

"A TWISTING, ENGROSSING DELIGHT...WHAT A WONDERFUL
RABBIT HOLE TO FALL DOWN."—ERIKA SWYLER

A HISTORY
OF
WILD PLACES

a novel

SHEA ERNSHAW

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE WICKED DEEP

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**A HISTORY
OF
WILD PLACES**

— A NOVEL —

SHEA ERNSHAW

ATRIA BOOKS

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For Jess, my agent

There is always danger for those who are afraid.

—GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

FOXES AND MUSEUMS

Excerpt from Book One in the Eloise and the Foxtail series

The green eyes of a riddle fox peered into Eloise's bedroom window.

It was a Wednesday, and the sun had long since dipped beyond the whispering evergreens. Eloise should have been asleep, but she kept thinking about the woods, about the lean-to fort she and her little brother had made at the base of a pine tree, and if it was strong enough to withstand the winter storms.

It was surely a dream—those eyes that stared at her through the glass, snow whirling and catching against the wool of its pointed face. Riddle foxes were rare this deep in the mountains. But dreams were nearly just as rare. Eloise never saw images when she slept anymore. They were fanciful and indulgent. The world wouldn't allow for dreams.

Even nightmares were scarce.

PART ONE

THE BARN

Death has a way of leaving breadcrumbs, little particles of the past that catch and settle and stain. A single strand of copper-brown hair, the follicle ripped from a skull, snagged by a door hinge or cold, clenched fingers. Drops of blood and broken skin, carelessly left at the bottom of a bathroom sink when they should have been scrubbed away.

Objects leave hints too: a bracelet broken at the clasp, dropped in the red-clay dirt; a shoe kicked off during a struggle, wedged behind a rear truck tire; a contact lens, popped free when the person screamed for help in some deep, dark part of a backwoods lot where no one could hear.

These things, these artifacts, tell me where a person has been. The last steps they took.

But not in the way you might think.

The past sputters through me, images reflected against my corneas, revealing the strained, awful looks carved into the faces of those who've gone missing. Who've vanished and never returned home.

I see them in a sort of slideshow staccato, like the old black-and-white nickel films. It's a terrible talent to hold an object and see the likeness of the person it once belonged to, their final moments shivering and jerking through me as if I were right there. Witnessing the grim, monstrous ends of a person's life.

But such things—such abilities—can't be given back.

Snow blows against the truck windshield, icing it over, creating a thin filigree effect—like delicate lacework. The heater stopped working three days back, and my hands shake in my coat pockets as I peer through the glass at the Timber Creek Gas & Grocery, a tiny, neon-lit storefront at the edge of a mountain town without a name. Through the gusting snow, I can just make out a collection of homes sunk back in the lodgepole pines, and several businesses long since boarded up. Only the small firehouse, a tow truck service, and the gas station are still up and running. A stack of cut firewood sits outside the gas station with a sign that reads: \$5 A BUNDLE, SELF-SERVE. And in smaller print: BEST PRICE ON MOUNTAIN.

This town is merely a husk, easily wiped off the map with a good wind or an unstoppable wildfire.

I push open the truck door, rusted hinges moaning in the cold, and step out into the starless night. My boots leave deep prints in the fresh two inches of snowfall, and I cross the parking lot to the front doors of the gas station, sharp winter air numbing my ears and nostrils, my breath a frosty cloud of white.

But when I pull open the gas station door, a tidal wave of warm, stagnant air folds over me—thick with the scent of motor oil and burnt corn dogs—and for a moment I feel light-headed. My eyes flick across the store: the shelves have a vacant, apocalyptic feel. Dust molders on every surface, while a few solitary items—starchy white bread, Pop-Tarts, and tiny boxes of travel-size cereal—seem almost like movie-set props from another era, their logos sun-bleached and outdated. At the back wall of the store sits a droning cooler lined with beer, cartons of milk, and energy drinks.

This place isn't haunted—not in the way I'm accustomed to—it's paralyzed in time.

At the front counter, a woman with feathered gray hair and even grayer skin sits perched on a stool under the headache-inducing florescent lights. She's tapping her fingers against the wood countertop as if she's tapping a pack of cigarettes, and I move across the store toward her.

To the left of the cash register sits a coffee maker coated in a heavy layer of dust—I'm tempted to reach for one of the stacked paper cups and fill it with whatever stagnant, lukewarm liquid is waiting inside, but I suspect it will taste just as it looks: like oily truck tires. So I let my gaze fall back to the woman, my hands clenching inside my coat pockets, feeling the burn of blood flowing back into my fingertips.

The woman eyes me with a nervy-impatience, and a hint of suspicion. I know this look: She doesn't like me at the onset. The beard I've been cultivating for the last month doesn't rest well on the features of my face, it makes me look ten years older, mangy like a stray dog. Even after a shower I still look wild, undomesticated, like someone you shouldn't trust.

I smile at the woman, trying to seem acquiescent, harmless, as though a glimpse of my teeth will somehow reassure her. It does not. Her sour expression tugs even tighter.

"Evening," I begin, but my voice has a roughness to it, a grating unease—the lack of sleep giving me away. The woman says nothing, only keeps her paled eyes squarely on me, like she's waiting for me to demand all the money in the register. "Have you heard of a woman named Maggie St. James?" I ask. I used to have a knack for this: for convincing

people to trust me, to give up details they've never even told the police, to reveal that small memory they've been holding on to until now. But that talent is long gone, sunk like flood waters into a damp basement.

The woman makes a half-interested snort, the scent of cigarette smoke puffing out from her pores—a salty, ashen smell that reminds me of a case I took out in Ohio three years back, searching for a missing kid who had been holed up inside an abandoned two-story house out behind a run-down RV park, where the walls had the same stench—salt and smoke—like it had been scrubbed into the daffodil and fern wallpaper.

“Everyone around here’s heard of Maggie St. James,” the woman answers with a gruff snort, wrinkling her stubby nose and looking up at me from the nicotine-yellow whites of her eyes. “You from a newspaper?”

I shake my head.

“A cop?”

I shake my head again.

But she doesn’t seem to care. Either way, cop or reporter, she keeps talking. “A woman goes missing and this place turns into a damn spectacle, like a made-for-TV movie—helicopters and search dogs were swarming up in those woods, found a whole heap of nothing. Searched through folks’ garbage cans and garages, asking questions like the whole community was in on something, like we knew what happened to that missing woman but weren’t saying.” She crosses her arms—all bony angles and loose, puckered skin, like a snake slowly shedding her useless outer layer from her skeleton. “We’re honest people ’round here, tell ya what we think even if you don’t ask. Those police made people paranoid, creeping around at night with their flashlights, peeking into decent folks’ windows. Most of us didn’t leave our homes for weeks; cops had us believing there was a murderer out there, snatching people up. But it was all for nothing. They never turned up a damn thing. And all for some woman who we didn’t even know.” At this she nods her head, lips pursed together, as if to punctuate the point.

The locals in this town might not have known who Maggie St. James was when she turned up in their community then promptly vanished, but a lot of people outside of here did. Maggie St. James had gained notoriety some ten years ago when she wrote a children’s book titled *Eloise and the Foxtail: Foxes and Museums*. What followed were four more books, and some fierce public backlash that her stories were too dark, too grisly

and sinister, and that they were inspiring kids to run away from home and venture into nearby woodlands and forests, searching for something called the *underground*—a fictional location she wrote about in the series. The *underground* was supposed to turn ordinary kids into something unnatural—a dark, villainous creature. One quote in particular from a noted literary journal said, *St. James's take on the modern fairy tale is more nightmares than dreams, stories to make your children fear not just the dark, but the daylight, too. I wouldn't read this to a serial killer, let alone to my child.*

Shortly after her fifth book was published, a fourteen-year-old boy named Markus Sorenson ventured deep into the Alaskan wilderness in search of this *underground* and died from hypothermia. His body was found seven days later. I remember the case because I got a call from a detective up in Anchorage, asking if I might come up and see if I could assist in finding the boy. But they found him at the entrance to a small rocky cave the following day, skin whiter than the surrounding snowfall. I wondered if in those final moments, when the delirium of cold began to make him hallucinate, did he think he had found the *underground*?

After the boy's death, Maggie St. James just sort of slipped into obscurity—with good reason. According to Wikipedia, there was a planned sixth book in the Eloise and the Foxtail series. A book that would never be written, because the author, Maggie St. James, vanished.

“Do you remember her stopping here?” I ask the woman, whose pale blue veins are tightening beneath the waxy skin of her throat.

She raises an eyebrow at me, as if I've offended her in suggesting that she might *not* remember such a thing after five years. I know Maggie St. James stopped at the Timber Creek Gas & Grocery because it was in the police report, as well as a statement from a cashier who was not named. “She was unmemorable at best,” the woman answers, what's left of her thinning eyelashes fluttering closed then open again, dark mascara clotting at the corners. “But lucky for the police, and you, I remember everyone.” She glances to the oily storefront windows—snow spiraling against the glass—as if the memory were still there, just within reach. “She got gas and bought a pack of strawberry bubble gum, tore open the package and started chewing it right there, before she'd even paid for it. Then she asked about a red barn. Asked if I knew where she could find one around here. Of course, I told her about the old Kettering place a few miles on up the road. Said it was

nearly collapsed, a place kids go to drink, and hadn't been properly used in twenty years. I asked her what she wanted with that old place, but she wouldn't say. She left without even a thanks, then drove off. They found her car the next morning, abandoned." She snuffs, turning her face back to the windows, and I get the sense she wants to make some comment about how rude city folk can be, but catches herself just in case *I* might be city folk. Even though I'm not. And from what I knew of Maggie St. James, she wasn't either.

I clear my throat, hoping there might be more beneath the surface of her memory if I can ask the right question and pry it loose. "Have you heard anyone talk about her in the years since?" I ask, tiptoeing around the thing I really want to ask. "Someone who saw her, who remembers something?"

"Someone who remembers killing her, you mean?" She unfolds her arms, mouth tugging strangely to one side.

I doubt there's a serial killer in the area—there'd be reports of other disappearances—but perhaps there's someone who keeps to themselves, lives alone up in these woods, someone who maybe hadn't killed before, but only because he had never encountered the right opportunity—until Maggie drove into town. Someone out hunting deer or rabbit, and a stray shot tore through a woman with short, cropped blond hair—a woman whose body now needed to be disposed of, burned or buried. Accidents can turn people into grave diggers.

"I can't say for sure that some folks around here don't have a bolt untightened from the mind, a few cobwebs strung between the earlobes, but they aren't killers." The woman shakes her head. "And they certainly can't keep their mouths shut. If someone killed that girl, they'd've talked about it by now. And soon enough, the whole town would know of it. We're not much for keeping secrets for long."

I look away from her, eyeing the coffee machine again, the stack of paper cups. *Should I risk it?* But the woman speaks again, one eyebrow raised like a pointed toothpick, as if she's about to let me in on a secret. "Maybe she wanted to get herself lost, start a new life; no crime in that." Her eyes flick to the pack of cigarettes sitting beside the cash register, a purple lighter resting on top. She needs a smoke.

I nod, because she might be right about Maggie. People did sometimes vanish, not because they'd been taken or killed, but simply because they *wanted* to disappear. And

Maggie had reason to escape her life, to slip into the void of endless highways and small towns and places where most don't go looking.

Maybe I'm chasing a woman who doesn't want to be found.

Behind the cash register, the woman finally reaches for the pack of cigarettes, sliding it across the counter so it's resting on the very edge. "Maybe it's best to just let her be, let a woman go missing if that's what she wants."

For a moment, she and I stare at one another—as if we've reached some understanding between us, a knowing that we've felt that same itch at the back of our throats at least once in our lives: that desire to be *lost*.

But then her expression changes: the skin around her mouth wrinkling like dried apricots, and a shiver of something untrusting settles behind her eyes, like she's suddenly wary of who I am—who I *really* am—and why I've come asking questions after all these years. "You a private detective?" she asks, taking the pack of smokes in her hand and tapping out a single cigarette.

"No." I scratch at my beard, along the jaw. It's starting to feel too warm inside the little store—humid, boxed-in.

"Then why'd you come all the way out here in the middle of winter, asking about that woman? You a boyfriend or something?"

I shake my head, a staticky hum settling behind my eyes—that well-known ache trying to draw me into the past. I'm getting closer to Maggie, I can feel it.

The woman's mouth makes a severe line, like she can see the discomfort in my eyes, and I take a quick step back from the counter before she can ask me what's wrong. "Thank you for your time," I tell her, nodding. Her mouth hangs open, like the maw of some wild animal waiting to be fed, and she watches as I retreat to the front doors and duck out into the night.

The sudden rush of cold air is an odd relief. Snow and wind against my overheated flesh.

But my head still thumps with the heavy need for coffee, for sleep—but also with the grinding certainty that I'm getting close. This gas station was the last place Maggie St. James was seen before she vanished, and my ears buzz with the knowing.

I climb back into the truck and press a hand to my temple.

I could use a handful of aspirin, a soft bed that doesn't smell like industrial-grade motel detergent, the warmth of anything familiar. I crave things I've forgotten how to get. An old life, maybe. That's what it really is: a need for something I've lost long ago. A life that's good and decent and void of the bone-breaking pain that lives inside me now.

The truck tires spin on the ice, windshield wipers clacking back and forth, and I swerve out of the gas station parking lot back onto the road. I glance in the rearview mirror and see the woman watching me from the window of the little store, her face a strange neon-blue glow under the shivering lights.

And I wonder: Did Maggie St. James see that same face as she sped away five years ago? Did the same chill skip down her spine to her tailbone?

Did she know she was about to vanish?

The truck headlights break through the dark only a few yards ahead, illuminating the icy pavement like a black, moonless river, and casting ribbons of yellow-white through the snow-weighted trees that sag and drip like wet arms.

I drive for an hour up the same road that Maggie St. James followed, passing only one car going in the opposite direction, and a scattering of small, moss-covered homes.

Until at last, through the tall sentinel pines and sideways snow, a red barn appears.

What's left of it.

The woman at the gas station had been right, the entire left side is caved in, a heap of splintered wood and old nails now buried in snow. But a metal weathervane still sits perched at the highest peak, the moving pieces locked in place by the cold or rust. It's the same barn I saw in a police photograph that Maggie's parents showed me. But in the photo, parked in the foreground, was a pale green, four-door, newer model Volvo: Maggie's car. She had parked here alongside the road, gotten out of the driver's seat, took her purse and her cell phone, then vanished.

I ease off the gas pedal and pull the truck onto the shoulder of the road, stopping in the very same place where she did.

It was midsummer when Maggie was here, the leaves on the trees a healthy, verdant green, the sun crisp and blinding overhead, and it must have warmed the inside of her car.

Perhaps she had the windows rolled down, smelled the sweet scent of green manzanita and wildflowers growing up from the ditch beside the road. Perhaps she closed her eyes for a moment while she sat in her car, considering her options. Perhaps she even thought back on all the things that led her here: the faraway moments, the fragmented pieces of her life that only come into focus in times like this.

She was building a story in her mind, just like the fairy tales she wrote, but this story was her own—the ending not yet written. Or an ending only she foresaw.

Ahead of me, the mountain road makes a sharp left turn and a small solitary house—the only one for miles—sits tucked back in the pines, a porch light on, illuminating the gray front door. Mr. and Mrs. Alexander live there. They’ve lived in the squat, single-story home for forty-three years—most of their lives—and they were there when Maggie’s car was found. The police spent quite a bit of time interviewing the Alexanders. From the report, it’s obvious the detectives had their suspicions about Mr. Alexander, and they even dug up parts of the Alexander’s backyard, searching for remains: a thighbone, an earring, any clues that Maggie might have met her fate inside the Alexander’s home. One of the detective’s theories was that Maggie’s car may have broken down—even though it started right up when the tow truck came to haul it away—and maybe she wandered over to the Alexanders’ hoping for refuge, for help. But perhaps instead Mr. Alexander dragged her into his garage and bludgeoned her to death before burying her out back. They found a hammer in his garage with blood splatter marks on it, that was later determined to be rodent blood. He had used the hammer to end the suffering of a mouse caught in a trap. But that didn’t detour the police from keeping Mr. Alexander as their main—*and only*—suspect.

There weren’t many leads in the St. James case, and the local police found themselves pacing this length of road with little to go on. Cases go cold this way. They grow stagnant, lose momentum. Without a body, without any blood or sign of a struggle, Maggie St. James might have simply wanted to vanish—just like the woman at the gas station suggested. *No crime in that.*

I reach into the backpack on the seat beside me and pull out the tiny silver charm. My ears begin to buzz. The charm is shaped like a small book, with thin metal pages and a narrow spine, and it’s no bigger than my pinky nail.

When Maggie's parents gave it to me, they explained that the charm once hung from a necklace that Maggie always wore. There were five charms on the necklace—five tiny silver books—one for every book in the *Foxtail* series. And each one had a number engraved on the front.

The one I hold in my hand is number *three*.

The charm was found by police a few feet from the trunk of Maggie's car. Which was the only indication that there might have been a struggle: someone who pulled Maggie from the driver's seat, kicking and clawing, and during the fray, the charm was torn free from her necklace and fell to the gravel beside the road. But there were no hair fibers found, no broken fingernails, no other clues to support this theory.

I close my eyes and clench my hand around the charm, feeling its sharp corners, its delicate weight in my palm—imagining it suspended at the end of a silver chain, against the warmth of Maggie's chest, pressed between four other identical charms. The air pulses around me: cotton in my ears, a tightness in my throat, and I imagine sitting in Maggie's green Volvo, just as she did, the idle summer breeze through the open window. The radio is on, playing an old country song, Waylon Jennings: "*She's a good-hearted woman in love with a good-timin' man. She loves him in spite of his ways that she don't understand.*" The music rattles from the speakers, sailing out the open windows—like a memory plucked from the trenches of my mind. Except this memory doesn't belong to me. It's a slideshow, distorted and marred with tiny holes, like an old film through a sputtering projector.

I open the truck door and step out into the snow.

And even as the cold folds itself over me, I feel the warm afternoon sun against my skin, the hot pavement rising up beneath my boots. I feel what Maggie felt.

It's been five years since she was here, but the memory replays itself across my mind as if I were standing beside her on that quiet afternoon. We all leave markers behind—dead or alive—vibrations that trail behind us through all the places we've been. And if you know how to see them, the imprints of a person can be found—and followed.

But like all things, they fade with time, become less clear, until finally they are washed over with new memories, new people who have passed through here.

I squeeze my fist, knuckles cracked and dry in the cold, drawing out the memory of Maggie from the small charm. *She* has brought me here. Dust and fluttering eyelashes

beneath the midday sun. Memories shake through me, and I walk several paces up the road, to the exact place where she stood. A bird chatters from a nearby pine, bouncing from limb to limb, back to its nest. But when I open my eyes, the bird is gone—the trees covered in snow. No nests. No roosting jays and finches. All gone farther south for the winter months.

I glance back up the road—my truck parked in the snow just off the shoulder. There are no other cars, no logging trucks wheeling up into the forest. But in summer, surely there was more traffic. A family heading into the mountains for a weekend camping trip at one of the remote lakes, locals driving into town to fill up on gas and beer.

Yet, no one saw a woman slip from her car. No one saw a thing. Or if they did, they aren't saying. Silence can hold a thousand untold stories.

The Alexanders' porch light winks against the snow that has collected on the railing and front steps—the house itself giving the impression of sinking into the earth, doing its best not to collapse completely. I can hear Maggie breathing, the beat of her heart beneath her ribs—she wasn't panicked or afraid. Her car didn't break down like the police report had suggested. She stood on the side of the road and stretched her arms overhead, like she had merely stopped to work the tension from her joints after a long drive. Her eyes blinked against the sun and she drew in a deep breath, tilting her face to the sky.

She wanted to be here; she came with a purpose. But she didn't turn for the Alexander's house. She may have peeked at it briefly, observed it in the same way I do now, but then she shifted her focus toward the barn. Walking to the edge of the road to stare up at it.

Yet, the barn was not her destination either, it was only a clue. *She was on the right path. She was close.*

I mirror her footsteps, letting the memory pull me back to her car where she opened the trunk, metal hinges creaking as she bent to look inside. She hoisted out a backpack from the trunk and stuffed it with two bottles of water, a hooded sweatshirt, and a fresh pair of socks. In her front pocket was the pack of strawberry gum she purchased back at the store, and her cell phone.

Around her neck, she wore the silver necklace—five charms clinking together.

She slung the pack over her shoulders and locked the car, taking her keys with her. *She planned on coming back.* She wasn't running away, not for good. She believed she would

return to the car.

I watch as the memory of her takes several steps toward the side of the road, and when her hand brushed at her hair... it catches on something. Maybe the straps of her backpack snagged the silver charm, or just her fingertips, but it breaks free from the chain and falls to the gravel at her feet. She didn't notice, didn't hear it fall, and she strode on.

It wasn't a struggle or a fight with an attacker that caused her to lose the charm: it came free on its own.

I watch her image walk down the embankment toward the barn, her pace assured, easy.

She only had enough supplies for a day's hike. No sleeping bag, no tent, no dehydrated food to be reheated over a camp stove. She didn't mean to vanish. Or she anticipated she'd have shelter and food wherever she was going.

She anticipated something other than what happened to her.

A little over a month ago, I was sitting in a truck stop parking lot on the northern border of Montana, considering crossing over into Canada and seeing how far north I could travel before the roads ended and there was nothing but permafrost and a sea of evergreens, when my cell phone rang.

An annoying little *chirp, chirp, chiiirp*.

I rarely answered it anymore—*it rarely rang*. The battery was perpetually low and I'd only ever charge it enough to keep it from dying, in case of emergencies. In case I got a flat tire. In case I wanted to call someone—which I never did.

But when I picked it up from the dashboard, I saw the name light up on the screen: Ben Takayama, my roommate from college, the guy I once drank a whole bottle of vintage bourbon with then drove all night to Reno only to sleep in the bed of his dinky Toyota truck, sweating under the midday sun as the alcohol seeped from our pores, then vomited in the bushes that lined a shady, neon-lit casino. No one even batted an eye at us. Not even the security guards. Ben and I had shared countless stupid, half-brained adventures together, most of which ended badly—with our wallets stolen, our dignity facedown in an alley gutter, our flesh bruised and sliced open. He was notably one of the

few people who I still called a friend. And probably the only person whose call I would have answered in that moment, longing for a homemade meal and something familiar. Anything. Even a call from Ben.

“Travis?” he said on the other end when I answered, but I just sat there, mute. *How long has it been since I talked to someone from the old days? How long have I been on the road, driving across state lines, heading east and then north? Two months? Three?*

I cleared my throat. “Hey.”

“No one’s heard from you in a while.” His voice was strange, concerned—unusual for him. And I didn’t like the way it made me feel—like he was trying to peer beneath the shadow I had been hiding under. He exhaled, as if he knew I didn’t want his sympathy. I wanted the old days, before it all went to shit. Cheap beer and Friday nights in our dorm room, bad breakups and failed economics classes. I missed those days in the way most people miss their college years, even though at the time you don’t realize you’re living smack in the middle of the years you will tell stories about later. The years when you’re so damn broke you have to steal rolls of toilet paper from the restroom of a dive bar two blocks from campus that serves a weekly happy hour special: a beer and a slice of pie for four dollars.

You miss those years, but you also wouldn’t go back.

They were also the years when I drank because it dulled the effects of my ability. When I was drunk, and even hungover, I could touch objects and not feel a thing. No flashes of memory. No seizing images of the past. When my mind was clouded over with booze, I felt almost nothing. I made it through college this way. And sometimes, I still drink just to escape the things I don’t want to see—*don’t want to remember*.

“I like that you’ve gone all Jack Kerouac and abandoned social norms,” he began, “living on the road like a fucking heathen. But you need to check in every once in a while.”

On the dashboard sat a half-eaten pile of French fries that had begun to soak through the thin cardboard tray. I was hungry, but I couldn’t stomach to finish it.

“Tell me where you’re at; maybe I can take a long weekend and come join you.” He sounded earnest, a shiver in his voice, like he longed to escape the normalcy of his perfect, sterile life. Two kids and a corgi named Scotch and a wife who bakes sugar cookies in the shapes of trees and hearts every damn Thursday. *Every goddamned Thursday*, he told me

once. Like he both loved and loathed it. He longed for dirty hotel rooms and shitty roadside diner food and smoky bars and smoky girls who all have the same names. Who all think you're a better man than what you really are.

Ben wanted what I had.

But Ben's *average* life had something mine didn't: a home. Shelter. A place you went after a long day that folded you into its center and held you there, safe, protected from everything that lurked beyond your front door. Instead, I had an old truck that wheezed and choked every time I started it, and a quarter tank of gas. And that was about it.

But I didn't deserve a safe, average life. Those things were given to good, decent people. I was not good or decent.

I was destruction and missed chances and moments I couldn't take back.

"You don't want to come here," I said into the phone. "Trust me. Jack Kerouac wouldn't be sitting in a truck stop parking lot eating day-old fries and considering how far I might get into Canada before I run out of money." I sounded morose, desperate, and I didn't like the feeling.

"You're right, Kerouac would be drinking his dinner," Ben said. "Maybe that's your problem."

"Maybe." I smiled.

Silence cut through the phone and I could hear Ben breathing. He didn't just call to check up on me, make sure I wasn't dead. He called for something else. "I've got something you might be interested in."

I swallowed and turned my gaze to the truck stop diner a good distance across the parking lot. Two men were walking through the double doors, and I could make out a long bar inside with metal stools that ran the length of the diner and several booths set beneath the windows with sad, olive-green upholstery. Most of the stools and booths were occupied. The place was meant to be brightly lit, to serve coffee all night, to keep drivers awake for whatever long stretch of road they faced ahead.

"What's that?" I asked Ben.

"A job."

"I don't do that anymore."

He exhaled into the phone. "I know, but it might be good for you. Give you something to focus on." So he didn't truly think the Jack Kerouac life was the one I