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**Raven Pond**

By

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Baccalaureate Degree (BA), University of Maine, 2016

Master Degree (MA), University of Maine, 2019

THESIS

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire  
in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts in  
in  
Writing

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This thesis/dissertation was examined and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master in Fine Arts in Creative Writing by:

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On November 18, 2021

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## DEDICATION

This story is dedicated to the memory of Simba, my cat, who died this past year after 22 years of amazing life. It may be stupid to dedicate a thesis to a cat, but I don't think so. Who else decides to lay by your side when typing for hours and hours? Who else informs you it's time to take a break by gesturing to get up and feed them? Who else is there, since the beginning, to remind you what it is to love someone unconditionally? No one is more deserving of immortality through the page than a loyal, dominating cat.

I would also like to dedicate this story to the memory of my grandfather, Sterling Brown. No, he was not the inspiration for the grandfather in this tale (that would be pretty messed up). I wanted my readers to know how joyous and loving he was. It was painful to lose him back in 2020. Because of the pandemic, I wasn't able to go to his bedside and say goodbye. I hope he knew how much I loved him.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Thank you to my grandmother, Judith Brown. I will always be grateful for your love and unwavering guidance. You are the foundation of my life.

And last, but not least, thank you to Sarafina, my cat. You are the most precious thing to me, and you are perfect in every way. I love you so much, and there are no words to describe how much you mean to me.

## ABSTRACT

Something disturbing is up with the lake...something to do with men...and women thrive here. But at what price?

Araminta and Andrew are partners trying to settle in a lake house that Andrew recently inherited from his dead mother on Raven Pond. Araminta learns Andrew has never been to the abandoned dwelling, due to his mother's rocky relationship with her own matriarch. Araminta wonders: what are the secrets lurking in the black waters that caused the rift between Andrew's maternal line? As Araminta tries to understand the intricacies and mysteries of Andrew's family, she must also face the eccentric—and off-putting—all women neighbors; who lurk in the shadows and watch the couple's every movement. Will Araminta uncover the dark truth of Raven Pond? Or will she become a part of the legacy that takes hold over the inhabitants and their loved ones?

This thesis covers themes of body horror, trauma, fat-phobia, LGBTQIA+ relationships, women's bodies, paranoia, sexual assault, and harassment.

# FALL 2016

## Prologue

Jonathon stirred to consciousness as his body, tied against cold hard pine, was rocked back and forth by arrhythmic beats. His mouth was dry, the tongue *clicking* against brittle saliva; tasting hard drooth against the breath of scotch. He blinked his eyes and felt sweat crisp under the inner eyelid. In the distorted vision that tilted his view on its axis, Jonathon could see, through his peripheries, undulating flames of torches pass through a broken forest. And bare bodies that flickered in dimensional shadows.

Confused and disoriented, Jonathon tried lifting up his right arm to wipe the crust from his eyes. But his wrist was wrapped in prickled hemp rope. He attempted to move his other arm, groaning against a similar strain; his body and mind wrestling with each other as the world seemed tilted to the opposite side, spinning and spinning in Jonathon's eyes making him lose control over muscle coordination and movement. Jonathon's chest heaved up and down like a child attempting to capture butterflies in a net: sporadic, uncoordinated. He felt a sinking nausea familiar to him when he drank or smoked too much. But through the squinting and dizziness that rolled around in Jonathon's head, he didn't believe he had more than one drink this evening, nor did he remember pulling from a joint or bowl. *No*, Jonathon thought to himself, his own internal voice slurring and off-kilter. *What's wrong with me?*

A chanting rhythm guided Jonathon through the shaded hues of the strange, hot September night. He lifted his neck and head, the weight of his skull and brain all too noticeable in his mind. Too aware; too intrusive. Bare bodies were below him—or perhaps, beside the pine precipice that flattened his spine. He moaned again through a hazed shake of his head and craned

his face to try and make out the beings that surrounded him. They lugged his spread-eagle form aloft on their shoulders, hiking to a cacophony of restless black fly wings and grasshopper melodies.

Jonathon's vision began to crisscross into a minute understanding of sense: a bombardment of salt plastered the inside of his nose; drying seaweed mingling with brackish sand. But he knew he was nowhere near the ocean. This was Raven Pond.

The humming of the bodies near him grew louder as the sound of lapping water strummed against his ear drums, washing out the rest of nature. The *swishes* and *swoshes* punched hard in the air, like a call to the wild, warring gibbous that stared down at Jonathon with red hues.

Jonathon turned his head against the rough board and blinked his dilated pupils to try and make out the bodies around him. Still, a fog lingered over his eyes that contorted his immediate view. What he could make out were wrinkles wrapping around youthful glows, and long braided hair tapping on freckled shoulders. He thought he was surely dreaming. But with each step towards the odd, salted water, a daunting realization pounced on Jonathon's rapidly beating heart.

Jonathon tried opening his mouth to talk, but his voice broke down as it poured from his throat. He felt his tonsils swell and ach with dehydration. All the sound he could muster was a pathetic moan that hurt his thoughts. *Why can't I speak?* he cried to himself, *Why is my voice so slurred?*

The bodies carried him to a sand-scaped shore. Their flickering arms lowered Jonathon down to the ground. He tried focusing his vision, looking for any explanation that could point to

his apparent capture. Their chanting ringed in his mind, and then abruptly stopped as the thrashing current still hung itself in his ears.

Jonathon looked up and thought he saw familiar eyes. Ones that looked like his.

*No. Impossible...* He thought.

In the distance, the waves of the rocking shore seemed to slurp and growl. A primordial hunger that called out in spine-tingling echoes. Jonathon felt an urge to scream. He tilted his head back and forth, but could only slur a baying moan at the looming figures surrounding him. With each exertion, with each attempt to make sense of what was going on around him, the terrible pain of fear raked inside Jonathon's rib cage like claws against slate. A small hand latched over his mouth, trembling. It touched his wild tongue with pointed nails, the skin tasting like fermented Earth. It startled Jonathon into silence.

Jonathon squirmed against the new restraint against his jaw. He turned his head, peering at the forms encircled around his tied frame. The bodies reached their arms down to the crevices of their legs. Jonathon still struggled to make out their identity, despite his pupils growing larger with adrenaline. He watched the bodies lift miniature chalices from between their legs, deep maroon wine spilling out splotches on their thighs.

The familiar figure that scared Jonathon leered over his face. He watched as small traces of moisture glistened in the sanguine moonlight under its eye.

Upon her cheeks that so resembled his.

She poured her chalice's contents into his mouth and over his face as the hand gripping his tongue zoomed from his gaping maw.

Hot iron and metallic flavors drenched his taste buds. He gagged and felt his saliva drool up into his throat. His nausea flickered again as the liquid pooled with thickness in his

esophagus. In his peripheral view, the other bodies drew closer to him, tipping their own chalices over his body.

Jonathon soon realized, he too, was naked in the night as thick liquid dripped down his pelvis and over his groin. How warm and chilling it was at the same time.

The bodies began to chant once more, and the stunning primordial sound thrashed again in Raven Pond.

The bodies went behind his head, to his arms, to his legs, and hoisted his pine platform towards the wild water. Jonathon screamed, his voice regaining clarity, but sputtering the iron liquid down his chin and chest. But no hand tried to silence his feral cries this time. He could feel the swirling water drench his skin; up past his heels, through the wild knots that propped up his back.

The creature of the water screeched once more.

The chanting bodies on the shore stopped their lyrics. Their silence grew sour in Jonathon's ears as they lunged his pedestal into the current. A deified force seemed to pull Jonathon further out into Raven Pond, to the middle of the large, black water.

A creature slurped, slipped, and slimed around him.

Then, Jonathon saw it snake and slither in and out of the waves. Splashing the horrific salted water onto his lips. One endless tail that rose under the glaring light of the night sky. Jonathon screamed, but his fear was drowned out by the screeching of the water around him.

And then, silence. Eerie.

And Jonathon was no more.

# JUNE 2018

## Chapter 1

As evergreens thronged both sides of a twisting, backwoods town road, the sun crept through blossoming, late-spring buds from a noon sky. An old, navy-blue SUV blasted down the twisting turns of the cracking, pot-holed tar. With her windows down, Araminta could feel the rays penetrate her skin and boil the brown moles freckled on her arm. She relaxed her small hand and let it dangle out the passenger-side window; the rush of the wind flicking her fingertips back and forth.

Her partner, Andrew, nodded his head to the music circling from the radio. It was an old grunge song—the rasping voice of the lead singer painting their memories from millennial youth—a melody that spoke of rebellion and anarchy. Araminta knew that Andrew liked the song simply because he enjoyed it when he was a child. But Araminta found comfort in the lyrics for a completely different reason: they reminded her that she didn't need to be like her parents. Could run away from them and the hold they had on every aspect of her life.

In the town of Sanguichor, Maine—so far into the woods and succumbed by the rural landscape—cellphone reception was minimal against the deep, dark pines that loomed high into the air. Instead, the fuzzing atonement of radio static occasionally interrupted the barely audible station of oldies and light rock.

Andrew cleared his throat and placed his right hand on Araminta's lap. She felt him tap her thigh twice with his index finger. Araminta turned her head and smiled at him through large, black sunglasses.

“Do you mind if we head into town first?” Andrew said. His eyes floated back and forth from the road to Araminta, trying to multitask his concentration.

“Aren’t we almost to the house?” Araminta said, grabbing his hand softly in hers. She flicked his fingernail with her own index finger out of an unconscious need. Andrew’s hand flinched and he gave Araminta a raised eyebrow. She smiled back at him and stopped her fidgeting.

“Sure, but I’m hungry. And I doubt there’s going to be food up there,” Andrew said. Araminta looked at the clock blinking green on the dashboard.

“I suppose so. Where do you want to go?”

“I think there’s a small convenience mart in the gas station. If I remember correctly from the lawyers’ directions. I don’t want to shop right now, just need a bite or something.” Andrew said.

Araminta nodded her head, “Works for me.”

Andrew kept his hand on her left thigh. Araminta could feel the heat from his palm against her jeans, but she enjoyed tapping her nail against his cuticles.

Soon, the woods broke out into a wide stretch of old-white colonials and blue-shuttered one-stories that gathered together near brick-paved sidewalks. Andrew slowed down to a crawl as a line of beat-down trucks and rusted sedans pooled under the strung-up traffic lights. Araminta looked around at green roofs and flower beds nestled under windows.

“Is this a part of Sanguichor?” Araminta said. She watched as an elderly woman soaked her garden flowers with a rusted metal can.

“The furthest part.”

“It’s cute! Reminds me of Freeport.”

Andrew took his left hand off the wheel and folded out his own window. “Freeport’s nicer than this.”

“Obviously,” Araminta scoffed. Her soft smile returning to face her partner, “But the colonials look a little bit like it. Not too many up North. Only time you ever see them is if you’re by the coast or drive through the tourist traps.”

“True,” Andrew said, “But wait ‘till we get to my grandmother’s. Affluent neighbors everywhere.”

“Is that so? Every camp I’ve ever been to looked like it was a second thought.” Araminta said. “Something to visit during a summer break, but nothing too extravagant. A dock for a boat to go tubing and a house to sleep in. You’d be lucky to have indoor plumbing too.”

Andrew laughed, “What would you use if you had to take a shit?”

“Outhouse,” Araminta said with a matter-of-fact tone. She then smiled and gave a small chuckle, “I remember one time I almost pissed myself walking out of a cousin’s camp in the middle of the night and I tripped over a root. Barely made it over the hole. Had to go so bad I didn’t lock the door properly, so a gust of wind took it and I was peeing straight out in the open.”

Andrew and Araminta broke out into laughter. Araminta could still remember the nipping breeze against her bottom as she recalled the memory. One of few humorous recollections of her childhood.

“Sounds homey,” Andrew said, breaking out from the stint of giggling, “sad, but homey.” He paused and gripped the wheel in front of him with more strength. “From what I remember from pictures, my grandmother’s place and the surrounding houses are a bit...more well off.”

Araminta bit the inside of her lip and took her arm off the window rest. She began to pick a scab crusted onto her thigh. “I’m not going to fit in, am I?”

Andrew sighed and took his hand off her leg. He reached forward and scrolled the volume control of the radio down. The car became loud with their silence and the twittering chirps of birds watching the small town below.

“I’m gonna be honest with you,” Andrew said, “We’re going to stand out. Both of us.” He put his hand back on her lap. “My grandfather fixed up the place a long time ago. He worked three jobs to do it. And then continued to do so to afford the mortgage. By the time he died, it was all paid off. And from what Mom said, Grandma kept up appearances.”

Araminta shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “I don’t have the appearances though.” She looked down at her body and felt the familiar sensation of guilt, even though there was nothing to feel culpable for. It was a feeling she always had to navigate through, even as a child.

Araminta swallowed hard and turned her head back to the window. Even if she could afford to look affluent, her body would make sure it still wasn’t enough.

“I don’t either.” Andrew said, inching along the road as the light turned green up ahead. Araminta could hear the pity in his voice. But she knew what he was trying to do: dig her out of the thoughts that plagued her when she was reminded that she existed in a larger body. That she was with a conventionally attractive man, despite her own appearance. Araminta knew Andrew was trying to be sympathetic—like an earnest, innocent mother buying a goldfish to replace the flushed family pet. But Araminta knew better. Still, she turned back to him and gave a closed-mouth grin that could reassure Andrew that he did his job as a partner. Araminta thought she perhaps was too self-aware of her own body and where it existed in the space around her. How it acted and reacted to others. Even how she thought and perceived her surroundings. But then again, that came with the territory—evolving to survive in the constant judgement of other onlookers.

Araminta watched Andrew blink hard and twist the wheel in his hand as he drew nearer to the convenience market. His slender fingers pushed the wheel steadily as the old SUV clunked into the small drive leading to the juniper-roofed gas station. He put the car in park and unbuckled himself.

Araminta followed and opened her door. Under the late spring sun, she could feel pools of sweat begin to form on her upper lip. Suddenly, she wasn't just Andrew's partner sitting in his car listening to the static radio blare. She was a stranger in a town far from the northern Maine she knew. This was to be her home, surrounded by different faces and glares that shed light on the pair entering the store. At least back home she had studied the various nuisances and glances that could trigger the northern Mainer. But down here, it was a different environment—a different sort of populace.

Andrew's body slipped through the dingy door. He opened the entrance more for Araminta as she followed, enjoying the slight temperature change from the whirring air conditioner above. Andrew walked towards the back of the store, his wide feet slapping the sandals against his bare heels. Araminta followed and pushed her intrusive thoughts back to the stem of her brain.

They both scrolled through the cold offerings in the slide-door cooler, their shoulders touching as Araminta and Andrew leaned over gas station tuna and egg salad.

\*\*\*

Back on the road, their lunch sitting in the backseat in opaque white plastic bags, Andrew chewed on the stick of a Slim Jim. He was humming along to the static, passing the snack to Araminta to take a bite.

Araminta grabbed the jerky. “You going to be okay when we get there?” she said, ripping a junk of slightly spiced beef. “Will there be things of your mom’s?”

Andrew drew a heavy breath into his lungs and furrowed his eyebrows. “I don’t know. As you know, Mom and Grandma didn’t get along. And mom never came up here again after she graduated high school and left home.”

Andrew had mentioned to Araminta the long running feud of his grandmother and mother during the beginning of their relationship. But Araminta knew that Andrew’s mother, Kelly, never could talk about the wedge that existed between her and her very own parent. Araminta assumed it was good old New England pride. She knew it could easily inject itself into a relationship, like a spirit stealing warmth from those who lived up here in the cold, wild state. One slight could make the closest of relationships freeze and crack under its own weight. Araminta knew it all too well. Had let it fester in her own heart when it came to her relatives. She believed the frost was necessary for her own well-being. But she also knew that’s what everyone said when parting from familiar bonds.

It came as a shock that Andrew’s grandmother gave the house to her daughter. Still, Andrew’s mother refused to return to the cabin, even when she fell ill and drew her last breath.

Araminta chewed on the Slim Jim then passed it back to Andrew. “Do you want me to go in first? See if there is anything of your mom’s?”

Andrew shook his head. “Nah. I should do it. It’s been enough time.”

Araminta reached over and put her hand in Andrew’s lap. She gave his thigh a squeeze. His mother had passed away during the winter. Andrew had a rough go cleaning his mother’s apartment and belongings. It took the thaw and Araminta walking across her grad school stage to finally get him to come out to the camp he inherited.

Whatever awaited at the lake house was to be a surprise.

Andrew turned the car onto a rough, dirt road. The vehicle rocked back and forth over rocks and deep puddle-soaked holes. Through the trees, Araminta could see outlines of large lake houses. She could faintly hear the soft waves of the lake rolling and mixing with the sounds of Andrew's thumping SUV. Some neighbors peeked their heads out their windows, watching the strange, young couple move down the hobbled path.

And at the long stretch of dirt and wilderness, Araminta and Andrew saw the looming, dark gray house, its red shingles cracking under the spring sun. And in the distance, the rolling waves of Raven Pond called in soft whispers.

## Chapter 2

“So, why is it called Raven Pond, if it’s not a pond?” Araminta said as she opened her door and took in the smell of the wilderness. It reminded her of home, up north, where nature ran wild and overtook the population by storm. It was well known by Mainers that there were more trees than people—but having moved to the southern part of the state for Andrew, Araminta felt alone in the openness of the larger cities. While they waited for the property to officially pass over into Andrew’s hands, they had stayed in Portland nearby. The large city was all buildings and traffic; cramped streets that billowed litter in its wings. Although there was a bustling community and a plethora of places to rest your feet—in cafés, dives, and hidden gems—for an introvert like Araminta, she felt like a fish sneeze in a large aquarium. Araminta knew it was silly to feel such a way in Maine. This Portland was by no means a large metropolis like you’d find in other parts of the country. But for someone who came from the dark shadows of the lurking timbers, southern Maine felt like a different state entirely. The influx of drivers from the rest of New England, like Massachusetts and New Hampshire, turned the place into a separate entity unlike the rest of the rural land. Since living in this area, Araminta felt a combination of always being watched but always being alone. Southern Main was Andrew’s home, not hers. He was raised here. And Araminta often felt like she was a guest of his within this trodden terrain.

But on Raven Pond, Araminta felt her loneliness subside—the birches leaned like bonsais, and the dank smell of the earth mixed with the soft scent of rocky freshwater. It reminded Araminta that Natura was just but a stone-throw away.

Andrew unbuckled his seatbelt. “I guess it looks like a raven from above,” he said, answering Araminta’s question. She heard the distraction in his voice.

“That didn’t answer my question,” she said with a smile creeping on her face. She inhaled a large breath and let the clean, lake air fill her lungs. She then turned to face her partner, but instead found him staring at the looming house. The cabin resembled decrepit absentness. The red shingles were burnt and broken, some falling away from the edges of the top. Patterns of ice damage, unchecked and left to rot, had split apart each tile’s weakness and pried it from the foundation of the ceiling.

“Sorry,” Andrew said, “I guess I wasn’t paying attention.” He put his arm on the roof of his car and let his chin settle in his tense fingers. “I’ve never seen the place ‘cept for old pictures. Mom never wanted us to come up. Grandma never invited me either. Thought the look of the place was just because of the age of the photos. Guess not.”

Araminta shut her door and walked over his to side of the vehicle. She opened up his passenger side and grabbed the plastic bags of food.

She took a free hand and placed it on the nape of his back. “Let’s go eat. Maybe that will help?”

Andrew turned to look at her. “Do you mind if we eat in the car? I’m not ready.”

Araminta nodded and walked over to her side once more.

They ate in silence.

\*\*\*

Andrew took the key he received from his mother’s lawyer and opened the lock. Inside, piles of books were scattered throughout the tiny foyer, dust coating titles and broken spines. The air was stale with warm dirt and grime.

They didn’t take off their shoes.

The couple walked past a half bathroom; khaki-green gray dust piled on the small sink. Araminta could feel her sinuses fill with fluid, her nose hairs scratching at the corners of her nostrils.

The flat wall logs were not the warm, stained apricot sheen of most cabin interiors. They were pale, sallow. The knots hollow eyes that stared at the couple with hopelessness. Araminta's hand brushed against a countertop at they entered the kitchen. Without looking down, she could feel years' worth of textile fibers etch themselves into her skin. She wiped her palm against the back of her jean shorts.

“Has no one been here since your grandmother died?”

Andrew shook his head. “No.” Araminta could tell he was holding a sneeze to the roof of his mouth, “Mom said she wanted the place to rot. She never did...” Andrew paused. Araminta could hear his breath stumble with each word. She reached over and touched his arm. She let him compose his thoughts in silence, feeling the tension of his mother's death ripple through his muscles. After Andrew let his breath steady, he continued: “she never did get the chance to sell it. Pettiness I suppose. Wanted to hold onto it and let it die by her refusal to come up. She didn't expect...you know. Didn't expect it to come to me.”

Araminta nodded and leaned her head into Andrew's shoulder. She took in his bergamot and natural body order as he shifted to her touch. “She didn't expect that she'd lose time? That she'd one day get rid of it once she felt it was beyond repair?” She said.

Andrew took in Araminta's words and nodded. They both cleared their throats.

Andrew picked up a withered book from the countertop. Flakes of black dandruff floated in the air. “Grandpa's side is long gone. All died before he did. No one left but me.”

Araminta saw a small furniture set drenched in fibers. A little nook of magazines were scattered around the coffee table. She unhooked her arm from Andrew's and walked to the middle of the room, a trail of imprinted tracks following her path. She leaned over the table and picked up a long-forgotten tome. June 25, 2001 lined the top of deep space and a planetarium tower. Araminta read the cover and planted it down next to Princess Dianna's face on March 11, 1996.

"I think your grandmother liked to read." Araminta said as she looked over her shoulder and smiled, hoping the slight change in subject would distract Andrew.

But Araminta knew he was deep in thought. Most likely, his head was filling up with large emotions. Disgust. Anger. Dread. Sadness. Araminta cleared her throat, feeling a soft coat of grime beginning to weave in her tonsils. She knew that Andrew was probably uncomfortable talking about the complicated past of his mother and grandmother—that death was what finally connected them in the end. Araminta felt sad, but knew what pride could do. Could understand it. But she realized Andrew had expressed an ignorance and detest for such emotions. He had told her once that he felt grudges were pointless. Even though Araminta knew that Andrew was hurting, she didn't know how to help him in this moment. She didn't feel she had the right words on her tongue that could adequately address what his mother and grandmother went through, while also consoling Andrew away from his own valid feelings.

Araminta walked around the small living room, combing her fingers through the dark-coated bookshelves. Her literary mind fluttered with wonder and anticipation. Although she could feel the tension coming off Andrew, she knew better to let him sit in his flurry of emotions. She knew she would want the same thing. Solitude, in her opinion, was an acceptable solution to let folks heal together even if they differed in emotional understanding. Besides, she was

fascinated by the state of this camp; how a beautiful home had turned into a tomb of dead memories and missed opportunities.

Her dust-tipped fingers touched a cracked, textured cover. She felt the tough exterior prick her skin. She grabbed the spine from the shelf and flipped open to the first page. Curved handwriting skewered thin blue lines, and scratches of deliberate ink blotted out unnecessary, misplaced, or wrong-meant words

“Hey, Andrew,” Araminta called out, “I think I found some journals.”

She turned around and watched as Andrew stared out the kitchen window. She followed his line of sight and noticed Raven Pond was visible through the gaps of evergreens.

“They liked to keep notes,” Andrew said.

“Who?”

“Grandpa and Grandma.”

Araminta looked through the rest of the shelf. Rows of cracked books—black and brown—populated the space.

“They both did? Damn.”

“Yeah. I guess until grandpa died. Then Grandma only did it occasionally,” he took a deep breath, “at least, that’s what mom mentioned one time.

Araminta gingerly positioned the journal back into its nest. A palpating urge shook her chest, and the desire to flip through the pages wound its way to Araminta’s brain. She reached for another book when a loud knock awakened her.

She looked back at Andrew, who’s gaze upon the lake was shaken. He stared at the opening of the foyer where the rhythmic banging began once more. Both the hairs on the back of their necks stood up.

“Do you know anybody around here?” Araminta said.

Andrew shrugged his shoulder and whispered, “I’d think my Grandma’s friends would be dead by now.” He stayed in place; his eyes open wide.

Araminta took soft steps to the hallway and peeked over the thin, wooden lining of the wall. Through the misty film of white, stained glass, she could see the figure of a woman standing by the entrance. Araminta looked back at Andrew, his eyes shouting at her that he would not be the one to answer the door.

She clicked her tongue against her teeth, and walked to the entrance.

She opened the barrier slightly, and saw the stranger.

An older woman stood strong at the top of the wooden stairs. Her white hair was cut short into a bob that spiked at the edges of her ears. Her large blue eyes were like steel that fell on Araminta’s own blue-green eyes. The woman forced a smile on her face revealing coffee stained teeth.

“Hi neighbor!” she said with a perk in her voice. Araminta kept the door slightly open. The woman’s floral blouse wisped in the cool breeze; her magenta capris tapered to the lower part of her shin.

“Hi.” Araminta said. She forced a smile on her own face.

“Saw you come down the road,” the older woman said, “wanted to know who stopped by. Didn’t think this place was for sale.”

Araminta bit her lip, “It wasn’t.”

“Ah,” the older woman began, “Thought so. But you don’t look like Kelly.” A strained, know-it-all chuckle fell from her throat. “You’re too young. You must be her daughter.”

“Uh—” Araminta said, but was interrupted by the presence of Andrew behind her. He used his left hand to push open the door more, his towering height eclipsing both women.

“You knew Kelly?” he said, an excited eagerness lingering in his breath.

The woman at the door ignored him.

“Where is your mother, by the way?” she said, looking at Araminta. “Haven’t seen her since she was a kid. She around?” The woman peered over their shoulders into the thin hallway, especially past Andrew. She saw the dust-coated walls and pointed her eyebrows into a judging smirk.

“Your mom’s probably gonna want help with that.” The woman pointed up; her index finger inches from the side Andrew’s face. “Shame it’s this bad. Your grandma kept things neater,” she looked back down to Araminta, “but Kelly never was good at that stuff. I was sad to see she never stepped foot back here.”

Andrew rolled his shoulders back as if they were heavy boulders and moved his head into the woman’s view again.

“What’s your name? I didn’t catch it.” He said. Araminta could feel his voice shifting from yearning to slighted annoyance.

The woman ignored him again.

Araminta looked up at Andrew, her mouth now slightly open with disapproving awestruck. Andrew’s green eyes were beginning to grow impatient. She looked down and saw Andrew’s right hand stab the door frame with firm fingers.

He made his voice louder and said, “*My mother* is not here.”

The woman's blaring smile did not fade from her lips, but her eyes darted up to the tall man. She looked at his features and blinked once or twice. Araminta noticed this strange face twitch at the edges of her eyes.

"I see," the woman said, "Kelly had two kids. Good for her." Her gaze went back to Araminta.

"No," Andrew said, his voice even more firm, "I'm her only child. This is my partner." Andrew put his arm around Araminta's waist. He mimicked the woman's smile on his face, spreading his lips wide into a painful, mocking arch.

The woman looked back at him, her smile now beginning to wane. "Ah," she said. "Well, when your mother gets home, I would like to speak with her." The woman nodded her head, and turned around. She stepped down on the broken, rock steps and onto the gravel driveway.

"My mother is dead." Andrew said. Araminta felt the pain in his tone. But it was mingling and fighting with something else she couldn't quite put her finger on. "Guess you weren't close enough to know." Andrew finished.

The woman turned around again, the smile completely gone from her face. Her eyes shifted between Araminta and Andrew, unwilling to compromise on who to address. Araminta watched as her head soon lifted her gaze to the top of the house, to the sides, and then settling on the space between them.

"My apologies...ur..."

"Andrew," He said.

"Andrew." The woman struggled to force a smile back on her face. With a vexed articulation she said, "I'm sorry for your loss. I'm Beatrice. Your grandmother's friend."

Andrew nodded his head with a short curt. Araminta nodded hers as well, squinting her own eyes in displeasure.

“And who are you?” Beatrice said with an audacious tone at Araminta, “Speak up.”

Araminta cleared her throat, turned her head and neck slightly. She told the woman her name.

“Very well.” The woman said. “I assume this is your house now,” she motioned to Andrew, “How long are you planning on staying?”

Andrew huffed, “Not sure. Why does it matter to you?”

The woman rolled her eyes. She looked back to Araminta and said, “I would recommend selling the place to me. Don’t worry about cleaning it. I can do it. Granted, I should have copied the key your grandma had before giving it to your mom’s lawyer, but I went against my better judgment.” The woman looked at the house once more. “Would have been taken care of properly.”

Araminta felt Andrew stiffen up.

“Oh well. Let me know the starting price. We’ll see what we can do.”

Araminta called out to her, “I think we’ll stay.” She felt Andrew’s eyes on her now. Her heart was racing but something in her gut told her to stand firm. She watched at Beatrice smirked with a sly grin.

“Think on it.” Beatrice said while turning around to head up the gravel. They watched her hips sway against a black, snakeskin bag. But then, her distanced voice carried through the light whispering breeze, “But not too long, now. Also, best stay out of the water.”

Beatrice turned once more to Araminta before taking her leave, “Wouldn’t want to scare the fish.”

She then turned and left the couple to their own assumptions.

## Chapter 3

Andrew half-slammed the door behind him once Beatrice was out of his sight. He hulked over to the kitchen and thumped his large hands on the counter top. A zephyr of dust fluttered into the air.

Araminta followed close behind, clutching her shoulder. She scoffed, thinking about what Beatrice said just now, while also taking in Andrew's humped frame; his shoulders overtaking his neck, his eyes focused on the tornado of grime floating past his fingers.

"Who the fuck was that?" He said, finally breaking the tension radiating off their bodies. "Never heard about that bitch in my life." His face contorted with angry concentration. Araminta figured his mind was wandering into the forgotten paths of his early youth. She guessed Andrew was racking his brain through all the conversations he tried to have with his mother about life at Raven Pond. While Araminta watched Andrew's face dance between steps of anger and frustration, she came to the sad conclusion that Andrew was facing a reality—that with every second that ticked by, a piece of memory that Andrew had of his mother would begin to fade and fuzz away, like oil from a fingertip smudging over glass. Araminta knew better than to voice this discovery. She knew Andrew clung desperately to the last mental vestiges of his mother; if she were to tell him it was normal that he could forget about some conversations they may have shared, she knew Andrew would crumple with pain. She could not do that to him.

So Araminta watched in silence, and tried to revisit her own, short, time with Kelly before she died. As far as Araminta could trace, she had never heard Kelly mention Beatrice. But then again, Andrew's mother kept her past well behind her. After all: what's buried must stay in the ground.

Araminta grinded her teeth. After what she deemed an appropriate passage of time, she raised her own voice to match Andrew's apparent annoyance. "What the hell was up with her?"

Andrew jerked his head back and forth, cracking small bubbled pops throughout his neck. He slowly stood up and faced Araminta. Often, Andrew's mild demeanor overshadowed his looming, lanky body; but seeing him angry highlighted his towering features. His eyes—which were naturally bulged with soft hues of green—looked at Araminta with a ferocity she had rarely ever seen. And in the gloomy sphere of the kitchen, his dark blonde hair looked as if it had turned into a shade of carob.

"You need to cool off?" Araminta said, uncrossing her arms and reaching forward to touch his hand. Her fingers touched warm knuckles pulsing with white tension. She traced a vein that snaked into his dorsal. Andrew drew in a deep breath and scrunched his face.

He stayed quiet, and Araminta knew the answer. After a few years together, they knew how to read each other.

Araminta lifted her hand from his and walked back over to fireplace. Dust bunnies bounced when her breath carved the edges of the stone.

"What did you mean when you said to Beatrice, 'we'll stay?'" Andrew finally said, watching Araminta standing in the living room. Araminta frowned.

"Just came out of me, I'spose," she said, "thought it would bug her the most." She turned around and faced him again. "Are you pissed at me for saying it?"

Andrew scrunched his mouth up and shook his head. His eyebrows, still furrowed, seemed to soften to reassure Araminta. "No," he said, "but what are we doing here?"

The mid-noon sun curtailed its rays through the large windows, falling on the musty carpet. Araminta looked up and shielded her eyes. She first spotted a small, shanty shed

cowering under the thick maples lining the embankment. Then, as Araminta moved her eyeline west, she could see the black, lapping water of Raven Pond tickle the sandy shore.

Andrew continued talking: “Maybe we should sell this place. I know we said we could stay down here for the summer, but—” he paused, “maybe that old biddy was right. Be better to give it to her.”

The rocking waves seemed to lull Araminta back and forth. She could imagine the sound of the water hitting the stones and reeds that sprang from the shallow crannies of the dock space. She could hear it faintly in her head, growing louder as her eyes grew heavy with dreaming curiosity.

“No.” She said, shaking her head a bit to clear the cobwebs spinning in her mind. She felt trickles of energy meditate her eyeballs, and a washing sense of consciousness drifted back to her temples. “I think we should stay.”

Andrew shuffled forward, his right arm tracing along the counter top, leaving a trail of dust on the ridge suspended between his elbow and wrist.

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” Araminta said, “sure, it needs a lot of work. And the neighbor is a bitch. But...I don’t know. It just seems like it should be ours.”

Andrew drew closer, his eyes turning from annoyance into exhaustion.

“It was your grandparents,” Araminta continued, “and then your mom’s. Maybe your mom wanted nothing to do with this place. But what if we did? Maybe we can get it looking alright again.”

“I don’t think you realize how much we’ll have to do.” Andrew said. Araminta crossed her arms again. He took his big hands and placed them on her shoulders. “Do you really want to stay in this dump?”

Araminta’s eyes looked back out the window. She could swear she could hear the water through the thick glass and wooden panes. She nodded her head.

Andrew sighed and dropped his hands down to his hips. Although tenderness was starting to seep back into his eyes, Araminta could still see the internal struggle rooting itself into his face.

“Okay,” he said, finally breaking the silence, “we’ll stick with the plan. We stay for the summer. See how it goes.”

His long legs carried him to a small, closet door, its gilded handle chipping black scratches. He turned the knob with force. Inside, a broken broom and unwashed rags leaned against a white-fiber coated shelf.

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Araminta and Andrew slouched into the car, their backs aching from the initial cleaning of the camp. They began with the kitchen, clearing out the dust bunnies with elbow grease and a half-bottle of old, probably expired, Pine-sol they found in the cleaning closet. Their excavation of the kitchen revealed grime-covered glasses stacked in light cedar cabinets; chipped teacups with pink florals dancing over the rim; and tarnished silverware that needed soaking in warm water.

Next, they ransacked the living room. The unkept furniture smelled of old black lab and watered paws and sharp moss flavor. By the time the sun had dipped into the lake, Araminta and

Andrew had barely scratched the surface of the old house. But reminders of Andrew's grandmother had popped in their feeble attempts to clean out the couch cushions. Missing buttons and rusted copper pennies trickled on the pale brown underneath. A basket of yarn and sewing items had gathered a pile of filth by a pale, faded blue loveseat. Araminta held each find to Andrew, who screwed his lip and nodded with guarded apathy. Araminta placed the buttons inside the sewing basket, and pocketed the pennies inside the small space of her short pockets.

The bedroom, yet to be discovered, was for tomorrow. For tonight, they would have to sleep in the car.

"Are you sure you don't want a hotel room?" Andrew asked, picking dirt from out under his fingernails.

Araminta closed her eyes and adjusted her passenger seat back. Her body now at an oblong angle, feet still resting on the floor. She grunted and said, "We don't need to spend money right now."

"I can afford it." Andrew said, his voice low and cautious.

"Eh," Araminta said, feeling anxiety rise to her chest, "I just feel bad. With, well, you know—"

"We agreed you'd take the summer off. I can support us both. Don't feel guilty about it."

"Andrew, I don't like being a burden—"

"You're not." Andrew said, rolling his eyes. Araminta knew this conversation was worn out by the various times they explored Araminta's "sabbatical." Still, despite their agreement for Araminta to rest after finishing her latest degree, her apprehension was deeply rooted by how she was brought up—she knew she was allowed to take a break. That it was good for her mental

health and wellbeing after being locked in non-stop field of competition. But the toxic “bootstrap” ideology was a bitch to overcome.

“Well, then,” Araminta said, trying to halt the argument before it could start, “didn’t you say you wanted to get rid of all the furniture? Start over? Get rid of the mildew and mold? That’s gonna be a hunk of change. We’re saving money by staying here. Besides, we gotta start early in the morning anyway. Might as well stay as close as we can.” Araminta opened her eyes again and brought up a notebook from inside the house.

“Want to read something of theirs?” She said, changing the subject.

Andrew shook his head and reclined his own seat. He closed his eyes and respired in a huff of air. Araminta could sense Andrew’s exasperation fighting—but losing—to his mental and physical exhaustion.

Araminta clicked the light on the car’s interior roof. Andrew turned his body away and shielded his eyes. In the dim, yellowed light, Araminta flicked open the cracked, light black book, reading the small writing until she fell asleep; the echoes of time lying flat on her lap.

## Chapter 4

*June 20, 1965*

*We have moved into camp. Wilma and Kelly spent the whole day in the lake. At first, I was pretty annoyed that they didn't want to help me unpack. But I saw Wilma's smile. It's been too long.*

*When we bought the land, the realtor didn't tell me how beautiful this place was. The trees are nice. Lush, green. Little Kelly Girl stuck a buttercup under her chin and asked me if I could tell if she liked butter. The yellow light flickered on her small neck, so I told her it must be true. She ran over to Wilma and asked her the same question. I didn't hear what Wilma told her, but I reckon she must have said I was right.*

*I'm excited to start building the house here. Right now, there's just a little shanty for our large family. Kelly's still too small to take up too much space, but I can tell Wilma was a bit frustrated when I told her about the purchase. I don't think she realizes yet that this will be good for us. It's a space for Kelly to run around. You can't get the wilderness in Boston like you can up here. My father, God rest his soul, said Maine camps couldn't be beat. I think he may be right. Wilma still needs convincing though.*

*She doesn't like that I'll be working so much to pay off the place. But I enjoy work. I like getting my hands dirty and feeling like I'm being put to good use. Idle hands and whatnot. I'm working for three construction folks around here, so I'll be learning quite a bit on how to build my own place. Wilma says her and Kelly will never see me. I don't think that's true. There's always dinners and night time. It's not like I need to be home during the day, anyway. Sure, in*

*Boston I was more around, but I wasn't happy. I was too restless. I think I'll be a better man up here. Better father too for Little Kelly Girl.*

*Besides, from what the realtor said, there are lots of women around here to keep Wilma busy. I think she misses her school mates from college. But hopefully some new faces will help her get settled. I love Wilma. She's the perfect wife and mother. I want her to be happy. I think this camp will give that happiness to her.*

*I met a few men in town today. I was picking up a few bottles of Coke and popcorn for us on the way in when I met them. Sturdy fellows. Heard them talking about getting a game of poker together. One of them saw me reaching for the bottles and asked if I was new in town. Told him I just moved in. He asked where I was. Told him on Raven Pond. Guy laughed and said, "No shit!" Guess they're all from here. We got to chatting and they invited me to their game next week. Never met friends so fast in my life. They have wives too, so maybe we can have a BBQ sometime and we can all get together. No kids though. But I'm sure that will change.*

*I'm off to bed now. Don't know when I will write again—be busy and all.*

*~Andy*

# **JULY 2018**

## **Chapter 5**

A month had passed by the time Araminta and Andrew had cleaned the entire house to an acceptable condition. Half the items they found in the house were thrown away—broken lamps; trampled Christmas lights; bruised and battered knick-knacks; mold and water damaged files; rusted tools; and the dead remains of forgotten insect carcasses and mice graveyards. The other half was donated or sold to thrift stores—the mildewed furniture; the rust-sprung master bedroom mattress and cracked frame; the rough sewn vestiges of clothes and winter gear; spaghetti-stained Tupperware.

What remained of the interior was minor. Andrew, with no emotional connection to any of his grandmother's possessions, tossed it aside with little concern. But when the pair got to his mother's childhood bedroom, Araminta noted the vice-grip that wrapped around Andrew's motivation and willingness to part with the past. Andrew would often leave his mother's room to clear his throat or walk around the premises looking at the weeds and dandelions tickling the foundation of the camp. During those moments of solitary confinement, when Araminta was trapped in Kelly's ditched quarters—letting Andrew overcome his unwanted sorrow—she'd take in the room and feel its residual haunting. Araminta could sense that the teenage Kelly left an energy imprint: a brew of misery and fury. Araminta would sit in the darkness, her legs crossed in the middle of the floor and stare at the ceiling drenched in cobwebs. And count the holes shaped by a thrown utensil or blunt object. How the collectable figurine faces were turned away towards the wall, blinded away from an onlooker. The window facing the lake was thrice covered by a towel or blanket, still left untouched all these years. Araminta knew she'd probably

never fully understand what drove Kelly away. But she could feel the restlessness on her skin that she could only explain was women's intuition.

When the two were finally able to disinfect and empty out Kelly's room, Andrew closed the door and didn't feel the need to return.

Araminta believed all of Andrew's actions were a purge; a new beginning for the home, rather than a recollection of the past. The camp was never his—until now—and she figured this was his way of leaving a stamp on what could be theirs. He even considered donating his grandparents' notebooks. But Araminta kept them for herself. Even if Andrew didn't want to look back at their thoughts and findings, Araminta couldn't help herself. Something about readers and writers born to be gossips.

Once the dawn of the month hatched, Andrew was pulled into his new job.

In the mornings, while the mist settled in waves over the cool lake water, Araminta walked Andrew to his car, kissed him goodbye, and then followed his vehicle until she couldn't see it anymore on the twists and turns of the dirt road. But she kept going, looking up at the trees and moss stained rocks as she continued on her walk. The cool morning air turned humid as the sun wet the tops of pine needles and maple nooks. Half an hour or so into her walk, sweat would pool on her upper lip and drip into her mouth. Her hair would twist and turn in all directions, drops of moisture accumulating on the back of her knees. When she saw the end of Raven Pond road, she watched a few cars rush by, then turn around.

Araminta noticed on her walks how the trees around her would push and pull the shadows of the forest. Every deciduous tree would rock in a slight breeze, and the evergreens would bend their branches down to manipulate the air current. Rocketing chickadees swarmed through the brambles singing long notes of *fee-bee* calls and quick *chicka-dee-dee-dee-dee*

warnings. And ovenbirds yodeled ricocheting *teacher-teacher-teacher* songs while primping their nests. Grey and red squirrels would shimmy up the trees, nuts clenched in their rotund cheeks.

But the blackflies—the self-proclaimed state bird—would buzz and gnaw at Araminta’s face.

Occasionally, a blackfly would zoom into her eye, and she would have to bend over, her middle finger digging at her tear duct and lid. A wing and a leg would come loose, resting on her nail. But Araminta could feel the twitching of the little bug still bludgeoning its way into her sight. Digging more and more, Araminta would finally free her tear-stained eye from the demon, only to find that the remaining body had been buried on her cheek once she checked a mirror at home.

Or worse, a blackfly had soared into her ear and began to excavate her wax. Loud beats of buzzed wings would fill her brain, even when her index nail was stabbing at the six legs and thorax. Araminta would rush home, the frenzied gnat still fluttering by her ear drum, to grab a handful of cotton swabs to rummage in her ears to finally yank the severed body parts from her canal.

But despite the incursion of the pests, Araminta explored her daily walks with pride. She’d see the outlines of her neighbors homes—blue and orange contrast against the deep greens of the trees. She’d hear the morning howls of Labradors wandering their lawns to urinate. The soft hush of lake waves. The area soothed something within her that she didn’t know she even needed.

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One morning, after Araminta had kissed Andrew goodbye and followed his car into the dust trail, Araminta saw a young woman walking on the road. Beside her, a gray-faced dog sniffed at the ground, its thick head bobbing up and down at every patch of grass. The woman was an inch shorter than Araminta; her thick curly hair dancing upwards in the muggy morning air. Her warm, tawny-brown skin shone with sweat, and her hazel-green eyes kept watch over her excited pet.

As the two passed parallel from each other, they both shared the polite, New England style nod: mouth curled up into a half-smile, head bobbed down for half a second. The act an acknowledgement of the other, but maintaining the distance of cordial forbearance. And both resumed their path. The dog wagged its tail and stopped briefly to happily stare at Araminta, but didn't move towards her. Its black and gray pelt shook with every tail wag, but then obeyed to resume the young woman forward.

When Araminta returned home, the strangers passed again, giving the same nod and tail wag.

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The next few days, Araminta passed the stranger and the dog twice. One up the road, one down. Each time, the dog inched closer to Araminta, smelling the air for a hint of welcome. Sometimes, the young woman would actually give a full smile with her nod. Araminta might do the same and raise her left hand with hers. And thus, the north-eastern mode of awareness and acknowledgement was affably upheld.

On a Friday morning, with the happiness of the weekend looming, Araminta saw the stranger's dog jogging up to her before the young woman was in sight. It rushed to Araminta,

tongue hanging out, tail going a million miles per hour. It jumped its front paws up to Araminta's thighs licked at her dew-dripped arms. Araminta smiled and kneeled down, taking the full extent of the dogs mouth on her face. She saw its white underbelly, felt the thick jaws nudge her hands towards the flapping ears. And in between the lapping mouth, Araminta could see the shaking, excited behind move rapidly back and forth.

The young woman jogged breathlessly up the road, her arms moving back and forth against her body, her hair bouncing up and down with each trot.

"I'm sorry!" she said, drawing closer to Araminta, "As soon as I opened the door she bolted out. She's never like this."

Araminta smiled back and gave the dog large pats on her body, "It's okay! No worries."

The young woman whistled through her teeth. A quick *wee-oh-weet* that grabbed the dog's attention. It trotted up to her, backside still wagging with intensity.

"You're naughty!" the woman said, trying to hide her smile, but giving the dog a few good pats on the side. The dog opened her mouth to let her tongue lap on the side.

"What's her name?" Araminta said, rising up from her crouch. The dog continued to watch her.

"Well, her full name is Frangipane," the woman paused to notice Araminta's chuckle, "but I didn't name her. But I call her Franny and she's pretty happy with it."

Franny sneezed.

Araminta smiled and waved at the dog. "She's beautiful. What is she?"

"Half pitty, half lab I think."

Araminta looked up at the woman, who was smiling at her. Her mouth was toothy, and a small gap separated her incisors. "I'm Araminta," she said, reaching out her hand, "Minty sometimes for short."

The woman outstretched her hand. Franny got up and circled the pair's feet.

"Robyn." She said. Her hand was soft with short nails. "I live up the road there." She raised her thumb over her shoulder without staring back.

"I live back here," Araminta said, gesturing towards her own house.

"You just move in?"

"Yep. Just finished cleaning up the place."

"That's good!" the woman said, "You all settled too?" Robyn's voice was warm and caring. It was a bit higher than Araminta's, and without a Maine accent, but her lips formed a barely recognizable lisp against soft s sounds.

"Somewhat," Araminta said, "just need to buy new furniture and get used to the area."

"I feel that." Robyn sighed. "If you want, I'm having a barbeque tomorrow night with some of the neighbors. Might be a good chance to meet some folks."

Araminta scratched behind her ears and felt Franny sit down beside her left leg. "Uh, sure!" She said, watching Robyn standing in front of her. "That would be nice, thank you. Do you need me to bring anything?"

Robyn snapped her fingers at Franny. Franny got up and stood by her side. "Drinks? I think everything else covered. Should be fun!" Robyn backed up, "Six good for you?"

Araminta thought for a second then said, "Should be good. Thanks for letting me know!"

Robyn nodded and turned around. Araminta watched her walk down the twist and into the tree lines. She then turned around, and headed back to her own camp.

## Chapter 6

Araminta poured her Arnold Palmer over ice, and sat down on the floor of the living room. She crossed her legs over another, forming a butterfly with her femurs and ankles. Andrew walked over to the spot, holding a plate of pigs-in-a-blanket. Cheese was spewing from the meat and began to coagulate onto the white plate.

“Who invited us?” Andrew said, crossing his own long legs as he sat down on the floor. He reached over and grabbed a dog and ripped into it with his teeth. Araminta dabbed her dinner in a mixture of mayo and ketchup.

“One of our neighbors. Her names Robyn, I think.”

“Was she nice?”

“Yeah,” Araminta said, “she’s a woman I’ve been seeing on my walks. You’d like her dog.”

Andrew reached over to another plate of tater tots. He popped one into his mouth and moaned with content.

“These are fucking good,” he said, followed shortly with, “did she say who else would be coming?”

“Not really. Just some of the other neighbors.”

Araminta took a long sip from her drink. A chunk of ice slipped in her mouth. She cracked down hard on the frozen water and chewed it all until it melted down the back of her throat.

“I wish you wouldn’t do that,” Andrew said, “it’s bad for your teeth. Ice’s too hard for the teeth over time.”

Araminta shrugged her shoulders. “Better than hard candy. Plus, my teeth are used to it.”

“That’s not how that works.”

The two of them stuck their food-laced tongues at each other and gave a shared giggle.

Araminta pulled out her phone and clicked open a streaming app. The newly set WIFI worked sporadically in the camp, but they were able to watch a poorly pixelated food show while eating the rest of their dinner.

“Do you think Beatrice will be there?” Andrew said, once their food was gone and the food show host had been paused on the screen.

“Hope not.”

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The next night, Araminta pulled on a floral black dress. Her favorite, of course. The short sleeves covered her arms, but still twirled in a slight breeze. Araminta was self-conscious about her arms. Always had been. Ever since her own mother told her that she would be prettier if she wasn’t fat, Araminta looked for all the flaws about her body. For her, the arms were her worst features.

Araminta would stare at cute dresses, but would never buy them because they were sleeveless. She knew people stared at her midsection; the dimpled grooves on the backs of her thighs. But she couldn’t stand people staring at her arms. Because she couldn’t stand to look at them. How her biceps formed mounds where muscles would be. How the dimple on her elbow looked like it spilled over her joint. She detested them. Andrew had once told her that he didn’t mind her arms. But she knew better.

Araminta looked at herself in the mirror and sighed. While the dress did look truly beautiful on her, she still wasn't happy with the whole picture. But it would have to do. Meeting new people was a chore for her. To deal with the first-impression glares that bigger women always faced. The ups and downs; the pauses at the stomach or the thick chin. And then glances at Andrew. Who was lanky and handsome. And Araminta could hear the thoughts turning in their heads: *What's he doing with her?* Or when they held hands in front of others, she could see with eyes on the back of her head the presumptuous stares of disapproving onlookers.

Araminta prepared herself for the rest of the night. She watched Andrew throw on a pair of Bermuda shorts and a form fitting shirt. Teal against his barely tanned skin. A few stray hairs poked from his chest and through the top. They were dark and twirled up towards his neck. He then took a comb and brushed the front part to the side. And then squirted some mild cologne at the ridge of his chest hair and throat.

Araminta believed the only concern Andrew might have tonight is if anyone thought to bring an IPA for him to taste. She didn't blame him for his potential, minute concern. But she was downtrodden all the same. She was covetous of his privilege, but knew better to keep the thought to herself. It was better to feign contentedness than try to explain the complex pain she felt sometimes. She often didn't even know how to define it herself.

Araminta walked out of the bedroom and to the kitchen. Her bare feet slapped on the hardwood floor.

"Do we have enough to bring? Should we stop by somewhere and get anything else?"  
She said.

Andrew followed from behind and slipped on his boat shoes. “We’re bringing a case of beer and you already went above and beyond what Robyn asked anyway.” He said, giving Araminta a sideways glance.

Araminta walked over to the fridge and took out the lemon bars she made that afternoon. Then, she reached down and pulled out the six pack.

“I want to make sure we give a good impression.” She responded.

Andrew stiffened his eyebrows and strengthened his look towards Araminta. She shrugged her shoulders at him, ignoring the inference he was sending her way.

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The couple got in their SUV and wandered the dirt road until they saw the camp of gathering people. Andrew parked the vehicle at the end of the lane, and both stared at Robyn’s house.

It was smaller than theirs, but incredibly welcoming. Bright pink, orange, and white milkweeds lined the gravel driveway. Cartoon character whirligigs spun their legs back and forth—Garfield chasing after Snoopy; Tom running from SpongeBob. Bird feeders lined bushes of lavender and hydrangeas. It was a spectacle looking at Robyn’s camp—warm and homey mixed with humor and innocence.

Araminta got out of the car and grabbed the lemon dish from the backseat. She felt the cool touch kiss her arms. On the porch of the camp house, she could see women flocking the rails with wine glasses in their hands. Araminta spotted Beatrice among them, smirking down from her high stance. Araminta watched her notice them, and the snicker turned into a slight sneer. Especially as her eyes darted from Araminta to Andrew.

Robyn appeared from behind a glass door, carrying a tray of raw hamburgers and hot dogs. Beatrice grabbed her arm and nodded at Araminta and Andrew. She whispered into Robyn's ear, and Robyn's eyes darted to Andrew and then back to Araminta. She forced a smile on her face and whispered something back to Beatrice. She nudged her way out of the grip and set the barbeque meats onto a table, and hopped down the stairs to her lined driveway.

Robyn called out to Araminta:

"Hey, Minty!" She said, her forced smile still on her face. "I'm glad you made it. Who's this?"

Robyn turned her head at Andrew and reached out her arm.

"This is Andrew. My partner." Araminta said. She watched as Robyn and Andrew shook hands. Robyn cleared her throat and replaced the painted expression on her face with a sincere one. Araminta let out a sigh of relief. *Must have been something Beatrice said.* She thought. *At least Robyn seems to like him.*

Andrew nodded his head. "Hey. We brought beer and bars."

Robyn laughed, "I told you not to bring something," she folded her hand over at Araminta, "thank you so much. That's so kind. Let's bring it up and we can introduce you to everybody." Robyn leaned in and spoke with a soft compliment, "I love your dress. It looks great on you."

Araminta thanked her, but took note of the comment. *Was that meant to be backhanded?* No, she thought, *don't overthink it. Just take it.*

Robyn led them up the porch and into the fray of neighbors. Beatrice walked along on the deck that wrapped around to the back of the house that faced the lake. Gray smoke rose into the air, and the smell of fire mixed with charred food wafted into Araminta's nose.

Robyn placed the dessert and beer onto the table. Pasta and potato salads, mixed heavily with sour cream, intertwined with the smoke in their noses.

Robyn rose and pointed to a middle-aged woman with braided, red hair with fringed bangs. She wore a colorful tank top and pink skirt. “Minty, Andrew, this is Steph. She lives just over there.”

Robyn motioned over beyond the trees to a blue and white house.

Steph turned her head and gave a forced simper to Andrew and Araminta. “Hi.” Steph’s voice was short, and Araminta, seemed too contrived.

And, she spoke to Araminta directly.

“Hello.” Araminta said back. She saw Steph’s green eyes shift over her, and then back to her plate of chips.

Another woman—older than Steph—reached over the redhaired woman with long fingers. Her hair was long and mostly gray over pale blonde strands.

Her voice was dream-like as she said, “Hi. I’m Falline. I live down a bit further.”

Araminta took her hand and felt the wrinkles bend on her fingers. Falline smelled of patchouli and vanilla lotion.

A glass door opened, and a younger woman with brunette hair and brown eyes poked her head from behind the glass door leading into Robyn’s house. A quick blur of gray and white rushed onto the deck, past the strangers’ legs—Franny noticed the new comers, barked, and galloped over to Andrew’s knees. She gave two licks, then approached Araminta with eager anticipation. She raised her front paws up to Araminta’s midsection.

“We want guac or—” the strange, young woman stopped, noticing Andrew in front of her. She looked at him, up and down, then closed the door and walked into the shadow of the house.

“Uh—” Robyn began, snapping her fingers at Franny to get her off Araminta. Once she saw her dog resume the four-leg stance, she picked up white Styrofoam plates and handing them to Andrew and Araminta. “That’s Corlee. She’s a bit shy. Sorry about that.”

Araminta and Andrew gave their own spurious grins, and looked over the food table.

Beatrice’s voice carried over the house, “Who wants burgers? Who wants a hot dog?”

The women on the porch turned their head and shouted back:

“One of each!” Steph said, flicking a small chip into her mouth.

“Two burgers please.” Falline said, still looking at Araminta with glazed eyes.

“Two burgers, one frank.” Robyn yelled.

They all turned their heads to the couple. Araminta’s eyes wandered over to Andrew. His cheeks began to turn red.

“Three hamburgers.” He said softly to Robyn, but still retaining some confidence.

Araminta thought she heard Steph scoff.

“Add three more burgers on, Beatty,” Robyn said with a loud voice. She then turned to Araminta with her toothy smile, “What do you want, hun?”

Araminta could feel the women’s eyes on her more. “One burger please.” She said with delicate precision.

Robyn repeated the order over the roof.

Sizzling meat soon canvased the area.

“So, where you from?” Robyn said, breaking the silent crackle of beef and pork. Andrew picked up a beer from the table and popped the top off with his hands.

Araminta cleared her throat, “I’m from Holden. Andrew’s originally from Lewiston.”

“Interesting,” Falline said, scooping up potato salad onto her plate. A chopped celery slice fell onto the deck. Araminta watched Franny move to the treat and licked it up with one scoop of her tongue. She then heard Falline continue: “How’d you two come to meet?”

Andrew moved to a red and blue lounge chair next to Steph and leaned his body down into the seat. “UMaine. I went up there. We had a gen ed class together.”

Steph took her plate and got up from her chair. She opened up the glass door and motioned for Franny to follow her. With sad eyes, Franny drooped her tail and followed the more familiar figure. Steph shut the door behind them. Araminta chewed on the inside of her lip.

“Fun,” Robyn said, “You two the same major?”

“No, no, no.” Andrew said looking at the glass door. He chuckled a bit and looked back at Araminta, Robyn, and Falline. “Complete opposite. She’s English. I’m engineering. We took astronomy for a lab course. Got partnered up. Stayed that way I guess.”

“Astronomy!” Falline said, her mouth full of white goop and chopped onions.

“Yeah,” Araminta said turning to look at the older woman, “I once had a writing professor tell my class that we should find engineers to match with. I guess he was married to one. Said the relationship is balanced or something like that. Didn’t think I’d actually follow his advice.”

Robyn smiled at Araminta, and Falline scooped another potato into her mouth. Andrew took a long drink from his beer and opened his legs a bit as he leaned back into the chair. Araminta heard small chatter coming from the direction of the grill.

Soon, Beatrice emerged, carrying a large, orange platter of burgers and hot dogs. Slices of yellow American cheese began to slop over the sides of the tray.

“Meat’s done.” Beatrice said, scooting past Robyn and Araminta. Falline shuffled the salads and chips around the table, while balancing her plate with a steady right hand. Araminta looked over and saw that the burgers looked well cooked. Almost burnt at the tops and edges. In Araminta’s opinion, it was a sin to overcook red meat.

“You want cheese, put it on yourself.” Beatrice said, lifting her head up to address everyone.

Behind her, the glass door opened once again and Steph walked out, a chilled glass of white wine in her right hand, and bags of buns in the other. Franny tried to scoot back outdoors, but Steph extended her pale leg and blocked Franny’s path. Behind them, Corlee grabbed Franny’s collar and pulled her back to the dark recesses of the house. Soon, she returned, bringing a plastic container of condiments out to the group, setting it down in the seat Steph had sat in previously. Her eyes averted Andrew’s with distinct obviousness.

“You wait, you starve!” Beatrice said again, taking a plate in her own hands and going to the bread. She picked up two hot dog buns and slapped them with a *crunch* on her Styrofoam surface. As she forked red hot dogs in between the slits of the bread, she turned to Andrew with sly grin.

“Decided to sell the place yet?”

Andrew took another sip of beer. “No. Not yet.”

“You’ll want to sell it before summer’s up. Like I said, I can get a price to you if I know it’s on the table.”

Steph and Corlee shifted their averted eyes to Andrew. They picked up brown hot dogs and began to slice them with small chops from plastic forks.

“Just wondering, why do you think I’d sell to you?” Andrew said, getting up and sliding past Beatrice. He grabbed three buns in his fingers and slapped them on his own plate. He then reached over with his long arms and began to shake the plastic neck of relish.

While squirting clumps of the green, pickled cucumbers on his charred meat, he said, “Maybe I’d find someone who’d want it more.”

Araminta cleared her throat trying to grab his attention, but she knew the attitude of the women around them had chipped away at Andrew’s patience. She felt him ignore her subtle plea, and watched as he mimicked a smirk back at Beatrice.

“I’d doubt it,” Beatrice said, biting off the tip of her frankfurter; a glob of ketchup fell down on a ripple chip, “I’m highly interested and invested in the camp.”

“I’m sure.” Andrew replied.

Robyn walked in front of Beatrice and grabbed her own hot dogs. She turned around and gave her a look that Araminta couldn’t decipher. Then she turned to Araminta and said:

“Go and eat, Minty. Before it gets cold.”

But Araminta was watching Andrew and Beatrice square off. She could see a vein begin to throb on her partner’s neck. Robyn followed Araminta’s glare and cleared her own throat.

“Beatrice, let’s talk about houses later. I want to eat in peace, and I’m sure my guests would too. They just got here. Let em’ breathe.”

Beatrice’s eyes furrowed down. She huffed, then walked away back from where she arrived with the platter of burgers and hot dogs. Steph and Corlee tiptoed after her.

Falline was leaning on the railing of the porch, already munching on her second burger.

While Andrew sat back down on his own chair and bit into one of his patties with haste, Robyn turned to Araminta with soft eyes. “So,” she said, “ just to let you guys know, best to stay out of the lake. Not quite clean this time of year.”

Araminta looked down at herself and felt the back of her neck grow hot.

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After everyone had finished their dinner, Araminta stared at her untouched lemon bars. Steph and Corlee had gone back to the former’s house to grab cookies and a half-eaten pie. But no one wanted to touch the homemade and still freshly cold dessert that Araminta had brought. A mix of emotions stomped on her insides. Most of them shame. As if Araminta had done something wrong. Or that she had somehow offended the rest of her neighbors. She knew deep down that they were just probably rude, judgmental women. But the best of Araminta’s anxiety had taken root in her gut. And she couldn’t shake the displeasure of disappointment.

She sat down next to Andrew, her seat still cool from the refrigerated condiments. She sighed, and Andrew put a hand on her knee.

“Let’s go.” She whispered.

“You didn’t eat anything.” Andrew said, his voice lowered into a whisper.

Araminta didn’t respond to him. She watched as Robyn approached, her mustard-yellow blouse sleeves rolled up to her elbows.

“Hey,” Robyn said, “So I think everything is winding down here. Let me walk you to your car.”

Araminta stood up with haste, and thanked Robyn for the invitation. Andrew followed suit. As they walked down the stairs, Araminta looked back and saw Beatrice appear from behind the glass doors, watching the three scuttle on the gravel rocks.

“So, is it true you might be selling your home?” Robyn said. “I don’t mean to pry. It’s just sad to meet you and then say goodbye.”

Andrew opened up his car door and got in.

“We’re thinking about it,” Araminta answered, leaning against the hood, “might do it after all.”

Robyn nodded her head up and down. “You mentioned yesterday that you didn’t have any furniture?”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe furnishing the place could increase the price a bit. Make it look nice and put together. If you do sell to Beatrice, it could help drain out her pocket a bit more.” Robyn paused and gave an apologetic chuckle. Araminta returned a half-hearted smile.

Robyn took in a deep breath, “I know a discount place with new-looking things. Up near Harpswell. It’s a bit of a drive, but I don’t mind taking you.”

Araminta curled her upper lip into her mouth and rubbed her teeth together. “I might take you up on it. Do you mind if I think about it and maybe text you later?”

“Sure!” Robyn said, taking her phone from her back pocket. She put in Araminta’s number and clicked the phone back to a black screen. “Let me know, and if we go we’ll make a day of it.”

After the two said goodbye, Araminta folded her body into the car and turned away from the camp as Andrew rushed out of the driveway.

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*A Moment with Robyn and Beatrice*

Robyn watched them pull away from her driveway, feeling utter shame and disappointment.

She went back up, leaning over the railing by Beatrice's side.

“Wish you told me what they looked like.” Beatrice said. “Would've told you not to invite them. You made it seem like you met some girl from the town.”

Robyn considered her words, then said with a calmed intonation: “I only invited her. I didn't know she lived with anyone else.”

“Doesn't matter. If I had been told what she looked like, I would have known who you were talking about.” Beatrice took her fingers and pinched her brows together. “Make sure they sell that house to me. I want them gone. You get the picture?”

Beatrice turned and walked down the stairs from the deck. She pointed her finger up at Robyn with a look of anger in her eyes. “Or you'll know what'll happen.”

A loon sang a song on the black lake.

## Chapter 7

Araminta fell behind Andrew as he slammed open the door of their cabin and dropped his remaining alcohol onto the kitchen island. She watched him take large breaths into his chest. He flexed his jaw while pacing the empty rooms. Araminta felt like falling into a bed, to wrap herself in large blankets and scream into a pillow; but they still didn't have furniture. She felt trapped in her own body.

Araminta followed with deliberate footsteps into the camp, shutting the creaking door behind her. She opened the refrigerator and tossed the untouched lemon bars next to the gallon of one-percent milk. She could feel Andrew's pacing steps echo on the floors, feeling the vibrations between her toes. She bent back up and looked at his straining mouth.

"I'm done," he said, running a swift hand through his short hair, "we're moving."

"Oh?" Araminta said, taking a deep breath.

"You see how they treated me?"

Araminta tilted her head and squinted her eyes at him.

Andrew pulled his shirt over his scalp; his dark chest hair stiff from static. He scratched at his slightly pouched stomach and threw the shirt across the room.

Araminta closed the refrigerator door, taking out a glass bottle of peach iced tea. She popped open the top and sipped the foam from the ring of the container.

"Just you, huh?" She said, irked. "But yes, I did notice how they treated you. Bunch of assholes."

"And fucking Beatrice," Andrew said, lifting his voice up and down when mentioning the woman's name, "what the hell is wrong with her? Does she really think I'm gonna sell this place to her now."

Andrew paused and pointed his jaw at Araminta. A vein in his neck throbbed. “What do you mean, ‘just you’?”

“Did you see how the red head and brunette followed Beatrice’s every move?” Araminta said, ignoring Andrew’s inquisition.

Andrew unbuttoned his pants and tossed them on the floor next to the thrown shirt. He muttered under his breath, “No fucking place to sleep either.”

Araminta took large gulps from her drink. She felt the sugar ring around her teeth. Andrew walked over, took the tea from her hands, and downed the rest of it. He placed the bottle in the sink and filled it with hot water.

Araminta grinded her teeth and gave Andrew a dirty look. She felt her blood pressure rise.

“I hate this place.” Andrew said, leaning over the sink, his large hands splayed on the stainless steel ridge. “Let’s just put it up on Facebook and get the hell out of here.”

“Where we goin’ live?” Araminta asked, noticing her tone shift into aggression. “I think we should stay to piss them off more.” Araminta dipped her mouth in rhythm with her shoulders. Andrew turned to look at her with questioning eyes.

“You still want to stay here? Why? They treat me like shit! And they barely said two words to you.”

“Oh, so you did notice how they treated me?”

“What the fuck does that mean, Minty?” Andrew said. “Are you seriously angry with me? What the fuck!?”

“I’m not angry,” Araminta answered, “I’m just a bit irked that you’re a little concerned with how they just treated you, but not acknowledge some of the things they said and did to me too. Yes, it was very clear they didn’t want you around. But they weren’t fond of me either.”

Andrew rolled his eyes at her and then turned his back to Araminta. Deep down, she knew picking a fight with Andrew in this moment was just a way to ease her own frustration with the women of Raven Pond. But she felt the aggression rise in her and she wanted to use it; not settle it away because it might make Andrew feel a bit better. Although Araminta felt compassion about Kelly’s death, she was growing to resent tip-toeing around Andrew after all this time.

She didn’t care if it was selfish of her right now. She just wanted to push Andrew’s buttons to see what the conversation might drag up.

Araminta lifted her hands up and began cracking her fingers by stretching them back and forth. “Well, Robyn and that other woman...Falline, I think...they weren’t too bad.”

“They weren’t good either.” Andrew said, his response tense and full of annoyance.

“I just think it would be stupid to run off just because a few hags can’t be nice.”

“It’s not just that,” Andrew said turning around with a swift whirl of his body, “look at this place! Fucking useless living here.” He raised his arms up over his head and then smacked them down to his sides.

“Then we buy furniture—”

“I don’t want to be here anymore!” Andrew shouted, the pupils in his eyes widening. He moved his hands up and down from his face. He walked past Araminta, brushing her shoulders with an uncaring shove.

“You don’t even want to try to like it? We don’t need to talk to our neighbors. Let’s just live here and do our own thing.” Araminta said.

Andrew put his hands on his hips and shook his head. Araminta continued:

“We furnish this place, get used to it.”

“This is *my* house,” Andrew said, his voice still deep and loud, “why do you care?”

Araminta felt the tinge she needed to cause the fight between them. The aggression in her rose. “Just your house?” She said, sliding her back molars against each other with force.

“I’m the one that pays for everything, yeah.” Andrew said. Araminta watched his eyes shift from anger to panic. She knew he caught what he said. He bit his lip while looking at Araminta. She clicked her tongue against her cheek, and nodded her head up and down.

“Gonna throw that at me, huh.” She said. “Thanks for that. I figured you’d eventually bring that up. *I’m the only one paying for things, because Minty took a nice little break after being an English major.*” Araminta mocked Andrew’s voice. “*Guess that means I get the say in everything.*”

Andrew stopped biting his lip and his face grew back its red hue. “We’re not having this fight Araminta. You can’t just put fucking words in my mouth to make you feel better about yourself and what you think people think about you. God I hate when you do this! Just because you’re miserable with yourself. Let’s just make sure it’s really true that others are really done being around you.”

Araminta watched him catch what he said in anger again. He then gapped open his mouth:

“Minty,” he paused, “I didn’t mean—”

“Nope. You’re right.” Araminta said, feeling the heat on her face by her eyes. “Fuck me, huh? Let’s just sell it, Andrew. Do whatever you want! It’s your house!” Araminta stomped away and into the bedroom. She could feel Andrew follow her. His arms outstretched to try and catch her. Araminta slapped his arms away from her torso. She turned around and slammed the door.

She felt like she had crossed the line. That she took it too far with Andrew. He was right, she thought. Araminta knew it was messed up to get him angry at her because she wanted any excuse to let out the shit that was building up inside her.

She’d have to apologize to him later.

Araminta’s cell pinged in her pocket.

Araminta clutched her phone and stared down at the screen. A new message from Robyn took her attention.

*Hey! It’s Robyn. Still on for furniture shopping?*

Araminta opened up her message and typed furiously back.

*Hi! Sounds great.*

In the remaining, tense silence of the cabin, Araminta grabbed a random journal from a pile next to her sleeping bag, and dropped it in on her pillow. She felt her phone vibrate again.

Robyn wrote back:

*Coolio. Saturday good?*

Araminta typed:

*Yep. Pick me up at 7 AM? I’ll get us coffee if we stop somewhere.*

Araminta turned her screen onto the floor. She untied her dress and let it fall to her feet, and then kicked it to the side, questioning if it really did look good on her. She unhooked her bra,

and felt the sweet release of pressure on her sides. The air danced around her chest. Araminta then grabbed a clean t-shirt from their luggage knowing full well she'd feel better covered up once more. She slipped the clothing over her body, then slid into her bag.

Araminta fell asleep reading from the journal.

## Chapter 8

*The 25<sup>th</sup> of June, 1965*

*I'm feeling a bit empty today. When Andy said we had to pack up all our things and move up to Maine, I thought he was crazy. Turns out, I was right. Again.*

*Don't get me wrong—I love Andy's spontaneity. Probably why I fell in love with him to begin with. But...I don't know. Sometimes it feels as if I have two children instead of one. Christ, he didn't tell me that our new home was just an empty lot of land with a miniscule trailer stained with cigarette smoke and carpeting. What was he thinking? I had heard from friends and family that the men in their lives were absolutely oblivious to details that didn't concern them. But I didn't believe them—didn't want to assume that Andy would be like that. I mean, small details aren't small at all. They all make one, large picture. Like little paint strokes built into a Van Gogh night sky. How foolish I was to think Andy would be different. Maybe, how foolish I am now. I don't know.*

*Jesus H. Christ, moving us all up here on a whim to live in a shanty by black water! What will we do in the winter?*

*I don't think he gets that Maine winters kill.*

*What am I going to do?*

*The 26<sup>th</sup> of June, 1965*

*Kelly and I got into a little tiff today. Andy went off to work, and you know how Kelly gets. Daddy's little girl for sure. Crying, and crying until she went horse. I tried holding her—*

*rocking her back into a calm rest—but she pulled my hair and scratched the side of my cheek. I don't blame her. She's still just a baby in her own right. But it made me mad all the same. God, I love her. I really do. But I'm so tired of raising her by myself. No child makes it easy, for sure. But dammit why do I feel like it's her against me when Andy leaves for work? Is it because he can just come home and spend the couple hours he has left in a day to be good parent? It makes me feel like I'm bad. Terrible. At everything.*

*With little space in the trailer, I had to lock her in time out. I feel so awful. But what am I supposed to do? Andy bought us no space. God, if only he had asked me before restarting our lives. I would have told him we should have gotten a house first, then maybe a camp once we saved up some money. But no...he went ahead on his own and purchased the whole camp. Thought we could build from the ground up, save money that way. I wish men would listen. Fuck, I sound like my mother. Pardon my language.*

*Anyway, Kelly wasn't too happy that I locked her in her "room," so she was quite aggressive today. I was fine when she spent some time throwing rocks in the lake. But then she turned on me. She started chucking stones at my back when I was turned away cleaning up the yard. I had to lock her in the trailer again to keep me from spanking her. When she came out, she pinched me so hard on the hand it turned purple. What is wrong with that girl? I'm out of my wits end. Moment I turn my back, she's up to something. Just like her father, I guess.*

*The 28<sup>th</sup> of June, 1965*

*Met a nice woman and her daughter today. Abigail's the mom, and her daughter's Beatrice. The daughter's got these piercing blue eyes—tiny black pupils in the middle—kind of*

*freaked me out a bit. But they were both sweet and kind. Brought over a Bundt cake with some sweet icing. We shared a piece each as we got acquainted. With such a delicious cake, I don't think a lick of bad must be in either one of them.*

*Beatrice says she's going off to school soon. Smart girl. I told her I miss my college days. She was surprised to find out that I was a biology major. Couldn't believe it when I told her I wanted to be a scientist. I loved studying plants and animals. She asked me if I was a scientist now. It broke my heart to tell her I couldn't finish my degree because I married Andy.*

*Abigail interrupted our conversation and asked about how long we were staying. I'm glad she did. It hurts too much to talk about what I gave up for love.*

*I told her, as far as I knew, we were there to stay. I described how Andy had come home that one day and told us we were moving up to this place. She seemed to understand, but I could tell she was judging Andy a bit. I know it sounds bad, but I'm glad she did. Feels like I'm being heard by someone other than my own voice. By the time we were done chatting, it felt like we had known each other for ages. In fact, she invited me over for cribbage this weekend to meet the other women that live on the lake.*

*Even if I have to tie down Andy to his chair to watch Kelly, I'm going to that cribbage game.*

## Chapter 9

Araminta reluctantly kissed Andrew goodbye when he went off to work for the rest of the week. He would squeeze her shoulder, whisper his sentiments, and walk out the front door, leaving her alone to tend the broken cracks of the cabin. By the time Saturday had rolled around, the amicable silence between the pair had begun to stich them back together; but even so, Araminta was relieved when Andrew agreed to go out on his own during the weekend to search for his own touch to bring to the barren lake house.

While waiting for her ride to pick her up, Araminta put on a pair of leggings, a t-shirt, and sat in the middle of the living room floor until she heard Robyn's car horn.

Outside, the waves crashed hard against the shores, carried by a thick wind that ruffled thinner tree trunks. It pushed against the heavy door of Robyn's vehicle as Araminta lowered herself into the seat. Clouds grayed the sky, and muggy damp air dewed on Araminta's skin before she felt the cool wisp of the car's air conditioner.

"Hey, Minty!" Robyn said, watching as Araminta clicked her seatbelt over her torso. Franny was in the backseat, her head lolling out the window with her tongue tasting the air. When the dog noticed Araminta, her tail swished back and forth, hitting the back seat with large *thumps*. Araminta gave a small greeting back to Robyn, scratched behind Franny's ears, and settled into the leather embrace of the Sudan. Robyn flicked the car into reverse, and began to swerve down the wind-swept dirt road.

"You sure we have to go all the way up to Harpswell?" Araminta said.

“Best prices I’ve seen,” Robyn said, “everything around here is jacked up. Or broken. Typically both. Some folks can usually afford it if they live down here. But even so, I’d rather get a better deal.” Robyn scratched the inside of her ears.

Araminta nodded her head. “Yeah. Me too.”

The two women didn’t speak until Robyn went through a local drive thru to their coffee and began the journey on the highway.

“What’s Andrew do for work, if you don’t mind me asking?” Robyn said after a few gulps of her hot latte.

Araminta took a large sip from her iced drink. “Engineer. Just got his FE license.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s the first license you get as an engineer. Basically means you’re ready to study under a real—” Araminta held up her fingers as quotations in the air, “—engineer. He’s got to essentially apprentice for another five years before he can get the big engineering permit.”

“What type of engineer?”

“Electrical. Works with navigations mostly.”

Robyn turned on her blinker and moved into the right-most lane. Four cars with Massachusetts plates whizzed by.

“I don’t think I ever asked what you do?” Robyn said.

Araminta scratched the inside of her palms. “Just graduated the writing program up at Maine. Taught first-years mostly.”

“You gonna be a teacher down here?”

“I don’t know,” Araminta said, “when Andrew inherited his mother’s place, he told me he could support me while I figure out if I want to teach, adjunct, or do something else.”

“What do you mean?” Robyn said with a quizzical look. “Does he think your degree doesn’t mean anything?”

“No! No.” Araminta said, her voice raised with alarm. “It’s just that I want to write a bit—I like writing essays—but I’m not sure I want to go back into academia.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah.” Araminta turned and looked back at the window. “It’s crazy competitive. And the patriarchy still runs strong.”

Robyn gave a quick glance at Araminta and sighed, “I think I know what you mean.”

Araminta took another sip from her coffee and felt Franny’s head lean against the back of her seat; her mouth sniffing in air from the outside.

“Did you always live in Sanguichor? By the lake?” Araminta asked.

Robyn kept her eyes on the road, her face muscles sliding into a serious glare. She watched a few cars pass her on the left, then answered:

“No.” She cleared her throat. “I moved up here from Connecticut about two or three years ago.”

“What made you come up to Raven Pond?”

Robyn blinked her eyes and adjusted her hands on the steering wheel. “Had an aunt pass away—she put the place in my name since she didn’t have kids. Never really met her.”

“Our?” Araminta swished her drink around and felt a small chip of ice slide down her throat.

“I ha...” Robyn cleared her throat again and sped up the car, “had a twin brother.”

“No shit!” Araminta said, “Does he still live with you? I don’t think I’ve seen him around.”

“No,” Robyn said, her voice more quiet, “he died in a car accident.”

Araminta swallowed some spit that had formed in her mouth. She looked away from Robyn, letting a silence fill her mind. *Of course*, she thought to herself, *she said she had a brother. Should have been paying more attention.*

“I’m so sorry, Robyn.” Araminta said, feeling the silence had expanded for too long. “I shouldn’t have asked.”

Robyn shook her head and waved her hand back and forth. “No, no. It’s okay. You didn’t know. I don’t talk about him much,” she closed her mouth in a soft grunt, “but don’t feel bad for asking.”

Araminta could tell that Robyn wanted the subject to be dropped. She let Robyn change the subject to other topics of discussion, letting small trickles of music distract them until the next conversation naturally appeared.

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Robyn showed Araminta the furniture store. Inside, Araminta was able to finally order a queen-sized bed and a sofa for an affordable price. Although she would need Andrew to Venmo her money to cover at least half the cost, she figured Andrew’s mood would improve if he had a bed to bury his body in, or a sofa to crash on.

Once Araminta had arranged for a date for her purchases to be delivered, Robyn took her through Harpswell, exploring the bayside town through the overcast clouds. Tourists packed inside the restaurants, grabbing overpriced breakfasts with specialty lobster scrambled eggs. Araminta knew that the tourists’ truly thought the locals ate the crustacean every day and night. Throughout her numerous classes she took for her degrees, Araminta heard classmates ramble on

about how lobster was a state staple—that they had never had seafood so delicious from where they originally came from. Araminta thought their observations were hilarious. She never wanted to totally correct them—so what if they were oblivious to the reality that red hot dogs reigned supreme next to crock-pot baked beans smothered in molasses and ketchup? It was better than the reality: that most Mainers couldn't afford the seafood fished from their own waters. That, now, after the gentrification of the coast—and then the mainland—the scallops; clams; lobsters; and salmon were sold to the rich who stayed in the state for the summer months and left before they saw the cruelty of winter. Their over-market priced home abandoned for the better part of the year while the locals struggled to make ends meet in their apartment slums. Araminta hated that Vacationland only applied to out-of-staters.

Araminta had never been to Harpswell before, but the mud flats in the distance soaked the area in thick sea salt and wet sand aromas; which reminded her of the sea in the Downeast. She knew high tide was still a couple of hours away: usually when the sun was at its highest point. But, still wafting in the morning glow of the coastal setting, the two women walked past the information booths and cafes stuffed with flatlanders.

When Robyn and Araminta got back into the car, the pair drove around the island as Robyn pointed towards the hiking trails and garden centers that allowed tourists to hunt in the summer, and locals to peruse in spring and fall. Even with the windows all the way up, the stench of raw ocean drenched the inside of Araminta's nose. She sniffed hard, tasting the residual scent on her tongue.

The pair crossed a rusting, metal bridge, as underneath, the low tide was beginning to resurface into small waves. Away from the bustling center of rented cars and SUVs, the lone

Sudan pierced through the slight fog and trailing mist of a hidden secret: the true landscape not carved out for outsider eyes.

The purlieu was dotted with rough foliage and hills of sharp rock and cliffs, cutting through the warning storm clouds drifting on the push from the battering wind. Barely visible shanty homes hid away from the road, peeking out appendages of rusted metal roofs and salt-covered windows.

Every break in the scenery revealed the caked, dark brown flats that marked the beginning and end of the earth. Through these breaks, Araminta could see in the distance, a short, battered gray fisherman's market, decked with painted fishing buoys. Wooden traps lined the outside of the building, and large black nets were nailed to any visible space of the location.

"Can we stop here?" Robyn asked, pointing to the structure as they drove closer. Araminta also found herself curious of the lone building in the center of the flats.

She chuckled and nodded her head. Robyn slowed down her car and pulled the Accord to the side of the road once they approached the dank shop. Dirt and damp sand coated the drive way.

Once Robyn was parked, Araminta opened her door to the brackish air. A strong gale slapped her hair, but she pushed through the force to exit. Something about the fish market peaked her interest, and she felt a pull coming from the door.

"Mind if I go in?"

"Sure! I'm going to take a few photos out here of this place!" Robyn walked around the car, her smile faint, but still toothy against the softness of her face. Her hand wrapped around her cellphone with pink, painted nails. Franny stuck her head out of the car and barked a short yip.

Robyn turned around and calmed the excited animal, while Araminta walked with soft steps through the entryway.

Inside the market, more buoys hung from the ceiling. Some were layered with cartoon character faces, or the natural animals that could be found in the state: moose, lobster, loons, bucks, and bears. A strong punch to Araminta's nose revealed pungent smells of rancid dirt and drying sea-dwelling creatures. Araminta noticed movement from behind a dark counter.

She glanced over and saw a looming, thick man with coarse facial hair. He wore a sun-bleached black cap, and loose overalls that covered a plaid t-shirt. He saw Araminta, and a beaming smile of yellowing dentures met her arrival.

“Well, hi theah!” He said, a burly accent rolling off his tongue from the back of his throat, “What can I help you with darling?” Every vowel from his words were elongated and stretched as they limbered off the roof of his mouth.

“Oh nothing much. Just browsing.”

“Ah yeah? Anything in particular, deah?”

Araminta smiled and shook her head. “Just saw the place off the road. Wanted to check it out.”

The old man laughed with a hearty bellow. “Not many folks come in my shop. ‘Cept my fishin’ buddies.” He brought a metal pail up from behind the counter and waved Araminta over. “Just caught these myself.”

Araminta walked over to where he was standing and peered into the silver-blue bucket. Inside, large, wriggling creatures flailed over one another. Their bodies were a grape reddish purple, and little thorns stuck out on their side. Araminta jumped back.

“Nah, nah, nah. They’re mostly hahm-less. Just a bunch of worms.” The man said, waving his hand again to get Araminta closer.

“Those are worms?” Araminta said, her eyes growing big and cautious.

“A yeah. Blood worms mostly. Few sandworms too.” He pulled out a large string of flesh and nestled it on his counter. He took away the pale and set it beside his feet. “Theah. Not too bad with just one now, eh?”

“Bloodworms?”

“Yessah. You can catch ‘em out there,” he said, pointing out the window to the mudflats, “dig up the unlucky ones in my claw. Sell em’ for a good price.”

Araminta nodded her head, feeling her heart thumping in her chest.

“Look at this!” the wormer said. He took his fingers—which were lined with dark sand under his fingernails—and began poking the creature sliding around his counter. “Little legs called parapodia on the sides. Help ‘em swim around in the salt water and dig through the dirt.” He poked the sharp thorns sticking on the sides. “Can’t live in freshwater, though.”

Suddenly, an exploding, peach red member shot out from the worm. It slapped against the hard wood, then slunk back into the body. Araminta let out an exasperation. The man began laughing.

“Yep. Got it pissed. That was the mouth. Got foah coppah teeth that like to bite.”

“Copper? You mean, real metal?” Araminta said.

“Yeah! Got some venom too. They shoot out, bite, and poison whatever they try to eat. Maybe smallah worms? But the venom liquifies the insides so the worm can slurp it up.” The man mimicked the sound with his throat and lips.

Araminta felt her stomach turn, tasting acidic saliva in the back of her throat. She watched the man poke the worm again, and saw the proboscis shoot for his fingers.

Behind Araminta, she could feel Robyn emerge through the door. She looked back at Robyn saw a horrified look on her face; as if Robyn had seen a ghost or witnessed a gruesome sight. Her green eyes were overcome by large pupils, and small trickles of moisture gathered underneath her lower eyelids.

“You just about ready?” Robyn said, her voice shaking. Araminta scrunched her face, silently asking Robyn if she was okay. Robyn shifted her eyes from Araminta, the wormer, and the frenzied worm squirming in the man’s hand. Robyn didn’t answer Araminta, but she turned around on her heels and opened the pale, cracking wooden door of the shop.

“We want to beat the storm coming in.” Robyn said. She stepped out of the shop and turned her head, her face beckoning Araminta away from the wormer.

Araminta turned to the man with a smile.

“Thank you for showing me the worms. I really appreciate it.”

“Not at all, deah. Come back again soon!”

Araminta stepped away, past Robyn, and out the exit. Robyn hesitated at the door, staring with intent at the blood worm, then turned and walked to her car.

“Everything okay?” Araminta said as they crawled into the vehicle.

“Fine, fine.” Robyn said, “Just a bit scared of worms, that’s all. Totally irrational, but still.” Robyn’s voice trailed off as she peeled out of the drive way and back onto the main road that curved around the flats.

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By the time the two women returned to Sanguichor, the wind had turned into a fury. When Robyn entered the gravel pathway to Araminta's camp, the black waves of Raven Pond slapped against the moss-covered stones with aggressive intent. Above them, the clouds were rolling and switching forms, blocking out any rays of sunlight.

In the tree lines, a stained white clothesline stretched from a giant oak, to the lowest point of the cabin roof. As the weather blew the ground and air, Araminta watched her clean clothes—which she had hung up the day previously—bat back and forth, mimicking the dancing leaves around them.

“Wind sure picked right up!” Robyn said, noticing the flailing summer dresses and tank tops. Both women witnessed clothes pin unhinge: undergarments flurried in twirls and were carried into the dark water of the lake.

“Shit!” Araminta said, stabbing her hands at the seatbelt button and unhooking herself from the interior. Robyn removed her own restraint and opened the car door.

“Minty! I can get the stuff from the water! Go get the rest of your clothes off the line!”

Araminta, already rushing to the water, turned her head and yelled over her shoulder, “I'm not going to let you wade into the water just to get my clothes! It's fine! If you don't mind, could you get the pinned stuff.”

Robyn sprinted to Araminta and gripped her arm. The similar look of worry that Araminta saw on Robyn's face at the wormer's shack was back.

“I can get them, Araminta! Please, you don't need to get in the water! It was my idea to go to the shops today. Let me! Please!” Robyn said, her voice a shade of desperation.

Araminta shook free from Robyn's grip and shook her head. “Don't worry about it Robyn! I got it!”

Before Robyn could grab her again, Araminta galloped to the shore and splashed into the cold, dark lake.

Araminta kicked into the tide, her sneakers immediately filling with cool, fresh water. She could feel her toes slide against each other and squish against the thickened support of fabric. She grabbed a purple thong from a reed, a pair of Spiderman boxer briefs from a jagged rock, and two cheeky panties that whirlpooled past a metal dock beam. As she lifted her clothes from the water, she could feel the energy of the waves pushing against her bare legs. Soaking cloth drenched her blouse, sticking cotton and polyester on her skin.

Araminta waded back with large steps back to the shore. But something caught her eye. In her peripheries, she could see Robyn stare at her with a horrified expression. *Is Robyn afraid of large bodies of water too?* Araminta thought. But trailing from that thought, Araminta could see in her direct vision, a writhing entity in the sandy dune of the lake. Her mind absent, Araminta crept closer to where the movement was.

“Araminta, come back here! Please!” Robyn shouted. But to Araminta, her voice seemed miles away.

In the rocky sand, a spiked worm—matte with a dull purple red, wriggled violently. Araminta, in her confusion, dropped her fingers to the creature. She didn’t touch the annelid, but let her appendages fall close to the body.

In a flash of wind, Araminta saw the proboscis shoot from the worm. Four miniscule teeth clamped down hard on her middle finger. At once, pain shot through Araminta’s hand and arm. She let out a yowl of agony.

Before Araminta knew it, Robyn was standing over her, overwhelmed fear dripping off her face.

## Chapter 10

A drop of blood pooled on Araminta's finger, then slid down her skin. It wrestled with gravity, but succumbed to a fall. Crimson blots, tiny—barely seen—splattered on the bloodworm.

Robyn reached her arm over Araminta's shoulder, and clamped down hard on the wriggling creature in the sand. She dashed her hand in her pocket, and towered over Araminta.

While the wound on her finger was beginning to clot, Araminta could feel a light-headed rush tip-toe up her neck and into her skull. Her hand seemed to throb with an important weight—her fingers clenching into her palm and then twisting open in relief. She shook her head, but the emptiness of the space entering her mind kept crawling up to the grooves of her temples.

“Was that a bloodworm?” Araminta said, her voice light and beginning to lose breath.

Robyn gripped onto Araminta's shoulders and began to pull her up from the waves. The bundle of clothes in Araminta's arms fell back into the water. “Let's get you out of here.” Robyn said, her voice straining and shaking.

“No,” Araminta said, partly to herself, “the man said bloodworms can't be in fresh water.”

Robyn looked at the lake. The turning waves seemed to sing a song of omen.

“Come on, hun.” Robyn said. “You look exhausted. Been a long day, you know.”

“My clothes.” Araminta said, her eyes becoming heavy. She could feel her head grow hot, but her body began to shiver and shake with cold bursts. Her voice began to slur, almost as if her brain was beginning to shut down.

“Let's get you inside. Take a nap.” Robyn ushered Araminta out of the water and towards the cabin. “I'm going to take your keys now, okay?”

Araminta felt Robyn pull at her side, but the swaying motions of their walk were beginning to make her nauseous. She felt a warm drum bang behind the spheres of her eyes; moisturized saliva gathered in the back of her throat; and a toppling of her setting moved back and forth as if on a pendulum. *Am I allergic?* She thought to herself, her own thoughts elongating and mixing up in whirlpools of garbling.

Robyn opened up the house and used her weight to keep Araminta from crashing to the floor.

“Come on, dear.” Robyn said, leading Araminta into the bedroom. She lowered Araminta to the sleeping bags still scattered on the floor. Araminta slumped down as if she no longer had bones. Her eyes closed, and a spittle of drool bubbled on the corner of her lips.

As Araminta passed out, Robyn turned around and shut the door behind her. She reached into her dry pocket, and dialed Beatrice’s number.

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### *A Brief Moment with Robyn and Beatrice*

Finally seeing the inside for the first time, Robyn could imagine how lonesome it could be to inhabit a place with nowhere to prop up her feet. Robyn’s pity for Araminta grew, but was swiftly snuffed out when she felt the motionless lump soaking up her pocket.

Before Beatrice could open the door to Araminta’s cabin, she could already taste the change of the lake. But she still had her doubts.

She entered the cabin to Robyn folding wet clothes over the kitchen counter.

“Show it to me.” Beatrice said, her voice lowered, but not reaching the level of a whisper.

Robyn scooped her hand from her pocket and brought out the bloodworm—now slightly crushed by her actions—and outstretched the creature for Beatrice to see. Beatrice squinted her eyes, took out her reading glasses, and pinched the worm between her fingers.

Next to the flattened head, a strange crimson mark etched the skin of the annelid. It swooped in coils towards each broken leg, and rounded into an arrow towards the entrance of the proboscis.

“It can’t be her.” Robyn said, gritting her teeth and looking at Beatrice with wide, scared eyes. “Please don’t tell me it’s starting again!”

Beatrice put her finger up to Robyn to quiet her talking. “She has the symptoms, right?”

Robyn nodded with reluctance.

Beatrice stared at the bloodworm for a moment, then took a small jar from her purse. A brown cork plugged the opening of the bottle. Beatrice pulled the stop loose, letting a *pop* out into the air. She placed the worm into the container, then closed the mouth once more.

“Show me the woman.”

Robyn pulled at the knuckles on her fingers, then lead Beatrice to Araminta’s bedroom. They opened the door and peered inside. Araminta was still, except for her chest rising and falling. Beatrice walked over to her side and felt the top of her face. Blasting heat came from her forehead. Beatrice slid her fingers to Araminta’s shallow-breathing chest. Colder than the Atlantic.

She picked up Araminta’s limp hand and looked at her finger. Swollen, and marked with a mole of crusted blood.

Beatrice turned around and left the room, closing the door behind her with a soft *click*. She motioned for Robyn to follow her into the living room.

“Well?” Robyn said, beginning to rip dry skin from her nails. Beatrice nodded her head.

“Unfortunately she has been picked.”

Robyn blinked a few times, turned, and bustled towards the window. Outside, the lake was dancing with feverish intent.

“They’ll need to be persuaded to stay now.” Beatrice said, taking out a pair of black lace gloves from her bag. She eyed them, desperately wanting to cut the gloves in small pieces. But she knew she couldn’t. Knew the risk of meddling with legacy. Beatrice fingered the gloves onto her hands.

“That will be your job. Make sure they stay.” Beatrice said once the lace wrapped around her wrists.

Robyn stood at the window and spoke through the glass, “No. I refuse.”

“You must,” Beatrice said, “you know the consequences better than anybody. You’re closer to her. Use your charm. Get her to stay.”

Robyn turned from the window, her face scrunched with burdens and a dangerous realization of the peril they would need to encounter. She gave a slight movement to demonstrate Beatrice her understanding.

“Good.” Beatrice said, walking towards the entrance of the home. “We’ll need to do this delicately. But swiftly. Leave a note. Say she fell ill and you gave her some allergy meds. I don’t care, create something for him to see. Clean up the place like a good friend would, then leave before he gets home. You’ll start the process tomorrow while she rests.”

Robyn walked Beatrice towards the door, but didn’t dare look up at the older woman. She could feel her own memory of pain throbbing.

Beatrice turned and looked upon Robyn with intense eyes. “You will keep me informed of every move that is made. Nothing must go unreported.” She stepped out the house, and onto the stone driveway with intense grinds of her heels.

Robyn closed the door, and began to gather Araminta’s clothes.

## Chapter 11

Awakening from her slumber, Araminta felt the blood in her head pulsing with the beat of her heart. *Thump, Thump. Thump, Thump.* It felt hot against the insides of her ears. She brought her palm up to cup and suction any air that intruded in her auditory canal, but the beating kept drumming: *Thump, Thump. Thump, Thump.*

Araminta rose up from the blankets on her floor, and suddenly heard a new sound coming from the distance; a nonchalant twisting of the front door knob—a sound she was beginning to notice in this abode. With a heavy head, Araminta crawled from her space and opened her bedroom entrance. She squinted her sensitive eyes out from the frame and watched as Andrew shuttered himself into the lake house.

“Hey,” he said while kicking off his shoes.

Araminta blinked a few times, her eyelids scratching away the glare of the mid-afternoon light filtering in through the room.

“Crazy storm on the way driving back,” Andrew continued, “must have been going fifteen under on the highway.” He placed a few reusable bags next to the counter; knickknacks and Andrew’s newly purchased selection of wall fixtures peeked out from the cheap fabric.

“Oh?” Araminta said, her voice parched and aching for something to drink. She reached up with her right hand to touch her forehead. It was warm on her palms, but she was sure it wasn’t indicative of a fever. Araminta walked into the kitchen area and looked at the countertop. Her clothes, which had been drenched by the lake water earlier, were dry and folded with crisp lines.

“Hmm,” she said, “did you just get home?” She could hear her voice crack, like the words had been surgically stitched together with faint thread.

Andrew turned to look at her, a wrinkle of confusion upon his brow. “You just watched me come in, Minty.” He walked over to where she stood, and placed his own hand on the laundry, using it as support. The once crisp lines crinkled underneath his touch. “You feeling okay? You look pale as all hell.”

Araminta shook her head. “I feel hungover,” she said, trying to remember the last thoughts she had before passing out in their room, “I think I had an allergic reaction to something.”

Andrew pressed his other hand to her forehead. His soft palms felt slightly cooler on her skin, and Araminta could smell the lingering traces of his musky cologne on his wrist. It brought her a slight sense of calm—like the memory of when he first held her on their second date, outside of an apple orchard. But Araminta could taste a new sensation at the root of her tongue: a tang of anxiety ringing around her own wellbeing; like a soft warning.

“Did you touch or eat anything different today?” He said. Andrew lowered his hand down to the crooks of her neck and brought her closer to his figure.

Araminta leaned into him, feeling his shirt buttons press to her cheek. A flash of the bloodworm poked into her head. She pulled away from Andrew’s soft embrace and rubbed her tired eyes with the points of her fingers.

“You ever hear about bloodworms?” She said, her throat dry.

“Random...but no.”

“I think one bit me today.”

“Uh, okay...” he paused, “what exactly are they supposed to be?”

Araminta cleared her throat. Andrew walked to the sink of the kitchen, took out a plastic cup from a pile on the counter, and filled it up with cold tap water. He slid it over to Araminta, who took a few sips before telling him about her day with Robyn.

“The last thing I can remember is Robyn essentially dragging me in here while I stumbled around.”

Andrew furrowed his eyes and chewed on the inside of his mouth. “She didn’t think to call me or anything?” Araminta noticed his voice was deep and seemed to roll like gravel out his mouth.

“How could she? She doesn’t have your number. I doubt she’d want to be known as someone who goes through other peoples’ phones either.”

Andrew clenched his jaw. “It sounds like it was emergency. I think we could have overlooked it.”

Araminta thought for a moment in silence, then cleared mucus from the base of her lungs. “She probably thought it would be an invasion of privacy. I don’t blame her. If anything, she probably stuck around for some time to make sure I was okay, then left when I got better.”

“Still—”

“She did the laundry,” Araminta interrupted, pointing down at the now-ruffled clothes tipping over onto the sideboard, “I’m grateful she was around. I’m still going to thank her next time I see her.”

Andrew rolled his eyes and followed Araminta’s pointed finger. He reached down under a plush dish towel and pinched a piece of paper from under the weight of the stacked items.

“Look at this.” He unfurled the parchment and read it for a few moments, then passed the message into Araminta’s outstretched hand. Araminta glazed over the writing with her awakening eyes:

*Hey Minty!*

*You got a little sick after being bit by a worm in the lake. No worries! It happens! Sometimes our bodies go in shock over the littlest of things. I took the liberty of re-washing and drying your clothes—I hope you don’t mind! I felt so bad about what happened, and I thought this might help take some stress off your shoulders. I also went down to the market after I felt you were okay and bought some soup. Get some broth into you! You probably feel real dehydrated. Take it easy for the rest of the night. I’ll stop by tomorrow and bring you a surprise! Tell Andrew I say hi!*

*<3 Robyn*

Araminta folded the piece of paper with care, and slid it back over to the towel. She brought her tired look back up to Andrew. “See?”

Andrew cocked his head to his shoulder and scrunched the corners of his mouth. “Fine,” he said, “but I still think it would’ve been nice to call me today.”

“Well then ask for her number next time we see her.”

“Maybe I will!” Andrew said, a small smirk beginning to stretch across his face. He turned his back to Araminta and went to one of the cabinets. He opened up the latch with a small *squeak* from the older brackets and peered inside the pantry shelves. Lo and behold, Robyn had stacked a variety of soups on the shelves next to blue and white boxes of Saltine crackers. Andrew opened up the door for Araminta to see.

Araminta smiled. *I really like Robyn*, she thought.

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The next afternoon, Araminta heard knocking on her door once again. In her bare feet, she padded to the front of the house, a spoonful of peanut butter in her mouth.

“Coming!” she said, her maw sticking with the sweet and salty paste. She swung the door open with a gentle pull and saw Robyn there with Falline, the latter’s face smiling with soft wrinkles etching out towards her ears.

Araminta smacked the peanut butter a bit more, feeling slightly embarrassed. “Oh, hi Falline,” she said between thick *slurps* of peanut butter and saliva, “I’m so sorry, I thought Robyn was just coming over so I thought I could grab a quick snack.”

Falline gave a small laugh, “Happens to us all. I thought I should pop over. See how you were doing after yesterday.”

Araminta looked at Robyn, who gazed up from the porch steps with a kind look. The women exchanged a silent conversation with their eyes.

“I told Falline about what happened,” Robyn finally said, “she’s used to be a nurse over at the family practitioner’s.”

Araminta concealed her peanut butter spoon in her pocket once it was licked clean. “Makes sense. Thank you, by the way! For taking care of me and my clothes.” She said towards Robyn. Araminta noticed the women were all still outside, so she brushed imaginary dirt off her thighs, and opened the door a bit further. “Come on in if you like!”

“We won’t have time for that,” Robyn said, taking a step down from the porch, “we’re going to be bringing in your furniture.”

Araminta must have shown a peculiar face, as Robyn returned back to her original spot on the stairs and reached over to touch Araminta’s shoulder. The touch made Araminta jump, but she leaned into Robyn’s hand and followed her tug. She walked out of the door frame and let

Robyn guide her gaze. Up by the beginning of the driveway, a small U-Haul trailer was backing up, pushed by a small, black truck.

“What’s this?” Araminta said, looking between the women.

“Word may have gotten around that you weren’t feeling great,” Robyn said, giving an apologetic look to Araminta, who shot a frantic look back at her, “so I asked Steph yesterday to do us a favor and grab your furniture for you that way you didn’t have to wait.”

Araminta’s mouth dropped a bit lower than she wanted, so she covered her face with her left hand. “Robyn,” she said, “this is too much. I mean, thank you for doing all of this, but I can’t imagine the amount of trouble you went through with the store—”

Robyn interrupted Araminta by bringing her in closer to her body. Araminta could smell lavender in her hair, which made her breath soften.

“Don’t worry about it, Minty!” Robyn said. “It’s what neighbors do.” Her voice whispered next to Araminta’s neck. Araminta felt a breeze dance down her spine and pin prick goosebumps on her skin.

Falline peeked her head through the mainframe of the house. “Is Andrew home by any chance?”

Araminta pulled away from Robyn and glanced back inside her house. “Yeah, he’s off on the weekends. He’s probably in the basement doing some packing.”

“He deserves a day off,” Falline said, “we’ve all seen him leaving every day for work. Must be tired all the time. You go get him and you two can sit down while we do everything here.”

Araminta stared at her in disbelief as Steph's vehicle pushed the trailer closer to the home. Robyn moved away from Araminta and back down to where Steph was drawing nearer to the porch. The left-side window rolled down:

"Robyn, you're supposed to be guiding me!" Steph's strained voice called out.

"Coming!" Robyn jumped down and used her arms to guide the movement of Steph's backed-up truck. Araminta watched them until Falline tapped her on the shoulder.

"Go get Andrew. We got it from here." Falline's slender arms beckoned Araminta into the house. As soon as she stepped into the cool shadows of her doorway, Falline walked away and stood next to Robyn.

Araminta rushed over to the door leading to the basement, and swung it open with a little more force than necessary. "Andrew!" she yelled down the stairs. A moment passed before she heard his voice:

"What?" He said, his voice carrying off in the distance.

"You better come up here. Our neighbors are going crazy!" she yelled back.

Soon, Araminta heard the thumping of his footsteps land on the platforms of the stairs. A stark look of bewilderment drenched his face. He looked at Araminta, who could only point at the front of the driveway, unable to voice another word. Andrew brushed past her, his body becoming like a tower against the landscape of their barren home. Araminta followed close behind, peering around Andrew's shoulders to see if the other women had yet entered their domain.

Andrew got a step outside before seeing Steph turn around the trailer and whip the metal door open up with a loud *clang*.

"Holy shit, they're forcing us to move." He said, his voice incredulous.

Falline laughed, turning around to look at him. “No sweetie.” She walked back up the stairs and put her own hand on his shoulders. He looked down at her soft touch, unable to comprehend the change of attitude. “We’re helping you move in.” She said, rubbing her thumb in small circles before releasing her nimble grasp on him, and returning to the women below.

Andrew and Araminta shared a look, first looking down at his touched shoulder, then back towards each other.

*What the fuck?* He mouthed. Araminta shook her head.

“Move...please.” Steph said in a huffing tone, carrying one end of a heavy cardboard box, her neck stretching to see over her right shoulder. Robyn stood at the other end, her arms shaking a bit with the weight in her hands. Andrew and Araminta jumped aside, watching the figures of Robyn and Steph disappear into the house.

“What’s going on?” Andrew said, turning to Araminta.

“They got the furniture that I ordered yesterday.”

A loud *thud* shook the inside of the house, followed by Robyn’s voice. A few moments, and both she and Steph walked out back into the daylight towards the trailer. Andrew followed close behind, but was soon halted by another one of Falline’s gentle touches.

“Why don’t you and Araminta go back inside. We’ve got it out here. I took the liberty of grocery shopping for you guys. My treat! I’ll go grab ‘em and then you two can put it away just how you like it.”

She ushered the pair back into the house, before Araminta or Andrew could protest. Her perfume wafted in Araminta’s nose once again, and Araminta felt her mind go numb for a second. But as soon as Araminta shook her head back to what was going on around her, Falline left her side and was replaced by Steph and Robyn carrying a large mattress through the opening

of the house. And as the womanly neighbors took over moving the furniture and stocking the empty pantries of the lake house, Araminta couldn't help but feel just a little bit relieved.

Overwhelmed, and annoyed with pride, but thankful all the same.

## Chapter 12

Stunned by the sudden generosity of their neighbors, Araminta and Andrew watched as Robyn, Falline, and Steph carried new furniture into the now hopeful lake house. The couple, in their confusion, often tried to help mitigate the heavy loads; offering to hold one side of a sofa or navigate the awkward instructions of bedframe assembly. However, their proposals for assistance was often denied. Always with a smile.

Once, as Steph was drilling into the bedframe with a yellow, cordless hand drill, Andrew had stooped down low to see if he could hold the back rest sturdy while Steph secured a nail bit in place.

“Get out,” she said, more sternly than her counterparts, “I’ve got it. Go relax or some shit.” Although Steph’s tone of voice was harder and more curt than the soft protests echoing from Falline and Robyn, Andrew and Araminta appreciated Steph’s blunt attitude. The couple felt a sense—even if it was only minute—a sense of normalcy amongst this bizarre turn of events.

“Forgive her,” Robyn said, overhearing the encounter as Andrew left the room, “she’s a one track mind.” Robyn gave a brief glare at Steph, then returned to helping Falline improve the look of the living room.

“We really appreciate all of this!” Araminta said. The intruding sound of the drill hummed louder in the background. “But you’ve already done so much. Almost too much. We can take over now. It’s our place!”

Falline shouted over the drill, “Don’t worry about it! It’s the least we can do.”

Araminta and Andrew gave each other a worried look and continued to watch, helplessly, as their lake home was filled by items Araminta had picked out, but was not granted to place.

Soon, dusk had reared its head over the currents of Raven Pond, and the interior of the house was stocked with food, furniture, and the tired bodies of the strange women.

“Bed’s done,” Steph said, packing up her tools and walking towards the door, “enjoy.” Her voice was lowered and mixed with a feeling that Araminta could not put a word to. Falline stretched her arms out and touched the couple’s shoulders.

“We’ll talk soon! But please find time to settle down tonight.” She patted Araminta on the cheek, then followed Steph out the door.

Robyn maneuvered her way around the fresh sectional sofa and drew close to Araminta’s side.

“Beatrice and Corlee wanted to be here,” she began, looking at Araminta, “but they had some errands to run. Bea wanted me to ask if you’d stop by Monday at noon. She’d like to start things over with you.” Robyn turned her head to look at Andrew. “Sorry, she’s not available to do it during the weekends.”

“That’s alright,” Andrew said. He sounded tired and relieved all at once. “I’m sure Minty will fill me in.”

Araminta faced away Robyn, and gave a short, alerted glance.

“Will you be able to make it, Minty?” Robyn said, some hope in her voice.

Araminta returned to Robyn’s soft face and said, “Yeah. Sure. Sounds like a blast.”

Robyn gave a small chuckle. She placed her hand around Araminta’s waist, drew closer, and kissed her on the cheek. Araminta jumped again, but didn’t reel away from the sign of intimacy. Although she had never felt that kind of affection from a stranger, she felt something in the pit of her stomach that suggested she and Robyn were no longer unfamiliar with each other.

As Andrew and Araminta watched the last of the women exit their driveway in Steph's black truck, they turned to each other with wild eyes and surprised expressions.

"What the fuck was that?" Andrew said, shaking his head. He exited the house, and walked towards the dock by the lake. Araminta watched his gait kick small pebbles towards the water, like a small beat set to Andrew's own internal drumbeat. He neared the platform—hovering above the lake on metallic stilts—but didn't step onto the small precipice.

Araminta felt goosebumps trickle down her body once more. In the glow of the setting star, hovering just above the water, Andrew was basked by lava-orange light. Araminta looked at him up and down and laughed to herself. She tilted her head and felt that Andrew looked like he was in an oven; the dark trees like a shadowed pit, the sun a flame baking his pored skin.

She walked closer to him, and shielded her eyes from the reflection of the dipping day.

"How did they go from hating me—us—then setting up our whole living set?" Andrew turned around. The refraction from the sun to the water bounced through his hair setting it aglow. "It doesn't make sense."

Araminta paused on his words, but still crept closer to him. She placed her arms around his torso, taking in his soft breathing. He reached his arms over her shoulders. After a few beats, she pulled away from the embrace and stepped onto the dock. She felt the boards beneath her feet shift and rock between her movements and of the deepening current below. She turned around and stared at Andrew still standing upon the grassy knolls of the shore. She watched as he took in her sight. She often wondered if he had deep thoughts about her, like she did of him. Would he see an oven behind her, or something else? More profound, more intimate. But Araminta knew that Andrew's mind didn't work like hers—lacked the creative and sensitive

nature that those in her profession were often mocked for. Even still, she felt a *twing* of curiosity of selfishness. Would Andrew think she was beautiful in this light, like she had thought him?

*Or worse, her darker mind creeping in like a haunted stream, would he never find me beautiful enough to think about in any such way, regardless of lighting?*

Araminta flexed her nostrils to shoo away the intrusive voice.

“Maybe they felt bad,” she finally said, breaking the seemingly long silence between them, “decided to overdo it on the kindness to make up for what they’ve said and done in the past?”

Andrew shuffled his feet in the dirt. “Maybe. I just find it strange, that’s all.”

“Yeah.” Araminta said. She took in a deep breath and let out a sigh. “But at least we have a bed again.”

Andrew smiled and walked closer to the dock. He stepped up onto the metal placements and made his way to where Araminta stood.

“Thank god,” he said, drawing her closer. She pressed her body up against him, feeling the flicker of excitement in her chest. He reached down and kissed her lips while she reached under his shirt to touch the warm skin of his lower torso.

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### *A Quick Peek at the Women of Raven Pond*

On the brief car ride back to her house, Robyn’s smile turned into a stern, worried look.

“You need to be nicer to them,” she said, turning to Steph in the driver’s seat. She felt Falline tense in the back.

“I did nice,” Steph said, “I made their fucking bed. I never had to do that with you.” She quickly met Robyn’s eyes before turning her attention to the long dirt road.

“You were short with them. At least try to control your tone.” Robyn said, rolling her eyes.

“I shouldn’t have to control my voice. I’m sick of this bullshit.”

Falline cleared her throat and fixed a loose strand of hair behind her ears. “We’ve got to at least make sure they stick around. I get the feeling he gets a little bit flighty.”

“Good,” Steph said, “let ‘em run.”

“You know we can’t,” Robyn said, her eyes turning worrisome. She let out a whisp of breath, “it’d be dangerous.”

Steph squeezed the steering wheel harder and bit her tongue with the back of her molars. “As if I don’t know that.” She scowled.

Silence returned to the inside of the car. The clicking of the rocks underneath the truck and empty trailer *tinged* against the metal framework.

“I’m just saying,” Robyn said, breaking the silence, “it wouldn’t hurt to get to know them. Make them feel welcome and secure here.”

Steph pressed on her brake, and turned the vehicle to the side of the road. She pushed the parking gear up near her steering wheel and shifted her body to face the others. She took deep breaths in, her eyes beginning to shift the pupils between large and normal.

“It does hurt.” Steph said, enunciating every word. She found the rare calm in the harshness of her voice. “Every time. We get to know them, then say goodbye. Just like that,” she snapped her fingers, “so forgive me if I’m putting some space between this one.”

Steph stared harder at Robyn, one hand still clutching firmly on the wheel. “I took care of you. *I* welcomed you in.” Steph said, watching as Robyn dropped her eyes to the middle of the consol. Steph shifted her head lower to try and regain the contact, her sight bearing down at the side of Robyn’s cheekbones.

“I got closer to you. It was my turn. Now it’s yours.” Steph turned away and put the truck in drive once more. She pressed down on the gas and began driving down the road again. “You get to be the bubbly girl next door. I do my part, so let me finish it the only way I can. You concentrate on your fucking tasks and worry less about what I’m doing or not doing.”

Falline turned to face the window. She reached up to her face and pressed a finger to her lower lash line and caruncle. Robyn clenched her jaw and turned away from Steph, feeling a heat rise to her temples and sinuses.

Steph shook her head. “Now let’s take back this fucking trailer before I get a late fee.”

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### *Returning to Araminta*

That Monday morning, Araminta woke up with blood between her legs. It smeared itself all over the dimples on her inner thigh and soaked into the fitted sheet. She scrambled off the bed to inspect the large, red surface left behind.

“Fuck! Shit!” She said, grabbing the blankets from the mattress and piling them on the floor beside her. Andrew stirred, his eyes still adjusting to the peeking morning sun. He turned over, grabbed his phone, and checked the time. His alarm had yet to ring.

“What’s going on?” He said, his voice deep with slumber.

“I think I just started my period,” Araminta said, “it got all over the brand new sheets.”

Andrew wiped his eyes, turned his face to where Araminta was sleeping, and looked down at the clotting stain. He cleared his throat, sniffed a little mucus in his nose, and then took a deep breath.

“Soak ‘em in cold water, right?” He got up, stretched, then began placing his pillows onto the floor. He then reached down to lift the corners of the fitted sheet from the new mattress.

“I hope it didn’t soak through to the protector,” Araminta said, lifting her corners up off the bed. A red pool, dark in its vibrancy, stared back at her. She could feel trickles of thick, warm liquid ooze out from her PJ shorts and down her leg.

“Goddamn it.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Andrew said, his voice pleading with a calm tone, “I got it. Go and get washed up. I can take care of these.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, no worries. If it touched the mattress I’ll just pour some hydrogen peroxide on it and let it sit.”

“We don’t have any,” Araminta said.

“Yeah we do,” Andrew said, lifting the white, rough cloth off the mattress, “Falline bought some for us.”

The two of them let out a silent sigh, then proceeded to strip the blood from their prospective duties.

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On her reluctant way over to Beatrice’s, Araminta thought about the last time she had menstruated—she stopped just as May was born. But the start of her last cycle began before she had to defend her thesis. In the latter part of March. And it had lasted right up until a week after

she graduated. Araminta had hoped she'd have more time before another shed had pulled at her uterus.

Araminta was one of the unlucky few who suffered cysts on her ovaries and overgrowing endometrium, where the results were long bouts of menstruation, then longer droughts of paranoia. She wondered how long this period would last.

Araminta stopped in her tracks. *Aren't my periods usually triggered by stress or trauma?* she thought to herself. Her mind flashed to a memory of being locked in one of her thesis advisor's rooms, the stench of his cramped office a mixture of hard-boiled egg and burnt coffee. How his raging anger tantrums tore apart her essays with impunity. With hatred. Imbued a sense of self-loathing for her writing and interpretations that still lingered within Araminta's mind.

Araminta pushed the scene back into her brain and slapped the sides of her cheeks until she felt she was back in control. Araminta grabbed the side of her hip and took in a deep breath of air, then continued on her trek to Beatrice's camp.

She wished this period wasn't going to be another long deluge.

The walk to Beatrice's home was only a short distance. As Beatrice had mentioned on their first encounter, she was only a stone throw away, completely able to see who drove down the gravel path to Andrew's lake house. And as Araminta took the left turn onto the older woman's property, she could see why the other neighbors gravitated towards Beatrice.

Her house was large for a true Maine lakeside property. It's white walls were pasted with carefully placed stones, and the matte red roof was trimmed with stained wood. Intricate, decorated, hanging potted plants dotted the wrap-around porch that reminded Araminta of a magazine cover. And Beatrice's driveway was lined with blooming yellow and pink tulips buried in ground bark mulch.

But what surprised Araminta the most was not the size or style of the nice house. It was the line of cars parked carefully in the wooded driveway. Araminta spotted Robyn's small Sudan and Steph's black truck; but directly in front of the attached, white garage door was a green, open Jeep with multi-colored beads hanging from the rearview mirror.

Araminta took a look at the cars, and suddenly felt claustrophobic. She felt an ambush was waiting for her.

After taking in the lines of cars, Araminta heard the soft barking of a dog drawing closer. She turned around and saw the excited Franny galloping over to where she was standing. Following not too far behind, Robyn made her way, a slight breeze billowing her purple dress around her.

"Hey Franny!" Araminta said, bending down to scratch behind the dog's ears. Franny twirled in a circle around Araminta's legs and placed her head on Araminta's foot. She leaned her head into Araminta's fingers.

"Thought we saw you coming in," Robyn said, reaching for Araminta. Araminta, half-expecting the embrace, let Robyn's long arms hang around her neck. She smelled of bright florals and sweet clementine.

"Is everyone here?" Araminta said, letting the embrace fall naturally. Robyn nodded and gave a small smile.

"Sorry about that," Robyn said, "I think Beatrice wanted everyone to start fresh. Feels a bit too much, huh?" She reached down and gave Franny a solid, yet soft, pat on the side of her body. Franny jumped up, and headed for the door.

"Come on," Robyn said, "I'll be right there with you."

The two women entered into the home, which smelled too much of expired Scentsy wax. Robyn removed her sandals from her feet, and wiggled her yellow-painted toes. Araminta, following her lead, bent down and undid her gladiators, and placed them next to the pile of shoes accumulated by the entrance.

Inside the home, the pearl panted walls were splotted with spiral candle holders and pictures of sepia painted fruits. Falline and Corlee were standing in the kitchen, fingering carrots in a prepared ranch dip that smelled of dried dill.

“Hey Minty!” Falline said, orange tendrils munched between her teeth. “How’s everything at your place?”

“Oh, great!” Araminta said, feeling her mouth curve into a nervous smile. “I can’t thank you enough for your help.”

“Don’t mention it, hon!” Falline said. She took another bite of carrot.

Corlee gave a small nod, and looked down at a half-chewed piece of celery. “Hi Araminta,” she said, her voice quiet like the falling of snowflakes. “How you doin’?”

“I’m good...Corlee, right?” Araminta said.

“Um, yep!” Corlee said, her smile growing a bit wider on her face. “I was worried you had forgotten.”

Araminta gave a slight, awkward chuckle, and painted the New England smile on her face. “How are you?” Araminta said. The sentence was long enough and seen as a proper greeting, prompting Corlee to nod her small head, shift her shoulders, and resume chomping the stringed celery that reached for her mouth. A proper answer in their rocky culture. Araminta felt relieved.

Robyn turned away from the kitchen and led Araminta through an arched hallway, which brought them to a large living room with a circular sectional sofa. On the couch, Beatrice sat, her legs tucked behind her bottom, while Steph and her watched the weather channel on a small touch screen in the former's hands.

When Robyn entered the room, Beatrice looked up, clicked her screen to black, and rose from her sitting position. Steph pushed her copper hair over her shoulders, but remained seated.

"Araminta," Beatrice said, coming closer. Her feet padded on the beige rug, her pink toes glistening with small rhinestones; "I'm so happy you could make it!"

Beatrice stood in front of Araminta, but without her shoes, came up to the bottom of Araminta's nose.

"Thanks for having me," Araminta said, "it was really thoughtful."

Steph looked away, out towards a slide door that faced the lake.

"Well, I wanted to extend an olive branch," Beatrice swallowed, "we didn't exactly get off on the right foot." She motioned for Araminta to sit on the couch, at which point Falline and Corlee shuffled in with their plates full of food.

Araminta gave an awkward laugh.

"Of course, it was no thanks to us," Beatrice said, bringing her pink nails up to her chest to tap on her wrinkled skin, "but you know how it is. New people and all."

Araminta gave the same laugh again. "Sure, sure."

"Well," Beatrice continued, "we wanted to introduce ourselves again. Reach out and invite you over more to get to know you better."

Corlee bit into a cucumber with a hard *snap*.

“Great!” Araminta said. Robyn sat beside her, letting Franny’s canine form fall at her feet.

“Where you from?” Falline said, taking a sip of a drink from a blue, glass cup.

Araminta told them all she came from the northern portion of the state; how she was recently graduated; and what Andrew did for work that allowed her take a needed summer break.

“I haven’t had much time off in years.” Araminta said. “Between thesis research, teaching first years, writing critical analyses on what I was reading in my own classes, and dealing with office politics,” Araminta’s voice trailed off, but a quick clench of her jaw drew her back in, “Andrew offered to take on the work responsibilities until the fall so that I could take a breather. It’s been different. But needed.”

“That’s so nice of him,” Steph said, her cheeks rising to meet her eyes. She gave a smirk, then returned her gaze to the sliding door.

“What Steph means,” said Falline, giving Steph a rotten look, “is that it’s nice to hear a guy letting his partner breathe a bit. It sounds like you went through the ringer up there.”

“Yeah, it was definitely challenging,” Araminta said, taking a breath, “but I know by fall I’ll be ready to go back into the fray and contribute my part in...everything.” She motioned towards the direction of her lake house.

“Well, take your time hun,” Beatrice said, “you’ll need it.”

The rest of the women stirred and adjusted their seats; except Steph, who took a long drink from her own cup.

After another few rounds of basic conversation, Robyn took out Franny towards the lake through the side door. Araminta watched her walk away, feeling lonely in the room once more.

“You know,” Corlee said, her voice still quiet, but more assertive in the presence of the women she knew best, “we have poker nights at each other’s places. You should come.” A strand of brown hair fell by her chin.

“Poker? I’d love to. We both love card games.” Araminta said.

Steph got up from the couch and back to the kitchen. Beatrice watched her walk away, then turned her attention back to Araminta.

“We?”

“Andrew and me?” Araminta said, a hint of questioning in her tone.

“Oh! Yes, yes,” Falline said, “but—no offense—we’re so used to ladies night.” She laughed.

Araminta nodded her head. “Oh, yeah. Course. I just figured—” she paused, then smiled again, “never mind.” She watched as the other women smiled back at her and grabbed at the food on their plates. “Do any of you have any partners or…” she let the sentence trail off as she noticed the shifting of the women again.

Corlee dropped a piece of cheese on her plate and turned stone face. Beatrice dipped her head down, then cleared her throat. Falline straightened her shoulders and let her French braid fall to her back.

“No.” Beatrice said with a direct distinction in her voice. “Just us gals.”

Araminta looked around, trying to study each of the women’s faces. Before Robyn returned, she figured something traumatic lurked behind each of their eyes. Something she didn’t want to press on. At least, not yet.

Robyn returned to the living room, and the conversation turned towards a different topic.

As numbers ticked away from the time, without warning, Araminta felt a *squelch* of cool ooze pool between her legs. She squeezed a Kegel and felt an over-saturated tampon push back at her muscles. A mucus-like sensation leaked out from her again.

“Oh no,” she said, lurching forward on the couch. Corlee jumped, staring up at her with terrified eyes.

Below, where Araminta sat, a developing circle of blood formed on the microfiber.

“I’m so sorry, Beatrice!” Araminta said, covering her butt with her hands. She could feel her panties stick to her skin with a cool, wet slickness.

The women looked at each other, and lifted themselves off the couch.

“Oh, sweetie,” Beatrice said, “it happens all the time. We all know what it’s like.”

Steph returned from the kitchen at the commotion, a bottle of red wine in her hands.

“She’s bleeding everywhere.” She said, no surprise in her voice.

Robyn reached for some napkins on the coffee table and began to dab the couch. Bright red and dull brown dotted the thick, white paper.

“Let me clean, it’s fine!” Araminta said, feeling a heat return to the sides of her temples. Her head felt heavy and full under the base of her eyes.

“We’ve got fabric cleaner for this very thing.” Beatrice said. She nodded towards Steph, who backed out to the kitchen for a few moments, then returned with a spray bottle. Steph pushed past Robyn and the embarrassed Araminta, and began to spray the area with large *squirts* of scented chemicals.

“I can’t tell you how many times its happened to me,” Falline said, taking over the napkins for Robyn. Robyn stood up, then took Araminta by the shoulders.

“Give her a cup.” Steph said under her breath, continuing to spray the area until the blood began to lift off the fabric.

“Right!” Robyn said, pushing Araminta to the bathroom. “We all stockpile supplies. You know, lake full of women. Would you happen to have a cup?”

Araminta looked at her with a puzzled look. “Like menstrual cup?”

“Yeah! We’ve got plenty lying around. Get ‘em couponing.”

Robyn entered the bathroom and opened a cabinet over a Maytag washer. She scrummaged around until she found a box with a clear cup centered in the middle of the package.

“You ever use one? Collects all your blood for a whole day, then you just dump it, rinse, and put it back up there. Works wonders if you’re going heavy.” Robyn looked down at Araminta’s pants, which were gaining a rust color near the back. “Get em’ heavy? We all do.”

“Really? They’ve always been heavy for me.”

Robyn stayed thoughtful for a few moments, then gave Araminta a warm smile.

“If you need help, let me know. But I can walk you home so you can get new clothes on and take it easy.”

Robyn washed her hands, then left Araminta alone to insert the chalice in her vagina.

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The sun was beginning to dip down to the late afternoon, and Araminta waddled next to Robyn’s side, desperately wanting to be back in the relative comfort of her new home. However, she felt the pull of curiosity stringing a cord in the bottom of her gut:

“Robyn,” she said, keeping a slow pace on the dirt road. Robyn stayed at her side, carefully watching Franny sniff and mark places in the woods. Araminta felt the cool liquid of

her pants meet her inner thighs. She continued with her question nonetheless: “I got the feeling that everyone back there...I don’t know...”

Robyn’s ears perked up as she listened.

“Like they have something against Andrew?”

Robyn stayed in silence, listening to the ruffling of leaves under Franny’s feet. Then, she took a deep breath, and said in a soft voice:

“Andrew reminds them...all of us,” she paused, clicking her lips together with a thin layer of controlled saliva, “of people we have lost.”

Araminta slowed down. “Lost?”

“Yeah. It’s funny...but we’ve all lost...men...in our life.” Robyn said, kicking a stone on the road. “It’s partly why we are so close knit. We’re all women with grief.”

“I’m so sorry,” Araminta said.

Robyn slowed down to Araminta and focused directly at her face.

“If you wouldn’t mind,” Robyn began, “I’d love to join your morning walks. Maybe even take you out on the lake. Show you the area. I feel like I can tell you what’s happened. To me. To all of us.”

Araminta returned Robyn’s attention with a soft, understanding smile. “I’m here for you.”

Robyn smiled back, then resumed walking with more speed. “Araminta?”

“Yeah?”

But Robyn didn’t need to finish her sentence. Araminta had a feeling she knew what Robyn wanted to say. Something personal and welcoming. Something that let her know that they crossed the threshold of a personal connection.

But what Araminta didn't know was that Robyn also meant there was pain too, lurking behind the silence after calling Araminta's name. And, perhaps, confusion. With something that tugged at Robyn that she didn't want to ever feel again. But such complexities Araminta couldn't read. Not just yet.

## Chapter 13

*The 1<sup>st</sup> of July, 1970*

*It's been some time, but I've finally gotten a chance to sit down and write. Let me tell you, it's been nothing but a whirl-wind here this past week. I mean, it's Kelly all day, taking care of Andy, and playing cribbage with the ladies at night.*

*Yes, I've been finding some time to get away with Abigail and the women around here. But it's been strange...Abigail's been nothing but sweet. Inviting me to go swimming all the time or have a spot of lunch by the water. I'd swear she was a fish if I didn't see her walk on two legs.*

*However, some of the other women are a bit...cautious (?) with me. I'm not sure of the word I'm feeling from them, but they just seem, oh, I don't know...guarded. Like at any moment they're about to drop a vase of flowers on the floor. Don't get me wrong: they're nice and very courteous. But sometimes it feels like they want me to stay away. Now, I've always been a New England gal, but these Mainers...Colder than the winters.*

*The 5<sup>th</sup> of July, 1970*

*Something strange happened yesterday during our BBQ. I was getting the sparklers out for the three of us while Andy started up the grill. Kelly was, of course, by her daddy. It was sweet looking up at them from the dock, watching the grill begin to smoke and sizzle in the breeze. I guess it was one of those rare moments where you can't help but think about how much you love a person. How beautiful they seem to you. It's funny, but I don't usually think about*

*those things. That's the kind of stuff you'd hear from Andy—always the more creative of the two of us. But I guess sometimes we all have to have those moments.*

*Oh, what am I thinking? Oh journal, sometimes I think funny things. I should really cross out these sentences when I get the chance—if I only believed in erasing my personal thoughts in you.*

*But back to what I was writing: I was trying to light a tip of one sparkler, when I foolishly tripped over a loose plank on the deck. Too busy thinking those asinine thoughts I guess. Burned the very top of my finger. So, I did what any sane woman would do and I went over to the edge of the dock to dip my hand into the water. And wouldn't you know it, I got bit.*

*I don't know what took the chance to bite me. Damn thing was too skinny to be a leech, but it sure packed a nice punch. As soon as it fell back into the water, I got incredibly dizzy. Not like me at all.*

*Andy thought I might have sipped too fast on my wine. But it goes to show he doesn't pay attention because I didn't drink at all yesterday. I think there was something in that little creature that gave me an adverse reaction. A big part of me wishes I had held onto the sucker. Probably could have dug out my old textbooks and seen what it was.*

*But I'm getting ahead of myself. I was so dizzy I had to lie down for the rest of the day. Didn't wake up until I heard the fireworks booming over the lake from Abigail's. I went outside and Andy had taken Kelly out in a canoe to watch the colors while rocking on the waves.*

*In a way, I felt a little alone. Just standing there on the shore while my family got to experience the magic of pyrotechnics.*

*The 6<sup>th</sup> of July, 1970*

*I told Abigail what happened the other day. About being bit by something in the water. She spent the whole afternoon asking me questions about the whole ordeal. But I kept trying to tell her it was just a bite and a bad reaction. Probably allergic or something. But Abigail says otherwise. She got kind of...excited about it. As if it was some good thing to spring up here.*

*The 13<sup>th</sup> of July, 1970*

*Abigail's been over here almost every day. She practically drags Beatrice over here too. I've noticed Beatrice looks at me different now. She used to have such hope in her eyes. I wonder if something happened to her?*

*Abigail's got all the women coming over too. It's as if they've all got ants in their pants, or some urgent need to be around me. One might say, journal, a sort of affection. Almost every morning I start my day by answering the door to someone bringing over muffins or a bringing over some coffee to sip on. Usually Abigail has Beatrice babysit the kids while the rest of us get connected and acquainted.*

*In all honesty, I'm liking the change. It feels good to be around people who don't want to drool on you or scream about their toys breaking. I do feel a little bad for Beatrice though. Seems like Abigail really wants her to abandon college and stay here on the lake. I hope Beatrice doesn't buckle on her dreams.*

*The 20<sup>th</sup> of July, 1970*

*Feeling a bit lonely recently. From Andy. The house is almost done, but it's not a home yet. He wakes up, leaves for work, comes back to build, then slumps into bed. I miss my husband. I know he works hard, but I just wish he'd take some time off the house to talk with me. Or just be in the same room as me for 10 minutes.*

*I know it's horrible to say, but I feel like my neighbors are less strangers to me than my husband. It makes me sad to write it. But I think it's true.*

# AUGUST 2018

## Chapter 14

Araminta woke up to the soft heat of a late summer morning. Andrew's body laid next to her, his arm draping over her bare torso; his own torridity seeping into her skin with drops of his sweat. Araminta turned her head and looked at his head, which arched to the opposite side of the room. With a gentle push, she removed his limb from her ribcage, and watched as his face moved back to looking at her. Little bristles of five-o'clock shadow sprouted in tiny wisps of copper down his jaw.

Araminta thought he was beautiful, lying here next to her. The way his hands, relaxed and posed carelessly on their sheets, popped teal veins between his knuckles. And his shoulders, reaching out from his neck, seemed like rolling hills with paths that she could trace her fingers on forever. Araminta thought to herself often how different their bodies were. His, long and narrow; hers, a mountain of bulges and hidden crevices. Sometimes, it made her nervous. Like the glares they got from strangers. She'd toss those intrusive thoughts away, but they'd always return when she remembered how intimate her looks at him could be.

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When Andrew had woken up, he joined Araminta on the couch, stealing a few dry cereal bits from her bowl.

"Hey!" she said, smiling at him crunching away at his stolen treasure. He winked back. His eyes trailed down to her feet, which were propped up against the new, wooden coffee table. Araminta saw his smile twist into thin lips. She knew he had spotted the small black book folded

down, spine up, resting alone with the inner thoughts of his late grandmother Araminta was reading last night.

“You’re still reading their journals?” He said, rolling his eyes. He got up from the sofa and padded into the kitchen. “Aren’t they boring?”

“Not at all,” Araminta said, “in fact, this latest entry I read last night makes me think something goes on here in the water.”

Andrew looked at Araminta with a contorted face, his eyes furrowed into slight annoyance.

Araminta took another bite of her cereal and continued through chews, “You’re grandmother was bitten by something too, and it made her pass out. Like she got an allergic reaction.”

Andrew snagged a mug out of the cupboard and filled it with cold milk. “Wow,” he said with disinterest, “it’s almost as if there might be leeches in the water.”

Araminta put down her bowl and picked up the book once more. “I’ve looked online,” she said, also taking out her phone, “and the only leeches in Raven Pond are found in a little strait that filters down into the lake that connects this body of water to another one a town over.”

“What, Lunar Lake?”

“You know about it?”

“I know about Lunar Lake,” Andrew said, taking a moment to sip a long drag of milk down his throat, “Mom used to say that my grandfather used to take her out in the canoe to the strait. Show her the shallow waters and pluck at the reeds to make whistles in their hands. He liked to show her where Lunar Lake was.”

Araminta leaned back into the sofa. “Is that a pond?” she said with sarcasm on her tongue.

Andrew smirked and shook his head. “Nah. That’s a lake too.”

“I still don’t get why our lake is called a pond.”

“No one does,” Andrew said, “but either way, are you sure leeches can’t get down to Raven?”

Araminta held out her phone, a website bright on her screen. “Come take a look. It says here that there are too many fish in our lake for leeches to survive; but they’re able to hide in the reeds in the strait.”

Andrew ignored Araminta’s outstretched hand and took the chair sitting across the room. He took another sip of milk. “Maybe a few get in here. Get by the fish. Too nippy or something. Probably why they cause reactions or whatever.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Araminta said, “how could swimming past fish be a sign they—”

“About the same sense as naming a lake after a pond.” Andrew interrupted, giving Araminta a side-eye that meant he wasn’t going to change his mind.

“I’m not dropping this!” Araminta said, getting frustrated with Andrew’s attitude, but still keeping a light-hearted tone. “Just because you think it’s a leech, doesn’t mean it was. It says here on the lake’s official page leeches can’t come into the larger portion of the water. I’m believing that over your skepticism.”

Araminta grabbed her bowl of cereal and strutted into the kitchen. She set down the dishes in the sink and turned back around to face Andrew. He turned around in the chair to face her change of direction.

“What else have you been reading in their journals?” Andrew said, clicking his mouth.

“Beatrice is in here,” Araminta said, “when she was just a little younger than us. Seemed way different back then than what she is now.” Araminta looked down at her hands resting on the counter. “She seemed to have some hope back then. Some...I don’t know. Maybe some notion of everything that wasn’t cloudy from being older.”

“What do you mean?” Andrew said.

“I don’t know,” Araminta sighed, looking up as she was trying to find the right words to describe what was in her head, “your grandmother wasn’t very descriptive. Kind of reminds me of you a bit.”

They both smirked and waited for Araminta to start again.

“But she wrote about Beatrice’s mother—and that woman seemed like a real piece. More intrusive than what Beatrice is now. Almost—prodding in a way. And back then, Beatrice didn’t have that in her. Just wanted to dream for herself. Just...leave here.”

Araminta stared down at her hands as she kept thinking about the passages in Andrew’s grandmother’s notes.

“It makes me feel a little bad for her. A little sad.”

Andrew scoffed, “What? For Beatrice? You’re kidding, right?”

“No. I’m not.” Araminta said, taking in a deep breath.

Andrew scratched his nose and blinked a few times. He swallowed hard and felt Araminta stirring in the kitchen.

“You know, I get from their writing that there used to be more men around here. Husbands at the very least. It’s been a big time jump since the last thing I read from them, so I’m not sure what’s happened to them.”

Andrew downed the rest of his milk in a single swig.

“Your grandparent’s journals are pretty scattered,” Araminta continued. She reached her left hand to touch her hair and feel it through her fingers. “It’s hard to read things chronologically. Do you mind helping me sometime sort them so that I can go through it all and see things through how and when they experienced what they did?”

Andrew slowly removed himself from the chair and walked into the kitchen. Araminta watched him trace his steps on the tile, place his empty mug in the sink, and bypass her awaiting looks. He took his hand, clenched it into a fist, and knocked it on the sideboard with light raps. Then, he turned to her, his eyes still a little furrowed.

“No,” he said after some time, “I don’t want to.”

Araminta crossed her arms. “Why?” She felt her blood beginning to heat at her temples once more. Something about Andrew’s attitude seemed foreign, sudden. Like a pulse from being shocked by a metal shelf in a store. While inconveniently small, it still sent a ripple of distaste and vexation throughout Araminta.

“I’m not interested. I never knew them, and any information my mom ever said was not totally positive. Unless it was her father. My mom refused to come back here after she left. Said this place was too fucked up.” Andrew paused, and Araminta watched as he swallowed hard with his whole neck. “She mentioned something about my grandmother and seeing how my grandfather died. I tried pressing her a few times, but she never told me what actually happened between all of them. Just that she and I were never to come here. Ever.”

Araminta stirred in her spot. She felt a familiar pang of inquisition and thirst for knowledge twist in her chest.

“To me,” Andrew said, “that warrants some hesitation in learning about what my grandparents thought. If my mom didn’t want me to know them, I’m going to respect that.”

Araminta bit her lip. “So, no interest at all?”

“None.”

“What about my interests?” Araminta said, her voice edged with tension, but mocking a cute tone. “Even if you’re not interested, I am. It would be nice if you could help me.”

Andrew ground his teeth together. “I don’t see how it’s peeked your attention. It’s not your family. You just want to keep reading it because of the drama.”

Araminta cocked her head back in disbelief. She felt her heart beating faster in her chest, which made her upper torso begin to loosen with a pain she didn’t like.

“The fuck?” she said.

Andrew flared his nostrils, and raised his own hand to touch his hair. He traced his jaw to scratch at the fuzz poking out from his pores.

“Look, I’m not telling you to not do it,” he said, “but I’m not invested in this emotionally. If it were up to me, they’d be bonfire pilings. But I’m letting you read them and do whatever you want.”

“You’re letting me?” Araminta said. Her voice didn’t hide anything. “I’m walking away before you say anything more stupid and before I rip into you!” Araminta pushed past him, making sure to bump her shoulder into his side. Andrew huffed and turned to her walking away.

“That’s not what I meant and you know it!”

“Do I?” Araminta said, whipping back around to face him. Her face was turning red in the cheeks. She knew her disposition dared him to say another word. She watched as Andrew explored a series of thoughts in his mind, and settled on silence instead.

She turned around, and grabbed the journal from the table. She pushed past Andrew again and out the door to sit by Raven Pond to read whatever it was she desired.

## Chapter 15

One morning, as the humid mist rose through the woods and onto the dirt path that trailed Raven Pond, Araminta heard a rhythmic beat against the door of the lake house. Curious to the early-dawn visitor, Araminta pulled open the entrance and saw Robyn smiling on the small deck with an excited Franny sniffing the old planks with eagerness.

“Robyn!” Araminta said, finding herself reflecting the grin that lit up in front of her, “You’re early! I thought I’d see you on the road. I was just about to head out.”

Robyn chuckled then said, “I wanted to surprise you! I wanted to know if you and Andrew had kayaks or a canoe? Today’s going to be a good day to go out and show you what’s around the shores.”

Araminta bit the inside of her cheek and took in a sniffle through her nostrils. “I don’t know if we have a boat. There’s a little shed over there,” she said, pointing with her head towards the shanty shack looming in the dense forest, “that I haven’t really checked out.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Not a huge fan of knowing if any mice or rats have gotten in there since Andrew’s grandmother had the place.” Araminta said. She looked back at Robyn and saw her lips fold slightly over her happy mouth in disappointment. Araminta cleared her throat and continued, “But I guess I can woman up and see what’s up with the hut.”

Araminta held up her finger, then turned around into the small foyer to grab her keys. She closed and locked the door behind her and led Robin over to the cracking, moss-green wooden abode. At Araminta’s slight touch, the paint around the rusted knob fell in large splotches on the

grass with *clicks*. Araminta felt the dirt cake on her skin, but she leaned her body on the door and shoved it open.

A large waft of mildewed lichen and lake-silt mud hit Araminta's nose. Small, black nets hung from the decaying ceiling, and a range of fishing poles dangled with desperate attention against water-damaged hooks. But in the center of the miniscule space sat a large mass of fabric, drenched over a slumbering mound of wood.

Robyn inched forward from Araminta's side and pointed to the cob-webbed object.

"I can flip over the tarp if you don't want to see a nest." Robyn said. Araminta shook her head and shifted positions to hide the scene from her eyesight. In her sideview, she saw Robyn take the wrapping and fling it off with strong arms, a clattering of textile waving in both of their ears.

"Yeah," Robyn said, "looks like a few rodents made a home here. But, we found one hell of a canoe."

Araminta turned completely away from Robyn and stared out towards the dark waters of Raven Pond. Franny was sitting down outside of the frame, head cocked as she watched the two humans rummage around in the foreign space. Her tail *thumped* hard on the soil. Between the solemn lapping of the currant and Franny's panting tongue, Araminta could hear Robyn huffing and struggling with the vessel behind her. She heard the shifting of twigs and rustled leaves hit the cracking foundation.

"Looks like the intruders are not here. Franny would be going nuts. Now's the time to pull this baby out. Get it into the water and open, fresh air," Robyn said.

Araminta moved her gait back to see her neighbor, who had a small rope wrapped around her wrist at what appeared to be the front of the canoe. Araminta looked at the side of the orange-

brown boat, the decades-abandoned watercraft painted with scrawled, misshapen letters: *Run Ahead*. Araminta lowered her hand and pressed the back of her palm against the paint. The wood was smooth and cool on her skin.

“You gunna help or what, Minty?” Robyn said, snapping back Araminta’s attention. Araminta blinked her eyes and moved away from the side of the rig. She looped the rope attached to the stern around her arm and lifted up.

“Sorry,” Araminta said, “Got distracted.”

Robyn laughed, “I couldn’t tell.”

The two women shifted the boat out of the shed, their breaths short and hearts beating hard as they strained their backs and knees carrying the heavy load to the water.

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Every morning, Robyn would walk over with Franny, the latter’s four legs sprinting to meet Araminta before the door could be opened. It was always after Andrew left for work when Robyn seemed to emerge from the dust trails, bringing on the morning rays with her careful strides. The two women would usher into the *Run Ahead* and paddle with soft strokes against the temperate current.

“Has Corlee always been shy?” Araminta asked one day, watching a flock of ducks swoop away from lake and into the sky.

“Oh yes,” Robyn said, taking a deep breath of freshwater air, “for as long as I’ve known her, she’s always been pretty timid.” Robyn placed a curl behind her ear and continued. “I only moved here a few years ago. But she’s always been quite...”

“Mousy?” Araminta said, trying to hide the shame she felt after interrupting Robyn with a snide comment. Robyn looked at Araminta and gave her a reassuring smile.

“Yes,” Robyn said, her voice lighthearted, “you chose a nicer word than what I was going to say.” The two paddled a few more beats before picking back up where Robyn left the conversation. “She also had a brother who died. Sometime ago.” Franny inched closer against the side of the canoe, but Robyn reached forward and tugged against her collar. The dog snorted, but didn’t fight too hard against the sudden jerk of Robyn’s control.

“Oh,” Araminta said, gripping the end of her oar with her finger tips.

“She’s...handled it the best she could. I mean, we all have.” Robyn looked out into the woods, but still darted her head to Franny to make sure she didn’t get too near the black liquid floating around them.

“What do you mean?” Araminta said.

Robyn took a few moments, and turned her head towards Araminta, “After he died, Corlee turned to the rest of them. They were the only ones she had left. Same with me when...” she paused again, her hands moving the rings on her fingers, “Well, you know. I got to know Corlee better...after what happened to my brother. From what the others have told me, Corlee was only slightly less shy when her sibling was still alive. They weren’t exactly close, but they got their house from an aunt and decided to live here for a bit.”

Araminta watched as Robyn cleared her throat and wiped away something unseen on her cheek. “What happened? To Corlee’s brother?” Araminta asked.

Robyn wrung her hands a bit and said, “Boat accident.”

Araminta jilted her upper body straight up. She gripped her paddle harder in her fingers, causing her knuckles to turn from pale pink to strained white. Robyn noticed Araminta's change in body language. She waved her hand and added:

“Oh, don't worry. It was in a faster boat. Like a skipper. He, uh, was going too fast. Turned around too sharply. Maybe...” Robyn paused and looked to the shore in the distance, “ah, Corlee may have said he was too close to some rocks. You know...”

Araminta didn't relax, but she felt a ripple of guilt-ridden relief tickle through her nerves. “That sounds horrible,” Araminta said. She moved a piece of hair from her chin. “Should I say something to Corlee?”

“No,” Robyn said, “No. She'll tell you when it comes around.”

Robyn turned to face the bow of *Run Ahead* and dipped her wooden blade into the loch. “Paddle this way,” she said pointing to a narrow bend in the beak of Raven Pond. The two women curved their arms and rowed in unison—left, right—to the direction of Robyn's attention. As they neared closer to the thinning, canopy covered nook, Araminta could feel her spade knock against slippery stones.

Robyn lifted her oar and placed it over her knees. The boat slowed down to a mimicking crawl and settled in a controlled drift.

“That's a known strait here,” Robyn said. Beside her, Franny stood up and inched closer to the front, placing her paws on the foot bench with *splits* of her claws. Robyn rushed her hand to Franny and pulled her down with careful strength. She settled the dog back to the floor of *Run Ahead*.

“Wouldn't happen to lead to Lunar Lake, would it?” Araminta asked. Robyn turned around, a quizzical brow lifted.

“Yeah, actually. How’d you know?”

“I saw it on a map of Raven Pond that I looked up on my phone. Andrew also told me his grandfather would take his mother up there sometimes. Maybe even in this boat.” Araminta felt the urge to pinch the tip of her finger that was bitten not too long ago. A sharp energy ran up her spine. “He said there were leeches in there among the reeds.”

Robyn looked down at Araminta’s hand as the latter fidgeted with the tip of her nail. Araminta watched her swallow hard, then swiveled her entire body to the stern. Robyn twirled her finger down in front of Araminta—a sign beckoning for Araminta to rotate a one-eighty. Araminta furrowed her eyebrows, but did what she was asked. She turned her whole body around, and both women began to push the boat back towards the center of the lake once more.

“Best not go through there then,” Robyn said, “we don’t want to accidentally tip the boat over in the shallow water.”

Before they could totally escape from the area, Araminta snatched a lone reed from the edge of the strait and put it to her mouth and blew a soft gust. A low, pitiful whistle vibrated out from the plant.

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On a warm, Wednesday evening, Steph hosted a poker night.

When Araminta arrived past the door of Steph’s quaint cottage, Robyn escorted her with a soft, hooked arm. The two friends entered the inside, and Araminta felt a rich blend of aromas waft into her nose. Chili bubbled in a Crock-Pot on a counter, directly across from the entrance; and sweet, warm bread steamed with fresh, hot air as Falline cut into the long dough with a serrated knife.

“Are you sure I shouldn’t have brought anything?” Araminta whispered to Robyn as they kicked their shoes off. Robyn shook her head, and leaned in closer to Araminta. Her breath was warm and smelled of fresh wintergreen. It sent goosebumps down Araminta’s spine.

“No way,” Robyn said, her voice soft and dreamy, “you’re a guest here to all of us still. I’ve got you covered in any sense.” Robyn lifted her head and gave a wink to Araminta. She reached her hand down into her bag and pulled out a square bottle of spiced rum and turned to enter into the kitchen. “We brought the good shit!” she said, allowing the rest of the women to turn and grab the bottle from her hands and welcome them into the space.

Steph’s cottage was smaller, but more of a home than Araminta had seen in Beatrice’s or Robyn’s houses. Pictures of Steph beaming lined the walls and side tables. In one, her braces shined next to a trophy that took up the space between her and a man’s arms.

“Steph, you look so cute here!” Araminta said lifting up the photo. Corlee stiffened, flickering her eyes over to Steph who, for the first time Araminta had seen, let go a genuine smile. Corlee relaxed and went back to setting cheese and sour cream out on the bannister.

“I do, don’t I?” Steph said. She walked over to Araminta and took the photo into her own hands. She looked at it for a while, then placed it down on the table. “Won that playing volleyball. Dad was the coach.” She pointed to the silver-foxed man beside her. Steph’s smile slowly faded away, and she turned to go back into the kitchen. Beatrice was watching, touching her fingers to her painted lips.

Araminta walked across the cozy living room and turned to another photo of Steph. This time, her arm around the waist of a man with equally bright red hair. Steph’s tall figure looked down at him with a warm, tender gaze while he stared back at her—small wrinkles crinkling around his eyes—his hand cupped around her chin.

Araminta felt Robyn come up and pinch her shirt, just hanging above Araminta's hip, with delicate fingers. Araminta turned her head and looked at Robyn's hazel-green eyes.

"Best not ask about him," Robyn said, her voice as a whisper again. She tugged at Araminta's shirt and drew her away from the picture. "I'll tell you about them soon."

For the rest of the night, Araminta watched Steph's mouth to see if she could find a trace of happiness that was present in the pictures surrounding them. But even with light-hearted jokes and winnings pouring from the poker chips, Araminta could tell that Steph's blissful smile was trapped in time behind the glass of the framed photo.

Araminta searched the room for a trace in the other women's mouths. While some cracked a trickle of excitement over a won hand, or a delectable spoon of chili, Araminta found that complete glee or fulfilled cheer was not present in the other women's faces.

At times, she noticed Robyn glancing at Araminta from across the table, her fingers lifting the cards with subtle levitation. Between the delicate moments of Araminta's awareness of Robyn's eyes, and Robyn turning away, Araminta could faintly see a beginning thread of likeliness that emanated from Steph's pictures in Robyn's expression. It was small, intricate, and gone when Robyn returned to her cards. But Araminta saw it nonetheless. And a deep part of her hoped the thread would grow larger.

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A couple of days later, Araminta went to Robyn's house, the rain pouring on their heads as clouds cried during their morning walk. Robyn grabbed a towel and patted Franny dry; the short coat sparkling with dew.

"She's gonna need a bath soon," Robyn said as water trickled down her own nose, "she gets so nasty after rain."

“Is that all the time?” Araminta said, ringing out her own hair with her fingers. A lingering curiosity lingered past her lips. Droplets fell onto her shirt and pressed the fabric to her collarbone.

“What do you mean?”

“Does she ever stink from the lake?” Araminta said.

Robyn patted her hand on Franny’s behind, and rose to meet Araminta’s inquisitive stare.

“Uh, not really. I usually like to keep her out of it.”

“Why?”

“She’d never get out!” Robyn laughed, but Araminta could sense something hidden behind her chuckles. “She gets so hot. Franny’d turn into a mermaid if she could.”

Araminta gave a soft giggle and walked over to Robyn’s couch. She placed a cushion over her torso as she settled into the plush back rest.

“So, when are you going to tell me about Steph?” Araminta said, just suddenly realizing Robyn hadn’t brought it up.

“Ah, that.” Robyn said, her content smile folding away once more. She walked over to the couch and plopped herself down. “She’s a tricky one.”

“I couldn’t tell.”

The women shared a small laugh, then Robyn cleared her throat.

“The picture I pulled you away from was Steph and her husband.”

Araminta’s eyes grew wide. “Steph was married? I didn’t see a ring on her finger.”

Robyn scratched her eyebrows and said, “She was married all right. This was before I moved here, but Steph and her husband were apparently real love birds.”

“You’re kidding?”

“Not a bit!” Robyn huffed out a laugh, “Falline told me that Steph and he were inseparable. She once even road by their cottage with them out front in the sprinklers. If you know what I mean.”

Araminta let out a gut-filling laugh. Robyn’s eyes squinted into small almonds as she found herself letting loose alongside Araminta.

After they calmed down, Araminta realized a part of the puzzle was missing. “What happened to him?”

Robyn bit her lip and gave a big sigh. “Steph had a bit of a rough patch a couple of years ago.” She carefully thought about what to say next, then shifted in her seat. “Steph’s grandmother lived out here for a few years. Really seclusive, nutty type. She ended up retiring somewhere down in Florida without saying a word. From what Beatrice said, she just had enough of the place.” Robyn stopped, and inhaled a long breath. “Upkeep and all.” She pursed her soft lips, and continued:

“I guess she gave the cottage to Steph. Steph’s mom left when she was just a little kid. Didn’t want to have a husband and daughter. But Steph once told me, after a drunken night, that her mom went and had a second family. Somewhere out of the States. Steph was so hurt she never bothered to find out exactly where her mother went.

“Anyway, Steph, her husband, and her father came up here to clean up the joint and make it theirs. A true, family camp. But her father died that summer.” Robyn paused, then said, “Heart attack.”

“Jesus,” Araminta said, thinking back to the younger Steph sharing a trophy with her father, “it looked like they were close in the photo.”

“She says they were,” Robyn said. She shifted in her seat once more, “the following year, Steph’s husband died. They were trying to sell the place. Or at least, Steph was. But her husband wanted to keep it. Liked the calm waters. He kept coming up here, until one day he fell off their dock. Hit his head on the rocks and broke...” Robyn touched her neck, her head squirming from side to side.

Araminta brought her hand up to her mouth. She felt a deep sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

“From what Falline said, Steph was never the same. Used to be cheerful at times, if you can believe that.” Robyn said. She fiddled with her hands, making circles in her lap. Araminta looked at her and saw her eyes were beginning to glaze over. As if scenes were playing behind her pupils like an old film on repeat.

The sinking feeling worsened in Araminta’s gut. Robyn looked away to her side table and tapped her nails on the wood. Franny walked over and placed her head on the couch between the women.

“Robyn,” Araminta said, breaking the long silence, “you mentioned before that all of you lost someone. What happened to the rest of you?”

Robyn stared up at the ceiling for a beat and opened her mouth. “Falline lost her son.”

Araminta looked up at the ceiling but only saw an eggshell white hue, which deeply competed against the bright, painted hues of Robyn’s walls. She looked back over to Robyn who looked like her eyes had been rained on.

“That happened way long ago, apparently. Even Beatrice lost someone...her own husband. A longer time ago.”

“Here?” Araminta said, growing concerned. Something tapped at the back of her head, but she couldn’t place what it was.

“Yes.” Robyn answered. She lifted her head off the couch and returned her look over to Araminta. Her eyes were still wet, but tears had not yet shed.

“Robyn” Araminta whispered, her own voice soft as if it had been silenced by an impending blow, “what happened with your brother?”

Robyn remained silent, her eyes losing focus with Araminta’s concerned face. Araminta counted the number of times they both tapped their toes. She felt Robyn’s soft breath beside her, and could almost hear the other woman’s heartbeat *thump*; as if Robyn held back a wall that helped kept her intact.

“I…” Robyn started, taking a moment to clear her cracking voice. She reached over to her table and opened the drawer. Inside she pulled out a photo which had been slammed in there, lost to time and broken glass.

She handed it over to Araminta without looking. Her body began to quiver. Araminta watched as Robyn had a wet, warm path trace down her cheeks.

Araminta shifted her eyes down at the picture and carefully adjusted it in her hands. It was cracked and large chunks of glass were missing from the middle. Behind the spider-webbed fracture, three happy people smiled up at her, all holding a tinier version of Franny by their knees.

Two faces were almost identical. To the left of Robyn’s image, the man next to her shared her gorgeous smile. His eyes flared a brilliant hazel. His hair, short and faded by his ears, tangled into Robyn’s thick curls.

But to the left was a woman with bright, amber-brown eyes that looked down at the dog panting between her knees. Her hair was black and trimmed down to her shoulders in swoops, and she had a small tattoo of a turtle on the inside of her wrist.

Araminta looked up at Robyn who still hadn't returned her look. She listened to Robyn clear her throat and wipe the dew from her face.

"I lost her too." Robyn said, her voice careful and held back. She hovered her index finger above the woman, but didn't touch the surface. "Imogen. She was *my* partner." Robyn looked up at Araminta with careful eyes. Araminta reached her hand over and gripped Robyn's soft fingers. Araminta nodded her head, a gentle sign that she understood—probably better than the rest on this lake—the intimacy between Robyn and the woman in the picture resting in Araminta's palm.

Robyn's eyes flicked with gratitude, small, but recognizable to Araminta. An unspoken, but shared feeling. A collective experience. An acceptance. A commonality.

Robyn swallowed, then continued, "Imogen and I adopted Franny that day. Jonathon," she said, moving her finger over to the man, "tagged along with his selfie stick."

Araminta looked closer at the picture and noticed his arm was stretched out behind the perspective. She heard Robyn give an almost silent giggle.

"He loved those things. I hated them. Thought they were ridiculous looking." Robyn took the photo from Araminta's hands and placed it back into the side table. Back into the dark.

"I'm so sorry, Robyn." Araminta said. She reached out with her hand towards Robyn's back. She hesitated for a moment, hovering above the curve of her shoulders. Then, she pressed her palm on Robyn's spine and inched closer. Robyn relaxed to her touch. "I can't imagine—"

Robyn waved her hand and looked back at Araminta with sad eyes. “Don’t apologize,” she said, “please. It was a while ago. It just hurts to think sometimes. I’m sorry. I can’t talk about what happened. To them.”

Araminta and Robyn stayed in silence on the couch, just watching the rain fall from the windows. To both of them, it felt it was the only appropriate sound that needed to be heard.

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When Araminta returned back to her house, she did so out of fear that she had left her menstrual cup in for too long. It had been over a week, but her flow was progressively getting heavier. Rather than bleed on Robyn’s couch and risk more embarrassment, she trotted home soon as the rain had stopped tapping on the windows.

As she turned into the driveway, the lake looked like a cosmic black hole. Araminta, drawn to its metamorphosis, inched closer to the shore, despite feeling a warmth between her legs. As she drew nearer, watching the wind whip up the tide with a rocking sway, Araminta could swear she could taste salt on her lips. Fine, and granular against her vermilion zone, she licked her mouth and was reminded of a harbor. Then, she looked closer at the top of the moving water.

Dead fish were being pushed to the sands. Their open eyes crusted and staring into a void.

## Chapter 16

Araminta stuck her fingers in her vagina and fished out the silicone cup, brimming with her menstruation. She tugged on the stem with soft pinches of her fingers, and listened to the soft, wet, sucking *thwoop* pop out from inside of her. She felt the chalice dip and release its contents into stagnant toilet water below. Soon, a warm dripping ran down her appendages—fresh blood and uterine lining oozing out from her opening.

Araminta was no stranger to the thick, clotted gore that seeped from her body.

*Fuck my insides*, Araminta thought to herself, reaching over to the sink to rinse out the red liquid from her fingernails and the menstrual device, *fucking PCOS flair up*. But this time, as the ever-streaming cruor leaked in dense drops into the bowl below, Araminta couldn't help but ponder—could this be more blood than usual?

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When Araminta was done cleaning up, she hustled to the collection of journals and notes Andrew's grandparents had accumulated. She took out her phone and messaged Robyn:

*Hey!* she typed, *Bunch of dead fish in the water...I did something weird. I put my finger in the water and tasted it. It was...really salty? Should we call someone? Any dead over in the water by your end?*

Within a few seconds, Robyn replied:

*Hahaha ya. That happens sometimes. Probs leftover from the winter. Salting the roads. Bound to be runoff and other shit. Andrew and you should stay out of the lake for now.*

Araminta set down her phone and scratched at her chin. She could feel a small blemish beginning to form underneath her lip. She grabbed a new pillow and placed it under her bottom, and positioned her body to sit cross-legged on the floor.

With a soft haste, Araminta flipped through the pages of the collection of notes and entries. With her trained, literary reading skills, she kept the words, “salt, brackish, and dead fish” in her mind as she turned the pages with partial attention. She had picked up a few books from late 60’s. but nothing seemed to jump out immediately. Araminta was just about to give up, tossing each explored tome with a semi-careless flick of her wrist to a few feet in front of her. *One more*, she thought, picking up a black journal with chipped gold threading on the spine. *One more, and I’ll call it quits*. Araminta’s fingers slipped and opened the back portion of the pages. Newspaper clippings fell onto the floor.

Araminta brought her eyes to the sun-stained pages that faced her eyes on the hardwood. She dropped her fingers to the ink and eagle-spread the small clippings to stretch out around her.

**RISE IN ASSAULTS IN THE AREA** glared at her in a 1970 headline. All the others, in the same year, repeated the same, ominous warning:

**ANOTHER WOMAN BRUTALLY ASSUALTED IN SANGUICHOR**

**RISE IN RAPE—POLICE SAY WOMEN SHOULD STAY HOME**

**BRUTAL ATTACKS SHAKE COMMUNITY**

**MAN FOUND NOT GUILTY OF VICIOUS CRIME, MURDER OF...**

Araminta felt a familiar lump form at the bottom of her throat and perspiration drench on her lips. Heat prickled behind her ears and spiked down her neck. Like other women before her, she was accustomed to this eerie feeling rising and controlling her body. Like a warning. Like a barrier. Like an understanding. Like an awareness. Araminta ran her eyes through the small

clippings, speed-reading over the horrific details of 70's journalism about women's—victims—bodies. All led to the same conclusion: during this year, a shocking rise in violence—especially against women—ran rampant in Sanguichor.

Araminta picked up the clippings in her fingers and looked back down at the journal. Without looking for a specific page, she opened the spine and stuffed the clippings back in. *Why would Andrew's grandmother keep something like that?* Araminta said, the anxious beat of nausea still settling in her stomach. Perhaps, she thought to herself, salt water in the lake wasn't as large as a priority for Andrew's grandparents. Something more menacing was clearly more important.

After waiting a few more moments, Araminta thought about continuing her search for any clues as to why there would be salt in Raven Pond. But she had to admit, this need to explore felt like it was small in comparison to larger issues out there in the world.

Just then, Andrew walked through the door and stole Araminta's attention.

Araminta saw her partner's furrowed eyebrows and tense expression. She left the journals scattered on the floor, and rose to meet Andrew's presence.

"Hey," she said, scratching her chin, "how was work?"

Andrew huffed and dropped his satchel on the floor. He went to the fridge, pulled open the door with vigor, and grabbed an amber bottle. "Fucking sucked."

Araminta found purchase on a chair and rested her arms on the kitchen counter. "How so?"

"Motherfuckers can't leave me the fuck alone." Andrew said as he popped the metal cap off his drink and taking a few, long sips. "I keep getting assigned project after project. Little shits know I'm one of a couple of engineers who can draft and code. Still, as soon as I get done on one

thing, I get an email saying a client completely changed their mind and needs something entirely opposite.”

“I’m sorry,” Araminta said, “I wish there was something I could do to help.”

“Well, you can’t.” Andrew said, finishing his drink then slamming it on the counter.

Araminta flinched and felt the prickling rise back up behind her ears. “I can’t even come home and fully explain what’s going on because you could never understand.”

Araminta felt the prickling turn to searing heat. “Excuse you?”

Andrew huffed again and brought his hand to his forehead. His jaw clenched and shook his head. “Sorry,” he said, “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“You know, taking it out on me isn’t going to help you.” Araminta said, her voice rising.

“I know, I know. I’m stupid.” Andrew looked over at Araminta, his eyes more soft, but still full of a tense pressure behind the irises. “I’m just overworked and tired. I shouldn’t attack you because I can’t do anything right at work.”

Araminta heard the pitiful whine Andrew used whenever he wanted to avoid taking full ownership of he did wrong. The sort of cadence that irked Araminta into quickly forgiving him, and perhaps, even take some of the responsibility for Andrew. She grew to pick up on that tone, despite Andrew’s ignorance to it.

Araminta squinted her eyes and began to clench her own jaw. “You’re not stupid,” she said, “but don’t pull that shit again.” She didn’t feel like fighting him on his griping self-flagellation.

Araminta left her chair and walked behind Andrew to the fridge. She took out a piece of American cheese and pulled the plastic off the yellow skin. She crumpled the clear cover and chucked it in the trash and took a large bite from the thin dairy.

Andrew turned around and pinched a corner off from her snack. The rest of the night they prepared dinner and went to bed with only few conversations between them.

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*Robyn's Perspective and Beatrice's Command*

Far in Robyn's house, Beatrice was dipping a wheat thin in a container of red pepper hummus. She plopped it into her mouth as she watched a few tears stream from Robyn's eyes.

"We can't do it," Robyn said, catching a droplet from her nose on her index finger, "we can't tell her everything!"

Beatrice chewed until there was nothing left to swallow but her own spit. She wiped a napkin over her lips, leaving behind a pink smear.

"Nonsense. We don't have time. The fish are dead so we know it's around."

Robyn's breath caught three times as she let out a giant exhale. She tore at the skin around her nails.

Beatrice took another wheat thin, scooped up a large portion of dip, and took a large bite. While chewing the different textures, she spoke:

"Gather the coven. Tonight. We need to prepare them. They need to get ready to talk honestly. It's time to share what we've all had to do."

Robyn rolled her strained, wet eyes. She grabbed her phone and whispered under her breath, "What she'll have to do."

## Chapter 17

When Araminta received the text to meet over at Robyn's house late at night, she didn't think much of it.

*Wanna come over at 10? Thought we could have a late night movie...*

It was a strange time—the two of them were usually in bed by eight or nine in their own respective homes—but Araminta liked the prospect of spending a late night with Robyn. That it might ease the anxiety she had felt after reading the newspaper clippings from the once-forgotten journals of Andrew's grandparents. It wasn't that Araminta felt anxiety around Andrew; she thought to herself since that day; it was just an odd, perhaps an ancestral inclination to always be prepared. She knew that Andrew could never resort to such violence. But then again, hadn't all women thought that same notion?

*Shut up*, she thought to herself, *Stop thinking impossible things*. Yet, when she looked at the lake through her kitchen window, she couldn't help feel the eagerness for the night with Robyn grow stronger.

When the night did grow dark, Araminta decided to drive to Robyn's camp rather than walk. Despite the woods being a quiet, contemplative place, the journal's mysteries reminded Araminta about the cruelty of being a lone woman when the sun went down. Better protected in a car than wrapping your keys in a clenched fist.

However, when Araminta did reach Robyn's cabin, she was surprised to see they were not alone. The eccentric driveway, decorated with the whirligigs and birdfeeders, was once again accumulated by the numerous vehicles of the neighbors Araminta had come to know.

Araminta walked to the screen door and watched two fireflies lift off towards a patch of tulips. Araminta thought back to when she was a child sitting on the front porch—how simple it all seemed back then just capturing lightning bugs in mason jars, poking holes through the top so that they could breathe.

Thing was, by morning, the bugs would be dead. Their stiff legs arched like bolts towards the metal cage, grasping desperately for a few moments of insignificant existence in the world of a naïve child.

Araminta tapped her knuckles on the metal frame of the entrance. A few moments passed when Falline approached. Her warm smile was contradicted by a fraction of solemn crinkles that lurked by Falline’s eyes. Araminta thought back to what Robyn had mentioned to her, and felt a twang of sympathy.

“Hey!” Falline said, her voice cracking as she elongated the single word. “Come on in.”

Araminta smiled back, hiding the knowledge of Falline’s loss. *If she wants me to know about her son, she’ll tell me when she’s ready*, Araminta thought to herself. Instead, she slid off her sandals and cracked the joints on her fingers.

“Everyone here?” Araminta said, “I didn’t realize that we would all be here watching a movie.”

“Oh,” Falline said, “Robyn must have let it slip from her mind.” Falline’s voice carried a tone Araminta was not familiar with, like a rhythm of apathy and dejection stuck in a water-parched throat.

Falline led Araminta into Robyn’s living room. There, Araminta was able to greet Steph and Corlee. The former sat close to the edge of Robyn’s bright, mustard couch, her head resting

on her hands as they formed a support on two stiff legs. Corlee was pacing with soft steps near the television, her gaze facing the north-east windows overlooking the now salty lake waters.

A door opened from down the hallway and Araminta watched as Beatrice approached.

“Ah, Araminta! Thanks for coming over. Robyn said she’ll be out soon. Just needed to wash up.”

“Oh okay.” Araminta looked around the room. Beatrice found purchase next to Steph and outstretched her arm to the nearest chair open. Araminta walked over, scooting past Falline who was keeping an eye on Corlee. “It, uh, feels like an intervention in here.” Araminta said. She smiled, letting out a small titter as she sat down.

Only Beatrice returned a half-hearted reflection of Araminta’s mouth, cocking her head to the side. Araminta clenched her teeth, cleared her throat, and sat back onto the chair. She heard the floorboard creak once more and craned her neck down the hallway. When she saw the familiar shadow of Franny, Araminta got up from her position and walked over to the archway of the area to watch the funereal gait of Robyn. Even in the dim shadow of the thin hallway, Araminta could see the red stain of veins in Robyn’s eyes.

Araminta walked closer to meet Robyn alone before they were surrounded in the living room. She raised her hand to Robyn’s face and touched her freckled skin. “Everything okay? You look like you’ve been crying.”

Robyn gave a faint smile and sniffed her nose. “Oh, it’s nothing. Just period shit. You know?”

Robyn removed her head from Araminta’s warm touch, and crept past her with a ginger slink. Franny bumped her head against Araminta’s thigh and gave a longing glare. Araminta

reached down and scratched her fingernails behind the crease of Franny's ears. The dog's tail wagged.

"You coming in, Araminta?" Beatrice said, "It's late enough as it is."

Araminta rolled her eyes in the darkness, but turned around and guided Franny back to the chair she once occupied.

"Well then," Beatrice began once the collection of women were all together, "should we begin the movie, so to speak?"

Araminta looked up at Robyn to catch a non-verbal, smirking side-eye. But Robyn kept her attention on the small details of the carpet flooring.

"What do you mean 'so to speak'?" Araminta asked, tilting her head with deliberate demurity.

"TV's not working," Robyn said, her voice monotone and pointed to the floor.

Araminta squinted her vision and gave a half-second peer at Beatrice. She felt a rumbling agitation grow in her sternum.

"Instead of abandoning our plans for this evening," Beatrice resumed, picking up from the lull of conversation, "how about we sit around and ask Araminta if she's ever heard the legend of Raven Pond."

Araminta scoffed and grew a slight bewildered look on her face. "What? That's the cure for a broken TV? Sit around and tell me about an old legend." Araminta looked back up at Robyn, but still found her gaze unmatched.

"I mean, if we had a bonfire going, I'd be more inclined to see a connection between the two ideas." Araminta said.

The women stirred for a brief moment as Beatrice's smirk grew wider on her face.

“Such a sense of humor, Araminta.” Beatrice looked from Steph to Robyn, who both seemed to share a look of distaste around their mouths. “You’ll fit right in.”

Beatrice opened up her purse. Araminta could see an open, menstrual cup bag out of the small, interior pockets. *Did she bring that for herself, Araminta thought, or for Robyn? Usually people of Beatrice’s age don’t menstruate anymore.*”

Beatrice slipped on a pair of black lace gloves over her fingers. She saw Araminta watching her and pulled the cloth over her wrist with more vigor.

“Old habit,” Beatrice said, “like to have them on when I tell this story. I guess my grandmother’s mother used to wear them all the time. They seem appropriate.”

Araminta furrowed her eyebrows. “So, this...legend—”

“You’ve never heard of it, have you?” Beatrice interrupted. She flicked a brief look at Robyn. Robyn didn’t react, so Beatrice returned her stare at Araminta, her face more relaxed, but still in a state of suppressed stress.

“No. I don’t know many this side of the State, so I haven’t heard any local tales.”

Araminta paused, then continued: “I know of a couple from up North. If we’re swapping ghost stories I can go first. There’s one about the Lucerne Inn—”

Beatrice held up her gloved hand and closed her eyes. “No, no. That’s okay. I came up with the idea. I can be first.”

Araminta leaned back into her chair and let Franny rest her thick jaw on her knee. She felt a small whine escape from the dog’s mouth, but Araminta put her hand over Franny’s head and brushed her fingers along the ridge of her long nose. Beatrice cleared her throat and fiddled with the fingers of her gloves. The rest of the women turned away their heads, but kept their ears to Beatrice’s tale.

“As I illuded to earlier,” Beatrice began, “my grandmother’s mother had some odd quirks. One of those such quirks was telling an old tale of how Sanguichor came to be. Apparently, this town was first settled by the Massachusetts military as a base against the French settlers from New France. This would be...before the revolution. ‘Bout a hundred years or so. Either way, the soldiers cut down the trees for lumber. Used the lake and the surrounding rivers for trade. And spilled blood in small, violent skirmishes.”

Beatrice paused, to scratch the edge of her hairline. Then she cleared her throat once more to continue:

“Since the start, even after the Massachusetts’s governor turned over the land to the descendants of the colonial militia, the area’s been seeped in violence. If the men weren’t fighting with each other over trivial land disputes or ridiculous, Christian idolatry; they’d turn on the women. As has been done since humans could recount our history.”

The women of the room stirred, and Araminta felt a cool prickle on the back of her neck.

“Something about this rough, rural landscape turned those men into monsters. If they weren’t desecrating the land or chopping up the ice during the winter, they’d take out their aggressions on their wives. Sisters. Neighbors. We all know how it was back then for women. How it still can be.

“It was no different for a woman who loved her self-proclaimed sister.” Beatrice said, chewing on the inside of her lip. “So my ancestors have said. Apparently, there was a woman that lived in Sanguichor by the name of Ada. She came from a small family. A mother and father who died young from a passing sickness. But Ada found a home in her best friend, another young woman by the name of Ruth. Apparently, Ada and Ruth were virtually inseparable. Often called sisters by a different bosom, Ada and Ruth relied on each other. Supported and looked out

for each other in their small community. Both worked as seamstresses, washerwomen, or school teachers. Small jobs that were allowed for women to have at that time. Even lived together in a small house by this very lake, up until money became too tight even for the both of them together.

“So, Ada agreed to marry herself out of necessity to a man with a larger paycheck than she could ever have. Ruth argued against this. Said they could find a way to survive with just the two of them. But Ada felt that a husband could help bring in more money—that she could support Ruth financially and give them added protection. But that meant Ada had to leave the cabin. To become a housewife to her new husband.

“Funny thing is, Ada did grow to love her new partner. He was good to her. Made her feel at home. But as promised, every chance Ada got, she’d go back to Ruth with the added gains she got from her new life. It wasn’t what they both wanted, but it worked for them. For a time. Until Ruth felt like a burden. Like an afterthought. Ada swore up and down that Ruth was her first priority. But Ruth felt otherwise. Afterall, it was Ada who left Ruth.”

Beatrice took a long breath and closed her eyes. A beat passed before she continued the tale.

“What has been passed down is this: Ruth, alone and hurt by Ada’s sacrifice, took more jobs in town so that she could feel like she wasn’t a type of ward. She became a domestic servant and became close with a few of the town’s larger families. She was well liked. Loved by the wives and children. Respected by the husbands. Others saw what Ada had always known.

“But one of the town’s prominent men took an unhealthy interest in Ruth. She rejected his advances, but tried to maintain a professional relationship with him. But, for him, it wasn’t enough. How dare a servant reject the likes of him?

“It was known that this man wanted Ruth. It was known that Ruth wasn’t interested. Ada tried to get Ruth to quit working as a domestic servant. But Ruth wanted to prove a point. She thought she knew the man well enough. Could avoid him. Could still show Ada what they could’ve had together.

“One morning, Ruth was found just on the edge of the lake. Apparently the brutality of her discovery made even the strongest stomach heave.

“Ada was...inconsolable. Her bereavement was never-ending, for the man known to have done this to her was far too prominent. Who would turn on him? Who would take down this man without fear of being brought down with or without him? Ada heard the excuses: if only Ruth had just said yes. Had just agreed to placate him. She could’ve gotten used to the marriage. Had only Ruth never chosen to be so poor and alone.

“It was too much for Ada. How dare they blame Ruth for what was done to her? This beloved woman cast aside out of fear from one, terrible man. Ada went to the lake one night with stones in her pockets. But as soon as her bare feet touched the water, she felt the rage seep out from her. She used the sharp edges of the rocks to cut her arms and scream to the void of the water.

“She promised she would do anything. Anything at all if it meant that no woman would suffer what Ruth had. What Ada felt right now. She dedicated vows to the land around her that she would make the men of Sanguichor suffer and rot for what they had always done.

“As Ada’s blood ran down into the black water, the offering awoke a dormant being. Ada felt a chill run up her spine and a sharp pain clench her hand. She fell into the water face first and took a breath of the cold current. She saw visions of an ancient creature, slithering and lurking in

the depths of Raven Pond. It opened its mouth and shot out a tongue of knowledge. Of promises. Of vengeance. It told Ada what she must do if she wanted her desires to come true.

“Ada went into the waters to return to Ruth. But she left with the power to reap what had been sown.

“Ada waited for a time. Just as the creature had told her to do. Between her legs dropped an ever consistent stream of blood; rich with her intent. Before too long, she was like the Lake. Ada knew then what she had to do.

“One night, she lured her husband to the edge of Raven Pond. Whispered in his ear sultry promises and exaltations of love. She took off their clothes, and tied him to a log. In his excitement, he couldn't see that the wetness pouring from her body was not her expectations. But her own insides.

“Ada pushed the log into the water, as far as she could walk. Of course, her husband finally realized what was happening. But while he screamed into the silence of the lake, the creature slinked through the waters and took all of him at once. Ada stood in the water, naked and free. A pact had been sealed.

“And what was promised came to be. Her husband became a distant, forgotten man in other's eyes. A tip-of-the tongue, unreachable memory. And a year of peace and safety was granted to the women of Sanguichor. No woman was touched or hurt for a whole turn of the world. There was no pain.

“But another promise came to be: Ruth's murderer married a woman who somehow loved him, and they both moved to the side of the lake. So Ada got close to the wife. Developed a bond just big enough to make the woman question her love for the man. And by the next year,

Ada and the wife poured their blood over him, and the creature devoured him; bringing another year of peace and solitude.

“And thus, Raven Pond became a haven for women. It was no longer the site of perpetual violence, but a land of promise. With an ancient caretaker always watching. Always hungry. It is passed down that if a man finds comfort on these shores, the woman who loves him must offer him to the waters. Or else Ada’s hard won pact be broken.”

## Chapter 18

Araminta took a large breath and nodded her head with slight motions. “Wow,” she said, drawing a pleasant look upon her brow, “that’s a pretty killer story. Is it written down somewhere in a collection of town legends? I’d like to look into how it was created.”

The rest of the women turned their heads at her with a rapid shot. Beatrice clicked her tongue against her cheek. Robyn’s shoulders quaked as if a chill ran down her spine. Corlee’s face grew pale. Falline shook her head and ran a finger past the bumps of her middle, Dutch braid. Steph rolled her eyes and cupped her chin with her fingers.

“It’s not a fucking story.” Steph said.

“Steph—” Beatrice said, holding up a finger.

“No,” Steph interrupted, “we want to get this over and done with right?” She inched closer off her seat and cocked her head at Araminta. “It’s a fucking curse. Real life, real time. No one fucking wrote it down because it’s still happening. Not to mention it’s not some fiction you pick up in an introductory lit class.”

Araminta shot a hot glare at Steph, feeling the guilt wrench her insides.

“What did you say to her?” Robyn said, surprising Araminta. “You watch how you talk to her.” Robyn’s voice deepened and her tired, bloodshot eyes perked up with intimidation. Although Araminta felt she could have defended herself, watching Robyn take the lead was reassuring—as if Robyn was never distant from her at all during the entire evening.

“Enough.” Beatrice interjected, pulling her gloved hand back close to her body. Robyn and Steph backed away from each other with their eyes, but their bodies still radiated tension like two animals arching their backs before a fight.

Beatrice looked at Araminta once more, “I didn’t spout off a fairy tale. There is a creature in the lake. It eats the men we love. It’s coming for you...It’s coming for Andrew.”

Araminta scoffed and gave a breath-filled laugh. “Very funny.” She pursed her lips together as dark thoughts ran through her head. *It’s all been a joke. No, Araminta, no. They’re just trying to play with you. You stupid fucking fool.*

“It’s not a joke,” Falline said, “you need to trust us.”

“Trust you?” Araminta said, “You literally just told me a large monster is in the lake that likes to chop down on men. We’re in Maine.” Araminta rolled her eyes and laughed again, this time her voice deeper and full of developing agitation. “Even if there were large creatures in our lakes that *could* swallow a whole ass human, it wouldn’t be because someone made a pact with an ancient being.” She paused again, “It’s okay, I get you’re messing with me.”

“It’s not funny!” Corlee pipped in. Her chest heaved and her face contorted into an anger that surprised Araminta. “We’ve all had to throw someone in the water. I...” Corlee trailed off, her eyes frantic with anxiety. Falline went to her and put her arms around her shoulders, but Corlee continued:

“I dumped my blood on my brother and fed him to it.” Her voice skipped and wetness filled Corlee’s eyes. Falline rubbed her shoulders and shushed her.

Araminta’s mouth opened and she felt nausea bubble in her gut. “Corlee,” she said, “I know your brother died. I’m-I’m so sorry. But...I’m sure you didn’t feed him to the lake.”

Araminta whipped her head around in anger to face the other women. “And it’s sick that everyone in here is trying to make you think that!”

Corlee shook her head. “No. No. It’s my fault. I—”

Falline interrupted her, “Minty, did Robyn tell you about my son?” Falline raised her head to hold Araminta’s angered gaze.

“It was mentioned to me,” Araminta said, “but Falline? This is not how healthy people cope with death! I think this rouse has gone on long enough.”

Araminta rose up from her chair. Franny whined and rose with careful stretches of her paws. Araminta’s thoughts bombarded the inside of her skull once more:

*They’re fucking delusional. Have they only ever been nice to me to play this kind of shit? Fuck, they mentioned Andrew...Jesus hell, this has all been a game to them all along. Get us to move out...*

“It’s real.” A voice said, cutting out the chaos in Araminta’s head. She turned and Robyn looked at her with a soft pity furrowed on her face.

*Robyn’s been in on it too...*

“My brother. I put him in that lake—”

“Your brother died in a car accident.” Araminta’s voice cracked, hinting at disbelief, anger, and fear.

“That’s what we tell people.” Steph said. “When they ask what happened to them. Car accident. Mugging. Heart attack. Drowning. Little accidents that paint over the truth. Not that it matters anyway. They all get forgotten. Except by us.”

Araminta didn’t remove her eyes off Robyn. She could feel her stare growing hot moisture.

*Robyn’s been in on it too...*

“What do you mean *forgotten*?” Araminta said, the last word like a poisoned arrow notched and shot out by her lips.

“It’s strange,” Robyn said, her voice trembling, “we give them to the lake and it’s like they’ve been erased. Like a faint memory.”

“My husband’s work mysteriously found paperwork where he had been let go.” Steph said, “Got the severance check with their apology letter a few days after he got ripped apart.”

Corlee’s cheeks were wet and red. “My cousins thought he had died years prior. Swore they saw it in a newspaper.”

Araminta didn’t take her eyes off Robyn.

“Dennie’s school sent a letter to me saying a fraud had stolen my dead son’s identity.” Falline said, her voice monotone. “Just a week after. He had defended his dissertation before that summer. His whole committee just thought the whole thing had happened so long ago.” She paused to catch her breath, “I actually called them. One by one. They asked me why I wanted to bring it up. Said they had ‘completely forgotten about the fraud case.’ Didn’t want to be bothered by me.”

“My father was retired.” Steph said, walking to Robyn’s side to catch Araminta’s peripheries. “But his old fishin’ buddies thought his ticker stopped some time ago. Old fuck’s kept calling him Steven. His name was Stewart.”

Robyn cleared her throat and blinked her eyes as if they were in slow motion. “The remainder of my family thought Jonathon wrapped his car around a tree in 2012. I sent him into that lake in 2016.” She pointed out the window towards the currants.

Araminta shook her head and whispered just enough for Robyn to hear: “This is fucked up.”

Robyn shed a tear that trailed on her cheek. She stepped forward to Araminta, but the latter lurched away.

“Everyone in this room as been bitten by the beast.” Beatrice said, her voice a small chime in the midst of the tumultuous, emotion-filled room. She reached into her small, leather purse and rummaged around in the contents. Pulling her arm from the bag, her hand held a small, glass vial. Araminta could see a wrinkled, minuscule creature crumpled in the center; its raisin colored skin sent shivers across Araminta’s body. “You get bit by the creature’s calling card. This: a simple bloodworm. This one, was yours. So ordinary, but...” she let a beat pass while shaking the bottle in her fingers, “strange. Bloodworms are from salt water. Not fresh.”

Araminta turned away from Robyn and directed her entire focus on the tiny annelid in Beatrice’s hand. A flash of dark, shadowed water flared in her mind, along with an image of giant, copper teeth. Araminta blinked her eyes, but felt a rush of rage boil her insides.

“Then the blood comes,” Beatrice continued, “It flows ever continuous from between your legs. You’ve been shedding since that day at my house, right?”

Araminta didn’t respond.

“Ah,” Beatrice said, “you’re silence is still an answer. It’s been flowing for us too. Even Falline and me.” Beatrice nodded at Falline and shared a look of solidarity. “We are the coven of Ada. When a new one is chosen, we all bleed. It’s the ink on the contract. We pour it over the offering as a signature.”

“Stop.” Araminta whispered.

“My mother was of an ilk that believed it was the women of Raven Pond’s duty to protect Sanguichor. She learned it from her mother. Who learned it from hers. Who learned it from hers. Who learned it from Ada and the original coven.”

“Please,” Araminta said, a tone louder than before.

“They’d lure women and their husbands. Sisters and their brothers. Mothers and their sons to these waters. She’d guilt the women into making the sacrifice. To keep the rest of the women in this town safe from the tragedy of man. She even convinced Andrew’s grandmother to stay here on these shores.”

Araminta felt lava pool in her head.

“Damn bitch even tricked my husband and me back here. I’d thought I got out. But she got me in that water.” Beatrice tugged at the glove on her right hand. “And by the end of the season I got a letter from my mother-in-law ‘checking up on me’ because it had been ‘years’ since she heard from me. Since her precious son drowned on our honeymoon.”

Beatrice wiped her finger under her eye. “But we’re not immortal. Mother died and I got the lake house. Since then, I’ve been in charge. I’ve made sure the coven’s been trying to keep folks away from here. Buying up the property. Make sure that when we die our shit doesn’t go to a son, brother, or male relative. Or that it isn’t given to a woman with men in their life. Course,” Beatrice looked around, “fate finds a way. Previous Raven Pond sisters didn’t agree with the new direction I wanted the coven to take.”

Beatrice looked over at Corlee and Steph.

“Other’s suffered their own death before changing their will and testament.”

Beatrice looked at Robyn, who still glared out at the lake ebbing and flowing behind the window.

Beatrice turned and faced Araminta once more before continuing: “And here we are again. Fucking Wilma promised to make her daughter give the property over to me. Her fool of a husband had it in his own fucking writing that Kelly would get the camp over his own adult wife.

But of course, Kelly and Wilma had a falling out since the kid snuck out of bed and saw Andy get sacrificed—”

“Enough!” Araminta yelled, her body shaking. “Enough of this bullshit! If you want the cabin, it’s yours.” Araminta pushed past Robyn and went to collect her shoes.

“It’s too late, sweetie.” Beatrice’s voice rang out, “It’s chosen you. Now you’ve got to feed Andrew to Raven Pond.”

Araminta turned around and said with a cold cadence, “Fuck you. Fuck all of you.” She could hear her voice in her head rattle off the paranoias she had been feeling since arriving in Sanguichor: *They’re playing you. They never wanted you. You’ve never been wanted. You’ve never been liked. Robyn was in on this.*

And before Robyn could catch up to Araminta, the latter scooted out the door, rushed to her car, and peeled out of the driveway towards her dreaded home.

## Chapter 19

Andrew was sleeping when Araminta came home late, the events of the night still fresh in her mind. She didn't care if she woke him up as she slammed her purse on the hook facing their entrance. Nor did Araminta pay any attention to the shriek of the metal curtain rings as she slashed away the reflecting lake waters from view. Araminta hoped that Andrew would wake up. Would frantically ask her what was wrong. Would comfort her. But, of course, Andrew slept like a fallen, maple log. He wouldn't stir until the dawn's light.

So Araminta waited, slinking into their bed in the darkness, unable to fall asleep. Her eyes stung with restlessness, but Araminta kept them open; staring at the door as if someone might barge in at any minute. Her chest hurt with a sharp pain that pricked and needled. She could feel her heartbeat rock back and forth and Araminta kept catching her breath in swift gusts like a falling cliff-climber that has slipped. By the time Andrew stirred his torso towards the creeping light peeking through the edges of their bedroom shades, Araminta felt like she had been in a fist fight.

Andrew wiped away his eyes and reached for Araminta's midsection. He pulled his body in closer to her and took in a long, uninterrupted inhale.

"You awake?" Araminta said, taking her hand and running it through his bed-shaped hair.

Andrew moaned and exhaled a deep yawn. Araminta smelled pickled onion, plaque, and tonsil stone. Andrew opened his eyes in small squints and snuffled his nose.

"Mm." He said.

“Go pee, then see me in the living room.” Araminta said, removing her touch from Andrew’s head and gingerly getting out of bed. Andrew cocked his eyebrow, smacked the saliva in his mouth, then reached around to scratch at his boxer briefs.

Soon after Andrew flushed the toilet, Araminta watched the soles of his feet *tap* on the floor towards her. He shrunk a graphic tee over his body and *plopped* on the couch beside her.

“I’m up,” he said, “what’s the rush out of bed?” Andrew cocked a smile at Araminta danced his fingers on her thigh. “Wanna dip in the lake?”

“No.” Araminta said with sharpness on her tongue. Andrew pulled back his fingers and gave her a concerned look.

Araminta then proceeded to tell Andrew everything about what happened at Robyn’s cabin.

“I’ve been waiting for you to get up since,” she finished, watching the sunbeams pierce the curtains with more ferocity. Araminta’s anxiety didn’t subside.

Andrew scratched the stubble sprouting from his chin and chewed on his lip.

“You haven’t slept at all?” he said.

“No! Haven’t you been listening?”

“Yes. But my main concern is that this whole ordeal has prevented you from getting rest. You should go to sleep. You’ll probably feel a little better after your brain has time to shut down.”

“I don’t need sleep!” Araminta said, getting up from the couch. She walked over to the windows to further adjust the curtains against the intrusive light.

“What do you need then?” Andrew said, his voice deep but inquisitive.

“I think you were right—”

“You admit it?”

“Don’t interrupt me!” Araminta said, turning around to give Andrew a stabbing glare. He continued to scratch at his chin. “We should have just sold this place when we first came here. I’m fucking sick and tired of being treated like shit in this hell hole.”

Araminta thought of Robyn, but pushed her image to the back of her mind.

Andrew popped the joints in his shoulder and cracked at his knuckles. “I agree. I was right,” he gave a sly smile, “but it’s too late now.”

Araminta drew closer to him. “What do you mean?”

Andrew shrugged his shoulders. “We can’t move. We’re settled now. Got everything organized. New furniture. I’m busy at work. I’m not moving again for a long time. Besides, it’ll show them. Just as *you* said. We fight back by staying. Not running away.”

Araminta crossed her arms. “Andrew, we can’t possibly stay around a bunch of women who freely admit to wanting to drown you in a lake! Who all, despite outside influences, think they’ve killed the men around them. It’s not sane!”

“Let them think it,” Andrew said, “we’re not therapists. Maybe it’s a way of coping, or some shit.”

Araminta blinked her eyes with haste. “Andrew, listen to me—”

“I have. Do I think it’s fucking weird they want our house so bad they’re trying to concoct some coven bullshit. Yeah. But it makes them look desperate. Look, if it makes you feel better, I’ll get a doorbell camera and set it up for when I’m home alone.”

Andrew chuckled and stretched upwards from the couch.

“This is not funny!” Araminta said, getting up close to Andrew, her head knocking into his chest.

“It kind of is.” Andrew kissed the top of her head and stepped over to the coffee maker. “Got to admit, freaking us out of house and home is a pretty good strategy. We’ll just ignore them. They’re pranking ya, Minty. Beatrice probably wants the house so she can flip it and give it to a wealthy family for a big payout. Others are in on it too, most likely. Just smile and wave when you drive or walk by and let em’ be.”

Andrew pulled out a bag of dark roast and scooped it into the filter basket.

“You won’t go, even if I want to?” Araminta said, feeling a pressure welting up behind her eyes.

Andrew popped the filter back into the machine and pressed a metal button. Mechanical whirs sung low notes in the kitchen.

“No,” he answered, “I’m tired of moving. I’m tired of this conversation. It’s my house.”

Araminta shook her head.

“Minty,” Andrew said, leaning over the counter, “let it go. We’ll be okay. They can’t do anything to us. We’re staying.”

Araminta quickly turned away from him and stormed into their bedroom.

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Andrew was out on a run—against Araminta’s wishes—when she heard a knock on the door. She was laying in the dim light of the bedroom, her head plopped between two, compressing pillows against her temples, when her ears picked up the thin sound.

Araminta trudged to the kitchen and stayed away from the entrance. She lingered over the silverware drawer and called out:

“Who is it?”

“It’s me,” a voice answered. Robyn’s.

Araminta thought to herself for a few beats. A larger part wanted to ignore the door. To go back into the bedroom and fade away into the blankets and wait until exhaustion took her. But there was a small, intense corner inside her mind that wanted to see Robyn. To talk to her. To find out why she would do this to her.

Araminta went to the door and creaked it open. Outside, Robyn stood wearing a flowing, peony-pink dress with small, embroidered woodpeckers. Her tight curls were tied up by a ribbon of ruffled red.

“Hey.” Robyn said, giving a soft smile.

Araminta cleared her throat. “What? What do you want?”

Robyn’s body stiffened. “I thought I should come over. Talk about what happened last night.”

“I know what happened last night. I don’t need a reminder.”

Robyn nodded her head. “Can I still come in? I’d still like to say something. Just you and me.”

Araminta thought hard about closing the door. Thought about walking away and following Andrew’s advice. But that strange little corner in her head opened the door and stepped aside for Robyn to enter. Araminta listened as Robyn’s sandals *popped* against her hardwood floor.

“Make it quick.” Araminta said, finding the only words she could muster.

“I know what you must be thinking—”

“No, you don’t—”

“I do.” Robyn said. “I do. Just listen. Please?”

Araminta crossed her arms.

“Two years ago, Steph and the rest of women told me the same thing. Told me about Raven Pond. Told me that it was time to send Jonathan into the water. I didn’t listen to them.”

Araminta furrowed her eyebrows and said in an exasperated voice. “Why are you doing this, Robyn? Are you trying to scam me?”

Robyn drew closer and reached her hands out to touch Araminta’s arms. Her hands were cold on Araminta’s skin.

“Just let me finish,” Robyn said. She gave a soft squeeze of her fingers and let out a small gust of breath.

Araminta didn’t shove her away. Just looked at Robyn’s eyes, which were tinged with fear around her hazel edges.

“Two years ago, I moved here with my brother and Imogen. We were happy. Excited. When we got here, Beatrice came over and offered to buy my place. She said no questions asked. Just give her a price. But I didn’t want to go. I thought Beatrice and the women just didn’t want me here. Wanted all of us out of their neighborhood. Because we weren’t like them.”

Araminta could see Robyn searching for the connection they shared in her eyes, but Araminta turned away to the closed shades hiding the window of the kitchen.

Robyn huffed three rapid breathes, but continued talking:

“I stayed because I thought it would send a message. Soon, Steph was coming over. Telling me and Imogen to stay out of the water. So you know what I did? I got in that lake every morning. I swam all day and night while they looked on with, what I thought was, disgust. Imogen wanted to move. Jonathan didn’t give two shits where we went. But I wanted to stay. I wanted to prove a point. Then, one day, I got bit just standing by the shore. By the same thing

you did. I passed right out in the sand and Steph and Corlee dragged me out before the water came too close to my face.

“I started bleeding like I had never done before. I went to the doctor—they had no reason nor care to find out what was wrong with me. Just gave me birth control to stop the flow. Didn’t work. Then all the women started telling me what we told you last night. That my brother was to go in the water.

“I ignored them. Kept to myself. But shit started happening in Sanguichor, Araminta!” Robyn paused, and raised a hand to cup her mouth as she let out a dry sob. “It was dangerous to go out at night. It was like something had been built up around us. Like a leak had suddenly sprung and there was nothing that could fix it. No amount of heavy patrols around the neighborhoods. No stupid fucking commercials on TV’s. Women were being offed in their own homes. Being attacked by people they had known their whole lives.”

Robyn stepped back and released her hands from Araminta’s arms.

“I thought it could be anyone we loved...it hadn’t been tried before.”

Araminta lowered her face and looked at Robyn with a serious look.

“He was my brother. My twin.” Robyn said between short bursts of sobs. Her face was dry from tears, but Robyn heaved fast bursts of wind from her mouth. “I had known him sense I first drew breath. Since we were fucking created. He wasn’t even supposed to come up here with me. He just wanted a small vacation before he went back to school.”

Araminta covered her mouth with her hand.

“We tried it. We put her out there. I hated it, but I let Corlee slip Imogen something. Knocked her out. Minty, I thought it was all a ruse. I thought I was just appeasing these bitches, get them to shut up about how it would be my fault that women were being attacked every night

and day. I thought it all a game even up until...until it came. Took Imogen right under and disappeared. We all thought...all believed..."

Silence filled the space between them until Robyn continued:

"All it did was piss it off. I gave up the woman I loved to save my brother. A man. It was furious. There was a massacre in town. Many women just sitting outside of a café. Walking down the street. Getting ready to take their kids to school. So many gunned down by a few men who had met in a chat room and thought women should be punished for not sleeping with them.

"So I did it. The night after the police said they were going to stop searching for the shooters. We put something in Jonathan's scotch hoping he would be knocked out like Imogen. But it wasn't enough. We didn't get the measure right for his body. I...I sent my brother screaming into the lake and watched him go under."

Araminta felt her body grow cold.

"Next day, the FBI found the shooters. Cracked down their different locations. In and out of town as if it never happened. The fuckers have been locked away in federal since." Robyn finished. She tugged at the ribbon in her hair and tightened the knot closer to her scalp.

Araminta lowered her hand to her side and shook her head. "I don't believe you."

Robyn closed her eyes and lifted her own hand to her mouth. She said through her fist, "It will happen again. A leak will sprout. It wants Andrew—"

"Get out." Araminta said, feeling the sides of her nose getting wet. She didn't realize when she had started crying.

Robyn opened her eyes and stared at Araminta.

"Minty...please."

"Leave. Now." Araminta said. "I don't want to see you again."

Robyn sniffled her nose and nodded her head. She tiptoed past Araminta, leaving behind a faint scent of pear and daisy. She opened the door and looked back at Araminta.

“You have a choice to make,” Robyn began, “if you want me, I’ll help you through it.”

Araminta didn’t answer. She looked away and bowed her head.

“I understand what you’re thinking.” Robyn said. “But I think, deep down, you know you and I are tied together. Forever.”

Robyn walked through the door and closed it behind her.

## Chapter 20

Feeling shaken by everything Robyn had told her, Araminta pressed her back to the east wall of the kitchen, and slid down to the floor. She brought her head to her hands and felt the room spin. She crinkled her toes against the cold tile and gave a short, frustrated caterwaul—deep, brief, but intense as Araminta let the built-up emotions inside her spill out. She didn't know what to think anymore. She was stuck in this cabin, alone, pressed up against two impossibles: believe the ridiculous claims of her neighbors or face the reality of living by the lake in constant paranoia. She felt it unjust that Andrew and Robyn had put her in this position. She didn't want to choose.

Araminta removed her head from her hands and looked into the living room. On the floor rested the scattered, disorganized pile of journals from Andrew's grandparents. Araminta felt the pages call to her; the sun-stained pages of time unsettled and twitchy on the floor.

Araminta heaved forward and placed her hands on the wood paneling. She arched her legs up and platformed her knees on the ground. Like a predator stalking a frantic prey, Araminta crept to the journals and plucked them up with her fingers. She loomed on the parquet, reading through the passages.

She clung a faded book that etched Andrew's grandfather's scrawl:

*October 22, 1969*

*I cannot simply recall the names of the men who greeted me when we first arrived in Sanguichor. I'm absolutely sure there were a few of them who I became acquainted with. Didn't I write some time ago in another journal their names? Where we first met? I couldn't find my notes the other day. But then again, the days got fuzzy a bit. Maybe senility is coming for me.*

*I'm confused. The other day I was suddenly struck with the realization that most of the men have died or left throughout the years I've been here. But...then again...I feel like they died around the time I moved in here with Wilma and Kelly. Accidents. Health issues. Better jobs out of state. Even sudden divorces. Strange. I do wish I could locate my old notes. I'm sure I could find what I'm searching for somewhere. But then again, what's the question?*

*Kelly's okay. Wilma's been having a grand time with her lady friends. When did she get more friends than me? Am I the only man around? Odd. Very odd.*

*~Andy*

Over the next few days, Araminta read through passages from a small notebook kept by Andrew's grandmother:

*The 5<sup>th</sup> of August, 1970*

*I write with half-hearted words, dear journal. I never thought I would say this, but I sure do regret appreciating the closeness of the neighbors here. It has been relentless. Every day and night I am invited to another house—or they come over here. Not to mention how closely they watch Andy. You'd think the man was starving with how much food they bring over here, or tell me to bring home. It's a bit unnerving. So they think we cannot handle our own business? Do they think me an ill wife?*

*Perhaps I am being too paranoid. After all, I've had a strange phenomenon for the past few weeks. How embarrassed I am to write this journal, but I feel my words are safe here. I have been on my monthly for longer than I have ever been. I'm too scared to go to the physician. What would he think? I'm a good woman, I swear. I've read before that an excess in blood is a sign of*

*ill repute. But journal, I've never done ill in my life. Could something be wrong with me? I do feel as though I could ask Abigail...but you just don't talk about these kinds of things. But who am I to talk to? Could I trust her enough?*

*I hope I think of something soon.*

*The 15<sup>th</sup> of August, 1970*

*I have spoken with Abigail about the issues of being on the rag. I did not like her answer. I did not like what she and the other women had to say. It disturbed me greatly. I cannot write about it. It is too dark to even think about.*

*The 17<sup>th</sup> of August, 1970*

*There are dead fish in the water. And the air tastes of salt. I still cannot talk about what was said to me. I will never utter those words. They haunt me with cruelty.*

Araminta read the last passage multiple times. She felt abused with how close she was to finding out about the dead fish a few days ago. It was another few turns of the sun before she picked up a barely-begun journal from Andrew's grandfather:

*September 3, 1970*

*Wilma has been pissing me off lately. She walks around here like a mouse. Jumping at every noise or at every movement Kelly or I make. It sickens me. She is a fragile creature. How easy it would be to break her in my hands. I bet I'm not the only one who thinks about pressing their fingers against a throat and watching mania take over. It's frustrating not being able to*

*talk to a man around here. I wish there were men when we moved here. If I had known it was just going to be me...*

*I'm going to bed and hope I don't reach my limit.*

*~Andy*

*September 14, 1970*

*Days are getting darker. I hate it. I hate it here. I hate my job. I hate my kid. I hate my wife. I hate me. Fuck Raven Pond.*

*~Andy*

Araminta couldn't find more writings from Andrew's grandfather. She spent a week searching for any notes from him. In small crevices by the floorboards. In the air vents. Under the stones outside her steps. There was nothing left from Andy. Resigned, Araminta scoured through the journals looking through Wilma's notes from that September. After flipping through the pages, Araminta came across her small writing in faint, scribbles:

*The 5<sup>th</sup> of September, 1970*

*It hasn't stopped. The blood. It's dangerous out here in Sanguichor. I cannot do it. I cannot do what Abigail suggested last month. I won't. Andy grows mad at me because I won't tell him what's bothering me. I can feel him watching me read the news. The horrible, horrible news. It can't be true. I want to leave here. But I'm afraid of what Andy will do.*

*The 23<sup>rd</sup> of September, 1970*

*I have to do it. So much blood in the streets. In my sheets and on my clothes. Forgive me.  
If what Abigail says is true, let my deed cleanse what has been done to those poor women.*

*Forgive me. Forgive me. Please God forgive me.*

*It happens tonight.*

*The 24<sup>th</sup> of September, 1970*

*I think Kelley saw what I did. She was supposed to be in bed, sleeping safely. She was crying when I came into the house. I pray she forgets this. I pray her soul is not darkened by these waters. Even if she hates me for no reason, I hope her child mind pushes this away.*

*What have I done?*

Araminta dropped the journal and felt crawling fingers up her spine. She took the books and threw them in the darkness of the cellar.

## **SEPTEMBER 2018**

### **Chapter 21**

On Araminta's phone, she received a notification that today was the autumn equinox—the first day of fall. Summer was officially over, but the broken clouds masking the sun didn't keep out a desperate, lingering heat. Warmth gripped at Araminta's skin when she also saw the text message from Robyn blinking bright on her device.

It had been some time before Araminta heard from her neighbors. Although she had stopped taking her daily morning walks on the dirt road circling Raven Pond, Araminta could faintly see their silhouettes through the woods, peeking out from the shadows. But they never approached her or Andrew. Araminta didn't know what was worse—surveillance or nonstop interaction; both equally unnerving and dreadful.

Andrew said he could hardly stand it.

Araminta would watch him pull into the driveway far later than he was expected to work. Progressively, his turn into their driveway became erratic—faster—as if willing for anything or anybody to stand in his vehicle's way. He'd come home, barely addressing Araminta, and slam through the kitchen to search for his supper. At first, Araminta tried comforting Andrew: talk to him about his day, the clients he interacted with, his conversations with coworkers. It had worked before moving to Raven Pond. Andrew could always unwind with simple communication: Araminta's ability to carefully listen allowed Andrew to release the vents of the day and talk about any bottled-up feelings.

But something changed for Andrew, soon after Robyn's last visit to the lake house. It seemed to Araminta that he couldn't stand being in the same space as her. She'd greet him when he walked in and he'd start an argument over something they had quarreled with years ago. Araminta resigned to leaving Andrew alone. It was exhausting otherwise.

Araminta was also tired of the news. Around the town, there was a spike in domestic disturbances. At least, that's what the papers and news alerts on her phone called them. But the growing concern about women's safety in social media groups revealed what was truly going on: women were being attacked. Ruthlessly. By their husbands. Fathers. Brothers. Strangers on the street. Something was emboldening the men around town through acts of violence. If not physically, then verbally. Groups on social media popped up that decreed women shouldn't vote anymore. Shouldn't be allowed to leave their homes. Women were howled at as they walked by. Araminta had never seen this behavior in the area.

She tried to talk to Andrew about her fears. Andrew called her fragile.

So when Robyn texted her, she felt compelled to answer. To reach out for the only contact she had been given in weeks.

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Araminta met Robyn at her house, the sun just beginning to set behind bulbous, graying clouds. Robyn was sitting on her porch sipping on a golden drink as she watched Araminta's car pull into the gravel path. Large, brown sunglasses shaded her eyes, and a black, slip-on dress kissed the bottom of her bare feet.

Araminta approached the painted red deck and lingered at the bottom step.

"You've never had to wait for me to welcome you up." Robyn said. She pushed up her glasses and settled them over the top of her head. She looked down at Araminta with despondent eyes and a frown.

"Wasn't sure if I should get comfortable," Araminta said, "not certain how long I'm staying."

Robyn bowed her head and nodded. "Please." She said with a delicate intonation.

Araminta felt a few beats of breath enter and exit her body. Something about Robyn's voice bewitched her. How soothing it danced in her ears. Araminta placed her hand on the railing and walked up the stairs to Robyn's porch. Next to the glass table was a blue cooler sweating bullets, and Robyn pushed a plate of sandwiches with goops of mayo spilling out the sides.

"I figured you haven't had dinner yet." Robyn said.

"No." Araminta said, not taking a piece of food. Robyn clutched one in her fingers and brought it to her mouth. She took a large bite and seemed to almost swallow it immediately.

"Where's Franny?" Araminta said, looking around for the usual wet nose that would have greeted her by now.

"She's at the kennel. Needed some grooming and they couldn't do it until late. I paid just to have her stay over and I'll get her in the morning." Robyn said, avoiding direct eye contact with her guest.

Araminta watched as Robyn took another sip of her drink. Water beads trailed down her fingers and frost *clinked* in the cylinder. Robyn reached down her hand and popped open the cooler. She fisted through chunks of ice and pulled out a pink wine cooler. She set it in front of Araminta and leaned back in her chair.

"I'm happy that you answered my text," Robyn started, "I wasn't sure if you'd want to come over."

"I debated it." Araminta said. She eyed the pink liquid in front of her, but didn't reach for it. She sat down in the green Adirondack and mimicked Robyn's position.

"Yeah." Robyn paused and took another drink. "How are things with you? With Andrew?"

Araminta took a moment to think. She chewed on her lip and shifted in her seat.

Araminta didn't feel like telling Robyn the whole truth. "Alright. He works a lot. Gets home later than usual. But I'm sure you've heard that."

Robyn scratched the back of her ear. "They're just worried about you."

Araminta scoffed, "It's fucking creepy. Tell them to stop."

"I've tried. They're just...they want to make sure that you're safe."

Araminta looked away towards the direction of her own cabin. She eyed the woods and watched as the shadows grew darker under the waning sun.

"Shits getting crazy out there." Robyn said, following Araminta's line of sight.

"Don't start." Araminta said, her voice cracking.

"Minty..." Robyn said, her cadence a soft whisper in the open air. Araminta turned her head and saw Robyn leaning closer. Her eyes were tired and beginning to grow bloodshot. Araminta cleared her throat and felt a bubble rising to the surface. In her mind she could see Wilma and Andy's handwriting being flipped through with a spectral finger; as if Robyn's voice had become embodied—could physically filter through Araminta's pictured memories. Through Araminta's disbeliefs.

"What if..." Araminta said, feeling a pressure behind her eyes. She felt a warm moisture lining her bottom lids. "I found writings. That may or may not coincide with what you've told me. What the others told me."

Robyn furrowed her eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

"Just...what if? What if I were to listen to this idea that something is going on? Something I could stop?"

Robyn stared down at the table and watched water ringlets scatter on the surface. She took a napkin from a holder and placed it between her fingers. She reached down under her dress and shifted in her seat. Araminta's mouth dropped as she hear a small sucking sound. She felt nauseous as she watched Robyn's face grow in discomfort as she wiggled around, then pull her arm back out. Robyn held up her hand, the white napkin now dipped in a dark splotch of red.

"I've been bleeding since late July. Maybe early August. Minty, at most I have my period for five days. Not months."

Araminta wiped her eyes and watched as Robyn got up from her chair and disappeared into her house with the soaked napkin. While waiting, she turned her body to face the road leading out of Raven Pond. Araminta could feel a knocking presence in the back of her mind telling her to leave—but the rest of Araminta's psyche wanted more. Wanted to be with Robyn and watch the sun fall below the trees and embrace the coolness of night.

Araminta inhaled the growing scent of the equinox evening and waited for Robyn to return to the deck. Robyn brought out a large, citronella candle and lit it with a small, red lighter. The flame flickered unbothered for a few minutes and exhaled delicate scents of orange and lemon.

"We've all been bleeding, Minty." Robyn said, finally breaking the silence. "And I'm sure you've gotten alerts about an increase in violence in this area. Specifically, against women. How city hall will probably declare a temporary curfew. That they'll say it's for everyone to follow, but the language implies only women. That they're ignoring the woman who are being attacked in their very own homes. How there are increasing acts of aggression. But the police don't care. Saying they're handling it but also saying that there isn't a problem going on. How

something terrible is happening. Something that should garner national attention, but won't because it's Maine—"

"I don't want this!" Araminta said, letting moisture flicker down her face.

"No one does!" Robyn said, raising her voice. "No one asked for this!"

Araminta felt her chest heave up and down. "Even if all of this was possible—was fucking real—why us! Why are we in charge of the fucking bullshit going on around us? It doesn't make sense!" Araminta felt her face grimace and turn sour with rage. "It's not right!"

Robyn leaned in close and reflected back a solemn glare. "No, it's not right. But no matter how fucked up it is—how much we resist or refuse—we're saddled with this responsibility. A pact was made and we are its keepers. This town is in the center of dam. If that water isn't fed, we will be flooded!" Robyn jerked her arm out and pointed to the black water of Raven Pond. Above the water reflected an awakening waxing gibbous; just about ready to come to fruition or reveal a yellow eye.

Araminta, exhausted and heartbroken, cracked open her mouth: "It shouldn't be on us."

Robyn relaxed her face and reached forward the fingers that was previously inside her. She brushed against Araminta's arm, and with a delicate rest, kept her touch upon Araminta.

"I know," Robyn said, "but we're still here. And a choice has to be made."

Araminta stared into Robyn's eyes.

They shared a knowing glance, a strong string that wrapped around them and pulled them together. Araminta felt her head grow light and hazed. Robyn got up from the table and lifted Araminta up by the hand.

"I'm with you," Robyn whispered.

"I don't want to go home." Araminta said, her face wet with tears from her eyes and nose.

“You have to.” Robyn answered. “Take me with you.”

Robyn led Araminta to her car and drove her down the narrow path that led them to Araminta’s camp. As they pulled up to the solitary nook, Araminta could see flames flickering by the lake.

## Chapter 22

As the two women pulled into Araminta's driveway, Raven Pond's coven gathered by the shores of the black waters. Araminta felt like she should be angry—knew deep down that this was a concocted plan between all the women. To distract Araminta while they convened on her property. Araminta also sensed a lurking, menacing truth—that maybe, just maybe, she was accepting of this deception.

Robyn clicked her seatbelt off and left Araminta in loneliness, to ponder the scene in front of her. Araminta felt her head fill with air; its haze running over every thought and feeling. To Araminta, it felt like breathing in burning smoke and refusing to exhale. Her thoughts slurred in her mind, and coherent thinking seemed to hide itself in the recesses of her memory.

Robyn came over to Araminta's side and opened her car door. She reached over and unhooked the metal belt from her chest and torso. Robyn cupped her hand over Araminta's cheek and chin and leaned in to kiss her on her forehead. Araminta closed her eyes and used a dazed momentum to lift herself out of the Sedan.

The two woman dragged their feet against the rock-splayed path. Smoke danced off lit torches and a small bonfire crackled in a fresh pit that was not there when Araminta left earlier in the daylight. As the moon poked its awakening eye down onto the lake and surrounding women, Araminta could see, shimmering through the flame's vapor, a pedestal of pine on the ground. Perhaps a pallet, but refined—touched only by nimble hands and the kiss of a forest floor. Araminta, growing closer to the set-up, could see a naked body on the wooden sculpture, limbs tied with twine in the crannies of the dark space between perpendicular boards. The figure moaned and turned its head, its eyes half-closed.

“Corlee!” Robyn said, arm hooked around Araminta’s. She settled by the head of the figure, her face full of held-back rage. “You didn’t give him enough! You remember what happened with Jonathon!”

Corlee returned Robyn’s sight, but held her hands together to pick at the skin around her knuckles. “I thought I put more in this time! He’s bigger than Jonathon, so it was hard to measure without overdoing it.”

Araminta looked down at the body and found Andrew’s chin pointed at her. His chest heaved up and down, deep in and out. Araminta felt tears falling along her face, but when she looked out to the water of Raven Pond, the current sang her a melancholic lullaby as it strummed against the rocks and reeds.

Beatrice looked up at the moon, and took a long sniff of the air. Her breath leaked out her mouth like a ghost.

“Araminta,” she said, “it has to be tonight. It’s the last day of the pact. When the night meets the day as equals.”

Steph came out of Araminta’s house with a collection of towels and washcloths. She tiptoed down the stairs and walked over to the fire pit. She dropped the items to the ground floor without care and crossed her arms, refusing to look down at Andrew’s sprawled body.

“How?” Araminta said, her mouth dry and slurring like her mind. “How did—” she pointed down at Andrew and back up at the house.

Robyn stepped in front of Araminta to block Andrew’s image from her sight. Falline approached from the dock and walked closer to the gathering group. She began to unhook the braids from her hair, letting her graying locks touch the back of her shoulders and crook of her collarbone. She opened her mouth:

“We waited until he came home. Told him we wanted to see you. He let us in thinking you were there. We offered to wait. Offered to get him something to eat or drink so that he could relax. Don’t worry hun: Corlee slipped him something so that he would be sleeping.”

Falline looked at Andrew with sad eyes. “Hopefully she gave him enough so he doesn’t feel anything.”

Araminta felt sick. She clutched at her mouth with her hand, but Robyn took her in her arms and whispered into her ear:

“I’m here. Please. I’m here.”

Araminta felt the soft skin upon Robyn’s neck. Her smell helped mask the heaviness of the smoke filling the air around them.

Andrew moaned behind Robyn. A deep, confused, whine that punched at their ears.

Araminta freed herself from Robyn’s embrace and reached for Andrew’s hair with her fingers. It was warm to touch and mingled with her fingers like a blanket. In Araminta’s other hand, Robyn squeezed with a cool palm.

Beatrice nodded her head at all the women, “We better get it done. Before he becomes anymore conscious.”

Tangled, broken, and lost in hope; Araminta nodded back.

And then she watched as all the woman began to undress. Their various states of vulnerability unfolded in front of her. Beatrice kept her lace gloves on her hands, but let go the rest of her garments to the ground by her feet, shoving them into dirt with her toes. Falline shed her cotton dress from her shoulders and rested her arms to her side, refusing to cover the wrinkles and scars across her body. Corlee unhooked her bra and wriggled out of her panties, her

bust freckled with auburn stars. Steph whipped her clothes off and threw them into the fire. She gave a scowl as she watched the others strip with precision.

Andrew grunted and strained against the binds. His own nudity glowing in the dim light of torches around them.

Robyn blocked Araminta from Andrew again and brought her hands to her black dress. She slipped down the straps that clung to her neck, and with a small shimmy, the garment fell to her feet, revealing her warm skin to the air. She then reached to Araminta's shirt and tugged at the bottom.

Araminta lifted her arms and felt Robyn pull the fabric over her head. Robyn then lowered her hands to the clasp on Araminta's jeans. With a flick of her fingers, she unbuttoned the metal and leaned down to guide her pants to the earth. Araminta lifted her feet up and slipped out her sandals. She felt Robyn's fingers rise up and release the hooks from her bra. As Robyn brought down the lace balconette, she traced her thumbs along Araminta's thong and brought it down to the rest of the vestiges.

Araminta tried hiding her body—the folds that curved out from under her breasts, the handles that draped over her hips, the crumbling of her thighs. But Robyn took her hands and placed them into hers. They shared a look, and Araminta relaxed.

Beatrice walked closer to the pallet and stretched out her hands. Falline took to her right, Corlee to her left. Steph stood next to Corlee, both intertwining their fingers together. Robyn reached her hand to Steph, and Araminta—through the pale colors swirling in her lobe—took Falline's other grasp. They circled around Andrew, listening to his body twist ever so lightly on the plinth.

Beatrice cleared her throat and began to speak:

“As ordained by the first sister, Ada of Sanguichor, we come to Raven Pond. To repeat the words sung by our coven. To offer what is ours. To abide to the pact made with the deity of the waters.”

Araminta heard a log split in the fire, consumed by red and orange heat.

Falline raised her head and continued, “We walk these shores stark with fear, anger, and hatred. We ask to be heard.”

The rocks beneath Araminta’s arches shifted. She felt herself stumble, but the strength of Falline and Robyn’s arms kept her in place.

Next, Corlee raised her voice, louder than Araminta had ever heard her. “We enter your embrace as an embodiment of nature’s true rule. A host to balanced judgement.”

A whipping breeze flew through the women and pushed their hair from their faces. Araminta’s cheeks grew cold and red.

Steph swallowed a thick, hard lump and spoke: “We bring the flesh of those who’ve held us; a sacrifice to share with your domain.”

Raven Pond’s waters quickened against the dock, splashing against the metal with fervor.

Robyn turned her head towards Araminta and spoke directly to her.

“We pour fourth our blood as the seal which binds us together. Take it all and grant us our desire to be free.”

In the distance, a howl refracted around them; without origin, but all encompassing. Araminta felt her spine grow tendrils underneath her skin, prickling and prodding to break the surface.

Beatrice broke the bond of the circle and reached down between her legs. She stuck her fingers up inside her and tugged. With her other hand, she supported with delicate care, a birthed menstrual cup, teeming with thick blood. She raised the chalice to the sky.

Araminta watched as all the women, one-by-one, stretch their vulva to pull from within them, brimming cups of blood. She waited for her turn and followed suit. She bowed down, felt for the silicone tail, and tugged. With her left hand, she guided the bowl out carefully, not spilling a drop. She released the ‘U’ mouth and revealed the goblet to the air.

Beatrice then walked closer to Andrew and dumped her blood on Andrew’s feet. Falline poured over his legs. Corlee covered his groin. Steph drenched his abdomen. Robyn dripped onto his chest and neck. They then all looked at Araminta.

Araminta whiffed the metallic stench wafting from Andrew. Small clots dotted his body like constellations. She reached out her arm and paused over Andrew’s head. Her hand shook, the muscles in her forearm beginning to cramp. She heard the lake call to her again, another howl ringing in her ears. She tipped the chalice over Andrew and splashed her blood over his face, mouth, and nose.

He stirred, his head turning side to side. He opened his mouth, tasting menstruation, and whispered with a small lament, “Araminta?”

Araminta shuddered and dropped her cup. It *plopped* against Andrew’s forehead and bounced down in-between the space of the wooden platform. The women eyed Araminta, and Robyn took her by the shoulders. With a slight pull, Araminta was removed from Andrew.

Beatrice began to hum a solemn tune, almost on the verge of a chant. It radiated from her throat, menacing and rhythmic like a drum. The rest of the women joined her. Araminta felt trepidation rooting in her vocal cords.

Like living in slow motion, they approached the platform at all corners like a six-pointed star. Beatrice and Falline took the bottom, Steph and Corlee the top. Robyn led Araminta to the middle plank by Andrew's head, and they lifted up. They crept towards the shore.

Araminta looked out towards the water and heard the thrumming of the chanting. It made her heart *dip* and *dap*. Too hard in her chest. She felt Andrew stir below her, his eyes beginning to flutter once more.

"No." Araminta cried as a whisper. She stopped in place, halting the procession. The chanting stopped in the air around her ears.

"Araminta!" Robyn whispered, her voice desperate. "We have to!"

"No." Araminta said, louder. She blinked her eyes rapidly and knocked against her temple with hard palms. The weight of Andrew on the platform shifted and the women struggled to hold him without Araminta's help.

"You have to choose us!" Beatrice yelled, her eyes bulging with fear. "We have to keep the pact up!"

Araminta felt the haze in her mind clear away. She looked from woman to woman, and saw their struggling arms holding Andrew aloft in the air.

She rushed forward with her arms and knocked them all over. The pallet crashed on top of them. Andrew gave a loud, muffled cry.

"What's...what's going on?" he slurred, his voice cracking with paranoia.

Araminta rushed to him and tugged on the twine. Steph reached out her hand to halt Araminta.

"Stop it!" Steph screamed. The portion of the wood holding down Andrew's arms held down her chest. Araminta jerked her foot away. The rest of the women shrieked as they clawed

in the sand by the shore. Araminta looked to her right and saw Robyn—who only fell down when Araminta pushed—begin to rise.

“Help me!” Araminta said, pleading with a stretched voice.

“Robyn!” Beatrice cried, her old body closest to the water. “Stop her! Hold her down! We need to get him into the water!”

Robyn looked back and forth from Beatrice and Araminta.

Araminta continued to rip at the twine holding the subdued limbs of Andrew. “Please! We can stop this!”

Falline gave out an exhausted plea, “Robyn, the pact!”

Robyn rushed to Araminta and took her hands. Tears fell on both sets of cheeks.

“Minty...” Robyn said under her breath.

Araminta laid across Andrew, putting more pressure on wood and the women. Blood drenched her cheeks. “You said you’d be here for me. Please!”

Robyn clenched her jaw and reached for a rock on the ground. She lunged forward.

With a few swishes of her hand, Robyn cut Andrew’s wrist free.

Araminta, surprised, froze up as she watched Robyn begin to slash at the binds holding Andrew.

“Don’t just stare!” Robyn yelled. “Get a rock. Start cutting!”

Araminta nodded her head, shaking the frost from her body. She lifted off the pallet and reached for a large rock. However, as her position changed, she felt Corlee slip out from under the platform. Corlee tackled Araminta and knocked her into a hard stone. Araminta felt the world turn and shift, her mind once again returning to a haze.

Robyn ran and picked up Corlee, scratching and clawing like a feral animal, from Araminta's back. Robyn tossed her aside and shouted for Araminta: "Finish cutting him free. We need to get out of here."

Araminta jumped on the platform. The rest of the women, still stuck, grunted and tried raking at Araminta's body. Steph, realizing the futility of her movement, picked up a rock and dashed it towards Araminta's head. It flung and slammed against Araminta's shoulders.

Araminta felt the force and pain. But she kept slicing away at the binding. While Robyn and Corlee fought with each other by the shore, Beatrice and Falline—following Steph's actions—began hurling stones at Araminta.

But through the bludgeoning, Araminta freed Andrew and pulled him from the pallet.

"No!" Beatrice screamed. Without the couple's weight, she lifted the pallet off her body and began to rise to her feet. "Fine! If you are to be fed to the waters, so be it!"

Robyn punched Corlee in the jaw, sending her to the ground. Robyn rushed forward and helped Araminta lift Andrew from his prone state.

"What's going on?" He said, finding footing, but barely able to keep his own body up.

Araminta looked at the dock. A small dingy bobbed up and down in the water.

"There!" She said to Robyn. The three of them backed up to the dock and clumsily stepped up to the pier.

In the water was the small canoe, so old with time and weather. How long ago had it been since Robyn and Araminta paddled on these waters?

Beatrice and Falline ran to them, tears streaming down their faces. Araminta and Robyn rushed to *Run Ahead* and dropped Andrew into the carved, hollow of the boat. He crashed with a bruising force.

Robyn leaped down and helped Araminta into the vessel. Steph and Corlee sprinted towards them, their naked bodies covered in scrapes and scratches. Araminta pulled the hooked knot from the dock's stand while Robyn kicked the boat out.

"Grab a paddle!" Araminta said, reaching for the wooden tools. They pushed Andrew's hulking shape off the oars and dipped them into the water.

"You think that boat will stop it!?" Beatrice cried from the shore. "It will take you all!"

Robyn and Araminta paddled out deeper into the lake, ignoring the cries from the women. Blood drenched the side of the boat as Andrew's hands draped into the water. Robyn removed his digits from the current and looked around.

And then they all heard it. The slow, slithering body coming closer.

"Row!" Araminta screamed. "Row dammit!"

"Go this way!" Robyn said, pointing northeast. "Head up the strait to Lunar Lake. We need to get out of Raven Pond!"

The two rowed on one side of the boat until they headed to the narrow and shallow stream.

But the sound of the slurping grew louder, and a long, menacing growl rose up from the waters. It grew and screeched, hurting the women's ears. Araminta turned around and saw her lake house grow distant, the firelight and the remaining women fading away with each dip of their paddle.

A primordial yowl rose from the water beside Robyn. Close and under the boat.

"Minty!" Robyn cried, her face wet with lake water and the blood drenched on Andrew's body.

Araminta looked down to Andrew and then back up to Robyn. She knew she could make a choice here. To throw one of them into the water and row away to the strait; to free waters. She could toss Andrew in and keep the pact. Run away with Robyn and never look back. But she also loved Andrew. Who had been by her side, loved her for years and gave her cherished memories. She didn't want to choose. *She didn't want to choose.*

Suddenly, Araminta watched the ancient creature rise from the lurch. An endless tail piercing into the sky. A stream of black, green, and red skin penetrating from out the water, dripped with malcontent. Eyeless. Sharp legs wriggling out to slash at the boat. An open maw that dashed out a proboscis with rows of copper fangs.

And then: silence. The eerie black waters rippling out like a tidal wave.

*End of Part I*