

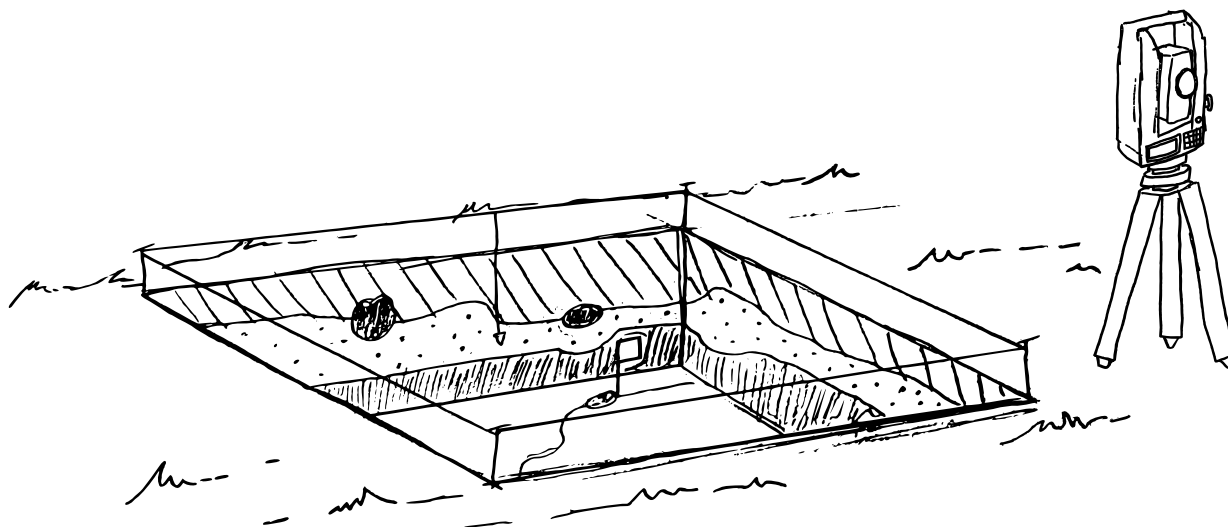
# AUTHOR NOTE

## **Content Warning**

The content of this novel may be emotionally challenging for some readers. Should you need them, a list of content/trigger warnings with mild spoilers can be found on the final page of this sample.



# PART ONE: GHOSTS



**Figure 1.** The total station (right) is recording xyz coordinate data about this 1 x 1 meter test unit, where clean profiles show defined layers. All that work for a single artifact, marked by a flag.

# APRIL

## 1

## Boulder, Colorado, United States

KATE ROTH PULLED her key ring out of her jacket pocket—seven keys, a bottle opener, a small plastic human skull—then slid off the house key now devoid of use. From atop the rocky precipice of Lost Gulch Overlook, she envisioned hurling it into the wilds below, the metal blip glittering through the air before disappearing amid the conifers. Instead, she pressed the key onto her palm, stared at it for a few dull seconds, reached forward, and turned over her hand.

Down it went, silently dumped. Just like her.

She took in the expansive view of western Colorado muted to sepia tones by her sunglasses. Evergreens blanketed the foothills between her and the white-capped Front Range of the Rocky Mountains. Too early to be swarming with tourists and hikers, the vista's only chorus was distant birdsong and the rustling of leaves. The outcrop remained unmarred by safety rails; it would be so easy to fall, to jump...

Her sanctuary should've relaxed her, grounded her. Today, it just pissed her off. She wished it were storming, or at least overcast, but the late-April morning insisted on being ruthlessly pleasant.

She shoved her earbuds in deep, sat down, and put her playlist of favorite rock songs on shuffle.

Her ex hated rock music. Nikki hated a lot of things she loved, which she had convinced herself wasn't a problem and ignored all their differences because who wouldn't want to be in a relationship with a beautiful ex-fencer with an MBA?

Kate groaned and lay on the lumpy rock, using her messy bun of greying brown hair as a pillow. Aerosmith did their best to drown out her thoughts, but instead of drums, she heard the steady thump of windshield wipers as she'd pulled into the driveway last night. Instead of bass guitar,

the heavy rain against her car roof. And instead of blue sky, she saw her foggy windshield, veiling the scene spotlighted by her car's headlights, a vacant space where Nikki's cherry-red convertible should've been.

That naked bewilderment of standing on the front lawn of the dark, quiet house, clothes soaked through from the evening downpour, holding a key that would not turn in the lock, its teeth pressing into her thumb as she pieced everything together...

*I pushed her away, she thought. Good.*

It was bound to happen, eventually.

Kate had been in a grand total of three relationships since moving to Boulder fifteen years ago. Other than those, there were the crushes, and flings, and one-date nothings, mostly forgotten. Some stayed with her over the years, though, murmurs in the back of her mind: if only, what if. People who'd since been reduced to fantasies, many partnered or living on other continents, or both.

She looked at her hands, at the chipped blue nail polish, at the faded, small scars from her years as a field archaeologist: on her right middle finger, from when she gave flint knapping a go; on her left palm, from a new trowel that had been way too sharp.

Fifteen years ago, after she successfully defended her PhD, she woke up the next morning, looked in the mirror, and saw twice as many grey hairs as she'd recalled being there before. When was the last time she truly looked at herself, at her life?

The music paused, and her phone vibrated, vibrated, vibrated. Time to go. She climbed down and jogged to her car, tossed her phone onto the passenger seat, and grabbed the steering wheel. Tight, tighter. The vinyl squeaked under her grip.

"Gotta go," she murmured. "Go, go, go." Her vision blurred, and she blinked away tears. "Forget her, forget her. *Fuck her.*"

She drove the winding path north to the Boulder campus, parked in the faculty lot, then headed for the Anthropology building. In the privacy of the empty ladies' restroom, awash in unforgiving fluorescent lights that tinted her hair an off-putting mucky green and gave her pale skin a bluish

hue, she attempted to mask her ashen features and the dark, puffy circles underlining her blood-shot hazel eyes.

“*Homo habilis*,” she murmured at her reflection. “*Australopithecus*. Leakey. Oldowan.” She gripped the sink and leaned toward the mirror, examining her makeup. It would have to do.

Most students wouldn’t see the details of her face. Rather, it was her presence as a whole that concerned her. Would they see it? Would they know? A shift in aura. A slump of posture. The faint tremble of her hands.

Impostor.

Useless.

Hapless.

Unwanted.

Discarded.

A familiar strain swept across her body. Shortness of breath, heat in her ears and face. The drone of the lights crescendoed, and electricity prickled along a nerve above her brow. Her neck ached, muscles clenching in anticipation of the world collapsing around her. She closed her eyes, and her forehead came to rest on the mirror with a soft thud.

*Breathe. Just breathe.*

Half. She could take a half dose of trazodone. Drowsy was better than jumping out of her skin. With her thumbnail, she broke the small white disc in half, then swished it down with tap water. She took several deep breaths, straightened her posture, swept her palms down her slate-grey blouse, over the pudge of her abdomen, and beamed into the mirror.

“*Habilis*,” she repeated. “Handy, capable!” She smiled again, maintaining the façade.

Kate didn’t want to talk about anthropology—she wanted to continue drowning her sorrows in wine. It helped that today was Friday and just a review day prior to final exams. Her brain went on autopilot until a student asked about Lucy, humanity’s 3.2 million-year-old adopted Eve.

Yes, Lucy was fully grown at about one meter, reaching just below Kate’s hip. Yes, Lucy was considered symbolic of humanity’s evolution in Africa. Yes, her name was inspired by the Beatles song “Lucy in the Sky

with Diamonds” which had played while the cohort of scientists celebrated her discovery, and, yes, Kate would play the song now for the students as a treat, because why not?

Kate loved teaching. Enjoyed disseminating knowledge and nerding out about osteology. Even when the male students spoke over her or when student reviews said she had no idea what she was talking about. Even when some students complained to the dean because she showed a video during the primatology lecture that depicted bonobos having sex. Even with the added stress of tenure advancement, she loved being a professor. But sometimes, like today, with no one to blame but herself, teaching absolutely drained her. So while the song played over the auditorium’s multimedia system, she sank into a lecture hall chair and absorbed the tune’s psychedelic cheeriness, singing along in her mind.

*Kate in the auditorium with a hangover.*

*Dreaming of jumping off Lost Gulch Overlook.*



*Stavanger, Rogaland County, Norway*

Esben Veholt was on a stakeout.

It wasn’t entirely untrue. He sat in his SUV, sipping spring cherry sencha from a thermos, watching other people work. Every so often, he would exit the SUV, stretch his legs and back, grab his notebook, inspect the construction site, take photographs, and consult with the developer. The official term was monitoring. Hawk-eyed archaeologists ensuring construction workers didn’t deviate from the authorized area, steal artifacts, uncover a Viking ship then bulldoze it, or exhume human remains then toss the bones into dumpsters.

The Stavanger Archaeological Research Institute had been monitoring this site on the city’s outskirts for weeks with nothing to show for it, which was more good than bad. They had concerns about this location, being near a known medieval cemetery. So far so boneless.

He missed digging—the feel and the scent of earth as he worked on his hands and knees, revealing features and excavating artifacts. He missed a lot of things his back pain denied him. Monitoring, administrative work, and directing excavations had become his routine a few years ago.

Today was cold, overcast. He liked this weather. Sweater weather. He would have preferred to be outside, but today the machinery was unbearable—horse-sized jackhammers vibrating his body from intestine to throat and excavator screams piercing his eardrums. So, for now, he reclined against his lumbar pillow and half-listened to a true crime podcast.

He touched the window, the patch of condensation formed from his breath and body heat, then drew a smiley face. And then he wiped it away.

Above the swiped smiley, he drew

OLLAH

Hello, backward. He didn't erase it. At its left, he drew

OLCA

Goodbye. Cold water dripped from his fingertip.

A ping sounded on his phone. The screen previewed an email titled *About this summer* from a colleague in Oslo, Anna Olsen. He double-tapped the notification.

Esben, apologies for this news coming so close to the summer, but my mother's health has taken a turn for the worse. Between caring for her and the children and my teaching schedule, I won't have the time or energy to join you in the field this summer—

*Crap.*

Anna was the biological anthropologist who joined him at the archaeological field school in Newfoundland that he and a colleague, Erik Varga, had been directing for four seasons going on five. The field school would begin in late June; it was likely too late to find someone else to lecture about human osteology and bioarchaeology. But in her email, Anna listed recommended replacements—a few in Canada, two in Norway,



several in the United States—and when he saw the line *Kate Roth, Boulder*, he drew in an odd, shaking gasp.

Throughout the last few years in particular, there hadn't been many days Esben *hadn't* thought of Kate.

He typed *Kate Roth Boulder* into the browser search bar and found her university page, various academic pages, a news article, and the familiar line of image thumbnails. One photo included Kate's girlfriend, Nikki. The photo on her LinkedIn profile was a good one, younger, from years before they last breathed the same oxygen.

Esben hadn't looked at Kate's curriculum vitae in over a decade. He lost count of the articles and books published, projects led, and courses taught. From her record, she was not shy about getting involved in international projects but was also not currently involved in any excavations, as far as he could tell.

She would fill Anna's position well. The other experts Anna recommended were likely as capable, but he didn't personally know any of them.

It didn't actually matter, and yet he was terrified of what Kate would think of him if they reunited. He had changed so much physically and mentally over the last few years, let alone over the past decade. They were roughly the same age, but time had been so much kinder to Kate, judging by photos of her online.

A familiar heaviness sank in his stomach, and the ache of regret tugged at his chest. There was an exquisiteness to the pain. But even as it hurt to think of Kate, he was comforted. She had always radiated positivity and warmth, like a campfire. Even from afar, even as a phantom, she made him almost happy.

Such thoughts were likely unhealthy. He had never mentioned them to his therapist when he was in therapy; he could confine those feelings to the dark recesses of his mind when he had to.

His phone dinged again. *Welcome to Norwegian Singles, IndianaBen!* He flicked the email notification away but then realized—Indiana Ben, the teasing nickname his youngest sister Solveig gave him because he was an

archaeologist. The email looked like spam, but displayed an old photo of him taken when his then-greyness ginger hair was short and he weighed many kilos less.

He texted Solveig.

**Esben:** Did you register me for a dating website?

A few minutes later, Solveig texted back a smirking emoji.

**Sol:** See you later!

He sighed, then left his SUV to check on the construction site again.



Kate made it through the review hour unscathed.

No one asked if she was ill; no one asked who died. Had anyone asked *Are you okay?* she would've likely broken down into tears.

She bought a Snickers bar from the vending machine, then retreated to her office. Normally she'd smile in greeting at the row of hominid skull casts locked inside a display case behind her desk. But today their gazes were heavy, full of judgment.

*Nikki left because I talk to plaster casts.*

"Hey, hon," Kate's colleague called from the open office doorway. "Lunch?"

Clara Barcol-Gonzalez leaned against the door jamb, her casual sunshine-yellow dress and bright smile in stark contrast to Kate's gloom.

"You alright?" Clara asked, approaching Kate's desk. "You look like you're 'bout to vomit."

Kate didn't feel like she would vomit—she felt like she already had, and that the void within her would swallow them all.

Clara lost her smile. "Right. C'mon, you can tell me all about it on the way."

Unlike Clara's home and office, her car was decorated exactly how Kate expected a cultural anthropologist's car to be decorated: kitschy in the

best way. Tchotchkes lining the small shelf in the center console. Various pendants and necklaces dangling from her rearview mirror. Sugar skull seat covers. No less than ten pride stickers. Clara's bumper stickers ranged from political to pantheistic, and one in big, bold letters, a pun celebrating Franz Boas, the father of American anthropology: *Like a Boas*. In contrast, Kate's car was barren of personality, sporting only the one faded bumper sticker: *Instant Archaeologist, Just Add Coffee*.

Kate picked up a small hand-painted turtle knickknack and watched its head bob in unspoken solidarity as she brought Clara up to speed.

"She changed the locks, and my driver's license still has my old apartment address on it. I had nothing to prove to a locksmith that I lived there... When I tried to message Nikki and our mutual friends, I couldn't find them in my friends list. They were just gone. Blocked."

"Nikki *blocked* you?"

"Yeah. I texted and called her I don't know how many times, texted mutual friends I had numbers for. Only Marissa replied. Apparently, Nikki just left. That's it. No explanation. She emptied the house, moved my stuff into storage, and left Boulder."

"What the fuck? Can she even do that? It was your home, too."

"Only for the last five months. It's her house. She never asked me for rent. I didn't even help pay for utilities, despite offering."

"And she didn't say anything? At all?"

"No one did. Nothing."

Clara scoffed. "Unbelievable. Has she ever left without warning before? Acted on impulse?"

"No. She's a planner, always calling *me* chaotic."

"Well, she's not wrong." Clara winked at Kate. "I wonder what happened."

"When I left town earlier this week, everything was fine. But she never responded to my goodnight texts. I guess I was too tired and busy with the recovery to notice something was wrong."

"Right, the skeletons. How'd that go? Was it gross?"

Forensic osteology wasn't a big part of Kate's career, but it was the

most rewarding. Though it often consisted of *Is this human? Please tell me this isn't human* conversations. At least it made up for the lack of opportunities lately to dig at an archaeology site.

"It went fine. And it was just bones. Otherwise, they wouldn't have called me."

"No squishy bits," Clara teased.

Kate managed a smile. "The remains were taken up to Cheyenne since they crossed the border up into Wyoming. They have a better lab there, anyway."

It was during these few days while Kate was away from home, laboring alongside the FBI over the recovery of three skeletonized bodies, tucking away her emotions and letting the scientist half of her brain take over that Nikki had removed herself from Kate's life.

Sitting at a wooden bench outside Snarfburger, Kate buried her face in her lunch—Angus bacon burger, extra bacon. She hadn't eaten at this fast-food joint in two years.

*Fuck your salads, Nikki.*

"I've got nothing in my schedule this afternoon," Kate said, mouth full. "Was gonna go to the storage place if you want to come."

"You know which storage?"

Kate nodded. "Nikki kept a few things there. I have a key."

Clara slurped her strawberry milkshake. "Okay, yeah, I'm coming. Hell, I'll drive. And then you're checking out of that hotel and staying at my place. You can finally see the redecorated guest room."

"I don't want to invade your lives like that."

"It's only until you figure out what's goin' on, find a new place. Then we'll kick you out." The sparkle in Clara's eyes dimmed. "Shit, too soon?"

Kate groaned into her burger.



"A dating website?" Esben glared at Solveig as he stepped inside her small,

cottage-like home. “Indiana Ben?”

Solveig laughed and flipped her long, thick blond braid from her shoulder to her back. “You have to advertise yourself honestly if you want a compatible companion.” She pushed up the sleeves of her light-brown cardigan that matched her eyes. “At least try it. You never know. Maybe a local hottie just got divorced. You should download their app.”

He scratched his left wrist over his jacket. “I will think about it.”

Solveig’s children were roughhousing in the next room. At four and six, Isak and Karoline were best friends. Esben adored his five nieces and nephews, though he rarely saw Else’s children. He helped Solveig care for hers now that their father was out of the picture.

Sitting on the sofa was his own daughter, Frida, thirteen years old, nose at her new (his old) phone.

“Hei, Frida,” he called. She mumbled a hello.

On his weekends with his daughter, she would go to Solveig’s house Fridays after school, a way for him and her mother to avoid each other.

He watched Frida, curled up on the sofa, typing with her thumbs. Tawny skin not unlike his, but skinny with dark straight hair and amber eyes like her mother, Lina.

The two little ones began to shout.

“Frida,” Esben called. “Can you please calm them?” He motioned to the rambunctious siblings.

Frida rolled her eyes, slid off the sofa, and separated the children without issue. Two seconds later, Karoline was braiding Frida’s hair, and Frida was staring at her phone again.

Isak climbed onto Esben’s lap. His back and hips disapproved, but he curled an arm around Isak as he leaned his little blond head against Esben’s shoulder. “Are you ready to go, little man?”

“Ja,” Isak said in a tired voice.

Solveig brought him the children’s overnight bags. “Thank you for taking them.”

“Of course.” Esben mussed Isak’s hair. “You have fun at the wedding.”

After piling the children into his SUV and starting on his way home,

Esben asked them, “How’s things?”

“Good!” the little ones said, then continued to talk about their day.

Under their voices was a lower *Fine* in English from Frida.

“Are you ready for Uncle Ben’s famous tacos?” he asked the children.

“Yeah!” they cheered.

“Tacofredaaag,” Esben drawled, and the children parroted him.

Frida asked in English, “Did you get ground chicken this time?”

“Ja, I got chicken.” He glanced at his daughter in the passenger seat. Nose, phone. Tap, tap, tap. Continuing in English, he said, “I also bought avocados. We can make guacamole.”

“Gwak-uh-moh-lee!” Isak shouted.

“Avocado is fattening,” Frida said.

“They have the good fat,” Esben retorted. “Some avocado once in a while is good for you.”

“That isn’t what Mom says.”

Annoyed, he grumbled, “Your mother is misinformed.”

“That is what Mom says about you.” Frida’s gaze, like her tone, was cold.



At the outdoor storage facility north of town, Kate and Clara wandered the concrete paths until they found unit number 53. The red sliding door roared upward, and confirmation of Kate’s new reality hit her all at once.

Nondescript brown squares stacked in three tidy columns sat atop her beloved purple microsuede sofa, every box the same size, neatly taped, no labels. Kate’s desk and desk chair. A philodendron set on her mother’s antique side table.

“Well, damn,” Clara said as she entered.

The revelation sat like stones in Kate’s throat, suffocating. Her hands balled into fists, thumbnails scraping against fingers.

*Go in. Put down your purse.*

*Breathe. Breathe again.*

Kate used a key to open boxes—one, two, three—and stared at the contents with a freeing numbness. Her clothing. Her books. Her various little whatnots. Nothing of Nikki's. Behind the sofa was her yoga mat, unfurled, a long poster tube beneath it.

After moving half a dozen times throughout her life, Kate had shed herself of so many belongings that what was solely hers fit into seven cardboard boxes. Fifty-six cubic feet of possessions. Plus the furniture. And the yoga mat.

The concert of highway noise set a fitting ambiance to this sad diorama of her life. At nearly forty-two, Kate hadn't felt *old* until today.

They removed the boxes from the sofa. In one, Kate found a small plush polar bear with a heart on its chest bearing the Coca-Cola logo. A gift from Nikki for Valentine's Day. They'd seen polar bears at the Denver Zoo not long before that, and Kate was always chugging a Diet Coke. Packed next to the bear was Kate's mother's old film camera, safe in its case.

Kate sat on the sofa, curling into herself, hugging the bear. "Nikki hated this sofa. I bought it on clearance before I met her and insisted on bringing it with me when I moved in. Her old sofa was scratched to hell by her mom's cat."

Kate recalled a prominent brown stain on the center cushion, hidden on the underside. Nikki had pointed it out, announcing they should buy a new sofa. A beige one. One that wasn't microsuede.

"I think she stained it on purpose so I'd curb it," Kate said.

"Stain?"

Kate showed Clara the round, dark patch spanning half the center cushion's width. She never did figure out what it was, chocolate or red wine or blood.

*Nikki left because I like microsuede.*

Clara flipped the cushion, stain forgotten. "If Nikki hated it, then we gotta keep it. Out of spite. It's a nice sofa, anyway. I'll find room for it until you get resettled. Felicity will have to deal. Come on, let's grab boxes of clothes. We'll get the rest another day. I've got my evening class, but

after, you, me, and Fel will have a girls' night."

They stuffed three boxes, the philodendron, and Kate's yoga mat into the car, then headed to the hotel.

Kate had reserved a room at the nearest hotel on the map, only caring about finding shelter and a place to empty her bursting bladder. She'd then visited North Boulder Liquor, relishing in the freedom to purchase anything she wanted without the threat of disdainful looks from her partner, settling on a big bottle of RumChata, a small bottle of cheap whiskey, and buy-six-get-one-free bottles of wine.

Somewhere in the past two years, she'd become a lightweight. This was in stark contrast to her previous habits, overdoing it with beer during the field season and drinking too many cocktails during a night out. Nikki had weened her off alcohol, mostly. They'd drunk wine, sometimes. Expensive wine, always.

The *Do Not Disturb* sign still hung from the hotel room door handle, so the room remained the disaster Kate had left it. All eight pillows piled at the headboard. Bedclothes crumpled and half on the floor. Suitcase open and disordered. Pizza box leaning against the wall atop the small garbage can, Dunkin' Donuts box on the tiny desk.

Clara toed an empty wine bottle that had ended up on the floor. "Right," was all she said.

Back in the car, that little turtle's head bobbed as Clara drove them to her house.

"You should take a vacation," she said, and the corner of her mouth quirked up. "A Nikki detox. Go somewhere nice. Fuck someone nice."

Kate laughed. "I do need a break. I'm scheduled to teach classes again this summer semester, so I could go somewhere in late June or July. Make a road trip out of it."

On a road trip by herself, Kate could stop wherever she wanted to take photos or whenever she needed to pee, eat as much junk food as her stomach could handle, and sing off-tune soul-cleansing music as loud as her lungs could belt.

No one to annoy with her fervent drumming on the steering wheel. No



dirty looks while she ate a donut. No *Can't you hum quietly, for once?* Fuck that. Fuck Nikki.

No. Fuck anyone else *but* Nikki.

“There’s a glacial pothole formation at the Minnesota–Wisconsin border I’ve always wanted to see,” Kate said. “Interstate State Park. Nikki wasn’t interested.”

Clara snorted. “Glacial potholes?”

“Geological formations. They’re cool. We have them near where I grew up in Massachusetts.”

Clara’s dark curls bounced as she shook her head. “You are an interesting specimen.”

“Thanks,” Kate replied.

*Nikki left because I’m weird.*



As Esben and the children watched the beginnings of various movies that neither Isak nor Karoline could settle on for long, the strums of an acoustic guitar sounded from Frida’s bedroom. When Isak went to investigate, Frida yelled, then the boy returned, pouting.

“I want to hear her play,” he said, snuggling up to Esben.

“I know,” Esben said. “Me too.”

“You also play guitar,” Karoline said. “Mamma says so.”

“I did, yes.”

Karoline picked up a blue crayon and started to draw either the sky or the sea. As she drew, she asked, “When Frida is finished, can you play us something?”

“I would, but it hurts my back to play.” It wasn’t a lie, but the whole truth was he just didn’t want to play anymore.

Isak found a red crayon, then drew something only Isak would recognize.

Esben was thankful for the time he had with the children—they

brought joy back into his home. Parenting Frida had been easier and, admittedly, more enjoyable when she was young. She used to be such an affectionate child, so intrigued by his job. He had taken her into the field many times; she had loved finding artifacts (pebbles) alongside him. They had been inseparable.

Frida was her own person, and Esben couldn't fault her for that. But any attempt to ask her about her life was met with clipped responses, and her increasing avoidance of him stung.

While the children colored, while the cartoon movie flashed around the room, Esben's mind settled on an unsent email and its intended recipient.

It was the afternoon in Colorado. Perhaps Kate was teaching a class or reading a paper about new forensic methods. Perhaps she was wondering what he did with his Friday nights, though she likely never thought of him at all.

Esben missed seeing Kate's photos online but didn't regret deleting his social media accounts a year ago. He couldn't bear seeing his friends and relatives share their happiness over and over again.

"I drew this for you," Karoline said, delivering her masterpiece to him.

"Oh, look at that." The deep blue sea, the sandy shore, and a cyan sky. A smiling, bright orange and yellow sun wore green sunglasses. On the sea was a boat or raft, and on that, a tiny person wearing an enormous cowboy hat.

"It's you," Karoline said.

A frown set in on Esben's face. "Me?"

"Lost at sea. That's what Mamma said. But you're not lost—you're here!" She grinned at him before returning her attention to a fresh canvas.

Esben forced a smile as he smoothed his hand along Karoline's two long blond braids. "That's right. I'm here." His fake smile slackened. "I'm right here."

Here, where he should be happy but wasn't, hadn't been, and would not be. Not so long as the rift between him and his daughter deepened.

He looked at his right forearm, at the tattoo finished in January. The

expansive black and grey half-sleeve had healed well. On the underside of his forearm was Yggdrasil, the World Tree, boughs stretching toward his hand where an eagle sat vigilant, its roots encasing his elbow. Other creatures—deer, squirrel, hawk, and the serpent Níðhöggr—filled in the scene. Jörmungandr, the World Serpent, wrapped around the tree. In addition to these, Esben had sketched in other details meaningful only to himself.

He traced the designs, closed his eyes, and clenched his forearm.

Solveig was right. He was lost.

Esben looked at his left wrist, at his scar, and decided it was time to schedule his next tattoo.



Wearing her old Aerosmith concert tee and field jeans, Kate lay on Clara and Felicity's living room floor drinking long-missed RumChata from the bottle, every sip an act of rebellion.

Rock, grunge, and blues—all genres Nikki scrunched her nose at—blasted from her phone speaker. The playlist shuffled on to “What’s Up?” by 4 Non Blondes. The song was definitely going on her road trip playlist.

Nikki preferred classical music. She'd never outright said anything dismissive, never yelled or made fun of Kate's preferences. But there'd been the nose scrunching and suggestions to listen to something else, to turn the volume down, to listen to nothing at all. For Kate, none of that had mattered. Not until it literally drove Nikki away.

*Nikki left because I love Aerosmith.*

It hadn't been common interests that brought them together. Rather, it was Nikki's laugh in the bar that night, that black dress baring her strong shoulders, her gold-tipped delicate fingers wrapped around a glass of red wine, and her confident diatribe against some marketing strategy Kate couldn't recall.

She had tipsily agreed to go on a hike with Nikki, but she didn't hike,

not in the way Nikki liked to—*No Pain, No Gain* wasn't something Kate understood. Two hours into the hike, they made out under the shade of a tree. Nikki had liked the taste of Kate's sweat.

Sex was, perhaps, the main reason they had been together for so long. Sex and companionship. They had loved each other, probably, on some level, for a while. Who was that person, the one whom Nikki loved? Not Kate, but someone Nikki had wanted Kate to be. That was painfully clear now.

"Fuck you," she grumbled.

Keys at the front door. "Kate?" Clara called.

RumChata sloshed as Kate shot the large white bottle up in the air. "Still alive!" She took another triumphant sip.

Clara flumped onto the sofa, and her shoes clomped to the floor. Her dress shifted up, exposing a strip of brown skin and the hem of her white thigh-high stockings.

"Started the pity party without me, I see." Clara snatched the bottle, sniffed, sipped, then scooted off the sofa to lay beside Kate.

"What I can't fig're," Kate slurred, "is why. Why? How am I s'pose to know what I did wrong, what not to do, if she doesn't talk to me? Who jus' leaves like that? People need to talk. Nothing was wrong. Nothing."

"Is this your first bottle?" Clara leaned over Kate. "You didn't take any pills, did you?"

Kate shook her head, limply pointed toward her purse that contained her anti-anxiety medication, then sipped more of the liqueur that tasted like milk leftover from a bowl of cinnamon cereal.

"We were so good," Kate whined, snuggling against Clara's cushy body.

"I thought you two were good, yeah."

"She even liked my cooking."

Clara snorted.

"Maybe I leave for work sometimes," Kate said. "Fine, I could leave less."

"Bullshit. She travels everywhere for work!"

"Right? It's gotta be somethin' else. Gotta be. Load upon load. I must've

done somethin', said somethin'. Maybe she met someone. I dunno what though and I'm gonna die not knowing and it's gonna kill me."

"I can't believe that perra ghosted you. I didn't think adults were capable of that shit."

"What the fuck did I do?"

"Did you cheat?"

Kate glared at her. "No."

"And the sex?"

"Ugh, so good."

They stared at the ceiling, enjoying a meditative silence between awkward horizontal sips. Beneath them lay a synthetic fur rug reminiscent of a polar bear. Matching the rug, the ceiling was white, not even a light fixture to break the monochrome.

Above, Kate should've seen clouds, cotton sheets, a never-ending snowscape. Peaceful things. Fluffy things. But on that blank canvas, she saw her love life roaring away in a cherry-red convertible, her ex's long, straight burgundy hair blowing in the wind, her skin slightly more tan than Kate's pale ivory tone. Nikki Straza was as beautiful as people came. Well-formed molecules, a phrase Kate heard somewhere. And now she was gone.

*Poof.*

"Clara?"

"Hm?"

"Am I a...*happy* person? Like, if someone asked you 'bout me n' asked you if I was happy, would you say I was happy?"

"Right now I'd say you're drunk."

Keys at the door again. "Ladies!" Felicity called. "I come bearing gifts of wanton and sustenance."

Kate and Clara scrambled off the floor, Kate wobbling a bit. Felicity placed weighted canvas shopping bags on the kitchen counter, then shucked off her blazer.

Clara rummaged through the bags. "Which is the wanton, and which is the sustenance?"

Felicity's silken black hair spilled forward as she leaned down to kiss her wife. Grinning, she said in her sultry voice, "That's for you to decide." She then wrapped her lanky arms around Kate's much wider body and, in true Felicity fashion, refused to let go until she felt Kate's negative energy disappear.

Several cocktails and a feast of wanton snacks later, Kate swayed to the guest bedroom. She'd only slept in it once before, in the pre-Nikki years, after getting drunk during Clara's fiftieth birthday celebrations. Then, the guest room and its bathroom had been plain, functional, forgettable. Now, the bedroom was styled as if it were a beach house—cream-white walls, oak furniture, pastel everything—and the bathroom was redone with sea-themed accessories and ocean-blue tiles.

Kate peeled off her clothes, left them where they fell, and started the shower. Relaxing under the warm water, her thoughts wandered to interior decorating. Aside from finding affordable furniture, hanging framed photos and diplomas, or tacking posters to walls, she'd never styled a home. Every apartment, every house—including Nikki's—had come furnished.

She scratched at the shower tile grouting, willing thoughts of Nikki and the storage unit away, instead envisioning her beloved comfy purple sofa and how the color purple for no special reason made her happy. And wasn't that the point of anything? To be happy?

After her shower, she selected night clothes from one of the moving boxes. In the same box, protected by clothing instead of bubble wrap, were framed photos. She pulled one out: her parents on their wedding day.

Her mother, Lilian, in a simple hippie-style gown, her dark waves spilling over her shoulders. Her father, David, in a dress shirt, slacks, and bowtie—clean-shaven, for once. Somewhere in these boxes were the negatives from that day. Kate had all her parents' photo albums and negatives, some of the few things she'd kept from her childhood home.

Others might remember scents or smiles or specific facts, but it was her father's laugh and her mother calling to her in a stern voice that came to her the clearest. Six years since the car accident that took them, but

there were still moments, like now, when she needed to hear their voices once more. How many times had she called them when sick or sad or overwhelmed? How many times had they consoled her?

In her mind, her father's silvery voice asked, *Are you alright, Kitten?*

The tears came without warning. Bracing against the resurfaced pain, she pulled at her nightshirt, and threads around the collar gave way as she leaned into a silent wail, fighting against the instinct to scream. Setting down the photo, she curled into herself on the bed and let herself cry.

*That's right.* Her mother's imagined voice. *Let it all out. Does no good, holding it in.*

And her father. *She just wasn't the one.*

Not the one. Never the one.

Kate couldn't believe she was single again, dumped again. No, not dumped—ghosted. Embarrassing was an understatement. Humiliating, more like.

A conspiracy. It couldn't have happened on a whim. At some point—days, weeks ago—Nikki had organized a mutiny, an end time, an exodus. And no one had cared enough to warn Kate, as if all their mutual friends had unquestionably followed Nikki's orders. Who helped her plan it? What lies had she told them?

Everything about this felt wrong—Nikki leaving when Kate was out of town, as if fleeing an abusive relationship. But Nikki had never hinted that she was unhappy. If Marissa hadn't replied, Kate would've thought Nikki had been kidnapped or worse.

But the reality was clear. Without saying anything—not a goddamn thing—Nikki had bluntly told Kate to fuck off. And Kate was left wondering what the hell she did wrong. Again.

Maybe she was annoying, or selfish, or used foul language too often. Maybe her anxiety made her unbearable. Maybe the universe was punishing her for leaving a great relationship for her career. Or maybe she was just not social enough to find the right person who could love her, the real her, the person she let fade into the background when honesty became inconvenient.

All she wanted was a partner she could send silly memes and cat videos during work hours without being asked not to. Was that so much to ask?

Sleep would be impossible without help. She reached into the darkness for her medication, took a sip of water, and swallowed the bitter white pill.



# CONTENT WARNINGS

alcohol and marijuana use  
prescription medication misuse  
anxiety, depression, PTSD  
ghosting  
separation, mediation  
weight and body image issues  
medical weight gain  
internalized fatphobia  
sexual content  
discussion of sexuality  
homophobic and fatphobic language from an abuser  
emotional abuse (past)  
death of parents (past)  
attempted suicide (past)  
abortion, miscarriage (past)