

Unrequited Empathy

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis presents a YA romance novella titled *Unrequited Empathy*, set in southeastern coastal North Carolina. The novella follows the perspective of mildly autistic Claire Madeleine West, who is navigating adulthood and new relationships for the first time when her parents send her to Port City University, hoping to find her own identity. Central themes of the novella include neurodivergent representation, campus life, and self-discovery. While awareness around neurodivergent folks has improved greatly, empathy for autistic people remains rare in our society, and so greater awareness and acceptance have now become more crucial than ever. This project is a blend of creative passion and scholarly ambition, arguing that empathy is a tool for human solidarity and empowerment.

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A Thesis

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Master of Arts in English

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Chapter 1: Another World

On a chilly fall Sunday, in the year 2024, Claire West anticipated her first semester at Port City University as she travelled alongside her mother, father, and brother. Looking out through the window toward this great new city she would soon call home, she stilled in her car seat, fidgeting with some magnetic sliders, enjoying how the two objects attracted each other. Move-in day took place for the students on the weekend before the first day of classes—termed “FDOC” by the school’s denizens.

PCU was a competitive southeastern North Carolina university located in central Port City, nestled between the Cape Fear River to the west and the Atlantic Ocean to the east. Claire came from Hurricane, North Carolina, a small but prosperous town teeming with delinquents, mental cases, and other characters, located thirty miles northeast of where she would begin her new adventure. Her aspiration was creative writing, a quiet childhood hobby that would become her greatest destiny. She’d first been inspired to write by her friends in high school, not necessarily by her father’s position as editor-in-chief of the local newspaper.

Her parents drove to her new residence, Aspire Hall. It was a towering four-story brick building of Georgian architecture, shaped like a Tetris T-block. Every building she saw on campus was gigantic; it’d been nothing like the cluster of diminutive buildings in her little hick town. Parking in front of the building, Claire and her parents exited their purple sedan, gathering the rest of Claire’s personal belongings from two prior road trips yesterday.

“Honey, this is such a beautiful campus you’ll be staying at,” her mother began. “Are you ready for your first day of classes tomorrow?”

“I’m not sure. I’m still a little nervous.”

“I remember my days at Flagship University in Chapel Hill,” her father chirped. “You’re gonna be just fine. After all, you’ll be carrying on the West family name. I know you’ll make your mother and I proud, Buttercup.”

Buttercup. That was one of the main characters on Claire’s favorite cartoon, *PowerPuff Girls*. Fancy and professional as her father was, he knew everything about her and took interest. Even though he always seemed to ignore her at home, he tried to spend time with her to the best of his ability.

“But that’s so much pressure to handle. Do you think I can do it?”

“I’m sure Grandpa will be looking forward to seeing you in your writing classes, sweetheart.”

Claire stayed silent and fumbled with a spinner. Her fidget spinner moved as fast as her heartbeat went, millions of miles per hour. The prospect of her new life was ever more daunting with the added responsibilities and connections.

Claire’s brother, Nicholas, the last one to step out of the car, was two years older than Claire, who was eighteen. He went to the local community college back home as a business major unlike Claire, who wanted the full, magical experience of campus life. She was rather exhausted of the rural attitudes that came with her home life.

“I thought you didn’t speak to Grandpa anymore, Pop,” he chimed in.

“Nick, why would you say all of that this instant?” Mom said. “Your sister is preparing for her big day. It would benefit you and this family not to ruin it.”

“Indeed, darling,” Dad answered. “Claire goes to her grandfather on the holidays, but we don’t speak of him beyond that. Understand? She’s chosen a good career path for herself without

a doubt. Before you know it, she'll be getting a master's degree in English before she joins me at the local newspaper."

"You got Snowball with you, dear?" Mom asked.

Snowball was Claire's emotional support animal and the family's pet cat, whom the family had registered at the Disability Resource Center. The runt of the litter, he had heterochromatic gold and blue eyes, which Claire admired so much as a kid that she wanted to keep him. Her mom handed Snowball on a leash to Claire. As a teen, she would take Snowball on long walks in the neighborhood, sometimes off leash so that Snowball stayed by her side as a spirit animal, protecting her with every step.

"Yep," Claire replied, picking up the snow white, short-haired cat in her lanky arms.

"Excellent," Dad bellowed. "Now let's go get you checked in and move your stuff to your dorm room."

The West family moved Claire's things to the new dorm room. After they checked into the residence hall, they took a move-in bin up the elevator with her possessions, some consisting of art supplies and *PowerPuff Girls* decor. After two more runs up the elevator, they started unpacking. Claire did most of the work around the living space. She always resented how her mother nagged her about chores every day, stressing that it would be useful for her in her later life.

"You sure you don't want me to help you with all that, Starlight?" her mother asked.

"You seem to be doing everything by yourself."

"Nah. I think I've got it under control. I need to learn to fend for myself now."

"Are you sure? I don't see your roommate. Have you talked to her at all before the semester? You should have both gotten an e-mail with each other's contact information."

“We texted each other this weekend and she seems really sweet. I don’t like calling. It makes me want to disappear from this world.”

“Well, you can call us anytime you need to, okay?”

Claire walked up to her mother and hugged her. The difference between their heights was striking. Claire stood three inches taller than her forty-year-old mother. How was she so tall at 5’9 when all the other girls were shorter? Afterward, her dad entered the room as Claire also hugged him, unable to see them go so soon.

“I love you guys,” she beamed, almost on the brink of tears. “Are you going to leave me?”

“Well, if you ever need anything, our home is always one phone call away,” Dad replied. “But you’ll need to get a job so you can get on your feet. That’s important.”

Claire nodded and pulled back from her father before Nick appeared at the door.

“Hey, sis,” her brother said. “You wanna walk around and go have a look at the campus? I could use a tour.”

“Yeah, I’ll go with you,” Claire said. “I wonder what beautiful sights there are to see. And I need your protection.”

“Be careful, you two!” Mom warned.

Both parents waved to their children and continued to unpack Claire’s things amidst the noise from other families outside.

At Campus Commons, the heart of Port City University, Claire and Nick walked through it together. The velvet, grass green area boasted two captivating ponds interconnected by wooden bridges and strong, deciduous trees. An amphitheater was settled alongside one of the lakes, and

a clock tower that withstood the strongest of hurricanes that battered the North Carolina coastline almost every fall.

Claire's mouth gaped open as they strolled along one of the bridges. The cozy breeze ran through her shoulder-length chocolate brown hair as the setting sun twinkled in her eyes. This was the most exciting moment in her life. Nick walked beside her, hands in his pockets.

"Gosh, this place is so beautiful," Claire said. "Can you believe it?"

"Meh," Nick smirked. "I've seen better. I used to always take the Greyhound bus with the boys to every big city nationwide. We would party our asses off and pick up chicks, and the monuments were outrageous. If you decide to go into downtown Port City someday, that side of town is really something else. It's like a whole new world down there."

"This feels like a whole new world," she said. "It feels a bit overwhelming to be honest. At least now I'll never have to worry about people calling me names."

"Damn, you really think so? They still do that here. They're all pretentious little fuckers. Don't get carried away walking out here alone, sis. It's scary. And you're figuring things out yourself."

"Though, I remember when we used to visit the battleship in Port City when we were little," Claire said. "It was so majestic."

"Uh-huh," he muttered.

"Hey, Nick?"

"Yeah, sis?"

"I somehow have this feeling that even though this experience is all I ever wanted, I'm already starting to miss my old life. I miss all of our friends back at home. I always cherish our shared memories together, and the thought of making new friends is nerve-wracking. I'm scared

they'll judge me once they get to know me and want to avoid me. College might be a lot more work for me, and so is having a job like my parents say. If I can't make eye contact, I won't be able to get through the first week."

"Don't fret, sis," Nick reassured, putting a hand on her shoulder. "I mean, I've known you for your whole life. If there's anything I've noticed, it's that you're gonna do great. You managed to get straight A's and became one of the top students in Hurricane High School, and you're one of the smartest people I've ever known. You belong here, sis."

"Yeah," Claire said. "Thank you so much. But you'll have to wish me luck."

"No problem. I'm just glad I get to call you my sister."

They came to a halt at the edge of Chancellor's Walk and exchanged a cordial hug. Then, Nick's phone vibrated, signaling a text from their mother.

"Shoot," he said. "Mom wants me to get going. Let's head back to your place so you can say goodbye. You ready?"

"Mm-hmm," she replied.

The two siblings traveled back to Claire's dorm. The brightest stars began to emerge in the red sunset sky.

"You got everything you need, darling?" Claire's father asked.

"Yep," Claire replied. "Clothing. Decorations. Personal items. Toys and food for Snowball. I think that's everything."

"You can also use your student ID to get into the dining halls for unlimited meals so you're not starving," Mom added. "Have you eaten yet?"

“A little bit,” Claire replied. “I bought Doritos from the vending machine on the way back.”

“Make sure you eat so you’re not starving all night,” Dad said bluntly. “You need to put on weight so they’re not making fun of you.”

“I will. Thank you guys for everything.”

Claire gave each family member one final hug before they huddled like penguins into their car, ready to take off.

“I’ll see you around, little sis,” Nick exclaimed, waving from the window. “Stay safe!”

“Take care, daughter,” Dad called from the driver’s seat. “Don’t get into too much trouble with all that college fun. Work and study hard!”

“And don’t forget to text us once a week so we know how you’re doing, okay?” Mom insisted. “We love you!”

“Love you guys!” Claire sang back. “Bye!”

The family waved until they pulled out of the parking spot and drove off into the horizon. Claire was now by herself on the college campus. She took a moment to admire the freshman village around her before starting for the entrance of Aspire Hall, enjoying the wind once more.

Now that she was at Port City University, she could study harder in school, ask smarter questions, and perform better than ever before. She loved a good challenge, but hoped she wouldn’t crumble before grad school. However, meeting new people was a challenge for her. She was usually reserved around strangers. In most cases, all it took was one glance and people would turn away, but some people even went out of their way to bully her. High school wasn’t exactly her safe haven, but university might be better for her.

Claire took the elevator back to the second floor, where her room was located. She took a left through the hallway, then unlocked the door, coming back to a spotless bedroom. She had no idea her new roommate was so organized and tidy. Her science textbooks formed a Jenga tower on the desk. Papers inundated the surface. Maybe she was OCD? Claire was, too, but she never felt she got enough credit for doing her chores, never mind the allowance. She wanted kind words.

For now, it was just her and Snowball. She already finished unloading her belongings on her side of the room. Snowball living here was the least of her worries. She already notified her roommate before bringing him, and she didn't mind. That was enough. Meanwhile, the cat rested on her pink loft bed like a potato, staring deep into her soul with heterochromatic yellow and blue eyes.

Lord knows how he got up there, Claire thought.

The room was set up neatly on both sides. Each bed flanked the dorm's singular window, which overlooked the village lawn. Many residential buildings and a dining hall surrounded the vast landscape. A desk and chair were laid out between each wardrobe and loft bed.

In Claire's space, rainbow lights adorned the ceiling. Posters of her favorite boy bands—One Direction was her top favorite, but she also adored K-pop—were held by push pins on the wall. A box sat upon her desk containing shark teeth, which she loved to collect, along with Funko Pops of *Pokémon* and *My Hero Academia* and piles of manga, sentimental souvenirs that reminded her of her old friendships. Jessica, Christopher, and Trevor would go to movies with her and invite her to marijuana smoking sessions, as well as the times they went to the movie theater. The thought of leaving it all behind as she transitioned to her new college life made her melancholy but hopeful as she anticipated new beginnings.

“Snowball, what are you doing on my bed, you goof?” she giggled.

The cat let out a short, content meow, leaping from Claire’s bed onto the dark, wooden desk, before landing on the floor with another extended meow.

“I take it you’re hungry.”

Claire walked over to her wardrobe and found a giant bag of Friskies. She carried the bag over and poured it out as Snowball raced to his food bowl and started munching. Claire hoped he didn’t spill anything all over his red bandana, which she used because he liked to chow down on tuna every now and then.

She then took his water bowl and went to the community bathroom to fill it up before coming back and placing it next to Snowball. She figured he was happy for the moment, but what about Claire herself? His litter box sat clean inside the wardrobe to help mask the smell, and his scratching post stood in the middle of the hardwood floor, now littered with cat toys. Who knew what her new roommate would think if she saw a cat in their dorm room? Was this person *actually* friendly?

Claire watched Snowball as he ran about the room playing with his toys.

He’s so cute, she thought.

Suddenly, the door burst open. Claire’s roommate marched into the room, apparently freaking out as she began pacing back and forth. The racket made Snowball jump from the scratching post. He scampered toward Claire and crouched behind her skeleton figure. Her roommate was pale and slender, with puffy golden blonde hair and large freckles. She wore a pink wool sweater and oversized glasses. She looked to be one of the more studious types, a typical schoolgirl reminding Claire of Nikki Maxwell from *Dork Diaries*. Her one identifying mark was a single, pointy strand of hair protruding like a spider’s leg from her widow’s peak.

“Oh my God, what am I gonna do?” she barked. “FDOC starts tomorrow, and I’m supposed to keep track of every assignment in all of my classes. I’m never going to get anything turned in on time if all of the course information isn’t clear!”

She stopped when she noticed Claire, who stared at her with wonder.

“Um,” the girl stuttered, repositioning her glasses. “Hi. Are you my roommate?”

“Yeah. We’re roomies alright. I’m Claire. What’s your name?”

“Kelly. Kelly Stewart. It’s a pleasure to meet you. Where are you from?”

“I’m from this little town called Hurricane,” Claire answered. “It’s not too far from here, although it is kinda boring. What’s your major?”

“I’m leaning towards science,” Kelly responded, “but right now, I’m undecided. STEM majors are hard, but my parents want me to become a pharmacist just like them.”

“My family is the same way,” Claire sighed. “I’m going into creative writing. My grandpa is a professor here. When I graduate, I want to become a famous author and write all sorts of books!”

“Oh, that’s so cool!” Kelly grinned, clapping lightly. “I love your kitty, by the way. He looks so adorable, and I love his eyes.”

“Thanks. He’s my emotional support animal.”

Boy, Kelly’s prior approval sure saved her life. She rewarded herself with a deep sigh. Snowball rolled around on the floor with his stomach exposed, enticing her to certain death. He then flipped over and began biting at the red bandana on his neck.

“Snowball,” Claire shouted, while making a high-pitched ‘S’ sound to grab the cat’s attention. “Quit it!”

“He’s sure got a mind of his own,” Kelly laughed. “Sorry I don’t have much to say. I’m kinda shy. It’s difficult for me to make connections here.”

“I’m actually pretty shy myself,” Claire admitted. “I miss my friends back home already, so I’m not very confident about finding new friends.”

“That’s good to know. A-are you looking forward to your first day of classes in the morning? I’m not. Haha!”

“Heh, I wish I could answer that question,” Claire scoffed playfully.

“Yeah, it does seem intimidating at first,” Kelly admitted. “Want some fruit gummies?”

“Yes, please.”

Claire accepted the offer gently and popped them in her mouth like anxiety meds. Maybe she’d benefit from them now.

“You don’t look like you eat a lot,” Kelly observed.

“Yeah, everyone always says I need to be more curvy. The girls at school would always say that. It’s so objectifying.”

“I always have to watch what I eat, too,” Kelly replied. “I’m always OCD about the nutrients mostly.”

This caused them both to laugh out loud. They looked out of the window at the same moment, seeing the sky turned pitch black.

“Hey, it’s getting pretty late,” Kelly declared. “We should probably get a good night’s sleep before school tomorrow.”

“Good idea,” Claire said.

The girls quickly got ready for bed. Before long, they shut off the light.

“Good night, roomie,” she whispered.

“Good night,” Claire responded affectionately.

Once Kelly dozed off, Claire switched off the lamp and climbed into bed for the night. She hoped to enjoy her first day of the semester tomorrow. Snowball jumped from the desk to the top of the covers, lying down next to her. His purr was comforting. He trusted this place. Claire was still navigating this trust, wondering if she belonged here. After a while, she soon fell asleep.

Chapter 2: Unfamiliar Faces

It was 7:30 a.m. on Monday, the first day of the semester. Claire's alarm blared from her phone. She put the blanket over her head to resist before impatiently deciding to turn it off altogether. Half awake, she scanned the quiet dorm room. Kelly had already disappeared. They seemed to bond the night before. Yikes, what did she do now?

Claire still needed time to decompress from the move-in. It happened yesterday for a reason, to avoid the influx of other students that overwhelmed her, but that usually never ends. At least now she'd have the privacy to talk to herself in front of Snowball. Claire descended from her bunk. As she rubbed her eyes, she heard Snowball meowing.

"Morning, Snowball," she said, stretching before moving around.

The routine was always the same. She fed Snowball and gave him water before she got ready for the day. After this quick chore, she went to her wardrobe to pick out her clothes for the day. She chose a white off-shoulder tee with black stripes, and a pair of dark blue jeans with large, gaping holes. Claire determined the attire to be the perfect choice. Her mom hated ripped jeans, saying it made her look like a "bum", but she didn't care.

She grabbed her outfit and hopped into a shower stall at the bathroom. Twenty minutes later, she returned to the room. Claire finished dressing up for the day, wearing black gumshoes, a gray beanie, and ebony earrings. Her fingers found the golden heart necklace given to her by a boy named Chris that she dated. A star and a crescent were engraved on the necklace's anterior, which bore two complementary shades of gold like the Yin and Yang. It was a souvenir from past times back in Hurricane. She wondered if he ever remembered giving it to her.

I miss my friends, she thought.

It wasn't really the thought of her friends that put her in distress, but not being able to learn from them anymore. How would she know what to say to the next stranger who judged her character and capacity after only a split second? She hated small talk. She needed a familiar space. Her friends didn't mind that she went nonverbal when overwhelmed.

Claire paused for a mirror selfie. The anime stickers crowding the frame felt childish, but she left them anyway. The lavender phone case with cat ears still made her smile. Claire found Snowball approaching her in the mirror like he owned the place.

"Snowball!" Claire said. "Why are you photobombing my pictures?"

The cat responded with a meow. Claire gave a half-smile. She closed her camera and stroked his fur, letting his purr steady her breathing. It worked better than brown noise. Claire then packed her school supplies before checking the time. It was past 8 a.m. She squatted down and kissed the black marks on Snowball's head.

"Be good for me, okay?" Claire said.

She exited the room and locked the door. Claire left Aspire Hall, mounted her skateboard, and rode it to the student center on the other side of the campus. Claire explored the campus bookstore and found Port City Brew. Thoughts about her first class lingered in her mind. New people. Different personalities. Make a good first impression. Don't shut down, stim, or act weird. You only have one chance.

She ordered a caramel Frappuccino, then sat in the dining area outside the café sipping her drink. She scrolled through Instagram, jealous of how everyone's lives looked so "perfect". Claire rechecked her phone after finishing her coffee; it was 8:30 a.m.

"Uh, oh. I don't want to be late for my first class. I'd better get moving."

Claire's first class was at 9 a.m., *Introduction to Biology*. She was eager to meet potential acquaintances, even though the idea was unnerving. At home, she learned never to just go up and badger random people about their personal lives or she'd be met with hostility. On Chancellor's Walk, some people formed pairs or groups as they walked. She didn't want to interrupt their happy conversations. She worried more about being hit by bicyclists who didn't signal when passing someone. That sort of thing could send her into a meltdown. Luckily, the distance to class wasn't very far, so she tried to blend in with the crowd.

Escaping the chaotic jungle, Claire arrived at Dobo Hall. As she ascended the steps to the science building's entrance, someone came out the door and held it open for her. She thanked him. The interior was spacious and fascinating. A mural showed dolphins and fish swimming alongside each other in the ocean, and a few students worked at a study space nearby. Claire went through the lobby and located her biology class.

It was a medium-sized classroom of about thirty to forty people. Tables were arranged in rows. Five minutes before class, Claire saw people simply picking which seats they wanted. She was flabbergasted. Back in high school, kids sat in designated spots chosen for them year-round.

Knowing she at least had that degree of freedom, Claire's strategy was simple. She would sit at least two chairs away from any other student, that way she wouldn't feel the need to thrash her way out of a hydraulic trash compactor. Claustrophobia had gotten to her since the old days. However, she looked around and saw Kelly, who waved.

"Oh my God, are you in this class, too?" Claire asked, walking up to her.

"Yeah, isn't that awesome? We're classmates and roomies!"

"Yay!" Claire replied. "In that case, I'm sitting right next to you."

She claimed a spot next to Kelly, a safe space among relative strangers. Their bond was official; now she wouldn't fear certain judgment.

Before class started, she took a sheet of computer paper from her backpack, using it to draw anime and cartoon doodles of the PowerPuff Girls, the movement of the pencil smoothing out the noise around her. However, her concentration was broken by someone whistling to her from the other side of the table a few feet away. She turned to two guys. The one trying to grab her attention was a skinny, nerdy redhead with sideburns and a giraffe's neck. He had braces and wore glasses, and donned a turquoise Hawaiian shirt with black flowers on it. Bits of facial hair sprouted from where a moustache would normally be, as well as on his abnormally sharp chin like an unkempt goatee. He spoke with a slight lisp and a bold demeanor.

"Hey, sweetie," he smirked. "You do math? 'Cause I'm gonna need a tutor."

"Um, gross?" Claire exclaimed. "Get away from me!"

"What the hell is wrong with you, Dominic?" the other guy objected. "I'm so sorry about him, ma'am. He's impulsive."

The other boy sat in between them. He seemed polite and well-meaning. Claire studied him. He had brown, ragged hair, an egg-shaped nose, thick eyebrows, and a heavy build like the titular character from *Wreck-It-Ralph*, as well his baby blue eyes that reminded Claire of Chris' cobalt blue eyes. He wore a gray T-shirt, and spoke with a slight Southern drawl. Claire's face felt warm. She wasn't watching Disney movies anymore; she was in one.

"I'm Andrew," he said, offering a handshake.

"Oh. I'm Claire. Nice to meet you."

His grip was firm, and it was too much. Claire knew she shouldn't mumble. It looked weak. Plus, her dad always said with brutal honesty that jobs would turn her down this way. She needed to build her confidence.

"Where are you from?" Andrew asked.

"I'm from Hurricane, North Carolina."

"No way! That's where Dominic and I are from. That's twenty minutes from you. We're practically neighbors."

Could he just get past the small talk already?

"So why did you choose Port City?"

The question caught Claire off guard. She wasn't sure if he wanted the real answer, but he looked as if he actually cared. Not many people saw her like that.

"It's my local college. Also, my grandfather works here."

The class grew quiet as the professor walked in, black shoes tapping the floor. It followed the clock tower's ringing outside that tolled the beginning of an hour. He had long, spiked hair, shaped like a fox's tail. He looked like a villain from a comic book, the strangest sight she'd seen thus far. Maybe she was overthinking it. She tried not to stare.

"Greetings. I am your professor, Dr. Albert J. Holstein. I welcome you to the Introduction to Biology course, which I believe you all have signed up for, if I'm correct."

Dr. Holstein went on to discuss his academic background, his research, and the rules of the course. One that stood out to Claire was that Dr. Holstein would not accept late assignments for any reason whatsoever. This wasn't just school anymore. This was the real world. After the first half hour, the professor called on the class to introduce themselves, while Claire had gone

back to doodling. Being picked on the spot always shook her, but surprisingly for her, everyone ignored her. The unexpected twist was surreal.

At the end of class, Claire volunteered to have Andrew as her lab partner, having some sense of familiarity with him. As she and Kelly exited the classroom together, Claire strived to stay invisible as much as possible from then on, while Kelly protected her.

“So who is your lab partner this semester, Claire?” Kelly asked. “Are they good?”

“Dr. Holstein let me pick Andrew as my lab partner. He’s such a nice boy.”

“Oh, so cool! I mean, he seems charming enough at least.”

As both girls laughed and socialized their way across the hallway, they encountered a poster for a rush event hosted by the fraternity *Alpha Gamma Eta*. Claire saw the perfect-looking people depicted on the poster and remembered the high school cheerleaders that always singled her out in the school hallway, calling her a “twig” and a “lesbian” for her outfit and saying the special needs kid who pretended to be a car would win in a fight. She was just a tomboy.

“Ew,” Claire scoffed. “Greek life.”

“Yeah, I’m not into fraternities and sororities either,” Kelly agreed. “It’s so distracting. And who knows how much homework we’re going to have tonight? It’s like we’re cramming for high school finals at the beginning of the semester.”

“Looking at the big event of the year?” a voice called from behind.

The girls looked over to Andrew and Dominic, approaching.

“Andrew?” Claire asked. “What are you guys up to?”

“So there’s this hockey game happening later tonight. Dominic and I are thinking about going. It’ll be one of the greatest competitions this season. You guys should come along.”

“Sure!” Claire replied. “I’d have to see what kind of homework I have this weekend after classes, but I think I have plenty of time.”

“We’d love to go with you,” Kelly said, blushing at Andrew like a tomato.

He chuckled and gave them a half-smile.

“Well, it starts at 6 p.m. at the Ice House. I promise you guys won’t regret it. Dominic and I are definitely looking forward to it.”

With that, the two traded numbers, and the boys left.

“Don’t be strangers,” Andrew said.

Claire reflected on the hockey game. She didn’t go out much. Perhaps now in college, she could change. Andrew was the first boy who’d ever been nice to her. She couldn’t let Kelly down after she said yes. Noises and crowds of strangers were all she despised. Nonetheless, a pair of noise-canceling headphones would solve all of that.

“Let’s go, Kelly,” she said, and the girls continued their way out of Dobo Hall and back toward the heart of campus.

At Claire’s next class at 10 a.m., American History I, the experience wasn’t nearly as exciting. Once she entered the lecture hall filled with two hundred and twenty people, the history professor went on tangents as he introduced the syllabus in his introductory lecture. Finally, there was a normal professor, but maybe it wasn’t so exciting. Claire zoned out, fatigue overtaking her.

So much for that Frappuccino, she thought.

Claire’s head slumped on her hand until she turned to a tall girl sitting by herself. The girl looked older than Claire, having fair skin, wavy light brown hair with two blonde tendrils, and

rosy cheeks. She had shining hazel eyes and wore golden earrings with black oval stones on them. She wore a white T-shirt with salmon-colored lettering for the *Chi Omicron* sorority, and distressed, light denim flare jeans.

In the middle of class, the girl got up from her seat, walking out of the lecture hall, probably out of boredom. Claire's face glowed intensely, but she didn't know why. She snapped her gaze away from that side of the room. The "cool people" wouldn't react kindly to this attraction. If there's one thing she learned in high school, it's that if someone noticed her staring for too long, everyone would know. She promised herself to never do that again.

After the second half of class in the cinderblock dungeon, it was 11 a.m. Claire believed this would be a good time to catch a lunch break before attending her last class at 12:30 p.m., her first-year seminar.

Chapter 3: Ice House

As Claire got out of her classes for the afternoon, her grandfather summoned her by e-mail to his office at Kenan Hall. She read only his most important words.

Reluctant at first, Claire decided to make the trip on her skateboard across campus to the creative writing building. The closer she got, the more she was elated to see her professor grandfather for the very first time on her own. She didn't have to defend her existence around him, and she hoped he wouldn't lecture her about a job like her parents.

Claire examined the name plate on her grandfather's cherry wooden office desk during his office hours, which read "Dr. Timothy West - BFA Coordinator". She didn't even know what a BFA was. Bachelor of Fine Arts? Her grandfather used to preach at her church every week when she was five years old. Hurricane, North Carolina called him a great orator. That's why writing was a tradition for the West family, or at least that's how she saw it. She'd always been a big fan of his books as a kid, which inspired her a great deal to write and also why she got into the program. Sixty-six years of life had turned him into a stoic owl.

Her dad always told her she shouldn't be so nosy. She couldn't help but notice that the grandfather who made her hot chocolate on Christmas and gave her pointers over FaceTime on her English papers seemed disappointed. Today, she watched as he searched for job listings on Port City University's job board, his jaw tight. He turned from one of his two desktops to face her.

"What are you going to do with your life?"

"What do you mean? I'm getting a college education."

“Well, you’re on your own now, aren’t you?” Grandpa pressed again. “Does Mom still send you money? Do you ever have to experience the anguish of executing chores around the house as you once did?”

Claire shifted in her seat.

“Um, she helps sometimes.”

“And what if she stops?”

Claire didn’t have an answer for that.

“In other words,” Grandpa continued, “now that you’ve left the comfort of your childhood home, do you know where that sense of purpose may have gone now? You can do just about anything you put your brilliant mind to, now that you’re fully grown. One such choice would be finding a job.”

“Grandpa, I won’t do it. It’s so overwhelming.”

“Claire, your mother has your best interests at heart. It’s reckless these days to simply ponder and wander through the muddy swamp that is the undergraduate experience, no? Navigating potential friends and enemies solely in the unpredictable sea of blue, teal, and gold at Port City University?”

“The constant work would be too stressful, Grandpa,” Claire argued. “Also, the job market is getting scarce. I can’t even make enough money to buy my own car. My dad says I won’t ever be independent until I can finally focus on the road. I’m already 18. Why do humans have to pay to exist?”

“Ah, your teenage spirit has not yet wavered, I see. But that kind of rash behavior could spell disaster for years to come, if you continue to disregard your elders. Even I wouldn’t amount

to millions of dollars selling houses to achieve my grand American dream. Ambitions like status, power, and money are mere distractions.”

“Grandpa, I want the experience of meeting new people and trying new things so that I can have better writing ideas that will help me be successful.”

“Then perhaps the campus bookstore is the best choice for you,” Grandpa replied. “You’ll have great opportunities to make the friends you want while building the skills you need for life by serving customers on the job. Even then, your friends won’t matter in five years. Your education is more important.”

The fire in Claire’s chest yielded.

“My mom says a lot of fast food places preach family,” Claire said, “but I don’t believe them. That bookstore opportunity seems more communal and authentic if anything.”

“The sailboat of your education doesn’t require a burst of angry wind shoving itself into your face as you drag your way to college classes,” Grandpa advised. “You’ve only just reached the age of majority. By the time you get your master’s degree and impress your mom and dad, then your prefrontal cortex will have developed.”

“But that’s six years from now,” Claire said. “Grandpa, what if it’s overstimulating? I don’t like to work under pressure. What if I just shut down and my friendships will be all for nothing? It’s bad enough that I miss all of my friends back home in Hurricane. Being by myself is so intimidating. Snowball is the only one who will keep me company when times are rough.”

“Now do you see what I mean?” her grandfather said.

“Huh?” she said, looking up.

“Your past is the weakest link in your ultimate adventure through life. You mustn’t rely forever on the ones you love for self-actualization, Claire. Hard work gives you a true sense of

purpose over time. Eventually, you'll learn to start relying on yourself. It's all part of becoming a strong, independent, and *functioning* adult."

"Hmmm," Claire said. "I'll think about applying for a job on campus tonight. If I hate it, I won't forgive you."

"Good," her grandfather ended, rising from his chair and picking up a Bible. "Now make the family proud and go study. I have a senior seminar that I must teach at 5 o'clock."

"Oh, I hope it goes well," Claire said, jumping from her chair to follow her grandfather out of the office.

"Well, aside from the truth of being incarcerated inside a windowless cinder block rectangle for the next three miserable hours," he said, "I have great certainty that I will profit substantively from the moans of undergraduate seniors as they endure my political agenda. Speaking of which, don't forget about our class tomorrow on Tuesday."

"I won't disappoint," Claire said.

"Good," her grandfather replied. "Take care of yourself."

"Bye, Grandpa!" Claire said, waving.

She crossed the double doors to the outside environment. She still didn't want a job, but for the first time, she was scared to know what would happen if she never got one.

At the Ice House that night, Port City's hockey team, the Seahawks, competed against their rivals, the Hammerheads. It was an hour and thirty minutes in. The scent of popcorn wafted through the subzero air amidst the alcohol-fueled cheers and boos clashing like waves at the seashore. Claire and Kelly ate some snacks and watched the game from the bleachers. Andrew,

sporting a white and navy hockey uniform, played center on the hockey rink as he guided the puck toward the opposite team's net.

"Andrew Gallagher sucks!" someone shouted from the other side of the ice rink.

"Seahawks, lose!"

Andrew knocked the hockey puck into the corner of the net. From the bleachers, Claire couldn't tell exactly what happened to the goaltender, but he ended up being thrown off balance. She couldn't hear the loud cheering either from her headphones, so it felt good.

"Whoo," Claire cheered. "Go, Andrew!"

She turned to Kelly, who was just staring at Andrew in bliss, her face completely flushed. Claire sat there with a perplexed smile.

"Kelly, are you okay?" she asked, laughing.

Dominic, who sat about six feet away from them by himself on the bleachers, chipped in unannounced.

"I'd give her some slack. Looks like she's also got the hots for the Big Andy if you know what I'm saying. Heh."

However, instead of entertaining his unwanted commentary, Claire looked past him and saw the *Chi Omicron* sorority girl from her history class today. She watched the hockey game for a while longer and then rose from her seat to go outside.

Overcome by curiosity, Claire decided to follow her this time, wanting to meet her. She slid her way through the crowd, proceeding toward the lobby. A soft wave resonated in her stomach as she approached the other girl, who was as elusive as the social butterfly Claire felt pressured by the world to become.

When she exited the Ice House, Claire found the girl vaping out front. The parking lot was packed, but otherwise void of people, minus a few social groups who kept to themselves and hung around near their vehicles. Now, Claire could at least not feel like she's being watched. Hopefully, this girl wouldn't be turned off by her trivia dumps. It always bored or confused people. Intelligence is supposed to be attractive, right?

"Hey," she said. "You look familiar. Don't we have history class together?"

"Um, hi there. What's your name?"

"Lucy."

She blew a puff of nicotine into the warm night air.

"What's yours?"

"I-I'm Claire. It's nice to meet you."

"You look tense."

Lucy offered Claire her vape.

"Here. It'll make you feel better."

"No thanks," Claire replied. "Smoking kills more than 480,000 people per year in the United States. I prefer marijuana."

"Are you, like, a nerd or something?"

Claire laughed awkwardly.

"Yeah, you got me. I hope that's not a dealbreaker."

"Don't worry," Lucy said. "I think it's kinda cute."

Claire went into a full-on deep blush, her face hot enough to cause first-degree burns.

"Wait, was that a blush?"

"Nuh-uh!" she lied. "You're just seeing things."

“I won’t tell anyone. I don’t like guys either, to be honest. Do you like it here at Port City University?”

“Yeah, I guess so. I’m a first-year. I’ve never been out this often in high school. I spend most of my time on intellectual stuff. But my friend, Andrew, invited me to tonight’s hockey game, so I’ve been enjoying it so far. I met him this morning in my biology class. Biology is not my thing.”

“What’s your major?” Lucy asked.

“Creative writing.”

“Wait, you still don’t know how to write? That’s not a very good look.”

Unsure if this response was meant to be banter, it didn’t sit too well with Claire’s literal-minded worldview. Sometimes, she wasn’t very skilled at reading between the lines.

“Of course I am!” she said, puffing her cheeks in an exaggerated pout. “Why wouldn’t I?”

She knew she was being dramatic, and Lucy could tell.

“I’m just kidding. We should totally be best friends.”

“Do you really think so?”

“Don’t be silly. You just haven’t gone out of your comfort zone. I bet you’re gonna have so much fun meeting new people.”

“Yeah, I love wanting to make new friends. It’s just really hard for me.”

“Well, I’m adopting you. You don’t have a choice. Anyway, you seem really cool. We should exchange numbers.”

“Okay!” Claire exclaimed.

Lucy wrote down her number on a sticky note, then Claire texted that number to her phone to trade hers.

“So, there’s this birthday party my sorority and I are hosting for one of our sisters during rush week. Granted, it will be a more formal event.”

Claire had imagined total mayhem, but this was perfect.

“That works better for me,” Claire agreed. “I hate the loud noise. It’s so overstimulating.”

“Great. 4 p.m. tomorrow at my place at the beach. I’ll send you the address once it gets closer. Be there. I hope there won’t be any conflicts.”

“Well, I have Intro to Creative Writing tomorrow morning at 11 and another class at 2.”

“Fun,” Lucy smirked. “It was nice meeting you! See you around, Claire!”

With that, she winked at Claire and walked off to her white sedan in the middle of the parking lot. Claire didn’t know what to make of the interaction or how to process it. Was she falling in love with Lucy? Why did her heart race when she winked? Christ, was she gay? And if Lucy was, what did that make her?

She couldn’t let her parents know about this discovery. Dad always said would destroy the family, but why? Was Grandpa too religious? Was that why her dad didn’t speak to him? Ever since she lived in Port City for the first time, this was what independence felt like. While her grandfather stressed about responsibility, Claire saw that facing the real world meant discovering parts of herself her family would never understand.

Claire looked up into the night, admiring the beautiful, shining white stars in the atmosphere, as well as the distant cirrus clouds that painted the sky a milky texture. Peace at last. Maybe she wasn’t so lonely after all. Claire had been searching for her home away from home

for so long. Now she might be there. After ten more minutes of Claire standing out there to recharge her social battery, she went back inside the Ice House to enjoy the rest of the game.

Chapter 4: The Architect

The next day, the morning sun shone radiantly as ever. White cumulus clouds scattered throughout the atmosphere. Claire rode her skateboard across campus to Kenan Hall. Reaching her destination, she took the side entrance into the building and found the small auditorium where her 11 a.m. *Introduction to Creative Writing* class was located. She entered and slid into a seat in one of the back rows, retrieving her writing journal and laptop from her backpack in the process.

There were only three other people in the classroom at the moment, out of what would be a cohort of twenty. After a few minutes, her grandfather walked in. It was 10:55 a.m. Claire took the time to admire her grandfather's formal appearance.

His bushy eyebrows retained a grayish color, a surprising feat, considering the white shell that now took the shape of his balding crown. His dark blue dress coat fit well over his aquamarine dress shirt, but the duller shade suggested it had been worn down. Whenever students greeted him, he merely acknowledged them with a nod, as if not expecting their attention. Thick tortoiseshell glasses gave him the appearance of a true, dignified writer.

Because Claire's grandfather was so busy with his professional life, the West family offered to let her visit on holidays during her childhood. Despite the sit-down they had at his office, Claire was elated to see him once again at her home away from home. Her grandfather then beckoned her, and she jumped up from her spot to talk to him. He always preferred to keep conversations at a whisper should students have questions about the course.

"You look good, Grandpa," Claire said.

"It's good to see you too, my dear. I trust you've thought more about what we discussed?"

“Uh-huh.”

“How is your family?”

“Pretty good, I suppose.”

“Good, good. It’s been painful not seeing their lovely faces.”

“Maybe you could come visit.”

Her grandfather said nothing, looking toward the front of the auditorium.

“When your father was much younger, only a small child, your grandmother and I underwent a terrible divorce. She called me a bad man. I leave little room for doubt you’ve read this in my autobiography.”

Claire frowned and held her arm, closing herself off.

“I-I actually didn’t know that.”

Her voice seemed to crack. Her grandfather’s reaction was frostier.

“Why don’t you return to your seat? Class begins in just a few minutes.”

Claire heeded her grandfather’s word and backtracked to her chosen seat. She had read all his historical fiction, his essays, and his critiques, but he never once mentioned his autobiography. Sometime after the conversation, Andrew appeared in the doorway. Claire’s face lit up.

“Andrew!” she beamed. “Over here!”

Andrew slipped into a seat beside her.

“Is Dominic coming as well?” Claire asked.

“Oh, it’s just me. Plus, he’s having the worst hangover right now. Dude’s such a pain in the ass. Anyway, how are you today?”

“Never better. So are you a creative writing major, too?”

“Yeah, you could say that. I like creative nonfiction, but mostly poetry.”

“I’m more of a fiction gal. I want to write novels and share my voice with the world.”

“I have a fondness for the past,” Andrew said, “but I have to get really good with the metaphors and the imagery and evoking emotions. In other words, I want my language to be strong.”

“That makes perfect sense,” Claire said. “I can’t wait to learn what Grandpa teaches. I’m really excited to improve my writing skills.”

Andrew lowered his voice.

“Actually, I heard he’s impossible. A friend of mine took his workshop last year and almost dropped out.”

Claire’s stomach tightened.

“W-what do you mean?”

“Well, maybe don’t tell him I said this. But apparently, he tears people apart. Publicly.”

Claire was left in denial. Before long, her grandfather stepped up to the podium. It was already 11 a.m.

“All right, class. For those of you who have not taken me in the past, but likely have heard of me and the work that I do, my name is Dr. Timothy West. Before we begin, let us go around and introduce ourselves.”

After introductions, Claire’s grandfather carried on with his lecture. Halfway through, he described the course, as well as his expectations and the responsibilities of the students in a metaphorical manner.

“Writing is mining with a pickaxe,” he asserted. “Your pencil is your pickaxe, and your writing materials your inventory. As creative writers, it is your job to break those rocks to dig the precious ores of prose and poetry.”

The class chatted amongst themselves, awed by this enlightenment. Claire engaged with passion while jotting down notes in her writing journal. Her grandfather spent the next ten minutes reviewing the syllabus. Participation was mandatory, and all work was due at the beginning of class. Claire had never missed a deadline during her high school years, but the stakes were palpable. Lastly, workshops would begin next month.

“Are there any questions or concerns?” her grandfather asked.

The audience merely shook their heads in response.

“When we come to class henceforth, I should not see any laptops whatsoever,” her grandfather said. “Digital technology is a distraction. Put those annoying laptops away. Your writing notebook and pencils are sufficient. We will take this course the old-fashioned way.”

Moans of exasperation filled the auditorium as students removed their computers from their desks.

“What?” Claire whined, putting her laptop back into her bag.

She glanced at Andrew, who shrugged. Was her grandfather serious? She’d never seen this side of him before. The grandpa who bought her ice cream as a little girl now felt like a stranger. He kept going on about the rules. No adverbs, no dialogue tags except “said” or “asked”, and no italics for thoughts and dreams. These were annoying, but they limited variety. Then came one more rule.

“And one more thing,” her grandfather said. “I don’t want any stories about cats, or warriors fighting in space. The practice of genre writing runs rampant in the creative writing

department. It's embarrassing, sad, and most of all, irritating. They are distractions from real literary work!"

Claire dropped her pen. She wrote fantasy. She'd been writing a novel since junior year, about a warrior princess named Celine from the Moon Kingdom. Her grandfather said it didn't count. She then sprang her hand up.

"Is something the matter, Claire?" Grandpa asked. "I do encourage you to speak your thoughts. This is, after all, a college classroom."

Claire rose from her seat, alerting her classmates who eyed her with perplexity. Everything went silent. She was doing it again. Her strong sense of justice made her act before thinking, as before in her grandfather's office. This time, she couldn't stop herself.

"You said no genre writing, but that's all I ever wanted to write. All you're doing is limiting our creative freedom."

Some students snorted in laughter. This shot Claire in the stomach and made her legs quiver. Their bullying was unlike anything in high school. They didn't need words. No one needed to say anything. Her grandfather pursed his already thin lips.

"Then perhaps this classroom is not for you," her grandfather said. "Genre writing is an obstinate, unhealthy approach to writing that inhibits one's progress in becoming a successful writer. It is too derivative, too complicated, and offers no real purpose to your work."

"And that's not all," Claire said. "The laptop thing? Some people need them! People with disabilities!"

"Then they can request accommodations at the Disability Resource Center beforehand. My classroom is not the place for it. Please have a seat."

Claire didn't speak for the rest of class as she settled back into her chair. Her body was still trembling from the impact. She had been a fan of her grandfather's work. That's why she wanted to write, yet she somehow found herself rebelling against him. Writing was art, not science. She sat for the rest of the lecture and zoned out at the desk instead of taking notes, trying not to go into another meltdown.

Students filed out of the auditorium at 12:15 p.m.

"Don't forget to bring your required textbook to class when we meet on Thursday," Claire's grandfather advised, "and feel free to e-mail me or leave a voice message after my office hours should you have any questions."

As Claire collected her belongings and prepared to walk out the door, her grandfather summoned her back.

"Claire, can you come see me? I would like to talk to you for a minute."

Claire reluctantly trod toward her grandfather and crossed her arms unhappily, facing away from him.

"I really do admire your strength," Grandpa began. "I'll give you that. No one else in my class dares to participate in such a capacity. It's quite natural that you would disagree with some of my teachings. We all get a little sensitive in the face of criticism. That's what makes us human. However, art requires discipline. The show you put on today was inappropriate. I thought more highly of you when you stepped foot into Port City."

He then handed her a copy of the syllabus to continue reading over.

"Read this carefully. The rules apply to everyone. Even family. I'll see you on Thursday."

Claire disappeared from the small auditorium and didn't look back.

Chapter 5: Chi Omicron

As Claire headed to the Shore Dining Hall along the Hawk Walk, she dwelled on her first impressions as she obsessed over the graphite lines in her character drawings. Kelly and Andrew had been welcoming so far. That was a pleasant start to say the least. She hoped she wouldn't find copies of her high school bully, Brittany Davis, floating around in the salty waters. Yes, people were salty. Every laugh that filled the air made her wonder if it was aimed at her. Claire kept her head, not carrying her skateboard this time. Insecurities persisted in her psyche.

Claire always had trouble coming to terms with her sexuality. As a little girl, she remembered she hated Barbie dolls and preferred to wield a Minecraft sword or have superpowers instead, and the *PowerPuff Girls* were the best of both worlds. Given her father's position at the newspaper all these years, he'd always been vocal about the "pivotal" importance of the nuclear family, but the subject of homosexuality never came up in the household. However, as Claire begrudgingly spent her childhood in a Southern Baptist church, the Bible taught her that sodomy was a sin, and by extension, homosexuality.

Twenty years ago, she certainly would've been disowned. Of course, times had changed and people had become more open-minded. Consequences might be less hostile. Perhaps it would've been better for her to get it all out and not have to deal with hiding it. So, hands clammy, she hovered over her dad's contact and dialed. He might not understand, but she needed to get it out, to someone who'd known her all her life before all this. When he picked up, seconds later, things were friendly at first. They talked about her class schedule and her job applications, and Claire shared stories about her new friendships on campus. Then, she got to the point.

"Dad?" Claire said, her hands trembling. "I need to tell you something."

“What’s up, pumpkin?”

“So there’s this girl in my history class that I like, and her name is Lucy. I don’t know if she takes me seriously or not, but when I introduced myself, she invited me to this birthday party at the beach. I’ve never really been this far out of my comfort zone before.”

“You made a new friend?”

She let out a deep breath.

“Dad, I think I might be gay.”

“What?...”

“Well, more like I’m bisexual,”

Her father sighed for a moment.

“Honey, let’s keep this between us. Understand?”

“So you aren’t going to tell anyone?”

“Not if you promise never to say those blasphemous words in our household again, young lady,” her dad said. “That’s why your grandfather left the family a long time ago. When I came out as bisexual to your grandfather around your age, he packed his things and never came back. I spent the rest of my youth alone with your grandmother, constantly berated by her for bringing shame upon the family. Your brother already failed us by quitting the football team. Do you even realize what damage you have done?”

“But you guys never told me about this,” Claire said. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Because you were still young. Now you’re an adult. It’s time you learn the hard truth. Your grandfather left Hurricane because he’s had enough disappointment. That’s why you visited him on holidays. What would he possibly think?”

“I’m really sorry. Please don’t tell Mom.”

“I’m gonna let you off here. Be good now, alright?”

“Love you, Dad.”

Her father hung up the phone.

Claire’s heart sank in pure guilt after the interaction. Her father couldn’t even bring himself to say “I love you” back after she came out to him. Plus, her brother Nick didn’t quit the football team. The doctor ordered him never to play football again after he broke his ankle in his freshman year of high school. The West family had always prided themselves on being the most able, and that’s why her parents turned their backs on him. Before then, her parents never even paid attention to her. Suddenly, her mom and dad became role models for parents when Nick was no longer the golden child. How does that work? Perhaps she was glad she moved out, but if her grandfather learned of her bisexuality, their relationship would have been destroyed by the time she worked on her bachelor’s thesis. Her life and career ruined just like that?

Nonetheless, she continued on the Hawk Walk, past the recreational field, where many first-years like herself played sand volleyball, pickleball, and basketball, Port City University’s favorite sport. When Claire reached the front of the Shore Dining Hall, she froze. Four guys approached her like male lions at the patio. A black steel fence guarding the patio was the only barrier shielding Claire across from them.

The pack’s leader stationed himself against the fence, his lackeys at his rear. He looked like one of those phony alpha males: a tanned complexion, a short height, slicked, dark brown hair, and an abnormally square jaw. He wore small diamond earrings, a periwinkle collared shirt, and faded red shorts. Two other accomplices, with body types of a giraffe and a gorilla, stood behind him wearing *Alpha Gamma Eta* T-shirts. Another had wavy, dirty blond hair like a surfer, donning a black T-shirt printed with a gray wolf howling at an ivory moon.

“Well, well, boys,” the leader said. “Looks like we got ourselves a new huzz!”

“Oh, are you looking for a new husband?” Claire asked.

“Fuck no. I’m looking for a nice lady to mingle with.”

“Um, no thanks. I’m not interested.”

“What are you? A fuckin’ dyke? “Get lost, queer.”

“Are you guys sure you’re not dating and just hanging out?”

“She thinks we’re dating! What the fuck?”

The leader cackled his ass off, and so did his comrades, forcing Claire to cover her ears as their boisterous demeanors became much too overwhelming for her senses to bear.

“What’s your name, miss?” he asked. “You look like a wild thing.”

“Um, that was so rude.”

“The name’s Jack Romanoff, but my boys call me Mr. Rizz. I’m the president of *Alpha Gamma Eta*, the top fraternity on campus that anyone ever saw.”

The obnoxious frat boys continued to bark in sadistic laughter.

“Hey, do you guys want to see a magic trick?” Claire asked.

She took out a glue cap from one of her front pockets, sticking it on her left thumb. Then, she hid the cap inside her hair, when really she kept a closed fist with the glue cap inside to maintain the illusion that the cap had magically disappeared. Finally, she lifted her beanie and released the glue cap underneath, after which she put it on the middle finger of her left hand and flipped the bird at the frat boys.

“Yeah, bite me, suckers!” she shouted.

Appalled, the gang booed her, but she simply walked off, aiming to carry on with lunch before noon had struck. Claire felt like she’d almost fallen into a trap, set up out of nowhere. If

not for her magic trick, who knows what would have happened? Once she passed the double doors, she got a text from Lucy disclosing the address to her party. After hesitating, Claire accepted the invitation, hoping to finally get out of her shell for once.

After attending her communications class from 2 to 3:30 p.m., Claire traveled to New Palm Beach to meet up with Lucy for the birthday party at 4 p.m, several miles east from the college campus. Claire took an Uber down the coast, disturbed by the chatty GPS on Google Maps that just wouldn't shut the fuck up, repeating the same directions over and over. Claire wanted to scream, gripping the back seat of the car, however, the air soothed her. The windows were rolled down, and the cool gust penetrated through, giving her the sensation of being on top of Mount Everest. Claire allowed the salty wind to ricochet off her face as it repeatedly whipped her short hair.

After arriving, Claire thanked the driver. It was nearly five until 4. She needed to make haste, however, she was fascinated by the house itself. It was a gorgeous blue three-story building, with a garage on the first floor and an exterior staircase with white rails that led to the main entrance on the second floor. The house was surrounded by giant palm trees and had a commanding view of the Atlantic Ocean that sat beyond the white sands of New Palm Beach. The house had a fountain where cars circled around it, and golden gates engraved with Lucy's last initial.

She hoped to make a good first impression with the sorority as she climbed the staircase. She thought she could at least pretend to be normal for a while. It was clear as day, and the heat had climbed to the nineties, making Claire want to drown in beverages as soon as she entered, the sunlight blinding her eyes.

The house's front door was decorated with Lucy's initials in the order of her first, last, and middle names. Claire knocked, and Lucy answered the door.

"Hey, you. You're late. What took you so long?"

Claire said nothing, paralyzed in shock, before Lucy laughed it off.

"I'm kidding," she replied, then gestured her inside. "Come on in!"

Claire entered into a sea of pink, white, and red latex balloons of varying sizes lying around on the wooden floor. Two large, golden mylar balloons, shaped like the number "2" and "0" floated in the kitchen, displaying the age of the sister whose birthday the sorority was celebrating. The words "Happy Birthday" along with pink and white streamers decorated the side window.

As Claire continued to glance around the interior of the beach house with astonishment, she noticed the Greek letters "ΧΟ" painted in glittery gold and standing upright near the entrance. "Hip To Be Square" by *Huey Lewis and the News* blasted on the speakers to give the space a vibrant atmosphere. Finger foods: pigs in a blanket, kettle cooked chips, chicken tenders, a vegetable platter, and a charcuterie board, sat out on the granite countertop. Claire took it upon herself to avoid the carrots with lifelong commitment. They were hard to chew, and she preferred soft food.

Alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks were laid out as well, and a red velvet birthday cake-- Claire's favorite!--decorated with sparkler candles sat alongside porcelain vases filled with red and white roses. Claire's wore a kiwi green, off-shoulder ruffle crop top and light blue skinny jeans, a comforting and modest fit as opposed to the *Chi Omicron* sorority girls' dazzling hot pink dresses.

“It’s nice of you to stop by, Claire,” Lucy said. “You’re not wearing pink like the rest of us, but that’s okay. I still like your style. It looks classy.”

“Thanks,” Claire laughed, blushing and placing a hand behind her head. “Whose birthday are we celebrating today?”

“Meet Tami, the most outgoing and awesome secretary in *Chi Omicron*. She is turning twenty today.”

“Hi, Claire! We’re glad you came. Welcome to the sisterhood! Lucy wouldn’t stop raving off and on about how nice you were. I was so skeptical.”

“Happy birthday!”

“Would you like anything to drink?” another girl named Emma asked, holding a bottle of chardonnay. “We’ll pour you something.”

She had wavy platinum blonde hair with purple highlights. Claire believed she could surprise the sorority with a little taste herself with the magenta highlight on her bang, though she held back due to being too self-conscious.

“No, thank you,” Claire replied, sitting in one of the tall chairs at the bar. “I’ll just take a soda.”

She opened a can of Sprite from one of the twelve-packs, swigging it down to quench her thirst.

“So you guys aren’t going to kick me out for being a nerd?” Claire asked.

“No, girl,” Tami said, chuckling. “We would never discriminate against people for their lifestyle! Who cares if you’re an introvert?”

“Yeah, but then these frat boys catcalled me at the dining hall today.”

“Are you talking about that womanizer Jack Romanoff from *Alpha Gamma Eta*?” Tami asked. “He does that to every girl that walks by the Shore Dining Hall.”

“Yeah,” Claire replied, “and when I didn’t want to talk to him, he just started calling me names like ‘queer’ and ‘dyke’ and kept pressuring me. He really made me feel uncomfortable.”

“Seriously?” Tami scoffed. “He’s so fucking homophobic and sexist.”

“Yeah,” Emma said. “And ableist. I heard *Alpha Gamma Eta* likes to haze disabled pledges every semester by orchestrating these sick haunted house pranks on Halloween. It’s also the time when most SA’s happen in Port City University.”

“Jesus Christ!” Claire caught herself saying. “How are they still enrolled here?!”

“Daddy’s money is what keeps them from getting suspended,” Lucy replied.

“He tried to go out with Lucy this one time,” Emma added, “but she was like, ‘Oh no, hun. I’m a lesbian. Sorry.’ And now he’s a raging Trump supporter who thinks all women are two-faced, vicious snakes.”

“Girl, of course he is,” Tami exclaimed.

Uncomfortably loud laughter erupted from Lucy and the sorority girls. Claire joined them in awkward fashion, plugging her ears shut until the noise faded.

“Don’t worry, Claire,” Tami said. “You’re safe with us! Jack can’t harm you here.”

“Yeah, you don’t have to worry about hate,” Lucy reassured. “We’re all about love in *Chi Omicron*. While it’s because we’re obligated to follow university protocol, diversity, equity, and inclusion are what we do best. It is the prime duty and foundation of our sisterhood. Everyone is welcome to our sorority, including transgenders, non-binaries, neurodivergents, and even our precious gay friends.”

“I-I,” Claire said, her heart melting. “I don’t know what to say. Does that mean I’m truly safe?”

“Someone give her a flag pin,” Lucy declared. “She deserves to feel supported.”

“Wow,” Claire said, receiving a brightly colored bisexual flag pin from one of the other girls in the extended group as opposed to Lucy’s circle, who placed it on her dark gray hat to create a stark contrast. “Thank you. I feel liberated.”

“As you should be,” Lucy agreed. “Come join the party with the rest of the gals. Don’t be a stranger.”

Staying at Lucy’s beach house was the highlight of Claire’s day as she relished every moment, no longer having to deal with her insecurities for the time being.

At eight, one of the girls took Claire back to Aspire Hall, after which she cheerfully waved goodbye to the sorority. As Claire set foot in her dorm once again, she saw Snowball attempting to sit on Kelly’s laptop while she worked on her assignments.

“Claire!” her roommate cried, trying to push Snowball off to no avail as he resisted, leaping over her hand. “Help! Your cat’s trying to step all over my keyboard. He’s going to close so many tabs! I don’t know what to do!”

“Snowball!” Claire said. “Get down from Kelly’s desk this instant!”

The cat meowed in defiance and stared at her mischievously. Claire reacted by grabbing the water spray on her desk, which prompted him to finally leave Kelly alone as he jumped back onto the floor. He then ran up to his human companion and began scratching his ear. Claire sighed and shook her head, then set her stuff down at the foot of her bed.

“Kelly, do you know when our first class assignment is due again?” she wondered.

“Um, let’s see,” Kelly replied, “Dr. Holstein says our first pre-lab activity must be submitted by Wednesday at midnight.”

“Crap, I forgot about that,” Claire said. “That’s tomorrow, plus four more hours! We don’t have that much time!”

“He also said we could ask for a 24-hour extension if needed,” Kelly added.

“Hmm, I guess I’ll think about it,” Claire hesitated, sitting down. “Who’s your lab partner for the semester, Kelly?”

“Like you, I’m partnered with a boy,” Kelly answered.

“Ugh, please don’t tell me it’s Dominic,” Claire said.

“His name’s Gerald, actually,” Kelly smiled. “I met him in our class last Monday. He likes poetry, Rubik’s Cubes, muscle cars, anime, and he’s from Costa Rica. He’s also kind of ADHD, but so am I!”

“Wait, so why were you swooning over Andrew at the hockey rink last night then?” Claire asked with a straight face.

“Why not, roomie?” Kelly asked. “Do *you* have a crush on him? Oh, do tell!”

Claire broke eye contact and held her arm.

“To be honest, I kinda do,” she mumbled. “He’s my lab partner and all, but he made me feel so good today, and I wasn’t sure why. Though, this other girl named Lucy in my history class also took my breath away. She’s from a sorority.”

“Wait, what?” Kelly asked. “You like girls?”

Claire immediately gripped her own arm in embarrassment, her face exploding in pure redness.

“Oh, that’s so awesome, roomie!” Kelly exclaimed all of a sudden. “I’m so proud of you for being yourself!”

“Wait, y-you don’t hate me at all for this?” Claire replied. “How is that possible? I thought you would turn your back on me.”

“No, I mean, it’s completely normal and totally okay,” Kelly said. “But hey, at least you had the courage to come out of the closet. Just be glad that you get to experiment and live life by your own choices.”

“Thank you for being so understanding,” Claire smiled.

Then, Claire and Kelly moved closer to one another and shared their first hug. Suddenly, the sound of blinds thrashing around startled them and caused them to pull back. Claire watched as Snowball’s vision remained fixed at the freshman village, which grew darker every hour, wondering what his deal was.

“Snowball, what are you doing?” Claire teased, going over to join him at the window.

While groups of guys competed against each other in Spikeball, others socialized and free-roamed. One lone individual with a black fedora played tunes on his alto saxophone for all to hear.

“I think he’s spying on the people playing on the village lawn,” Kelly said. “He seems so fascinated.”

“He’s probably plotting their downfall,” Claire added.

Both girls enjoyed a spark of laughter from Claire’s jest.

“So what do you wanna do now?” Claire asked.

“I might go back to doing homework,” Kelly said. “I feel like I’m gonna be stuck all night studying. Hehe. What about you? Do you have any other plans for tonight?”

“No,” Claire said, “but I should probably think about starting our pre-lab assignment for tomorrow before my partner Andrew gets mad at me.”

The girls then heard Snowball jump to the ground before rolling around and swatting his many cat toys. They both smiled in endearment.

“God, he’s so happy,” Claire noted.

“He’s so adorable,” Kelly replied.

Some minutes passed before Claire and Kelly decided to wind down for the night. While Kelly fell asleep, Claire wrote in her diary all the events that had transpired during welcome week so far. With the ceiling lights off, Claire employed a desk lamp to help her with every diary entry. When she’d finished, Snowball crept toward her and cuddled in her lap, while Claire closed her journal and opened Canvas on her laptop. She began her first homework assignment of the fall semester, an introduction to the scientific method. This would be followed by Claire and Kelly’s first biology experiment the following Thursday.

As she paced herself ever so slightly, her father suddenly texted her. He sent her a link to Amazon to buy the comic book *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel, hoping it would intrigue her as Claire aimed to learn more about herself. Her dad’s love and support meant the world to her, but how could this be so? She never thought he’d react this way, but she figured he had a change of heart. Hope had been restored. Thankful, she turned off her device and returned to her studies, ready to pull her first all-nighter.

Chapter 6: Bagels & Sob Stories

It was Wednesday, the third day of Claire's first week. As the weather had yet to warm up, she decided to bundle up in a large pink hoodie with a white star on the front. After her biology and history classes let out, she got an unexpected text from Lucy.

Meet me at the Varsity Café at noon. We should talk.

Claire didn't know how to react. She suspected that something felt off despite the fun they had yesterday. She replied to Lucy straight away.

Sure! I just got out of our history class, and I don't have anything until 12:30, which is when I have to go to my UNI class, so I should be there. Is there something wrong?

Lucy returned another message within the next thirty seconds.

It's nothing. I'd like to share something personal that only you should know.

An hour later, Claire rode her board to the student center and purchased her second caramel frap of the day at the bookstore. Then she went on to the Varsity Café, where she ordered a chocolate chip bagel with cream cheese. After she picked up her breakfast, she went to the café, which was filled with round tables and people whining about their exes in study sessions.

She saw Lucy, who sat by herself beside the window facing the veranda. A lesbian flag pin and a bee pin were attached to the collar of her denim jacket. Claire took a chair across from Lucy. At first, they made small talk. Lucy talked about her job at Starbucks, and they both enjoyed gossiping about the things they disliked. Eventually, Lucy showed Claire how to download and use Snapchat, and they discussed majors.

"What year are you, Lucy?" Claire asked.

“I’m twenty-one and a junior. I’m also majoring in nursing, though I used to always write in my spare time. What kind of things do you like to write?”

“Mainly fiction and a little bit of nonfiction. I like writing stuff about romance, science fiction, fantasy, horror, and sometimes my personal life.”

“Oh, what was your inspiration?”

“Okay, you’re going to hate me for this,” Claire said, “but I used to watch a lot of kid anime and cartoon movies and TV shows, and that’s what got me into it. I would always draw and make these little doodles, so I’m also pretty artistic. *PowerPuff Girls* was my favorite TV series of all time, and I still enjoy it very much. I even have a white cat named Snowball, who’s my emotional support animal. *And*, this is crazy, but I also keep a diary of all my experiences and memories at school.”

Lucy smirked, then cackled. Claire’s face turned to ketchup.

“I know! I’m such a dork, and you’ll never want to hang out with me again. Gosh, I’m so awful. Why did I say that?”

Lucy ended her fit of laughter, wiping away tears of joy that stained her cheeks with mascara as she sighed.

“It’s okay. I like cats. At least you were honest. I only laughed at how absurdly vulnerable you were acting. I love that you at least get to be yourself.”

“What do you mean?” Claire asked.

“It’s not easy being popular and attractive. Being the president of *Chi Omicron* has its perks, but it doesn’t help the fact that people look up to you. My manager always tells me, ‘Well, you shouldn’t wear such tight clothes at work, or customers wouldn’t be hitting on you.’ I call that horseshit.”

“Oh my God, do they hit on you, too?”

“Welcome to womanhood, Claire.”

Claire remembered the dining hall incident with the frat boys. She never imagined grown adults would misbehave. Maybe that’s why her dad said to stay safe and not have too much fun.

“Yeah,” she said. “I was always dealing with something similar in high school. My mom pressured me to do chores, and my dad pushed education all my life. And even though I was a top student who worked really hard, it was difficult for me to make friends. The cheerleaders would always call me names and make fun of my small weight. I was mostly an outcast just for being different, but I had a few close friends, Chris, Trey, and Jessie.”

“Sounds like you had a really hard life. I’m so sorry...”

“Thank you for understanding me, Lucy. But at least I have great friends at Port City. I have Kelly, and I have Andrew...”

“And you have us,” Lucy said. “In *Chi Omicron*, we’re all about uplifting each other and those in need. If it makes you feel any better, all my life I was forced to live up to the expectations of others and my family, to be what others perceived as ideal. As a kid, I wanted to be friends with everyone. However, my parents only wanted to associate with other wealthy families and held the rest of Port City in contempt. They told me to grow up. They said I was too soft, that I should be more influential, more popular, and especially more successful. I began to expect praise from everyone to improve my self-worth. I was made to conceal my true self and never demonstrate weakness. I suffered from depression through it all, but later I realized it was my rich parents who only cared about their reputation.”

“Lucy, that’s so terrible. You never deserved to be treated like that.”

“When I graduated and moved on to college two years ago,” Lucy continued, “I was lost and weak. That’s when I found my sisters in *Chi Omicron*, who were more or less in the same boat. They took me in, told me I was loved despite my circumstances, and that I shouldn’t adhere to the norms of society. I no longer had to hide who I was or listen to my controlling parents. I was transformed into the best version of myself again.”

Neither of them spoke for a moment. Claire’s shoulders loosened, and her breath slowed as the tension in her chest eased within her.

“Lucy, you’re the greatest sorority president anyone could ever ask for. I’m so glad we could vent together.”

Lost in affection after her encouragement, Claire found herself holding Lucy’s hands, after which her eyes widened.

“What are you doing?” Lucy asked, pulling away her hand.

“Umm, nothing,” Claire said, jerking her arms away and tugging her sleeves. “Oh my God, I don’t know what I was thinking. I’m still learning boundaries. Dangit! I’m really sorry.”

“No, no, it’s okay. You just wanted to get it out.”

“Are you sure? I should’ve asked for permission.”

“You’re different. You’re not like those creeps that hit on me every single day at work, as ridiculous as that is.”

“I haven’t really loved anyone in a while,” Claire lamented. “Although that was an accident. I didn’t know what I was doing.”

“Well, would you still want to be friends and come to our rush events?” Lucy asked. “Our agreement hasn’t changed, you know. We still want you to feel loved.”

“Of course. I’ll have to see about the rest of the week, though.”

“That’s fine.”

Claire devoured the rest of her bagel and finished her Frappuccino. Realizing it was nearly ten until 12:30, she got her stuff ready so she could head to her last class for the day. She didn’t have much time to waste.

“I have to go to my UNI class now,” she said. “I’ll… see you later? I suppose?”

“Wanna shake on it?” Lucy asked.

“Sure!”

The girls shook hands. The pillow-like softness of Lucy’s palm caused Claire to feel fuzzy inside and outside. Her hypersensitivity. Initially awkward, it felt soothing. The girls pulled back.

“Keep in touch,” Lucy told her.

“I will,” Claire said, about to leave the cafe.

“And, hey.”

Claire looked back toward her.

“Please be careful going by yourself,” Lucy said. “It’s crazy out there.”

“Okay, I will,” Claire said, smiling and waving at her before leaving the student center.

“Thank you so much!”

“Byeee.”

Fifteen minutes before 1, Claire attended her first-year seminar class. As she listened to the professor give her lecture, her phone suddenly vibrated in her pocket. It was a text from Andrew. She snuck the phone under her desk to avoid the teacher’s gaze.

Are you okay? You didn’t seem very happy yesterday after that episode with Dr. West.

Claire messaged him back at the instant.

Yeah, I'm okay. My grandpa and I sorted things out.

Ten seconds later, Andrew sent another response.

You wanna spend some time together after classes? Just you and me? We can go bowling, then we can go to this new pizzeria downtown, and then we can grab some ice cream from Boombalatti's and watch the sunset at the boardwalk. You up for it?

Claire never thought Andrew would reach out to her this way, and she always missed the experience of downtown Port City when she was a kid. This would be her first time visiting in ages. Claire flashed with a bright smile as she messaged him back.

I'd like that.

She shut her phone off and paid attention to the professor during her lesson. Unable to contain her excitement for what was to come, this day would be a lively and memorable part of her time at Port City. Despite her anticipation to see Andrew, she couldn't quite shake the warmth she'd felt at the Varsity Café.

Chapter 7: Market Street

Claire waited outside for Andrew to pick her up at Aspire Hall. Since she was still experimenting with her identity, this seemed like another fun adventure. Although it seemed like a date, Claire wanted only to get out more and make lifelong friendships. She feared falling in love too fast. She'd always struggled with that habit, but she still desired that special someone in her life, like the Kristoff to her Princess Anna.

Soon enough, a maroon truck came by and stopped beside her. Claire climbed into the passenger seat and examined Andrew, who wore a white and red printed T-shirt in place of his usual gray athletic T-shirt. She recognized it as the logo for one of her favorite bands, One Direction.

"This seat feels cozy, Andrew," she said. "It's so relaxing."

"It's not much, but it's a pretty neat truck," Andrew replied. "I know plenty about cars and trucks. Do you like Harry Styles?"

"Oh my God, yes! He's one of my favorite artists of all time! He's from One Direction! And you're wearing their shirt!"

"I love Harry Styles. You're in for a special treat. Listen to this."

He connected the aux to his phone and turned on the truck's radio to play the hit single "Watermelon Sugar." He cranked up the volume all the way and opened his windows, blasting the music on his way to College Road. They turned onto the highway going southbound. Claire closed her eyes, her short hair flailing around in the feisty wind, detaching herself from the dullness of reality as she repeated the lyrics, immersing herself and appreciating the sweetness of life that surrounded the song. It was nothing like those trash rap songs that Nick and his buddies performed in the garage too late at night. For the first time, her spirit felt free.

“Have you bowled much?” Andrew shouted through the music.

“No, I’ve never bowled before!” Claire exclaimed.

“I don’t consider myself a professional bowler, but I’m fairly skilled at it. I could teach you a few tricks if you want!”

“Yes!”

Before long, they pulled into Cardinal Lanes. Each bowling lane was ocean-themed. As they started a match, Andrew knocked down all ten pins three times in succession with little effort. Claire could never manage to score a turkey even on Wii U Bowling as a kid, but rolled off her defeat like a duck. Andrew showed her how to throw the ball in a straight line and how to keep a firm posture. Claire was having fun, and that was enough.

After completing nine more rounds, the two left the bowling alley for historic downtown Port City, filled with Victorian-esque buildings and picturesque views. They ate at Mellow Mushroom, located beside the famous Cape Fear River. They slid into a booth across from each other. Andrew decided to get a buffalo chicken pizza, while Claire chose a Little Italy sandwich, a bit worried her stalling could drag on their engagement. She was always indecisive about these things whenever she ate out with her family.

Claire’s eyes met Andrew’s as she craned her neck toward her glass of sweet tea, sipping through the red-and-white striped straw. Andrew casually reciprocated with a finger gun on the chin. Claire bit her lower lip, her heart beating rapidly.

After they were done eating, they stopped by Boombalatti’s ice cream shop near the Brooklyn neighborhood before finally heading to the Riverwalk. Strolling down the waterfront at

sundown, Andrew and Claire looked toward the Cape Fear River that gleamed crystal clear in the night. The U.S.S. North Carolina Battleship, moored on mysterious Eagle Island nearby, brought back old memories of when her family took her to Port City for the first time as a little girl. How did the people of Port City know her so well? This weird girl who rode a trusty red skateboard across campus?

“You see that?” Andrew said. “That’s the North Carolina Battleship. She fought in World War II, against Japan in the Pacific theater following the bombing of Pearl Harbor.”

“My older brother and I visited the battleship with our parents when we were little kids,” Claire replied. “It was so pretty. How do you know so much about this place? Do you have family in the military?”

“My father served eight years in the Marine Corps.”

“Whoa.”

The two soon reached the dead end of Market Street along the Riverwalk and came to a halt. Claire watched him sneak out a pre-rolled joint from his coat pocket. Did he just assume that she liked to smoke, or was this the best experience of freedom ever?

“Do you smoke marijuana?” Andrew asked, offering the joint to Claire.

“Mm-hmm. My friends and I would do this often back in high school.”

“I have a lighter if you need it.”

Claire took it from him and lit the joint. She inhaled deeply. Smoke traveled down her throat, igniting her chest in passionate flames. Then, she blew out the smoke like the fall breeze in the direction of the sparkling river. She coughed a few times.

“I needed that.”

“I thought you could use a smoke sesh in case you were feeling stressed or anything,” Andrew said, putting away the rest of his stash.

“Wait, you aren’t smoking?” she asked.

“I would partake with you, but I still have to take you home.”

“All good.”

This generosity is what she would’ve wanted in past relationships. Andrew had seemed like the type. By the time she finished the joint, it was well past 6 o’clock. The stars diffracted into spikes and danced in her vision like jacks. The serene light of the rising white moon blanketed the city like a bedroom nightlight. The occasional hum of cars filled the silence between Claire and Andrew as they enjoyed the scene before them. Claire felt interconnected with the night sky above, like she was the celestial warrior princess Celine from the Moon Kingdom in *Hero of Light* series that she authored.

Staring at her reflection in wonder. The blackwater Cape Fear River had indeed become pitch black with terror. Literally. Black like the abyss, ready to swallow her into oblivion. Was she starting to become paranoid?

“Hey, Claire,” Andrew said with a chuckle. “Are you higher than cloud nine yet?”

Claire tee-heed at his comment, covering her mouth with her hand.

“It does feel quite nice out here, though,” Andrew said. “That’s for sure.”

“You can say that again.”

The two stood there, sharing laughs before Andrew looked over at Claire.

“How did you get that cool scar?” he asked. “I’ve never seen it before. It looks Goth.”

Claire flicked the roach into the river.

“Oh, you mean this scar?” she said, lifting her beanie and revealing the rest of her scar as she moved her bangs. “That’s from my cat Snowball. One time, I got too close to him when we were playing, and he scratched my eyebrow. And that’s how I got *this* scar.”

“Damn, I’d be careful.”

“Hey, it was an accident. Honest.”

“Nah, I’m joking,” he said with a belly chuckle.

“Yeah, you better be,” she replied, pulling her beanie back down. “Hey, do you wanna see this tattoo I got for my 18th birthday?”

Claire then showed Andrew her arm tattoo.

“Man, that’s sick!” Andrew said, reading the quote and then repeating it out loud.

“*Nothing gold can stay.*”

“Uh-huh. My former boyfriend and I read the book together in my first year of high school, where Johnny tells Ponyboy to “stay gold” before he passes away. It was so sweet.”

“What do you think it means to you?”

“Nothing good lasts forever. My grandpa taught me that the world is always changing for better or worse, and that such change is inevitable. That’s why leaving behind my old life hurts.”

“Do you miss your old friends a lot?”

“Yeah. I miss them so much. We’ve been friends for more than a decade. I wanna go see them when I go home for Winter Break. I hate running into complete strangers everywhere I go now.”

“It sounds to me like you had good friends who really understood and cared about you a lot. They must’ve been like family. Yeah, I’m not gonna lie. I’m kinda wary around strangers myself.

“Wow, I know how that must feel. I think you’re great just the way you are.”

“Thanks.”

“I was the same way in my earliest childhood,” Claire said. “When I was little, my parents would favor my older brother Nick over me. They had very high expectations of us. And they always chose favorites. My brother wanted to get a full-ride scholarship from varsity football when he got into high school, but he quit when he broke his ankle. Everything fell on me to become the better sibling when I started getting good grades.”

“Well, if there’s anything you need to tell me,” Andrew assured, “I’m here for you. If you need to vent, I’ll cry with you.”

Claire’s arms ensnared his tall figure like the tentacles of an octopus.

“You make me feel safe,” Claire said, holding him tight. “This was the best night of my life in forever.”

Her heart was going light-years an hour from the weed-induced euphoria. Was it merely attraction or genuine friendship? Andrew nevertheless hugged her back with his bear arms and held her close. The duo then heard whooping in the distance as limousines and party buses dropped off partygoers who flooded into local downtown bars and nightclubs. Claire used her gray beanie to cover her ears.

“Yeah, we’d better be heading out soon,” Andrew noted.

“Good idea,” Claire said, yawning and stretching.

“Did you get a chance to do the pre-lab before it’s due at midnight?” Andrew asked.

“I started on it, but I haven’t really finished it yet. I know Dr. Holstein doesn’t take any late assignments. I’ve already spent so much time focusing on my social life. My grandfather

says too much fun is distracting. And my ADHD isn't helping anything. Gosh, I must be so behind. Haha!"

"It's alright. I already turned mine in. If you want, I can send you the rest of the answers to the homework once we get home, since I'm your lab partner and all. I take it that school spirit left your vessel, huh?"

"Stop! You're such a good help."

"Let's get back to your dorm," Andrew suggested.

They retraced their steps back to Andrew's truck. Claire found herself stumbling. This was the strongest weed she ever had. Andrew helped her up by putting his arm around her shoulders as she put her arms around his. Claire's mouth became an arid desert as they waltzed their way back to the parking deck where the F-150 happened to be parked.

"I feel thirsty."

"I have some water bottles in the truck."

"I appreciate it. Thank you so much."

Andrew offered her one of his water bottles as soon as they entered the truck. She took the bottle, gulping it down like a pelican eating its prized fish, after which Andrew started the F-150. Soon, they took off back to Aspire Hall. By tomorrow, everything would simply be a dream.