

First Chapter of IN THE ECHO OF THIS GHOST TOWN BY CL WALTERS

1.

The cruel asphalt underneath me feels like the truth because everything else about me is a lie. I hurt. Tanner, my best friend, is on the asphalt next to me because we've been in a fight. He says something I don't catch because I'm drunk as fuck. His voice sounds distant as if I'm covering my ears even though he's just an arm's length away. I think I said something about him being pussy-whipped—definitely thought it. He bit back with sharp words drawing blood, though I'm not exactly sure what kind of weapons they were or where they cut. I'm just bleeding internally. Angry, we sort of collided—two drunks—and rolled across the parking lot outside a convenience store unable to keep our feet under us in order to add blows with our hands to the ones with our words.

I break myself into parts to avoid the feelings—or the hurtful truth of them. There's the Griffin who wants to accept the stark reality of tiny painful pebbles pressing my skin. He wants to find a way to bandage up what's bleeding. That Griffin is the optimist, but he also feels the wounds. So, there's the Griff who adds scar tissue to protect the softer parts. This tougher Griff is filled with so much rage there aren't defenses big or strong enough to damn the vitriol ready to ooze from my mouth. He's the one who will cauterize the weakness to protect all of me because gentle Griffin is an infection. Unyielding Griff won't accept heartache; this Griff is all about the

lies I tell to keep the tender fragments of myself hidden.

Now, breathing like my lungs might spew from my mouth, I'm trying to remember why this was so important. I turn my head to look at Tanner on the ground next to me. The world moves slower than my body. I wonder why—of all the people in my life—I'm fighting with Tanner. He's my brother—or the closest thing I have to one since my older brother, Phoenix, left me—but right now, I feel like my gut is bruised from the rocks I've been carrying around inside of it and my throat is on fire with the need to cry. Or maybe I just need to puke.

Tanner's on his back, like me, drunk, like me, and looking up at a black sky. But I'm looking at him, my best friend since we were fourteen. I'm always looking at Tanner.

The smoother side of me suggests I apologize and listen.

"You were my brother, Griff," Tanner mutters up to the sky.

Were.

Were.

Were.

I get stuck in the past tense. Angry, insulated, scar-tissue Griff tags into the match instead, stacks more bricks into the thick walls around me. Fury as a default setting. Everyone leaves. I imagine Phoenix's back as I watched him walk away. He didn't turn around, and I think that's what hurt the most. In my mind, I've created a version of him stopping at the end of the sidewalk. Turning and looking over his shoulder at me to smile; the kind of smile that says: *I see you, baby brother. Don't worry. You've always got me.* He didn't though. He just turned left and kept walking toward the bus stop.

I'd looked at my mom, waited for her to change her kicked-out-of-the-house sentencing, unable to register the tears in her eyes for my own anguish. She hadn't. She shored up her defenses, her mouth thinning into a barbed wire fence, and she waited for me to yell. I just didn't. All of that feeling was stuck in my throat. The blame for making Phoenix leave dumping concrete mix down my gullet, filling me up with bitterness and anger, and hardening my insides into

stone. I stomped past her and disappeared into my room. I slammed the door but didn't scream. I couldn't. I just went silent. Flopped on my bed and stared at the hot girls, hot cars poster Phoenix had given me for my thirteenth birthday. He was gone—kicked out by our mother. First dad. Now him. What did that mean for me?

So, fury is a friend. I roll away from Tanner. “Fuck you. You're leaving,” I say, because everyone leaves. I know it better than anyone.

“Where am I going?”

I struggle onto my hands and knees, the loose pebbles of the parking lot biting at my palms. I don't know why I think about the sting of rocks when there's a boulder sitting inside of my chest. I need to puke it up, but it's lodged there.

Tanner might be right; he isn't leaving in a physical sense. We both made sure we didn't have options after high school, but that doesn't mean he isn't leaving me.

“You left a long time ago.” I spit because I do feel like I need to puke. Sick. Somehow, I get to my feet. “Everybody fucking leaves.”

Tanner sits up. “I didn't. I tried to talk to you; you wouldn't listen.”

I don't want to listen now. Nothing he can say or might say will sway pissed-off Griff. Tanner violated our pact. He broke the Bro Code, and it isn't the part about fucking bitches. Tanner broke what was real between all of us and that was the promise to always be there for one another. Tanner is choosing to leave. Phoenix left and never came back; he just sends stupid postcards that don't make any sense. Brother by postcard proxy. Tanner isn't going to come back either. “We aren't friends anymore.”

Danny's voice punctuates our mutterings with the clarity of his sobriety. “Guys. This is dumb.”

I swing around toward our other friend, swaying as I do. My feet scratch over the scree of the lot as I walk away from Tanner to Danny standing near his tan car. Danny—his arms crossed over his chest and his hands tucked up under his arms—watches us. His brow has collapsed over his dark eyes with irritation which makes me

hesitate because I'm not sure I've ever seen Danny mad. Then again, I can't be sure of anything since I'm wasted.

At least I still have Danny.

There's a shuffle in the gravel behind me which I assume means Tanner has gotten to his feet. He says, "You're right. We haven't been friends for a long time." His words add weight to the boulder that's holding down my heart, holding all of me down.

I glance around for Josh—the fourth of our gang—but remember he isn't there. He's wherever kids with intact families who love each other go.

Lately, I feel like I've been trying to hold our brotherhood together, trying so hard to keep things the way things they've always been.

I thought it would always be Tanner and me. Tanner, me, Danny and Josh.

Tanner says something about walking home.

Danny's arms collapse to his sides, and he takes a step past me. "That's pretty far, Tanner. I can take you."

I shake my head. "No. He isn't our friend."

Danny looks at me, dark eyes narrowed. "He's mine." He calls after Tanner, "I can take you home, bro."

Tanner's voice is farther away. "No."

I hear the slide of his steps across the gravel as he walks away, but I don't turn to look at my former friend. Turning around might tear open the exposed underbelly of weak Griffin. That Griffin wants to reach for when we—Tanner and me—were fourteen and walking down the school hallway laughing after getting kicked out of homeroom together. Or when we played the prank at the end of freshman year with the fire alarm. All of the times we traipsed around town before we could drive, looking for fun and usually finding it—or making it. The quiet talks when life felt too heavy, and it was when it was only one of us holding it up alone. That's been a long time ago. After months of trying to bind Bro Code together, I'm not begging Tanner to stay. He's already gone. Instead, I climb into the front seat

of Danny's car and sink down as low as I can in the passenger seat.

Danny gets into the car behind the wheel, but he doesn't start it. "That was messed up, Griff. What you said about Rory." I hear the disappointment and displeasure in his voice, in the punctuation of his words and the way they run together as if he's speaking Spanish.

"What are you talking about? I didn't say anything about Rory." I shake my head to deny it, but my brain is cement. Why would I say anything about Tanner's dead brother? "Tanner broke the code," I mumble and lean my head against the window wondering how we'd gone from laughing and drinking a little while ago—Tanner, the prodigal son, returned to the fold after his misguided, relationship detour with the Matthews chick—to what had just happened.

"No. He didn't." Danny starts the car; his hands slip from the key because he does it with so much force. "You're the one who broke it."

"How's this my fault?" I stare out at the overflowing dumpster at the edge of the parking lot. Not me. I turn to look at him. "Tanner's the one acting like a bitch."

Danny makes a disgusted sound. "He's tried to talk to you for months." He looks over his shoulder as he reverses the car. The staccato of the gear shift moving into first gear adds emphasis to the tension in the car. "And Josh and I tried to tell you. You're so stubborn. That's not how friends treat one another."

"We're going the wrong way. Bella's is the other way."

He swears, and I'm taken aback by it. I've known Danny for three years. Of all of us, he hasn't been the one to let loose with his mouth. That's usually me.

"I'm taking your ass home."

"Whoa, dude. Tanner's the one who broke the code."

Danny goes silent, his hand gripping the steering wheel so tight his knuckles are white. Then he sort of unleashes, slamming the wheel with his hand and yelling, "This isn't about the fucking, stupid-ass code!"

I'm not sure what to say. Of course, it's about the code! All of

who we have been together has always been about our crew; why else would I be fighting for it? For the last three years, our code has been our navigational system. First Tanner (Josh has always been a ride-along) and now Danny is disabling our operating procedures. That party at Bella's was my endgame. I had a feeling tonight I'd get lucky with her. We've hooked up—making out and hand shit—but I thought perhaps she was going to let me inside tonight. That's the rules of Bro Code: to help one another freaking get laid. My anger collects, so when he parks in front of my house refusing to go to Bella's, I'm not only shocked by his defiance and disregard of our rules, I'm also fuming.

“Get out.” He won't look at me. Danny. The last of the gang. The dependable one. The one who is always there. “You're drunk and I'm going home.”

“I'm always drunk.”

Danny's face turns toward me then, and the shape sharp and jagged like unfinished granite. “Yeah. Maybe that's the fucking problem.” He reaches across me and the door groans as it opens. “It's time to grow up, Griff. Get out.”

The seat belt latch pops and releases, but I can't seem to get my feet under me and roll out of the car instead. When I finally stand, the earth tilts under me, and I sway to correct. “Well, fuck you then.” I slam the door and fall down with the momentum into the grass outside my house.

Danny drives away, the car huffing and puffing exhaust as if it too were angry.

I roll onto my back as the sound of Danny's car disappears in the distance and lay in my front yard gazing at the spinning dark sky. I'm alone and stretch my memories back to find the last time that was so. They are thin and breakable. The expanse of dark sky above me taunts me with my smallness and isolation.

“Fuck!” Angry Griff rages at feeling so small and reinforces his fury by lying about our victimhood.

Softhearted Griffin—who might be able to recognize the truth if

he weren't so small—makes himself smaller in order to stay safe.

I don't cry even if I feel the sharp points crawling up my throat.
Then again, I maybe just need to puke.

