

TWO

by

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ABSTRACT

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TWO

Under the direction of DR. MARK WEST

Howl, the studious college student, and Ella, the free-spirited art school dropout, are one and the same. Both have troubled pasts they want to let go of but do not know how to. On any other day, they would have never met despite both living in Charlotte, NC. But that all changes with an encounter at the park involving an Italian opera Ella knows but does not understand. With Howl and Ella on the run from their pasts, they travel all around Charlotte, NC, discovering themselves and each other.

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Chapter 1

Ella

He was beautiful as always.

I had to take a second to admire his looks again. I've been coming to see him for a while now, and each time there was something new I see. Whether it be his curved, smooth face that rounded out his body or how he towered over everyone with his impressive height. That was why I came all this way to the park at the crack of dawn just to see him. He was always at the park uptown, just minding his own business. He was always sitting in the same spot: a small circle next to the gardens with benches surrounding him. He sat in the middle of the circle inside a pool of grass. I always saw him sit there alone, looking around, maybe contemplating something, perhaps just enjoying the scenery. Without fail, he was always there—come rain, come shine. I saw him still sitting there while passing by at 2 a.m. once.

I admired his aesthetic. He had a bright, near-flawless complexion. His body was perfectly proportionate, not a single thing off-putting. I loved his clothes too. I'd only seen him wear silver with streaks swirling down the middle. His clothes were so shiny that you could see your reflection. I would get up close to him to stare at my own face through him. It wasn't a reflection like a mirror, though. Because of the streaks and how he sat, it made me look disfigured. My head squashed, my torso three feet taller, my face erased into his colors. I wondered if that was how he saw me, all broken up and flawed. It wouldn't be the first, I supposed.

What was strange was that even though he was always at this park, no one noticed him when they passed by. They might have given a glance, but they just moved on with their day. I thought that was unfair. He cleaned up super well, and people needed to appreciate it. He never responded to people, though. He kept this same stoic expression all day. I could never tell if it was

out of sadness, anger, or both. I'd meant to ask, but I was afraid I'd get the same cold stare he gave whenever I spoke to him. I'd been talking to him ever since I moved into this area. It started as a courtesy thing, but then it turned into therapy for me. I'd poured my heart into him. I'd told him secrets, passions, and frustrations, and he just looked back with that same blase look. Maybe he was listening. Maybe he was trying to find the right words to say. Maybe I was annoying him. Ah well. I was just happy to have someone to vent to. At this point, I'd take anyone. I'm sure he felt the same way.

I was supposed to be on the move, but I couldn't help but pass by him one more time. This might be my last. As always, there he was, the same spot, the same frozen look on his face. And as always, I approached him. This time was going to be rough, though. I wanted him to understand how I felt. It might hurt, but it had to be done. I wanted to leave a lasting impression on him, and even if he doesn't respond, at least it will give me peace of mind. I looked up at him. His gaze looked past me, but I didn't care. I cleared my throat...

Howl

A statue? Thought she was yelling at someone with how loud she was.

She wasn't speaking English, either. Italian, I think? Not good with foreign languages even though I read a lot. Well, this wasn't something I've seen around here. Liked this park a lot because it was typically quiet, and it was the perfect place to read. Now I got Italian screaming in my ears. Oddly, I couldn't help but watch. The book I was reading was getting boring anyway, and this was much more entertaining than calculus.

She stood directly in front of the spiraled statue, eyes forward, gaze uninterrupted. She spoke with grandeur, every syllable flowing out of her mouth like a splashing torrent. Only me,

her, and that weird statue were taking part in this speech. Never paid attention to that thing until now. All it was was just some tall cyclone-looking spiral reaching up. Honestly thought it was kind of ugly now that I see it. Why was she doing this to this one out of all of the stuff here? There was a fountain behind us that was much prettier. Better to rave about, too.

I started to hear what this person was actually saying. Very impressive. Her words and performance moved me. Actually, moving didn't really describe it. Hearing passion like this was refreshing. Been cooped up in my own thoughts for so long that I've forgotten what another person sounded like. Hearing words instead of reading them on a page was what I needed. Got goosebumps listening to this.

The more I watched, the more it felt like I witnessed a defining moment in this person's life. Don't even know what she was saying, yet I can feel resolve. She moved her whole body for the statue as if dancing. She waved her hands and twisted around in rigid motions. Fists high in the air, hips locked. Looked more like an eloquent argument. Wish I knew what she was saying. It would make anyone pay attention.

She clasped her hands together, looking at the sky as she continued. Her speech turned musical with a certain rhythm as if she had picked each word beforehand. No way that could've happened. Her voice was so natural without a hint of reciting. She had long, wavy brown hair that swayed and bounced. Even from a distance, her brown eyes were filled with excitement as words soared from her heart. And with a series of short interjections, she finished. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and ran a hand through her hair.

It took a lot out of me not to applaud. No, that would be awkward. Painful, almost. It got silent now, which seemed odd. Almost uncanny. The brown-haired girl still stood there, checking the time on her phone as if she was about to leave now. Couldn't just leave it at that, could I?

Whatever she said compelled me, and I had to let her know. Maybe it would make her day. Had to be careful, though. Doubt she noticed I was listening. She might think I was a massive creep, which is the last thing I wanted to come off as. I sighed a bit. Hate when you know deep down what you wanted to do, but you still end up being indecisive. My parents once told me that was called thinking with your brain instead of your heart. Fitting...

Decided to put my book in my messenger bag and walked up to her. Normally, the mere thought of doing this would make me cringe, but this felt right. She needed recognition for such a fantastic performance. My heart raced the more steps I took.

“Excuse me...”

Ella

I shouldn't have acted surprised, but the suddenness got me good. I stood there, my back to whoever wanted to speak to me, thinking about how I was going to justify what I was doing. I expected people to think I was insane doing this, but for some reason, I didn't expect someone to come up to me about it. I figured people would stare, shrugged their shoulders, and leave. People treated the statue the same way, but I didn't have that ability to disappear into the background. It was times like this where disappearing would be great, not for avoiding situations, but for removing myself from them.

I jerked my body behind me. He looked my age, not a day older or younger. He didn't dress to impress, clearly. He had a plain hoodie on, as dark as the circles under his eyes. He carried a messenger bag that sagged on his shoulder. I'm surprised he was even standing with how heavy it looked. He reminded me of those characters I'd met back at my old college: sleep-deprived and

studious. He scratched the little bit of stubble on his face, looking away for a second just to look back at me. Was he nervous? The way he approached me made it seem like he was concerned.

“Had no idea what you just said, but that was one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever heard,” he said. He spoke in short bursts as if he had a million and a half things to tell me at once. I couldn’t help but flash a quick, small smile. It was the first time I was ever complimented on my speaking skills. To be fair, I’d never done this in public. Guess I should break it to him. He was honest with me, so I’ll be honest with him.

“Thank you,” I said in perfect English. “But to be honest, I don’t know what I just said.”

He blinked. I wanted to burst out laughing but held it in. God, do I love good comedic timing.

“What?”

“I actually don’t speak Italian. I don’t understand a lick of it. Funny, right?”

The puzzled look on his face was so priceless I wanted a picture of it. I felt kind of bad for him. It looked like his life was crumbling around him now, like he didn’t know what to believe in anymore.

“But the way you said all of that sounded like you spoke it your whole life,” he said, his eyebrows scrunched up.

He was right. I knew this passage more than my phone number. I’ve had dreams about this passage, even. Whatever this was, it haunted me and probably will until the grave.

“Thanks. Honestly, I wish I knew what all of it meant. It’s pretty romantic and stuff. But no one in my family speaks Italian. I’ve wanted to translate it, but I’ve been so caught up with things. I know it’s from an opera.”

“What opera?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged.

He must’ve thought I’m either insane or just messing with him. It certainly wasn’t the latter. There was a lot about my life I didn’t have figured out. Like how I was going to keep stalling time today. What was there to do around here that was inconspicuous. Something I would spend the most time in...

“It’s a pretty long story and kind of funny too. But I have to get going. There’s a, uh, museum I wanted to go to.”

“Which one?” he asked.

Crap. I didn’t think that one through. What museums were around here anyway? Does Charlotte even have them? Wait! I remembered someone recommending me one a long time ago. What was that name? It started with a “B.”

“I think it’s pronounced the Bet-sh-ler?”

“Bet-chler,” he corrected.

“Ah, okay. I’ve never been. I was just here killing time.”

Saved.

Howl

Pretty strange way to kill time, but I’ll reserve all judgment.

Got through step 1. On to step 2: say “Nice to meet you,” and leave. Easy. But just then, I had an idea—a crazy one. One I never considered doing today. My brain was muzzled. It was the heart’s turn to speak. It was so excited that it started jumping. I had to remind myself that the worst she could say was “no.” But I hope she didn’t.

“Could go with you if you want,” I said.

She redirected her eyes at me. Her smile faded and turned into an honest expression—eyes widened, mouth slightly opened. Came off too strong, almost desperate. Panic set in. I had to find a way to play it off cooler.

“Haven’t been to that museum in a while. Besides, I’m heading that area myself. Got some books to return,” I added, gesturing to my shoulder bag.

This looked bad. I’d gone off the deep end. Don’t even know what I was saying at this point. I should’ve just left and saved both of us from embarrassment. I couldn’t even look at her in the face for more than a millisecond. Nope, this was a terrible idea. I was about to say “forget it” and move on until she interrupted me.

“Oh. I guess it would be nice to go with someone. I get bored going to places alone anyway.”

I looked up at her to make sure that just happened. She looked as serious as could be. Expected her to suddenly burst into laughter and mock me for asking such a stupid question.

“You said you went there before, right? I actually don’t know where it is,” she added.

“It’s not far at all,” I said.

“Good, you can guide me then. What’s your name?”

I was in such shock that I almost didn’t register the question.

“Howl,” I said in relief.

She looked at me up and down. Expected as much

“Is...that really—”

“Nah,” I replied. “It’s what I prefer to be called. Been trying to reinvent myself lately.”

“I kinda like that. Reinventing yourself. Well, you know where to go, so...”

My breathing went back to normal. My heart was done trying to jump out to talk. Guess I could be myself now, whatever that means.

“Well, I’d like to know the name of who I’m accompanying, first,” I said with a slight smile.

Ella

Well, that was kind of rude.

Howl

Oh no. I cringed hard inside. Note to self: don’t try to be funny. Should have just asked for her name without all the sarcasm. I thought she would chuckle at my snarkiness, but she looked taken aback instead, wrinkling her eyebrows at me. Apologizing right now would’ve made things more awkward. I needed to get better at this kind of stuff, but I guess the only way is through practice.

“Ella,” she said.

Chapter 2

Howl

The girl named Ella and I headed south of the park and crossed South Church Street. The morning sun started creeping out, shining along with the skyscraper windows. From a certain angle, the windows looked like a clear swimming pool of orange light. The wind picked up some fall leaves off the ground, some reaching up to those swimming pools. Minutes had passed, and we hadn't said anything. The sound of typical morning traffic filled the awkwardness between us. I occasionally glanced at her to see her staring at her feet a lot. She wore black slip-ons, which complemented her long-sleeved white button-down and dark skinny jeans. Probably looked out of style compared to her. Usually tried to dress comfier on weekends like these: a simple dark hoodie and jeans. More minutes passed with no talking. This was agonizing. Time to break the silence somehow.

"Sorry if I was rude earlier," I started. She turned to me as we continued to walk.

"About asking your name, I mean. Felt like I was rude. To be brutally honest with you, I'm terrible at first impressions. Seems to be a curse of mine," I said.

"It was a bit rude," she said, looking down at her feet again. Surprised by how blunt she was, but I expected it. I'm honest to God shocked she was still walking with me after that. It could've been worse. But still, some people didn't take things like that too kindly. I knew that from experience.

"I accept your apology. But I guess this means you have to make it up to me." She gave me a smug look.

"Oh?"

"Mind paying for our trip?"

“Not at all. Hell, we can get breakfast somewhere if you want,” I said, shrugging.

She glared. “You’re either very nice or very desperate.”

I didn’t say anything more. Wasn’t quite sure myself. I’m sure she was thinking, “He’s trying to hit on me,” but that wasn’t my intent. Wanted to make that clear to her. I was enjoying her company, no matter how brief. Couldn’t remember the last time I made small talk with someone. In a way, she was right. I was desperate, just not in the way she was probably thinking.

We reached the intersection of South Church and South Tryon, turned right, walked a few blocks, then approached the modern art museum. A large, L-shaped, cube-like structure hovered over us. Planes of glass covered the front entrance side while every other side was reddish-brown concrete. When we got to the front entrance, she rushed ahead and opened the door for me. I looked at her, puzzled.

“Thought that was my job,” I said.

“You’re the one paying,” she said with a smirk.

We reached the front desk. Like I said I would, I paid for both of us. The lady at the front desk brushed her shoulder-length black hair away from her face. She looked young but not in the same range as Ella and I. If I were to guess, perhaps mid-thirties. But I wouldn’t be surprised if I was wrong. She had a natural way about her that told me she had more life experience. She gave inquisitive looks, spoke in terse sentences like “\$10.70. Cash or card?”; and she prefaced all body movements with caution—especially when handling the money I gave her. She stared at my hand, swiped her eyes to my other hand, then slowly reached out to the money as if to test the waters. Found it odd. Never could be too careful, I guess.

She took off her thin glasses, uncovering her sleepy eyes. She cleaned the lenses with the end of her blue sweater. When she did that, I had a realization—a triggered memory from my past.

The world around me zoned off as I was deep in my own head, calculating this woman's presence. I'd seen her before, I swear, but something felt off. Like when you give two bakers the same recipe, and they both come out different. The person in front of me looked different than my memory of her.

"The new exhibit is on the top floor. We recommend starting at the top and work your way down. If there's anything I can help you with, just ask."

Ella

How long was he just going to stand there?

He'd been staring at this lady for about a minute. One long, excruciating minute. I hope he wasn't checking her out or something. That would just be creepy. I poked his side. He jolted, swung his head at me, then to her. He apologized as she gave us each a map and a brochure detailing the latest exhibit. She also reminded Howl (why that name of all things...) to leave his backpack here at the front.

I headed straight for the elevators, but Howl walked to the staircase on the opposite side.

"I prefer stairs if you don't mind," he said.

"She looks like someone familiar," he later mentioned as we climbed the stairs. He said it concerningly as if he was making sure he wasn't in a dream.

"Who? At the front desk?" I asked.

"Yeah. She actually looks like an elementary teacher I had. Don't know why it came to me all of a sudden."

"She must have been memorable to you, then."

“Not really. I don’t even remember if I liked her or not. That’s what makes it strange. Haven’t thought about her in forever,” he said.

Howl

That was a fib. I remembered this teacher for something I never got over, but I didn’t want to thrust the duty of therapist to someone I met twenty minutes ago.

“Who knows, maybe that was her,” she replied. “I mean, teachers don’t get paid much around here anyway. This might be a day job.”

I hope not.

Marilyn Monroe greeted us when we reached the top floor. Her relaxed smile and smokey eyes made us draw instantly to her. Ella eyed her up and down.

“Wow, a Warhol. Never thought I’d see him,” she said.

“The soup-can guy? Sorry, don’t know much about art,” I admitted.

She gave a disappointing sigh.

“Yeah, that’s what he’s known for the most. I’m not a massive fan of him or anything; he has his place in history. I can’t forgive him for what he did to Basquiat, though. I think he was a much more expressive artist,” she said.

“Wish I was more into art like you,” I admitted.

“Didn’t you say you’ve been here before?”

“When I was little. I only hung out in the kids’ area while my mom and dad looked around. They had an activity where they showed a famous piece of art and told you to try and recreate it with crayons, and I cried because I couldn’t draw a tree as good as the painting.”

She chuckled at my misfortune—story of my life.

We walked around the exhibit more. The whole collection seemed random to me. There were pastoral oil paintings next to sculptures next to what I could best describe as brightly colored shapes fighting each other for space on a canvas. A few other visitors strolled with leisure, stopping at each artwork to gaze or gawk at it. Didn't know how to appreciate fine art, and I admitted that to Ella.

"If it looks pretty to me, I just like it," I told her. "I know there's all these elements like line, shape, and volume they teach you, but I don't really know how to appreciate all of it."

"I don't think everybody has to *appreciate* it to like art," she said. "It's like you said, if you like it, you like it. That's really the basics of it. From there, people take it more seriously. They like it, appraise it, critique it, and whatever else. Appreciation is so subjective, though. I had an art teacher in high school who was so mean. She had a very strict view of what art was. If it wasn't flowers and vases and all that, it wasn't art to her. I did a tribute painting in the style of Jackson Pollock—"

She pulled out her phone and showed me one of his paintings on Google. Thought it looked cool and mentioned that to her.

"Yeah, I know, right? So anyway, I made something similar to this, and I just loved it. Other people in my class loved it too. But then my teacher saw it and said, 'Next time, stop wasting my paint and paper.' I was so mad."

That truly was awful, but I wanted to change topics so that I didn't risk saying the wrong thing like I was prone to doing.

"You in the art field? You seem really passionate about it," I asked. She paused for a moment before speaking.

“I was. I studied it for a while in college then dropped out. It was a waste of time and money. There was too much pretentiousness for my taste,” she said.

I grunted in agreeance. I knew a thing or two about that and was about to agree with her wholeheartedly when we noticed a woman touching a bronze sculpture. It resembled the skull of a bull. Strings of pearls covered it, hanging like a curtain around the bull’s head. The woman grasped the pearls in her palm, the clacking sound echoed through the hall. With a curious face, she squatted down and examined them. “Please do not touch” came over the museum’s overhead intercom. She ignored. “Please do not touch.” The woman kept touching. Finally, a museum worker rushed up to the woman and told her to stop. The woman looked confused, as if she wasn’t doing anything wrong. The woman then asked if the pearls were genuine, as they could be worth a lot of money. The museum worker assured they were just decorative ones, as the number of pearls on the statue would total in the near billions. The woman laughed and walked away without another word.

“Crazy people,” Ella said, sighing.

“Makes you wonder what goes through their heads,” I commented.

“I know, right.”

As we walked into the next hallway filled with paintings by artists I’m not familiar with, a question dawned on me.

“That woman and the sculpture reminds me...”

“Hmm?” she said, turning to me.

“You still never told me why you were speaking to the statue at the park. Or how you speak Italian but don’t know it.”

She pursed her lips and went silent. She looked back down at her feet again. Was afraid I struck the wrong chord.

“I can tell you one thing, but not the other,” she said.

“Why?” I asked.

“I’m not just gonna dump my life story on you. We’re complete strangers. You gotta work for it,” she looked at me with a slight grin.

“Fair enough.” I shrugged. I was surprised she was tagging along with me for this long, honestly. Perhaps once we left this museum, we would part ways and never see each other again unless we share phone numbers or something. Got a sense from her that would not happen. Might be annoying the hell out of her, and she had only been courteous for my sake. I hope not. I liked her, and I’d been trying to keep a good impression since that earlier mishap at the park. She was good company, and I might as well enjoy talking to an actual human being while it lasted.

“I can tell you about the statue. You know that park’s name, right?”

“Romare Bearden Park.”

“You know who he was?”

“Someone important enough to have a park here in Charlotte.”

“He was an artist, and I mean that in every sense of the word. He did it all: collages, poetry, oil paintings, songwriting. He was born in Charlotte. That’s why the park is in his name.”

She pulled out her phone again to show me pictures of this artist’s work. She showed me these colorful collages made of paper and cloth. They were flamboyant, yet with a slight edge to them.

“Did this guy design that statue?”

“No. That was one of his close friends, Richard Hunt. Bearden died a while ago, and Charlotte wanted a new installation in honor of him. That statue’s only been there a couple years.”

Now that I thought about it, I did remember some activity around the park back then. When I was a senior in high school, I walked over to the park to read, but a huge crowd got in my way. I remembered that day because it wasn’t the greatest, and people invading my favorite reading spot didn’t make it better. I didn’t mention that to Ella as she talked on.

“So, the sculpture is called *Spiral Odyssey*, and it’s a reference to Homer.”

“Homer?” Nothing about that artwork screamed Homer. All I ever saw was a big waterfall-like cyclone of metal. I never paid attention to it at all. To be fair, I don’t think anyone does, except for the people who talk to it in Italian.

“A lot of people don’t see it, which is kind of the point, I think. It’s very subtle. Bearden was part of an artist group called the Spiral group. They were a group of African-American artists who wanted to constantly progress African-American art.”

“Yeah. Still don’t get it, though.”

“Well, what does a spiral do?” she asked.

“Go around.”

“Right. A spiral reaches all directions. But a spiral also goes upward no matter what. So that was the Spiral Group’s mission: to influence everyone around them while still lifting themselves up.”

“And Homer goes in where?”

“*The Odyssey*. I’m sure you can see the connection somewhere.”

I replayed the entire book in my head. It had been forever and a day since I’d read it, so I only remembered certain moments.

“I mean, it’s the ultimate story of voyaging through hardship,” I concluded.

“Exactly. *The Odyssey* influenced the Spiral group. They loved the mythos, the romanticism, the visuals; they even related to Odysseus’s trek home. So, when Hunt was commissioned to make a sculpture for his friend, he mixed all these ideas together.”

“How do you know all this? Act like you met them all.” I glared at her.

“There’s a plaque next to the statue.”

“Oh?”

“It’s in plain view,” she said.

“Oh, yeah. I remember now.” I didn’t. I was starting to feel dumb.

Ella stopped to look at a tapestry hung on the wall. It looked like the quilts my mom used to throw together for the winter. Didn’t look as comfortable as my mother’s, both in material and design.

“I see something new every time I see that statue. This is going to sound crazy, but I’m sure you think I’m insane already. I used to go look at it nearly every day. I get inspired every time I look at it, not because I think it’s a beautiful piece of art, but because of the story behind it. A friend made that for a friend. It feels personal. You can see it in all the fine details and what they represent. It really inspires me. You don’t see art like that anymore. I get the same feeling when I recite that Opera. Just the way the language sounds is so meaningful. I thought it would be fitting to match the two together.”

We walked in silence. She looked back down at her shoes as I processed all I heard. “Now I’m *really* curious about how that’s the only Italian you know,” I said.

She looked at me with a small grin again.

“Not yet,” she replied.

“Do you at least know ‘ciao’ or ‘buona sera’?”

She shook her head. I didn’t push any further. Guess we both had secrets we didn’t want to tell. We strolled through the rest of the exhibit. Ella would point out a piece of art and explained its context, history, and a little bit of the technique used. I recognized some of these artworks referenced in books I’d read, but they were not always well described through words. It was interesting how different they looked compared with how I read about them. It was also fascinating seeing Ella being so passionate about this subject. She constantly asked questions and pointed out details in the artwork that went right over my head. She spoke with such amazement and reverence the same way she talked to the statue earlier. She was better than any art teacher I ever had. More inspiring, too.

We made our way down the floors like the lady at the front desk (I swear she was my 3rd-grade teacher...) recommended. The third floor had sculptures from around the world. Nothing impressive. They were mostly bland and straightforward. Even Ella admitted that. One was just a cube with a see-through hole in the middle. A man walked by and made a perverted joke. His wife gasped and hit him on the arm. We tried our hardest to contain our laughter. The second floor had the kids’ area (bad memories...), where a dozen or so kids were making sculptures out of playdough.

“Hey, want to redeem yourself?” Ella said to me with a sly look. I looked at her, confused for a moment, then realized.

“I mean, I can try,” I said. I grabbed a sheet of paper, a pencil, and some crayons.

“What do you want me to copy?” I asked. She thought for a moment, then pulled out her phone and searched for something. She laid the phone on the small, colorful table for kids.

“Here you go. Try this,” she said.

It was a gorgeous painting—a man crouching down with his back turned in front of a creek. Grass and trees surrounded him, looking gradually sparse the farther they were to him. There were no definitive traces, just colors blending together to form the man, the river, and the trees. The use of negative space (a new term I learned today) was also astonishing. Most of the painting was a soft, white border around the subject. It centered the piece, catching your eye to him. Started tracing out the negative space first because I was so drawn to it. Then, I tried to replicate the sparseness of the foliage around the man before using the crayons to match the colors. Ella hovered over me as I worked. Didn't see her expression, but I had a feeling she was giddy. She was quiet the entire time. After a few minutes, I was done. Wasn't a perfect match, but I tried.

“Hey, not bad,” she commented. “Nice use of color. I'd scale back on the rigid lines next time, but not bad.”

“That was hard. This is a pretty good painting. Who made it?” I asked. She gave a big grin.

“I knew it,” I said.

“You really think it's good?”

“I mean, it's better than the one I made, right?”

“I don't know; yours looks more modern,” she said.

“Yours looks classical,” I replied.

“People don't want classical anymore,” she said while shaking her head.

“Don't know about that. Retro always makes a comeback.” I folded up the drawing and put it in my pocket. We playfully bickered as we went down to the first floor. The front desk lady just got off a phone call. She groaned to herself, rubbing her temples. The moment we came up to her, she perked up as if we caught her in the act of something. She turned around to the counter behind her and gave my bag back.

“Umm...was wondering, actually. What’s your name?” I blurted out.

She blinked at me a few times, eyebrows scrunched up.

“I’m Johanna. There something wrong, sir?”

“Were you ever an elementary school teacher?” I asked.

The woman named Johanna shook her head slowly. She stared at me like I was about to report her to the manager or something.

“Oh, sorry. Thank you,” I said before Ella and I left. Was cringing all the way out the door.

“Wow, you really are bad with first impressions,” Ella said as we got onto the sidewalk.

“It’s a curse, I swear,” I said, sighing.

“I don’t know. To me, it seems like you need to think about what to say and how people are going to react to it,” she said.

I wanted to be defensive and say, “no, that couldn’t be it,” but perhaps she was right. I never considered it like that. Wanted to ask her more about it, but her phone chimed. She pulled it out and looked at whatever message she got. It was probably her parents reminding her to come home or her cooler friends telling her to meet up somewhere soon. Regardless, it was nice meeting her, and I wanted to tell her that. Wanted to get her number to keep in contact, but I didn’t want to sound creepy about it. She bit her lip while reading the message. Figured this was the part where she needed to leave but didn’t want to offend me, so I started my goodbyes in advance.

“Hey, it was nice talking to you...”

Ella

I bit my lip harder as I closed my text messages.

What was he saying? It didn't matter. I needed an excuse and needed one now. I just met this person named Howl. He was definitely out there, but I think he was going to be my saving grace for a minute.

"I was wondering, umm, if I could—"

"You mind if I stick around with you?" I blurted out.

He was taken aback.

"I mean, you said you had books to return, right? I can go with you. I got time," I said, trying not to sound in a hurry the best I could. Please say "yes." Please, Howl.

"Umm...okay, yeah," he said.

I sighed in relief. "I've been looking for something new to read anyway," I said, smiling a bit warily. I knew he probably had a million questions, but I hope he doesn't pry. I shouldn't complain about someone actually wanting to be with me today.

Howl

I had a million questions, but I figured I shouldn't dig too deep. I shouldn't complain about someone actually wanting to be with me today.

Chapter 3

Howl

I checked the time. It was only 10 a.m. Not like I had to be anywhere or anything, but I wondered how long Ella was going to be accompanying me. Had a big exam tomorrow, and I should probably do some totally-not-last-minute-at-all studying tonight. But I didn't want to bore Ella with my bad college habits anyway; she looked like she had enough on her mind.

Since Ella got that text, she looked on edge. Her steps were quicker next to mine. I struggled to keep up. She also kept looking at her shoes again. Like after we first met, we were back to not saying a word. Eventually, I couldn't take the awkwardness anymore.

"You look at your feet a lot," I said.

She looked up at me with a startled look, as if she was caught doing something wrong.

"I do?"

"Yeah. I mean, nothing wrong with that. Just noticed."

"I guess it's a bad habit," she said, keeping her gaze in front of her now.

"Just makes you look sad. Like your dog died or something." I expected her to laugh at my observation. Instead, she gave me a quick, sharp look. Her stare pierced me to my core.

"Sorry, did your dog actually die? Bad joke," I spouted in an instant.

She squinted her eyes at me. My soul started cracking open like ice melting away from my body. Someone please come stitch my mouth at this point. I was about to spiral into more apologies until her lips curled. She erupted into laughter, shaking her head.

"You're too much," she said.

"Huh?"

"You're too easy.."

“So you don’t have a dead dog?”

Ella

He definitely had some quirks to work out. By the way he talked and acted, it was as if he had never spoken to a human in his life. He was surprisingly observant, though. I never noticed how much I looked at my shoes. Then again, I’d been wondering why my neck seemed to ache a lot.

Was it strange that I was walking around with a complete stranger? He could be leading me to my death as far as I knew. This was a city, after all. But I’d never met someone like this boy named Howl. My initial impression was that I knew him inside and out. I thought I met plenty of people like him: studious, pretentious, and conceited like those obnoxious film students back in art school. I expected him to start waxing poetically about Tarantino any minute. But talking to him more, he came across as an earnest person. He usually only speaks when spoken to, which was strange considering he made the first move. I shouldn’t really think of it as a “move” now that I thought about it. Either he was actually not interested in me, or he was slicker than he put on. With how much of a mess he was, I doubted the latter.

Howl didn’t say anything as we walked. He didn’t even tell me where we’re going or how long it would take. At this point, I didn’t care. The farther away, the better. I’d been trying my hardest not to sound desperate, but right now, I needed Howl. I needed him as a means to escape. Something grew deep inside me, telling me that running away was only going to make it worse, that maybe this boy named Howl would get involved the more I’m with him, but I tried to repress it. The last thing I wanted was an innocent person involved.

After realizing I was in my head for too long, I wanted to ask where we're actually going, but I was interrupted by a loud cry of "Jesus saves! Jesus saves!" He was a tall, lanky African-American man in an old-fashioned suit that looked good on him. He had buzzed white hair that matched his mustache. He carried a wooden sign around his neck: "John 3:16" written in red spray paint. All around him were stacks of small Bibles that reached up to his knees. With each person that walked by, he handed them off with a delightful smile.

"Jesus saves! Jesus saves!"

A businessman in a suit and tie ignored him. A child walking with his parents pointed his finger and laughed. A woman with no hair scoffed and smacked the Bible from his hand. Yet with all this, when Howl and I passed, he handed Howl a Bible with the same warm grin.

"Jesus saves!"

"Thank you," Howl said. He took the Bible, put it in his shoulder bag, and moved on.

"That was really nice of you," I said to him.

"I've seen him around here plenty of times. I always take a Bible from him when I'm by."

"You always take one?" I had to make sure I heard him correctly.

"Yeah. Surprised he hasn't recognized me yet. I got a stack of these things in my dorm room. I donate them to thrift shops. I don't believe in selling Bibles."

"Are you religious?"

"Nah."

I looked at him, puzzled.

"I just don't believe in selling books," he said. "I'll buy them, but I won't sell them. Honestly, I don't think anyone should be charging for books. We should just be distributing them for free."

“Why?”

“Well, first, not a lot of people read much anymore. So what’s the point? Second, I think we shouldn’t put a price on education. Books educate us, even fiction. Plus, I’ve spent too much money on these damn things.”

“So how do writers make any money, then?” I asked.

“Most of them work at Wal-Mart anyway, right?”

“You’re awful.” I laughed. “So let’s say you spend most of your life on your magnum opus book. You shed the blood, the sweat, the tears, and everything. You’re telling me you don’t want to get paid for all that hard work and end up cleaning toilets for the rest of your life?”

“Knowing my work is loved by people is enough for me,” he replied.

“You’re insane.”

“Art for art’s sake, right?”

“That doesn’t pay bills,” I assured.

“Makes for better books.”

I rolled my eyes again with a smile. This guy was insane. He had some...interesting opinions. I appreciated how honest he is, at least. Most people I knew would lie just to impress me. This was refreshing.

Howl

Strange. She wasn’t looking at her shoes anymore. Her posture straightened up, too. Night and day compared to how she was 10 minutes ago. Maybe something snapped in her. Should I mention it to her? Don’t want to make it worse.

“Wait, where exactly are we going?” she asked.

“Bookstore. A good one,” I answered.

“To *return* books?”

“You’ll see.”

Ella

The bus ride was surprisingly loud: kids laughing and screaming, a man playing music through an open speaker. What got my attention and worried me the most were the two people a couple seats in front of me.

These two were just going at each other in earshot, hands waving, voices raised. Cries of “I never said that!” and “You’re not listening!” flew around the bus as it charged along. I glanced over to Howl. He stood holding the pole while I sat near the window. He just gazed out the window like a philosopher in thought, not concerned with the event in front of him. Wouldn’t that be nice? To be able to just escape into your own head like that. I would abuse that power. I hate being too present and alert sometimes. Even when I didn’t know these two people, I felt anxious in their place. I felt for the sake of others too much, which was my blessing and curse.

I looked out the window again to best copy Howl. He was quiet this entire ride. He never lifted his eyes from the window either. I started to wonder what his secret was. He never seemed bothered by anything but himself. If only. But then again, maybe that was *his* blessing and curse. My father told me that a person’s mind could be their own dungeon while others saw it as freedom. Perhaps that was it.

The bus made a stop. Howl nudged me that this was ours. We stepped out, merging with the other crowds getting off. Howl immediately crossed the street, and I followed. A few steps later, I found myself in a small, corner-shaped commons area with an Asian restaurant and

sandwich shop. Wedged between those two, sticking out with rows of book carts outside, was the bookstore. It looked almost rustic. There wasn't even a sign on the front window. I had to step back and look at the top of the building to get a name: Book Buyers. I didn't expect him to take me to a mom-and-pop store, though I suppose that fits him. When I thought of a bookstore, I thought of one of those big-name chains like Barnes and Noble. Howl opened the door for me.

“Couldn't come up with anything witty to say, but you first,” he said.

A musty smell attacked my nose the moment I entered. There was no doubt what this place was. Every corner of the area was filled with books, and I do mean every corner. Bookshelves, bins, and rows from the floors to the ceiling, some organized, some not. There wasn't even any decor, not even a poster. Light jazz played on a speaker, echoing around the room since there seemed to be no people. It felt like I walked into someone's private library, but the cash register to my right assured me that these books were for sale. There was no one behind the counter, though—only a shelf of vintage books, bound with cloth or leather.

“Hey, Sal. I'm here,” Howl shouted out.

A man wearing a straw hat came from the back of the store. He looked in his mid-50s, and the 60s never died to him. He had the sandals, the colorful shirt, and the wild, greying beard. He sauntered to the back of the counter.

“Hey there, chief,” he said.

“Returning these.” Howl pulled out a few books from his bag and handed to him,

“Like'em?”

“I liked all of them except for that early McCarthy. He's written better by a long shot. The new Rumi anthology was phenomenal, though.”

“You’re the hardest critic who comes here,” Sal said as he chuckled and took the books. He looked over at me.

“How can I help you, ma’am?”

“She’s with me.” Howl turned his head to me. “There’s an art section here if you want to look at it, by the way.”

The old hippie’s eyes widened. “You like art? I just revamped the architecture section back there.” He pointed to the shelf closest to the opposite wall.

I just nodded and kept a smile on. I felt so out of place here, as if everyone was in on something except for me.

“Can I see the backroom today, actually?” Howl asked.

“I don’t see why not. Not for too long. I do inventory today.”

The backroom? How was Howl allowed back there? How was he so buddy-buddy with this old man? Unraveling Howl was like a puzzle at this point. As much as I wanted to go to the art section, I was curious about this mystical “backroom.” Howl said thanks to this Sal guy and guided me to the back of the store. He opened the door for me again. Inside was a big, plain room with piles of unorganized books, some old, some brand new. He turned on the overhead light. It buzzed and shined only in the middle of the room.

“You got special privileges, huh?” I said.

“It helps when the owner is a friend of the family.”

“Mister Peace and Love back there?”

He snickered.

“Yup. That’s Sal. He’s known me since I was in diapers. Likes me a lot for some reason and lets me in here. Can have whatever I want around here as long I give it back,” he said.

“Wait, you don’t pay for any books here?”

“Only if I really like them,” he said as he browsed. “He says he trusts me to return them, so I do.”

What a deal. We both looked around the stacks. A lot of them were stuff I’d never even heard of. I picked up a few books just to look at the artwork. I appreciated old book covers. There was much more thought in the artwork.

“Must be nice to have your own personal library.” I thumbed through a stack of books.

“It is. Though, eventually, I might end up reading everything around here,” he admitted.

“Are you a fast reader?”

“Too fast. Had plenty of English teachers who didn’t believe me when I said I read the assigned books in a few days. They thought I just read CliffNotes or something. But then test time came, and I aced them without fail.”

“I’m not the biggest reader myself. I feel like I never had time for it. High school English wasn’t the best for me,” I said.

“That’s because the books they choose are so boring.”

I was shocked to hear that, but before I could ask for him to explain, he rattled off.

“They always pick books high schoolers can’t relate to. It’s all about Gods and rich people and whatever. Take Gatsby, for example. Why are people teaching that book in high school? We should be reading it as adults. We’ll relate to the themes more. The average high schooler isn’t going through a midlife crisis while struggling with the disillusionment of the American dream, right?” I said.

“But don’t you think reading something like that early can make an impact on someone?”

“Sure, I can see that. Depends on the person, don’t get me wrong. But I just think that stories have a right time and place for each person. We read kids ‘The Boy Who Cried Wolf’ to teach them not to lie early on. Read it to adults, and it’s too late.”

I crossed my arms with a slight smirk. Might as well give him a challenge.

“I think you’re looking into it a bit too much. Not all art has a moral. It can just exist to look good. That’s aesthetics, right? Also, art is subjective. The meaning I get is different than yours. Art can’t always be a talking piece,” I laid down for him. It took a moment for him to reply.

“I don’t think art just exists. Someone made it, someone who wanted to tell someone something. I think there’s always some kind of lesson to be learned, ya know? I think we’re naturally drawn to morals because we want to be better people deep down but don’t know how to express it. Art does that for us. Think of it like all that artwork we saw today. All those artists wanted you to learn something or see the world differently from their work. Why else would they make it? They could just paint it and keep it to themselves. Sure, it’s subjective, but in the end, a person still learns something no matter how they interpret it.”

I couldn’t help but laugh as if he told a great joke. “Have you been practicing all this in the shower or something?”

Howl

I had been, actually.

Ella

“Well, here, let me put it like this. That painting you had me copy, what was your intent in making that?” he asked.

“Why do you have to bring that up? You made your point.” I ran my fingers through my hair. I hate questions like that. I really do.

“I’m curious, that’s all. I really like it.”

“*Perchance*,” I said. I kept thumbing through a stack of books.

“What does it mean?”

“Whatever you want it to mean,” I said.

“I’m serious.”

“I am too.”

“All right, what does it mean to you,” he said with a slight edge.

“It’s not up to me.”

“But you made it.”

“I know I made it, but I could’ve just painted it and kept it to myself, right?” I said. He shook his head with a grin.

“All right, changing subjects. What do you do when you’re not painting for yourself?”

“I work at a clothing store,” I said, still flipping through books with my fingers.

“Where at?”

“Plato’s Closet. The one twenty minutes away.”

“Hell of a commute with the traffic around here,” he said.

“I just take the light-rail.”

“Same. Ain’t the best, but it beats dealing with the traffic outside my campus.”

“Where do you go?” I asked.

“UNCC.”

It seemed like everyone went there. In fact, the most popular thing I'd heard at work was "I'm a UNCC student" because they either want a discount or they try to justify why they were buying second-hand clothes. "What do you study?"

He grabbed two books from a shelf and put them in his bag. He took a sharp breath. I think I hit a nerve. I don't know how; I asked a pretty simple question. Sal popped his head through the door just then.

"Time's running up, chief."

Howl picked up some last-minute books after he left. He urged me to take something, as I was welcomed to. I refused. I didn't feel like lugging a big book around anyway. We walked out of the back room and back to the front counter.

"Wanna mind the store while I do inventory?" Sal asked Howl.

"Sure, unless you have to go anywhere?" Howl said to me. I shook my head quickly. I got all the time in the world right now. Sal thanked us and went on his way. Howl and I walked to the front counter and sat on the barstool chairs. It was dead in here, just Howl and I. It made me wonder how this place was in business. I rested my elbows on the counter and leaned forward.

"Do you work for him too?" I asked him.

"Nah, sometimes he just has me tend bar for a little bit. Not enough to get paid for it."

"I'm surprised. This looks like a dream job," I said.

"Don't really have time for a job."

But he had time for this? And for reading at Romare Bearden early in the morning? I didn't ask further. He didn't even want to tell me what his major was earlier. Which, to be fair, I didn't blame him. I got embarrassed when people asked me about my college experiences too. I'd heard all the art school drop-out jokes, so at this point, I didn't bother anymore. I remembered that one

time a co-worker asked me what I did before I started at Plato's Closet. After I gave them the art school spiel and why I had to leave, they just gave me the strangest look and walked away. What was I supposed to make of that? I couldn't stand people like that. Just when I thought I ran away from all of that pettiness, it kept coming back...

I looked over at the rows of rare books next to me. I had to get my mind off things and not focus on other people's thoughts so much. My therapist told me to work on that. I read the spines of all the leather-bound and cloth-bound books. I bet their pages were yellower than a Macaroni & Cheese Crayola. Just when I was about to ask Howl if he borrowed these, someone came into the shop.

That Preacher on 7th Street walked in as if on a mission, throwing the doors open with force. His red painted sign was under his right arm with a cardboard box around his left. His steps were brisk as if he needed to be in and out of here quick. He approached us with that same toothy grin, though this time it seemed brighter and more exuberant. He laid down his items on the floor as he reached the counter.

"Hello there, how are you today?" he said with joy. He didn't seem to recognize us from earlier, not even Howl, who claimed he took multiple bibles from him.

"Hey. How can I help you?" Howl asked. He seemed unphased by this.

"Now, I don't wish to bother you or anything, but I was just wondering if I can have a moment of your time?"

Howl gave me a quick look. I shrugged. Again, I got all the time in the world. Before Howl could respond, The Preacher started:

"Thank you, sir. I'm the minister of the Baptist Community Church down on University City—do you know where that is?—anyway, we are doing our monthly donation drive to the needy

and underprivileged in our community. That includes local shelters, food kitchens, and even directly to community members. We'll gladly take anything you're willing to donate, and we will let them know that it was a generous donation from you. If you're interested, I'd be glad to take anything right now."

He held up his cardboard box, which didn't have much in it besides a couple of worn-out shirts and a half-eaten loaf of bread. This sounded rather nice, and I felt bad after seeing that box.

Howl just scratched the back of his head. "Well, to be honest with you, I don't actually work here. Can grab the owner if you want? He's busy right now, but—"

"Oh, that's no problem, sir. I'll just come back later. Thank you. God bless. God bless," he said in one big breath. He picked up his things and walked right out with the same quick steps as when he came in.

"Sounds like a good program," I said. I wish Howl didn't shoo him away. I would've given a piece of candy to him, at least.

"Little too good to be true," Howl responded.

"Are you always this skeptical?" Now that I thought about it, I hadn't heard a single affirming thing come out of his mouth.

"Only when the going gets too good."

I guess that wasn't a bad philosophy, just a bit depressing. (Then again, all of philosophy is depressing.) It reminded me of my middle school days (unfortunately). Back when I thought I was an adult thrust into a meaningless and fleeting world at the ever-so-old age of 14.

Without another minute, Sal came to the front and asked how everything was. Howl told him he might have a visitor later today with a proposal. Sal brushed it off.

"I'd be crazy to give away free books to anyone but you, chief."

Howl chuckled. I mentioned that I wanted to go to that art section. Sal nodded and guided us to a whole line of bookshelves on different art forms: architecture, visual art, music. Each section had its subject on a small sign underneath. It was so impressive that I was overwhelmed. I started with the visual art section, inspired by the Warhol we saw at the Bechtler earlier. I was in heaven within a few seconds—a retrospective on Basquiat, Van Gogh’s letters, a visual book on Egon Schiele’s self-portraits. I wish I brought a tote bag from home. Howl just watched me being in my own world, glancing at whatever book I grabbed only to move his eyes to other parts of the shelf.

“Rarely go into this section. Don’t know much about this stuff.”

“Not even music?”

“I don’t go out of my way to listen to it.”

I stopped to look at him.

“Do you do anything for fun? I mean, you don’t even listen to music?” I asked earnestly. I was serious. All I knew about Howl so far was that he reads.

Howl scratched the inside of his arm, looking deep in thought. “Depends on what you mean by ‘fun.’ I don’t think music is that fun, but I guess if you’re willing to recommend me a few things...”

Oh boy, I had to process this one for a second. I can accept naming yourself Howl. I can get not understanding visual art. I can get having your nose so deep in a book that it turns black from the ink—but not liking music? That was just inhuman. That was just one of those things that *everyone* at least enjoys. I took it a bit personally because I was raised on music. I couldn’t say anything after. I looked over the visual art section for a book on Bearden. Sure enough, there were plenty. I grabbed them all so I could look through them. When I turned around to show Howl, he

was gone. I looked up and down the aisle. Not a sound. I figured something caught his eye, so I went back to glancing at the Bearden books. What a beautiful man and artist he was. Even when seeing his work in a tiny book, it gave me chills. The Spiral statue at his park made me feel the same way. I could only aspire to the level of these great masters I'm looking at right now. I wish my work were powerful enough to have books written about me. I would have gotten to that point. If only I had made better decisions.

I noticed Howl came back. He had a massive book under his arm, as thick as a concrete slab. I couldn't see what the title was.

"Sorry. Found something. You hungry?" he asked.

Now that he mentioned it, I hadn't eaten anything all day. We walked back to the front counter. Sal was crouched down, doing something I couldn't see. When I put the books I found on the counter, Sal shot right up with a fluffy, orange tabby cat in his arms. It took me off guard. The cat looked at me with squinted eyes.

"How is she?" Howl asked.

"Oh, hanging in there. She just woke up," Sal said. He offered me to pet her and told me her name: Fifi. I took out my pocket purse. Sal waved his hand.

"If you're with chief, don't worry about it. I'll just hunt him down instead of you."

Howl shook his head with a smirk. Howl then told him we were going out for lunch and that we might come back later. Sal just nodded and told him with a serious look: "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

I asked Howl about that as we walked out. He took my books and put them in his bag so that I wasn't lugging them around everywhere.

“He’s had a hard life. I won’t get into details, but stuff like drugs, family deaths, all that fun stuff. Really messed him up,” he said.

“Wow. I never would’ve guessed.”

“He hides it well, or he’s just finally happy. I hope I can be like him someday,” he said with a slight choke.

“Are you saying you’re not happy or something?” I looked at him. Seriously, where did that come from? That was the most melancholy I’d heard from him so far.

He paused for a second and looked up at the sky. “I didn’t mean it like that. He just seems happy right now in his life. Anyone would love to be like that, right?”

There really was something about this boy named Howl. There really was something.

Howl

Right now wasn’t the time to get into all that. She didn’t press further as we left.

Thank God.

Chapter 4

Howl

“You’re not vegan, are you?” I asked Ella as we reached the street. It was a little bit after 11 a.m. Perfect time for brunch, and I knew a good place. Ella gave me a biting look as if I had asked her what planet she was from.

Panic set in. I was in for it now. I took one big breath.

“Sorry, sorry, I just know a lot of girls are into it. I don’t know much about it, honestly. The place I go to don’t have many vegan options and—”

“Again...” Ella sighed, cutting me off. She pointed a finger directly to her temple. “Think first. Say later.”

My heart stopped thumping, but my stomach was still a bit uneasy.

“And I’ll eat anything as long as you pay like you said,” she finished with a smirk.

Crisis averted. Although, I was starting to think she was tagging along for the free food. To be fair, I’d do the same.

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We had to retake the bus to get to the place I liked. She was skeptical, but I promised her it would be worth the trip.

The bus led us down North Davidson Road, stopping every so often for the regular in-and-out crowd. We passed nothing special. This place was full of convenience stores, apartments, and the Ma & Pa restaurants with big retro signs older than anyone on this bus. It was starting to get much warmer. I had to take off my hoodie and put it in my bag.

“It’s crazy how it gets this hot in fall,” Ella remarked. She sat next opposite of me, her in a row, me on my own.

“Welcome to North Carolina. You get three seasons: really hot, really cold, or rainy. That’s it.”

She gave a good belly laugh. Didn’t expect that kind of reaction. It wasn’t that good of a joke, and I’ve been hearing that one for years.

“Sorry, that just reminded me of something,” she said in between fits. “When my parents said we were moving down here, I honestly thought that North Carolina was hot year-round, so I refused to pack winter clothes. Sure enough, we moved down here in the middle of winter. I was so dumb.”

I couldn’t help but give a belly laugh as well.

“Crazy what people think this state is like. I’ve seriously had people think we’re all just hillbillies living in the mountains until I show them what Charlotte looks like. Where you from anyway?”

“California.”

“Hell of a trip.”

“We drove the whole way, too. It was cheaper than flying at the time. What about you?”

“Where do you think I’m from?” I asked.

Ella took a moment to think. “New York City,” she said confidently.

“What makes you think that?”

“Well, I don’t know many people from New York, but you kind of fit the type of what I think they’re like,” she said.

“And what’s that?”

“I don’t know. You’re kind of snappy. You’re pretty aware, almost cautious. You seem to like moving a lot, to far places too. Not that I mind or anything. You speak your mind a lot, too.”

I had another belly laugh.

“Was I off?” Ella said, frowning.

“Way off,” I said.

“Dammit. Where are you from, then?”

“Look out the window.”

She looked at me like I was joking. “No way. Your whole life?” she said.

“My whole life,” I confirmed.

“But you don’t have an accent.”

“I grew out of it. Took a while, but I did it.”

Ella looked like I admitted to murder. I didn’t see how it was that shocking. Thought it was pretty apparent with how I carried myself.

“I honestly thought you recently moved here from a big city or something,” she said, bewildered. “How do you grow out of an accent?”

“Lots of TV and movies. You wouldn’t believe it if you met my parents. Some deep southern accents there.”

“Does your accent ever slip out?”

“Sometimes. Only when I’m really mad and shouting,” I said.

“Oh, I have to hear it,” she said, grinning.

“I don’t get mad often.” I had to fib on that one.

“How can I get you mad?” she said in the most nonchalant way possible as if she asked how I had my eggs in the morning.

“That’s the weirdest thing someone’s asked me.” Had to shake my head on that one.

“I don’t think it’s that weird. There has to be something that pisses you off, right?”

We dropped the conversation right there because (thank God) we finally reached our stop. Ella and I got off in front of a plain, almost lifeless building. A tall stretch of darkish gray concrete on the corner of a not-so-busy street made the area look even lonelier. It wasn't jam-packed either; the chairs outside the restaurant were empty and needed a good cleaning with all the leaves falling. The windows were tinted, adding on the mysteriousness. The only color found on the outside was the black and white striped storefront awning with the name *Amélie's*.

Ella looked at me with concern. I forgot how suspicious this place looked. Hope she didn't think I was about to steal her organs to sell on the black market or something.

"This is...it?" she said.

"Yep. It's better than it looks," I assured her. We both approached the front double doors.

"Who's doing the honors now?" I asked with a slight smirk.

Ella flashed a wry smile.

"Let's just enter at the same time. That'll save us an argument," she said.

We flung the doors open at the same time. Ella paused and looked around, amazed. Knew she'd have that reaction. Did the same the first time I entered this place. The cafe was much larger inside than it looked outside. The tall ceiling had small chandeliers with trinket toys and painted bottles hanging from them. Complementary pastel colors covered each wall, with local homemade art in bronze frames filling each gap between. The wooden floors didn't have a speck of dust or wear. On the opposite side of where we entered were three counters, one for pastries, one for ordering sandwiches or other regular food, and a circular bar with beers and wines. To the left and right were tables, each with a vase of flowers and leather seats. The left side of the cafe had a large glass wall that gave you a look into the bakery, where pastry chefs were kneading dough while wearing flour-covered black aprons.

I walked up to the pastry and food counter. Ella caught up to me.

“Umm...wow,” she managed to say.

“Book by its cover, right?” I said.

“No kidding.”

We both looked over the chalkboard menu that hung behind the counter. I already knew what I wanted but gave Ella a moment. She bit her thumb, looking at the menu like one of the paintings at the Betchler.

“Umm...are you sure you can afford any of this?” she asked.

“Yeah? I mean, I’m paying, right?”

“Everything sounds good. I’m gonna break your bank.”

“Get whatever. Don’t mind. It’s not my money anyway,” I assured. Ella gave me a quick glance after I said that. She said nothing more and walked up to the counter. I got my usual: a ham and dijon sandwich on baguette bread; two eclairs, one chocolate, one vanilla; and a sparkling water lemonade with a squirt of lavender syrup. Ella ordered a bacon tartine with a spread of brie cheese and a café au lait. I paid for both of us, grabbed our numbered sign, and tried to find us a table. It was busy inside. All the good tables were taken already. Saw a spot open near the bakery window and snagged it for us. There was a baker inside, wiping his sweaty forehead as he kept putting bread in the oven.

“My favorite spot was taken, but this’ll do,” I said.

“Where’s that?” Ella asked as she sat down.

I pointed to the front of the store, to a seat near the window overlooking the street. A table snuggled up tight against the wall with two leather seats on opposite ends. A mother was there with her child, who was playing on his phone.

“The chairs there are very comfy. Read at that spot a lot,” I explained.

The baker in the window walked away to grab another batch of bread to put in the oven. Ella watched him but didn't *see* him. Her eyes went right through him. Even as the baker walked back and forth from his table to the oven, her eyes didn't track along with him.

“Something wrong?” I asked.

“Hmm?” She looked at me.

“Don't take offense, but I've noticed you've been kind of zoning off lately.” Lately? I'm speaking like I had known her for years. For some reason, that felt the comfortable thing to say. Ella's face perked up. She looked away from me.

“Oh, yeah, I just have a habit of people watching. Sorry,” she said.

“Do bookshelves count as people?”

“What?”

“At the bookstore. You were zoning off looking at bookshelves for like a solid five minutes.”

“You are so strange. How can anyone notice that?”

“I people-watch too,” I said, shrugging.

“You're creepy sometimes.”

Sometimes? Was I before? What did I do? I felt a cold strike along my chest. Cold sweat formed on my forehead. Eas trying my damndest to not come off that way. I ran through our entire day in my head, wondering where exactly I went wrong. Sometimes I wished people would be more direct about what they mean. It would've saved me a lot of stress and trouble back when I was in high school.

Our food came at the right time. I grabbed my plate with clammy hands, feeling an icy

shock across my nerves. Last thing I needed right now was to think of the past. Ate my sandwich to get my mind off it. Ella scarfed her food down.

“Good?” I asked.

Ella nodded with her mouth full. She took a sip of her coffee to wash it down.

“Surprisingly. Not what I really expected, though.”

“How so?”

“Well, I didn’t really know what a tartine was. But it had bacon, and that sounded good to me. I also didn’t really know what a *café au lait* was, but I figured it was coffee with something.” She took two more bites of her tartine, and, to my bewilderment, she finished it. Couldn’t help but stare at her.

“I was hungry,” she said in a matter-of-fact tone. Barely made a dent in my sandwich. An awkward moment passed when Ella was just watching me eat while periodically watching the activity through the bakery window. A light vibration came from somewhere. With how many people were on their phones here, I figured it was nothing. Eventually, Ella made a small groan and pulled out her phone. Without even looking at it, she held the button on the side, turning it off. She slid it back into her pocket with a slight huff. Decided to lighten the mood. I reached into my messenger bag.

Ella

How fitting for her to ruin one of the best meals I’d had in a long time. I couldn’t even enjoy a nice cup of coffee without her nagging about something. This is going to sound terrible, but I couldn’t believe we were related sometimes. We never thought alike. We fought over everything, to the point where I expected it daily. I’d tried to mentally prepare myself, but I couldn’t. Even her

text at the museum sent me into a blind rage, turning my mind blank. I reacted a way I thought I never could. I had to turn off my phone. I was done. Today was for me, not for carrying the disappointments of someone else. Someone who said they cared for me but didn't.

I was zoning out again, just how Howl pointed out. I had to lie to him. I didn't people watch at all; it never interested me in the slightest. Too much had been on my mind. I admit I hadn't been good at hiding it. Howl legitimately looked concerned at how fast I ate. Again, I couldn't help it. I didn't get much food like this. There was only so much McDonald's and Taco Bell a person could eat. Does Howl eat like this all the time? He'd been spending left and right like one of those businessmen at the Bank of America building. I saw how much he spent at the bookstore. That was over \$60 worth of books! And he said he didn't have time for a job! His parents had to be loaded; they had to be. I guess it was good to not worry about money. Yet, at the same time, he didn't seem too happy about all this. Not once had he flexed about anything, really. Most people I knew found any opportunity to flex and flex hard, even if it was something they were supposed to be doing in the first place.

I'd noticed something during our time together: he seemed to just be floating around like a ghost, even with me around. Heds been stringing me along like a spirit through the woods. He hadn't told me anything about his interests or likes. Hell, I didn't even know his real name! What kind of name is "Howl"? He didn't even speak aloud most of the time. He was such a contradiction. Something was interesting with this, though. He showed himself all the time, so much so that he didn't have to say anything. I'd been seeing it since this morning. The way he came up to me told me he was earnest. The way he kept eye contact with me told me he was a natural listener. The way he held and looked at the books at the bookstore showed me that he treasured what was close to him. I'd never met someone who showed all that he does. All I'd ever heard in my life is talk.

Good talk. Bad talk. Gossip talk. Loud talk. Hurtful talk. Talk, talk, talk. I was sick of it. There were days where my earbuds were glued to my ears just because of it. Those days were some of the most draining in my life.

Howl was more than fresh air. It was like having your sense of smell back years after losing it. I breathed in all of Howl's movement and exhaled what I thought about him. For example, right now, he was reaching into his bag in quick movements. I had no idea why, but that tells me he was interested in telling me something. Tell away. I wasn't going anywhere. I couldn't at this point. He pulled out that massive block of a book he bought from the bookstore. Seriously, this thing was huge. It could break your foot if you dropped it.

"So, was wondering if you could help with something," he said, opening the book and flipping through the first few pages. "That Italian opera you know. Any way you can write it down or something?"

I asked him why. He lifted up the book to show the title on the spine: *The Authentic Librettos of the Italian Operas*. There was a book on anything, wasn't there?

"It has both Italian and English in it. Was thinking we could reverse engineer it."

"Why? I mean, it's not that big of a deal."

"Just curious. It's not every day I see something like what you did this morning."

I suppose he was right. It was a strange moment for me, and I bet stranger for him. I did it for a reason, though. A pretty personal reason that would be too much to load on Howl. I knew I looked insane to him, but I didn't care. I'm sure people had thought worse about me. I put my elbows on the table and leaned my head on my right hand.

"I mean don't you have anything more important to do?" I asked. He didn't answer; he started flipping pages then looked back up at me.

“Clearly, this opera means a lot to you,” he said.

“I mean, not really—”

“Don’t buy that,” he snapped back. That shocked me. That was the first time he ever snipped at me.

“The way you recited it was like you meant it. What “it” is, I don’t know, but I felt it. Lemme put it this way: I put down a book to hear you perform. I never put down a book for anything. Not even my high school graduation.”

I had a strange feeling creeping from my chest up to my throat. “You make this sound like this is life or death or something,” I said.

“Well, let’s just say that what I heard moved me.” Howl thumbed through more pages of the book, scanning each page faster and faster.

“How exactly?” I had to know. I had to pick apart his brain on this.

“I just thought it was beautiful.”

“Now, I don’t buy *that* either,” I shot back at him.

Howl looked away from me. He took a sip of his lemonade before speaking. “Well, guess I’ll start with what my morning was like. Don’t want to bore you, but it’s important. I do this thing before I go to bed. I make hot water the night before so that when I wake up, I grab it and leave. I don’t drink coffee, but love to drink something warm in the morning. Was so tired last night I forgot to put the hot water on, which was a great start. Don’t like wasting my morning waiting on water, but I really needed it that morning. I started my electric kettle, and it broke right there. Now, that’s not what got me. What really got me was how it turned on for a split second—made the little happy chime, flashed its button, and everything. I was glad, relieved, actually. Thought today was going to be fine. I was going to get my hot water after all, the same as any normal day. And then

it just died. Right in front of me. It crushed me. Really did. Not because of the kettle, I can get a new one any day. But how it gave me a glimmer of hope and then took it away.”

He took a bite of his sandwich and wiped it off with a napkin. This was the most I ever heard him talk since we met. I could never have guessed something was really eating him up like this.

“Don’t want to depress you, but I’ll just say that I tend to have a history of that: people getting my hopes up just to crush it. Don’t settle well with me. Coming from a cheap kettle, too.”

He paused to bite his éclair. He swallowed it fast, almost forcing it down his throat. “Anyway—the park. I was there way earlier than usual. Only usually come around noon after classes, but I was so hung up and had to get my mind off things. I come there when I need reading done, but I was so out of it I couldn’t even do that. None of the books I had on me interested me, and that depressed me even worse. I love reading; you can tell. Felt like the universe wasn’t going to let me enjoy that either. It got so bad that I ended up reading my calculus textbook, and I already aced the last test a week ago. So, you have to imagine what it was like for me to hear you this morning. It sounds odd, but it was just what I needed.”

That made me scrunch my eyebrows. “How?”

“By the way you performed. You an actress?”

“No.”

“Don’t know if I believe that.”

“I’m seriously not. What makes you think that?” I said. No one has ever mistaken me for an actress before. I didn’t think I was all that good either. I’m pretty sure I made a few mistakes there too.

“There was power in your voice,” Howl said. “Not the loud kind but the vulnerable kind.

That probably doesn't make sense, but it does to me. You spoke every word like you had something built up in you. Just raw, unfiltered emotion. The best way I can describe it is earnest, and I don't hear earnestly a lot these days. The whole thing rejuvenated me. It really did. I mean, that's why I had to tell you it was beautiful because it was. I really haven't heard anything like that."

I found myself looking down at the book, not saying anything. I really didn't know what I could say after all that. I couldn't believe that something I had done affected this person so much. And it was the first time I'd ever done it.

"Umm...wow," I managed to say. "That's...wow..."

"Really, I want to figure this opera thing out. Want to know what it means, because clearly, it means a lot to you."

And it did. For so many sentimental reasons. I had too much rushing through my mind. All I could do was sit and nod as Howl talked. I couldn't focus on what he was saying anymore with how much I was processing. Howl went back to shuffling through the pages of the Italian opera book, absorbing each page.

"So, is there a way you could write it down?"

"I can't. I don't know any Italian, remember?"

"Figured, but it was worth asking. Had another idea, though. We can record you saying it and kinda work from there," he said.

"I tried speaking it into a translator once, but it came out awful." I hadn't thought about that in a long time. In fact, this whole conversation had unearthed a lot of hidden memories.

"Awful how?"

"It came out nonsensical. The online translator couldn't pick up any of the words I was saying," I said.

“Strange.” Howl looked up from the book. “Well, could only mean two things: it’s really old Italian, or it’s not Italian at all.”

“I know it is.”

“How?”

I regretted that question. I had that sinking feeling that eventually, he would have to know about all of this: the opera, the statue, the constant question dodging. The problem wasn’t trust; the problem was how he might see me, which is crazy since I don’t know if I would ever see Howl again. There was that thing I’d heard about stranger trust, where people tend to trust a random person with their problems because they know they’d probably never see them again. You’d hope they’d forget you, that they just shrug and move on. I didn’t think anyone could shrug off the deep history I had with that cursed opera. That was family history that might go to my grave.

Howl

“I mean, it just sounds Italian, you know? You could be right,” Ella said, glancing over at the bakery window. This was a real mystery. Feel like not even *she* knew anything about this.

I closed the book. It made a “thud” sound that made a satisfying echo, but it got lost in the cafe’s crowd. We went silent while I pondered. Don’t know anything about music, especially music in a foreign language. But I was determined. After all, I laid my heart out on her. I felt so compelled to know what these words that captivated me meant. More importantly, I wanted to learn more about this special girl named Ella, who became those word’s vessel. Book Buyers only had this one book on Italian operas, which was a start. We had a solution, but no beginning—not even a question. Sal never carried music CDs or DVDs—“People who buy books don’t watch movies,” he always said to me (to be fair, he was right). Had a feeling that this opera quest will

require some specific research, something that probably went beyond the internet. There was only one place I knew that could help us.

“Let’s go to the library,” I said.

She broke eye contact with the window. “The Charlotte-Meck one? It’s Sunday.”

“No, no, not there. My campus’s library. Has everything on any subject. There’s got to be something for us there.”

Ella looked down at her empty plate. She dried swallowed like a nervous child awaiting punishment. There was an odd air of tenseness between us as if some traumatic event happened and we didn’t know how to talk about it. She stared at the bakery window one more time. She was hyper fixated on peering into that window like a mirror to another universe. I had a feeling it was because she just wanted to leave. Felt like I was crossing thin ice with this, and the “creepy” comment she made earlier didn’t help. But if she wanted to leave, she would’ve done so already. She was certainly the type of person to do instead of say.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Can I be honest? No.” She looked at me. “This is going to sound really weird, but I don’t like talking about all this.”

I wanted to jump into a bunch of questions, but I held my tongue. Figured it would be best if she explained the way she wanted to. I’d been trying my best to do that this entire time. It was easy for me to put words in people’s mouths or tell them how they should feel.

“It just...makes me uncomfortable,” she said.

“I’ve kinda noticed.”

She sighed and wandered her eyes around. “There’s a lot of history. History I’d rather not go to,” she said with a quiver in her voice. “This morning was the first time I ever recited the opera

out loud because of it. And it's funny how you said it sounded so powerful. I guess it ended up that way."

"Sorry if I'm prying into anything, really," I spat out. "Guess it's a curiosity more than anything. I really want to know what all that meant. If I was moved just by you *saying* it, I want to know. I'm that kind of person, I guess. But what'd you say?"

The crowd noise dwindled down, and now all I could hear was the old jazz ballad with light horns coming from the speakers. Ella closed her eyes and took a breath. She sat in pure meditation, her head rolled back, her hands on her lap. Didn't know if she was soaking in the music or not, but that was what it looked like. Had that feeling in my stomach, the one that told me that I was going too far. If this bothered her that much as she said, I was afraid she was going to leave. Didn't want to make her uncomfortable. That was the last thing I wanted. Deep inside, I was hoping she said, "let's go." I was hoping she would come stick around with me.

Ella

I was named after the person who sang this song.

"All Through the Night" by a beautiful singer named Ella. My parents gave me her name but not her talent. If only I could do something as well as she sang; I wouldn't be where I am right now. I'd probably be living carefree sitting in a cafe like this every week, not having to worry about the next meal or what time I was supposed to come home. I'd been getting that taste of freedom today, and I never expected it with the kind of morning I had. I almost wanted to laugh when Howl was telling me about his morning. Not because it was funny, but because it was so identical to mine. I wanted to tell him; I really did. But if I was going to burden all my problems on him, we would be stuck in this cafe all night. This morning was when I laid out a lot of emotions

for the first time. Mine didn't involve a kettle, though. Mine was about a basket of clothes.

My mother conditioned me to do everyone's laundry every day as long as I lived under her roof. It was just one of those things she was obsessed with me doing. When I was young, she said it was for teaching me to be responsible, but I grew up to realize it was a lie. It was just another excuse for me to do all the dirty work in the house. First, it was the laundry, then the dishes, then the floors—and I accepted all this without fuss. What better did I know as a child? You did what your mother told you. Period. I thought that was just how it was. I wish I saw through it all sooner.

Even as a full adult, I still do everyone's laundry, even when it was just me and mom at home right now. I had this nightly routine regardless if I was dead tired or literally dead: I come home after work with a pile of laundry greeting me, and I do it right then and there. The thing is, though, is that some things needed special care; some clothes were old and needed hand-washed, and others might needed bleaching. I worked as a one-person 24-hour laundromat. There were some days where I had to work overtime and only to come home to do the laundry until early morning. Sleep was a construct to me. I thank art school and my mother for that.

My mother wasn't a subtle person. If she wanted something, she would burst in and let everyone in the room know, even if they didn't ask. I was used to her just waltzing into my room, barking orders. Who needed an alarm clock when I had my darling mother? She'd come in at 6:00 a.m. sharp to tell me what I was doing that day: go to the store for me, meet this person I didn't know for me, grab that for me. Me. Me. Me. Day in and day out, it was always about her, and don't you forget it. Sometimes you couldn't afford to forget. She'd curl those thin lips of hers and tilt her head down, giving you that piercing look above her glasses. I called it the "stingray" look because it was as if one stabbed you right in the chest when she did it. That look was enough to elicit fear in everyone, even my father. I feared that look and what would come after it as a kid. I

did everything in my power to avoid it.

But this morning, I didn't, and that's how it all started.

Last night was long and tortuous. I had a long overtime shift with absolutely the worst customers I've ever dealt with. I try not to have an attitude, but certain people really get at you. And when I saw the laundry workload in front of me when I came home—almost all of it my mother's—something in me snapped, something that was a long time coming.

I wasn't going to do it.

Thundering pounds at my door woke me up this morning. My mother, in nothing but a nightgown, unloaded on me, asking why I didn't do this, why didn't I do that, why was I so lazy, why do I freeload, why do I disappoint her. She was screaming so loud she was in tears. All I could do was lie in my bed wrapped in pillows and blankets, bracing for this catastrophic storm. I accepted the consequences and defended my decision, something my father always taught me.

The problem came when I opened my mouth (as always). I stupidly thought I could explain my reasoning and question why I had to slave around. On cue, she gave the stingray look, and instead of shaking in fear like she wanted, I simply laughed. I laughed at the absurdity of how a look used to keep me up at night, how one person's look dictated my life, how one look separated me from my father—a man who told me he loved me more than anything.

I jolted up from bed and kept laughing so much it made my already uneasy stomach worse. The louder she yelled, the more I drowned it out. Both of us started crying in hysterics. I went about my morning like it was nothing: all groomed and dressed in the middle of her constant stomping and shouting. After ignoring all her questions and demands, I went straight to the front door, told her I was going to work, and left right there. She screamed through the screen door, telling me to come back when I wise up or not come back at all. She would never want that. She

couldn't lose the only person that did things for her. With how much I do for her, she probably couldn't hold on her own.

I almost threw up mid-walk. I'd never done that before. I thought it would make me feel better, but at that moment, I thought today was going to my last day on Earth. I'd always had this moment played out in my head. I, the hero of my story, finally stand up for myself, showing the world I am fearless and liberated. The crowd cheered, everybody made up, and all's well that ends well.

That was when I realized life wasn't like in movies. This was why romanticism was the death of all art.

I wiped my tears on the light-rail, mind racing about what was going to happen to me. My mother would never let this down. Ever. That wasn't the kind of person she was. She'll hold it over my head. My life was going to change from now on, and probably for the worse. I feared going home. I thought standing up would liberate me, but it made me feel even more trapped. And what was even worse: I forgot to take my meds this morning.

Since I reached a point of no return, I had to go to Romare Bearden Park to say goodbye to a piece of art I grew fond of. He was more reliable than any other person I knew. Always there when I needed him and never judged me once. Funny enough, I see that in someone in front of me, and that statue introduced me to him.

I opened my eyes and looked right at Howl. He had an impatient look in his eyes. I was still shocked he really wants to go about this. Someone actually wanted to know me. Someone actually cared.

Howl

“You know what?” she took a large breath.

“I’m ready,” she said as she exhaled. “Lead the way,” she added with a soft smile. I put the opera book away and scarfed down the rest of my food. Needed all the energy I could get.

Chapter 5

Howl

The light-rail was surprisingly quiet. Unlike the bus.

Was a nice change. It was almost quiet enough for me to read. Wish every ride from campus was like this. Ella sat on the window side like on the bus, gazing out as Charlotte whizzed by. The scenery changed from urban streets to a forest like a snap. You got a little bit of everything in Charlotte. Skyscrapers next to farmhouses. Good sports cars next to muddy pick-ups. This place had always been a contradiction, even as someone who lived in the area their entire life. Knew too many people around here. People I'd rather not see. People who hurt me and people I had hurt.

A strange feeling came over me as I looked away from Ella. It was a feeling-based memory, one of those moments where you didn't remember an event all that well, but you remembered how you felt in that moment. Was overwhelmed to the point of being disoriented. Everything around me felt heightened. The lights brighter, the sounds louder. Felt sick to my stomach. Had to sit next to Ella for a second. She didn't pay any mind.

This happened too many times. I think about my past once, and I cringe so hard it triggered this sensory overload. There'd been times where I ended up talking to myself out loud, saying things like "Nope. Not thinking about that," or "Stop, stop." Try not to do it in public, but it might slip out every once and a while. The last time I felt like this was in third grade. That lady at the Bechtler. That teacher I had.

In third grade, I had this young teacher who despised me. I never knew why, but she treated me differently. I could tell by the way her mood changed in front of me. She could be sunshine and smiles with the kid next to me but gave me the dirtiest scowl. Whenever I wanted to answer a question in class, she never picked me. And when she did, she gave me a dismissive tone, as if my

answer wasn't good enough. I never brought it up with my parents. I tried to think nothing about it. I figured that was how adults worked: they liked some kids, they hated others. Felt like I saw that all the time. My parents adored me but were pretty rude towards my "crummy friends," as they called them.

One day we were doing this project where we had to make a model plane out of pieces of wood and paper. There were instructions on how to do it, but I didn't like how the plane looked on them. It looked too boring and honestly not very flyable, so I took some liberties. I extended the wings and made the body more round and aerodynamic. Read in a book about flight that week that explained all of that. When I finished, all the other students gawked at my plane. They said it was the coolest, so cool they wanted to make theirs the same way. I felt so proud. At that time, I was the quiet kid that didn't rock the boat too much. It felt accomplishing for others to recognize me.

But then, that teacher came.

"Why does your plane look different?" she demanded.

I explained to her why.

"That's not what it looks like in the directions," she yelled.

I said I was sorry.

"If you can't follow directions, you won't make it anywhere in life."

I pushed my table at her. I screamed. I stomped. I hate you, I hate you, I hate you so much, I cried. Why do you hate me. Why do you not care. What is wrong with me. Just tell me. Just tell me, please.

They gave me detention for two days. I had to write a full apology to that teacher. Doubt she even read it. Probably just took it and shoved it inside her desk. I had to stay with that teacher

for the rest of the year. She talked to me less since that outburst, which was a blessing and a curse. Now I knew she had it in for me, but why stop there? Maybe everyone had it in for me. Maybe they didn't like how I talked, how I looked, or how I existed. Felt like there was something wrong with me. Something that people despised, but I didn't know what.

I think that's where it all began.

The outburst in 3rd grade changed me. I looked at everyone around me differently: even my friends and family. People must have not liked me before I even talked to them, I figured. Well, to hell with them. If people didn't like who I was, then clearly I was better than them. What right did they have to judge me like that? How about I gave it right back to them? But I wasn't going to hold anything back. I would tell it to them straight. You were an idiot. You were slow. You were not worth my time. You were not like me at all. Didn't even have to talk to them to tell them all that. Could just *look* at a person and know. Why did I have to bother? I just knew these things. I saw it in people. I knew it all...

I cringed harder thinking about it. Needed to stop while I'm ahead. Sure hope Ella wasn't seeing the amount of sweat coming down my forehead. Could pass it off as that classic North Carolina humidity, but the light-rail was air-conditioned. Ella hadn't said a thing this whole ride. I should probably say something.

"Atkins library really has a lot. Bound to find something."

"I'm sure." She didn't say anything else. Ah well. Maybe she was as deep in thought as I was. This whole day has been about undressing ourselves, and I think I was doing pretty good at moving away from old habits. I wanted to thank Ella for today. In a strange, almost subtle way, she'd been helping me. I know that wasn't her intent, but I really wanted to let her know. Felt like she needed to hear that.

UNC Charlotte's reddish brick buildings came into view. By the time the train stopped, everything was grounded for me: no more loud sounds or bright sights. I took a deep breath. Things were getting better. Thanks.

Ella

This campus was massive.

The art school I went to was a postage stamp in comparison. I looked up at the tall buildings as Howl guided me along the brick path. Everything was red brick almost, the trails, the buildings, the walls. A bit too much for my taste, but it achieved its aesthetic well. This was a real college, not the dingy place I went to. This was what I thought college would look like. This was what I wish I got.

Howl moved faster than me. I wanted to soak in all the gardens and architecture, but he was dead set on going to the library. He really does act like this was life or death we were dealing with.

"What year are you?" I asked.

"Sophomore."

"You never told me what you study, by the way."

He paused. "Business admin," he said without even looking at me.

I thought it was a joke at first and waited for a real answer, but it didn't come. He kept his head forward, marching past everything in his path.

"I didn't peg you as a numbers guy," I said.

"I'm not."

"But..." I started. This got interesting.

"I'll talk about it later," he said. He pointed at a tall building in front of us. "This is Atkins."

The library was tall and shaped almost like a wide bell tower. Instead of a bell at the top, there were windows. This college had to be well off if this is their *library*. The one at my campus was just one room shoved in the back of some musty building.

“And every floor has books?”

“Yup. Ten floors,” Howl said as we entered the front double doors. Oh yeah. This was one of those rich schools. To be fair, all colleges were expensive—mine including. But this school *looked* rich, which made me wonder what kind of person Howl could afford going to a place like this.

We entered the library and saw a sea of students sitting at computer desks, books opened, pens clicking, keyboards clacking away. All the sounds echoed around the open building, creating a musical rhythm. To the right was the circulation desk, where Howl walked straight up to. He asked her about booking some kind of study room. I was too preoccupied with everything around me to listen. There was something new every which way I turned. A row of box-shaped glass frames lined up against the wall opposite of me, working as study rooms. Looking into the private lives of people was a bit odd. I wasn't sure how I would feel knowing people might look at me while I was just doing my business. In the far back of the lobby were museum-like installments with preserved relics in cabinets. It was as if this library didn't know what it wanted to be. This would be the kind of place I would wander around for hours. I don't even read that much, but there was something about the design and aesthetics of this building I enjoy.

Howl took a ticket from the circulation desk and led me to the end of the hall, where the elevators were.

“So, what section are we going to first? Language? Theatre?”

“Neither,” Howl said. He pressed the elevator button to go up.

“Hmm?”

“We don’t need to look at any books,” he said. “Hurts to say that.”

We entered the tiny elevator, making Howl and I stand shoulder to shoulder. I guess to have a nice library like this, you had to sacrifice a few things.

“If we’re not here for books, what are we here for?”

“Don’t worry. You’ll see,” he said. This better not be a ploy to get me to tutor him or something. It was just a funny thought, but this would’ve been some plan if that were the truth. I was just thinking on the light-rail how today was a bit too good to be true. My mother would be crazy enough to get the police on me or something. I might have jinxed it all for all I know. I better play it safe; I couldn’t risk getting too reckless right now.

The elevator doors opened at floor 3, showing columns upon columns of compressed bookshelves all neatly stacked and spaced. There was so little room in between the columns, though. One student had to walk inside sideways to grab a book. Howl led me to the very back, to a study room with sliding glass doors. Inside the room was an all-in-one desktop computer sitting in the middle of a long, oval table. After we entered, Howl closed the door and jumped to the computer.

“Remember back when I said ‘reverse engineering’? Atkins has their own database, with nearly every book scanned and cataloged. Know they got some old books, probably in old languages. Are you sure you can’t write what you know down?”

“I wouldn’t even know where to begin,” I said, shaking my head.

“Okay. Maybe we can try this. Can we use your phone?”

I did, but I didn’t want to turn it on. I pulled it out anyway.

“Use speech-to-text and recite all you know, then send it to me. I’ll input it all, and

something's bound to come up, if not the whole opera."

I guess I had no other choice; we'd already made it this far. I held the button on my phone to turn it on. Within an instant, it buzzed like no tomorrow. A bunch of texts and missed calls flashed on my screen—all of them from my mother.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, sorry," I blurted out. "Service here isn't great for me."

"Noticed you turned off your phone earlier. At the cafe."

Of course he had noticed that. Nothing slipped by him, apparently.

"Really, is there something wrong? If you need to be somewhere else—"

"No, it's fine. Really. I want to figure this out with you," I said.

"Okay," he said. "Can I make a request, though?"

"Hmm?"

"Recite the opera like you did at the park. Want to hear it like that again."

"We're in a library," I said as if I had to remind him.

"A bit more quietly, of course. But still. Really want to hear it again."

Despite how flattered I was, I still thought the suggestion was crazy. But I figured if this was what Howl knew me by, I might as well not disappoint.

Howl

Don't know how she did it, but she spoke into the phone as if it was the Spiral Odyssey.

The same passion was there, mixed with that reserved power that gradually built after each word. Hearing her use her full vocal range would've been better, but this would have to do. I noticed something new in the words hearing her recite it a second time. Don't know much about

opera or Italian, but none of the words rhymed. The syllables were melodic, though, like metered poetry. It didn't sound like any Italian literature I know (my only knowledge of that is Dante, anyway). I couldn't wait to see this written down. Wondered if the words had the same passion written down.

Ella closed her eyes the entire time. Started to wonder what she was imagining. At first, I thought it was the statue, but this was a much more subdued performance. I closed my eyes along with her to see what I could imagine. A single image grabbed hold of me: a man leaning over a body of water, looking at himself in the water's reflection. *Perchance*. The painting Ella did. Started as just a memory flash, but as Ella spoke more, it turned into a complete vision.

When Ella stopped, my vision reset to the darkness of my eyelids. When I looked at her, she still hadn't opened her eyes yet. She stood in meditation as if praying over her words.

"That should be good," she said, her eyes still closed.

Ella

Howl is one fast typer.

The moment I sent him the text, he went off like one of those courtroom stenographers. I bet he got class assignments done the day of. Speaking of which...

"Hey, you were gonna tell me something."

"Really?" He didn't look up from the computer screen or his phone at all.

"Yeah, why you're a business major."

"I mean, is it that much of a shock?"

"Sure is!"

"It's a long story, and it's gonna bore you," he said.

“We got time. Plus, I think it’s only fair.”

“Fair how?”

“That I get to know you more,” I said.

“What happened to ‘we’re complete strangers’ thing?” He looked up from the screen.

I shrugged. “I’d say we’re well-acquainted now.”

Howl didn’t react. He focused his energy on typing out the long passage. I didn’t know why he had to type so much of what I said. I thought a small section would be enough. Let him have fun, I guess.

“I didn’t want to get into business. At all,” he said. “I wanted to go into something else entirely.”

“Which is?”

“Take a wild guess.”

“English.”

“Bingo,” he said, nodding.

“Then why aren’t you? You’d be a perfect fit.”

“It doesn’t bring in money,” he said. “The richest people are involved with businesses.”

“But you don’t believe that.”

“But it’s what my parents wanted, so they got it.” He kept typing as he spoke.

“That’s not fair at all.”

“Can’t argue against it. They’re right. You only have two options with an English degree: you write a novel which will take you forever and bring you no money, or you teach. Teachers already don’t get enough of a salary, and most schools don’t take someone with a bachelor’s in just English.”

This was the coldest I'd ever heard him. I leaned up against the wall to process all he said. "Howl. You don't believe any of that, do you?"

"Not one bit." He stopped typing to rub his eyes. "I hate all this business stuff. It's cold, it's harsh, and so boring. But that's where the money is. My parents wanted me to be successful, not some starving bum who reads well."

"But you can do so many great things with that kind of knowledge," I said. "Money be damned. I went to art school to be an illustrator; that's not a big paying career either unless you know the right people."

"You have way more talent than me. Wish I could draw as good as you," he said, looking at me.

"Howl, I'm not that good. I wish I could read and analyze like you."

"I'm not the greatest at that either—"

"See what I mean?" I interjected.

Howl shrugged, pursing his lips. "There's a lot in life I wish I could change. Probably wouldn't be in the situation I'm in now, but I'm far too deep—"

"What situation?" I asked.

He went back to typing, not saying a word.

"It seems like you got it pretty well off. A nice college, affording good meals..." I said.

"Feel like I don't deserve it."

"What does that mean?"

He kept typing, not acknowledging me one bit. I dropped it right there and looked out the glass sliding doors. I went too far; I knew it. But what I heard was so unfair. Even my mother—the most logical, rational person I knew—was okay with me pursuing the arts. I didn't expect

another word from Howl.

“I’ll put it to you this way…”

I turned my head to him, surprised. He kept typing but slower.

“So, don’t know if you knew this, but my name’s not actually Howl. Shocker. That’s just a nickname I want to go by. Been telling everyone around here that that’s what I go by. Even the teachers. The reason why is because I don’t like my real name. Not because of how it sounds or spelled, but because there’s too much baggage with it. It’s like a guilty by association thing. There’s people out there where the moment they hear my name, they have an image of me—one I don’t want anymore.”

He turned off his phone, done with typing. “I did a lot of mean stuff years ago. I hurt a lot of people, just about everyone I met almost. Won’t get into too much detail, but years ago, I used to be the most judgemental person you’d ever met—the most pretentious too. I had to let everyone around me know how smart I was. I verbally abused people and thought nothing of it. Seriously thought they deserved it. I really did.”

He looked away from me, scratching the back of his neck. “I bullied people. I hurt innocent people just because I thought I was better. It disgusts me because I’m not that person now, at least I hope. Can’t go by my old name anymore. I just can’t.”

“But what does Howl *mean*? And where did you get it from?” I asked.

“Thought it’d be obvious, but I forget people don’t read much.” He turned to the computer to open a new tab. He typed in something I couldn’t see and showed me a picture of this near-bald man with a black beard and thick glasses. Honestly, he looked like someone’s uncle to me.

“This is Allen Ginsberg. He’s a pretty famous poet. Bit of a weirdo, but he wrote some decent stuff. His most famous poem is called ‘Howl.’”

He opened another tab and looked up the poem for me.

“Honestly, I think it’s pretentious. It’s just one long rant on his generation, how no one understood him and the other beat poets—the movement he was a part of. Kinda like Bearden and that Spiral group you talked about earlier. The beats weren’t well-liked. People saw them as just a bunch of pretentious white men writing about crude things like sex, drugs, and jazz. ‘Howl’ was their manifesto. They were outcasts and proud of it. They tried him for obscenity for this. Just a bunch of words on paper figuring out why no one liked him. It’s crazy. All this man did was try to process all that was wrong with him, and he got punished for it. I don’t like this poem, but I like what it stands for. *I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked...*”

Howl leaned back on his chair, staring at the poem on the screen. I read some of it over his shoulder. Even from just this short section, it felt like an impassioned demand for help with no one listening. It was a cry—a howl.

I got it now.

Howl

It felt great to get that off my chest.

It was true what they say: it felt like a great weight off your shoulders. Could start floating around right now. I needed that. That was the first time I talked to anyone about my name and my life. And I only met her this morning.

Ella looked to the ground, no doubt thinking about all I said. Wanted to lighten the mood, so I closed out all the Ginsberg stuff.

“I’m done, by the way.” I opened the Atkins library database site. Everything she said was

now in a text box on the screen, ready to be searched.

“Howl. Thank you,” she said.

Not the response I expected. “For what?”

“For today. Just accept it. Go ahead,” she told me.

I pressed the enter key. It took a second for the database to load. It was going through a lot of books and electronic articles, after all. We waited in anticipation as if watching some kind of life or death surgery before our eyes.

The site reloaded.

Only one match.

The text matched a copy of an insanely old book, way before me and Ella’s time. Only one place could have a book that rare and that old: the 10th floor, which preserved all those books behind temperature-controlled glass. Only people with special privileges could look through those. Thankfully, the database had it scanned already. I clicked the link to find the matched page.

“*Ottone in villa, RV 729, dramma musicale in tre atti,*” I attempted to pronounce.

“Probably ‘drama musical’ or something,” Ella said. Her breath quickened as she spoke.

“By Antonio Vivaldi.”

“Sounds familiar,” she said.

“It does. Let me see...”

I went to the music section of the Atkins database. The music section had CDs to stream for students only. Typed in the opera’s name and got a result instantly. *The Operatic Works of Antonio Vivaldi*, a massive CD collection. Scrolled down and played the first track of the opera.

It was pretty music. Light and airy violins with a jumping beat. Some instrument in the background caught my attention; it was like a harp but harsher.

“Harpsichord,” Ella told me when I asked. “It’s pretty much a harp played like a piano.”

We listened to more of it. So far, no singing or lyrics. Just short little music pieces with the same instruments: guitars, violins, and that harpsichord thing. Started to worry that we were on the wrong path. But this had to be it. I looked over to Ella. She sat in silence, looking down at the floor. Was hoping something familiar to her would come up. For her sake.

But then, track 4 started.

“That’s it!”

Within the first second of the track, Ella jumped up and shouted so loud that I was pretty sure people heard from upstairs. We’re definitely getting a complaint in a few minutes. She leaned her head closer to the computer’s speakers, her eyes widened, mouth wide open. She mouthed along with every word and even muttered the words that came next.

It was strange. When the words were sung, they lost some of their impact on me. The woman singing did it too romantic compared to Ella’s blunt force rendition. I preferred Ella’s because it sounded so human. This version didn’t sound earnest. Like it was just a bunch of pretty words strung together to grab someone’s attention and nothing else.

Before we knew it, the song ended and went straight to the next. Ella didn’t know any of the rest, so I paused it. The section she knew by heart was only a minute and thirty seconds long when sung. When she spoke it, it felt like a long, grand soliloquy. Ella stood there dazed. She asked me to play it again, so I did. She closed her eyes this time and mouthed the words, looking like she was meditating like before. When the song ended a second time, she sat down on the chair and ran her fingers through her hair.

“Now we know,” I said. Didn’t know what to say, but felt like I had to say something. It took a while for Ella to respond.

“Now we need to know what it means.”

“Before we do that, I need to know something else,” I said. Ella looked at me.

“How do you know this opera? You’re telling me you’ve never heard it before?”

“Never. Never ever.” She gave me the wildest stare a person could give. Scared me, honestly.

“But how do you know only this part?”

She stood up and sighed. She went over to the wall and leaned up against it, head back, eyes closed.

“This stays in this room, okay?” she said in one breath

I promised her.

“My parents divorced when I was young, around 6 or 7. For a while, I lived with my father. He loved all things music. He played any instrument you can think of. He loved all kinds of music: jazz, electronica, reggae, literally all of it. I was named after his favorite singer, and he played her music right when they took me home from the hospital. He had piles upon piles of sheet music all around his house, and he would play them for me whenever I wanted...”

Ella paused to look up at the ceiling. “And he passed away. He was slowly dying away with cancer and hid it from me and my mother. My mother says he was the kind of person who always kept to himself, but I don’t buy it. I swear he didn’t tell us because he knew it would hurt me to my core every day if I watched him die in front of me. I swear on it. My mother sold his house and junked everything in it without telling me. I was so mad at her I cursed her. At 7 years old, I cursed my mother for doing that. I begged her for me to go to his house to find at least something to remember him by. Anything.”

Two tears rolled down her face. “She took me there and, sure enough, it was empty. All

his instruments, all his sheet music. Gone. I sobbed on that floor harder than when my father died. I ran through that whole house just to make sure they forgot something. There was a piece of yellow paper on the kitchen floor, and guess what it was. Just guess..."

She covered her face with her hands, sobbing through each word. "It was the only thing I have to remember him by. The only thing. I used to read it endlessly at night. I don't even know what it means, but I hear him. I hear him when I read it, and it's almost like he's talking to me. And when I recite it, it's like I'm talking back."

Her body slid down to the floor. Got up from my chair to sit next to her. I put my hand on her shoulder.

"Thank you," I said.

"For what?" She turned her red face to me.

"For today. Just accept it."

She smirked a bit as she wiped her tears with her sleeves.

"Glad I could help give you some closure," I said, smiling.

"We're not done yet. We have to translate it," she said in a shaky voice. "I need to know what it means. I'm sure you do too."

"Do we?"

She looked at me, confused.

"Been thinking. Art is subjective, especially when we don't understand the meaning," I said. "You know what that opera means to me, and I know what it means to you. Maybe we don't need to know the meaning. I'm sure this Vivaldi guy wouldn't expect us to react the way we did, but who cares. Might destroy all that."

The brightest smile crossed Ella's face. She wiped her last tears and laughed. I looked at

the time. It sure flew. It was almost dusk out. Had a test tomorrow and didn't study at all today. Ah well.

"It's getting late. Sure you don't need to be home or anything?" I asked.

"Can I stay with you a bit longer? It's a long story, but...I can't be home right now. I just can't. Besides, you're good company. You really are. I can't imagine you being mean like you said."

Words couldn't say how much I appreciated that, so I just smiled at her. "Guess I can show you around a bit. It's a big place, though. We have a tiny art gallery too. Isn't much, but I'm sure you'll make something out of it."

I helped her up and turned off everything in the study room.

Ella

It was cooler outside now that the sun was setting. I needed fresh air after all that had happened. I took Howl up on that offer to go to the art gallery, but he did warn me there were plenty of steps involved. I saw the world differently now. It was a cliché, but it was true. For once in a very long time, I felt refreshed, my mind emptied, ready to start again. I took a good look at everything around me. The students walking by, the purple sky, the trees. And Howl. I saw him differently as much as he saw me, I'm sure.

"Ready?" he asked me.

"As I'll ever be. I'm not the fittest," I admitted.

We made a few steps until a familiar face appeared in front of us once again. That Preacher on 7th street, handing out his Bibles right in front of the campus library. His regular chant of "Jesus saves!" and free Bible offerings fell on deaf ears again. When Howl walked by, he took another

Bible from him.

“Wait. Excuse me, you two,” the Preacher said to us. We stopped.

“You two seem very close. Very close indeed. Now, I don’t want to impose. You two might be strangers just walking by. But you know, the Bible talks a lot about predetermination. Things happen for a reason, but we’ll never know why. That’s what makes life worth living in the eyes of God, you know. Maybe you two were meant to meet right now, and maybe I’m the one here to remind you of that. Who knows. But I’m glad it happened. I really am.”

He smiled at us and blessed us as we continued walking. We didn’t say anything, but I sure was thinking about that a lot.

I’m also glad it happened. I really am.

Howl

I’m glad it happened. Really am.