

*Two bloods of one will bring down the shadows, to cast, no more... Rain will  
grow as River flows... Together...*

# Preface

Phantom pain has been described as the suffering sensation lingering in the place of an amputated limb or organ. That's what it felt like for me, except I didn't know which extremity had been severed—what part of my soul or heart had been taken from me, not until confronted by this stranger in the woods. I say stranger—yet his voice, his smell, his very essence resonates with me on a level I didn't know existed.

His dominating hold on me is alarming, yet it's something I'm sure I've hungered for. The unrecognizable iridescent blue shapes and symbols forming on his neck are possibly a warning that this man is nothing I should want, but deep down I sense he's *everything* I need and have needed for some time.

My internal battle distracts me, causing me not to hear, "I'm sorry," before it's too late. At the base of my neck, fangs I hadn't even seen sink into my flesh.

My body jolts. His arms tighten. The stranger is not going to release me. Before I can feel the sting of his betrayal, I feel a slight burn as

something pushes into my jugular vein. The heat continues through the channels of my body, and then, as quickly as it began, the burn subsides. Whatever now swims in my blood causes a floating sensation. My body relaxes to the point I'm sure I will soon slip into unconsciousness. My weight is no longer my own. The stranger lays me on the ground. His deep, soothing voice echoes. "*I love you.*"

On the forest floor, an uncanny awareness takes over my senses. Leaves I have never noticed before have my full attention. Their crisp texture in

India R. Adams

the brisk evening air... Even though my thoughts are becoming random, I have a view of the stranger in his warrior stance, knees bent, ready to attack. His right arm reaches behind him for a knife in a weathered leather sheath that wraps around his bare chest and back. He pulls it out with expertise—he has done this a million times. The florescent fluid I had seen forming on the

stranger's neck drips from the blade, bathing it in the foreign substance.

Many dark-robed figures approach us. By the stranger's posture, I know they are the enemy. This enemy swings at the brave, lone fighter. The stranger is hopelessly outnumbered but never slows his vicious response to this unwanted attack, biting and stabbing any dark figure daring to approach. Blue liquid drips from underneath his long dark hair, down his muscled, naked back onto a crisp leaf and puddles there. As the gathered fluid vibrates with all the pouncing feet around me, I realize the stranger in the woods is fighting... for my life.

## Chapter One

Violently throwing up, my mother clings to the toilet bowl with her whole frail body. The light-yellow walls seem dim and confining in the only bathroom on the second floor. I press a damp rag to her sweating forehead that once belonged to a vibrant face, full of life. I miss that smile terribly. "Are you okay, Mama?"

Her eyes close, and I wonder if she's praying for this to end, just like me—not her life but her sickness, the unexplained illness that keeps stealing lives like my daddy's. We are not the only ones forced to endure this. So many families have been affected. Some moved away. Some were torn apart beyond repair. At least mine—what's left of it—is still together.

"Rosie! Wade is splashing me!" echoes from downstairs.

Still on her knees, my mom's head falls to the arm resting on the toilet that is mercifully holding her up. "I'm okay. Go tend to them." Her trembling voice makes me shudder with doubt. I kiss her hair, forcing myself to leave her side, scared the next time I check on her will be the last.

Walking quickly down our wooden stairs, I hear my little brother and sister yelling at each other. Wade, who is seven, is a hard-to-handle wild child. His school teachers say he is just acting out because he doesn't know how to handle our circumstances. The immature side of me wants to scream, "*I want to act out, too!*" but the nineteen-year-old side of me knows I can't, so I do

my best to deal with Wade driving Louisa and me nuts. The only good that's come out of Wade's defiant behavior is that it makes little six-year-old Louisa a young'un to be reckoned with. Instead of breaking, Lulu has become a fighter, and I suspect it's because Wade keeps her on her toes.

"Wade Conley Junior. Stop!" I warn as he cups his hands full of dirty dishwater, preparing for another assault on Louisa. Sam, my furry, pure-bred mutt, lying on the cool kitchen floor, is completely at ease with the normal ruckus. Lulu sticks her tongue out at Wade, probably assuming she's safe with me present.

*Splash!*

"Rosieeeeeee!" she screeches, both little fists ready to attack.

Lulu doesn't call out for my mama anymore. Her care has become my duty. Both Wade and Lulu know it. In every family, older teenagers have to grow up overnight as parents become sick. I'm strong enough to be a parental guide for Wade and Lulu, but not strong enough to wish it doesn't have to be.

As I put my hair in a ponytail, I study my surroundings, wondering how many of my family's generations have intervened in this old kitchen. The worn counters speak of many pies being made. If those women did it, I can do it. I prepare for battle. "Wade, you tell Lulu how sorry you are."

He wipes his hands on his pajamas. "But I'm not." "Wade!" "But Mama says lying is a sin," proclaims the little monster. I try to reel in my temper as I grab his arm, yanking him from his

stepping stool. "I bet me beating your butt is a sin too, but that's what I'm going to do if you don't march upstairs and get into bed this second." As Wade marches off, a little too happily for my liking, I internally

question the grin I'm witnessing until I face the sink again. There are many dishes to be done, and Wade has left our little sister in disarray. Lulu's bottom lip trembles. Blond curls drip soapy water. "Now *I* have to do *all* the dishes?" Sam stands up from the floor and licks her little, wet palms.

Patting Lulu's hair with a dishtowel, I think about how positive I am Lulu is going to snap one of Wade's toys in half when she gets the chance.

Torn. Completely torn. Part of me knows Daddy would've told Lulu that life isn't always

fair—a strong farmer building strong children. But the fact that he isn't here to say it rips my heart in two. This little girl has already seen enough to know this lesson well. So instead, I finish drying her hair, pick her up, and wrap her tiny pajama-covered legs around my waist. “I'll do the dinner dishes so you can get rest for school tomorrow. Okay?” The adorable little bottom lip is still protruding, but Louisa nods and rests her head on my burdened shoulder as I carry her upstairs with Sam in tow.

I should remember to be more careful as I pass the bathroom. Lulu's head lifts from its resting place. “Mama?” Yes, Lulu has already been exposed to so much for her age.

Sam goes to sniff my mom, and my heart thunders. I pick up my pace to their bedroom. Lights are already off. I lay Lulu in bed as quickly as possible, trying to stay composed for the little eyes studying me. “Mama's okay, baby. I'm going to tuck her in too.” I nervously smile as I rush, tucking the blanket around Lulu for a cocoon effect. “Just like *this!*”

Lulu finally smiles, but I notice wisdom behind her eyes. “Mama will like that.”

Sam jumps in the bed with Lulu, causing my exhale of relief. The above-average dog would've told me if my mama had—*uh, I can't even think it.*

Still angry with Wade, I cross the wooden bedroom floor to cover him with his Batman blanket. As I do, he stares sadly out his window. “Are you really gonna beat my butt, Rosie?”

My shoulders slump. I'm doing this all wrong! “No, Junior.” I hope he hears the apology in my tone. Wade rolls to face me. The little devil in him disappears as the moon shines on the young boy's face. I suddenly forget what a handful he is and love him with all my heart. I grin. “But I should, huh?”

He *knowingly* grins too. All is forgiven.

The glow from the bathroom guides me down the hallway. “Mama?” My

heart stops. She lies so still on the bathroom floor that I freeze in the doorway. Sam was wrong. No! Please, God, no, no...

Mama's shoulders shake when she coughs. In praise, I close my eyes and tilt my face to the ceiling. "Thank you. Thank you."

Mama—barely weighing anything compared to what she did when my father was still alive—is easy to get back to her bedroom. As I lay her in bed, she reaches for the frame on her nightstand. I swallow my tears while helping her hold the picture as she places a kiss on my daddy's smiling face. "He's waiting for me, Rosie."

I want to crumble to the floor and stay there for a long while, but I don't. She doesn't mean to upset me. I know that my mother loves me. I think she just sometimes forgets *I 'm* waiting for her, too—waiting for her to *heal* and be our mother again.

After settling my family down for the night, I go back down to the kitchen to force myself to do one more chore. As I stand at the sink, my chest aches, then my whole body shakes. I know they're just dirty dishes, but I feel like I'm two inhales away from a complete breakdown. The dirty sink that fills daily is a metaphor for my life.

Rushing out my screened back door, I try to reel in my fear, gasping for air and courage to keep plowing forward. It is fall and chilly but not cold enough to keep me indoors, not when I need to breathe to survive.

At the tip of my back porch steps, my legs give out, and I plop down on my rickety stairs. Looking around, I'm reminded that this old farmhouse—it has been in my dad's family since the 1800s—is all we have left. Instead of flourishing with my father's growing winter wheat, the fields are barren, haunted. The crops faded as my daddy faded, probably knowing they were losing the one who appreciated them most.

There used to be life in the valley surrounding my home. Now there is only empty horse stalls 'cause we needed the money and empty turkey and chicken pens because I had to feed us. The thick woods and mountains blanketing our property used to make me feel lucky to have such a view. Now, the forest and hills remind me of how secluded I am from the rest of the

world. Farmers tend to not have neighbors nearby.

Hanging with friends has become only a memory. We have no time for such luxuries. Some have lost a parent. Some have lost both and are on their own. Some had to quit school to get a job and support the ones who did survive or who are still trying to. I sit here, wondering why, when the sun is down, my spirits drop. Without the rays of light, I'm drained and feel used.

Sam coming to my side tells me who is here. Only one person can get into this house without my dog barking. Gunner, knowing everyone is asleep by now, doesn't bother knocking. This is practically his home too. Gunner sits on the steps next to me with no words as he releases my hair from its ponytail as if to tell me to release my worry. He knows what I need from him.

Sometimes, I sit out here alone for hours. Sometimes I have *him*. I'm grateful for tonight. My head leans on Gunner's strong shoulder as scared tears drop from my eyes. His warm arms scoop me up with ease, and my tired head falls to his chest. I smell his longer, dark hair. His familiar scent tells my senses that he's really here, and I can break for a while. "I hate being so weak."

"This isn't weakness, stubborn girl. It's called being human under immense pressure." My best friend walks us to my daddy's rocking chair, sits me on his lap, and begins rocking.

"Aren't *you* human, Gunner?"

"As far as I know." He never falters, never shows a side like the one I can't hide tonight.

The chair creaks in a rhythm that speaks to my soul. I'm far too old to be treated like a child, but I'm exhausted and let go. When I gasp for air, Gunner tries to soothe me. "I know. I know, Rose." His hand, calloused from the mill, rubs my arm. Calmly, so calmly, he whispers, "Rose, you and I, my little fighter, we'll get through this. We'll see our families through this hell. I promise." He presses his lips to my forehead. My shoulders shake in his safe embrace. His deep voice vibrates through his chest to my resting ear.

"Remember when you fell out of my tree house?"

I nuzzle his large neck, appreciating his distraction. "Why were you always dragging me up trees, Gunner?"

He leans his head to mine, still rocking us. “I don’t know. My mama said it’s where I belong.” Gunner hesitates. “Anyway, remember you crying over your scraped knee?”

I wipe my nose. “This is a little worse than my injured knee, my friend.”

A smile slips across his lips. “Don’t ruin my story, Rose.” I snuggle closer, not wanting him to let me go. His arms tighten. “After you hit the ground—”

“I still can’t believe you leapt out of the tree for me and didn’t get hurt. We were so high up!”

“I know. True live Superman, I am.”

Teasingly, I smack his chest, trying to be strong, then cling to his T-shirt, failing miserably.

He kisses my head, assuring me he sees no failure. “You cried and cried, even after I promised you I would make it all better and carry you home.” The memory is fresh in my mind, seeing Gunner so young, already so tall and strong, his dimple and brown/gold eyes flirting with the sun. “How old was I?”

“Nine. The biggest nine-year-old this town has ever seen.” “I like to think I am *still* quite tremendous *and* good-looking.” Gunner tooting his own horn finally makes me smile. “I never said

good-looking, Gunner.” Big shoulders shrug. “It’s okay. I know you meant to. ’Kay, moral of

the story is?” I sniffle, bathing in his warmth. “You were right?” “Bingo! So when I say, ‘we’ll see our way through this’?” Thank you for this young man holding me together. “We will.” Mama once told me, “Childhood best friends—like this, like your

Gunner—are once in a lifetime, baby.” She’s right. Gunner gives me a lifeline and hope.

“I got you through high school, didn’t I?” Gunner asks me, half joking again, but we both know how scary that time was.

“When the sickness took Daddy and my mama fell ill, I thought we were doomed. I thought we would starve.” I’d thought my brother, sister, mother, and I would perish like so many others in this poverty-stricken town. Gunner had just graduated high school and stepped up to the plate without a second thought.

“Taking a job at the log mill wasn’t so bad.” It’s where his father works. And that job helped my family until I finished *my* senior year of high school. In all truth, it still does at times.

The rocking chair keeps with its soothing movement. I take hold of Gunner’s hand. “You bought votes with chocolate bars, not fair.”

He kisses my hand. “You tried to refuse half my paycheck. I had no choice.”

My cheek affectionately rubs his shoulder. “Because I knew how much you wanted to attend the Folk School for your wood work.”

Brass Town, North Carolina may be tiny, but we have a great art school, and it was all Gunner wanted. He’s truly gifted at creating anything from a simple piece of wood, but when my mama became too ill to work and the money from the sale of the horses was gone, she could only lie in bed and hope to *survive*. Everything else fell to me: cooking, cleaning, raising Louisa and Wade.

“My little fighter gave me hell. Didn’t ya?” Gunner squeezes me. I had even tried to withdraw myself from high school so I could get a job, but since this *is* a small town and *everyone* knows *everybody*, Gunner had beat me to the punch.

“You cheated by talking to the school counselor.” The woman had refused to accept my withdrawal form and told me to go home and appreciate Gunner. That night, Gunner showed up with groceries— ignoring me as I told him no—and handed Louisa and Wade each a chocolate bar.

Louisa had chocolate all over her lips as she pleaded with me. “Let Gunner help us, Rosie.”

Gunner grinned as he put the last of the groceries in the fridge. “Yeah, *Rosie*.”

Louisa jumped into his arms. He squeezed, closing his eyes. Gunner reached in his pocket, whispered to Louisa, handed her something, then grinned at me again. He carried her over to me as she smirked and held out her closed fist. Reluctantly, I exposed my palm. Cash dropped into it. My shoulders slumped in shame. Her little voice repeated his instructions. “Gunner says don’t be a pain in his—”

My eyes popped wide. Gunner looked just as surprised as me. Still in Gunner’s arms, Lulu giggled as she covered her mouth. “Hiney.”

My thankful, watery eyes looked up at him. He would never whisper a cuss word to her, nor would he let us fall. Still holding Lulu, Gunner pulled my face to his, kissing my forehead. “I love you, girl.”

Wade—sitting at the kitchen table—licked his sticky fingers. “I love *you*, Gunner. Best chocolate *ever*.” That little terror always behaves for Gunner.

So here I am again, on my back porch, leaning and counting on Gunner Hayes, wiping my tears, needing to ask even *more* of him. “I have a shift next Friday night—”

“I can watch Lulu and Wade. The least I can do. You won’t let me give you money anymore.” I made him stop once I graduated. I immediately got a job to take weight off his kind, loving shoulders. I mostly work while Wade and Louisa are in school or ask Shelly to babysit, but next Friday, we are both on the floor.

With his darker brown hair and the warmest, lightest brown eyes ever, Gunner is handsome, I suppose. At least, that’s what Shelly, one of my oldest friends, who waitresses at the diner, says. She *also* says Gunner is in love with me. I tell her how Gunner and I are just best friends. Shelly’s beautiful red curls bounce when she laughs. “He wants to be your *best* lover.”

I don’t think that’s the case. Gunner has never made a move on me— not even one kiss.

## Chapter Two

The first thing I hear is Sam's nails pacing up and down the hallway—*click, click, click*— on the wooden floors, up and down the stairs and in and out of all the bedrooms. Lying on my belly,

staring at my open bedroom door, I realize morning came too quickly. I could use another three hours of sleep. "What is it, Sam?" He whimpers and keeps intensely sniffing, so I sit up, moving to the edge of my bed, preparing to investigate. But the house is quiet. Nothing stirs, not even *inside of me*, which is unusual. I freely inhale through a wonderful feeling of comfort exuding from my body, from my soul. I sit still, trying to understand this foreign peace until Sam, my golden retriever fur-ball, sits in front of me with his tongue hanging as if smiling. "Time to start my day, big guy?"

He sits up on his hind legs, front paws hanging, waiting for attention I offer willingly. Then my morning routine goes into high gear. Opening Louisa and Wade's curtains, I sing, "Wake up, you two. Don't be late for the bus."

Walking into my mom's room, I'm shocked to see her alert, eyes open. I rush to her bed. "Mama?"

She is a delicate shade of green. Normally, her skin's a sickly dark. "Hi, Rosie."

I touch her forehead. "Still a fever but, you look... good." Good is a stretch, but there is a little life to her skin that I haven't seen in over a year. My heart breathes a sigh of relief. Maybe, just maybe, she will win this battle. I want to stare at her and this small miracle, but I have cereal bowls to fill.



My week passes in the usual blur, and Friday night is already here. Tying on my apron while chasing Wade Junior is proving to be quite the task. Stubbing my toe, I'm about to lose my mind with Louisa screaming in the background. I reach for Wade—again—but miss—again. "Junior! Stop ripping that doll's head off!"

The front door opens, and Gunner steps in. He evaluates the room in a heartbeat and grabs the blond, guilty seven-year-old running past him. Wade tries to get free but quits when Gunner's voice lowers even more than usual.

“Wade.”

“Yes, sir?”

I stop dead in my tracks, toe throbbing. “Gunner, *please* teach me how to *do* that.”

He grabs Wade’s chin and affectionately shakes it. “I was once this *eager* child.”

I exhale a “Thank you,” thinking *eager* is a bit mild, seeing how I’ve already broken a sweat, and I’m not even at work yet. On my tippy toes, I go to kiss Gunner’s cheek, but when he turns to say, “You’re welcome,” my mouth unexpectedly presses to his. I freeze mid-kiss and see his golden-brown eyes widen.

I pull my embarrassed lips from his. “Oh—I—uh, I’m sorry.”

Wade takes advantage of the moment and runs off to annoy his sister. Again.

“No—I—uh. No, it’s okay, really.” Gunner struggles for words, but when Lulu is screaming for her doll, Gunner snaps his attention from me and back to Junior. “Wade! Doll. Now.”

Wade sulks, walking to Louisa. “Fine! Here.” He hands over the goods.

“*And* the head.” Gunner points to what Wade’s hiding. Junior pouts in defeat as he pulls his other hand out from behind his back, handing over the plastic doll head with loopy eyeballs.

After pushing mutilated parts back together, Lulu rocks the horrid doll as if it were full of emotions instead of the stuffing protruding from the violent neck injury.

Still embarrassed over the accidental kiss, I try to smile at Gunner. “Well, okay. I guess I should go then. Umm, Mama is fed and sleeping. The hellions need dinner in an hour. It’s in the—”

“Fridge. I know the routine, Rose. Go to work.”



“You *kissed* him?” Shelly shrieks from across the diner as she pours coffee for Archer, an elderly regular. Smelling our dinner special, meatloaf, is somehow not helping this awkward conversation. Why did I open my mouth!

Archer chuckles and reaches for the steaming cup. “Who kissed who, Shelly?” The old, wooden walls of this building know all the tales of Brasstown and are hearing yet another story to add to the gossip rat race.

Sitting at the table in the middle of our restaurant, Betty explains to her husband with her elderly, wobbly voice, “Gunner. Rose kissed Gunner, Archer dear.”

“Well, about time!” Archer clicks his coffee cup to his wife’s in celebration. “I like that boy, even if he needs a haircut and his daddy met his mama in the woods.”

Gunner says it feels natural for his locks to hang past his shoulders. As long as mine is longer, I don’t care. He’s had long hair since he was a toddler. I’d probably freak if he snipped his thick mane.

Shelly comically yells to the old-timer, “Eat your biscuits, Archer. Gunner’s mama is not from the woods.”

Little old Betty is getting excited. “It is true! And my parents used to tell me stories of trolls living in our mountains.”

“Trolls?” Shelly wickedly eyes Betty as if she’s ready for a *special* home.

Betty doesn’t care and takes a bite of her meatloaf. “Besides, there’s no other explanation. No one can be as beautiful as Eve and be of this world.” She rubbernecks to me. “And now the romantic story continues with you and Gunner kissin’.”

Archer and Betty laugh as I—with much embarrassment—try to explain. “It was an *accident*, and stop spreading wise tales.”

Shelly grabs another meatloaf order from the kitchen window. “Did you like the kiss? I would have liked it—”

“Shelly!” I try to get her to focus on her job, not my non-existent love life.

“Oh, come on! Please? I need the juicy details. Gunner is Brass’s only catch.”

“Oh, a catch indeed,” Betty chimes in.

Archer has loved Betty for fifty years. “So now I need to grow my hair long and be born of the woods?”

Exasperated, I set down a cheeseburger in front of another regular. “He’s not of the woods.”

“What hair, dear?” Betty grins, rubbing Archer’s shiny, bald head. “And you are already more wild than I can handle. Now hush. Back to Rose.”

They both goggle at me as I notice all the diner patrons are now waiting for my answer. Shaking my head in disbelief, I surrender. “Uh, I *think* I enjoyed it.”

“Hmm.” Shelly empties her tray. “What?” I know Shelly’s *hmms* are never good. She hesitates. “Well, it’s just—” “What?” I’m anxious for advice because something has been different

inside me since I woke and found Mama seeming better. I need to know what it is.

Archer holds up his dirty fork for emphasis. “What Shelly means is, you should *know* if you liked it.”

I can’t believe this conversation is happening! Betty’s old voice quivers. “That’s right. I *knew* when Archer kissed me.” The antique bell on the diner’s door rings, stopping our gossip. I take

this as a great time to escape torture and head back to the counter. Shelly greets the customer. I hear her mumbling, “Untamed and sweaty. Just the way I like ’em. He’s got an animalistic draw to him. Am I right, Betty?”

“Oh, yes. Archer, you think Gunner has long hair?”

Archer’s metal chair squeaks on the old, white linoleum flooring as he twists his weathered neck to see what his wife is fussing about. He attempts whispering, but he’s too old to know he isn’t. “And shaved on the sides like

he's from one of them crazy *teenage* movies.”

Standing at the kitchen's ticket window, I suddenly feel... *alive* inside, breathless yet not struggling for air. My heart pumps my blood at an unrealistic speed. I keep expecting to feel faint, but the sensation is the opposite. Sturdy... Yes, my feet feel grounded to the earth like never before. It's almost hypnotic.

Harry, the diner's cook, grabs a ticket from the spinning wire wheel.

He wears a ridiculous chef hat reading “#1” with a drawing of a spatula on the front. He pauses, studying me. “Old Archer got you flustered?”

Surprised Harry has *also* been following the embarrassing conversation, I answer, “What? Uh, no... I'm just feelin' a little... funny.” Still facing the window, I feel my breathing become a little more labored. Flutters in my belly make me feel as if I'm filling with a warm light.

After seeing to her new table, Shelly joins me at the kitchen window. “He's even hotter up close. I swear he has leather straps under his T-shirt, making me wonder who's the lucky one who gets to tie him. And *girl*, he has blue eyes to die for, but I'm not calling dibs, he ordered a *salad*. What gives?” Shelly believes men should order steaks, or they're simply not men. Period. The. End. “Ohhh, you did get a peek at him. You're lookin' a little flushed.”

“What? No, I'm—” I stop when I look over my shoulder at the guy sitting in one of our hideous orange booths. He's looking down, so I can't see his eyes, but I understand what Shelly's fussing about. He's attractive in a rugged, untamed manner. Long brown hair is tied back in a ponytail. If he had short hair on the top of his head, his shaven sides would resemble a timid Mohawk. Not able to understand the draw I feel, I stare at the mysterious—

The bell rings again. Another young man I do not know enters the diner, heading straight for the mysterious one still staring at the tabletop. He slips a T-shirt over his impressive bare chest, and I notice the leather straps Shelly suspects our first newcomer to have, but I don't think they are for the bondage my friend is apparently hoping for. No, I see a knife sheath—with a knife.

The newcomer has the same demeanor as our first unfamiliar guest, the same

powerful presence and hefty shoulders. The only difference is this man has an actual Mohawk with longer brown hair dripping down his back instead of a restrained ponytail. He unwraps another leather knife holder from his rather large thigh and slides it into a pocket of his cargo pants that look homemade, still walking as if on a mission. His chest rises and falls with a shortness of breath. As he passes through the diner, he slows peculiarly, taking a sniff of the air. His gaze follows a trail...

I gasp. His incredibly alive eyes suddenly hone in on me, but he does

15

India R. Adams

nothing but continue on his path to our first odd guest. Shelly grabs my arm. “Dear lord, look at his green eyes. They both got some sort of I-want-to-roll-around-with-you-in-the-dirt-and-rock-your-world thing kickin’.”

“Shelly!” I don’t agree. They both look dignified in an I-live-in-the-woods—yeah—Shelly’s right. These young men are animal-natured, complicated, beautiful.

Shelly pulls out her ticket pad. “What? It’s written all over them. You’re just too preoccupied to see it.”

“Preoccupied?”

“Yep, by a tall, broad-shouldered guy named Gunner.” As green eyes sits down, Shelly readies herself to investigate a future prospect—I mean, take his order. “Better not be a salad boy like his *buddy*.” She walks off. “Two in one night will be too much to...”

The bell on the glass door rings again, and an old friend from school walks in. I haven’t seen Darren in a while because of what is going on at his home. Darren’s heavy shoulders tell me the outcome. I hear Betty behind me, “Archer, I think Darren’s mama passed.”

“She gave a hell of a fight.” Archer sounds touched by the unconfirmed news.

Darren’s body sinks into a booth, and I go to him. The familiar heartache we all know too well surrounds him. “I’m so sorry, Darren.” I grab his hand.

He squeezes my hand back. “I had to get out of that house... At least she’s out of her misery now, right?” He sounds awful.

I nod with sorrow. Another victim has surrendered to the sickness. Darren had been nursing his mama and caring for three siblings while his dad worked around the clock to pay medical bills. The government sends people to assess the illness and give us encouraging words such as, “Okay, we will be back next month to monitor your progress.” If you’re lucky, you receive a small check. Maybe if we had more than one road in and out of town, we would have more assistance.

Even though the illness has oddly slowed on its own this past year, and fewer and fewer cases are coming forward, it’s still painful for the people who have sick ones. Darren’s red eyes are proof of that.

Darren glances to the diner’s front door. His eyes widen. He peers

at our connected hands then quickly retracts his from mine. I hadn’t even noticed the damn bell that rings all day long. Gunner stands there, holding Wade and Louisa’s hands, staring at Darren’s table, and appears to have stopped breathing. Suddenly, heat—luscious heat—travels up my spine, warming my whole body and causing my own breathing to become rapid.

Lulu lets go of Gunner’s hand and runs to me, hugging my leg. “Rosie!”

“Hey, my little Lulu.” I pull her to my thigh as I observe Gunner’s eyes leaving the table. His stare is now my burden. Still breathless from the heating sensation, I smile, tilting my head, wondering about his expression. “Hi, Bubba.”

Gunner studies my labored breath. “Hi.” “You okay?” Gunner blows out a breath. “Yeah, think so.” Still holding Wade’s

hand, he approaches Darren’s booth. “Are *you* okay, Darren?” Darren shaking his head with evident pain is his only answer. Gunner swallows hard and grabs his shoulder. “Damn, man. I—”

Darren puts his hand up, pleading for Gunner to stop. “I hear ya, friend.” Then he says to me, “I didn’t mean to interrupt.” He points between Darren and me. “But, uh, they wanted milkshakes.”

Lulu and Wade nod their heads fanatically.

Still short of breath, I feel a sweat bead roll down my temple. I find myself wanting to reach out to Gunner—or to the something stirring my insides like never before. Gunner is a warm, kind soul, and I am genuinely happy to see him here. Maybe I am seeing him differently because of the accidental kiss. But this unusual peaceful feeling is something I've been having all week, even before the kiss.

With Lulu attached to my leg, I gesture Gunner to the counter. “Have a seat, and I will be right there to satisfy their cravings.” I make sure to give a playful warning glare to my *rumor* table. My scowl tells them to behave, but Archer and Betty mischievously giggle.

“Hey, Archer. Miss Betty.” Gunner’s big hand brushes his long dark hair from his eyes as he walks Wade to a stool.

“Hello, Gunner,” they reply in unison—a little too happily.

Archer is *not* minding his business. “Interesting evening, Gunner?” Apparently, I need to work on my warning glare.

“Darren, would you like some coffee?” He inhales deeply. “Please.” I rub his shoulder. “Be right back.” Heading to the counter, Shelly passes me with an already full cup.

“I got it, baby. Go to your family. And,” she whispers, “new hot guy *also* ordered a *salad*. What the hell?” She sits in Darren’s booth. “My shift ends soon. Can ya use a friend tonight?”

Walking behind the counter, I think about what Shelly said. Family. I stare into Gunner’s gentle eyes across from the bar. Yes, he is a part of my family. A wonderfully sincere smile crosses his face.

I make strawberry milkshakes for my family and set them on the bar with nothing but love in my heart. The doorbell clangs. I look through the large glass front windows at the back of Shelly’s first “hot” customer. The muscles in his arms are taut as if frustration owns his whole body. His hands are clenched into fists.

“Do you know him?”

I shake my head at Gunner, but my eyes are drawn back to the stranger. Even though my eyes only drifted for a second, he’s already gone. Within moments, his friend approaches the counter, unfolding cash in his rough hands. “Hi, I would like to pay for our two salads.”

His eyes are captivating, the brightest green I’ve ever seen with waves of white. I say waves because I’m sure they’re moving, forcing me to blink and check my sanity. “But you haven’t even received them yet.”

“That’s okay.” “You want them to go?” “No, I need to catch up with my friend.” “Oh, well, hold on.” I go to the kitchen order window. “Harry, have you made those salads yet?” “About to start. What up?” “Canceling that order.” I go back to the counter, noticing how healthy

the stranger’s hair is. Even his shorter strands on top are shiny enough to make any girl envious. “No charge.”

“Yeah?” “Sure. No food was wasted.” “Wasting food should be a crime. Thank you. Very kind of you, Rose.” “How do you know my name?”

His eyes show alarm for only half a second before he points to Shelly. “Heard our waitress call you that.”

I feel stupid. “Of course. Sorry.”

“How ya doing?” Gunner eyes the newcomer and does not sound friendly.

The stranger smirks at Gunner’s body language. “Better than some. How about yourself?”

Oblivious to the testosterone in the air, Lulu answers for Gunner. “We’re having strawberry milkshakes.”

Green eyes leans in, his long hair falling forward. “And I’m sure they were made with love.”

Lulu giggles, and I gasp. That is exactly how I made them. Standing back up,

the stranger winks at me. “Thank you again, Rose.”

At the end of the long night, Harry stands with me while I lock the diner’s front door. My keys jingle against the door’s glass as a cool breeze blows my hair into my face. “Harry, you really don’t have to wait out in this cold for me.”

He rolls his dirty apron up in his hand. “You’re kidding me, right? And have Gunner rip me a new one? *Nooooo*, thank you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Uh, let’s just say that you are to get to your truck safely. Per clear instructions, if ya catch my drift.”

Gunner had visited the kitchen before he left. “Sorry, he thinks he’s my older brother.”

Harry’s ridiculous chef hat bounces with his laughter. “*Brother. Right.*” Damn Archer and Betty. Heading to my mom’s truck, I step on something on the sidewalk.

“You okay?” asks Harry. I pick up the item and study it. A fork. Not just any fork. It’s bent in half, mangled.

Holding it up to inspect it further, Harry says, “Hope it wasn’t my cooking that made a customer so angry.”



Wade and Louisa are sleeping by the time I get home, so after my shower and after I check on Mama, I meet Gunner on the back porch. He notices my fresh clothes. “Better?”

“Oh, yes.” I sit beside him on the top step. “I noticed Mama is in different clothing, too.”

He reluctantly nods. “Got sick but we got through it. Don’t worry.” Guilt rushes through me. “I hate that you have to—” He grabs my hand. “Don’t. Don’t worry. It’s nothing new for me.” I pull his hand to my cheek and close

my eyes. “Have I ever told you

how much I appreciate all you do for me?” Gunner’s hand opens and cups my face. “I would do anything for

you, Rose.” My eyes open. This is different. Gunner is being different. Or I am

finally seeing us differently. “You would... wouldn’t you?” He stares at me as though he cherishes me. I move my body to face his. “Gunner...” I hesitate, wondering if this is a good idea. “Shelly thinks—well, Betty and Archer feel that—umm.” I blow out air.

His body faces mine. “Don’t listen to them if you don’t want to, Rosie.”

My eyes snap to his. I don’t think he is denying anything here. “Are they wrong?”

“Have you ever wondered why I don’t have a girlfriend?” “No.” That’s the truth. “You’ve been overworked, just like me.” “I don’t consider myself overworked when it comes to anything

you need.” “Oh.” My shoulders cave a little, bashfully. “Do you understand now?” My heart stirs as I look at my lap. “Yes... I think I do.” Gunner’s hand trembles slightly. “I have waited so long for you to see.

Rose, I know you love me—like... I know our friendship is incomparable to any other but... well, if you ever want... more—from me, I’m here.”

The only thing I’m sure I want more of is the new internal comfort I’ve been feeling all week. The sense of ease in my body has been so rewarding, melting stress from my consciousness. To not be terrified every moment of my day is addicting. I crave more. I desire more of the new air lingering in my lungs. “And if I only want your friendship? Are you asking me to choose, Gunner?”

I watch his face, his lips, and feel a tingle on mine—a recognition of sorts. Is it from the accidental kiss? Do I want more? Feelings toward the opposite sex are so new for me. I never had time to focus on anyone outside my family,

but a fire begins to burn, to ache, making me all kinds of curious.

“No—no.” Gunner drops his hand from mine. “Not at all. If you only want friendship, I will—” He pauses, appearing perplexed. “Why are you staring at me like that?”

“I don’t know, but I feel a pull, a desire to... Gunner, can I kiss you?”

In the woods that skirts my property, birds take flight from a nearby tree, but I don’t look away from Gunner. He holds his breath and slowly nods. His voice shakes. “Please.”

Gunner’s breathing becomes labored as I slowly lean to him. He doesn’t move. Gunner lets me do this at my own pace. I am grateful. I pause then press my mouth to his, on purpose this time. Gunner’s lips are softer than I would have imagined, had I taken the time to do so. They are full and invitingly warm, not firm and powerful.

With our lips connected, I’m waiting for the passion to kick in instead of this sensation of a strengthening bond between Gunner and me. I almost whimper at the lack of hormones. The need to satisfy my internal yearning holds my attention more than Gunner does.

His eyes close, so I shut mine, hoping this will start a tidal wave of lust. Not using my sight only heightens my awareness of my yearning. I sense a being that magnetically attracts me—or the something in me that knows him well. Since Gunner is the only male to fit this description, I know it must be him and force myself to let go of any inhibitions.

During our timid kiss, my fingers touch Gunner’s cheek then slide down his neck, studying muscle indentations. Moving my kiss slowly from his lips to his face, I kiss his strong jaw, eventually bringing me to his neck. Resting my hand on his chest, I feel him straining for air, his heart pounding, somehow so familiar.

I let my lips caress his skin as I move them back to his open, gasping mouth. He swallows as my lips linger over his and moans when I press them to his again, gently slipping the tip of my tongue to his. My hands slide down his arms to find his hands in fists.

I want to be breathless like him. I want to struggle for control as Gunner is doing, so I take his fists into my hands and wrap his arms around my waist. That seems to be what he was waiting for. He groans, pulls me closer, then takes charge. His kiss becomes aggressive in a yummy way. My toes don't curl with excitement, but my heart is soothed into a rhythm that also feels familiar. The more he kisses me, the stronger this rhythm becomes. I'm getting lost in Gunner, and I'm loving it.