly. Josh really couldn't have scripted a better night.

After about an hour, Josh pulled out a bottle of the good scotch. He'd get hell for it later probably, but at the moment he couldn't be bothered to care. He'd offered shots all around, enjoying the fact that the idea of doing shots of liquor meant for savoring would drive his Dad up a wall. Beth had passed, but everyone else had taken him up on it.

Then Mike and Matt, pleasantly buzzed, were playing pool and making friendly wagers, coming up with consequences like jumping in the pool or stripping naked. Finally getting bored of their increasingly ridiculous bets, Emily took over for Matt and trounced Mike soundly as Jessica cheered her on. She claimed a kiss from him as her victory and took full advantage of it, while Chris whistled loudly. Sam, drunk off of what could only have been one shot and less than one beer, had turned on the stereo and started to sing. She dragged Mike over to join her in belting along with Melinda's favorite Bowie albums, which permanently lived in the CD player.

Beth had filmed them, laughing her head off, while Chris tried to teach Ashley how to shoot pool. She'd flushed crimson when he put his arms around her to help her position the stick and yet Chris didn't seem to notice. Josh had poured him another drink – a new bottle of pilfered and expensive booze – and toasted to naivety and youth, although Chris didn't seem to recognize the point he was trying to make.
Then Matt and Ash were arguing something from model UN – something about trade negotiation tactics. He spotted Jess and Emily heading towards the pool and laughing. Beth grabbed Sam by the collar and pulled her away to somewhere he didn't want to think about. He downed his drink quickly and poured more. Hannah and Mike and Chris were talking and his sweet little sister was starry-eyed. Mike seemed oblivious, though, just waxing poetic about something or other.

The party moved to the pool, though the UN debate continued, sucking in Chris and Mike as well. Jessica was showing off, doing elaborate ballet-style leaps from the diving board in her underwear. It was not a bad view. Emily shrieked every time one of Jess's jumps sprayed her and sending slapping splashes across the pool at her.

Sam appeared in a blur, throwing herself into the pool like a cannonball. It devolved into pool games from there.

It was exactly right. Josh watched from a lawn chair. He raised his glass and smiled. Josh remembered his favorite poem from Brit Lit in 9th grade and recited it to the uncaring audience of the party. "Oh, tis jesting, dancing, drinking spins the heavy world around. If young hearts were not so clever, oh, they would be young forever. Think no more. Tis only thinking lays lads underground." He took a long drink of the new whiskey, finally feeling like he understood the appeal of its oak-and-smoke taste.

Hannah flopped down next to him, spraying him with pool water. "We should go up to the lodge this winter! Have a party like this one. D'you think Mom and Dad would go for it?"

He ruffled her hair and she stuck her tongue out at him in mock annoyance. "Don't pout, Hannah Banana. If you ask them, they'll go for anything. You and Beth are the responsible ones, remember?"

"Well, I mean, you are giving out Dad's liquor cabinet to a bunch of teenagers."

"I didn't hear you complaining."

"Come swim with us!"

He shook his head, finishing his drink. "I'm good."

Hannah grinned cheekily at him and pushed herself up slightly. "Oh Sa-am!" she called across the yard. "Sammy, darling, Josh doesn't want to swim! I think we should help him!"

As if she'd teleported, Sam was suddenly at his other side. "How do you move so fast?" Josh asked, blinking up at her. He must be more inebriated than he realized.

She didn't answer, just smiled, her cheeks flushed and eyes sparkling. In a flash, she'd snatched the glass from his hand and was propelling him towards the pool. Hannah had his other arm and between them, they threw him bodily into the water. He surfaced, water-logged and laughing.

"Come on in, Sam. Thanks for coming." Bob Washington didn't get up from his chair, though he smiled at her and waved a hand in welcome.

"Of course," she said, walking as silently as she could. The entire house seemed eerily still. Despite the warmth of the California night, Bob had the fire going and the light from it set the colorful mosaic of the fireplace glittering. She didn't comment on the cut-crystal glass in his hand or on the nearly empty bottle sitting on the coffee table.
"He's upstairs. I'm not sure where. Movie room maybe. Or his room." Mr. Washington rubbed his free hand over his balding head and removed his glasses to rub them vaguely on his shirt. "Stay as long as you want. Or don't. I'm sure you have homework or some other pressing matters as well. The world doesn't stop just because—just because."

She had no idea what to say. Mr. Washington had always been friendly and welcoming, if distant. But this, she had no idea how to handle. Finally, she decided that there was nothing to say. His gaze had returned to the fire as he took another sip. So she slipped away, toeing off her shoes near the wall and walking carefully down the hall to the grand staircase that had always seemed unnecessarily and intimidatingly large.

As she headed upstairs, she heard a clink and the pouring of liquid behind her. Was Melinda around? Sam stayed as quiet as she could, moving through the familiar hallways like a ghost, glancing into rooms with open doors and watching for light under closed ones. The doors to Hannah and Beth's rooms were shut tight. Beth's door was undecorated, while Hannah's was covered in signs warning people to Stay Out! as well as countless decorative butterflies and flowers. Tears stung her eyes but didn't fall. She felt empty, dried out and hollow.

Josh's door was open a crack but when she swung it further open, it was empty. As Mr. Washington had predicted, though, there was light under the movie room door. Sam considered knocking but finally just opened the door. The light of the projector's screen was startlingly bright after the darkness of the hallway and she blinked away spots. The movie was playing with no sound, but she could have recited all the lines along with the silent picture. On the screen, a greyscale Judy Garland was walking along a fence at the hog pen, arms outstretched to keep her balance.

"They would kill her, you know?" Josh's lazy voice made Sam jump and she moved into the room to see him reclining on one of the couches. Behind her, the door slowly swung shut with a clunk. "Pigs are mean fuckers."

Sam perched on the arm of the sofa and watched as an anxious Judy was calmed and scolded in equal measure. "She shouldn't have been climbing next to them then."

"What else are you going to do in Kansas? Must be boring as shit."

"Josh—"

He didn't let her continue. "I would have done that. Fuck, I would have just fallen in on purpose. Or no, first I would have taken care of that bitch who hated my dog."

Taking a deep breath, Sam forced her voice to evenness. "Budge up, Josh. I want to sit down too."

He grunted, not moving or looking away from the screen. She snorted and lifted his legs to slide under them. The couch was broken down and sitting in it always made her feel a little like it wanted to eat her alive. Josh's boots were heavy and caked with mud. Crusts of it flaked from the soles and streaked the couch and now Sam's pants.

They watched the movie in silence. Judy sang soundlessly to a grey sky. It had been Hannah's favorite movie. No, not had been. It was Hannah's favorite movie. It felt familiar and alien in equal measure to be here with Josh: all they were missing was the girls and sound. The projector light was dim enough that it seemed to cast them into shades of black and white and grey as well. Not for the first time in the last few weeks, Sam wondered if she was dreaming. The only color in the room
came from the faint ripples of blue light that made their way through the Venetian blinds from the illuminated pool out back.

Judy Garland was running away and eagerly speaking to the fraudulent Professor Marvel.

"Did my Dad send you to check on me?" Josh's face didn't change and he didn't move. The words were flat, with just a touch of derision. "Are you my family-appointed babysitter now?"

She wanted to hug him and murder him in equal measure, so she settled with throwing a pillow at his face. "You're an asshole. I'm here because I care about you, you idiot. Your Dad finally let me come. He didn't send me. If you want me to go, I will." She tried to stand, but Josh pushed down with his legs, pinning her to the couch.

He pulled the pillow over his face and held it there. "No, wait." His voice was muffled. "Don't go, Sammy, please? I'm sorry."

As if she had really intended to leave. She smiled sadly and started to unlace his boots. "I won't. Why are you wearing these? It can't be comfortable."

Josh shrugged, still keeping the pillow across his face. "I don't know. In case I needed to leave quickly. I didn't want to waste time."

She pulled one boot free and then the other, dropping them at the side of the couch. There was a ridiculous amount of dirt on her lap and the worn leather of the couch. She brushed at it idly, sweeping it onto the floor as well. "Now they're right here on the floor. If we need to go, we'll go together."

He let the pillow drop to his stomach and finally looked at her. Josh always looked vaguely exhausted, but the shadows under his eyes were dark as bruises and in the shifting light from the movie he looked almost corpse-like. "What should we watch after this?"

Sam smile faltered. "Um… How about Ivanhoe?"

His hand found hers in the dark. His fingers were cold and she held onto him tightly, willing some of her warmth into him. The only fitting follow-up to Hannah's favorite movie was Beth's. It didn't matter if they were calling off the official search. They were fine. They had to be. So Josh and Sam would watch movies together until the four of them could all be together again.

"Ivanhoe. Perfect," Josh said quietly. "Thank you."

Chapter End Notes

Now back to your regularly scheduled programming!
You Can Talk to Me

Chapter Summary

Many conversations occur.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Rain was coming down hard. Emily made a face at it, pleased she had decided to bring her umbrella. It cast shades of blue over her and she raised a hand, watching the colors shift on her skin. Somehow it felt like the last moment of normalcy, although she knew things hadn't been normal for a very long time. "Enough stalling, Em," she told herself sharply and rang the bell.

The elderly woman who opened the door peered at her. "Can I help you?"

"Uh—yes, I'm looking for Matt?"

"Matthew!" she called back into the house. "Matthew, someone at the door for you! Well, come on in, then. Get out of the rain." The woman smiled and suddenly Emily recognized the resemblance.

"Are you his grandmother?"

"I certainly hope so. Otherwise it'd be strange, me letting him live here." The woman chuckled at her own joke. "What's your name?"

"Oh, I'm Emily. We used to, well…"

"You used to date, if I remember right." The woman raised her eyebrows expectantly. After a long, rather awkward pause, she burst out laughing. "Oh honey, of course he told me about you. He told me about everything."

Emily folded the umbrella and set it by the door, then toed off her boots. The house was warm and well-lit. It smelled faintly of bread and much more recently of garlic and basil and tomatoes. She sat gingerly on the very edge of the worn brocade couch. "Everything?"

The woman's smile faded. "Yes. Well, at least—There's always the possibility that he's still keeping secrets. You teenagers do try to be so mysterious. But I believe him when he says its everything. He seemed a bit different when he was done talking. And no one can keep all that sort of thing built up inside them without it hurting after a while." She sat down next to Emily and took her hand. "If you would like to, you and I can speak later. From what he's told me… well, it's a lot to believe, but I've seen some crazy stuff in my time. It's not hard to believe that there's more out there than what I've seen with my own two eyes."

"I—" Emily had no idea what to say to that. Truth be told, she hadn't talked to her parents about the events of that night at all. Or at least no more than she'd been forced to. It was easier to go with what the cops had announced as the official story: mentally ill kid playing some pranks that got out of hand, wild animals, and treacherous woods and mines. "Thank you," she said finally, looking down at her lap.
Matt's grandmother patted her hand. "Now. You must be freezing. Let me get you something to drink. You drink coffee? Of course you do." She rose and headed for the kitchen, calling up for Matt again. "Matthew, get down here. I know you can hear me. It's not that big a house! Oh. You can call me Rose, by the way. None of this 'Mrs. Taylor' nonsense."

Footsteps sounded on the stairs as Matt burst into the room, then stopped dead at the sight of her. Emily waved awkwardly. "Hi Matt."

"Em? You're here. In the living room. Of my grandmother's house."

"Yeah? Sorry." She stood, hugging her torso. "I—um. I needed to talk to you some more."

"You know I have a phone, right? You should know. We were talking on it… yesterday?" Matt huffed out a disbelieving laugh. "How did you even get here so quickly?"

She shrugged. "There are always flights from New York to Seattle. You can even do it nonstop if you don't mind being on a plane for six hours."

"Six hours?"

Shifting from one foot to the other, Emily shrugged again. She just wanted him to smile at her. Some tiny sign that things would be okay. Matt was always good at that, always a believer in good things. Like Jess. Emily wished she could be more like that, but, as she'd told them on more than one occasion, she'd rather be proven right in her cynicism than be disappointed by misplaced optimism. "Look, I just needed to see you. I think we need to talk. All of us. But I wanted to talk to you first."

Finally, slowly, he did smile. It wasn't what it had been, not as bright and ready, but it was there. He spread his arms. "I guess so. Can I have a hug from an old friend, then?"

Stifling her sigh of relief, she hugged him tightly.

-0-

He had said

"You're the only one they'll listen to."

and

"I can't do it. You know they won't even give me the time of day."

and

"Sam, you're the one who knows them."

Sure, all of Mike's points may have been valid, but Sam still wanted to be standing anywhere but in front of the call button at the Washingtons' gate. She swallowed hard and pushed the button.

There was no answer. She counted to ten in her head and pushed it again, hoping against hope that this wasn't a completely futile errand. Were they even home? Finally the intercom buzzed to life. "Hello?"

It was Melinda. She had always insisted on being 'Melinda' to Sam – she hated being called 'Mrs. Washington,' she said. It made her feel old. "Hi, Melinda? It's Sam. Samantha. Giddings." As if she wouldn't remember.
There was silence on the other end. Then: "Sam? Hello. Was there something you needed?"

That didn't bode well. Melinda had always been endlessly welcoming. "I need to ask you and Mr. Washington about something. I'm very sorry to intrude, but I didn't want to do it over the phone."

Melinda didn't answer, but after another moment, the side door gave its distinctive buzz-and-click and Sam was able to open it. She headed to the house in a strange daze. How many times had she followed this exact path to see Hannah or Beth? How many times had Beth come out to let her in so that the automatic unlock didn't give them away? How many times had she seen Josh on the walkway, strolling with careful, perfectly casual steps down to meet her? Sam didn't want to be here. "Oh, fuck you, Mike," she muttered, shoving her hands in her pockets and continuing up to the house. Knowing that Mike was right – that it had to be her – didn't make this any easier.

As if sensing her approach, Melinda opened the front door just as she came up the broad front steps. "It's nice to see you, Sam." Her lips curved into a smile that didn't reach her eyes. She looked at least ten years older than she was: the lines carved by her daughters' disappearance only confirmed and driven deeper by her son's. "Come on in. Bob's in the living room. You can ask us what you want in there."

She was escorted into the room, feeling like she was walking to a judicial hearing. Or maybe into detention. Bob Washington was sitting on one overstuffed chair, papers spread over his lap and his bag open at his feet. He glanced up and nodded at her. "Hello Samantha."

"Hi Mr. Washington. I'm sorry to show up unannounced like this."

"It's fine. You know you're always welcome here." That might have been true once, but now it was clearly just another polite lie. "What can we do for you?"

"I—" she faltered, unsure how to phrase it. No matter how many ways she had practiced it in her head on the way over, it didn't get any easier. Better to just go for it, right? "I was wondering if there's any possibility you'd let me go back up on the mountain."

Whatever they had been expecting from her, it wasn't that. Both Washingtons stared at her, dumbfounded. "You… you want to go back? Why?" Melinda's voice trembled.

Sam held herself as straight as she could. "I want… closure. I need to go back, see what's left. They rushed us out so quick that I never had the chance to come to terms with everything."

"You want 'closure'?" A slow smile grew across Mr. Washington's face. Something about it spoke to Josh, to his constant, indefinable strangeness, and it hurt more than Sam could have anticipated. "Are you serious?"

"Yes?" Why was he smiling at her like that? "Why wouldn't I?"

He shook his head, shrugged, and looked back to his papers, still smiling slightly. "I just thought that, after everything, it's the last place you'd want to go."

"After everything?"

"After Josh, what was it, again? Chased you around the basement naked?"

Even after everything, his words and tone made Sam flush pink. "It wasn't… I don't need…"

"Or did you enjoy that? Is that one of the things you and my son used to talk about when you came over?"
Melinda shot him a dirty look and interrupted. "Ignore Bob, Sam. I'm sorry, though. We simply can't allow you back up there. It's still incredibly dangerous. There's no stable shelters available – the closest would be the cable car station, and even that is a mess. The mine is still subject to cave-ins. We were even warned about avalanche risks."

Sam opened her mouth to protest and Melinda waved her down. "No. I'm sorry, Sam. But the answer is no. We aren't allowing anyone up there. Possibly ever. I think you should leave now. Thank you for visiting."

She was ejected without further ceremony. The sun beat down on her as she walked back towards the gate. That had been exactly… well, actually she hadn't known what to expect. There must have been a better way for her to go about it. Maybe if she went back and told them she thought Josh was alive, then they might—her phone buzzed. She sighed as she pulled it out. If she went back claiming Josh was alive, they'd have her committed.

*How did it go? Are you still with them? Mike.*

*No. Leaving now.*

After a second, her phone started to ring. She answered it, letting the gate door swing shut behind her and heading for her car. "It went about as badly as it could possibly have gone. Maybe you should have been the one to talk to them. They don't seem to be big fans of me these days."

"Fuck," Mike swore under his breath. "What did you say?"

"I told them I wanted to hunt for ghosts in a dangerous mine, obviously. What do you think I told them? I tried to tell them that I need closure and asked if I could go up there. Mr.—Bob Washington made shitty comments about running around in my towel, while Melinda just shut me down entirely. Complete waste of time."

"Closure?"

"Okay, if you want to keep critiquing my approach, you're more than welcome to try your own."

Mike groaned. "No, sorry. That's probably the best way you could have done it. I figured it was a long shot."

"So now what?"

"Now we'll have to hike up, I guess. Should be, what, like three days?"

Sam was about to scoff when she stopped to consider it. It wasn't really too bad. There were a few spots that were a bit rocky, but from what she could see from the cable car trip, it wouldn't be all that difficult. "Yeah. Maybe less. You really want to hike?"

He laughed. "I think you forget who outpaced you during camp in the 7th grade."

"It's been a long time since 7th grade. Sure you can keep up?"

"You'll have to carry all your nutrition bricks, right? That'll slow you down a bit."

She bit back her smile and shook her head. "So we're really gonna do this?"

"I'm already arranging tickets. We can get from here to Seattle, talk to Matt, and then head North."
"Tickets for who?"

"Well, you, me, and Jess so far. I'm having trouble getting ahold of Chris and Ash." He hesitated. "Do you want to try? You're closer with them than I am."

"Sure. I'll just avoid using the closure excuse this time."

"If they had the dream too, I don't think you'll have to."

Jess pulled another box down from the top shelf. "Are you still going with me?"

Over the phone, Mike laughed. "As if you could stop me."

"Oh no, not the mighty hero of the Sanitarium. What would I do without you?" she asked sweetly, tucking the phone under her chin as she opened the box and started rummaging through its contents. "Ugh. Don't call me that. But yeah. You, me, and Sam so far."

"Awesome. I think—I mean, I don't want to count my chickens or whatever, but I think I have some stuff we can use. Old gear. Like radios and other useful stuff. My dad kept all his gear from way back when. It might be kind of old, but it should still work. We can test it out later." She hesitated, then gave into the urge to ask. "So you saw Sam early, right?"

"This morning? Not that early. Just real quick before she went to talk to the Washingtons."

Unseen by Mike, Jessica rolled her eyes. "No, dummy. Yesterday. Before I came by to talk to you. I bumped into her at the gym and she said you two had already talked."

"Yeah? We, uh, yeah. Yep. We did. I was going out to get coffee and I ran into her and—"

"Jeez, Mike. I thought you used to be a good liar." She tested the Taser but it didn't work. Tapping it against the heel of her hand, it thwapped hollowly. No batteries. She put it in the 'no batteries' pile. "I'm not mad or anything. Why would I be? I was just, well, you know me! I'm was just super curious."

She could practically hear him rubbing the back of his neck. Her eyes narrowed slightly as she heard a faint rattling. "I guess I just wanted to see her. After the dream about Josh, and what happened at the lodge, I just… she seemed like the logical person to reach out to first."

"Sure. Yeah. Makes sense. Have you heard from Emily?" Jess asked quickly, moving on to the next box down.

"Yeah, briefly. She's in New York."

"Of course. Getting herself mani-pedis on the Upper East Side," she muttered.

"She offered to help bankroll this whole operation."

She hadn't expected that. Shaking her head, she forced herself to keep sorting. "Nice of her." It was. The tickets would be expensive and, of all of them, Em was the most able to drop that kind of cash at a moment's notice. It just didn't mesh with the Em in her head, the one who had spat insults at her like a snake spitting venom. It was more like the old Emily. The one from before.

"It really is. I'm working with her to get some tickets set up. Get us up to the mountain. It's looking
like our best bet is a connecting flight through Seattle. We can see Matt there. Then to Blackwood and a bus to the base. Then we're going to, well, hike."

"Hike?!" she yelped, dropping the binoculars with a heavy thump.

"Um, yeah. That's part of why I was calling. Sam tried to talk to the Washingtons, but they're just not going for it. That means no cable car which means hiking."

"Isn't it, like, days of hiking?"

"Probably only two or three. It won't be that bad. It's already getting warmer up there."

"Sure, by, what, ten degrees or something? Michael, you are trying to get me killed."

There was silence on the line. "Absolutely not. No one's going to die." His voice was fierce, determined.

It made her smile. "No. I'm sure you're right."

"Nope. Nuh-uh." Chris folded his arms over his chest and slumped back in his chair, shaking his head at her.

"Chris, so far everyone we've talked to has had the dream. Even Ashley. You must have had it too."

"Look, I don't know what to tell you. I haven't had any prophetic dreams lately."

Sam rubbed her temples. She felt a headache coming on and it was making her want to grab him and shake him as hard as she could. "Okay, fine. How about any dreams about Josh? Would have probably been two nights back. Josh. The mine. Etcetera."

"I've had so many dreams about that fucking place and that asshole. If I had a dream about him two nights ago, it wouldn't mean anything. And what, you think you're going to just run off into the woods and rescue him? True love's kiss or whatever the hell it needs to wake the dead?"

"He's not dead."

"Oh come on," Chris said flatly. "You and I both know he's dead. Pretending he isn't won't make anything better. He's as dead as that poor guy with the flame thrower. You're going to hike into the woods and, if you're very, very lucky, you will find nothing except a corpse, then climb back down. But so much shit could go wrong. You've seen the reports of the area, right? No building up there is in any kind of viable condition. The fire tower's collapsed, the mine is caving in, the lodge has burned down… There's nothing for you. It's a waste of time."

She took a sip from her water, trying not to do anything rash. "I get it. I do. But don't you think that even if there's even the slightest chance of us finding him alive, it's worth it?"

His laugh was cold. "Keep telling yourself stories for as long as you want, Sam. Some of us are trying to get through this and get better. Josh was my best friend. And then he tortured me. And Ashley. And you, in case you'd forgotten. If he was alive and himself, maybe. Maybe. But I'm not going to risk my life to find his dead body. I'm not going to do it. If you can't understand that, then I guess we're done here."

"Chris—" He didn't bother to pause, just grabbed his backpack from the table and left, the apartment
door slamming hard.

"I'm sorry, Sam. He's just... He's having a really hard time with everything." Ashley approached slowly, dropping into the chair across from the blonde.

Sam reached across the table and took Ashley's hand. "And you're not?"

"Not like this." Ashley saw Sam's disbelieving look and smiled. "I mean that. I'm a mess. No—don't fight me on it. I know it's true. Did you know I had a breakdown over a butterfly in my room the other day? Well I guess you do know. About the butterfly, at least. Maybe not the breakdown. But anyway. I think it's normal. The breakdown, not the butterfly. Like, it sounds silly maybe, but I think I'm supposed to fall apart. It's like now that I have, I can start to put myself back together you know?"

"So, hold on. You believe me?" Sam sat forward in her chair, squeezing the other girl's hand. "You think Josh is alive?"

Ashley slowly shook her head, brow furrowed. "No. I don't. Or at least, not necessarily. Chris, he... well. He's pretty convinced he knows what happened and that it doesn't involve monsters. Maybe he's right. I didn't see them all that well in the dark. But I think... I think the dreams are what you want them to be. Maybe what you need them to be. What was yellow, for the visions?"

"Guidance, I think."

"So I think it's like that. It's a guide. I can't say what it means. I don't think any of you can, really. But for you, I guess it has to mean that he's alive, right?"

Sam couldn't speak, so she nodded tightly.

Another comforting squeeze from Ashley's warm hand. "Then that's what's important. Something is trying to bring us back. And—" Her eyes filled with tears. "I don't think I can go. I'm so, so sorry Sam. I want to be there to help you more than anything, but I just can't do it."

She smiled at the redhead. "I understand, Ash. It's okay. Just knowing you're here and that you have our backs. It's helpful. It means a lot."

"Oh!" The girl sprang to her feet and dashed down the hall. "Just wait—I have something else—"

She emerged back into the living room with a worn leather journal, pages stuffed with what seemed to be everything from receipts to folded notebook paper with scribbled notes in brown ink.

"Flamethrower guy's book!" Ashley grinned at her and the old Ashley, passionate and excitable, surfaced in her face for a moment. "I stole it. Or kept it, I guess. I mean, he died, so it's not like he was going to ask for it back." She slid it across the table to Sam. "I read the rest of it later after we came back down."

"But didn't the police want it?"

Ash waved a hand dismissively. "I didn't tell them. They totally ignored everything we tried to tell them. They liked a version without monsters, I guess. I didn't think that Chris would—anyway." She shook herself off of that train of thought. "I kept reading it. And he might have been crazy or something, but man was he dedicated. You should see the details in here. I checked some of it against the lore I could find and it seems to line up, at least in most spots. I think it might help you guys."
Picking it up gingerly, Sam undid the twine tying it shut. She opened it to the first page and read the inscription, then glanced up at Ashley. "Do you think that the wendigos are real?"

The other girl shifted uncomfortably. "I don't know. I mean, I know what I thought I saw. I know what I read in there. But… Chris, the cops, my doctor… there are a lot of reasons to think that it was just us seeing what we wanted to see."

"What we wanted to see?" Sam stared at her. "Seriously?"

"No, that's not what I meant. I just mean… people make up things sometimes. Things that fit the story they're trying to tell themselves. After all, isn't it easier for you to believe that there were monsters and stuff than that this is all Josh's fault? That he planned an evil prank that got super out of hand, then the rest was just a naturally unsafe environment and Canadian winter? Look, Sam," Ashley pulled her sweater a little tighter around herself. "I don't know what to believe. I'm not saying you guys are wrong, but I can't really say that Chris is wrong either. I'm sorry. If you guys need anything, call me, okay?"

-o-

For the fourteenth time that day, the phone on the wall rang.

"I haven't had this many calls since I was arranging the office party and someone started a rumor that I wasn't going to get a caterer," Rose remarked from the table where she was folding laundry.

Matt laughed. "I told you I was popular."

"Says you. Maybe it'll be for me this time, you know."

"Probably." He picked it up. "Hello?"

"Hi Matt."

"Jess!" From the corner of his eye, he saw Emily stiffen in her seat, then take an extra-deep gulp of juice. "It's good to hear from you. I was wondering if I would."

"Oh—" she sounded surprised. "I wasn't sure you'd want to hear from me."

He shook his head, then realized she couldn't see him. "No, Jess, look. It's fine. I get it. And I'm just, well, I'm tired of being mad. I don't want to fight anymore. Especially not right now, with all of this going on."

Jess's smile was audible in her voice. "Oh god, Matt, I miss you. You total softie. How you ever survived dating Em, I'll never know."

"Hey, you know it's not like that. She's not—"

"Yeah, I know," Jess interrupted him quickly. "Forget I said that. I just… there's so much happening, so fast. I guess I just missed talking to you."

"Ditto."

Her voice turned wistful. "Do you remember that time we broke into the gym, just the three of us?"

"Do you remember how you guys ditched me and I had to find you on the roof?" Emily sat up a little straighter, that razor gaze of hers on Matt. He raised his eyebrows and turned his back on her. "It was very uncool."
"We thought you knew where we were!"

"It took me two hours to find you!"

She giggled. "Okay, fine. Sorry about that. We didn't do it to be mean. We just got distracted."

"I know. It's okay." They lapsed into a comfortable silence. That's what he'd always liked about Jess: they didn't have to impress each other. She'd always been okay with him when he didn't want to talk or do anything.

"So… dreams and stuff, huh?" She finally said.

"Dreams. And stuff. Em showed—" Matt glanced over his shoulder at Em and she shook her head warningly. "Emily called to tell me about it." She relaxed again, nodding to him gratefully.

"Are you going?"

He frowned. "I'm not sure yet. There's… this is a lot to take in."

"Tell me about it."

"Are you?"

"Absolutely. I'm going back. I have to."

Matt wasn't surprised. "That makes sense. I'm glad."

"Really? Mike just keeps trying to talk me out of it. I'm glad you don't think I'm going to shatter at a slight breeze, at least."

He laughed. "Are you kidding? I remember seeing you in Cinderella. It had been before she quit ballet. A twisted ankle and she'd still persisted. She'd done all of her piece as Spring on pointe with a radiant smile, even though just walking on it had hurt like a bitch.

"Oof. Not one of my finest moments."

"Wow. You're pretty dumb if you think that. You're tough. Mike's an idiot."

"A well-meaning idiot. I mean, I get it. If I were him I'd want to keep me away too."

"Only because he didn't see you in the mine."

Jessica scoffed, amused. "Oh fine. You flatterer. Anyway, I think we're coming up by way of Seattle. Any chance I can at least get to see you, if you decide not to go?"

"Of course."

"Okay, well, thanks! I'll talk to you soon? It was really nice to hear your voice, Matt."

"For sure." He hung up the phone and turned back.

Emily watched him carefully. "Is she planning on going up to the mountain?" She managed to layer scorn, disbelief, worry, and irritation into her voice simultaneously. Matt was almost impressed.

"Yep," he said, opening the fridge and grabbing a coke.

She slumped back into the chair. "Fuck."
Sam had never really been much for fairy tales. It wasn't that she disliked them particularly. They just
didn't interest her as much as other stories could. Beth, on the other hand, loved fairy tales. Hannah
too, although for different reasons. Hannah loved the romance, the excitement, the triumph of good
over evil. Beth had loved to dissect them. She'd pick a story and then read every version she could
get her hands on, comparing them and picking her favorite imagery. It was one of her favorite things
to do. And more than that, she loved to talk about what she'd found.

And so Sam knew that in fairy tales, certain events tended to happen in sets of three. Three old
women with magical abilities. Three chests you could open. Three days, three wishes, three siblings.

She'd met with the Washingtons and she'd met with her friends.

There was one more person to meet with.

Her heart was pounding as she found a parking spot, easing into it carefully. She'd almost expected
him not to answer when she called, but after his assistant had given her name, he'd been on the line
immediately. He had a free half hour or so, he'd said, between 3:00 and 3:30.

Climbing out of her car and heading for the front doors of the building, she gripped the strap of her
backpack tightly with one hand, as if the journal in it might suddenly try to escape.

Her phone buzzed. *How'd it go?* Mike asked.

She ignored the message, shoving the phone into her pocket. If this third visit didn't go well, he didn't
need to know. Not right now, at least.

After the heat outside, the air conditioning was too cold and she shivered slightly as she rode the
elevator up. She checked in at the front and was gestured back. The office was beautiful, all dark
wood and gleaming leather, and something about it made Sam's skin itch.

"Sam, please come in. Have a seat. I must admit that didn't expect to hear from you."

She took a deep breath and sat. "Hello Dr. Hill. I need to talk to you about Josh."

Chapter End Notes

You learn so many interesting things crawling through all the wiki and meta pages for
this game. Did you know that Jess was a ballerina? I would love to hear people's
thoughts on how this is going - anyone you particularly like or dislike, any moments you
enjoyed, any flubs you notice, etc. As mentioned in my bio, I haven't written fanfiction
in quite a while, so feedback of any kind is not only appreciated, it is read 4,000 times in
a row and delighted over.

Coming soon to a mountain near you: Sam has a plan. Dr. Hill does his Dr. Hill thing.
Josh continues to have a rough time. The Washingtons are not stupid. And the kids get
this show on the road.
Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! Sorry for the long delay - Spring semester of grad school started and immediately began to kick me to the curb. I should be back to a regular posting schedule now.

This chapter is mostly just getting things moving.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Things began to happen very quickly.

Too quickly, in Sam's opinion, although the moment the thought occurred to her she felt guilty. If Josh was alive, then every second counted. Especially after it had been so long already.

It turned out that most of the equipment Jess had scrounged from her garage was useless to them – either it was unsafe to use or impossible to bring on a plane. They briefly discussed the possibility of trying to mail it up, but gave up. They'd have to do the same thing to get it to Blackwood. Instead, they decided, they would just try to get what they could once they were there.

Sam ignored a call she received from her parents and one from Melinda Washington. It wasn't like she would change her mind about giving them permission and she couldn't stomach the thought of Melinda's pitying voice. As she packed her bag, she tucked what she'd gotten from Dr. Hill carefully inside a pair of socks. It wasn't fragile, but it felt delicate in her hands and she felt better with it thoroughly cushioned.

It was fortuitous that Emily seemed to have no hesitation when it came to buying their tickets. In the space of two days, Sam had talked to her teachers, given her roommate an excuse and apology, and was on a plane with the others. Nothing felt real. She found herself using the dream test constantly. Could this be true? And she added the question Josh had asked her in the dream-vision to the test: how did you get here?

How did you get here? I climbed in Tess's car and she dropped me off at the airport. Then I walked through the sliding doors, checked my bag, presented my license and ticket, and found the right gate.

How did you get here? I sat on the aisle seat of the plane, ate slightly-stale pretzels, and tried to nap. Instead I read the old yoga magazine I found in Tess's car that she told me to take. Mike fell asleep and snored. Jess listened to music and stared out the window.

How did you get here? We took a taxi together from the airport. Not enough. Details? We hit a pothole as we turned onto the sloped street to Matt's grandmother's house. The driver swore. Jess had laughed and made a weak joke that it was like a roller coaster ride.

How did you get here? Jess bounded ahead of me to knock at the door, so Matt was already opening it as I made it up the last steps. We trooped together into the entryway and deposited our luggage.

It was a tedious game, but somehow it helped reassure her. There were others here. She couldn't be going mad or dreaming if she could trace every step. She shook her head, trying to bring the world
back into focus. Jess was hanging off Matt as she talked. "—so good to see you, I can't even say. I can't believe we're here and you're here. It's been forever. I mean, I know it hasn't actually been forever. I just… with the way thing went, it just feels so weird. Sorry." Matt laughed and moved into the living room with her still half-hugging him.

Jess fell abruptly silent. Shooting a confused look at Mike, Sam kicked off her shoes and followed.

When Sam had been younger, her family had two cats. One of them had been an especially talkative orange tom, the other a sulky long-haired white female. They largely stayed out of each other's way, preferring avoidance to confrontation, but once she had found them at the end of the downstairs hallway, frozen as they stared at each other, tails poofed and fur on edge. They'd been the picture of tension and she hadn't known whether doing something would trigger an attack or just cause one of them to run.

Jess and Emily were looking at each other exactly the way the cats had. Emily, who had clearly been sitting on the couch and reading, had put her book down and stood. Jess released Matt and put her hands on her hips. "I didn't know you were going to be here."

Emily's lip twisted in a slight sneer. "Oh, I'm sorry. Was I supposed to ask for your permission?"

"Um, okay. Nope. We're not doing this again." Matt said, stepping forward and raising his hands. He glanced to Sam and Mike, hopefully.

"Yeah, Matt's right." Mike moved further into the room and gave Emily a quick hug that she did not return. "It's good to see you Em. Jess, we should bring our bags in."

"Our bags are already inside, Michael." She didn't even glance at him, keeping her eyes fixed on Emily. "Don't be an idiot."

"Jess," his voice was tired. He rubbed the back of his head and sighed. "Can we not? I mean, I'm exhausted already and we aren't even there yet. We can't waste energy on this crap."

Finally she let out a long breath and nodded. "Fine. Sorry. You're right." Jess nodded to Emily. "We're on the same team. Are you—are you coming with us?"

"Of course. At least I was actually useful last time, unlike some parties present."

Jess opened her mouth to retort, then seemed to think better of it and settled for rolling her eyes.

Things settled into an uneasy sort of peace after that. Matt's grandmother was at work, he explained, heating up a massive pot of soup on the stove. They sat or lounged around the kitchen and Sam boosted herself onto a back counter that only held a stack of mail and an old phone handset. She liked the kitchen. In fact, she liked the whole house. She could see why Matt would want to live here. It had all the warmth and worn charm that the Washington Lodge had been trying to force. It reminded her of the house she'd lived in when she was a kid. Tears stung her eyes unexpectedly and she leaned her head back against the wall and let the voices of the group wash over her. Matt was explaining how he'd come to take up cooking and Jess was laughing over old recipes she'd found in a cookbook from the 1950s. Something about gelatin being in everything.

"You okay?" Mike's voice was soft, pitched only for her to hear.

She looked at him and tried to smile, feeling it trembling on her lips. "I think so. I'll let you know again in a month or so."

He chuckled and leaned against the counter beside her. Sitting up on the ledge, she was nearly his
He fiddled with the knuckles on his injured hand and she found herself staring, fascinated. She'd never really gotten a chance to look at where his fingers had been severed. The ends didn't look quite right – probably the result of a machete amputation by a civilian rather than a real surgeon – although they seemed to be healing well enough. "It was stupid of me," he said, smiling slightly. "I don't know why my brain told me that touching a severed hand was going to be a good thing."

"I feel like I should be making terrible finger- or hand-based puns right now."

"I am very okay with you not doing that."

"I'll just have to practice and save them up for next time."

"And you think she came to see me?" Dr. Alan Hill steepled his fingers in front of him, watching Melinda closely.

She had trouble meeting his gaze. That sometimes happened, especially when people were uncertain they were doing the right thing. He kept the smile from his face and continued to wait for her to speak. Finally she squared her shoulders and looked at him again. "Yes, I do. Or at least, I think she went to someone else after she spoke with us. I've known Sam many, many years. I don't think she was telling me everything. I've tried to contact her. Bob was… he can be very unpleasant and he was on point when Sam came to see us."

"Does he have a history of unpleasantness?"

"More so recently. The last year or two has been—" she broke off with a short, brittle laugh. "I'm not here for you to analyze, Doctor."

He chuckled and leaned back in his chair. "I apologize, Mrs. Washington. Call it force of habit."

"Back to the original reason I came, if you don't mind: I am certain Sam came to see you. I have it on very good authority."

"Samantha did see me for a few sessions after they returned last month."

"That isn't what I meant. Don't play games with me." Her mouth tightened into a thin line. "Did you play games with my son?"

Alan's eye twitched, but otherwise his facial expression remained the same. "I helped Josh to the best of my ability. As you well know. If I was too late to prevent what happened… you may be assured that I regret I was not more able to see what was happening to him."

Melinda took a deep breath and crossed her legs, smoothing her skirt down. She was an attractive woman, albeit looking a bit worn around the edges. She didn't look much like her son, except in some of her mannerisms. Josh had her ability to look annoyed, amused, and utterly guileless at the same time. "I'm sorry. That was uncalled for. But I'm worried about Sam. I turned her away from Blackwood and I'm concerned about how she's holding up. I was hoping that if she spoke to you, you might be able to give me some small insight into what I can do to help her."

"Mrs. Washington, you know I am not at liberty to discuss anything Sam and I have talked about. In fact, unless she shows clear intent to hurt herself or others, I cannot tell a soul what she says."

"And you don't think she might hurt herself?" The genuine concern in Melinda's tone softened him slightly. Despite what Sam had said, it seemed Melinda did still care for her.
"I think Sam is a smart young lady who wouldn't do anything without thinking it through. She's resourceful."

Melinda sat straighter, gaze sharpening. "Resourceful?"

Oh dear. Had he said too much? He smiled, trying to assuage whatever thoughts had just sprung to her mind. "I only mean that Samantha is a logical person. I'd imagine that she's on a path to recovery. Though it may take some time, she is determined. She's not one to give up."

She shook her head, slowly. "No, no she isn't. You're quite right. Thank you Doctor." Melinda stood and extended her hand. After shaking it firmly, she moved towards the door. "You've been quite helpful. I'll get out of your hair."

Dr. Hill watched her go. "Fuck," he said to the empty room. She was more like Josh than he'd realized. Josh had always been remarkably good at reading between the lines. He only hoped Sam was as determined and resourceful as he'd said.

-o-

It was nearly midnight and most of Matt's friends were asleep. The house wasn't particularly large, but there was room enough for them to be camped out across the living room, with Emily firmly claiming the sofa. He'd thought about asking one or more of them to take his bed, but they'd all worked out their sleeping arrangements before he could even mention it.

And he couldn't sleep.

He stared up at the ceiling in the dark. Counting sheep had never worked. Neither did warm milk or any of the other countless insomnia remedies Dad or Grandma had ever pushed on him. With a groan, he rolled over, burying his face in the pillow.

There was a soft knock at his door. "Matthew? Are you awake?" His grandmother's voice was pitched low, designed to not disturb him if he was sleeping.

Matt rolled to his side. "Yeah. I'm awake."

The door opened and he blinked as the light from the hall fell across his face, momentarily dazzling him. Rose stood in the open doorway, a dark silhouette against the white wall behind her. "I had a feeling. I'd guess that all your friends are having sleeping issues of their own." She moved into the room and shut the door, then clicked on the desk lamp. "I just wanted to talk to you for a minute."

He pushed himself up to seated. "About what?"

She gave him a look. "You know about what. About going."

"I don't think I'm going to."

"Why?"

"I don't think I'll be able to help them. And I should be here to help you."

"Bullshit." Her swearing startled him and she chuckled. "You know I swear. I'm a grown woman. But that doesn't matter right now. You know perfectly well that, while I love having you here, I can manage without you. Why don't you think you'll be able to help your friends?"

Deep breath. He might have lied to his parents – didn't every teenager? – but he'd never been able to
lie to Rose. She'd always had an uncanny ability to call him on it immediately. Eventually he'd given up even trying. "I couldn't last time. Everything I tried to do just backfired. I couldn't save Em. I nearly got Jess killed when I found her. I mean, I barely got out of there alive. This time won't be any different."

She was watching him with a skeptical eyebrow. It was the same look she gave him when he had been four and tried to claim he hadn't eaten the leftover cupcakes. But this time he wasn't lying. "That's nonsense."

He opened his mouth to protest and she waved him down. "No, listen to me this time. Sometimes things don't work out. If you miss a catch, do you quit the game? No, because you're letting your team down. They know you didn't make a mistake on purpose. And they know that next time, the odds reset. Just because you missed one doesn't mean you'll miss the next." She pointed at him. "Unless you let it get into your head that you're always going to miss."

"But—"

"No," she cut him off. "I told you to listen. So listen. Actually listen and think about what I'm saying. Your parents would kill me if they knew I was encouraging to go out into something dangerous and do something that most people would think was stupid. But here's the way I see it: your friends down there are going to go. Whether they're right about your friend being alive or not, they're going. And it's going to be dangerous. I've known you your whole life, jelly-bean," she said, winking at him as she used his old nickname. "—and if you don't go, you're going to regret it." Without waiting for a response, she turned out the light and left, shutting the door behind her with a soft click.

Matt sat in the dark for a while, trying to sort through his racing thoughts. Then he quietly slipped out of his room and padded downstairs. He picked his way through his sleeping friends and shook Emily's shoulder gently. Her eyes fluttered open and she looked up at him.

He whispered as quietly as he could, trying not to wake the others: "Can you get me a ticket too?"

Her lips curved up in a little smile. "I already did," she murmured sleepily. "I had a feeling you would change your mind."

"No way."

"Okay, I hoped you would change your mind." Emily shut her eyes again. "Now go to bed. It's going to be a long day tomorrow."

-O-

_How did you get here?_

For a mercy, things went smoothly the next day. Matt's grandmother drove them all to the airport and they loaded onto the plane without incident. It helped that they all had made an almost identical trip only a short time before. The only difference was that this time they were all traveling together.

Emily stayed as far from Jess as possible, which made Sam roll her eyes. At least they weren't fighting, though. She would be grateful for small favors.

There was a small town near the lower cable car station. None of them had ever spent much time there, instead walking or taking a bus straight to the gate. This time, though, they stopped there to get their bearings. Most of the "city" was a trendy little strip of shops and cafes, populated mostly by bored-seeming locals and the occasional snow bunny. There was a resort at the edge of the lake and guests would come up to buy bottles of wine, vintage tchotchkes, or whatever else struck their fancy.
Separated from the overpriced tourist area by a few streets was a small grocery store and a gas station, plus a diner and a few other various necessities for the locals.

It was in the diner that the group gathered, crammed into a single booth to settle on a plan. Night had fallen and outside the snow was lit to a bright glow by the fluorescents of the gas station next door.

"I am not staying here," Jess said, folding her arms over her chest mutinously. "You can't force me to just sit around and wait for you guys."

"Look, someone should stay here. We can use the radios, since there's no signal once we get further up. That way someone can be a sort-of safety net for the rest of the group. They can call in help if we need it. I know it sucks, but it makes sense." Sam wrapped her hands around her steaming coffee and tried to think of a better way to justify it. "We know the fire tower is gone. Who knows if there's another emergency radio up there we'll be able to access."

"That's fine. It's smart. I'm just not going to be the one sitting on my ass while the rest of you go up the mountain."

Matt groaned. "I'll do it. I'll stay here."

"Are you sure?" Sam asked. "I know you wanted to go."

"We all want to go. That's why we're here. But you're right. It makes sense. I'll get a room at that motel we passed. It seemed cheap and it's well-positioned, right? I'll stay there and keep in touch with you guys. I can also let you know if I hear any weather advisories or anything."

"Thanks," Mike said, grinning at him. "I'd go crazy cooped up down here."

"Sure."

"Okay, so the four of us will head up the mountain once it's light out." Sam smiled around the table, bravely. Somehow being here, in this slightly grimy diner with its surprisingly good coffee, made the whole trip feel more possible. Maybe they could find Josh. They could bring him home.

The waitress brought their food and vanished behind the counter again. Jess hesitated, looking at her burger, then seemed to steel herself. "Mike, can I talk to you for just a sec? It's not a big deal. I just keep forgetting and I don't want to forget again."

He shrugged, confused, and followed her down the narrow hallway towards the bathrooms. She stopped by a payphone that looked like it had seen better days and bounced lightly on the balls of her feet. "So, um. Yeah."

"Yeah?" He had no idea what she wanted to say, so he couldn't help her out. He waited, expectantly.

"We broke up, didn't we?" It took him by surprise. She continued, her words pouring out in a nervous rush. "I mean, I hope I didn't misread the situation. I know we never really talked about it and I know this probably seems like a terrible time. Our food just came and everything. But I just mean… I want to get things really sorted out. Just in case."

"Just in case? In case of what?" Did she think they were going to die?

She seemed to read his mind. "I don't mean it like that. I'm not sorting out my final affairs. Really I should have talked to you about this a long time ago, like I said. But ever since everything… I know we have sex and it's good – it is good, by the way – but we're not together. I don't think we've really been together since everything happened. I mean, I love you. I guess that sounds ridiculous. 'I love
you and we have sex, but we're not together.' Ugh!' She put her hands on her hips tried to catch her breath.

Mike put his hands on her shoulders and tried to steady her. "Hey. Jess. It's fine. I get it." His smile was a little sad. "I was feeling the same way."

"You were?"

She looked so relieved that he laughed and pulled her into a hug. "Yeah. I love you too. I'm glad you're here. And I'm glad we finally talked about this. But now I'm going to go eat before my eggs get cold. I can't think of anything worse than cold diner eggs."

Jess leaned back to smile up at him. "You really were excellent in bed, you know."

He flashed an exaggerated grin and stood as heroically as possible. "Feel free to tell me that whenever you want to."

She cuffed him lightly on the arm. "I don't think your ego needs any more help in that department, Michael. Let's go eat."

-o-

In the room they rented to be Matt's base of operations, the group tried to get a few hours of sleep before dawn rolled around.

Jess dreams: She dreams she is walking through a field of flowers. It's bright and sunny, but turning cold. The cold grows, the air flavored with oncoming frost. She was not ready for winter; she is wearing her favorite sundress and flipflops.

Mike dreams: The jacket of his tux is a little tight across the shoulders and he seems to have lost his tie. Senior prom was at the aquarium and he is looking up once more as a multitude of colored lights illuminate the whale skeleton suspended from the ceiling. He raises his hand to shield his eyes and see more clearly; his fingers are a bloody mess, staining the cuff of his shirt.

Matt dreams: He's sitting in a small room, looking out a window. Outside, it's snowing hard and all the trees are covered with a thick layer of white. There is one lone set of footprints leading off into the woods, rapidly being buried. Something dark has dripped along the path of footprints, but he can't tell what it is from this distance.

Emily dreams: Jess's hair is silky and long in her hands as Emily plaits it back from her face. She smells like the lotion she used to wear in junior high – like peaches and sugar. It's overly sweet and grows in intensity the longer she braids.

Sam dreams: Josh is chasing her. She knows it's Josh, even though he's wearing a terrifying mask and coveralls that appear to be padded. He grabs her and this time there is no baseball bat. She tries to pull off his mask, shouting his name, begging him to call it off now, before things get worse. The mask is fused to the skin around his throat.

Far from them,

Chris dreams: He was always good at solving Rubix cubes, but this one just won't cooperate. He knows the pattern, the way to bring it into harmony, but every time he gets close, the colors shift on him. It should make him angry, but it just makes him sad. He keeps twisting it, trying in vain to finish it.
Ashley dreams: Everything is covered in butterflies. Yellow ones, white ones, red ones, brown ones. She thinks she sees one or two black-winged butterflies as well, but the insects move too much for her to see clearly. More and more appear, until the world is nothing but a shifting mass of wings.

And closer, but also farther away,

Josh dreams, or does not dream. He screams or is silent. He twitches in his sleep; he rests like the dead. He is dead. He struggles to breathe. He's starving. He's broken. He's healthy. He's hale. Josh dreams, or is a dream. He's not sure anymore.

Chapter End Notes

Coming soon to a story near you: Plans are laid and implemented, but nothing goes the way they'd hope. If it did, there wouldn't be much of a story, would there?
The morning dawned bright and cold. It may have been February, but there was no sign of Spring approaching. They dressed and ate without speaking much. Sam had laughed when Jess came out of the bathroom wearing layers upon layers, all topped by what looked like worn army fatigues. Jess had stuck her tongue out at the other girl. "I'm not going to risk the cold again. You try wandering around a mine shaft nearly naked and see how you dress."

Sam just grinned. "You look good."

"I always look good."

Emily rolled her eyes and pulled her hat down over her ears.

They said goodbye to Matt at the hotel, checking their watches – cheap but reliable pieces they picked up in a sporting goods store in Seattle. "If I don't hear from you every four hours, I'm calling in help." They tested the radios, checked their packs, assessed their supplies. In truth, they were all stalling for time, putting off the moment when they had to actually head out into the snow.

Finally Sam called a halt to it all. Daylight was valuable.

The four of them hiked for a while in silence. It wasn't a tough hike, not by Sam's standards, but she reviewed what she remembered of the view from the cable car. It was going to get harder. Possibly a lot harder. In a lot of ways, they were lucky. Though there had been a bit of new snow in the last week or so, it wasn't much. Most of the loose, powdery stuff had hardened down into a crust, making it a bit easier to trek across.

They paused briefly to eat and breathe, Sam carefully rationing out her vegan bars. If it came down to it, she supposed she would have to compromise, but she intended to make them last as long as she could.

The monotony—perhaps "zen" or "calm" would be a better way of putting it, Sam considered—of the hike didn't break until the sun had dipped below the mountains. The temperature was dropping sharply. Jess was scouting ahead, while Sam kept a steady pace and Mike hung back slightly to stay with Emily.

"Hey guys—there's a building!" Jess's voice carried back through the trees.

"What?" Sam picked her way through the brush towards her and stopped in her tracks. There was a building. It looked like a little cabin or waypoint of some kind, but seemed totally deserted. "What is that?"

Jess was already approaching the front door. She knocked briskly, but there was no answer. She moved around the corner and peered through one of the windows. "I think it's a ranger station or something."
Bending to re-tie her boot, Emily grunted. "Do they have those up here? I figured it was just empty forest from the cable car station at the bottom up to the lodge."

"They probably have a few points they use," Mike tried the handle. "The weather gets so bad up here. There must be little shelters around." The door didn't budge.

"So does every ranger have a key or something? Just in case?" Sam asked. "That seems really inconvenient."

"Maybe it isn't a ranger station at all. Maybe it was something else? Either way It doesn't seem like anyone's here." He took a few steps back and surveyed the area, taking in the amount of snow on the path and wooden steps. "I don't think anyone's been here for a while. They said there hasn't been a lot of snow lately, right? No footprints up to the door. It's been at least a week since someone's been here."

"I vote we break in," Jess said, raising her hand like an eager student. "It's freezing out here and we should probably stop for the night."

Emily rolled her eyes. "Brilliant idea. Then we can get arrested for breaking and entering!"

"We're already trespassing," Sam pointed out. "We'll try not to break anything and we'll be gone in the morning."

"Yes! So Sam votes we do some crime! Mike?"

He hesitated, assessing the building again, then nodded. "Yeah, let's do it."

After some exploration, they found a window in the back that didn't seem to be latched, though it was closed tightly. It took some careful knife-wiggling, but eventually they managed to squeeze it open enough for Sam to climb inside. She unlocked the front and they all gratefully rushed in to escape the wind.

Even from the inside, it was tough to tell what the building's purpose was. It had a small bedroom off a larger main room, with a small stove and some empty cabinets. There was a bare desk along one wall and an empty bookcase, as well as a decrepit wood-burning stove.

Jess had burst out laughing the second she saw it. "Mood lighting, right? God."

"A lady knows what she wants," Mike added, grinning at her. "At least this time there's no fuse box for me to shock myself."

"And I am keeping all of my clothes on at all times," Jess said with a cheesy wink as she bent to examine it.

Emily scoffed. "Sure. I'll believe that when I see it."

Jess rounded on her. "What the fuck is your problem? You can't seriously still be pissed about Mike and me. That's old news. Will you just lay off? Do you even know what we're here to do?"

"We're here to play Boot Camp Barbie, if your current outfit is any indication."

"Argh!" Jess threw up her hands in frustration, then seized Emily and dragged her towards the bedroom. "We'll be just one sec, guys."

She shoved Emily in and entered after her, slamming the door shut. Emily sat on the edge of the bed
and raised her eyebrows expectantly. "Are you going to yell at me some more? I love watching you pretend you have any power at all."

"Emily, stop." The blonde leaned against the closed door and shut her eyes, face twisted in pain. "Will you just, please, stop?"

"Stop what? I'm not the one trying to go all princess badass and ridiculous."

"Oh for fuck's sake, Em. Are you trying to get me to leave and go back? Is that what you want?"

Emily didn't answer and after a moment, Jess opened her eyes and looked at her. The black-haired girl, so aggressive only a minute ago, wouldn't meet her eyes. "Wait, really? You're trying to get me to leave? Why?"

Emily lifted her head quickly and sneered at her. "Why would I want some skanky-ass bitch with us?"

"Okay, you know what? Fine." Jess turned and opened the door. "Nevermind. I was hoping you might actually—but no, suit yourself."

She rejoined Mike and Sam, who had spread out all four sleeping bags on the floor. "Should we start a fire? The smoke might attract attention."

Sam shrugged. "It would take at least a day's hike for anyone to get to us. We might as well. If we get dry enough wood, it won't smoke much."

It was good they did. Whatever the little cabin was, it wasn't very well insulated. Cold seeped under the door and through every window. With the fire going, it created an almost cheerful atmosphere, but the cold was an ever-present reminder of what they were doing. Long after the others had dropped off to sleep, Sam stared at the shifting light cast on the ceiling. Finally she sat up slowly and hugged her knees, watching the dying fire.

They were really here. Doing this. Hiking through the woods to get back to Blackwood Lodge, or whatever was left of it.

Maybe they were all crazy. Maybe this was some sort of post-traumatic shared delusion and Chris and Ashley were the only ones free of it. Or Chris at least.

But she knew it didn't matter. Not really. If there was even the slightest chance that Josh was alive, she couldn't leave him up there all alone. She'd seen him near the end, down in the mines with Mike. He'd been seeing things and hearing things, talking to people who weren't there. She wished she could have another vision dream about him, if only to have some reassurance that she was doing the right thing and that they weren't too late.

"Sam?"

Careful fingers brushed her back and she glanced back at Mike, trying to smile. "I'm okay. Go back to sleep," she whispered.

He shook his head and sat up. "Not unless you do too."

"You're going to wake the others."

"Nah. They're both pretty heavy sleepers. Jess could sleep through a siren. I think she has, actually."

"How do you—" She broke off, huffing a silent laugh. Of course he would know that. "Slut."
"And proud of it," he said with what he hoped was quiet dignity. "I worked quite hard to become one."

Sam raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, I remember. Personally, I liked you more before you realized you could charm the ladies."

He bumped her shoulder lightly with his. "Why are you still awake?"

"I'm kind of amazed that any of you can sleep, honestly."

"After that trek?"

"Yeah, yeah." She sighed. "I just keep worrying that we're making a mistake. We don't know what we're doing. What if he's already dead?"

"He's not."

"How can you be sure?"

Mike leaned forward and flicked the grate on the fire open to add another log. "I just am. We've got to be." He watched the new log catch and begin to blacken. "Did things use to be simple? I feel like I remember things being simple."

"I'm not sure if I'd say simple. There may have been no cannibal monsters, but I remember the Valentine's Day debacle."

"Oof." He flopped back down and laughed softly. "Yeah. I forgot about that."

Lying back, Sam rolled over to poke at his shoulder. "You forgot? Do you even know how long it took to schedule all the Val-o-grams? Noooo, Mister Munroe suddenly had training sessions all day and couldn't be bothered to help us." It helped, talking about good things. She smiled at him gratefully.

He grinned back. "You are never going to let me live that down."

"Go to sleep, Munroe." She stifled a yawn.

"Not while you're still awake."

"Well I can't go to sleep if you don't shut up, can I?"

They were out and going again before the sun was even up the next day. As Sam had expected from her memory and the terrain map, it was getting rougher, the ground beginning to slope upwards.

More than once, she had to scale a rockier surface and help the others climb one at a time. Emily had some climbing experience, but the others had more trouble.

Mike struggled in particular, with his missing fingers causing more trouble than he had expected. If it came to it, they had climbing rope and spikes and such to help, but for now it was still manageable.

After a particularly tough section of jagged rocks, Sam saw him wash down some kind of pills with water. He did it so quickly she almost missed it. She looked away before he caught her watching and didn't comment.

There were areas of snow several feet deep, but under the trees there were spots that were almost entirely bare. Animals were rare to see, but there were lots of birds. Crows were everywhere. At one point they saw a single elk in the distance, watching them warily. It clearly made Emily nervous, but
it bounded away before they could get any nearer to it.

They made good time. As they paused to eat, Sam pulled out the map and they tried to orient themselves. Perhaps another two days day of hiking after the rest of the day's progress.

Camping in the woods wasn't pleasant, but they made do. On a relatively flat patch of ground, they pitched a tent and, after a brief argument, they agreed on an order to keep watch. Mike and Emily both tried to argue that there was no reason to keep a lookout, but they didn't try very hard.

The closer they got to the lodge, the closer they got to the last place they'd seen the Wendigos. No one was willing to claim that all the Wendigos were dead. Especially not after Mike had recounted the ones he'd seen locked up in the Sanatorium. There was no guarantee that they had died when he'd blown it up or that they would still be locked up if they were alive.

The more progress they made, the quieter they all got. It was all too easy to forget that any time had passed at all, too easy to be back in the thick of it, the constant fear, the overwhelming exhaustion. The echo of it could be felt in every step Sam took. Time took on that strange quality she had grown so familiar with now: speeding up and slowing down simultaneously and making her heart sink.

*True or impossible? How did you get here?*

She forced herself to take another step, to pull herself forward. Josh was waiting. Memories were waiting.

-o-

"I'm not sure exactly – the ones who were there a month ago. At least some of them. Do you remember?"

"I think so. Jock kid, right?"

"Two of them. One likes to wear a letterman jacket. A short blonde girl. Vegan. Three other girls who are taller: blonde, black hair, and a redhead. A blond boy with glasses. Any of that sound familiar?"

"Can't say for certain, but it might. There were four or five kids at the motel the other day. Stood out – most kids that age are here for the skiing and they stay at the resort. I can check with Bev and see if she remembers. I didn't get a good look at them. It was pretty late at night."

"Thanks Hank, would you mind? I'm worried about them. I think they might go up the mountain and that's not very safe right now."

"You think these kids flew all the way up here to go up to a burned out ruin?"

"I know. It sounds a little ridiculous. But I'd love it if you could check. I'm probably wrong; this will put my mind at ease."

"Anything for you, Melinda. I'll let you know if Bev knows anything."

-o-

Matt was so fucking bored.

The others checked in with him as planned but, barring one time when the check-in was 14 minutes later than scheduled, his post was incredibly dull.
He ate at the diner a few times and got snacks from the convenience store to stock the motel room. It also had magazines, which was nice. The motel room was shabby but clean. He played with his phone, he read, he went on long walks, he called Rose to update her. More than once he found himself standing at the edge of the road, staring off into the trees, wondering. He had come to help and he knew this was helpful, but it felt like wandering the mines for hours, unable to find his friends or his way out.

Matt would be the first to admit that he didn't know Josh very well. The guy was fun but kind of weird. His sisters were cute enough, but Matt had never been that interested in dating. He mostly hung out with them because the others had.

The dream had been surprising: not that it was a vision necessarily, but seeing Josh in his sleep. He had lots of dreams about that night, but they rarely included Josh. Instead he would dream of fire and falling, of wandering in the dark, and of grey-skinned monsters with too many teeth. Sometimes he would dream about finding Emily or Jessica dead—or even Mike.

But seeing Josh had felt different from the beginning.

The guy had looked awful, emaciated and sallow-skinned. He'd looked inches from death. He'd blinked at Matt, his eyes not sharpening with any kind of recognition. Instead he'd just babbled something about finding new uses for pigskin. Matt had been lost in the mine. If Josh was down there, they had to help.

He just wished he wasn't here, wandering around the practically nonexistent town, waiting.

- o -

"Almost there."

Almost there.

They were magical words.

As they continued to climb, they watched the cable car line. It cut a stark black line against the ominously grey sky. It became a sort of race: the four of them against the weather. Sam hoped they would at least get to the lodge before it snowed again. She didn't want to traverse unfamiliar terrain in fresh snow.

At one break in the trees, they could even see the shape of the station on its metal supports.

Almost there.

Sam pushed up carefully on the ball of her left foot, hooking the tips of her fingers onto a rocky ledge. Consider things from a new angle. That was the best advice she'd ever been given about rock climbing, though it had taken her a long time to really appreciate it. Sometimes you would think you were stuck, but really all you needed was to turn your hips, shift your foot, and a whole new set of possibilities would open up.

She heaved herself up onto the slope and took a moment to gather her breath. Just to her right, the ground bulged oddly, like a miniature hillscape. "Mike, you want to come up next?" she called down. "It's not bad—just look out for that bit in the middle where that purplish piece is jutting out."

He nodded tightly and started to climb, taking it slowly and carefully. Here and there she offered suggestions, which he gratefully took. Jessica was retying her boots, knotting them securely, while Emily watched Mike's ascent. "I'll go after Mike," she said shortly. "This one looks easy."

"What was that?"

"Nothing. Just trying to focus."

The wind picked up. The forest creaked ominously. It made Sam nervous. She looked around, scanning their surroundings. They were in a relatively open area, a bare expanse of snowy slope breaking off at the rock dropoff, then continuing lower down. It might have been better to go around the dropoff rather than climbing straight up it, but it would have meant extra time they didn't want to waste.

Mike dropped heavily onto the ground beside her, breathing hard. "Piece of cake. Carrot cake. Pineapple upside down." He let his head fall back onto the snow. "Hey Sam?" His voice sounded strange, uncertain.

"Yeah?" She glanced at him. Below them, Emily started to climb. He was staring up and back, towards their goal.

"Did the cable car station always look angled like that?"

Her heart thudded in her chest and she looked back, the groaning of the forest all around them. The station was tilting, listing to the right, as if... as if...

"Run!" she shouted, grabbing Mike's arm and hauling him to his feet. "Em, Jess, run! Rockslide! Get away from its path!"

She wanted to wait, to get to the girls, but she'd done enough reading to know that there was no time. They had to fend for themselves. Sam grabbed her backpack and bolted, feet punching holes in the snow's crust as she ran. Behind her she heard Mike following. The creaking grew louder, snapping branches and the distinctive sound of shifting rocks. "Fuck!" They had to get out of its path. Not up the mountain or down—to the side. They could loop around later, if they lived through this.

Avalanches, cave-ins... Melinda had warned her about the natural risks. She'd known it was possible in an academic sense, but part of her had never really believed it.

The ground shook under her, a trembling shift that felt different than any earthquake in California ever had. Sam glanced back. *True or impossible?* The peaceful slope behind them was gone. Rocks slid like water, like pouring sand—a rush of grey and brown and white. Where were Jess and Emily? "Move, Mike!"

"I am!"

They pelted along the uneven ground. Bursting through a copse of bushes, Sam skidded to a halt. They'd found a path. The sight was so sweet it made her want to laugh out loud. Behind them, the rumbling continued distantly. She looked up towards the station. It was still there, mercifully, although it looked much less stable than it had only a few minutes ago.

"Are you? Okay?" Mike panted, bent at the waist and trying to recover his breath. "I knew this mountain hated us. Fuck."

"I—did you see where Jessica and Emily went? Emily—she was climbing when it started..."

"Hey. No. They're fine, Sam. Don't think like that. They're smart and they're fast. We just have to go look for them."
"Right." She nodded resolutely. "But we can't go back there. Areas that have been hit with landslides are prone to more. We're just asking for trouble. Do you have the radio?"

His face paled. "No. I don't have my bag. I didn't grab it when we started running. Fuck!" He rubbed his hand over his face. "Fuck. I'm sorry."

"No, it's fine." It was not fine, but it would have to be. "We'll head for the lodge. That's where we were going. They'll know to head there too. We'll all meet up. I'm sure Em still has her radio."

"Yeah. You ready?"

They started up the path. It seemed incredibly leisurely after the rough hike of the last few days. Sam heard a soft rattle behind her and glanced back. He tipped out two pills into his palm and pocketed the bottle again. They kept walking.

-0-

"Run! Em, Jess, run! Rockslide! Get out of its path!"

Emily, only a few feet up, froze, then dropped down. The ground was starting to shake under their feet. Jess found herself incredibly grateful she had tied her shoes. She shouldered her bag and started to sprint off to the side. The rock face was high enough that she couldn't see which way Mike and Sam were running, so she guessed.

Beside her, running hard, Emily swore under her breath. "Of course. Of-fucking-course."

They dodged into the trees as rocks crashed down towards them. Jess could see it from the corner of her eye, like a massive wave rushing towards them. But this wave wouldn't break around them. It would break them.

The bottom of her stomach dropped out. They weren't fast enough. She could feel it in her bones. They just weren't fast enough. It would catch them, crush them into oblivion. All the waiting, the walking, the hoping, and she would end up dying. Maybe she should have died the first time.

"There!" A mine opening, supported by thick beams of wood.

"That's suicide," Emily panted. "It'll cave in."

"We won't make it out of the path anyway. At least if we head in there we have a chance."


Jess ran for it anyway. Em swore again and rushed after her, trying not to think about how she was essentially running towards the landslide.

They didn't slow down as they entered, their feet slapping the packed dirt as they fled down the tunnel. All around them, the earth was shaking, dirt and pebbles falling from the ceiling, the walls as the beams trembled under the strain.

"If we die in here I am going to kill you," Emily hissed.

"Sure. Your ghost… can kill my ghost." Pain flared in Jessica's side, but she kept running. The further they got from the entrance, the better.
In case you didn't know, what Emily and Jessica did is very silly. But hey, if you're certain to die from one choice and only LIKELY to die from the other, which would you choose?
The rockslide hit the tunnel.

It went pitch black in an instant. It was deafening. One of them was screaming. Maybe both of them. Jess couldn't tell, couldn't see or make any sense of what was happening. She dropped to her knees, throwing her arms over her head. Rocks crashed down around them, dirt raining from the ceilings, the beams shaking. It was like drowning, like being stuck under saltwater for too long, but worse. Her lungs spasmed and she coughed, trying to eject the dirt she had inhaled.

Slowly the rumbling eased.

She was alive. She didn't know how, but she was. Carefully she lifted her head. It was too dark to make out anything and she reached back to her bag, praying it hadn't been totally destroyed protecting her from the falling debris. It was torn and she could feel a large wet patch where her canteen must have been busted, but the flashlight still worked.

The tunnel was a wreck. They had gotten far, but not far enough to escape the disaster completely. In the narrow beam of the flashlight it was hard to discern details, but it was clear they wouldn't be able to leave the way they entered. There must have been at least 20 feet of rubble plugging up the entrance.

It was quiet. Too quiet. Where was—

"Emily?" Jess spun in a circle, scanning what she could see of the tunnel. "Emily!"

She rushed to the girl's side, brushing dirt from her face. Emily was limp in her hands. Pressing her fingers against Em's throat, she nearly sobbed with relief at the pulse she found. "Emily, wake up. Emily! Fuck!" Jess yanked open her pack and pulled out her leaking water bottle, letting some of it dribble onto Emily's face. The girl started to stir feebly and Jess scanned her body, looking for any other visible injuries. It didn't seem like she'd been struck too directly.

Emily's eyes opened and after a moment, she focused on Jessica. "Jess?"

"You're okay?"

Nodding weakly, Em tried to push herself up to sitting and bit off a shriek, falling back again.

"What is it?" Jess helped Emily drink from the dwindling water in the canteen.

"My… my shoulder. I think it's dislocated or something." She let her head drop back. "This fucking mountain. I swear to god."

"If it's dislocated, we can fix it. I mean, not fix it fix it. But Elly dislocated her shoulder when she fell and I watched them put it back. I think—I mean, I bet we can do it. That should help. Then you'll
just have to be careful, right?"

Emily groaned. "So you're going to play doctor? I should've let the rockslide get me."

"Hey Em?" Jess asked sweetly. "Shut the fuck up, okay?"

Against all odds, it made Emily laugh. Using her good arm she shoved herself up and gingerly reached out with the other. "Okay, fine. Do your thing, Florence Nightingale."

"Actually, you need to lie back. Here." She helped Emily lie back down and took her arm. "This is going to hurt. Probably a lot. I'm sorry."

"Just do it." Jess pulled slowly on Em's arm, hoping against hope that she was doing it right and not about to make things a lot worse. On the ground, Emily closed her eyes and gritted her teeth. Suddenly there was a soft clunk and Emily sighed. "Oh fuck. That's so much better."

"We should try to make you a sling or something." It wasn't hard. They found Emily's bag a few feet away and used one of their spare shirts to craft a makeshift right. "Try not to move your arm."

They shared the rest of Jess's water between them. The bottle wouldn't do them much good at this point. Together they unpacked both bags, assessing their undamaged supplies. They had the radio, which seemed to be intact, and some extra clothing. Emily's canteen was still functional and the rations, though crushed, were edible. Jess's small first aid kit was largely complete, although the travel thermometer had broken and the aspirin looked more like a powder than some pills. They re-packed to give Jess most of the weight. Emily's arm wouldn't support a heavy bag any more.

It could have been much, much worse.

The radio crackled to life and both of them jumped, Emily wincing as her shoulder jerked. "Jessica—Emily?" Sam's voice was distorted and fuzzy with static. Then Mike's voice, a bit clearer: "Em?"

"Sam? Sam!" Jess snatched up the radio. "Oh my god, you guys are okay!"

It was hard to hear anything through the static. "We're underground," Emily pointed out. "We're lucky we can hear them at all."

"—lodge—all meet—okay—"

"Yeah. Yeah, we'll find you guys. We're okay. If you can hear me, tell Matt we're okay. We'll make our way to the lodge. We're in the mine right now, so it might take us a while."

"—look—head there—"

The radio went silent again and Jess clipped it onto her pack. She glanced at Emily. "Do you think we can do it?"

"Of course we can. The mines aren't that bad. We'll just be careful. I bet we can find that passage thing that Mike talked about. The one that goes to the basement in the lodge."

"You think it's still intact? The lodge exploded, didn't it?"

"Only one way to find out. But the basement was mostly cement and rock. I bet at least part of it is still there. And if we find an exit before then, we can take the above-ground route."

They picked their way down the shaft, not speaking more than they had to. They turned left at a fork in the tunnel, Emily marking their way with chalk. They'd known they would be in the mine at some
point. None of them had wanted to get lost again and they'd decided that marking the tunnels was probably a good idea. Each had a different color of chalk in their bags. Emily's was blue and Jess's was green. At every turn, Emily rubbed a thick line of each color onto the wall, turning it into an arrow in the direction they were heading.

The air was damp and musty and cold. "Should we try to find Josh?" Jess asked, after they'd been walking for a while. "I mean, we are in the mine."

Emily considered it, then shook her head. "We should try to find Sam and Mike. We'll keep going for the lodge like we planned. We can come back once we find them. Looking for Josh will just get us deeper in the mine."

It felt like they wandered for hours, making guesses at each intersection based on their hazy recollections of the mine. Then, emerging from the darkness like a mirage, was a door. It was a green-tinged metal, set into a similarly designed frame.

"What is that?"

"Maybe that tunnel Mike talked about?"

The handle was stubborn with disuse. Jess put her shoulder into it and it gave, screeching open an inch. They both winced. "Cool, well. If Josh is down here, I'm sure he heard that."

It was weird to be in a constructed hallway after the mine. Jess led the way. "Is this the tunnel?" she asked over her shoulder.

"No idea. Mike locked the door behind him when he went so we didn't get to see the whole thing. This looks different from what I did see, though."

With a thud, pain flared in Jess's shin and she swore wildly. "-cking up your fucking ass, you piece of shit."

Emily's flashlight illuminated a chair on its side. "I don't think it's able to do any of those things."

"Ugh." Jess glared at her, rubbing her leg. "Whatever. That hurt like a bitch."

Together they surveyed the hallway. "I don't think it's the lodge," Emily said finally. "There's this old hotel that's connected to the lodge basement. I think we're somewhere there. We didn't go far enough to get to the sanatorium."

"An old hotel? This just gets weirder and weirder."

"Hey, it's the Washingtons. I'd be surprised if this was the end of the weirdness." Emily grinned at Jess, who laughed. Em's smile was wide, bright, unafraid. Then her face closed abruptly and she turned back to the hall. "We should keep going. I bet we can find our way to the lodge. Or at least to the outside."

The hallway began to branch. It was mazelike and seemed endless. At least they'd had a general idea of the mine's layout. This was a complete unknown. They didn't speak when they paused to eat and share a drink of water, then continued in the deafening silence. The urge to sing, to talk, to make any noise besides footsteps was strong, but seemed impossible to obey. If Jess didn't know better, she'd swear that the hotel was angry at them for even being there.

As they passed an open door, a bright light suddenly burst across them and they both winced. Jess let out a little yelp of surprise, blinking and trying to get her vision to clear.
"What the fuck?" Emily turned towards the doorway, trying to peer into what seemed like a blindingly white light. The hall was still just as silent as it had been moments before. She took a tentative step into the room, Jess trailing behind her.

"What—what is this place?" Jess's words were soft, almost reverent.

It had been a kitchen of sorts. The floor was ceramic tile, dirty and cracked in places. One long wall was lined with cabinets. The room, which had been at least 40 feet long, was divided into two by what looked like a recent addition: a strange metal and glass wall. Twelve large circular saws, red with rust and who knew what else, were lined up at regular intervals across the width of the dividing wall, all at waist height. Above them was another foot of metal, then filthy glass windows stretching up to the ceiling. Through it they could see the other half of the room.

A long chain extended from a winch at the center of the saw wall, attached to a pair of manacles. They were heavy and had a patina of rust as well. A floodlight lit the room, motion-activated.

Emily moved to the glass, leaning carefully to avoid the saws jutting out from the wall. "The chain goes out the other side too. It's shorter. No, wait, I think it's the same chain maybe? It has handcuffs too."

"Was this another one of Josh's things?" Jess hugged her arms around her chest. It was freezing, the cold only amplified by the tile under her feet. She could feel it through the soles of her boots, though maybe that was just her imagination.

"I'm not sure. It matches the kind of stuff the others talked about. Saws and rust and dirt and whatever." Emily picked up the manacles and turned them over in her hands. The edges were sharp, almost to the point of pain. It might not have done any real damage to wear them, but they would bruise and maybe cut.

"Then who was it for?"

"Matt and Mike maybe? Or another for Chris and Ashley? It's definitely meant for two people."

Jess turned slowly, surveying the room. On the wall behind them, a key hung on a nail. If a person pulled the chain to its maximum length, they could probably reach it. In an upper corner on each side of the center wall was a speaker and a video camera. Inset into the glass portion of the wall at two points were circular metal grates to allow sound to pass more easily between the two halves of the room. It was like the bank teller's window from hell. She shuddered. "This is creeping me out. Can we go?"

"Oh? Are you scared?"

She rounded on Emily, ready to snap at her, but the expression on the other girl's face made her stop. It wasn't mocking at all, just a little frown and worried eyes. "I—yeah. Can we go?" she repeated. "I don't think there's anything in here anyway. Not anything that would help us, right?"

Emily gave the room a last once-over and nodded decisively. "Yeah. Let's bounce." They went back into the rubble-strewn hallway to continue on. Emily paused briefly to rest her palm on the next door down. "This must lead to the other half of the room." She glanced back. Jess was studying something on a shelf in the hall with a strange look on her face. "What did you find?"

"I'm not sure. I think—" She reached forward and pushed a button.

A muffled voice came from the room they had just left, loud in the otherwise dead silence of the ruined hotel. Emily opened the door and the voice flooded the hallway.
—and thought that no one could see. But here, now, it's time for best friends to prove themselves.

There was a momentary pause in the recording.

Now, now. Stop shouting and listen up. It's time to focus, girls. For you see, it's time for you to get even closer. You are best friends, correct? BFFs I believe is the term? Connected at the hip – or, shall we say, the hands? If you ladies would look at the wall behind you, you'll see a little gift. Only one of you can reach it at a time. So does pride and self-preservation win out? Or would you really sacrifice yourself for the other? I can't wait to find out. One way or another, someone's going to get a makeover.

The voice fell silent. Emily didn't move, staring into the room. "It was for us." Jess's voice shook as she came up beside Emily. "He meant it for us."

"I know." The other girl's voice was strange, detached. "I wondered, you know, if he had something planned for me. Or for us. Isn't it all our fault? The prank, what happened to Hannah and Beth."

"No—"

"Oh my god. Don't be stupid." Emily's voice was still flat and expressionless. "Of course he'd want to make us suffer. You and I killed his sisters."

Jess hesitated, then slipped her arms around Em's waist. Emily took a deep breath, as if steadying herself, then sagged against Jess. She slowly put her arms around the blonde, her usually proud frame collapsed, body trembling. "We made a mistake," Jess said quietly. "We did. But it was an accident, what happened to them. Even Josh must have known that, on some level, right? These saws and stuff… none of them are fatal. They can't be. That was the whole point. To make us realize what we'd done and to punish us. But not to kill us."

She reached up and smoothed her hand over Emily's hair. She smelled like dust and metal and, under that, the faint, sweet scent of the perfume that clung to all of her clothing.

It made Jess smile. "You still wear the Dior?"

Against her shoulder, Emily snorted. "Don't fix what isn't broken."

"It's nice. I…"

Em stiffened and pulled back. She cleared her throat. "I think we should keep going. This place is gross."

-o-

Beth stroked Josh's hair, smoothing the filthy strands back from his face. He stared blearily up at her, his eyelids heavy. He wanted to sleep. He always wanted to sleep. Hunger dug its claws into his stomach. He wondered if his stomach could turn inside out. It had been eight days since the last time he ate. He thought of his meal and wanted to throw up, even as he wanted more.

A shrieking howl echoed up the elevator shaft from deep below. Josh flinched. Beth shh-ed and soothed him, humming a lullaby under her breath as she continued to pet him.

"It's gonna get me, Beth. It's gonna get me."

Beth shook her head. Across from them, Hannah smiled. "No, it's going to get them."

"It's gonna get them," Josh repeated, muttering it under his breath until the words began to run.
together. "It's gonna get them. It's gonnagetthem. S'gonnaget'em."

The fingers on his hair stilled. Beth's face didn't change, staying serene and fixed in place. She cocked her head to the side, as if listening. Her eyes narrowed infinitesimally.

Hannah began to sing, a mocking out-of-tune version of Beth's lullaby. "—buy you a diamond ring. And if that diamond ring turns brass—"

Beth stood. Josh tried to catch her wrists, to cling to her, but his hands slid through her like water and he laughed. "Of course. Why do I even try anymore?" The girls were gone. He was alone again. Just like he'd always been.

He shoved himself to his feet, swaying. Every fiber in his body screamed for food. The word beat in time with his heart, pulsing in his ears. His mouth salivated at the very thought. He needed food. Nausea battled need and he took a step, then another. Then another. He needed to eat.

-o-

"Matt—"

"Jess? Oh good. I was starting to worry."

"We're in the—lodge—make our way to the—mine. Might take us a while."

"It's kind of hard to hear you guys. Are you all there?"

"Yeah—we're okay."

"Be safe. I'll hold down the fort."

-o-

"I'm just saying. You're vegan, right? So your options are limited up here. I shouldn't be eating your food."

"Just eat the damn bar, Mike. It's fine. I'm vegan but I'm not stupid. If it comes to it, I'll eat whatever I have to." She was breathing hard, taking the path quickly. "I mean, except people. Take a big pass on that one."

"And I for one appreciate that decision."

The cable car station emerged from the trees in front of them. It tilted crazily to the right. They came to a stop. "I… um. I don't think we should try to go in there," Sam said quietly.

"Seconded. Do we just keep heading to the lodge?"

"I guess so. If the girls didn't reach Matt or if they decided to call in help… we don't have much time left."

The air was colder. Sam glanced towards the sky. Grey clouds lay low and heavy over them, a slight bright spot the only indicator of the sun. It was lowering towards the mountains. Bad sign. "I think it might snow soon."

"Then we better get a move on. We need some kind of shelter. We should get to the lodge and see what kind of shape it's in."
It was in awful shape, as it turned out. They should have expected it. On some level, they had known, yet after so long spent in the lodge, the mixed emotions of her memories, Sam had half-expected it to be exactly as it had been. The doors and windows of the front were blown outwards, the face of the lodge a blackened ruin. The lodge was huge; at least part of it still stood, but it seemed impossible to access. They’d have to get through the wreckage, or possibly find some entrance around back.

"I vote we don't sleep there tonight. It looks seriously unstable."

"Melinda warned me," Sam said with a sigh. "Our options are running out and, I don't know about you, but I really don't want to sleep in the Sanatorium."

"The guest cabin?"

"Really?" She glanced over at Mike and he shrugged.

"I mean, at least it didn't explode. We kind of did a number on the buildings up here."

"I'm just surprised you'd want to go back."

He rubbed his injured hand and popped the lid on his pill bottle, downing two. He dry-swallowed them and flashed a smile at her. "Everywhere up here had some bad shit happen. Jess lived. I can deal with the memories."

"It might be a bit far if we're waiting for Jess and Em. Were there any other structures around here?"

"The shed with the dead Josh trap?"

Sam shuddered. "Absolutely not."

Mike straightened and grinned at her. "The generator shed!"

She blinked at him. "The what?"

"It's by the gate to the path to the cabin! It's this little shed building with the generator in it. It's pretty sturdy and we definitely didn't blow it up."

She laughed with relief when they found it, throwing her arms around Mike in an enthusiastic hug. "You're a genius! It's perfect." It was small, but just as sturdy as he'd described. It had small windows and a heavy door that stood open. It was close enough to the lodge that they should be able to hear or see the girls if—they arrived.

They decided to wait, to wait for morning and hope the girls caught up to them by then. Darkness fell and they picked watches. Sam set up the electric lantern to be a beacon to Jess and Em, setting it by the doorway. Mike pillowed his head on his arms and promptly fell asleep.

Sam stared out into the night, waiting. She was glad he'd agreed to sleep first. She couldn't sleep right now, even if she'd wanted to. They were so close.

It really means a lot to me that everyone came back this year and you know, that you came, Sam.

How long had he been planning to hurt them? Had he always intended to chase her around as he had, naked and wet and alone? She didn't like to think she was so predictable, but she was a sucker for a hot bath. Had he known? Or guessed that she would do that?

Sam had thought a lot about hell in the weeks following that night. She wasn't raised religiously by
any stretch of the imagination and had never felt any sort of driving curiosity about organized
religion, so the concept of hell remained an amorphous one. But after they got back down here after
the seemingly endless rounds of questioning, it had suddenly seemed much more pertinent.

If hell was a punishment, then surely Josh was living in it now. For a second she tried to imagine that
they would find him dead, the way she had described to Mike when he'd first tried to convince her to
return. It had seemed like the only possibility then, but somewhere along the way, she'd lost her
ability to believe it. Josh was here. She could practically feel him, the way his body burned hot even
when his hands were freezing.

On the ground beside her, Mike made a soft noise in his sleep, something between a murmur and a
whimper and she looked down at him. She'd seen him sleep before. He'd slept like the dead: all trace
of his cocky smile would vanish from his features and he'd always looked younger and more
innocent. But now he looked older, brow furrowed and mouth in a tense, thin line. Was he having a
nightmare? If so, it seemed mild enough to not merit interruption. Every moment of sleep now might
be vital later.

She looked back towards the night outside, where a light snow had begun to fall.

Beth stood in the snow, watching her.

Her heart thudded painfully in her throat. "Beth?" Sam's voice broke slightly on the word.

Beth watched her, face calm and unchanging. Her feet and legs were bare, as were her arms. She
wore only a simple shift dress, floating down to end just above her knees. The snow didn't seem to
touch her, as if her body created some air current shield that sent the flakes drifting away. Beth
looked down at Mike's sleeping form, then turned and began to walk away.

"No, wait!" The words exploded from Sam. "Beth, please?" Was she dreaming again? Every fiber of
her being screamed that this was impossible and couldn't be real. It must be a dream. Mike didn't
wake, although he stirred restlessly. She must have fallen asleep at her post. She should try to wake
up. And yet…

Glancing back, Beth beckoned to Sam but didn't stop moving.

Sam swallowed hard and followed, clenching her fists at her sides. What other choice was there in a
dream like this one?

Beth led her down the path, back towards the lodge. The walk, long enough when awake, seemed
unending. Moonlight poured through a break in the clouds to turn the snow a dazzling white. The
front of the lodge was just as it had been when she'd seen it with Mike: a blackened shell, large
portions entirely gone. The dead girl didn't hesitate, stepping directly into the wreckage. Her legs
passed through the remnants of the wall. Sam followed, climbing awkwardly through.

Together they wound through the ruin of the lodge. Much of it was destroyed, almost
unrecognizable. The grand staircase that had been such a focal point was nearly gone. What was left
was clearly unstable, yet Beth began to climb. It was a dream, after all, Sam reasoned. She would
follow Beth.

The staircase held under her weight and she ascended to the second floor. Beth never looked back
and they walked together to a mostly-intact door.

Again, Beth walked through it and Sam turned the knob, heart pounding. She knew where they
were.
Beth's room.

Like Hannah's, it looked like the Washingtons hadn't done anything to it. The bed was made neatly, the books all shelved, the pictures straight on the blue walls. It still smelled like Beth: like vanilla soap and cinnamon and paper and ink. Only now it mingled with the scent of smoke and ruin.

She wasn't sure what to do. She had expected this room to be destroyed. Truthfully, she'd expected the lodge to be in much worse shape than it was.

Beth pointed to the bed.

"What do you want me to do?" Sam fidgeted slightly, bouncing on the balls of her feet. "Is there something I'm supposed to see?"

For the first time, Beth's face changed expression, tipping forward slightly with raised eyebrows. It was a look calling Sam an idiot, albeit with affection. It was so familiar it made her want to laugh. Beth pointed again at the bed, more aggressively.

"You want me to lie down?"

Beth nodded.

Sam was exhausted. The bed looked incredibly inviting, with cool, mostly-clean blankets and pillows. A fine layer of soot brushed across them, but when she turned back the comforter, she couldn't resist. This was silly, sleeping in a dream, but the mattress was deliciously soft and before she could think any further, she was asleep.

Or maybe not.

She opened her eyes and sat up. Beth was still there, looking down at her. Something was different. Sam looked around the room, trying to pinpoint what it was.

Light. And not just the light. The bedside lamp was lit, illuminating the room. Any trace of the soot and wreckage was gone. The room was warm, properly insulated. She could hear music in the distance, muffled by walls and closed doors. And Beth looked different. She was less gaunt, her eyes sharper and warmer. Her hair looked clean and was pulled back. She wore sweatpants and a tank top, with fuzzy slippers.

"Beth?"

Her face broke into a wide smile and she rushed over to sit on the bed next to Sam. She grabbed Sam's hands; her fingers were freezing. "Sam. Oh Sam, I missed you so much."

"I don't understand what's going on." Sam shook her head. This was too much. Was this the same dream or a different one? What was real? How did you get here, Sammy?

"No—no, don't." She'd never heard Beth sound so frantic before. "Don't think too hard, Sam. Don't try to make yourself wake up. Please."

"So this is a dream?"

Beth bit her lip and nodded. "It's the only way I could talk to you. It's too hard to talk out there." She gestured vaguely. "And I just had to talk to you. God, Sam, I missed you so much. I've missed everyone so much."
"You're in my head."

"Sort of. I needed you to sleep. Thank you for following me." Beth's eyes unfocused slightly, then sharpened again. She grinned. "I'm glad you snuck in here. Hannah told me I wasn't allowed to hog you all to myself this trip."

"What? No, Beth, I—"

Beth shook her head hard, her short ponytail flipping wildly. "No, wait, you're right. I'm losing—I can't—" The other girl groaned and rubbed her forehead. "Just listen to me, Sam. I don't know how long we have. I don't know how long I have. You're looking for Josh, right?"

Sam didn't want to talk about this. She wanted to bask in the warm comfort of the familiar room and pretend nothing bad had ever happened. But she took a deep breath. "Yeah. He's in the mine, right?"

The other girl looked confused. "The mine? He's downstairs playing poker with Mike and Chris."

"Beth, what are you talking about? Chris? He's not here."

"The mine? He's downstairs playing poker with Mike and Chris." There was the faint sound of laughter from below them, and a slight tapping sound, like an impatient person drumming their fingers on the table.

"No, he's… oh fuck. Sam, I'm sorry. It's… hard. It's foggy, out there. Hard to see, hard to do anything. I try to talk to him like this, like we're talking, but I'm not sure what he sees or hears or believes. He's losing it, I think. And I think… I think he did something bad. Something really, really bad, Sam. He needs you. Now. Soon." The tapping was louder, more immediate. It was at the window. Sam turned to look and Beth caught her face. "No. Don't look at it."

"Look at what? What is that?"

"Something old. Something bad."

Carefully, Beth leaned forward and pressed her lips to Sam's. Her face was wet and Sam could taste salt. "Beth, are you okay?"

Beth laughed softly, her breath brushing against Sam's skin. "I'm dead, Sam. Of course I'm okay. Nothing can hurt me now, right?"

The tapping grew louder. Tip tap tap. The sound was rhythmic, an almost recognizable pattern. Tip-tip tap. Tip-tip tap. Tap tap TAP. Beth's skin was cold. The room was losing its comforting warmth. Wind came from somewhere, carrying with it the scent of wet charcoal and snow. "But I—"

Sam blinked. She was looking up at a white plaster ceiling. Brown-mottled water damage spread across most of it. Here and there the remnants of glow-in-the-dark constellations remained. She could see part of Orion's belt and the hindquarters of Ursa Major. Beth's room. Cold air stung at her face and right hand, where she wasn't covered in blankets. She sat up abruptly.

Beth's room. She was really in Beth's room.

"Fuck."

It was in remarkably good shape. From somewhere outside, pale light filtered into the room, showing her old, familiar details, worn now with weather and the decay of a breached house. All around her, the house groaned in the wind. What once was a veritable fortress was straining under nature's thumb.

She had to get out of there. The walls pressed in around her. She shouldn't be here. Had she been
sleepwalking? "Fuck, fuck, fuck," she muttered under her breath, throwing off the covers. She was still dressed, mercifully.

Easing her way down the staircase slowly, she winced at every creak and crack. Had she done this in her sleep? Or had she actually followed some version of Beth? Swearwords seemed inadequate.

It was still dark outside, though that strange pre-dawn feeling lay over the grounds. She rushed to the generator shed, drawn in by the lantern's pale glow.

Just as she entered, Mike jolted awake, throwing himself to his feet and looking around wildly. "What—what's wrong? What happened?"

She opened her mouth to tell him, then thought better of it. Now that she was back, she wasn't even sure she could believe it herself. "I… um. Nothing. I went for a walk."

He looked out at the fresh snow and brightening light. "You were supposed to wake me up."

"It's fine. I wasn't tired."

"Sam—"

"I'm sorry. I promise: next time I'll wake you up," Sam had trouble meeting his eyes. She wanted to tell him, but couldn't find any way to explain. "We should try to find Josh today."

"The girls?"

She sighed. "We'll leave a note for them on the lodge door. Either they're safe and they just haven't made it or Matt's called in help. So either they're going to find the note we leave or we don't have much time."

They ended up wedging the note into a crack on the ruined front door. It would have to do, Sam thought. If her dream had actually been Beth, they had even less time than she'd already thought. After a brief debate, they headed for the mine entrance where the monsters had dragged Jess. It had the elevator, Mike had reasoned, and had seemed like a stable and certain way down.

Sam strapped her headlamp on and tossed Mike the spare flashlight. He grimaced. "I was so determined to be prepared this time and then left my bag behind like an idiot."

"Better than a lighter."

"And I have that too," he said, patting his coat pocket.

"Then I guess it's time. Let's do it."

They began their descent down the elevator shaft and if Sam heard a slight tapping from above, she ignored it.

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Emily rolled her eyes, pausing to rest on a collapsing sofa. "You don't smell any worse than usual."

"Ouch."

"We should try to sleep again at some point." They had crashed for a few hours in some kind of
parlor that had smelled strongly of mothballs and age.

"I'm not tired." Jess stretched up towards the ceiling, then folded forward. Her entire body complained loudly. Straightening, the room around her seemed to spin and she caught herself on the wall. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to keep her face calm and unconcerned.

A hand on her arm made her open her eyes again. Emily frowned at her. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm fine."

"Jess..." Em gave her a look.

She shook her head and immediately regretted it. Instead she gave a little self-deprecating laugh. "It's really fine. I just... the doctor said I hurt my head pretty bad when I... when that thing pulled me into the mine and the elevator collapsed. It's not a big deal. Just sometimes I get a little dizzy. It's already better than it was."

"Seriously? And you still came?" Emily's brow furrowed for a moment before she turned away abruptly. "You're so fucking stupid, Jess."

"Emily, can you knock that off already? I get it, okay. You hate me and you wish I'd died in the rockslide so you didn't have to deal with me. But I didn't. So can you just, please, stop? Let's get out of here and then you never have to see me again, okay?" It was just too much. Her head ached. She was hungry and her body was exhausted, even though she didn't want to sleep. On top of everything else, this was too much.

Emily mumbled something, still turned away.

"What? I can't hear you."

"I don't wish you died."

"I was exaggerating," Jess said tiredly. "You know. Overstatement for emphasis."

"I don't—" Emily's shoulders sagged. "I don't hate you."

The silence of the ruined building was oppressive. Jess rubbed her forehead. "Then why—"

Em rounded on her. "Because you're going to get yourself killed. I don't get it. Are you trying to die? Is that what you want?" The words burst from her. "Why would you insist on coming back here when your head is messed up? I mean, fuck, Jess. Are you that fucking determined to die?"

"I—"

"You almost died last time," Emily continued, throwing her free hand into the air. "What makes you think it'd be different this time? Look at you. You're having trouble standing up straight. And you're here, dressed up like some wannabe soldier, thinking that's enough to guarantee your safety? I just don't understand why you..." Her voice faltered. "Why you would put yourself in danger like this."

Emily swallowed hard and turned away again quickly. Jess took a step forward, reaching, then dropped her hand. "I don't want to die."

The other girl shrugged and shook her head, not saying anything or looking back.

"I don't. Em, I had to come back. I tried to explain it to Mike and I think he understands, at least a little."
"Mike's an idiot."

Jess laughed. "Yeah, sometimes. But he got it, I think. It's like... Em, all of you lived through something. Something bigger than I can even really believe. You all lived through it. I... I survived it. Barely. I spent most of it unconscious or alone in the dark. I barely saw the thing that grabbed me, really. And then when it was hunting me later with Matt, I still only barely saw it."

"You should be grateful."

"And I am, I guess. I mean, I would have definitely died if I'd had a better look. But at the same time, it's like... it's like realizing that you're a side character in a story. And the idea that you guys might come back here, to save Josh without me... It would just confirm that. I couldn't do that. I couldn't just sit on the sidelines and wait to hear if you were coming back alive." She took another step and touched Emily's arm gently. "Is that why you were so mean? You wanted me to go back?"

Emily turned towards her and shrugged again, not quite meeting her eyes. "I don't want you to die."

Jess bit back a smile. "I don't want you to die either."

It wasn't an apology or a declaration.

But it came close.

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It watched them climb.

The boy was clumsy and awkward, doubtless due to his missing fingers. The girl was faster but holding herself back.

It was hungry.

It was impatient.

It was bored.

Hunger could be dealt with, at least temporarily. It always could. It always had been.

Boredom was harder.

Stroking the button on the communication device, it drummed its fingers on the plastic surface and smiled.

It would wait.

It would be worth it.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay in posting! Comment and feed your local starving writer. <3

Coming soon: I miss Josh. Do you miss Josh? I think Josh misses you...
...My Shaking Head

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is ALSO from "When You Break" by Bear's Den - what can I say, I really love that song.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Something wet touched the palm of Jess's hand, jerking her out of uneasy sleep. She sat bolt upright and yelped. A long, canine snout snuffled at her fingers and she scrambled back.

"Um… Emily?" She tried to keep her voice calm but it trembled as she stared at the wolf.

Emily groaned and rubbed her eyes, sitting up. "What is—fucking—what?" She looked confused. "I… have no idea what to do."

The wolf sat back on its haunches and its mouth dropped open in a dog-like grin. Jess couldn't look away. The second she did, she was sure it would lunge at her. She did not like the look of its teeth. "How did it get in here?"

"Probably not that hard to do. There's a lot of openings and stuff."

But apparently, they were boring. The wolf looked between them, then stood and began to walk away, trotting briskly down the hallway. At the corner, where the hallways turned to lead out of site, the wolf sat down again and simply watched them in silence.

"Does it think we have food?"

"Maybe it thinks we are food," Jess muttered.

"Wolves don't eat people."

"They might if they were hungry enough."

Moving slowly, Emily stood and stretched, adjusting her sling. "These woods are full of animals. Did Matt ever tell you about the deer? We found a whole herd. There's no way that thing is starving up here."

"So… what? It just came to visit?"

Emily made a face. "Didn't Mike say he met a wolf?"

"Two of them."

"One died, though, right? Is this the other one? It's white. Didn't he say the one that helped him was white?"

"Really? You think that the random wolf or dog or whatever that Mike made friends with somehow found us here and, what, wants to help or something?"

Em glared at her. "I didn't say it wasn't weird. But really, would it be the weirdest thing to happen up
"Oh my god. Okay, fine. But if it kills us, I'm going to be so pissed." Jess pulled her hair back tightly. "I would literally kill someone to be able to wash my hair right now. I feel so gross."

She shouldered her bag and they proceeded cautiously towards the wolf. Its paws were dirty, but it was indeed white. Rounded, thickly furred ears perked towards them as they approached and once they were within ten feet, it turned and once more began to walk away. Jess let out a nervous giggle. "I feel like I'm in a Disney movie. You know, like I can talk to animals or something."

"If this was a Disney movie, you'd have perfect hair all the time without needing to wash it. That would be nice," Emily murmured, shooting Jess a smile. "Also, you'd probably be barefoot or wearing heels or something."

Jessica shuddered. "No thanks. Barefoot around here is a bad idea. And I should know."

If the wolf was leading them somewhere, neither of them could guess at where. They wound through the labyrinthine halls of the old hotel without going up or down any levels. The floor under them went from worn wood to rotting carpet and finally to smooth marble tile.

Jess stopped dead. "You have got to be kidding me."

It had brought them to a bathhouse. Both girls burst out laughing and the wolf padded back to them, sitting and looking for all the world like it was laughing too.

"We smell that bad, huh?" Emily reached down and rubbed its head. It leaned into her hand slightly. "Did Mike really tame you this much?"

"Probably friends with that guy with the flamethrower you guys told me about. Do you think any of this stuff still works?"

Shrugging, Emily started to poke around. The wolf let out a little huff and ambled over to a small wooden doorway with a padlock on it. Jess followed and saw that the lock was undone, hanging awkwardly off the latch. The door was open a hair. The wolf nosed the door open and vanished down a set of stairs into the darkness.

"Em, I think it wants us to go down here."

They descended carefully. The stairs were rough and crumbling, broken in several spots. The stairway was narrow, though, and it was easy to use the walls to keep their balance. Another door stood open at the bottom landing, leading out into a small cave.

"And now we're back in the mines. Great. Don't we need to get to the lodge?" Emily put her good hand on her hip and scowled at the wolf. Its tail beat at the ground.

Jess found herself warming to it. She hadn't expected it to be so doggy. It was hard to be afraid of such a friendly creature, even if it was huge and dangerous. "You're the one who wanted to follow it. Commit or go home, Em, c'mon."

The cave opened onto a much larger cavern. The air was warm and moist on Jess's skin. Copper pipes fed down from above, tapping into steaming pools in the ground. "Oh. My god." Jess grinned at Emily. "It's a hot spring. Did you know there was a hot spring down here?" She crouched down to dip her hand into the water. It smelled of Sulphur and other minerals, but was blissfully warm. "It's not too hot."
"I think Josh actually mentioned at some point. That's why they built the sanatorium up here, right? And I guess the hotel too."

"I'm getting in."

"Are you fucking kidding me? You're going to take a bath?"

"Em, I'm tired and cold and sore. I want to get the grime out of my hair. Period. Just let me have this one."

"Have you ever watched a single horror movie, ever?" Emily fidgeted with her sling.

Jess laughed. "Fuck it. I don't care. Last time I was attacked naked. You really think that'd happen again?" She dropped her bag and stripped off her coat. "I'll be quick. Want to join me?"

The wolf settled down next to the backpack. "I guess if you don't think it's a problem," Emily muttered to it. "This is so fucking stupid. I can't believe I'm doing this."

Easing into the water, Jess sighed. "You, Mister Wolf, are the best friend a girl could ever have." She leaned her head back and closed her eyes.

Emily rummaged in the bag and pulled out a compressed washcloth. "Here," she tossed it at Jess. It glanced off her shoulder and into the water. "If you're going to wash, might as well make it count, right?"

As much as they were tempted to linger, neither could quite relax. They scrubbed quickly in the warm water. Jess rinsed what felt like pounds of dirt out of her hair. By the time they were done, the water was cloudy. It wasn't as good as an actual shower with shampoo, but it made Jess feel more human after the rockslide and finding Josh's trap for them. She felt more awake than she had in days. "Admit it. This was a good idea."

The other girl made a face at Jess as she re-dressed. "No, this was a colossally bad idea. But—" she smiled. "It was worth it, either way. I do feel way better."

The wolf stood the moment Jess shouldered her pack again. It let out a little yip and trotted off again, leading them down another tunnel.

Now the ground was sloping gradually upwards. They marked their way with chalk, but there were few turns. The tunnels seemed remarkably direct, at least for wherever the wolf was trying to take them. Suddenly it froze, hackles raised and growled, low in its throat. Then it was gone, bolting forward into the dark.

"Hey, wait!" Jess took off after it, running as fast as she could with the heavy bag bouncing on her back.

"Jess!" Emily called from behind her, then swore softly and started running too.

They pounded up the path and dodged through an open iron door. Skidding to a stop on a poured concrete floor, they glanced at each other, panting hard. "Where did it go?" Jess asked, coughing a little as she caught her breath.

Emily waved a hand vaguely. "No clue. Where are we?" They reviewed what they remembered of the map. "I mean, we went uphill a lot. Is this the sanitarium?"

The iron door slammed shut behind them. They spun to stare at it. Emily tried its handle and frowned
"Oh. Good," Jess said, trying for levity. "I was worried this might be boring."

The lodge may have been entirely different than they remembered it, but the mine seemed to have frozen in time. It was still damp and musty with dead, unmoving air. If Sam thought about it too much, it gave her the heebie-jeebies. She'd never been a huge fan of cramped spaces and, though large portions of the mine were open, at least half the tunnels they passed through were narrow and tight.

They followed the map as best they could. When they'd seen Josh in the dream, he'd been near the elevator shaft, but that could have been on any level. She hadn't paid much attention to the signs once she'd seen him. It was also highly likely that he'd moved by now. She couldn't imagine him just lying in that same space for days. At the very least he'd need to get water.

Here and there they saw signs of Flamethrower Guy: a makeshift ashtray, a broken strap from his flamethrower rig, scorch marks. At one point Mike picked up the soggy remnants of a book of matches and grimaced. As they passed by a rack of tools, something caught Sam's eye. It was an old steamer trunk, shoved back and mostly out of view behind a row of shovels.

"Did you see this?" Sam beckoned to Mike as she knelt down to examine it. "It's locked."

He crouched down beside her. "Maybe one of Flamethrower Guy's stashes? Think we can open it?"

Sam grabbed the handle and tugged it awkwardly out of its hiding spot. Glancing around the tunnel, she grabbed a filthy shovel and shrugged. "We can try. Here. Back up. I'll try to pop the lock off."

"It's going to be loud," he warned her.

"So? Who's down here to hear us besides Josh?" Beth's voice echoed in the back of her mind: Something old. Something bad. She ignored it. "And if he does hear us, so much the better, right?"

Without waiting for another objection, she wedged the blade of the shovel into the lock and pushed down. It took three tries, but the lock final gave with a loud cracking sound, pieces of it shooting back from the pressure. She hissed in pain and looked at her hand. Part of the shovel's handle had splintered up and torn a jagged hole in her palm.

Blood welled up and she dropped the shovel, letting her bag fall to the ground.

"What happened?"

"Just cut myself on the stupid shovel. Will you grab the first aid kit?"

Mike retrieved it and set about dabbing the wound with disinfectant and wrapping it tightly. It throbbed vaguely but seemed more or less fine. She waved off Mike's concern and dropped to her knees again, carefully opening the lid of the chest.

It was nearly empty. There were some army rations in battered containers stacked in one corner and two jars on the other side, each stoppered and sealed with wax. Sitting alone in the middle of the chest was a piece of wood, carefully carved to resemble a badger. Her fingers hovered over it uncertainly, then she took a deep breath and picked it up. She held it up for Mike to see. "It's a totem."

He sucked in a breath. "What color is that?"
It was impossible to tell with any certainty. Age and moisture had faded it until it was all essentially the same shade. Maybe it had been brown or black at one time, but it could just as easily have been white. "I don't know. Should I—"

"I guess. It can't hurt anything, right? Maybe it'll help."

Sam braced herself and lifted it to peer inside.

"Wait!" The Flamethrower Guy throws out a hand, stopping Chris in his tracks. There's something moving in the trees.

Chris takes a step back and a twig snaps under his foot. There are cries from around them and the Flamethrower Guy shouts: "Run! Go! Now – now – now!"

He tries to move, lights the night with flame, shouting and directing Chris to run.

"And we're right out in the open – gotta get out of here!"

In a flash, a naked, grey-skinned wendigo shoots across the path. Its hand moves too fast to track, but suddenly he's gurgling, blood streaming down his chest and out of his mouth. His eyes roll back and he drops to his knees. As he does, his head slides off, like butter sliding off a hot knife.

Sam reeled back from it, letting it fall back into the trunk and pressing her hand to her forehead against the sudden headache.

"Are you okay?" Mike dropped down beside her and put his hand on her back. "What was it?"

"Flamethrower Guy. It was him, dying. With Chris."

"What? Wasn't this his trunk?"

She nodded slowly, trying to process. "He knew. He knew he might die. He knew he would probably die. And he still helped us."

"Damn."

Sam lifted one of jars and tipped it slowly from side to side. It was 3/4 full of a dark, sluggish liquid that moved with the viscosity of thick honey or molasses. "What is this?"

"Search me." Mike picked up the other jar and shone his flashlight beam into it, trying to see better. The jars were brown glass and it was almost impossible to make out any more detail of the contents. "Do we open them?"

"Nah. Who knows what it is. I don't really want to risk it. That guy didn't seem entirely stable." She sighed. "I can't believe—and then we just came back. He would be so mad that we came back. Ugh. Okay. I think that was worth cutting my hand open."

They continued on. It was slow-going. After the rockslide and what they'd seen of the mine the last time, both Mike and Sam were suitably paranoid about the possibility of a cave-in. They kept quiet when possible, although their footsteps seemed to echo loudly all the same. Time seemed to slow as they walked. Without any daylight it was hard to tell how much time had passed.

How was it possible to be both bored and incredibly on edge simultaneously? For the hundredth time, Sam was grateful they'd thought to bring chalk to mark their way. Every corner, wall, and intersection started to blend together in her head. How twisty was this damn mine? Carefully she
rubbed a red arrow onto a beam and turned the corner again.

There was someone in the tunnel. Her headlamp's beam illuminated a figure with its back to them. Coming up next to her, Mike sucked in a breath. "Is that…?"

The figure didn't turn to look at them. Ragged clothes draped over emaciated shoulders and filthy black hair hung in short, tangled clumps. Their hands were in front of them, fingers wide, as if assessing the ground. Sam took a step forward carefully and could hear a faint muttering.

"…if I went this way and they went that way then up down sideways high ho I should be better at climbing by now just need to find it again yes it's gross I know it's gross doesn't matter if it's gross because I need it gotta have it gotta have it gotta have it…"

She knew that voice.

"Josh?" Her voice was shaking and she couldn't stop it.

The muttering stopped abruptly and he swayed in place. "A person. A person here. I don't have my face on yet. People shouldn't come early. Only really good friends come to a party early."

"Josh, is that really you?" He was here. Real.

He twitched, turning his head slightly to view them from the corner of his eye. Now beside her, Mike froze. "Oh no," she heard him whisper under his breath.

"Oh no?" She glanced at Mike. His eyes were wide as he stared at Josh.

The only warning she had was a faint scuffling sound. She looked back and flinched. His face was an inch from hers, bright and pale in the headlamp's beam. Josh chuckled, a raw low sound in the back of his throat. His eyes, which had been hazy and dull in her dream, were inhuman, pupils blown and black. Half of his face was pulled back in a horrifying grimace, revealing long, razor-sharp teeth. He reeked of old blood and mold and other, unnamable filth. She held her breath, trying not to move.

"Josh, man. Don't…" Mike's voice was perfectly, pointedly calm, even friendly. "You know us, right? You recognize us? We're here to help you."

Josh's head rolled towards Mike and he hissed, tongue darting out to taste the air like a snake. He twitched again and sniffed the air, nostrils flaring. His head slowly turned back to Sam.

Her whole body jerked instinctively as he dropped into a crouch, scenting her. Frigid hands grabbed at her, pulling her bandaged palm forward and, with a jerk, he tore the bandage away. "Fresh," he muttered. He snarled and his head shot forward towards her still-bleeding wound.

"Hey!" Light flashed across the tunnel as Mike brought his flashlight down hard on Josh's shoulder. It didn't seem to hurt him much, but the unexpected impact sent Josh sprawling. He hissed again and lunged for Mike, tackling him and slamming him back against the tunnel wall. Mike grunted from the force of the contact and shoved, trying to dislodge Josh, who slashed at him with long, sharp nails.

"Josh! Stop!" Sam slid her backpack off one arm and swung it like a flail. It wasn't as forceful as Mike's hit and the bag was softer than the heavy Maglite, but it was enough to distract Josh again.

He leapt off of Mike and landed on the ground between them, his predatory stare shifting between them. Slowly he blinked. It was like watching a person wake from a dream. His eyes seemed to
focus on Mike's face, then shifted to Sam and widened in shock. He looked down at his hand, at the streak of Sam's blood glinting on his fingers. "No," he mumbled. "No, no no no no no no."

With another mad chuckle that was almost a sob, he threw himself backwards from them, catching himself on all fours before launching off in a dead run. As he passed a support beam, he shoved it hard, trying to cave in the tunnel. It groaned and shifted, loosened dirt falling in a shower. He did the same to the next one and the next as he fled. A few rocks fell and the tunnel seemed to shake ominously, but stayed more or less intact.

Then he was gone, vanishing into the darkness beyond their lights.

"Josh!" She spun to Mike. "Mike, that was Josh. He—he—"

"He's turning into a wendigo," Mike said grimly.

Sam swallowed hard. "No..." Not after everything. They couldn't have come all the way up here just to find him as a monster. This was worse, worse than him just being dead and gone. They'd have to kill him. "No, it was just a trick of the light. And he's been down here too long and—"

He shook his head. "No, Sam. He's turning into a wendigo. I saw all these photos and lab reports in the Sanatorium. That's what it looks like, the process. Longer teeth, messed up face, all of it." He took her hand to re-wrap the injury. His entire body radiated tension.

"No, it can't be. There was no one up here for him to—" She could barely say it, her stomach roiling. "For him to eat." The realization hit her the same moment it seemed to strike Mike.

"Flamethrower guy. We saw his body that night, right? It must be that. Fuck. He must have been so desperate." Mike's voice was pitying. "Sam, is there anything in the journal about this? I know he sort of recognized us and that's good, but if there isn't some way to reverse it, we're going to have to—"

She cut him off. "I'll look. But we... we need to get through this part. We need to find him. I have something that can maybe help a little."

"What? Anti-wendigo powder?" Sam stared at him and he raised his hands defensively. "Sorry. Bad, terrible joke. I just don't know what to do at this point. When we saw him in the dream, he wasn't like this, was he? I feel like we would have noticed."

Sam ignored the dream comment. "I went to see Dr. Hill," she said quietly.

"What? When?"

"After Ashley and Chris. I had an idea. I found some stuff, last time we were up here. Medical documents and stuff." He nodded, encouraging. Sam plowed ahead. "I guess he went off his meds or something. Withdrawal effects are bad. Hallucinations and worse. Like what we saw when we... when he..."

"I remember."

"But anyway, when I saw him in the dream, he was still hallucinating. Enough that he thought I was a hallucination, right? You saw that?" Mike nodded again. "So he still must be hallucinating. It wouldn't still be withdrawal symptoms after this long. So I went to see Dr. Hill. I thought that he might be able to prescribe something, based on what he knows of Josh and what I could tell him and his medical history."
"That's..." Sam winced, bracing herself for him to tell her how stupid it was, but all he said was: "...genius. That's genius, Sam. Did he give you anything?"

"Yeah. He wasn't happy about it, but he's kind of weird. He didn't really seem that opposed to the idea overall. I think he knows I don't want to take them myself. I don't think he thought we'd find Josh, but I looked up the stuff he gave me and it's legit. So if we can get Josh to take it, it might help him be more himself. At least a little."

"Well we'll have to find him then. And we should look through the journal. Even something small might help, right? Some hint or something?" He grinned. It looked too bright and too hopeful, like a cartoon character come to life. "We'll figure it out. The pills will help him and we'll find something in the journal and we'll figure it out."

Sam finally nodded and turned back to consider the tunnel. The whole right side had caved in. Josh had fled in that direction. She did not want to go that way, but she wasn't sure there was any better way to try to find him. She started to pick her way down the tunnel, Mike behind her. She heard the soft rattle of his pill bottle and pursed her lips.

Hell. She had been right. He was in hell. She couldn't even stomach the idea of eating chicken anymore, let alone anything more advanced. What could have led to Josh being so desperate that he ate human fle—God, she couldn't even think it in her own head. She took careful breaths through her nose and out through her mouth, trying to ease her nausea.

At least the Flamethrower Guy had been practically a stranger. It wasn't as bad as knowing that Hannah had eaten Beth. Sam would always be grateful that she hadn't been the one to find Beth's remains. Emily had been nice about telling her, or at least as nice as Emily ever was. They were still down here somewhere. The rescue teams had deemed it too unsafe to explore the mines too deeply. It suddenly struck her that she could find Beth's remains herself this time, wandering around down here. She flinched away from the thought, although it wasn't as painful as she would have expected. Something about her encounter or dream the night before had helped ease the immediate horror of Beth's death.

Sam didn't realize she was crying until she tasted salt. Another reminder of kissing Beth in her dream. Beth had been so frantic, so terrified. She wasn't okay. Whatever she said about being dead and untouchable, it wasn't true.

More than one Washington was living their own personal hell.

They were going to die here. The realization hit her hard in the gut. There was every chance that none of them would make it down the mountain. Jess and Emily could already be dead. She and Mike could be next. And she had agreed. She could have talked them out of it. She could have warned the Washingtons, had people posted to intercept the others, but she just couldn't let go of the possibility that Josh was alive.

Well, he was. Sort of. And likely going to be the death of them all.

As if he'd heard her thoughts, Mike's voice was strong in the darkness behind her. "We're going to be fine, Sam. You and me... we're the top team. We're going to be okay. We were before."

"He attacked you. He attacked me."

"It's fine. We'll figure it out. We've got this."

Something in her chest snapped and she rounded on him. Still walking, he almost ran into her.
"Dammit Mike. Stop acting like nothing about this is wrong! Act like a human being for once in your goddamn life instead of Mister Perfect President guy." She rubbed the heel of her hand against her tear-stained cheeks, mercilessly. There was no time for this, no time for any of this fucking delusion.

"What do you want me to say? What would make this better for you?"

She stared at him. "Are you serious? Stop trying to prop me up all the time. This isn't about me, Mike. This is about all of us. And this is about you. Stop pretending like you're fine. I know you're not fucking fine and it doesn't help anything for you to keep acting like you are."

"What do you want to hear?" He rubbed his remaining fingers along his jaw, leaving slight traces of her blood on his skin. "Do you want me to cry myself to sleep and talk about being broken?"

"I want a little bit of honesty. Is that too much to ask?" Sam hugged her arms around her stomach and tried to regulate her breathing. "Mike, I'm not stupid. I know you're having nightmares. I've seen the pills. I just need you to talk to me. You need you to talk to me. Or anyone, really, but your options are kind of limited at the moment."

"The pills are for my hand—"

She cut him off. "Don't lie to me. Maybe they were for your hand at first, but you're taking them more often then you should be and we both know it."

"Sam, is this really the time for an intervention?" Mike smiled, teasingly, and she wanted to smack him. Instead she settled for shoving him hard. He stumbled back and steadied himself on the wall.

"You're right. It's not. I should have known better than to try to talk to you." Turning away, she started to pick her way through the rocks again. She stumbled on a jagged piece of shattered stone and winced as she caught herself on a beam.

"Do you really want to hear about stuff you already know? You want me to tell you that this is all my fault? That Josh turning into a monster and losing his mind down here… that it's my fucking fault?" His voice made it clear it wasn't really a question. He was certain, sure, his voice building steam as he continued. "I was pissed. I thought he'd killed Jess. And even seeing the wendigos, I still thought that maybe it really was him and, well, better him than me anyway right?"

"And I hesitated. Even just for a second, it was enough. Hannah took him. And Hannah… that's my fault too. All of this comes back to me. I should have been better. I know that. And even now, I can't seem to shake this sense that…" Mike sounded suddenly exhausted. He shook his head. "Is that what you want me to say?"

She turned to look back at him again. "It wasn't your fault."

His fist hit the wall, sending dirt and flaky chunks of rock skittering onto the ground. Sam winced. "Yes, it fucking is. Don't do that. Don't pretend like you don't blame me."

"I don't." Mike growled low in his throat and Sam moved around to face him directly. He was so much taller than she was. Carefully, she gripped his shoulders, pulling him until he looked down at her. "I don't. Do you blame Jess? The prank was her idea." She took a deep breath. "I don't blame anyone. Everyone did stupid stuff that they would take back. You think I wasn't at fault myself? I knew what you guys were doing. I went looking for Hannah. I should have just stood in front of the bedroom and waited to intercept her. If I'd actually thought it through, I could have stopped it all."

"What? No."
"Oh? No?" She laughed bitterly. "You want to talk about the fact that I knew about her massive crush on you? If I was any kind of friend I would have talked her out of it way earlier. You would never have given Hannah the time of day. She wasn't one of yours."

"I knew you blamed me," he said quietly, closing his eyes.

"Mike, you're not listening." Sam hit his shoulder again. "There are things I'm angry about. Sure, I'm angry at you. But that's not the same thing as blaming you. I'm angry at Josh. Shit, I'm angry at Hannah. She might be—have been—my best friend, but she was an idiot. It's not like she's never been up here. She knew what winter is like. She knew lots of other places in the house she could have run to. But she ran out into the snow. I'm pissed at her. I'm angry she died. I'm angry she got Beth killed.

"I'm angry I didn't stop Beth from chasing her. I'm angry you went along with that stupid fucking prank. I'm angry that no one warned any of them that there were monsters up here. I'm angry about so much stuff, Mike." She took a deep breath and glanced up. He was watching her, brown eyes fixed on her face and expression unreadable. "I'm tired of being so angry all the time. I don't like anger. But we all have to face what happened. Anger, sadness, fear… all of it. And you pretending like you don't feel it doesn't help. I need—"

She couldn't say it. Her voice faded to nothing and she focused on breathing. Mike lifted a hand and carefully tucked back her hair where her bangs had escaped her headband. "What do you need, Sam?" His fingers hovered against her cheek.

"I need to know that you feel all this too. I need honesty. There have been so many tricks and pranks and lies. Please, just be honest with me. I need to know I can trust you and I can't do that when you're pretending that everything is all hunky-dory."

Pulling her roughly into him, he wrapped his arms around her tightly. "It's hard."

He was wonderfully warm. She let herself relax, frustration and affection mingling in her chest. "I know." Her voice was slightly muffled by his shirt.

"How do you be that good of a person?"

"You don't. That's not the point." Sam sighed against his chest. "Mike, it's not about being a hero or being whatever it is you think makes a good person. It's about being human."

"I don't want to be human."

She smiled. "Me neither."

His lips pressed against her hair. "Okay. I'll try. I just want to keep you safe, Giddings."

"I know. Can we keep each other safe instead? I don't want you to lose any more fingers. Or die."

Mike laughed, a rumbling chuckle that rolled through her. "I don't want that either. Either option. I'll take door number three, Alex."

"Alex Trebek is Jeopardy, not Let's Make a Deal."

"The only time I ever watched any of them was if I stayed home sick. They all blend together in my head."

"Mike, I have to ask—" She hesitated.
"You can ask me anything. I'll be honest. I promise."

"Do you have enough pills? Enough to last you up here?"

He pulled away roughly. "I'm fine."

Sam groaned. "Mike…"

"No, really. It's… it's fine. I'm being careful."

"I was serious when I said I'm not trying an intervention. We can figure that out if—when we get out of here. But are you going to be okay while we're here?"

"I think so. I'm trying to be careful."

She nodded. "Okay then. Let's keep going."

---

"Melinda? Hi, yeah, it's Hank."

"Oh hello Hank. Anything?"

"Could be nothing. There are lots of kids here right now, for skiing season. But Bev says she thinks she might have seen them. No letter jacket or anything, but there were kids in the diner a few nights back and there's a black kid staying at the motel."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Doesn't do much. He just wanders around mostly, when he's out. That's what made her remember the bunch of them the other night. He was with them then and seeing him just hanging around… it's weird. Motel's usually just used by people passing through, not long-term visitors."

"Hmm. That could be Matt—Matthew Taylor. Hank, do you think you could get his name?"

"I can try. What do you want me to do if it is him?"

"Just call me and let me know. I may have to come up there if they really went up to the lodge. It's not safe, but I don't want to get the rescue teams all worked up over nothing."

"Will do. I hope you don't mind me saying so, but I hope it's not him."

"Me too, Hank. Me too."

---

Sam screamed: the raw, ugly sound ripped from her throat as the thing withdrew its hand from her stomach. It was over. Somehow, despite everything, it was over. The light in her eyes faded and she dropped to the ground, collapsing in a limp pile.

With a howl of rage, Mike ran at the thing, but it turned, almost casually slowly, and caught him around the throat with the same blood-soaked hand. Its smile grew as it tightened its hold. Mike scrabbled at its arm, trying to pry it off but it squeezed. Its long, thin fingers dug into the soft flesh of his neck, nails piercing his skin. With a hoarse laugh, its hand clenched and Mike jerked violently. It let him fall too, throat crushed.
From somewhere in the dark behind it, a piercing shriek cut through the air and Jess bolted out of the shadows. Josh, face twisted into an obscene, shark-like grin, came after her, leaping and bounding across the uneven ground until he slammed into her from behind, driving her down into the floor.

Ashley didn't wait to watch Jessica die. She ran. The tunnel was uneven under her feet and it took all her concentration to not trip. Her boots pounded along the gravel and packed dirt, her breath coming hard. She was not a runner. She had never been a runner. She would swear if she had the breath for it.

Something large under her feet made her stumble and she glanced down, choking on a sudden sob as she saw Emily's face torn open, her right eye an empty ruin. From behind her she heard Josh singing softly, accompanied by the sound of wet tearing. "And I… want to rock and roll all night… and party every day…" Underneath it all, she could hear a strange tapping sound, slow and rhythmic.

She couldn't bear it. Ashley screamed, her stomach revolting and head throbbing.

With a jolt, she sat up, flinging her blankets to the floor. The only light in the room were the red numbers of the alarm clock: 3:28, with the little dot that meant "AM."

Her throat hurt. Had she really—"Ashley?" Her housemate knocked on her door. "Are you okay? I thought I heard you yell."

"I—I'm fine, Maria. It's fine. Sorry. I didn't mean to bother you."

"Okay Ash. I'll see you in the morning." There was a shuffling sound as Maria headed back to her room.

Ashley touched her cheeks with tentative fingers and they came away wet with tears. "Fuck," she whispered. That had been worse. So much worse than most of her nightmares. She hadn't had one that bad since the first few nights after the evening on the mountain. She switched on the light and nearly screamed again.

There were butterflies in her room: at least six or seven. They were brown and red, fluttering about, agitated.

"No."

She stood and shoved the window open, prying the screen out of the frame desperately. One of her fingernails broke and she winced, but kept at it until the whole thing popped. Grabbing a magazine, she flapped it, driving the butterflies out into the night. "Fuck you. Fuck you fuck you fuck you," she mumbled. "Get out. Get out!"

Once the last one was gone, she shut the window again and collapsed onto the floor, drawing her knees into her chest.

Red and brown.

Danger and loss.

She could ignore the single yellow butterfly, pretend like it didn't count, like it was just bad memories and trauma that made her so scared, but this? She remembered the thing on the porch that had almost killed Chris, the way she had known, deep down in the pit of her stomach, that Jess's voice calling to her had been wrong. Ashley wasn't sure she could pretend any more. She wasn't sure she wanted to, not if it meant ignoring red and brown.
Not if it meant condemning her friends to what she'd seen in her dream.

Chris was going to be so pissed at her. The thought made her laugh, even as tears continued to stream down her face. Maybe this would be their first official fight as a couple.

Chapter End Notes

Two chapters in a week? Yowza! Call this an apology for the long wait on the previous one.

Be comforted though- Josh may be in rough shape, but hope is there.

I adore all of you for reading this story - what started out as a "I'm going to write a Sam/Mike story!" turned into a ridiculously long and complicated sequel to the game that involves everyone. I just couldn't write a rescue mission without addressing all of them. The story would be incomplete if I left any one of them out, the crazy darlings.

I hope you're all enjoying reading it as much as I love writing it!
Finally sagging back to lean against the wall, Jess spread her hands in defeat. "Fine. I give up. That door will not give."

"I told you so."

She laughed. "Yeah, you did. Fair point. So now what?"

"We go upstairs, I guess," Emily took a drink from the canteen and tossed it to Jess. "That must be where the wolf went anyway. We should try to figure out where it went. It obviously wanted us to come here."

"Let's not take directions from a wild animal next time."

"I told you so on that one too."

Jess rolled her eyes. "Yes, yes. You are Mistress Emily, the All-Knowing One. I am totally amazed and in awe of your skills. Let's get this show on the road."

They ascended the stairs. Their construction seemed sturdier than the old hotel, though maybe that was simply due to the wear and tear they'd seen. Neither could remember much about what Mike had said about the layout, except that, apparently, if you saw moving body parts, you weren't supposed to touch them. Which seemed like common sense, but Jess had never had the heart to tell Mike that to his face.

Dim light filtered through the grimy windows. Jess checked her watch; it was nearing sundown. They'd been underground for a long time, sleeping sporadically. She swore quietly to herself. If Mike and Sam were still at the lodge, they'd been waiting a long time. Not good. Jess pulled the radio off her belt and clicked it on. Now that they were aboveground, they might be able to get a better connection.

She lifted it to her mouth, but Emily shushed her before she could speak. A long, slow scraping echoed out from a long, grand-looking hallway across from them: a sound like metal screeching on tile. The girls stopped, staring out into the darkness. The sound paused for a moment, then continued, growing slightly louder.

"Um..." Jess reached out and grabbed Emily's hand. "What is that?"

Emily sounded annoyed. "Like I know?" But her grip tightened on Jess's hand all the same. Whatever it was, it was moving towards them.

And then, as suddenly as they'd started, the screeching sounds stopped. Jessica shot a look to Emily, who shrugged helplessly. "No idea."
Em took a step forward, squinting into the darkness. Everything was perfectly still, with no sign of the wolf or anything else. In Jess's hand the radio buzzed to life and she jumped. It crackled with static and she bit her lip, heart thudding. "H—hello?" she asked into it, voice shaking. "Sam?"

Only static met her question.

"Turn it off, Jess. It's creeping me out."

"It might be someone trying to reach us though. Sam or Matt maybe."

Emily glared at her. "Seriously. Have you ever seen a horror movie? Fuck. Static is always bad news. Always."

Opening her mouth to retort, Jess froze as a voice came through the static. It was barely able to be understood, but it was clearly someone speaking.

"What? Please repeat," Jess said into the phone, ignoring Emily's warning look.

"—shh-ahh-shhh-rre—" The static was thick. Then, abruptly, it cleared. "Run," whispered a female voice.

The hallway was freezing. From down the hall, in the rapidly deepening shadows, came a long, low metal screech, something dragging along the tile ground towards them.

"Run," the radio whispered.

They ran.

Jess tried to shove the radio back onto her belt, but missed it as she dodged across rubble from a collapsed wall. The radio clattered to the ground and she skidded to a stop, sending gravel flying. She looked around frantically, trying to see where it had fallen.

"No, Jess. Come on!"

"The radio!"

"Fuck the radio! We can't use it if we're dead!"

Behind them, the sound faded slightly, then came back, louder. Jess glanced back. An iron bedframe slid out of the darkness into a pool of dim light. It was rusting and had no mattress, its feet screeching on the floor from its weight as it moved.

"What the fuck?" she said, staring at it. It was maybe 20 feet back. Jess gasped as a nearby bench shot forward towards them, as if someone incredibly strong had given it a shove.

"Why are you staring at it? Come on!" Emily grabbed her wrist and tugged. "I don't know why furniture is chasing us and I don't want to find out."

They hurdled broken chunks of concrete and rush through a section that might once have been a central hob but was now a blackened disaster. Mike really had done a number on this place. The unburned portion of a sign over a doorway read "—istration" and they ran in and came to a sliding stop. There was no way the bed would be able to cross the uneven ground and rubble.

"Are we safe?" Jess gasped, looking around wildly.

Emily shot her a dirty look. "I know you're not a natural blonde. You don't have to act that stupid. I
don't think we're safe anywhere up here."

"Whatever bitch. Just because you're scared..." Em always did that: turn aggressive when she was upset. It was incredibly annoying, and yet oddly reassuring.

"I'm not scared."

"You are way more scared than me."

Something fell in the darkness with a clatter that seemed to echo all around them and they both jumped. Jess pulled out her flashlight again and flicked it on, shining it out into the darkness. The sun had nearly completely faded and the beam was bright. Beside her, Emily retrieved hers as well.

Beyond the broken floor, next to the bench and illuminated in the flashlight's beam, Hannah was crying. Her skin was abnormally, unhealthily pallid, her hair long and black and stringy around her face. She was on her hands and knees, her shoulders heaving. Jess could hear her whimpering softly.


Like a failing movie projector, Hannah's entire body flickered and vanished.

"You saw that, right?" Jessica reached blindly for Em's hand and her fingers closed on her arm. She looked around wildly, shining her light everywhere it could reach. Nothing. "That was Hannah."

The other girl cleared her throat and shook her head firmly. "No. No way. It's another one of Josh's prank things. Like how he faked the ghost in the lodge. It's just a holdover."

"Then why didn't Mike see it when he was in here?"

"Because Mike is a moron who wouldn't notice a snake if it bit him on the dick." Emily's voice was tight, strained. "We should get out of here. We can get outside, right? Go to the lodge and find the others."

"No, Em, wait. What if that really is Hannah?"

"Like a ghost?" She scoffed and squared her shoulders. "Not a chance. I'm going to go grab the radio. We got all freaked out for nothing."

Jess tried to stop her but Emily dodged her hands. "Don't. Don't, Em."

"Stay here. I'll be right back." Before Jess could protest further, Emily began to pick her way back towards where they'd been. She was barely visible against the darkness, her flashlight lighting up her way. Pausing for only a moment, she turned a corner and vanished from sight.

A sob echoed out of the hallway behind Jess, reverberating loudly through the empty rooms. "Emily?" she called, softly. "Emily, did you hear that?"

No answer came back from the other girl. Jessica turned, shining her light around the wing she was in. It looked like it had once been offices, but now they were largely ruined. Doors stood open or hung broken off their hinges at crazy angles, casting bizarre shadows. Another whimpering sob carried out of the dark, from somewhere further down.

There was a flickering of color in her light as she moved it across an empty room and she moved it back. Hannah was kneeling, her arms wrapped around her torso. She lifted her head as Jess's light
lingered on her. Tears streaked dirt or makeup down her face and her eyes were shadowed. "Jessica?" The voice was Hannah's, though her lips didn't move. "Jessica, please... help me. Help me, please. Please."

Jess took a step forward, unthinkingly. The flashlight wavered and Hannah vanished again. Rushing into the room, Jess shone the light around frantically. Nothing. The room was completely empty.

"Jessica? Where did you go? Jess, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I won't go near him again. I promise. Please help me." Hannah's desperate, despairing voice carried through the dead air of the sanitarium and Jess ran back into the hall.

"Hannah?" She turned towards toward the voice. It was coming from the further down the hallway, away from where they'd run from.

The missing girl screamed, voice breaking painfully before it subsided into whimpers again. Jess cast a glance back towards where Emily had vanished, then, grimacing, headed towards the crying noises. This was stupid. She knew it. This was very, very stupid. The kind of stupid thing that lost Mike fingers and Emily was going to kill her for doing this and—

"Jessica? Please…"

She knew Hannah's voice. They might not have been close, or even really friends, but they'd been in school together since Jess had moved to town in 5th grade. "Hannah? Where are you?"

"I'm lost, Jessica. I don't know where I am."

"I—what do you see?" Her footsteps were loud, even as she tried to move carefully. The ground was all rubble and gravel and broken glass. It was getting colder. Probably because the sun was down, she told herself. That was all. The corridor smelled like rusted metal, the scent growing stronger as she walked.

Another broken sob echoed around her. "Just darkness. Darkness and walls. Where am I? Jess, help me. Find me."

"I'm trying." Jess whispered, tears stinging her eyes. It wasn't hard to belief that Hannah's ghost would linger. The idea that, after everything, she was alone here in this desolate place… "I'm sorry, Hannah. I'm coming." She hesitated at a turn in the hallway, listening hard, then turned right, towards the sound of Hannah's faint crying.

Back up the passage, across a broken entryway and down another hall, Emily's flashlight beam found the radio.

"Fucking finally," she muttered, passing her flashlight to her injured arm and scooping the radio off the ground. It crackled slightly as she picked it up and she pushed the button. "Sam? Matt? Is anyone there?"

A garbled voice came through. "Repeat?" Em said, sighing. "Please repeat?" God, she had caught so much shit from Matt for how she'd used the radio before. Too much babbling, too much panic.
Whatever. If it was better to be terse, then terse she would be. She was good at that.

The voice spoke again, but she couldn't make out any words. She smacked the radio against her thigh a few times, more out of anger than out of any belief it would make it work better. "Repeat," she said again.

"...keep..." said the same female voice from before, the one that had told them to run. "...Jess..."

Her heart thudded painfully. "What? Jess? What are you talking about? Please repeat. You're breaking up and I—" She forced herself to stop. Okay, maybe she wasn't great at being terse. At least not on the radio.

The static cleared completely. With perfect clarity, she heard the woman's voice: "Emily. Find Jess."

The buzzing, crackling static returned, full-force. She hurriedly clicked the radio off. The sun was completely down now and besides her flashlight's beam, the only other illumination was the thin, silvery glow of the moon off the snow outside. It fell through the windows in regular patterns along the floor. The sudden silence was oppressive.

She shook herself. She was imagining things, letting the atmosphere and the stupid static get in her head. The woman had sounded familiar, but it wasn't Sam. It was nothing. God, she hated it here. "Jess?" she called back, as loudly as she dared. "I got the radio!"

There was no answer.

"Fuck," Emily muttered, turning to pick her way back to where she'd left the other girl. It took longer to get back when she wasn't in a dead, desperate sprint. After banging her shin on a piece of rebar jutting from a broken block, she had to admit that it was amazing they'd even gotten to the administration wing without either of them tripping or getting otherwise injured. They'd run through this in the dark.

She passed under the broken Administration sign and looked around. There was no one there. "Are you fucking kidding me?" Emily growled low in her throat. "I swear to god, Jess, if you get yourself killed, I will personally go get a damn Ouija board just so I can tell you what a stupid fucking moron you are." She raised her voice. "Jess? Jessica?" Her own words came back to her, dimly.

A shriek tore through the still air of the sanatorium. She'd heard someone scream like that before. Not Jess, though. "Hello?" Emily spun in a circle, trying to figure out where the scream had come from. The shriek subsided into a moan and then a whimper from somewhere down the hallway.

"Shit." It wasn't Hannah. It couldn't be Hannah, for very, very obvious reasons. Which mean there was someone else up here. Someone who needed help. She should find Jess. Maybe that's where Jess went. She always was a bleeding heart.

Emily shook herself and took off down the hall towards the scream. "I am such a fucking idiot." She paused where the hallway met another corridor, trying to place where she'd heard it coming from. "Hello?" she asked the darkness, shining her light in both directions. Then she frowned, shrugged, and turned left.

-o-

There was a piece of notebook paper on the scratched wooden desk, torn roughly from its metal spiral. On it, near the top and used to keep it weighted down, was a child's hairclip: the kind with glittering butterfly wings bouncing slightly on thin wire coils. In slightly shaky black ballpoint pen the letter read:
Dear Chris,

I should have talked to you. I'm sorry I didn't. But you would have tried to talk me out of it again and I just can't take that right now, so I had to go without talking. I hope you aren't too mad. I know you'll be mad at me. I understand. But I still have to go.

I guess what it comes down to is that... I think you're wrong. I think Dr. Jocelyn is wrong. I think the cops were wrong. I think that what I remember—what I know that you remember—is real. And like Dr. Jocelyn kept saying: focusing on fantasies about what happened won't help me heal. I had more dreams with more butterflies and our friends are in danger. They really are. And I'm not going to wait here until we never hear from them again. I can't keep living in this fantasy that there isn't something still out there. I can't live with myself if I try. I know I can't. Josh is still out there. Or he was. And now our friends are out there too. I owe it to them. I owe it to Beth and Hannah. I have to go back.

Here

Please forgive me.

Ashley

The letter was crumpled up and thrown on the ground. It bounced slightly and came to rest just under the bed. The mattress groaned as the letter's reader sat heavily and put his head in his hands.

-o-

The further they went, the more convinced Sam was that they were getting lost. One turn rolled into the next and the next. Only once did they run across one of their own chalk markers, which was reassuring. And on another corner, shortly after that, was...

"Look! Mike, look! Green and blue. That's Jess and Emily!" She grabbed his hand and dragged him over to shine the light more directly on it. "They must have made it through the rockslide! They were down here."

He laughed in sheer relief and kissed the chalk arrows. His lips came away lightly colored and Sam grinned. "Gross. You're going to get cave mono."

"Cave mono?"

"Well you've already had the normal kind, so..."

"I did not! I never got mono. That was a rumor. You know I just had pneumonia." He pouted at her and she giggled, brushing the chalk off his lips roughly.

"Mike Munroe. Making out with a mine. You've sunk so low..." It felt so fucking good to laugh. Even the tiniest sign of good news was a relief. "Should we—?" She glanced down the passage the arrows were pointing. It seemed to be heading away from the center of the mine, more towards the lodge's basement.

Mike shook his head. "They'll find the note. We should keep going. We know he's down here."

They continued on. The mines echoed with faint dripping and the occasional soft sound of vermin scurrying by. Turning at a sharp corner, Sam stopped abruptly. Mike bumped into her from behind and swore quietly, stepping to the side, then fell silent.
They had found it. They had found the location in the dream. And there, next to the elevator shaft, just as there had been before, was someone lying on the ground. There was no caution in her this time. "Josh!" Sam threw herself forward, narrowly evading Mike's arms as he tried to catch her.

"Sam, no! He's not stable!"

"I don't care," she shot back at him, rushing forward. It was so familiar: the most distinctive déjà vu she'd ever experienced. Things were different. Of course, things were different. She wasn't in workout gear. She was in hiking boots and Mike was actually here.

Josh was babbling something. As she closed the distance between them, she could make it out. "... just a dream. Another dream. Not real. Not real. If it was real, I hurt her and I would never hurt Sam. Not Sam. Not my Sammy. Not really. Before it was a game. This isn't a game. We could play a game. Anyone have an Uno deck?" He lifted his head to look at her, then shook it slowly. She slowed to a walk a few feet away and raised her hands, trying to look both confident and unthreatening. Her hand ached in its bandage.

"Since you aren't real, my dearest Miss Giddings, would you warn me before you dislocate your jaw, please?" He chuckled weakly. Sam swallowed hard. It was almost exactly the line he'd given in her dream. "Or if you're planning to melt this time, try not to get it on my clothes. They're designer, you see."

Steady footsteps on the ground behind her reminded her she wasn't alone this time. Mike touched the small of her back gently. "It's okay, Sam. Breathe."

"You're alive," she said, breath rushing from her body with the words. "You know who I am."

"You're not real, Sam. Just like Beth and Hannah and—oh hello there, Mister Munroe—my mother and my father and Alan and Patches and Punch and Judy."

"I'm real."

He shook his head again, curling into a tighter ball. "Not real, not real, not real, not real," he muttered.

Sam glanced at Mike and pulled the pills from her pocket. Mike nodded grimly. "Let's do it."

"So I'm not real then," she said, hating herself for the words. "That means I can come over and you won't hurt me, right? You won't be able to. There's nothing for you to be scared of."

"Not scared!" The emaciated man shoved himself up straight against the post. "Can't be scared. I'm a Washington. Washington men are never afraid."

"I need you to take this for me." Sam stepped away from Mike and crouched down next to Josh. She held out a pill in her open palm, hand shaking.

He stared at it, then her, then grabbed her wrist. Flinching, Sam held his gaze. "I can touch you." The words were slurred slightly, made awkward by the long, razor-sharp teeth on half of his face. The other half looked remarkably normal. She tried to focus on that part and ignore the rest.

"Doesn't mean I'm real, does it?" This was a sick fucking thing to do to him, but she wasn't sure how else she could get him to take the pill. She wasn't even sure it would help, but it didn't matter. She clung to the fragile hope that it might bring him out of this haze, at least a little. "Just take the pill, Josh. You have nothing to lose."
"Red pill or the blue pill, yeah? Never liked that movie." Maintaining that same eye contact, he lowered his head to her hand. Behind them, Sam heard Mike shift on the rocky ground and prayed he would stay still. She held her breath as Josh plucked the pill out of her palm like a horse taking a sugar cube. Tipping his head back, he swallowed it dry, then opened his mouth wide to show her his tongue. "Gotta make sure Josh took his meds like a good little patient. They used to check my mouth, you know. Make sure. Can't trust Josh Washington. No one can." He released her and collapsed back.

All her instincts screamed at her to throw herself away from him but she forced herself to breathe evenly and stand. Calm. She had to stay calm. It was all too easy to remember his mad, blown pupils.

"Sammy?" Josh closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the post. "Sam, how did you get here?"

She smiled. This time, she could answer that. Now that she was here, she could feel the reality of it with heavy certainty. "Hiked."

"Hiked?" His voice was incredulous.

"Well... Got a ride, then a plane, then a taxi, then another ride, another plane, a bus, and then hiking."

"What did you give me?"

Sam's smile faded. "Just try to rest, Josh. Please."

"I'm good at that. Resting. All I do these days."

And just like the dream, Mike was there when she turned. He reached out and she took his hand with her uninjured one. Squeezing gently, he gestured to her backpack. "Shall we settle in here?"

"I'd rather try to get him out of here."

"I don't think we can. Not yet." He sighed. "Let's wait here for a while. You can look through the book and I'll watch him. I—Do you think he'd let us tie him up?"

"No he would not!" Josh announced loudly.

Sam shrugged. "He seems harmless enough right now. If we just watch him really closely, then..." She trailed off. 'Then we can stop him if he tries something,' really meant 'kill him' and she couldn't say it. From the look on his face, Mike knew exactly what she was thinking. He gave her a little smile. Maybe it was meant to be reassuring, but his eyes were pained.

She pulled the journal out of her bag and settled down against a beam near Josh and tried to focus on finding something to help.

-0-

"Melinda? You were right. Kid's name is Matt. Room is under the name 'Emily Davis.'"

"Shitting fuck-balls ass-fucking hell—um... Sorry."

"Hey, I get it. Just never heard you swear before. Heh."

"I'm on my way. Keep an eye on him, please? If you see the others, try to keep them off the mountain. I'll be there as soon as I can. I will go up there and drag them back myself if I have to."
"Sure thing. Godspeed."

-0-

Some pages of the book were nearly illegible, while others seemed carefully printed. Several large sections were gathered with paper clips and there were a number of dogeared pages. It was easy to flip through, although the pages felt oddly fragile within their hardy leather binding. Here and there were notes written in Ashley’s distinctive hand, using purple ink.

One page said:

*Because the Wendigo is mutated from a human, it knows how to hunt us. It can perfectly mimic its prey. You must remain sharp and disciplined.*

*I have killed 6 Wendigos. Knives or bullets will not harm them. Use a flamethrower. It is the best weapon. Fire envelops them, burns away their skin and makes them weak.*

*But try NOT to kill them.*

*Killing a Wendigo should be the last resort. Death releases the Wendigo spirit into the air.*

*I have contained them. I used traps to catch them into cages. The traps were baited with human limbs from those who had no further use for them.*

Ashley had shoved a folded half-page of notebook paper next to that page. It said:

*Wendigos? He knew what he was talking about with their habits and stuff (Em didn’t turn from the bite, fire, etc.) but stuff doesn't line up. Eastern Algonquin? Cree? Alberta? Plains vs. mountains and stuff. I guess the name doesn’t really make a difference, since if they’re real they can kill us no matter what we call them, but it still feels weird. Proof none of it happened? Was the guy just nuts? Faulty info?*

Another page was nearly destroyed, where a lot of water had made contact with the paper. The ink was smeared and faded. It was clear that there were words there once, but what they had been was anyone's guess. The only person who would know was a month in the grave. Only one spot was still legible, near the bottom left corner. Ashley had circled this spot several times and added exclamation points. It said:

* [...] a cure [...] *

A few flips later, on an otherwise empty page:

*Blood calls to blood.*

*That's all he told me.*

*Blood calls to blood.*

*What good does that do me? I have the monster blood, but it's not enough. He said it was their humanity that mattered. So if it's blood I need, they're all fucked. None of them have anyone left alive they're related to. Not that I could hope to find.*

The following was written in over-large black letters, the period of the sentence driven into the page with enough force to puncture the paper:

*They don't deserve it.*
Below it, Ashley had added a note of her own. *But did they have a choice?*

There was a folded piece of paper shoved into the back cover. It was a tracking confirmation slip, but the interesting part was on the back. In the same handwriting from the rest of the journal, it said:

*Jackson Hole, Missouri. Dennis Ladme. Could be related to Dalton O'Reilly but won't talk to me.*

*Another dead end.*

Ashley's last note: *Does that mean he needed a blood relative?*

-o-

Interesting.

The girl gave the boy something. She said she thought it would help. Help, of course, was a relative term. It quite liked the boy. He was entertaining on his more active days, babbling and fighting with himself.

It ran its fingers over the surface of the scavenged radio. The static had been new, as had the new voice.

It liked new voices.

It didn't get many of them these days.

Its collection could keep growing, if things kept up as they were.

The girl was reading, the boy was sleeping, and the other boy was pacing and doing things that were of no interest. It shrank back against the wall, its long fingers and toes finding crevices that let it climb.

It would eat. Something less satisfying than the options in front of it, but it would be back. It wanted them. Oh, it wanted them. But it would wait.

Perhaps it would check in on the other little girls.

So many options.

And so, so much time.

Chapter End Notes

I absolutely love reading your comments, all! I want to respond to every comment. Is that weird? It feels weird. But know that getting comments from you guys is an incredible motivator. I love writing this and I'm certainly not going to give it up - it's just nice to get feedback from you all as well!

I adore each and every person who took the time to read this. You mean the world to me and I'm glad people are enjoying it as much as I am! <3
In the mine, it was hard to tell that the storm had hit in earnest. The only signal was a cold draft that seemed to sweep over them in a rush. Sam shuddered and pulled on her coat. She glanced towards the source of the cold. They must be close to an opening. It made her chest hurt to think of how close Josh had been to an exit.

Rubbing her eyes, she picked the book up again. There were still long sections she couldn't seem to get through. The guy's handwriting had varied from bad to completely illegible and she was starting to suspect that some segments were even in code. She wished she could just talk to Ashley directly for five minutes and pick her brain. Ash had always been better at stuff like this. Or even Beth, with her fairy tale analyses. It felt like she was picking apart some weird fairy puzzle, trying to find the magic words that would break the spell. True love's kiss or something. She groaned softly.

As if summoned by the sound, Mike sat down across from her. He drummed his hands nervously on the ground. "So…"

She raised an eyebrow. "Yeah?"

He jerked his head towards the sleeping Josh. "If this does work, how fast is it? Will it be, like, 'Poof! All crazy gone!'?"

"Don't say crazy."


Sam let the journal fall closed in her lap and stretched upwards with a sigh. Her legs tingled slightly from sitting in one position for too long. "I'm not sure. Dr. Hill says it varies from person to person. If it's a good fit for him, it might take weeks to see all the effects. Hopefully though we'll see some more coherence soon. When I looked it up it said that hallucinations and delusions and stuff can start to improve within a few days or a week."

He grunted. "Not ideal, but better than nothing. Did you find anything in the book?"

"Maybe." Sam picked it up and paged through it again, trying to find the bit that had caught her eye—the bit about blood calling blood. She held out the journal and Mike leaned over and took it.

His eyes scanned the page and he frowned. "Not much to go on."

"No. And we don't even know where he got the information. Plus, Ash left some notes and stuff and I guess some things he wrote don't really make sense with actual lore. But it's all we have."

"What do you think it means?"
"I'm not sure. I think it was like some kind of separation thing. He mentions wendigo blood and then there's stuff in the back about him trying to find one of the miner's relatives. So I think it was like magnets or something. Wendigo blood calls the wendigo part and human blood calls the human part." She sighed again. "Not that I have any idea how that would work or even if it's possible. I mean, he wasn't even sure. It doesn't look like he ever found any blood relatives for experiments. There might be other stuff in here, but I'm having trouble getting through it."

Mike flipped through the pages and paused on a particularly scribbled, stained page and laughed. "Yeah, I get that. Maybe if you try again in a while? Let your brain rest for a bit."

She hesitated. "...we need food, too."

He nodded, frowning slightly. "I was just thinking about that. Without my pack, and now with him here..." He shrugged helplessly. "I wonder if the Washingtons have any stores or anything. We'll have to ask Josh when he's up again. Hopefully—"

"Yeah."

There was the soft sound of cloth on dirt as Josh rolled over restlessly. Sam glanced over. His hand twitched and he shook his head in his sleep. He mumbled something under his breath. The only word she could make out was "...cold..." Mike stood and walked over, pulling off his coat. He carefully tucked it over Josh, who relaxed again. He looked at Sam, then away again quickly. "He's been cold for a long time. It's...never mind," he mumbled. "Try to get some sleep, Sam. I'll keep an eye out."

Sam pulled her hat down over her ears and curled up obediently. "Wake me if anything happens," she said warningly and he chuckled. "Yeah, yeah, Giddings. I'll wake you up if anything happens. If you don't wake up first."

Sam slept restlessly and dreamed. Or at least, she thought she was dreaming. It was more memory than dream, though, which always had the unsettling feeling that she wasn't really asleep, just lost in her own mind. She was staring at the Washingtons' fancy front door. She knocked. Sam had always hated the Washingtons' front bell and avoided it as much as humanly possible. It was overly loud and aggressive and she always felt invasive using it, even when she was expected or there was a lot going on. So instead she rapped her knuckles on the wood as loudly as she could.

No answer.

She pulled out her phone and sent another text: Here. Let me in?

After a moment, the phone buzzed in response: Unlocked.

She tried the handle. It was, indeed, unlocked and she opened it just enough to slip inside. The house was dark; both Melinda and Bob were gone for the next month or so, off shooting on the East Coast somewhere. That was part of why she was here. She couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that something bad would happen if she left Josh alone with his thoughts for too long. "Josh?" she called into the foyer, her voice echoing eerily back to her.

Where are you? The glow of her screen illuminated her face in the big mirror across the way with startling clarity that almost made her jump. She stuck her tongue out at herself.

Upstairs.

Suppressing the urge to roll her eyes at his monosyllabic responses, she kicked off her shoes and
climbed the grand staircase. The door to the movie room was open, but there was no sign of life from within. Then she heard a clink of glass on glass and soft swearing from Bob's study. She opened the door to find the room bathed in soft lamplight.

Josh didn't glance up as she came in. Blood welled from a cut on his thumb and he dabbed at it with a tissue.

"What did you do?" Sam rushed over and snatched the tissue from him, pressing it hard against the wound.

"Knife. I was trying to get the wax off the bottle and my hand slipped. It's nothing." He gestured towards the bar with his free hand. A bottle of whiskey that was older than she was sat on the polished oak, shining in the warm light. He caught her disbelieving look and grinned. "An accident, Sammy, I swear."

"Ah. And you were looking to check and see if it was still good?"

"That's me. Certified booze inspector. I care about Dad's tastebuds. I wanted to make sure he wasn't going to poison himself. Not accidentally, at least."

"Hold this there. I'll be right back," she ordered, then ran to the bathroom for a bandage. She taped it down securely and frowned at him. "Josh, you're drinking a lot."

He snorted. "Not really. You're just always around when I am, so it seems that way."

"Really?" Sam raised a disbelieving eyebrow. "So you never drink alone?"

He wouldn't meet her eyes. "Nope."

"Liar."

"Have a drink with me, Sammy. It's already open. I'm getting in trouble either way. It's the good stuff, too. Quality, grade-A poison."

Sighing, Sam shrugged. He was going to drink either way. She knew from experience that it was hard to get him to stop once he had a plan in his head. Maybe if she drank with him, she could distract him with doing something else. They could play a game or go swimming or watch a movie or something. "Fine. Want to play cards? I don't really want to just sit and drink in silence."

They found an unopened deck of cards in a side cabinet and settled in to play Go Fish. As a drinking game, of course—at Josh's insistence.

The last time she'd gotten truly drunk was months ago, at that party Josh had thrown. She'd had Beth then, to make sure she drank lots of water before she went to sleep and keep her from being too hung over. This time she had no such safeguard. She doubted Josh was going to worry about it. Getting hungover was probably at least partially the point. Fuzziness and pain.

She stared down into the glass, watching the amber liquid shift against the perfectly clear ice. That was such a Washington family thing: perfect ice. It was never cloudy or cracked. How did one even do that?

Cool fingertips brushed along her jaw and tipped her head up. Josh was leaning forward, his lips quirked in a slight sad smile. "You're doing that thing again."

"What thing?"
"That thing where you get all locked up in your own head."

Sam laughed. "Really? That's a thing that I do? Have you looked in a mirror lately? You're, like, the king of being all up in his own head."

He nodded gravely. "And, as king, I am aware of the habits of all citizens of In-Their-Head land."

"Weirdo."

Josh dropped his hand and looked away, taking another long swallow. Not to be outdone, Sam took another sip. She could see the appeal of it. It burned along her tongue and down her throat, heat pooling low in her belly. "So this is the good stuff, right?" She grabbed the bottle and held it up to the light. The label was black and embossed with gold. It looked like it was probably more expensive than her car. Hell, it was probably more expensive than her education. Popping the cork out of the top with her thumb, she poured more for herself. She misjudged the distance and the rim chinked against the glass. Her gaze shot up to Josh's, nervously.

He laughed. "Self-conscious and increasingly clumsy? Is wee little Sammy getting drunk?"

With great dignity and maturity, she stuck her tongue out at him. He downed the rest of his glass and looked away again. She snorted and reached forward, touching his jaw just as he'd touched hers. For all that his fingers were cool, his skin was hot, flushed. She could feel a trace of stubble. When was the last time he'd shaved? Or left the house?

His eyes met hers and he sucked in a breath. "Sam?" His voice was barely audible.

"Yeah?"

He closed the distance between them in a moment, his hand coming back up to her face. Slowly, carefully, he kissed her, his lips soft against hers. She froze in shock. He was hot. Too hot. Fever hot. But that wasn't really unusual. Josh always felt like that to her, like a furnace with frigid hands.

Liquor buzzed in her veins and her heart pounded wildly in her chest. She could feel him hesitate against her, waiting for some sign that it was okay. It was tempting. It was so tempting.

After a beat, she pulled back.

"Josh, no."

"No?" He looked confused, lost. "I thought… I know with Beth… but you also like men, right?"

She hastened to reassure him. "No! No. It's not that. Yeah, I'm bi. But it's… Josh, we're drunk and in mourning. And this… it's just grief, right? I don't want us to do something now that we regret later. You mean too much to me." Standing, she set her glass on the desk. "I should go."

She knew it was cowardly, but she didn't want to wait and hear his response. It was hard enough to leave, even knowing she was doing the right thing. She didn't want to give him a chance to talk her into staying. He could, too. Josh was good at that. She could still feel the ghost of his touch on her cheek, his lips on hers. She left the study quickly, texting Ashley for a ride as she rushed down the stairs to her shoes.

From upstairs, there was a snarling noise and the sound of glass smashing against something hard.

It was only grief that made her want to stay, to find comfort in her friend's hands and mouth and body. It would be a mistake. She should never have come here. If there were tears in her eyes, she ignored them.
From there, the memory dissolved into a more normal dream, if any dream could be called normal these days. She was running in the dark. Running from something that called to her with the voices of the dead, begging prettily for a kiss.

-0-

The storm was much more apparent to a very annoyed Melinda Washington, as she was directly told about it.

"Delayed? For how long?" Melinda had played this game before. The trick was to be just irritated enough to get their attention and force them to deal with you, without crossing over into the realm of 'crazy bitch who I want to spite just because.' It was a fine line to walk, particularly when time was pressing.

The woman behind the counter eyed her, mouth pursed slightly. "I'm sorry, but I don't know, ma'am. With weather like this, it's unlikely that they'd be able to keep the runway clear enough for landing. In that event, the plane would be forced to turn around. So the airline has decided to delay temporarily."

"I'm sorry." Melinda smiled sweetly. "I don't mean to imply that you don't know how to do your job. It's simply urgent that I get there as soon as possible."

It was too far. She realized it the moment the words left her mouth. The woman's eyes narrowed slightly and she returned Melinda's smile. "Oh, I understand completely. I'm sure all the prospective passengers have very important business. Unfortunately, the weather doesn't take your personal affairs into account. We'll provide you with updates as soon as possible."

Melinda growled under her breath as she returned to her seat. A winter storm, sweeping the area, was bad news for more than just her flight. "Fuck," she muttered. Then again, with feeling. "Fuck."

-0-

Ashley rested her head against the glass window, watching the dark countryside roll by. It was uncomfortable. The glass was cold and bumped lightly against her forehead every time the bus's tires hit any irregularity in the road. She should just rest her head back against the seat, but she didn't want to. She didn't want to be lured to sleep by the rumble of the engine, as she always was on long drives. She didn't want to dream.

Snow was starting to fall. It was part of the reason she'd flown in from Salt Lake and then Montana, rather than Seattle. Google was a helpful thing, providing all kinds of weather reports and recommendations. The bus driver had assured her he'd do his best to get her as close as he could, regardless of the weather.

Of course, he probably said that to everyone. She couldn't imagine that driving a long-distance bus in Canada was a thrill ride of easy transport.

She sighed and then winced as the bus hit a pothole and her head banged against the window. Glancing at her backpack, she considered getting her phone out, but instead grabbed her composition notebook. She used to go through at least one every few months, filling them with doodles and rambling thoughts and daydreams. These days it had become less of a diary and more of a log book. Clipping her booklight to the cover and flicking it on, she started to leaf through the notebook, noticing her purple nail polish was chipped beyond all belief. It didn't seem to matter now, though. She was probably just on her way to her death anyway.
Skipping the page full of big block letters ranting about butterflies, she got to the part where she'd taken notes on the Flamethrower Guy's book. Maybe she should have given this to Sam too, but there was too much personal stuff in here. It would have felt to exposing, like she was stripping herself naked for her friend.

And, well, she liked Sam. Just not like that.

"Stupid," Ashley muttered, adjusting her fingerless glove where it caught uncomfortably on one of her rings. "Focus up, Ash. Jeez."

The guy sitting across the aisle shot her a curious look and she flushed, slumping down in her seat and pulling the notebook up to her face. Her eyes focused on the words and she took a deep breath, trying to get into puzzle mode. She'd always loved puzzles as a kid. Her mom hadn't had a ton of money, so instead of paying for ice skating birthday parties or whatever the other girls in class always seemed to do, she'd plan these elaborate parties with all kinds of home-made puzzles and activities. It was her favorite thing. And every birthday morning she'd wake up to a riddle tied up in red ribbon that would lead her to one of her little presents.

"Just like that," she whispered to herself. "This is just another riddle. Like a real-life adventure."

She wished she still had the Flamethrower Guy's book, but she'd taken enough notes that she didn't really need it. His whole selection of weird symbols were copied over, as were some of the long, hard to read segments. It had been oddly comforting in the aftermath of what they'd been through to forge her way through the codes and tangled thoughts of the guy. It had also felt like a tribute of some kind—after all, he'd kept Chris alive. Someone should know what he'd been working on.

And now it had a new kind of vital importance. If her dream had been a prophetic one, as she was sure it was, it meant her friends were in real danger, from something more aggressive and direct than anything nature could throw at them. It also meant that Josh was turning into one of those… things. Whatever they were. Monsters, she supposed, was the only certain word for it. Or maybe he hadn't started to turn yet, but only had the potential.

Or maybe he'd turned and she was too late and they were all already dead.

She shoved that thought away forcefully. If that was the case, there would be no point in dreaming about it, right? They'd never had visions of stuff after it had already happened. Then it would just be a memory anyway.

Ugh. Okay. She forced herself to read her translations again, looking for mistakes or some suggestion of what to do once she got there. The segment about the cure had seemed pointless before, but now…

A goddamned cure? All of this and there's a goddamned cure?

Fuckers don't deserve a cure. They got what's coming to them. Man doesn't eat man. It's an abomination. I'd rather die. Just let the hunger and the cold and the dehydration take me. Even if it didn't turn them into beasts, it would still drive a man mad. At least any man with any kind of conscience at all.

Can't even rightly say the cure is real. Just some nonsense muttered in someone else's stolen voice about blood calling blood and separating the monster from the man again.

I've seen the way their blood jumps from them once you get through their damned hide. Like it wants out of their chest. Especially if there's another of their kind around. Killed the one that
got out in the cells the other day and the blood spattered all the way across the hall and into the cell with #4. No right way it should have got that far. Should have just gone on the ground and the wall. That's what would have happened if it had been any kind of normal animal.

But then what's left behind? What keeps the man in them hanging on? They may be tougher than steel, but they're still mortal enough once you get through the skin. What would keep them living?

Wish I had more info but I'm not fool enough to seek it out. Not now, at least. That motherfucker in the mine wants me dead. More than that. It wants to play with me first. I might get more info from it, but it might get my head in the bargain.

That was the end of that passage. Ashley shut the notebook and propped her feet on the back of the seat in front of her. She wished she knew how long ago he'd written that, but he didn't date much. A few entries here or there had scrawled months or years, but the rest was just a timeless ramble. Was the thing in the mine Hannah?

A stolen voice. She shuddered. The cops hadn't believed her on that either. In fact, the woman she'd told that to had given her this pitying look that made her want to scream. She wasn't crazy. She'd heard Jessica down in the mines. Chris had told her that night that he'd had the horrible thought of her getting her head cut off. Obviously she still had her head, but she wondered if it was anything like the vision of Mike losing his fingers. If she'd followed her gut, gone to try to help Jessica when she heard her, would she be rotting in some forgotten corner of the mine now? Or be just bones left after a mimicking monster had eaten her?

Her head came up as a thought occurred to her. She'd had visions of her own on the mountain. It had caught her eye as she'd followed Sam and Emily down the tunnel, Chris limping after her. Her flashlight's beam had caught the bleached wood, the reddish paint. It had been smooth and hard, like petrified wood, although she knew it couldn't have been that old.

Josh. It had shown Josh, his face deformed and full of rage.

Oh god.

She hadn't thought about what it meant, especially afterwards, when Chris and the doctors and her parents and the cops had all seemed so sure he was dead. She should have known. She should have seen this coming. Tears stung her eyes and she rubbed her glove-covered palm over her face.

She opened the notebook again, to re-read the passage about the cure once more. There wasn't a lot she could do. She wasn't fit and stubborn like Sam. She wasn't strong and brave like Mike. She wasn't as determined as Emily or as loyal as Matt or even as confident as Jessica. She didn't know Josh like Chris did or the mountain as well as any of the Washingtons.

But she could do this. She could do puzzles. She pulled out the heavy volume on monsters and mythology she'd brought along and her phone, with its rapidly fading signal. She could research. She could figure this out. And she would get to the mountain with a plan. It might be a stupid plan that was probably going to get her killed, but it would be a plan. There was only one way to make this right, and she was doing it.

-0-

Something was dripping. It sounded loud and Jess flinched every time she heard it, half-expecting something wet and cold to touch her, but nothing did. The moon had gone dark, likely due to increased cloud cover. She passed a room with a broken window and felt a gust of freezing air and
imagined she could smell snow.

"Hannah? Are you there?"

There was no answer.

Jess sighed and shoved her hair out of her face. It was coming loose from its braid again. Finally she wedged the flashlight into her belt and pulled the hair tie free to rebraid it. If she'd known she'd be wandering a ruin, she wouldn't have gotten layers put in her hair. Oh well. Coulda shoulda woulda, as her mom would say. She scanned the darkness carefully as she did it. Hannah didn't seem aggressive, at least. That was good.

Maybe she should go back and find Emily. It wouldn't be too hard to pick her way back to where they'd been. The sanatorium wasn't like the mine. It was just a building, with a layout that made at least some kind of sense. Now, for instance, she was clearly in some kind of records room. A narrow staircase leading down was the only way forward.

So go forward or go back—that was the decision. Hannah had led her this way though, Jess was sure of it. She shone the flashlight down the stairs. It turned at a bend and she couldn't see where it went after that. Mike had told her about a whole basement level and she and Emily had seen a tiny portion on their way up from the mines, but she wasn't sure exactly where this led. He'd also mentioned a morgue, which she most emphatically did not want to see.

"Hannah?" she called down the stairs.

A soft sob answered her distantly. It was hard to pinpoint where it was coming from, given the weird ambiance of the room, but it seemed like it was coming from below.

"Shit," Jess muttered. There was her answer. Go forward or go back? Go forward, apparently.

The steps creaked under her feet and she made her way carefully down. It was colder and the walls transitioned from plaster and wood to cement. The stairs turned and proceeded down a bit further, before letting out into a large concrete room. It looked like it was probably supplemental record storage. One wall was lined with old oak filing cabinets that seemed to be in various stages of rotting.

"Han? Are you down here?"

There was no answer. Everything seemed muted at this level, as if the air was thicker. It reminded her of the hostile feeling she'd gotten from the old hotel, like the building itself hated her and wanted her gone. "Hannah? I want to help you, I just… where are you?"

Somewhere off in the dark, something fell with a thump and she jumped. Swallowing hard, she kept going.

As she passed through a door into the next room, something stirred in the dead air. It could have been wind from outside, but it would have had to come down the stairs and instead it came from her right. Curious, she shone the light around, trying to pinpoint where it was coming from.

A soft noise came from the darkness ahead, almost like a person murmuring, but for a moment, Jess decided to ignore it. The air against her face felt fresh and she wanted it. It was like being stuffed up from a cold and then having it finally clear. There was nothing but a wall.

Jess put her hand against it. It was cold, but it felt… she pushed, tentatively, and it shifted. She pushed again, harder. It definitely moved. Frowning, she slid her hand to the side and pushed experimentally, but the concrete didn't budge. She gritted her teeth and put the force of her body into
the shove. With a creak and thud, a narrow segment of the wall fell back.

More cold air hit her face and she breathed in deeply. She tucked the flashlight into her belt once more and grabbed the piece she'd moved. It was plywood, cut perfectly to fit into a barren, frameless doorway. Rusted, broken hinges on one side suggested that there was probably an easier way to open it than the brute force method she'd used. Jessica grabbed the edges of the wood, trying to keep from letting any of the splinters drive into her hands, and angled it to pull it out of the way.

Behind it was a small room, more of a closet than anything else. Snow drifted down lazily through a small grating in the ceiling above, leaving a slight white dusting over the floor. She scanned the room carefully. Why had it been hidden away? Had Hannah tried to lead her here? She couldn't imagine that was the case. How would she even have known it was here?

Simple shelves covered one wall, stocked with canned goods that looked older than she was. A filthy plastic tub held a bag of rice that still seemed good as well as a single copy of the *The Walrus*, dated from a few years back. Jess flipped through it briefly, then shut the tub again. This wasn't as old as the rest of the stuff in the sanatorium. Maybe it had been some kind of storeroom for that guy the others had met—the one who had died protecting Chris.

She turned, slowly, looking for anything else. The light fell on a strange contraption and she paused, then squatted down to get a better look. A large canister, like one that would have been attached to a grill, had straps on it and a second, smaller canister as well. The top had a hose leading to what looked vaguely like a pump at a gas station, only misshapen and oddly stretched.

"Huh." Jess lifted the pump-thing and turning it over. "What the heck are you, fella?" She frowned at it. It reminded her of one of the weird things her dad had put together in the garage, like some kind of makeshift weapon. She considered messing with the gauges and pulling the trigger and shook her head. That was a great way to get yourself blown up. "Okay. I'm coming back for you. Maybe."

She slipped back out of the hidden closet and looked both ways into the darkness. "Hannah?"

No one answered, no figure showed itself.

"Maybe I'm just going nuts," she muttered. "Great."

-o-

"Jessica? Jess! Where the fuck did you go?" Emily wanted to shout at the top of her lungs, but something held her back. She told herself it was that she didn't want to attract wild animals. And weren't voice vibrations sometimes what caused avalanches? She could have sworn she'd read that somewhere. If she was truly being honest with herself, she'd admit it was nerves, but she wasn't willing to concede that just yet.

She wandered down the hallway, shining her light briefly into each room she came across. Most were empty and dull, just desks and cabinets and the occasional bookcase. A few had papers scattered across various surfaces, but she had no desire to go poking through them. She wasn't Michael-fucking-Munroe, superhero detective man. All she wanted to do was find Jess and then find the others. They could get outside from here, she was sure, and then they could just follow the path down to the lodge. It would be cold as hell, but totally doable.

"Jess! God dammit, did you seriously get lost?" She stubbed her toe on a piece of broken tile and swore, shaking her foot. Bitterly, she knocked the broken tile out of the way with the side of her foot and glared at it. "Piece of shit."
The corridor was silent. The snow falling outside seemed to muffle things even further. Far off, down the hall, a door slammed. Emily jumped, then scoffed, shaking herself. Wind. There was always wind, right? The building was so broken, it was amazing there wasn't more noise, not less.

There were no ghosts.

When Emily was eight, her uncle had died. She'd been there, in the hospital room with him at the time. It had been simple, to her young self. He'd stiffened, then he'd relaxed. The constant beeps had stopped, easing off into a steady tone that was masked by her mother crying. He'd just been there. Then he'd been gone. It was straightforward. It was sad, but there was no mystery to it.

It was just her mind playing tricks on her. She was alone and looking for Jess and this place was creepy. That was all. It was guilt and loneliness and exhaustion.

She turned into another room, walking around the busted desk to peer out the window. The glass was so dirty it was hard to see anything. All she could tell was that it was still snowing.

Where was Jess? Had she gotten turned around and just missed her? Absentmindedly she fingered the radio on her belt and debated trying it again, but she really didn't want to hear more static.

A voice whispered over her shoulder: "All alone, Emily. You're all alone."

She held herself stock-still, as if she was facing down the wendigos again. If she didn't move, whatever it was that she was imagining would fade. The voice hummed contentedly and Emily flinched. "Oh Emily, perfect poised Emily… Are you afraid?" The voice, the absolutely-not-familiar voice, sharpened. "You should be."

Ice-cold fingers ghosted along the back of her neck and Emily instinctively threw herself forward. A laugh rang out behind her but she didn't pause, didn't turn. She hurdled the desk and was out the door, sliding slightly as she turned and headed down the corridor at a dead sprint. The laughter followed her, a low, vicious chuckle.

"Leave me alone, you stupid… nothing," Em spat back over her shoulder as she ran. This was stupid. She was running from nothing. There were no ghosts. Hannah wasn't here.

And yet monsters were real. She'd seen them. She had the scars on her shoulder to prove it.

"Fucking dead bitch." She leaped over the rubble again, glancing towards the direction of the stairway they'd first emerged from. No, that wasn't a viable option. It was probably still locked. In fact, now that she was being chased by something that was not a ghost, she realized that probably should have clued her in to something weird going on.

She skidded to a stop in the chapel. It was blown out but she realized now that's what it must be. Mike had done a number on it, but she'd heard his descriptions and it made sense. Central location, Flamethrower Guy's home base or whatever.

"Why are you running, Emily?"

Em glanced back over her shoulder and wished she hadn't. Hannah was ten feet back, clearly illuminated in the flashlight's pale beam. The girl smiled and tipped her head to the side. "All I ever wanted was to be your friend, Emily. Well, that, and to have a chance with the man of my dreams. But you couldn't let me have either, could you? Of course not." There was a flicker and Hannah's figure vanished, then reappeared five feet closer. "Let's be friends, Emily."

She wanted to do something, throw something, but what could you throw at someone incorporeal?
Instead, she did the only thing she could think of: she ran.

There was the room that led to the hallway Hannah must have come down, shoving the furniture. She went for it. Her lungs burned, her shoulder ached in its makeshift sling. She wanted Jess. Was Jess already dead? Lying in some busted up room in this god-forsaken place, torn to pieces by whatever Hannah was now?

She bit back a sob, stumbling slightly. Emily Davis did not fucking sob. There was a door. She threw herself at it, trying to open it, but it was bolted, perhaps from the other side. She should have paid more attention to Mike when he talked about this place, but after the incident with the gun, she'd had trouble even looking at him, much less listening to him yammer on when all she wanted was to take a valium and go to sleep forever.

Her light flashed around the hallway, searching for anything, any other way through and forward and away from Hannah. The beam caught the bright white of Hannah's shift at the other end of the hallway and a brief glimpse of her wide smile.

Emily threw herself at the door again and again. Then, finally, it shook in its frame. Desperately, she threw her entire weight into it, slamming her uninjured shoulder against the wood. With a shudder, the door gave, sending a shower of dirt into her face. She coughed, rubbing at her eyes with her sleeve and rushed out, shoving the door shut again behind her.

Muffled from behind the wood, she heard Hannah laugh again.

Emily looked around. She was outside. Or at least, sort of. Chain link and wooden beams made up a kind of hallway leading to another building, one an even bigger ruin than the one she'd just left. Snow was falling heavily, already covering the ground with at least a good inch.

She started forward, lifting an arm to shield her face from the wind and biting cold.

"Oh Emily?"

She didn't want to. She knew it was stupid. But she looked back.

Hannah smiled at her from the door. "I like that you closed the door. It was a nice, if naïve touch."

Ahead was the ruined building. It looked hazardous, even if she could get in. She'd be a sitting duck for this thing to keep taunting. Then Emily spotted a gap in the chain link. A ragged, wide open hole. She could get out and at least she wouldn't be stuck in a confined space. She could keep running, or find something, or... fuck, she didn't know. But anything was better than hanging out here with Hannah smiling at her like that.

She went for it, hoping she wasn't going to eat shit as she ran through the fresh snow. Her sling caught at the ragged edge of the fencing as she dove through the gap and she fell, hard, onto her side. The flashlight went spinning from her hand and landed out of reach.

"You're cute," Hannah said, walking carelessly through the opening towards her. Her feet were bare and filthy, but she seemed unconcerned by the freezing ground. "Adorable, even. I see what he saw in you, I suppose." She lifted her hand, bending and reaching towards Emily.

Em scrambled backwards, away from her and hit her back against something rough and hard. She grabbed at it, using it to help her shove herself onto her feet as Hannah continued to step slowly towards her. With her came the scent of lavender, sweeping forward and over Emily like a wave.

With a snarl that didn't seem to shake her smile somehow, Hannah threw herself forward, both hands
raised. Emily shut her eyes instinctively, flinching and waiting for the impact.

Hannah shrieked.

Emily's eyes sprang open again. Hannah was reaching for her, clawing at her, yet her hands seemed slowed somehow. It was like she was underwater, paddling desperately, but unable to move forward. Em watched her in shock. "I—" She shut her mouth and snatched the flashlight off the ground. The beam fell on a strangely shaped object covered in snow. It jutted from the ground, tilting at an odd angle, like an unfinished letter 'F.'

The girl was still struggling, snarling, trying to move forward and yet frozen in place. Emily scanned the ground and realized what she was seeing: graves. The first one she'd seen had been broken, but others were intact. Small, wooden crosses stuck up from the ground like parodies of flowers all around her. She'd even backed into one in her rush to get away from Hannah.

Hannah.

She looked back. Hannah's smile was gone, her face twisted into something ugly and inhuman. Her eyes were too big, her skin too sallow and tight across her skull. "You can't come in, Han. I guess you're not allowed."

It wasn't meant to be a joke, or even sarcasm, but Hannah snarled again, hissing. "You bitch—"

Oh, now that was a word that Emily had heard often. That was a word she knew how to handle, a word that threw her mouth into an autopilot of sass. She straightened herself, wincing as her entire body complained. "I might be a bitch, but you're just pathetic. You don't even know how to be a good fucking… whatever the hell you are now. God, Han. Just die already. Oh wait, you did."

Hannah straightened and considered her. Slowly, her smile returned. "You think you're so clever, Emily. You always thought you were so clever. Are you going to stay here forever? It's getting awfully cold."

"I'll be fine."

"Maybe. Maybe you'll live to see dawn. Maybe you'll sneak away while I'm distracted. After all…" Hannah cast her eyes back towards the building they'd come from. Emily's heart pounded and she fought to keep her face calm and disdainful. "…there was someone else with you. Someone who was all too eager to help a poor, lost, dead girl. I got bored of her and came to find you, but, well…" Her tongue darted out to lick her lips and her grin was wide and almost joyful. "So you just stay right here. Sleep tight. Maybe I'll bring Jess back here and make you watch. Or maybe not."

With a flicker, Hannah vanished. The smell went with her. Emily took a deep breath of the lavender-free air gratefully.

"Jess," Emily groaned. "Oh fuck, Jess." She couldn't leave Jess out there alone, prey to Hannah. The beam of her flashlight caught countless fat snowflakes, but no sign of Hannah. With a sigh, she passed the flashlight to her sling-bound arm and bit her lip. "I'm sorry," she muttered to whoever might be listening, then pulled off the hanging piece from the broken cross. She had no idea if it would work, but if had even a small part of the repelling power the rest of the graveyard did, she was damn well taking it with her.

She stepped carefully back through the gap in the chain link, braced for Hannah to appear and pounce on her. That would have been a valid plan. Threaten Jess and then just sit back and wait.

Actually, it wasn't. That was a terrible plan. Unless Hannah didn't know they weren't friends
anymore. It only worked if Hannah remembered them as they'd been last year, when Jess had been only too happy to loudly announce that they were "BFFs." It was like Josh's unfulfilled torture scenario they'd found, she realized as she approached the building again. The prank he'd planned didn't work if they hated each other. They'd shown up at the lodge bickering and Josh had been truly upset. It was why he'd sent Jess and Mike off to the cabin and hadn't fought her going back to the cable car to look for her bag.

"A bag I never found again," she muttered bitterly, trudging through the snow with her hand on the wall. She'd loved that thing.

But what it all boiled down to was this: did Hannah have any memory of the last year? Did she remember being a monster?

Was she dealing with the ghost who remembered the taste of flesh? Or was she dealing with the ghost of a girl she'd tormented and, ultimately, gotten killed? Her stomach twisted and she fought down the surge of nausea that always seemed to accompany thoughts of Hannah and Beth's deaths. Hannah may have technically survived the night of that stupid prank with the camera, but really she'd died with Beth. It just took her longer to go.

So which ghost was it? And, really, which one frightened her more?

She took a deep breath and opened the door. Or she would have, but it was locked from the outside. She swore wildly and looked around. She'd have to find another way in. A corner of the chain link was curling up from the ground and she bent to crawl awkwardly through it. Fresh pain shot through her shoulder but she ignored it.

Snow soaked into the knees of her pants and the elbow of her jacket. Her hair caught on the wire and she tugged her head free mercilessly. There was no time to linger. Not when Hannah was going after Jess with purpose. What had she said? "A poor, lost, dead girl." That was the game she was playing. It made sense. Trusting bleeding-heart that she was, Jess would fall for it hook, line, and sinker.

She skirted around the edge of the building, turning off her flashlight so it wouldn't shine through any of the windows and attract Hannah's attention. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust. It was easy to follow the wall, but the snow was coming heavily enough that it was hard to make out anything more than ten feet away. For the second time, she wished she'd paid more attention to Mike's description of the place. How had he gotten in? She vaguely remembered something about a window into the basement. That seemed like a terrible plan, but everything about this seemed like a terrible plan, so she wasn't going to complain.

Fine. She was going to complain. Just later. At great length.

Emily glared at the little window. It was like the cable car station all over again, with Matt bugging her to weasel her way in. She wished he was there. She missed him, missed his smile, his steady presence, the way he hadn't demanded anything from her or tried to push her into doing something she didn't want to. "Reminisce later," she scolded herself.

The snow soaked into the butt and thighs of her pants too as she sat down and eased herself through the window. She could deal with cold. It was the damp that bugged her, making her pants cling to her legs and making her skin itch. She dropped as carefully as she could but still hit harder than was pleasant, her bones jarring uncomfortably.

She held herself stock-still for a moment. The darkness in here was different than the dark outside: thicker and richer, with shadows that were all too easy to imagine as Hannah waiting to grab her. Slowly, her eyes adjusted once more. She kept the turned-off flashlight in one hand, the makeshift
graveyard club in the other.

She was going to get through here and she was going to find Jess and they were going to get the fuck out of this stupid fucking sanatorium once and for all.

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How in the hell was this lower level more confusing than the upper one? Jess turned in place, trying to orient herself. She should have marked her way with chalk, but it had seemed pointless. It was just a building. It was supposed to follow rules and logic. Yet somehow, she'd gotten all turned around down here. All the rooms were starting to look the same, smell the same, and feel the same.

She picked a doorway and headed for it, shining her light ahead of her. Something flickered across the room and she stopped in her tracks. "Emily? Hannah?"

It flickered again, like an old film reel coming to life, and Hannah appeared. Her shoulders sagged and her head hung low, hair falling around her face in a limp curtain.

"Hannah? I was trying to find you."

"Why?" Hannah lifted her head, her voice cracking. Her eyes were red, as if she'd been crying for a long time. "Why would you look for me?"

"Because I—I'm so sorry for what happened. I know that's not—but I want to help you now. How can I help you?" Hannah turned away slowly, towards the dark beyond. She began to walk away, bare feet making no noise on the floor. "Hannah, wait! Please. How can I help you?"

"I'm lost," the dead girl murmured, her words trembling. "I can't find my way home, Jessica. I can't find my way." Her shoulders shook and she wrapped her arms around herself. Her nails, clearly visible against the white of her shift, were black and torn. This room smelled different than the others. Over the baseline of wet cement and rusted metal and rot was an undeniable layer of lavender. It was disorienting, clearly out of place in this building of death and old memories.

Hannah turned back and reached out a hand towards Jess. "Help me, Jess. Please."

"Of course. What do I do?"

Chapter End Notes

Coming soon: Where is our beloved technophile? Certain big scary monsters are getting tired of watching. It's almost time to play.
Stay With Me

Chapter Notes

This chapter kind of got away from me and ended up much longer than I initially expected. Go figure - when you actually plot stuff out, it gets looooooong. And even so I decided not to include everything I planned.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jessica followed Hannah. She wasn't sure if she was being led back to the stairs she'd come down or deeper into the basement level, but didn't question it, instead keeping her flashlight fixed on the ghost girl. As they entered another room, a large chamber with its walls lined with shelves and work tables, Hannah paused and sagged again. She turned back to Jess, covering her eyes with a hand.

She and Hannah had never been close, by any standards. They'd hardly even been friends really. Josh and Sam had been the unifying force that entwined the group, pulling all their disparate lives together. Truth be told, Jess knew that she was the most disconnected of all of them, but she never minded. In the early days, she'd had Em and Matt and then later she'd had Mike. There was always someone to talk to, someone to flirt with. Even Josh was fun in his own way, with those shadowed eyes and wicked wit.

So she had no idea how to handle Hannah. She wasn't sure they'd ever had a real conversation, even, just brief exchanges about beer or the pool or some random piece of clothing. Once she'd picked up on Hannah's crush, it had been fun to get her to blush with comments about Mike, and then there was the disastrous prank, but she had no idea what to do with this. How did you comfort a dead girl? How did you even interact with a dead girl?

But Hannah was dead. And that, really, was her fault. So she would try. Matt always said she was a good listener. She would try that. "What is it, Hannah? What's wrong?"

Her voice shook, as if she was on the verge of tears. "I'm all alone here," she confessed.

"What about Beth? If she di—I mean, isn't she around here somewhere?" Oh, very smooth, Jess. Good show. She wished it was true, though. Jess had always liked Beth. She was calmer, always welcoming.

Hannah's facial expression flickered and an emotion Jess couldn't identify washed over her face. "Beth?" she whispered, her voice not matching the movements of her lips.

"Yeah? Is she around too?"

"Bethhh—" The word was long and drawn out, creeping through the air and wrapping around Jess until she felt dizzy. "Why would perfect Beth be stuck here with me? It'd be heaven for her, where she'd read all day and lie with Sam in the sunshine." Hannah's voice was bitter, lonely—things Jess understood all too well.

Jess leaned against the wall, letting her head settle again. Then she took a deep breath. Maybe she could do this, after all. She could help Hannah. She could do something to make coming here worth it. Standing straight, she walked towards the girl. "I know about being alone, Han. But you don't
have to be. I'm here. Let me help."

Hannah's disembodied laugh rolled over her. "You don't know about being alone. You're Jessica Riley."

"Yeah, I do. Everyone is lonely sometimes. And everyone is alone sometimes. Some more than others. I don't know about this—" She gestured around at the cold, broken room. "—but I do get being alone. And rejection. And missing people you care about."

She reached out and took Hannah's hand. Immediately, she wished she hadn't. The girl felt like ice, or colder than ice. It was like being naked in the snow all over again, only all of it concentrated into her fingers. Her hand jerked instinctively away but she couldn't pull back. Hannah's fingers felt soft, almost nonexistent, except for the intense cold of it.

"You want to leave me," Hannah's voice hissed, her had raising to stare at Jess. "I knew you would."

"No, Hannah." She squirmed, trying to pull her hand away while reasoning with her. "No, it just hurts. I'm not leaving."

"You want to leave me!" she repeated. "After everything, you want to leave me too!"

"Hannah, no." Her bones ached with cold. It was biting, brutal, seeping up her arm into her wrist, her forearm. "Please, Hannah. I'm not leaving. It just hurts."

The dead girl's eyes were fixed on her face. "Stay with me," she whispered. "Stay with me."

Familiar pain pulsed in her head and Hannah's face swam in her vision. The whole room was tilting dizzily around her. Maybe Emily was right and she'd been stupid to come here with her head still a mess. Who was she fooling, anyways? She could feel her own weakness in the pit of her stomach. All she'd done so far was get them lost in the mine and then trapped here with Hannah. She had even wandered off on her own. She'd found a weapon and been too scared to even try it.

Jess closed her eyes against the tears that threatened. She remembered Emily's expression, the cold, shuttered look in her eyes after Jess had done something stupid on that long-ago night after winter formal. She remembered seeing Beth vanish into the snow as she chased after her sister, fleeing Jess's vicious laughter. She remembered finding out that Emily was dating Matt, the way Em had shut the door in her face when she'd shown up at Matt's house.

The sensation in her hand was fading, the pain spreading up her arm further. Her elbow seemed to creak with cold, her skin burned with it.

"Stay with me, Jess?" Hannah's voice broke. "I'm all alone. But together, we don't have to be."

The idea was increasingly tempting. There was so little Jess could do to help her friends, but if she stayed with Hannah, it would be what she deserved. Hannah wouldn't be alone and Jess… she could finally do penance for all her stupid, impetuous decisions. She had killed Hannah, really. It was only right that she should be the one to help, to assuage her loneliness at least a little.

"We don't have to be," Jess repeated, softly. "Stay with me."

"Stay with me." The cold was oddly sweet. She tried to wiggle her fingers against Hannah's and couldn't feel them. That was nice too. Her shoulder ached, the freezing cold creeping along her collarbone towards her throat and down across her ribs. She swayed slightly in place, waiting.

Ready.
"Get the fuck away from her, you ghost bitch!"

Jess's eyes sprang open just as something dark came sweeping down onto Hannah's arm. It passed clean through, but Hannah hissed. She wasn't stuck anymore, Jess realized, stumbling back numbly. It was hard to focus, to bring her attention back to what was happening around her.

"Came out of your hidey-hole?" Hannah's sing-song voice was full of laughter. It sounded weird, like a totally different person than the one who had been so desperate only a moment ago.

A figure shoved in front of her, one arm holding a club of some kind. "Fuck you."

"No thank you. You're not my type. You know my type, though, don't you?" Hannah, a blur identified only by her white shift, paced back and forth in front of them, like a restless animal.

The figure scoffed and Jess suddenly recognized it as Emily. "Get over it. Jesus, bitch. It's been more than a year. Move on already. Find the great beyond or whatever." Angry Emily. Angry Emily was a bad Emily, Jess thought dully. Angry Emily was good at being mean.

"Why would I? I have both you of you right where I want you." Hannah giggled and vanished in a flicker.

Cold. There was so much cold, everywhere. Soft, nearly insubstantial fingertips ghosted along Jess's face, pressing closer and closer to her temples. She wanted to move. She didn't want to move. Hannah was lonely. Hannah shouldn't be lonely. She let her eyes flutter closed again.

"No!" Hands that seemed fire-hot in comparison grabbed her wrists, tugging her forward. She fell away from Hannah's grip and heavily into Emily's arms. "Come on, Jess. We have to run."

"Stay with me," she mumbled. That was important. An important thought.

"No, stay with me. Shit. Run." And then she was stumbling along, being pulled behind Emily. Her legs were moving, somehow, although she didn't seem to have much control over them. Her eyes focused on things randomly as they ran: splintered wood, broken bricks, a staircase under her, shattered glass, Hannah's drawn and angry face, Hannah's tearful eyes, Hannah's grasping hands, Emily's back, snow, and dirt.

Emily stopped abruptly, pulling Jess around her and shoving her forward. Jess fell to her hands and knees. Cold. More cold. But this cold was wet and real.

Rolling to her side, Jess blinked up at the snow falling on her face. Her whole arm hurt. She lifted her hand and wiggled her fingers in front of her face, wonderingly.

"Get back from the opening," Emily snapped.

As quickly as she could, she obeyed, shoving herself backwards awkwardly. Then Em was beside her, standing stock-still and staring out. Jess shook her head, trying to shake the fog that had crept over her. They were… outside? Snow was already thick on her legs and shoulders. She looked around. It was dark and odd shapes loomed out at her, but didn't move.

"Where are we?"

"Some kind of graveyard." Em didn't look at her, still watching a gap in what seemed to be a chain link fence. "Hannah can't get in here for some reason."

Hannah. "Oh Em. She's so alone."
"Good."

"You don't mean that. You don't understand. She's so lonely."

Emily spared her a glance, her mouth pressed into a thin line. "So, what, you were going to die and be a ghost with her?"

"No—yes? Maybe." Jess rubbed her head. "I don't know."

They were silent, waiting. They didn't have long to wait. With the distinctive flicker Jess was coming to expect, Hannah appeared, her face fixed in a wide smile. "Hiding? Cowards." Her head turned to Jess and tipped to the side. "I thought you understood."

"I… I do."

"No, you don't. Shut up, Jess," Emily glared at Hannah. "Back off. You can't get in here."

"No?" Hannah's smiling gaze slowly turned back to Em. Her eyes fixed on something behind them and, if possible, her smile grew even wider. "But maybe you shouldn't be in there be either."

"Souillure," something hissed softly, drawing out the sibilance of the word as Jess imagined a snake would.

Emily spun, lifting the wood over her head like a club. Climbing to her unsteady feet, Jess looked back too. There was no one there. At least no one she could see. After talking to Hannah, though, she wasn't going to take anything for granted. "Hello?"

"Show yourself!" Emily called in challenge. Behind them, Hannah giggled and there was the sound of hands clapping together excitedly.

"Saletés et blasphèmes…" The voice swept around her and Jess turned, trying to follow it. It made her slightly dizzy and she forced herself to stop and stand still. Emily waved her club menacingly. "Me comprenze-vous, fille?"

Jess suddenly wished she had taken French instead of Spanish. Fille meant girl, but the rest of it was totally lost on her. She glanced at Emily, who was glaring around at nothing in particular. "It's really goddamn rude to not even show your face," Emily snapped. She backed towards the chain link, then seemed to remember Hannah and stopped in her tracks.

"Verlaussen," it said. That was German. She didn't speak German either. Fuck. With a casual flick of its hand, Emily went flying. She slammed into the chain link, sending rippling shakes along the length of it.

"Em!" Jess scrambled over, pulling her away from the fence and Hannah, who was running her finger along the chain link and humming softly. They stumbled back into what Jess now realized was a graveyard, wooden crosses and small stone markers jutting out of the ground at irregular spots.

"You are a child." The voice said in heavily accented English. "You understand that, I think."

Emily bristled. "I am nineteen, you unbearable asshole."

"A child." The snow was still falling steadily, piling on her shoulders and hair. Emily pulled away from Jess and took a blind step backwards. Jess grabbed her and stopped her from moving, looking at Hannah's wide, waiting smile.
"Um, we're very sorry for intruding, but can't we please just stay here for a little while? Until she leaves?" Jess tried to look disarming. The trick, in her experience, was to look helpless and slightly dazed. At the moment, it wasn't hard. Her head still spun and she clung to Emily as much for support as to keep her from leaving.

"Déchets d'esprit," it spat.

Jess peered into the darkness. She thought she could see it, a cutout of darker black against the night, a place the snow didn't touch. "It's not mad at me? Why isn't it mad at me?" she muttered to Emily.

"Because you did your stupid Disney princess fainting thing and it feels bad for you," Em snapped back.

"Because she does not desecrate," it said simply. Then it was there, next to Emily, a cutout silhouette of a person, reaching out with one hand towards her face.

Emily yelped and ducked away instinctively, hopping across a grave.

"What did you do, Em? Fuck, what did you do?" Jess tried to think, tried to piece it together, but her brain wouldn't work. There were too many missing pieces. When did Emily desecrate a grave? How did she manage to piss off this… whatever it was so badly?

"Oh! Um…" Emily glanced at the club she still held and bent to wedge it into a crevice on one of the broken crosses. "I'm… sorry? Sorry. I didn't think, I just…" She floundered around for an apology. Jess would have laughed if she wasn't so worried that the thing was going to keep going.

The silhouette was perfectly still for a long moment, then inclined its head slightly and vanished. Hannah screamed, the sound ripping through the air. "No! No, no, no, no, no!" The girls spun to face her as she threw herself against the invisible barrier. "You're mine! You're both mine! I waited, I deserve it. Don't leave me out here all alone!" The energy fell out of her and she collapsed back, staring at them with reddened eyes. "Jess, please? I thought… you promised."

"I—"

"She's not yours," Em said fiercely, shoving in front of Jess. "You can't get in here, Hannah."

The ghost girl straightened. "Maybe not. But you can't stay in there forever either." She smiled. "I'll see you both soon."

With another flicker, she vanished. They were, from all they could tell, utterly alone in the small, snowy graveyard.

Jess looked at Emily. "Um… so what now?"

-o-

Cold, dry fingers touched Sam's cheek and jolted her awake. She sat upright, looking around wildly. "What is—" Josh was squatting in front of her, his hand still outstretched.

"Sorry Sammy. Had to be sure. Had to be sure you were really here."

There was movement in the corner of her eye and she glanced at Mike, who was approaching slowly, and shook her head. "I'm really here, Josh. How are you feeling?" His eyes shifted to stare at something over her shoulder and she looked back. Nothing was there. Taking a deep breath, she took a chance. "It's not real, Josh. There's nothing there."
He twitched and then smiled at her brightly. "Sammybird. Like a canary in the mine. Ha!" His laugh was hoarse, more of a bark than anything. "And you're blonde too. How nice of you to match the theme. Means I don't have to bleach your hair. It would be tough. As you can see, there's no reputable salon down here."

She wanted to scream. She'd known the pills wouldn't be an instant cure—she'd told Mike as much yesterday—but she'd hoped there would be some improvement. Yet Josh seemed just as out of it as he had the day before, babbling and uncertain.

Abruptly Josh sagged back and flopped down to sprawl on the ground. He was so thin it was painful to see: his collarbones stood out and his jaw looked sharp enough to cut. He closed his eyes and began humming softly, waving his hands lazily above him as if conducting an orchestra in his own mind. After a moment, Sam recognized the song, out of tune as it was. David Bowie. Kooks. That was one of Melinda's favorites. Sam had a distinctive memory of Melinda singing it while she cooked.

"...'cause we believe in you..." she sang along, quietly. Josh's hands stilled and he cracked an eye open to peer at her. She couldn't read his expression.

Mike approached slowly and crouched down next to them. "Hey, Sam? We should probably... the thing we talked about yesterday?"

Her stomach reminded her loudly. Food. They needed food. She nodded. "Yeah. Do you mind—would it be totally stupid to give him what I have left?"

"If you didn't suggest it, I was going to. We could go a few days without. It would suck, but it's doable. Him, on the other hand..."

"'Him' can hear you!" Josh called out in a sing-song voice. "Him is in the room and is tired of people pretending like he isn't!"

Sam tugged her pack into her lap and opened it, rummaging in the bottom for the food she'd brought. They'd gone through a bit of it, but she still had some. She retrieved the remainder of her bulk trail mix and various dried fruit leather and power bars. "Josh, we have some food. It's not much, but hopefully it'll help while we go—"

"Go?" Josh sprang to his feet so quickly it made both of them jump. "You can't go. Don't go, Sammy. Don't go. You can't leave me here. Don't leave me again. Please don't leave me again. I don't want to be alone in the dark any more. And I can't tell. Are you real? You always leave when you come here. Don't leave me." His words were almost incoherent in their rush.

"No!" Sam stood and grabbed Josh's hands, bringing him to a standstill. She squeezed them tightly. It was like the old days, when she would try to get warmth into his hands. She rubbed her thumbs along his palms in the old, familiar pattern. "We're going to come back. I promise. Here." She pressed another pill into his palm and handed him the canteen. "Take this. Eat what I have and rest. We're going to get more food and we'll be back."

"More food? Real food?" If he'd been a dog, his ears would have perked up, but he didn't look happy and eager. He looked ragged, ravenous, dangerous. It took every ounce of willpower Sam had not to shrink back from him.

She nodded. "Yeah. We were going to go explore and see what we can find. Do you know—do you know where your family might have stashed some canned goods or other stuff that would have kept? Like emergency ration-type things? We thought we would look in the lodge—"
He frowned, expression petulant and stubborn. "No."

"Liar," she said with a little smile. "You forget I know you Josh. I can tell when you're lying to me."

"Not always."

Snorting, she grinned at him, trying to get him to smile again and engage. "Always. Like the time you told Melinda that Chris ate the last blondie, because you knew she wouldn't get mad at a guest. Didn't think I knew about that one, did you? I could always tell when you were full of it."

He didn't smile, just watched her seriously. "Not always, Sam," he repeated softly.

The intensity in his face made her even more uncomfortable than the violent hunger. She forced a smile and pulled back, grabbing her hat off the ground. "Just take the pill, okay? And stay here. We can find you. We're marking our way so we don't get lost. We'll be back as soon as we can."

Without another word, Josh turned away and dropped to his knees beside her small pile of vegan offerings. He downed the pill and then grabbed the first item to wolf it down.

Mike stood and cleared his throat. "Uh… not too fast, man. If you eat too much too quick, you might get sick."

Whether Josh was going to listen or not, Sam didn't want to waste time.

Now that they'd found the elevator shaft, both of them had a much better sense of where they were. They made good time, carefully marking their path and making their way to the passageway into the old hotel. Here and there they saw more green and blue marks and their excitement grew with every one they found.

"How did they end up in the mine, though?" Mike asked as they entered the old hotel.

Sam shrugged. "No idea. But we'll ask them when we find them." She grinned at him. Just knowing that they survived the rock slide at all made her feel infinitely more hopeful.

"If they haven't killed each other first."

She laughed. "I mean, maybe, but with Jess, I doubt…" She broke off. That wasn't really any of her business.

"Doubt what?"

"Nothing. Just… a theory I had in high school. Doesn't matter. I wonder if they kept marking their way in here too. That would be nice."

But they saw no markings as they picked their way through the old hotel and directly to the lodge's unfinished basement. Sam led them to the staircase up to the house. "Okay, so no promises," she told Mike as he followed her up the crumbling stairs. It was bizarre being back, and on such a mundane errand. She remembered stumbling down these exact steps in just her towel, heart going wild in her chest.

She didn't realize she'd paused until she felt Mike's hand on her back. "Hey, are you okay?"

"I—yeah. Sorry. Just… stuff, you know?"

"Stuff?"
"Josh stuff."

"Oh," He was quiet for a moment, then asked hesitantly: "Do you want to talk about it? I know... I mean, I heard you didn't really talk about it much. Afterwards."

She shook her head firmly. "No, it's fine. There's no point in obsessing about it. Just Josh getting too into his own brain and a prank that just got way out of hand and—"

Mike interrupted before she could babble on. "Sam. Stop. Look, I know the bare bones of what he did and... it's not okay. No matter what. It's not okay that he did that to you. Or Chris or Ashley. He was your friend. There's no excuse."

"He's sick, Mike."

"I don't give a shit if he's sick," he snapped and she looked at him, startled. His face was fierce and furious. She'd almost never seen Mike look so angry. Mike didn't do angry. Mike did confident and brash and joking and, yeah, sometimes he did mad, but he never did furious. Only when he'd thought Josh had killed Jess. That was the only other time she'd ever seen an expression like this on his face. He met her eye and looked away again, rubbing the back of his neck. "Look, I get that he's sick. I'm glad you have meds. I hope they work and I hope we can save him and I hope we can bring him down off this godforsaken mountain. I do. But it doesn't excuse what he did."

Sam didn't know what to say. "He—"

Mike shook his head, interrupting her again. "Stop making excuses. I know he's your friend, Sam. I'm sorry. I don't mean to be an asshole and I know I end up being an asshole, like, 99% of the time anyway, but still. If you want to forgive him, that's fine, but, as you so eloquently yelled at me in the mine, 'don't pretend like you're fine.'"

She laughed and she punched his shoulder lightly. "Turnabout's fair play, I guess."

"I'm just saying—"

Now it was her turn to interrupt. "I know. Thanks. I appreciate it." He gave her a disbelieving look and she smiled. "No, really. I appreciate it. It's just, I feel guilty about leaving him here, and what he did to Chris and Ash was so much worse, that I just... I have to get over it."

"Why?"

"Why? Because we have to move on, right? There's no point lingering over stuff that happened in the past. Mistakes were made. Now we fix them." She turned to keep climbing.

Mike followed. When he spoke, his voice was quiet. "I hope you know it's not a contest though."

"What do you mean?"

"You said that what he did to Chris and Ash was worse. That doesn't matter. It's not a competition for who suffered the most. You don't have to medal in it to feel bad or be messed up from what happened."

The door at the top of the stairs was shut and locked. It shifted a little when she shoved it, though, which was promising. If it was blocked, it wouldn't move at all. "Here," Mike said, stepping up next to her. "Let me be good for something." He put his shoulder into it, slamming into the door with a heavy thump. It took two more tries before the handle gave with a cracking sound. The wood, made brittle by its month of exposure to winter weather, splintered around the lock and Mike half-fell
through the doorway into the space beyond.

He preened, flexing his biceps. "For I am Mike, the human battering ram. All doors tremble before me!"

"Nerd."

"Human battering ram," he corrected, grinning.

"Okay, fine Captain Human-Battering-Ram. I am duly impressed by your ability to be less breakable than the door you ran into. Shall we?"

They could see the destroyed front of the house, the blown-out windows and blackened, unstable staircase. Sam was tempted to try to climb them, to get back to Beth's room, but the memory of Josh's desperation and starvation kept her focused. They picked their way through the destruction to the kitchen and began searching the cupboards as quickly as they could.

"Did the Washingtons have a dog?" Mike asked, turning to show Sam the canned dogfood he'd found.

"I think they used to, but it was a long time ago. I am not eating dogfood, Munroe."

"I wouldn't dream of suggesting it. It has meat in it anyway. Dog wasn't vegan, apparently. Slacker."

On a partially broken rotating shelf in a corner cabinet, Sam found a few bulk boxes of cans. She sorted through them eagerly. Garbanzo beans, black beans, refried beans… certainly not glamorous food, but better than nothing. She ducked under the ruin of the sink, searching for plastic bags or anything they could use to hold the cans.

"Here, I'll do that." Mike scooped up the food, packing them up for easy transport. "There's a lot here. I was worried."

"Look around and see if you can find more. I'd bet this wasn't their only stash of cans. They probably have other stuff and anything that isn't moldy is worth taking. I'm going to go check the bathroom. See if I can find any bandages or towels or anything we can bring for Josh." She crept down the hallway. The house groaned around them, complaining at every slight wind. The beams that had been so beautiful, so carefully chosen to fit with the lodge's Craftsman style, now seemed ominous, as if they could come crashing down on her head at any moment. In another month, Sam thought, the house would be entirely unstable. The Washingtons would have to take a wrecking ball to it and just start new if they wanted to stay up here ever again.

Somehow she doubted that they would try.

The guest half-bath was inaccessible. Part of the ceiling had fallen and blocked the door. It was possible she could get in from the outside, but there were other things to check first. The full bathroom down the hall had seen broken plumbing of some kind. The walls were wet and mold was growing visibly in the corner over the shower.

She sighed and ducked down, using her head lamp to illuminate the cabinet under the sink. Jackpot! A brown plastic bottle of rubbing alcohol. She laughed at herself. What was her life that she was thrilled to find rubbing alcohol? It wasn't the most useful item in the world, but it was helpful. With Mike's pack missing and her own meagre first aid supplies dwindling, anything to supplement their supplies was worth its weight in gold. Josh had more than a few cuts and scrapes himself, from what she'd seen. When they got back, she'd have to try to get him to let her patch him up.
Sam froze. She knew that noise. *Don't look, Sam,* Beth had said. *Something old. Something bad.* She straightened. Turning as slowly as she could, she braced herself for whatever she might see. It was probably nothing, she thought. She was just tense and ready to be scared.

There was nothing there. The window was filthy with soot and dirt. She took a step closer, peering through the glass. The haze on the window turned the dark, snowy woods outside into a dreamscape. A hellish one, crusted with filth and memories.

She listened, waiting for the tapping to continue, but there was only silence in the bathroom. Shrugging, she ducked back down to rummage for anything else. A box of bandaids was waterlogged and useless, though she found a stack of spare towels that, while a little dusty, seemed usable enough. She scooped them up in one arm and grabbed the glass bottle of rubbing alcohol.

*Tap.* She whirled and still saw nothing. It was just her imagination getting to her.

Sam crossed through the hallway to the other side, scanning around for dry blankets. The huge living room was freezing, open and exposed to the elements. Snow drifted in to settle on blackened rubble that was once couch or armchair or something. She glanced up the stairs. The temptation to climb them was strong, to try to trace the route she'd used to follow Beth's ghost or memory or whatever it had been.

There could be all kinds of supplies on the upper floors. She knew that, but if she was being honest with herself, that wasn't why she wanted to go. She wanted to be back in Beth's room. She wanted to pretend for a moment like Josh wasn't rapidly turning into a monster somewhere below them.

"Hey Sam? I found some tablecloths and stuff. Would that be good?" Mike's voice from the kitchen broke her out of her reverie. Going upstairs would be stupid. It was lucky enough that she survived climbing them the first time.

She headed for the kitchen, passing through the dining room. Leaning in the doorway, she smiled at him. "Yeah, it couldn't hurt. More cloth, right? I wish we could get him some new clothes."

"Maybe the coat closet is intact?"

"Maybe. I'll go check."

*Tap. Tap-tap. Tap.*

Mike seemed to notice that she froze. He frowned. "What is it?"

"Do you hear that?"

"The tapping sound?"

The window that looked out over the back blew inward. Mike threw himself to the ground instinctively, throwing his arms over his head. Sam dropped the bathroom supplies she'd found and covered her face, shielding it from the broken glass.

*Tap.*

The tapping sounded different, wood instead of glass. Her head jerked up. A monster, bigger than Hannah had been, hung through the window, tapping one claw like fingernail on the window frame. Its fierce, rictus grin was full of amusement. "It's—very nice—to—meet you—Sammy." The voice
was broken, pieced together from others' voices, familiar and unfamiliar. Mostly, though, it borrowed Josh's words, stringing them together in a new order for a new meeting.

Mike stood slowly. He was closer to it than she was and she saw his eyes darting between her and the thing and back. She wanted to shake her head, to signal to him to stop, but she was fixated by the thing's eyes on hers, holding her in place like a rabbit in headlights. Mike lunged for it.

One long, talon-fingered hand shot out and caught Mike in the chest, sending him flying. He tried to catch himself, turning, but only succeeded in his elbow and forearm cracking against the island. It sent a shattered piece of wood up to tear a jagged gash along his face as he fell. He was on his feet again as soon as he landed, staggering around to try to get a handle on the situation. Fire. It was like the wendigos from before. That meant fire was the best option.

He groped in his pocket and pulled out his lighter. It didn't seem to mind, or at least it didn't realize what it was he held. Its head swung between Mike and Sam, who stood frozen. Mike grabbed a broken table leg and tried to light the splintered end. It didn't want to catch. He wished he had time to tie some cloth around it or something, but... His eyes fell on the bottle of rubbing alcohol.

Grabbing for the bottle, the thing lunged at him, springing up to land on the island. It laughed at Mike: a startlingly human laugh that made his stomach seize up.

"Hey!" As he unscrewed the cap quickly, he saw Sam running.

The blonde girl swung her flashlight at the back of the thing's head, just as Mike had done to Josh so recently. It glanced off and the thing turned, jumping back down off the island and straightening. Her eyes widened as it stretched upwards. It was easily seven feet tall when standing straight and it towered over her, even as hunched as it still was.

Its cheeks split as it smiled, wider than any human could smile. Its teeth were long and sharp and seemed too crowded to fit in its mouth properly, like a shark. Fumbling slightly, Mike doused the wood with alcohol and dropped the bottle. Then it lunged, one hand shooting out, grabbing her around the neck.

Sam didn't even have time to yell. She just made a faint gasping sound as it threw her through the wall. Plaster flew everywhere, sending up a cloud of white. The table leg went up in a crackling rush of flame. With a shout, Mike threw himself forward, not thinking. He shoved the makeshift torch into the thing's face.

It growled and brushed the torch aside, knocking it out of his hand and onto the ground. It caught in the remnants of the spilled bottle of rubbing alcohol with a whoosh. Clearly the creature hadn't been expecting that; it hissed at the fire as it spread to the broken furniture. Then it turned back to Mike and rushed forward, grabbing at him and ramming him hard into the brick partition.

It smiled. Emaciated cheeks pulled wide, revealing sharp teeth. They were tinged the brown of old blood or rust. "You're," it said in Jess's unmistakably bubbly voice, "cute."

Mike flinched and its smile widened. It reached out and ran a rocklike nail down his cheek, catching at his open wound. "I see," it said in Emily's bitter tone. "What she saw," the voice was Hannah's. "In you," Sam concluded.

"Don't," he said, closing his eyes. He couldn't bear it. He'd rather die than listen to it stealing their voices, pretending to be them.

"Can't stop, man." It was easier to handle with his eyes closed. He could listen to it transition from
Chris to Matt to someone he didn't recognize and hear how the words didn't match. It was like listening to an automated message system on a phone line. The words made sense in order, but the tone and mood didn't fit. "Won't ever stop, bro."

"Why?" He didn't want to know, but he had to ask. "Why are you doing this? Why not just eat us? Why would you—Sam—"

"Sammy, Sammy, Sammybird," it parroted back in Josh's voice. Then it shifted to someone Mike didn't recognize. "Dull. Alone. Bored." The nails trailed down his nose and along his jawline. They were sharp. Any pressure and it could kill him easily. He tried not to move. "We can always grab dinner later, darling." The unknown woman's voice was posh and flirtatious.

There was a wild snarl from the right and the thing hissed loudly. Mike's eyes sprang open just as it was torn away from him and flung backwards. Josh landed in front of him in a crouch. "Go," Josh choked out, his voice barely recognizable.

"No way. Sam would kill me if I—"

"Jesus fucking bicycle bunny Christ, Munroe. Get your ass in gear!" The thing threw itself forward and Josh launched himself at it. "She'd kill you—for trying—to fight—this thing!" Josh spat the words between growls.

Mike was brave. He wasn't stupid. He ran, bolting for the hole in the wall left by Sam. He had to find her, get them both away from here. Behind him he heard Josh and the thing hissing and snarling as they engaged. He paused, glancing back. The thing had at least a good fifty pounds on Josh. It was taller, broader, although wiry. Josh was focused on it completely, dodging its swipes and using his momentum to propel himself around and under it. His face was twisted and as inhuman as Mike had ever seen it, yet he had still had enough presence of mind to send Mike running.

As if sensing his thought, Josh caught his eye and jerked his head towards the hole in the wall. Mike went, hurdling the pile of rubble and landing in a shower of pebbles on the other side. He looked around wildly. Where was Sam? She should have landed somewhere out here. The fire was catching, spreading. What was it with him and property damage? Smoke poured from the hole in the wall.

"Sam?" He rushed further into the yard, scanning for any sign of her. His eyes watered from the smoke and he fought off a cough. He needed to find her and get them out of here.

Sam stumbled through the smoke, coughing and trying to blink the spots out of her eyes. Everything blurred and slid together. Snow drifted down onto her skin. "Mike?" She groped along the wall, holding herself upright. There was no sign of him.

The last she'd seen, he'd been trying to light as she'd gone through the wall. Her entire body ached. It was hard to move her head and her left hip was a blaze of agony. Where was Mike? He would have been no match for a thing like that, alone and unarmed. "Mike!" The name tore from her like a howl of agony, ripping along her throat painfully. "Mike?"

She spun, trying to orient herself in the smoke and snow. Something warm was creeping slowly down her forehead and she rubbed at it before it could hit her eyes; her hand came away red with blood.

A figure approached through the smoke and she froze, unsure whether she should run towards it or away from it. But then the wind picked up momentarily and the smoke parted. "Sam—Sam I'm
here," Mike ran the last few steps, catching her up in a hug that lifted her off her feet. Her body complained at the treatment, but she ignored her aches and pains. He was alive.

Her eyes devoured his face, dimly noting the shoot streaking his face and the open cut splitting along the side of his face. He looked awful: tired, ragged, and in pain. But he was alive. It was enough.

"Mike?" Her hands found his chest, his shoulders, his face. She ran her fingers through her hair, ghosted them along his injured cheek. "You're alive. I thought—I was trying to—" His hands were on her too, running up her arms, over her shoulders and throat. It was the most beautiful thing she could have asked for: assurance that he was alive, that she was still alive, that this nightmare could continue. There was hope, as long as they could keep breathing.

As long as she didn't lose him. As long as she wasn't alone.

"Shh…" His thumb brushed her lower lip. "Sam, it's okay."

"I thought you were dead. I saw you with that thing and then the fire started and I just thought—" His eyes were so warm, a rich brown like the damp, fertile soil from her garden back home. Home.

He shook his head. "No, it's gone. I didn't know, though… It threw you and then the wall and the fire… I was worried that—" He started to laugh. It was infectious. The sheer joy of being alive, of finding each other in the smoke and escaping that thing swept them up, holding them somehow above the reality of what was happening. It was ridiculous, laughing at a time like this. Some small part of Sam's brain reminded her that they were still in danger, but she couldn't listen to it.

And then she was kissing him. Or perhaps he was kissing her. His lips were chapped and tasted of blood and concrete. That same joy that led to their laughter coursed through the contact. Her fingers tangled in his hair, pulling him down into her. His hands were on the small of her back, drawing her in, closer, desperately pressing her against him.

Her entire body sang with adrenaline and something more, her blood burning in her veins. They stumbled back slightly until her back met the bark of one of the birch trees. He pinned her against the rough surface. His body was hard, hot, real against her and an involuntary sound—something close to a moan—was pulled from her throat.

The wind was rising, tugging at their hair and clothing, bringing with it the acrid tang of burning rubber.

He pulled back slightly. "I—" He laughed again breathlessly. Sam looked up at him; he looked stunned, lips slightly parted and eyes wide. "Um—"

Sam shoved him back, taking a shuddering breath. "We need to get out of here."

"Sam, I—"

"No. I… We'll… we'll talk about it later. We need to move. This is unsafe. There might be more." She took another deep breath, trying to kick her mind back into gear, to pretend that hadn't just happened and focus. "Where did it go?"

Mike looked around, but there was no sign of Josh or the thing that had attacked them. "I don't know. Josh, he—He's why I got out. He must have followed us. Or followed the chalk markings to find an exit and then found us. He was fighting it. It was stronger, I think, and bigger. Josh is faster though."

She blanched. Josh was fighting that thing? He might be turning into a monster, but there was no
way he had the strength or health to even stand a chance against it. "We have to—" She started to turn, to scan the ground for any track or sign of where they'd gone, but Mike caught her arm.

"No, no, don't. I bet he led it away from us. He'll catch up. I know it. Sam, he made me run. He's still Josh, somewhere in there. That means he's smart. He can lose it. We should get out of here though. He'll find us."

She cast one more desperate look around, but nodded. Even that simple action made her head and neck ache and she knew she'd be feeling even worse tomorrow. If they made it to tomorrow. She wanted to talk to Beth, to ask her what she knew about the thing that had attacked them. It was like the wendigos, but bigger, smarter. Remembering its smile made her skin crawl.

It could be anywhere. It could have killed Josh and be on its way back to them now.

The fire was dying out again, from a combination of the dirt and snow that had been thrown onto it from Josh's fight with the thing and from a lack of easy, dry fuel. Mike stooped down and grabbed the bag of canned food. Neither spoke, both too paranoid about seeing the thing reemerge from the woods again. They left through Sam's hole in the wall exit again, winding their way around the side of the lodge.

The sun was coming up, turning the world shades of grey and pale blue, despite the remaining heavy cloud cover. They could still smell smoke. The woods were almost ominously silent, save for the crunch of their feet in the snow. No birds sang, no rustles in the underbrush signaled rabbits or deer. It was good, Sam told herself. It meant that if the thing came back, they'd hear it right away. All the same, though, she could feel the wrongness of it under her skin. Even in the winter, there should be something.

She tossed her head, shaking off the most recent layer of snow. She realized they hadn't talked about where they were going. The thing could be anywhere. Going back in the mine seemed especially stupid, since that seemed to be where all the other wendigos had seemed most at home. But her bag was there with their remaining supplies. They still didn't know where Emily and Jess were, and now Josh was missing again too.

Fuck. The word didn't make it past her lips but she must have made some sound, since Mike slipped his free hand into hers. He didn't speak, just squeezed her hand.

She clicked off her headlamp, pulling it from her forehead to shove into her pocket for safekeeping. The sky was light enough to see that the note they'd left for the girls was still on the front door. She couldn't imagine they would have put it back, which meant they hadn't been here. She glanced at Mike and he smiled reassuringly. "We know they made it, though," he reminded her.

She took a deep breath and nodded. "Okay. Back to the mine? Or the old hotel? Our options are increasingly limited."

Running footsteps crunched rapidly in the snow behind her and Sam jolted, spinning and raising her hands defensively. Warm arms tackled her, sending her staggering back a foot. "Sam! Oh Sam, it's so good to see you!" Jess's voice was muffled against Sam's coat.

"Jessica? Holy shit!"

Emily was just behind her. She wasn't as exuberant as Jess, but she was smiling, relief evident on her face. "It's really good to see you guys," she said.

Mike went to hug her, then hesitated. Emily raised an eyebrow at him and he waved awkwardly
instead. "I'm so glad you guys are okay," he said, hefting the bag of canned goods and towels onto his hip. "We—ah—we should move, though. Reunion party later. Something… we have a lot to tell you guys."

"Us too," Emily said shortly.

Jess pulled back from Sam and hugged Mike tightly. "Okay, yeah. Good idea."

-o-

Chris didn't often miss landlines, but he really wished he could slam the fucking phone down on its fucking cradle. There was something deeply unsatisfying about touching the screen to hang up on someone.

Or, not someone, as it turned out, since no one was answering their god damn phones.

He let his head fall to rest on the wheel of his truck. Ash was gone. Marie had said she'd packed up and headed to the airport. Her letter was shoved in his pocket, a crumpled mess. She'd gone back. He'd thought she'd agreed with him, had seen that it was all just some trick their minds had played, but she'd gone back. And now she was putting herself at the mercy of the mountain just to… to what?

Sam hadn't answered his call, which he'd expected. He knew she'd already gone and he knew the mountain had no signal. After scrounging around, he'd gotten Mike's number and Emily's, but they didn't answer either. Ashely's number had rung for a minute before ending. She was screening his calls. At least that meant she was still somewhere where her phone could get calls at all.

The car, turned off and parked, was getting hot. He raised his head and looked up at the house. He didn't want to be here. He hadn't been here since before they'd gone back for their disastrous reunion. He and Josh had played video games in the media room and snuck beers. Josh hadn't let him in his bedroom, which had been unusual. Only in hindsight did Chris consider what that might have meant, what parts of Josh's horrible plot he might have seen if he'd gone inside.

But the Washingtons were his last shot, short of flying up there himself.

Without thinking about it, he scaled the gate, not bothering to buzz. It was an old habit and he regretted it the moment his feet hit the pavement on the other side.

Climbing back felt even more embarrassing, so he trudged, red faced and frustrated, to the front door and hit the bell. After a few minutes, he hit it again.

Finally, Mr. Washington opened the door, leaning on the edge of it heavily. He looked bleary and more than half asleep, his eyes red and out of focus. He smelled unwashed, as if he hadn't showered in a few days. "Yeah?"

"Uh, hey, Mr. Washington. It's me, Chris."

"I know who you are, Chris. You've been at my house since you were eight."

"Yeah… sorry to come over unannounced. I just was wondering if Sam or Ash—Ashley—came by recently about going back up the mountain—"

"Oh for fuck's sake. It's all anyone ever talks about. Mel never shuts up about it. So she went. The other girls probably did too. I don't know."
Melinda too? "Mrs. Washington went to the lodge?"

Mr. Washington blinked at him, then turned to go back into the house. "I don't know. She'll be back soon, I'm sure. She's always flitting around like a butterfly." He vanished into the house, heading towards the living room and leaving the door hanging open.

Chris hesitated, then crept in after him, shutting the door with a click. He stared after Mr. Washington, then glanced around. The house looked largely unchanged. It was hard to believe that he'd been here less than three months ago. The house was quiet. In the living room, he heard a television going, playing what sounded like old episodes of the Twilight Zone.

He climbed the stairs. He wasn't sure why. Every step made his heart sink a little further, his stomach knot up a little more.

Josh's door was shut.

He opened it.

His parents hadn't touched a thing. The room was a disaster, but it was a Josh disaster, where everything was an inconsistent level of clean and organized. The bed was made, but there were clothes all over it. The desk was neat, but the bookshelf was almost unusable, with every nook and cranny jammed with books and magazines. Josh had still lived here, while he went to school. USC was close enough that it made sense to live at home. That, and his parents had insisted on it.

Josh had hated that. "I'm not a rabid dog," he'd told Chris furiously after he'd found out. He threw a tennis ball at the wall with increasing force, catching it on every bounce like he was Steve McQueen waiting out his cell time.

"They know that."

"Fuck them."

"They probably know that too." Josh had thrown the tennis ball at him. Chris caught it, barely.

They'd hung out in his room for the rest of the night, smoking pot and re-watching Cowboy Bebop, skipping through the bits they both agreed were boring. Josh had grabbed Akira too, but that's where Chris drew the line. Josh might have called him a pussy for it, but he didn't like all the weird body expansion and gore. It wasn't a problem in live action horror, but something about the animated version made his stomach heave.

Now Chris turned away, shutting Josh's door behind him. Unbidden, the memory of washing Josh get cut in half flashed through his mind and he groaned. Stupid fuck. Josh was always like that: pranks that went too far, jokes that went on too long. He just never would have thought Josh would do that shit to him. He wasn't even part of the fucking prank on Hannah. He was too busy being passed out in the kitchen with the man himself.

But now they'd all gone. They'd all left him. Even Ashley, who he'd been so sure would stay.

He leaned against Josh's closed door, staring across the hall. Was it true? Was he the crazy one in all this? He remembered the Flamethrower Guy, the nearly-hairless beast that had killed him and almost killed Chris. The things in the lodge tearing each other to shreds. But monsters weren't real. They just weren't. They were for video games and novels and shitty SyFy channel movies and badly dubbed anime. They weren't supposed to show up at your friend's designer vacation home and tear your life apart.
Josh.

His friend.

Could he still be alive? It had been more than a month, but from what he'd seen of the mine, it wasn't impossible. Especially for a savvy dude like Josh. He'd seen vermin down there and water. It would be freezing, but that could be dealt with.

Oh fuck. He was doing this. At the very least, he was going to go drag Ash back kicking and screaming before she got herself hurt. He would bring rope and tie her up if he had to.

And if he happened to find Josh alive and coherent, well… he could always punch him again.

Or hug him.

Whatever.

Chapter End Notes

Holy shit! Actual, real, badly-timed smooches!

Also other stuff.

Leave a comment and feed a starving writer. Or don't, but know that they're always appreciated and fawned over for hours on end (not exaggerating. I seriously read them a million times and get happier and happier every time.). <3
Catching Up

Chapter Notes

Oof. Sorry for the super long delay. That was not what I wanted at all, but this has been a rough two weeks. Next update should come much quicker.

I ADORE YOU ALL, by the way. Getting the comment or kudo notification just completely makes my day and I read them over and over again.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"We have to go get it," Mike said, springing to his feet.

Jess tugged him back down again. The four of them were sitting in the generator shed, sharing their stories. Mike and Sam had provided the bullet points of their adventure so far, including finding Josh and being attacked. Neither had mentioned the incident in the yard, skipping straight to the others finding them.

Jess and Emily recounted their trek through the mine, Emily's arm, the old hotel, and Josh's trap. They seemed uncertain, even cagey, about the story after that. They'd gone to the sanitorium and gotten separated. Jess had found the guy's cache. That's where the story derailed completely, as Mike eagerly jumped on the mention of the weapon. "I don't even know if that's what it was. I'm not exactly an expert on flamethrower technology, you know."

"Yeah, but if that is what it is and it still works? We need it. You guys didn't see the thing that attacked us. It was big. Scary big. Sam?" Mike looked to her for confirmation.

After a moment, she nodded firmly. "Yeah. We need it. Even if it doesn't work, you said there was rice down there? We need that. Who knows how long we're going to be up here."

"But…" Emily's voice faltered and she and Jess shared a glance that Sam couldn't decipher. "It's dangerous up there."

"You said that before. What's so dangerous? I mean, it's probably unstable like the lodge, but what else makes it so scary?"

"Um, yeah. Unstable. It's just in really bad shape. And there were animals and stuff. Like this wolf that—" Jess caught Emily's glare and fell silent again.

"A wolf?" Mike perked up. "Was it white?"

Jess bit her lip and nodded unwillingly.

He whooped, making all three girls jump slightly. "Shut up, Mike. You want to bring the thing back?" Emily snapped, kicking him in the shin.

"Ow. Sorry. But that's awesome! I love that guy! Or girl, I don't really know. We should definitely go get the stuff. I can look for my buddy too."

"I fucking knew it. The second you said 'wolf,' I knew he was going to be running off into the stupid
snow to find it," Em glared at Jessica, who shrugged helplessly. She turned to Mike instead. "That is a terrible idea. It is a wild animal. You think it's going to remember you? After everything that happened?"

Sam sighed and rubbed her eyes. They needed a plan. They needed a better plan than just stumbling through the woods and hoping for the best. They needed their supplies, a safe place to hole up, and a way to find Josh. If she could just think for a moment, she was sure she could come up with something, but her exhausted brain just jumped from one random thought to another. For fuck's sake, she was having trouble even looking at Mike without blushing. Her body ached from being thrown through the wall. Her head was killing her. She was hungry. All she wanted was to curl up in a bed they didn't have access to and drink a soy hot chocolate she couldn't get and listen to the Goldberg Variations with the big cushy headphones she'd left in her dorm room.

But none of that helped her now. So a plan. A plan was necessary.

"Okay," she said finally, putting a halt to the wolf debate. "We need to go get our supplies from the mine. We need to find Josh and a new safe place to sleep. And, if possible, we should try to get the rice and, if it works, the flamethrower. Who wants to do what?"

"Flamethrower," Mike said, raising his hand. "I can try to find it by directions if no one wants to go with me."

Sam shook her head. "No. No one should go anywhere alone if we can help it."

Jess raised her hand tentatively. "I'll show him." She met Emily's fierce gaze with one of her own. "It'll be fine. We'll get it and the rice and then meet you guys somewhere."

"So that leaves Em—want to go with me to get the stuff from the mine?"

"Not really, but I'm don't think that's really a question. How do you know the thing that attacked you guys won't be down there? Aren't all these wendigo things totally at home in the mine?"

"I don't. But I remember seeing something in Flamethrower Guy's journal about them being largely nocturnal. If—when Josh gets away from it, I think it'll probably retreat to eat or rest or something. And at the very least, we really can't afford to leave the stuff down there. We need supplies. And the meds."

"Meds?"

"Long story. I'll tell you on the way." Sam took a deep breath and looked around the small group, trying to look confident and resolute. "Okay. So now all we need is a place to meet up. Easy."

Emily scoffed. "Easy? What about that is easy? The sanitorium is a disaster. This place is tiny and we'd be trapped here if it attacked us. The guest cabin has all the broken windows and the lodge is a mess. Where are we supposed to go?"

"The cable car station?" Jess offered.

Sam considered it, then shook her head. "We saw it after the rockslide. It's not stable. It could collapse down the mountain at any second and if the storm keeps up, it might."

"I know it's not ideal, but what about the old hotel?" Mike asked quietly. "It's big and stable. There's places to hide and we could probably reinforce some areas to keep that thing at bay. We might even be able to get the cameras working if we're really lucky. And I know Josh could find his way there if we left the right clues for him."
Emily climbed to her feet and brushed at the dirt on her pants. It made no difference Sam could see, but it seemed to make Em feel better all the same. She reached out a hand and hauled Sam to standing. "Let's go then. I don't want to be in the mine any longer than I have to be. You two take the aboveground route to the sanitorium and we'll meet in the old hotel. We can shoot for the stupid Psycho room. At least we've all been there before." She shot Mike a dirty look. "And this time there will be no 'let's shoot Emily' debate."

She turned on her heel and left, gesturing for Sam to follow her. Sam glanced at Mike and tried to smile, but it felt more like an awkward grimace than anything else. He flashed her a quick smile back, just a little quirk of the lips that seemed oddly sad. Then she followed Emily out into the snow towards the lodge.

As they neared the building, Emily hung back to let Sam take the lead. They walked in silence, both on edge at the slightest sound, but didn't see anything as they made their way down through the basement and into the tunnels. Sam clicked on her headlamp and frowned at the mine. When this was all over, she was never going underground again, spelunking be damned. *If you make it out alive,* murmured a little voice in her head. Gritting her teeth, she kept walking.

It was odd being with Emily after so long with Mike. She didn't know her very well and had no idea how to talk to her. Dozens of questions battled for Sam's attention, begging to be asked, but the thought of breaking the silence of the mine made her nervous. Then a question occurred to her that was too important to let lie. "Have you been able to get ahold of Matt?" she asked softly, shining her light around the tunnel until she spotted another chalk arrow marking her path with Mike. The mine was quiet, save for its usual ambient soundtrack of drips.

The other girl shrugged and nodded. "After the rockslide. Actually, it was only a little bit after we talked to you guys. There was a lot of static, but it worked. Have you not talked to him?"

Sam stared at her. Her brain was still moving slowly, struggling to put things together, but she could feel the wrongness of Emily's words under her skin. "A little bit after you talked to us?"

"Uh, yeah?" Emily frowned at her. "You know, right after the rockslide. You told us to meet you at the lodge? We could only hear every few words, but it was definitely you."

"Mike lost his pack in the rockslide."

"So?"

She could hardly bear to say it. "Our radio was in his pack."

It took a moment for the thought to land, then the other girl went pale. "Fuck," she said, voice shaking slightly. "Oh, fuck."

Sam swallowed hard. "Okay. Um… okay. Nothing we can do about it now. That just means… We can't use your radio any more. Or we can't trust anything that we hear from it. It must have the radio. It was pretending to be me. Does that mean… were you even talking to Matt?"

"I don't know." Emily tapped her fingers on the radio clipped to her belt nervously. "It sounded like him. But I think we have to assume it wasn't him."

"But no rescue vehicles yet. So Matt didn't tell anyone."

Emily straightened. "Then it must have talked to him too. Matt would have sent in people if he thought we were real danger, which he would have if he hadn't heard from us. Fuck. It's fucking toying with us. Just keeping us up here and isolated so that it can have more fucking fun." She
looked furious. Sam had the distinct impression that she was about to cuss out the darkness loudly. She grabbed Em by the elbow, shaking her head warningly.

"We have to keep going. We need to get the stuff and get out of here. We can figure things out then."

Emily opened her mouth to argue, then nodded sharply. "Fine."

They didn't speak as they continued to follow the chalk marks. It was surprisingly easy to navigate the mine with directions like that. In fact, coming back made Sam feel like she could probably navigate well even without the chalk. She had no desire to put that to the test, though.

The pack was where she'd left it, as was a lot of the food. Josh hadn't eaten all of it, having either decided to follow Mike's advice or having been distracted into following them to the lodge. She shoveled the small pile of remaining food back into the bag while Emily wrapped up the sleeping bag as best she could with one arm still bound in its sling. The journal went into the front pocket and she buckled it shut. The bottle of pills was still in its place and she allowed herself a sigh of relief. She hadn't wanted to think about what she would do if they were gone.

"Ready?" Emily held the sleeping bag hanging from her good arm. Her face was drawn and tense. Sam wanted to ask her more about what she and Jess had found, to get the details she knew Em was leaving out, but there would be time for that later.

"Yeah." She started to turn, shouldering the pack, then she realized—how could Josh find them again if they left? He was still so out of it, it was unlikely he'd figure out they'd relocated. He'd be convinced they were a dream or something. And she had to get him more of the medicine, bring him back to lucidity, so they could figure this out. "Wait a sec, Emily. I have an idea."

Sam pulled out her chalk. She had told Josh—We'll come back. We're marking our way so we don't get lost—and he must have followed the markings at least once, to find them in the lodge. She didn't dare leave clear marks this time, not when they were being hunted by something smart enough to cobble stolen words together into whole thoughts and use the radio, but she could leave a clue. A clue that hopefully Josh would understand and the other wendigo wouldn't. Maybe it couldn't even read. She wasn't willing to chance it, though.

The chalk was nearly ground to nothing by the time she was done. Emily pursed her lips, but didn't say anything, instead surveying the tunnels and openings around them with distrust.

"Okay. Now I'm ready. Let's go."

Em nodded, once. They went.

-o-

The snow stung her face as they trudged along, boots sinking into the fresh snow with every step. Jess felt herself growing increasingly tense the closer they got to the sanitorium. She cast a nervous glance over her shoulder at Mike, who smiled reassuringly. It was small comfort, though. She doubted Hannah would be any nicer to her because he was present. She'd probably be nine thousand times worse.

It was hard to keep from looking at him repeatedly as they hiked along the path. After so long separated, it felt weird to be with Mike. She missed Em's scowl and snarky insistence that she wasn't afraid of anything. After her fourth or fifth look back, he finally spoke up. "Okay, I have to know. What's wrong?"
"Nothing."

"Liar. What's got you so freaked out?"

She floundered about for a reason he'd believe. "Just an unstable building and the mountain is creepy and—"

"Hey." He grabbed her arm to slow her down and tugged her to face him. "Come on."

"Um…" She felt stupid. He was going to laugh at her, but she couldn't deny that he deserved to know. "Ghosts." He didn't say anything, nor did he laugh. Instead he just frowned, brow furrowing.

"Whose ghost?"

Really? It was going to be that easy? "Hannah's."

"Oh."

Jess turned her attention back to the trail and tried to explain, the words coming with stumbling hesitancy. "Em doesn't want to believe it, although how she could not believe it at this point… She knows it's Hannah. She's just being stubborn. It was Hannah and she… she's crazy, Mike. Like, super crazy. She wants to kill us. Em and me, at least."

"How do you know she wants to kill you?"

"Because she tried to do it. She tried to kill me. Or, I guess, she tried to get me to let her kill me? She was—she's broken. She's all alone up here." Her heart ached at the thought. She still wasn't entirely convinced that she should be standing here, alive. Maybe if she'd let Hannah kill her, had overruled Em's insistence on staying alive, then maybe this would all be okay. Or at least marginally less hopeless. Maybe Hannah would be at peace. She deserved it, after everything.

He cleared his throat awkwardly. "Not all alone."

Shooting him a look, she scoffed. "Right. Because crazy-monster-Josh is great company. Or company at all."

"Why didn't you tell us before we split up? Sam would want to know this."

"Because I didn't think you guys would believe me. Shit, Em doesn't even really believe it and she saw it all with her own two eyes. Of course, she's so deep in denial it's amazing she doesn't drown, but still."

"You should have said something."

She nodded. "Yeah. I know. And, hey, look… I don't know what we'll find when we get up there. Hannah had us trapped in this little graveyard that she couldn't get into for some reason—I was not about to question it—and then she vanished after a bit. Then the sun started to come up and we just decided to make a run for it. She didn't show up when we were heading for the lodge. I'm not sure if she was busy or what. Maybe she's not a fan of daylight. That's a thing in ghost stories, right?"

Mike shrugged helplessly. "No idea. I'm kind of out of my depth with monsters, let alone ghosts."

"Right? This was not in my post-high-school plan. But I'm not sure if she'll still be up there or what she'll do. So let's just get in and out as quick as we can."

"Yeah. Good plan. Then we can get to the old hotel and find the others." They resumed their trek.

Somehow, she found his agitation reassuring.

They saw no sign of Hannah or the wolf as they approached. In fact, they saw no animals of any kind or, thankfully, the wendigo. They dropped down through the window to the basement and made their way through the obstacle course of rubble in silence, Jess leading the way as best she could. Finally they reached a room she recognized and she looked around, trying to pinpoint where the fake wall had been.

"There," she said, pointing.

Mike shifted the wall piece and rested it to the side. He squatted down to examine the contraption. He nodded to her. "You were right. I think it is a flamethrower. Not an official one, but maybe one he made himself. Like a backup. I think—" He twisted the valve on the tank and sniffed at the nozzle, then made a face and twisted the valve the other way. "Yeah. Gas. It probably still works. Or it might explode. Either way, it'll be useful."

"Hey, just because you're into blowing things up…"

He looked wounded and pressed a hand to his chest. "I do not like blowing things up."

"Then why was the lodge on fire?" she asked sweetly.

"That was a tactical move. And not an explosion."

"All the same, I'll be taking this, thanks. I don't want you to get trigger happy, Mister Pyro."

He sighed and helped her put it on. It was lighter than she'd expected. Mike shoved the bag of rice into Jess's pack and nodded to her. "Let's go."

After a brief debate, they decided to go through the tunnels to the mine to get back to the old hotel. They climbed back up to the main floor and made their way to the back stairs. As they headed back down, something occurred to Jess. "Oh, uh. I think the door might be sealed."

"Sealed?" Mike gripped the handle and pulled. The door opened with a screeching groan.

"Or not. Never mind. When we first came out here, the door shut and then we couldn't get it open."

She thought about Hannah's wicked smile and her stomach clenched painfully. "Probably just weather-related. Metal got too cold or something."

He did not look convinced.

"So…" she said as they headed into the passageway. "You guys found Josh."

Mike grunted in affirmation. "Sort of."

"Sort of?" Mike and Sam hadn't said much about it during their lightning round catch up. Just that they'd found him and that he was pretty out of it, but that he distracted the monster when it attacked them.

"He's loopy. Super out of it. Hallucinating and everything, just like before. And, well, he's… um…"

He made a face. "Turning into a monster?"

"What?!" Jess swatted him on the arm. "Why didn't you tell us? Holy shit, Mike. That's huge!"
"I didn't know what to say. It didn't feel like my place, I guess. I figured Sam—" He broke off and sighed, running his hand over his face. "I don't know."

She frowned. "So, wait, what does that mean? Is he, like, hungry for human flesh? But he helped you. But the wendigos are evil, right? Can he still talk? Does he sound like other people?" Jess could hear herself starting to babble and bit off more questions. Mike wouldn't meet her eyes and was fiddling with the straps on her pack, looking pained.

"No, he's… he's just like he was. Nuts. Hallucinating and babbling and stuff. Sam got drugs from Dr. Hill that should help, but he's only taken two so far. He's sort of feral, but also kind of himself. It just depends. I don't know. Sam… she thinks there might be a cure. I guess there's something in that guy's journal." He shook his head. "I don't know. But I know that we have to try, right?"

"Sam thinks there's a cure? What is it?"

"Ask her." His voice was clipped, unexpectedly abrupt.

Jess narrowed her eyes. She knew Mike. She fancied she knew him pretty well, actually, and this was weird. Everything about this was weird, of course, but especially the way he was talking about Sam. Like he wanted Jess to drop the subject and never bring it up again, ever. And that, quite frankly, was bullshit. "Okay, Hot Stuff. Your turn. Out with it. What's eating you? And I don't mean the monster stuff. You're being weird." He wouldn't meet her eyes and she almost smiled. Suspicion confirmed. "Seriously, Mike. Tell me."

He rubbed the back of his neck, flushing slightly. Jess cuffed him lightly on the arm again. "You're blushing. Oh my god, Mike. You have to tell me now. Don't make me pester it out of you. You know I can, too."

"You really want to do this now?"

"Hey, we might be dead in another half an hour. At this point, I want any joy I can possibly get, and a blushing President Munroe is the best thing I can think of at the moment. Well, besides a cheeseburger and a hot shower."

He looked awkward. "It's nothing."

"It is not nothing. I can tell it's not nothing."

"I'm an idiot."

"I knew that. That's not something new."

"Gee, thanks."

Despite the revelation about Josh, Jess giggled and adjusted the flamethrower's tank on her shoulders. It was heavy, but the weight was reassuring. It was a weapon. She liked weapons. It made her feel more confident and capable. She wanted to try it, to watch flame tear apart the cool air, but she knew she should save the fuel. Who knew if there was more up here? "Come on," she wheedled again, batting her eyes at him. "What did you doooooo?" She drew out the last word, waggling her eyebrows playfully.

"I… I kissed Sam." The words came out in a rush and he covered his face with his hand.

She stared at him. That was not what she had been expecting. "You what?"
"Don't make me say it again." His voice was muffled. "I'm such a fucking idiot. She's never going to speak to me again."

"You… kissed… Sam..." Jess burst into laughter. "Oh my god—"

Before she could say anything more, there was a low *hoowuff* from the tunnel and they both turned. The wolf was watching them, its mouth hanging open in a canine grin.

"Wolfie!" Mike squatted down and opened his arms, as if expecting the wolf to throw itself at him in joy. Instead it trotted over and sat about a foot away, tail thumping slightly on the ground. Mike laughed. "Fair enough." He reached out and let it sniff his fingers. "It's really good to see you, dude. You're looking well. Handsome. Dapper, even. Good show."

"You are such a fucking dork, Munroe. Has anyone ever told you that?"

"Almost daily," he said, smiling at her. The worries weren't quite wiped from his face, but he looked decidedly more at ease scratching the wolf's ears. "Do you want to come with us?"

The wolf stood, expectantly.

Jess settled the flamethrower more firmly onto her shoulders. "Alrighty then. To the old hotel. And wait until you see the hot springs. I think we could all benefit from a bath, don't you think, Wolfie?"

---

Josh was dreaming.

Or, actually, he wasn't sure. It felt like a dream. A nightmare, really. Sort of. He was strong and fast and hungry – so, so hungry – but there was something bigger, stronger, hungrier behind him. He could hear it coming, though it made little noise. His ribs stung from where its claws had gouged him and he could feel a thin trickle of blood running down the side of his face. The familiar scenery of the mountain flashed around him as he bolted, leaping to climb across the shed where he'd faked his death, then down and around the back, through the trees, past the guest cabin, and on.

It was like when he used to imagine being Spiderman, except without the web shooters. He darted past Chris, who gave him a dirty look. Yeah, yeah. It was a thing he'd been corrected on before: in the original comics, Peter Parker built the web shooters himself. They weren't part of him. No, wait. Chris wasn't there. He glanced back, but saw no sign of the blond, bespectacled kid. Or was he? Had he left with the others? Was he here with Sam? Was Sam here?

The thing that was chasing him snarled and he let that line of thinking drop. The sun was coming up now, the forest brightening, even as snow continued to fall. It was cold. He knew that objectively, but it was also easier to ignore now than it had been only a few days ago. That was interesting. A good thing, maybe. Or not. He leaped, throwing himself up into a pine tree and sending snow flying. He was getting tired. That always seemed to happen when the sun came up. Or at least, he thought it did. It was hard to tell if the sun was up when he was in the mine.

The mine.

He could go back there, but the thought made his skin crawl. He was out. He was finally out. The air seemed impossibly crisp and clear, flavored with pine needles and wood and just a hint of smoke from the lodge.

A shout that was half-whoop, half-shriek ripped from his throat. It was delightful. He was finally free. He could go anywhere.
He could hunt.

The thought came out of nowhere—a gentle whisper in the back of his mind. He could find prey. He was strong now. He was fast now. There were animals. There were… other things. He ran the tip of his tongue over the sharper of his teeth and smiled, then his stomach heaved with revulsion and he shook his head.

What the fuck was wrong with him?

Josh looked back, but there was no sign of the beast that had been chasing him. Sometime during his wild, joyous, terrified run, it had stopped following him. He stopped abruptly, clinging to the log he was on with fingernails that seemed overlong. His mother would be ashamed of him. He should find some nail clippers. Where did the thing go? He had the nagging sensation that he'd seen the monster before, though he had no idea where or when, or even if the sensation was a lie. Maybe it just reminded him of the monster Hannah had become.

Where had it gone, though? That was the pressing question. Had it gone somewhere to sleep? Or eat?

Food, the whisper came again. Hunt.

No—he yanked his thoughts back to the present. Yeah, he was starving, but why did thoughts of food consume him? For a moment, he thought he could smell blood again. Blood. Like Sam's blood. The rich, metallic tang of it had set all his senses on fire. Coupled with the scent that always seemed to cling to Sam, it had been almost intolerable. Sam had smelled like dirt and rocks and blood and metal, but under that he could still make out the old, familiar Sam: that unnamable distinctive scent that reminded him of coffee and daffodils and almonds and all the other things that didn't really go together but always seemed connected to her anyway.

Thank Poseidon and Odin and any other various deity paying attention that Munroe had been there to hit him with that flashlight.

Actually, no, fuck that guy.

He dragged his nails down his face, letting the pain help him sort out his thoughts. What to do, where to go, how to find her again… "She's just another hallucination," he muttered, then dug his nails deeper, hissing. "No." No. That wasn't true. He was out. He was out of the mine. That could only have happened if he'd had signs to follow. Those could only exist if she was here.

He had to go back.

If he gave himself too much time to think, he wouldn't go back into the dark. He knew that, could feel the reluctance in his bones. So he threw himself forward, hurtling back towards the lodge. That's where she would go. That's where she thought he was, unless Munroe had told her otherwise. Even if he had, though, it was Sam. Sam never gave up on him. Sam never left him, not on purpose. Sam would find him. He would find her. He would get more of her pills, he would touch her face and she would fix whatever it was that was wrong with him. Maybe she could drive the creeping coldness out of his veins and he would finally stop being hungry.

There was no sign of the thing that had chased him. Josh didn't slow down or let himself hesitate. He slipped into the ruins of the lodge, hopping across the burned wreckage of the living room and down the broken hall to the door to the basement.

He knew the layout so well he could navigate it in his sleep, and nearly had before. Funny that it had
taken him so long to get out of the mine, yet only minutes to get back into it now. His eyes seemed to have adjusted from his long days down below; it was easy to see, even in the near-darkness of the tunnels. He wanted to stroke and kiss every mark he saw, to taste the chalk on his lips and know that it was real.

Instead he just followed them back, tracing them down the tunnels and to the familiar, hellish scene that was the landing outside the elevator.

Josh stopped dead.

Sam was not there. Not only was she not there, but her bag, the food, the sleeping bag… everything was gone. On the ground, scrawled in narrow red letters, were three lines:

*I want to play a game. Everyone's entitled to one good scare, right?*

*Who's laughing now? A feminist, vegan punk.*

*A beautiful, bathing bird.*

He stared at the message, the energy draining from him. She wasn't here. She had come back and taken her stuff and left. Gone home. Given up. Or she'd never been here at all and even this message was in his imagination. He read it again. It made no sense—just the kind of bullshit he'd expect from his own fucked up brain.

Hannah and Beth were hanging from the elevator cage again, grinning at him with mouths too wide, eyes too bright. "Oh Jo-osh…" Beth called in a sing-song. "Did you even leave the mine at all?"

His legs gave way and he hit the ground hard, the shock of it jarring up from his knees. The words swam in front of him. They seemed so familiar. Of course, they would be. They were his words, right? His stupid fucking brain messing with him. Playing a trick, giving him false hope, just as it had so many times before.

"A beautiful, bathing bird," he whispered. That hadn't been a planned line. He'd jotted down notes before luring her into the cinema room for her portion of the plan, but that hadn't been one of them. It had just been true. He'd watched the image of her on the screen, thought about the pure peace of her face in the bath, surrounded by candles, and the words had just come out, unbidden.

"I want to play a game." Had he actually said that too? No… he didn't think so. He knew that line, had heard it before, but not in his voice.

"Holy fucking hell…" He jumped to his feet, ignoring the shrieking of his sisters' corpses on the cage. He read the lines again, his teeth making him slur the words slightly as he mumbled them to himself. He knew all the lines. And only the very last one was his.


The cinema room.

Before the prank on Hannah had gone wrong, before his entire life had shattered beyond saving… they had all gathered in the cinema room to watch movies. Despite Jess's insistence that they watch something funny and lighthearted, Josh had won out and they'd watched some classic horror movies. Sam had hated *Saw*, but she'd liked that line about the feminist, vegan punk. It was meant to be derogatory, just a mocking joke, but she'd adopted it. She even signed his yearbook with it.

"Sam…"
It was her writing. He was... well, he was only about 80% sure, but that was enough. The cinema room. She wouldn't want to linger here, not with that monster around. It was a fragile hope, but it was something. He scrubbed at the words with his bare hands, ignoring the sandpaper feeling of the rough ground against his palms. Eventually they were reduced to smudges.

He ignored the girls as they howled, turning and heading back up the tunnel once more. Fuck he was hungry. He wanted food. And not the vegan crap Sam had offered him. He wanted meat: steak, or maybe something more. His gut heaved and he leaned against the wall for a moment, trying to keep the contents of his stomach down.

Chris was talking, saying something about anime character tropes. Josh shoved himself away from the wall. If he lingered, he would be stuck here, trapped in his own head again. Fuck that. Sam was waiting. The others were waiting.

The cinema room was empty, though largely intact. He shrank away from the mildewed posters, all horror films his dad had worked on or loved. The doors still didn't close properly, a legacy of the way he'd busted through them with the gas tank for Sam. She'd looked so terrified, so lost. He remembered the way she'd shrieked watching the footage of his faked death. It had been horrifying and beautiful and exactly what he'd wanted. It was proof. Proof that she cared, that at least one person would mourn his death.

There was another chalk message on the wall.

*Hide and seek.*

_You were always good at that. You could see into all the hiding spots. Like you just knew._

He took a deep breath, trying to think. Were they quotes?

Then it hit him. It was so obvious. It was hardly even a riddle, if you knew their whole story. She, or at least another clue, would be where he could see into all the hiding spots. Why she would go there, he couldn't imagine, but then he couldn't really understand why she would have come back for him at all. He didn't deserve it.

Josh looked down at himself, at the barely recognizable shreds of the Psycho outfit. He didn't want to go there, go deeper into the shit he'd done. But it didn't seem like he was being given a choice. Not if he wanted help. Not if he wanted to see her again.

"Dammit," he muttered, heading for the basement again.

Chapter End Notes

Coming soon: Matt is getting extremely bored, Ashley has a terrible plan, and Melinda's coming home. Everyone's bad day is only going to get worse and they're all getting grounded, dammit.

Also, is the only ship name for Jess/Emily really "Jemily"? We can do better than that, y'all. Come on. <3
The girls stood across the room, side by side and watching her. They were dressed identically in simple white dresses that reminded her of the ones she had picked out for them when they were four and still liked to match. "Hi Mom," Beth said softly, smiling. She knew it was Beth. She could always tell, ever since they were born, though she sometimes played along when they tried to fool her.

Melinda wanted to run to them and fling her arms around them both, but held herself back. They didn't look like they would welcome it. Though Beth was smiling, Hannah's face was fixed and grim. She looked tired and unhappy. Both girls' hair was down around their faces; Hannah was missing her glasses. "Hannah? Are you okay, chickadee?"

"Of course not, Mother. I'm dead, aren't I?"

Memory crashed down on her: the frantic call from Josh, the desperate search, the funeral with empty coffins, the mourning, the long nights staring out the window at empty backyard. She swallowed. "I think so."

Hannah nodded, lips twisting up smugly. "I knew it." She turned her head slowly to look at Beth. "I knew it," she repeated.

The other girl sighed. "I never disagreed. As someone who's been dead a lot longer than you, this is not exactly a startling revelation."

"Shut up, Queen Elizabeth. You always think you're smarter than me."

"Not smarter, just not surprised."

Melinda cleared her throat. Watching them fight sent a bittersweet throb through her chest. "I'm sorry," she said, voice catching.

Both girls turned their attention back to her. Hannah tipped her head to the side. "Why?" she asked curiously.

How could she even begin to name the reasons? She was sorry she had let them go up to the lodge without her, that she hadn't been more thorough in warning them about the dangers of the woods, that she hadn't looked harder to find them. She was sorry they'd called off the search, that she hadn't been there. She was sorry for things that she couldn't even name.

She had hesitated too long in answering, apparently. Hannah's tone sharpened. "Are you sorry you didn't find me?"

"Either of you."
"No." Hannah shook her head. "Didn't Sam tell you? Beth died right away. I was down there for days."

Sam had told her, but Melinda hadn't wanted her to be right. She had hoped it was just part of the kids' shared trauma, the imagined tales of monsters and evil spirits and transformations. There was nothing she could have done, she had told herself. No way she could have brought even one of the girls home. By the time she had made it up there with the search crews, it had been too late. "It was too late."

"Mother, dearest. It wasn't. You were right on top of me and none of you ever found me. I was alive and alone, with only my bare hands to dig my sister her shallow grave."

Beth put her hand on Hannah's shoulder. "Han, stop. Stop pushing. She didn't know."

"You have to be forgiving, too?" Hannah hissed. "Brilliant, gifted, beloved Beth has to be a saint on top of everything. I'm not pushing, anyway. Is anything I'm saying a lie?"

Melinda waited, hoping, praying that Beth would say it was, but the girl just frowned slightly and shook her head. "No. But she's here now."

"And she's still too late. Too late for us, and now too late for Josh. Did you ever even love him?"

That question was directed towards Melinda, who flinched away from it. "He doesn't think so. After all, you loved us more, right? That's what he says. He says even an idiot could see it. That you just wanted healthy kids who would make you proud without all the trouble. That's why you left him up here to die, just like me. Except with me you at least tried."

"No," she croaked. "That's not true. I love Josh. I—they told me it was too dangerous to keep searching."

Hannah smiled and it made Melinda's skin crawl. She'd never seen a look quite like the one on Hannah's face. "Well no more searching is necessary, Mom. You're here. So he found you." Her eyes shifted to look at something over Melinda's shoulder. Something growled softly.

She turned and bit back a scream. Josh launched himself at her, snarling. His strange, handsome face was nearly skeletal: a ruined mess of teeth and despair. She had no time to react before the force of his impact drove her to the ground and pain tore through her.

She jolted awake with a gasp, smacking her head against the window frame behind her. A man sitting across the hall from her gave her a curious look and she tried to get herself under control. She had dozed off in the small, hard airport chair, her carryon bag tucked behind her legs and the remnants of her coffee sitting on the empty seat next to her. It was odd. She didn't normally have such distinct dreams. Or if she did, she was unlikely to remember them after waking.

Rubbing the sleep out of her eyes and wincing as she felt her makeup smear, she grabbed blindly for the drink. As she brought it up to drink, something soft brushed her lips and she gasped again. A butterfly took off from the edge of the cup where it had been sitting and fluttered off into the terminal. She had a momentary impression of red and white pattered wings before it was out of sight.

She checked the board for any updates and sighed. Still grounded. Draining the rest of her tepid latte, she decided to take a lap around the airport. At least it would be moving. She really didn't want to fall asleep again right now.

-o-

Matt was staring at the ceiling. Every now and then, something would change in the light outside the
window, causing the shadows of the room to shift, but otherwise it was exactly the same. He wished he hadn't agreed to stay behind. It was smart, sure, but it was frustrating and pointless too.

"Should have called for help after the rockslide," he told the empty room. If that wasn't the kind of crisis where you called in help, then what would be? He was having trouble getting them on the radio with the storm outside. Letting his head fall to the side, he surveyed the view lazily. The snow came down at awkward angles, driven by the wind. The resort had been put on some kind of warning, but judging by the increased traffic for liquor, no one was really that disappointed.

He rolled over to flop onto his stomach, stretching his back. He wanted to go for a run or eat something that wasn't heated in a microwave or made on a diner stove, but even if the weather hadn't been oppressive, he was loathe to leave the room. The lady at the front desk had taken a weird interest in him, asking him all kinds of questions about why he was there. He had made up some excuse about taking a spontaneous road trip to get over a breakup, but it hadn't seemed to entirely satisfy her. Rather than deal with more questions, he'd started to just avoid her completely.

A loud buzzing shook him out of his thoughts and he sprang off the bed. The others had left their cellphones, since they wouldn't do much good on the mountain, and Matt had kept them charged on the off chance some crucial call or text came through. Mostly they were silent; Em's parents didn't really seem to care where their daughter had gone and the others all had roommates covering for them.

Sam's phone was lit up, vibrating enthusiastically. He checked the number, expecting to see another call from Melinda Washington, but the name simply said "Ash."

He slid his thumb across the screen to answer. "Hello?"

Ashley sounded slightly startled to hear a male voice. "Um… is Sam there?"

"Ashley, it's me. Matt."

"Oh! Hey Matt. Is Sam around? Where are you guys? I thought the lodge didn't get signal very well."

"It doesn't. I'm in town at the base. I just have everyone's phones. Like a lookout or the cavalry or whatever. Why? Did you have a message for her?"

On the other end of the line, Ashley was quiet for a minute, then she laughed awkwardly. "I'm… um… I'm here, actually."

He blinked. "What?"

Her voice was slightly obscured by the sound of wind. "I'm here. Just got off the bus. Not really sure where to go." She laughed again, helplessly. "Can I come to you or something?"

Matt shook his head, trying to clear away the cobwebs. "Yeah, of course. Where are you? The main stop? I can meet you. Head towards the… do you know where the diner is?"

"No, but I can get directions, I'm sure. Okay. See you soon?"

Shoving on his boots and pulling on his coat, he scanned the room for anything he'd need, then shook his head again. He was being ridiculous. They were just going to come back here anyway. Gloves, hat, scarf and he was out in the snow. It swirled around him, cold and wet, but he took a deep breath, savoring the chill of it after the numb sameness of the motel room. Not many people were out. In fact, other than a truck driving past with its wipers going full speed, he didn't see
anyone.

Ashley’s figure emerged from the freezing white, hunched over against the wind. Her head lifted as she saw him and he grinned. It was so good to see a familiar face. He lifted a hand and waved, in case she didn’t realize it was him.

They didn’t try to talk in the snow. He had a feeling it’d be hard for them to hear each other and neither wanted to pull down their scarves far enough to expose their mouths. Ashley followed him to the motel, her body immediately untensing as they went under the motel’s front overhang and were granted some protection from the weather. They brushed off what snow they could before heading into the lobby. The woman wasn’t at the front desk, thankfully, and Matt ushered Ashley quickly up the stairs.

The room, which had started to feel increasingly small and cramped, seemed much larger with another person in it. "What are you doing here?" he asked, pulling off his scarf, then winced. "I just mean… I’m surprised to see you. Happy, but surprised. I thought you didn’t—" He had no idea how to finish that thought.

She shivered as she shed her coat and toed off her boots. Matt switched on the heater and it hummed to life. "I, um, I had a dream?" Shaking her head at her own hesitance, she tried again. "I had a dream. A possibly-true dream, like the one everyone had, but worse. Like, way way worse. They were all dead or dying. Something was killing them. And Josh was helping."

This room was killing his brain cells. He was sure of it. It was like listening to her through noise-cancelling headphones as his brain tried to catch up to what she was telling him. A prophetic dream where the others were being killed. And Josh was helping? "What do you mean Josh was helping?"

"He was turning into a monster, one of those things that attacked us last time. Like Hannah. I don’t know if it's already happened or if it's going to happen or what, but I had to come. I couldn’t just sit at home after that. And I thought maybe I could help. The journal talks about a cure and…" She faltered. "I don’t know. I guess it was a dumb idea."

"No, not at all." Matt shoved down the rising tide of panic in his gut. They hadn't talked about the possibility of more of those monsters still existing, but it had been on everyone’s mind anyway. Jess and Em and Mike—they could all be dead already. He’d last heard from them hours ago, a static-laden, broken-up message that was barely understandable. Anything could have happened since then. "Should we call in the rescue service?"

Ashley gave an awkward gesture that was half shrug, half head shake. "I don't know! I mean, if we do… that's it, right? For Josh and any chance of rescuing him if they haven't found him."

"But you said he was a monster."

"I don't know," she said again, pacing in a tight loop beside the bed. "It's all potential, right? Maybe he hasn't started turning yet. Maybe they haven't even found him. I thought—" She broke off again, bringing one hand up to chew nervously at her thumbnail.

"Thought what?" Matt didn’t know what to do. What could they do? What was smart? What was right? Fuck.

"I-thought-that-maybe-we-could-go-up-and-find-them?" she said in a rush, stringing all the words together in one breath.

It was probably the stupidest plan. He could think of dozens of reasons why it was a terrible idea, not
least among them the weather outside. However, it was also the only plan that didn’t feel like some kind of betrayal. Their faces flashed through his mind: Mike's fierce bravado, Jess's determination, Emily's resignation, Sam's hope. He couldn't leave them up there, nor could he bring himself to calling in the authorities. He wasn't a superhero or anything, but he was tough and strong and smart and Ashley was clever and caring and seemed determined. They could make a difference. Right?

In the space of twenty minutes, they'd packed up. Matt layered on every article of clothing he had, while Ashley pulled a surprising amount of winter gear out of her backpack. Without debate, they decided to not check out of the room completely and left the cellphones behind, along with all other fancy tech beside the radio. From his long hours in the motel, he'd amassed a decent stockpile of random nonperishable food and they loaded up their bags with as much as they could take. Neither commented on how unprepared they were. They didn't have to. Both knew it.

Ultimately it didn't really matter. They couldn't wait.

The snow had paused momentarily as they set out, ducking off the road in the same place he'd hugged the others goodbye. Matt found himself thankful for the dense forest. It kept him from seeing up the mountain and thinking about exactly how far they had to go.

-o-

Hundreds of miles away, Melinda Washington sighed with relief as they finally began boarding the plane. She pulled her hair back tightly, grabbed her bag, and took a deep breath. After a moment's hesitation, she also took an Ambien, hoping she wouldn't remember any dreams she might have.
I don't think you guys realize exactly how excited I really get about comments. That alert email from Ao3 is just about the greatest thing I've ever seen. I'm so happy you guys are enjoying this as much as I am! It's my first time writing horror, so if I'm creeping you out, I'm doing my job right!

Chapter title comes from the song "You Will Be Waiting" by the Barenaked Ladies.

Emily and Sam were the first to make it to the surveillance room. Sam found herself holding her breath for long portions of the trip, walking through the familiar, nightmarish layout of the basement. Here and there she saw things that should have been red-flags the first time around: industrial lighting fixtures, a fog machine, various other plans and schematics Josh must have neglected to put away before things started. It made her feel stupid, but she tried to let it go. How was she supposed to pay attention to stuff like that when she was being chased by a masked madman with a gas canister?

She didn't talk and Em didn't press her. She found herself appreciating Emily more and more. They'd never really been friends, especially after the shit she'd pulled with Hannah, but the girl seemed to understand the value of silence.

They passed through a narrow, rubble-strewn hallway and Sam led them to the drop where she'd entered the old hotel for the first time. Glancing towards the dumbwaiter where she'd hidden from him, she shuddered and tried to swallow around the sudden lump in her throat. She could almost hear him, with that deep, fucked-up voice modification he'd used. Here little kitty. Here pussy, pussy...

What was he punishing her for? She could think of at least a dozen possibilities, each as likely as the next. She remembered him realizing he'd lost her and swearing. It almost made her want to laugh now, though there was really nothing funny about it. If she'd been less panicked, she might have realized then that it was Josh—the pure frustration in his voice had been so clearly him.

She didn't want to still be angry with him, but she was. A sick part of her had been relieved to find out he'd planned a torture for the other girls. That same part of her wanted to see the room Jess and Emily had found, to examine what their punishment was going to be and compare it to what she'd been through. Had Josh planned something for Mike? For Matt? Would Josh even remember if she asked him?

They passed through one of Josh's workshops. A pig's disemboweled corpse hung from a hook and made Sam fight her gag reflex, but at least the temperature had kept it from rotting. Emily tried one of the sinks and they were both relieved to see the water still running. Whatever system Josh had rigged down here was still at least partially intact.

That was good. She could focus on that. Sam was good at practicalities. She and Em made their way to the room full of monitors and dropped their burdens. Together, they assessed the room. It looked largely the same as last time they'd been there. As much as Sam was loathe to be here, it was a pretty good place to hole up. She tried the surveillance system, but it didn't turn on. Knowing Josh, he probably had a backup power plan around somewhere if they could find it. Maybe he could show them, if he caught up.
They heard the others long before they saw them. Mike and Jessica were not particularly stealthy in their approach. Sam would have found it amusing if she’d had the energy. Her body still hurt and, though she didn’t feel hungry, knew she needed to eat.

"Look who we found!" Mike announced as he entered, gesturing behind him to a white and grey wolf. It looked intensely pleased with itself, as if it was responsible for herding the two there.

Sam blinked at him. "Um… what… are we supposed to feed it?"

He grinned triumphantly at her and she felt her cheeks go hot, looking quickly back at the wolf. From the corner of her eye, she saw his smile falter slightly. "It can take care of itself. Can’t you, Wolfie?"

"'Wolfie'?" Emily said, voice dripping with incredulity. "Seriously?"

"I told him it was a dumb name," Jess said, crossing the room. She set her load down with a clunk and Sam looked over. Jessica bounced on the balls of her feet, clapping her hands excitedly and pumping one fist into the air. "Yep! It’s a flamethrower!"

"What, really? It really is? That’s great!" Sam glanced at Mike. "Shut the door?" As he shut and bolted it, she went to examine Jess’s find. Sure enough, it seemed to be some kind of makeshift flamethrower, like something Josh and Chris would have cobbled together in high school when they had more free time than common sense. "Did you test it?"

"Not yet. We just wanted to get back here. All the valves and stuff still twist though. It doesn’t seem like it’s jammed or empty."

They spread the supplies across the floor. It was better than they’d expected. There were the cans of beans, the huge bag of rice, the remaining rations from both Sam and Jess’s bags. Sam mentally reviewed what they’d seen in the kitchen before their untimely attack and the fire. There was probably more up there if they needed to go back. Or there might even be stuff in the basement. She vaguely remembered seeing metal shelves of canned goods when she’d helped Josh get the water heater going.

"Do the cameras still work?" Mike asked, looking up at the wall of monitors.

Emily shrugged. "Not sure. It doesn’t look like they’re getting any power."

"Were they on the main grid?"

"How the fuck would I know? You think I designed this lodge? Or spent a ton of time chatting with Josh about how he set up his torture palace?"

Mike stood and crossed to examine them, tracing the cords to a small opening in the wall. "We should try to find out. If there’s a way to power them up, that could be really helpful. We could see that thing coming if it tries to get in here. And maybe even see Hannah."

The room went dead silent. Sam stared at him and he tensed, not looking at her.

"What—what did you say?" She looked to the other girls, who wouldn’t meet her eyes. "What’s going on? Why would we see Hannah? Hannah died in the lodge explosion. I know she did." That was just a fact. She couldn’t be alive still. She couldn’t be. The air seemed suddenly thin around her and she found herself breathing shallowly, trying desperately to get enough air. She couldn’t take this, not on top of Josh turning into a monster. She couldn’t kill her best friend again. She wouldn’t survive it.
"No—" Mike quickly knelt in front of her, grabbing her shoulders, shaking her slightly to bring her back to the present. "Sam, no. It's fine. You're right. She's dead. She died in the explosion."

Emily's voice was sharp. '"It's fine. She's dead'? Jesus, Mike. Way to be comforting."

Mike shot her a dirty look before turning back to Sam. "It's just… She's still here. Somehow. Like a ghost. Jess and Em saw her at the sanitorium. I don't know what that means, but she's not a wendigo. That Hannah died. I remember. I saw it too. I'm sorry. I should—I shouldn't have said anything. I'm an idiot. You know me." He tried to laugh, but it died in his throat.

Numbly, she turned to look at the girls. Em just looked stone-faced and stubborn. Jess forced a smile, but her face was twisted with pain and guilt. The blonde tried to elaborate. "I'm sorry we didn't tell you before. It just didn't seem like the right time. I… she…" Jess struggled to find the words. "Maybe we were just imagining things. I just… there's other stuff going on up here, I think. Stuff we weren't ready for. And we saw Hannah. She…"

She was interrupted by a hesitant knock on the door. The four of them stared at each other, then Sam moved stood slowly and moved around Mike to answer it. It wouldn't do any good to ask who it was, not with the big monster so good at mimicking other people. Shit, it could answer as Chris and she still wouldn't have any way of knowing whether it was true or not. She opened the door, braced for an attack.

Josh was standing on the other side, his hands clasped in front of him and looked vaguely bashful, like a hellish version of a Norman Rockwell painting. He smiled ruefully, but the effect of it was unfortunate, given the disfigurement on half his face. "Tag, you're it."

She opened the door further to let him in.

As she bolted the door again, she heard an audible gasp behind her and realized belatedly that she hadn't warned Jessica or Emily about Josh's transformation. It had been too fresh when they were sharing their stories and she hadn't been able to really explain. Not that she'd lied, exactly—just sort of glossed over that part of things. Kind of like them leaving out the bit about seeing Hannah's fucking ghost, she thought bitterly.

Jess's eyes were wide, but she didn't look actively terrified. Mike must have told her. Emily, on the other hand…

"Are you fucking kidding me? We are not letting him in here!" Emily snarled. She eyed Josh, her hand on her hip. "Look at him! He's halfway to being a monster."

Josh shrank back slightly, eyes wide and wild as he looked from Emily to Mike to Jess to Sam. He looked like a cornered, wounded animal which, Sam thought, wasn't entirely untrue. She could see blood on his face and torso that hadn't been there before the events of the morning. She wasn't denying that Emily had a right to be upset, but Josh was looking edgier by the second and she had the uncomfortable feeling that he was seconds away from bolting. If he did, she wasn't sure she'd be able to find him again. Not if he didn't want to be found. "Em, just calm down. It's not a big deal. We're watching him, we're going to be careful—"

The girl rounded on Sam. "Really? It's not a big deal? Are you kidding me right now? Mike almost fucking shot me because you guys thought there was even a tiny chance I was going to turn into one of them and now suddenly it's fine? Now that it's precious, darling, crazy Josh that's turning into a wendigo right in front of us, it's totally okay and worth the risk? You don't get why that makes me, you know, just a tiny bit pissed?"
Sam opened her mouth to respond and Em raised a hand. "I don't want to fucking hear it. You guys are fucking unbelievable."

"Em..." Jess's voice was soft. She put her hand on Emily's arm, trying to calm her.

"Shut the fuck up, Jess. You weren't there. You didn't see your precious hero holding his gun to my head while I begged him not to kill me. Did he tell you about that? Did he tell about how he shoved a gun in my face and fucking **apologized** while he tried to gear himself up to shoot me?" Taking a deep, shuddering breath, Emily raised her head defiantly to regard Mike. Her voice was suddenly low, dangerous. "'This is the safe room, Em.' Right? 'It's not safe as long as you're in it.' Yeah, I remember. I remember exactly what you fucking said to me. It's not the kind of thing you forget."

"We know things now, from the journal—" Sam said, trying to reason with her. It was insane, though. She knew it. She knew what a crazy risk it was to have Josh in there with them.

Emily laughed bitterly. "Right! Yeah, of course. How could I forget the crazy old dude's journal! Silly me. That obviously invalidates every argument I could possibly make about why inviting an in-progress cannibal monster into the safehouse is a bad idea." She shook her head and threw her good hand into the air. "Fine. Whatever. Invite the monster in for tea. I'm sure it won't end horribly for all of us." She turned to Josh. "I found your little room for Jess and me. Congrats. That was an A-plus design. Well done. Beautifully psychotic, you fucking nut-job."

Sam tried to protest, but before she could Josh straightened and grinned humorlessly at her. "Thanks. I was bummed you never got a chance to use it."

"Oh, fuck you very much, you piece of shit." Emily grabbed her flashlight and left, shoving him hard with her uninjured shoulder as she passed.

Mike started after her but Jess grabbed his arm, yanking him back. "Wow, no. Nope. You're really bad at reading situations, Michael. She does not want to talk to you right now."

"But I—"

"Apologize later," Jess said, shrugging. "She's going to punch you if you go out there and, frankly, you totally have it coming." She flashed him a small, icy smile, then vanished out into the hallway, letting the door swing shut behind her.

Josh closed his eyes, swaying in place, then took three unsteady steps towards the wall and sank down to sit. He slumped forward, his head on his knees. Sam quickly moved over to him. "Josh, she didn't mean—"

"Yeah she did."

Sam slid down the wall to sit next to him. She wondered if he had seen Hannah too, or if he'd even remember if he had. She was too tired, too sore, too hungry for this. Her mind was coming up blank with anything to say to make things better. Back before things had gotten so bad, she had known how to comfort him. She would have put her head on his shoulder or wrapped her arms around him, but now that seemed inappropriate: an intimacy suggesting more than was possible. Finally she just tipped her head back to look up at the damaged ceiling of the saferoom, searching for answers in the water stains.

"Why did it have to be here?" He said finally, voice still muffled by his knees. "Sam, why did you have to come **here**?"

"It was Mike's idea." Across the room, Mike's face was closed, serious and unreadable. He turned
away and she heard the soft sound of a pill bottle being opened. She watched his back, noting the subtle shift in his shoulders as he lifted his hand to his mouth and swallowed. They still hadn't talked. She found herself missing the time when it had been just the two of them, then immediately felt guilty for the thought and looked away.

"Of course it was." Josh didn't sound bitter or upset, just unsurprised. "Of course. It makes sense, tactically, right? Cameras and monitors on an independently run generator to help watch for the Talker. So of course, it's here. You're here. Makes perfect sense. Don't know why I didn't think of it myself, actually. Must be losing my mind." He barked a laugh.

She closed her eyes. "The Talker?"

"Told me it wouldn't eat me," he mumbled. "Or I think that's what it said. Can't remember very well. Something about not tasting good. Guess that makes sense too, since I'm turning into a big nasty monster. Like a bad B-movie or something. Look out, Lon Chaney, I'm coming for you. Gonna be the next big thing in Hollywood. Dad'll be so proud." Josh growled dramatically into his knees, the sound dissolving into another bout of hoarse laughter.

Sam pulled the bottle of pills from her pocket and set it down next to him. "Here. I think you should have these. In case we're separated again."

At that, his head reared up and he grabbed her arm with bruising force. "Don't leave, Sam," he whispered desperately. "Please, Sammy. I can't… Please don't leave me. I know I don't deserve it. But… please." She made a slight noise of pain and his eyes dropped down to where he was holding her. Josh swallowed hard, every muscle movement exaggerated by his emaciation. He seemed to have trouble forcing himself to release her. Slowly he pried his own fingers away, pulling his hand back and sitting on it.

"I'm not planning to leave you." She tried to sound cheerful and confident. "But it's better if you have them in case something separates us briefly. Just in case. Right? It's a plan B."

"Damn, Sammy. I figured if we were ever talking Plan B pills it'd be because we had a way more exciting night than this one."

She snorted and rolled her eyes. "Nice. Real nice. Now I know you're feeling better." Across the room, Mike pulled a cord roughly from one monitor, the metal connector on the end hitting the wall with a louder noise than she would have expected.

Josh didn't smile. "You know Em is probably right, right? Heh. Right-right. I shouldn't be in here."

"Screw that. No. She'll get over it. We know more now than we did then. The transformation isn't overnight. And I'm not leaving you out in the hall like a bad dog."

"You'd be better off if you did."

"Shut up, Josh," she said, elbowing him gently. "We're not having that conversation again."

Josh just watched her in silence. Finally, he glanced at Mike, then back to Sam. "So what now? Now that we're—" his eyes flicked around the room and then fluttered closed. "—here?"
"I'm not sure. I guess we need to eat, right? And sleep? While we can?" As if on cue, she found she couldn't suppress a yawn. She raised her hand to cover her mouth and winced. Every single part of her hurt and reminded her of that fact. Loudly. It wasn't every day you got thrown through a wall.

Mike addressed Josh for the first time since he'd reached the safe room. "Did you say these cameras run on a separate generator?"

He grunted in affirmation.

"Where is it? We should get them powered up. Then we'll know if we can relax a little." Mike hefted his flashlight. "I can go get it turned on."

"I'll show you. Faster."

"I— okay." He looked at Sam and she couldn't read his expression. When had Mike turned into a closed book? He used to be so easy for her to read, wearing his emotions on his face for everyone to see. Or maybe she'd just never been someone he'd hidden around. She rubbed her eyes. She was too tired. Her mind was running away with her. They'd all feel better once they were secure, well-fed, and rested.

The two men left, the door shutting behind them with a reassuringly solid thunk. Wolfie padded over to Sam and sat down, resting its head neatly on its paws. She smiled a little and reached over to let it sniff her hand, settling back to wait.

-o-

Jess followed the sound of Emily swearing down the hallway. Now that they were back down here, she understood the layout a little better. She glanced to the left at an intersection and knew she'd find the trap room Josh had designed for them that way. Thankfully, Emily apparently wasn't quite that pissed off. Instead she had wandered towards a large open area that had once been some kind of lobby or landing. She was pacing from wall to wall, muttering to herself.

"Em?"

"I am not apologizing," the other girl snapped. "It's bullshit. They're wrong and they fucking know it."

Leaning on the wall, Jess tried to steady herself, to get her head to stop throbbing and figure out a way to handle Emily. All things considered, though, she wasn't actually sure Emily deserved 'handling' at all. Mike had mentioned the bit with the gun, but he'd glossed over the details. "Is that really what happened?" she asked, finally. "With Mike?"

Em's head came up and she stopped pacing. She looked both furious and seconds from bursting into tears which, for Em, was a big deal. Emily didn't cry. Almost ever. Jess could count the number of times she'd seen Emily in tears on one hand. On Mike's hand, even. Her voice was hard. "Yeah. That's what really happened."

"Oh shit. Em, I'm so sorry. I had no idea."

She gave a one-armed shrug and tried, unsuccessfully, to look like she didn't care. "Whatever. I just can't believe they're letting him hang around. And I can't believe they didn't tell us. Oh, wait, yes I can. Because they're assholes."

"I understand now."
"Understand what?"

"Why you left afterwards. When we got back off the mountain." Jess tried not to look at Emily as she spoke. Sometimes Em was like an animal or something—move too fast or be too direct and she'd attack. "Want me to punch him for you?"

Emily snorted. "I can punch him myself, thank you very much."

"Yeah, but you fucked up your arm. Probably best if you let me handle it."

"My hero."

"Yeah, well," Jessica smiled, her cheeks flushing. She hated that. She always blushed too easily. "You did save me. Only fair I return the favor. And since your life isn't currently in danger, I figure I can try atoning for past injustices. Since I wasn't there to punch him the first time around."

Crossing the room, Emily leaned against the wall next to her. They stood in silence, listening to the soft creaks and groans of the old, dilapidated building. Distantly they could hear talking. A door opened and closed. Nothing seemed particularly threatening; it was easy to feel safe here, surrounded by old furniture and knowing their friends were close. Taking a slow, careful breath, Jess murmured: "He wasn't wrong, though."

"Um, yeah, he totally was."

"No—I mean, yeah. He was totally wrong to hold a gun to your head. That's not what I was trying to say. I just mean… if it was you, in his position, what would you have done?"

"I wouldn't have shot him!"

Jess tipped back and forth on her toes, stretching the arches of her feet in her boots. "I know. But the leaving part? Getting him out of the saferoom?"

The other girl scowled and adjusted her sling. "I—"

"Em…" Jess could feel when Emily was revving up to anger again. "I'm just saying. He absolutely deserves to be punched in the face—and, again, I totally volunteer for that—but you can't stay out here. And I don't think they're completely wrong about Josh. Sam's read that whole journal, right? And Mike saw all those records about how the transformation happens. It doesn't happen instantaneously. Everyone was panicking, that night. But we're not panicking now. We're some smart, savvy ladies. We got this."

"We most emphatically do not 'got this,'" Em muttered mutinously.

Jess raised her hand, three fingers extended. "I swear on my honor as a very prepared former girl scout that I will blast Josh in the face with my shiny new flame thrower the second he gets uppity."

"He's still an asshole. Even without the monster bit."

"Um, yep. Definitely. But he also doesn't deserve to die up here alone."

Emily rolled her eyes and huffed. "Yeah, I guess." She fidgeted a little, then let herself drop to sit on the ground. "Do we have to go back right now, though? I just… I want to be out of that room for a little bit. Josh smells fucking terrible, among other things."

"Right?" Jess slid down to join her. She held her hands out in front of her. "You know what I'm
going to do? First thing when we get out of here?"

"What?"

"Massage. And maybe a mani-pedi. You in?"

The other girl laughed and let her head fall to rest on Jess's shoulder. "Yeah. I'm in."

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Josh tried to ignore Mike as they headed for the generator, but it was hard when he felt like he was constantly being watched. "It's just ahead," he said finally. "Should still work."

"You really thought it all through."

He glanced at Mike. "Yep. Sure did."

His response effectively killed all further attempts at conversation, which wasn't what he was going for, but was a happy result. Mike looked uncomfortable, which was another win as far as Josh was concerned. He tried to focus. Generator. Power. Security cameras. It took a few minutes to get the generator up and running, but eventually it was rumbling along, doing its thing. Josh saw Mike smile in relief. He straightened. "And back we go. Epic adventure, Munroe. We barely made it out alive."

As he crossed the room, Mike straightened, then wrinkled his nose. "Do you—did you stash more clothes down here somewhere? No offense, bud, but you reek and that outfit cannot be warm at this point."

Josh smiled grimly. "Hey, the spa in the mines only had lavender-scented skin oil. Not my fault." *Lavender*. Hannah was lavender. Beth was vanilla. He shook his head, trying to get off that train of thought. For a split second, he thought he saw Hannah's desiccated, monstrous face staring at him from over Mike's shoulder, but he blinked and it dissolved again.

He stopped walking to consider. It seemed almost silly, the idea of bathing or changing after so long in this same outfit, but from the moment Mike had mentioned the clothes, they started to itch. Sure, it was probably actual grime making them agitate his skin, but it was the idea of them that really kept bugging him. It was like walking around in a reminder of what he'd done. He looked down at the Psycho's ragged jumpsuit. The shoulder was brown and crusted with blood from where Ashley had stabbed him with scissors, not to mention all the other blood and refuse from Hannah and the rest of the time in the mine.

"I'll meet you back in the monitor station—er… the safe room." That's what they were calling it now. He wasn't about to make them refer to it the way he had back when… back when he'd had other priorities.

"I am not leaving you alone."

"Dude. I just want to go wash up and get the clothes. I don't need a fucking babysitter."

Mike raised his eyebrows and seemed about to argue, then shrugged. "Fine. An hour. You've got an hour and then I'm going to come find you."

Josh swept him an elaborate, low bow with a mocking smile. "Yes, my lord, my liege. The cameras should be working now. I'll be back." He turned and loped away, inexplicably glad to be leaving Mike's company and his sharp, judgmental eyes. His thoughts were clearer than they had been in recent days, though whether that was due to the medicine Sam had given him or due to simply being
out of the mine, Josh wasn't sure.

He navigated the halls easily, avoiding the room where he could hear Emily and Jess talking. Had Mike really tried to shoot Em? That was kind of hilarious, all things considered. A better revenge on Em than anything he could ever orchestrate. Of course, in hindsight he probably shouldn't have taunted her just now about the prank he'd planned for her and Jess, but whatever. He opened a small janitorial closet and retrieved his clothes. They were the only ones down here and easily accessible. He didn't want to take more than an hour, not only because he really didn't want Captain Munroe hunting him down with righteous indignation, but because he didn't want to make Sam worry.

The water was still on in his old workshop. He stripped down to nothing and hosed off, the freezing water not bothering him nearly as much as he'd expected. There was still a knob of the harsh, industrial soap he'd used to clean up after butchering the pigs and he relished the near-pain of it. It felt like he was removing a full layer of skin along with the thick crust of dirt and blood and filth. He dunked his head into the sink and let the water run through his hair as he scrubbed his face. No towel or anything, but he had an old cotton sheet which would serve.

He was loathe to admit it, but he was grateful to Mike for the suggestion. He felt miles better, dressed in different clothes and mostly clean. In his workshop, in his own old clothes, it felt almost like nothing had changed. Like he was about to go check a piece of his plan or manipulate Cochise into the next step. At least his own body kept him from sinking too deep into that idea; his fingers explored his face, running over the exposed teeth and the new ridges around his eye. He'd felt the change slowly, after he'd... after he'd been forced to resort to... he couldn't quite bring himself to complete the thought. His stomach growled. He was hungry.

He was always hungry.

No shower, no new outfit could distract him from that fact.

Emily was right, he thought again. Sam might be protective and determined, but it didn't negate the simple truth. He shouldn't be in the safe room. Even with Sam just sitting quietly next to him, he could smell her blood, her scent, and wanted her. He wanted to devour her, in every sense.

"Jo-osh," Beth called, swinging around the edge of a shelving unit, her head tilted at a crazy, broken angle. "Oh Josh. You should run now, while you can."

Hannah slung an arm around his shoulders. "Or you could just off yourself, you know, brother-mine. There's still a gun in the drawer in the monitor station. The one in the filing cabinet."

"No cameras in here, you know. Of course you know. You're the one who installed them. No one would see you. You could leave and no one would be any the wiser."

"Or you could go back and get the gun." Hannah leaned in to whisper in his ear. "You never did have a chance to play with Emily. Or sweet little Jessica, for all Mike thought you did."

Unthinkingly, he growled low in his throat, the sound vibrating out from deep in his chest. It startled him and he swallowed hard, pulling the bottle of pills from the discarded rags that had been his costume. He looked at the label. It directed him to take it no more than twice daily. That was good enough. He popped the cap and swallowed one, wincing as it worked its way down his dry throat. He could still see Hannah and Beth. Was it progress to think that they were hallucinations? After all, he'd known they weren't really there along. They couldn't have been. But it didn't make their arguments any less persuasive.

He shoved the bottle into the pocket of his jeans and yanked on his boots. On either side, in the
periphery of his vision, he could see his sisters grinning at him. "Fuck off," he muttered, knotting the laces tightly. He had to get back. Back to the others and back to Sam, before this place, the fake stalker photos on the wall, the half-butchered pig, the memories got their claws too deeply into him.

-o-

Sam didn't fall asleep, but she was zoning out, staring at the wall, when the monitors abruptly lit up. Her head jerked up and she stared at them blankly for a moment, trying to process what she was seeing. It was nothing terribly exciting. She could see a few rooms she recognized, including the one with a dummy still dressed in her old outfit and the table with the saws where they'd found Ash and Chris. There was another room that she thought fit Jessica's description of the one intended for her and Emily. In a random camera shot she didn't recognize, she could see Emily and Jessica talking. There were a few other views, various spots around the basement and old hotel, plus one that looked like the cable car station, but nothing stood out.

That was good, at least. It was something. Being able to see made her feel slightly safer.

The door creaked open and she sprang to her feet, ready to run or fight. Beside her, Wolfie looked up but didn't rise. Mike poked his head in and looked embarrassed. "Sorry," he said. "I should have knocked or something."

She glanced at the monitors. "I thought I'd have seen you coming. Guess there's no camera in the hall right there." He slipped inside and bolted the door. Sam frowned. "Where's Josh?"

"Getting a change of clothes." He seemed to feel her displeasure and raised his hands defensively. "Hey, I tried to go with him. He insisted he didn't need someone to watch him and said he'd find his way back here as soon as he could. I gave him an hour." Mike ran his hand over his face tiredly, then moved across the room to lean on the table and peer into the monitors. He spotted the one that showed Emily and Jessica and his shoulders stiffened. "Think they'll come back?"

Sam sighed. "Yeah, I'm sure they will. Just give them a little time."

"I meant to—I tried to tell Jess. But I just—how do you explain something like that?" His voice was bleak as he stared at the girls. "I can't believe I did that."

"You didn't do it, though."

"I almost did. I was angry at myself for not doing it. Shooting Em. Fuck." His head dropped. His voice was barely audible: "Fuck."

Without realizing what she was doing, Sam had crossed the room and put her hand on his shoulder. He was tense and trembling under her fingers. "Mike, it's okay."

"It's not okay."

She couldn't really argue. "No. It's not. But it will be, eventually. She's hurt. We should have told her about Josh and not let it be a surprise. That's as much my fault as it is yours. Maybe even more so. She came with me, after all. I should have told her." In the monitor's slightly distorted picture, Emily nudged Jess with her knee and both girls smiled. She had no idea what they were talking about, but it seemed the storm had passed for the moment. The storm out there, at least. "Mike?"

He lifted his head to look at her. His mouth tipped up in a one-sided smile that didn't touch the rest of his face. "How do you know?"

"Know what?"
"How do you know that it will be okay? Any of this? Josh, Emily, the monster thing… Hannah? It's just one thing on top of another and I just—how do you know?"

"Because you promised, remember? Top team." He didn't look amused. She wasn't sure she'd ever seen Mike look this exhausted. His face was pale and the circles under his eyes were so dark they looked bruised. She wished he would smile for real, or laugh, or make a stupid joke. Something to reassure her that he was still Mike under all the soot and pain. She flicked his nose lightly. "Hey, Captain Human-Battering-Ram. You promised me."

He caught her hand. Slowly, tentatively, he turned her hand over, examining it. Her palms were filthy, riddled with tiny cuts and scrapes from everything they'd been through in the last days. Her thumbnail was torn short and ragged. They weren't pretty hands, she knew. Once upon a time, she'd liked to wear lotion, to paint her own nails. Hannah had taught her how to do simple nail art, though she was only decent at it with one hand. But recently it had seemed pointless.

Mike looked up at her, his brow furrowed. "Sam, we should talk. About before. I didn't mean—I don't—" He groaned. "This is like the worst possible timing for anything. Ever."

As if to prove him right, there was a knock at the door. They stared at each other, and Mike let go of her hand reluctantly. She quickly crossed back to where she'd been sitting before. He unbolted the door and peered outside, then backed up to let it open more fully. As Josh stepped around Mike and into the room, Sam's heart caught painfully in her throat. In profile, his face was perfect, unchanged. The dark Henley, the blue plaid shirt, the jeans—even the olive-green puffer vest was there. The white beanie was sticking out of a vest pocket, too big to fit there properly. He could have stepped straight out of that night. He dropped a small pile of ragged-looking blankets onto the ground as he entered.

"I thought you ruined that shirt during the first… the thing with Chris and Ashley." She didn't seem to be able to say the word 'prank.'

He didn't meet her eyes, instead turning to scan the monitors as he spoke. "I had to have two sets. Didn't know how the timing would work. What if I had to see some of you guys before everything went down? I couldn't explain a totally different outfit. I stashed it down here when I changed into the jumpsuit."

His matter-of-fact tone made her stomach hurt. "Oh." She turned back to the food. "You should eat."

The door opened again and Jess came in, followed closely by Emily. "Isn't the whole point of having this room that we can keep the door, you know, bolted?" Jess asked pointedly, turning to set the bolts in place herself. "Makes a safe room a lot less safe if it doesn't get locked."

Emily eyed Josh. "You look marginally less disgusting."

"Thanks. You don't."

"Fuck you." She opened one of the granola bars still remaining and took a bite. "Fine. So what's the plan."

"Eat if you're hungry and sleep while you can, I guess," Sam said, shrugging. "I'll keep watch first for anyone who wants to sleep. I think the thing—the Talker—is nocturnal and now we have the cameras, so that should help. At some point, those of us who need to should probably get our injuries cleaned up."

"Maintenance stuff." Mike nodded.
Jess raised her hand. "Um… not to be 'that person,' but why don't we just head back down the mountain? It's not like the thing can follow us all the way back." She caught Josh's glare and he gestured vaguely to his disfigured face, scowling. "Oh… Nevermind."

"Another day won't kill us," Sam pointed out. "We'll figure things out as soon as we're all in better shape."

"Another day might kill us," Em muttered, grabbing one of the blankets and retreating to a corner of the room.

Sam didn't want to agree with her, so she settled for opening a can of beans instead.

-0-

The snow was intense, but Ashley felt like they were making good time. She wondered how it had gone for the others. Maybe it was easier with only the two of them. She imagined that four people, especially those particular four, would have disagreements and butt heads, but she at Matt were happily in sync. She'd always liked Matt. They'd met in Model U.N., where she had assumed he'd simply followed Mike. In reality, joining had been Matt's idea. His parents had wanted him to join an academic club and he told Ashley that he liked what he'd heard about the U.N. in history.

He wasn't always the most vocal, but she could rely on him to be level-headed and think things through. All in all, she was glad he was the one she was traveling with now. The only one she'd maybe prefer was Sam, and she wasn't even sure about that. There would have been pressure with Sam. Sam was a do-er. She always seemed to move with purpose and Ash was still struggling with her newfound decision to believe everything was real.

She couldn't even really believe she was here. In a way it was good it was freezing. The cold was undeniable. She couldn't pretend this was just a particularly vivid daydream.

They made straight for the lodge, using a compass and the cable car lines to keep them oriented correctly. They rested for a few hours under a rocky overhang that mostly sheltered them from the snow, huddled together, then pressed on. There was no good place to camp, even if they had a tent suitable for this weather. They also didn't dare rest any more than they absolutely had to—neither knew how long they had before Ashley's dream would become reality.

Most of the time it was hard to even talk and they kept their scarves up and wrapped around their faces. She focused on keeping her footing and the puzzle of the cure hinted at in the journal. With most puzzles, Ashley found that the key to solving them came from breaking down what she knew, then assessing what she needed to know and attempting to fill in the blanks with the most logical possible solution. Occam's Razor, right? The simplest explanation was usually the right one.

She wanted to talk it over with someone, but that would have to wait until they got up there and found the others.

"One foot in front of the other, Ash," she whispered under her breath. "That's all you can do. One foot. Then another."
Consider this your warning: smut ahead... sort of. Near-smut. Almost-smut.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Mike frowned at the hose. He really didn't want to do it. He'd tested the water briefly and it was fucking frigid. He'd give anything for a searing hot shower, but this was his option. This, or wander off and try to find the hot springs and pray that he didn't get eaten by that huge, nasty thing. Freezing was probably the lesser of the two risks.

…still didn't make it any more appealing.

With a sigh, he stripped off his shirt. The outermost layer came away stiff with dirt and dried mud. How had he managed to get so filthy in only—he counted—three days? Four? Time and sleep deprivation were playing tricks on him up here. Fine. Maybe the amount of dirt was reasonable, especially given everything they'd been through so far.

He shed the rest of his clothes quickly, tossing them onto a clear portion of the counter. The soap was where Josh said he left it. Glaring at the hose, he braced himself. Who knew the next time he would have a chance to get clean. He should take advantage of the momentary lull.

"Stop stalling, Munroe," he said aloud, turning the knob.

Even knowing it was going to be cold, he still yelped as the water hit his skin. "Son of a sea cook—"

Just enough water to get him wet, then he turned it off and used the soap, wincing as it tore at his skin like sandpaper. He scrubbed vigorously, feeling like he was about to get frostbite and lose a more fingers. Or other various unmentionables.

Tossing the soap onto a shelf, he hosed down again, teeth literally chattering. He'd never really thought teeth did that until he came up to this stupid fucking mountain. He'd never been one to get cold easily, if at all. Now it seemed like he was cold all the damn time. It even felt like it had followed him back to California after their last unfortunate excursion.

He used his undershirt to towel off as best he could, then began to re-dress. For the millionth time, he wished he hadn't been stupid enough to let his bag get swallowed up by the rockslide. He supposed a lack of spare clothes was a fair price to pay though, all things considered. His hand ached, the cold making the pain sharper, more pronounced. That seemed unfair. Shouldn't the cold numb him and make it easier to ignore? He tipped his remaining pills into his hand. Eight.

Fucking eight.

Mike stared down at them: the little round pills in his calloused, torn-up palm, framed by his remaining fingers. It hadn't really occurred to him that he was taking more than he should until Sam pointed it out. Once she did, of course, it seemed incredibly obvious. He didn't think he really had a terrible problem, but then that's what everyone always thought, right? Pathetic, he thought. I am pathetic. He took one.
"Mike?" Sam opened the door.

"Hey Sam." He tried for nonchalance, but even to his own ear it sounded forced. "Were you looking for me?"

"That's why I said your name—um..." She rounded the corner and trailed off, staring at him. Belatedly, he realized he still was mostly undressed, with only his jeans on. "Sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt..."

"No, no, it's fine," he said hastily. He turned away, shoving the loose pills desperately into his pocket. As if she wouldn't see them, as if she'd miss what she'd already pointed out that she knew. Some of the pills fell to the cement floor and he swore, dropping to his knees.

She rushed over to help.

The floor was damp and he plucked the pills off the floor as quickly as he could, hoping none of them would be damaged beyond repair. Sam was faster than he was. By the time he had three, she had the others. He caught her gaze and braced himself, waiting for a comment on the number, some remark about how many he'd gone through, but none came. She just smiled sadly and dropped them into his palm. "There. Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

They both stood. He put them away properly this time, back into their bottle. "You didn't."

Sam grinned then, seemingly unable to suppress it, laughed. "Right. That's why you jumped. Because I didn't startle you. Come on. Why else would you have dropped all your pills?"

"You underestimate how clumsy I am," Mike pointed out.

"Yeah, I guess. Maybe you are just a huge dork. I've been saying that for years."

"You and everyone else. Need I remind you that I was running back?"

"Need I remind you that I paid as little attention to football as humanly possible?" She smirked up at him and for a split second, it felt like nothing had changed, like they were still young and innocent. Then her eyes flicked down to his mouth and he saw her throat work as she swallowed. Her tongue darted out to moisten her lips and he looked away.

He'd always known Sam was attractive. He was human, for fuck's sake, and had basic observational capabilities, but she'd always been carefully sectioned off in his brain. She wasn't one of the girls he went for and, besides, she had Beth. Any idiot could see how crazy they were about each other. So it had never really been a possibility he entertained. She was just Sam, his friend. His very attractive friend who gave him lots of well-deserved shit for his fuck-ups and could always be counted on to roll her eyes at his puns.

Until now.

If there were awards for Worst Timing, he would win every single one of them. He couldn't even pinpoint when things had begun to shift. Had it been when they'd hugged in the tunnel? When he'd woken in the ranger station to find her staring into the fire, looking lost? When she'd slid her hand into his by the big oak back on campus? When she'd clung to him in her dorm room like she was drowning? Or was it even further back, when she'd saved his ass more times than he could count from Hannah and the other monsters?
Seriously. Worst timing in the entire fucking universe. And some terrible judgement thrown in for good measure. That was him, in a nutshell.

"Hey, Mike?" Her words startled him out of his thoughts and he turned back. She was rocking slightly forward onto her toes, hugging her torso and looking at the floor. "Are we—are we okay?"

He smiled quickly. "Of course."

"No, don't—" Sam took a step towards him, laying one hand on his chest. He imagined he could feel every ridge and callous of her palm and fingers on his skin. It was... very distracting. He tried to ignore it. "You promised you'd tell me the truth, Mike. You promised you'd be honest with me."

He had promised. Mike sighed. "I don't know. Honestly, I don't. I—what happened earlier—I don't know what it means, and—I wouldn't blame you at all, but I'm worried that you're not going to forgive me for taking—"

Then her hands were sliding up his chest, along his shoulders to twine behind his neck. Every inch of her was pressed against him and it was so sweet and unexpected he wondered for a brief moment if he would pass out. Her lips brushed against his, softly. "Are you about to suggest that you took advantage of me?"

"Didn't I? You were concussed, probably messed up from smoke inhalation and panic. I mean, the thing threw you through the wall. Like the Kool-Aid man in reverse or something and I find out that you're okay and I—"

She pulled back slightly to press the tips of her fingers against his mouth. "Mike? Shut up."

"But—"

"We could die any minute now, you know."

"I'm tired. I'm so tired of questioning every little thing. Can't we just—if you're okay and I—"

"I—Sam—" It was madness. Sweet, perfect madness. He tried to think, to voice some other kind of objection, but then her teeth were at his throat and he lost track of what he was about to say.

"Please?" she whispered, voice breaking. That, more than anything else she might have said or done, was his undoing. His arms slid behind her back and she surged up against him. "Mike..." He lifted her. She felt so slight in his hands, even though he knew she'd probably deck him for saying so. Her legs went around his waist eagerly and he turned to let her rest on the table behind him.

She moaned against his lips, the sound vibrating out from her throat and jolting straight through him. Her fingers tangled in his hair and pulled him down. He was drunk, intoxicated on the feel of her pressed against him, her breasts crushed against his chest, her strong thighs around his waist, every single point where their bodies touched. Heat, comfort, and something more. Something that chased away the cold, the fear, the constant threat of death. There were two soft thumps as she kicked off her shoes.

He slid his hands under her shirt, drawing it upwards. She helped him, letting it slip over her head to be tossed, forgotten, on the table beside them. He pulled back to look at her and she flushed, then tugged the sports bra over her head, flinging it away. "It's practical," she muttered.

He laughed. "Sam, you're kind of dumb sometimes." He gestured vaguely to himself. "Does it look like I find this un-sexy in any way?"
Her eyes followed the gesture and she turned even more red. It was possibly the cutest damn thing he’d ever seen. Without waiting for her to respond, he kissed her again, trying to demonstrate very thoroughly his exact level of enthusiasm.

She moaned, her legs tightening around him, and he tipped her head back, leaning down to press hot, open-mouthed kisses along her throat. Her hands fumbled at the catch on his pants and she laughed breathlessly, pressing her lips to the hollow of his collarbone. "Are you sure—" He couldn't hold back the question, even though part of him was sure he would die if she said 'no.' It was too good to be real, not in this dark, horrible place.

Then his pants were being shoved down and once again he lost all ability to speak, let alone protest. He wanted to touch her. Every inch of her revealed was the single best thing he could have hoped for; her skin smelled like the remnants of smoke and rock from what they’d been through, but underneath it was a musky sweetness that set his senses on fire. He lifted her again, letting her tug down her pants in turn, and bent his head to take one rose-colored nipple into his mouth. She bucked against him, biting back another moan as he slid further down, his hands braced on her hips.

Sam stilled abruptly. He glanced up to find her eyes wide and horrified, fixed on something behind him. "No, don't! Please—" Her desperate voice rang out through the room, but Mike didn’t even have time to look before he felt razor claws pierce his back, driving deep through his ribcage and into his lungs. He gasped, choking, fighting for air, but there was only pain.

Laughter rang out to the left.

He jolted upright, narrowly avoiding smacking his head on an overhanging shelf. The dream-pain began to fade almost immediately and he looked around, frantic and disoriented. Where was—Dreaming? He had been dreaming. Who had been laughing? Had that been in the dream too? It seemed almost impossible that someone could be laughing right now.

Jess clapped her hands over her mouth, looking guilty. "Sorry," she whispered, grinning. "I didn't mean that to be so loud. It's Sam's fault."

He glanced at Sam, who looked defensive. "I wasn't trying to be funny. It was a serious answer." She caught his eye, flashing a little smile, and he tore his eyes away. His face felt hot. Shit, all of him felt hot, the dream still fresh in his mind, pain and pleasure alike. She had smiled just like that when… oof. Nope. Get it together, Munroe.

"Oh come on," Jess said scornfully. "Lettuce? That's what you want. If you could have any food in the entire world, right now, you'd want lettuce?"

"Yeah. Fresh, crunchy lettuce."

"Will you tell her she's nuts, Mike? Lettuce. Oh my god." Jess snickered, glancing around the room to see if she was disturbing anyone else. Emily was either still sleeping or pretending she was, curled under a blanket and facing the wall. Josh looked like he had passed out in the middle of doing something, like he'd just fallen sideways from where he'd been sitting. Maybe Josh always looked like that when he slept, Mike didn't know.

From the corner of his eye, he saw a flutter of wings and turned, trying to spot the butterfly. Was that white? Or red? Was there even a butterfly at all? "Fuck," he mumbled under his breath. This mountain really was trying to kill him. He let his head fall back onto the makeshift pillow and rubbed his eyes. How long had he been asleep? He felt marginally better, if now incredibly distracted. And, after the sensation of cleanliness in the dream, he found his clothes chafing him.
"No, come on. Sam, I know you're vegan, but seriously. Like, your ultimate fantasy meal. If you could have anything, right this second, what would you pick? Not just lettuce." The way Jess said the word dripped with disdain. "Even vegans must have good dishes."

"Fine! Fine. Okay…" Sam cast about for an answer, then snapped her fingers. "Okay. I'd have this curried lentil soup with dried cherries that they serve at Open House," she said, naming a café near the campus.

Mike gave up on more sleep and stood. Both girls looked guilty. "Sorry. Too loud?" He couldn't meet Sam's eyes.

"Nah. Just going to go wash up while we can."

"Are you sure that's safe?" Sam frowned. "Do you want company?"

"No!" The word came out angrier than he intended and he winced. He paused, rapping out a quick pattern on the table. "No—that's fine. I'll be back soon. I'll be quick. That's the knock I'll use when I come back, so you know it's me. Bolt the door behind me." Sam opened her mouth, possibly to protest, and he fixed her with a sharp look. "I mean it, Sam. Bolt the damn door. Jess, make sure she does it."

Before she could object again, he undid the locks on the door and slipped out, heading towards where he and Josh had found the generator. He knew the stupid room with the hose had to be around there. Josh had gestured vaguely before he left. He had to do something to snap himself out of this and freezing water seemed suddenly like an excellent idea.

Unless, of course, there really had been a butterfly and that dream had been some kind of prophecy of sex and death.

He shook his head. Why was that even a possibility? Fuck this stupid mountain.

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"What do you mean he's gone? He was just here, wasn't he?" Melinda couldn't keep the irritation from seeping into her voice. She was tired and sore. She hated traveling, particularly along the narrow winding roads that brought her to the small resort town. They inevitably made her feel claustrophobic and carsick.

Beverly shrugged. "I don't know, Mel. That last kid just vanished. He's still checked into the room and all, but I haven't seen him in a while now. I think he left too. Went up the mountain, maybe."

"It's been snowing. Storming. Why—" She threw her hands in the air. "Christ. Are all these kids insane? Fine. I knew I'd have to go up there."

"Are you taking the cable car? In this weather?"

"It'll be fine." She could see Hank frowning at her from the corner of her eye and shot him a challenging look. "I don't want to hear it. I'm going up there, one way or another. It's an enclosed car." He opened his mouth and she glared him down. "It'll be fine, Hank."

He folded his arms over his chest and his frown deepened. Hank had been a heartthrob once. Now his face had creases carved into it, the signs of a life very thoroughly lived, if not entirely happy. Melinda wasn't sure which she preferred. All of them were older now. "At least stop for a few hours. Rest. Traveling is shit even when you aren't on one of those damn buses."
There was no time to rest. She'd rest once she got them down off the mountain. She thought about Allison Giddings, Sam's mom, who probably had no idea where her daughter was. If she had to explain one more death caused by her family, she wasn't sure what she'd do. They were fine, she told herself. She'd get there before anything bad happened and just yank them back down by their ears. "No, I'm just going to go. I slept on the bus. I just want to get his over with."

Scowling, Hank nodded once, sharply. "Fine. I'll give you a lift to the station, then."

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Sam watched the view on the monitors rotate and flicker, but there was no movement, nothing to account for how on edge she was feeling. Every one of her nerves seemed to be sparking at once. If she were a dog, her hackles would be raised. It was an unsettling sensation with nothing to blame it on. Something was coming. She couldn't say how she knew, but she did.

They should rearrange the cameras, she thought for the hundredth time. They could put one in the hallway just outside the door and maybe move a few others closer. She glanced over at Josh, who was still passed out. It used to make her laugh, the way he slept, but now it just made her sad. The mangled half of his face was buried in his arms and he looked almost normal. She'd need his help to adjust the cameras. Better to just let him rest and hope that the drugs were taking effect.

Emily and Jess had traded places. Em, who had refused to sleep unless someone stayed up to watch Josh and apparently didn't trust Sam to do it, was now sitting on top of one of the tables, perusing the journal and letting Jess get some rest. She wanted to ask Emily about it, get her thoughts, but even one glance at the girl showed her how unwelcome that would be. They might have all reached an uneasy sort of truce, but Em obviously didn't want to talk to Sam any more than she wanted to talk to Mike.

"I'm going to go check on Mike," Sam said, pushing herself to her feet and feeling her muscles groan from the lack of use. She stretched briefly, touching her toes and sweeping her arms up to the ceiling.

"Whatever." Em followed her to the door to re-bolt it. "Shave and a haircut to get back in."

Nodding, Sam slipped out into the hallway. She hadn't realized how much the temperature of the saferoom had shifted from all of them sitting around in it. In comparison, the hallway was much colder and she rubbed her arms, trying to stay warm.

She followed distant sounds to the workshop she'd passed through with Emily. That one had the working water. "Mike?" She stuck her head around the door. Too many shelves. Wherever he was standing, she couldn't see him from the door.

"Hey Sam. Were you looking for me?"

She snorted. "That's why I said your name—um..." The words died in her throat as she was confronted with a rather undressed Michael Munroe. She hadn't realized he was planning to wash up that much. She'd figured, with cold water, the most he'd do was wash his face and hands, maybe rinse out his hair, but it seemed he'd really gone for it. She felt the blood rush to her cheeks and started to turn away. "Sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt..."

Mike's hand clenched around whatever he was holding, clutching them against his chest. "No. It's fine. Did something happen?" His voice was abrupt, clipped. Moving slowly, with what seemed to Sam to be excessive caution, he tipped the pills in his palm into their bottle and stowed them in his pocket, then grabbed his shirt.
"Not really. Actually, no. Not at all." She really had no reason for coming after him except boredom and, maybe, loneliness. Sitting in that room with Em silent and cold, with the others asleep... she felt more alone than she had wandering around in actual solitude. She wanted to see Mike, relax in his easy company.

Now that she was here, though, it seemed anything but easy. Sam watched him pull on his t-shirt and flannel, leaving his undershirt and outer layer on the counter while he pulled on his boots. The words came out before she could stop them: "Are we okay?"

He flinched at the question, his whole body growing even more tense. "Of course."

"No, don't—" Sam crossed the room, feeling as if she could break through his odd stiffness through physical proximity. He watched her approach looking like a wary dog. "You promised you'd tell me the truth, Mike. You promised you'd be honest with me."

"Don't say that," he said sharply. "Don't say that, Sam."

Mike looked angry, though she had no idea why. Unless... unless he was angry at her for what had happened earlier in the yard. "I'm sorry," she said finally, her voice weak. "I'm sorry about before. I didn't mean—I don't want things to be messed up between us. I know you're with Jess and—"

He snorted. "We're not together."

"What?"

"We broke up officially before we came up here, but I think it's been over for a lot longer than that."

She took a deep breath. "Well I'm sorry anyway. I don't want things to change between us, not if it means we can't be friends. It might have been a mistake, and I shouldn't have... I shouldn't have..." Once upon a time, she had been good with words, right? She'd like to blame exhaustion, but she hadn't been able to sleep, which must mean she wasn't that tired.

He was watching her with raised eyebrows and she faltered entirely. "You didn't do anything wrong, Sam."

"Yeah, I shouldn't have kissed—"

"And I took advantage of you. We're even."

Sam took another step in, reaching up to trace his heavily-stubbled cheek. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard you say, Munroe."

He opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again, his jaw clenching. She shook her head, smiling slightly, then tipped onto her toes to press her lips against his. "You didn't take advantage of me."

"Didn't you just say you shouldn't have kissed me? And yet—"

Her heart stuck in her throat. He was right. What was she doing? "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have even come here." She turned to leave and he caught her hand, pulling her back into him. It was the third time she'd kissed him, and each time felt new and surprising. His spare hand gripped her shoulder and if she'd thought he'd been cold or uncaring, she'd been wrong. She could feel the tension vibrating in every inch of him, as if he was holding himself back from something.

He pulled back and dropped his hands to clench, white-knuckled, at his sides.
"I think I should wash up too," she said softly. "I'll meet you back in the room." She pulled her sweatshirt over her head and kicked off her shoes. Mike looked like he was in actual, physical pain.

"Sam, look… this just… this isn't a good time."

No shit. She snorted. "Yeah, obviously."

"I'm doing this all wrong. Fuck." He took her hands again, looking down at them with an expression she couldn't decipher. "I don't—I'm not—"

The door opened again and they both jumped, spinning to face the newcomer. Josh came around the shelf, his face drawn anxious. "Hey, so… someone is coming up on the cable car. The station activated."

They stared at him. "What?" Sam said finally.

Josh laughed, the sound hoarse and humorless. "My reaction exactly."

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"You want me to fly you up there?" Hank frowned up at the snowy forest through the filthy glass. "It'd be tough, but I could do it."

Melinda shook her head. "No, let's not risk it. And I'm not getting the authorities involved. The kids aren't stupid. I'm sure they're fine. I'll just go up and get them to come back down with me. Should be simple." He snorted and she smiled ruefully, pulling on her gloves. "Fine. Maybe not simple. But I don't want to ruin their lives and their futures by getting them in trouble. This was stupid, but I can't say I don't understand the urge." She had put the key in and turned it, then manipulated the controls until the engine above them started up. Now all they had to do was wait.

"You're a good person, Mel. Taking care of those kids like this."

"Doesn't feel like that most days. But thanks. Should take a bit to get down here. Mind keeping me company?"

He smiled. "Not at all." He hefted the thermos he was holding. "I kind of hoped you'd ask. Coffee?"

They sat together on the cold bench, watching as the cable car slowly made its way down the line towards them. Melinda couldn't think of anything to say, but Hank didn't seem to expect her to chat. They passed the cup back and forth, drinking the bitter brew. She smiled slightly as she took another sip. Black with sugar, the way she liked it. He remembered. Either that, or his own personal coffee tastes had changed.

She stared out at the snow. "Somewhere out there are the last links to my kids, Hank." Now where did that come from? How inappropriate and unfair of her to say—she shouldn't put that on him. Not after everything he'd already done for her. "I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry?" He poured more coffee. "You have nothing to be sorry for."

"I have too much to be sorry for. Too much to even really start apologizing to the right people." Melinda sighed, rubbing her forehead. "But you don't have to share my burdens."

He was quiet for a long moment, then cleared his throat and straightened. "I share those burdens whether you want me to or not. Mel, I've known those kids since they were little and you first started coming up here. I remember when Josh knocked his tooth out falling off that ledge. I remember
when Beth was too shy to even say hi to people properly but would sing at the drop of a hat if you asked her. Hannah and that damned dog of hers. Not a day goes by that I don't wonder if I could have done something different. If we'd spread the search farther or…" He trailed off, scowling into the steaming coffee. "Sorry. I'm just trying to say, Mel, that we all have regrets. I'm just hoping—I'm just hoping that letting you go up there on your own doesn't become another one."

The car rolled into place and came to a stop, swaying slightly. Melinda stood and picked up her bag. "It won't. It'll be fine. I'm just going to go up there, find them, and bring them back down."

"If you're not back soon, I'm going to fly my ass up there to get you."

"Deal." She smiled and climbed on. "Here we go. I'll see you soon, Hank. Thanks for the coffee."

The doors slid shut and she took her seat. She hated this fucking thing. It always made her vaguely nauseous, the way it swayed from side to side as it moved. Hank stood on the platform as the cable car began to make its way back up the mountain. She watched him until the snow obscured the view, then settled into her seat with a sigh. She hoped Sam and whoever she brought with her were easy to find. She didn't want to wander from building to building in the storm any more than she had to.

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"Um… Matt?" Ashley reached out and grabbed his sleeve. "There's—the cable car is moving." It was coming down towards them, slowly emerging from the storm like a ghost.

He shielded his eyes to look up at it, frowning. "So does that mean they found Josh? Or spare keys or something?"

"Should we go back? Are they on their way down?"

Squinting, he tried to make out any details through the swirling snow. "I don't know. Let's… let's hold up for a moment. See what happens. Maybe find somewhere to sit that's out of the snow."

Ashley shivered. "I like that plan. Out of the snow. That's definitely a good plan." She looked around. "Um… where though?"

They settled for ducking in a hollow created by a fallen tree, watching as the cable car made its slow, ponderous descent towards the bottom of the mountain. It shook in the wind, but moved well enough. Ashley wished they could be sitting in it. She was all about the rescue they were attempting, but her socks were soaked and she was getting blisters and, honestly, she knew she was not cut out for this kind of cross-country trek. The cable car vanished from sight, momentarily disappearing into the snow, before reappearing again.

"So…" Ashley bounced in place, trying to keep herself warm. "Did we just hike into the middle of nowhere for nothing?"

"Maybe. But, I mean, that's sort of the best-case scenario, right? That means they're okay, they found keys and/or Josh, and are headed down. That's pretty good."

"True. Would have been nice to get a dream about that possibility," she mumbled bitterly.

Matt laughed. "You cold?"

"Yeah."

"Come here." He held out an arm and she scooted into his side, wrapping her arms around his waist.
Immediately she felt better, though it was only marginally warmer. He felt solid and sure at her side. "How have you been?" She craned her neck to look up at him and he smiled ruefully. "I haven't seen you in a while."

"Yeah. Not since…" Not since they were nearly killed by monsters and she'd been terrorized by a villain out of the Saw franchise, she almost said. It was unnecessary. Matt knew. He remembered. "I've… I've been better."

"I know that feeling."

"So you and Em broke up?" It felt silly, sitting here making pseudo-awkward small talk in the middle of the woods, but it helped a little. It was like his arm around her: something solid and familiar.

He laughed again. "Yeah, I guess you could say that. I'm not sure we were ever really together. She wanted some kind of revenge on Mike and Jess and I was handy. Ugh—I sound bitter, don't I? I don't mean to. I love Em. She's just not really the most, well, emotionally responsible person." The cable car disappeared completely, still apparently on its way down the mountain. "So how about you and Chris? I heard you finally got a bit cozy."

Ashley smiled sadly into her scarf. "I guess so. Not sure he'll forgive me for coming up here though. He thinks all of us are totally crazy."

"Really? I thought he'd be the first to lead a 'Rescue Josh' charge."

She shook her head. "He's convinced Josh is dead."

"Didn't he have the dream too?"

"I think so. He was kind of cagey about it, but yeah? I think he did. He's just—ugh." She let her head fall to rest against his shoulder. "It's Chris, you know? He's so sure that everything can be explained and monsters are just too far outside the realm of the explainable. You know how none of the cops or rangers or anyone would believe us? Chris is on their team. Team Reason. Team Logic and Science."

"As opposed to Team Monsters and Magic?"

"I prefer to think of it as Team What-We-Actually-Saw."

He chuckled. "Yeah, that's a way better title. Let's go with that." He sat up straight and Ash jerked upright, senses immediately on high alert.

"What? What is it?"

"It's—look." She followed the line of his point, squinting into the white. "The cable car."

It was coming back. That meant—that meant it wasn't them. They weren't going down. Someone else was going up. Someone with a key. The light was on in the cable car, tinting the windows yellowish even as it rocked from side to side on its ascent. "Oh shit. Oh shit-shit-shit. Oh my god, Matt, we are so fucked!"

He offered, but she could hear in his voice that he didn't believe it.

They watched in tense silence as it continued to work its way up the line. It was funny, Ashley thought dully, how much longer the trip seemed to take when you were the one in the car rather than
the one watching it. Or maybe it was just that the last time she'd ridden in the cable car, she hadn't been freezing, hungry, stressed, and tired. They hadn't taken the cable car down after the lodge had exploded; the helicopter had taken them. She'd sat, clustered together with a silent Emily and a single emergency blanket wrapped around the two of them.

As the cable car approached them, both Ashley and Matt craned their heads, trying to see inside. The only thing either could make out was that it seemed like there was only a single rider. Ash made a face. She wished that was reassuring. She shook herself, pulling her bag onto her shoulders securely. "Okay, well. I guess we have to keep moving, either way, right? It's not like anyone's going to come get us."

They continued on. The ground began to slope upwards more steeply and they skirted around the edges of what Matt concluded must have been the end result of the rockslide. Ashley was the first to admit that she wasn't particularly outdoorsy, but she'd read enough to know that even being around the area was unsafe. Having one rockslide greatly increased the chances of another one.

There was a brief respite in the storm, the snow slowing to a few gentle flakes. As they made their way around the edges of the rubble, Ashley caught sight of something. "Is that—" She caught Matt's sleeve and pointed. "Is that the cable car station?" It listed to the side, looking for all the world like it had too much to drink. As if it heard her, she felt a slight rumbling in the ground and looked up towards the approaching cable car with dawning horror.

"Matt—Matt, it's going to fall."

She watched the realization grow on his face as he looked up.

Several things happened in quick succession: a line snapped, the support beam under the station gave way, and the snow resumed. Because of-fucking-course the snow resumed at a moment like that. Ashley screamed, but the sound of it was torn away from her, flung into the wind and away. Matt tackled her, driving her to the ground and shielding her under himself as the world seemed to explode around them.

She felt the ground shaking, heard the howl of wind the indescribable sound of things falling, things that could easily kill them both. Not knowing what else to do, she stayed huddled, all-but holding her breath as she waited. It wasn't too different from an extreme earthquake, she told herself over and over again. Just like the drills in school.

But the drills never covered buildings that seemingly fell from the sky, or the whip-like shrieking crack of sheared off metal cable. She grabbed Matt's hand and clung to it, relishing in the way his fingers squeezed her. It meant he was alive. For now, at least. She closed her eyes and prayed, begging the universe to just let them live through this. They weren't even to the others yet. If she died here, it would mean nothing. She wouldn't have been able to help at all and she'd just be scaredy-cat, useless Ash all over again. And Matt. Matt didn't deserve to die here in the woods with her, on this pointless quest. They should have just called in the rescue service again.

Then Matt was up, jerking to her feet. The ground was still sliding, the snow still coming down. He pointed into the trees and said something, but after the din of the last few minutes, she couldn't make out his words. She looked in the direction and saw what had caught his attention. The cable car was wedged in the canopy, somehow caught in a thick entanglement of pine boughs, but any second now, it was going to collapse further and plummet to the ground.

Without either asking the other, they both took off running, skidding down the hill towards the car, shouting soundlessly into the storm. The light inside flickered and went out completely as they watched. They got to within about twenty feet before the branches gave way and the cable car made
its final descent, crashing into the ground and sending rocks, ice, and broken wood flying.

Chapter End Notes

Seriously. This mountain hates them.

Coming soon: Everyone is so getting grounded. If they live long enough, that is.

Also, someone tell me it would be a bad idea to write a darkest timeline fic, because I really, really, REALLY want to, but it will be... painful. In many ways.
Holy shit, you guys. I'm so sorry this took me so long. I just changed jobs, going from part-time night shifts to early morning 10-hour ones and between that and rehearsal for the burlesque troupe I'm in, I'm just totally beat. Not to mention that this chapter was a non-stop struggle bus. Lots of reasons, but no excuses. Ugh.

Anyway, thanks for being patient and for all the kudos and comments and reads! I'm definitely not abandoning this. Cross my heart! Next chapter is already in the works and nearly finished.

Chapter title comes from the song "Paths Will Cross" by Josh Ritter.

Sam grabbed her boots and sweatshirt and followed Josh back to the monitor room, jogging a little to keep up with him. He used to be good at slowing his pace to make it easier on her—short legs and all—but whether it was heightened stress levels or his new preternatural abilities, he moved incredibly quickly, despite looking like he was still walking.

The girls were standing, shoulder to shoulder, staring at the monitors. Em spared them a glance as they came in, but all her attention was focused on the flickering screens. The one that showed the cable car station immediately caught Sam's eye. It probably would have, even if she hadn't known to look there. The lights were on, for one thing. The image may have been only in shades of greyish-green, but the difference was startling. The machinery was moving too, the wheels steadily turning. The cable car, which had been hanging from its line just barely in the sight of the camera, was gone.

"When did it go?"

"We're not sure exactly," Emily said shortly. "We didn't notice when it started. And the camera only shows the upper station."

"The unstable one?" Mike asked softly and Sam tensed. He shot her a worried look. They had seen the station and been afraid to even set foot in it. Surely the movement of the machinery was even more of a strain than the weight of a human. "Fuck."

Jess hugged herself, shivering. "What do we do? Should we go check it out?"

"And open ourselves up to attack by that thing again? I vote no."

"But—"

As the others continued to debate, Josh grabbed Sam's arm and pulled her to the side, away from the group. "Sam, w-who is that?" His voice was low and urgent, catching slightly with the remnants of his old stutter. "It could only be—Sam, what did you tell my parents?"

"I—" she faltered. "I asked them if I could come up here. To get closure. They said no and so I left. That's it."

He closed his eyes, face pained. "Sam, you… oh fuck."
"What? They said no! I agreed! That was it!"

"No fucking way does my mom think you just gave up. No way. Have you met my mom?" Josh's cheek twitched and he clapped a hand over it, nails digging into the skin of his face. "Sam, is that them?" His nails looked wickedly sharp and long, carving little half-moon marks into his flesh. She wanted to pry his hand away but couldn't bring herself to touch him. Not when he seemed so close to losing control.

"Sam—SamSamSamSam—" He continued to mutter her name over and over again, turning away from the group and into the corner.

A hand on her shoulder made her jump and she spun to see Mike, watching Josh with worried eyes. "Is he—" He shook his head, as if tossing away the thought. "I think we should go investigate. We still have a few hours until dark and since we haven't seen any sign of the thing—or Hannah—we're probably as safe as we're going to be. We could get down there and stake it out while we wait for the car to come back up."

"Too late," Jess called to them, pointing at the screen.

As they turned to look, the entire screen shifted, dissolving into lines of violent static as the view changed drastically.

Sam was having trouble shaking the sense that this was a dream again, though nothing was obviously impossible and she could trace her steps to this moment with ease. But even knowing that the station was unstable didn't make it seem any more possible for it to just go down the way it was. Barely visible through the disruption was the cable car line, slack and falling, the floor violently slanted, then the camera's shot swung down completely and the screen went dark.

"Oh…" Emily said quietly, with immense feeling, "…shit."

From behind her, Sam heard Josh let out a painful sound halfway between a growl and a screech, then the door banged open loudly. She turned, knowing instinctively what she would see and reaching for him, but he was gone. Throwing herself into the hallway, she caught a glimpse of him as he bolted around a corner and out of sight.

"Josh!" She started to run, only to be grabbed and pulled bodily to a halt. "Mike, let me go! We have to go find him!"

"No, Sam, you're not thinking. He can find us again. But either he went to help whoever was in the cable car or he didn't. If he did, we'll see him there and if he didn't, well, I don't think whoever was on their way up can afford for us to wait."

Her chest hurt and it took every ounce of willpower she had not to rip her arm free from Mike's grip and run after Josh. Finally she nodded. "Fine. Yeah. Let's go."

She shoved on her boots, grabbing her coat and winter gear to put on as they left. Without hesitation, Jess and Em offered to stay behind and keep things secure, though Jess looked antsy, as if she wanted to rush out into the snow with them. But aside from that, there was no time for discussion or planning. Someone had come up the mountain. Someone might be dead.

Again.

They ran.

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"Oh fuck. Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck oh—" It became a mantra, repeated unendingly under her breath as she tried to avoid cutting through her gloves on the broken glass. The windows had shattered and the inside of the car was a wreck. It was hard to tell what she was looking at exactly. She shot a panicked glance at Matt, but he seemed entirely focused on the disaster before them. Whether he had a better sense of things or was just plowing ahead regardless, Ash couldn't tell, but he was clearing away twisted metal as best he could.

She caught a glimpse of hair and gestured wildly to Matt, who came to join her digging. Together they unearthed a woman who looked familiar to Ashley, but it was hard to put a name to her, not with the blood and dirt on her face and the wreckage of the cable car all around her. Matt shouted something, but once again the wind away tore the word before Ashley could catch it.

No matter what, they had to get her out of there. The snow was black and brown and red and Ashley had trouble focusing on it, sorting through it in her head or with her hands. It was like those magic eye books she'd hated as a kid; she couldn't shake the sense that if she crossed her eyes and then slowly uncrossed them, she'd see a dinosaur or a spaceship.

Matt slid his hands under the woman's arms and pulled her carefully. She was limp, unconscious, and her body seemed stuck. Ash rushed to pull away the weight on her legs so they could drag her out more completely.

Together they lifted her awkwardly, moving her under the relative shelter of the trees. Ashley looked up the mountain, at the ominously collapsed cable car station, and swallowed hard. She had thought a lot about what would happen when she got up here, but she hadn't been ready for something like this. She'd thought it would be like last time—running around in the dark, afraid and lost. This was different. This was like a car accident.

Car... accident...

Chris would have made a joke about that.

She really, really wished he was there.

Matt grabbed her arm and pointed over her shoulder. "Look!" He shouted it, just as the wind began to die down again and then winced as it came out louder than intended.

Looking back, Ash's heart thudded hard in her chest. The others. Not all the others, but the sight of Sam and Mike's familiar faces was sweet enough to almost bring her to tears. She waved her arms wildly overhead, gesturing to them. Sam saw her first and began to run as best she could through the snow, slipping here and there as they made their way down the hill, giving the area of the rockslide a wide berth.

"Who is it? Are they alive?" Sam was out of breath as she dropped to her knees beside Ashley. "Oh fuck. Melinda."

Melinda. The name clicked in Ashley's head. Josh's mom. "Matt? Is she breathing?"

"Yeah." He lifted his head from her chest, his face grave. "She's in really bad shape. We should try to get her out of the snow. Do you have a place nearby we can get her to?"

"Should we be moving her? Isn't that, like, the worst thing you can do for someone when they're injured?" Was Josh going to lose his mother on top of his sisters? Ash hit her fist lightly against her forehead, trying to make it work. Why couldn't she think properly? Shit. Shit-shit-shit.

Matt was saying something. She tried to focus. "—a choice. We have to get her out of the weather.
We can figure out everything else later. Mike?"

The boys used their arms to create a makeshift seat, scooping Melinda gingerly off the ground. Sam hovered, helping support her head when necessary and otherwise just dancing from foot to foot, chewing her lip anxiously. The snow had abated slightly, and they started to move, trailing behind Sam as she led them up the mountain.

Somehow, the short hike up the remaining slope to the path leading to the lodge seemed longer than the entire hike with Matt. Ashley gripped the straps on her pack tightly, watching as her friends moved Melinda as carefully as they could while still making decent time. The lack of snow felt ominous, like the… oh god. The calm before the storm. Her brain was stupid and she hated it sometimes.

Again, she missed Chris. Or even Josh. Someone needed to make an inappropriate, ill-timed joke and she just didn't have it in her.

She wondered how Mike and Matt even knew to make that chair-sling with their arms. Probably some holdover from football or other youthful, idiotic adventures. For a second, she let herself long for high school. She might not have had a lot of friends, but the ones she had were good. Well, except when they weren't.

Nope. Nope, nope. That wasn't helpful right now. She focused on hiking and tried to come up with a better plan. The weather hadn't been part of her expectations and Ash had figured she'd be able to talk things over with Matt on the hike up, but that obviously hadn't been the case. First, she needed to figure out the full situation here. Second, she needed to find out if Josh was turning into a monster. Third, she needed to know how far along he was and sit down with the others to talk about the potential for a cure.

A cure.

Ashley stopped dead in her tracks, staring at the injured woman in her friends' arms. "Blood calls to blood," she mumbled under her breath.

"You okay, Ash?" Sam shouted down to her, beckoning. "It's not much further."

She rushed after them.

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He couldn't stop laughing. That wasn't good. He knew it wasn't good though, so maybe that was good? Josh clapped his hands over his mouth, trying to muffle his heaving, horrible chuckles. The reality of the situation was just so fucking funny. And by funny, he really meant not particularly funny. Funny to other people, maybe. Irony? Perhaps. Who even knew what that meant anymore? He certainly didn't. Not really.

His parents. One or both of his parents. Maybe Donny, but he doubted it. Hank? Nah. Hank would fly. He could feel it deep in his bones, though. Almost like he could smell it in the mountain air. Mom.

He was so getting grounded.

"Joshy's a dead man," Hannah whispered, leaning forward and resting her chin on her palms.

Beth draped herself over her twin's back, stretching like a cat. "Psycho-killer, qu'est-ce que c'est?" she sang softly to herself, the tune slightly off-kilter. "Fa-fa-fa-fa-fa-fa-fa-fa-fa-far better to run
"Shut up," he muttered. "Shut the fuck up."

At least he had stopped laughing.

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Sam hated how cold the ground was. She could practically see ice actively forming on it. Shivering, she stripped off her outermost layer. Following her lead, Ashley did the same, laying them down to form at least a slight barrier between Melinda's unconscious body and the ground of the pump house.

Out of the wind, it was marginally warmer. The boys slowly eased the injured woman to the ground. Her body was limp. She looked like a broken doll. Sam wanted to look away, but forced herself to stay focused. She knelt by Melinda's head, smoothing the hair out of her face gingerly. "Melinda? Melinda, can you hear me?"

She didn't answer or stir at all, though her chest rose and fell lightly. That would have to be reassurance enough. Sam tried to assess her injuries and general condition. She'd read so much about wilderness survival and injuries and the like, but her actual field experience was pitiful. This was pathetic. She felt impotent and powerless in the face of Melinda's accident and shook her head, hard enough that it made her dizzy momentarily.

Her fingers worked their way over Melinda's head, trying to move her as little as possible. There was a pretty serious contusion and it looked like Melinda's nose might have broken. Certainly there was a gash across it, running over onto her left cheek a bit. There were dozens of small cuts, but none were bleeding seriously. As she felt her way carefully down Melinda's torso, she reached a spot on her ribs and the woman's body twitched. She peeled back her shirt. Dark bruises were beginning to appear on her ribs. Sam gestured to show the group.

"Broken rib. Maybe more than one," Matt said simply. "I've seen that kind of bruising before." He glanced at Mike for confirmation, who nodded.

"Football?" Ashley asked.

Mike snorted humorlessly. "No. Kevin fell out of a tree in eighth grade."

Sam searched her memory for what she had read about broken bones. Ribs weren't the worst thing that could happen. She'd be able to move, if slowly and painfully, and they wouldn't be able to splint it anyway. Ignoring the others, she kept checking. Melinda's hips seemed okay, though she wouldn't be able to tell if she had internal bleeding or something. More cuts on her legs, especially her shins. Had she curled into a ball? Or tried to? Her legs seemed unbroken, at least.

She sat back on her heels and rubbed her eyes. "Okay. I'm not sure, exactly, but I think the ribs and the head injury are the worst of it. We'll know more when she wakes up."

"—if she wakes—" Ashley broke off awkwardly as she caught the eye of all three of the others. "Sorry," she said meekly.

Matt was fumbling with something and Sam turned, just in time to see him raise the radio to his mouth. "Em—" Sam all-but tackled him, snatching it from his hands as quickly as she could and hurriedly backing up again before he could react.

The three others stared at her. "Um, Sam—" Mike started, just as Matt spoke.
"What the hell? I just thought they could meet up with us here. Unless Emily and Jess…” His eyes widened and he swallowed hard.

"No!" It hadn't even occurred to her that he might think that. "No. Shit. Um, okay. So, this isn't really the best time, but I should have said something before to you, Mike. Sorry. Okay. Mike and I lost our radio. In the rockslide." They just continued to stare. Mike looked confused, Matt paranoid, and Ashley like she was worried Sam had hit her head as well. She decided to just say it plainly. "We don't have our radio, but Emily thinks she talked to us after we had lost it. We also know there's another wendigo-thing up here—" She saw Ash open her mouth to interrupt and Sam raised her hand to stall the questions. "—and they can mimic voices. We heard it last time we were here and that guy's journal confirms it. Emily and I think that it must have the radio. And knows how to use it too. So we shouldn't use the radio unless we absolutely have to. We only give it more power."

Silence met her pronouncement. Finally, Mike cleared his throat and Matt nodded. Ash folded her arms over her chest and frowned, staring down at her knees. "I'm going to die here. I knew it. I just fucking knew it."

Sam chose to ignore that statement for now. "So what to do we do?"

"I think we just wait," Matt said softly. "Wait for her to wake up."

"We can't move her again though. Or I don't think we should."

Ashley looked up again. "So wait, you and Em have talked? That means they're okay, right?"

"Yeah."

"Do you guys have supplies? Where are they?"

Sam smiled grimly. Ash wasn't going to like this at all. "Remember the lodge basement? The old hotel?" The girl went even paler than she already was, freckles standing out vividly on her face. She nodded slowly. "Josh's room with the screens to watch us all."

Even though she was sure Ashley had been braced for something along those lines, Sam still felt a pang of guilt and sympathy. She understood the look of frustration and horror that washed over the other girl's face and wished she could do something. But what could you say to ease that kind of thinking? The wave of memories that were doubtless hitting Ashley all over again.

Mercifully, Matt spoke up, distracting them both. "We need supplies. For her. Any blankets that you guys might have, plus water and a first aid kit. Is that where Em and Jess are? How do I get down there? I haven't—that night, I didn't ever end up down there."

Mike looked at Sam. He hesitated, frowning, and she made the decision for him. "Mike can take you down. The lodge is kind of a wreck."

"No—"

She fixed him with a look. "One of us has to show them and I'm not leaving Melinda alone."

"I'll stay with Sam," Ashley piped up. "The two of us can stay here and you guys go and come back as soon as you can."

Mike sighed. "Fine. We'll be quick." He gestured to Matt and the two headed out into the white landscape outside, vanishing quickly around a bend.
Looking around the generator shed, Sam spotted shelves: boards lying across angle braces. With a shove, she was able to dislodge one of the boards and pull it down, resting it on the ground beside Melinda's prone form. She beckoned to Ashley. "Here. Sit on this with me. It'll be better than the ground."

The girls sat in silence, watching the gentle rise and fall of Melinda's breathing. "I thought you weren't going to come," Sam said finally.

"I had another dream."

"Oh?"

"A bad one." Ash looked down at where her hands rested in her lap, chewing on her lip. "Did you find Josh?"

Sam hesitated. "Well—"

"Is he turning into a monster?"

"How did you know?"

The redhead groaned and rubbed her arms, shivering. "The dream. I knew there was another thing up here too. You guys—all of you guys—they were… it was bad. So I had to come. I couldn't… I just couldn't not come. There were butterflies. All colors of them and I just sort of knew. So I left a note for Chris and bought a ticket and… yeah."

Sam couldn't think of what to say. She hadn't been sure, when she saw Ashley, why the girl was here. It had seemed pretty clear that she wasn't convinced and didn't want to come, but Sam had thought that maybe it had just been a whim—some kind of spur of the moment doubt that made Ash want to rejoin the group. But this… Ashley knew how dangerous the situation was and had chosen to come anyway. Sam put her arm around Ashley and squeezed. "I'm glad you're here."

"I'm going to die up here," the other girl mumbled again and Sam laughed.

"No, you're not. I'm not going to let you." Melinda stirred, making both of them jump. Her lips moved slightly but no sound came out. "Melinda? Melinda, it's Sam."

"Sam?" Her voice was barely audible. "Sam."

"Yes, it's me. Try to be still, Melinda. You were hurt badly." Sam glanced at Ashley, who was chewing her lip again. "What do we do?"

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"Matt!" Jess threw herself at him, hugging him tightly. "You're here! Wait, why are you here?"

He laughed breathlessly, the wind knocked out of him. "Ashley showed up and we decided to come find you guys."

"Were you in the cable car?" Emily asked curiously.

Matt sobered. "No. That was Melinda Washington. She's alive but in bad shape. Sam and Ashley are with her in the generator shed. Mike and I just came for some supplies real quick."

"I'll take them," Mike said quickly. "Stay here with the girls." He began to grab things, gathering blankets, first aid supplies, and a canteen. He didn't like the thought of Sam and Ash out there with
the injured woman, totally unarmed and at the mercy of anything that might happen by. It wasn't a fair thought, since he knew both girls were more than capable of handling themselves, but they were unarmed and from what he'd seen of the thing that attacked them… he gathered stuff faster.

"Are you—"

He didn't wait to hear what Matt was going to say, heading right back out the door. Em and Jess could catch Matt up, he reasoned, and it wouldn't take two of them to get the supplies back.

Fuck. He was being irrational, Mike knew, but he couldn't shake it. He just needed to be going, moving, doing something.

The path up was growing increasingly familiar. He took the stairs two at a time, keeping his arms tight around the bundle of stuff he'd grabbed. Melinda Washington was here. That changed things, right? She—and her husband, he supposed—were the owners. They could kick them right off the mountain entirely and where would that leave Josh? And whatever of Hannah was still around.

That was an entirely separate thing that he just couldn't handle right now.

Outside, the sun was getting worryingly close to the horizon. He wasn't sure whether what they'd theorized was actually true: that the thing was nocturnal or that Hannah didn't come out during the day. Whether it was true or not, night here was dangerous. He skirted around the edge of the lodge, trudging up a short, steep hill and stepping back onto the trail to the pump house.

He nearly dropped his armful completely. Sam and Ashley were coming up the trail slowly, helping Melinda between them. She wasn't walking, exactly, but she was moving her feet, an arm around each girl. They'd put both coats on her. Her eyes were half-closed and her jaw set and tight, her entire face wracked with pain.

"Shit," he muttered, rushing towards them. Mike let his load fall to the ground and took Ashley's place; the redhead slipped away quickly, obviously recognizing that he was the better fit to support Melinda. Instead, Ashley stooped to gather up what he'd dropped, slinging the blankets over her shoulder. "What are you guys doing?" he demanded. "You were supposed to wait!"

Sam glared at him. "She woke up! It didn't make sense to just 'wait' if she can move. I'd rather get her out of the cold and somewhere actually safe!"

"So she's conscious?"

"And 'she' can hear you," Melinda mumbled, her head tipping back to look at him. She looked dazed and half-drunk with pain, plus the effects of the head injury he had no doubt she'd sustained. "What's going on?"

He gritted his teeth and avoided looking at Sam again. He'd been right. Melinda's presence… it changed everything. And there had still been no sign of Josh since he'd run off. Maybe he'd been wrong to stop Sam from going after him, but there had been no way for them to know that Ashley and Matt were helping Melinda. For a split second, he wondered if things would be simpler if Melinda had simply died in the accident, then guilt stabbed hard into his gut. That was a bullshit thought and he knew it.

"We're going to get you inside, Mrs. Washington. It's cold out here."

They met Matt in the yard. He looked pissed. "You didn't need to run off like that," he told Mike over Melinda's head, taking Sam's place under her right arm. Sam took some of the blankets from Ashley and the two girls hung back behind them as they continued on.
"Took you long enough to come after me," Mike retorted.

"Whatever dude. Just... don't be like that, okay? Just talk to me before you do crazy shit. I'll still let you do it. I'd probably even encourage it. You go crazy when you don't get enough crazy shit in your life."

Mike glanced at him, but whatever Matt had meant by the comment wasn't shown in his face. He was focused on the path ahead. Between them, Melinda mumbled something Mike couldn't catch and he sighed. He should have known better than to have Sam ask the Washingtons. She'd warned him. He should have listened. He found himself wishing he knew the family better. He'd known Josh the best and he'd known Hannah a little. Beth, he knew mainly through Sam and a little bit from the club, but they'd never been close. And the parents? Yeah, he didn't really 'do' parents. Not other people's parents and, as much as he could help it, not his own.

Adults were fucking weird anyway. Who came up a cable car to a location they had been warned was dangerous on their own? He'd at least expect Mr. Washington to be with her. "Whatever," he muttered, trudging on through the fresh snow.

Emily and Jess were in the hallway when they got down there: Em was leaning on the wall with her 'bored' face on, though he knew that was at least partially a lie, while Jess was pacing, looking like she might start running at any second. "You're back!" she said eagerly, the moment she saw them. Mike flashed her a little smile and kept up his steady pace towards the room.

The sleeping bag was still set up. He and Matt eased Melinda down onto it, padding under her head with a coat while Sam spread an extra blanket over her. Melinda shook her head, trying to get up again, then winced and sagged back. She slurred something he couldn't make out, but Sam knelt beside her and took her hand. "You just need to rest a little right now, okay? Does anything hurt?" Sam flinched the moment she finished the question and it made Mike want to laugh. He bit down on the impulse.

"Everything," Melinda rasped.

"Yeah, sorry. Dumb question." Sam sat complete, her hands in her lap.

"Samantha—" Sam winced again. Was there some sort of Mom University where all mothers went to learn how to say a kid's full name in that specific tone? The woman rubbed her eyes with her hand. Her voice was weak and slightly hoarse. "We're going."

"But—"

"No. I didn't call in the authorities, despite the fact that all of you are trespassing, because I understand what you're doing up here. It's hard to let go. But it is incredibly unsafe, as was thoroughly demonstrated by the cable car. So we are going back down the mountain until I can get sufficient signal and then we are calling in Hank to come get us. Hank Durand. You've met him, I think." Melinda seemed to realize she was rambling. She sighed and waved her hand vaguely, her eyes on the ceiling. She hadn't seemed to realize where she was or what the monitors signified. "Either way. It doesn't matter. You and all your friends are coming down with me."

Mike wanted to yell, to shake her. Why had Josh run off? There was no way to convince Melinda, no way to break through this shell she'd put up without Josh. Mike couldn't even call it denial. As much as he wanted to shout at Melinda, he couldn't deny that the reasonable thing to think was the cop's story. Sam sat in silence. All of them were silent, waiting.

Finally she just nodded. "Yeah. Okay."
Melinda sighed again, this time in relief, her eyes fluttering closed.

"Is it—um…" Ashley hesitated. "Is it okay for her to sleep? If her head is messed up?"

Sam just shrugged. It made his chest tighten. Sam didn't care? Sam didn't have an opinion? Oh, he wanted to strangle Josh. Where the fuck was he?

The group settled into an uneasy silence, all of them very aware of the sun setting outside. He bolted the door, dropping the overwrought security beam into place across it as well. If Josh came back, Mike reasoned, he'd knock. Or something. Either way, he'd survived this long with that thing up here. He'd have to either come back to them or survive another night. It was an ungenerous thought, but Mike had been having a lot of those today. He was here to help Josh, yeah, but everywhere he turned he was being faced with reminders of exactly how Josh had hurt the people around him. It was hard to ignore.

He rested a hand for a moment on the bolted door and took a deep breath. For now, they'd just have to wait and hope.
Begging for Forgiveness

Chapter Notes

Because you were all so patient for the last chapter, have a much more eventful one! Events in this chapter have been a long time coming.

Chapter title comes "When You Break" by Bear's Den. It's pretty much THE song for Broken Parable (despite the entire story being named after a different song - heh). Give it a listen if you haven't yet.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ashley frowned. "It didn't like Hannah? And it got mad that you broke the cross? I'm not sure, but... I was reading about guardian ghost things. Sometimes it was the first buried or sometimes it was a mantle passed down to new people who were interred. But the ghost's job was basically to keep anything from desecrating the cemetery."

"That makes sense then," Jess said, casting an uneasy glance over her shoulder to where Melinda was resting, her eyes closed. None of the girls wanted to talk to her and they certainly didn't want her to hear them talking about Hannah. "Em did fuck up the grave."

"Not on purpose. Or, yeah, on purpose, but not to be a dick. I just thought that since Hannah couldn't —"

"We all get it. You don't have to explain." Jess smiled at her, placatingly. "I was just saying that it made sense."

They were quiet for a few minutes, listening to the steady sounds of Melinda's breathing and Mike's knife. Sam stared up at the ceiling. She wanted to sleep, but couldn't make herself relax enough to do so. Instead, she was just lying back on the cold floor, barely cushioned by her coat and extra clothes, watching the slight changes of light on the ceiling as the monitors cycled through their images. There was a weird buzzing in her veins, waiting for something to happen. Maybe the thing would come back. Or Josh—she hoped he would come back soon. She knew she could fix things if she could just show him to Melinda, make her see the truth of what was going on.

"So… Hannah?" Ashley asked, finally. "I'm sorry, but—" She cast another furtive glance at Melinda to confirm she was still asleep. "Did you guys really see Hannah?"

Mike's knife faltered, then resumed. The girls glanced at him, but his attention was fixed on whatever he was whittling. Could Mike whittle? From where Sam was lying, it looked like he was just making, well, a slightly smaller piece of wood.

"Yeah." Jess's voice was soft.

"Like a real ghost though? You're sure? Not just another one of Josh's prank thingies? He rigged a ghost for Chris and me to see, you know."

Emily rolled her eyes. "Yeah, you've told us enough times."

"Jeez," Jess muttered. "You make it hard to defend you sometimes, Em."
"Who asked you to?"

The blonde girl turned her attention back to Ashley, hugging her knees to her chest. "No, this was different. I mean, I assume so? I didn't see the thing Josh made, but this was... she, like, chased us all over the place. And I touched her. She was freezing. And... and so alone. I'll totally admit that I didn't know Hannah that well—I mean, apart from... yeah—but she's still here, somehow."

"Did Sam see her?"

"I don't think so. I think just Em and I."

From the corner of her eye, Sam saw Ashley look at her, but didn't acknowledge it. She still couldn't quite wrap her head around the idea of Hannah's ghost being around. And even though she didn't entirely believe it, she also found herself resenting Jessica and Emily. Why would they be the ones to see her?

She rolled over to face the wall, gritting her teeth and trying to resist the tears stinging her eyes. Why wouldn't she get to see Hannah? Hannah had been her best friend. She might shove away the feelings, focus on the problem at hand, but she missed Hannah so much it hurt. It hurt just as much as losing Beth. Maybe more. She missed Hannah singing Disney songs off-key and how she always wanted to go hiking, no matter where they were. She missed wandering through the dry riverbed with her, skirting around broken beer bottles and picking strange plants that would later turn out to be poison oak—that had been a rough week.

Killing her in the explosion had only been doable at all because she seemed so separate from the Hannah Sam had known. Sure, she might have still had the butterfly tattoo and been annoyingly fixated on Mike, but that was where the resemblance had ended.

If Hannah's ghost was different... if it was really her... Maybe Sam was happy she hadn't seen her. She couldn't decide.

"And she tried to kill you?"

"Sort of. She—" Jess fell silent and Sam heard her suck in a breath. "Did you see that?"

Sam shoved herself up to look over. The others all had their eyes fixed on the monitors. One in the top right showed movement: a shadowing figure with arms and legs far too long, creeping through a room of chains and ruin. Sam didn't recognize the room. Perhaps it was another one of Josh's traps, maybe the one Jess and Emily had found. It was hard to tell with the graininess of the image. "It's the thing," she said softly.

"It's, um, big." Ashley's voice trembled. "Bigger than I expected."

"Didn't you see it in your dream?"

"Well, yeah, but there was other stuff—there was a lot going on."

Matt stood and peered at the image. "What's it doing?"

"Looking for us?" Em snapped. "Obviously."

"Or maybe it's looking for Josh." Mike's knife continued its consistent work. He sighed. "I'm not sure which possibility is worse."

Jess hugged herself and glanced at Melinda, who was still asleep, breathing peacefully. "What do we
"Nothing we can do, I think. Just wait, right?"

It was a tense night.

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The night air was cold on his face, but not unpleasant. If anything, it felt refreshing. Josh swung himself up onto a higher branch, his long, claw-like nails digging into the bark easily. He'd always been okay at climbing—not good, not bad, just okay—but now, with whatever the fuck was happening to him, he was amazing.

His mouth and chin were sticky. He licked his lips, savoring the metallic tang of the blood. The deer had been easy enough to catch. The moment he'd had the idea, listened to the little voice in the back of his head, it had been like fireworks sparking in his mind. All his senses had gone into full alert. He'd done cocaine once and this reminded him of that high, only multiplied by a thousand. It was like coke and Adderall and a good night's sleep and just getting laid all in one.

He'd taken the deer down easily, grabbing it by the antlers and twisting it until its neck snapped. He wasn't a hunter. He'd never had his Dad's keenness for guns and the loud noises had always set him on edge. But this kind of hunting was easy. It just felt right.

And yet, even after eating, he still could feel the hunger that lived deep in his gut.

So he downed another pill and tried to ignore it. Just like the idea that his Mom was here.

He'd gone to the wreckage of the cable car after the sun had gone down, when he was sure they were gone. There were tracks leading away: four sets of footprints. He wasn't sure what that meant, exactly, but his mother's body wasn't there. That might be good or it might be bad. He couldn't imagine that Sam would leave her body there, even if she was dead.

Pausing for a moment, he looked out through the branches, letting the scent of pine wash over him. There were other scents too, things he might not have picked up before: things like the metal of the distant crash, the smell of the deer carcass, and more. At least he wasn't seeing or hearing or smelling any of the others. He didn't want to see them or speak to them. That last view of Sam's desperate, anguished face as he fled was carved into his mind. When he closed his eyes, she was still there, begging him to stay.

He was a fucking coward. He should go and face the music. His options were to either stall forever and be left on this hideous mountain, alone with monsters and his own madness, or to go back.

It was still night, though. As long as it was night, they would be locked in the safe room. That was license enough to stall, he figured.

He pushed off with his legs like a frog, springing up to the next branch, then up and up again. Josh wondered vaguely if he would be better at climbing ropes too. That was what they'd always done in gym class in elementary school: a thick rope stretching down from the roof of the gym, studded with the occasional knot to mark height. Chris had been fucking awful at it. He'd never been able to get even ten feet up, while Josh could make it at least twenty. Climbing class. He hadn't even thought to ask if Chris was here, but he hadn't seen the idiot and since Sam hadn't mentioned him, Josh doubted it.

That meant Cochise had given up on him.
It made sense. It had been the goal, after all. When Josh put his mind to something, he let nothing stand in his way. He wanted to comment on it, to say something to the night, but when he opened his mouth, he had trouble forming words. Oh well. The mountain didn't need to know that he missed his friend's carefully styled blond hair—why were the two most important non-family people in his life both blond?—or his dorky glasses or his urge to take awkward, close-up selfies. Had Chris finally hooked up with Ashley? Josh hoped so. It would mean that at least one part of his plan succeeded.

Well, two parts. Getting Cochise to finally see him for what he was had clearly been a success as well.

Looking down at himself, he was relieved to see that he'd managed to keep his clothes mostly clean, though his boots felt oddly tight. Had his feet grown? That didn't seem possible. He settled down into a crook on the tree, wrapping his legs around the branch below him and locking his ankles. Letting his head fall back, he looked up at the dark sky, the moon hidden by clouds. He knew he should be freezing, but he just felt oddly calm. Not sleepy, strangely enough, but relaxed. He closed his eyes and let the sounds and scents of the forest wrap around himself.

For the first time in a long time, he heard no one talking to him.

It was beautiful.

-o-

No one caught more than an hour or two of sleep, and what they did get was in bits and pieces. It all added up to a group that was incredibly irritable in the pre-dawn hours as they tried to decide what to do. There had been no additional sign of the thing. Melinda had woken, eaten, and fallen back to sleep. She'd been able to sit up, though she'd complained of pain in her abdomen that didn't seem related to her ribs and when she'd tried to stand, she'd been unable to put any weight on her left foot. So now they were faced with an unpleasant decision.

"We have to take her down. She needs medical attention." Sam rubbed her forehead, trying to think. "I mean, we don't even know all of what's wrong with her. Her ribs, yeah, but her foot's messed up too and her head… she might have internal injuries too. We just can't tell."

Ashley was chewing on her lip again. "But Josh—"

"I know!" Her voice was louder than she intended and she winced. "I don't mean to snap. I know. I don't want to leave him behind and I don't plan to. But I also can't just let Melinda possibly die up here. What do you want me to do, Ash? What can I do?"

The other girl sighed. "Yeah. I guess you're right. What if we take her down until she can get ahold of that Hank guy? We can probably raise the emergency line with one of the radios and then we… never mind. Monster thing has the radio too. Ugh."

"What about her cellphone?" Both girls turned, surprised, to see Emily watching them. "She has a cell, right? I know my phone worked until, like, halfway up the cable car when we came up last time. We probably don't have to get her all the way down to get a call through. We could go for that cabin thing we stayed at on the way up. Call him from there and have him come pick her up. Easy."

When they didn't answer immediately, she scoffed and threw her good hand up in the air. "It'll even give you time to try to convince her to come back and save psycho-monster boy. Personally, I think we'd all be better off just calling it and leaving at this point, but somehow I doubt you'll go for that idea."
"I'm not abandoning him up here," Sam snapped.

Emily rolled her eyes. "Yeah, no shit. That's what I meant. I know you're super attached to Corporal Crazydick."

"Okay," Sam said, sounding more decisive and confident than she felt. "The second the sun comes up, we get Melinda down to where we can make a call. We'll deal with the fallout as it happens."

They didn't have much time until sunrise. They packed as efficiently as they could, leaving most of the food behind, stored carefully in the corner. Instead they focused on bringing blankets and anything they thought might make the trek down the mountain easier. If they left the second the sun came up, Sam thought, they might be able to make that cabin before dark. It would be easier going back down, knowing exactly the right path to take and being about to skirt around any potential pitfalls like the rockslide.

Melinda didn't fight them. Indeed, she seemed incredibly relieved that they were already geared up to go. They found a piece of piping that she could use as a rudimentary walking stick and ease her way.

They took up a specific marching order instinctively. Sam led the way with her certain footing. Just behind her came Jess, armed with her new best friend. Emily and Ashley followed, then Melinda, then Mike and Matt. Before Melinda had woken up, they'd all agreed that if she faltered, either Mike or Matt would carry her until she could be on her feet again. None of them wanted to put bets on the monster leaving them alone for much longer, so the faster they got down the mountain, the better.

It snowed a little more on them, but otherwise it went as smoothly as Sam could have possibly hoped, although she hadn't hoped for much. No sign of Josh or the monster, nor any sign of Hannah's ghost. None of them talked much. She spent the time trying desperately to come up with a possible way to convince Melinda to let them stay. Without Josh, though, she couldn't think of anything she thought Melinda would accept.

Skirting around a boulder, Sam glanced behind her to make sure everyone was keeping up. No one looked happy. Mike caught her gaze instantly, the only member of their party who wasn't focused on the ground and keeping their footing. He didn't smile, just watched her for a moment before she turned back to the front.

They stopped occasionally to rest, but none of them wanted to wait long. Every second wasted was another second closer to nightfall. Sam didn't want to think about what might happen if they were still exposed. The monster might have made the mine its home, but she wasn't fool enough to think it wouldn't follow them down for easy pickings. At some point during their trek, Wolfie vanished into the woods. None of them commented on it, not quite willing to point out the wolf's presence to Melinda if she hadn't already noticed it.

Melinda checked her phone frequently, waiting to see bars, but it wasn't until Sam spotted the cabin about a quarter mile away through the trees that she was finally successful. Even so, she apparently wasn't able to reach the guy she'd mentioned, judging from the lack of conversation and her closed, stormy expression. It was times like that when Sam could see the resemblance to Josh, the frustration that the world refused to bend to their wishes.

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She must have been in a lot of pain, Sam realized as they closed in on the little building. Melinda wasn't one for terse silence, and Sam had been certain she'd object to them breaking into the cabin, whatever it was. But Melinda didn't say anything as Sam climbed once more through the back window to unlock the front door. It wasn't dark yet, but none of them wanted to keep hiking and Melinda didn't fight them. She collapsed heavily on the sofa.
Sam helped her take off her shoes, easing the left one off carefully. The woman's foot was swollen, but Sam knew better than to ask about it. If Melinda was anything like Josh, and she clearly was, she wasn't likely to want to talk about an injury. She probably saw it as a weakness, like a stronger person would have walked out of the accident entirely unscathed.

*People,* Sam thought tiredly. They were ridiculous. Herself included.

The woman fell into an exhausted sleep almost immediately, leaving the rest of them to set up for the night. They locked the door and blocked off the windows as best they could. It seemed kind of pointless. Mike and Sam, who had seen the thing up close, knew very well it could probably break in if it wanted to. Maybe, though, it would hesitate if it didn't know the situation inside. That was their best bet.

They continued their unofficial group silence. Apparently no one had come up with a plan to convince Melinda to let them stay. Em made an inaudible comment to Jessica, who elbowed her with a small smile and Sam looked away, swallowing her anger. Maybe no one else had been trying to come up with a plan at all.

Rather than wait for the sun to go down completely, they all decided to sleep while they could. They chose watches. Mike volunteered to go first, the others laying out their plans behind him.

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Sam dreamed she was at a graduation party that didn't happen.

The real graduation party had been the worst party Sam had ever been to, and she'd been to some doozies. Sure, there had been all the hallmarks of a good party: they had a real reason to celebrate, there were no parents around, there was loud music, and there was plenty of booze. But, graduation notwithstanding, she just hadn't wanted to celebrate. Not all of her peers seemed to feel the way she did, but she had still imagined she could feel an undercurrent of sadness and uncertainty running through the house.

She had sorted through the bottles in the kitchen, ignoring Vanesse and Dave, who were making out in the corner, and the gaggle of girls she didn't know who were counting down to their next round of shots. There had been a lot to choose from. Finally she had grabbed a bottle of plain, unflavored vodka and poured it into a new red plastic cup. It had hardly been touched and chugged merrily as it poured.

Sam had downed half of it quickly, then poured more. She shouldn't have come out that night. She had known that, even as she shed her baggy commencement gown and changed into more comfortable clothes, but her Mom had pressed her into it. "'When's the next time you're going to see all your friends, Samantha?''' she had muttered to herself, repeating her mother's words from earlier that day. "'You graduated. You should celebrate. It's what kids do.'" Her Mom had sounded almost desperate, begging Sam to do something normal.

Vodka was vile, but it seemed strangely appropriate for the night. She didn't want to do something normal. Things hadn't been normal for a long time. Honestly, she just couldn't wait to get out of the house and move into her dorm and just try to start from nothing. Sam had picked her way through the living room, carefully avoiding meeting the gaze of anyone she knew. She didn't want to talk to Chris or Liz, and she definitely didn't want to talk to Ash or Em or Jess or anyone involved in that stupid, *stupid* prank. She could accept that they hadn't intended it to turn out the way it did—how could they possibly have predicted that?—but tonight, of all nights, she couldn't handle dealing with them. Not when there were three people missing that should be there and weren't.
The room had spun slightly as she moved. Too much vodka. "Or not enough," she mumbled, taking another sip. She had wanted to scream, to break something. They should be there, with her, celebrating. Beth, with her elaborate plans for the future. Hannah, with her shining eyes and giddy joy at being free. Josh, with his dark humor and fierce wit. Three near-identical sets of eyes that had defined so much of her life. How had she become so entangled with the Washingtons? And how could she get back what she'd lost?

She'd only seen Josh outside of school. After they'd returned, he'd dropped out, preferring to get his GED from home. But that night, she'd stumbled out the front door, narrowly avoiding running headlong into Jesse, she staggered to a halt on the driveway and stared out at the street. The curb was crowded with cars. Among them was Josh's car. He'd been sitting behind the wheel, staring out at the lit street with dead eyes. She'd knocked on the window and all-but fallen into the passenger seat with her vodka.

But that wasn't what she was dreaming now.

She was dreaming of joy. The same music, the same people, but with three additions that made it perfect. She and Hannah did shots of watermelon-flavored vodka to compensate for the fact that Sam wouldn't do jello shots. "They're not vegan!" she'd hollered over the din of the party.

"Some jello is vegan," Hannah had argued, tugging down her shirt. She'd tried to dress sexy, but on Hannah it looked adorably awkward. Sam just shook her head.


Josh had paused while filling water balloons with Chris just long enough to roll his eyes, but Beth had pulled Sam away. "My hero! Always so good. Such a little paladin." She pressed her finger against Sam's nose and made a silly face, crossing her eyes and pursing her lips.

The blonde brushed away her hand, pouting with mock anger. "I am a druid, thank you very much!"

"You're both nerds, is what you are," Hannah had interjected, handing them both another shot each.

Sam scoffed. "Just 'cause you think you're too cool to play DnD with us…"

"I am too cool to play DnD with you guys. Holy shit. Everyone is too cool for that. Down the hatch, girlie-o! No more stalling! Tonight, we party!" Hannah grinned cheekily at her, jogging Sam's elbow.

The three girls tossed the shots back and Beth grabbed Sam, pulling her away into the crowd, dancing wildly, spastically. Sam laughed at her, the sound of it lost beneath the pulsing bassline. Beth spun her, both of them laughing, then her face sobered abruptly. She pulled Sam close, so that she could hear Beth's voice even through the music. "Sam, wake up. Wake up now."

Sam jolted awake, sitting up in the near-black of the cabin. It took a moment to shake the giddy euphoria of the dream. She scanned the room, trying to pin down what had made her wake up, what had triggered Beth's urgency—if, indeed, it had been Beth and not just some figment of her imagination.

Blankets on couch rose and fell gently with Melinda's breath and she counted the other sleepers in the room. Everyone was there, safe and sound. Everyone except…

"Mike?" she whispered, peering into the dark corners of the room. Perhaps he was only in the bathroom? She rose silently and picked her way between the sleepers. The bathroom was empty too
and, she noticed with dawning horror, his boots were gone.

She didn't dare swear aloud, for fear of waking the others, but her mind had a few choice words it would like to shout at him. Sam weighed her options quickly: wake at least one of the others, which ran the risk of waking Melinda who would doubtless put a stop to any attempt to follow him, or go alone.

There was really only one option she could convince herself to take.

Sam slid into her clothes as quietly as she could, layering with everything she had remaining. She slipped on her boots and shoved her head lamp in her pocket. There was no way to grab her pack or the flamethrower without alerting someone. As a last-ditch measure, she grabbed her compass and lighter, then opened the door carefully. Cold air swept across her and she rushed out, shutting it with a soft click.

She waited on the doorstep for a moment, to see if anyone would stir, but there was no sign that anyone had been disturbed by her actions. Knotting her boot laces, she zipped her coat up over her chin and pulled her hat down over her ears. Outside, it wasn't terribly dark. Breaks in the heavy clouds let the moon filter down to illuminate the snowy woods.

A set of footprints led away and back up the mountain once more. She allowed herself the indulgence of swearing under her breath as she began to trudge through the cold.

"—better find you alive so I can have the pleasure of fucking murdering you myself you stupid stubborn piece of—"

She made surprisingly good time hiking alone. Here and there she found signs that she was still going in the right direction: footprints in the fresher snow, scuffmarks where he had hauled himself up ledges. Where was he going? She had half-expected the prints to lead back towards a mine entrance, but they curved and tracked away. Towards the… lodge? Sam walked a little faster, finally breaking out into a run as she emerged onto a clear path. How long ago had he left? What on earth was he thinking?

Rounding a bend approaching the small lodge gate, she skidded to a halt. "Mike?"

He had been staring up at the building. He turned and smiled ruefully. "Should have known better than to think you'd find me. You were always the best at taking care of people."

What the fuck was that supposed to mean? Sam was tired, cold, and irritated. "Mike, what are you doing? Why did you come all the way back up here? It's suicide to come up here by yourself, you idiot."

He dropped his gaze, then turned back to the house. "I just… I kept thinking about Hannah."

She frowned and folded her arms over her chest. "Okay. Even if I believed Jess and Emily—not totally sure I do, by the way—what was your plan? To come up here and just wander around, hopefully not getting killed by that thing from before, and hope you can, what, talk to her?"

"I know it's stupid." Mike rubbed his injured hand. Sam had a feeling he wanted to take another pill. Must be running low, if he was fighting the urge.

Sam sighed. "It's not stupid. Sorry. I'm being a bitch." She laughed bitterly. "Truth is, I want to see her too. But that doesn't mean I would sneak out in the middle of the night all alone, putting my life at risk to do it. We were going to come back up here. Why couldn't you wait?"
"Because I couldn't be sure we would come back up here. Fuck, why would Mrs. Washington ever let us? She doesn't see anything when she looks at us except a bunch of dumb kids who can't let go of the past. I wouldn't let us come back up here. Would you?"

"So instead you decided to hike through the dark for hours?"

"I said it was a stupid plan."

She walked up behind him and punched him lightly on the shoulder. "Yeah. Pretty fucking dumb, Munroe. But we're both here, so now what?" He gave a half-hearted shrug and she shook her head. "No way. This was your idea. What was your plan from here?"

"I guess I was just thinking about where she might be. They said they saw her in the sanitorium, but that wasn't somewhere... I don't know. I guess I just thought she'd find me." Mike smoothed his hand over his face. His stubble had grown in dark over the last few days of no shaving. Soon it wouldn't even be stubble, Sam thought, the idea hitting her unexpectedly. What would Mike look like with a beard? "I do believe the girls, by the way. I know they were exhausted and injured and, like, totally freaked out, but I don't think that's the kind of thing both of them would just imagine."

Sam sighed again. "Yeah. That's what I'm afraid of." She squared her shoulders. "I guess we can at least go check the safe room. Maybe Josh was there and left a message or something. Maybe he's there right now. That would be a good thing, right?"

They picked their way down to the basement. Every little noise made Sam jump, expecting the monster to spring out at them from the darkness. She found herself utterly terrified that she might hear a voice. Even Mike's. After hearing it speak, doing its mimicking act... she was grateful that Mike seemed to want to stay as quiet as she did.

The stone steps crumbled away even further as she almost fell, catching herself on the wall. The broken pieces of concrete cascaded down with a soft patter almost like falling rain. Mike's breathing seemed overly loud in the silent stairwell.

They passed the old water heater and she flinched when the rocking horse shifted slightly. She forced a silent chuckle, trying to shake the tension. Jeez, that thing had seen some serious shit. Shit that no child's toy should ever have to see. Behind it, the dollhouse stared at her balefully, its empty windows like eyes. Sam remembered when Beth had shown it to her on her very first visit up to the lodge, opening it up and showing Sam all the little secrets that were hidden within its walls. For a moment, she was tempted to open the roof and find Hannah's diary. The key, on its long length of ribbon, still protruded from the lock.

Behind her, Mike made a strange, strangled noise. Sam turned slowly, ready for the worst, ready to see the creature with its hand shoved through Mike's stomach or his head pulled off.

What she actually saw was even harder to bear.

Hannah, barefoot and clad only in the same kind of simple white dress as Beth had been, was reaching towards Mike, who seemed stunned. He simply stared at her as she extended her hand, her smile growing. Hannah had always been quick to smile, but this was different. Her eyes didn't change. They were cold and hard, full of a rage Sam had never seen before.

Jess's description of Hannah's touch flashed through Sam's head, the way she'd talked about nearly dying. She couldn't let that happen, not while she was here to prevent it. Sam gave herself no time to think.
"Hannah, stop!" Sam shoved herself in front of Mike, wincing as the freezing cold seemed to slice into her skin. If she glanced down, she knew she would see Hannah's fingers deep in her chest. She could feel them under her ribs, digging into her right lung. Instead of looking, she focused on breathing slowly. She'd read enough to know that breathing too-cold air could kill you. It wasn't hard to imagine that the shade's frigid hand could do something similar. "Hannah, please."

Hannah's wide, white eyes bore into hers, the girl's mouth still twisted up into a grotesque parody of a smile. Her voice came clearly, though her lips didn't move. "Oh Miss Giddings, how you do go on." The accent was terrible, hovering somewhere between posh faux-British and soft Southern. It had always made Sam laugh, before—Hannah's horrible inability to do any kind of remotely accurate accent. Now it just made her shudder.

"Please, Han. Please stop."

Slowly Hannah shook her head, smile still fixed in place. Her words came again, lips unmoving. "No. Not a chance. I finally have my big chance with Michael Munroe. Do you really think I'm going to just give that up?"

Behind her, Sam felt Mike twitch at the mention of his name and she shoved behind her, trying to make him back up and signal to him to stay quiet. From the corner of her eye, she thought she saw the flicker of Beth and ignored it. Hannah had been—no, was—her best friend. She could do this. She hoped she was right.

"Han, let us go. You don't want him."

"Oh Sam. Of course I do." Hannah's voice was syrupy-sweet. "I got a tattoo for him. I died for him. Isn't it fair that he should return the favor? I love him. The least—" In Sam's chest, Hannah's fingers shifted slightly and Sam bit back a whimper of pain. "—he can do is Love. Me. Back." Each word was punctuated by another stab of her freezing nails.

Sam heard Mike draw in a breath and waved the hand behind her wildly. "Shut the fuck up, Mike. She prayed he could hear her thoughts or at least understand her signals. It would make it worse if he spoke. She could sense it. Hannah had always been emotional. She could turn on a dime, devolve into tears or rage or laughter.

Taking a long, slow breath, Sam kept her voice steady. "You don't love him."

"Yes—" Hannah hissed viciously, her smile in place. "Yes, I do. You know I do."

"No, Han, you don't. God, Hannah, why do you always do this?" Okay, perhaps that wasn't the best way to talk to the thing that quite literally held your life in her hands, but truth be told, Sam was sick of this. It was an old argument. Before Mike, it had been someone else, some now-forgotten guy who was in shop class with her. More than anything, though, Sam just wanted Hannah to stop smiling. The corners of her mouth were drawn wide and fixed in place. It was like something wearing a 'Cheerful Hannah' mask. Like the Psycho mask. Like all the masks the Washingtons seemed determined to wear.

Slowly, oh so slowly, Hannah tipped her head to the side. "What?" Her disembodied voice was low, dangerous.

Sam was hyper-aware of Hannah's fingers in her, of the stupidity of continuing on in this way, but she just couldn't help it. Hannah had been her best friend, but they had fought often and aggressively. She may not have been able to reason with Hannah as a monster, but this argument was so familiar,
she couldn't help herself. Maybe she could reason with Hannah as a shade. At least now, she really was Hannah. Right?

"This. This ridiculous melodrama. Shit. Hannah, you work yourself up to this ridiculous level of insane devotion and convince yourself that it's more than what it really is... a crush." Sam swallowed another noise of pain as Hannah's nails twisted. "Just a crush that you let eat you up."

"A... crush?"

Mike started to speak: "Hannah, I—"

Hannah's hand moved forward a full inch and Sam shrieked. It was like driving splinters of ice straight into her chest. "Mike, shut up." She kept her head up, barely, and drew in a ragged breath. "Yeah, Han. A goddamn crush."

"I love—"

"You don't even know him, Hannah. You have this picture of him and you in your head but it's not... You barely ever talked to him. What, two parties and a few quick conversations and it's true love? That's not what love is. That's infatuation."

The shade hissed angrily, her smile finally fading. "How dare you say that to me?"

"I should have said it to you a long time ago. God, Hannah. No one is worth you dying. No one is worth you letting go of all the things that make you so amazing. You're kind and thoughtful and passionate and you care about people. Why would you throw that away to become this... whatever you are now?"

"Anger." Beth's voice was soft and sad. "Anger is powerful. It's easier to, well, be. I tried to be angry, but I couldn't hold it. Not enough rage, I suppose."

"And Hannah has more than enough," Mike said quietly. He sounded exhausted. "Fuck."

The fact that Mike could hear Beth was significant, but there was a more pressing concern right in front of her. Sam took a slow breath. It was just like running outside at night or keeping on through a cramp. You just kept breathing, kept running, kept going. She could do this. She had to do this. You fought with Hannah until she broke, and then there were tears and apologies and calm.

Hannah's blank eyes shifted, looking over Sam's shoulder to Mike. "You told me you wanted me. Signed with three Xs. An X is a kiss, Mike. I'm sure you know that."

"I didn't—"

"Mike, shut up. Hannah, he didn't write that. Jess did."

Her smile returned, full force. "Doesn't matter. I love him. He should love me back. Give me a kiss, Mike. The three of them that were promised." With another hiss, she darted forward, passing through Sam entirely.

Sam's lungs stopped. It was how she imagined dying, how she'd imagined Beth's last moments in the dark and snow. Spots swam in front of her eyes and she staggered, falling hard to her knees. The ground bit into her palms and she struggled to get her breath back. Every inch of her was freezing. It was worse than when she'd waded through the lake, worse than being naked and wet in the basement, worse than anything she'd dreamed. She had the vague notion that she should be numb from a cold this severe, but it just translated into pain, visceral and sharp.
Distantly she heard Mike shout and an echoing pounding that might have been footsteps or simply her own blood racing to her head. She raised her head with difficulty, trying to blink away the darkness that seemed to be closing in from all sides. She couldn't die. Not yet. She wasn't done yet.

A blur that dimly resembled a figure in white ran at another, similar blur. Both fell to the floor. Then there were hands on her shoulders, cupping her face, lifting her, supporting her. "Sam? Sam, look at me. Sam, are you okay?"

"Mike?" The name felt fuzzy in her mouth. Her tongue felt too big. Had her tongue always been so big? The pain was fading, and with it any sense of her feet, her hands. That was nice. "Better than pain," she mumbled. She would just close her eyes for a moment. Just for a second. She couldn't die, but maybe she could rest for a while.

"No!" Someone was shouting; someone else was screaming. Someone was singing? That didn't make sense. Sam giggled soundlessly, her head resting against something warm. "Sam, open your eyes. Sam, look at me." A hand smacked lightly against her cheek a few times and she forced her eyes open again, annoyed.

"Lemme sleep."

"No. Sam, wake up. Stay up. Shit." Mike's face came slowly into focus. He rubbed her chest vigorously with one hand, supporting her with the other. She leaned into his shoulder. "Are you cold? What's wrong? You feel okay."

"You're all red. You always get all red when you're nervous." She laughed again, sleepily. "S'kinda cute."

He grunted. "As much as I'd love to hear about you finding me cute, I think we should talk about that a different time. Can you move at all?" His palm rested against her neck, her cheek, her forehead, assessing her temperature.

"I'm so tired."

"I know, Sam. But I need you to move. Please." His voice quavered on the word. "Please, do it for me. Just move your hand. Or your foot. Or your... anything. Please."

She rolled her eyes, her whole head rolling slightly with them. "Mother Munroe. Such a nag." With effort, she shifted one hand up to flop onto her stomach.

Mike let out a long, relieved breath. "That's good Sam. Just, um, keep talking."

Someone had been here. She'd been talking to... "Hannah?" A jolt of memory shot through her and she tried to get up, but her muscles failed her and Mike held her still against him. "Hannah! Did she —what did she do?"

"She tried to kiss me."

"Not funny."

He sighed. "Yeah, no shit. I think she was trying to kill me too, if that's any consolation. Not the first time I've had that reaction from a woman. No, but yeah. Beth, like, tackled her or something. They disappeared. I'm not sure where they are. It doesn't matter. How are you feeling?"

Moving was still hard. She felt sluggish, like the blood in her veins was thick and slow. "Cold," she said finally. "Tired." Sleep sounded divine. She would just close her eyes for a moment. If Hannah
was gone, the urgency of the situation was diminished. She could just drift off, take a quick nap, and…

"No!" An arm slid under her knees, the other still behind her back, and she was being lifted off the ground. Sam shook her head. She hated being picked up. It made her feel awkward and helpless. Before she could protest, Mike shushed her. "No. Nope. You're not going to go to sleep, Sam. And you're not going to give me that speech about carrying you. Not again. Not after what I had to deal with during the winter concert when we had to dance. You can just deal with it. I'm going to… um… we're going to the hot springs." He sounded more confident the moment he settled on a plan. Mike was always like that. He didn't like not having a plan.

Sam giggled, turning her head into his chest again. He seemed to radiate warmth, even through the layers of clothing. It was the opposite of Hannah and her fingers. "Avoid submersion into hot water when suffering from severe hypothermia," she mumbled, reciting one of the sections she'd memorized from the survival guide. "…can lead to a dramatic fall in blood pressure and result in cardiac arrest or death."

He shuddered as he continued to walk. She felt, rather than saw, him shake his head fiercely. "You don't have hypothermia. You don't feel cold to me. It'll be good. Warm water. I'll help you. I'm going to help you." The last sentence was barely a whisper, but Sam could hear it anyway.

Melinda's eyes snapped open. She sat up, pushing herself up heavily. The room was dark and her eyes were struggling to adjust. Something was off. She looked over at the floor to where the kids were still sleeping.

Or rather, to where most of the kids were sleeping. She counted them quickly. Four. Only four, where before there had been six. Although it was hard to tell with them all curled up and covered with whatever blankets and coats were available, she was having trouble identifying Mike's lanky body or Sam's blonde hair. "Oh for fuck's sake," she muttered. These kids were incorrigible. She pushed herself up further. Pain flared in her ribs and her stomach and she flinched, falling back again slightly. She grabbed her phone and pulled up Hank's number again. The light of it was almost unbearable bright and she quickly shielded the screen with her blanket, trying not to disturb the kids who were still asleep.

The call rang twice before something thumped on the end of the couch. She glanced up and dropped the phone, the sound of its impact muffled by blankets.

"Hi Mom," Josh said quietly, his face in profile as he looked out an uncovered window towards the snow. "It's been a while.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you guys know how much this story and all your responses mean to me. I write a lot for entirely original projects, which is a very isolating and isolated process, so it means the world to get feedback from you all. Every single comment makes my whole life brighter - that is not an exaggeration (I literally copy and paste the comments and send them to my significant other, as well as the friend who beta-reads for me).

Thank you for taking the time to give me kudos or leave comments. It's such an amazing
motivator to write more (and faster!).
Grad school final projects can bite me. Sorry for the long delay. I've missed this story quite a lot.

Chapter title comes from the Josh Ritter song of the same name.

Warnings abound, y'all. Smut ahead. Actual smut, not just the lead up to potential smut like before.

There was a girl sitting alone in the dark. Across the room was a mirror, reflecting back her pale dress, dark skin, black hair. She didn't want to look at it, but she did, eyes taking stock of what she saw. Her face was impassive, eyes the only thing showing any expression. Those eyes were angry and sad and tired and stubborn and triumphant, all at once.

The reflection spoke. "Will you talk to me?" Not a reflection, then, but a separate, identical girl. They were both young, perhaps no more than twelve.

One of them, the one who hadn't spoken, drew her knees up to her chest, hugging them against her. She was gangly: all knees and elbows and thin, thin limbs. Her body had hit its growth spurt upwards without any of the fat or muscle to fill it out. She propped her chin on her knees and looked out at the dark corners of the room, face staying unnaturally still.

"Hannah, please? Please talk to me." The reflection girl was nearly begging. She tried to make her voice light and teasing with limited success. "Banana? Han Solo? Hanburger with pickles?"

The other girl—Hannah—didn't respond.

The reflection girl stood up and wandered around the room, poking at the walls, the window, the furniture. The fireplace bricks were painted wood, the windowpanes plastic. "You're hiding." She turned to look at Hannah and frowned. "Why are you hiding?"

Still there was no answer.

"Are you ashamed of what you did?" The reflection girl's voice hardened slightly. "You should be. Idiot. Sam was right." Then she shook her head, all anger dissipating. "I didn't mean that. I'm sorry. Just talk to me, Han, please?" She crouched down in front of Hannah and smoothed one hand over the silent girl's hair.

Slowly, hesitantly, Hannah shook her head.

It was more response than the reflection girl had seen in a long time. She sucked in a breath that she didn't need and cupped her hands around Hannah's face, pulling her head to study her. "Hannah, you hear me? Talk to me. Please? You can hear me. I know you can, you dummy, or you wouldn't have shaken your head."

Hannah flickered and vanished, leaving the reflection girl's hands hanging in the air, empty.
The girl sagged, falling to her hands and knees. She wished she could cry, but that wasn't an option. Finally, she stood, looking once more around the dollhouse, and noting the familiar, beloved details. Then she disappeared as well.

-o-

Melinda tried to stand, shoving her legs off the couch and onto the floor. Was she asleep? Was she dreaming? Perhaps that's why she was able to swallow the groan of pain that threatened as her foot screamed in agony. She stumbled slightly and saw Josh—Josh—reach for her, then hold himself back. She grabbed the walking stick from where it rested and began to awkwardly propel herself towards the small second room.

None of the children stirred. She supposed they were wiped out from their time on the mountain. Melinda realized she knew almost nothing about their time up there. There had been no real chance to ask, not when all of her energy was focused on staying upright and making sure all the kids were headed back down with her. As she headed down the hall, she glanced again at the empty places where two more figures should be and sighed. She hoped this was a dream. It would mean that she didn't have to hunt them down in the morning.

There was a soft noise behind her as Josh followed and her heart clenched painfully. No. That was a lie. She very much hoped this was not a dream.

The second room was tiny, with a small bed and some very basic bedding. And still all the kids had chosen to sleep on the floor. She turned to sit heavily on the edge of the bed, half-expecting that there would be no one there. Josh was staring at her with a strange expression. Moonlight filtered through an open window and the chill air from outside made her shiver. With a casual swat, Josh swung the bedroom door shut.

Melinda had no idea what to say. Truthfully, it was hard to believe that she was here, looking at her son. There was something strange about his face: some kind of injury to his mouth, his eye. She couldn't quite tell in this light, though. She waited, hoping he would say something, but he just looked at her. Finally, she broke the silence. "Josh." Her voice cracked and she cleared her throat. "Josh. You're alive."

"That's debatable."

She drew in a ragged breath. He seemed incredibly tense, every muscle in his body tight to the point of trembling. It was the same look their old dog Chile had when she spotted a rabbit. She couldn't think of what to say that wouldn't make things worse. What was the proper line here? I'm sorry we stopped looking for you, honey. Mommy and Daddy were told you were dead. Fucking hell. "Don't say that, Josh."

"Why not? You'll take away my toys?"

"Josh—"

"You keep saying my name." He grinned abruptly, flashing teeth that seemed abnormally sharp. What had happened to him up here? "Josh-Josh-Josh-Josh-Josh. Did you forget me? Have to remind yourself? Makes sense. I'd forget me too. As soon as possible, really. And if I—"

She cut him off. "Josh—"

"See, there you go again. Shouldn't've come here since I already knew the lines for this scene."

"Stop." Her voice was sharper than she intended it to be, but she couldn't suppress the wave of
frustration that swept over her. Josh was alive. He was here, *talking* to her, and still they couldn't talk. When had he stopped being her little boy and turned into this cold stranger. "Just stop, Josh. Please."

He stopped, shoving his hands into the pockets of his vest. She remembered that vest. Melinda took a deep breath, trying to sort through her thoughts. Was it the concussion that was making it so hard to think of something to say? "I'm so glad to see you," she said at last.

Josh snorted, leaning back against the closed door. "Sure, Mom. Whatever you say."

There was the frustration again. "Dammit, Josh. I thought you were dead. Do you know—" She swallowed hard. There were things she couldn't talk about. Not to Bob, not to her friends. Not even to her therapist. "I thought you were dead." He stared out towards the window, then closed his eyes. His lips moved as he muttered something that she couldn't quite hear. "What was that?"

"I said 'I should be.' Fuck."

"Language." The admonition was out of her mouth before she could stop it and it struck her as so ridiculous that she almost laughed. "Fuck is right. The other part isn't. Jesus, Josh. We lost the girls, then this happened, and they told us… I'm so..." Josh paced towards the window and the moonlight caught his face more clearly. The edge of his mouth was pulled back, as if his face had been split. A Glasgow Smile. The injuries, the sharp teeth, the odd, animal-like energy—maybe it was the concussion that made the idea seem plausible, but... "Sam was telling the truth," she whispered.

Her son turned and smiled again. It was only half of his mouth, it seemed, but somehow the unevenness of it made it harder to bear. She fought back the rising tide of nausea and shook her head. "No."

"Yes," he said simply. He bared his teeth. "It's great. Now I look exactly how everyone always thinks of me. Like something out of a fucking creepypasta."

She had no idea what that was, but she could guess. Like Bob's movies. She hated horror. It had always felt too familiar. "What—what does this mean?"

His hoarse laugh seemed to pierce straight through her aching head. "It means your son is a fucking monster, oh mother-mine!" He swept an elaborate bow and gestured to himself. "Just like everyone always said! Come one, come all, to see the freak! Told you I should have died. Joshy should have just let himself go, but he had to go and prove everyone 100% right. Couldn't just give up. Or maybe this was giving up."

It was all too familiar. She'd heard this kind of speech from him before. Melinda shoved herself to her feet again, reaching for him. If she could just hug him, she thought. If she could just show Josh that she didn't give a single shit about what anyone else thought of him—even himself—then maybe he would see...

With a low growl, he backed away from her, his eyes wide and frightened. Then his expression hardened. "Go home, Mom. You don't belong up here. Take them with you. Forget about me."

Her hands closed on empty air. He threw himself through the open window and bounded away, disappearing into the trees.

He was gone.

She tried to take another deep breath, to stay calm, but it was impossible. Ugly sobs ripped their way free of her chest and she couldn't keep her grip on the walking stick pipe. Her torso, her foot
thrummed with pain, but she didn't care. It seemed fitting, really. How had she let this happen? How had any of this happened? Josh was alive, but this was worse than death. She was losing her only remaining child to something that she couldn't wrap her mind around, couldn't understand. She'd heard the legends, of course. She'd even talked to that man—Jack Fiddler—back when he'd tried to convince Bob not to build up here, but she'd dismissed him just as Bob had.

This was her fault. If she'd just listened, if she hadn't been so determined that her understanding was the only real one… She remembered seeing Sam's exhausted, bloody face, the strange smile she'd had as she'd told Melinda what had happened. Melinda had shrugged it off as trauma.

All the kids… They had known. They'd come back here, not for closure, but for Josh. For her child. The one she'd abandoned.

When he was four, he had fallen down the stairs. He hadn't cried at first, just looked up at her horrified face with an expression of utter confusion. His palms had been skinned from trying to catch himself and the red, red blood on his tiny, soft palms had been like a physical blow. But she'd patched him up and they'd eaten ice cream and watched one of the old Narnia movies. Just her and Josh, sitting on the floor in the sunlight while Chile shoved her nose into their laps, begging for treats. Her perfect little boy, even with all his quirks.

It was like being punched in the stomach over and over again. She hadn't just abandoned Josh. If he really was turning into some kind of monster, that meant… that meant… "Hannah." The name came out as part of another strangled sob. Oh god.

"Mrs. Washington?" The voice was tentative. She couldn't even lift her head. There was no part of her that didn't hurt. A gentle hand rested on her back, rubbing in small circles. "Was it Josh?"

She nodded as best she could. She needed to pull it together. Fuck. This wasn't how adults handled difficult situations. There wasn't time for her to fall apart. Melinda tried to straighten, to look at the other person in the room, but her vision was blurred with tears. Her eyes stung, but when your entire being ached, one more thing was hardly noticeable.

"I thought so, but I didn't want to interrupt." Matt sat back, his hands dropping onto his knees. He hesitated. "Take as long as you need. I… I think I'm the only one who woke up. Do you… do you want me to go?"

Melinda shook her head, slowly.

He nodded. "Okay. I'll stay."

When the paralyzing grief finally eased slightly, she wasn't sure how long she'd been sitting on the floor. She straightened. Time and her mind were playing tricks on her. It was still dark, so it couldn't have been too long. Her entire body seemed to scream with pain, but she took a deep breath and ignored it.

"Are you okay?" Matt asked quietly.

"No."

"Yeah, sorry. Dumb question."

She rubbed her temples, trying to get herself under control. The room was freezing, the window still open. She took another deep breath, then another. It didn't help. "I need you to tell me everything."

"What do you mean?"
"Everything. I need you to tell me what happened up here. All of it."

"Since we hiked up here——"

Melinda frowned. She didn't want to know any of this. She needed to know all of it. "Before that. Back—back, please." She hated when her words wouldn't obey her. She knew what she wanted to say, but her mind and mouth couldn't seem to string the words together properly. "Beth. Hannah."

The boy's eyes widened. He looked like she'd hit him in the face with a hammer. "I—I'm not sure I'm the best person to——"

"You're the only person," she said sharply, cutting him off. "You were there. And now you're here. So please. Tell me what happened. I promise… I promise to listen this time. Like I should have before. What happened to all of you? What happened to my kids?"

-o-

There was a mirror in this room as well, but with both girls moving, it was clear they're separate. There was no one there to see, but it mattered to both of them all the same. They might have played the occasional mistaken identity prank, but really neither of them ever liked it when people got them confused or thought they were the same. The room was perfectly put together, albeit a bit worn and mildewed. The bright purple accent wall was faded around the edges and there were water stains creeping across the ceiling. Hannah stared blankly down at a music box, sitting closed on her dresser. Her hands hovered over it, but the other girl knew she couldn't open it.

"It sucks, doesn't it? Not being able to touch things?"

The only sign that Hannah heard her is an almost undetectable tilt of her head. It's promising enough that the girl tried again.

"Unless you're really, really angry, right? At least you're better at that than I am. You know me. Too mellow by half." It was a lie. Or at least half a lie. She might have been calmer than her twin, but it didn't mean she didn't feel. If there was a slight edge of bitterness to her voice, it wasn't malicious or directed at Hannah. It was an old wound, one that still stung slightly. Beth the robot, she'd been teased. Beth the tin girl. Heartless Beth. Monk Beth. That was what being calm and reasonable and hyper-focused, coupled with a lack of interest in boys, got you in junior high. They might not have been particularly nasty insults, but it didn't mean they didn't build up to an ache in her chest.

She stepped up next to Hannah, looking down at the box as well. She remembered the inscription well enough without seeing it. That year, Josh had gotten her a leather journal with her initials engraved on it. She wondered where it was now. Probably somewhere in their house in California. Or maybe their parents had cleaned out her room and it was gone entirely.

"You know, if you talked to me, we might be able to figure it out? Make things stop hurting so much?" Beth had no idea if that was possible, but seeing Hannah like this, silent and terrifying… it was too much. "I… I missed you, Han. It was a long year without you."

Hannah's head whipped around to look at her, eyes blazing with rage. "I was here the whole time. You're the one who left," she hissed.

With a crackle like static and a flicker of color, she disappeared again.

"Fuck!" Beth snapped to the empty room. "Fuck."
Mike tried desperately to think of something to say, some way to keep Sam awake and talking, but nothing seemed appropriate. She nuzzled her face against his chest and made a sleepy noise. Maybe sleep would be the best thing for her right now, but he couldn't shake the terrified thought that she might never wake up again. "So... um... how are your classes this semester?" Great. Smooth. Perfect.

She let out a soft snort of laughter. "Dork."


"Are you trying to keep me awake? Because you might want to reconsider your strategy." Sam waved a lazy hand in the air. "You should put me down."

He shouldered through a door and headed down another hallway, trying to follow any features that were familiar. "Do you really think you can walk right now?" he asked pointedly, glancing down at her.

She laughed again, quietly. If there was anything that was certain to make him paranoid right now, it was her laughing. There was nothing funny about what had just happened and the Sam he knew would never laugh at it. The fact that she hadn't even mentioned Beth again was enough to make his eye twitch. Beth's fucking ghost. Hannah was bad enough, but Beth too? What the fuck was going on up here?

Suddenly Sam jerked in his arms, her head coming up sharply. "Josh?"

Mike's arms tensed automatically. He tried to keep his voice calm. "He's fine. I don't know where he is, but we'll find him, okay? We need to get you better first though. You need to rest."

"I'm trying, but you won't let me." She sounded like a petulant child.

He took the tiny steps two at a time, descending into warm, steamy, Sulphur-scented air. It was just as Jess had described it: a few pools of hot water. It immediately made him feel slightly better. "I'm going to put you down now, okay? Slowly. See if you can stand." Carefully he lowered her, letting her feet drop to the ground.

Sam pushed away from him eagerly, then immediately staggered. He caught her, letting her steady herself on him. Was it his imagination or was she really shaking? He studied her face, noting the clenched jaw, the determined way she was glaring down at her feet, as if they'd betrayed her. "I'm okay."

"Just let me help you."

"I'm fine."

He let go of her, backing up a pace. Swaying slightly, she stood with her legs braced apart, looking for all the world like someone who'd just gotten off a roller coaster and was feeling a bit queasy. Finally she looked up, scanning the room. "Now what?"

"I—" Mike closed his eyes for a moment, reveling in his own shortsightedness. He hadn't really thought about what they'd do once they were here. Fuck. Why couldn't he ever think things through? The prank, the trip up here, looking for Hannah, and now this? Why did his brain just skip the later bits in his planning? "I don't know. I thought... warmth might be good?" he said lamely. "And you said you wanted to wash up, right? Before we were interrupted before?" Heat flooded his cheeks as he remembered what had been interrupted. As if he needed another reminder of things he'd fucked
up. Awesome.

Sam smiled. "Warmth is definitely good. Do you think we're safe here?"

He shrugged. "As safe as anywhere else."

"You going to wash up too?"

"Nah. I showered before. One of us should keep watch, right? I'll sit over..." He cast around for a good spot and pointed to a low rock. "I'll sit there. Take as long as you need."

She didn't take very long. He wasn't sure if it's because she was having trouble staying awake and upright or because she couldn't relax in such an exposed space. Personally, he hoped it was the latter reason. Sam was too sensible, he knew, to ever be comfortable in a situation like this—unless there was something very wrong. He kept his eyes averted as she dressed. The warmth of the air seeped into him and for the first time in what felt like days, his shoulders un-knotted slightly. They were all alive. They were all surviving.

Sam's soft touch on his arm made him jump and she smiled. "Little on edge, huh?" She looked tired but more alert than she had before they came down here. He'd take it.

"I was actually just thinking about how well we're doing so far."

Her eyebrows raised. "Well?"

"None of us are dead so far. I'd call it a win."

"That's a low bar. A fair one, though. Now what?"

A loud bang echoed through the room and they both jolted, Mike springing to his feet. He couldn't place where the sound had come from exactly. Deeper in the mine? Or up the stairs? Sam met his worried look with one of her own and shrugged helplessly.

Another bang, followed by a drawn out scraping sound made the hair on the back of his neck stand. "We—we should go."

"I am very glad that didn't happen a few minutes ago," Sam muttered, looking around. "One instance of running through the dark naked is more than enough for me, despite what Bob might think. Safe room?"

"What if it's up the stairs?"

She shook her head. "I think it's coming from the mine. I mean, what other choice do we really have? Do you know how to get there?"

"Well enough. Do you need me to—"

"Do not carry me."

The level of adamant irritation in her voice made him want to hug her. That was the Sam he knew. He raised an arm. "At least use me for support. We can go faster if you do."

Looking for all the world like she wanted to stick her tongue out at him, she took his arm. They made their way up the steps as quickly as they could. Every slight noise in the dark made him twitch. On the way down, he'd been so preoccupied with Sam that he hadn't really registered how fucking creepy the old hotel was. Antique and now decrepit furniture moldered along the walls. Here and
there he saw statues and vases on decorative plinths that held what may have once been flowers. It was like walking through history or a movie set. Where was Josh's plan for him? He was sure he and Matt couldn't be the only ones Josh decided to skip.

They managed to reach the safe room without incident, although just thinking that seemed like it would be enough to jinx them. He locked the door quickly, taking great satisfaction in the feel of the bolts sliding into place. The room was plunged into darkness, then almost immediately lit with the pale, greenish glow of the monitors as Sam turned them on. She studied each one, frowning slightly, then let her head drop, her shoulders relaxing.

"Safe?"

"Safer, at least," she said quietly, still leaning heavily on the table. "I—I'm not sure that being in here would keep out..."

"Hannah?" Sam took a step back from the table and dropped to the ground, dragging out one of the spare blankets they'd left behind. She tried to spread it across the floor and Mike crouched to help her, pulling it flat. She wouldn't meet his eyes. He hated it, hated himself for coming back up here and making him follow her. It had been stupid to think that she wouldn't have come after him. "Look, Sam—"

"Don't."

"No, I have to. I'm... I'm sorry. I just thought—Jess told me some stuff about what she saw. She told me how lonely Hannah seemed and how angry she'd been. I guess I thought... I mean, if anyone should pay a price to help Hannah... It should be me."

He wanted to take a pill. He wanted to take several. But they were running dangerously low and he tried to fight back the urge. It nagged at him, a little pinch at the back of his mind. Finally he dragged his eyes back to her, braced for the worst.

She was staring at him. "God, you are such a fucking idiot." She opened her mouth, then closed it, as if unsure what to say. Then she leaned across the blanket and cuffed him hard on the upper arm. "Seriously. Every time I think 'man, Mike must finally get it' you go and prove me totally and completely wrong."

"What are you talking about?"

"You. You are ridiculous. You're so wrapped up in your stupid martyrdom that you can't even listen to me!" She sat back on her heels and glared at him. "Let me make this simpler, okay? If you get yourself killed, I will never forgive you. 'It should be me,' she repeated his earlier words with a scowl. "Mike, if you leave me alone on this fucking mountain, I will find another Ouija board and never let your goddamn ghost have a moment of peace, I swear." Unable to restrain herself, she lunged at him and smacked his shoulder again.

He grabbed her hand instinctively. "Ow! Okay, okay. I get it."

"Do you? Do you really?" Her fierce expression softened and her eyes scanned his face. "Because I mean it, Mike. I really do. I don't know—please don't leave me alone up here. Don't do something stupid that you can't take back. Don't do something that I can't fix. Not another thing I can't fix."

"Sam..." His free hand came up to smooth a strand of still-damp hair back from her face. This close, she smelled like the minerals of the hot springs: an earthy scent that seemed to suit her. He wondered if he was going a little bit mad up here. Maybe it was the mountain. Maybe it made them all a touch crazy. Mike sighed and closed his eyes. "We should eat. Or try to get some sleep or something."
Soft lips brushed against his for the space of a heartbeat. His eyes flew open and he looked down at Sam, bewildered. She smiled sadly. "I'm not hungry. I guess we can try to sleep until daylight. I don't... I don't want to hike back down right now."

He thought off the banging sound, of the way the creature had moved on camera, Hannah's vicious smile. He shuddered and forced a cheeky grin that he was certain Sam saw through instantly. "Yep. It's too chilly out to hike at night right now."

They arranged themselves side-by-side on the thin blanket. The cold of the cement floor seeped up into him quickly, robbing him of any remaining vestige of warmth from the steam in the hot spring. Beside him, he saw Sam shiver and gave in. He rolled to his side and lifted an arm. "Come here. It's cold."

She shifted up against him and he draped his arm carefully across her. With a soft huff of laughter, Sam slipped her hand into his and squeezed.

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Hannah was staring into the shell of a fireplace. This one was not mere painted wood, but was huge and beautiful, artfully crafted from stone. Or at least, it used to be beautiful, before the explosion. Now it was blackened and shattered, part of it blown entirely away. She remembered that, at least in part. She looked towards the remaining parts of the staircase. Sam had stood just there, near that pillar. Or Hannah thought she had. Her memory came in fits and starts. She hated it.

She was alone. Finally. How curious it was, to hear human voices again. To hear her sister's voice, her friends. Where had they gone? She would have to go find Mike and Sam. They were still here somewhere. She could feel it.

"Tag," said her twin, voice soft. "You're it."

Turning slowly, she found Beth watching her, expressionless. Yet for all the lack of emotion in her face, her voice was heavy with sadness. "No."

"Then... maybe you could not run away? I finally—we're finally here. Together. Han, please."

Beth's voice was near to begging.

It was hard to focus, hard to think. She should go find Mike. This time, she would make him see. And Sam. Sam. "Sam," she whispered, then focused on Beth again. "This is where they killed me, Beth. This is where I died. I died in fire. You died in ice. Like that poem from Mrs. Arnold's class."

"That's about the end of the world."

"The end of our world. That's close enough for me." Hannah jerked back as Beth lifted a hand. She didn't want to feel her twin not touch her. And she wouldn't be able to; Hannah knew it. She wanted heat. She wanted life. She remembered the sweet warmth of Jessica's hand, her mind—the moment of pure life she felt when she had lunged impulsively through Sam to get to Mike. "I'm cold, Beth."

"I know. Me too."

Hannah stiffened. Naturally Beth would be cold. After all, Hannah had stolen her sweater. She couldn't look at her twin, couldn't take the sight of her impassive face, couldn't bear her sympathetic voice. Anywhere but here. She left.

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The first thing Sam was aware of upon waking was heat. There was a rush of stimuli: strong arms around her, a hand on her stomach, another hand on her thigh, his nose buried in her hair. Some time while they had slept, she had pressed herself back against Mike, letting him curl around her protectively. Despite the hard concrete floor beneath them and the ever-present danger, her sleepy self relaxed into his arms.

She tried to make herself get up, but he was warm against her and before she could think about it, she shifted back against him, trying to wiggle herself deeper into the heat and safety her body and mind desperately wanted. His arms tightened around her. His face nuzzled against her head, nose brushing against her ear. A pang of longing echoed through her and she shuddered, shifting back again.

Mike's breathing hitched as he woke, changing from deep and rhythmic to something unsteady. She heard him suck in a breath. "Sam…?" His voice was only audible due to his mouth hovering near her ear and the puff of his breath sent a shiver through her.

She was tired. She was so tired. She was tired of thinking, of fretting, of being paranoid and on guard every single second. She just wanted to forget for one moment, to relax into something that felt simple and good. Tension had ruled her life for every single moment since… well, since Hannah and Beth had vanished, if she was honest. Was it so terrible to want to let that go for a while? Was she such an awful person if she wanted to find comfort in the arms of someone she could rely on? This moment felt unreal, like something out of a dream.

"Sam?" His voice was unsteady. "Are you awake?"

Sam turned her head to look at him, biting her lip. She nodded, not trusting herself to speak. His reaction to her small movements was clear as she pressed against him. He propped himself up slightly, looking down at her with an expression she found hard to decipher. She tried to calm down and focus. "Should I—should I stop?"

The hand on her thigh slid upwards, trailing along her side and ghosting along her ribcage. She realized his hand was shaking. "I should say yes," he said finally. "But I don't want to."

"Why?"

"Why I should ask you to stop? Or why I don't want to?"

She rolled her hips again and he groaned, his eyes closing. "So that's a 'no' to stopping then, huh?" She wanted to be cool, to be mischievous and playful, but his fingers tightened on her hip, pulling her hard against him, and all the air seemed to leave her in a rush.

His eyes opened again: fierce and dark with something she was hesitant to name. "Don't tease me." He leaned down, his stubble brushing lightly against her cheek. "Don't tease me, Sam. Please. I need to know…"

The feather-light brush of his lips against her ear set her skin on fire. She was so caught on the way he said her name that it took a moment for her to register the last thing he said. "Know what?"

"Is this real?"

"What is real?" His teeth grazed along the shell of her ear and she moaned. "Mike, please."

She felt his lips curve in a smile. "Please what?"

Oh, that was bullshit. "You can't tease me, either." Sam rolled over to face him, her fingers tracing
the angles of his face, the line of his throat. He swallowed and she tracked the movement with her eyes. The collar of his shirt was pulled open and instinctively she leaned in, dropping a light kiss on the exposed edge of his collarbone. His grip tightened again, tugging her flush against him. If there had been any doubt in her mind about his enthusiasm, it was laid to rest. She could feel him, hot and hard and ready. Another wave of need surged through her and she looked up at him, eyes wide. "Fuck," she whispered. "Oh fuck."

He stared at her for a moment, then something seemed to break inside him and he kissed her.

"Yes." She wasn't sure if she said it or just thought it. Mike held her possessively, grasping her by the arms like he was worried she would be torn away from him. It felt like she couldn't get close enough. She nipped at his lip, catching it in her teeth. With a soft growl, his hands slid up and under her shirt, sliding along her back. His hands were calloused and rough. She'd never thought of her back as being particularly sensitive, but now she imagined she could feel every ridge and whorl of his fingertips.

Countering, she fumbled with the buttons of his shirt, tugging it off his shoulders. It was hard to get the right amount of motion and leverage from her position, so she pushed him back and climbed on top of him. She shoved his t-shirt up, enjoying the view. She couldn't suppress a slight smirk as he twitched under her hands, his breathing labored. "Fuck, Sam," he panted. "You're kind of mean, you know tha—"

Sam bent down and cut him off. She'd caught him mid-word and took full advantage of it, kissing him deeply, sighing into it. His hands were busy, tugging her own shirt up. They broke apart just long enough for him to pull it over her head and fling it to the side before she seized him again. Her body was moving with a rhythm all its own, pulsing and surging against him, savoring the delicious friction that radiated out from all the points where they touched. Fuck. She wanted this, wanted him. It wasn't just sex, just gratification—though it had been long enough to make her want to scream—it was Mike. Sweet, stupid, vulnerable, heroic Mike. Mike, with his idiotic, ill-thought-out plans and noble intentions. Mike, with his dumb expressions and goofy smile and inability to ever, ever shut the fuck up when he should.

She jerked back, gasping, as his hand slipped into her pants. His thumb brushed against the sensitive bundle of nerves and her hips bucked. Sam glared at him in mock indignation. "How dare you."

From his prone position, he shrugged awkwardly and grinned. "You were being mean."

"So you decided to be mean back?"

"Fair's fair, right?" His fingers slid against her and her eyes widened. His eyes darkened further and his smile turned wicked, satisfied. "You have no idea how long…"

She yanked off her sports bra, tossing it after the shirt, then bent to kiss him again. Her nipples grazed against his bare chest and she shuddered. "No more teasing," she murmured against his lips. "Please, Mike."

It was enough for him. He rolled them, pinning her underneath him. Heat radiated from him, fighting the chill she felt from the floor under the blanket. Fire and ice. She wrapped her legs around his waist, rolling her hips, begging him without words for something more. She was ready, eager. God, she wanted.

Two fingers slid inside her and she moaned, a broken, desperate sound to her own ears. It was incredible, but not enough. It wasn't what she needed. "More. Please."
"Say my name again."

She was about to snap, to scold him for teasing her, but when she looked up at him, she only saw honesty and a sweet, fragile hesitation. Her back arched, electricity flooding through her system. Even with so little, she was so close, but it wasn't right yet. It wasn't what she wanted. It wasn't… "Mike? Mike, please. I want you. Now."

Every moment of delay was like torture. She whimpered as he pulled his hand back, but then he was tugging her pants down. Then his were off too and it was just them. This was insane. The rational part of her knew it, but as far as the rest of her was concerned, that rational part could go to hell.

And then he was pressing into her. Her eyes closed and she bit her lip, but he stopped. "Look at me. Look at me, Sam." Her eyes fluttered open again and she was transfixed by his. They bore into her, even as he slid into her inch by inch. Fuck. It had been so long. He let out a slow, shaky breath. Sam tried to do the same, but it just came out as a long, quivering moan and her eyes fell closed again. She felt his cock twitch, sending a shiver of pleasure through her. "Fuck, Sam. Oh fuck. Are you—is it okay?"

"Yes," she breathed, forcing herself to look up at him. The concern on his face almost made her laugh, but she reached up to cup his cheek, thumb smoothing along the skin. "Oh god yes."

Then suddenly, she needed more again. She wrapped her legs around his waist once more, canting her hips up and urging him wordlessly on. With a sigh that sounded like relief, he seemed to give in. His hand slid between them again as he thrust into her, his fingers moving urgently. That same electricity returned, sending shockwaves along her skin and making her twitch and squirm. He let out another strangled groan as her fingers dug into his back, urging him on, deeper, harder. Dimly she was aware she was talking, moaning his name, begging for more.

The pace changed, taking on a new urgency. "Fuck, Sam," he mumbled against her neck. His hand moved more quickly as his rhythm broke down. His free hand gripped her hip, fingers digging into her with enough to bruise. She didn't care. She clung to him, reveling in Mike's short, hard thrusts and the quickly building storm inside her. It was on her before she had time to realize, sending her muscles into spasms. Her thighs clensed around his hips and her back arched. Sam wasn't a screamer; a long, broken moan dragged itself from her throat.

The sound was enough to drive Mike over the edge. He hissed, biting down hard on her shoulder as he strained against her. She could feel him shift and pulse inside her and it sent another stab of fresh pleasure through her tired body as the lingering throb of her own orgasm slowly began to ease.

For a long moment, neither of them moved or spoke. The weight of him should have made her uncomfortable, but it felt welcoming and warm. Slowly Sam slid a hand up to stroke his hair, damp with sweat. She pressed a kiss to his forehead, smiling. "Are you okay?"

He nodded against her. His stubble brushed against her shoulder and she cringed slightly at the abrasive touch. Mike lifted his head and looked down at the angry red mark left by his bite. "Sorry," he said softly, touching it with his fingertips.

"What are you sorry for?"

"Everything." He rolled off her to the side.

Sam flicked his nose. "I thought you agreed to stop that."

"Do you regret this?"
Her heart thudded painfully in her chest. The heat of a few moments ago was fading away. "I'm cold," she mumbled.

She let out a little gasp as he tugged her over to him. His arms closed around her again, warm and secure. "That's not an answer."

"I thought you were supposed to be the super-confident king of campus," she said, craning her head to look up at him. "Are you really worried? You just got laid, bro."

"Don't do that," he said, cringing and closing his eyes. "Don't."

Sam propped herself up on one elbow and poked him in the chest. "I thought—isn't that what you want? Comfort and fun and that's it?" That would be easiest, she told herself. A one-time thing and they could forget about it. Go back to being friends with the tension eased. She wouldn't have to explain it to anyone. She thought of watching him date someone else and her stomach clenched painfully.

"Is that all you wanted?" His voice was soft. "It's not… I'm not…"

She rested her fingers on his lips, silencing him. "Mike. I don't regret this. I'm incredibly grateful this happened. I care about you a lot. I always have. This doesn't have to change anything if you don't want it to. But maybe we should just wait and figure it out later? We don't have to have all the answers now."

His palm cupped her cheek and he kissed her carefully. "You're an incredible person, Sam."

"Nope," she said with a smile, resting her forehead against his. "You're just biased."

"That I am, Miss Giddings. That I am. But I still stand by my assessment." Mike tugged their clothes over them haphazardly and tossed the edges of the blanket across them to make an odd kind of cocoon. He pulled her close, tucking her head under his chin and wrapping himself around her. "Get some sleep, Sam. We'll talk again in the morning."

She knew she should fight it, should get dressed and eat and plan, but his warm skin and steady breath lulled her to sleep before she could pursue the thought process any further.

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Moonlight filtered down into the cavern, reflecting off the snow and turning the world into something unreal. If Beth had really been barefoot, she would have been freezing. She wasn't, obviously, but that still didn't help her fight off the strange phantom of cold she felt. It was always like that: the cold a more constant companion than her own twin. If she'd been religious, she thought, she surely would have lost her faith being stuck here.

Why was she here? Not in the cavern, but on the mountain. Why did she still exist at all? With so many people here and so much suddenly happening, it was easier to focus than it had been before.

She remembered watching Josh and Ashley and Chris playing with that stupid spirit board. She'd had a strange sense of what would happen. Not details, of course, but she knew that something very bad was coming. It had something to do with Josh's secret projects, she knew, and with Hannah. Hannah was strange in those days. She only spoke with others' voices. Now she could put a name to it. She could call that Hannah a wendigo and recognize her for what she was, but at the time she'd only seen her perfectly imperfect twin sister, losing her way and growing lonelier and hungrier by the day. Beth had tried to warn Josh, to stop him from whatever it was he intended to do, but he either hadn't seen her or had just dismissed her.
Now she stepped across the rocks and ice, moving with unerring certainty towards the one spot that called her more than any other. The ramshackle wooden cross was splintered and broken. It was too cold for it to rot, but it wasn't going to last. Her final resting place would be forgotten soon, vanishing like so many others in these mines. She was surprised the place wasn't crawling with ghosts and spirits.

And there, in the shadows, was Hannah.

Beth had known she would be here. It had made sense—perfect, mythology-esque timing—but she wondered if there was something more. Did Hannah want to be found?

"I'm tired of chasing you, Han."

Her twin didn't respond. Silence was worse than any hateful thing she could possibly say. Hannah had always tried to levy the silent treatment as punishment, knowing Beth hated it, but had never been able to keep it up long enough to make it a real threat. Now, though, it seemed that she'd been given new reserves of silence.

"Please, Hannah. Just talk to me. I can't… I can't keep doing this." It was true, too. Beth could feel her strength fading. She needed something, some boost to get her going again. It was the only thing she'd found that would let her take action: strong, overpowering emotion. If Hannah would even just yell at her. They could fight. That could be enough.

Hannah didn't look at her. She didn't look at anything, really, just gazed blankly into the middle distance. "I buried you here. Then I dug you up to take your sweater and reburied you. Then I dug you up again."

It was nauseating to consider, if Beth could still feel nauseous. The memory of nausea was there, at least, reminding her of what she should be feeling. "You did what you had to."

"I did what a monster does. So I became a monster." She smiled, a sickly-sweet smile that didn't touch her face, as if a puppeteer had simply pulled her cheeks back towards her ears. "I would have killed them all, you know."

"I know."

"Even Sam. Even Josh."

Beth raised a hand to stop her. "Not Josh. You didn't kill Josh."

"Oh, but I did. I just took longer to go about it." Hannah's rictus smile caught the moonlight as she wandered towards the bottom of the cliff. "I made sure I wouldn't be alone. But we were both going to die. One way or another. I killed Josh more surely than if I'd snapped his neck.

"That's your problem, Beth. You keep acting like I'm the same as I always was. I'm not. Neither are you. Neither is Josh. So why fight it?" Her head tipped up and she gazed at the barely visible sky above them. "Just let us be the monsters we are. Maybe it's time for you to finally give up on us."

When she left, Beth didn't follow.

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The sun was near to coming up again, but Josh kept running. Despite coming up here year after year with his family, he wasn't sure he'd ever been this far out in the forest. He wanted to get lost, to forget where he was, to be unable to make it back, but when he paused, his senses told him clearly
exactly where he'd come from.

He looked to the Northeast and knew, deep in his bones, that if he ran that way, he'd find the lodge.

"Fuck," he swore under his breath, hearing the way the word slurred around his teeth. He didn't want to know that. He didn't want to be able to find them again.

Why had he thought that would be a good idea? He'd been relatively calm before, but with the daylight had come doubt. The thought of his family being here had gnawed at him until he just had to know. Was he right? Was it his mother? Was she okay? Was she staying? Leaving? Taking everyone with her?

Tracking them had been almost laughably easy. They didn't move very fast. Through the trees, he'd watched his mother limping along, surrounded by his friends. Every time she stumbled, Mike would start forward as if he wanted to catch her, but she always recovered. That was Mom, all right. She always recovered. She'd recovered from Hannah and Beth vanishing, after all. He was certain she'd recovered from him disappearing in record time. The Washingtons were hardy folk. They didn't let little things like 'human emotions' get them down.

He had wondered what the other monster was doing. Was it sleeping? Or in that kind of near-rest state that he felt calling to him?

At some point, the wolf had vanished into the trees, heading away from where Josh was watching them. They came upon a little building he'd never seen before and Sam had slipped easily through an unlatched back window to unlock the front door. Had she done that before? She'd become much better at breaking and entering than he remembered her being. As the sun had slowly gone down, he'd watched as they blocked off all the windows.

His blood had begun to sing again, telling him to hunt, to find food. After all, a little voice in the back of his head murmured, there was a veritable bounty of sweet, fresh meat inside the little cabin. They would be easy prey.

Josh had swallowed that thought and gone hunting again. Rabbits, this time. Fast little fuckers but more satisfying to bring down.

And yet the relative peace of the previous night eluded him. The moon was out, huge and bright between clouds, and the world was transformed around him. The little cabin was dark, though he wasn't sure if that was because of the windows being covered or because they were truly lights-out. He wanted to talk to Mom. He wanted to scream at her, to make her cry, to make her see that he was alive and needed help. He wanted… he wanted to rest his head on her knee and let her stroke his hair, like she used to when he was sick. He wanted to hear her call him 'kiddo' and say 'I love you.'

But the best laid plans of mice and men, as they always said. Whoever 'they' were.

He turned to look in the general direction of the little house, guided by that unerring sense of direction that he just couldn't shake. If he went back now—no. He couldn't go back. He hoped she would listen to him and leave, taking everyone with her. He hoped she would stay and fight. He hoped that she would leave but Sam would mutiny and come back to him. He hoped the other wendigo thing would tear him limb from limb and let him finally rest. He hoped… He hoped.
"So then Ashley showed up because she had another one of those dreams—this time everyone died. We figured we had to warn them and—"

"And I think I know the rest," Melinda said tiredly, waving a hand vaguely. She rubbed her eyes. Outside, the world was beginning to lighten. It had taken Matt hours to catch her up, what with the number of questions she had. She sighed. Her violent grief, coupled with her injuries and lack of sleep, had left her utterly wiped out. "I'm sorry, Matt. Thank you for telling me all of this. I'm sorry I didn't listen before."

He shrugged. "I don't blame you. If someone else had told me all this, I don't know if I would have believed them. I was lucky enough to have my Grandma believe me. Most of the others weren't that lucky. I don't think Em—Emily—even tried to tell her parents. She knew they'd just think she was nuts and lock her up."

"Still. You all deserved better than this. So this was Sam's plan from the beginning. I wish she'd told —" Melinda broke off. That was an unfair statement and she knew it. If Sam had told her the truth about why she wanted to come up here, Melinda would have been even quicker to shut her down. She didn't even want to think of what Bob would have said to Sam about it. "This thing that's happening to Josh… is it… is it permanent?" It was hard to get the words out around the lump in her throat.

Matt frowned. "I don't really know. Ashley mentioned something about a cure, but I don't know exactly—"

A soft knock sounded at the door, then it cracked open. Ashley stuck her head around it, looking anxious. "I'm… um… I don't mean to interrupt, but this sounded like my cue, so…" She came in and shut the door again. "Can I—can I sit?"

Bewildered, Melinda gestured to the open floor beside them and Ashley took a seat. "Were you listening?"

"Yeah, I mean, um… Sorry?" God, the girl looked like she was afraid Melinda was going to bite her head up. She tried to smile, but couldn't seem to get her face to cooperate. "I wasn't trying to eavesdrop. I just woke up and you weren't on the couch and then I heard you guys talking… I didn't want to interrupt, so I just sat outside the door, but then Matt mentioned a cure, so—"

"It's fine. I would assume nothing Matt said was really a surprise. You were there too, after all."

The redhead swallowed hard and nodded. "Um, yeah. Okay, so, look. I haven't really had a chance to talk to Sam or anyone about this in a lot of detail, but I had Flamethrower Guy's journal and he talked about a cure. It's kind of hard to figure out exactly what he meant—he wrote in code a lot and a bunch of the pages were destroyed or illegible."

"Flamethrower Guy?"

Matt laughed. "They didn't get his name, I guess. I never met the guy, myself."

"Jack Fiddler?" Melinda offered.
"Yeah!" Ashley nodded, rocking back and forth eagerly. "Yeah, that's right. I keep forgetting that was his name. We got so used to the other nickname. Anyway, yeah. He talked a lot about a cure that he was told about but never able to try. I'm not sure how he found out about it. He didn't really write about personal stuff."

Melinda's heart seemed lodged in her throat. In the space of a few hours, her life had become something out of a nightmare or one of Bob's stupid movies. She couldn't complain, of course. The children had been living this horror for far longer than she had. She nodded sharply. "Okay. What did it say?"

"Basically, it says that blood calls to blood. He wasn't sure exactly what that meant—or if he was, he didn't write it down—but he said that if he cut a wendigo and got through its skin, its blood would, like, jump? He wrote that it was like magnets. If there was another wendigo nearby, the blood would be drawn to them. Like it was all part of some big whole that wanted to get reunited with itself. He thought that maybe living human relatives could sort of draw the human part of the wendigos out of them, while another wendigo or wendigo blood could draw out the wendigo bit."

"Like some kind of magical plasmapheresis?"

"Exactly. Or, well, I think so. That's what it sounded like." The girl lapsed into silence, shooting a nervous, hopeful look at Matt.

"So you need me," Melinda said finally.

The redhead hesitated, then nodded and shrugged simultaneously. "I think so. Human relative, right? And he seemed to think that maybe the closer the family member, the better? I'm not sure exactly."

"We need to go back up to the lodge, then."

The kids exchanged a look, then Matt cleared his throat and raised his hand. "No offense meant, Mrs. Washington, but I'm not sure… I think you need to see a doctor."

"I'm fine."

"No, you aren't. I get it. Trust me, I get it. Power through, right? Leave no man behind, etcetera. I know you want to go rushing off after Josh, but that thing I told you about is still out there too. And you can't move very fast and you might even have internal bleeding." She hated the look of pity on his face almost as much as she hated the fact that he was right. "Just get checked out. Then you can come back. We'll keep him alive until then. I promise."

Another wave of grief crashed over her. How had it come to this? She looked to Ashley and saw her nod, face a picture of sympathy and understanding. "He's right, Mrs. Washington. I'm sorry. But we should really try to get you to a doctor or something."

She took a deep breath, trying to stomach the thought. Wasn't this just abandoning Josh all over again? She was leaving him alone and, worse, this time she knew what she was doing. She remembered entrusting him to the staff at the care facility in their clean, pale blue uniforms and wondering if she would ever see him again. Returning home, she had sat alone in the garage, holding the box cutter with its red plastic casing and trying to figure out what she'd missed. There was some piece she hadn't picked up on, some piece that still didn't fit quite right in her mind. And now she was leaving him again, trusting him to children who were practically strangers.

After another breath, she clenched her jaw and jerked her head in an approximation of a nod. "Fine." She began to shove herself to her feet, biting back any sound of pain. "Then we'll go now. Get my
phone."

"Are you sure you want to—"

"Now," she snapped. "Every second I delay is another second before I can come back up here. Ashley, get my phone. It should be on the sofa. Wake the others if they're still asleep. We need to get everyone on the same page."

Ashley vanished for a moment before returning with the phone. "I… um… I don't want to be the bearer of bad news, but did everyone notice that Sam and Mike are gone? Was I the only one who missed that memo? I really hope so. I really, really hope so."

"Yes," Melinda pursed her lips and took the phone. "They were gone when I woke up. I'm not sure where they went."

"My money would be on back up the mountain." Matt stood, stretching. He rolled his eyes, but his slight smile was affectionate. "It's Mike. And Sam. There was no way they were going to just leave the mountain. Not while Josh is still up here. Big ole heroes, right? Not even a little common sense."

"That is not particularly reassuring." There were two missed calls on her phone. One from Bob, which she ignored. The other was from Hank, only a few hours ago. Right around the time Josh showed up. She vaguely remembered that she had been trying to call Hank when she saw her son. Quickly she dialed again. The first ring didn't even have a chance to end before he answered.

"Mel? Mel, are you okay? You called but when I answered, there was just fuzz."

The sound of his concern made her want to weep all over again, but she swallowed the desire. "No, I'm not. Hank, I need you to come get me. I'm at… was there an old outpost station about a day's hike from the lodge?"

"Yeah. Hasn't been used in years."

"I'm there. Can you get me here? Or is there somewhere nearby I can go?"

Hank's voice was layered with worry. "Mel, what happened?"

"It's—it's a long story." She tried to think of what she could tell him now. What did he need to know? Ultimately, she decided to keep it simple. "The cable car collapsed and—"

"Holy shit!"

"Well said. The cable car collapsed, I found all the kids, and Josh is… Josh is…" Somehow she just couldn't make her say it. She settled on: "Alive."

The line went utterly silent. Then she heard a ragged breath and Hank's hoarse voice. "He's alive?"

"I'll tell you more when I see you." If she couldn't trust Hank, she couldn't trust anyone. He'd been telling the truth; he'd been around the kids almost as much as she and Bob had been. He'd also lived up here. If there was anyone outside of the late Jack Fiddler that she could talk to about the harder to believe aspects of this, it would be Hank.

"There should be a break in the trees near the cabin," Hank said finally, his voice still hoarse and shaky. "I'll be tight, but I think I can touch down there. Do you need me to bring anything? Is it just you?"
"Yeah. Just me. For now. I need a doctor, but it's not... I don't think it's urgent enough to necessitate you bringing one with you. Hold on." She covered the phone with her hand and looked at Ashley and Matt. "Do you need him to bring anything?"

The kids exchanged a look. "Unless he can bring us another flame thrower, I don't know what else we'd want. Guns are useless, right? And they found food at the house," Matt said, shrugging.

"Just come get me as soon as you can, Hank. Where's the break?"

"Should be east of the cabin. I can be here in an hour. Maybe less."

Jessica and Emily were packing up what little they'd brought with them, Jess pulling the flamethrower onto her back. "Um, where the fuck did Mike go?" Emily asked them, pointing accusatorily at the empty spot where he'd been sleeping. "And Sam?"

Ignoring the question, Melinda laid out the bare essentials of what had happened, namely that she was going to get picked up and they were to keep Josh safe until she could get back. Emily snorted at that, folding her arms over her chest and looking mutinous, but Jess had elbowed her and they both agreed. It would have to be enough. She leaned heavily on the makeshift walking stick and waited anxiously as the kids finished getting ready.

That's what they were, she realized. Kids. Barely more than children, and she was leaving them in real, mortal danger. More than she'd even realized—it wasn't just the weather or the treacherous terrain. There were things up here actively hunting them, Josh possibly included. She took a deep breath and tried to take confidence in their confidence. The mood was serious, but there were small smiles, the occasional dry joke.

It wasn't hard to find the spot that Hank had described. Through a break in the trees, they came upon an open area that, in the summer months, would probably be a lovely picnic spot. Distantly, she could hear the chopper coming. She turned to the kids. "Go. I'll wait here for him."

The expression on Matt's face made it clear what he thought of that idea. "No way. It's way too dangerous to be out here by yourself."

"I appreciate that, but I don't want to have to fight with Hank about why you're not coming back with me. He'll be here in minutes and he's not going to want any of you left up here, regardless. It's best if you start heading back now. I'll come back as soon as I can, I promise."

He looked like he wanted to argue further, but just frowned and nodded. "Fine."

"So... We're not leaving this horrible fucking mountain that's trying to kill us?" Emily muttered. "Fine. Whatever. Not like I wanted to live to see twenty-one anyway. No big. Totally fine."

Melinda leaned heavily against a tree as she watched the kids head off, vanishing into the woods and the brightening dawn. She hoped she was doing the right thing, but nothing was certain anymore.

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The new, gleaming sunlight was unpleasant. Some of its weaker brethren shunned the day entirely, preferring to skulk in their burrows deep in the mine. Or at least they had, before they had been destroyed. It suspected at least one or two were still around, but dormant. It didn't like to do that. It got bored.

So, though the sunlight was less than ideal, it had learned to ignore it. Clouds helped. The light didn't burn, but it made its eyes smart and its skin twitch.
It would be worth it. It was bored. It was hungry. It had been patient long enough. It could smell their sweet young flesh in the air, coupled with someone's blood. It didn't know who was bleeding, nor did it care. Blood set its senses on fire and it was time. Time to eat something that wasn't venison or old desiccated corpses.

Time.

Its long, long tongue snuck out to swipe at the old blood on its cheek. Its skin was already knitting back together from where the man that smelled like anger and peppermint had burned it. The blonde girl's blood was sweet, even old and dried. She would be a lovely treat. But for now, it watched these four. The determined one, the bitter one, the fierce one, and there, in the back, the soft, scared one.

It smiled.

-o-

Mike ran his fingers lightly over Sam's hair, skirting around the gash she'd gotten when the thing had thrown her through the wall. She was still sleeping, he thought, and her face was perfectly relaxed. He hoped that meant she wasn't having any dreams. Or at least that they were only good ones. From the corner of his eye, he could see the monitors' pictures changing slightly. Those showing rooms with windows brightened a bit. Dawn. That was good and bad in equal measure, though he was self-aware enough to admit that all the 'bad' aspects of it had to do with his own selfish desire to stay here with Sam's head resting on his chest.

He was afraid to wake her up, if he was being honest with himself. Things were getting increasingly complicated, and they had already been pretty damn complicated to begin with.

Finally, he smoothed his hand over her shoulder, trying to absorb the feel of her skin. "Sam," he murmured. "Sam, it's dawn."

She stirred sleepily, then buried her face against his chest. "No," she said, voice muffled.

It made him laugh. "Tired, huh?"

"S'your fault." A finger poked into his side and he jerked reflexively away from it. She pushed herself up and grinned at him. "Holy shit, Mike. Are you ticklish?"

"No."

"Oh?" She raised a hand, waggling her fingers threateningly. "Should I test that statement?" Then her smile abruptly vanished as something caught her eye and she turned to the monitors. "Oh… oh. Mike, look." Sam scrambled to her feet and padded over peer at the screen.

As much as he wanted to enjoy the view, he tore his eyes away, climbing to his feet and grabbing his pants. "What is it?"

"Josh," she said quietly. Her fingers hovered over the monitor's surface, trembling slightly. "Look. It's Josh. He's okay."

Better than okay, Josh seemed to be whistling. Mike hopped on one foot as he tugged his pants up and frowned. That was unsettling. The guy was leaning against a wall in what could only be the shed where he'd set up the prank he 'died' in. Restraints hung from a wall and there was a saw buried in it. He had his hands in his pockets and, were it not for his fucked-up face, he might have been the picture of purposeful innocence.
"Why is he whistling?"

"I don't think he's whistling," Sam said, leaning closer to the screen. "Is he?"

"I guess it doesn't really matter, right?" That was good. Better than saying It's not the weirdest fucking thing he's done in the last year. Mike sat to pull on his socks and boots, stealing glances at the still-naked Sam. Fuck, she was beautiful. And, like that, intensely distracting. "Are you going to—I mean, not that I'm complaining, personally, but you might get kind of cold…"

She grimaced at him, but grabbed her clothes. "Very funny, Munroe. We should… um… we should talk at some point."

"We keep trying, but we don't seem to be very good at it. Other things, however, we are very good at." He waggled his eyebrows at her, but she didn't seem fooled by his forced levity. Sighing, he stood and looked around for his shirt. "I know. I want—we need to. There just never seems to be a good time."

Sam moved towards him and he tensed unthinkingly. She hesitated, then cuffed him lightly on the shoulder. "Top team, right?"

"I thought you didn't like that."

"I didn't like that you were lying to me and being deliberately obtuse about shit," she said, shooting him a look as she pulled on her bra. "There's a difference and you know it."

Rather than respond, he turned to the monitors while she finished dressing. The cable car one was still down and in the image from the shed, Josh was still waiting. Waiting. That's what it looked like. Waiting for what, though, Mike had no idea. There was no one visible on any of the other screens, which he was both happy for and concerned about. Were they others with Mrs. Washington? What had she done when she discovered they were missing? She might be just now finding out, waking up to see that two of her errant charges had vanished.

He considered their options. If they found Josh, they had another shot at getting him to go talk to Melinda. That could change everything. Personally, he was getting more than a little irritated with the guy. All the shit he put everyone through and then they came back for him, risking life and limb, and he was too scared to talk to his fucking Mom? Irritated. That was a better word than the real one, which was 'totally and utterly fucking pissed.'

Given that the other possibility was to try to convince Sam to leave Josh alone, he figured he could safely discount that as a real option.

There was no sign of either Hannah or Beth as they climbed back up through the ruins. Just as Sam was reaching for the door handle at the top of the stairs, he couldn't take it anymore. Leaning forward, he grabbed her hand, pulling her back to face him.

"Mike, what—"

He didn't give himself time to think; he closed the space between them to kiss her. God, the way she seemed to melt against him made him feel like he should sing, or kill the talking wendigo thing with his bare hands. Before he could get carried away, he broke away again. "Sorry," he said softly. "I just… before we go back out there."

One side of her mouth twitched up in an impish little smile that gave him a lot of other ideas and she tipped onto her toes to butt her head affectionately against his chin. "Yeah, yeah. You big softie. I always knew that macho stuff was bullshit."
"Excuse you, I am extremely and obnoxiously macho and I worked very hard to get this way."

"C'mon. Let's go get Josh. Melinda's going to kill us for leaving as it is."

Mike shuddered. Again, he just didn't do parents. Especially not the parents of someone he wasn't even dating. That was just unfair.

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The four of them hiked in silence. Ashley kept feeling like she was supposed to say something, but every time she opened her mouth, her brain seemed to short out. So instead she tried to think through the cure clues again. They had so little to go on that it was kind of stupid. Maybe they could just get Josh to not eat people anymore? Did you have to keep doing it in order to turn into a monster? Or was once enough? Did one moment of weakness and desperation just totally fuck you over?

Too many questions, with more occurring to her every day. Ugh. If—when—she got out of here, she was just going to read something super easy and relaxing. Like her old Tamora Pierce books or something.

As they climbed up a small rocky ledge, something made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end. It reminded her of being in the old hotel with Chris when they'd found the camera. She'd just had a horrible certainty that they were being watched.

She turned and surveyed the forest. The light seemed practically blue, casting a strange, otherworldly sheen over the snowy landscape. It seemed peaceful, which just put her on edge even more. She didn't think she used to be this paranoid, but after what had happened up here already… Well, as Josh had once put it: "It's not paranoia if they're really out to get you." She forced a nervous giggle at her own anxiety. She was being ridiculous.

A shriek rent the calm of the forest, high and long and sharp. Before any of them could do much more than look around in shock, there was a series of creaking groans, like the very forest was moving.

Ashley heard Emily say something about another rockslide just as she saw it. Another monster—huge and horrifying, its mouth split into a wide, evil grin—was hanging in a pine tree. Or was it even smiling? She stared at it, stunned, as her brain continued its weird ramble. Maybe it was like a dog, where its gaping mouth resembled a smile by human standards. It saw her notice it, and its smile grew wider. The bough beneath it bowed and it screamed. Ahead of her, Ashley heard Jess yelp and there was a metal clang as she fumbled with the flame thrower. The quiet morning was suddenly over-loud, between the swearing and shrieking and the sound of what must be Melinda's helicopter behind them.

"Fuck!" Matt grabbed for a fallen branch as Jess continued to try to get the knobs on the flamethrower to cooperate.

She couldn't move. Its attention was still fixed on her, and why not? She was easy prey. She'd always been easy prey; she knew that. "I'm sorry," she whispered to no one in particular. Its muscles tensed and she saw it leap at her as if in slow motion, its arms extending towards her.

In the end, she just hoped it would be quick. She closed her eyes, flinching back, waiting to feel its razor claws piercing into her.

A deafening boom split the air and her eyes sprang open again, just in time to see the monster being thrown violently to the side. With a crash, it hit a tree hard and sending snow and shards of wood
It slammed into the ground, then immediately was on its feet again. Its arm hung at a crazy angle and it spun, driving its hand into the trunk of the tree and wrenching its shoulder back into place with a horrible fleshy sucking sound.

She tried to move, tried to focus around the echoing pulse in her ears. The thing's head swiveled to look at her and it hissed, pacing towards her again. There was a muffled clicking sound and then another boom tore through the clearing to send the thing flying once more. This time it missed the tree and was thrown a good fifteen feet before it skidded to a halt.

Fire split through the freezing as Jess was finally able to get the flamethrower working. Jess cheered loudly as the thing came bounding back, dodging around the bursts of fire. Its face was twisted into a horrible, furious grimace. Its gaze swung around the group before fixing on Ashley again. She stumbled back. Why was it so determined to get her? Maybe she just seemed the easiest, she thought. It wasn't wrong on that count.

Someone shouted: "Get the fuck away from her!" Another boom. This time it wasn't thrown, but part of its leg seemed to splinter. It snarled and flinched back as Jess's flame came dangerously close to catching it in the face. Finally, it hissed at Ashley, then bounded off, limping and leaping one-legged, swinging itself away through the trees like a gibbon.

Jess whooped again. "And stay gone, you dickweed!" she crowed, spinning in a circle.

"That was fucking awesome." Emily ran to her, catching her in a hug. "You are officially much more badass than you were last time."

"Told you so. This is my new best friend."

Ashley wanted to join in the exultation, but stumbled slightly until she could catch a tree for support. Her head was swimming. That had been… she should be dead right now. Why wasn't she dead right now? It was still hard to hear. The ringing in her ears hadn't gone away.

A warm hand rubbed a small circle on her back and she turned to see Matt watching her, looking concerned. "Are you okay?"

"I should be dead, Matt." Her voice was flat, emotionless. It was just a statement of fact. "You guys saved me."

He smiled and shook his head. "I don't think we get the credit." His eyes shifted to something over her shoulder and she turned, numb and waiting for some new horrible development.

Chris grinned sheepishly at her. "Surprise?" he offered.

Chapter End Notes

And the team's all here!

Just in time for things to go horribly, horribly wrong!
Ashley could only stare at him, her head swimming. "Chris?"

"Blown away?" he said, hefting the shotgun in his hands.

Next to her, Matt groaned. "That was terrible."

"Hey, I had to take the shot. I didn't want to miss the opportunity, even if it means I have to jump the gun."

"Dude. No. That one doesn't even make sense."

She just couldn't seem to process this. Chris was here? That thought just repeated over and over in her head. Chris was here. Chris was here. "You're here," she whispered.

He closed the space between them, hopping down off the boulder he was on to crunch into the snow. His arms came around her and he pulled her tight to his chest. For all his bravado and dumb jokes, she could feel him shaking. "I'm here," he murmured against her hair. "I'm so sorry, Ash. I'm here."

"You're here," she repeated, burying her nose in his jacket. He smelled like gasoline and gunpowder and Chris. A thought occurred to her and she pulled back "How did you get here? We would have seen you hiking and the cable car—oh my god, Chris, the cable car crashed—"

Chris jerked a thumb over his shoulder. She leaned over to follow the direction and saw a rusty-looking vehicle she could only assume was a… "I borrowed a snowmobile."

She opened her mouth, then closed it again, blinking at the machine. Glancing back at Matt, she saw him shrug ruefully. "We… we didn't even think of that. That never occurred to me. Okay, wow. Points for you. And they just let you ride it up here?"

He rubbed the back of his neck and laughed awkwardly. "Not exactly. I… well, remember that guy we met?"

"Flamethrower guy?" Jess asked, picking her way back down the rocks to the rest of the group with Emily close behind. She hefted the nozzle of her weapon and grinned. "I have to say—I never met the guy, but I am a big fan of his random mechanical chops. This thing is so freaking cool. I'm taking it with me when we leave."

"Uh, yeah," Chris said, eyeing it with a certain amount of hesitation. "Just don't point it at me. Anyway," he continued as Jess stuck her tongue out at him. "I found out where he lived. Or, not lived, exactly. But he had this old storage unit in town and I just… borrowed some stuff? I didn't think he'd mind."

Emily snorted. "Oh? And how'd you get in? Did he have a key taped in his stupid book that you've been keeping secret this whole time?"

"Not exactly." He flushed slightly and scuffed the toe of his foot along the snowy ground. "Crowbars are a lot more useful than I thought."
"You broke in?" Jess laughed and nudged Emily with her elbow, still clearly riding high from successfully getting the monster to retreat. "We're all criminals now! Awesome!"

"I'm going to bring it all back," Chris muttered defensively.

Matt cleared his throat. "As much as all this is good to know, we should get a move on. I don't think we can trust that whatever the fuck that was won't come back." He sighed, rubbing his eyes. "Plan. We need a plan. Do we have a plan?"

"Find the others?" Jess offered.

Ashley finally swallowed and broke her silence. She poked Chris hard in the chest. "You believe us now?" she asked him quietly. Matt was right, she knew. They needed to go, but she also had to ask. She had to know what had changed. "You were so sure before." So sure that you were willing to let all of our friends come up here alone, she wanted to add, but held it back. He glanced at the others, then turned away slightly, as if afraid they would overhear. Ash didn't have the heart to point out that turning a fraction away from the group wouldn't prevent them from listening to everything he said. "Look, Ash, I—I don't have a good excuse. And to be honest, I still didn't believe you guys until… Until I saw that thing coming at you. And it was like I just couldn't pretend anymore. I didn't want it to be real, because that means… that means… Ugh. Fuck." He gestured wildly in the air, still holding the shotgun in one hand. "I'm an asshole, basically. Can that be enough? I admit I'm an asshole and that you guys were right and that I just didn't want to admit that I didn't know something. Can we go rescue Josh and get the fuck out of this nightmare already?"

Biting her lip to keep from laughing at his frustration, she nodded. "Yeah. Let's go. I'll fill you in while we walk."

"Walk?" He glanced from the snowmobile to the group and back, then sighed. "Yeah, I guess it would be pretty shitty to ride away while everyone else has to walk."

"You bet it would," Emily said, smiling with syrupy sweetness. "It might be the last thing you get to do."

Jess leaned forward and, in a stage whisper, explained: "It's because she'd probably kill you."

"Yep. Got that. Thanks."

-0-

They heard the whistling before they saw him. Sam didn't quite recognize the tune, though it sounded vaguely familiar. Something classical-ish, she thought, but couldn't get any more specific. She ducked a low-hanging metal trap. It was incredibly unsettling, especially here, surrounded by a rejected set from Saw. "Hello?" she called hesitantly. The whistling faltered, then stopped. Rounding a corner, she saw him behind a pane of glass, watching them approach.

Josh looked just as he had when he'd run from her, save for a faint trace of blood on his jaw. Her stomach squirmed, but she quashed the thought down. Probably just an animal. That wasn't great, sure, but he had to eat and it seemed like he had to eat red meat. At least he was eating, she told herself sharply. She smiled. "Josh! We were so worried about you."

Something about his expression made her profoundly uneasy, though, like his tune, she couldn't quite place it.

"Your Mom's okay," Mike offered.
"I know." His voice was flat.

"How do—did you go see her?" Sam wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. The shed was in bad shape. Portions of the roof had all-but rotted away and with the doors wide open and several windows broken, the cold winter air cut straight through her. Josh's fake frozen entrails were close enough to touch and she tried not to think about it.

He shrugged lazily. "It seemed polite. Can't go ignoring modern standards of behavior, after all. I figured you'd be with her on the way out of town right now."

That was a familiar tone. Sam knew it well. It reminded her of finding him in the movie room after the girls were gone, feigning indifference and talking about death as a fun alternative to boredom. She brushed past it. "Of course not. She was injured, so we had to get her to some medical attention, but I was never going to leave you up here. You know that."

"I do, do I?"

She rolled her eyes. "If you don't, you're an idiot. And we both know you're not an idiot."

"Is that a compliment, m'darling Sammy? A compliment for moi?"

"Sure. If you want to take it that way. Now come on. We should go find them."

The moment the words left her mouth, she could tell it had been the wrong thing to say. Josh froze in place, eyeing her warily. "No," he said softly, voice barely audible over the sound of the wind.

"Why not? Didn't Ashley—" Sam broke off. No, neither she nor Ashley had talked to him about what they'd found in the journal. He was still operating under the impression that he was on a path of no return. She felt like an idiot. An asshole and an idiot. "Josh, we think there's a cure."

His eye twitched, the only sign that he'd heard her at all. From the corner of her eye she could see Mike fidgeting, glancing around the shed nervously. She ignored him. If there was something, she figured Josh would be the first to notice. From what she could tell, his senses far outstripped hers or Mike's. She reached for Josh and he jerked away. "We are men of action, Sammy. Lies do not become us."

Scowling, she folded her arms over her chest again. "Don't you dare quote Princess Bride at me, Washington. Stop pouting and help us get this going. I told you. We think there's an actual cure. You think I'd lie about something like that? Do you know what that means? That means that you get to come home. We can actually get you out of here."

He wouldn't meet her eyes. Slowly, carefully, he started to whistle again.


This time, Sam recognized the tune. Somewhere over the rainbow. Another relic of Hannah, of Beth, of happier times and uncanny, unlikely hope. She frowned at him. She wanted to do something—to hug him, to poke him, to tickle him or smack him. Something to shake him out of the grave he was digging for himself. Last time he'd just tried to crawl into a bottle. That had seemed so simple in comparison. "And she did get to go over the rainbow, you dolt. She had her adventure and then she came home. She left. She thought she was lost. And then she came home."

"You know they were assholes to her on set, right?"
"So you tell me every time we talk about that movie." She was freezing. Now that she was fully awake, she was hungry. And she, well, wouldn't say no to washing up. At least he was talking more like his old self now. "Can we leave this place now, pretty please?"

He hesitated, then shook his head. It was enough to make her groan aloud. "Why not?" Mike asked, irritation evident in his voice. It helped, a little, to know that he was just as annoyed as she was. Maybe more.

"Where's my Mom?" Josh's voice was quiet.

Sam and Mike exchanged a look and Mike shrugged. Sam forced a smile. "We're not sure. We left her in the little ranger station. With the others."

His head jerked up and his gaze caught hers. It was an odd sensation. It reminded her of finding a rattlesnake on one of her hikes in Placerita Canyon back home. She had known that it was unlikely that it would hurt her if she played it smart, but it had felt actively malevolent. Josh's eyes had the same sheen to them and it was all too easy to remember how he'd been when they'd first found him, his pupils blown and face almost unrecognizable. "You left her?"

"We didn't see you, so you must have seen her after we left," Sam said slowly. It was hard to suppress the urge to freeze in place, as she'd had to do with the monsters a month ago. "I figured you knew."

He shook his head, slowly at first and then faster. "No—no. I didn't—I was… Fuck."

"No, Josh, it doesn't matter. It's okay."

"It's not okay. It's not—I should have noticed, Sammy. I always notice. Why didn't I notice?"

Sam touched his arm lightly. "You can't expect yourself to notice everything. I didn't mean to make it sound like you should have—"

"But I should have, Sam. I should have noticed. Why didn't I notice? I'm—I thought I was getting better—I thought these pills were supposed to help, and I mean, I guess they do sort of help. Don't see the others as much, but—" She was losing him, she could see it: losing him into that dark pit inside his own head where he went when he panicked.

So she gave in to the urge she'd been having since she saw him again. She hugged him. It was an awkward side-hug and he was so bony that it made her want to cry. He'd stopped eating before, but it had never been like this. It had never gotten this far before. He stiffened inside the circle of her arms, his muttering stumbling to a halt. She rested her chin on his shoulder, just as she had from the moment in ninth grade when he'd finally been taller than her. Mike turned away, averting his eyes as if they were doing something private. She supposed, in a way, they were.

"Hey Josh?"

"Yeah?" He wouldn't look at her. His arms were clenched at his sides, his whole body as tight as strung wire.

"Sometimes people just miss stuff. You were there to see your Mom, who you haven't seen in a really long time. If you insist on blaming yourself for things, I can't stop you, but not noticing that Mike and I were gone better not be one of them. Or," she continued sweetly, "I will force-feed you nothing but tofu and vegan cheese. The bad vegan cheese."

That got the reaction she was hoping. His mouth twisted up in distaste and he faked a gag. "That's
uncalled for. Unwontedly harsh punishment that does not fit the crime." At least he wasn't babbling. He still wouldn't move to hug her back and finally she let go, taking a step away. His nostrils flared as he looked from her to Mike and back again. "Now what, then? Do you propose we go down the mountain to try to find my dear mother?"

Sam shook her head. "No. Let's go to the saferoom. At least for a bit. We can eat—we have some supplies there—and regroup or something. Then we can figure out what we're going to do. I can fill you in on the cure, too."

"Oh yes. This magical, mystical cure. I can't wait to hear all about demon penicillin."

Unprompted, Mike turned to lead their departure.

As they passed through the wreckage of the living room, the idea hit her like a freight train. She stopped dead in her tracks, not noticing Josh's quick sidestep to avoid running into her. "Oh," she mumbled. "Oh. Maybe. Maybe? I guess it's worth a shot." She hopped over a blackened piece of granite and assessed the stairs.

"Sam?"

"What are you doing, Sammy?"

She waved a hand vaguely back at the boys. "I—wait here." Sam cast her mind back, trying to remember the exact places she'd stepped when following Beth that first night. The staircase groaned ominously but stayed steady as she climbed. Behind and below her, she heard Mike swearing and Josh letting out a long, low hiss of annoyance. "I'll be back."

"I would follow you and drag you back down here if I wasn't sure it would snap under my weight the second I tried," Mike said, rubbing his injured hand across his face. "What is it with you and climbing crazy things?"

She turned sideways and edged along a narrow metal support. "Just can't resist, I guess. I just… I have a theory."

"That theory is going to get you killed."

"Probably."

Josh looked between the two of them again, his mouth in as much of a fixed straight line as was possible given his changing features. Then he smiled. "Sammy, do you want us to wait here? Or should we meet you down below? Get cleaned up, like you said?"

"No, bad idea. Bad, bad idea," Mike interjected, but Sam was already nodding as she climbed, jumping slightly from one stable point to another.

"Yeah, that's a good thought. Go for it. I'll meet you back down there." She glanced down and smiled reassuringly at Mike. "It's fine. It's daylight, right? And I know what I'm doing."

He raised an eyebrow. "Do you, though?"

Sam stuck her tongue out at him, then turned her attention back to the awkward climb. Going up here might be a bad idea, but it also might work. Down below, she heard the guys start to leave and tried to focus. She couldn't do anything about that now. They'd be fine. At this point, she'd take any small victory she could get. Even just getting up the stairs would be enough to put a mark in the win column.
She just hoped that everything was still intact.

"Okay, here, let me…” Chris leaned down over the ledge and grasped Ashley's hand, helping to pull her as she scrambled up.

It was harder getting back to the lodge than Ashley had expected. Maybe it was their detour to that clearing, but the terrain seemed unfamiliar and unfriendly. Of course, it didn't help that it had started snowing again, thick flakes falling slowly but consistently. They were piling up fast. Chris had covered the snowmobile with a tarp from its storage box and they'd begun to walk in relative silence. She wanted to say something, but couldn't think of something that didn't sound awkward and dumb.

So, how have you been?

Man, the weather these days…

What was your plan coming up here?

I think we need to get some wendigo blood, guys.

Oh, by the way, Josh is turning into a wendigo, probably 'cause he ate the body of the Flamethrower Guy who saved your life… Which, incidentally, means that we need to go find that big ugly thing that tried to kill us and somehow get some of its blood.

None of those options seemed like a promising idea for some reason. Ashley watched Chris's back as they hiked. He was wearing a heavy-duty canvas coat over his own puffy one. She wondered if it was something of his Dad's she'd never seen or if it was from Jack Fiddler's storage unit. He'd always said that he didn't like to wear stuff of his Dad's. He said it seemed like he was being flippant or something, to wear his Dad's stuff to just hang out. But this wasn't 'just hanging out.'

She opened her mouth to ask, then thought better and closed it again. In the very front of the group, she saw Emily and Jess walking side by side. The flamethrower had been super helpful. Every now and then, Ash saw Jess adjust the straps or reach over her shoulder to touch it, as if reassuring herself it was still there.

From far off in the trees, they heard a shriek and all of them froze, tensing. It was off and to the right, somewhere beyond what they could see.

"I forgot how much it sucks up here," Chris muttered flatly and Matt snorted.

"Keeps you on your toes, though."

The blond shot him a look. "I'm pretty sure I was cool with not being on my toes. I like flat shoes. Super flat. Like, anti-heels."

Ashley wanted to laugh, but something was still nagging at her. She could hear something else. Something like a rumbling? Like distant thunder? "Do you guys hear that?"

"Rockslide?" Jess asked, looking around frantically.

Em shook her head slowly. "No… more like…” She glanced at Matt, face pale, and his eyes went wide. "Deer?"

The rumbling was growing louder, coming through the trees. Ashley spotted the first one, a slender,
shaggy deer with a serious set of antlers, leaping over a fallen tree and plowing towards them. "Uh…
guys? What do we do?"

"They might not be heading this wa—" Chris started to reassure her, just as a half-dozen more deer
burst into view behind the first, heading right at them.

Matt grabbed Ash's arm and yanked her out of the way as the first one rushed past. "There are
more!" he shouted to the others.

Before Ashley could ask him how he knew, there were more. She couldn't even count them as they
came leaping and bounding towards them. Individually, they might not have been scary, but rushing
towards the group, all she could see was horns and hooves and literal tons of shifting, panicky,
furious muscle.

Instinct took over and she bolted, running the way she'd always read you were supposed to when
faced with a forest fire, towards the threat but at an angle. The rest of the group was running too, but
she was too focused on not tripping to pay much attention. Matt was still beside her. She could hear
him breathing hard under the pounding and rustling of the stampeding deer. Snow was flying from
the impact of their hooves. She could practically here the fucking music from the Lion King as she
fled.

Finally, she felt safe enough to slow down, catching herself on a tree trunk and swinging to a halt.
Matt skidded to a stop a few feet away, bending double and coughing as he tried to get his breath
back.

She looked around. "Um…"

Matt raised his head and glanced at her. "What?"

"We—we didn't run the same way everyone else ran."

"Fuck."

"Yeah," she mumbled, pressing her forehead against the rough bark of the tree. "Fuck."

-o-

Emily shoved Chris's shoulder hard. "God dammit. God-fucking-dammit, Chris. What the fuck!"

"This isn't my fault! How can you possibly blame me for this?" He clenched one hand anxiously in
his hair and looked around. "Ashley?! Oof. Ow. What the hell was that for?" Emily had shoved him
again with a fixed and furious glare.

"Don't yell, you idiot. That thing is out there. That thing probably caused the stampede in the first
place! Don't start shouting and let it know exactly where we are and that we're separated." She
looked around, still breathing hard. Where the hell were they? And where was… "Jess?" she called
into the woods. Pain flared in her shoulder and she yelped.

Chris smirked. "You said not to yell. That goes for both of us."

"So you shoved me?"

"Fair's fair."

"I'm injured, you unbelievable imbecile," she snapped, pointing deliberately at her shoulder, the
makeshift sling still in place.

Chris had the decency to look embarrassed. "Uh—yeah. Sorry." He groaned, rubbing his face with his hands. "Don't split the party," he muttered. "You're never supposed to split the party."

She eyed him suspiciously. "What are you muttering about?"

"DnD thing. Bad stuff always happens when the party gets split up."

"Good thing we're smarter than your weird elf barbarian or whatever."

"Why would I play an elf barba—you're making fun of me."

"I am definitely making fun of you." Emily straightened her coat and pulled her scarf tighter around her neck. "…nerd," she added for good measure. "Okay, fine. We're stuck with each other. Now we need to find the others and get back to the lodge. All without dying. Think you're up for it?"

Chris wiped his glasses on his shirt and put them back on, then adjusted the shotgun's strap across his chest. He nodded, determined. "I don't plan to die up here."

She smiled slightly at that. "At least we agree on that. So who do we go after first?"

"Ash."

"Ashley was with Matt, though. So they probably ended up together."

He countered quickly. "—and Jess has the flamethrower."

They glared at each other for a few moments, then Chris sighed and waved one hand weakly in acquiescence. At least Emily chose to interpret it that way. She looked around, trying to figure out where they were, then set off decisively. No point in hanging around here waiting to get eaten.

-o-

It was hard to tell how much time had passed. It felt like only moments, but time was playing tricks on Sam in here. She let the slightly mildewed pillow drop into her lap and looked around the room. It wasn't too different from what she'd seen the last time she'd been here. Part of the wall was blackened and broken, letting in some of the weather. It made the butterflies droop sadly on the purple paint and lent a bit of a smell to the linens and clothes.

She couldn't bring herself to look around the way she'd planned. Instead, she'd sat cross-legged on the bed and hugged one of Hannah's ridiculously frilly pillows to her chest. When she buried her face in it, Sam had almost been able to convince herself she smelled Hannah's old lotion. It was probably all in her head, she knew, but it was oddly comforting all the same.

Hannah.

Mike.

Fuck. She'd fucked up. Or maybe she just was fucked up. Hannah would kill her if she knew. And, really, Hannah might actually kill her if she found out.

This wasn't helpful. It was dwelling and dwelling was the opposite of action. She needed to see if she could find anything that might work and then get down to the saferoom to eat and regroup. With a grunt, she shoved herself up off the bed and started going through the nightstand. It wasn't that she really thought she would find anything that would simply take care of Hannah instantly. But she
remembered Beth's words about rage and strength. Perhaps there was something that could serve as a talisman to the Hannah she knew. The real one. The one that wasn't a love-hungry ghost.

She considered and discounted the worn copy of *A Pirate's Embrace* with its lurid cover and dogeared pages. Running her fingers over the battered edges, Sam sighed. Everything in here was going to be like this—a memory that would wash over her and hurt. The pain wasn't as sharp as it had been, though. It was more like the wistful nostalgia when she thought about sixth grade graduation or playing Rummikub with her parents, just with a harder edge. She remembered when Hannah had found the romance novel at a second-hand store and pounced on it gleefully. She remembered Hannah reading passages aloud to her during sleepovers in a hushed, breathless voice. It was tame, really, but to a couple of teenagers, it seemed like the height of scandal.

Moving on, she passed over the stuffed animals, the notebooks full of doodles, the odd misplaced hair-tie and knick-knack. Hannah was a collector. She wasn't a hoarder or anything, but she liked things. She would start collections, becoming utterly obsessed, and then drop them to move on to the next collection. The old ones would sit on shelves or be shoved into drawers, but never discarded. Never completely forgotten.

Sam supposed it made sense that Hannah crushed on people the way she did. She dropped an old cigar box filled with state quarters back into a desk drawer with a sigh.

A ballerina. She paused, considering. Why was she remembering a ballerina?

She snapped her fingers and rushed over to the dresser. The ballerina had been in the jewelry box Sam had found when she had been there the previous month. There was a plaque too—something about love, signed by Josh. That was probably a better bet than blindly rummaging through her desk. She opened it and nearly jumped out of her skin when the music started. Shaking her head, she forced a soft huff of laughter. Being up here had made her jumpy, albeit with damn good reason.

Last time she hadn't paid much attention to the contents of the box; she'd just looked at the inscription and moved on. This time she began to pick through the jewelry, searching her memory for anything that seemed significant. Her fingers found it before her eyes did. A thin, cold chain with a silver butterfly pendant. Sam turned it over in her palm, smiling ruefully. Hannah and her damn butterflies. It had been a gift from Beth and Josh, she remembered, given to Hannah when they were all kids. They'd pooled their allowance and bought Hannah the necklace she'd been desperate to have: a delicate, silver-wire butterfly with a sparkling blue stone set in the center.

*It's real silver, too!* Sam remembered Hannah boasting, showing it off with pride.

Sam rubbed her eyes, trying again to shake off the weird layer of nostalgia and exhaustion that seemed to hang over her. Would this even help? She honestly couldn't say, but she felt better holding it.

Looking around, she tried to think of somewhere else to look, but came up with nothing. She certainly didn't want to take anything that would remind Hannah of Mike or her ill-advised infatuation. Her eyes fell on the closet and she hesitated, then crossed the room to poke through the clothes. Here, between the hanging garments, she could definitely smell Hannah's lotion and body spray. Carefully, she slipped one of Hannah's puffy down jackets off its thick wooden hanger and considered it. She was so cold. Was it disrespectful to borrow it?

As much as she wanted its warmth, Sam put it back and headed for the door. Too long. She'd been here too long. It was time to get this show on the road—whatever the show was.

Back out in the open hallway, she glanced down the other side. That way lay Beth's room. And
Josh's. That was a bad idea, Sam knew. If she'd thought Hannah's room had put her into a weird funk, what more would Beth's room do? And Josh's… Sam wasn't even sure what she'd find in there.

Curiosity nagged at her. She'd always had problems with that. Curiosity killed the cat, right? Although she'd read that the whole phrase was 'Curiosity killed the cat, but satisfaction brought it back,' which had a rather different meaning.

Glancing out through one of the busted windows, she saw the sun still hanging in the sky. A few more hours of daylight, then. That meant relative safety from the thing. After all, it had never attacked them during the day, right? She wondered what Melinda was doing now. There could already be a helicopter on its way up to the lodge to force them to leave, but she doubted it. Not if Melinda had seen and spoken to Josh.

Josh's door was closed and locked. Naturally. Sam remembered how the doors of the lodge had seemed to lock at random times. Now, in retrospect, she knew he must have rigged them up somehow so that he could control where they went. "Ugh," she muttered, shuddering. She was lucky she didn't have bathroom-related trauma or something.

Nope. She was getting nowhere. She had the best item she could probably hope to find and she should get back to the others.

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"So… Here we are," Mike said, gesturing around at the saferoom.

The other guy just stared at him from where he sat against the wall. That alone was an unsettling thing. Up close, Mike could see Josh's fucked up eye, the bulging lips where his new sharpened teeth protruded, and all the other damage his face had endured. There were dozens of cuts and scrapes, along with a set of curving half-moon marks that Mike suspected were the result of Josh's own fingernails. They'd been sitting in silence for who knew how long and it was officially driving Mike fucking nuts. Where the hell was Sam? Should they go look for her?

Finally Josh spoke. "Yeah dude. I know."

"You would. This was your masterpiece, right?" The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them. Truthfully, he wasn't sure he wanted to stop them. He might feel bad for the guy, but he still couldn't shake the urge to strangle him. Who did shit like that? Who threw his best friends into a horror movie for his own sick amusement? And why… Mike sighed. Why do it to Sam, of all people?

"It was supposed to be." Josh tipped his head back against the wall. "We should do something. We should stock this place up. Just in case."

"There's food."

The look Josh gave him would have withered crops. "There are a few cans of beans and a granola bar. Maybe. You really call that 'stocked'? It'd be awesome if we survived monsters and shit just to starve to death. Super awesome. Is my sarcasm obvious enough?"

Mike's hand clenched into a fist. His missing fingers ached, a phantom pain that he wasn't sure would ever go away. He wanted to take something. He shouldn't have let his pack get lost. He shouldn't have let himself get fucking hooked in the first place. He should have punched Josh in the face when he'd had the chance. Technically, he had another chance right now, but the timing was
less than ideal. Later, he promised himself, when they got out of this alive. Then he'd punch Josh. Maybe they could just have an all-out brawl. That seemed fair. He was sure he deserved more than a few square hits to the jaw himself.

"No, look," Josh said, gesturing broadly. "I know another place where the parental units stuffed some canned goods and the like. Too many enthusiastic Costco trips. Or whatever the Canadian equivalent is. Probably has a name involving moose. Mooses. Meese?" He didn't wait for Mike to answer, just hopped to his feet and vanished into the hallway.

Mike hurried after him. He sure as hell wasn't letting Josh out of his sight again. "How did they even get it up here?" They passed into a fancy parlor-type space. The marble underfoot was slick and Mike stumbled, catching himself on a doorframe.

Josh glanced back at him. "Airdrop. My family owns three helicopters and two prop planes."

"I can't even tell if you're joking." He caught Josh's sly smile and rolled his eyes. "Which is, of course, the point, right?"

"It's fun. Like taking candy from a bag of hammers." The other man stretched his arms up, then folded his hands behind his head as they walked. "So," he said conversationally. "You and Sam, huh?"

Mike stopped dead in his tracks, staring at Josh's back. Without seeing his face, it was easy to feel like he'd slipped back in time. Whether it was the prescription Sam got him or just being out of the mines and around people, Josh seemed to be standing straighter. "What?"

Shrugging his puffy green shoulders, Josh didn't turn, just paused in the hallway ahead. Everything about his pose, his tone of voice suggested blasé and total nonchalance, but Mike didn't buy it for a second. He'd seen under Josh's cool façade before; it didn't fool him this time. Regardless, this didn't feel like the right time for this conversation. Plus, Sam should be there for it, right? Mike wasn't even sure he could answer the question accurately without her there to weigh in. So he settled on denial. "I don't know what you're talking about."

A harsh, barking laugh rang out and made him jump. Josh turned and seemed to assess him. It made him twitchy. He didn't like being twitchy. Folding his arms over his chest and keeping his face as expressionless as he could manage, Mike waited.

Josh stalked back down the hallway towards him, circling him, nostrils flaring. It reminded Mike of the way Wolfie had come after him initially and of the way… the way Hannah had crept towards him, back when she was a monster. Josh's tongue darted out briefly, tasting the air like a serpent. Taking a deep breath, Mike fought the urge to swallow hard and tried to keep his voice light. "Um… what are you doing, dude? I thought we were going in search of bigger and better snack foods? And not the human kind, he didn't add.

The other man's lip twitched slightly and he stopped, still staring at Mike. "Just tell me."

"Tell you what?" What did Josh want him to say? He didn't even know what was going on with him and Sam, so what on this big blue marble did Josh expect Mike to say?

"Mike," Josh muttered, his voice drawing out the vowels and turning his name into a warning hiss.

"Whoa. Calm down, Josh. Talk to me. What's going o—"

Josh hissed again, this time wordlessly. "Tell me, Mike. I can smell her on you."
All his instincts screaming at him, Mike raised his hands in front of him and took a step back.

It was the wrong move.

Josh lunged at him, snarling, his face twisted once more into the inhuman thing they'd seen in the tunnels upon their arrival. He didn't even have time to think, let alone react. The other man was faster, stronger—he suddenly seemed to have eight hands and be made entirely of iron. There were sharp, ragged nails. There were teeth. Too many teeth. There was pain, bursting through his head like a floodlight.

Then there was nothing.

Chapter End Notes

Oh shit! What happened?! Tune in next time, everyone! Same bat-time, same bat-channel.

As a side note: if you'd like to join me in rarepair hell, check out "I Think I Would Remember" - my attempt at a Jess/Josh fic that is entirely separate from this story. :)
The Wounds We Inflict

Chapter Notes

...so my fantastically amazing beta reader/bestest bud has basically chewed me out for leaving the last chapter where I did and demanded I write the next chapter immediately, so here it is!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sam hurried down the basement stairs. She was god-damned starving and in desperate need of a shower. Not to mention that she'd feel much better once she saw the boys again. Her fingers tangled in the necklace's chain, stuffed deep in her coat pocket. The wire of the pendant cut lightly into the pad of her thumb.

She felt strangely hopeful for the first time in a while. Even having no idea if the necklace would do anything, it helped to remember the good things about Hannah, especially in the face of this new, vindictive shadow. They'd found Josh and it seemed like the medicine from Dr. Hill was at least slightly helpful. Everyone was still alive. It was almost enough to make her start to sing. Instead, she snorted to herself as she walked. It was kind of sad that her bar for hope and joy was so low these days.

Dropping down into the dumbwaiter was growing to feel like second nature. She wasn't sure that was a good thing, but if it meant that she wasn't treated to a flash of remembered terror, she'd take it. The hallways of the old hotel were clear and quiet.

"Hey guys, I—" Her voice trailed off as she entered the empty saferoom. That was odd. She glanced around. A few things had been moved and there was a mostly-eaten can of pinto beans on the table that she was fairly certain hadn't been there before. She picked it up and blinked at it, puzzled.

"Guys?" she called, louder.

She set it down and headed back into the hall. "Mike? Josh?" Her voice echoed back at her, mocking her. A knot tightened in the pit of her stomach. Where had they gone? Clearly, they'd been here, even if only for a few minutes. How long had she been in Hannah's room? "Mike?" she called again, heading down the hall away from where she'd come from. She would have seen them if they'd been that way.

As she rounded a corner, she came to a dead stop. Josh was sitting against the wall, knees pulled in to his chest and his head down. "Josh?" She rushed to his side, dropping down and putting her hand on his arm. "Josh? Are you okay? You freaked me out. I thought you'd be in the saferoom." She forced a rueful laugh. "I thought the worst had hap—"

Josh lifted his head. His eyes seemed to look through her for a moment, then he focused on her with considerable effort. There was a streak of red along his cheek. He lifted a hand to rub his nose and she saw more red on his fingers, under his nails and thin along his skin.

"Josh, what—" Sam looked around the hallway desperately. He would be there too, wouldn't he? Something had happened, but he would be there. The small stretch of visible hallway was empty. "Josh, where's Mike? What happened?"
He chuckled, a dry, harsh sound in the back of his throat. "Gone."

"Gone? What do you mean 'gone'?"


Her temper flared and she shoved him. He didn't resist, letting the force of it send him sprawling back onto the floor of the hallway. He just smiled. "You should leave, you know? There's nothing but death up here."

**Death.**

"Josh, what happened?" Sam swallowed hard. "What did you do?"

He raised his eyebrows. "Why would you assume I did anything? That's kind of insulting, really. Why would you think I would do something to Munroe—just because you fucked him?"

She froze in place, staring at him. "What did you say?"

"Oh, sorry. I thought it was common knowledge. Didn't you want me to know? After all, you know I have my kickass new monster senses. Why else would you show up to find me with his Axe body spray scent all over you?" Josh's grin was harsh and joyless. "It's cute. You guys match now. Eau de Douchebag. Like a combination of hippie granola and fresh mountain man, or whatever they market that shit as."

"I—"

Josh sat up and punched playfully at her shoulder. "Aw, come on, Sammy. No secrets between best pals or potential in-laws, right? I can't believe it took you this long to jump into the sack with the dude who got Hannah and Beth killed. I mean, he's so dreamy."

She went cold. All the panic, all the uncertainty and anxiety she'd felt when he brought it up so bluntly vanished. "How dare you," she whispered, meeting his gaze squarely. Her voice hardened. "How **dare** you say that to me."

"How dare I? Quite easily, really. Does he have a magic dick, Sammy? I assume he must, since apparently it's impossible to resist, even when he killed Beth, who you claimed to love." Josh tapped his finger against his lips idly, a parody of thoughtfulness. "You know, it makes sense. Hearing Hannah extoll his virtues must have been an excellent sales pitch. Then you just had to wait for all possible obstacles to disappear. Too bad Jessica didn't die. Then he would have been single even earlier. Or is he even single now? Are you a homewrecker too, Sammybird?"

Her hand connected hard with his face, the sound of the impact echoing down the hallway. She shoved herself to her feet, backing away from him. "Fuck you, Josh."

"No thanks. I'm not really into sloppy seconds," he sneered, leaping up as well. He paced from wall to wall, watching her with a strange, intense gaze.

The derision in his voice cut into her like a knife. That was the tone he used when he mocked the guy who made fun of him or the teacher that he showed up in Chem. It was the tone he reserved for those he thought were lesser. It had never been aimed at her. "Asshole," she mumbled finally, turning away so he wouldn't see her tearing up. She didn't want him to know he'd gotten to her. He didn't need any more ammo. God, she should have just let him rot up here.
Behind her, she heard him mutter something she couldn't make out. "What was that?"

"Nothing, nothing. I'm sure you have important things to be doing. Run along. Fly away."

She spun back to him. "What did you do, Josh? Where is he?"

Josh held out his hands, palms up, and looked down at them. "No idea."

"You're lying. What did you do? Is—is that his blood?" If Josh had killed Mike—she couldn't even finish the thought. The time for kid gloves, though, was over.

"Probably. You know me. Psycho-killer. Qu'est-ce que c'est." He hummed a little under his breath. "Would that break your heart, Sammy? If I killed your lay?"

"God damnit, Josh. What the fuck is wrong with you? I thought the meds were working! Or, fuck, were you always a huge asshole and I just didn't notice somehow? God, you know, after we got off the mountain last month, I kept thinking about all the things I'd ever done wrong. Every time I'd ever done something to hurt you. I kept pouring through my memory, trying to figure out what I did to make you hate me so much that you decided to—to torture me." Sam felt powerless to stop the words flooding out of her mouth. She could feel the tears on her cheeks, but even that wasn't enough to stop her. Every resentful, bitter thought she'd had about Josh was bursting forth in a rush. Josh had grown very still, watching her, waiting expressionless.

"And I just couldn't do it. I couldn't think of a reason. Not a real, solid reason. Josh, I thought we were friends. More than that—after the girls—you were my best friend. How could—why would you do that? Why are you doing this? Have you just hated me for years and now you've just given up pretext? You don't have to pretend just because your sisters like me, so you just cut loose? You know, your illness doesn't even excuse it. I did research. I read stuff. And you know what? There are tons of people who have what you have who didn't decide to imprison and torture their friends on an isolated, subzero mountain."

She pressed her fists against her eyes, trying to get herself under control, but she couldn't. "Josh, I thought—I thought—" Biting back a furious, desperate sob, she saw him take a step forward and she backed away. "No. No, Josh. What—what did you do this time? What did you do?"

They locked eyes, unblinking. The silence was thick and almost palpable between them in the hallway, the weight of her words hanging in the air.

After what felt like an hour, he blinked and dropped his gaze. He licked his lips and cleared his throat. "Why did it have to be him, Sam?" he asked softly. "Really, out of everyone, why did it have to be him?"

Anger flared in her chest again. "You know nothing about—"

"I thought it made sense before," he continued, still not looking at her. His voice seemed calm, remote, almost dreamy. "You were too hurt; it was too soon. You were grieving. I was grieving. You were right to call a halt to it. And then you came, in your ridiculous little fake-furry hat, and you seemed calm, y'know? Good. Good-ish. And you looked at me and you saw me and you smiled and you joked and for a second it was like old times and I let myself think maybe—but maybe couldn't be. That would be a betrayal. So I wanted to show you, to make you leave, but then, with him, Sammy, I just… I couldn't think, couldn't think straight."

Sam stared at him, trying to process his monotone ramble. "Josh—"
"I'm not sure why you came back, really. I'm not sure why you'd forgive me. You always were a wrench in my plans, Sammy. Too good at escaping, at thinking on your feet, at forgiving, with your dumb little vegan heart always forgiving everyone. You forgave me. I guess you forgave him too. Forgive the entire world their sins. Maybe then we can all hold hands and sing kumbaya around a campfire. With marshmallows. Vegan marshmallows. Do they do that? They probably do that."

"Josh—" she tried again, but once more he started talking, still detached.

"I can't though. I can't let it go. I wish I could, but I just can't. I'm bad at letting go. I always have been. I just can't believe he took another thing from me. I can't believe he took another thing I care about. It's just kind of unbelievable at this point. And I just saw red, Sammy. I'm sorry, Sam. I just couldn't think anymore. I couldn't. I tried, but I just couldn't. The pills aren't enough. Not anymore. The voice I hear now. It's not the same. It's different, Sam. It's hungry and it wants and it's too much and it's never going to go away, I can feel it. It's rooted in my chest, in my stomach. It's too much. It's too much." He finally lifted his head again to look at her. In the blood-streaked, gaunt, monstrous face, she saw the eyes of her friend, desperate and alone. "I'm sorry, Sam. For everything."

He took off running, hurdling a busted wooden crate, and vanished from sight. She didn't try to stop him.

Sam stared at the empty place he'd left. The walls of the hallway seemed to press in on her. It was hard to breathe, hard to think, hard to process anything that was happening. She closed her eyes, steadying herself on the wall.

What now?

What was she supposed to do now?

She opened her eyes and gazed dully at a piece of chipped tile on the floor. The chip looked a little like a lightning bolt. Her fingers found Hannah's necklace and she almost burst into tears again. Only a few minutes ago, she'd been so hopeful. The things she wanted seemed so straightforward, so simple: she wanted to be safe and warm with her friends—her family. She had to admit that after what they'd all been through, the other survivors were starting to feel more like family than her own blood relatives.

Josh… What the fuck was she even supposed to do with that tirade? After what he said to her? And Mike… She straightened, tugging her coat into place and scrubbing her palms across her tear-stained cheeks. There had been blood and Josh had talked about death, but that didn't mean anything, not really. Even after everything he said, she still couldn't quite bring herself to believe Josh had killed Mike. If he did… if he did, that really did signal the end, she thought. She wasn't sure she could bring him back from that.

She wasn't entirely sure she would want to try.

"Don't be dead, Munroe," she muttered, zipping the pocket holding the necklace. "Don't you dare be dead."

Ashley rubbed her arms vigorously, shivering. The novelty of being able to see her breath had worn of about thirty seconds after she'd gotten off the bus back in town and now she just wanted to go to the beach. And she didn't even like the beach. There was too much sand and it just got absolutely everywhere and it was hard to lie at the right angle to read your book without straining your neck. But it didn't matter. She'd put up with all of it just to soak in the sun like a lizard.
She glanced to Matt, who was looking around, studying the ground. "See anything?"

He shrugged. "I'm a football player, not a tracker. I don't think I've even gone camping."

"We're a great pair. So good at this stuff." Ashley looked up at the sky. The snow was still threatening and she expected it to start up any moment. "What if we just follow our tracks back to where we all started running? Then we can find their tracks or something. Find them?" Before he could respond, another thought occurred to her. "But that's probably what the monster wants, right? Ugh. What are we supposed to do now?"

"That's not the worst idea, though," Matt said, looking back along the tracks they'd left. "That thing could be anywhere right now. We probably won't see it before it sees us anyway."

"Um… Is that supposed to be reassuring?"

Laughing ruefully, he shook his head. "No, I guess not. Sorry."

They began to head back through their old tracks. Ash jumped at every sound, including a heart-stopping moment where Matt zippered his coat with a sound that made her audibly yelp. "Sorry," she mumbled, blushing.

"I think that one's on me, actually."

Movement caught her attention and she stopped dead, Matt bumping into her before he realized. She reached behind her to grab his hand, tightening her grip warningly. Far ahead, up the hill, she could see the monster, creeping through the trees. It was strangely fascinating to watch, like going to the arachnid house at the zoo. Its muscles bunched and extended smoothly, even when it reached behind and up to hook its claws into a branch and swing itself upwards. The action should have looked awkward, but it made it look graceful. It lifted its head, scenting the air, then swung its head towards them.

Did it see them? She could feel Matt trembling with the effort of staying perfectly still and she held her breath. She had Mormon relatives and Catholic ones, but her own parents hadn't really held with organized religion. In this moment, though, she wished she had something to pray to. She didn't think it would help, but thinking something more specific than ohpleaseohpleaseohplease would have been nice.

She didn't even dare blink and her eyes were starting to sting with the cold, dry air. The thing opened its mouth—her curiosity noted that it had multiple rows of teeth, like a shark—and Matt's voice carried clearly down to them: "It's way too dangerous to be out here by yourself."

Her fingers clenched around Matt's, clutching at him for reassurance. Even watching the monster make the sound, it was still unsettling.

After a few more breaths, the thing took off, leaping from one tree to the next and out of sight. Every muscle in her body seemed to release at once and both of them sagged. "Jesus," Matt muttered. "Holy shit."

"That was… nuh-uh. Nope."

"At least it wasn't right in our faces," he offered weakly. "Being in the mine was insane."

She looked at him curiously. They hadn't really talked, after the events of the previous month. He'd gone to Seattle right after they were finally released. "What happened?"
Re-tying his boot, he snorted. "Jess and I barely got out alive. I'm not sure if it was the Hannah wendigo or a different one, but it was right up on us and Jess was in such bad shape... we couldn't run. We just kept hiding and staying still. It sucked, big time."

Ash shuddered. "So, um... It went the way we were going. What now?" Matt pointed. Following the line of his finger, she saw a small, wood-framed opening leading into the mountain. She shook her head. "Nope. No way. Bad, bad, bad plan."

"I know, I know." He sighed. "But we know it's up here, right? And we know that the mine will get us back to the old hotel. All we have to do is find some of the others' chalk marks and we can follow them back. That's where the others will be. Mike and Sam and probably the others too."

"I guess it makes more sense than just wandering through the forest playing cat and mouse with that thing." She squared her shoulders. "Okay. Let's do it. I didn't get to go into the mine much last time. This'll be exciting. Right?"

Matt didn't answer and she was grateful. She wasn't sure whether she wanted confirmation on that particular point.

-o-

"Chris, will you hurry the fuck up? I want to find the others." Emily glanced back over her shoulder at the blond and sighed. "How did you even manage to do that?"

There was snow up to his thighs. He waded forward, trying to feel for the ground before every slow, trudging step. "I don't know. The ground under the tree seemed so smooth and flat, and we keep climbing stuff, so I thought..."

"Thought you'd take a snow bath?" She tried to keep from laughing. He looked like Tinnie did when he was still a kitten and he got stuck in the laundry hamper. "Hey—try going back out the way you got in and then walk around the snow drift, genius."

It took him a good five minutes to get back out again. He brushed ineffectually at himself and groaned. "I hate this mountain."

"Look at that," Emily said drily. "Another thing we agree on."

There was no sign of the others. After their previous conversation, neither dared shout, but they kept their eyes peeled for any sign of Jess's blonde hair and camo, Matt's burgundy jacket, Ashley's pompom hat. But there was nothing, just white and brown and black. Emily pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed again. She was going to tie Jess to her waist, like a toddler on one of those leashes shaped like a monkey. At least last time, they'd been running together. This time they'd been right next to each other! How had Jess managed to end up somewhere else?

And what was going on with the monster thing? Emily frowned at the snow as if it could answer her questions. She thought the thing was supposed to be nocturnal or allergic to sunlight or something. Was that all just a connection she'd made incorrectly? Perhaps they'd just been lucky the last few days. If so, they needed to regroup even sooner. Maybe even yesterday, if that was an option.

"Emily!" Jess's voice carried through the cold.

"Jess?" she called back, spinning in place, trying to locate the direction the sound was coming from.

Chris pointed through the trees to their right. "That way," he said quickly, and took off, hopping over a small downed tree branch.
Following him as quickly as she could, Emily craned her neck, trying to see ahead. "Emily!" She heard Jess shout again, her voice slightly frantic. Something was nagging at her, but she couldn’t quite put her finger on it. "Emily!" the shout was louder this time, closer.

…and had exactly the same intonation as the first two times they’d heard it.

Instinct seized her and she lunged forward, grabbing Chris by the wrist and yanking him back, just as the wendigo came flying down through the trees to land right where Chris had been. Chris yanked the shotgun off his back and aimed, but the monster swatted the barrel down with one casual movement and the shot glanced off a rock.

Emily cast around for something, anything to use as a weapon. She saw Chris try to bring the butt of the gun around to clock the thing in the face, but it slid to the side and he stumbled from the unspent inertia.

"Oh for fuck's sake," she swore to herself, yanking her arm free of its sling and grabbing a hefty rock with both hands.

It grabbed Chris by the shoulder with a clawed and snarled in his face, spittle flecking Chris's glasses.

"Hey asshole!" Em shouted, heaving the rock overhead. It was an awkward throw with a heavy object and a messed-up arm—not to mention the fact that she was no athlete—but she was close and the wendigo was hard to miss. The rock struck it hard in the shoulder and its fingers sprang open, dropping Chris to the ground.

It hissed at her, then its lips twisted into words. "Emily!" it called again, in Jess's same frightened voice. "Emily, wake up!"

Was it… was it mocking her? Oh hell no. No one mocked Emily Davis. She grabbed for a nearby branch, ignoring the way her shoulder was protesting the movement. If she got out of this, she'd have whatever surgery she had to have to deal with it. "Stop sounding like her, you unbearable dick," she muttered, swinging the branch like a club.

The thing caught the end and forced it back, continuing to babble in the voices of her friends.

"Duck!" shouted a voice from behind her.

Emily didn’t like to follow orders, but she followed this one, throwing herself to the ground just as flame sprouted in the air where she’d been standing.

"You heard her! Stop sounding like me!" The fire waved in the thing’s face and it screeched loudly. "You're just the poor man's Jess, anyway. Look at you. You clearly don't know how to dress."

Whether in pain from the fire or from Jess's critique of its fashion sense, the wendigo had clearly had enough of them for the time being. It laughed—a high, wild sound that reminded Emily of Josh for some reason—and somersaulted backwards, twisting in the air like a cat to land on all fours. It paused, considered them, and smiled. The voice it used was gruff and annoyed, like the guy with the flamethrower that had tried to help them. "Nothin' but time, you piece of shit. Nothin' but time."

With something like an easy wave, it turned away again and vanished.

Jess grasped Emily's hand and pulled her awkwardly to her feet. "You okay, Chris?" she called over.

He nodded brusquely and reloaded the shotgun. Emily considered it an act of kindness that she didn't
"How did you find us?" Em asked, shaking the snow off her coat as best she could. She considered putting the sling back on but decided to just shove it in her pocket. She'd put it on again when they were safe.

Jess beamed at her triumphantly. Her cheeks were flushed and rosy from the cold and adrenaline and tendrils of blonde hair had escaped her long braid to frame her face. Emily cleared her throat and bent to adjust the lace on her boot. Which was coming undone, obviously, and had to be corrected. Otherwise she might trip in a critical moment. "Well I knew I wasn't the one yelling, didn't I? It's a cool trick, but not super effective if you're trying it on the person who's voice it is."

"I mean, I think it was trying it on us, to be fair," Chris said, coming up beside them.

"Whatever. It still knew I was around, right?"

"Maybe it's bad with faces?" The blond guy shrugged. "You have pretty kickass timing, though. I dig the look, too, by the way. Didn't get a chance to say earlier, but it's very Lara Croft meets Cadet Kelly."

She raised her eyebrows. "You've seen Cadet Kelly?"

Chris flushed and looked away. "No. I mean… my sister watched it. I just saw a snippet."

"Oh come on, Chris. There's no shame in liking what you like. Plus, Hillary Duff is super cute." Jess's smile faded and she shot Emily a worried look. "Um… I don't think it cares that it's daytime."

She nodded grimly. "We need to find the others."

-0-

The doctor left the room and they sat in silence. Melinda stared at the familiar, ordinary furniture, trying to sort through her thoughts. On the one hand, it was a relief to learn that her injuries weren't as bad as they could have been. On the other hand, it made her feel even more guilty for leaving the mountain at all. She should have toughed it out. She would have been fine. Probably. She supposed it was lucky that Hank had even been able to get the resort doctor to come to his house to check her out and hadn't insisted on flying her to the nearest real hospital.

Finally, Hank cleared his throat and leaned forward on his knees. "You want to tell me what happened, Mel?"

"Not particularly."

"Okay, let me rephrase." He cleared his throat and said, over-enunciating each word: "Tell me what happened, Mel."

She huffed out a little laugh and glanced at him. "Really?"

"Yes, really." Hank's voice was fierce. "Mel, last I saw, you were planning to go up, get the kids, and come back down. Next time I saw you, you were bleeding and injured and talking about Josh. Now you get to tell me what the hell happened." He folded his arms over his chest and settled back in the chair expectantly.

"What I said. Josh is alive." The words still felt alien on her tongue. Alien but oh, so sweet. She said them again, for good measure. "Josh is alive."
"How?"

This was the part that was going to be hard to explain. Melinda bit her lip. "Do you remember Jack Fiddler?" she said finally.

"That tin-foil hat fellow? Yeah."

"Remember the creatures he was obsessed with?"

Hank nodded. "Wendigos, right? Cannibal monsters? He didn't talk about them much, but I was getting a drink one night and he got a bit talkative. Went on and on about these monster things that didn't like fire. Talked about you and Bob, too, actually. Called you idiots."

"We were." She frowned. Hank was not going to like the next bit. "He was right."

"He was right? About what?"

"The monsters are real."

The man just stared at her blankly, then pushed himself to standing. "I'm going to get the doctor back in here. I think your head injury is worse than he realized."

She glared at him. "Hank, you sit your ass down and listen to me."

"Fine," he said, scowling. "You get five minutes to convince me you're not just heavily concussed."

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"Okay, no, look. Matt and Ashley aren't stupid, right?" Jess said.

She was silent for a few awkward seconds before Chris realized she hadn't meant it rhetorically. He shook his head. "Nah, I guess not."

"So they'd know to go back to the lodge," she said, smiling triumphantly. "We have a saferoom there. Or at least it's the closest to a secure place that we've found since we've been up here. The food is there and everything."

"Food?"

Emily rolled her eyes. "Uh, yeah. Food. Like the thing that humans need to eat. Jesus, Chris. Aren't you supposed to be one of the smart ones? Or are those glasses just for show?"

"I just didn't think—I didn't realize it'd been so long…"

"Yeah. It has. A few days at least. A few days without you, by the way. I note with interest that I was more willing to come rescue Josh than his own best friend was, but whatever."

He swallowed the lump in his throat that had come with her words. She wasn't wrong, and it hurt. Jess reached out to brush his arm with her fingers comfortably. "You're here now. That's what counts, right? We all—we all do stupid shit we regret." She glanced pointedly at Emily, who frowned and folded her arms over her chest. "Anyway, I think they'll go back there. That's what would make the most sense."

Considering it, Chris finally shook his head. "You don't know if they can even find their way there. And that… that thing… it's still out here somewhere. And they don't have a gun or a flamethrower or anything. They're sitting ducks. It makes more sense to backtrack to where we were when the deer..."
showed up and then follow their tracks."

"Okay, you know what?" Emily said sharply, throwing her good arm up in annoyance. "Fine. You go do that. You have the gun, you'll be fine. We'll meet you at the lodge. Probably where Matt and Ashley are already, along with everyone else." She turned on her heel and began to head up the slope, using some jutting, exposed roots as a pseudo-staircase.

Jess and Chris exchanged a bewildered look and Jess rushed after her. "Em, what the hell? We can't just leave him?"

The black-haired girl glanced back down at Chris, her face grim. "Why not? It's what he wants, right?"

"I want to go back and track Matt and Ash," he said sullenly. "I don't particularly want to go alone, but I will if I have to."

"You have to."

Jess put up both her hands in a conciliatory gesture. "Whoa, guys. Bad plan. This seems like a very, very bad plan." She turned to Emily and, though she dropped her voice, Chris could make out her words. "Em, what the fuck? Why are you so pissed at Chris?"

The other girl didn't even bother to lower her voice. "Because he was also on team 'let's-shoot-Emily.' Whatever. If he's so sure his plan is best, he'll be fine. He's got the gun, he knows how to get to the lodge. Either he finds them and makes it there, or he doesn't find them, gives up, and makes it there anyway. But I want to get somewhere safe before the sun goes down."

"It's fine," Chris called to the girls. He shifted the shotgun on his shoulder. "I'll see you guys soon!"

"Um, okay. Be careful, Chris," Jess said. "Don't forget about the staying still thing. Or that it can copy voices. Or that it's super big and fast. Or that—"

He cut her off quickly, shuddering. "Thanks, but I don't need to hear the reminders. That's—thanks."

The girls disappeared quickly into the trees, heading upwards towards the lodge. Hoping against hope that he wasn't making the biggest—and possibly last—mistake of his young life, he turned to follow their tracks back. Though it was snowing lightly, the snow had been deep enough and soft enough that their tracks weren't filled in.

He followed them through the mess of broken boughs and burn marks that marked their second encounter with that huge-ass wendigo and on. Should he be walking in his own footprints? That was a definitely a thing people did, but he wasn't really sure it mattered in this situation. If it was following his tracks, he'd run into it before it ran into him. This was stupid. This was really stupid. He had his phone out and was unlocking it before he remembered he'd have no signal. Shoving it back into his pocket, he grumbled to himself. It was annoying to realize how much checking his phone had become habit. Not that it was a bad thing to have a habit like that, but he should be able to not do it in a place like this.

A bird took off in the bushes, cawing loudly as it launched into the air and he jumped, then laughed nervously. His own words to Emily earlier echoed in his own head. Don't split the party. And here he was, splitting it even further. He hoped he had an actual player class in this scenario. It would suck nuts if he was an NPC or something. He glanced down at where the collar of his t-shirt peeked out from under his layered coats and felt even more stupid. Red. A red shirt. He'd literally worn a red t-shirt. He was just fucking asking for it, wasn't he?
The woods were so quiet it was starting to get to him. The steady crunch of his footsteps and soft swishing sound of his clothing seemed overly loud in the snow-muffled landscape.

A twig snapped behind him and Chris spun, the gun coming off his back and up against his shoulder smoothly. A flash of pride shot through him. That was the kind of instinct he'd always hoped he'd have post-apocalypse, but had never really thought he would be able to pull off.

"Whoa, whoa. I surrender, Cochise," Josh said, raising both hands and grinning. "Say, is that a gun in your hands or are you just happy to see me?"

Mike Munroe opened his eyes.

The room was nearly pitch black and for a moment he wasn't sure he had actually opened his eyes after all. Then a small red dot lit up for a fraction of a second before going dark again. Okay. Eyelids up. That was good, he supposed.

Gingerly he touched the contusion on the back of his head and winced. What had Josh hit him with? He remembered Josh talking about Sam and getting angry. He remembered Josh attacking him and—he ran his hand up his left arm and along his chest and bit back a groan as his fingers brushed against what felt like an open wound just below his collar bone. There was another on the other side. He hadn't realized that Josh's nails had grown so sharp and strong. Another set of scratches lay along his forehead, narrowly spaced.

He felt around him. What felt like cold, dry concrete met his fingers and he pushed himself up into a sitting position. The only thing he could make out was that red light. Rather than try to stand and possibly hit his head again, he crawled along the floor, letting his fingers lead the way. They brushed against cold metal bars and he felt his way up. When he was on his knees, the light was at about chest-height. His fingers met more thin pieces of metal—the edge of a shelf?—and he reached forward.

The little bump of the red light was solid and stationary, but just below it was a piece of plastic that moved slightly as he brushed against it. He pushed. With a click, Mike heard the distinctive hiss of a cassette tape player start up. After a few seconds, a voice began. The volume was low, lending the recording an air of intimacy.

Tsk.

Tsk.

Tsk.

So sloppy, Michael. To let yourself get taken like this. I honestly expected more of a fight. How disappointing.

I'm sure you have questions, Michael. So many questions. No doubt you're muttering them aloud to yourself even now as you listen to this. Why am I being targeted? What did I do to make this happen? How am I going to get out of this? Will there be anyone around to see me make my heroic escape? Me-me-me-me-me. Your ego is rather magnificent.

I'll make it simple, so it's easy for you to comprehend. You aren't being targeted.

There was a clunk and all the monitors switched on, blinding him. He shielded his eyes, letting them readjust. The recording continued, Josh's false voice vicious.
This isn't about you, Michael, even if you're used to everything else in your life being that way. For once, you are going to be the outsider, the bystander, the one who isn't there to rush to the rescue. You don't get to be the hero of this story. Not when all you really are is a spoiled, selfish coward who takes what he wants without a thought to anyone else. So you get to wait here, alone in the darkness. You get to watch my plans unfold and know that you are utterly unimportant to them.

Enjoy your stay.

Mike's eyes smarted from the screens' light and it made his head ache even more. Fuck Josh. It instantly turned into a furious, ranted mantra in his head: Fuck-Josh-fuck-Josh-fuck-Josh-fuck-Josh-fuck-Josh-fuck-Josh-fuck-Josh-fuck-Josh-fuck—

He turned in a slow circle, trying to assess the situation. Monitors with cabling that vanished into a tiny hole in the wall behind them. It was cold and no air was moving, giving the space the feel of a coffin. Empty shelves lined the walls, making the room even more cramped and claustrophobic. A freestanding wire shelving unit had been shoved against one side, as evidenced by the deep scratches its legs had left on the concrete floor. On one shelf was the tape player, with another cord that ran to a place out of sight between the monitors and the wall. At the opposite end from the screens was an oversized metal door with a huge handle.

Testing it, he found it didn't give easily. Mike gave it a dirty look and leaned into it, trying to push the handle down and release the door. It wouldn't give.

He stumbled back, glaring at it. It looked familiar. Something about the design reminded him of Italian food. Why in the flying, focaccia fuck would it remind him of Italian food? Then it clicked. "Zitinellis," he said, smacking his head with the palm of his hand. He'd done a brief stint doing food prep at a faux-Italian restaurant in high school. That's why he knew it. It was a familiar design.

He was in a fucking fridge.

He scowled and slammed his fist into the metal door. Pain flashed up his arm and he shook his hand, angrily. Was it… was it supposed to be a reference to *The Shining*? Or had it just been the most convenient place to set up some kind of insane jail cell for his stupid fucking plan? "Oh fuck you, Josh," he muttered. He was going to punch the smug right off that dick's face when he got out of here. Or maybe he'd light him on fire. Mike figured he had time to decide while he figured out how to escape.

Resting his head against the closed door, he let the cool of the metal seep into his aching skull. It didn't make the pain vanish, but it calmed him down a little. The only sound besides his own breath was the soft hum of the monitors.

The monitors.

Mike turned and crossed to them. What were they there for? *You get to watch,* Josh had said in the recording. As he scanned each one in turn, he realized what that meant. They were feeds like the ones in the saferoom, but only specific rooms were included. One showed the shed, one showed the table where he and Sam had found Chris and Ashley. One showed the room Jess had described. Another showed a fuzzy, off-kilter view of the upstairs bathroom in the lodge, while the fifth camera showed the shadowy media room. The last one showed a room he didn't recognize. He might not be the smartest guy, but he could sure as hell put those pieces together.

He was meant to watch all of his friends suffer.

God, Josh was a dick. He knew he deserved some kind of comeuppance for what had happened to
Hannah. He would never deny that. But this? This was fucking sadistic. He would have been watching an unidentified, crazed serial killer torture everyone he cared about.

And now this. He remembered how Josh's face had changed, the way he'd said *I can smell her on you*. Mike didn't exactly want to dwell on that statement, but here, alone, with nothing but the empty video feeds, it was impossible not to think about it. The memory of Sam, of her warmth and affection and the sweet press of her body against his felt impossible now. Like it was some great dream he'd had in the middle of this disaster. But he clung to it. Josh couldn't take that away from him; he just couldn't. He wouldn't let Josh taint that.

He slid down to sit against the wire rack, watching the monitors dully. He would escape. He would. But first he would rest for a moment. His eyes fell closed, shutting out the monitors' invasive glow.

His leg jerked and his eyes snapped open again. He sat up abruptly. Had he fallen asleep? In this timeless, airless tomb, he wasn't sure. Oh, and that was a fun thought. Was it truly airless? Was he going to slowly suffocate? Because that would just be fucking icing on this cake made out of dog shit and old, cold coffee grounds.

Movement caught his eye and he turned to look at the monitors eagerly. Something. Anything. Miraculously, there was movement on two of the monitors. The first one made him shout and pump his fist in the air. Sam was poking around in the room with the table. Mike had no earthly idea where the fridge was located, but Sam was there. Sam was alive and looked healthy enough, if extremely unhappy. Her face, from what he could see on the pixelated screen, was fixed and angry. She ducked down to look under the table, then kicked the table leg and headed to the side of the room.

More movement on the other drew his attention. He glanced over and his blood went cold. The thing. It was the huge wendigo monster thing, creeping through the shed. It sniffed at Josh's fake entrails and then took a huge, messy bite. Mike's stomach heaved and he glanced away for a second. When he looked back, the thing was leaping, jumping straight up to land among the rafters. It lifted its head and its jaw opened in a soundless screech, then it launched itself out of view of the camera.

Mike rushed back to the door, heaving again at the handle. Enough was enough. He'd spent enough fucking time in here. Josh couldn't possibly have sealed it perfectly. The edge of the handle cut against his hands as he pulled and pushed at it.

"Come on, you stupid, stubborn piece of sub-par, mediocre, bought-at-a-discount cold box. What do you do? You don't even do anything. You keep food cold. That's dumb." He wasn't even listening to himself as he argued with the silent door.

Finally, he sagged back against it and looked to the monitors again. Sam was still visible, at the very edge of the frame. She was taking a drink from her canteen. "I sure hope you're looking for me, Sam," he told the tiny version of his friend on the screen. "Because I have no idea how to get out."

Chapter End Notes

A few things I wanted to mention: First, the warnings on this fic are in earnest. I didn't use them just for fun and if you're not ready for or interested in seeing death and violence, duck out now. I understand. Please know that I made choices very carefully and nothing I'm doing is intended purely for shock points.
Second, this chapter was very difficult to write. It's incredibly hard to write characters you love being horrible to each other, but every other way I tried to take it felt untrue to them. I want you all to know that I love all the characters (except the monster thing, obviously), but some of them do and say terrible things. That's just part of being human. Sometimes you do or say horrible shit to people you care about. After this I'm just going to write an everyone lives AU where they all play with puppies and watch 10th Kingdom together.
Chris stared blankly at Josh for a moment, his brain not quite processing at its optimal capacity. Then instinct took over. He dropped the shotgun, which swung back down on its strap to thwap against his thighs, and crossed the space between them. His fist connected solidly—and loudly—with Josh's jaw.

Pain flared through his knuckles, radiating up his arm and he shook his hand. "Fuck. That hurt," he snapped at Josh.

"Jesus-fuck, dude!" Josh rubbed his jaw and glared balefully at him. "Yeah it did."

"No, it hurt me," he said, holding up his hand, the knuckles reddened.

Josh's eyebrows shot up. "Are you serious? Cry me a river. You punched me in the face."

"You deserved it."

"Really? The first time you see me again and you punched me in the fucking face?"

Chris shrugged. He refused to feel bad about it. He refused. "You deserved it," he repeated. Then he stopped and squinted at Josh's face. Was there something wrong with his glasses? He took them off and rubbed them on the edge of his shirt. Putting them back on revealed no change. "Uh… what's up with your face? You look like you're halfway through makeup to be the Joker."

"I don't want to talk about it."

He snorted. "Yeah, no. Fuck that. I just traveled half a continent to come get you, since apparently you're a goddamn cockroach who can't be killed. You lost the chance to 'not talk about it' when you decided to make me saw you in half." Okay, that was a bit more of a word and emotion dump than he had intended to say, but seeing Josh was overwhelming. He was wearing that same fucking outfit, too. The one from before everything went to shit. The one he'd been wearing tied up to that wall, with the saw coming at him. Actually… "How are you wearing that? Didn't it get all bloody from your insanity?"

"Second set of clothes. Only thing I could find easily after S—" Josh frowned and looked away, rubbing the back of his neck. "After the guys found me in the mine. I—ah—like the gun? Good look. Very 'monster hunter.'"

"Yeah, that was the idea." Now that he was here, he was blanking on everything he wanted to say to Josh. Honestly, most of him had been totally convinced that they would be lucky to even find his corpse. Yet here Josh was, right in front of him. Chris wasn't sure whether he should punch him again or just hug him as tightly as he possibly could. He forced a snort and returned to an easier topic. "Seriously though, what's up with your face?"
Josh grinned humorlessly. "Long story."

"I have time."

Suddenly Josh lifted his head, his nostrils flaring. "No. You don't. We should move."

"What? Why?"

The other man gestured towards the shotgun. "Because the reason you brought that is nearby. And, no offense, but I don't think the gun is really going to save you."

Chris scowled at him. "Bullshit. You just want to get out of answering my questions and you have no fucking right to expect that. You don't get to have me just follow you blindly any more. I came all this damn way. You owe me answers. You owe me the truth."

"If I'd known you were going to be such a little bitch, I wouldn't have stopped to say hello." Despite his flippant words, Josh looked anxious. His eyes darted around the forest and he looked tense, ready to run at a moment's notice. "Seriously. We should go."

"And where do you suggest we go? Because you're not allowed to leave my sight. I trust you as far as I can throw you, and my athletic abilities have not improved since I saw you last." Seriously. If Josh tried to leave without him, Chris would shoot him. Not to kill, obviously, but, like, in the leg or something. Then Josh would have to talk to him.

"Oh my god, you're such an old woman. I'm not trying to ditch you," Josh hissed, keeping his voice low. "But there is something big and it's nearby. If you don't want to end up monster chow, we should go."

Casting his mind around for an option, Chris shrugged. "The lodge? The others have a saferoom there, right?"

Josh straightened, his face suddenly cold. "No. I'm not going back there."

"Why not? Isn't that where the others will be?" He was echoing Emily's logic, but it no longer seemed quite so objectionable. He felt vaguely guilty for not chasing after Ashley, as he had been, but with Josh here… he hated to admit it, but it skewed his priorities a bit. "I think that's where Mike and Sam are, at least. And Emily and Jess are headed that way. So why wouldn't—"

"I said no," Josh snapped.

Chris flinched, then felt his face flush with anger. How fucking dare Josh pretend like he had any right to be a dick or boss him around? He should be groveling right now, not ordering Chris around like a goddamned sovereign lord. "Either give me a reason or that's where we're going, Josh. Now."

The two men glared at each other. It made the air feel thick around Chris, but it tasted sweet all the same. Somehow, being here, fighting with Josh… it made him feel real again. Whole. The way he was before. Before he'd been stupid enough to get wasted and pass out the night the twins died, before he'd had to pick between Ashley and his best friend, before his entire life had shattered. Back when he'd been young and fearless and stupid.

Finally, Josh deflated slightly. Chris suppressed the urge to pump his fist in victory. Josh dropped his eyes to the snow-crusted ground. "I… I had a fight with Sam. I did something bad. I can't see her right now."

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"I said no," Josh snapped.
enough for the moment, especially since he was sure Josh was telling the truth about the wendigo being nearby. "Okay. Then where do we go?"

"The closest place to go is the shed."


"I answered your question. Now let me keep you alive a little longer, yeah?" Shoving his hands in the pockets of his vest, Josh looked at Chris again. He looked tired and sad. The wound at the side of his mouth seemed almost too red against his skin.

Swallowing hard, Chris nodded again. "Okay. Let's go."

He trailed behind Josh, jumping at every sound. For the most part, their path seemed direct, although every now and then, Josh would freeze or take an odd little detour around an area that seemed straightforward. Chris didn't question it. For his part, he couldn't see any sign of the monster and he was more than happy to keep it that way.

And there it was. His own, personal nightmare. The moment he saw the splintered wooden slats, his blood ran cold and he felt his chest tighten painfully. He didn't want to go inside. Everything about this place meant death: Josh's fake, now-headless corpse, the memory of Josh's babbling, the errant bullet holes left from when he'd failed to save Jack Fiddler.

He didn't even realize he'd stopped walking until Josh turned back to him. "Come on. Let's get inside."

"Fuck you," Chris growled, brushing past him and into the shed.

"Buy me dinner first," he heard Josh mutter as he bolted the door. Looking around, though, Chris wasn't sure he believed this place was any better than being out in the woods. It was falling to pieces, with rusty pieces of garbage—that were probably once useful items—hanging from the rafters. He remembered the way one had almost cracked his skull open and grimaced. This place was a death trap. He'd almost rather let the wendigo chew his face off.

Almost.

"Now what, asshat? We just camp out here forever and hope it starves to death before it eats one of our friends?"

"Your friends."

"Our friends," Chris corrected pointedly. "Don't do this shit, dude. Don't pretend like you don't give a fuck. Because you might want to play all dark-and-brooding-guy-in-the-shadows, but I know what you really are."

"Devilishly handsome?"

"An overly sensitive egomaniacal asshole who, despite torturing your friends past the point of sanity, still somehow looms large enough in their thoughts to warrant a whole goddamn rescue party from Death Mountain. Appreciate how fucking lucky you are that they still want to rescue you after the stunt you pulled."

Josh stared at him blankly, then grinned. "So I am devilishly handsome?"
Scowling at him, Chris fought the urge to punch him again, with moderate success. Fine. If Josh wanted to play that game, he just wouldn't talk. Chris folded his arms over his chest and glared at the wall in silence.


He shook his head.

"You're being kind of childish, you know."

"I'm being childish? Me. Really. You're an idiot."

The other man smirked. "Got you to talk though."

Chris threw his hands in the air. "There's no way to win with you is there?" At the sight of Josh's smug smile, he jabbed a finger into his chest. "That isn't a compliment. It doesn't make you a winner. It just makes you an asshole. Seriously. What the fuck is wrong with you? Is your brain just totally fucking broken, you psycho?"

The silence was heavy. Every word he had said left a foul taste in his mouth. Chris chewed on the inside of his cheek. It was too late to take it back and he wasn't even sure he wanted to. But the echo of his words still sat on his tongue and made him want to throw up. It was everything he'd sworn he would never say to Josh. They didn't talk about it, but he knew about the suicide attempt, the hospital stay, the medication… You couldn't spend that much time with someone and not know. Psycho. Broken. All the things Josh had been afraid he was—Chris had just confirmed it all. He took a deep breath, trying to calm his nausea. And yet, he also felt justified. Josh had tortured him. Josh had come up with the worst, sickest possible scenarios and forced him to live through them. He'd even loaded them with gore, which he knew Chris hated more than anything else.

Wind whistled through the damaged walls. Finally, Josh looked at him again. "You hate me."

Unable to think of anything to say, Chris nodded. It wasn't the whole truth, but it was part of the truth. He wouldn't lie about it.

The unmarred side of Josh's mouth quirked up slightly. "Finally."

He shoved himself away from the wall. "Finally."

"I said 'finally. '" Josh said simply.

"Finally. Finally? What, you want me to hate you?"

Josh just shrugged, face impassive.

Slowly, Chris shook his head. Memories flashed through his mind. Josh in all black, drunk off his ass and shouting at the girls' funeral, being escorted out by Bob. Josh, not even telling Chris he was dropping out of school—just not showing up one day and never coming back. Josh, never answering Chris's texts or emails, though he continued to send them even after starting college. Josh, showing up out of nowhere to invite him back to the lodge and the way he had described it as "tying up loose ends." Josh, shoving Chris into Ashley as if he was playing a desperate match-maker and the odd way all of the 'pranks' had been designed to drive Ash into his arms.

*A replacement,* whispered a little voice in the back of his head. *An upgrade.*

He shuddered. "Fuck, dude. Your brain really is broken. You want me to hate you?" After helping
Ash for so long, he was familiar with the symptoms of a panic attack and, fuck, he felt like all of them were crashing down at once. But it wasn't a panic attack so much as an intolerable, confused rush of forty emotions at once and he felt like he was drowning.

Josh shrugged again, then smiled. "Probably for the best, really. You don't want any of this. Trust me. I don't want any of this and I am 'this.'"

He had punched Josh before and his hand still hurt from the impact. Now he was moving again, registering Josh's slight flinch and the set of his jaw that said he planned to take it. Rather than punch him, though, he threw his arms around Josh, crushing him in a hug. "Dude, you're alive. And you might be a manipulative dick, but you don't get to tell me how to feel."

"So you don't hate me?" Josh's bewildered voice was muffled against the shoulder of Chris's coat.

"Oh I totally do." The other man smelled like old blood and pine. Chris didn't even question it. It was still Josh. No matter what, it was still Josh. "But unlike one of your dumb characters, I don't have only one emotion."

Josh's body shuddered and his arms closed around Chris's back. "Dammit, Cochise."

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"The mines are way less cool than I was led to believe," Ashley grumbled, trudging after Matt. They hadn't found any marks so far and she was starting to worry they were getting themselves lost. Then they'd just be sitting ducks for the monster when it decided to come back down. She tried not to think about how deep they were getting in the mountain; she'd always been mildly claustrophobic and it was far too easy to imagine a cave in or something that would get them trapped down here, just like Josh had been. And as much as she tried to reassure herself that her friends would never let her get stuck down here, the monster's speed and teeth loomed too large in her mind to be discounted. Flamethrower or not, shotgun or not, it was so much more powerful than they were.

"Weren't you down here before? And who said they were cool?"

She glared at him, folding her arms over her chest. "No one. But I hoped they would be."

Matt laughed, then pointed ahead excitedly. "Look!" He rushed forward and shone his light on the wall. There were two arrows, pointing the same direction. A blue one and a green one, bright against the stone. "This way!"

They followed the path of blue and green arrows as it wound through the tunnels. It was surprisingly simple to do, which immediately put Ashley on edge. Nothing up here was easy. Ever. There was no way this would just lead them straight to the door they were looking for—

"A door!"

The redhead blinked at it. There it was: an iron door, just sitting there in front of them. She followed Matt and finally let herself smile. Soon she'd be back with the others. They were stronger as a unit, where they could all have each other's backs. Not that she wasn't happy she was with Matt—if there was anyone she'd want to be stranded with, Matt was high on the list—but she wanted Jess's flamethrower, Sam's surety, and Chris, with his lopsided smile and awful puns.

The door looked different than she remembered, but it was so long ago and she'd been so amped up on adrenalin and fear and exhaustion that who knew what it had really looked like. She stepped up next to Matt and tried the handle. It didn't want to budge. "Can you get it open? What if it's stuck?"
Not bothering to answer her question—which, if she was honest, was largely rhetorical, since if it was stuck they were totally *fucked*—he grasped it securely with both hands and heaved. The door stuck stubbornly, then gave, shooting out towards them and nearly sending Matt sprawling. He brushed off his hands and grinned at her. "See? No problem."

"So *that's* why people like athletes," she teased. "I get it now."

"Next thing you know, you'll be a cheerleader."

She giggled. "Yeah right." A cold breeze blew in through the open doorway, which made her shiver and smile. After the sullen air of the mine, it felt amazing. "Shall we? We still need to get the others, find Josh, and figure out the whole cure thing."

"Is that it?" Matt stretched his arms over head and sighed in satisfaction as his shoulders made cracking noises. "That's nothing. Walk in the park."

Pointing at him, she smiled broadly. "I like your optimism. You can be the cheerleader."

"Sure. Have you ever tried that shit? It's an incredible workout." Together they headed through the door and up the narrow flight of stairs.

They emerged into a rubble-strewn hallway. Filthy windows let dim light filter in to cast strange shapes across the tiled floor. Ashley froze in place, then slowly turned her head to look at Matt. His eyes were wide and he looked slightly stunned. "Um… this is not the lodge," he said softly.

"No, I don't think so." Ash forced a nervous laugh. "Still, though. Not like there's definitely a ghost here, right? I mean, why would Hannah be mad… at… us…?" She bit her lip and shook her head at her own stupid words.

"She's not here," Matt said quickly. "Obviously. It's daytime. The girls said she wasn't around during the day. So we can just go back down the stairs and—"

A metallic clang echoed up the stairs.

Ashley laughed again, a little hysterically. She could hear it in her voice, but there was no way to stop it. Oh, they were so very, *very* doomed. "That was the door closing."

"Yep."

"We're going to die."

"Probably."

"Well… shit."

She looked around wildly. It was still daylight. That was something. And really, neither she nor Matt had actually orchestrated the prank, so when you really thought about it… Ash sighed. That logic was so full of holes it might as well be a colander, as her Mom would say. "Um… okay. I have an idea. First we have to get outside."

They passed quickly through the hallways, trying not to make too much noise. There were birds around, though, and at one point Ashley spotted a squirrel vanishing through a broken window. That alone was enough to make her feel slightly better, especially when she remembered the dead silent forest of earlier. From the windows, she thought it might be getting towards dusk, but it was hard to tell. Wandering through an open, rubble-strewn room, Matt pointed out a door that looked different
than the others.

It matched Emily’s story and opened onto some kind of outdoor hallway, a path enclosed by chain link. It wasn't hard to find the gap in the fencing Em had described.

"Are you sure about this, Ash?" Matt hugged his arms around his chest, shivering in the cold. "I mean, I won't stop you, but if what Em said is true, then…"

She smiled with what she hoped was confidence and not just naivety. "We need info, though, right? I think I've pretty much exhausted Fiddler's journal and we know next to nothing about Hannah. If what Em said is true, then this thing knows something about her. At least a little something. And I speak French."

"You do?"

Chewing on her lip, she nodded. "A little, at least. I did the French track in school. Four years, including AP."

"'A little'? That sounds like more than a little."

"Hey, did you come out of Spanish fluent?"

Matt laughed. "Okay. Fair enough."

She stepped carefully through the gap in the chain link, braced for anything. Her feet crunched as she tried to keep from stepping on any of the actual graves. It was hard to tell where they were, for all that there were wooden markers. Fresh disturbances she assumed were Emily and Jess were barely visible under the fresh snow. Matt climbed through after her, looking more than a little nervous about the whole thing. She really, really hoped she wasn't getting them both killed.

Nothing happened.

Squinting up at the sun, Ashley frowned. Was it too early? Did it only come out at night? Or maybe it only came out when Hannah was around. That would be really inconvenient. Or maybe she should just say something. That's what always scored you points in fairy tales—being polite. You gave bread to the old lady in the woods and she'd make your tears turn into diamonds or something.

"Um… bonjour?" She instantly had Beauty and the Beast stuck in her head. Ignoring it, she continued, dredging up every old memory of long study hours that she could. "Bonjour. Je m'appelle Ashley. J’aimerais vous poser quelques questions si vous avez le temps."

Hello. My name is Ashley. If you have time, can I ask you some questions?

The graveyard was very quiet. There was no sign of the birds she'd seen earlier, nor any other animal. She wasn't sure if that was a good sign or not. Sparing a glance to Matt, she saw him shake his head and shrug. He had no more ideas than she did. She tried again. "Je pense que vous avez rencontré mes amis plus tôt? I think you met my friends earlier?"

She wasn't sure if it was actually getting colder or if it was her imagination. It was hard to tell if there was some kind of unnatural chill when you were already outside in the Canadian winter. Maybe this was all a futile exercise. She and Matt should head back to the lodge quickly and try to find the others before it got dark. They'd be sitting ducks for the monster or for Hannah, whichever found them first.

"Enfant, je n'ai que du temps."
Ashley yelped and clapped her hands over her mouth, flushing red. She had been waiting for a voice, yet it still made her jump. From the corner of her eye, she saw Matt spin in place, looking for whoever had spoken. But there was no one visible, just the empty graveyard and the snow that was once again starting to drift slowly downwards. Child, I have nothing but time.

She was doing it. She was talking to an actual ghost.

Holy shit.

"Uh—" Matt gestured for her to keep talking, his eyes wide. "Merci?"

A soft chuckle rolled through the graveyard and made her hair stand on end. It wasn't particularly unpleasant, but something about it set off alarm bells in her head. "Je n'ai rien encore fait."

Okay. First things first, she figured she'd try to mend fences. Obviously it hadn't hurt Jess or Emily, but still… "Je suis désolé pour ce que mon ami a fait." I'm sorry for what my friend did.

"Elle ne savait pas. Elle s'est excuse." She didn't know. She said she was sorry.

"Good. I mean… bien. Êtes-vous un protecteur?" Ashley didn't really know how to phrase it. Are you a protector? That would hopefully get the spirit of her question across, at least.

"Je suis le premier. Je suis celui qui est resté."

That confirmed her theory. It was whoever was buried here first. "Il n'y en a pas d'autres?" There are no others?

"Il y en a d'autres sur cette montagne. Ils ne sont pas les bienvenus ici. La fille de la rage n'appartient pas ici."

Her eyebrows shot up. There were other ghosts on the mountain. Technically, she'd already known that, but having it confirmed was a totally different situation. 'La fille del a rage'… Hannah? The angry girl? That made sense. "Tu as vu Hannah—we want… uh…" She fumbled for the words in French.

The laugh came again, louder than before. "Tell me what you want to know, fille," the voice said in affectionate, heavily accented English. "I do appreciate the attempt to speak to me with such courtesy."

Matt's head came up and he stood straighter. He opened his mouth to speak, then shook his head and gestured hopelessly to Ashley. It was on her to explain. "Thanks. Um… Thank you. We… the angry girl. That is our friend. We want to help her. Or at least stop her."

"She will kill you, fille. That is what she is good for now."

"No, but there must be some way to stop her," Ashley insisted. "Help her with unfinished business or burn her body or something."

"You have listened to too many of your grandmother's stories." The spirit's voice was firm. "She will kill you. That is what is most important to her now. She is lost in death, as they all are."

She started to object, but Matt jumped in before she could. "There has to be a way. She's our friend."

"Yet you stink of guilt."

Matt bristled. "And we're trying to make it right. We're not going to run away just because she wants
to kill us."

"We're not? Um… can we vote on that?"

He shot her a look and she shrugged helplessly. Of course, she didn't really mean they should just abandon Hannah, but she also didn't want to get killed by her. The spirit-thing spoke again: "You are not close enough to her to pull her back from where she's gone. She was one of those beasts. She watched herself devour others and become something unforgiveable. That is a dark place into which you cannot reach."

"But… that means someone else might, right?" Matt started to smile, an idea surfacing in his eyes. "That means that there is a chance, even if we're not the ones who can do it."

"I tire of you, children. Let me rest."

Matt started to talk and Ashley grabbed his hand, squeezing it tight. "Don't piss it off," she hissed. "We got something, at least. Let's go. We might be able to make it to the lodge before dark."

Squeezing back, Matt nodded. Together, they climbed back through the fence.

-o-

"Okay," Mike mumbled, shoving himself back to his feet. "Okay. You can do this, Munroe. You got this. A plan. An escape plan."

The air of the fridge felt heavy and hard to breathe. Again, he worried that it might be airtight and slowly suffocating him. He shook his head. "Nope. Remember. Dickhole didn't want anyone to actually die. Crazy, but not crazy. An important distinction." He was babbling. "Fuckity fuck."

He pulled at one of the monitors and felt it shift. Angling it, he tried to use its glow to look around the corners of the room. For all his effort, he saw nothing new. Just empty shelves, the wire rack with the tape player, and the wall of monitors. "Monitors!" He rushed over to them, looking again for the hole that the cords fed into. It was nothing more than a small hole drilled through the back wall, but it made him want to sing.

It was man-made.

Technically, the entire refrigerator was man-made, but this hole… this was Josh-made. That might be a dumb distinction to make, but boy howdy did it matter to Mike. That meant that an average person could make a hole. And if there was a little hole already, they might be able to make it bigger.

Fumbling with the rack, Mike managed to dislodge one of the shelves. He shoved one of the monitors to the side and took careful aim.

Bam. He slammed the corner of the shelf into the hole. It made the screens flicker as the cords were briefly compressed, but that didn't deter him. He was going to get the fuck out of there even if he killed himself trying. "I'd prefer it if that didn't happen though," he told the wall. Pulling his arms back, he readied himself for another swing.

Bam.

The shelf still suspended high, he froze. That particular bang wasn't one of his. After a moment, it came again, the sound ricocheting around the fridge and making his ears ring. It had come from the door.
He looked quickly to the monitors, but there was no action on any of them. Of course, that didn't mean much. He couldn't see the outside of the fridge from here. Or, at least, he assumed he couldn't. He wasn't sure exactly where he was, so it was always possible that the door was hidden in some way and he could technically see it. Mike grimaced. His thoughts were weaving in a dizzy, uncertain circle and he wasn't sure whether to blame the limited air, the lack of water, or just his own ridiculousness.

_Bam._

Rushing to the side, he raised the shelf, readying it as a weapon. It could be anyone—or anything—at the door, and he wasn't going to let either the monster or Josh kill him without a serious fight. "Come get me, fucker," he muttered, ignoring the fact that his hands were shaking slightly.

_Bam. Bam-bam-bam._

From the other side of the door, he heard a muffled metallic rattle and then the handle of the door was yanked upwards. The door swung out and open and the sudden flood of light made him hiss with pain, even as he fought to keep his eyes open to see whoever it was. That was the idea, at least, but the full light of the hallway outside was so much brighter than the monitor's glow that he couldn't see a damn thing.

"Mike!" A much shorter force all-but tackled him, arms encircling his waist and squeezing tightly. "Oh god, Mike. I thought you were… I was afraid you…" Sam's body shook as she buried her face in his shirt. The shelf hit the ground with a clatter that neither paid any mind.

His hands were uncertain as he stroked her hair, his vision slowly clearing. "You found me. Thank you, Sam. I didn't know how I to get out. I was trying, but it—it was dumb and I—"

She drew back to look up at him. He drank in the sight of her face, trying to absorb every detail. She was pale and looked tired, her eyes red and raw. He gave in to the impulse and caught her up in a deep kiss. Melting against him, her fingers dug into his back, stinging the scratches she'd managed to leave the night before. The reminder set his heart pounding and he drew pulled back, pressing his forehead against hers with an overwhelmed huff of a laugh. "Sorry. Got carried away."

Sam smiled up at him, her lip trembling. He wanted to kiss her again. "Mike, you're alive. I would forgive you for just about anything right now."

"Oh really?" he said, waggling his eyebrows.

She laughed and smacked his shoulder, then her face abruptly sobered as the reality of the situation hit her again and the giddiness faded. "What happened? What did Josh do?"

Releasing her, he stepped back to let her further into the room. He didn't really want her to have to see this, but she deserved to know. She'd heard about the trap Josh set for the girls already and she'd seen his setup for Chris and Ashley. She deserved to see this too, to see what her friend had done. A tiny, vindictive part of him was glad she got to see it, but he knew that made him an asshole. Not as much of an asshole as Josh, but still.

As she slowly made her way over to the monitors, brow furrowed in confusion, he tried to summarize. "He—ah—he knew something. About us. He kept asking me what was going on between us and I, well, I didn't know, did I? We haven't even really talked about it. So I told him there was nothing going on and he… He attacked me." She looked back at him, bewildered, and he pulled down his shirt to show Sam the nail marks on his chest, then pointed to the scratches on his head. "I woke up here. And…" Mike pointed to the tape player.
The fridge was silent save for the click and hiss as Sam hit the rewind button, then play. They listened to Josh's fake 'Psycho' voice together. Mike was having trouble even processing the words and just focused on Sam's face. Her eyes fluttered closed and her jaw clenched as she listened to the Psycho's plan and the thinly veiled rage as he commented that Mike just takes whatever he wants.

Without letting it finish, Sam opened her eyes and stopped the playback. When she looked at Mike, her eyes were hard and cold. "He's wrong."

Mike shrugged. "Not really."

Her voice was adamant. "He—is—wrong."

He wasn't sure he'd ever seen Sam like this. She'd told him before about how angry she was, but this was different. This was cold and sharp and final. He thought of Josh and of the strange, panicked look in his eyes back when he'd realized he'd hurt Sam in the mine. Wordlessly, he shook his head. This was wrong. This was all going wrong. They'd come back to save Josh and he could see in Sam's face that she was ready to let him die up here.

Catching her hands, he held her in place. "Sam, no. Sam, listen to me. He's not wrong. I mean, I'd like to think that that isn't true anymore, but it was. It was. You know it was. We were friends, Sam, so you saw other sides to me, but I did just take what I wanted. Always. I thought…" He swallowed, trying to find an eloquent way to say such an ugly thought. "I thought I deserved it. So I got Erin. I got Emily. I went along with that prank without a second thought and, I mean, I was cool with it. I think—"

"No, I remember. I'm not going to pretend I don't. Hannah, she… She was ready to undress. She started to. And I didn't stop her. Even knowing that everyone else was there." She yanked her hand free and turned away, towards the screens. Mike forced himself to go on. "Listen, you want to know how fucking shitty I am? How about the fact that I left Em for Jess knowing that it would hurt Emily. I even knew that Jess was doing it out of some sense of revenge. I don't know why, exactly, and I never bothered to find out. I just went along with it."

"So yeah, I… Josh wasn't wrong. And he didn't hurt me, Sam. He didn't. He could have and he put me in here instead." A thought occurred to him and he ran his hands through his hair in exasperation. "I'm not even sure he thought the tape player would be here."

She didn't look at him. "You give him too much credit. More than he ever gave you."

"Am I saying I deserved to be tortured? No, not really. But I am saying that he still needs our help."

"Let him suffer."

He shook his head and walked over to put his hand on her shoulder. She tensed, but didn't pull away. "You don't mean that. I know you don't."

"Yes I do." Despite the words, her voice was less certain.

"Let's get him off this mountain. Then I will gladly let you kick his ass, okay?"

Sam let her head fall back to rest against his chest. Staring dully at the screens, she took a deep breath and closed her eyes. "Promise?"

"Yeah, Giddings. Plus, beating up a dead guy is considered unsporting."

They were quiet for a minute, then Sam spun in his arms to hug him tightly, her face pressed once
more against his chest. "I'm really glad you're okay."

"Thanks for finding me. Wait, how did you find me?"

Her answer was slightly muffled by his shirt. "No one padlocks a fridge. Seemed weird. So I took a
crowbar to it."

He pressed his lips against her hair. She smelled faintly of lavender, but he didn't care enough to
question it. Sam was here. He was free. And that was enough for now.

-o-

"I really don't think we should have ditched him like that."

Emily rolled her eyes. "Yeah, I get it. You've made it clear from the last hundred times you've said
that."

"Well I don't."

She stopped and turned to Jess. Poking her in the shoulder, Emily frowned. "Do you want to go
back?"

Jess stuck her tongue out, brushing past Em and continuing up the path. "No," she said, glancing
back over her shoulder. "Not really. But splitting up at a time like this… It just seems like a really
bad idea."

"So far we've all been fine."

"Wow. Okay. And the award for 'most flawed logic' goes to…” She drew out the last word in her
best awards show voice.

"To Chris, obviously. Who thought the best plan was to keep wandering around the fucking woods
with a monster and just hope for the best."

The flamethrower was heavy and starting to make Jess's shoulders and back feel tight and sore. She
just wanted to sit down somewhere and rest for a minute, but the memory of that thing haunted her
thoughts. Her own words to Emily, about wanting to see it better, nagged at her, reminding her that
she was a total idiot. She had nightmares about her time in the mines, but they were mostly full of
shadows and greyish blurs. Had that really been what Hannah turned into? Jesus. A monstrosity of
bone and iron-rod muscle, with ashen grey skin stretched tight over the angles of her face?

A shiver rolled down her back that had nothing to do with the snow. Not for the first time, she
considered the fact that she might actually die up here. For all her brave words to Mike and the
others, she was afraid. There was so much she had left to do and say. She might never have another
chance.

She stopped and turned, Emily nearly bumping into her. "Um… hey, Em?" Jess tugged nervously at
her braid.

The other girl didn't pause. "Yeah?" She was focused on keeping her footing and stepped around
Jess to edge her way up a rocky slope.

This wasn't right. She had to be able to really talk to Emily, not just toss off a comment while they
kept hiking. *No more time*, she found herself thinking. And if there was no more time, she was going
to do this. Now. "No, Em, stop for a sec, okay?"
"Seriously? We're going to get eaten. Do you want to be eaten? I seriously do not." Nevertheless, Emily stopped and turned to look curiously at Jess.

"I don't want to be eaten. But I just…" Jess adjusted the straps on the flamethrower just to give her nervous hands something to do. "Look, I just wanted to say I'm sorry."

Em's eyebrows shot up. "You're… sorry?" Her voice was incredulous.

"Yeah. I'm sorry. I'm sorry for seducing Mike away from you—" Emily snorted but Jess ignored it and plowed ahead. "—I'm sorry for the things that I said when we were fighting. I'm sorry for how I reacted after—"

"No." The other woman cut her off sharply and turned away to keep climbing. "Stop it."

The blonde blinked at her back, dumbfounded. Then she shook her head and rushed after her, irritated. Jess grabbed her arm and pulled her to a stop. "What the fuck? Em, you have to let me apologize."

"No I don't."

The bottom seemed to drop out of her stomach. She bit her lip to try to counter the tears that threatened. "You really still hate me. I mean, I get it. But… Please? I just want… I don't want things to be…"

"I don't hate you. Oh my god, Jess. Pay attention. I said that already."

"Then why—"

Emily's voice was clipped and sharp. "You think you're going to die, so you're saying goodbye. And trying to make amends or whatever." She slowly turned back to face Jess, though she couldn't seem to bring her eyes up to look at her. "I get the impulse. Seriously. I do. But I'm not going to let you do it, because then it's like I'm agreeing that you're going to die. And you aren't. I won't let you."

At this, Jess laughed. "Um… last I checked, I'm the one with the flamethrower. Not really sure how that makes you the one to decide who lives and who dies."

Em didn't laugh. She lifted a hand, her fingers almost touching Jess's cheek, then dropped it. "You aren't going to die. Because I fucked up before and then, like, fourteen more times after that and you're still here helping me for some incomprehensible reason. So I'm not going to fuck up again. And I want to talk about shit and fix things but I can't while we're in the middle of the woods being hunted by monsters—so not happy that this is my life, by the way—so you're not going to die. You aren't allowed to die."

"I forgot that the world takes orders from Emily Davis."

"Damn straight it does." Emily smiled slightly. "Because if not, then I have to apologize too. I'd have to tell you how sorry I am for the way I acted after… after…" Her cheeks flushed and she shook her head, unable to find the right words. "Ugh! I hate this. Apologizing is stupid. Which is why we're not going to do it."

"Fine," the blonde agreed. Her heart was pounding. Fine. If she wasn't allowed to apologize, then she was going to do what she'd been wanting to do ever since she saw Emily again. She didn't give herself time to second-guess the decision. Closing the space between them, she cupped her hands around Emily's face and kissed her.
The other girl was frozen for a long moment, then softened, kissing her back and making Jess's entire being sing with joy. It was just like the first time, after formal when they'd gotten drunk on tequila and watched her favorite old rom-coms. Only this time, Emily wasn't shoving her away the next day. She wasn't alone and cold and broken, dreaming of what had been and desperate to make Emily hurt as badly as she did. Now she was still cold and broken, but Emily was here, in her arms, kissing her back.

It made her feel immortal.

Emily's skin was soft under her fingers and Jess gave in to the urge to pull her closer. Her lips weren't as soft as Jess remembered; they were chapped from the cold and wind. It didn't make it any less sweet. If anything, it meant more to Jess than ever. It was a tribute to everything they'd been through, from the fights to the rockslide to Josh's sadistic trap. She broke away, murmuring her name. "Em, I…"

"I'm sorry," Emily whispered, her eyes closed. The phrase stung Jess, lodging a rock in her throat, but Emily continued. "I'm sorry for leaving. I'm sorry for what I said."

Abruptly, Jess understood what Em had been saying before. The apologies weren't unnecessary—they sounded like a farewell. She kissed Emily again, softly, and smiled. "Stop it. You don't have to apologize."

"But—"

"If you want to make it up to me, I have several ideas. For later."

Em blushed and waved a hand dismissively at Jess. "And we really should get inside," she said pointedly, trying to scowl and failing miserably.

"Yeah, yeah. Let's go. Jeez."

-0-

It had waited too long.

It knew it and it was furious. How dare they arm themselves and think they stood any chance of surviving? It didn't like the victorious scent of their confidence. It wanted them terrified and running, the silver of their panicked movement breaking up the otherwise monotonous stillness of the mountain.

It watched the girls hike. The one with the tank on her back… she would have to go. So would the boy with the gun that had been such an inconvenience. Then it would destroy the tools and those remaining would be easy enough.

And perhaps it was better that they should have some small, false, temporary triumph. It would make their screams, their terror all the sweeter when it came.

Hooking a hand around a branch, it launched upwards into the tree. It didn't like being in the sun so much, but it enjoyed the freedom of movement outside of the mine.

Soon. Very soon. It would feast. Maybe, for once, the gnawing ache of starvation would be sated.

It doubted that, of course, but one could always dream.
I just want them all to be happy, dammit.

Shit's about to get real and bloody. Just a warning.

Also- want to see the scene Emily and Jess are referring to? Check out Memories and Regrets, otherwise known as "stuff I wrote for this story that didn't actually fit in due to timing and flow issues."
Chapter Notes

Brother, Let Me Tell You

I'm so friggin sorry, y'all. In the last three weeks, I've done a ton of OT at work, had two performances, hosted three house guests, and gotten super sick. It's been a mixed bag of awesome and awful and I've missed this story dreadfully.

So here! And now we should be back to our regular scheduling (roughly 1 ch/week). We're getting to the end here and shit's getting real!

"Okay, well… what now?" Ashley looked at Matt expectantly.

He shrugged. "No idea. I guess we could go back to the original plan and try to get back to the lodge."

"This mountain is way too fucking big," she muttered, shivering. "But, yeah, I guess that works. Better than just hanging out here while we wait to get eaten. The way we came in is locked though, right? So how do we get back down?"

"I bet there's another way. There's got to be."

Ash groaned, rubbing both hands over her face in frustration. Why was this mountain so huge? What other horrible shit were they going to find up here—an abandoned doll head factory or something? She ticked off things on mental fingers. So far there was an asylum, a probably-haunted hotel, a cemetery, a mine, and countless ruined buildings. Plus some bona fide monsters and ghosts just to finish it all off. Any respectable horror movie would stop at one insane setting, but the Washingtons, true to form, had to one-up the average horror.

She forced herself to breathe and swallowed hard. Back to her to-do list. That helped a little. They needed to find the others. They needed to find Josh. They needed to find some way to get monster blood. They needed to get Melinda.

Oh, and they also needed to deal with Hannah. No big deal there.

"Let's go try that door again," she said finally.

Matt stared at her. "Really?"

"They said it didn't stay locked, right?"

"Yeah, but I don't think we can predict it. Why don't we just head down the above-ground path? We're in a totally different spot from before. It's way less likely that we'll run into the thing up here."

She zipped her coat up fully. The temperature was dropping rapidly, and it hadn't been particularly high to begin with. "I guess it just depends what we're more scared of, huh."

He laughed. "At least we know one potential way of escaping the thing. I have no idea what to do about a Hannah ghost."
They headed towards the far end of the fenced-in walkway. Ashley's mind raced as they walked. It wasn't much, sure, and the guardian ghost-thing hadn't been very optimistic, but the implication in its words was clear. There might be someone who could reach Hannah and bring her back from the brink. Ash shuddered. She hadn't even thought about the monster part of the whole thing. Hannah had been one of those beats for almost a full year. God, she couldn't even imagine the sense of utter desperation that would lead someone to eating another person, let alone their own sibling. But then, she'd never been trapped in a frozen cave with a broken leg for over a month, so her frame of reference was a little narrow.

No wonder Hannah was so unhinged. Not only would she hate them for what they did to her, but she also had to live with what she'd done—not just to Beth's body, but to her brother and her friends. And she really did consider Hannah a friend, Ash realized. That prank had been awful. It was so obvious in hindsight, but in the moment, it had just seemed funny.

"Not funny at all," she muttered as she trudged along.

Matt glanced back over his shoulder. "What was that?"

Shrugging, she shook her head. "Nothing. Just thinking about Hannah. And that stupid, stupid prank."

He stopped so abruptly that she bumped into him. "Hannah…" His voice was so soft she barely heard it over the wind.

"Well, yeah. It's kind of impossible not to think about Hannah right—"

His hand clapped over her mouth and he shook his head warningly, eyes fixed on something in the distance. She followed his gaze and her blood ran cold. It would have been easy to believe it was another of Josh's tricks. In the building ahead, a pale, dark haired figure paced slowly, visible through the row of windows. Every time Hannah's form passed out of view, Ashley's heard seemed to stop. What if she just vanished and reappeared out here with them, as Em had described? But then Hannah would appear in the next window, her face fixed and almost bored, walking steadily along.

"Uh, okay," she whispered to Matt. "I now officially agree with the 'find an outside path' plan. I do not want to go in there."

"Are you sure? What if we tried to—"

"Holy shit, Matt, no. Absolutely not. You heard the guardian, right? She'll just kill us. Unless you had some deep, secret relationship with Hannah that you have literally never mentioned before now." She knew he was stronger than she was, but she would drag him out of there before she let him try to reason with Hannah. No matter how nice Matt was, there was no way that was going to work. Not a single chance in hell.

They skirted back towards the other building, climbing awkwardly through another tear in the chain link to reemerge into the woods. It was getting darker and darker, which made her nervous. Admittedly, it hadn't seemed like daylight was much of a deterrent when it came to that monster that had attacked them, but being able to easily see where you were walking was nice.

Matt led the way, for which Ash was grateful. They moved as quickly as they dared, following the occasional path left by the wildlife, and twitching at every unusual noise or motion.

As they rounded a downed tree, Ashley spotted another opening into the mine. Ugh. It was like an anthill. Maybe it would make more sense to her if she knew more about mining, but it just seemed
like an insane layout of tunnels. She hesitated, then grabbed Matt's arm and pointed. "Best of both worlds, right? Out of the woods and also away from Hannah?"

"As far as we know," he said unthinkingly and she glared at him.

"Thanks. Super helpful thing to remind me of."

They headed into the cave. She wondered if it would be better to try to keep the beam of her flashlight steady, but that hadn't seemed to matter before. It was movement, not light itself that drew the creatures to them. So she supposed that, while waving the flashlight in the air was a bad idea, letting her beam move around the tunnel to reassure herself that she wasn't about to be eaten was probably okay.

It took longer than she liked to find another set of arrows, but eventually they did. This set belonged to Mike and Sam, which also seemed helpful. From what Sam had said, they'd gotten to the lodge first and then gone into the mine, which meant they should follow them back the way they came.

Maybe she was becoming numb to the mountain and the reality of the mine. Or maybe she was just getting increasingly exhausted. Things weren't making her jump the way they had before. It was nice to not be constantly feeling on edge, but it was also rather unsettling. What if she now no longer reacted as quickly as before? She shook her head hard, trying to drive away that line of thoughts. She was going crazy up here and it was intensely annoying.

She giggled under her breath. It was a measure of how far things had gone that she no longer felt fear at the idea of insanity, but just irritation.

"What's that?" Matt asked, shining the beam of his light over to the side of the tunnel.

Ashley turned to look. A chest with a broken lock and splintered edges sat awkwardly, pulled away from the wall. She trotted over to it, curious. That was her curse. Always her curse. It had taken every ounce of willpower she had not to try to find Jess when she'd heard her before, even though it would have left her all alone.

The lid was heavy and she wedged her flashlight under her jaw as she heaved it upwards. It came up with a squealing, pained creak and she peered inside. There was a small stack of scraped-up containers on one side and two jars on the other, plus one of those hollow animal carvings. She held it up for Matt to see and he shrank back, shaking his head.

"Nope. Hell no. I don't want to see whatever it has inside."

"It might be important, though," she said, shaking it at him.

"So you look. Sorry, but I don't really want to watch myself or any of my friends die right now."

Her curiosity just wouldn't let her put it down. The vision flashed over her and she slumped down, dropping the totem back into the trunk. She bit her lip, shuddering. Then she tried to keep her voice calm. "It doesn't matter. It's an old one."

"Really?" Now Matt's curiosity was piqued. "What was it? And why was it locked up?"

"It was Fiddler's."

"The flamethrower guy you all keep talking about? What was it?"

She picked up one of the jars. "He knew he was going to die. Probably, at least. Helping us." The
stopper in the jar was incredibly tight. Ashley wedged the edge of it on the trunk and wiggled it, trying to work the cork loose. It crumbled and she tried to be more careful, easing it slowly out of the jar's wide mouth.

"Jeez."

"Yeah." The cork abruptly broke in half and she pulled each piece out. A smell something like rotting meat washed over her and she gagged. "Oh my shit that is so gross."

Matt crouched down next to her and took the jar, holding his nose shut with his free hand. "What is it?"

She looked inside it. A liquid moved sluggishly, like a thick syrup or mud. Shining her light on it, she could see it was nearly black. Under the scent of decay, she could make out a metallic, copper tang. "Blood?"

"Is blood normally black?"

"When it's really, really old. Of course, it's normally also dry by that point, so I don't really know. But I think it's blood."

They looked at each other. Her heart started to pound. If this was what she thought, it was more valuable than gold. "Is it… is it wendigo blood?" Matt asked carefully.

_I have the monster blood_, Fiddler had written. Ashley hadn't paid much mind to that bit before; she'd assumed it was regarding his access to actual, captive wendigos. But no, he was a practical guy, right? And she knew what she would have done in his shoes—she would have bled them and stored it, against the eventuality that you might have to kill them or they escaped. "…and I broke the cork. Oh my god. I'm the worst."

"There's another jar. Do you think they're the same thing?"

She picked up the other jar and shone the light through it. It was hard to tell the color, since the glass was brown, but it moved the same. "I think so. Yeah."

"Okay, so we'll try to plug this one up but we'll leave it here. We can always come back and get it if we have to. We know where it is and so do Sam and Mike. We'll take the sealed one."

They moved quickly, wrapping the remaining sealed jar in a spare shirt and shoving it deep in Ashley's bag. The other, broken cork was jammed awkwardly into the jar and they placed it carefully back in the trunk. "Matt, this means…"

"It means we might be able to save Josh," he said with a grin. "First good news I've heard up here."

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"See, I told you we'd find them if we looked." Mike pointed to the screen that showed the shed. "… wait."

"Chris is here?!" Sam grabbed the edges of the screen that showed the shed, as if she intended to pull it closer to her. "Chris. Chris is here. Chris is here."

Mike laughed. "Yeah. I'm pretty sure we can safely say that Chris is, in fact, here."

The blonde studied the screen closely. They were talking about something—maybe even arguing.
Chris was waving his hands in the air animatedly, while Josh leaned against the wall, just as he had when they'd found him before. Seeing Josh's tiny figure set off another wave of anger, curdling in her gut. Knowing that he hadn't actually killed Mike was something, she supposed, but it didn't take away what he'd done and everything he'd said to her.

'Sloppy seconds'. Ugh. But, though the insults had hurt, the deadpan, disconnected ramble about her forgiveness was even harder to remember. She wanted to sit and sort through what he'd said, especially now that she knew Mike was safe, but another part of her wanted her to stop caring and just accept that Josh was a terrible person who did and said terrible things all the time. What had he even meant by that? About betrayal and Beth?

They didn't have time for this shit. Dammit, Josh.

"We should go meet up with them," Mike suggested quietly.

"Why?" The glib comment came out before she could stop it. He looked at her earnestly and she waved a hand. "Yeah, yeah. I know. I know."

"Sam, if you—"

"I get it." Her voice was sharper than she had intended. "I want to kill him right now, but I'm not leaving him up here. It's fine. Well, no. It's not fine. It's the opposite of fine. But I get it. We should go find them. And Chris is here. So, you know, maybe he can make Josh stop acting like... like this."

He didn't look satisfied with that answer, but he nodded.

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Matt followed Ashley up the tunnel. They were getting close to the lodge. They had to be, given how long they'd been walking and the fact that they were still finding the chalk arrows. That was good. He wanted to see the others and he wanted to sit, even if only for a few minutes.

Something caught his eye and he shone the light over to the side. Tucked behind a rock, he saw an edge of worn, splintered wood. Ash didn't notice as he paused and pulled it out. Another totem, bleached to the point where he could hardly tell the color. There were faint traces of brown and black and yellow decorating the carved shape of it. It looked like some kind of fish. Trout, maybe. The hole in it seemed too dark to be real: a kind of void blackness that he felt like he might fall into.

He didn't want to look in it. Maybe he should get Ash to check it out, like she had with the one in the trunk. But this was probably an old one too. The worst he'd see would be something happening to a stranger. He could handle that.

*The snow was blazingly white under the shining moon, standing out in sharp contrast to the shadowed trees.*

*There's a shrieking noise and a more human shout, then a burst of bright arterial blood and the sound of someone falling.*

*Another shriek.*

*Then silence.*

Matt stumbled and dropped the totem.
The girl ahead looked back, concerned. "Are you okay?"

He nodded wordlessly and she continued to walk. Matt looked down at the totem at his feet. What was that? Who was that? If he picked it up, he could look again, but it was cut so sharply into his mind that he didn't need to. The shout had sounded familiar, like someone he knew. One of them. There were no other details, though. It could be any one of them. Or maybe it was old and he was just imagining it sounding familiar.

That was probably it.

That had to be it.

-0-

"So much for your amazing, magical, air-tight plan," Emily said, going back into the hallway. There was no one in the saferoom. In fact, they hadn't seen anyone anywhere. She put her hands on her hips and mimicked Jess, her voice as high pitched as she could make it. "They'll, like, totally go back to the lodge. That's what makes the most sense!"

"Okay, why does everyone always do a valley girl impression when they're pretending to be me?"

Ticking off on her fingers, Emily tipped her head to the side thoughtfully. "Blonde, silly, popular, reads garbage, takes too many selfies…"

"Never too many selfies."

"Hey, if the Ugg fits…"

Jess stuck her tongue out at the other girl. "I do not own Uggs. Gross." She looked around. It was hard to tell when someone had even last been here, although there were signs of humans around. Someone had started to eat beans and given up part-way through and there was a heap of blankets in the center of the floor that hadn't been there when they'd left with Melinda. "So now what?"

"Smart people would stay here, where they're safe and have food."

"Since when are we smart people?"

The black-haired woman waved off the comment. "Excuse you. Some of us didn't have to rely on our personal essays alone to get into college."

"How is that a bad thing? Just means I'm kickass at writing those stupid things and that grades aren't important."

"Grades are important."

Putting on a haughty voice, she mimicked Emily. "4.0. Honor roll." Em laughed and rolled her eyes.

There was a clatter from down the hallway and both their smiles dropped away. Emily looked at Jess worriedly. "What was that?"

It was obviously rhetorical, but Jessica shrugged and shook her head all the same. She had no idea what it was. It could be anything from Wolfie to the others to the monster itself. The only thing it couldn't be was Hannah, since she was incorporeal. Although, a very rude thought pointed out, Hannah had been able to move the bench in the sanatorium. Jess would be lying if she claimed she
didn't expect Hannah around every corner, come to finish what she'd started.

Warm fingers intertwined with hers and her head jerked up. Em was glaring at her, cheeks flushed. "If you say anything, I swear to god I—" She couldn't seem to come up with a suitable threat and fell silent, still trying to look fierce.

Jessica bit her lip to hide her smile. What a dork. She squeezed Emily's hand and pulled the nozzle of the flamethrower down with the other, holding it pointing in front of her. Maybe it was stupid, but she was still riding on the fumes of her giddiness and… "What is that noise?" she mumbled.

It wasn't the clank from before. No, this was louder and more present. It seemed to be everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Like the sound of a highway or a washing machine running, it had a kind of constancy and mechanical rumble that felt familiar. It was muffled, though, and clearly not right where they were. Without debating it, both women headed for the stairs, winding through the now-familiar hallways and towards the lodge. The noise only got louder as they walked. Emily sped up, pulling Jess behind her as they rushed up the basement stairs.

"Em, what is—"

"A helicopter," Emily said excitedly. "That's why it sounds so familiar to me. It's a helicopter."

Jess paused, blinking at her, dumbfounded. "Uh… wow."

She was reaching for the door handle just as the sound died out. Hesitating, she dropped her hand and glanced to Em. "Do we—"

"Might as well, right?" Yet Emily didn't reach for the door either. Both girls yelped and jumped down several stairs as the door swung aggressively inward. Jess swung the nozzle up and was about to pull the trigger when Emily shoved her arm down. "No! It's—"

Melinda Washington stared at them, looking just as shocked as Jess felt. "Girls?"

The urge to hug her was overwhelming and made no sense to Jessica. She didn't know the woman. She didn't even really like the woman, if bandaged and leaning on a crutch, and knowing she had come in a helicopter that was likely still there somewhere made her feel more hopeful than she had in a while. "Mrs. Washington!" Jess grinned at her. "You're back!"

"I’m back," the woman sighed, glancing over her shoulder. "Were you coming up?"

"We heard the helicopter," Emily explained. "It's… it's still here, right? Please tell me you didn't send it away."

"Of course not. I didn't hurt my head that badly. I just hopped out while Hank was fiddling with some stuff and came to see who I could find. I didn't expect it to be you girls. Last I saw, you were way down the mountain."

Emily shrugged. "It's not really that far, once you know where you're going. And we've been up and down this mountain so many fucking times, I swear…" She shook her head. "Anyway. You have a helicopter. That's awesome. Can we use it and get out of here?"

"Where are the others? Where's Sam? Where's Josh?"

"I don't know," Jess said, frowning. "We're not sure exactly. We all got separated—I mean, I haven't seen Sam since before we left you. Mike too. And Josh I haven't seen since the cable car station collapsed. We got… um…" She wasn't sure how much to say. It was hard to believe that Melinda
was suddenly on their team and would believe them about the monster.

But as usual, Em didn't seem to be worried and took the direct approach. "We were attacked. One of the big wendigo monster things attacked us and it also set off a stampede of deer that got us separated. Jess and I came back here to check the safe room and Chris decided to follow the footprints and probably die."

"I'm sorry… Chris?"

"Oh. Yeah. Chris showed up. Fucking finally."

An unfamiliar male voice called from behind Melinda and she turned, backing out of the doorway to let Jess and Emily up. "Mel?"

"Over here, Hank. I found two of the girls."

"We found you," Emily muttered and Jess suppressed a laugh at the indignation in her voice. Em spared a glance at the blonde and her lips quirked in a slight smirk. They crested the stairs and stepped out into the hallway. Outside it was nearly sunset, with the snow shaded blue from the fading light.

A tall, older man in a heavy canvas coat stepped over a beam and gave them a quick wave. "Which two?"

"I'm Jessica," she said, sticking out her hand. He shook it firmly. "This is Emily."

Em didn't extend her hand; she nodded to him and he nodded back. "I'm Hank." He grinned and it lit up his previously serious face, crinkling the corners of his eyes. "Obviously."

"So is it your helicopter?" Emily asked bluntly, jumping straight to it. "Can you get us out of here."

"Absolutely. But I understand from Melinda that we need to find your friends first. And do something about Josh."

"Why? He got himself into this."

Melinda's eyes narrowed, but Hank just smiled grimly. "That's as may be. But we still have to get him out of here. Isn't that why you came up here in the first place?"

Folding her arms over her chest mutinously, Emily raised a scornful eyebrow. "No. I came up here to keep this one from getting herself, or any of our other friends, killed. Jess shot her an exasperated look and Emily sighed. "I don't mean you would get them killed. I mean—ugh. Okay, fine. I guess we can save Washington too."

"So where are the others?" Melinda asked again, rubbing her forehead as if she was getting a headache. Given the injuries she'd sustained, Jess wouldn't be surprised if she had a permanent headache at this point.

"No idea," Emily said, voice flat. "Not here."

"Great." Hank's cheerfulness was obviously forced, but Jess was grateful for it all the same. "I love a good scavenger hunt."

"So can you smell it or something?" Chris glanced uneasily around the shed. It was so rundown and
broken that it was easy to imagine the huge wendigo bursting through a window or wall. For the fourteenth time, he checked to see that the gun was loaded and ready. He hoped he would be able to see it when—*if*—it attacked. It was getting dark so quickly.

Josh's cheek twitched. "Sort of. Not smell, exactly, but I know when it's nearby. We're good right now."

The movement drew Chris's attention once more to Josh's messed up mouth and eye. "That means we have time for you tell me about your face," he said with a thin smile. "So, what, someone gave you half a Glasgow smile and then got bored? You decided you really wanted to be a shark, so you started to file your teeth into points?" The lame jokes kept coming and he couldn't stop them. "You kept trying to take your contact out and forgot you don't wear contacts at all?"

"I'm turning into a wendigo, dude."

Chris froze, then slowly shook his head. "No, you're not."

"Don't play dumb, Cochise. It isn't cute." Josh's face split into a wide grin. "Actually, it is kind of cute. But now's probably not the time."

Ignoring *that* comment, he told himself pointedly, returning to the topic at hand. "You're not turning into a wendigo. You're not."

"There's the denial. Let's get you through all seven stages quickly."

"There are five stages to grief and I'm not grieving, because you're wrong."

"That's, like, textbook denial."

Chris scowled at him. "You are such a dick. Why are you fucking with me?"

"I'm not fucking with you!" Josh's sudden shout made Chris jump. Then the other man took a deep breath and said, more quietly, "I wish I was. I wish this was a prank. But I'm not screwing around. This is real and pretending it isn't won't make it go away. So I'm just telling you straight. Maybe then you'll just put a bullet in my head and save us both some hassle."

"But what would you have—" Chris swallowed hard, fighting back a surge of queasiness. "You didn't."

"Guess I did."

He had heard through the grapevine about Sam and Mike finding the flamethrower guy's body and head. The way he'd been hung on a hook, like a slaughtered cow. It didn't mesh with what the guy had actually told him about being skinned alive, but maybe the wendigos had been in a hurry that night and were going to come back for him later. Then Sam and Mike blew up the lodge and didn't give them a 'later.' He cleared his throat, but his voice still sounded weak and hoarse. "Why?"

Josh looked down at his feet, uncomfortable. "I don't know. I really don't." He caught Chris's disbelieving look and raised both hands. "I really don't, dude. I'd tell you. I was just starving and… and lost. And I don't have a good reason. Or any real reason. I barely remember it. I just remember wandering in the darkness and bumping into something and then I wasn't hungry for a while."

Though they were practically outside, given the state of the barn, it still felt like the air was too close, closing in around him. Chris put a hand on the wall to steady himself, and tried to keep breathing. It was much harder than it should have been. "You… you ate a person, though. You ate the man who
tried to save us."

"I didn't know that," Josh insisted shoving himself away from the wall he was leaning on.

"It doesn't matter. You ate a person. You literally ate a dude. What the fuck."

The other man paced across the room and back, growling under his breath. It set a large part of Chris on edge, his instincts urging him to run. But that was dumb, right? Unnecessary. It was Josh, after all. Josh, his best friend. Josh, who tortured Ash and Sam and him. Josh, who needed help. Josh, who ate a person and was turning into a monster. He let his head fall back to rest on the splintered wood and stared up at the rafters. "God damnit, Josh. Why do you keep making shit more complicated than it needs to be?"

An exasperate laugh burst from him and he closed his eyes.

"Why are you laughing?"

Chris cracked an eye open and let out another laugh at the sight of Josh's perplexed frown. "You. You just… everything always gets so fucking complicated with you. Always."

"Not always," Josh muttered.

"Yeah always. Do you remember the time you convinced me that we should both play sick so we could stay home and play video games all day?"

Josh grunted in affirmation, still eyeing him suspiciously.

"And she called home and heard me in the background so you overcompensated by doing an hour's worth of research into smallpox and drawing pox marks all over yourself and pretending that the disease somehow twisted your vocal cords and made you sound like me?"

He grunted again.

"This is like that. Only, like, four million times worse. Shit's just never simple with you. I don't know. Like, you can't just be angry about your sisters. You have to turn it into some overcomplicated prank that probably cost your parents thousands and thousands of dollars. You can't just be lost on a mountain. You have to eat a corpse and turn into a monster. Oh my god."

Chris really wasn't sure why he was laughing. It wasn't funny. And yet, at this point, it made a fucked-up kind of sense. It almost felt inevitable. It was like there was a list of the possible scenarios and he should have expected that Josh would pick the most entirely terrible, extreme option.


"Cry me the fucking Nile, okay? You can take it. You ate a person. You deserve at least some mild harassment. If not a can of lighter fluid and a lighter."

The other man winced.

"Is there a cure?" The question was phrased so plainly that it almost sounded rude to Chris's ear, but it had to be asked.

"Sam says there is."

"Sam says what is?" Sam's voice cut sharply through the air as she came around the corner. Behind her, Mike looked uncomfortable and beat up, several marks on his forehead red and angry-looking.

It was cold already, but if it was possible for the mood of his companions to make it even colder...
Chris groaned internally. He was just starting to figure out how to interact with Josh, but one glance at him told Chris that things had already changed. His eyes were fixed on Sam's face, wary and nervous, although if Chris didn't know Josh so well, he might not have noticed his anxiety.

Time for him to defuse the situation. Humor, he thought. That was what he was good at, right? Something funny. Say something witty, Chris. "Sam says 'stop being a monster.'" He looked between the three tense faces and tried to smile. "Get it? Like Simon Says? But with Sam instead? Uh… never mind."

Josh cocked his head back and smiled. Fuck. Chris knew that smile. It was a lazy one, calculated to look casual, but Chris knew from long experience that it was anything but. "Hey Monroe. Good to see you."

"Shut the fuck up, Josh," Sam snapped and turned to Chris. "Hi Chris. Welcome to hell. Glad you could make it."

He laughed nervously. Sam looked ready to murder someone and he very much hoped it wasn't going to be him. "Yeah. Sorry about that."

She seemed to realize how her previous statement had sounded and flashed him a small, embarrassed smile, then darted forward to hug him. "Sorry," she said softly. "I am glad to see you. I promise. It's just been… it's been hard."

"I get it," Chris reassured her. "It's okay."

"It's not. But I'm still glad you're here."

"Are… um… are we going to have a problem?" He heard Mike ask Josh and Sam turned back to the others, stepping in front of Mike carefully. Chris frowned. What the hell was going on?

Josh shrugged. "Probably. But who the fuck knows anymore."

"Do you want to murder me right now?"

"Not any more than usual."

"And before?"

"Different."

It was like he was listening to a conversation being conducted entirely in a language in which he was only vaguely fluent. "Uh… hey guys? What the heck is going on?"

Mike ignored Chris. "How is it different? Nothing has changed."

"I don't know. Your face looks better now."

"What, now that I'm bleeding?"

Josh smirked and gave him two thumbs up. "Ten out of ten. Good look for you."


The look that passed between Sam and Josh was impossible for Chris to decipher. He wasn't sure if they were trying to stare each other down or size each other up or simply kill the other solely through
the power of their eyes. Clearing his throat, he raised his hand. "Hi. I'm Chris. Also new to whatever is happening here. Someone want to explain?"


"Are you going to stop?" Sam's voice was practically a hiss. "Are you? Because I will leave you up here and let you hang if you try shit like that again."

Alarm bells clanged wildly in Chris's head. This was way more than Josh had led him to believe. This wasn't just some fight. He could hear it in Sam's voice; she was entirely serious about abandoning him. And it was Sam. Sam didn't do shit like that. Sam never, ever gave up. Even when she probably should. He wanted to shove between them, to do something to break up whatever was happening, but he couldn't make himself move.

Mike put his hand on her arm. "Sam…"

With an audible inhale, Josh's eyes fixed on the point of contact. Chris's frown deepened. Why did Josh care that Mike was touching Sam? Sam was always a touch-happy person and Mike wasn't really shy or reserved. He could think of at least a handful of times he'd seen them hug without even straining his memory. Sam seemed to notice Josh's attention too and her eyes narrowed. She grabbed Josh's chin and forced him to look at her. "Can you control yourself? Because if you can't, that is a different conversation."

"Stop acting like you're my fucking mother."

"Since you were being a dick about Melinda too, I don't think that really means much. I don't give a shit if you feel like this is condescending or whatever. Then I'll be condescending. Can—you—control—youself?" She spoke overly slowly, her gaze fierce.

After a long, tense moment, Josh nodded. Sam let go of his face and all the breath went out of her in a rush. She shot Chris and apologetic look. "So…"

"What now?" Chris asked, feeling more than a little flummoxed. Then everything from before the weird pseudo-fight came rushing back. "So there's a cure? What is it? How do we do it?"

"Well, Ash found this part in the flamethrower guy's book about a cure. I guess the monster blood wants to—" A low, rolling chuckle drifted through the room and she broke off.

All of them looked around, but Chris didn't see anything. Then he noticed Josh. If he had been a dog, his hackles would have been raised. He was stock still, his lips pulled back slightly from his teeth. "I didn't notice," he breathed, his eyes darting over to Chris, then to Sam. "I was too distracted and I didn't notice."

"Notice what?" Chris asked, already knowing the answer, deep in his bones.

"It's here."
No one had time to react before the ceiling collapsed, sending shards of broken wood showering down over them. Sam shouted "Freeze!" at the exact same moment Josh shouted "Go!" Despite her frantic urge to stay still, Josh's exclamation made her lunge, just as he started to throw himself towards the figure slowly beginning to stand. She flung her arms around his waist and threw her entire weight into the move, driving him to the ground. "Stay still," she hissed, hoping desperately that he would listen to her for once.

"Let me fight it," he snapped. She braced herself for him to struggle, but, mercifully, he didn't. From the corner of her eye, she could see Mike and Chris, frozen in place. Chris had the gun half-raised and his arms were already trembling from the effort of staying motionless. Mike's eyes flicked to meet hers and his eyebrows raised a fraction. She shook her head as subtly as she could. There was nothing he could do in this moment that wouldn't be certain to get him killed. Their best bet was staying still and trying to wait it out.

"Don't move, Josh," she whispered, keeping him pinned. He could throw her off easily, she knew, but he didn't. She could feel his entire body quivering with frustrated energy, like a worked-up dog locked in a kennel.

The thing straightened fully, standing tall on two legs in a mockery of humanity. It was too long, too thin—a playdough person on a taffy pull. It was odd, getting such a clear look at it. It was huge, as she'd already known, but seeing it standing upright put a whole new light. Its skin was grey and its eyes were wide and round. It was also naked, much as Hannah had been. Sam remembered some of the monsters having clothing scraps, but whatever or whoever this thing had once been, there was no trace of it now. It was so much bigger than Hannah. Sam just hoped it had the same weaknesses, including the vision movement and a short attention span.

But their luck couldn't hold forever. She could feel it in her bones.

Slowly it cocked its head and its eyes swung from side to side, surveying the room. "Children—I know—you—are in here." Its patchwork voice made Sam shudder—a feeling she felt echoed in Josh. The voice switched quickly between genders, ages, and accents. It was impossible for her to sort through them quickly enough to identify them. "Hide!—and—seek—will not work—this time." The first word was a scream. Another stolen laugh seemed to wrap around Sam and make her dizzy. A growl vibrated in the man under Sam and she tightened her grip warningly.

The thing took a step forward and swiped its hand casually through the air, claws long and filthy and visibly sharp. It hit nothing, but she saw Chris flinch. Taking another step, it swiped again. Unknowingly, it was moving towards the others. Sam wracked her brain, trying to come up with a plan.

"Let me go," Josh breathed, his entire body tense and ready. "Let me do it, Sam."
Its head swung around towards them. "What was that?—Did you have—something to—say?" Its claws cut through the air again, swiping as it took a step towards the two of them. Opening its mouth wide, it screeched. The urge to cover her ears was overwhelming. It felt like the sound was piercing straight into her brain. Its tongue darted out to lick its cracked, dry lips and it smiled. "I—hear—you, child. –You—can't keep fighting—always."

Josh shuddered again and Sam tried not to breathe. Maybe her stillness on top of him would disguise any movement he made. It was a fragile hope, but she would cling to anything she had right now.

Another vicious swipe and it shrieked again, the noise reverberating through the broken-down structure of the shed. It was almost totally dark now, but her eyes were adjusting with the changes and she could still see it clearly, caught along the edge by a white line of moonlight.

Sam gasped as she was suddenly flung backwards. Josh was on his feet before she even stopped moving. The thing's head swung between the two of them and instinctively, Sam felt her muscles lock back into stillness. The impulse lasted only a moment before she scrambled to her feet and ran for Josh again, but by that time he was already diving towards the thing. "You don't fucking know me," Josh snarled, darting around behind it as it followed, turning in circles.

"Chris!" Sam shouted. "Shoot it!"

She saw the man swing the gun all the way up to his shoulder but no shot fired. "I can't. I might hit Josh!"

He was right. She could see it, the way Josh and the thing were ducking and weaving around each other. Josh's mad laugh sounded and it took her a moment to realize it wasn't coming from Josh, but from the monster. It clawed lazily at him and laughed again, taunting the man with his own voice.

**Taunting.** The word was in Sam's mind before she even quite registered it. Then the thought hit home. It was teasing Josh. Playing with him. "Josh, get out of there."

But Josh knew it was messing with him. She could see it on his face, the way his jaw was fixed and his eyes hard. "If I go, it's going to get you guys."

Its mad, lidless eyes turned to where she stood. She couldn't tell if it could actually see her, given that she was fixed in place, but it certainly knew where she was last and was focused there. It was still smiling, if the painful-looking grimace could be called a smile. "Sam!" It called, in Josh's voice. "Sammy-Sammy-Sammybird. My Sammy. Mine."

Josh growled and threw himself forward, but it was waiting. It swatted out, not even bothering to look away from Sam, and casually backhanded Josh like a disobedient child. He landed hard on the ground.

An echoing crack tore through the air, making Sam's ears ring. Chris had taken advantage of the fighters' momentary separation to take the shot. The wendigo, caught by the impact and unsteady from hitting Josh, was thrown forward and into a dividing wall. The entire building shook ominously. The thing shrieked again and drove its claws straight into the wood to haul itself to its feet. Shaking still further, fragments of shattered wood fell around it.

**Why was it so loud?**

The thought seemed stupid the moment it occurred to her. Of course it was loud. There was screaming and fighting and breaking wood and general destruction. Why wouldn't it be... no. There was something else. Some other noise adding to the din. She looked around, trying to pinpoint where
it was coming from. It was distracting: an overwhelming and constant sound like machinery. But that didn't make any sense.

She caught Mike's look. His eyes were wide. *Helicopter*, he mouthed.

The thing stood and turned to Chris, who was visibly shaking. "Cochise," it said slowly. Its face was furious, twisted with an animal rage, but its voice—Josh's voice—was sad and desperately lonely.

"Chris, don't move," Mike snapped, but Sam didn't see how he could stop. Tremors like that weren't exactly a voluntary thing. And besides, it knew where Chris was.

"Put you down like the damn animal you are," it muttered in Fiddler's scratchy voice. "Fuck. No bullets."

An insane idea popped into Sam's head. She knew it was insane and would almost certainly result in her getting killed, but she didn't see many other options. Chris had, what, one more shot before he'd have to reload? She and Mike had no weapons, and Josh... she really didn't want to let Josh try to take it on, man-to-thing. At least this might give them a chance to escape.

Sam didn't give herself time to second-guess. She grabbed a piece of rebar from a pile near her. Ignoring the way the freezing metal tore into her skin, she brandished it at the thing and shouted at it. "Hey!"

The thing's head swung around, its eyes fixing on her face. "Sammy-bird..."

She scoffed at it. "Sing a new song, asshole. This whole game is getting boring. Can you even catch us? Maybe you're too old. A couple of kids giving you this much trouble?" All three men were staring at her. Josh looked like someone had just thrown a pie in his face. "Come on, buddy. Let's dance." Her stomach was in so many knots it hurt. She swallowed hard and held up the pipe like a baseball bat, ready for it to launch at her.

Instead, it laughed. "You think—the point of—this—is just—to eat?" She thought she recognized her own voice in the mix for a moment, but now was not the time. Why weren't any of the boys running? Why were they just standing there and staring at her? Didn't they see that this was their only shot to get the fuck out of this shed and not die here, trapped like rats?

Sudden silence fell over them as the background noise of the helicopter abruptly cut off. Its gaze lifted, glancing towards the direction of the lodge.

All five of them stood fixed in a bizarre tableau for a moment, then it shook its head and looked back to Sam. "Who do—you—think that was?" Its tongue darted out again, tasting the air like a serpent. "Dearest Mom?" It reached for Sam almost lazily. Swinging as hard as she could, the end of her pipe connected with its forearm. The force of the blow reverberated up her arms and she dropped the pipe instinctively.

The thing just laughed again—the same laugh repeated over and over again in the same intonation. Its long fingers caught around her neck, pulling her towards it slowly. The things fingers were like iron, perfectly balanced to not crush her throat but also to held her perfectly in place. She flailed, grabbing it around the wrist and trying to stop her movement. Why were the boys still here? "Go!" she choked out.

But Mike clearly had no intention of running and leaving her here. He dove towards its back. She wasn't sure what he was planning to do. Maybe just cause a diversion and distract the thing? If that was his plan, it worked. The thing caught a glimpse of his movement and dropped Sam. She
collapsed to the ground, her leg crumpling painfully under her, just as it spun and caught Mike by the arm. That laugh again. Sam was going to hear that laugh in her dreams. "Boy—idiot—boy—" it hissed softly.

It twisted around Mike so quickly her eyes had trouble tracking it, yanking his arm up and behind him. Mike screamed as Sam heard the crack of bone. "Idiot—boy—"

"Chris, shoot the fucking thing!" Josh hollered, scrambling to his feet and wiping at the blood streaming down his face.

The gun cracked again, catching the thing in the hip. It howled and threw Mike away from it, still holding hard to his arm. Mike screamed again, but it was hard to see what was happening. Sam grabbed for the pipe, but Josh got there first. He grabbed it and swung—not towards the thing, as Sam would have expected, but towards a wooden support pillar.

"Grab Mike!" Chris shouted to Sam, reloading as fast as he could. The thing laughed and screamed and laughed. Why couldn't it just shut the fuck up? The noise was worse than seeing it, being attacked by it. If Sam never had to hear its copy-pasted laugh ever again, it would be too soon. She ran for Mike, ducking around Chris and dropping to her knees. Mike's face was so white it almost looked green.

The shed was weak from age and weather and rough use. It wasn't taking much, especially with part of the roof already collapsed and the damage from the wendigo's flying body, for Josh's assault on the pillar to have its desired effect. The building, or at least the part they were in, was starting to come down.

It wasn't going to be enough to bury the monster, but it was certainly distracting. Josh narrowly missed being struck by a falling rafter beam and wheeled around wildly to stare at Sam. She shrugged and jabbed her finger towards the gap in the wall. "Go!"

Sam slid herself under Mike's good arm and began to shove him to his feet. "Come on, you big lug. Come on. We have to get out of here."

"Leave me."

"Oh shut up. I'm not leaving you. So if you want me to die too, feel free to keep hanging out here, because I'm staying as long as you are." Her muscles screamed with exertion as she hauled him to his feet. He was much, much larger than she was and he wasn't doing much to help, though whether that was due to inability or unwillingness, she wasn't sure. "Come on, Mike. Come on."

In a flash, Josh was at her side. "Let me," he said quickly, and she transferred her burden. Josh, with his newfound monster powers, was stronger than she was. He was probably even stronger than Matt. He supported Mike and started towards the opening in the wall, ignoring the metal traps falling from their ceiling hooks and the shards of wood as best he could. Sam grabbed at Chris's arm. "Let's go!"

Chris got off one more shot at the thing, who lunged for him. With her grip on his sleeve, she hauled backwards as hard as she could. He stumbled back, just as the thing's hands closed on the air where he had been. A rusted bear trap, which has been hanging from a long chain, fell, striking the thing in the shoulder.

They ran. Ahead of them, Josh had given up on supporting Mike and had simply flung him over his shoulder in a fireman's carry and started running. Sam and Chris pounded after him. She didn't dare turn and look back at the thing. That was always how it worked, right? You don't look down; you don't look back. Then you trip and you're a sitting duck. The only thing she might see would be the
thing launching itself after her and she couldn't do anything about it if that was the case.

Don't look down.

Don't look back.

The snow crunched under her boots and she stumbled slightly, hitting a patch of ice. Still, they ran. From behind her, she heard another piece collapse and the thing howled with rage. "Get off the path!" she called to the others. They had to scatter. If they did and then played their frozen-in-place game, it might not be able to find them. It wouldn't know where they were to come after them.

"Where?" Chris asked, out of breath and frantic.

"Anywhere. Just somewhere that's not obvious!" Breaking her own rule, she glanced back. There was no sign of the thing. That could have been good news or bad. It might be momentarily stuck in the shed or it might be in the woods, running alongside them and about to pounce. Fuck. They were so screwed.

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"Well… here it is," Jess gestured to the saferoom's open door. It felt like she should bow as Melinda passed her, followed closely by Hank. The woman's face was closed and carefully expressionless, her jaw tight. Had she been down here before? Or had they just closed the mountain and never looked around at what their son had done?

Seeming to realize that Melinda wasn't going to say anything, Hank nodded and smiled at the girls. "This is good to have. If these things are as scary as Jack always said they were, then we'll want this later. It's secure?"

"Yeah, as far as we can tell. We haven't tested it though." Emily had her arms folded over her chest and looked annoyed. She was probably still angry that they hadn't just choppered back down.

"That's good too, right? It means it doesn't know this is here."

"Or at least that it doesn't know you're using it," Hank agreed. He put a hand gently on Melinda's shoulder. "Mel?"

Voices echoed through the halls and Jess spun, the nozzle coming up automatically in front of her. She was so relieved to have a weapon that she knew worked. If it was going to kill her, at least she'd do some damage on the way out. The voices resonated and it was hard to pin down exactly where they were coming from, but she recognized them all the same. Glancing at Em, they shared a wide-eyed look. "Is it—"

"Or maybe a trick?"

"A trick?" Hank asked, brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"It can mimic people. Don't trust anything you hear."

Hank let out a frustrated grunt. "Things just keep getting better. Jack never told me about that. Are you sure about this?" Both girls stared at him and he raised his hands in defeat. "Sorry, sorry. Forgive a guy for hoping."

The voices were getting louder.
"I know it's this way. We saw this before."

"Did we? Ugh. I hate this. All this stuff looks the same. Another gross room with more gross fake blood."

"I'm not sure it's fake."

"Oh my god. Rude. Let me dream, okay?"

Matt's warm laugh echoed up the dark hallway and Jess flashed Em a quick grin. It was him. It was really him. There was no way the thing had cobbled together that conversation, that laugh, and timed it perfectly to match the rooms they were walking through. What would even be the point? She gave in and took off down the hallway, flinging herself into Matt's arms and knocking the breath out of him in a whoosh. "You're alive!" Her voice was muffled by his shirt, but she didn't care. Matt was alive. He was okay.

"You okay, Jess?"

She looked up at him, blinking away relieved tears. "Better now." Honestly, she cared about everyone up here now, but Matt… Matt and Emily and her… She didn't know what she would do if she lost one of them. But that didn't bear considering, not right now. They were all still alive and that was enough to keep her going. That, and the thought of taking Emily on an actual, proper date once they got off this fucking mountain. Oh, Matt was going to tease her mercilessly for this.

Ashley fidgeted awkwardly. "Hey Jess."

"Oh! Hi Ashley!" She hugged the redhead as well.

"Hey Matt," Emily waved at him and he smiled.

"Yeah right. 'Hey Matt.' Trying to play it cool, Em? Unconvincing. Come here." He didn't wait for her to move and crossed to give her a tight hug. "I'm glad you guys are here. I was… I was worried." There was an undercurrent of fear in his words that Jess wanted to question, but she held off. They should get back.

"Come on. Let's go back to the saferoom. Melinda and Hank are here."

They headed back. Ashley slid up to Matt. "Um… who's Hank?" she whispered.

"No idea," he muttered back. "I hope he has another flamethrower."

Emily grinned back over her shoulder. "Better. He has a helicopter."

"Oh fuck yes."

And yet, Hank was still unmoved by Emily's requests—demands was the better word, but Jess didn't think it was a good idea to point that out—to get them off the mountain. "It's too dark," he pointed out. "And with the snow starting up again, it's better if we find the other kids and get all of us locked up in here until morning. Then I'll take you down."

"Or what if you took some of us down and came back for the others? It's not like we'll all fit in the helicopter anyway, right?"

"If what you've told me is true—"

"It is."
—then we shouldn't risk leaving anyone behind. Safety in numbers. After all—"

Ashley interrupted, voice confused. "Hey guys? What happened to the shed?"

They turned to look at her, then followed her shaking finger to look at one of the monitors. What had been a display of the shed with Josh's faked corpse was now a static-laden mess. What little they could see showed a disaster of broken wood.

"When did that happen?" Jess asked, looking to Em. "It was normal before, right?"

"I think so. I don't remember seeing it change."

Squaring her shoulders and pulling the flamethrower's tank back on, Jess nodded decisively. "I'm going to go check it out."

"What? Why?"

"Because," she gestured towards the screen. "Anything could have happened. We need to know. What if one of the others is there? They might need our help. I'm not going to just sit around here waiting."

Emily groaned and rolled her eyes, but pulled her gloves back on. "Fine. Let's do it."

It struck Jess that Melinda hadn't said much of anything since she'd gotten into the saferoom. She glanced at the woman, uncertain if she should say or do something. After hesitating, she crossed the room and put her hand gently on Melinda's shoulder. "Mrs. Washington?"

"Melinda," she said softly. "Just call me Melinda."

Jess hated when parents told you to do that. It was almost as bad as teachers asking you to call them by their first name. It just felt weird on her tongue. But if it would help, she'd do it. It was a ridiculous thing to be discomforted by at this point. "Okay. Melinda. Are you okay?" She shook her head. Jess was aware of the others watching them and turned slightly to block their view of Melinda's face. "We're going to find him," Jess promised, trying to sound confident. "We will. We'll go look right now."

"That's not—thank you." Melinda gave her a small, clearly forced smile. "Thanks."

"We'll be back." Jess turned to Emily. "Ready?"

"More than you are."

Hank cleared his throat. "I'm going too."

The blonde blinked at him, surprised. "Uh… you don't have to."

"Sure. But I'm going to."

"Me too," Matt said firmly.

Ashley's voice was soft and tired as she fiddled with the ends of her dirty scarf. "Okay, but we can't all go. Someone should stay here and hold down the fort. You know? Give everyone a safe place to come back to? I mean, it might be out there waiting. This could even be a trap. Maybe it messed up the shed on purpose to get us out there and—"

That line of thinking was too dangerous. Jess cut her off. "Okay. Okay. We need to go and check it
out, but you're right. Um… what if Melinda and Ashley and Hank stay here?"

Emily threw her hands in the air. "We're wasting time. I'm going. Anyone who wants to go, follow along." She headed out the door, muttering about pointless bickering and who-the-hell-put-Han-in-charge-anyway. Jess hurried after her, followed closely by Matt. That felt good. Like the old days, when they were the three Musketeers, off to get into as much trouble as they could talk their way out of.

They got up the stairs just as the door burst open. Josh, holding someone over his shoulder, bowled straight into Emily, sending her stumbling back down the stairs. "What the fu—"

"Move!" Josh snapped, continuing his headlong descent.

Sam and Chris were moments behind him, panting as they threw themselves through the doorway. Sam caught herself on the wall and spun, slamming the door shut and fumbling for the lock. Her fingers, pale and almost blue with cold, couldn't quite grip it. Matt brushed her hands out of the way and threw the lock in place. "Sam, are you—"

She shook her head, gasping for breath and clutching at her side. "Get to the saferoom. I don't know where it went. We need to get somewhere safe. Now."

Josh was already gone, Chris sprinting after him. The rest of the group followed. Jess held the nozzle of the flamethrower tightly, her knuckles white. It felt like her heart was lodged in the hollow of her throat, making it hard to breathe. I don't know where it went. She glanced uneasily at every corner they passed, up at the ceiling, down every open hall.

They reached the saferoom only moments after Josh and Jess froze in the doorway. Mike had been deposited on table; his head dropped to the side limply, his eyes closed. He couldn't be—but then she saw his chest move. Alive, then, if unconscious. And his arm… She glanced down and her stomach heaved. His arm was a ruin. She'd never seen anything like it. It was like it had been caught in machinery or something—it bent in several impossible angles, the forearm broken and bone jutting out, while his bicep was torn and twisted, skin split and muscle crushed. She was glad he was unconscious.

There was so much blood.

Emily tugged her into the room and she followed numbly. She heard someone shut the door and slam the bolt into place, then a metallic scraping as a filing cabinet was dragged into place blocking the door further. "Hey," Em muttered. "Snap out of it."

"Mike…"

But Hank was already rushing to his side as Josh backed away quickly. "Do you have a first aid kit at all?" Hank asked, rolling up his sleeves. "Anything at all would be good right now."

Sam fumbled in the remaining supplies and pulled out a largely depleted hiking first aid kit. She tossed it to Hank, white faced and looking like she was seconds from passing out. Her eyes flicked to Mike and she looked away again quickly, her face pained. "I'm not sure we have anything else down here. There's other stuff in the house, but…"

"No," Hank agreed. "No one should leave right now." His voice was even and measured. Jess wondered who he was and what he had done before coming up on this mountain with them. Melinda didn't seem surprised that he was taking over, even if the rest of the group seemed a bit uncertain. He started going through the bag, pulling out the contents. "I need someone to help me."
Everyone looked to Sam, but she was frozen in place, still staring decidedly at nothing. Matt quickly stepped forward. "What do you need?"

"Put pressure here," Hank directed, handing Matt a spare shirt and pointing at the worst of the bleeding. "Press hard."

Matt leaned into it and Mike whimpered, his eyes moving wildly behind closed lids. Hank pulled out a pocket knife and began to strip away Mike's shirt from the shoulder seam.

Not sure what she could do, Jess turned to look at the monitors, searching for any sign of the thing. The camera in the shed had finally given out completely and was a solid mass of static. She fiddled with the side of the monitor to turn it off. The other screens were all calm and almost peaceful. There was the room with the trap for her and Emily. There was the one with the table for Chris and Ash. Was Matt's prank on here? Was Mike's? Behind her, she heard Mike let out a strangled groan of pain and someone let out a soft sob. It felt voyeuristic to watch.

After several long, tense minutes, Hank straightened and frowned. "Okay." Jess turned back. A belt was closed tightly around Mike's upper arm, secured with a long piece of broken wood. Matt's hands were red and wet; he looked more than a little stunned. But Mike was breathing. That had to mean something.

"Are there blankets?"

Hank's voice snapped her out of it and she rushed to grab one of the blankets in a heap against the wall. Ashley grabbed the others and together they covered Mike with them, tucking them around him as securely as they could. There was a soft sound as Sam cleared her throat and looked at Hank. "Is he going to live?" Her voice was calm, almost flat. It was hardly even a question. She had already assumed Mike was going to die. Jess fought the urge to go hug the other girl, to try to comfort her.

"Maybe," Hank rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I honestly can't say. The sooner we can get him down off this mountain and to some real medical care, the higher the chances. I'm not sure about saving his arm. How—how did this happen?"

But Sam didn't seem to hear the question. She walked to Mike's side and carefully reached down to brush a streak of dirt off his forehead. Chris spoke up instead, his voice hoarse. "The—" He cleared his throat and tried again. "The thing found us. It had us trapped in the shed. Didn't matter if we stayed still because it knew we were there so it was just wandering around with its arms out to get us. We barely got out."

"How did you get out though?"

"Property damage and idiocy," Josh muttered. Seven sets of eyes turned to look at him. He looked uncomfortable from the sudden attention and shrugged, keeping his face angled to hide the twisted side of his mouth. "We're all idiots who did idiotic things and it happened to pay off. Except for Munroe, I guess."

Sam crossed the room in a flash, slapping Josh hard across the face. He didn't even flinch, just took the blow, watching her without expression. "Why do you keep doing this?"

"It wasn't meant to be a joke," he said quietly. "Sorry. Also, stop hitting me."

"Then stop being a dick."

"I wasn't trying to be a dick. I'm sorry," he repeated.
Again, Jess felt like she was intruding on something private just by watching. Fortunately, Hank spoke up again, glancing at Emily. "I take back what I said before. We need to get him off this mountain now. We're all together. I say we go."

"But not everyone will fit, right?" Ashley asked.

Josh pushed away from the wall and turned his head towards the light, showing Hank his face. "Can't make it, Hank. I have a pressing engagement and it would be rude to cancel, so I'm gonna have to stay here." He smiled. "It's fine though. Get them out of here."

"Josh—" Melinda, who had been quietly watching, stood and crossed to him. "I'm not leaving you up here."

He snorted. "You should. You're going to die if you don't."

"Watch your tone. I'm your mother. You can't tell me what to do."

"There's a cure, anyway," Ashley commented, then flinched as Melinda's head snapped around to look at her. "Um… well… we think there is? It's in the Flamethrower—Jack Fiddler's journal. And we need you for it."

"A cure." She rounded on Josh again. "There's a cure and you're trying to convince me to leave?"

"Hey!" Hank shoved himself between them and held up his hands to keep them separate. "Josh, we're not leaving you up here. Mel, calm down. We'll figure it out. We'll all get off the mountain and then we'll figure it out."

Something shifted on the monitors and Jess turned to study them. The thing, moving fast, tore through the upstairs bathroom, ripping the doors off the cupboards. It lifted its head and she saw its mouth open soundlessly. Then it turned slowly and approached the camera. One long-fingered hand reached out. The picture shuddered and jerked, then went to static.

She swallowed hard. "I—ah. Guys, I don't think we should go up there right now." Another camera down.

Chapter End Notes

...at least the gang is all here?
Shall I Return to Shore...

Chapter Notes

Chapter title comes from the Tom Waits song "Everything Goes To Hell."

I'm going to stop predicting when the chapters are coming, since apparently my brain and fingers hate me. Every word I write gets us closer to death and the end of the story and it hurts. Trust me when I say I'm moving as fast as I can. There are a lot of loose threads I want to tie up. The good news is that the next chapter is already nearly done.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sam was finding it hard to care about the camera. Who gave a shit if they couldn't see the upstairs bathroom? It's not like anyone was going up there anyway. She tangled her fingers in the chain of Hannah's necklace, staring down at Mike's ashen face. His hair and stubble—now more a beard than anything else—seemed unnaturally dark against his skin, like some kind of inverted Snow White. Beth's voice in her mind lectured that originally a kiss hadn't been the cure. Snow White's body had been jolted during her funeral procession and she'd coughed up the apple that poisoned her.

But this wasn't some magical poison. This was blood loss and trauma and infection and death.

Everyone she loved died. She was cursed. Why hadn't he run when she faced down the monster? She shut her eyes. Yoga breaths, right? You do yoga. Do your breathing. He'd promised. He'd promised her. It felt like years ago that they'd spoken in her dorm room and she'd thrown her water bottle at him.

A tentative hand snaked its way around her waist and a blonde head rested on her shoulder. Jess had left the discussion and slid up to her; Sam hadn't even noticed. God, how out of it was she? She hardly even felt human anymore. The other girl's voice was soft, pitched low so the others, who were still talking, didn't hear. "He's going to be okay."

"Sure."

"He is, Sam. Of course he is. He's too stubborn to die from something like this. You know Mike. If he's going to go, he's going to go out in a blaze of glory." Jess paused, then smiled. "Probably while blowing something up."

It startled a huff of laughter from Sam. "He does seem to have a knack for it." She sighed and let her head fall to rest against Jess's. She was surprised to find how much she liked the girl. She seemed different, more grounded, but maybe she'd always been like that. All Sam had ever really seen was Jess's partying, popular-kid side, quick to a witty insult or flirtatious comment. Here, all of that seemed stripped away. The laughter and wit was still there, but there was also a determination that Sam appreciated. "Are you sure?"

"Of course. Are you kidding? He'd be too embarrassed at dying from losing blood. Never live it down. I'd tell all his buddies."

She took a deep breath, trying to let Jess's words wash over her. They were bluffs, white lies. They didn't mean anything, really. But she tried to take comfort in them anyway. Behind them, she heard
Em's voice raised in irritation and Matt trying to calm her down, but didn't pay much attention. "Sorry, Jess."

"Oh my god. No. You have nothing to be sorry for. I'd be upset—I am upset. I just know… he's going to be fine. Trust me." Jess's arm squeezed around her in an awkward half-hug. "I bet he was one of those kids who lit stuff on fire for fun. Or, like, stole firecrackers and set them off at random times."

"Firecrackers!" Josh said loudly and both girls jumped. Everyone stared at him, but he just grinned. "Didn't mean to eavesdrop. Sorry. Can't really help it. But… fireworks. Firecrackers." He raised his eyebrows at Chris, still smiling widely. It was a less charming smile than it used to be, with his teeth visibly sharp and the corner of his mouth twisted, but his excitement was palpable. "Dude. Fireworks."

Chris stared at him blankly. "What fireworks?"

"The ones I told you about. The ones I brought up here for us to mess around with."

Slowly, Chris nodded. "Uh… yeah. The firecrackers and, what was it, bottle rockets? They're still here?"

"Probably. It doesn't seem like the explosion hit the basement much."

Clearing her throat pointedly, Em raised her hand. "Um, hi? Hello? Earth to the dork twins. What the hell are you talking about?"

"A diversion," Chris said, glancing at Hank. "You said a diversion would be good, right? Can we get to them?" He asked Josh.

"What do you mean 'we'?"

The blond glared at his friend. "Shut the fuck up. We already talked about that shit. If you're going, I'm going too."

"Excuse me," Melinda interjected. "What exactly are you planning to do?"

"Go get the fireworks and set them off to distract that toothy asshole from what we're trying to do."

"I'm sorry. I'm still stuck on that particular point. The fireworks?" The woman rubbed her forehead and closed her eyes. Sam had the distinct impression that she was counting to ten. "You brought fireworks. To the woods."

If it was possible for part-monsters to look guilty and embarrassed, Josh was certainly pulling it off. "Sorry. But… lecture later? Be grateful for your son's idiocy now?"

Melinda rolled her eyes, but a small smile played across her face. "I think there's a few things you need a lecture about." She looked pointedly around the saferoom at the monitors, the tools, the bulletin board with paraphernalia of the twins. Josh looked even more guilty. Sam snorted. He had the whole 'kicked puppy' thing down pat.

Clapping his hands and rubbing them together, Josh nodded decisively. "Okay. So. Plan. Plans are good." He ignored Emily's pointed snort. "I'll go get the fireworks—"

"We will go get the fireworks."
"Jesus. Okay. Yes, Christopher. We will go get the fireworks and set them off to distract Big-n-Nasty, since heat and movement and loud noises are all very distracting. When you hear them going off, make a break for the helicopter and get the fuck out of here." He turned to Hank. "How many people can your limo seat?"

Hank frowned and folded his arms over his chest. "Four. Maybe six, but it gets less and less safe the more we pile in there."

"So you take Captain Fantastic and Mom and—"

"Um…" Ashley's voice was hesitant as she raised her hand. "Mrs. Washington needs to be here for your cure, I think. I mean, I think so? Like I said earlier—"

He shot her a dirty look. "Fine. Captain Fantastic and the party girls. Then you can come back for the rest of us."

"But—"

"Or—" Jess and Matt started to speak at the same time and exchanged an amused look.

Sam looked back at Mike. He was so pale. Had she ever seen him look this pale? She thought of Beth's still, perfect face and lonely eyes and swallowed hard. Everyone. Everyone she cared about died. She turned to Hank. "Fine. That works. The longer we wait, the worse it is for him, right? So we do this. Now." Glancing at Josh, she nodded to him. "Go. We'll see you back here."

Without waiting to hear any additional objections or concerns, Josh braced his feet and heaved the obstruction away from the door. He opened his mouth like he wanted to say something, then shook his head and unbolted the door. "You coming, Cochise?"

He was holding Ashley's hand. Sam hadn't noticed before, but now she could see his white-knuckle grip, as if he was terrified of what would happen if he let go. The redhead clung to his hand until he joined Josh at the door. Tipping onto her toes, she whispered something in his ear and hugged him tightly. Sam tried to smile but couldn't manage it. She wanted to reassure them, but the words felt like a lie on her tongue and she swallowed them.

They vanished into the hallway. No immediate shouting erupted, which had to be a good sign. At the very least, it meant the thing wasn't hovering just outside the saferoom. It still might not know where it was.

Sam extended her arm and Ashley moved to lean into her, resting her head against Sam's. "They'll come back, right?" she whispered.

Still, Sam had no comfort to offer. She just hugged Ashley close on one side, Jess on the other, and closed her eyes.

All those left behind settled in to wait.

-o-

Chris had to trot to keep up with Josh. On some level, Josh felt bad about it, but not bad enough to slow down. Every slight shift in scents, in the air, were overwhelming and sent his instincts running wild. He couldn't even properly describe the scents. It wasn't like saying that you smelled bread or bacon or roses or horses. It would be more like turning to Chris and announcing that he could smell Airforce Blue or A Clockwork Orange. It just wouldn't make sense to him. "Shit," he mumbled under his breath as he rounded a corner. It didn't even make sense to him. How could Chris possibly
understand it?

Abruptly he realized Chris wasn't behind him. He spun, ready for the worst, but the other man was just standing against a wall, his arms folded over his chest and feet set stubbornly apart. "Uh… We really need to keep going."

"Nope. I went along with your stupid plan because I assumed there was a 'plan' part to it. Not just lots and lots of stupid. So now it's time to explain. What the fuck were you talking about? There are no fireworks."

"Yeah there are… the ones from… before…"

Chris snorted. He kept his voice pitched low, as if he thought it would reduce the chance of the other monster finding them. Josh didn't have the heart to tell him that even whispering was probably enough, if the thing was close enough to hear them talking. "No. No there aren't. You would have told me the second that it even occurred to you to get them."

"I didn't tell you about the Psycho."

The comment had its desired effect. The blood drained from Chris's face and his jaw clenched. "That's not the same thing."

"How do you know? Maybe in my head it is. Who fucking knows anymore?" Was that Hannah, just barely visible down the hallway? Was it Beth? Was it his own goddamn brain messing with him again? He'd kept taking Sam's stupid pills, but he couldn't tell if they were making a difference at this point. It was hard to distinguish between that strange animal voice muttering at the back of his mind and what he was somehow doing to himself. "Let's get the lead out."

"Not until you give me some fucking answers. If you do something stupid you're going to get everyone killed and I won't let you."

He smirked at the blond. "And how exactly would you stop me?"

"Answers. Now."

Chris was not budging. They didn't have time for this. Josh briefly considered tossing the other guy over his shoulder the way he had with Mike before dismissing the thought. "Fine. No, there are no fireworks. But I can sure as hell make a good distraction anyway. I've got all kinds of fuel I can torch. Gasoline. Propane too. Might not be fireworks but it's still big and hot and loud and exploding. That's good enough."

"Why didn't you just tell me, you ass-weasel?" Chris threw his hands in the air, exasperated.

That… that was actually a very good question. Josh supposed that he had just assumed no one would go for it. At the very least, he'd get Mom objecting to him risking some big explosion. Fireworks were supposed to be at least moderately safe for the user, if they did it right. Lighting a canister of propane, not so much. "I… uh… didn't. Can we go?" He could hear darkness and smell ochre and he just wanted to know the others were safe. Even Mike, the unbearable asshole.

"Fine."

He knew that tone. That was always the tone Chris used on him when he thought he'd taken a joke too far or had one too many. That sounded amazing. He wanted a beer. Or anything, really. The thought of a drink made his stomach growl and he shuddered in revulsion. He hadn't eaten since the rabbits and his body yearned for more. Think how easy it would be, that alien, insidious voice
murmured to him. You could kill him before he even realized. Then you could have something fresh. His mouth was watering. He could feel drool dribbling out from the damaged side of his face and he rubbed it away forcefully.

They walked in silence. Hating his own thoughts, he tried to slow his pace to let Chris stay with him and focused as much of his attention as possible on his senses. But the old hotel, which he knew so very, very well, seemed utterly still.

"It's quiet," Chris muttered dramatically. "Too quiet."

"That doesn't apply here, dumbass. That's only out in nature when the birds stop chirping."

Chris checked that the shotgun was loaded anyway and Josh fought the urge to roll his eyes. "Whatever. I mean, you know I'm right though. Something bad is going to happen. It's like saying: 'nothing bad is going to happen.' It's like bringing a curse down on yourself."

"Bro. You're babbling."

"Yeah, no shit."

"You're killing the mood."

The blond laughed humorlessly. "Good. If I'm going to be in a horror movie, I want it to be one of the shitty, cheesy ones. So I figure I might as well make the dialogue dumb and kill the vibe to help drive us that way."

Josh waved a hand at him dismissively. "I picked our horror movie type last month. Saw was critically acclaimed, you know."

"The first one, maybe. After that it was just a parade of shitty sequels. So if that's what you were going for, then congrats. You're in a shitty sequel."

"That's just… so rude."

He laughed again. The sound felt strange against Josh's skin. "If the boot fits. If you'd made even one different choice, we might not be here now. God… do you remember Jeannie Simmons?"

It took him a moment, but he did remember her. She'd been in music with them back before he'd been held back: a brunette girl with more freckles than she could handle and a slight overbite. Josh hadn't really liked the class. It had been boring and they never got to listen to any good music. Just random classical stuff that he liked even less as a child than he did now. Then at some point Chris had been moved back to sit with him. "Didn't she move away?"

"What? Why would I be pissed?"

"Oh, you know," Josh gestured vaguely. "Your life now would be very different without her." He
stuck his head through a doorway and growled. Not the right place. How many fucking hidey-holes had he set up down here? He would make a better system next time. Not that there would be a next time, for roughly a thousand reasons.

Chris's finger jabbed into his shoulder and he had to fight the urge to turn and bite it off. If Sam was wrong about the possibility of a cure, then he would have to light himself on fire. There was no way around it. And if any of them tried to stop him, he'd… Josh couldn't really think what he would do. Leave them and do it in isolation, he supposed. There was something cold and matter-of-fact about the thought that didn't feel at all like that time years before. Now it was a different kind of necessity.

His sisters would be so disappointed in him.

"Hey. Get the fuck out of your head, dickwad, and look at me." Still growling slightly, he glared at Chris, who seemed unimpressed. "I can totally tell what you're thinking. You have a shitty poker face."

"I have an excellent poker face."

The blond snorted. "No you don't. People just get too intimidated by you to actually pay attention. Why do you think I teased you so much when you were making us play with that spirit board?"

"Because, like me, you too are a 'dickwad'?" Josh made quotation marks with his fingers in the air, pointedly ignoring how claw-like his fingers were beginning to look.

"Because I knew you were pulling some kind of fucking prank. I figured you just wanted to scare Ash and me, like I did with you and Sam." He sighed. "I admit that all the follow-up you planted was gold. Like, shitty pyrite gold that you should feel fucking awful about—because you are a garbage person who does garbage things—but yeah. The spirit board part… I could tell something was off with you. Otherwise I never would have laughed about that crap. So yeah. Nope. Terrible poker face."

Josh stared at him blankly for a long moment, then turned and headed further down the hallway. He never should have let Chris come with him. Next to Sam and his Mom, Chris was the one who could call him on his shit. Of course, he never did call him on his shit, but obviously their relationship had changed. He settled for just grunting in response.

"I just wanted to explain! And then maybe you'd—" Sighing again, Chris followed him. "Nevermind. I should have known better than to try to talk to you."

Ignoring that statement, Josh let out a soft whoop of satisfaction and stooped, heaving a can of propane up and propping it on his shoulder. "Mission part one, accomplished." He grinned at Chris, who smiled grudgingly. "The next part is going to be way more fun. C'mon Cochise. Blow stuff up now and very serious discussion time later, yeah?"

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Sam kept looking at the monitors. There was no sign of the monster and, despite a fifteen second period where Josh and Chris passed across one screen, there was no other movement. A small series of numbers in white indicated the date and time in military format. It was late and only getting later. Every second felt like an hour as she listened to the tense, troubled silence of the saferoom.

And even past the waiting for Josh and Chris's plan—terrible, ridiculous, dumb plan—something more nagged at her. There was a piece missing. She was sure of it. Her hand clenched into a fist, the chain in her pocket pulled tight to cut into her battered fingers.
Hannah.

That was the other piece. That was the other thread she couldn't bear to leave hanging. They might cure Josh. They might even all get out of here alive. But she couldn't leave Beth or Hannah up here like this. And that meant that she had shit to do. Samantha Giddings. The get-stuff-done girl. She sighed and rubbed her other hand over her tired eyes.

On the table, Mike shifted slightly, shaking his head, his eyes twitching under closed lids. "Is he going to wake up?" she asked Hank quietly.

He crossed to stand behind her. Sam didn't really know why or how he came to be here, but she already liked him. His face was lined with weary knowledge and he moved purposefully. Despite their information about monsters and other insanity, he seemed to take it at least somewhat in stride. Maybe he was saving it up for a mental breakdown later. That method had served her well last time.

"He might." Hank's voice was slightly hoarse and he cleared his throat. "I mean that—he'll wake up either way, I think, if this plan works out as I hope. Whether he wakes up before we get him to a hospital, I'm not sure. Depends how tough he is and how well his body handles trauma."

"Last time we were up here, he chopped off his fingers to get out of a bear trap and then kept going for hours." She laughed. The sound was brittle even to her own ears. "Not that he came out of it intact… ugh. Obviously, since he lost fingers. You know what I mean."

Hank snorted. "Yep. I think I do. Well, he might. If he does, he's going to be in a metric fuck-ton of pain. I don't suppose you guys have any painkillers?"

She flinched away from the question. There had been painkillers. She doubted Mike had more than one left, at best. "Great," she muttered. "Add detoxing to the list…" Take a deep breath. Count to five. Think of three good things. Real or not real. How did you get here? But there really was no question in her mind about the reality of this. Too much was happening, with too many of them and too quickly. This was real: horrifyingly, bitterly, shot-in-technicolor real. "Maybe some aspirin. Not anything that can help with something like this." Sam glanced down at his arm and then away again. "He should have run."

"Let me guess. Someone tried to play hero and it didn't go as planned?"

Crossing her arms over her chest, she scowled at him, irritated. "You make us sound like idiots."

"I never said that," Hank said quickly, raising his hands in defeat. "I just mean… it wouldn't be the first time I've seen something like that fail. You think you can take the brunt of the badness and everyone else can get away. But people are stubborn and care about each other more than common sense often says they should." His voice was heavy and tired. "I—"

A muffled boom interrupted him. Sam turned and glanced at Jess, who shrugged. "Was that—"

Emily cut her off. "Time to go. Whatever it was, it was not right here and was loud and probably got the thing's attention. Or it was the thing. Either way, let's move it." She pointed at Mike. "Who's going to carry him?"

"I got it," Matt said, crossing the room quickly and starting to scoop Mike up into his arms. The injured man mumbled something. "Uh… are you sleep-talking?"

"Well, there's your answer." The older man smiled at Sam, but she could see the seriousness in his eyes. Mike might be awake, but that didn't mean he was out of the woods—pun not intended. "All we had to do was try to pick him up."
"Puhmuhdow." It was hard to distinguish what he was saying, but he was blinking bleary eyes at all of them and it was the best news Sam had received since seeing the helicopter in front of the ruined lodge. He swallowed a whimper and she again lamented their new lack of powerful painkillers. As if he could hear her thoughts, his eyes focused on her face and he tried to smile. At least, she assumed he was trying to smile—an assumption that was generous and certainly meeting him more than halfway. It looked like a drunken, pained grimace. "Shuddah kep more," he mumbled.

"Yeah, dummy. You should have. How did you not realize this was going to happen?" With Matt under his good arm and all-but holding him upright, Sam put one hand on his back for a moment, then stepped away again. She felt useless. Glancing at the others, she nodded decisively. "Em's right. Let's go. I'll be back," she told Melinda firmly. "You stay here with Ashley. If you hear the shave-and-a-haircut knock, it's us. Or Josh and Chris. That's the pattern we used with Josh before."

She didn't wait around to see if anyone objected. The door opened with a stubborn, angry squeal and she held it open for the group. "Lock it behind us," she called back to Ashley, who stared at her.

"Uh. Well, yeah. Of course." That was polite-Ashley-speak for 'Duh.' Sam nodded her thanks and shut the door behind her.

Hank headed up the group, followed by Matt and Mike staggering along as best they could. Emily's shoulders were set and tense as she followed. The other blonde girl, though, hung back as Sam brought up the rear. "He's awake," she commented softly, smiling. "Points for our team, right?"

"Woo-hoo," Sam said drily. "We totally dunked that goal."

Jess rolled her eyes. "Party pooper. Let me take joy where I can. I figured you'd be happy."

"I am." Talking seemed foolish but it was helping keep her calm. She kept her voice as quiet as she could manage. "I just—I'll rejoice in his survival when he gets off this mountain. When we all do."

The other girl hesitated, then spoke hesitantly. "I think I'm going to stay behind with you guys. Let Hank take Em and Mike and Matt if he'll go."

"What? Why?"

She gestured vaguely with the nozzle of the flamethrower. "I want to stick this through. All the way to the end." Her smile was awkward but seemed sincere enough. "I know it's dumb and I'm probably going to die or something, but still. I think I need to be here. Plus, I have the flamethrower and I am not letting anyone steal my thunder."

The chain of Hannah's necklace was warm from Sam holding it. She pulled it free of her pocket and held it in her palm as they walked. No sign of the thing, which meant that Josh's plan had probably worked, at least for the moment. They were moving slowly due to Mike's limited abilities, but at least it was progress. Every step they took was a step closer to some of them being certain of survival. The silver butterfly glinted in the dim light. Sam hadn't noticed the similarities between the necklace and Hannah's tattoo before. The tattoo was sharper and had stronger lines, but they had the same twisted aesthetic to them.

Sam swallowed hard. The others were not going to like this.

"Jess, I think I need to leave."

The blonde's head came up sharply. "What?"

"Just for a little while," Sam rushed to add, gesturing for Jess to keep her voice down. "And not right
this second. But after we get the helicopter off the ground and Mike's getting real help. I need… I think I need to go find Hannah. I think I can help. And then maybe she can help? I don't know," she finished weakly. It sounded unconvincing even to herself.

"Uh… no. No way. You're going to die." Sam shrugged in response and Jess's eyes widened with alarm. Apparently the attempt to be casual had backfired. "Okay, no. Because even if Hannah doesn't kill you, the thing might. You saw what it's done to… to everyone. Come on, Sam. Don't do something stupid."

"It's not stupid." Considering, Sam shrugged again. "Okay, maybe it is stupid. But it's also more than I can do here."

"The cure—"

She shook her head. "Ashley knows at least as much as I do. Probably more."

"And what makes you think Hannah won't just kill you?"

"She did try to before. But not on purpose."

"Uh… she what?"

It really had been that long since she'd seen Jess. Fuck. So much had happened. If the dorm room and the oak tree felt like years ago, the unbearable cold of Hannah and the warmth of the hot springs and Mike's arms felt like months. "Yeah. She found Mike. She was… not particularly happy to see him."

Jess raised her eyebrows. "I can imagine. Shit. So this time you think it'll be different because…?"

"Well I'm not bringing him along, for one thing."

"And what makes you think you can even find her? So far, she's just been in the crazy house."

Oh right. Sam frowned. It felt like she was divulging something secret, though she knew that was silly. There was nothing wrong with Jess knowing. She looked up and realized with a start that they'd already made it to the basement of the lodge. Down the hallway ahead of them, she could just make out the edge of the rockers of the old wooden horse where it lay on its side. "When we saw her, she was here. So I think she's all over this mountain when she wants to be."

Jess was silent for a minute, frowning. Then she shot Sam an exasperated look. "Well, I guess if you're not forcing me onto the helicopter, I can't exactly force you to not do this incredibly stupid thing. When this is over, we really should grab that coffee."

Despite everything, it made Sam smile slightly. "Yeah," she said quietly. "I'd like that. When this is over."

As they passed by a rather dusty display of Bob's power tools and an assortment of cardboard boxes, Sam spotted something and ducked over to grab it. The baseball bat felt sturdy, if a bit worse-for-wear. Shoving the necklace back in her pocket, she gripped it with both hands and took a practice swing. She caught Emily's eye and raised her eyebrows, but the girl just rolled her eyes and kept walking.

They headed down the narrow concrete hall leading to the stairs. There was the wooden pallet she'd tipped to trip Chris. There was a smear of dried blood from when she'd skinned her hand running from Josh. At this point, she was practically a part of the damn house. Was that in a fairy tale?
Probably, though she couldn't think of one offhand. Beth would know.

Ahead of them, Matt was helping Mike ascend the stairs. Their little party bottlenecked as they slowly filed up behind them.

"Brace yourself," Jess said with a nervous giggle, hefting the flamethrower.

They all held their breath as Hank opened the door, but aside from a blast of freezing air and the lingering scent of fire, nothing came rushing out of the dark at them. It felt too good to be true. For the first time, Sam let herself truly consider the idea that at least four of them were soon to be safe. That was four more than she had come to expect and it leant her a welcomed swell of courage.

The snow was drifting down lazily through the destroyed roof as they continued. Sam fanned out to one side, holding her baseball bat at the ready, while Jess took the other. Flanking, she thought Chris had called it, way back when he'd convinced them all to play Dungeons and Dragons. Or, no, that was when you surrounded an enemy. Sam groaned softly to herself. She never could remember. And why that should be on her mind now, of all times…

Emily let out a choked sound and Sam spun, raising the bat, heart racing painfully in her chest.

But it wasn't the thing. It was the helicopter.

Or, at least, it had been a helicopter, once upon a time. The six of them stared in silence at its twisted, mangled blades.

"How did it—" Hank had to clear his throat a few times before he could make his voice work properly. He seemed stunned and Sam couldn't blame him. "How did it know?"

Chapter End Notes

What, you really thought it'd be that easy? (No you probably didn't. Emily kinda did though. How foolishly optimistic of her.)
Chapter Notes

Chapter title also comes from the song "Everything Goes to Hell" by Tom Waits.

This may not end up being 35 chapters. I'm going to play it by ear. I'll definitely update the chapter total once I know for certain.

And... yeah. Archive warnings apply.

The explosion was almost painfully loud.

Chris whooped and pumped his fist in the air, rushing towards it. "That was fucking awesome!" he all-but shouted, grinning at the roaring flame. "Why the hell haven't we done that before?"

"Blown stuff up? Probably basic survival instincts," Josh offered, but laughed along with him. It was pretty damn cool. They'd shoved the propane tank into an old cabinet he hauled up from the hotel, shoved a makeshift torch inside, and then backed way the hell up. If part of him wanted to rip Chris's throat out and eat it—which seemed, apparently, to be the case—part of him also wanted to keep him safe. When the explosion had come, he had been halfway in front of Chris before he even thought about it, shielding him from any potential shrapnel.

Now he stepped closer. Heat washed over both of them as the remains of the cabinet burned merrily. It was the first time he'd felt truly warm in a long time. He wasn't even sure how long, really. It felt incredible, but also strange and not entirely welcome. That was probably the monster in him. Admittedly he didn't know much about the Wendigos, but he knew fire was a definite bad thing. "Do you remember Joshua Tree?" This wasn't the time for nostalgia, as he'd pointed out earlier, but he couldn't help it. The crackle of the flames and being here with just Chris brought him back to it, back to a time before everything had gotten so fucked up.

"Yeah." He heard Chris chuckle softly. "Horse piss? Horse piss."

It had been the world's worst beer. Of course, they were fifteen and sixteen respectively, so they hadn't really had a lot of options. "We didn't know any better."

"True. Hindsight is always 20/20, right?"

"Yeah," Josh murmured, watching the flames. They were overly bright to his newly sensitive eyes, searing into his brain. There were moments, sometimes, that you knew would be with you always. They were in your memories even when other things, things you actually tried to remember, faded away. He might not be able to remember how to do differential equations, but he could remember a specific log sparking on the dry desert ground of their campsite. This felt like another one of those moments. Years from now, would he remember the way the blackened hinges of the cabinet stood out against the flames?

"We should get out of here," Chris said finally, shaking himself out of his reverie. Josh glanced back at him. "Who knows when that thing'll show up. Get back to the others." To Ashley. Josh could hear
the unspoken end to the sentence. He wondered if they were officially together now. He certainly hoped so. Ash was good for him.

Josh nodded. "Yeah." He turned to the fire and held his hands out, willing the warmth to sink in his fingers and stay. The smoke was thick. It was hard to smell much over it or to focus on anything else at all. Maybe wendigos were like bees, lulled by smoke. He wished he'd had the presence of mind to look over the journal when he'd had the opportunity, though he supposed it hadn't really been much of a chance at all.

"We should get out of here." Chris's voice came again. "Who knows when that thing'll show up."

"Yeah, yeah. I get it." As the fire began to slowly die, hampered by the snow, his senses were clearing. The air smelled of grey and charred wood and water and hunger.

_Hunger._ He knew that scent.

Behind him, Chris let out a slight, choking gasp. "Jo—"

He turned just in time to see the other wendigo pulling its hand free of Chris's chest, fingers red and dripping. Chris's eyes stared at him, the blue of them set ablaze by the firelight. Chris's mouth gaped soundlessly as his body collapsed to the stained snow. The colors were painful: red and blue and the faded army-green canvas of his Dad's old coat, all awash in the golden firelight.

There were moments, sometimes, that you knew would be with you always.

The fire was running through his veins, igniting him from inside out. Was this what it felt like to burn alive? He threw himself forward, his voice ripping itself from his throat as he screamed. If there were words in what he shouted, he wasn't aware of them. That thing was staring at him, its grotesque face twisted into an obscene smile. It lazily waggled its wet, bloody fingers in the air and, just as he came within reach, it leaped over his head, crunching down hard in the snow behind him.

He turned his back on Chris's body—and it was only a body; he could see it in the glassy eyes, the parted lips—and ran for the monster again. It didn't matter anymore if he died. None of this fucking mattered. It hadn't for a long time. All he'd wanted to do was to make Chris see him for what he was. Toxic. A malignant spot that spread tendrils of its black disease out to choke those he cared about. But he hadn't even been able to do that. First the twins, and now… and now…

His voice was raw and broke as he screamed again, the sound morphing into a shriek like those he'd heard so many times in the dark of the mine. He was going to kill it. He was going to kill it even if it killed him to do it.


Josh's stomach heaved, his skin shuddering. He shook his head wildly, trying to shake it off, to get the sound of Chris's false voice out of his ears. It felt like a living thing, like a worm working its way down and into his brain. "Don't," he snarled at it. "Don't you fucking do that."

"Can't—make—you listen—without it," it said, tilting its head to the side slightly. It was using other people now too, but here and there, he could still recognize Chris.

Maybe he shouldn't try to stop it from talking.

This might be the last time he got to hear Chris's voice.

Pain flared in his palms and he glanced down. He'd clenched his fists so tightly that he'd driven his
knife-like nails through the skin of his palms. "I don’ t want to listen to you. You have nothing to say to me." He was going to kill it. Feinting to the left, he dove right, feeling the muscles in his legs bunch and expand as he jumped. Both arms extended in front of him, his own blood on his fingers, he launched at it.

His hand caught its shoulder as it dropped flat and he jammed his claws into it. The thing’s stony skin didn’t puncture like his own had, but he clung to it all the same, swinging around its back to swipe at its eyes. It hissed and bucked upwards, throwing him off. He hit the ground hard, the breath driven from him and he looked up at it as it slowly stood to loom over him. Josh closed his eyes for a second against the wash of hatred, of pure, unadulterated fury that swept over him. He didn't just want to kill it. He needed to kill it. Every single part of him wanted to tear its lungs out, to watch it die gasping and choking on its own blood.

Even that rabid voice in his head wanted him to do it.

Whatever he was feeling must have translated in some measure to his face. Perhaps he’d sucked in a rattling breath. Or perhaps his muscles had tensed for another leap or his lips had twitched.

"Filth," the other wendigo said as a stranger, then drew the last syllable out into a long hiss.

Josh didn’t even think about it before he screeched again. He’d never heard such a feral sound come from his own lips, but it made him smile. It felt good, like taking a long drink of water after baking in the sun. "I'm going to kill you," he spat at it, scrambling to his feet again.

"No—you're not." It considered him. "Even Makkapitew—could—not kill—me. And—you aren’t!—Makkapitew—yet." The name was strange to Josh, but the voice it was said in sounded familiar. It didn't matter though, not really. The thing was wrong. He could kill it. He had to.

"Why won't you just kill me?" he muttered, circling it slowly. It was like it just wanted to keep playing with him, over and over again. If it had as much of Josh's voice as it seemed to, it could have killed him at any point while he'd been stuck in the mine. And it certainly could have killed him in the shed. He’d felt it, in the ease with which it had tossed him into the wall. Not that it would answer. It would probably just—

"Aren't!—Makkapitew—yet," it repeated. Its gaze shifted to Chris's body and it smiled again, wider. "Doesn't it—smell—so—good. I bet that you—'re hungry. Kill—others—kill—you. I miss you—Makkapitew—eat—we'll play." It flicked its fingers at him and he flinched as drops of Chris's blood speckled his face. His stomach heaved again, but at the same time he felt his nostrils flare. It smelled good. It smelled… real. Vital.

Swaying in place, he tried to think, tried to force his brain back into some mode of thought he recognized, but a blanket of hunger and rage and need seemed to lay over him, dampening his senses and his ability to move or make decisions.

Before he could do much more than fight off the urge to lick the blood from his own face, it bounded off again, out of the circle of light cast by the smoldering remains of the cabinet. Desperately, he rubbed at his face, trying to get the blood off. How much had there been? It felt like only a few slight drops, but he could still smell it and it was only getting stronger.

He turned and staggered towards Chris's body, dropping heavily to his knees. He wanted… he needed to eat. Every fiber of his being screamed at him, urging him down, baring his teeth, ripping at him until it felt like he would die.

*Kill—others—kill—you.*
The others. It was going to go after the others. It wanted him to eat this, to give in and become a beast entirely. The snowy, bloody ground swayed and pulsed before his vision. Bare, brown feet in the snow… no, not in the snow. On the snow. He managed to break his fixation on Chris's outstretched fingers—so very close to him now—and looked up and over.

His sister crouched down beside him. Her gaze was curious. "Are you going to do it?" she asked.

It took him two tries to get his voice to function. "Do what?"

"Eat him."

Josh was drooling. Part of him was disgusted and part of him didn't care. One of the parts spoke louder to him now than it ever had before. "W-what?"

Hannah cocked her head to the side. She sounded annoyed. "I hate it when you do that. I know you heard me the first time." She reached out and trailed translucent fingers along Chris's jawline. His eyes were still open, staring. "Do you think it's karma?"

"Karma?"

"You let me die. You passed out and you weren't there and you left me alone in the dark with only Beth's flesh. So now it's your turn. But of course you have no siblings left, so the mountain gave you the next best thing. A best friend. Part of your soul." Her voice turned dreamlike and nostalgic. "The five of us. Beth, you, Sam, Chris, and me. Playing DnD. That time we went to Vasquez and he locked his keys in the car with the engine still running. Going to the Homecoming game just to indulge me. The only option you really have, for true poetic justice, would be Sam. Or maybe she'll be next. I had forgotten, you know. Those memories will go. They won't come back until after you're dead. And they will. So tell me, Joshy, are you going to do it?"

He wanted to do it. He wanted it more than he had ever wanted anything, on an entirely different level than anything he'd ever felt before. It was beyond desire. It was necessity. His stomach was going to tear itself apart, the acid eating him alive. Scenes flashed through his mind: snapshots from all the horror films he'd ever seen, from the fleshy, apocalyptic-level gore of Akira to the bloody flood of The Shining to the horrific mechanical traps that had so inspired him from Saw and Hostel and dozens of others. He would dissolve into nothing, but would that even stop these urges? Could he even die of starvation anymore?

Forcing his head up again, his hands clenched around handfuls of snow, the cold biting through any comforting memory of warmth that remained. "I'm—" It might not even be real; after so long hallucinating everyone he'd ever known, he couldn't be sure it was really her. But if he was going to lose himself completely, if this really was his last real thought as himself, as Josh Washington, as a friend and a brother and a human being, he had to make this right. At long last. "I'm sorry, Hannah." Tears stung his eyes, falling to melt slight depressions in the snow below him. "I'm sorry, Hannah. I'm so sorry."

"What did you say?"

"I'm so fucking sorry, Hannah. I'm sorry I wasn't… I wasn't good enough. I always fucked up. I always did. I know that. I'm so… I'm so sorry I stopped looking, that I gave up, that I wasn't even awake to save you. This never should have happened. Any of it. And Chris—" His fingers found Chris's outstretched hand and he grasped it, squeezing it so tight it felt like his tendons might snap. "I'm so sorry."

He was sobbing. Great, heavy, heaving sobs that shook his whole body. He didn't cry. Josh
Washington didn't cry. He hasn't cried, even in the long, lonely hours in the mine. Even when the fucked-up phantoms of his sisters whispered to him that he should die. "I don't know if you're you or in my head, Han, but I'm so sorry that I wasn't better. B-better for you. Better for all of you."

He was losing himself. He could feel it—great chunks of his soul getting shredded away. He was losing things. Losing the way Chris had always tried to cheat at poker, the sprinkle of freckles across Sam's nose, the little snort when Hannah was trying not to laugh, the way Beth snuck books under the table when they were having a boring family dinner. "Hannah?" The scent of Chris's blood was heavy, sweet, like copper pennies and freedom and strength and god, he needed it. Just one bite. Just one. That would be enough. Enough to stop this from hurting so very, very badly—

As cold as it was outside, his sister's fingers were colder. They slid along his cheek and his head followed them instinctually, tipping up to look at her. "You're hurting." Josh stared up at her. He could hear the words, but they seemed off, like she was speaking some language he had never quite mastered. "You're hurting very badly."

He nodded.

"I thought I wanted this, you know." Her voice was surprised. "But it doesn't matter, does it? Hurting doesn't help. It didn't help, making the others hurt. And it doesn't help, seeing you hurt. I think I see what Beth was trying to show me." Hannah's nails cut razor-thin, icy tracks along his skin and her lips twitched into a slight, uncertain smile. "Get up. Don't give in to this."

"I—I can't—" Hannah. Her name was Hannah. She was his sister and he loved her. Chris's blue eyes were fixed on his face, judging him, taunting him. Or was that just his imagination?

"If you want to make this right, get up. I gave in. I didn't understand. I thought there was no other choice. But you and I both know there is. Don't listen to it. Don't listen to your Psycho anymore. Don't listen to that monster. Fight it. Get up. Go back, Josh. Now."

-0-

Every corner they rounded seemed ominous, dark with shadows and things ready to leap out and eat them. Wendigo shrieks echoed through the air around them, seeming to come from every direction. They sounded different too, more human and pained than Sam was used to. She thought of Josh and Chris off in the night somewhere and tried to focus on getting them back down to the saferoom.

There was no more thought of her wandering off to find Hannah, no chance of her slipping away unnoticed. She tightened her grip on the bat, making up the rear of their group. This might be the first time she'd ever wished she'd taken up organized sports. She would probably much more comfortable with a bat if she had.

They were moving so slowly. It wasn't his fault, but Mike was still a disaster. He was conscious, which was good, but between the shock and the blood loss and the lack of painkillers, he staggered along slowly, supported by Matt. Jess was jumpy, swinging her flamethrower from side to side. Sam was a little afraid of what would happen if it jumped them down in the basement. Flamethrowers in enclosed spaces seemed like an incredibly bad idea. Another ragged scream tore through the night and she shuddered. She suppressed the urge to tell the others to hurry. They all knew. It would be a pointless waste of breath.

Something in the trees was snapping branches. Sam glanced back as the others moved as quickly as they could down the basement stairs again. Was she really seeing movement in the ruins or was it her own imagination? She slammed the door and heard the lock engage.
She rushed down the steps after them, glancing up towards the ceiling. Her Grandfather used to have her do that when they crossed the street. Left and right for cars. Up for helicopters. Down for gophers. Sam swallowed an uneasy laugh. There was that dollhouse again. And the rocking horse. And Hannah.

Sam jumped, alarms blaring in her head.

No one else seemed to notice her, all of them hurrying down the hallway. They stared at each other. "I—" For all her bravado with Jess, Sam had no idea what to say. "Han—"

The spirit shook its head and pressed its finger to its lips. It jerked its head towards the group. "Hurry," Hannah mouthed.

From somewhere up above her, Sam heard another muffled wendigo screech and the sound of something large slamming into something solid. "Hurry," Hannah urged, her voice louder this time. "Go now." The bang sounded again, accompanied by the sound of splintering wood.

She sprinted after the others. They’d heard the sound too. Mike, drawing on vestiges of strength that amazed her, had broken into a staggering run beside Matt. Em shoved in front of Jess, hammering out the pattern on the saferoom door. She didn't even give them time to respond, just rapped out the pattern again and again and again, frantically. The door swung open and she rushed inside.

"Em? What happened—"

"It wrecked the helicopter," Emily snapped to Ashley. "It's coming down here. Get everyone inside."

Jess and Sam stood guard, each facing down opposite ends of the hallway, waiting. Sam's heart was racing. The splintering—had that been the door down to the basement? Had it been another room upstairs? Where was it? And where was—

"Josh!" Jess exclaimed. "Holy shit!"

Sam spun. Josh had skidded to a halt about ten feet down the hallway, staring at them with wide, wild eyes. Blood speckled his face and clothes, water soaking his cuffs and knees. Even from that distance, Sam could smell campfire smoke and the chemical stink of propane. "Josh? Are you okay? It worked, but the thing messed up the—"

"Jess, get away from him," Sam said slowly, sliding her hand around Jess's arm and tugging her backwards. "Josh, say something. Say something so I know you're not going to attack us."

He shut his eyes, chest quaking heavily, then forced them open again. His tongue darted out to taste the air and he shuddered again, his entire body shaking. "S—Sam. I—I'm okay. I'm okay. It's coming. It's coming for you. I'm okay." He seemed to be repeating the thought more for himself than for her.

"Where's Chris?" Ashley had emerged back into the hallway, Matt just behind her, relieved of his burden.

Josh just shook his head, his eyes still squeezed shut.

"Where's Chris?" she asked again, louder, her voice higher pitched. He shook his head again. "No." Ashley shook her head, repeating the word as if it alone was enough to change things. "No. No no no. Where is he? Where is Chris? Why isn't he here?"

"It—it got him."
An ear-splitting cry tore through the air. Ashley flung herself forward and Matt grabbed her around the waist. He tried to pull her back but Ashley fought like a fury, clawing at him desperately. "Matt, let me go! He's out there! We can't leave him out there!"

Sam couldn't breathe, couldn't think. It was possible Josh was lying, but she couldn't see why he would possibly do that. There was nothing to be gained and everything to be lost by such a deception. She swallowed hard. "Hold onto her, Matt." The words were painful; she could barely get them out. But it didn't matter. It was too late. It was too late for Chris. It might be too late for them too.

Ashley screamed again, voice breaking as she dissolved into tears. "We can't leave him out there," she said desperately, begging Matt to listen. His eyes were full, but he kept his grip on her, holding the struggling girl in place.

The others came out into the hallway to better see what was going on. Sam smacked the heel of the bat against her thigh, trying to jolt herself out of the haze of disbelief and dawning horror. What were they going to do? Mike leaned heavily in the doorway and looked at her, pain written into every line of his face. He seemed decades older than he had even an hour ago. "Sam—"

She heard, rather than saw Josh move, taking slow, staggered steps towards the group. His eyes, open again, were fixed on Mike's bloody arm. His tongue darted out again and he sighed with what looked like relief and pleasure. "Josh, stop there."

His entire body shuddered again and he swung his gaze around to fix on her. "I had to leave him, Sam. I had to. I c-couldn't touch him without—I wanted—but I didn't. I didn't, Sam. But I don't know how much more I—it's coming, Sam. Lock yourself in the saferoom and let me try to kill it." Despite the crowd around them, it felt for a moment like they were the only two people there.

In Matt's arms, Ashley went still, watching Josh. Her eyes grew wide.

Shaking her head, she tried to find the words to reason with him. "We'll fix this. We can save you. We can—"

"I need—" His eyes jerked involuntarily back to Mike's arm and she saw his throat move as he swallowed. He took a few more shuffling steps towards them, into the group. "I can't stop—"

There was a loud thump and Josh dropped, his eyes sliding back in his head. Ashley stood over Josh, looking down at his unconscious form. Her arms shook from the impact of her heavy pack against Josh's head. Her eyes were red and raw, but her face was set and determined. "If you want to save him, we need to do it now."

"Ash, are you—"

Ashley shook her head. She took a deep, unsteady breath and met Sam's gaze. "Don't. I'm not. But if Chris is—if he's d—" She couldn't finish the thought. "You saw what I saw. Josh is losing it. We do this now or we don't do it at all."

"But he's the only one strong enough to fight the thing!" Em snapped. "You want to get rid of our only real defense?"

But the redhead didn't spare her a glance, her focus still on Sam. "We do this now or we don't do it at all," she said again, her voice trembling but utterly sure.

A crash echoed down the hallway, followed by the wendigo's piercing call. They could hear a woman's voice, distantly calling for them. "Children? Children? Children?" in the exact same
intonation over and over again.

"Get Josh," Sam said quickly to Matt. "Where can we go? The saferoom won't hold." It wouldn't. Swinging doors with a bar on them? It would be child's play to a wendigo. It had been stupid of them to ever think it might, not once the thing discovered it. And a quick glance back down the hallway showed her that Mike's injury had left a trail of blood drops that would lead it right to them.

Hank interjected quickly. "Follow me. We can retreat further into the hotel. I'll find us a place."

"How the hell—" Melinda stared at him, leaning on her crutches.

He shrugged. "Bob and I checked the place out before he bought it. That included the hotel. It did not include the fucking monsters," he muttered.

Matt scooped up Josh and looked to Hank. "Let's go, then."

Sam quickly lost track of the hallways they passed down. She hoped against desperate hope that Hank knew what he was doing and where he was going. He was mumbling under his breath: "Limited entry. Multiple doors better. Layers. Checkpoints. Fuck." She supposed that at least suggested that he had a plan, which was more than she had at this point.

The call continued behind them. "Children? Children? Children?" She was going to hear it in her dreams, assuming she lived long enough to ever sleep again. Sam wanted to scream back at it, but that would only give away their position even faster.

As a group, they rushed through a set of double doors into what seemed to have been a club room of some kind. Old leather chairs sat arranged around an ornate fireplace and the walls were lined with decaying cloth- and leather-bound volumes in built-in shelves. He slammed the doors shut and gestured at Emily. "We need to brace this door. A first barrier. There's a few more rooms past this that'll be good, but we need to blockade this first."

They dragged one of the armchairs over, then another. Just as they'd wedged the back of one of the chairs under the handle, the door shook in its frame, sending a shower of dust cascading over Jess. The blonde stared at it, then looked back at Sam, her eyes wide. "It's not going to hold," she said softly, her jaw tightening. "We'll try to do something here. Hurry."

She squeezed Sam's hand, then let go, looking around the room wildly. Rushing to the wall, she pulled at the edge of a heavy oak bookshelf, heaving it with all her might. Emily ran to help her, shoving her shoulder into the far side. It moved a few, screeching inches. Sam couldn't move, couldn't breathe. She couldn't just leave them there.

As if hearing her thought, Emily glared at her. "Go, Sam. Now!"

Hank and Jess exchanged a nod. "Let's go," he said.

"You're not going to get another chance," Jess said, breathing hard as she continued to force the bookshelf further in front of the doors. The plaster of the wall seemed to be crumbling, collapsing in on itself.

The thing slammed into the door again, the shock of it seeming to reverberate straight through her.

"Sam, are you coming?" Melinda's voice, pitched high with anxiety, carried back down the hall.

She swallowed hard, nodded to Jess and Em, and turned to bolt up the hallway as the bangs and wild shrieks of the thing seemed to carry after her. It doesn't matter, whispered the insidious little voice in
the back of her mind. *Even if you do save him, you'll all die up here. You can't stop it. The only one who could fight it at all was Josh, and you're trying to take away his ability to even do that much. You're an idiot. A naïve idiot.*

Skidding through another, single door, she found the group again. This time Ashley looked at her and let out a little laugh that bordered on hysteria. "I think this is my stop." It was a smaller room that looked like it had been some kind of service room. There were mops and other antiquated cleaning equipment, spare carts, and other various bric-a-brac.

This wasn't right. She tried to reason with the girl. "No, Ash, you have to...the cure—"

The redhead shook her head and shoved her bag into Sam's arms. "You know as much as I do. And I think… I think it should be you, Sam. The wendigo blood is in a jar in there. Just go. We'll keep it from—we'll keep it as long as we can."

A warm hand closed over hers, where she gripped the bat. Mike took it from her stunned fingers, hefting it in his left hand. "Go be the big hero, Giddings. We've got this."

"No—"

"There's no time for you to fight me on this," he told her firmly. "I can't carry Josh and I can do more good here. I've still got a few good swings left in me." It was all falling apart. She was going to lose everyone. Absolutely everyone. His lips quirked up in a little smile as her arms tightened around the bag and its precious cargo. "Sam, if anyone can pull this off, it's you. Go."

She went.

The next room had been a dining room, back in the day. It was large, with a high, open ceiling, and now boasted moldering velvet-backed chairs and dusty, crooked chandeliers. Most of the tables were stacked along the wall, but there were a few out in the open. Melinda was ripping back the sheet that covered one of these. She rushed over to them, just as Matt deposited Josh on the surface. Sam didn't bother to shut the door. She didn't have time to barricade it and when—if—the thing made it past Jess and Emily and Ashley and Mike… But that wasn't helpful. Hank rushed back to try to block them off, but she ignored him, turning her attention to Josh.

Matt had been right in his assessment. Josh tossed and turned, alternately growling and moaning with pain as he fought his way back towards consciousness. His fingers dug into the fabric of his stomach, his chest, his face. Countless small cuts decorated his exposed skin and he looked nearly skeletal, his skin unnaturally pale and stretched tight over the bones of his face. Melinda was crying silently, tears streaking through the dirt caked onto her skin.

"What now?" Matt asked. She glanced up at him and the utter trust and confidence in his eyes made her want to scream and cry and throw up simultaneously.

She swallowed again and shoved her sleeves awkwardly up her arms. Looking to Melinda, she wondered if she should try for bravado. Instead, she settled on the truth. The woman deserved that, after everything that had happened. "It might not work, Melinda. I don't really know—"

"Just fucking do it, Sam. Whatever you need me to do, I'll do. I know that he might—just do it." For all the tears, Melinda's voice was steady and certain. It only doubled down on her desire to cry, but she bit it back. Later. Later, when they were *all fine*, Sam would cry.

"Okay," she mumbled. "Here we go, Washington."

Fiddler's book had been so difficult to sort through. Thank god for Ashley and her puzzle-happy
mind. It was at least enough to give her a place to start. As to the rest, she figured she'd just follow her instincts. She yanked the stoppered jar from Ashley's bag and set it on the table next to Josh, then immediately had to snatch it back as one of his violent gestures almost sent it spinning to the ground.

She grabbed her knife and dug it into the thick cork. After a moment, it came loose with a sucking noise and the thick, metallic scent of blood washed over them all, layered with something putrid and almost oily. From the corner of her eye, she saw Matt gag and cover his mouth.

Well, he would just have to deal with it. She handed him the jar, and he held it obediently in front of him. Gesturing, she grabbed Melinda's hand and pulled the tip of her knife along the woman's palm. It was dirty, but the idea of getting infected seemed almost laughable. Blood, dark and garnet-red welled up in her hand. Melinda cupped her hand and held it close to her stomach, letting the blood continue to build up in a pool.

Here, she faltered. It had been in Fiddler's book. The wendigo blood—or whatever you wanted to call it—wanted to be out. It wanted to be with its kind, just as Josh's human self wanted to be with his family. But short of just slitting Josh's wrists, Sam wasn't sure what to do.

She could kill him. And not just in a 'leave him to die' kind of sense. She might cut him and he might bleed out right here in front of her, with her unable to do anything to save him. It might be just like... "...like last time," she whispered. When he'd tried to do it himself, years and years ago. This was stupid. She was being stupid. He was going to die if she didn't do this. It was impossible to tune out everything around her and focus. All the invasive thoughts, the noises, the fear, the grief were overwhelming. They were like some tangible thing in the air, poisoning and suffocating her.

Sam didn't realize that she was feverishly hot until she felt sweet, blissful cold against her skin. She glanced to the right.

Dead though she might be, Beth's eyes were shining with tears. Her hand on Sam's shoulder was icy, but it didn't hurt. It didn't penetrate, just hovering against the surface. "You can do it, Sam. It isn't like before. That was his illness, making him do terrible things to himself. You're helping him."

"Beth?" Melinda's broken, bewildered whisper was almost enough to pull Sam's attention away. Almost.

"Shh, Mom," said a new, soft voice from Sam's left. "Let Sam concentrate, okay?"

Sam's head whipped around so fast it hurt. Even without the glasses, Sam knew it was Hannah. It was all there, in the lines of her face, the amusement and fond annoyance in her eyes. "Hannah?" The pale girl nodded, her hand coming up to rest on Sam's left shoulder, mirroring her twin. "Hannah, you're... you're you again?"

The spirit's lips quirked up slightly. "I'm afraid I always was me. I probably owe you an apology or seven. But right now, I think you should try to help my idiot brother out of this mess he's gotten himself into."

"What do I do?" Sam asked, looking between both twins.

Beth hesitated, then shook her head. "I'm not sure. I think you have to just trust what you read."

The other spirit laughed, the sound harsh but finally, perfectly, truly Hannah. "That's my Beth. Always with the books. She's right. But also trust your gut." Hannah's eyes grew serious and pained, her voice earnest. "Even if you kill him, Sam, it's better. It's better than becoming... that. Believe me. I know."
Their cold continued to seep down into her, but rather than being painful, it made her calm. Sam took a deep breath, then another, and looked down at Josh. He was still unconscious, she thought, though it was hard to tell. His eyes jerked wildly under closed lids, his throat shifting as he seemed to swallow over and over again. He wasn't growling anymore. Instead, she could hear a soft, high-pitched keening, like a dog whimpering in pain.

It was Josh. After everything he'd done, everything she'd done, everything they'd been through… it was Josh. Josh Washington. Brilliant, tormented, selfish, generous, passionate, desperate fuck-up. She loved him. No matter what happened from there out. She loved him. And she couldn't leave him like this, no matter what it cost her.

From off down the hall, she could hear shouting and more banging. There was no more time.

Sam grabbed his arm, pulling it back and exposing his wrist, with its old white scars that he hated for people to see. "Come on, Washington," she said fiercely. "You complete and utter asshole. It's go-time." The knife had been dulled by its hard use, or perhaps his skin was already something more than purely human. It tore into his skin jaggedly and she pulled harder, feeling as though she was trying to cut into stone.

Slowly, steadily, blood began to well up. It was thick and dark and moved sluggishly, more like mud than blood.

Josh's back arched, his entire body spasming up off the table. She heard Matt curse and Melinda gasp, but she didn't let go of his wrist, still holding it as firmly as she could, continuing the cut. It was like one of Beth's fairy tales. Like Tam Lin. You didn't let go, no matter what happened. You held on through the pain. You battled through it.

"I'll never let go, Jack," Hannah muttered drily.

The complete incongruity and irreverence of the comment somehow gave Sam strength. She pulled the knife as hard as she could manage. More of the sluggish alien blood welled up, clinging like a blob to his skin. Sam spared a quick look at Matt and Melinda, who each held out their respective blood. Everything smelled of it—copper and rust and lightning and life and death. Her skin tingled, the cold of Beth and Hannah still seeping into her, creeping down her arms and chest, combatting the sudden fever that she could feel raging through her. It made no sense, but even knowing that it made no sense didn't help her shake the feeling of lightheadedness.

The black blood on Josh's arm quivered and his entire body shuddered. Yet the blood didn't move. It didn't separate the way Fiddler had described. She shot another look to Matt, who stared at her helplessly. He held out the jar even further and shook it slightly, setting the mud-thick liquid shaking. And still nothing happened.

"No," Melinda said desperately, shaking her head. "No. This can't be it." She looked to Sam. "What do we do? What else are we supposed to do?"

A furious, animal scream ripped the air in two, reverberating around them and making all of them jump. All six heads turned to look to the door. The thing hung there, suspended in the doorway like a spider. "Makkapitew..." it growled, in Fiddler's gruff voice. There was a crack of breaking glass as Matt dropped the jar of wendigo blood and many things happened in an instant.

Hank swung a chair hard at its head and the wood shattered upon impact. The thing screeched in his face and grabbed the side of his head, flinging him out of the way. The older man crashed into a pile of tables and tumbled to the floor, unmoving. Melinda shouted his name, forgetting her cupped
hands, and her blood splattered across the table and ground.

The creature hissed and launched itself from the doorway towards them, just as the blood on Josh's arm twitched again.

Then it split. True to Fiddler's scribbled nonsense, it was like a magnetic pull, the globs of thick, brackish blood splitting itself in the air in front of them. Murky, oily muck separated, spattering violently towards the wendigo. Matt ducked out of the way as more and more of the sludge flung itself at the monster, each drop hitting it with an impact that sent it staggering.

It screamed, clawing at its skin, scraping at the blood and desperately trying to remove it. Josh's other blood, red and real, simply fell back to drip down Josh's arm. He collapsed, the painful bow of his back giving as he slumped down, still whimpering. The blood flowed faster. It seemed like enough blood for an entire murdered person, spurting and spraying as if the result of some unseen onslaught.

The thing continued to scream. Josh's wendigo blood seemed like a living thing, crawling across its skin. Sam wasn't sure if it was burning the thing or trying to choke it or just plain driving it crazy, but she didn't care. It seemed to be going mad. The screaming was incoherent, ragged and raw as it all-but fell backwards and away from them.

Rallying, it reared up to hiss at them, spittle flying. The cold touch of the twins vanished and Sam saw Beth step forward, anger twisting her features, and she nodded to Hannah. The girls disappeared, flickering out of sight like an over-exposed photo.

Light, painfully bright, burst through the room and a sound like a bell, as loud and overwhelming as if they were in an actual bell tower, resounded through the room. Sam staggered, trying to shake off the ringing in her ears and the spots dancing before her eyes. She could just make out the blur of the thing falling back and turning to flee, rushing back through the door and away. She could hear its screams receding.

On the table, Josh shuddered again, weakly. His eyes fluttered open for a moment, then closed. He continued to bleed, his blood purely his own. His face, with it monstrous disfigurement, began to relax. Sam studied his face, waiting, looking for any sign of a change—would he lose some of his gauntness? Or maybe she would see his cheek begin to seal itself back together again, his predator's teeth shrinking.

But there was nothing.

Matt scrambled back to his feet and headed for Hank, but Sam and Melinda continued to watch Josh. Melinda's voice trembled: "Was that—did it work? Nothing happened with my..." She looked down at her spilled blood and blanched. "Did I ruin it? Sam, why isn't he waking up?"

Josh's lips moved, slightly, but Sam couldn't make out a word. Then he went still, his last breath going with a sigh.

Chapter End Notes

I love you all and after this I'm going to write an AU where they all work in a flower shop and the only drama is simple and sweet and ultimately ends totally happily. I hope you guys continue to stick with me here, though, and ride this train to the end of the line. It's not over yet.
Happy Fanfic Author Appreciation Day! We're nearing the end now and it's gotten so long that I can hardly believe it. I appreciate you all for sticking it out and joining me on this wild sequel roller coaster.

"Okay, how do I do this again?" Hannah held the dice in her hand like she was afraid they would explode. "This is so weird."

Josh rolled his eyes and shoved the book across the table towards his sister. "It's in there."

"Just tell me. Don't make me look it up," She whined, pouting. "It'll be way faster."

Scooting her chair over, Sam flipped through the book until she found the right section. "Right here. We're doing it this way… you roll four dice and then you drop the lowest one. The total of the other three, you write down. Then, once you have six number, you pick where you want each to go." She pulled on her purple flannel and buttoned it. Beth had teased her about bringing it, but Sam had been to Chris's house before. His mom loved her air conditioner way more than any reasonable person and it always seemed to be at least fifteen degrees cooler inside than it should be.

"I think I'm going to be a wizard," Beth said thoughtfully, scrolling down a page on her phone. "I found a cool setup."

Her brother threw a pencil at her. "No power gaming."

She raised her eyebrows at him, unamused. "I have no idea what that means."

"It's exactly what it sounds like. You are not allowed to research and find some crazy way to build your character so that you're way more powerful than the rest of us. It's cheating." She raised her eyebrows at him and he amended his statement. "Okay, it's not technically cheating, but it is cheap."

Beth laughed. "Seriously? That doesn't even sound like something I'd do. You know who does sound like?"

"Who?"

"She means you, bro," Chris said, grinning broadly. "She's right, too. What are you playing?"

Josh slouched back in his chair, looking surly. "A monk."

"Uh… what kind of monk?"

"There are 'kinds' of monks?" Sam inquired, glancing up from her character sheet.

"A…" Josh's voice dropped and he mumbled something that Sam didn't catch.

"A what?"
"A tetori monk."

Chris cackled and shook his head. "Fuck no you're not. DM veto. Pick a different class."

"Seriously?"

"Yep. Pick something else."

"I can't be a monk at all? That's bullshit, dude." Josh sighed and rummaged in his bag for a new character sheet. "Fine. I'll be a sorc—"

"No."

Josh groaned and let his head fall to bang on the table. "You're killing me!"

Beth threw the pencil back at him. It glanced off his shoulder and he made a muffled noise of protest. "'No powergaming,' right?" She smirked at him. "That's what you get for bringing it up. Chris might not have realized what you were trying to do if you hadn't decided to get all smug about it."

Frustrated, Hannah shoved the book away from her again. "I'm not doing this. It's too dorky. I have a reputation to maintain."

"What reputation? Your reputation as a wilting wallflower?" Sam almost teased her about the tattoo booking she'd made, but closed her mouth on the joke. If she said anything, it'd lead to all kinds of questions and possibly mockery from the boys and Hannah would rightfully yell at her.

Hannah stuck her tongue out at Sam and folded her arms over her chest. "Seriously though. I'm not. There are way too many rules and dice and things. I have other things I'd rather be doing."

"Han, it'll be fun. Please?"

"I'll watch. How about that?"

Looking up from the book he'd retrieved from across the table, Josh frowned. "Is that going to affect how likely we are to survive this campaign?" When he caught Beth's curious look, he explained. "Cochise here is rather fond of incredibly high difficulty levels in his combat. And, like any true DM, has a sadistic streak you might not be expecting."

"I've played boardgames with him. He's fine."

"Oh no," Josh chuckled ominously. "That's a totally different thing. We just agreed to give Chris god-powers over us. We're probably going to die."

His sister shook her head and waved her hand dismissively. "We are not going to die. That wouldn't be any fun."

"Have you heard the term 'TPK'? No? It stands for 'Total Party Kill.' Chris has managed to do it in two of the three games where he's DM-ed."

Chris looked hurt. He pressed his hand to his chest and pouted at Josh. "I didn't do it on purpose. Really, it's your fault. You decided to go charging in against an archdemon you weren't even supposed to fight. That's on you."

Raising her hand, Sam cleared her throat. "Um… can I ask that you maybe not do that? It's my first time playing. Having everyone die horribly kind of sucks."
Josh licked chip dust from his fingers and grinned at her. "Oh, it's too late for that kind of request. We're all doomed." His eyes sparkled with mischief in the lamplight and he winked, then closed his eyes and began to quietly pray. "May Our Lady of the Nat 20s hold us in her open hands and bless our dice. May our DM not kill us all and may we still be friends when this is all over so that we can go to R&A Bakery for donuts and coffee."

Even with his eyes closed, his face was alive with quiet amusement. Josh was always like that – always going and going, almost like he was onstage, though he hadn't performed since being in the Pied Piper play his 2nd grade teacher had put on.

The room was very quiet in the wake of the monster's departure.

And Josh's eyes were closed, his face utterly expressionless.

"TPK," she mumbled.

Sam wanted to be able to think he was sleeping. Wasn't that a thing in stories? 'He looked like he was only sleeping.' Or they really would be sleeping but they 'slept like the dead' and if she just shook him hard enough, he'd wake up.

But Melinda was already shaking him, her face buried in the stained, damp puffy vest that still covered his chest. The woman's knuckles were white as she clutched at him, her shoulders heaving. Her sobs were muffled by the material, her blood staining his clothing further. Blood still leaked slowly from the gash Sam had made on his arm, red and sticky in the light from her headlamp.

She couldn't tear herself away, racking her brain for something she could have done differently or something she could do now. There had to be a way to fix this. There had to. She couldn't have come all this way for it to end like this. Chris had died. Mike might die. Fuck, Mike might already be dead. All the others might be, back at their various posts. And where were Beth and Hannah? All she wanted was to see them again, to feel their cold fingers on her, proof that they were real and not just the product of her shattered mind.

A warm hand touched her back and she jumped. Matt, his face creased with concern and his eyes red, pulled her in for a hug. She let him do it, numb. After a moment, she pulled away and he released her. "Is..." she struggled to pull names and words together in her head. "Is Hank okay?"

"I'm alive," the man croaked from across the room, his voice weak. She glanced over to where he was leaning against a pile of chairs. He began to pull himself to his feet, then fell back, wincing. "I'll be okay. The others?"

Matt looked to Sam again. "Do you want me to—"

"I'll go," she murmured, pressing the heels of her hands against her eyes. "I need to go. I can't stay here." She couldn't look at Josh's body. She just couldn't. It felt like she was going to collapse; they'd come all this way and suffered so much for nothing. He was gone.

He nodded and moved away from her, crossing to Melinda's side. "I'll stay here. Call if you need me."

Nodding to him, she headed back, bracing herself for the absolute worst. They were all going to be dead. She was sure of it. Still, she felt weirdly numb. As she walked into the service room, she nearly tripped, her feet catching in a tangle of tools that had fallen or been thrown across the floor. "Hello?"

"Sam?"
She spun, searching for the source of the voice. Ashley was half-buried under rags and bottles and crates that had fallen from one of the shelves. "Shit. Ash, are you okay? Are you pinned?"

The girl smiled weakly. "I don't think so. It just seemed easier to lie still. Rest for a minute." She jerked her head towards the club room. "Go see the others. I'm not sure if they're okay. Mike went to go check it out."

"Mike's alive?" Sam blinked at the redhead, not quite believing it. She had been so sure. "He's—really?"

Ashley nodded, coughing hard. When it subsided, she jerked her shoulders in an approximation of a shrug. "It didn't seem that interested in us. We tried to attack it, but it just sort of forced its way past. It shoved me over and knocked over the shelf and it attacked Mike because he hit it with the bat, but once it had us out of the way, it just kind of went on ahead. I think it was more worried about whatever you were doing." Her face was hopeful. "Did it work? Did you save him?"

The lump in Sam's throat was too big to speak around. She just squeezed Ashley's hand and shook her head slightly. Ashley's eyes widened but she didn't protest as Sam stood and headed on.

The acrid stench of singed leather hit her hard and her eyes began to smart as she scanned the room quickly. Mike was kneeling beside a prone figure, his head pressed against their chest. Sam hurried around a fallen table and stopped, closing her eyes and trying to breathe. Emily was down and bleeding. A long gash had caught her down the jaw, cutting into her collarbone and chest. It was hard to tell from just a glance whether it was as bad as it looked. She forced herself to open her eyes again and ask. "Is she alive?"

Mike glanced at her and nodded. "Yeah. Just unconscious I think."

"The gash?" Jess's voice shook. She was leaning heavily on one of the chairs, the flamethrower on the floor beside her. Though she was upright, she seemed unstable, blood trickling down from her hairline and her entire body trembling.

"I don't think it's that bad." Mike caught Jess's look and repeated himself, more firmly. "It's not that bad. It just looks bad, Jess, I promise. I think she'll be okay."

"But she's unconscious—"

"So were you, and you survived, right? Come on, it's Em. She's tougher than she looks. And she already looks pretty tough."

Jess tried to laugh and broke off into a coughing fit. Sam rushed over to support her, slipping her arm around Jess's waist. "What happened?"

She gestured vaguely. "It busted through after a while. Threw the shelf across…" More coughs racked her body and she let Sam hold her up. "I was going to… the flamethrower… but then I thought about the books and how we're inside and… I hesitated too long. It wanted…" Sam had never seen Jess look so ragged, even when she'd been brought down from the mountain by the rescue crew. "It used our voices. All of us. It was Chris. It was… I heard Josh scream like a monster as it… as it…" She looked at Mike again. "She's really breathing? Really? Sam, she… we… we never really got to…"

The other blonde girl turned in, letting her head fall down to Sam's shoulder. Desperate sobs tore through her, though she didn't think there were any tears. Sam could understand that. She didn't think she had any tears left herself. She put her arms around Jess, hoping it was comforting. Josh's blank,
lifeless face still loomed large in her mind and she couldn't think of anything adequate to say. Looking over at where Mike was one-handedly trying to take Em's pulse, she shuddered.

She'd never gotten to say goodbye to Beth. Not the way she would have wanted—though, of course, she had never wanted to say goodbye at all. Sam had wondered about Jess and Emily's falling out for a long time. No one argued with that much passion unless they cared deeply about each other, no matter what form that care took. She held Jess a little tighter. "She's going to wake up. This isn't over, okay?"

Even though she couldn't put the feeling into the words that she wanted, it seemed to help. Jess's sobs gradually settled and she broke away, staggering back to the chair she'd been using for support. She collapsed into it and looked up at Sam bleakly, rubbing her eyes. "I saw the thing leave. I don't know why, but… is Josh…" Jess couldn't seem to settle on a word. "Okay?"

Mike's eyes were on her too and the weight of their anticipation felt heavy on her shoulders. Mutely, she shook her head.

"So is he still turning into one of those things? We can try again, right?" One look at Jess's face told Sam that the girl knew it was a pointless question, but there was still the tiniest edge of hope to her voice.

Sam shook her head again. Mike's face, already serious and exhausted, looked like it had aged another ten years. "I'm sorry, Sam," Jess whispered, letting her face fall into her hands. "Nothing. All of this, for nothing."

She had to pull it together. She had to do… something. Anything. The thing might be gone, but it could come back. And even if it didn't, they had injured people here. They couldn't just wait. They didn't have the luxury of grief. Sam ran her hands over her face and felt something wet smear on her skin. Looking down at her fingers, she saw they were red with blood, but she had no idea whose it was. It could be any of them at this point. Blood siblings, right? Family.

And she refused to lose any more family.

If she'd had it in her, she might have laughed at that. As if she'd had any say over losing people so far.

"Okay. Um… Okay. We have to—fuck." The last word was only a whisper. She couldn't do this.

"Guys?" Matt came in cautiously, Ashley following just behind. Compared to the others, Ashley didn't look that bad physically. A bit bruised and dirty, but otherwise hale. His voice broke as he saw the girl on the ground. "Emily!"

Mike moved away to give him space, standing slowly. He wavered and Sam remembered how much blood he'd lost. God, they really had to get out of here. She tried to get her brain in gear. "We have to leave. We have to get out of here while we still can." But even muttering the words to herself wasn't helping.

A tentative hand on her arm broke her out of her frustration. "How broken was the helicopter?" Ashley asked her.

"Wrecked," Jess said tiredly. "It's not usable."

"No, but… Most of them have radios, right? Was the cab damaged? Or just the top part… I don't know what they call it."
Sam shook her head. "No, just the blades. Oh shit. Do you think—"

The redhead gave a half-shrug, half-nod. "I think that we can't hike down. It's the best shot."

"Is Hank still down?" Sam asked Matt quickly.

"He's with... He's talking to Melinda. She's—" He seemed to think better of the comment and swallowed hard. "He's not in great shape, though. I think he might have fractured something. He's having trouble standing."

Well, then that was something she could do. Sam felt a surge of energy rush through her. Just having a plan of any kind was better than floating around, unmoored. She nodded decisively. "Okay then. I'm going to go for the radio." A sudden rush of protests and exclamations overlapped each other as Mike, Jess, and Matt all tried to stop her at once, but she held up a hand and they stopped. She couldn't look at Mike, afraid he would shake her resolve, so she looked to Matt instead. "You and I are the least injured. Someone should stay here who can move people and we both know that if we're picking one person for that, it's you. I'll go quick and try to call for help. Stay here. Barricade the door again if you can. I don't know if it'll come back, but it's probably worth it anyway. I'll be back soon."

As she headed for the door, Mike grabbed her wrist and pulled her back. "Sam, don't—"

"I have to do this." She glanced at his ruined arm and then away again. His fingers caught her chin and pulled her face up, just as he had back in the tunnels when she'd begged him to be honest with her. The skin under his eyes looked bruised. She let her fingertips skim over his stubbled cheek in a wordless apology. If there was more time, there might have been things to say, but the clock was ticking for all of them. "It'll be okay. I'm fast. Just, you know, don't die?" It had been intended as a joke, but it came out as a plea.

Before he could say anything else, she ran out the door.

It was easier than she'd expected to find her way back to familiar corridors of the old hotel. For all that Hank had led them through countless random passageways and around corners, the area had clearly seen so little use in the last years that it was easy to see where people had been. They'd left quite a trail and it was easy to see how the thing had managed to find them. Disturbed dust, scuffed footprints, the occasional blood, shoved furniture... they really hadn't been subtle.

This felt like a dream.

It wouldn't have been the first time. True or impossible? She really didn't know anymore. Only two months ago she would have sworn anything with monsters was impossible. How did you get here, Sam?

She paused, leaning against a molding plaster wall and letting herself breathe for a moment. She didn't want to remember how she got here. It was too easy to do, to see her obvious mistakes. Chris's voice, cocky and excited, echoed through her head: "Boom! Butterfly effect."

If she hadn't let Chris go with Josh to do the distraction—

If she hadn't thought attacking the monster would give the boys an opportunity to run—

If she had realized how Josh would react to Mike—

If she had told Melinda the truth from the beginning—
If she hadn't fallen for Josh's everything-is-fine act—

If she'd gone with Beth when she'd run into the woods—

If she had just found Hannah before the prank—

Something cold and wet pressed itself into her palm and she yelped, jumping away from the wall and out of her looping, desperate thoughts. She threw her arms up—though that seemed like an almost laughably useless gesture—and heard a soft whimper. Looking down, she saw round eyes and a doggy grin. "Oh," she breathed, her heart's desperate pounding beginning to slow again. "Hi."

Wolfie cocked its head to the side and looked up at her, waiting.

"I... I have no idea what you want, fella. Sorry." But having the wolf there was comforting all the same. She remembered Mike talking about him, about how he'd saved Mike more than once. Sam crouched down and held out her hand. The wolf shoved its head against her fingers and she scratched behind its ears wonderingly. "Pretty sure you're not supposed to be this okay with a human, buddy. It's probably not very good for you." Its fur was coarse and thick and felt grimy, though that was probably normal. She remembered reading about people trying to domesticate wild animals and how it inevitably went horribly wrong, but death by wolf seemed like an almost enjoyable demise at this point.

She took a deep breath and straightened. "Want to come with me?"

The wolf trotted along next to her as she passed the safroom and headed once more for the basement. She wanted to see Hannah or Beth, but at the same time she found herself grateful when she didn't. She couldn't bear to face Melinda; she really couldn't face the girls. It was her fault. It had to have been. There was some piece she'd missed, something she had been too distracted to realize, and now Josh was dead.

There was no sign of the monster, either. Outside the lodge, the clouds had cleared, the moon bright and shining in the sky. After the stale, blood-scented atmosphere of the old hotel, the cold, clear winter air was a sweet blessing against her face. The wolf sat at attention as she climbed awkwardly into the helicopter's cockpit and fumbled with the radio.

Her heart was in her throat as she tried to get it working. If they didn't have this, she really didn't know what they were going to do. For a desperately long minute, there was nothing but static. Then it cleared. "Emergency services, Blackwood County, over." The strange voice was like music to her ears.

"Hello?" Her voice cracked. She cleared her throat and tried again, speaking louder. "Hello, this is Samantha Giddings. We need an emergency extraction from Blackwood Mountain."

Bits of the wilderness survival guide she'd read came back to her.

Be sure to give as exact a location as is possible. Stay calm. If you are unable to provide an address or coordinates, describe any major landmarks or other identifying criteria.

Explain the nature of the emergency so that rescuers have the appropriate preparation.

Remember to stay calm and speak clearly.

She kept going, counting quickly in her head. "We have two seriously wounded people and several others. We need help as soon as possible. We're at the ruins of the Washington lodge."
"Copy that." The speaker hesitated and she wondered if they were rubbing the bridge of their nose in frustration at yet another emergency call to the lodge. But then— "Is Hank Durand up there? He was heading up with Melinda Washington."

"He is. He's with us. I'm radioing from his helicopter, but it was…” *Destroyed by monsters.* "Messed up by the storm."

The person sounded relieved. "Copy that. We'll send a helicopter for you now, while the weather is good. Reports show more storms coming. Please stay in a visible area. If possible, find a light source to help us locate you quickly."

Sam clutched the knob of the radio with white fingers and nodded. "Uh… Yes. Okay. Please hurry."

The wolf made a noise and she glanced over, then her blood went cold. It was on its feet, staring off into the trees, its hackles raised. It growled again, low in its throat. Beyond it, crouched in the shadow of a huge, gnarled pine, was the wendigo.

It was watching her.

-o-

It was almost pitch black in the room. Thick curtains were drawn across the windows, cutting off what little light was available from outside. The room, a bedroom, was meticulously clean. The bed was made, the dark green bedspread smooth. Unlike the rest of the rooms on the second floor, this one seemed to have almost entirely escaped the effects of the explosion, likely due to its location. A large, overly ornate mirror was propped on a dresser, held in place by a collection of mismatched bookends.

It was also silent in his head. Truly silent, for the first time in a long time.

"Hi," said a soft voice.

Josh tore his gaze away from his reflection in the mirror—his features seemed strange, almost unfamiliar to his own eyes—and glanced towards the door. His sisters stood next to each other, hand in hand in simple white shifts. "Come and play with us. Forever and ever and ever," he said dully. He couldn't even muster the energy to do the voice. After taking Sam's pills for a while, he'd stopped seeing them. Or rather, he only ever saw them like this: clean and simple in their plain garments and unadorned faces. It was a marked improvement from rotting, melting, monstrous horrors, so he wasn't going to complain.

He looked back to his reflection. He looked… normal. His mouth was back to the way it used to be, although his lips had an odd tint to them. Those familiar dark circles were under his eyes, both of which were familiar again: dark brown and deep-set, with whites that were actually white, not stained red with broken blood vessels. He stuck his tongue out and it was the usual human length once again, rather than being long and pointed.

"It's weird, isn't it?" Hannah's voice came from just behind him, but he didn't jump. Nothing that could happen now could scare him really. The last thing he really remembered was telling them that Chris had died. Then there were vague, blurry memories of screaming and crying and pain, but that described so much of his life recently that he couldn't place them more specifically. He wasn't entirely sure he wanted to.

A strange numbness was settling over him. It almost reminded him of being on lithium, back when his doctors had thought he was bipolar. He felt flattened out, like a flower pressed between the pages
of a book. He continued to stare at himself blankly. This was what he wanted, right? Cured? Dead? Both? Neither? It didn't matter, ultimately. *Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners.* His lips shaped the words, but he didn't speak them aloud. Was it blasphemy to utter the words of a prayer you didn't believe? Or if you were only quoting a favorite movie, was it okay?

He would say that film was his religion if he didn't know that would make him an intolerable douche. Although, really, he was fairly certain he was an intolerable douche anyway.

A slender hand rested on his shoulder and Hannah leaned forward, into the view of the mirror. "That's the strangest part. You don't look like you anymore, although you also look more like you than ever." She tipped her head to the side thoughtfully. "I never expected mirrors to work for us."

"Talking in riddles, huh?" Beth sat on the other side of him, though the bed didn't shift from her presence.

"It's a monster thing," Hannah said with a small smile. "Be glad you don't understand. After all, you're the only one here who didn't fuck up royally."

There was a soft laugh at that. "Sure. Only because I died before I could. And, by the way, chasing you out into the woods with no backup counts as fucking up."

"Not *royally*, though."

"Fine. Not royally. Still."

Somehow their voices made him feel more human, driving away the grey haze of confusion and dull light. He wondered he had transcended psychosis into an entirely new plane, but he managed a small smile regardless. "So what now?"

The three of them sat in silence, looking into the mirror: two identical faces flanking his. No one had an answer to that question.

Chapter End Notes

By the way, I also started that happy (well, happy-with-drama) flowershop AU story. It's called "Creekside Flowers & Gifts." If it interests you or you need a happiness palate cleanser from Broken Parable - and I know I sometimes do - check it out and let me know what you think!
Grad school has started again, so I'm sorry for the delays. My life is a hectic disaster right now, but I have not forgotten about this. I promise. We're almost there.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The wolf continued to growl. It wasn't like any noise Sam had ever heard before, from classes or documentaries or visits to the zoo. It was a low, near-constant rumbling that seemed to vibrate through the air around the wolf and into her, making her feel jittery and on edge. She didn't dare look at it though, her eyes fixed on the wendigo in the trees.

It was a mess of its already monstrous former self. Josh's blackened, oily blood substance still clung to it and seemed to be eating away at its flesh. Parts of its skin looked burnt and one arm hung at a strange angle that, even for the monster, seemed unnatural. Its eyes, round and wide and mad, were locked onto her. Strangely, Sam found that she felt almost calm. After everything she had just seen, after speaking to the disembodied voice of off-mountain normality, this seemed like such a small thing. Maybe it would kill her here.

That would be okay. It didn't really matter anymore.

Wolfie's growling deepened a shade and the thought jarred in her head, like a bell rung too hard and too close. It was too similar to the things she'd heard Josh mutter under his breath. Sam remembered Mike's face when he'd realized she was leaving, the way that Jess had clung to her in desperation, Ashley's hand squeezing hers, Matt's certain nod when she'd told him to stay behind and help. It did matter. She mattered. There were others up here still depending on her.

Sam swallowed hard, waiting for the thing to make a move. The wind began to pick up, shifting the pine boughs and making them sigh. How long did she have before their rescuers arrived? Would there be time to deal with this and get the others up here for evacuation? Her exhausted muscles ached with the effort to stay still.

And its eyes remained on her.

Her arms ached. Her whole body ached. She took a slow breath and a sharp pain lanced through her lung. Gasping, she flinched and, in that moment, knew it was over.

The thing launched itself forward, bounding across the snow towards her like a beast. Chris's delusion about them being a type of big cat seemed suddenly much more believable. Sam tried to move, scrambling backwards towards the cab of the helicopter again, as the wolf snarled and leaped towards the approaching monster. Wolfie sank its teeth into the thing's thigh and the two spun in some kind of horrific parody of a dance. Sam grabbed for anything, anything that she could use as a weapon and almost sobbed in relief when her hands closed around a freezing, splintered branch.

She swung it around and up, just as the thing shook off the wolf, flinging it to the side. It slid in the snow, whimpering softly. But Sam didn't have time to think about the poor animal. She brought the stick down in front of her, holding it like a sword. "Come on, you bastard," she muttered. "Come on."
It caught the branch on her first swing, wrenching it out of her hands and letting it fall, useless, to the ground. "Sammy-bird," it sang softly in Josh's voice. Then, in that cobbled-together patchwork voice she'd come to loathe: "I should—thank you for—killing—him. Saved me—trouble."

Something inside her broke and she drove her bare fist towards its face. "Fuck you!"

It grabbed her wrist easily and bent her arm back. She gasped as agony, new and fresh, radiated through her. Driving her arm back even further, it forced her backwards but kept her from falling. Her back bowed painfully and she let out an involuntary, choked off shriek. "Rude—child. I've waited—for—long enough."

She spat in its face. It screamed with rage, the sound piercing through her like a spear and she laughed, following that same insane urge that had let her smile at the police interview and hit the Psycho with the bat and even kiss Beth for the first time. There was nothing left to lose, really, and she'd be damned if she went quietly.

In the periphery of her vision, three figures in white flickered into view, like developing photographs or sunspots. Hope—slim, fragile, beautiful hope—bloomed in Sam's chest, but she didn't dare look away from where the thing loomed over her, a long tendril of saliva dangling down to tremble inches from her cheek.

"Sam!"

She couldn't tear her eyes from the teeth, the thin, quivering tongue. There were feet pounding towards them, crunching in the fresh snow, but the thing didn't look away either. It hissed, its jaws widening as it lowered its head down. It almost seemed like it was going in for an open-mouthed kiss. Sam winced, bracing herself. It was time. It was her turn. *TPK*, she thought numbly. *Total party kill.*

Its hands were wrenched off her as something bowled into it, driving it off her and into the snow. No longer held up, she collapsed backwards. Matt took advantage of its surprise to jump back onto his feet in a flash, clearly drawing on untold hours of practice on and off the field. He darted to Sam and hauled her to her feet. "Get behind me," he ordered, grabbing a crowbar from where he'd dropped it off to the side.

"How did—"

"Totems," he said by way of explanation, then dropped his voice to mutter under his breath. "Dumb visions. Not even helpful. Mostly just creepy. Thanks a million, you stupid fucking mountain."

Sam looked around, trying to find the figures she'd thought she'd seen, but there was just an empty, moonlight clearing with forest beyond. There wasn't even any sign of the wolf who had tried to protect her. She took a deep breath, wincing as her entire body complained. Her arm ached and it was hard to clench her fist. That couldn't possibly be a good sign. In front of them, the thing shoved itself back to its feet, crouching on long, wiry legs. It hissed. "I—will eat—the—both of you," it snarled.

She could feel Matt's entire body tense, ready to fight, and she braced herself.

It seemed to leap towards them in slow motion, both arms reaching forward, overlong fingers grabbing for Matt.

Sound and light exploded in front of them. White flashes, quicker than Sam could easily track, burst into being in a quick, spastic pattern. After the silvery glow of the moonlit snow, it was blinding.
Instinctively, Sam shielded her eyes, already seeing spots. In tandem with the lights, the sound she'd heard down below in the old hotel echoed around them, the bell-like bong that seemed to reverberate through her very bones. It set her ears ringing and she wasn't sure she could hear anything else.

"What the hell? Matt, do you—" She couldn't even make out her own words; she doubted Matt could hear her any better. Another thought occurred to her. Why weren't they dead?

Under the residual ringing of the phantom bell, she could hear something else. It wasn't a speaking voice, but more like a howl of frustration and hurt. Sam reached forward blindly, one hand finding Matt's warm, broad back. She stepped to the side and forward, moving around him, and felt something cold wrap around her wrist.

The blonde froze, heart in her throat, praying that the familiar chill wasn't just in her head. She blinked rapidly, trying to rid herself of the spots in her vision.

Gradually she was able to see in front of her again. Matt had apparently been hit by the same combination of sensory overload and decided to just stay in place. He was shaking his head, looking dazed. She gripped his arm tightly and he turned to look at her, his eyes taking a moment to focus on her face. "Are you okay?"

He nodded. "I'm not sure how, but yeah." She could hear him, though it sounded like he was speaking to her from the other end of a long tunnel. "What the hell happened? Where is it?"

They looked around, but the thing that had attacked them was gone. The snow where it had been was a mess of blackish, spattered blood and disturbed snow. Rough tracks dragged their way away from the two of them and back into the trees. The night was quiet and peaceful again, the moon shining down on the snow. There was no sign of any figures in white either. The only cold Sam felt was the chill of the winter.

Sam swallowed hard, blinking away the suddenly threatening tears. She had been so sure... But no. Shaking her head, she smiled weakly at Matt. "Gone, I guess. How did you know I was in trouble? You said there was a totem?"

He looked sheepish, scratching the back of his head and shrugging. "I wasn't sure it was you. I thought it was an old one, really, but then I realized you'd be up here in the snow all alone and I just... I panicked, I guess."

"Well I'm incredibly glad you did." She was trying for lightness, but her voice just sounded tired, even to her own ears. "I'm not sure if it was me, but your timing was perfect anyway."

"I'm still not sure why we aren't dead right now. Why aren't we dead right now?"

With one last glance at the empty area around them, Sam sighed. "I think we just have to be grateful for it. There are rescue helicopters on the way. We should get everyone up here."

"Do you think that thing is going to come back?"

She laughed humorlessly at that, her voice cracking painfully. "Given our luck? Probably. But we still have to be here for the helicopters. We need to get everyone out of here before we lose... before anything else happens."

They took the walk back in silence, for which Sam was grateful. She could practically navigate these strange passageways with her eyes closed at this point. Every now and then, she thought she caught a flicker of white in the corner of her eye, but there was never anything there. It was exhaustion and desperation and having the end in sight, making her imagine things.
The second Sam walked back through the door into the club room, a small, warm figure slammed into her. "Sam," Ashley said, her voice breaking into a sob. "Sam, I was so worried you wouldn't come back."

"I almost didn't," Sam murmured, casting another grateful look to Matt. She closed her arms around the redhead, holding her tightly. "But I'm back and help is coming, okay? It's going to be—" Okay, she almost finished before she caught herself. But it wasn't, was it? Chris's body was still out there somewhere in the darkness, while Josh lay dead in the far room. "We're going to get out of here. How's Em?"

"I have the worst hangover in the history of the world without even having a drink and if I ever have to see this mountain again, I will burn the entire thing down. " The girl was leaning heavily on Jess, looking irritated and gloriously, miraculously alive. She pointed at Sam. "I am serious. I will burn the forest down."

Hank cleared his throat. "I would advise against trying, but either way, let's work on getting you gone." His tired eyes met Sam's and he raised his eyebrows. "You were able to get through?"

She nodded over Ashley's shoulder. "They're sending someone. We're supposed to get up there and shine any lights we have so they know where to go."

Matt rested a gentle hand on Ashley's arm and she pulled away from Sam to hug him instead. The blonde looked around the group. Melinda was staring blankly at a tipped over chair. If she could hear their conversation, she didn't seem to care, not that Sam could blame her. What were they going to do about Josh's body? She hadn't even thought about it yet.

Forcing herself back to the moment, she tried to focus. What mattered right now was getting their injured to safety. The rest could wait. It would have to. She hoped Josh, wherever he was now, would understand.

It was a slow group that trudged up to the surface, most of them leaning on others or even being carried. Emily hadn't been stable enough to walk, despite her loud insistence, and Matt had finally just scooped her up into his arms. Once he was holding her, she fell silent again, letting her head fall to rest grateful against his chest. If she'd had it in her, Sam might have smiled at that. Sometimes Emily reminded her of Beth: all stubbornness and snark to hide when she was hurting.

For some reason, Mike wouldn't meet her eyes and simply staggered along, face pale and tired. His arm was a disaster. It was hard not to stare at it, to remember when he'd held her. Sam couldn't muster the energy to press, though, and let him be for the time being. Later, she told herself. She'd figure it out later, when she wasn't supporting a dead-eyed Melinda.

Sam thanked her lucky stars that Hank was there. He seemed to be in decent shape, despite the occasional stumble, and helped her set up the rescue flares from a plastic box under the pilot's seat. The group huddled quietly in the alien red glow of the flares, waiting. The distant sound of a helicopter's blades made Sam's heart shudder painfully in her chest. This was it. This was the end.

It was over.

The helicopter meant safety, but it also meant finality. Josh was gone. Chris was gone. The girls were gone. They were leaving.

And that, she supposed, was that.

They took the most injured first: Emily, Mike, Melinda, and Jess. No one said goodbye. No one said
anything, besides the bare minimum needed to tell the rescue team who was who and what kind of help they needed. Sam finally caught Mike's gaze as the helicopter began to lift off the ground. He offered her a weak smile and all she could do was nod. She hoped he understood everything she was trying to tell him with that one gesture. *Wait, she tried to say. Wait for me. I'm not done yet.*

Waiting for the helicopter to make its return trip for the rest of them, Sam took Matt across the clearing under the pretext of straightening one of the flares. "Do we go get the bodies?" she asked him softly, trying not to let Ashley overhear. The poor girl didn't need to be reminded yet again of what she'd lost.

He sighed and scrubbed his hand over his eyes. "I don't know. Do we even know where Chris—where the other body is?"

Everything about this made her feel nauseated and weak. "We'll tell Hank. He can figure out the retrieval, I guess."

"They know what they're doing," Matt said, nodding.

Then a realization hit her hard, knocking the breath out of her. She shook her head. "Matt, it's a cannibal."

"But—" His eyes widened. "Oh."

"We can't leave them here. We just can't. What if it—if it—" Sam couldn't even say it. She beckoned to Hank and shot a meaningful look at Matt, who headed back to keep Ashley company.

Hank, thankfully, seemed less concerned. Although whether that was due to confidence in the rescue and retrieval team or simply because he didn't fully appreciate the severity of the monster's eating habits, Sam wasn't sure. He reassured her that they would come back immediately for the bodies and get them down off the mountain.

It would have to do. Like so much else lately, Sam really didn't have a choice in the matter.

Sitting in the helicopter was almost deafening. Her stomach squirmed as they took off, one arm around Ashley as her other hand clutched Matt's in a white-knuckled grip. She looked down at the ruined lodge, the ring of faltering flares.

Three figures in white stared up at her from the edge of the trees, watching her go.

Chapter End Notes

I promise it gets better from here on out. This chapter was quite literally painful to write. These poor kids just have nothing left to give.

Oh, and if you're interested, I lurk on tumblr at livinginadeadfandom. Come talk UD with me any time!
Dawn is Coming

Chapter Notes

The titles for the next four chapters all come from the song "Stay Alive" by José González.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sam opened her eyes blearily, feeling for all the world like she had mud caked over them. She made a muffled, sleepy noise of protest and rubbed a hand over her face. A jolt of terror, cold and sharp, shot through her and she shoved herself upright, heart pounding, ready to run or fight or—

The room was shabby and lit solely by the soft glow of a lamp on a messy wooden desk against the wall. It was about as different from the environment of the last few days as humanly possible. A down comforter, a quilt, and two fleece blankets were piled on top of her, or they had been before she'd sat up and flung them partially off. Even without them, though, the room was only cool, not cold. A worn and slightly dingy rug was spread over a rough wooden floor and thick dark curtains were pulled across the window.

She was safe. True, she wasn't really sure where she was, but this was different. There was nowhere on the mountain that had been like this. Sighing, she fell back onto the stiff mattress. Her dreams, if she'd had any, didn't linger and she stared up at the ceiling. She should get up. There was something she needed to do. She could feel it nagging at her, like a forgotten homework assignment or some chore she hadn't done.

It all felt like a bad dream. If the room had been more familiar, she might have believed it was. Maybe she could even trick herself into thinking that she was about to go hang out with Hannah or rehearse with Mike or go climbing or see Beth or… or…

But it wasn't a dream. None of it.

Her feet hit the rug, and the feel of the fibers under her bare soles was surprisingly comforting. She was wearing a men's flannel that she didn't recognize and a pair of sweatpants that she was swimming in. Easing the door open, she padded out into the hall. The narrow hallway led to a small living room with a television, a VCR, and more books than seemed necessary. Outside it was dark, a faint swirl of snowflakes just barely visible in the porchlight. A light was on in another room and, hearing the soft murmur of voices, she stuck her head in.

"Sam! You're awake!" Jess shoved herself back from the dining room table tucked into the corner of the kitchen and came over to hug her. The girl was clean and seemed rested, despite the shadows still present under her eyes. "I'm so glad," she whispered, holding her tightly.

"Did you think I wasn't going to wake up?" This all seemed surreal.

Jess pulled back to look at her incredulously. "You were asleep for almost two days. Yeah, I was a little worried."

"Seriously?" No wonder her mouth tasted like garbage and her body felt weak and stiff.
"Yeah," Hank said from his seat at the table. He smiled at her. "Want some tea?"

In the only other occupied seat was Matt, his hands cupped around a mug. Like Jess and Hank, he looked clean and was wearing new clothes. They didn't quite seem to fit him right—the sleeves a little too short, the shoulders a little too narrow—but like hers, they seemed soft and warm. Hank had risen and was filling the kettle with new water and pulling a mug out of a cabinet.

Matt waved at Sam. "I'd come hug you too, but I think Jess has it covered." Indeed, the blonde still had her arms around Sam. "How are you feeling?"

"Confused," she admitted. "Where are we exactly?"

"My house." Hank lit the burner and leaned back against the sink, folding his arms over his chest.

"Not to seem ungrateful, but… how? Why?"

Jess giggled and glanced at Matt, who grinned and gestured for Jess to explain. "You passed out in the helicopter and they put you in a hospital bed. You woke up, realized you were in a hospital, and then ordered us to get you out of there. Do you not remember?"

She really, really didn't. Sam sighed. She must have been incredibly out of it. That wasn't good. There was too much to do still. She couldn't be losing time and sleeping for days. Some of what she was thinking must have translated to her face and Hank raised his eyebrows at her. "That's to be expected. You all went through some serious shit."

"But I—"

He held up one hand to silence her, his eyes kind and sad. "Stop. Sam, I know you don't know me, but I can already see…" Hank sighed and ran his hand through his salt-and-pepper hair. "We can talk about it later. For now, just let yourself be warm and safe. It's the best thing you can do."

Sam fought the urge to scoff with moderate success. "Where are the others? They're… they're okay, right?"

"Oh! Oh. Yeah. Yeah, Sam. It's okay." Jess squeezed her arm apologetically. "Sorry. I should have already said. Mike and Em are still in the hospital, but they're okay. Or, well, they'll be okay. Mike—" She swallowed hard. "He lost the arm. But he's going to be okay. He's dealing with it, I think. As much as he can, so soon. And Emily's getting better every day." The blonde released Sam and returned to her seat, a soft smile playing across her lips. "She'll be out of there soon."


"Does that mean that—"

He nodded quickly. "They got them off the mountain without any trouble. They're bringing them home."

It hurt more than she'd expected. Bringing them home. That's what she was supposed to do. She was supposed to help Josh and bring him home. Now, that just meant bringing his body back to be buried. It was more than Beth and Hannah had been able to get, she supposed. She realized Matt was still talking and tried to bring her attention back. "—animal attack. So they're not really investigating too much further. I guess they're going to just try to close the mountain off to hikers and stuff."

"What?" Her head snapped around to Hank so fast it made her almost dizzy. "Animals? Seriously?"
Hank just looked at her and after a moment, she felt her indignation fade. "Of course," she murmured, rubbing her head and wincing at how greasy and tangled her hair had become. "What else could you say?"

"Mel wanted—Melinda wanted to talk to you, Sam. When you can. Maybe after you get back to California."

She nodded. Another thought struck her. The word was hard to say, but she forced herself to say it. "Is there going to be a funeral?"

"We're not sure yet. She only just left." The kettle started to rattle warningly and he turned off the stove. "For now, let's just have some tea and get some sleep."

Sam crossed over to the box of teabags on the counter and pulled one free. The scent of dried herbs, of lemongrass and ginger and licorice and other things she couldn't name, drifted up to her. She breathed in deeply and realized abruptly that she was smiling. It wasn't huge. She didn't feel healed or anything—the razor-sharp knot of loss was still lodged in her stomach—but she was smiling. Was that good? She wasn't sure. Glancing nervously up at Hank, she saw him watching her with a mix of understanding and sadness. At least he wasn't looking at her like the cops had looked at her last time, when she'd smiled to the camera and offered ominous warnings about monsters. Maybe that meant that her smile wasn't a sign of insanity.

At the table, Matt was teasing Jessica about something and she was getting grumpy, her voice rising in pitch as she argued. Hank poured steaming water into the empty mug and passed it to Sam, who dropped in the teabag. "Look, Sam. We've really only just met. But I want to say… I've known people like you before. You're a strong person, right? You took care of people when they needed you and now that things are done, you don't know what to do with yourself." She started to protest but he held up hand and she quieted, blowing on her tea just to be doing something.

"You can't save everyone, Sam. That's the hard truth of life. Sometimes you fail. Sometimes it has nothing to do with you at all. I watched you down there. I don't know that anyone else could have done what you did. I know I couldn't. I don't think Mel could have, and she's his mother. I know it doesn't feel like it now, but you did the best you could. Sometimes it just isn't enough. And I'm sorry that you had to go through that."

She couldn't look at him. If she did, the tears building in her eyes would fall and then she would break down completely. The mug was too hot to hold, but she kept it in her hands all the same, letting the burn of it make her hands ache.

"There's no more to do now. Just rest. Let yourself recover, at least physically. The rest will come." He huffed out a rueful little chuckle. "Listen to me. I've become the old guy yammering advice at a young person. God. I told myself I'd never get to this point, but here we are all the same. Drink your tea. Take a shower if you want. Then get some more sleep. Everything else can wait."

-0-

He stared at her, his hand clenched around his pen. "I'm sorry, what?"

Melinda's mouth tightened into a thin line and she repeated herself slowly. "I want a divorce. Or at the very least, a separation." It was odd—she always had imagined that she would be nervous in this moment, but all she felt was a kind of calm certainty. Bob looked like something out of a movie: a caricature of a producer or other bigwig, with the nib of his fountain pen hovering just above a stack of papers and a glass of scotch in the other hand. Perhaps this wasn't the best time to do this, but she didn't want to wait anymore.
She should have done this a long time ago. It was easy to imagine what might have been. If she hadn't been so desperate to keep her marriage together or so terrified of what she might have passed on to her children, she might have seen Josh spiraling. Maybe she would be having lunch with her son right now instead of making quiet arrangements for his cremation.

That scotch was looking rather tempting at the moment.

"Are you really doing this now, Melly? Now?" His jaw tightened and she saw a flash of pain in his eyes. "We're about to..." He couldn't even say it. Instead he downed the rest of his drink and stood, striding over to the bar to pour himself another. "You're not thinking straight."

The handle of her cane was smooth and she ran her thumb over it, letting it grow warm from her skin and then letting go. "I'm thinking straight for the first time in a year. We're not happy. We haven't been happy for a very long time. I think it's time we were honest about that."

"Why now?" His voice was a broken whisper and she saw his shoulders slump.

Melinda sighed. Bob Washington wasn't a perfect person. No one was. The problem, though, was that Bob had worked so hard to convince the world he was perfect that, for a time, he'd convinced himself. And her too. The glamour of his life had been undeniable: mingling with movie stars, travel, parties, money... And he'd given her the children as well. Her surprise of a son, who took after her in more ways than she'd ever wanted, and her two brilliant, passionate girls. He'd even loved them, in his own way. It was just that Bob should never have been a father. Perhaps he shouldn't have even been a husband.

She felt a sweeping wave of sympathy wash over her. Hindsight was twenty-twenty. Everyone had things they would change if they could. Standing slowly, using her cane to keep from putting undue pressure on her injured leg, Melinda crossed to the bar and leaned on it. "I'm sorry, Bob," she said gently, resting her hand on his. His fingers intertwined with hers and squeezed tightly, clutching her like she was his last lifeline. She supposed that, in a way, she was: a last tie to their old life, to the memories of playing baseball in the long, golden evenings of summer at the lodge and their children laughing.

After several long minutes of silence, he nodded, gazing down into his glass. "I know. I am too."

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The ache in his arm was persistent. Of course, the worst part was knowing that it really wasn't persistent at all. It wasn't even there. It was in his head, the doctors had patiently explained.

Remembered pain. He kept expecting to look down and see his arm there, even missing those fingers. He would go to scratch his ear or grab a cup or do nearly anything and then it would hit him all over again.

Mike slumped back in the seat, looking dully out the bus window to the trees. He was being a coward, checking out of the hospital and rushing back before anyone could arrange to travel with him. He was lucky that Emily had understood. It made sense somehow, that she would. They might have been ill-matched as a couple, but they both knew what it was to be strong and in command. She still hadn't forgiven him for the incident with the gun and if he was honest with himself, he didn't know that he even wanted her to let it go. It was one of the most shameful moments of his life, right up there with letting Hannah unbutton her shirt and not being able to—

A long sip of lukewarm orange juice quelled that line of thought.
Forgiven or not, though, Emily had understood when he said he didn’t want pity from the others. *A few days*, he’d said. *All I need is a few days away from them to figure out what I’m going to do next. That way when I see them, I’ll have something I can say.* She’d bought him a ticket on the spot.

So now he was on a smelly, rattling bus on the second leg of the journey home. The doctors had been adamant about traveling after the amputation. No flights. Apparently, there was risk of him developing some issue or other from the pressure changes inevitable with a plane ride. He rolled the pill bottle of painkillers between the fingers on his remaining hand and closed his eyes. *To figure out what I’m going to do next.*

Mike snorted to himself and tightened his hold on the pill bottle. As if he had even the slightest clue what that could possibly be.

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It was only after Emily was released to go home that Jess agreed to leave. Sam felt guilty as they continued to camp out in Hank’s house, though he insisted that it was no inconvenience. More than once, she wondered about Hank’s life and his ties to the Washingtons. The better she knew him, the more it seemed that he was like her: drawn into the gravitational pull of the family until he was so involved that he couldn’t leave.

She hadn’t hugged him goodbye the way that Matt and Jess had, but she shook his hand firmly and hoped he understood. From the look in his eyes, he did. It was strange to think that they were leaving and that she might never be here again.

No dreams of any kind had come since the helicopter ride and Sam couldn’t decide whether she was happy or disappointed. No dreams meant no nightmares, but it also meant that there were no visions, no sense of what might be in her future. She reminded herself for the thousandth time that most people didn’t get visions and that she knew how to be a normal person without them. It just didn't feel like it. Every move she made, every word she said felt oddly flat, as if she'd stepped into another world.

Mike had left without saying goodbye. As with so many other things lately, Sam didn’t really know what to make of that. She missed him. She missed talking to him and being able to always have him there when she needed someone. She missed the little half-smile, half-smirk he did when he was trying to be witty and she missed the terrible jokes that he always seemed to pull out of nowhere. Emily would only tell Sam that he’d gone ahead because the timing sucked. He'd have to take road transportation, which would make his trip far longer than theirs.

She would have gone with him if he'd asked or even given her the chance to offer. But like Melinda and Ashley leaving, it was already done. There was nothing to do now but to go back with the others.

Despite what Hank had said, she still couldn’t shake the thought that she was forgetting something. A small, secret truth was lodged in the hollow of her throat and she could feel it with every breath. It was something she could never admit to the others. She could already imagine their faces and objections.

But the truth was that she wanted to go back again—back to the forest, back to the lodge, to the sanatorium or the old hotel or the mine.

Early one morning before Emily was released, Matt had confirmed what Sam remembered: Beth and Hannah had been there in the end. It helped to know that she wasn't going mad completely, but it also meant that there was a chance they were still there. Sam remembered seeing three Washington
faces looking up at her as they left in the helicopter, but that part no one could support. Maybe now that it was over, they were gone.

What could possibly still be keeping them there?

There was no answer to that question, so Sam kept her mouth shut and simply endured the pain of speculation. They'd received word that Chris's mom was planning a funeral and she knew she needed to be there. Everything else would have to wait. She thought of Ashley, of Chris's lonely mother, of whatever unfinished business she still had with Melinda, swallowed hard, and boarded the plane.

Chapter End Notes

In case you were concerned... No, they are not done on the mountain just yet.
Sam didn't own much black. It had never really been an issue until she had to dress for a funeral and the most appropriate thing she had was a black faux-leather jacket and stretchy black yoga pants. She had stared blankly into her Mom's closet, looking over the rows of neat dresses and sweaters and blouses. This was pointless. Why would it matter what she wore to a funeral? The people whose opinions she cared about weren't going to be there. Even their bodies wouldn't be there.

Finally, she had yanked the first black things she saw off the rack and put them on. A black dress with thick straps, slightly too long for her taste, and a black cardigan. She had black tights of her own, at least, but she grabbed a pair of low-heeled black pumps from the shoe rack on the floor.

She had wanted to wear purple. Hannah liked purple. She had a lavender skirt printed with roses that her friend had always threatened to steal, though it would be too short for Hannah's long legs. Or she could wear blue, for Beth. She had wanted to wear Beth's sweater—the one Sam had stolen a month back that still smelled like her. Of course, since she couldn't even look at the sweater without her heart palpitating and her hands starting to shake, it was probably for the best that she was forced into black by convention.

Everyone had been there, scattered throughout the pews. Sam had spotted Ashley sitting near a pillar. Between her red hair and black turtleneck, her face seemed impossibly pale. Near the very back, Jess sat next to Matt, looking like she hadn't slept in weeks. Josh sat in the front, silent and unsettlingly still between his parents.

It was an odd funeral, not that Sam had had much to compare it to. There were no bodies. Technically the search hadn't really been closed, but after this long, it seemed impossible that either of them was alive.

By contrast, Chris's funeral went off without a hitch.

At least one thing did, Sam thought dully, staring at the back of Ashley's head and messing with the hem of the borrowed dress. She hadn't thought, when she'd taken it off after the twins' funeral, that she would be wearing it for another one less than two years later. It itched slightly. She hated it.

As people began to go up to the closed casket to pay their respects, Ashley slipped out the side door.
Sam locked eyes with Matt, who nodded meaningfully towards the door after her. Excusing herself, Sam hurried down the hall, trying to guess which way Ash had gone.

She finally found her in an indented section of the wall, squeezed between the corner and a jutting drinking fountain. Sam had expected her to be crying, but her eyes were dry as she gazed dully at the wall across from her.

"Hey Ash," Sam said softly.

The girl started. "Oh. Hey Sam. Do you—do you need something?"

"Only to make sure you're okay."

Ashley giggled, then clapped her hand over her mouth. "Wow. Sorry. Ignore that." She looked at Sam for a minute, then slowly lowered her hand. "Do you think if I go back to the mountain, he'll be there?"

"I—no. I don't think so."

"Yeah. Me neither." Ashley didn't sound grieved so much as purely exhausted, as if she'd already cried all her tears and come out the other side drained. Sam wished she could have seen her more after they'd come back down, but everything had been a whirlwind and she'd barely been able to see anyone. "I tried to convince myself that I might be able to find him, you know? Like Hannah or the thing in the graveyard or whatever. But he wasn't buried there. And he wasn't connected to the mountain like Hannah and Beth. Maybe… maybe it's better. He'll get to rest. Right?"

Sam leaned against the wall, giving Ash space to come out of her little nook, and their hands found each other, squeezing tightly. "Right." She thought back to the three figures in white and suppressed a shudder. Were the Washingtons at rest? Or were they still there? It helped that everyone else had seen the ghosts at least once—it was harder to think she had just been hallucinating when there were lots of other witnesses to back her up.

"I just…" Ashley's hand clenched almost painfully tight and Sam glanced at her. Her jaw clenched and her voice dropped down to be almost inaudible. "I just don't understand. Sam, he was the one who prepared. He was the one… he didn't even want to come. He wouldn't have come if I hadn't… If I hadn't… But when he came, he thought things through. He brought a gun. He brought—"

Ashley's wild giggle returned for a moment before she swallowed it again. "He brought a snowmobile. Of everyone, why… Why would it be him? Why did it have to be Chris?"

She had no idea what to say. She'd thought about it a lot. As Ashley was pointing out, it felt wrong. If anyone should have died, Sam thought, it should have been her. And she didn't say that with any kind of desire to die, but simply considering the patterns of the mountain and her own connections to the Washingtons. *Chris had those same ties*, her mind reminded her, but it wasn't entirely true, was it? He might have been close with Josh, but short of being in calculus with Beth and just being around a lot, he had no ties to the girls.

"It should have been me," Ashley whispered, interrupting Sam's train of thought.

"What? Why?"

She shrugged. "I was the extra. Smart but not a game-changer. Slower and weaker. I probably should have died the first time around anyway."

"Don't say that."
"Why not? It's—it's true. And if I had, Chris wouldn't have come back and he wouldn't—"

"Chris still would have gone to the mountain," Sam said, firmly.

"But he—"

Sam stepped closer to Ashley so that their shoulders touched. She chose her words carefully. "Chris was one of the most bullheaded people I've ever met. Whether you had been there or not, eventually he would have gone. I just don't believe that he wouldn't have given in eventually, like he did. It would have bugged him too much to not know. And I think… I think that Chris would have felt compelled to get the truth about Josh, too. It just took him longer than the rest of us to overcome his own common sense."

Peering down the hall, Sam didn't see anyone, but she could hear the murmur of voices. She wasn't sure what was rude at a funeral, but she squeezed Ash's hand again. "You don't have to go back in there. Let's go somewhere. Where do you want to go? Do you want food?"

"I'm not hungry."

Thinking back to how she'd been in the aftermath of the twins' disappearance and even how she'd felt for the last few days, Sam frowned. She hadn't been hungry either. She remembered this, remembered how it went. "Let's go get coffee then, okay? Or hot chocolate? You don't have to get food if you want, but I think we should get out of here."

Ash hesitated and Sam shook her head. "It's fine. Darlene will understand." She doubted Chris's mom was aware of much at the moment. But at least she had the whole crowd of Hartley cousins and uncles and aunts to help her. "Come on."

She drew Ashley down the hallway and towards a side door. The girl followed numbly, her eyes not focusing on anything in particular.

Sam drove without thinking. Being back in their home town set her mind on familiar roads and she went into autopilot, steering them into the drive-through of her favorite high school coffeeshop. "What would you like?" she asked softly as they waited.

"Nothing."

"Not an option." She smiled. "Come on. My treat." When Ashley still didn't answer, Sam quickly shot off a text to Matt. He responded just as they pulled up to the ordering stand. "A 16-ounce soy hot chocolate, please. And a vanilla bean blended with extra whipped cream."

"What? How did you—"

"Matt," Sam said with a smile. "You wouldn't pick!"

"I haven't had that since high school. It's so much sugar."

"Good."

They pulled around into the parking lot and Ashley took a sip. She didn't smile, exactly, but her eyes softened and Sam saw some of the tension leave her shoulders. Her phone buzzed again and Sam glanced at it, then started the car up again. "Let's go see the others."

Ash stiffened again and shook her head. "Please don't take me back to the funeral."
"I'm not. It's okay. Just... just us. I promise. Is that okay?"

After a moment, Ashley nodded. They drove.

Emily buzzed them through the gate and Sam pulled the car up the long, sweeping driveway. She recognized the other cars and parked carefully next to Matt's truck. "I've never been here before," Ashley said softly as they stared up at the big house. "It's—um. It's really big."

"Yeah. Not really any bigger than the Washington's though, right?" Sam squeezed Ash's hand reassuringly and took drank some of her rapidly cooling hot chocolate. "It's just Em. You can't be intimidated of her at this point. Not after everything else, right?"

"Sure," Ashley said with a wry smile. "It's not like she's a terrifying individual anyway."

"Nah, she's a big softie. At least comparatively. Besides, this was her idea. Well, hers and Jess's, I guess. Seriously. Matt's here too."

They made their way inside, slipped their shoes off, and headed down the stairs, per the text instructions. It was like a museum, incredibly quiet and clean almost to the point of sterility. She wondered where Emily's parents were. She had heard something about them coming home to California when they'd gotten back, but they must have taken off again now that they knew Emily was safe.

The murmur of voices and the sound of a soft laugh broke the silence. They moved down the hallway and into a large den-like space. It seemed softer than the rest of the house, and more human, though that may have been primarily due to the people in it. Jess was sitting on a polished bar, swinging her feet and swiping through her phone, while Emily was behind the bar, pouring drinks. Matt waved as they came in, rising from an overstuffed leather couch to wrap Ashley up in a hug. "You okay?" Sam heard him ask and turned away, giving them a moment of privacy.

The only one missing was... "Mike?" she asked Jess quietly.

Jess bit her lip and shook her head, shrugging. "I don't know. I invited him."

"Do you want a drink?" Em asked Sam, but didn't give her a chance to respond. She slid a glass full of something dark and fizzy across to her. Lifting her own drink, she raised her eyebrows. "Cheers?"

She stared down into the glass, considering. Her impulse was to resist, to think that it was in bad taste in the wake of a funeral, and yet she could remember the light in Chris's eyes when he'd had too many beers, the way he rambled about machine learning algorithms and artificial intelligence... And Josh, though he hadn't had a funeral like the one today. He was an adventure drunk, always ready to rush off to explore something, to go spelunking or skinny dipping or anything else. "They'd want this, huh?"

Emily flashed her a slight, sad smile. "I really couldn't say."

Sam chugged the drink. Rum and coke burned her tongue and her throat, making her teeth feel like they were humming. She wasn't much of a soda drinker at the best of times, and soda plus alcohol was a combination that made her stomach squirm with surprise. Gasping, she set the empty glass down. "Gross," she said, once she could breathe properly again.

"Rude," Em said, draining her own drink. She leaned over the bar to hand Jess her own glass. "Here. As requested."

"For me? You shouldn't have!" Jess looked pale and lovely in black and dark purple. She looked
tired, as they all did, but the pleased smile she gave Em wasn't lost on Sam. Her fingers brushed over
Emily's and the other girl flushed a little.

Without thinking about it, Sam pulled out her phone, glancing down at the screen. Nothing. No
alerts, no messages. She wasn't sure what she'd expected. Everyone was here. Or dead. Except for
Mike, of course, but she hadn't heard from him still. He hadn't been at the funeral that she'd seen and
she hadn't wanted to derail anything by asking about him. It seemed unbearably rude.

Matt and Ashley came over to the bar, Ashley climbing up onto one of the stools and eyeing Emily
nervously. "Do I—do I get a drink too?"

They considered each other in silence for a long, tense moment. Sam felt like an idiot. She hadn't
thought about why Ashley would be so nervous where Emily was concerned and somehow, in all
the rush of everything that had happened, she'd forgotten about the bite and the journal. But Emily
just sighed and gave Ashley an understanding look. "Sure. What would you like?"

"Um, whatever you're making is fine? I don't… I don't have a preference." Looking like she couldn't
believe her luck, Ashley smiled as she fiddled with the edge of the counter. "Hey, um… Thanks. For
coming today. All of you. I really… I really appreciate it."

Matt slung his arm around her shoulders as Jess reached over to nudge Ash with her foot. "He was
our friend too, Ash. And you know we'd be there for you." She grinned. "You were there for us,
right?"

"Only after stalling for a million years."

Her objection was waved away by Emily, of all people. "Don't be an idiot. That doesn't matter. What
matters is that you came. Just like Chris did."

On the counter between them, Sam saw Jess's phone light up and heard it chime. She saw the name
on the screen before Jess picked it up and her heart thudded painfully in her chest. Mike. It wasn't
any of her business. If he didn't want to see her, that was okay. It sucked, but she could understand.
She just wanted… she had to know… "Is he okay?" The words burst from her before she could stop
them and she turned quickly back at her newly refilled drink to avoid whatever look Jess was giving
her.

Everyone was quiet and Sam hated it. She hadn't meant to say anything at all, much less have
everyone hear her. It was too much pressure. It was too much pressure to put on Jess and on Mike.
Again, she reminded herself: it was his choice. "Sorry. Forget I—"

"Hey everyone. Sorry it took me so long to get here."

"I didn't open the gate. Did you… did you seriously walk here? Jesus, Mike. So melodramatic."
Emily snorted and grabbed another glass. "Since I'm apparently playing bartender, what do you
want?"

Sam suddenly found herself unable to move. Wordlessly, Jess put her phone on the counter and slid
it over to where Sam could see the message Mike had sent. I'm here. You guys downstairs? Oh. She
took a big swallow of her second drink. This one was stronger, or at least had less soda in it.

She heard Mike cross the room and couldn't seem to make herself raise her head to look at him.
There was so much she'd wanted to say when she saw him again, and yet now, surrounded by
friends, with Chris's funeral so fresh in her mind, she couldn't seem to remember any of her planned
words.
Hopping off the counter, Jess dragged one of the heavy armchairs across the carpet towards the bar. Before Emily could object, Jess stuck her tongue out at her and grinned. "Here. You can sit here."

"Need a hand?" Mike asked.

There was a moment of awkward silence, then Jess giggled. "Oh my god. You fucking dork. Did you really just do that?"

"I wanted to beat everyone else to it. I am a joke pioneer and I intend to stay that way."

"Hey pioneer man—"

"Joke pioneer."

"—whatever. What do you want to drink?"

In the quiet, Sam finally managed to force a casual expression onto her face and look up. Her eyes shot straight to him and it made her stomach clench. The last time she'd seen him was in the helicopter, lifting up and away from her into the darkness. Memories struck her hard and fast: pineapple upside down cake, cave mono, his fist hitting the tunnel wall, carrying her, keeping her whole. She swallowed hard and took a drink.

"Water is fine. I think I've been dehydrated for the past year." He smiled at Matt, who grinned back. "Like in two-a-days. You could have drowned me and I'd have still wanted more water."

Sam caught a glimpse of Jess's face and the thoughtful frown said more than any words. She'd wondered, back when she'd realized about the pills, if there were other things he was doing. Maybe she was wrong, she told herself, but either way, the fact that Mike was passing up a drink was probably a good sign. Her eyes fell to his arm, to the empty sleeve of his shirt, pinned up and out of the way. She wanted to ask him if it still hurt. Was he on pain meds again? She imagined he must be.

The glass of water was set down with a thunk and Jess carried it over, perching on the arm of the chair and seeming more relaxed than she had been only moments ago. "Hey, Ash? I'm really sorry I couldn't make it. I wanted to, but I had an appointment and between traffic and… I just didn't want to show up late and interrupt things."

"It's okay," Ashley said. "I understand. Besides, I…" She trailed off, looking uncomfortable.

"You…?" Jess prompted.

"Did it feel kind of pointless to anyone else?" she asked in a rush, the words running together. She somehow managed to blush and go pale at the same time, spots of color standing out high on her pallid cheeks. Clapping her hands over her mouth, her next words were muffled. "Oh my god I can't believe I just said that."

Sam considered the idea, taking another drink. The alcohol had transitioned to a pleasant hum in her veins. "No, I get it," she said finally, breaking the thoughtful silence. "I think I know what you mean."

"It felt kind of hollow," Matt offered. "I mean, they just think it was an accident, right? Animal attack or whatever it is they're calling it. So it felt…"

"Disrespectful," Sam agreed, flashing him a grateful look.

Ashley closed her eyes for a long moment, then looked around at each of them. "C-can you guys
promise me something? I know it's stupid, but can you—can we agree to not pretend like that's what happened? They're so… everyone is so sure they know what happened, but it's not and I just can’t bear to keep pretending and trying to convince myself that it was just…” Her voice faltered and Matt put his other arm around her, drawing her into a hug.

"Any time you want to talk about it, Ash," Sam said quietly. "I'm here. I'm not going to pretend." Mike was watching her and she carefully kept her eyes fixed on Ashley, trying to infuse her voice with every possible comfort and certainty she could. "I'm not going to pretend ever again."

"Can I make a toast?" Climbing back on the bar, Jess raised her glass and looked around the room, her eyes shining with tears and something more. "To Chris, the worst dancer at prom."

Catching the spirit, Emily raised her glass. "And to Beth, who beat my grade in AP Calc by one decimal point, the sneaky bitch."

"To Hannah," Matt said, his voice rough. "The best running partner. Also, the one who complained the most."

The last one was hers. Her hand shook slightly, the ice in her glass rattling. Sam took a deep breath, thinking hard. "And to Josh, who made the worst vegan macaroni and cheese I've ever had…” She hesitated, then a breathless laugh burst from her. "…the fucking nutjob."

Emily laughed loudly at that. "Here here!" She drained her glass and gestured to everyone. "Who wants another?"
Look Into the Sun

Chapter Notes

It's funny to look back and see all the author notes where I apologized for a week delay with comments like "My life exploded!" since my life truly did fall apart completely. I'm so sorry for the incredibly long wait on this and the other stories. I love every single one of you for taking a chance on a WIP - especially one with such a hefty wordcount - and I promise to finish all three. It may take a while, but I'll get there.

"Thank you for meeting with me, Sam." Melinda's hands fidgeted, palms cupped around the ceramic mug and her thumbs rubbing against the lip. She looked better than the last time Sam had seen her. Although she still had a crutch to help her, most of the cuts on her visible skin had closed and were healing.

Sam nodded, not trusting herself to speak. What she wanted to say was of course or I've been dying to talk to you or I wish I could have saved him. When all the options were so loaded and dangerous, it was better to just stay silent.

"I'm sorry," Melinda said suddenly, meeting Sam's eyes. "I should have listened to you from the beginning."

She frowned at the woman. "What do you mean? I lied to you. You couldn't have listened to me."

"No, I mean further back. After the trip. When Josh was—" Melinda visibly forced herself to continue. "When Josh was left behind."

It was a relief to have Melinda speak so plainly. Sam was so tired of lies, of dancing around the truth and being afraid to say the wrong thing, to tip her hand and give up the game. Emotion surged in her chest as she remembered the group and their promise. Eventually she would be able to think about it and not want to cry tears of gratitude. At least, she hoped so. "It's okay. I don't think I would have believed it either. Monsters? I would have thought that we were crazy too."

"I saw…" Melinda hesitated again. "I saw pictures of what Josh had done and I just couldn't…"

Leaning across the table, Sam took the woman's uninjured hand, squeezing it tightly. "I understand. Seriously." She laughed, a sound that startled her. "I probably understand better than most. He was sick, Melinda. He was much sicker than any of us thought. It doesn't make it okay, but it's what lay at the root of what he did."

After a moment, Melinda closed her eyes and nodded, her hand tightening in return. "Sam, I'm going back." Before Sam could say anything, Melinda rushed to keep speaking. "I am. And I would like… that is… if you want to, I'd like to have you come with me. I think you're the only one who could—who should—go. I believe… God, it sounds insane to even suggest it, but—"

"They're still there," Sam said softly. She could feel it in her bones. Every time she closed her eyes, she could see the three figures in white, looking up at her as the helicopter pulled away. She'd had dreams about it. Not prophetic dreams, as far as she could tell, but still. They were there, in every dream she could remember having. Just a moment, a snapshot, background figures in a scene: two
women and a man, dressed simply in white, watching her without expression.

The woman's eyes sprang open. "You think so?"

"Isn't that what you're saying?" She tried to be gentle, but having it confirmed in this way was almost overwhelming. "Please, Melinda. If you are going back... I do want to go."

Melinda's grip on her hand was almost painfully tight. "Then let's. And this time, we won't mess around with any of that hiking nonsense. This time you have permission."

"Good," Sam said with enough feeling that Melinda chuckled. "I have had enough hiking through the woods to last me for a year."

"Only a year?"

The blonde girl smiled grimly. "We'll see, I guess."

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She didn't tell anyone. No one would understand.

Sam paused, halfway through shoving a spare pair of pants into her bag and sighed. That wasn't fair. It was quite likely that everyone would understand. But understanding or not, they would still want to deter her from going. They would see it as delusion at best or a death wish at worst. Regardless, Sam could still feel it with painful certainty. She had to go back.

It didn't matter that the monster was probably still alive. She couldn't imagine that whatever had happened there at the end had been enough to somehow, miraculously, kill it. It didn't matter that, despite Melinda's confidence, she didn't really know how they were going to get to the lodge besides hiking. After all, Hank's helicopter had been wrecked, the cable car was down, and she highly doubted anyone else would be willing to fly them up.

All that truly mattered was that she still woke up sweating and restless, a dream-sob finding its echo in her chest as she remembered where she was and who she left behind.

They didn't talk much on the ride to the airport, nor on the plane. Melinda was tense and distracted and, while Sam understood and empathized, she didn't think there was anything she could do to comfort the woman. The closer they got to their destination, the more Sam felt doubt gnaw at her gut. It reminded her sharply of one of Beth's favorite myths: Orpheus and Eurydice. Was this Sam's test? If she couldn't keep the confidence that they really were going to find what they were looking for, was she doomed them? Was the monster lurking around the ruined lodge, waiting for them, smiling its obscene smile and feeling her lack of confidence?

Sam chewed on the edge of her thumbnail, watching the clouds below them.

It didn't matter, she told herself fiercely. It didn't matter. She was going to see them again, all of them. She was going to... do something. She had to.

She had to make it up to them.

-0-

"No."

"Hank, really... I—"
"Absolutely fucking not, Mel. What the hell are you thinking?"

Melinda leaned heavily on her cane and glared at him, free hand firmly on her hip. It was in moments like this that Sam could really see the family resemblance. She'd seen the exact same stubbornness on each of the siblings' faces many times. Sam tried to interject: "I know it sounds crazy, but—"

"Hank, I'm going up there whether you help me do it or not," Melinda snapped, cutting off Sam's attempt to be reasonable. "I don't know what you saw, but I know there's still something up there."

"Yep. A ruined building and unstable ground and whatever the fuck that thing was, most like. And I'll be damned if I'm helping you get yourself killed."

She shook her head. "Stop being stubborn."

A sharp, hoarse laugh burst from him. "Me? I'm being stubborn?"

"You know I'm not talking about whatever that thing was or is. You must have seen them. My girls. They're still there. I can't just leave them. Not after... Not after..." Melinda's face started to crumble. Not for the first time, Sam wondered how much sleep she'd been getting since they returned. The lines on her face seemed deeper, the bags under her eyes more pronounced.

Sam put her hand on Melinda's shoulder and met Hank's gaze evenly. "I know it's stupid," she said quietly. "But I saw them too. I'm not sure if you did, but do you really think we're crazy?"

He sighed and rubbed his jaw. "No. I don't think you're crazy. Just exhausted and grief-stricken and feeling the weight of more guilt than you should."

Not bothering to argue about the guilt comment, Sam nodded. "Fine. But I know what I saw. And I'm not the only one who saw it—who saw them. So I'm going up there. I don't want to hike, but I will if I have to. We were just hoping you might have a quicker way. If you really think the monster might still be around, I would think you'd want to help us, not make us take the long road."

Hank sighed again and shot her an aggravated look. She bit back the sudden urge to smile. She had him. Logic-ed! she heard Chris crow triumphantly in her mind. The feeling of triumph faded as quickly as it had come.

He looked at Melinda. She had pulled herself together and not fallen to tears, but she was visibly trembling, her grip on the cane white-knuckled with tension. "Fine. Fine. Mel, for what it's worth, I hope you're right about this. I hope this isn't a trip for nothing. I hope this isn't a trip for nothing." He tried to smile. After a moment, it seemed to stick. "I think I can figure out something."

-o-

Mike stared out the window but didn't register anything but light. On his desk, his phone was still lit with the message from Jess. He didn't need to look at it to remember what it said. His entire body felt overly tense. A few years back, he'd been in a car accident. No one had been seriously hurt, though the car he'd been in had been horribly messed up. Just before the impact, he'd seen it coming and known it was going to happen. There had been nothing for him to do, but every single muscle in his body had tightened, bracing for it. That's what it felt like now. It felt a bit odd to even remember the accident as a source of tension or trauma, after everything he'd been through.

Jess's message didn't quite sound like her: no weird abbreviations, no emoji. He wasn't sure if that was good or bad. It didn't really matter. He was focusing on the wrong things, trying to make his body relax, but it wasn't working.
Sam went back. She left a note.

After several long minutes, he messaged her back. Why?

I'm assuming you mean why did she go, not why did she leave a note. It didn't really say. Melinda went with her.

What do we do? He asked, trying to ignore the way his fingers were shaking. His missing arm hurt beyond all reason – not the healing surgical scar, but the arm itself. No amount of painkillers would make it go away.

It took a few minutes for Jess to respond. Nothing we can do. Just wanted to let you know. We can't go after her. None of us can. Not this time.

He had no response to that. His body felt like it was rebelling against him. His skin itched, his muscles ached with tension and yet somehow felt weak, his mouth felt dry. He wanted a drink, wanted to pop more painkillers, wanted to do something, anything, to get out of his own head. If only he could go to the gym or play football, do something aggressively physical.

And why can't you?

The thought, when it came, spoke in Sam's reasonable, ever-so-slightly irritated voice.

Because he couldn't. He couldn't pretend like he was the same when everything had changed so drastically. Chris was dead. Josh was dead. The girls were dead. He could still remember Hannah's sweet, hopeful smile and felt ill. He couldn't very well go play football with guys who knew nothing about what he'd been through. He didn't want it and didn't deserve it.

He certainly didn't deserve Sam, even the fake Sam encouraging him in his own mind. It was hard to keep from imagining her up on the mountain, alone and at the mercy of the thing. He hadn't even spoken to her since they left Canada, not really. The memories were too much. Every time he thought back, the happiness and peace and pain and guilt were overwhelming.

The little orange pill bottle next to his phone caught the light and he stared at it blankly, then shoved up out of his chair. This was stupid. This was all so fucking stupid. He jammed his feet into trainers and grabbed a hoodie. Whether it was said in Sam's voice or not, whether it was correct or not, he had to do something, even if that meant trying to adapt his weightlifting routine to only having one arm.

For a moment, he let himself lean heavily on the door to his room. She was really back there, back in the snow. If anyone could come back in one piece, it was Sam.

His phone buzzed in his pocket and he fished it out. A text from Emily. Actually, more than one.

She's a moron.

A total fucking moron.

But she'll be fine.

It's Sam.

Somehow, it made him feel better.
It was a good thing Hank had agreed to help him. There's no way anyone would have flown them up to the mountain without his support. He'd been there long enough to be a fixture of the community, a true local, and people were apparently willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, even when he was asking for something that they thought was nuts.

Sam nestled deeper into her coat and snorted. It also helped that the official report just listed wild animals. It was a much more understandable threat and infinitely easier to believe that someone like Hank could handle it.

He had insisted on accompanying them, which was a small price to pay for the benefit of flying. Sam really hadn't been kidding about not wanting to hike for a while. Strange sensory memory kept hitting her and she'd feel freezing water in her boots or cuts on her hands. She watched the forest below them, thankful that the sound of the chopper was too loud to allow for much talk.

Melinda sat across from Sam, her face set and expressionless.

There still had been no butterfly dreams. There was no indication that they were going to find what they were looking for. Sam closed her eyes and focused on breathing.

They touched down in the same area she now knew so well. Some of the hollow flare shells were still visible and the snow was uneven, some sitting in areas tramped down by their group or the rescue team. It was still light out, which set the whole thing into a strange kind of surrealism.

She stepped out, the snow crunching under her feet and looked over at Hank, who was helping Melinda down. "Now what?"

He raised an eyebrow. "You tell me. This was your idea."

"Melinda?"

The woman looked lost. "I thought… I thought they would just be here."

"Let's look around," Sam said quickly. "We only just arrived. And it's still daytime. We don't know how this works."

As she led the way towards the ruins, she swallowed hard. Please, she thought, reaching into her pocket for the necklace she still carried. Please, please, please.
There were few things Sam loathed more than an anticlimax. Movies, books, television shows…
Sam absolutely hated feeling let down by an ending. It wasn't necessarily a lack of satisfaction that did it—there were plenty of books that left off poetically, leaving a reader thinking and wondering—but a true, anticlimactic ending, where the writer simply played at cleverness but really couldn't wrap things up… that was the worst. It was, Sam felt, unforgivable. No matter how ardently Josh tried to justify it, media like *Lost* just seemed inexcusable to her.

So, as she trailed along behind Melinda, she found herself growing increasingly annoyed, which was the absolute last reaction she'd anticipated. Nothing here felt the same. Not that she wanted it to feel the same, exactly, but that ominous air of foreboding she'd felt from the very first time they'd all arrived, the whole pack of them, still in high school and beautifully naïve, was gone.

The snow seemed almost oppressively silent. The occasional birdcall rang in the air and made her twitch. It was out of place. The only thing that should be here, she felt, irrationally, were ravens and the odd squirrel or deer. Not actual, normal birds.

Samantha Giddings: Nature's Judgmental Bitch.

She snorted to herself and tried to summon a bit of the certainty that had led her here. Ahead of her, Hank helped Melinda over a fallen beam as they headed towards what had once been the lodge's kitchen. The smell of acrid smoke had faded since Mike had lit it on fire, Sam noted, and felt a pang of loneliness at the thought. She still hadn't talked to him, even at the impromptu wake they'd had at Emily's house. Or at least, not real conversation. Not the kind of conversation she needed or wanted.

Not that she even knew what to say at this point. Right now, it didn't matter.

Her fingers felt empty and she once more grabbed the necklace, letting the pendant press in against her palm hard enough to leave an indentation of its shape. It did little to calm her, but the slight pain of it broke through her numb irritation. After everything, how was it that now Hannah was nowhere to be found? Beth had only shown herself rarely and Josh… Sam still wasn't sure that her own addled, exhausted brain hadn't invented seeing him. But Hannah had been a certainty. Almost everyone had seen her. She'd even come close to killing some of them. She had to be here, somewhere.

"Hannah?" Melinda called again. Sam had lost track of how many times she'd called out for her children now. "Beth? Josh?"

Nothing. Still nothing.

They all moved through the house. Hank's eyes growing sadder and more pitying by the minute. As much as she liked the man, it made Sam want to shake him. That didn't help. As Melinda opened the door down to the basement, Sam flinched, half-expecting a monster to spring out at them, but there was nothing.

Sam wandered along behind them, noting all the marks of what they'd been through with a kind of detached curiosity that should have bothered her more than it did. It felt like wandering through a museum of trauma. *And on our left, you can see the dollhouse rigged by Joshua Washington. The*
last written record of Hannah Washington can be found in the attic. Our experts have... Sam shook her head, hard, trying to rid herself of the absurd urge to giggle. What the fuck was wrong with her? And more importantly: "Where the fuck are you guys?" she mumbled, rubbing a hand over her tired eyes.

The weirdest part was seeing the blood of her friends all over the place. Hank had managed to get Chris's body out of there, but no one had gone through to scrub the place. Why would they bother? No one was supposed to come up here again.

She realized with a jolt that Melinda was heading towards the old hotel and, more specifically, towards where they'd had their final attempt with Josh. It made sense, in a way. Where else would you expect to find a ghost than in the place where they died?

"Melinda, I—"

The woman turned, her face calm and unsurprised. Before she could say anything, Hank spoke up, softly. "Sam, his body is gone. We got it out of there. You won't see anything."

That wasn't what she had been about to protest, but his reassurance was so simple, so reasonable, that Sam shut her mouth with a snap and continued to follow them, mute. Melinda hadn't told her about that, but it made sense all the same. They wouldn't very well have an elaborate funeral for someone who was already presumed dead. They passed by burned and blackened bookshelves, brown stains that had been Emily's blood, and Mike's, and countless others. The building creaked ominously around them, but seemed more or less stable.

The dining room seemed smaller than she remembered. Patches of oily residue still patterned the wall and floor. The broken glass of the blood jar crunched under her boots as she made her way to the table and trailed her chain-tangled fingers along its surface. It was almost too easy to remember the way Josh's eyes had emptied as he released his last breath. He'd deserved better than that.

"I'm... I'm going to head back upstairs. Is that okay?" Sam hated this fucking feeling, this sense of inadequacy and near-boredom. She needed to do something, itched to just get out of there and run, run until she found them.

Hank opened his mouth—likely to protest—but Melinda cut him off. She didn't look happy about it, but she nodded. "Just stay close, okay? And if you need anything, yell."

Sam had every intention of keeping that agreement and staying close. Or at least, she told herself she did. Though she tried to keep her pace even, as she left the club, she found herself almost jogging. It was strange how small all of this seemed now—not just the dining room, but all of it. It had seemed monumental and maze-like before, but now? She knew it so well that it seemed she could navigate it in the dark with ease, no harder than going from her dormroom to the communal bathroom at 3 a.m.

She stumbled to a halt just past the dollhouse and turned to look at it, to survey the whole area: the water heater where she'd fucked with Josh, playing a dumb prank that she'd actually felt guilty about afterwards, where she'd left the baseball bat she'd later hit him with... And here is where Samantha Giddings hid, shivering in her towel, as she believed she was being stalked by a psychotic killer.

Before she realized she was doing it, she had opened the dollhouse and pulled out Hannah's diary. It was dusty and smelled of mildew, just as the rest of the basement did, but it also had a slight lingering edge of lavender. Was that really an echo of Hannah from more than a year ago? Or was that another cruel layer Josh had added just to fuck with whoever found it? Either way, Sam closed her eyes and breathed deeply, willing Hannah to appear behind her, even to try to kill her again.
Nothing. Still nothing.

Sam stowed the Journal in her waistband and climbed the crumbling stairs. She had every intention of staying in the damaged living room as Melinda had implied, but staying still made her feel itchy and impatient. The afternoon light filtered through the pine trees and near-destroyed walls of the lodge. Carefully, she once more climbed what was left of the stairs. Every climb had made them creak more under her weight and she knew she was pushing her luck, but it still seemed like the strongest possibility so far. Melinda would never have allowed it.

At the upper landing, she glanced towards Hannah's room and considered, then headed the other way, to the locked door of Josh's room that she'd been so determined to avoid violating previously. "'No secrets between best pals or potential future in-laws,' eh, Josh?" she muttered, jimmying the lock with her penknife. "You can't even be mad about this. You taught me how to do it. If you were just around like any decent, self-respecting ghost, I wouldn't have to—" The door swung open.

Josh's room was remarkably undamaged. The walls and ceiling were intact, which meant that the only weather had been what made its way under and around the door. His bed was neatly made and the room still carried his scent strongly: a mix of his deodorant and sunscreen and metal and who-only-knew what else. The books on film theory were all in their place and Sam shifted the large calendar writing pad on the desk to reveal several pages of scribbled notes that she didn't bother to read. More of his planning, undoubtedly. The bookends they'd found at Buttercup Thrift were on the mantle, holding his mirror in place, and a huge television set took up a good portion of the far wall.

There was no Josh, though. No familiar faces to greet her except for those looking out from the pictures pinned to the wall above his desk. He hadn't bothered to frame any of them, and they came in formats of all sorts, from a few Polaroids taken with what was probably Beth's camera to a printed eight-by-ten of their whole group at Winter Formal. She smiled at Josh's awkward, overly-formal grin and her own half-laughing, half-smirking expression as she'd posed with her hand on his arm.

"Are you sure you don't want to just, y'know, come say 'hi'?' she asked the room at large, a bit plaintively. "It would make this way easier on me."

She rolled her eyes at the ensuing silence. "No, of course not. It's not like you ever made anything easy on me ever."

The climb back down was even less stable. Sam wondered vaguely if she should apologize to the house. They'd certainly put it through enough shit to last a lifetime. All it had wanted to be was a house. A grossly large, opulent house built on land that, according to Flamethrower Guy, the Washingtons didn't really have any right to… Nevermind. *Fuck you, house.*

-  

Sam wasn't entirely sure how Melinda managed to talk Hank into letting them spend the night, but she didn't really care. It meant more time here and another chance to find them. Hank had enough emergency supplies in his helicopter to keep them warm that night. He'd insisted that it was just a happy coincidence and that they truly were meant for emergencies, but Sam counted three sub-zero sleeping bags, assessed the amount of gear, and drew her own conclusions.

It was roughly one in the morning when Sam gave up trying to sleep. Hank, who'd been keeping watch, had dozed off and was sitting slumped with his chin on his chest. It wasn't hard to put her boots back on, zip up her coat, and slip away.
If it wasn't so cold, if the sharp edge of moonlight wasn't so crisp and clear, if, if, if… If it weren't for any one of a dozen things about this, Sam might almost think she was asleep, dreaming this climb. There was stupid and then there was stupid, Sam thought as she awkwardly hurdled a downed tree and continued up the snowy path. Coming back had been stupid. Going upstairs had been stupid. Wandering away from Hank and Melinda and the house and the helicopter was stupid. Like, leveled-up stupid. She was at least level four stupid at this point. She'd put all her ability score points into stupid and now got a +6 bonus to doing stupid things.

"Shut up, Sam," she muttered. It was nerves. It had to be. Her brain kept circling and circling in random and wildly unhelpful loops of nonsense as she headed out towards—

She stopped, looking around. She didn't even know where she was heading. It certainly wasn't towards anywhere particularly familiar—not towards the shed or the guest house or the main mine entrance. She'd just felt a driving urge to walk away, away from the lodge and her friends' empty bedrooms, away from Hank and Melinda's breathing.

"How did you get here?" Sam hadn't meant to say it out loud, but she did, her voice startling her. Automatically, her brain filled it in. I talked to Melinda in a coffee shop. We flew up and then took a bus to town. Hank flew us up here. We slept. I walked off into the woods like a dumbass. It really wasn't that complicated.

But, of course, that wasn't really what she was asking herself.

How did you get here? By not being fast enough or strong enough or smart enough. By forgiving too easily and not being cynical enough. By being too cynical and not loving enough.

By loving too much.

The ground beneath her gave way. There was a scant moment where she seemed to hang in place, feeling the echo of her mistake deep in her chest. She'd been so caught up in her own thoughts that she hadn't watched the changing landscape, hadn't seen where it dropped off, hadn't stopped in time…

She fell. Instinct kicked in and she grabbed for something, anything to break her fall. Her hands scraped against rock and ice, catching here and there for a moment, but not enough to hold her. Adrenaline surged and it almost felt like she was falling in slow motion. She felt a brush of something organic against her palms and she snatched at it, catching the root for a second before it tore free and she fell once more, finally striking the ground hard. Pain flared through her hip, her shoulder, her head; her vision swam, massive shadows of subtly varying grey and black shifting and pulsing in front of her.

Slowly, Sam shifted, her arm screaming in protest as she rolled over onto her hands and knees. Her stomach heaved and she vomited, what little of Hank's wilderness rations she'd been able to eat emptying themselves out onto the frozen ground.

Something flashed white in her peripheral vision and she jolted upright, ignoring the flood of pain and renewed gush of nausea. It had been there. She knew it had been—the edge of white fabric, moving in the slight eddies of air—but she found herself staring at nothing but rock and ice.

There was something dark and hulking next to her. She reached out, unthinkingly, and her hand met something cold and hard. It came slowly into focus: a big can—oil drum, her dazed brain supplied, though she wasn't sure that was accurate—made of rusted metal that stung her scraped skin. She clutched at it, using it to pull herself up to her shaking feet. Looking up, she could see the path of her fall. The moonlight from above cut against the jutting stones and smooth stretches of packed snow. It
was nearly vertical. It wouldn't be an impossible climb, but it would certainly be challenging, and just looking up at it made her head swim all over again.

The mine. She'd fallen into the mine. She must have, though it wasn't part of the mine that she'd been in before. Somewhere nearby, she could hear water and the familiar creaking of the water wheel, so she wasn't completely lost. That was good. It would serve her right to have survived everything only to die because she wandered off and got lost.

Gingerly, she felt along her leg, her hip, her arm. Although it all hurt, there was no sharp, fresh spike of pain, which was reassuring. If she'd broken something, she knew from experience, any touch would make that very obvious. She would have wicked bruises, but if that was all, then she was very, very lucky. What if she'd broken her leg?

At the thought, she froze, her heart pounding. A broken leg. Broken limbs. Being trapped. She looked around again, taking a stumbling step in closer to the barrel she had used to stand. A ragged scrap of thick paper, half buried in snow and severely discolored, was barely visible in the cast-off moonlight. She fumbled to pick it up and turned it over, barely choking back a sob. Hannah. She had taken this picture. She knew this picture. It was Hannah, posing, showing off her butterfly tattoo and beaming at the camera.

Emily had told her about this. Emily had told her about all of this. Sam dropped the picture, hardly noticing it flutter to the ground. She staggered towards where she could hear the water and found boards leaning against the stone wall. Long gauges were dug into the rock, marking days. She should stop. She knew she should stop.

Instead she kept moving, kept walking, rounding the ruined wooden wall and staring into the small alcove behind it. She didn't have light, she told herself. She wouldn't be able to see—but her hand had found her phone, the screen cracked but still functional, and turned on the flashlight before her brain could catch up with her fingers. The stark white light caught a familiar, if desiccated profile, and then her phone fell to clatter on the ground.

Sam's knees hit the ground and she heaved again, her stomach trying to turn itself inside out.

This, Emily hadn't told her about, but she had learned of it through the others: the makeshift cross, the... the head... The search and rescue crew had told them it was too dangerous in the mine to try to recover it, though perhaps they had simply not believed Emily's story enough to pursue it.

Beth and Hannah's coffins were empty. They always would be.

She'd found Beth's grave, she remembered, found the familiar watch. Why were there two graves? Why two ramshackle markers, clumsily fashioned out of broken boards and scavenged nails? Why was Beth's head set up like this, on display for anyone who came by? "Why?" she whispered, letting her head fall to rest against the freezing, packed-dirt ground. Her tears felt overly hot on her cheeks, burning along her lashline before falling.

Slumping to her side, she curled into a ball, her shoulders shaking. Cold seeped into her, numbing her injuries somewhat. She hoped it could numb her mind, let it stop its wild, spastic scramble.

She slept.

- 

Gentle hands stroked her hair. Sam kept her eyes closed for a few minutes, savoring it. The fingers were slender and lightly calloused, but still soft. They traced along her hairline and combed through
her hair. It made Sam's headache fade. She wasn't sure why her head hurt in the first place. Maybe she was dehydrated. She'd been trying to be better about drinking water, but she often forgot.

She shifted and sighed contentedly. A quiet laugh made her open her eyes and look up into Beth's amused eyes. "What?" Sam said, pouting. "Are you laughing at me?"

"Absolutely."

"Rude." She couldn't hold the pout and smiled, reaching up to lazily brush a strand of Beth's own hair back behind her ear. "And you woke me up, too."

"You weren't supposed to fall asleep. I thought you wanted me to read to you."

"I did!"

"And yet you fell asleep. You're the rude one."

Sam smiled. "It isn't my fault. Your voice is relaxing. I'm tired. The book is boring. It all led to naptime. I couldn't help it."

"It is not boring!"

"Um, it is a book about the Sweet-Harley Davidson Act. It is intensely boring."


"To you and doing well on the exam, maybe. To me? Not so much."

"You are an ignorant cretin and I don't know why I even like you."

Smirking, Sam pushed herself up to sitting and leaned forward. Her fingers slid along Beth's jawline and into her hair, pulling her into a kiss. Beth's lips were so soft. Sam hummed contentedly and deepened the kiss, feeling the thrill she always did as Beth melted into her. When she broke away, she couldn't keep the grin off her face. "That is why you like me."

Beth laughed again. "One of many reasons, you jerk."

"You also like my modesty."

"Oh definitely. Best quality. You're so humble."

"The most hum— Beth kissed her again, effectively shutting her up. Sam let her hands wander, tracing the familiar curve of Beth's waist and trailing along the narrow sliver of skin where her shirt rode up. She—

A sharp, rapid knock interrupted them. "I am going to count to five and then I'm coming in and I better not see a single thing I don't want to see!" Hannah's voice was louder than it needed be to sound through the door and Sam winced. "One! Two! Three!" As she finished counting, Sam scooted back, putting a respectful amount of space between her and Beth, who still looked a little dazed and flushed.

The door banged open and Hannah burst in. "Good! Keep Jesus between you two!" She glanced down at the history book on the bed and pointed at it. "Or US history. That works too. Nothing to deaden a sex drive like that."

"Did you want something?" Beth asked sharply.
Hannah's smile widened. As Sam watched, it grew wider and wider still, wider than any human smile should be. Had her teeth always been so sharp? And she looked so skinny—had Hannah not been eating much lately? How strange.

Her friend caught her staring and raised her eyebrows. "Do I have something on my face?" Hannah ran her hands through her hair, as if pulling it back into a ponytail, and large chunks of hair fell free, dropping to the ground and leaving her scalp looking sparse and bare. She pulled a butterfly barrette from the pocket of her jeans, hanging loosely from bony hips, and clipped back her remaining hair.

Sam glanced back at Beth, uncertainly. Something was off, but she couldn't put her finger on it. "Did we all have plans this afternoon?"

Her girlfriend hummed thoughtfully, thinking, her head tipped towards her shoulder at a crazy, unnatural angle. "I think Josh wanted to do something. I don't remember what, though." Something thick and red was leaking down from her ear, shining slightly on her teeth as she spoke. The air of the bedroom smelled like vanilla and lavender and copper and dirt. Just as Sam thought it, Beth wrinkled her nose. "Hannah, did you step in something? It smells gross in here now."

Hannah's grin didn't falter. It should have been impossible for her voice to be so clear with her teeth clenched in their vicious smile, but it was. "Wow. Rude. You know, she who smelt it, dealt it."

Something pierced through Sam's chest, hard and cold and fierce. She gasped, looking down at the protruding tip of a long needle. The shiny metal of it shone red with her blood and a viscous clear liquid dripped slowly from the hollow end.

"Jesus, Josh. I thought you were supposed to inject it into her, not spill it all over the quilt," Hannah complained.

Sam craned her head back to look over her shoulder. A familiar chuckle rolled out from behind the mask, half made up of the Psycho's bared, broken teeth and skull-white skin and half Josh's own, twisted, monstrous face. She heard Beth laugh too, then speak, voice amused. "You look so dressed up. Where are you going, brother-mine? Big date night?"

The needle hurt. The piercing ache of it was spreading, creeping through her torso and along her limbs, pain crawling like a spider through her veins and along her bones. "Why?" she said, finally, looking around at all of them. "Why are you doing this?"

The needle shifted. Pain shot through her head, her shoulder, her side and hands and legs. "Josh?"

He didn't answer, just moved the needle again, wiggling it from side to side as she fought to keep breathing.

"I mean, you did kill him," Hannah offered, leaning in closer. The barrette fell to clatter on the floor as what was left of her hair dropped away. Her skin had taken on a greyish tint, scummy and filthy in the warm California light streaming through Beth's windows. "It kind of seems like you have this coming." Beth patted her hand conciliatorily on Sam's knee, nodding.

It hurt more than the needle. She had killed him.

Fuck.

She had killed Josh. She had laid him out on a table, cut him, and watched as he bled to death. She had basically just finished what Josh had tried, years ago. Beth had been wrong when she'd… when she'd…
Sam slowly turned her head, fighting the pain and the screaming of her vertebrae, to look at Beth. Her head was still broken, her eyes strangely glazed. "I killed him."

"You did. I can't believe you did it, but you did. I thought you loved us. But it makes sense, I suppose. You let us die. You killed Hannah. Why wouldn't you kill Josh?"

That was wrong. This was all wrong. Beth had been the one to tell her it was different. Hannah had reassured her that death was preferable to existing as a monster. Josh had… Josh had forgiven her. She knew he had. She could feel it in the soles of her feet, in the hollow of her collarbone, in all the strange small places on her that certainty seemed to come from. *How did you get here, Sam?*

By loving too much. By giving in. By giving up.

"This isn't real." The pain wasn't coming from the needle. She wasn't an expert in stab wounds, of course, but the way the pain covered her whole being couldn't possibly be coming from the one injury. It felt like cold, like blunt trauma, like a migraine or something worse. Hannah leered at her, her face fully twisted and monstrous. From the corner of her eye, she could see the Psycho-wendigo-beast-Josh tip its head curiously to the side. "This isn't real."

"Sam?" Beth touched her cheek gently, then warm lips brushed against her skin. She jerked, startled, and stared into Beth's kind, sad eyes. "Are you okay?"

Was she okay? No, of course not. She looked around, trying to focus, but they were alone. There was no dead girl, no monsters, no needle. She still hurt, though, the fierce pounding in her head growing worse with time. "Where did they go?"

"Who?" The other girl looked around, then sighed and sat down besides Sam, the bed shifting under her weight. She pulled her legs in and crossed them, leaning on her knees. "Oh. The nightmares. Yeah. They're gone."

"Gone?"

"I can't say they won't be back, but that's all they were. Just nightmares."

"And you?"

Beth sighed. "I'm… something else. Not new. I'm whatever I was before, the last time we talked. A ghost, maybe?" She made a face. "I hate that word, though."

"Where are we?"

Her late girlfriend's face grew very still and solemn. "You're asleep. And as much as I want to keep talking to you here, where I can actually move my facial muscles, such as they are, you need to wake up."

She shook her head. "No. I don't want to. I want to stay here with you." Fear gripped her, hard. What if she never saw Beth again? This might be the last time she'd ever get to speak with her. "I'm not leaving. I'm not going."

"Sam, you have to." Beth took Sam's hand between both of her own and squeezed hard. "Please. I can't… you are going to die if you don't wake up."

"Good," Sam said fiercely.

"You don't mean that. Don't say that."
Sam looked down at their joined hands. She considered. If she died, would she get to stay here? She still believed that Chris hadn't, so why would she be any different? Would she get to be with her friends, with her family? Though there was a surge of longing at the thought, there was an equally powerful rush of grief as she thought of Jess, of Matt, of Emily and Ashley and Mike. She had more friends and family than she'd realized.

"Wake up, Sam. Please? I promise I'll be there. It won't be the same, but I promise." Beth leaned in to rest her forehead against Sam's shoulder. "I love you, Sam. Don't let yourself die here."

She woke up.

The mine was freezing. She was freezing; every part of her that wasn't numb screamed with pain. Her muscles didn't want to move, but she slowly dragged one hand up to press it against her head and winced at the sticky, matted mess she felt. How could she have been so stupid? The last thing you ever wanted to do with a concussion was fall asleep. She could still feel the echo of Beth's lips on her skin and imagined she could smell her lotion. It was a cruel trick for her mind to play on her.

It took her several minutes to sit up fully, dragging herself over to the nearby wall and leaning against it for support. Her phone was still on the ground and she pulled it into her lap, shutting off the flashlight function. It might be important to keep the battery alive, but it was more important that she not see the head again. She didn't think she could bear it.

"I thought you said you'd still be here," she said aloud, her voice cracking from disuse and cold. It had just been a dream. Another stupid dream, without even a butterfly to signal it was anything more. "Liar," she muttered bitterly.

"That seems uncalled for."

Sam nearly jumped out of her skin, groaning as her sudden, jerking movement reminded her once more of her injuries. She turned and saw, in the faint, cast-off light provided by the moon far above, Beth. Her face was a calm mask, serene and unfeeling, but her voice was amused. "Am I hallucinating?" Sam asked her.

"Possibly, but I don't think so. I'm real, at least. Or as real as I can be, if that makes sense."

"Are…" Sam hesitated, then plowed forward. "Are the others here somewhere too?"

Beth nodded, slowly, as if considering the question. "They are. It's harder for them. I have practice," she said, drily. "I'm the most tenured of the three of us. I never thought that would be a good thing. I know they wanted to see y—" Beth's impassive face twitched into the slight semblance of a smile. "Speak of the Banana!"

"Hannah?" Her friend was there: flickering like a faulty film reel and looking nearly translucent, but there. A rush of relief so overwhelming it almost made her dizzy swept over her. "Hannah, you're here."

Although her face was steady, she sounded like she was smiling. "And I even promise not to try to kill you. Though it seems like you're doing a good enough job of that on your own."

Sam shook her head. "No. I'm not."

"You will be if you don't get out of here soon. Trust me," Hannah's voice took on an edge. "I know what it's like to be injured down here. And you didn't even bring snacks." Beth scoffed and her twin looked over. "Too soon?"
"I think it might always be 'too soon' for that joke."

"Sorry." It was strange, hearing Hannah sound truly apologetic. Hannah had rarely been like that; she'd always been one to stubbornly hang onto her decisions and refuse to admit she'd made a mistake. Her voice was small and more than a bit ashamed. "I don't know what to say anymore." It was like listening to a radio station fading in and out of range.

Sam looked at Beth, panicked. "Is she—"

"She's trying," Beth said softly. "It's hard. It takes time. She was angry before."

"You aren't now?" Sam asked Hannah's unstable image, desperately. "Han? Can you—can you forgive me?"

Her best friend suddenly popped into perfect clarity. "I wasn't, but that question kind of makes me mad. Does that count? Sam, I could never… I don't need to forgive you. There's nothing to forgive."

Where was she even supposed to start? "I let you die. I gave up the search too soon. I—Mike—" She faltered, glancing back and forth between Hannah and Beth. How could she ever hope to explain any of it? She should beg forgiveness from both of them. There was a strange, echoing sound and it took her a moment to realize it was laughter: two voices, laughing together. She stared at them.

"Sam, you did nothing wrong," Hannah said.

"Although, I think your taste in men might be questionable," Beth chimed in, voice still laughing.

"But you did nothing unreasonable, nothing bad. Hindsight is twenty-twenty." Sam could almost have wept at the kindness and understanding in Hannah's voice. It was her friend, her best friend. Not a monster. Not an insane spirit bent on hurting others. Just Hannah. "If anyone had known, they would have kept looking. That's no one's fault."

"Josh—"

Beth cut her off. "You couldn't have known that either. No one could have known. The moment you realized, you came back in a blaze of glory to do everything you could do to save him. And, Sam? We were talking about it and—"

"We don't think you could have saved him," Hannah said, finishing the thought. "We've felt the things that are up here. Makkapitew was a part of both of us. We felt him. We felt what he was, what he did to us, what we did to ourselves. And all three of us have felt that other monster. There are more things, too, Sam. More things up here than you could imagine or understand. It had to be like this. We have to be here, now."

She didn't understand. "You were supposed to die?" It didn't make sense. If she'd stopped the prank, if they'd kept looking, if she'd realized Josh had gone off the deep end, if, if, if. She hated how much the word dominated her thoughts, parading through her mind in an unending loop of possibilities.

"Not exactly." Beth and Hannah shared a look before Beth continued, speaking slowly and choosing her words with great care. "We don't know, precisely. But what we did—when it attacked you and Matt just before you all left—I could never have done that on my own, or even with Hannah. Together, though, we were able to actually do something. I'd watched for so long. Hannah and Josh knew it in a way that I can't even imagine.

"I don't know about destiny or fate or any of that stupid shit—" Sam laughed, despite herself, at the familiar, beloved annoyance in Beth's voice. "—but we can actually do something here. We might be
able to actually do something to make this mountain what it's supposed to be. Or at least try to prevent more death up here. That man, with the armor and the gun and the fire, he tried to help Hannah and I, but we were too freaked to listen. He helped you all the first time. He's helped others, too, but he was just a man. Just a normal, mortal man. I'm not sure exactly what we are now, but I know that we're more than that."

Hannah appeared next to her sister and they looked at each other. Hannah's hair was longer, but without her glasses, in identical white shifts, they were near-perfect mirrors of each other. Something stirred longingly in Sam's chest, something that told her that she couldn't go with them, couldn't stay here. She wasn't a part of what was happening now. Salt stung the scratches on her face and she realized she was crying.

"I don't want to leave you alone. Not again."

Both girls looked at her. "Sam, don't you see?" Beth said gently. Hannah's form flickered again, and Beth reached down to take her hand. Steady fingers entwined with unstable ones and squeezed. As if it had pushed new energy into her, Hannah solidified once more. Both girls smiled, the sweet, intimate, real expressions that Sam had always found so beautiful. "We aren't alone. We have each other. We have Josh. He's new and uncertain and this is too hard, but he's here with us. We're Washingtons."

The corner of Hannah's mouth quirked up a hair in amusement. "We always were at our best when we were together."

Sam nodded, through her tears. "Then I'll come back and visit."

The twins shared another look and then shook their heads. "I don't think it's a good idea," Beth said. "At least not for a long time. We need to figure this all out. It's going to take practice and time. It's still not safe up here. It may never be."

"Ten years," Sam said fiercely, pointing at her. "I will give you ten years, then I'm coming to visit."

In a sudden, almost startling break from her sweet, sad serenity, the ghost rolled her eyes. "Oh fine. God, you are ridiculous." Her face dropped back into near-expressionlessness and she raised a hand. "Now you need to leave, Sam."

"But—"

"You're hurt. You need to get out of here. You need to get warm and have someone look at your head."

"I—"

"Sam…" She knew that voice. It was Beth's I'm-the-only-sensible-one-on-this-fucking-planet voice. It was the voice that would allow no argument, because it knew it was right. "Go."

Before she could think to protest again, the twins vanished. "Always have to get the last word," Sam muttered in mock irritation, hoping they could hear her. "Always have to be the smartest one in the room." She didn't look back at the grave and its gruesome marker. It wasn't Beth anymore. It didn't matter.

"Josh?" she called, hopefully. From what Beth said, she didn't expect much, but it would have been impossible to not try. Truthfully, she wasn't even sure what she would say to him if she had the opportunity.
After a few minutes, she sighed and made her way over to the metal barrel she'd found earlier and slipped the photo of Hannah into her pocket. It caught on something and she pulled out the necklace. She had never had the chance to give it to Hannah.

She considered leaving it as some kind of offering, but hesitated. "I suppose you can't wear it now," she said quietly to the empty air. Carefully, she undid the clasp and put it on, letting the pendant slip down under her jacket to rest against her breastbone. It felt right. It wasn't just Hannah's. It was part of all three of them: a treasured gift that she could carry with her. "The alternative," Sam said, louder, "would be getting a tattoo, but we've all seen where that leads."

Only silence and the faint sound of water met her comment, but she liked to think that somewhere, Hannah was laughing. Or at least trying not to laugh.

The mine was cold and seemed emptier than she remembered. There was no sign of the wendigos, though from what Beth said, at least one was still around here. There are more things, too, Sam. More things up here than you could imagine or understand. That was a chilling thought. What else might be lurking down here, ready to pounce on an injured, freezing girl?

She sped up a little.

The only upside to being chased through the mine so many times was that it was easy to navigate. It was hard to imagine being lost down here, though she knew there were plenty of passageways she'd never been down and might be able to get her twisted around. Especially with her head the way it was.

As she rounded a bend and began heading up a slight incline besides a set of mine cart tracks, something made her stop dead.

Something was moving in the darkness ahead.

Her eyes had adjusted somewhat, but there were limits to what human vision could accommodate. She squinted into the shadows, trying to make it out, keeping herself as still as possible, just in case. Something had happened while she spoke to Beth and Hannah and the desire to lie down, to sleep forever and stay in this place, had vanished. She knew she wouldn't be able to stay here with them, and that thought terrified her more than death alone could.

A shadowy shape made its way forward, low to the ground and moving at a brisk pace. It seemed to spring suddenly into focus and she let out the breath she'd been holding in a soft huff of laughter.

Wolfie sat back on its haunches and tipped its head to the side. Affection and relief welled up inside her and she found her eyes welling with tears again. She hadn't devoted much thought to the animal, but she'd wondered what had become of it. The last she'd seen, it had been attacking the wendigo in a valiant attempt to protect her. She owed Wolfie her life.

Squatting down, she held her hand out and it thrust its nose against her palm. "If I weren't so sure you were a wolf, I would think you were someone's lost pet," she told it, ruffling its ears fondly. "I'm glad you're alive, pal. I was worried."

She straightened and smiled down at it. "Want to keep me company?"

It moved around to stand beside her, then abruptly its head jerked to stare forward into the darkness. It growled, low in its throat, and then bolted forward, vanishing once more. Sam swallowed hard. "I guess I can take that as a 'no,' then." She took a cautious step forward, then another.

The darkness was intense. It was the right way, but it must have been more closed off to the world
above than some other areas of the mine, since there was almost no ambient light filtering down. She
pulled out her phone and turned the flashlight on, then yelped and almost dropped it.

There was a figure ahead of her, perhaps ten feet away. Her heart thudding painfully in her chest,
Sam took a step forward. She could hardly see him. If Hannah had been a failing film, this figure
was static, his outline barely there. She had to be wrong. She knew she must be wrong. "Josh?" Her
voice was barely more than a whisper and she hated the fragility of it. "Is that you? You're here?"
The voice that came, in all its dry, sardonic glory, was enough to make her hands shake. "Well, I
considered going to Milan, but you know… the air fare is just ridiculous this time of year." The
longer he spoke, the clearer his words came, as if he was gaining momentum. "I suppose I could
have gone to New York or somewhere closer, but—" His face, when she could see it, was as
impassive as the girls had been most of the time. Even without expression, though, it struck Sam as
beautiful. There was no sign of the transformation he'd been suffering through.

"Josh," she said again, not quite believing her senses. "You're here."

"A bit repetitive, but I like it. It has the cadence of a haiku. Simple, but the rhythm is nice."

"Shut up." The words came out before she could stop them, an automatic response to Josh's
nonsense born of long experience. She clapped her hand over her mouth. "Oh no. I don't mean that.
Don't go."

His outline continued to stutter uncertainly but didn't vanish. "Telling me to shut up does no good.
Everyone knows that. Come on, Giddings. Like you could ever shut me up."

"I'm sorry." She had to say it. She had to tell him, while she had a chance. "I tried to help you."
The teasing tone dropped out of his voice. She wished she could see his face properly and
consistently, but she knew him well enough to imagine. "I know. I wish I'd had the chance to thank
you."

"I shouldn't have done what I did. I should have thought about it more. I should have found another
way. I should have—"

"Look, I have trouble with this whole talking thing. Always have. Now, I suppose, it's a bit more
literal, but—"

"Josh," she interjected, trying to cut off his rambling.

"Anyway. I was there. Earlier, when you were talking to the girls. I couldn't manage… I don't know.
I couldn't… Not with them watching, looking at me. They're probably listening now anyway, but it's
easier without seeing them. Look. You did the right thing. You set me free from that monster under
my skin. I was a total bastard to you, but you still came back for me. Over and over again." His voice
faded a bit and took on an edge of confusion. "I don't know why you did that. It doesn't make sense.
You didn't have to."

Sam took another step towards him. "I did."
The outline shrugged. Or at least, she thought that's what the movement was. "You really didn't. I
didn't deserve it. But you did it anyway." Josh laughed. "Listen to me. Death! Better than
antidepressants! Clears the mind! Try some today!"

"No thanks."
"Good." He sighed. "I don't know what I meant to accomplish here. I guess I just really needed to thank you. And to apologize."

She thought about it and smiled slightly. "You know, you haven't actually apologized yet."

He grunted, sounding annoyed. Though she doubted he would truly be able to, she imagined him glaring at her. "You're right. Apologizing implies I was wrong. That there was a flaw in my perfect, immutable plans. So…"

The figure vanished.

Sam stared at the empty tunnel where he had been in disbelief. "Seriously?"

When a few seconds passed, and he didn't reappear, she clenched her jaw and started moving again. She was close to the exit now. It wouldn't be long.

As she finally spotted the opening ahead and felt the cold sweep of mountain air against her face, she paused. Quietly, almost inaudibly, she thought she heard a voice on the breeze.

"I'm sorry, Sam."

"I know," she said. She wasn't sure if she had actually heard anything, or whose voice it even was: Josh or the mountain itself. In the end, she supposed, it didn't really matter. "I know."

She didn't make it all the way back to the lodge before she ran into Hank, who had been sweeping the forest with a flashlight and calling her name. Sam half-expected him to smack her, given the look on his face, but instead he had simply relaxed.

They were a quiet, awkward party in the lodge. Sam couldn't quite meet Melinda's gaze evenly. The woman must have suspected something, but perhaps was too afraid to ask Sam about it directly. Sam, in turn, was too uncomfortable to tell Melinda what had happened to her. Melinda was their mother. Sam already wondered why she had been granted a visit when Melinda hadn't.

Ultimately, Sam thought, it did none of them any good to lie. They had at least learned that much.

"I saw them," she said, simply.

Hank started, opening his mouth, but Melinda raised a hand and he stayed quiet. Instead, Melinda spoke. "All of them?"

She nodded, miserably. "They're all here."

The older woman closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Then another. Finally, she opened her eyes again and, to Sam's shock, smiled broadly. "Thank you, Sam."

"What are you thanking me for?" Sam asked, confused. "I didn't do anything."

"You confirmed that they're here. I was so sure before, but was starting to doubt. Now I know that they're here. It's real. They're real."

"But you didn't talk to them. You really believe me?"

Melinda reached over and rubbed Sam's arm comfortingly. "Of course. After everything, how could I not? I'm glad you got to see them while you were here."
"They're not very… I don't think 'strong' is the right word…” Sam fumbled for the right way to describe what had happened. "It's hard for them to appear and talk. I'm not sure if they'll be able to do it again before we leave."

"…and you're worried I might not get to see them?" Behind and out of Melinda's gaze, Hank sighed silently. It was clearly a concern of his as well. Melinda just kept smiling. "If I don't see them this time, I'll just come back."

Hank coughed. "You'll what?"

She laughed and waved a hand dismissively. "It hasn't been announced yet," Melinda said, her smile turning a touch sad. "But Bob and I are separating. I'm not going to fight him over much. I don't really care about most of our more ridiculous assets. In return, I get the mountain."

"You what?" Hank's voice cracked slightly. "Mel, you can't live up here."

The look she gave him could have leveled a building. "I'm not an idiot. I don't plan to 'live up here.' I'll live in town. But I won't let him sell this off to developers, not now that I know what's up here. Would you want that?"

"Of course not."

Sam stared at her, trying to process. Her exhausted, injured brain couldn't quite fathom what Melinda was saying. She hadn't thought about what would happen to the land. It was valuable and full of painful memories. Bob would try to sell it. It only made sense. A flood of gratitude, deep and profound, washed over Sam and she leaned over to hug Melinda awkwardly. "Thank you," she mumbled against the woman's shoulder.

Her hand smoothed over Sam's hair, carefully avoiding her injury. "No, Sam. Thank you."

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"Sam? There's someone at the door for you!"

She sat up with a sigh. Staring at the ceiling wasn't particularly interesting, but the air conditioning was relaxing and she had nothing better to do. Reading seemed pointless and television seemed too loud. When it cooled off a bit, she reasoned, she'd go for a run.

Returning to California felt even stranger this time than it had the previous. She said goodbye to Melinda at the airport and climbed into her Dad's car. There wasn't much she had to say to him and he didn't press. Her parents had adamantly refused to let her go back to the dorm immediately and she hadn't fought them on it.

It was just too bizarre. All of it, from the first moment of horror in the woods to saying goodbye to ghosts, felt unreal: a story that had happened to someone else. Even so, it seemed impossible to go back to doing normal things, like going to class. She could do things on her own, like run, but interacting with people who knew nothing about what she'd gone through? It was unthinkable.

They were all gone. Beth, Hannah, Josh, and Chris were all gone. She'd texted everyone upon her return to let them know she hadn't died, but either they had no interest in what had happened on her last trip or they'd had no idea how to ask her. Her money was on the latter, though there was an odd reassurance in knowing that she could count on Emily at least to pretend to the former. What could she say to them? The conversations she'd had with the siblings had all been so private. Sam felt like she owed the group answers but had none she was at liberty to provide.
Sam groaned. She kept doing that; she kept zoning out, losing herself in her own thoughts. She’d been avoiding the others, but now, it seemed, her time was up. It was probably Ashley, impatient with waiting but too nervous to text or call.

She headed down the stairs at a trot and opened the door, trying to summon up her patience.

Mike stood on the front step, looking like he was torn between smiling and bolting for his car. It was still funny to see him clean-shaven, though that was how he’d been for most of their acquaintance. The scruffy, shaggy version of him was so imprinted on her mind that it blocked out any other version of him.

When she didn't speak, he shuffled his feet, glancing around. Finally, he cleared his throat. "Um… hi." The moment the words left his mouth, he closed his eyes in frustration and she could practically hear him berating himself for his distinct lack of cool.

She realized she was fighting back a smile and gave in to it. It felt good to smile, like a weight was lifting from her face. "Um… hi back?" she offered, realizing she had nothing wittier to say herself.

He looked good, although she suspected that, like the rest of them, he could never truly look his age ever again. They had all been aged by what they’d seen. It was hard to believe that none of them were old enough to legally drink. "It's good to see you."

Mike opened his mouth to speak, then seemed to think better of it. He pulled his hand from behind his back and thrust something forward. She took it automatically, her hands closing on something organic and chilled and slightly damp. Looking down, her brow crinkled in confusion. "Lettuce? Am I… what?"

"You said it—" He fumbled for words, rubbing the back of his head awkwardly. "In the mine, you were talking to Jess and— Oh fuck. Fucking fucksticks fuckington. This was stupid." He shook himself and straightened. "I thought… I thought it would be funny. I wanted to bring you flowers or something, but then I remembered the thing with the lettuce, and I asked your Mom what your favorite kind was, so I went and got the red leaf because—"

Sam giggled, startling both herself and Mike. It was… god, it was perfect. "You…” She couldn't even say it, her laughter renewing with a vengeance. Mike started to grin himself, watching her. He brought her lettuce. What an idiot. What an amazing, brilliant move of total dumbassery.

The hot sun beat down on them and she clutched the head of lettuce to her chest, feeling the moisture on the leaves seep through her thin tank top to touch her skin with its freshness. Nothing was ever going to be the same again, Sam thought, absurd tears stinging her eyes even as she reached forward and leaned against Mike's chest, trying to breathe through her laughter. Nothing would be the same.

But perhaps it would be good, all the same.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not really sure what to say. I started this in January of last year. While writing this, my life has changed drastically. I've moved twice, gotten divorced, fallen in love, changed jobs several times, had a family crisis, and more. And through it all, I've plugged away at this. Knowing that this is the final update is more than a little surreal.
If you read it from its first publishing, thank you for your patience. This last chapter has been the most difficult thing I’ve ever tried to write. I’m tremendously proud of this story and wanted to finish it off on the right note. It took four drafts to finally get there, but I like to think I managed it.

I hope you enjoyed it. I’ve loved writing it.

Thank you.

Works inspired by this one: Just Before Dawn by le_crininel_consultation, Memories and Regrets by gentlemanadventurer

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