

Enemies by Nature

Aaron's Best Bud Dale offers instructions in guise of Advice

Aaron and Dale stared across the clean expanse of a maple desk, unwilling to be the first to break. Labrador-brown eyes warred with slate grey, their respective expressions blank, unyielding. The tension in the air was thick enough to cut with cheese wire.

Until a car backfired in the distance. Then Dale blinked.

“Gol darn it, I hate losing to you.” Dale leaned forward to slap a fiver down on the desk in front of him. His movements were almost formal, but his face was aggressively earnest. Dale had always been a top notch guy - weird down to the core if you could get him to trust you, but an honorable creature. There were few rooms in this skyscraper where Aaron could really let his shoulders relax, and this was one. Aaron leaned back into the cheap leather chair, rifling his fingers through the throwback coiffeur he'd begun sporting to avoid visiting the hair stylist.

“The trick is welcoming the idea of gunfire.” To the untrained eyes, Dale was unperturbed by Aaron's flippant attitude. Aaron knew better though - knew that Dale's forehead was only one angry sidecomment away from wrinkling, god help them all.

“You know Aaron, I can't help but notice your devil-may-care transformation as of late.”

“Oh, you noticed huh? I suppose three warnings from our client base that I was *taking a tone* would do—”

“Obviously I read the client comments, as your managing director that’s my responsibility. You and I know, however, that you’ve been unnecessarily terse with the interns and that is why I’m concerned. “ Aaron stared determinedly at Dale’s left ear.

“We’ve hired a dumb bunch of them this summer Dale-”

“No, no I don’t believe we did. Because I had my best onboarder on the team scry the applications as though preventing an oncoming apocalypse would be less urgent. You picked this team, and now you’re taking it out on them Aaron.” Dale’s ear was now too near to Dale’s eyes to serve as a conflict-free focal point.

“...I see.” Aaron shifted in his seat, unsure of the correct response. Dale was his friend, and wouldn’t be distant enough to draw a hard line on the situation. That said, it would tread on that friendship to not treat his complaint with humility. “I will... pay better attention.”

Dale heaved a sigh. “Listen, I know it was a few months ago you and Madison broke up, but since it’s not... healing I went to the board. They agreed to give you the extended time off for that retreat.”

“It’s not *not* healing, it’s just-”

“Let me be clear, I don’t care if you two get back together. I want you to come back with some perspective. And for the record, the execs are taking this out of your holiday schedule next year if you can’t make this team work when you get back.” Aaron glared briefly at Dale before looking down at his hands to hide his embarrassment.

“Thanks, Dale.” Dale huffed in response, twiddling a heavy pen across his fingers like a silver dollar.

“She was a piece of work. Couldn’t follow a single joke I made at your birthday party last year. How did the two of you even stick it though this long?”

“We had a mutual friend at the beginning. They did a lot of the matchmaking, translation, crisis management. By the time Madison and I were on our own we’d learned enough about each other to pass as potential friends aside from just.. You know.” *Fuckbuddies*. Aaron gestured weakly, unsure of how crass to be within the walls of his employer.

“Well your translator was either a saint or satan in sheep’s clothing.”

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The Camp Hiawatha pamphlet stared at him from its tenuous position wedged into the dashboard of his coupe. Wind whipped the pages violently, coaxing the vile document out into the empty space of the road rushing past. Aaron felt his heart lift in spite and hope as the cracking sound of the heavily vinylated pages echoed in his ears.

If only the wind had been strong enough to remove the trash by the time he'd arrived home. The towering four-corner house loomed above him, a landmark for the small town he'd grown up in. Movers languidly strode across the hardwood porch, shuffling boxes between them. Aaron's parents watched as the inexperienced handymen began to fix ancient cracks in the stucco, a futile attempt to raise the house's curb appeal before the lot went up for sale.

A good part of him regretted his decision to sell it, but there was no way he could bear to be in the family home as a bachelor. The image of him moving from room to room, drifting in search of human contact made his skin crawl in desperation. No, a tidy condo in the city would continue to meet his needs, just as he'd planned. His parents could shoot their baleful glares elsewhere.

At least, while he was here. Without them staring at him disappointed in the backdrop of their *legacy*, his resolution faltered on the hour, every hour. He'd never been a particularly rebellious kid growing up - Sarah and Paul had been logical, tolerant parents that had been proven right countless times. Weed *was* foul smelling, Derek from Econ *did* get arrested for

what he'd promised was a totally legal prank, and that mean girl in 3rd grade had actually confessed years later to throwing rocks at him out of poorly expressed affection.

“Aaron, did you get the heirloom cedar chest wrapped in the extra blankets like I asked?” Of course his mother would start this interaction with an excessively protective request. If it wasn't a dedicated truck for the chinaware, it was full foam guardware for christmas decorations.

“Yeah, ma. Three blankets.” Two too many.

“Oh sweetie, you're so good.” The gap finally disappeared between them, and Aaron was swaddled cedar chest style in his mother's embrace.

“You know, you don't have to do this. I hired to movers so you and Dad could relax.”

“Oh well, you know, I've got input. And your father was worried they would scrape the woodwork.” Paul lumbered over from the porch, leaning heaving on his wife's shoulder as he caught his breath.

“Son.”

“Dad.” Silence stretched on, perhaps a callback to the cowboy westerns they'd watched a decade go, his dad's best attempt at teaching masculinity. Eventually Paul snapped.

“We didn’t leave you this house for you to sell it. It’s unnatural. You’re working hard to give away what we wanted you to have.

Paul was typically more tight-lipped about his opinions. Aaron already knew the heart of it - only a foolish yuppie millennial would balk at the chance to inherit property, and only an idiot like his son could have bungled the familial future Paul could see so clearly. That beautiful woman Aaron had managed to bring home faded into the past, just as the Price ancestral home would.

Sarah and Paul Price had lived in Longfellow Township for the last forty years, having inherited the house from Paul’s parents when they’d passed. Aaron grew up running across the uneven sod and thistles which grew like a virus across the lawn. The family had been a key feature in the social structure of the township, Aaron and his siblings taking up large percentages of any team photo. If Sarah had her way Aaron would be here instead of downtown, choosing domestic bliss and an endless parade of This Old House re-runs over Taco-Tuesdays and rush hour traffic.

“You left me the house, and I can’t justify keeping it when I work downtown and am single.”

“Oh honey, Madison and you have that special vacation planned, you’re focusing on the negatives—” *God, was he?* Maybe this was a colossal mistake. This house was here, ready, primed. He’d been trained since birth to operate on these streets. But this house needed a family in it, and he’d only just begun to realize that all the preparation he thought he had completed with Madison had been a massive miscalculation.

“No, Mom, I wouldn’t call it a special vacation. Dale calls it a *closure party*, and I think that’s the best label I’ve heard so far.”

### **Barb Lewis Wants A Baby And Doesn’t Care What You Think**

Barb tucked the the stubborn patch of auburn bangs behind her ear as she forced the heavy door to the adoption agency open. Folders, haphazardly clutched against her purse, threatened to fall through her fingers and spill the carefully curated and organized arguments for her eligibility across the dusty floor of the entryway. Not today, folders. Not. Today. The adoption agent Barb had been wooing was germaphobic to an obsessive extent, and Barb couldn’t afford a single endorsement to be tossed aside as contaminated.

“Ms. Lewis, you are late.” Barb panted lightly, leaning against the closed door of Mrs. Brooks sterile office.

“Please accept my apologies, Mrs. Brooks. There was an issue with the train this morning-” Barb halted at Mrs. Brooks stern expression, realizing that even the mildest explanation would be categorized as a petulant excuse.

“Ms. Lewis, I see you have brought another archiving project to share with me?”

Barb blushed. “You’d expressed concern during our last interview that my circumstances predicted an absence of community. I thought I’d show you a few testimonials to reinforce-”

“I believe during our last interview we discussed your inability to afford our fees, your absence of community due to having moved here *in the last six months*, and your marital status.” Mrs. Brooks slid the documents back into their manila home, pushing the stack to the far edge of the desk. “Dear, come back when you’ve actually settled in.”

Disappointment flashed across Barb’s face. The panic had started last year after a gynecologist confirmed she was at risk for depleted ovarian reserves - suddenly that optimistic idea of waiting for the right man to come along and pop a kid out with her rang false. With that variable for her dream family no longer strictly practical, Barb was brought here.

She had not expected even adoption to require the presence of a presiding male. Not knocking dads of course - Barb’s own dad had been fantastic. He’d also gone it alone and done a



fabulous job. Sure, there were awkward conversations and logistical struggles, but those didn't mar her memory of childhood.

The sound of the door closing behind her, a sharp *snick* leaving her alone in the mildewy hallway, was dim behind the tumult of her own thoughts. Muscle memory guided her down three flights and out a heavy door, back into the bustling city street from whence she'd come. Two urges warred within her - the first and stronger of the two the desire to move to a safe harbor to sit and process, the second to sit on the stoop and sob. Tears stung the back of her eyes, and only the horrible prospect of a stranger trying to comfort her held them back.

Shoulders back, chin up, Barb turned to stride purposefully towards a coffee shop she'd frequented back in the college days. North Carolina had been a fun pitstop to start life in after college, but had never been able to offer quite the same pour-over with which she'd started her coffee addiction. Heart muted by the short-term direction, Barb whipped out her phone.

When the familiar ringing noise ended with a woman's casual greeting, Barb was momentarily stunned. "Madison, it's Barb."

"Barbie? Did I forget- Oh wait, you'd said you'd be back in town this month."

"Yep, yep, I'm in town again. I just finished moving in on the first. It's not just this month though, I'm here for good."

“What? I thought you had some glamour life out on the coast?”

“Well I...I’m thinking about putting down some roots, and I want them to be close to Dad. So I’m back.” Madison squealed, launching into a laundry list of brunch places to which Barb knew they’d likely never go, but could dream of all summer.

“Madison, just one quick thing.” Barb paused momentarily, hoping to disguise the hitch in her breathing twisting her lungs. “I got some bad news today. You’re the only one I’ve got here, I was hoping you could make time-”

“Oh honey I’m so sorry, I am booked up all day. Let me look at my calendar and then I’ll arrange a fantastic ladies getaway for us, okay? Just like the good old days.” The sinking feeling in her stomach was almost nostalgic - Madison always had a penchant for rain-checking small concessions of attention or time with a promise of a greater reward to come.

“Sure. You don’t have to, if you just wanna drop by for a glass of wine later you can. I’ve texted you my new address. But let me know either way.” It was a challenge to swallow the knot in her throat, summoned by bitter disappointment, but Barb choked it down.

### **The Ballad of Steve and Laura**

Monday night dinners with Dad were the saving grace of the week and quite frankly the only materialized justification for her cross-country move. Barb's taxi pulled up outside the small house, pushing forward through the wire gate and a yard of dead grass to her old front door. The first month of regular visits hadn't been enough to acclimatize to how small and humble the house looked now, compared to her memories.

Steve and Laura had just been a couple of kids, really, when the stressful consequences of reduced access to birth control intervened in their senior year of high school. Steve had gotten on one knee easily, as though he'd been just waiting for the moment when fate would force his hand. Laura had babbled an acceptance, her joyful tears more at the knowledge of how bad her situation *could* have been if she'd chosen to waste her glorious youth on just a slightly more selfish jock.

The door swung open easily, clearly her father had left it ajar for her while he busied himself in the kitchen. Sizzling noises and the smell of charred animal products filled every cranny of the building.

“Steve, you're letting the hot dogs burn. You know how I feel about burnt hot dogs.”

“You love ‘em, don't think you can pull a fast one on me, kid.” Barb chuffed off her flats, tucking them under a rack filled with grimy boots, sneakers, and a single pair of fashionable leather shoes. Photos lined the walls, an ode to childhood she could only remember

in sepia tones and sound bites. A polaroid framed in dingy silver featured two young faces peering out at her looking hopeful and breathless.

Visiting home was never complete without the tug of hunger this picture always coaxed from her.

They'd got married. Steve got a job at a manufacturing site just half an hour out in the 'burbs, and Laura waited until they had enough cash to do part-time community college. She didn't get a chance to start though - their baby girl showed up. Barbara. Steve had had a thing for Barbara Streisand, and Laura wanted a name she knew none of her friends would copy. Barbie was healthy, they were happy, and they got through.

"You didn't respond to my text, so I got the potato salad. The coleslaw was on sale, and I got nervous." The plastic bags from the grocery store were heavy, cutting purple lines into her hands and she moved through the narrow hallway to the kitchen.

Her dad looked up at her from where he was attempting to toss a salad. "I see your potato salad and I raise you one real salad." Barb tutted, dropping the bags on the round table, currently overflowing with empty packaging and grilling accoutrements. The kitchen, like the rest of the house, seemed to have been frozen in time. Sad tiling pulled up from the corners of the room, hinting at the dream of hardwood floors beneath. Each wall was a slightly different type of beige, and partially ripped wallpaper poked out from behind the fridge.

The wallpaper had been the last renovation project her mom had had in her before the dam broke.

Steve knew that something had changed for Laura. She struggled through postpartum, what he thought was postpartum. But it lasted a lot longer than he'd initially expected. Laura had a lot to mourn, he knew that. She'd wanted a college degree, and she was so flippin' smart, she deserved it. He kept telling her, the cash flow was just about ready, they just needed one month without a surprise and they could-- but Laura wouldn't hear it. It was about more than cash, he could see it in her expression. All he needed was for her to tell him - name the obstacle and he'd leap it for her.

When Barb was 11, old enough and responsible enough to walk back from the middle school on her own, Laura finally named the obstacle. It wasn't one that Steve could leap over. So he just broke it down.

Laura left.

Barb hadn't really understood what was happening. Dad sobbing quietly into the oatmeal before school. Mom picking her up from daycare and dropping her off at Dad's, watching Barb with guarded eyes. Eventually the pieces began to fit together. Mom broke Dad's heart. Mom needed something other than them. Dad would try to be fair about it, tried to be calm and

collected during a weekly dinner together, but he never quite could keep it contained. It wasn't malicious, it was just... uncomfortable.

Mom was determined at first to maintain her presence in Barb's life, but that waned. Dad got his composure, and Mom slowly vanished. These days Laura was just another woman on Barb's social media pages, posting about her husband and kids and their little house on the other side of town.

Barb stacked the dishes and sides on her arms, moving to the dining room and calling through the doorway. "So I'm supposed to believe that burnt hot dogs are the one food item I like that won't kill me?"

"Well you never believed it when I said it about ice cream and raw cookie dough. Let's say this old dog is learning." Barb chuckled to herself, methodically setting the table with the few bottles of salad dressing that had yet to expire. Set up was easy- paper plates, a bowl of iceberg lettuce masquerading as salad, a tub of deli counter potato salad and a wide slotted spoon stuck haphazardly inside the tub. Steve was responsible for the hot dogs, and Barb supplied the rest. In an ideal world, she would have made it herself in a tiny, efficient kitchen after a focused but rewarding day of work. Maybe next week. Barb could hope.

“Speaking of things that you always said were bad for me, what is this stack of dating profiles?” Silence echoed from the kitchen, the clatter of a metallic utensil slipping to the floor the only sign of life.

“Oh well, you know. I’m thinking of getting back out there.”

“Nice try. Derek, 35, likes skiing and Asian Fusion restaurants. What with your fear of heights and aversion to horseradish, doesn’t seem like a fit.”

“You think he’s too young for me?”

“Mmm. Follow your heart, Dad.” Steve stepped into the dining room, bearing a tray with an absurd number of thoroughly burnt hot dogs. His face was ruddy, either from the heat of the grill or from the embarrassment of being caught playing matchmaker for his daughter.

“I know, it’s... the boys at the shop were talking about this site, and I wanted to see what candidates it’d serve up for my prize-fighter.”

“You know, this site doesn’t ban silver foxes. You could give it a try yourself.” Steve shrugged, loading his hotdog and bun with grilled onions and a generous slathering of mustard.

“So hun, what’s this thing you’re doing with Madison? Give me the details.”

Barb sighed heavily, the woosh of air almost dislodging her precarious pile of toppings. “Madison is taking me on a camping retreat. I asked her to hang out, since the interview went so badly on Monday.”

“What? You didn’t tell me you had an interview - I’d have offered to drive you downtown.”

“No, not— Not a job interview. I submitted an application to an adoption agency.” Steve’s face faded, going as pale as his ruddy complexion would allow.

“Oh. I see.” Silence stretched on, slowly pushing Barb onto the edge of her chair in anticipation of a scolding. A remnant of the good old days when she’d lived in this tiny house, when Steve’s word was law.

“So, she’s taking me out to Camp Hiawatha. I think a bit of nature will be a good reset before I start the job hunt and build a little more runway before I submit another application.”

“Three weeks of camping will either clear your head or wipe it clean of all sanity. Cheers to that.”

### **The Bus Seat Rule**



Barb stood in the dusty parking lot of Camp Hiawatha's commercial office, hip popped and backpack slung over one shoulder. She'd arrived early enough to watch the other eager beavers pull into the driveway, originally intending to run her engine and jam to music until Madison arrived to keep her company. Eventually there were enough fellow campers to make her antisocial choice feel explicit to the point of rudeness, and she finally turned off her engine and exited the car. Now, resting against the hood of her aging Toyota, Barb surveyed the list lot.

Once the bus arrived, its ancient door creaking open as a dreary invitation, Barb felt doubt creep in.

God, where *was* Madison? Barb knew they'd talked about meeting at the camp, but she had only seen the one bus at the camp office. One by one, the travelers loaded into the dark green school bus. Just as though they'd all seen junior high yesterday the grim looking adults took window seats until all options for solitude were taken. Barb, a naturally anxious and punctual creature, claimed a seat perfectly in the center of the vehicle. When Madison finally boarded she'd be within immediate sight, but not so far forward as to seem *uncool*.

As the second wave of passengers dutifully pulled themselves into the bus, they moved like clockwork. Each seemed to sit with mechanical precision, not a single body hovering in the aisle to debate their seat partner. Barb only began to notice as the bus filled up, Madison still absent. The last three heads visible from her angle were decidedly not blonde, not styled impeccably, not even female.

It seemed rather dramatic, but not unheard of for Madison to have chartered her own boat to the island. Barb felt tension build behind her eyes, dwelling on how comforting it would have been to have a friend for the trip over. The bus as a whole had a strange tension, as though everyone present had woken on the wrong side of the bed.

Camp Hiawatha Nature Retreat for Divorcees had been a sub-optimal girls weekend idea all together, but Barb was willing to take any getaway she could get after her last meeting with Mrs. Brooks. This had the added benefit of being free - Madison had an extra reservation set up somehow.

Finally, someone waited in the aisle with uncertainty.

“Ah, sorry, can I sit?” Barb craned her neck up to meet a blue shirt and set of collarbones. A very nice blue shirt and collarbones situated over a lean torso, reminding her a of the sprinters from her broomball league back in Charlotte. A quick correction upwards connected her gaze to the concerned face of a bespectacled divorcee. He wasn’t quite looking at her as much as he was gazing out the window over her shoulder, his forehead creased what was either concern or constipation. Barb narrowed her eyes, trying to detect the missing element on him.

“Sure, no problem.” Barb pulled farther into the cold metal wall of the bus, as though the man wouldn’t fit if she couldn’t shrink into the structure itself. He sat, and Barb stared forward into the old grey fake leather. If the bus would just *move*, she could use the jolt as an excuse to turn, observe her new bus buddy. Something about him niggled at her - Barb had only had a few glimpses of him before she’d clung to the polite anonymity of bus-rules, but he seemed unquestionably familiar. Even the act of choosing not to speak to him was muscle memory.

The engine starting, causing a gentle vibration to ripple through the padded seats. Barb braced herself against the seat in front of her to balance through the jolt, noticing her seatmate’s stiff back and uncompromising posture. Once the velocity became familiar, she padded along her pockets for her phone. Madison would have an explanation. Barb curled her body toward the window, surreptitiously holding the contraption to her ear as the ringtone chimed.

It went to voicemail. Good! Good. That meant Madison was probably in transit.

“Madison, it’s Barb. I tried to save you a seat but it look like you found another way to the camp. I’m looking forward to seeing you and having our girls weekend. Give me a jingle if anything comes up.” She tapped the red button on the bottom of the screen and tried to exhale. As her shoulders relaxed and body returned to a position endorsed by standard bus design, she noticed a hot, discomfiting aura emanating from her right.

The man next to her was staring. This was odd, typically men did not stare at her. Stares were standard practice on days in which odd hats or loud makeup was applied, not on days in which she dressed in her muted nature colors. Barb stared forward, confident that the jolly gentleman would come back to normality.

He did not.

“Madison?” His voice was low, a growl, and seemed to lilt with an accent she couldn’t identify.

“No, sorry, I’m Barbara. Some people call me Barbie, but I call me Barb.” Ugh, babbling. Always babbling when some better than nightmare looking man started an interaction. She tried to clamp her tongue between her teeth the still the impulse.

“You called someone named Madison. You think she missed the bus.” At this, she turned to him on guard.

“You were snooping on me?” Her voice dropped to a whisper, almost conspiratorial yet there was no mistaking the accusation in her expression.

“Madison is my ex-fiance, I have snooping rights.” His handsome face was twisted in a sardonic snarl. “You let that skinny twit give you her reservation for a *divorce counselling retreat*? What kind of idiot *are* you?”

Oh. Oh oh oh. Aaron Price. Price the Prick. Can’t-Twice-Price. Madison’s long-term security-blanket lover. No wonder sitting in tense silence felt so natural - she’d been forced to sit next to him at bar after bar throughout her twenties, the both of them watching her train-wreck best friend live la vida loca. They hadn’t conversed well then either, both of them unsure if talking would count as attention seeking behavior, and not willing to be the one that got ignored when Madison chose a side.

Fudge. Barb winced, incredulous at her own naive idiocy. Of course Madison wasn’t going to attend a *nature retreat*. Of course it was *Madison* who bailed, not her unimaginative rule-following boor of an ex. Her head hit the seat in front of her with a dissatisfying thud.

Aaron was only silent for a minute before commencing a low, ceaseless stream of obscenities. “Of course she sent a fucking stunt double. She’s probably off fucking some new flavor of the week, because who cares who I get stuck with on an island for a rotting eternity.” Barb jolted back, her spine ramrod straight.

“Excuse you, you insufferable asshat, that’s my friend you’ve having a conniption over, and I am *not* a stunt double. If you had ever been able to see past her tits you would know it’s

*me*, Barb Lewis, and you would have the courtesy to pretend this was all a simple misunderstanding. But *no*, Prissy Price strikes again, the moment things aren't perfect you go into a nihilistic spiral of doom." Her throat ached from monologuing with such vehemence at so low a decibel. If only if only she'd had the space and privacy to let the proclamation echo out properly. The only satisfaction she found was his wide-eyed expression.

"*Barb Lewis?* No, no way. You moved to a Carolina, you had bottlecap glasses, you only ever wore knit sweaters and glowered." Barb raised an eyebrow. "Wait, did you just call me prissy? Are you just picking random "p" words, or—"

"Says the man with Farrah Fawcett hair. How comforting to know you were exactly as enlightened of a man as I ever thought back in college."

"Oh give me a break, we were all terrible in college." Aaron had the good grace to look embarrassed. "I am sorry I called you an idiot, as fair as it was. Damn, Barb."

Aaron turned his face forward and leaned back until his shoulders and ribs were hugged by the grey, rotting pleather. No Madison. No closure. He'd be here for three weeks while couples reunited and reignited, and he was just *out* thirty grand for no good reason. He plumbed his memories of therapy, of Madison, trying to find a moment that could justify spending a fraction of the expense of this trip on that relationship. Only one memory served - Aaron lunged for his backpack, rifling through pockets to find the flier Dr. Fasner gave him that fateful day.

*‘Guaranteed to rekindle flames or resolve that burning tension, or your money back!’*

“Barb, I have a proposition for you.” Barb waited patiently, comforted inexplicably by his level tone.

“...go on.”

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Barb and Aaron disembarked seven hours later onto the gravel road that served as the main thoroughfare at Camp Hiawatha Nature Retreat. The island was thick with evergreens, and seemed alive with summer sounds. Couples ahead of and behind them jostled with luggage, grumbling in resignation. It seemed disgraceful that they would be unwilling to pause and absorb the beauty around them, just plain rude. Clearly Barb was one of very few who’d chosen to pack lightly - by not bringing anymore more than the bare minimum, she’d save herself from any competitive impulse with her intended roommate. Although it seems her caution was purposeless. Aaron wasn’t likely to wear any black tank top with more panache than she could.

The crowd began to move in a listless train to a main hall, marked by a tall flagpole and bear carving. Barb followed them eagerly, only to be held back by a firm hand on her forearm.

“We need a strategy before we start talking to people.” His voice was no higher than the conservative whisper he’d spared on the bus.

“The strategy is obvious, don’t worry. Just let me do the talking and people will know we’re doomed.” Barb patted his hand consolingly. His hand was hot on her skin, and she had to fight the urge to skim her free hand up the forearm. At her expression of patient concern Aaron quickly pulled away. Ugh, some people just couldn’t be pleased.

Barb turned back, seeing that only two or three stragglers still lingered in their vicinity. Aaron’s presence lingered in the corner of her eye like a spectre. With effort she could ignore him, focusing on the smell of pine needles and cedar planking. This place was exactly what she’d dreamt of when Madison had first suggested an escape.

The seats of the main hall were mostly full, but luckily people seemed to be leaving them in sets of two. Barb lunged for a pair with a good vantage point, as close to the middle of the room as possible. Not too far forward, but not dead center, but still... She heard Aaron grunt in exasperation.

She sat in a rickety chair next to a nervous looking woman. There was barely enough time to adjust how her asscheeks rested on the hardwood before her neighbor descended. Barb

couldn't ignore the woman's fierce grip on her own arm, manicured nails likely to leave light but distinct marks.

“Oh you were so smart, did you really pack everything into that one bag? I could never manage that. One of the many things Samson over there has on his list of cons he wrote for this trip.” The woman flung her hand dismissively over her shoulder, not bothering to turn her head and disrupt the intense eye contact she currently maintained with Barb. Welp, curtains up.

“Well you know, I keep most of my things packed & ready to move out from our house when things get bad. Aaron can't seem to keep to our therapy intentions for more than four days in a row.” She could hear his spine cracking. Serves him right, his pride needed to take a few knocks early on.

“Honey, you just come knock on my door if things get tough this trip. I'm Abigail, pleased to make your acquaintance.” Abigail's eyes carried the warm expression of someone dying to be a confidant, the idea clearly providing enough comfort for her to relax the death grip of one of her hands.

“Could you not?” Aaron muttered just under his breath, clearly unamused with his partner-in-crime. Barb turned to him, studying the face that she'd known so long ago. He'd cleaned up, grown up a bit. Gone was the poorly bleached mop of hair perfect for boy bands and

hockey teams. His head instead was adorned with a pointedly vintage mullet in his natural brown hair color.

“Price, I need you to chill.” His eyes flashed.

“No, you *don't* need me to chill. I need *you* to pace yourself.”

They were spared further discussion on the subject by the timely interruption of what appeared to be a camp counselor. A burly, almost supernaturally fit juggernaut squished into a forest green t-shirt bounced energetically on the slightly raised platform along the far wall. While most of the crowd immediately found him more interesting than anything else that could possibly exist on the island, he still began a measured clapping rhythm.

Oh goodie, they were starting with a camp song. The best part of any event was the mindless sing along's used to build camaraderie.

“Are. You. READY?!” Swarthy McTightshirt roared into the wood paneled dining hall, maintaining the steady clapping. The front of the room joined in half-heartedly either from pity or fear. Petulant silence competed boldly in the back. McTightshirt didn't balk. He instead bounded off of the platform into the middle of the room, within two arm spans of Barb's ears.

“Come on, you can do better than that. When I say WAR, you say PEACE-” and so it continued, demanding the sullen participation of the crowd. “Alright, introductions. You can call me Bearclaw, but only if you’re brave enough to drop the ‘Counselor’ in front. Who wants to kick us off?” Bearclaw’s arms windmilled around, stopping abruptly to point at Aaron.

Aaron sat, stupefied. Barb could imagine her abstentionist companion’s inner turmoil, disgust at having to use words in front of the rabble surrounding him. He stood jerkily.

“I’m... Aaron. I’m here with Ba- Madison. My former fiancée. I live in the southeast burbs..?” Bearclaw stared at Aaron with intense almost furrowed eyebrows and a manic expression resting around his mouth. Silence stretched on until the counselor gave up on his reticent victim, turning to Barb. Barb rocketed up promptly, the muscle memory of a million professional networking sessions taking over. Going first would have allowed her an opportunity to save her identity, but pretending to be Madison would probably make the whole farce easier in the end.

“I’m Madison! I’m here with Aaron to work on our trust issues and the trauma from his countless trysts. Our therapi- Ooph” Aaron’s hand had snaked up to her armpit, forcefully pulling her back to her seat with a commanding grip on her upper arm. “God Aaron, could you take a xanax?” She blushed, belatedly recognizing unbanked fury in his gaze. Odd, she couldn’t remember Madison ever mentioning this type of exchange in her endless diatribes regarding the failings of that relationship.

Bearclaw's smile twitched, betraying the effort exerted to maintain a positive energy. "Let's do introductions in, ah, small groups then." The audience began to clump up, grabbing the most obvious partners and attempting to leave anyone noticeably problematic to the outskirts. Aaron took advantage of the hubbub to chastise Barb, leaning close to her ear like her mother had in the good old days to whisper hotly.

"Have you ever even *dated*? Nobody talks like that about personal shit." Barb blushed further. Aaron caught the reddening hue creeping up her neck, breathing shallowly as her implication hit him. "You've... never. Never had something big fail like this. You're just faking it." Barb cast her eyes to the ceiling, counting the gaps in the boards to buy time to sculpt her face into an expression of defiance. So what if she'd been faking it? Dating wasn't hard, she'd dated all the time. Relationships though... those were a trap.

"I have source material, it's just not, uh. Standard." Aaron's eyebrow quirked. "Maybe it was platonic, but Madison fucked with me too. I can do that believably on a dime, and then we'll get our cash and be on our way."

Aaron tsked, abruptly turning his gaze elsewhere and lifting the unwieldy metal chair, scraping it around to join the group forming beside them.

Getting Settled In

The evening passed while Aaron was lost in a haze of paranoia. Shock after shock for eleven consecutive hours tended to have that effect, wife-swap or no wife-swap. Finally they'd received permission to wander across the camp to their new abodes, armed with branded flashlights and a flimsy map.

The relative peace of the path, absent one enthusiastic dork of a counselor, provided a much needed mental refuge. It was too bad that he hadn't been able to restrain himself from degrading Barb to her face on the bus in his initial shock, but any man would be upset to find that the subject of his most recent revenge plots had abandoned him for no acknowledged reason. Barb's hurt face swam in the forefront of his thoughts, accompanied by a twinge of regret.

Barb was by no means the worst option for a week like this. 'A week like this' encapsulated by their current surroundings - a buggy, low budget camp with small wood log cabins and poorly maintained paths meandering across the 10 acre lot. That wasn't to say she belonged back here, but she was certainly putting up less protest than he had prepared for the weeks ahead of this trip. Barb trudged behind him, the only sign of her existence the quiet grunts of effort as she routinely tripped over what in his mind were obvious roots.

“Would it kill you to give me heads up when these logs show up?” Her voice echoed over his shoulder, somehow both plaintive and indignant.

“Maybe you should just step to the side so you can watch your own feet.” He was done caretaking.

“Sure sure, I’ll step to the side and walk in the weeds so as not to inconvenience you, my liege.” The sarcastic bite in her response stiffened his spine.

“ROOT.”

Their cabin destination finally loomed up amid the thickly packed woods along their path. The roof was slanted in a haphazard fashion, the eclectic uncle in the family of cabins. Aaron firmly grasped the doorknob, grimacing at the grating feeling of rust on his palm. With a determined twist, the door swung open, revealing a poorly decorated Twin Peaks hotel replica, complete with paintings of waterfalls which Aaron assumed were initially conceived with artistic intent.

Barb seemed undaunted. “Ah! Well, this is... humble. Charming and humble.” Aaron twisted to look back at her, noting her face was relaxed and open. She must... actually have meant it when she said it was charming. For the first time since they’d begun this crack-pot adventure, he had a moment to look at her, *really* look, at this long lost college friend. She’d

changed. Aaron wasn't surprised that she'd taken his bet, but the old Barb would have done so knowing that there would be no confusion as to their dynamic. How she could be willing to take the same risk, with her ringlet red curls and curvaceous body, was beyond him.

"I'm glad we don't have a blacklight."

"Is that...tell me that isn't a bowl of condoms by the bed." Aaron focused, noticing finally that first of all there was merely one full-sized bed, and secondly that the nightstand was 100% condoms, condoms everywhere.

"What the f--" He choked back the shock. This was going to be a long week, and by no means would he let an instinctive reaction bar him from having a good time, Barb willing.

"That's...considerate of them. They think we'll reconcile over the course of the camp."

His thoughtful comment was met with a tittering noise, the first of the kind he'd heard from his companion. "All optimism aside, I don't think we'll need quite this many." Aaron's insides lurched as she winked at him. "But then again, maybe Madison was wrong about you all along."

Madison... talked about that? She told her friends? She told Barb that he wasn't- couldn't- "I don't know what you've heard, but you heard it from a distracted and self-interested participant so I would take it with a grain of salt."

Barb set down her bag at the foot of the bed before crossing to the dilapidated door of what must be the bathroom. Her voice echoed from the porcelain fixtures of the smaller room. “I suppose I never heard her describe taking it, salt or no salt, so I won’t cast aspersions yet.”

Aaron felt heat creep across his face. Surely Barb wouldn’t have even brought it up if it was something as pitiful as his nightmares. If she really *believed* Madison, surely this easy-going affable woman would have just let the subject drop. No, Barb was throwing down a challenge. Interesting, knowing that Barb had been quite adamantly unwilling to flirt back in those halcyon college days. Well if she was curious about his sexual prowess, he could be convinced to share his secrets.

“I’d help you develop context to evaluate Madison’s comments, but I don’t meddle with virgins as a general rule.” *That* got her attention.

“You really are a grade-A broheim, aren’t you. The only way you can think to deflect my comments is assume I haven’t had the pleasure. Well I’ll have you know that experience has only served to reinforce my confidence in the betting odds on a man being altogether too timid in the sack to make it any fun.” Barb voice reverberated, likely amplified by the curve of the sink. Briefly the sound of running water echoed from the little room before Barb appeared before him.

He hadn't really noticed before, but Barb glowed a bit differently when she was angry. Her cheeks were bright pink, and her eyebrows arched so deliberately that he could taste the derision they were attempting to convey. Those features paled in comparison to the direct gaze she focused on him, sharp with impugned dignity.

Silence stretched on, until broken with his own cough of discomfort. "So why did you take this deal then, if I'm such a broheim?" He watched her move to her luggage, mechanically unpacking the efficiently loaded backpack. Her face betrayed nothing - she might be talking about the weather.

"I'm trying to adopt, and the fees are monster. This could move my timeline up by two years." Aaron's mind whirred around, struggling to imagine Barb with a child. It was hard enough to imagine himself with a kid, especially knowing that for most of his adulthood the assumption would have relied on picturing Madison as a mother. Only a fool would waste time picturing Madison as a mother. Barb though - he supposed it worked. She wasn't nurturing as far as he could tell, but as the quiet moment stretched it became easier to picture. The only element that still didn't make sense was—

"Hold on, won't your husband be pissed when he finds out how you got the money?" Barb's hand flew to the back of her neck, rested there as she turned to face him. Her face looked sheepish.

“I’m single. I’m adopting to skip the whole husband part. It’s another fly in the ointment, so to speak.” Aaron’s brain fritzed out. Raising a kid alone seemed like a death wish. All the guys at the firm spent hours of each work day coordinating schedules with their family, negotiating with teachers, diagnosing obscure ailments. The prospect of doing all that alone was enough to create a tension headache just from sympathy.

“You’re kidding. I’d say that you’re brave and noble, but—” Her sharp gaze returned to him, a reprise even more fiery than when he’d needled her sexual experience.

“But what? How about ‘But it’s even better than that, my feminist queen.’” Aaron couldn’t stop his eyebrows from raising. The pain of his forehead wrinkling into rumble strips almost had him wishing he’d just nodded along.

“You wanna be a feminist queen, fine. Being a single mom just to prove a point sounds suicidal.”

“Well most marriages are crap anyway, and having one invested parent is just as good as having two with one of them out the door.” Aaron knew a trap when he heard one. Not that there were so many verbal traps to experience, in a typical day. But he’d grown up with an older sister, and if Claire hadn’t taught him to dodge this kind of landmine Madison certainly had.

“Sure, right. Anyway let’s decide how to split the bed.” She eyed him, squinting as though a clear lens could detect his virtue or lack thereof. “The truly egalitarian solution, my feminist queen, is to take turns on the floor. We can flip a coin for the first night.”

“Sounds fair enough. Do you have a coin?” He padded his pockets, annoyed to find that he had nothing double sided on him. Looking to his companion, he witnessed a similar realization. Barn’s eyes gazed at the bed unfocused. Silence stretched on.

“We can just share the-” She snapped her fingers, turning to him like every murder mystery gumshoe he’d ever seen.

“Condom.”

Aaron choked. “What? I mean sure, I just-” Barb’s eyes returned to his, her knowing expression belied by a blush blooming across her cheeks.

“No, we can flip the condom. Heads I get the bed, tails you get the floor.” Heads. Tails. Condoms. The possibilities rushed his brain like a freighter. Hopefully he’d get tails— wait. It was now Aaron’s turn to glare.

“Tails I get the bed, punk. Go ahead, flip it.” Barb strode over, making a show of balancing the broad square packet on her thumb.

It landed on the floor, branding facing up. Barb crowed in victory. “Heads it is!” She scrambled to the bed, dumping her sleeping bag on the pastoral-themed quilt.

Acknowledging defeat, Aaron dropped his bags on the floor at the foot of the bed. “How early do we have to wake up again?” He eyed the floor morosely, anticipating some serious neck sched for tomorrow's breakfast. His question was meet with rustling, and a quick glance back to the bed confirmed his suspicion. Barb was already tucked in beneath the comforter, the fluffy end up it pulled right up beneath her chin.

“The alarm is set for seven, so we better get cracking on those sweet dreams.” Her voice was muddled with a suppressed yawn, signaling that the time for witticisms and snark had passed. Aaron moved to the lamp, clicking it off and allowing dim light from the moon to guide him back to his own roost. Barb's breathing leveled quickly, her body twisting into a fetal position. Her sleeping bag already began to slide down below her knees, neglected by her tight hold of the comforter.

Well, if she wasn't going to use it...

Aaron snagged it, and sunk down to the floor to dream of his turn on the mattress.

Hiking through Nature is apparently a matter of opinion

The first day of the rest of their divorce dawned with inconsiderate beauty. How dare the sun rise with rosy fingers, how dare the flowers smell sweet along the path to the breakfast hall. None of this was permissible until *after* coffee was brewed and served next to a small pitcher of cream and cubic container of sugar. Barb staggered along the path, bleary-eyed and determined to spot every overgrown tree limb herself this time. Aaron clearly wasn't to be trusted in that task.

Wind whipped around her flimsy polyester shirt, the sound of it whispering “your fashion is cheap” in her ear. Apparently yoga-chic was not sufficiently sporty for the up-north camping experience. Her boots were the only facet of her preparation for the day that were serving her well. The dark red leather supporter her ankles and shin as she stumbled rock to rock towards the promise of food. Aaron was quiet behind her, but not in the comradely aura of two souls in the pain of waking. He seemed to be breathing the fresh air in with satisfaction, taking the time to stretch lightly down to his toes.

The main hall was much as it had been twelve hours ago during their introduction to Counselor Bearclaw and Camp Hiawatha. The pine planking coating the single room glowed with honey hues in the morning light, and the smell of coffee and fried potatoes wafted through the front door. Upon the tingle of the caffeine in her nostrils, Barb sprung to attention, releasing

the screen door abruptly. It slammed with a loud thwack, the product of tightly coiled springs and seasonal exposure to human interaction.

“ACK- okay, that’s a little extreme even for you.” Barb glanced over her shoulder at the first human sound of the day, catching Aaron awkwardly forcing the door back open from its home position with obvious effort. It seemed fitting Aaron would start the day by complaining. She grunted in response, unable to even lift her eyebrows to express the instinctual disdain.

Effort could be better spent elsewhere, of course. The line along the cafeteria style buffet seemed thin, and a swift perusal of the hall made it clear why. Most of the campers seemed to have woken much earlier to get started on breakfast. Panic began to raise through her heart - what if the potatoes were gone? What was the point of even waking up if there were no potatoes? Barb rushed forward, seizing a bright orange tray pressed into four divets as though the population here were still learning about appropriate portion sizing. The first station was a thick tub of sausages & bacon. Behind them stood a tall, intimidating woman bearing a fearsome pair of tongs.

“3 pieces. Which kind do you want.” No inflection was needed to convey the message, even this early. Barb’s eyes focused briefly, likely her survival instinct kicking to prevent a colossal mistake.

“Bacon please.” The Valkyrie-esque guardian of morning victuals deposited the greasy strips on the orange plate. Eggs followed quickly after, and then... then came the potatoes. The cafeteria queen deposited the tiniest scoop of breakfast potatoes into the littlest square of the plate. Barb looked up warily, wondering how far to push on day one. “Ah, could I have -”

“One scoop. Move along.” Eeek, no, run little Barb and live to fight another day! Her adrenal gland jumped into hyperdrive, turning her to the coffee & juices along the other wall with surprising agility. The mugs on the table next to the antique coffee urns were tiny, orange like the platter. Balancing the platter on one hand, Barb filled two mugs with coffee and looped their tiny handles around pairs of her fingers. All in all, it was a miracle she made it to a table that morning.

One mug of coffee downed, Barb finally had the presence of mind to look up and assess her position. Aaron had somehow found his own way to table and seated himself across from her. His attention was consumed by a sheaf of papers, held together by a severely strained staple. Casting her gaze down the table, Barb detected duplicates scattered every few feet and grabbed one for herself. It turned out to be an agenda for the camp. Some of the events listed were truly terrible, and others seemed almost enjoyable. The last page of the packet was a map of the island highlighting typical fixtures like the main building and snack shop, as well as some less common landmarks such as “Nooky Point.”

“Are they highlighting the leech-free beaches in hopes that we will... use them? For lake sex? Because gross.” Aaron lowered his reading material to shoot her an unamused glare. Well, she thought it was funny. Barb dropped her copy of the guide to return to her main concern - bacon.

Her attention was regained as Aaron wheezed through his toast. “There is apparently a discretely hidden copy of the Kama Sutra in each of our cabins as well.” She could feel her eyebrows reaching new heights towards her hairline.

“I always wanted to read that, but didn’t want our data overlords to know. Should make for a good time.”

Aaron choked on the toast. “Oh. How... interesting.” His face was purpling, and Barb let a smug smirk overtake her lips. The poor prude probably wouldn’t look her in the eye for hours after that.

“What, you never were curious?”

“I was, so I read it. It’s not really that illuminating.” Barb felt her jaw drop. The bacon suddenly tasted like rubber. “For a novice like you, I’m sure it’ll be fascinating.”

“Oh fuck you. Why are you a beet impersonator right now if you’re so worldly?”

“I suppose I just imagined you’d be the type to try and read it aloud.”

Two orange trays slammed down next to them, quickly followed by the cheerful greeting of their pseudo-friends Abigail and Samson.

“Phew, I’m so glad we’re not the only ones cutting it close.” Abigail plopped cheerily down quickly followed by the lumbering movement of her husband.

“For the third time, we are *not* that late.”

“Late? I wasn’t aware we had a -” Aaron interrupted her, shaking the thick packet with obnoxious zeal. Barb glared before reaching over to smack the papers down into the table surface. “Of course it’s too much to ask for you to say *‘Dearest Madison, it’s in the agenda?’* You had to shake it at me like I’m a toddler?”

Abigail and Samson stared at their trays, sneakily making eye contact. They seemed to relax slightly, which Barb wondered at. She continued to observe their expressions as she made a show of leafing through the agenda, pausing at the page outlining the days’ activities. The only explanation that would seem to fit was that by being obviously dysfunctional, they had made Abigail and Samson feel more like a team. A warm tendril of pride wormed its way through

Barbs' ribcage. Perhaps there were non-escapist benefits to role-playing this retreat that's she'd overlooked on the bus ride up.

Her eyes returned to the agenda, becoming sheepishly aware that she'd been staring at it for a conspicuously long time.

“Okay, so we're supposed to be at the trailhead in about seven minutes.” She released the packet with a plop, promptly scarfed down her potatoes with regrettable efficiency, and stood ready. “Guys, you're so slow, let's get moving.” Aaron glowered before fastidiously adjusting what appeared to be every facet of his clothes, down to his shoe laces. The seconds - Barb knew in her mind it was only seconds, but it felt like an eternity - eked by in relative silence. When the four of them had all reached their feet, Barb bounced forward, eager for adventure.

The path to the trailhead was the most widely used fareway on the island, well defined with landscaped shrubbery and heavy gravel. Sunlight washed out their surroundings, as though Barb was looking through an overexposed filter on her camera. Eyes focused on the path immediately in front of them, the group traipsed together until they came upon a large cluster of the more punctual campers. Bearclaw stood between his charges and the discreet path into woods, holding a thick stack of yellow pages.

“Good morning campers! It's so good to see your bright and shining faces!” Counselor Bearclaw brimmed with unjustified enthusiasm. Perhaps *he'd* gotten an extra portion of breakfast potatoes. Early bird gets the worm.

“We're kicking off your stay with a little scavenger hunt.” The burly man began handing out his yellow leaflets, face buoying between concentration and manic glee. A shadow briefly drifted over him, accompanied by a thrashing noise in the boughs above the group. Barb watched in fascination as the color drained from their leaders face, his posture crumpling as though about to be squished by concrete.

“Oh, a cardinal! So pretty!” A tall, athletic woman pointed above them, directing the collective attention to a low branch behind them. Bearclaw did not appear reassured. He straightened, continuing to pass out the papers while casting distracted glances over his shoulder.

“There are compasses built into the base of your flashlights. Good luck, and-” The cardinal dropped from its perch in a magnificent arc right past Bearclaw's baseball cap- “see you by dinner time!” He shoved the last of what by now were obviously maps into Barb's hand before rushing away into the wide sunshine of the path they'd just taken.

Aaron spoke up, humor softening his typical acerbic tone. “I guess that's why he's not Counselor Birdclaw.” Fighting down a smile - they were supposed to be estranged after all - Barb turned back to their assignment. The outline of the forest was an unfamiliar blob shape- the

only real clue as to how to orient themselves was a distinct arrow pointing at a gap in the solid line, labeled *trailhead*. $A + M$ was also inscribed on the page, a reminder that this was a task designed to remedy their rocky relationship.

A sappy set of instruction was scrawled along the bottom of the page, some thought exercise they'd be expected to indulge. Barb scanned it before folding it into neat quarters. Aaron's history with Madison wasn't really her perview after all - he probably wouldn't want to even bother with the touchy-feely bit of this nature hike. Not to say she wasn't interested, but the best way to fail at resurrecting their fake relationship was to fail at even these simple tasks.

Scanning the path ahead, Barb passed the page to her cohort. "Looks like we're all on the same path, if just for now."

An hour in, Barb lost all illusion that she'd be able to remember landmarks in what was apparently a labyrinth. Birch and pine lined the path, roots rippling under their feet. Aaron seemed content to follow behind her, either completely apathetic or trusting her judgement.

"I know what *I* was getting out of a relationship with Madison, but I can't for the life of me figure out your payoff."

Barb shrugged, uncomfortable. “Madison... nothing felt better than those few moments when Madison was focused on me. It wasn’t stable, or really balanced, but we were practically kids.”

“So you planned a girls week out in the woods?” Barb glared, hearing the incredulity in his voice. She’d had a hard enough time explaining to her family, time and again, why this friendship had survived the odds over the years.

“Imagine for a second that she’d actually shown up. It would have been fantastic proof that she’d, uh. Grown.” Aaron huffed from behind her on the path. It could have been the effort of overcoming a rocky outcropping, or something else. Something more empathetic.

“Madison would have been too distracted by a new pool of people to fascinate to pay attention to either of us at this camp.” Aaron glanced back at her with an appraising expression. “To be fair, I should be assuming you’ll get distracted too. A bunch of desperate singles here.”

“I’m shocked - you’re acknowledging I could be scoring on our little vacation?”

“You always could’ve been scoring, you just liked intimidating people more.” Odd, it sounded like an compliment but tasted like an insult.

“What? Excuse me?”

“That’s what you were doing, right? All through college, you’d just lie in wait for some poor sod to split an infinitive and *bam*, you’d tear him to pieces. I’m actually clenched now, just reminiscing.”

“You’re crazy, I wasn’t scary.” Barb peeked over her shoulder, and he had to pull his eyes up from the rocky path to meet her gaze.

He just shrugged in response, drawing Barb’s eyes to the movement of his broad shoulders.

The path wound sharply to the left, bringing them along a ridge overlooking the lake. Barb glanced down to the map Bearclaw had provided, and the tiny “x” marking their special scavenger hunt type item. If she was reading the map correctly, and she could only be sure of that when no other parties depended on her, the item should be down the ridge. The trees below grew close to the steep drop, like a stage curtain hiding the magic of the green room.

Well, bombs away. “Hold this,” Barb thrust the paper and her flashlight into Aaron's fumbling grip before taking a running leap toward a barren pine, confident in her ability to scramble down its tiered branches to the ledge below.

Aaron let out a distressed yodel as she leapt, his baritone surprisingly forceful.

“It’s - unf - fine, Aaron.” Barb shimmied, testing her grip on the craggy bark of her pine. A quick glance down past her knee verified she'd have her pick of three branches below and from there a low drop to the ground. She could hear him pacing on the path.

Barb made short work of it, dropping on to loamy ground with only a few patches of irritated skin and scratches. Her surroundings now were obviously ungroomed, brambles and low growth obscuring any possible path from view. A glimmer of light caught her eye- sunshine reflecting off the lake not more than fifty feet away. It was so pretty...

“Wait Barb!” A soft *whump* sounded behind her, the flashlights dropping unceremoniously to the ground. Aaron was dropping down from the pine, his strong arms making short work of what she'd spent at least a few desperate heartbeats mapping out to prevent something unlucky. Once he was earthbound again, he fixed her with a reproving glare. “Don't just run at trees, I can't carry your corpse all the way back to camp if you die.”

“Phht. Sure you could. I'm light as a feather. Anyway, let's look around. Bearclaw left something here for us to find.” They waded through the brush, eyes on the ground waiting for a bauble to come to their attention.

“Ugh, some assholes carved into this tree. Jerks.” Aaron stood by a bunch, his hand tracing a roughly hewn heart with initials “E+B” scratched in the center. It wasn't perfectly

symmetrical, or even that pretty to look at. Just the kind of thing that comes out when average Joe's replicate a cache idea.

“I think...this is what we were supposed to find.”

“Okay, so, is that it? We just go back now?”

Barb took a last look at the map, noticing a line at the bottom. She'd thought it was a riddle, and had planned to ignore it. Now she saw them for what they were - instructions. “*This mark is a sign of wishing for permanence and optimism. Discuss how it makes you feel.*” She read it aloud to Aaron, her voice sounding strange to her own ears. “Bearclaw is hella deep. No wonder this culty camp has lasted so long.”

Aaron stared at their subject, his face impassive. What could he be trying to discern- this wasn't exactly complicated.

“Listen, I know you didn't sign up specifically for this, but if we're going to carry this charade off we probably *do* need to do the assignment.” He peeked at her, his brown eyes entreating. Barb felt her heart jump, surprising herself. She'd thought that particular weakness had been weaned off in the early years, before she'd learned how to protect her own heart. The tender ache had her feeling vulnerable and a little apprehensive to top it all off. Barb weighed her options. Overcompensate with a bit of extra flair? Or keep it clinical?

“I...guess I can see that.” She could feel the option on the tip of her tongue. *If you were mine I'd be leaving marks everywhere. They'd probably be redder, and fade quicker.* Oh god, just imagining his expression scrunching up in confusion was enough to dissolve her courage. “Tell me if you disagree, but I think Madison would have just thought it was a good photo opportunity for the internet. The prompt would annoy her- she'd never play along to talk about *permanence.*” Aaron didn't answer, just nodded demurely. When he didn't volunteer his own feedback, Barb felt herself begin to babble. It was the bus all over again, God help her. “I think it's sweet. Maybe a bit naive, but then again the prompt calls it optimism. Looking at it makes me feel proud of the dweebs that carved it.”

“Looking at it makes me...not angry, but kind of sick.”

Barb stared at him, his idea sounding as disjointed as a portrait by Picasso. “Are you trying to say, um, defensive? Resentful?”. He shrugged, turning back to the carving and subsequently hiding his expression from her view.

“Maybe. That sounds...yeah. These two people just had to go out of their way, ruin a perfectly natural tree out of their own vanity.” So, did that mean hickeys were a no go?

“Well, yeah, but it's still romantic.”

“It’s unnatural. They should have stayed in their lane.”

Ugh. Spoken like a spoiled yuppie boy. “Living, like actually living, requires that you carve something of your own in. At least they used their names - they’re more accountable than the ding dongs leaving chip bags all over the campsite.” Aaron's back stiffened, his eyes meeting hers warily. The exchange no longer felt like a strategy session - her gut started to sizzle with adrenaline.

“Yeah, I’m not really asking for *feedback* Barb.” He huffed, starting to dodge around her and back to the tree that would deposit him back on the path. This fucker- how dare he ask her to be vulnerable, play along, and then clap back the minute she obliged.

“I can't believe I didn't recognize you right away on the bus,” Barb called at his back, picking her own way back to the tree. “You're the same shade of coward you were back in the beginning.” Aaron grunted at her, his attention primarily focused on his now precarious position on the lowest pine branch.

“Oh, so I'm a coward because I don't agree with you?”

“If you’d had the courage to think about my point and disagree you wouldn't have to climb a tree to get away.” She stared up through the branches at his retreating ass. Confident she was in the right, she allowed a brief moment of appreciation - he did have a nice ass. “I’m just

going to take your retreat as an admission that if you had enough spine to be honest you'd end up admitting I'm right." Aaron swung up a set of branches and crouched, apparently preparing to leap from the boughs to the path above.

"If you so badly want to be right about it being cute to carve initials in a tree, have it your way." Barb smouldered, annoyed beyond measure. Obviously the conversation was about more than a damn carving in a tree, but waxing any further on the topic would just imply that she cared. Caring about his actual feelings was not why she'd agreed to stay.

Turning her fury inward, she propelled herself up in to tree reaching the upper limbs only just after Aaron leapt and rolled on to the upper path. He stood, grunting quietly in effort, before turning to face her and extending his hand. The exertion had left him too disoriented to maintain his earlier snarling expression, for which Barb was grateful. It would have been very difficult to leap from the tree to his awaiting arms if he'd kept it up. "Come on, I'll catch you."

She didn't dignify his offer with a response. Barb watched him warily, palms chafing against the bark of her perch. His carefully coiffed brown mop looked artfully disheveled from effort. Infuriating that even now she couldn't ignore Aaron - not a single inch of him. Not that it mattered, no man who'd been weak enough to settle for Madison's fickle attention could be worth appreciating. Aaron had proven time and again he should be beneath her notice. Of course, she had to rely on him now. It was that or the rather intimidating bush to the left, and he was just barely less prickly.

“Oh come on, I’m not a monster, I’ll catch you. If you die here my refund will go to all the legal fees.”

She leapt. Aaron's arms were more of a precaution, his chest stopping her forward momentum and keeping her upright after she'd more than cleared the gap. Barb’s eyes were shut tight, clenching to ignore the pleasant sensation of his muscled body wrapped around her however briefly. Once she'd pulled away, focusing instead on follow the path back the way they’d come, Aaron interrupted her huff.

“It not every day a beautiful woman leaps into my arms.” His jovial tone was wrapped around a half-assed apology, she could hear it.

“That's cute. You're still a dick.” It wouldn't be worth it to make him come to heel on this particular battle. Barb slowed just enough to keep step with him.

“I know. You put up with a lot. Thanks.” As quickly as the anxiety washed into her back at that tree, it ebbed.

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The walk back to camp from the trailhead wasn't exactly the relief Aaron had hoped for after hours of trudging through the backwoods of Camp Hiawatha. Abigail and Samson apparently had not had much success on their journey together. Barb had stood close to him as they'd waited for the stragglers to emerge from the forest, her proximity setting his skin on fire.

She seemed focused, fully intent on watching for their first pseudo-friends arrival. The only sign that she possibly reciprocated his hyper-awareness was a set of perfectly round, red circles high on her cheek bones. Aaron absently began to list the other scenarios that could arouse a similar flush. Last night as he'd tossed and turned on the floor of the cabin, he'd made peace with the distinct absence of chivalry in his thoughts for this particular adventure.

If Barb was naive enough to think Madison would have got on the bus to Camp Hiawatha in the first place, she might have been similarly duped into believing the lies Madison would have told about him all these years. Specifically those about his sexual acumen. She may not be interested now, but Aaron would be ready to correct any historical bias starting with that impressive rack. It would be endlessly satisfying to scratch the itch that had been plaguing him since he asked her if her seat was free three days ago.

Although if she figured out why he walked behind her so often, it might get harder to convince her.

There could be no shame in admitting that seeing her had been a refreshing surprise. Sure, if she'd chosen *not* to participate in his scheme, bitterness at being out the camp fees on day one might have permanently soured the memory. Luckily she had been amenable, giving him license to revisit the pretty picture of her sitting primly in that shitty bus seat. Barb had been a good friend by necessity back in the old days, one he would have called a "diamond in the rough" to the guys. Not to Dale - Dale would have responded with a side swipe and serious judgement. Adult!Barb been neigh unrecognizable at first, eyebrows carefully groomed and clothes tailored to accentuate her assets rather than to hide.

If Barb of today had been Madison's wing-woman, there was no telling how events would have played out. At least until she opened her mouth. Then the Barbara of old stepped back onto the stage, all righteous fury and haughty indifference.

That was the key difference. Barb was loud about her scorn, and Madison was quiet.

The bell from the mess hall signaling dinner rang, dimly echoing across the island. Orange hues coated the landscape like a thin film, betraying the coming night. Abigail and Samson finally stumbled from the woods, tersely ignoring one another. Barb started towards her. Before he could catch up she pulled ahead, joining Abigail in her march to the main buildings. Up close it was clear that Abigail was speed walking with the determination of an airline passenger with only twenty minutes to cross three terminals.

Aaron turned his attention to Samson, realizing the natural next step would be to bitch about their partners. The man trudged, his gaze not quite at the horizon. Following the trajectory, Aaron knew where Samson's eyes were resting. Yeah, the picture the two women made up ahead was easy on the eyes. Thank God for leggings.

“So, how did it go? What did Bearclaw make you find?” Samson turned to him, as though snapped from a dream. Aaron repeated his question. Obviously Samson was not quite ready to be brought back to civilization.

“Uh, right. We were supposed to find something. We didn't find whatever it was. Abigail got upset when I told her she was reading the map wrong, and when she ran off I...” He sighed, gesturing weakly with his open palm. Aaron felt exhausted just thinking about the exchange.

“That sucks, man.” They walked together in silence, the scuffing noise of their boots on the gravel the only soundtrack. The companionable quiet was broken with a distinct peal of laughter. Aaron could see the girls doubled over, guffawing like pranksters. Their careless joy seemed to aggravate Samson - his face twisted from resignation to bitter disdain.

“We came here to get better, and she goes off to make friends after giving me the silent treatment for two hours.” Samson shook his head, and seemed to come into sharper focus. He turned, fixing Aaron with a curious glance. “What did you and Madison have to find?”

“It was a carving in a bunch of trees down on the bank.” Aaron shrugged, trying not to sound pensive. The reality of it was that the trees had been unimpressive, but his mind was reeling trying to imagine his reaction to them if Madison had been there. She’d have thought they were completely boring, moved on immediately. Instead of feeling annoyed by the disruption to nature, he’d have been forced into explaining their value. Barb’s inherent romanticism over it had been a surprising relief. Getting to be the pessimist for once let him flex a muscle he’d forgotten existed.

Samson shrugged, nodding in casual agreement. “Cool.” They returned to silence. Dinner would be welcome relief from this small-talk hell. Aaron found himself wishing for Dale - Dale would know how to do this. He’d always had a random comment or strange fun-fact that strangers seemed to find interesting or at least endearing. Ahead of them Aaron could see Barb and Abigail, whom had progressed to some sort of thumb war. Apparently their conversation hadn’t been enough entertainment either.

Barb twisted, wrenching her elbow far beyond the realms of fair play. Were no rules sacred?

“Can you believe her?” He peeked back at his companion. “She can’t even play thumb-war fair.”



“All’s fair in love and thumb-war.” Samson chuckled at his own joke before exhaling loudly, letting the tension finally dissipate. Aaron spotted Barb disentangling herself as the pair hit the junction in the paths, careening off towards the cabins.

“What, where does she thinks she’s-”

“Probably to shower, I’d think. I know I’m going to clean off.” Oh no. Fuck no, Barb took *ages* in the shower. If he had to wait for her before he could clean up, all the food would be cold or gone by the time he made it to the main hall.

“Shit.” Aaron broke into a run, shouting to Barb in desperation. “Hold up Madison!” Barb whipped her head around before breaking into a run towards the cabins. “No you don’t!”

And they were off.

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Barb slammed the door to the bathroom shut, twisting the bolt into a lock position. She could hear the screen door separating their little living space from the outdoors smack against it's frame, could hear Aaron cursing and panting like a predator. This victory would make her bath all the more satisfying.

Fifteen miles and five hundred percent more temptation than she'd expected later, Barb was in need of some serious decompression. Thankfully, this camp really did tailor itself for a.) adults and b.) sexytime. The bathtub was huge, with insightfully sculpted ridges and carefully placed jets. Barb sunk her aching muscles, submerging briefly before returning to the surface. A tray reached across the tub end to end, providing a stable if not entirely secure ledge on which to rest her phone and some reading material.

Aaron could still be heard clomping around the door - she expected him to be a bit sore about her getting the bathroom first, but she hardened her heart against him. This would be just another lesson in taking ownership of your destiny, which he seemed to avoid so heartily. If he'd wanted to shower first, he should have hoofed it harder.

Yet another luxury she'd never expected distracted her from shadow of his likely muddy boots below the door - bubble bath. Who even bought bubble bath? She'd never liked it much as a kid growing up, what with sensitive eyes, but she'd read some novel that had described it so sensually that seeing it here made her giddy. Barb played with the foam piling wedges and mounds on her head and shoulders.

She signed contentedly, and picked up her phone. It was contraband, according to the detailed packet left out at dinner. By no means was the contraption allowed outside of her cabin at any time, limiting her contact to the outside world to these few stolen moments. Scrolling through her notifications, she found a little purple icon flashing.

A temporary video. From Madison. For anyone to see.

Adrenaline raced through her veins, making her toes tingle and her hips twitch back into the porcelain. Barb leaned forward with trepidation, tapping the screen with the tip of her nose, the only part of her still dry. Sounds began to emanate from the phone, first dance hall music, then soft smooth jazz. Madison had been panning her camera side to side, capturing a raucous night on the town. The final scene, six second long, was a nauseatingly sweet peck on the cheek, Madison cuddled close to a sinfully attractive man that looked oddly like their old club leader.

The video looped endlessly, waiting for her nose to boop the screen again, dismissing it into the void forever.

Barb watched it three more times, hoping the music at its various volumes would ease her mind around the bitter annoyance rotting the bottom of her stomach. Eventually her body screamed for air, and she realized that after the initial whoosh of surprise, she'd refuse to inhale. Madison had shipped her off for a weekend retreat with Prince Charming out there, and used her newly found free time to have a romantic adventure with their mutual crush from college.

Madison had *barely* liked him back then, Nick had been *Barb's* fantasy. It seemed almost too mean to be real. Not even Madison could craft circumstance so fancifully. Intentional or no, Barb felt her baseline affection for the woman sour.

The phone clattered back to the tray with a tinny *thunk*. She stared over the bubbles, listening to the periodic whooshing noises of the jets alternating. *Madison didn't do this for me, and she's not with Nick to spite me. I want this refund, and I wanted a vacation. So, fuck it.* Barb leaned back, snatching the book from the tray and sinking a little farther down into the water.

Cracking the weak, papery spine of *The Complete Kama Sutra* open she began to read, mumbling quietly along. "Hmm. Chapter One, the stimulation of erotic desire..."

Aaron's firm knock disrupted her descent into literary escape.

"Barb, we're gonna be late for dinner. Let me in there to shower." His voice was muffled, demanding. He made a good point - dinner would be deeply satisfying after their trek. It took a few moments to accurately weigh the pros and cons. Pro, delicious food. Con, giving Aaron anything he thought was owed him.

The water splashed around her as she deftly extracted herself from the bubbles. Towel securely wrapped around her, she gathered her personal items close and opened the door.

"Fine." Aaron barely spared her a glance, rushing into the bathroom with deeply relieved expression. Barb spared him no more than a glance before moving toward her drawers,

efficiently pulling on the barest minimum to be both appropriate and comfortable. As she shimmed underwear up still-damp thighs, Aaron called out.

“A *bubble bath*? How long did you intend to stay in here anyway?”

“Well it’s better than the floor which awaits me.”

Aaron harrumphed before slamming the door shut, the sound of the shower effectively ending their exchange. Barb stared at the cheap pine door, processing her options. Dinner awaited, had been ready for the campers twenty minutes ago when the bell first rang. Waiting for Aaron would be stupid - food would be cold at they’d be perceived as a united front. Clearly not a strategic choice. And yet... they wouldn’t have many opportunities to coordinate their efforts without risk of being overheard.

Barb nodded to herself, heart easy in having made a decision despite her suspicion that it was self-indulgent. She slipped on a tank tee, sliding down the length of the door to sit cross-legged on the appropriately dirty cabin floor. Eventually Aaron would be safely ensconced behind the shower curtain, and she could resume the conversation he didn’t technically know was long overdue.

Steam began to leak out from the crack along the floor, the green light Barb needed. With a haphazard twist of the wrist, she cracked the door enough for her body weight to nudge

the wood back. The ceiling, her new focal point as she laid half along the linoleum of the bathroom and half on the wood paneling of their living space, was disgusting. Cobwebs everywhere, and what could be a birds nest. All the same, Barb thought it was appropriate.

“So Aaron, I was thinking—”

The garbled yelp from the shower was something else Barb acknowledged was appropriate. Aaron practically sang his cuss words, letting them resonate. “Can I help. You. Barb.”

“Yes, actually. It occurs to me we should have a plan for this going forward.”

“Can this wait till I’m clothed?”

“I think it will be more believable if you feel a bit extra vulnerable when we hammer this out.” The rush of water filled the silence as Barb waited for Aaron to refute her theory.

“...Fine. Where do you want to start.”

Barb wrestled her primal urge to thrust her fist in the air in victory. “Lets start with... Do we live together?”

“Of course, next question.”

“Okay, so what do you wear to bed?”

“What? Why—”

“If we live together, we’re gonna need these details. Do you want to do a convincing job?”

“I really don’t think—”

“Think of the money on the table, Aaron. This is just a tiny thing we can do to make it more likely to be in our pockets at the end of this.”

“Fine, I wear boxers.”

“Thank you. I wear a muscle tee.”

“Is that it? The extent of it?”

“I was think of it more as an appetizer. What did I find most attractive about you when we started dating?”

“Can’t you pick something?” Barb fell silent. She could. She could pick a lot of things she’d found attractive about him back when they met. Telling him that his general face situation was a big plus...felt like a cop out, no matter how true it was. Aaron from college hadn’t been this lean, sculpted, intimidating creature she’d met on the bus to camp. Back then she’d been most intrigued by...

“Your hands. If anyone asks you or me, that’s what we say.” Thank god he was behind a curtain. “Okay, now me. You can just do something easy like my eyes or something.”

“What, I get a cop out answer after you just came up with a real one? I am officially noting that you like my hands, I’m not gonna let you pretend that was a courtesy answer.” Barb turned, glaring through the dancing goldfish decorating the aperture between herself and her tormentor. “Luckily you’ll never have to be around when I answer this, only the guys will ask and that answer is up to me.”

“I’m not worried about when you inevitably tell the bros I give good head. I’m worried that when Abigail gets cute you’ll choke. What would you tell Abigail?”

“Do you?”

“What?”

“Give good head?” Barb tutted.

“I don’t bite, does that count?”

“Categorically, yes.” Aaron paused, and Barb hoped he was thinking about the answer to her Abigail question, not imaging hypothetical blowjobs. “This is tough, if I say anything physical I’m shallow, and if I say anything else I’m evasive.”

“Well we’re both humans and fuck-ups. Which faults will be your tragic flaw? I personally vote evasive.”

“Woah, criticism so soon... I guess I won’t tell you what my answers are. You can just go on thinking I fell in love with your eyes.”

“As long as you don’t have a foot fetish I have to pretend to indulge, I’m fine.”

“Okay, are there any former flames I need to be jealous of?”

Interesting, he seemed to be getting invested now. Not that this line of questioning would be useful or relevant. “As Madison, yes. At least twenty. I’m still friends with all of them. And you should know that already.”

“I do. I wanted to know if *you* knew. Can you play like you’ve got a harem?”

“Of course. I’ve been practicing. So far I’ve got a list of at least ten fictional heroes to reference whom definitely worship the ground I walk on.”

“Nice trick, I might need to copy you. My only other relationship was in 8th grade, so perhaps not... necessary to use in our con.”

“Woah. You cut your teeth on a pretty challenging fem, Aaron. I’m surprise Madison didn’t eat you alive and spit you out years ago.” Aaron huffed out something that had the shape of a laugh.

“She didn’t seem so intimidating when the three of us hung out, Barb. You were there, she didn’t eat *you* alive.”

“Moving on! Are you still compulsively tidy?”

“Are you still creating formulas to calculate appropriate levels of emotional investment in daily small talk?”

“Fine. Are you almost done in there? I’m getting hungry.”

“I’m only in here because you’re still—”

“Oh, right. Fine.” Barb slid herself out, reaching up to close the door. “This isn’t over! I have a hundred more invasive personal questions to ask!”

Barb confesses to Abigail that she’s got a short timeline

The victuals-guardian hovered over trays of roast beef and root vegetables, her eyes the dead-eye glare of a shark. Eustace stood next to her, his posture for the first time fully casual as though in resting mode. It was odd to see him not in full hoo-rah mode, his face seemed tired and a little sad without the intense focus of the morning.

Just Another White Picket Fence Fantasy

Aaron was prepared to bet that the second full day at Hiawatha would be better than the first, if only because last night he’d taken his turn nestled in the bed. He knew it was an objectively terrible bed, but relative to the floor it was a cloud from heaven. The optimism of a good night’s sleep would have to be his strength to survive another day of fake-therapy in pursuit of his refund. Sweet sweet cash and the guilty pleasure of taunting Barbie Lewis kept him immune from the din of campers gathering in the “craft barn,” preparing for another of Bearclaw’s therapeutic exercises.

Aaron wasn't sure if the loosey-goosey instructions for art & crafts today made him feel free or annoyed. Bearclaw wandered around the repurposed barn, speaking in low tones with individuals as they fisted old crayons and dry markers. "Family - past, present or future. Artist's choice." Most of the campers were entrenched in their projects, what he could see of their faces from this vantage point screwed up in concentration.

His own paper stared back at him, vague outlines of a traditional house and yard taunting him. The yard and sky were easy choices, but in order to draw a house and family he'd have to choose an era. Drawing his parents seemed like begging for Bearclaw to tie his issues with Madison back to his childhood, and as fair as that might be he wasn't sure he wanted to go there with Barb here. So, present. Present could just be him, or he could draw the two of them for kicks. That path was easily the least risky.

Knowing he'd be asked about the details was really cramping his style. Aaron cast his eyes around the room, as though he could cheat off of a more successful student. Barb was scribbling furiously on her paper, her full lower lip being chewed with fervor. Wait, she was *surrounded* by papers.

“Hey,” he leaned forward to get her attention, trying to keep his voice low to avoid Bearclaw’s gaze. “Hey, you’re not doing the assignment?” Barb briefly met his gaze, brushing the flop of auburn curls out of her eyes, but seemed uninterested in his question.

“I like drawing. I finished the first one already.” Hmm, interesting. Aaron looked at his page again. He could make one for discussion later. Suddenly the subtle buzz of the room and Barb’s distracted humming sounded less ominous, fading into white noise. The crayons fit in his hand better, and grip felt natural.

Strong vertical grey lines framed out the mid-ground of the page, and bodies filed in front on what he supposed was the porch. His first page, discarded to his left on the table, was a cartoonish house and yard with stickish figures of his mom and dad. This copy focused instead on the porch, let him position the subjects casually along the cushioned swing. It wasn’t quite right, the wood was the wrong color and she wasn’t sitting where Madison had always perched, on the post by the stairs as though about to run to the car and escape.

The man - he supposed it could be his father, but it felt more honest to say it was him - sat in the big wicker chair at the corner. His feet were propped on the edge of the swing, where a woman reclined claiming the two person space. Bearclaw’s voice disrupted his fugue state.

“Madison, these are lovely.” The counselor had swiped two of Barb’s collection of artwork. Aaron’s head jerked up in surprise at Bearclaw’s proximity, and found his eyes drawn

the uneasy expression on his accomplice's face. Barb clearly had not prepared to have a therapist critique her work. "This is quite a lonely picture, could you tell me about how you felt while drawing it?" The three or four nearby artists all stiffened, Aaron suspected that they had no less curiosity than him for hearing Barb's diagnosis. Curiosity and a bit of fear, dreading the forced vulnerability.

Barb seemed to choke down a few breaths before answering. "I was thinking about home."

"So, are you this part here in the center? And are these blurry, fluid strokes your home?"

Aaron was more drawn to the way her hair, gathered low at the nape of her neck, shifted over her shoulders than to her answer when she shrugged a response. "It could be." Bearclaw was beginning to move on to her other works, picking up two additional pages.

"There are no other steady subjects in any of these. Why do you think that is?" Aaron couldn't see Barb's expression as she responded, but could hear her voice drift into a tone similar to a sleepwalker.

"I guess I don't know what two would look like." The idea strung a funny chord in him. It was as if she was determined to be lonely, who in their right mind—

“Wait, here’s one with two. Who’s this?”

“That’s me and dad.” She couldn’t hide the glow of pride in her voice. The picture was ugly as sin, so the pride must be a side effect of the subject. Did he and Madison talk about her parents to their therapist? The memories were dull and slippery at this point - god willing, they’d completely skipped over it and Bearclaw would have no evidence that whatever confessions Barb was spilling out weren’t canon.

“What’s your dad like?”

“He’s my rock. Mom left real early, and Dad got me through. He beats himself up over it, but nobody could have done it better.” Aaron looked down at his picturesque family scribbles, suddenly self-conscious of the huge house and traditional family he’d drawn.

Bearclaw was silent, apparently satisfied with Barb’s answers. Aaron assumed he’d moved away, until the small hairs on the back of his neck stood up. Dear god, had the mountainous man never heard of personal space? Whipping around, Aaron barely managed to avoid knocking Bearclaw in the jaw. The counselor’s face was puckered in deep consideration.

“Aaron, could you tell me a bit about your drawing?” Why did his tongue suddenly feel coated in sand?

“Thats - that’s my house. I grew up there. Well, it *was* my house. I’m selling it, moving downtown.”

Bearclaw’s eyebrow arched, saying more than any verbal comment could muster. Aaron felt his ribs tense, prepared to fight. For what, who knew.

“It doesn’t make sense to live there when Madison is... Madison.”

“Oh?”

Aaron felt his face heat, partly at the prospect of admitting his reasoning to Bearclaw and partly due to Barb’s condescending expression. Her eyes were scornful as she stared at his pastoral scene.

“Well, I thought we’d be starting a family by now. Without a family, this house doesn’t make any sense. So I’m selling it.” Barb snorted, and Aaron no longer felt the need to be subtle in watching her reaction to their conversation. “What, what’s your problem?”

Barb didn’t meet his gaze. She was fixated on the drawing, her fingers drumming the tarp nailed to the craft table in an angry staccato. “I can’t believe you’d even dare say that you’d planned to have a family right now knowing you were with... with me.”

Aaron felt blood rush to his face. “It was a natural assumption to make, Madison.” Her name came out as a sneer, and he was embarrassed by his own acidity until he remembered that their act would need to spell out a toxic relationship in the end anyway.

Barb seemed to return from some place far away. She watched him for what felt like an eternity before turning to focus on one of her many artworks. “Of course, it’s so natural. If you ignore everyone and everything involved it’s almost inevitable.”

Bearclaw bounced between them, his face glowing with carefully managed anticipation. When they had both gone silent, he seemed to recollect his role as moderator.

“Aaron we might want to dig into this during one of our sessions. I’ll take this for our records if you don’t mind.” Aaron merely nodded his assent, and Bearclaw swept away with the flimsy paper in hand. In his absence there was no avoiding the unnamed tension between the artists.

“Go ahead, spit it out already if you’ve got more wisdom to share.”

Barb averted her gaze, focusing instead on shuffling her various papers. “Nothing. Nevermind.”

The Bonfire

Aaron wished he had brought the drawings from this afternoon to toss on the bonfire. It would have been a suitable distraction for this awkward nightmare. Counselor Bearclaw had decided that they'd all needed some time to process, so their solitary dinner and naturally facilitator-free evenings were hijacked into this young-adult backdrop. He hadn't worn his I'm-prepared-to-be-dirty clothes, and these jeans were expensive as fuck.

The only secret benefit of this particular detour was that he had time. Bearclaw hadn't necessarily been wrong about needing process time. Activities had started to flow into one another, the consequence being that he'd started to lose track of what Barb had told him as Barb, and what she'd said as Madison. At least the cold, damp log he sat on was definitively that - a cold, damp log. On his primo pants. Aaron fought the urge to stand and turn his back to the fire to dry out the wet patches.

Tawnya had (miraculously) saved the evening with her cub-scout acumen, also known as functional alcoholism. Technically they shouldn't encourage her, but the whiskey had truly helped so Aaron wasn't about to go shutting anything down. The metallic tang on his throat provided a conflicting sensation worth pondering, letting deeper problems sink down for his id to handle. Barb did not seem to experience the spirit in the same mellow flavor. She wasn't alone in that, but she was the one that drew his eye.

All of the campers had begun to speed date with haphazard movements, edging between logs and the edges of the fire. Carefully, Aaron began social intercourse with Angelo, finding Angelo to be a soul-mate of sorts. Not to say he could top Dale, but in another life perhaps they'd have played video games together. Abigail found him next, drawing a stark contrast in tolerability.

“Aaaaaaron.” She walked towards him with arms outstretched, as though playing the part of some affectionate aunt. For christ’s sake, how many drags on the whiskey bottle had those magpies let her take? “Aaron I feel like you don’t trust me.”

“Well you did egg on my ex on the first day here.” Abigail clasped her arms around him, pinning him to his sides. Her hair puffed into an inflated halo, concealing her features when he dared to look down in a half-hearted attempt to glare. Aaron could detect where her mouth had landed after a few moments, feeling damp where the corner of her mouth had pressed to his pectoral. Fearing the oncoming wet mark Aaron shook her off, forcing her into a middle-school waltz form. Plenty of room for Jesus.

“You know I was just- *hic*- bonding with Madison. We girls have to stick together. At least, until we don’t.” Abigail blearily winked at him, her forehead weighing her entire head down into a comical exaggeration. Was she...was she hitting on him? Or trying to be funny? Dear god, what if all of them were budding comics, just thinly restrained by strict sobriety?

“Ah well, Madison was telling me how much she values your friendship already. You’ve really been a comfort to her.” Abigail’s face swung back up, and if he had to guess he supposed she was now addressing his eyebrows. Her face crinkled up, as though tears were on the verge of falling.

No. Not again. He would not be able to keep a compassionate face if Abigail started crying *again*. She’d already lost her composure twice during crafts.

Tawnya was shimmying past, likely assuming that she was safe with Abigail’s attention so thoroughly fixed on Aaron. He grabbed her arm and Abigail’s, trying to piece their unwilling hands together. “Tawnya, Abigail wants Barb. Could you guide her over there? I don’t think she should walk around the fire solo.” Tawnya’s gaze was flat, but if he didn’t know better he’d swear there were literal flames burning at the center of her pupils.

“Sure, Aaron. No problem.”

Solitude was feeling better and better with every passing encounter. Until Aaron saw Barb across the fire, leaning in to Samson. Abigail’s husband sat not two inches from Barb, the gap between their thighs on the log could merely be a trick of the light. Barb’s face was rosy, practically pure red. Likely a combination of heat from the pillar of flame at her feet and fuzzy warmth of the whiskey.

She swayed in, a micro-movement. Aaron caught himself holding his breath.

She reeled back. It was just the pendulum of drunk heart-to-hearts. He relaxed.

Aaron decided they'd had enough "processing" time. He picked his way over, the opposite route around the fire from Tawnya and her babbling charge. As he picked his way over log and rock nearing the rough-hewn bench serving as Barb's perch, she turned from Samson and waved at him.

"Aaron! Pookie! Did you get some-" she lowered her voice like the good conspirator she was, "hooch?"

"Yes Madison, thank you. You look much warmer on this side of the fire. Can I sit?"

"Sure, sure!" She scooted over, almost scooting into Samson's lap. With a bark of surprise, Samson stood, jolting with bleary eyes to a new conversation and new friends. "How are we doing?" Her eyes sparkled with light, but also with mirth.

"You're doing a good job. It's a tricky balance, we're not going to nail it in the first few days." Barb leaned back, turning to the fire to mimic his formal posture.

“Thank you sir, your positive feedback has been noted.” She saluted the fire. Stupid-what couple did that shit? Aaron grabbed her saluting fingers and pulled her back to face him with what he hoped was a sentimental smile on his face. It seemed the only way to he would get Barb to fake interest in him tonight would be to actually engender it.

“I like it when you call me ‘sir.’” Her eyes went wide, like a child unable to comprehend automatic doors.

“Well.” She paused, biting her lip. He wondered if she was thinking about what he’d said on the hike. Barb dipped her eyes, either to his lips or jugular. Maybe he was still a little intimidated by her, if her going for the jugular was still a possibility in his brain at this point. “If that’s all it takes for a sidekick like me to get a little lovin’, I’m all set.”

Aaron really hoped it was his lips she was eyeing. He almost didn’t notice that she’d continue to explain herself. “I have to keep the campfires a’burnin, as they say. Stoke the embers, if you catch my drift.” Aaron groaned. Barb reeled back, as though offended. “Hey you’re really marshing my mallow, dude.” She couldn’t keep her face straight, a giggle breaking through almost immediately. “Get it? Like harshing my mellow, but with a marshmal-”

“I get it.”

“Like, I get that maybe being a determined to be single is a questionable choice, but isn’t determinedly dating someone just as bad? I could have just found some loser joe shmoe to get me preggo and—”

“No.” Aaron catches himself, blushing furiously at the reflexive response. Barb is thrilled.

“Oh honey, now that we’re reconciled you’re the *only* Joe Shmoe I’d let put a baby in me.” Her hand rested on his arm, the fingers twirling with what had been innocuous arm hair. Now the threads seemed to be electric synapses, sending shocks all the way to his dick. “I never realized that’s what you wanted. Otherwise I’d have warned you back on day one that shacking up with Madison was a— “

“You’d have done something about it? What would you have said?” God, this was turning out to be a goldmine. When he’d fought with Madison over the years, he’d thought about those early weeks waiting to see which of the two girls were interested in him. Now he would have a soundbite of Barb trying to save him to play over the thorough fantasy he’d built in his head.

“I’d have said ‘Aaron, you’re picking the wrong girl. She’s beautiful and lovely but she’s not gonna do anything with you she can’t undo in an afternoon at a doctors office.’ And then I’d have— ”

“So was there a better pick?” Something playful was writing in his stomach. It felt like baiting a puppy, she was earnest and peaceful. Aaron wasn’t expecting her to pause, as though caught in a lie. Barb turned her head to him, her expression frozen into the caricature of wariness.

“I... I don’t feel so good.” And she whirled away, scabbling up from their cozy perch close to the fire into the night. Her haphazard path made clear what had been a niggling suspicion - Barb was three sheets to the wind drunk. Concern flooded up into his throat, alleviated only after he also launched from the log to find her.

She was resting her head against a smooth, wide birch, breathing heavily. Aaron drew closer, and tried to comfort her with circles on the small of her back. Barb hiccuped, her breathy and miserable.

“Come on champ, lets get you back to the cabin.” With little coaxing, Aaron managed to get her arm around his shoulder. Barb’s head lolled into the divet of his collarbone, sending a thrill down his spine. Fear that she’d lose her shit on him, wonder at the sensation of her soft cheek through his shirt.

She wasn’t going to remember this, he would bet a full night on the floor. “You know, if you had tried to save me, I think I would have been pretty excited about it. Maybe not later on,

but in the beginning. By the time you left, I had too much sunk into it to just give up.” The words felt true, but also selfish. Indulgent. It was easy to say that everything could have been different. But Barb had never said she wanted him, only that Madison wasn’t the type to settle down. And if Barb had tried to redirect him out of honor or good intentions, he’d have destroyed her for it.

The only motive he’d wanted from her back then was self-interest. But that wasn’t how Barb rolled, which was part of why she was such a admirable person to know. Then again, her motive now was self-interest, sort of. For the money. The cabin loomed up in the darkness, a landmark for the safe ending of the evening. Barb’s weight complicated the stairs and screen door. A devil on his shoulder knew she’d never be able to blame him if she knocked her feet or got some screen in the face but... considering the tenor of his thoughts this evening it would be rude to be careless.

He wrestled her into the humid cell serving as their home, pausing for breath. Barb moaned, recoiling at the discomfort of the indoor air. Aaron moved quickly, ready to be done with this whole night. He reached down, pulling her knees up to catch her into a carrying hold. After a few halting steps to the bed, he deposited her onto the comforter. Barb immediately rolled to snuggle the pillow, her curly hair spilling from the tired elastic band that had held it in check.

A pan, she'd need a pan. Just in case. After rummaging through the bathroom he'd found a tired plastic cup holding their toothbrushes. Setting it on the nightstand next to the bucket of cabins, he realized his misstep. Obviously he should have dumped the condoms.

He left the cup where it was.

“Barb,” Aaron gently placed his hand on her shoulder, hoping he'd have one last chance for lucid conversation. She turned her head slightly, blearily opening one eye.

“Wha?”

“I left a cup on the nightstand if you get sick. I've got a water bottle in my bag if you need it.” Barb rolled back over, a soft wheeze whooshing from her nose.

“Thanks. Sleep tight, Joe Shmoe.” Aaron straightened up, watching her curl into a ball for a few minutes before readying himself to sleep on the floor yet again. Being Joe, the only guy to get her preggo, maybe was better than being Aaron, the guy that dated her best friend. He'd take it.

Ballad of Samson and Abigail

The morning of day four was brutal to all, bed or no bed. Barb marvelled that she was functioning - somehow an angel had convinced Aaron to honor their agreement even as they'd

stumbled back to the cabin totally soused from cheap whiskey. The mess hall was filled with bleary-eyed campers, and the usual tinging of dishwear was muted in self preservation.

Abigail and her husband sat in tense silence next to Aaron and Barb. Abigail turned pointed to Barb, striking up a conversation with fervor. Her lower lip was trembling, her eyes red and watery.

“These boys are the worst, aren’t they Madison.” Barb wasn’t sure if it was more dangerous to agree or to disagree. Abigail hadn’t been exactly a reliable narrator, as Barb had discovered last night around the campfire. The evening had begun in a picturesque salute to sleepaway camps of her childhood, the eclectic gathering of miserales squatting on logs around a bonfire taller than an ogre.

Bearclaw had forced the couples to scatter at first, asking them to share their stories and recent revelations from the arts & crafts session. At first, sharing felt unbearable. That was, of course, until a savvy middle-aged woman pulled a plastic handle of whiskey from within a unreasonably large windbreaker. Sharing emotional pain and revelations may bring people together, but the secretive passing of the alcohol was more efficient that evening.

One rotation in, the walls wavered. Barb learned Samson was deathly afraid of ticks, that Tawnya was hiding her interest in women from her family and partner, that Angelo used to camp with his parents and goes every year. Round two and Barb learned Samson has troubles

managing his credit cards, that Tawnya was planning to use this camp to find her next flame, and that Angelo had lived with his Nana for 10 years before moving in with his ex-wife. There wasn't much left in the bottle by the third time Barb got a drag, and there wasn't much left to say.

Barb couldn't quite remember today what she'd confessed, but she distinctly recalled Samson sobbing on her shoulder, moaning about societal expectations and trying to take care of his woman. Somehow after that, Abigail's initially relatable woes rang slightly false.

"I mean they're no byronic heroes, but I've heard those are out of fashion these days anyway." Abigail's response seemed to ignore the aside, moving into the well-rehearsed sigh and hair flip. The sips of air through her lips were loud, raspy, begging for empathy. A quick glance across the table to Samson and Aaron enhanced the discomfort. Samson was staring at the familiar rust-colored meal tray as though he'd be able to carve a message into it with sheer will, and Aaron watched Abigail with a deadpan expression. "Do you need some air Abby? We can pop outside for a second."

Abby nodded, sniffing as she stood. The last time Barb had been asked to shepherd a crying woman to privacy had been a wedding - a solid b-tier friend had invited with extreme generosity, and there had been a number of highly competitive young women together with entirely too much free tequila. Despite the lack of lit bathrooms and long list of wilderness

activities, Abigail had thoroughly applied her daily allotment of foundation of mascara. Her dedication was betrayed by her tears, carving distinct tracks along her cheeks.

“Abby, what’s wrong hun?”

“I thought- I thought we were getting better,” the woman’s chest heaved and she forced air into her lungs between words. “We’ve been together since high school, I don’t know what I’ll do if” Barb began to rub between Abigail’s shoulders, hopefully reassuring contact to soothe the hysteria.

“And you’re scared now?” Abby’s head bobbed up and down. Shit, this was the part where Bearclaw was supposed to slip in and have them draw a picture or something. “Did you talk to Samson about how you’re scared?”

“He - Sammie, he said I put too much pressure on him when I say that.” Abigail turned her wide, watery eyes back onto Barb. Sympathy for Samson immediately surged - Barb could imagine the desperation he might feel when this expression was turned on him year after year. Not to say that Abigail was intentionally needy, but as someone who took pride in solving problems for people she was having to cope with her own sudden strong urge to fix things for Abby.

“This sounds like a good conversation for Bearclaw, but hun I bet you guys can talk this out.” Abby’s gasps slowed as they sat on the heavily treated wood of the porch wrapping the main hall. Barb sat, keeping the rhythm of her hand steady until her companion fully calmed. “Let’s go back in and finish our breakfast, okay?” Again, Abby nodded with childlike acquiescence.

“Madison, thank you. Thank you for being here. It’s so crazy you and Aaron are here at all, with how good you are together, but I’m glad all the same.” Barb jolted as she opened the screen door, running into the defined edge hard enough to leave a bruise. It probably wouldn’t be worth it to correct Abigail just for the sake of cover - it would be unnatural. All the same, Barb couldn’t meet Aaron’s gaze as they returned to the table. Barb could feel embarrassment heating her ears.

Aaron's expression as they returned to the long tables was a delicate blend of suspicion and concern. Barb knew intrinsically that Abby’s damsel-like qualities but him on edge, and quite frankly envied his guaranteed distance from the woman. She on the other hand had broken the seal of anonymity on day 1, and was now duty bound by polite society to comfort the hot mess beside her.

Samson rose from the opposite side of the table, tray and demolished breakfast in hand. “Abby, I’m heading back to the cabin quick before afternoon activities. Are you coming?”

“No,” her reply was just barely discernible between hiccuping breaths. “I offered to help Audrey with the dishes in exchange for some contraband.” She leaned in over the table to whisper. “Popsicles meant for next week.” Barb tried to imagine a world where doing dishes was worth a popsicle - it was a stretch to say the least. At least Abigail's face had lost its pallor. It wouldn't be worth risking her return to gloom to question her priorities.

As Abby prepared to move on to her self-inflicted chores, Barb focused on Aaron for the first time that morning. “Our first individual session is this morning. We get Bearclaw's undivided attention.” Barb waited a beat until Abby had reached the trash receptacles. “Got any requests? Particular Madisonisms to throw in?”

Aaron quirked an eyebrow, taking a moment to consider her question. A slow smirk began to form on his face. “It might be easier to sell our hypothetical intimacy if I'd seen you naked. How about it?”. Barb's mind skittered to a halt. He was...flirting? Should she...flirt back? Flirting hadn't ever really been her strong suit - whenever she'd gone down that road it had escalated too quickly. Apparently it was uncommon to say the things *she* thought were playful and not immediately break out lube or handcuffs.

She'd smile. Smiling was safe. Fuck, no, Aaron was watching expectantly, waiting for a witty rejoinder. Her mouth opened, ready to deliver, but that escaped was a stilted giggle. Barb could feel the fires of hell swallowing her up, or perhaps it was just her whole body burning in

embarrassed. Aaron's face crumpled, eyes and mouth squishing tight as his body shook with mirth.

Great. This was going to go great.

Therapy Session #1

Barb could feel her skin start to stick and sweat on the burnt orange leather seats in Bearclaw's office, and it made her almost as uncomfortable as fake-empathizing with Abigail in the main hall that morning. This would be the real moment of truth - laying the groundwork towards convincing Bearclaw to refund the deposit. Bearclaw would have to see that despite all the activities and heart-to-hearts that Aaron and Madison would never be able to reconcile.

If they failed Aaron was out some serious cash, and she was back on the 5 year plan to affording her new family member.

“To start today, I'd like us to have an activity. Follow me please!” Bearclaw gestured cheerily to them, indicating that they should stand from their admittedly uncomfortable chairs and follow him out the back door. Aaron led the way, Barb following closely behind. Bearclaw took them along a well worn dirt path into a clearing, small and bordered by the ever-present crush of evergreens.

At the far end of the field stood a series of targets pinned on hay bales. A row of tubes filled with arrows, and a pair of bows lay nearby. This seemed to be a precarious set up. Emotional vulnerability and projectile weapons?

“Let’s start with Aaron. Aaron, go ahead and get geared up. We’re going to fire some arrows and establish a baseline to work from.” Aaron followed Bearclaw dutifully, leaving Barb standing a few feet away, wary of finding herself in range of any athletic feau paxs. Once Aaron was girded with protective contraptions, Bearclaw instructed him to nock the arrow and begin the draw.

“Now, hold there and focus on the target. Not full draw, just enough to get familiar with the tension. Focus. Good.” Barb waited, curious to see how this would unfold. “Aaron, tell me about when you fell in love with Madison.” The bow began to go lax, Aaron forgetting the activity in his hurry to turn, facing Bearclaw.

“What? You have all this, its in the files from Dr. Fasner.” Bearclaw dead-eyed back.

“We are establishing a baseline. Please *focus* and *draw*.” Aaron sulkily turned back toward the hay bale at the end of his line of sight.

“Fine.” Barb couldn’t help but admire the ripple of muscle in his arms as he pulled the bow taut. “Madison and I fell in love in college, when we both knew all the words in the rap bit of *It Wasn’t Me*.”

Barb couldn’t believe her ears. She stared at the pair in front of her slack jawed. Bearclaw merely nodded, as though this revelation had deep philosophical value. “That is a tough one to master, I see you.” Bearclaw leaned closer, gentling making a few subtle adjustments to Aaron’s posture and correcting form. “Okay, let’s get a little tighter. Why do you think you and Madison are here, today?”

Oh this was freaking golden. Barb had to pinch her arm to keep a grin from her face. Madison would have found no pleasure in this, naturally, but this was just a gold mine of inspiration and material for her. Aaron took longer to respond to this one, possibly struggling with the physical effort of holding the bow, possibly unwilling to summarize their strife in one sentence.

“I can’t keep Madison’s *attention*. She doesn’t see how that’s her problem. She said I’m too boring to live with anymore.” Barb no longer had to fight to keep the grin off of her face. The idea of being too vanilla for Madison was not difficult to empathize with. She could feel the shame and resentment from every time Madison had been distracted or underwhelmed with their plans as though the memories were raised scars on the pads of her fingers.

“Good, good work. Release the arrow.” With a low, sinewy *thrum* the arrow leapt from the bow and flew down towards the target, striking the lower ridge of the outer ring. The men watched the result for a few seconds, as though maybe the arrow’s destination would change if they waited. After a heartbeat or two, they turned to face Barb. Aaron’s face was flush from the exertion on the string, and likely in some part due to the uncomfortable realization that he’d have to go through therapy from square one in front of her, a stranger.

No- not a stranger. An accomplice. She’d show him- she was an ally.

“Your turn, Madison.” Aaron had stooped to drop the bow, rather than hand it to her. At first Barb was prepared to bristle at the discourtesy, but spotted the slight shake to his hands as he stepped to the side. Bearclaw might be ridiculous, but it was becoming clear day by day that his tactics were strangely effective.

Barb stepped forward, snatched the bow, hooking her arm through to let it rest in the crook of her elbow as she strapped on a wristguard. Bearclaw waited patiently, remaining silent until Barb had begun to reach for an arrow.

“We’ll begin the same way. Nock the arrow and draw, not fully but just until you feel the tension.” Aaron had made this part look so easy - the strength required to get the bowstring back even partially had Barb grasping at her resolve. The target had seemed fixed, easy to keep in the

center of her vision up until the moment she'd been expected to really aim at it. Now, the idea of location and accuracy seemed pure folly.

“Good, Madison. Now, when did you first realize you loved Aaron?” *Shit. Shit.*

Madison had never been very open about her feelings for Aaron, honestly had avoided waxing poetic about most of her romantic trysts. Barb wracked her brain, trying to spot the moment or at least *a* moment that would be plausible.

“I... I had told Aaron to delete all of his instant-picture contacts because I didn't want him chatting with other girls. I expected him to get defensive, but he just deleted the app. Not to obey, just to show how little that bothered him.” At least, that was when Barb had realized she'd have to get used to him crashing her previously dedicated girl time with Madison. He'd been unflappable in a way no other boy could have matched. Bearclaw made a soft noise of affirmation.

“Alright, pull taut as though you're about to fire.” He waited as Barb struggled with balancing the effort of pulling the bowstring taut and keeping the arrow tucked into the shallow guide just above her thumb. Barb's full attention was directed at the precarious balance, delicately achieved. Just as her breathing began to even again, Bearclaw's voice reminded her of the true nature of the task. “Now, why do you think that you and Aaron are here?”

Ugh. The tension in her arms and back make it hard to think, hard to brainstorm. The answer on the tip of her tongue was that Aaron didn't have the courage to look for something that would actually suit him. What would Madison have said?

“Aaron gave up a job out of state to let me take a promotion, and has been punishing me ever since for it.” Barb remembered that fight vividly. She supposed most people wouldn't have even realized it was a fight, but anyone in hearing distance of the cold, measured summary of their decision could taste the acrimony in the air. Madison had got her way, as she'd always intended. But Aaron's sacrifice had not been as coolly detached as the app deletion years ago. This particular exchange had made him dig deep. It was...disconcerting to witness how far he was apparently willing to go to preserve the relationship.

“Go ahead, release the arrow.” Barb took a second, trying to remember how exactly she was supposed to go from her current state to something fully empty of tension. Pulling the tip of the arrow up from its dead-on alignment with the bullseye, she finally allowed her fingers to move, releasing the string. The thick cord thrummed against her wrist, and she was thankful for the protective gauntlet. She blinked furiously, before being able to focus on the target.

She'd hit it - thank god. The embarrassment of the arrow flying far out into the woods behind the clearing would have added yet another annoying layer to the parfait of emotions she'd already assembled. Bearclaw cleared his throat, and Barb returned her attention to him. At least that was her intent, until a fuming Aaron entered her periphery. He was pacing in a short radius

from his safe vantage point, hands on hips and head shaking, condemning some internal commentary.

His reaction was bewildering. “What’s your problem?” Aaron turned to face her, face in a tight mask of fury.

“God Madison, you live in such a fucking hallucination. Do you even realize what I gave up so you could have that opportunity? You asked with your freaking puppy dog eyes and I just- I couldn’t-”

Barb reacted instinctively, jolting immediately into the defensive by his attack. “How is it my fault that you don’t have boundaries? If I made you sacrifice something you wanted that much, how could I have gotten by not knowing?”

“I thought you would return the favor! I thought I was making a sacrifice, and that you would do the same for me!” It was a relatable idea - she’d fooled herself similarly for a long time. Many a failed date or engagement later, she’d learned that the people who’d been taking care of their needs first had actually been doing her a favor.

“Well fuck, that’s not a smart assumption to make about me. You should know better, I’ve never done that before, not even for my friends.”

“I thought we were more than friends.”

“You must not have any friends, Aaron.”

“Now now Madison, you know this isn’t how a healthy session progresses. I need both of you take a take a deep breath. There seem to be a few old issues here based on your file, but also some new ones. Firstly Madison, I’m very impressed that you named your frustration with Aaron’s inability to define boundaries.” Barb stared at Bearclaw, keeping her face slack to hide her confusion. That was good? She’d always just assumed that was Madison’s issue, but apparently Madison had not gotten into the subject before the trip. It was easy to see from a distance that Aaron had never had the courage to stand up to the beautiful tyrant. For years Barb had followed the same pattern, desperate for approval and terrified of being abandoned. She only woke up when her dad got sick, and she’d needed to take charge of people who *truly* needed and depended on her.

Bearclaw was not done with her, however. “You’ve also just said that you’d never make a sacrifice for Aaron, as though you’re not even friends. As far as I can tell, you’ve been adamant that you love Aaron. Help me understand.”

Barb could feel her slack jaw in response to his question. Shit, what would be the right play? She could pretend she’d had an epiphany and realized her heart was cold, or play this most

recent gaff as an exaggeration. Silence stretched on as she debated, the laser focus on Aaron's glare repeatedly disrupting her train of thought.

"I'm done assuming I need him. And I'm sick of him assuming it too. I don't need anyone, not their validation, not their love." Bearclaw turned to his notepad, scribbling furiously. Barb kept her eyes trained on the counselor, afraid to turn and meet Aaron's gaze. She'd be surprised if he wasn't upset at her for this particular ad-lib. It wasn't anything she could image Madison saying in any atmosphere or scenario in this lifetime.

"Interesting. Aaron, how do you feel when you hear this?" Barb couldn't look. She hadn't expected things to be so raw, hadn't expected Aaron to really need this conversation. He was so vulnerable, it made her feel like a voyeur. His voice cracked when he finally responded.

"I feel cold, Bearclaw. And angry. And scared." Could she? Barb cheated a look up to Bearclaw, and found him turning to Aaron. With the stolen moment free of scrutiny, Barb met Aaron's eyes hoping to communicate an apology. But Aaron's eyes were hazy, unfocused, lost in some sort of confusion.

"We're coming up on our hour, but I think the two of you should take a walk before you go to the mess for lunch. Don't dwell much on this until our next session - it's hard work, and I'm here so you don't have to do it on your own."

Barb began dismantling her wristguard, returning her bow to its resting place. She could hear Aaron pace briefly before turning to leave the clearing. Anxiety ravaged her heart, even knowing that he brought this on himself.

“Aaron, wait. Hold up.” Barb ran the last few yards when he paused, looking first to see if Bearclaw was watching, and then to her with a quirked eyebrow.

“What? I think we did okay. We can work out a few kinks later. We gotta hurry if we’re going to get to the mess hall before the good cuts of dinner are gone.” His face had cooled, the blotchy spots high on his cheekbones the only remnant of the encounter.

“I wanted to apologize. I made some snide remarks when we got in that first night, and I realize now-” He cut her off.

“You were being bold, I get it. But thanks, I appreciate it.”

pudding up with it

Aaron may have only fired one arrow, but it felt like he’d fought a war. Step by step he made his way towards the mess hall, disregarding Bearclaw’s advice to walk off the effects of the session. Aimless walking had never been rewarding, and taking a detour now would just put him at the back of the line for lunch. The light steps of his accomplice echoed dimly from

behind him, providing a cadence to pace their progression. As the main building loomed ahead, Aaron caught the bubble of laughter from the rest of the campers, trudging along the main path in good spirits.

It appeared the other couples had been at the obstacle course, racing for a perk to be awarded during the evening activity. Lighthearted chatter outlined a series of comical mishaps, sounding by the second more pleasurable than the tough pills he'd swallowed instead. As they filed in Barb managed to stick right behind him. Having a few people between them might have been nice - just enough space to indulge what was transforming into distinct sulk.

Staring forward, he could almost block out what he now knew was routine humming. How anyone could anticipate food with that much enthusiasm was beyond him. He almost missed it when she shot forward along the outer curve of the line.

Aaron grabbed her arm, hissing. "Where are you going, we just got a prime spot in line."

Barb winced, turning a petulant expression to him while trying to wrench herself free from him. "Yeah, but the pudding cups are limited-"

"So you just go grab them ahead of the line? That's not how it works." It was...unjust. Unjust! No doubt she also cut into merging lanes when getting on the freeway.

“That is what people who miss out on pudding always say.” She patted his hand consolingly. He felt his cheeks flush with rage.

“There are rules, Barb-”

“*Ahem*, Madison you mean. Rules won’t save you if my blood sugar drops, pal. I’m doing you and me a favor.” Finger by finger she peeled his hand off of her forearm, taking extra time to pull his thumbs backwards. Judging by how her tongue seemed pinched between her teeth and cheek, she must have thought she was torquing his hand to inflict some pain. Somebody really needed to teach her the rules of thumb war.

He didn’t have a chance though - she was off down to the far end of the line, swiping a pudding cup with the grace of the shameless before circling back to wait at the end of the line. Aaron felt a tension headache building, and quickly took stock of his tightly clenched fists and grinding teeth. *Unclench, unclench*. Not a single other head appeared to turn, and she winked at him from her distant point.

The moral high-ground was turning out to be a barren place.

Aaron peeled away from the buffet, tray laden with a crispy chicken sandwich, potato salad and melon medley. Having the pick of the seating was only worth so much. Angelo and Tawnya sat in companionable silence in the far corner next to a few of their regular companions.

Abigail and Samson stood behind him in line, soon to face the same quandary. He only had a few moments to decide to seize his destiny and sit with a new group, or embrace his tried and true practice of sitting alone. Sitting alone wasn't the goal, just a means to an end. The end being, of course, to not have to make the decision of whom his friends here should be.

Canoeing Scene - In which Aaron is terrible at steering, strands himself and Barb on a mudbank, and Barb steers them home safely.

The couples lined up along the bank, clearly already following some unsaid rule about whom could or could not be trusted to steer. Aaron fumed quietly beside her, the impotent rage left over from their therapy session with Bearclaw having fermented quietly all the way through lunch.

From her vantage point, Barb could see the early birds rummaging through a dilapidated shack filled with mildewed life jackets. She felt the rush of adrenaline for even this minor battle over resources.

By the time they'd made it to the door of the shack, most of the clean lifejackets were taken. Tawnya and Angelo looked particularly dashing. Barb picked up the closest vinyl object, holding it as far away from her body as possible. It was huge, in terms of her 5'5" frame, and it took no time to throw it back before identifying a new, better option.

And yet disaster *would* strike. Abigail was left with the massive lifejacket, and Bearclaw quickly found them to raise his concerns over safety. With a heavy heart, Barb unfastened the cheap plastic latches and deposited her perfectly sized lifejacket in the hands of the demure woman whom she had once considered a friend.

Transition to actually canoeing

Barb finally began to feel comfortable in the precariously rocking craft. She leaned back into the oar, pretending she could see the current of the river like paint. Aaron hadn't been as terrible as she'd probably made him think, but all the same she had no regrets. Paddling like an engine was not her style.

"You don't remember that fire, do you?" Aaron's voice carried back to her, jolting her from her reverie.

"What?" Barb leaned forward slightly, raising her voice.

"The fire, after Samson finished bawling. We talked, Bearclaw was too busy to get up in our faces." Aaron had torqued his upper body around, following the natural swing of his arms as he paddled. The movement led to strange emphasis in his comment.

"I guess not. Did I make any good jokes, or was I all puns at that point?"

“You were all puns. But you said something about being a sideshow. I just wanted to - I don’t know. Does it mean anything if I say I don’t think that about you?”

It did. The depth of the resulting feeling surprised her.

Barb gulped, focusing on the swirl of water around her paddle. It was embarrassing to have him catch her out in the petty competition she found herself with any other woman. It wasn’t something she was proud of by any means. Madison had garnered a lot of attention during their college years, and at the time she’d been pretty sure that she’d suffered by standing so close to beacon.

“Thanks, Aaron.” It was one thing to accept a compliment, but the aftertaste was still acrid. The awkward silence afterward seemed to clue him in.

“I’m not just— maybe this is wrong to say, but you don’t have to compare to anyone.”

“Sure. Thanks, that’s sweet.” She could feel her tone turn sarcastic. Sarcasm was never a good look, but honestly— did he expect her to believe that he hadn’t held the two of them up side by side back then? One of her best friends had graded women on an eight-point scale, described in detail how various women of his acquaintance measured up.

“I don’t need to see your face to know you’re being condescending, Barb.”

“Lucky you.” Barb savored the sensation of the quick rebuttal, but found herself waiting for another rejoinder. When Aaron didn’t fire back, she found herself wracking her brain.

“Listen, college boys are assholes. And I don’t know, I just assumed that wasn’t something a person could grow out of. I’m glad to know you think I—” What was she saying? She doesn’t need to compete? She stands on her own? One of a kind? The cliches ran through her mind, slowly but surely reinforcing the quiet impulse to jump into the river and escape this naively uncomfortable conversation.

“I think you’re— I think I’m lucky you’re here, that’s all.”

“Ha, yeah, thank god something desperate with a vagina showed up.”

“No— thank god somebody with a brain and body and some history with me showed up.” His voice rang too loudly from behind her, accompanied with a threatening splash of water.

“Does this history matter that much?”

“I mean second to... your brain and body... yeah.”

Barb felt a smirk creep across her face. He was taking a risk, being so complimentary. And considerate, really. He must feel pretty bad about being such a dick over the pudding.

“Are you trying to tell me my body isn’t as good as it was when we met?” Her smile broke wide when his paddle splashed uncontrolled into the water, and a coughing noise echoed from behind her.

“Nope.”

“Are you trying to tell me I was fat in college?”

“Barb seriously. Stop being a—” Barb whipped around, her expression frozen in mock horror.

“Aaron do these jeans make my butt look big?” His face relaxed, relieved that she’d shifted away from subtle trickery into more collaborative territory.

“Yeah, and you don’t hear me complaining.” Feeling a surge of daring, Barb winked.

“That’s what I thought.”

They drifted on together, chatting about old adventures. Aaron remembered a drunk adventure where they’d walked from the suburbs, abandoned by taxis, downtown for pizza. Barb shared the unknowable details of preparation for the most epic night at the clubs that either

of them had experienced. Aaron admitted his pain over the puppy he'd had to leave behind at the shelter when Madison had left. And Barb, hearing his pain, explained that her father needed her now more than ever to be home.

It had been about forty minutes of empty horizon before Barb realized they were horribly lost, not a sign of Bearclaw to be found.

Stranded on an Island

“You said turn left, so I turned left. Where the fuck are we, Aaron?”

“Bearclaw was clear, we go towards the birch grove if we get lost.”

“I think Bearclaw expects us to know north from south, dingus. We are now on the north side of the lake, and it's going to be pitch black in about twenty minutes.” Barb pinched the bridge of her nose in frustration. She'd started to trust him, which had clearly been a colossal mistake. “We're going to have to camp on this outcropping. There's no way we'll be safe floating around on the lake in the dark.”

“Do we have enough supplies to do that?”

“There are two tarps rolled in the back there. I brought my pack, and you did. I think the only thing we’d be short on is s’mores supplies.” Aaron seemed to relax, and his expression seemed thankful. He’d never reacted well to surprises, always preferring to have planned every step, but easy to soothe if memory served.

They landed on the spur of grass entreating them from the far side of the bank.

The trees stood straight up, oddly barren of leaf or needle along the little peninsula. Tiny smooth pebbles blanketed the beach, skittering in all directions when Barb and Aaron thrust their inexpertly bundled camping gear onto the shore. Once the canoe laid empty, Aaron set to hauling it inland. Barb dragged the large pack containing their tent toward a small semi-flat patch of grass, and began to assemble their temporary living quarters.

It wasn’t like Barb didn’t remember him from college - she definitely did. He’d been an asteroid, and her friendship with Madison had been the least adaptive dinosaur. College-Aaron had been the weedier, angrier version of her new bunkmate.

They’d run into him in as a result of a confusing booking system for the private rooms in Snyder Hall, compromising by agreeing to study together in the cramped cell. Barb remembered sneakily eyeing him as they’d studied, relieved that his demeanor was both even-keeled and charismatic. Madison had propositioned him not seven hours later when he’d walked them back to their apartment building across campus.

Barb had begun assembling her famous midnight nachos in their kitchen, waiting for Madison to stop flirting around downstairs on the stoop. Just as she was shaking the can of black beans into a pan for heat and seasoning Madison returned, her face flushed and furious.

“I don’t like him. Lets avoid him next week Barb.” Barb had felt her heart sink in resignation that her curiosity in the boy would go unsatisfied. A male creature resistant to Madison’s charms was uncommon - that alone would have merited further exploration in the name of science. For science, and for her own secret promise to never fall for a guy that fell for Madison.

As much as Madison would have preferred to say that they’d cut him from their circles completely, that wasn’t the case. Madison seemed to find the idea of the one boy to resist her charm as tantalizing as Barb, and it led them to obscure haunts around campus too often to pass as casual coincidence.

The dance came to an abrupt crescendo on a Saturday afternoon in April. Barb was airing out the apartment, having found the pile of shoes and dust in the entry hall too distressing to ignore. Armed with two trash bags, a broom, and a bandana she began taking trips up and down the flight of stairs leading to their second-floor apartment. After the third trip she’d rested upon the porch windowsill, assessing her progress and contemplating washing down the rest of it with a hot bucket of soapy water.

Urgent knocking quickly redirected her thoughts.

Aaron stood, his lanky frame filling up the semi-transparent glass of the front door. He'd seemed distressed, waiting only a few minutes before he raised his hand again to rap at the glass. Barb moved quickly to the door, but only managed to crack it before Aaron was helping to shove the obstacle back and slide into the antechamber with her. Barb couldn't help herself, a cloying feeling swamped her. She felt her diaphragm drop, as though she was preparing to plunge deep into icy water. His hands had grabbed her upper arms, whirled her body so her back was to the smooth wall, and leaned in until their eyes met.

Time had slowed, this moment was more than she could have ever hoped. He had been rejecting Madison, he had endured the two of them for weeks, and now he was *here*. Barb had fought to avoid hoping Aaron could *possibly* prefer her to the charming counterpoint she'd filled her life with. Now the hope surged, recognizing the signs that her day for vindication had finally come.

"Is Madison here?"

"No?" The word feathered from her lips in breathless anticipation.

“Good.” Her heart ricocheted into her throat in preemptive ecstasy. But no, he was stepping back. Barb’s mind raced, trying to claw through the fog of fantasy to assess her reality. “I needed to ask you, since you’re her best friend.” Aaron tucked his hands into his jean pockets, suddenly looking sheepish. *No. No, damn fuck.*

Her heart grew cold, the absence of emotion even more painful as the aftertaste for the tumult preceding it. “How can I help you, Price?” His expression grew morose, almost desperate. He looked so young all of sudden.

“Does she mean it? She’s been tailing me all over campus, and I just thought she was screwing with my head at first but then she went that dive bar across town-”

Of course, he was just like the rest. A slight upgrade, to have been smart enough to start his fall into infatuation cautiously. Barb deflected, buying time to test her composure. “The Kings Crown? That place was fucking scary, you shouldn’t be going there Aaron. I had to pretend to like Red Stripe to just survive while Madison fronted like a regular.”

He exhaled forcefully. “So I’m right, she’s stunting to get my attention?” Aaron’s mouth broke into a wide, boyish grin. “Alright, I guess I can work with that” He turned, about to leave with the same velocity of his arrival.

The door slammed shut behind him. “You’re welcome.” Her voice sounded composed to her own ears, but the sick sensation of disappointment left a residue on her heart that she knew would last for days.

Reality swung in abruptly on Barb, reminding her that the tent was assembled, and she was likely spending too much air trying to blow up this tiny air mattress. Just like she was likely spending too much time wallowing over one who had got away. A loud synthetic noise echoed behind her, and a feeble twist of her neck exposed Aaron’s playful attempt to poke her head through the rugged plastic of their hovel.

His voice was slightly muffled, only the playful intention coming through.

“I can’t hear you through that, come around.”

Aaron reappeared on his knees, climbing through the ground-floor entrance.

“Nice job, that was quick. I didn’t realize they gave us one of those fancy mountaineering pads.”

“The surest method of killing a marriage is sleep deprivation. Bearclaw knows his business.”

Bear Attack!

The night was dark and full of monsters. Or at least it seemed that way to Aaron. Aaron wasn't exactly comfortable with the situation he'd gotten them into, but it only seemed fair that he dig deep and provide security for the two of them as they coped. It was a pure miracle that Barb had thought to shove one of the few emergency tent bundles - that or she'd never really trusted him to steer them safely in the first place.

A soft rustling from the surrounding grasses kept them company. Aaron could pretend it was soothing, even if every non-mechanical sound for three miles was secretly sending his heartbeat through the roof.

“It's my turn to take watch, you can sleep.”

“I'm fine here. I can't really sleep.” Aaron felt the anxiety in his heart mute. Staring out into the darkness, the crackle of fire his only company, sent his mind spiraling into dark tunnels he'd thought were limited to Heart of Darkness style horror. Any other night, any other campfire, he'd have found Barb's refusal slightly insulting.

The light of the fire cast dancing shadows, easily mesmerizing his tired eyes. It was the only justification for the words that fell from his lips.

“After you moved, we just kept going.” He could feel her eyes resting heavy on him. “We’d been done with the honeymoon phase for months, so we chalked anything unflattering up to, I don’t know, I guess familiarity?” A brief glance at her face showed very little sympathy. “I know, you think I’m pathetic, but it’s not that easy. Ending it meant starting over. We’d spent so long pretending it would last. We thought - I thought that maybe we’d still get to a good place if we could work it out.”

“So now what. Now that she’s not going to work it out with you.” She phrased it like a question, but her voice made it clear she thought she knew the answer.

“What do you mean? It’s done. Madison is clearly not as conflicted as I was. I have to start from scratch.” Barb watched him, eyebrows low and lids squinting.

“That’s it?” She shook her head, returning her gaze to the fire. Her profile softened, tone changing to wonderment. “I don’t think I could move on like that. I didn’t think anyone could.”

Aaron felt his heartbeat quicken - was she judging him? Was he supposed to have held on to hope longer? No.. the idea of pining after Madison when the signs had been so clear at the end made his stomach twist and palms sweat. “You called me a coward. I might have been, back then. But not when my choices are so obvious. Holding onto her now would just be to punish her.”

Barb's voice was soft, almost cajoling in response. "You...don't want to? Punish her, I mean?"

Honestly, it surprised him too. "No, not really." His lungs heaved out a whoosh of air, sending embers whirling in the air between them. "I just hope I haven't wasted too much time. I'm going to have to sell the house at this rate, and... it would have been nice to fill it up again. My parents made it seem so easy."

Barb didn't seem to have advice for him on that topic. Too bad, that was something on which he'd be happy for assistance. Instead she let them fall into silence, the lapping of water on the nearby bank substituting in the absence of voices. After few sharp cracks from the fire, Aaron looked over to discover Barb's eyes had drifted partway closed, clearly sabotaging her intent to maintain her guardpost.

His elbow found her ribcage, gently nudging to test her resolve.

"What, what, I thought you wanted to sell the house, I'm awake-" Barb spluttered, thrusting the palms of her hands to her eye sockets, appearing to blearily fight the exhaustion away.

"Stop being so stubborn and go sleep."

“No,” her mumbled response was accompanied by a full body slide from their log, and her torso leaning against the length of his shin. “I’m keeping watch too. Shut up.” Firelight sprinkled her auburn waves with gold flecks, painting a visual treat almost mesmerizing enough to stymie his annoyance at her complete refusal to compromise. The warmth of the fire and her body slowly but surely lulled him to sleep long before the sun broke the horizon.

Therapy Session #2 - in which Barb takes some accurate pot shots, Aaron insinuates that Madison owed him for his caretaking, and Barb storms out for effect

Barb woke with the dawn, but more importantly with the jolt of awareness of just how freaking cold it could be outside of a tent. The fire had long since fizzled to cold coals, and Aaron laid draped back along the log strangely arranged to leave the leg she’d braced against just as it was the prior evening. Now what? They’d have to get back, hopefully before anybody called out rangers or mounties or whatever to come find them.

With new inspiration, Barb leaned up to smack her pillow. “You were supposed to stay awake, it was your watch.” He jolted into a fetal curl before rolling off the log onto the ground beyond the campfire, likely more due to the proximity of the blow to his family jewels than to the blow itself.

He moaned miserably from his prone position. “*Unnecessary.*”

“What?” Was he still dreaming? Or talking to her?

“Attacks on the goods are unnecessary Barbara.” Aaron rolled onto hands and knees, his hair flopping in his face. Satisfaction from her tactical victory - waking up first was an unexpected power play - tinged her perception. Disheveled like that, he looked like some caveman, and the primal association sent something thrumming down her spine.

Last night, Aaron tried to offer support in the form of letting her sleep. She didn't want to take it, didn't like admitting that the idea of letting go of even the simplest form of control was appealing. Go ahead, sleep and let your old friend take care of you for an hour. Well, she hadn't *let* him, just happened to take a nap. As far as he knew, it had been a long con to get him to open up a bit.

Most of what he'd said had been par for the course - changing his plans to fit a new reality. The one element that seemed novel to her was that he'd been so level and confident while claiming to be over Madison. She'd seen what happened when someone's heart was broken, seen it close and personal. Yet Aaron seemed to be at peace, knowing that Madison had no doubts. Her confidence in ending things had been a resolution from which he'd rebounded.

Dad... hadn't. She'd just assumed that was normal.

“What? Is there something on me?” Aaron stood abruptly, leaning back in a frantic attempt to eyeball his own ass. Barb couldn’t help but smirk at the comical picture he made, even though it was her fault for staring at him.

“Yeah, it’s a bug, just lean back a little farther.” Aaron’s arms windmilled around violently, now fueled with the panic of a man unused to camping. She couldn’t hold back the manic grin at his expense, and when he finally caught sight of her he stopped to glower.

“Fu-un-ny. Good one Barb.” Sarcasm dripped from every syllable. “Lets fucking pack and get off this god-forsaken spur of rock.” Barb rolled her eyes, forcing herself up to her feet amidst of flurry of spasming muscles and cracking joints. Aaron had strode to the tent itself, thrusting their sleeping bags and other camping accoutrements out into the sunshine. He was mumbling furiously to himself as he violently dismantled the tent. “*First she comes for the goods, then for my pride—*”

Barb packed the bags silently, allowing her wounded compatriot to fume. If he was so hurt by her little prank she could humor him. She shoved the insect repellent and tin cups in just under the flap of her pack, cinching the drawstring tight when she heard it. Rustling, much more insidious than the chaotic clatter of Aaron packing the tent. Barb turned her head slowly, feeling her body freeze when a large furry creature entered her peripheral vision.

Black bear.

Better than a brown bear, for sure. And apparently unconcerned, sniffing around the edges of their camp as though unaware of their continued presence. Aaron hadn't noticed their new friend either, finishing the last few straps on his pack before tossing it across his back and beginning his last trip to the canoe. He didn't make it two steps before he saw her, her limbs frozen in a tense, unnatural position and she guessed fear across her face. Aaron's eyes filled with concern, and he whipped his head in the direction of her gaze.

He didn't tense up. He walked towards her slowly, keeping his eyes on the furry interloper. Barb felt her eyes well up in tears - the faintest thought that maybe Aaron knew what to do, knew how to get them through this sent a flood of relief through her system. He reached her, hands gently pushing her towards the boat, steady pressure the only reminder she needed that slow, calm movements would save the day.

Step by step, they crept closer to the canoe. The water quietly lapped at the metallic siding, completely unaware of the rush of adrenaline shouting in her head that they were in danger and everyone should panic. Barb took her eyes off the bear long enough to get into the craft, quickly shifting to the back and arming herself with a paddle.

Finally, a weapon. Not that she'd need it or be smart to try and use it, but even the semblance of control was a comfort. The bear was snuffling around, totally unconcerned with

them, until Aaron had pushed the canoe into the deeper swells of the lake, jumping in with a mellow *tung* against the belly of the canoe.

“Bye, bud. Have a good day!” Aaron softly called out, waving gently at their tormentor. With a gentle twist he turned to her, brown bangs falling into his eyes. “You good? We did good, got out without bugging the guy.” Barb let a wave of anger wash over her, furious that this doofus who couldn’t even steer a canoe was able to keep his cool when she lost her shit. It took a few deep breathes and moments of silence to tamp it down.

“Yeah. Thanks.” The paddle in the water brought her back to calm. Somehow the pressure of the current reminded her of their new purpose - getting back to camp - and that was all she needed to let go of Yogi Bear. It wasn’t fifteen minutes before they saw the birches, turned left, and were back at the docks. Barb felt her muscles tense, ready for Aaron to be incredulous that she’d so completely lost faith in him last night and forced them to camp with home so close at hand.

It didn’t come, though. His strokes sped up, and he grabbed the dock with gusto. The sounds of effort seemed to wrap around the satisfaction of an adventure completed. Back in the shallows he jumped out, pulling the canoe up the sand beach before wading back in towards her. Barb lifted the bag, holding it out to him. Aaron took it and immediately set it in the front of the canoe.

What did he— Aaron waited, hands outstretched. “Come on, get out of the goddamn canoe. We’re done with this shit.”

Another wave of relief washed through her. She wasn’t alone in how fucking over this stupid incident had been. They were done. She squeezed her eyes shut again for a moment, opening them to see his crooked smile greeting her. “You got me?” He nodded.

She lunged, wrapping her arms around his neck. “Alright, keep me dry Ranger Rick.” Together they toppled into the water.

“Oh, good, I don’t have to call in search and rescue after all.” Bearclaw must have come down the path to the beach, likely drawn by the raucous laughter echoing off the docks and pines. He looked panicked, then relieved. Instead of two missing campers, he had two hysterical mud-people completely slimed in algae, mud and sand. Barb watched Aaron pant, waiting to see if he’d speak up. He seemed to be content to pant, regaining his breathe. It was up to her to get what they needed, just as it was up to him to make sure they made it through.

“Is there any breakfast left? We’re starving!”

Bearclaw huffed a laugh, allowing a few more seconds to pass with the relief at their safe return obvious on his face. Then, he quickly shifting in a surprisingly scolding tone. “Listen we allow you guys a lot of freedom to get around camp to resolve sexual tension, I would appreciate

that you take those opportunities when on camp grounds. You're not the first I've had go off to, you know, *have a fire*, on canoe trip day, but if you'd been much later I would have had to call authorities in concern for your safety." Barb felt her eyes go wide. If Bearclaw thought they were sneaking away to go canoodle, then he definitely thought they were reconciling.

Bearclaw began to turn back towards the path, gesturing impatiently that they should follow. Barb trudged out of the shallow water, hearing the telltale splashing of Aaron close behind her. Aaron clearly was not taking Bearclaw's serious tone to heart - he'd reached forward to pull the sopping fabric of her compression shorts back from her thigh, giggling at the loud smacking noise of the elastic suctioning back to her skin. Barb twisted abruptly, mouthing a warning.

They fell in step a few feet behind their chaperone. Bearclaw resumed his condescending tone. "I'm escorting you back to your cabin to change, then back to the cafeteria for the afternoon activity. Going off on your own is a good sign in itself, but these activities are designed for more than just make up sex." He paused, before shrugging to himself. "At least most of them are."

When they reached the cabin, Barb slammed the door closed and rushed to her bags to change. She stared at the cabin walls, unwilling to do any more than turn away to preserve her modesty as she shimmied into new, dry clothes. "You know, he thinks we're fucking. I'm going to have to start being a bitch again, even if you saved me from a bear."

“We have plenty of time before camp ends, we can have a little fun.” Aaron’s voice sounded muffled, likely from his own rapid disrobing.

“Are you serious? But the money—”

“It will be to our advantage to show what we look like on good days anyway. Then the bad days we manufacture will be more believable.” He sounded confident, like he’d done this a million times. Barb wasn’t convinced - not that he was right, and not that they had time to be going off-script.

The screen door slammed. Barb whipped around, pulling her own shirt down over the fresh bra and rushing towards the door. Aaron was practically bouncing back to Bearclaw, ready to go. His dry clothes didn’t cling the same way as their sopping outfits, and she found herself trying to trace the lines of muscle that had been so clear and fascinating on during their scuffle and walk. Fuck. If he was going to be cute, it was going to be a lot harder to play the unflappable Madison.

She opened the door, stomach churning with either dread or anticipation.

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Audrey scanned the cafeteria with a critical eye, noting the unease from her campers with delight. Their discomfort was part of the magic of this exercise, an integral part of tricking them into dropping their prudish MN sensibilities. Sunlight gazed through the windows gently at them, distorted by her best sher scarves, setting a perfect mood. The only drawback was the bright orange trays, propped up between the cheap salt & pepper shakers to serve as privacy screens every few feet. She'd begged Eustace every year for some cash to get something just slightly more sultry, but he'd always shut her down.

Probably because he was always terrible at this exercise.

The campers sat in pairs facing each other down the long stretch of the galley table. Audrey walked the length, relishing how each full grown adult flinched at her natural authority. They cowered, closing their eyes to avoid seeing her shadow stretch over their place setting. When they recovered the courage to peak back out at the world, they stared at the gift deposited in front of them.

A pomegranate.

Audrey loved pomegranates. They were perfect - a project and a treat. Delicate and ingeniously packaged, able to deliver two vastly different sensory experiences. When she'd first introduced the pomegranate test, Eustace had rolled his eyes and exhunted stage right immediately. It was only after four summers of data that he'd been forced to acknowledge that

the pomegranate exercise was a pivotal moment in the program for most couples who'd been able to reconcile. Then he'd finally condescended to attend her experiment, commenting only that a pomegranate was cheaper than a refund.

She had bets on who was going to do well this evening.

“Good evening, lovers.” It felt so good to let the imperious tone echo from her throat. Once upon a time, she'd coordinated almost half of the events on this godforsaken island. Now she had only this, protected by publishing. “Tonight we will explore the fruit that trapped Persephone to Hades, and has doomed many to hours of stained hands.” Having reached the far end of the table, Audrey paused. Each camper was gazing at her, trepidation and wonder alight in their eyes.

“Your partner will eat half of the pomegranate in front of them. You will describe *how* they ate it to them verbally. You will each take turns until the fruit is gone. Feel free to be playful, and remember to enjoy the fruit. It's expensive, after all.”

With a flourish she turned, leaning over a discreetly placed stool to tap the contraption resting there. A carefully crafted playlist began to punctuate her performance, kicking off the evening with a classic 80's drum sequence. With an indulgent air-drum dance, Audrey spun before walking calmly into the periphery of the cavernous room.

They would need time to settle in. The first few bites were always terrible, either from too much or too little awareness of the purpose of the exercise. She could easily see Madison from her vantage point, and had to fight not to wince as the woman bit ravenously into a peeled section, red juice shooting up to splatter her face. Aaron's back, all Audrey could see as she drifted surreptitiously by the wall, was shaking in laughter until all of a sudden he went still.

Audrey again fought off a wolfish grin. The early chatter and giggles from couples on every section of the room began to muffle. Backs arched forward to hide between the orange food trays, focused on their task. At least, most backs. Some still sat straight, dutifully explaining just how their partners fingers had dig into the tender flesh of the fruit, peeling it apart before pressing it to their mouths in delight. Audrey couldn't help but respect their steadfast refusal to be seduced- even she would have to take steps to resolve her own craving for pomegranates after the session.

Audrey began to jot notes into a small notebook, coded with nicknames to prevent exposure should any ambitious subject dare try and sneak a peek. One must learn from their mistakes, after all. Abigail ate daintily, while Samson rested heavily on his arm as though waiting for an overlong lecture to end. Angelo quickly dispatched his fruit into quarters, removing all lining with the efficiency of a hunter cleaning the kill. Tawnya seemed to be watching him warily.

Victory thrummed through her as she rounded the table, finally able to see the expressions on those she'd been observing from behind. The transformations were subtle, but definitely present. And just as she'd predicted, Aaron had been the first to truly discern the skill set they were practicing.

He'd only just started. His face was flushed, likely from his own attempts to describe Barb's relentless assault. Audrey felt a surge of pride, knowing that these two had particularly befuddled Eustace after their first therapy session. Their stories were similar, but all the reactions seemed raw and unpracticed. A couple that had fought this long together *should* present a more defined rut.

Heh. Rut. Just what Aaron was in the mood for, apparently. Audrey weighed the risk of slowing to observe his performance. It was for science, but would probably tread close to voyeurism if she wasn't careful. Oh well, she's just a cafeteria lady on the tax documents so to hell with it.

Audrey scribbled furiously on her pad of paper, academizing the straight-up lust happening in front of her. Aaron was carefully peeling the pomegranate, lifting the membrane over the pockets of jewels, and in such small sections sucking the juicy seeds into his mouth. Small popping noises could be heard by those listening closely. Madison had scooted as close to the table as the secured bench seat would allow, the palms of her hands pressed along the curve of her neck as though attempting to calm a fever.

Audrey didn't blame her. Aaron had been focusing more on keeping eye contact than avoiding the random unavoidable spurts of juice, and the evidence of it clung to the lines of his face. Hot. Damn. She couldn't stay here, it was too much. Just as she began to drift on, Aaron's voice drifted over the poor excuse for a privacy screen.

“Aren't you going to describe what I did?”

Madison moaned softly, as though his request was a form of exquisite torture. *Damn.* This experiment was way more effective than she realized.

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Aaron fought off a smirk. If Barb caught him smirking, she might lose that entrancing expression. She couldn't seem decide if it was safe to speak, blurting out adjectives in fits and starts. Her eyes had darkened as he toyed with the fruit, knowing intimately what Audrey's intention with the game had been. The orange curls haloing her face contrasted with her flushed cheeks.

Barb must have really avoided literally all joy, if this was so shocking. Seeing her disarmed again, just as she'd been when that sweet ole bear had visited the campsite, proved a powerful incentive to take advantage of the situation.

She snapped out of the trance when he wetted his lips, the pliancy leaving her posture. “My turn, then.” Her first attempt had been petulant at best. Aaron had watched as her chin was bathed in the chaotic explosion of red juice, eyes squeezing shut in surprise despite herself. She took a different approach this time.

Barb took the pomegranate half remaining and slid it into the curve of her palm. She stared at it intently, and Aaron wondered if she would just try to replicate his own strategy. Sorry Barb - different strokes for different folks. No way would she get him hot and bothered like he could tell she was.

Barb peel the thick outer layer back, leaving a wedge of exposed seeds and fleshy membrane exposed. Her color continued to rise as she peeked from side to side, checking yet again that their cohorts behind the lunch-tray dividers were fully distracted with their own exercise. When she turned back to him, Aaron felt the blood begin to leave his head. The weight of his arms and head suddenly sat heavy on his elbows. Barb had taken the whole wedge of fruit, like last time, and slowly forced it into her mouth. Where her last attempt had been violent, impatient, her movements now were careful and calculated. Her cheeks hollowed as she sucked, pulling the fruit out periodically to show him the tiny red pearls on her tongue. Aaron suddenly only lived in those moments when her eyes fluttered shut, the seconds when the evidence of the fruit was visible one more.

Not half of the fruit was gone when she set it back on the napkin on the table. He stared at it, waiting for her to pick it back up and continue. Aaron felt a flush of unreasoning anger wash through him when he realized she'd folded her arms, waiting for him to take his turn. How dare anyone *stop* a performance like that.

“Well fuck.” Her mouth twisted up at the corner, no doubt reveling in that same satisfaction of a job well done that he'd known ten minutes ago. She looked so fucking smug. Well he'd have the last laugh.

Barb finally grew impatient. “You have to descr—”

Aaron leaned forward, farther than the table ever intended to allow a human. He whispered, knowing that if anyone, even himself, could hear what he was about to say that he'd lose his nerve. “You put your fingers all over my metaphorical dick. And then you put it in your mouth and sucked it, till you got my juice all over your mouth.” Her face was slack in shock. He pulled himself back slowly, waiting for her. She couldn't stay stupefied forever. The minutes ticked by.

Audrey jolted them out of their reverie. “Alright campers, good work today! Staggered lunch today, some of you have sessions with *Counselor Bearclaw*. We expect to see you all at the playhouse at 3pm. Don't be late!” No, no, this would disrupt the flow. Barb would have an

opportunity to recollect her composure, and that would just be the shittiest outcome possible from a lesson in seduction.

Barb immediately stood, clearly desperate for an escape. She fled to the door, pretending to check an invisible watch to disguise the reason for her rapid escape. “Barb, hold up, we can walk there together!” She turned, eyes wide in panic.

But she waited.

“So.” Barb gulped audibly. “So what do we spin for Bearclaw? We have the first interview slot with him.”

“I don’t know. I’d have suggested your repressed sexual response, but it seems like nobody would buy that now.”

“Here’s an idea, how about you’re reckless and desperate?” Aaron felt his hackles rise. *Desperate* was not a word he regarded fondly.

“Maybe you’re frigid and uptight.”

“Don’t get too creative till we get there Aaron, I wouldn’t want Bearclaw to miss this goldmine.”

“Listen, just admit it, I got you going. I’ll say it, you did a damn good job with your side of it.” It felt desperate to say out loud. It felt like begging. But somehow he couldn’t stop the words, and wouldn’t take them back. She didn’t respond.

No— this couldn’t happen again. He would not be invested in a vacuum again. This was intolerable. Aaron reached for her to arrest her movement, determined to clarify this point between them before they were back under cover. Now when she was Barb, not Madison. But she lengthened her stride and reached Bearclaw’s office.

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Barb sat on the pleather chair of Bearclaw’s office for a full minute before Aaron was able to join her. Either she’d ran at hyper-speed, or he’d taken the extra time to cool his jets before they were forced to role play. It would have been a good idea for her as well. There was a certain sensation associated with fleeing in Barb’s mind, and it was not the one making her uncomfortable now. Typically fleeing came with the cold sweat on her back, a tingling across her knuckles. Her most recent escape however came with with heavy damp weight between her legs and a strange exhilaration in her stomach that on any other day would have her putting her head between her knees.

The solution for these symptoms was more likely getting *Aaron's* head between her knees. Barb wasn't a particularly religious woman, but in this moment she promised herself to God. May she go to the grave, or at least go home, without having let her own overdue libido cost her major moolah. Flirting was one thing, and that slutty fruit exercise was quite another.

And Aaron wasn't letting it *go*, which was confusing on an entirely new level. They'd had a good night, a good escape from a bear, but what he was insinuating was not something subtle. If the heat he'd been sending her over the galley table was fully explored, there would be no disguising it afterwards. Maybe a hardened professional could fake disinterest and incompatibility after that, but...

But she was having a hard enough time *now*, just knowing him as an old friend.

Bearclaw opened his office door, peeking past the knobbed pine jam with an academic air. "Madison, Aaron, come in." He had glasses on, slid down to the edge of his nose. Barb racked her brain - she was pretty sure Bearclaw didn't wear glasses at all. It was enough of a disconnect to momentarily distract her mind from its one-track. Aaron moved past her, his shoulders hunched like a rebellious teen. He didn't look back at her.

"So, things with the two of you seem to be going well." Bearclaw hedged, his tone trailing off to invite comment. Aaron glared balefully, clearly unwilling to break the silence.

Barb bit her tongue. “We have one more session at the end of the camp, but this session serves as a checkpoint. What’s going well, what’s not. Madison, how did the canoe trip go for you?”

Barb forced herself not to cheat a look over to Aaron. It was show time. “Well this dope got us lost. Typical, really. Sometimes a person just needs to recognize when they’re not meant to fill the alpha role.”

“An alpha role - you mean steering?”

“Exactly. Don’t think it’s a secret, every single dude on this trip steered. And I wouldn’t make a stink, but *we* got lost because he wouldn’t own his own inexperience so—”

“Oh, okay, so saving you from a bear wasn’t alpha enough?”

“We would have been fine, black bears are pretty uninterested in mauling.”

“You’ve got to be kidd—”

“Anyway Counselor, *that* is how the canoe trip went.” Bearclaw settled back in his seat, jotting notes and biting his lip. Watched him, looking for a reflection of Aaron in the light on the reading glasses. Aaron was quiet, the too-quiet of a person seething. Barb hoped it was only for show, obviously she’d already thanked him for helping when she froze at the campsite. Even if

she wasn't willing to capitalize on some of the instinct between them, this level of assholery was beyond her.

“And Aaron, is that how you saw the trip?”

“I mean I typically don't describe my failings as a desperate attempt to claim my manhood, but sure. She'd not wrong about the general tension of the trip. Even if she's a bitch about it.”

“Alright guys, I was there in the cafeteria. Something changed between there and here. Who is going to tell me what's going on?” Silence met him, the ticking noise of a small clock echoed loudly.

“I'll tell you.” Aaron's voice rang with more emotion than Barb expected. She turned enough to catch a glimpse in the corner of her eye. “I just put myself out there, took a risk with her at that fruit class, and she's trying to tell me that I imagined it.” Barb felt a flush crawl up her neck again. Playing Madison had cooled her down, made her heart settle into a sardonic and fearless tone. Hearing Aaron voice what might be a very honest complaint stirred it up, setting off alarm bells.

“Madison, is that true? Tell me about how you felt after that class.”

The blood was hot on the bridge of her nose and along her neck. Barb began tapping the tips of her fingers together, hoping to maintain oxygen flow to normal parts of her body. “I’m not dead, I had a reaction to class. Aaron and I have been together for years, of course I—” she stuttered. She *didn’t* know what his expression had promised, and the anticipation in that moment would have driven her insane if she hadn’t escaped. “I’m just not going to let horniness trap me with someone I don’t want.”

“You think you’re different, but you’re exactly the same. Completely unwilling to compromise, to recognize that sometime people make sacrifices for you. Just like her, as much as you try to define yourself as her polar opposite.”

“Her?” Bearclaw interjected, reminding the embattled couple of his presence. Of the ruse. “Madison, who is he talking about?”

“M-. My friend Barb, I guess.” Aaron’s eyes glittered with an unspoken dare. Apparently he was willing to risk improvisation to win the argument. She spluttered back to life, back into character, unwilling to lose to him like this. “I compromised enough by staying with you. Barb wouldn’t have tolerated that shit. She’s not afraid of things getting ugly, no matter how *unnatural* it might seem to you.”

“Right. Load of good that’s done for Barb. Lets all be more like her.” Barb could feel her eyes start to water. She couldn’t be sure, was he pushing her buttons for effect, or was he

still mad from earlier? The sarcasm dripping from his words left her scrambling for a rebuttal. She stood, forcing the chair to skitter back.

“You don’t know shit about me, you just think I make a nice looking prop.” This came out before she could stop it. Aaron looked at her askance, clearly unsure about the response that would be expected in their screenplay.

## **Interaction #2**

The screen door of Bearclaw’s therapy den slammed loudly behind them, a claxon sound which perfectly summarized Aaron’s inner emotional state. How many different ways could this go wrong? In any moment Barb could be trying his patience, risking the entire endeavor with her playful demeanor, or delivering the most painful criticisms he’d heard in years.

It was one thing to hear the *real* Madison call him hide-bound and paralyzed, quite another to hear this defiant firebrand say it with such convincing certainty. Aaron almost forgot Barb *didn’t* have four years of in-person experience living with him to verify her statements. Barb clammored down the steps, swinging her arms and legs with excessive force. As soon as her sneakers hit the dusty patch of path, she careened to the left path. Apparently she wasn’t planning on going back to the cabins. Probably for the best- if they had to unpack what just happened there, Aaron couldn’t predict the outcome.

Either he'd kill her, or kiss her.

She'd taken the scenic side of the camp for her tantrum, leaving him with the path leading to the main hall. The tether-ball court and mid-day snacks left in the main hall held little appeal, but it was better than nothing. Aaron's feet followed the path mechanically. The corner of the main hall pulled into his periphery, the usual smells of bacon or chili conspicuously absent. A curl of smoke rose lazily from behind the building. Odd.

Perhaps it was a fire actually within his ability to put out.

Aaron turned the corner to find the fearsome cook, slumped onto a crate which in bygone days might have been used to ship supplies. A nametag on her faded blue blouse read *Brenda*. Brenda didn't react to his sudden appearance. Was it possible she only had that one facial expression? Realizing he wasn't going to leave, Brenda huffed and let the cigarette drop from her mouth.

"Got a problem Mr. Varjak?" Brenda's voice was raspy, and smoked leaked from her mouth as she snarled at him.

"I'm Aaron, I'm -"



“One of the feelers, I see you. You missed the hook-ups, they meet here at 12:30 before the hike.”

“Feelers? Really? You don’t feel, is that the joke?”

“Don’t get defensive on me, you’re at a camp to make up with a sweetie. Can’t tell me that’s not touchy-feely.”

“Interesting turn of phrase there, *a sweetie*. The softer term for the hook-ups, I’m guessing?” Brenda eyed him as though weighing him on the scales of justice. If he passed, did that make him someone she thought would join the hook-up crew? She shrugged.

“It’s the same every summer. God knows why they pay to come on this field trip, it’s an expensive singles bar.” Another exhale, more smoke billowed around her. “Like clockwork.” Maybe it was a trick of the light, but she started to look demoralized. Her head turned away from him to the line of trees, allowing silence to creep back like fog.

“I won’t tattle. But I won’t be joining the hook-up club.”

“Phht, don’t look at me like you’re doing me a favor. I know better than to canoodle with the campers.” She almost seemed to smile at the thought. Brenda was rocking a James Dean vibe, and it made Aaron want to lean on the wall next to her and concur, campers were the worst. Luckily he maintained enough of his individuality to remember that he *was* one of those dumb

campers. Brenda must have sensed the conflict, she stubbed out the cig and stood from her perch. “You don’t seem to have much to worry about, either way. The way your girl looks at you, you’ve gotten your money’s worth.”

His girl. What a joke. Aaron could feel his lips twisting in a sneer. “She’s not mine, and she likes it that way from what I’m hearing.” Brenda tilted her head, her nose furrowing in confusion.

“Well Linus, I think you’re misreading those signs, but then again I just ration the bacon.”

“Aaron. You Brenda, me Aaron.” He thumped his chest with a loose fist in a sad Tarzan impression.

“I’m Audrey, this shirt belongs to Bearclaw. His ex-wife used to cook here. Don’t go telling people though, I prefer they live in the agony of not knowing what to call me.”

“Bearclaw’s *ex-wife*? And he’s the one giving us counseling?” Audrey’s face turned stoney.

“Think of it this way- your counselor understands what is at stake.” Audrey seemed far away for a moment. “Eustace, *Bearclaw* I mean, understands this kind of rift. Brenda did too, I suppose, but she didn’t really feel the need to help as much as he does.”

### **Meanwhile, back with Barb**

Barb stood at the lakefront, her body only just beginning to slow from the manufactured huff, built for the single purpose of marital discord.

They’d ended the session abruptly, less by design and more by inspiration. Madison would never have tolerated Aaron implying that she owed him anything, even a display of affection, so Barb stormed herself out there with the appropriate indignation. It felt good to be impetuous, hearing with wood doors slam with momentous thuds and feeling gravel fly under her feet as she fled down to the bank.

She’d made it all the way to the water before her actual identity regained the foreground of her mind. It must have been the glassy serenity of the lake around her that brought back her normal level-headed demeanor. After a few moments, she felt a tell-tale buzz of her phone against her belly from where it rested in a pocket of her jacket.

Dad’s calls had been primarily about inviting friends to their Monday dinners, but the last few had been medical updates and Barb had been unwilling to go the whole day without access

to the communication - ban or no ban. She looked down at the touch screen, marveling at the absurd number of notifications. Glancing around the picturesque beach, Barb raised the phone to her ear and listened to the ring tone.

“Dad, you left like seven messages. I told you, I only get a few hours now and again to call what with the schedule up here.”

“Those messages are strategic - now we have all the boring updates from my end out of the way.” His gruff, jocular pattern eased a tension in Barb’s heart she hadn’t quite realized she was carrying.

“I think you just didn’t want to tell me you’d been orchestrating a series of blind dates while I was available to actually respond.”

“Oh hun, they’re not blind dates. I just want you to have some friends here in town now that you’ve moved back-”

“Male friends. Did you set up any dinners with these dude’s sisters?” She heard him clear his throat, attempting to buy time.

“Barbara, there are reasons people hitch up before they have kids. It’s not a one-man-job.” Ah, it seemed Dad’s motive wasn’t as light-hearted as she’d thought.

“Why can’t it be?”

“If you’re too afraid of loving a whole separate person, how are you gonna handle the emotional rollercoaster of a kid? You can’t skip square one, it’s the training module.” Barb could feel him pacing, and might have considered it herself if adrenaline hadn’t wired her straight down into the sand where she stood.

“So you don’t think I’ll be a good parent?”

“Don’t put words in my mouth young woman. I just want you to take good risks for good reasons.” What a hypocrite.

“Was Mom a good risk?”

Silence. Then, “Yeah, kid. She was.” Barb could picture his face as though he was right in front on her. She knew his eyes would have softened the same way they did when she’d asked him to be her date to prom when she was seven.

Pain sliced through her. “So then *why*”

“Laura and I did a bunch of things with....poor execution. And Barbie, a lot of that is on me. I’ve got my own skeletons that needs dusting, and I don’t want you taking them around with you.”

“Dad-”

“You’re doing good work up there, doll. I don’t want to fall behind. I’ve got a doc appointment on Wednesday.”

Anxiety wheezed in again through the gaps of her ribcage. “Another doctor? Dad, you gotta tell me these things earlier-”

“A shrink, baby girl, for those skeletons. God knows I’ve already hit the deductible on my plan. No harm in another appointment.”

Dad was going to get therapy - for what? To deal with the fallout from Laura? Barb stared at the water, hoping the twinkle of sunlight reflecting off the ripples would somehow whisper an explanation. Laura had broken her dad, she broke him when she’d lied about her commitment. She’d been unable to hold up her end of the bargain. The fall-out had been Barb’s nightmare. At every crossroad she had evaluated the path that exposed her to the fickle promises of others, and the memory of her father sobbing silently at the kitchen table had served as a tonic to strengthen her resolve.

## Yoga

This by far took the cake for most uncomfortable group activity. *Intimacy practice*. Only God knew what were the designers of this camp experience smoking when they drafted this up. Bearclaw was into it - excruciatingly invested in the ambiance.

Except... except for those moments where his figure-eight rotation through the room led him towards the back, towards their matching yoga mats. Bearclaw was watching for a tell, it was obvious. Aaron couldn't blame him - Barb had the endearing and dangerous habit of feeling empathy during their therapy sessions, which would have stood out as an odd occurrence to anyone reading their case notes.

What conclusion would this burly quack draw? It hadn't seemed common for people to really buck the regime here - even the folks that clearly had given up on the stated goal were playing along. Those couples were here at the behest of a family member or child or court order. Barb's act was too heartfelt to be under duress, no way Bearclaw would think it was blackmail.

"Now, move into modified mountain pose, standing behind your partner. Beta partners, place your hands along the spine, supporting your partner as they inhale.... Exhale..." Eye contact with the counselor at the word *support* provided a surprising amount of insight.

Bearclaw just thought *Madison* was putting in more effort - that Aaron was being a dick. So much for an unbiased third party.

“In this moment I challenge you to remember the feeling of connection, the spark of feeling when your body supported your partner. Inhale... Exhale aloud from your mouth... modified forward fold.” Aaron kept his eyes trained on Bearclaw as Barb folded over in front of him, pulling him along in the strange modification the Hiawatha team seemed to think would help couples rebuild their *sensual connection*. His hands slid along her back, spreading wide. Barb’s answering exhale was slightly more pronounced than their earlier repetitions, sparking a raised eyebrow from Bearclaw and a smirk from Aaron.

Bearclaw pivoted with more force than necessary, wobbling briefly as he resumed the circuit around the room. Once their audience was out of range, Aaron felt Barb swing forward in an attempt to return to the space in their earlier progressions. The sudden emptiness on stung the palms of his hands. He leaned forward, regaining the connection.

“Just let me support you for chrissakes.” Her shoulders remained tense, uncooperative. “It can’t be that hard to let Bearclaw think we’ve got some chemistry. I’d buy it.” Barb exhaled forcefully in what may have been a chuckle. Aaron could feel a distinct difference in the poses as they moved through the bastardized sun salutation now that he’d solidified the contact between his palms and Barb’s back. The heat in the room had been manageable as much as it was sweltering before, but the feel of the sweat on her back arrested his breathing.



Side-by-side planks provided a good three lungfuls of solitude by comparison.

“Partner B, take the support position for downward facing dog. For those of you really looking to make an *effort*, please use the variation shown at the start of class.” Well, if he didn’t show effort Bearclaw might not refund the money, so... Aaron moved into the support position as Barb shifted her hips back, dropping her shoulders in an attempt to make the textbook triangle shape. She was a tense creature - her heels wouldn’t drop, and her hips seemed to be locked forward.

Aaron tucked his feet behind hers, slid along her back from behind and gently pulled her hips back allowing his body weight to ease her into the form. Barb exhaled forcefully and did not inhale again for what felt like eternity. When she did inhale, Aaron could feel her spine expand back into his chest, sweaty clothes pressing together.

*Nana Walters’ fake teeth, Raymond changing in the canoes, Madison offering to give him a makeover...* Aaron was fast running out of imagery that would prevent him from alerting Barb to his true opinion of intimacy yoga at this stage. If she freaked out over what he suspected was the entire point of this ridiculous exercise, that might be a dangerous indicator to Bearclaw that something was afoot.

She shifted, pedaling the soles of her feet on the top of his own, letting out an obscene moan. The mild awareness of before transforms into an aching throb.

“Alright, inhale, star pose, facing your partner.”. Shit. Shit. Aaron began to disentangle himself from Barb's lithe body, stepping back and discretely assessing... yup. His athletic shorts did absolutely nothing to obscure his interest. Barb was going to get an eyeful.

A waft of air washed over from the right side of the room, directed by a soft breeze from outside. The fresh outdoors could not camouflage the foul nature of this particular cloud, however. Gagging noises erupted in a distinct trail across the room, drawing Aaron's attention just before suffering the first wave of it himself.

He had to admire the sheer power of it. Somebody had truly epitomized silent and deadly. Aaron's erection flagged immediately, preserving his dignity in the face of Barb. Moving into the wide-spread stance for star pose, he met Barb's eyes. Her face was pale, her throat working furiously as though fighting to keep lunch down. Aaron pantomimed, pulling his own shirt collar up over his nose. Barb followed suit, hiding her face until the gas cloud had passed.

Bearclaw, brave soul that he was, stood in the offending corner with a puzzled expression. Seeing him withstand the environment seemed promising- Aaron began to let his nose back out in the open air.

“Exhale, drop at the waist, relaxing the shoulders.” A high, tinny noise squeaked in the corner quickly followed by groans of disgust.

Tawnya straighten up, indignant. “It's *not* me, stop looking at me like that!”

### **Barb's Reaction to Yoga, leading into Skinny Dip**

There hadn't been a single moment when Barb had imagined legitimately relaxing during yoga. In fact, various muscles had continually tightened over the entire duration up until the moment someone (likely Tawnya) farted with such vehemence that the entire class was forced to evacuate.

Yoga had never been her strong suit, so Barb didn't mourn as much as some. She did regret, however, losing the comforting warmth of Aaron's hand on her back and hips, pulling her deftly into the formations Bearclaw had guided them through. The class stood clustered outside the building, the brave few standing near the windows hoping that the room would de-fog quickly enough to allow class to continue.

“Anybody bring a canary?” Barb looked to Aaron, surprised he'd made a sound. He'd been choked up for the last fifteen minutes, and seemed unwilling to look her in the eye.

It...could have been unpleasant for him to hold her so closely. Barb tried to avoid lying to herself unless it was *truly* terrible, so there was no cause to pretend she hadn't enjoyed his touch. The idea that he'd been anything less than serene while handling her body made her itch with discomfort.

No. No, he'd said. He'd buy it. He thought they had chemistry, he must have at least tolerated touching her. She wouldn't apologize for it. And it wouldn't matter anyway, she didn't *ask* him to like it. She didn't need him to think of her as anything other than a partner in crime.

Barb snuck a glance at Aaron, cheating her posture towards him hoping to discern his state. He was flushed, that was for sure, long after the heat of the room had dissipated. Her hand landed on his bare arm, gently turning him towards her. She wasn't sure what she wanted to say, but it needed to be good. Coy, aloof, but playful and captivating. If she had actually been Madison, she would be able to do it instinctively.

"Did you get enough of a stretch?" Aaron watched her like she'd asked him to swallow three tablespoons of sriracha on a dare.

"What? OH, oh. Yes. Did-" he coughed. "Did you get enough of a stretch" His face was practically purple. This was what she needed. A smug smile stretched across her face, and a sense of cosmic peace settled in her heart.

“Yeah, thanks for the adjustments.” An imp on her shoulder made a suggestion. “It felt good.”

“Sorry guys we’ll have to call this one. We have to burn sage to make sure this isn’t an evil spirit. We’ll continue the practice at a later date. Have a good rest of your night!” Bearclaw was waving them on, his face swathed in an old t-shirt as though he’d been sweeping a fire for collapsed victims. The crowd began to shift, meandering down the path leading back to the cabins. A small group broke off, likely heading to the mess hall to play games.

Barb followed Aaron just a half inch behind, wondering how he wanted the evening to play out. Could they really survive another night of Go Fish and youtube streaming? He didn’t seem as apprehensive as she was of another night in. It was either a mark of a lack of creativity or a compliment to her company.

If they did go back to the room... Barb wasn’t sure if she’d be able to contain her unease. Aaron had laid his hands on her in purely utilitarian ways, but they sure as shit hadn’t felt utilitarian. When he’d held her hips, pulled them back to stretch her back and thighs, her mind had immediately turned to a certain cinematic adventure she’d partaken of during her college days alone in her dorm room. The volume and vocal emissions were totally different, but at this point in life the inability to moan obscenely only made the fantasy more compelling. If he’d

pulled her back just a little farther it would have fit right into minute 3 of that video, and she might have had to excuse herself.

Of course, once they reached the cabin there would be no need for discretion. No one slept near enough to be disturbed by noise aside from a true scream of terror. Her thoughts turned to the huge bowl of condoms on their bedside table. Technically, there was nothing wrong with a dalliance, if Aaron was agreeable to-

No. No, she was already flirting with a strange feeling of attachment, and erotic play would only make things more confusing when the camp was over. Surely that would make her feel like her share of the refund was merely a thinly veiled fee for services rendered.

### **Skinny Dipping Scene - in which Barb bares all and Aaron asks about the walls still up**

Aaron was aware of two things, and two things only. First and foremost, that his roommate whose ass he'd been molded to not thirty minutes ago was perhaps two inches behind him. Secondly that every step took him closer to their cabin, where they'd spend the evening ignoring each other. Shifting to allow her to walk beside him, they moved silently and swiftly. The inside of the cabin was musty from the sweltering heat of the day and their foolish failure to crack the windows.

Barb seemed to droop immediately before crossing to her luggage and rummaging for something. “Well this is unbearable. Let’s crack the windows and wait for this shack to cool down. I’m going to the famously leech-free Nooky Point, wanna join me?”

“What? We need to work out our story, we don’t have time.” God, hadn’t they done enough already today? It seemed weeks ago when they’d pulled up on the banks of the canoe launch, just in time to prevent a full search party from casting out across the lake. In reality, it was less than 12 hours ago. Aaron was more than ready to turn off his brain, staring absently at the ceiling waiting for sleep to come.

“If you come with me, then I can get a swim and you can get a story.”

Aaron huffed. “Fine. I’ll get my suit.” He eyes Barb’s empty arms. “You’re not bringing anything?”

“Oh, you’re right, I almost forgot.” She disappeared into the bathroom, grabbing a towel and bag.

They trudged together down the path, side by side towards Nooky Point. The pier was a about half a mile away down the south side of the island, away from the lights of the other cabins and mess hall. Owl’s and crickets sang together in the brightness of the evening, lit by a nearly full moon. Of all the nights to go out for a summer dip, Barb had picked a contender.

The beach *was* clean.

“Part of me expected this to be covered in leeches. That intro packet has lied to us in so many ways already.” Barb looked at him quizzically, her expression only slightly obscured by the darkness surrounding them. “I... I looked for that Kama Sutra copy. They didn’t have one in our cabin.”

“Sure they did, I just found it first.”

Silence stretched on between them. Aaron’s mind was at full capacity processing the idea that Barb had the balls to grab the book and either got rid of it or -

“So what, you hid it?”

“You think all my baths take that long? I’ve got needs, pal.”

Aaron nodded mutely. Barb was a grown woman, she was fully responsible for her own orga- “Let’s get in. You said you wanted to swim.” He broke out full tilt running down the pier. Physical effort in such a classic sense was a welcome relief. Swimming ,running, it was an honest drain on his muscles. For weeks they’d been hiking, canoeing, all activities that drained the body slowly over extended time. The cold water shocked his body, swallowing him up until



the momentum of his leap petered out. As he kicked to the surface, he heard a muffled explosion beside him.

Cool nighttime air stung his face once he resurfaced. With a few wild swings of his arms Aaron was able to spin as he bobbed with the swell of the water, reorienting himself with the pier and bank. Barb gulped air behind his periphery before emitting a quiet, joyful whoop.

“Credit where credit is due - this idea wasn’t total bullshit.” He’d intended to slowly pan back to her, but the wet smacking noise coming from the pier drew his attention forcefully. Glaring into the muddling dark, he caught the motion of something fly through the air, water rivulets accompanying its trajectory, ending in a *thwack* against the wood.

Aaron’s eyes went wide. Water slowly creeped up his neck, up to his nose before he remember to tread water. Barb shook her head, not quite a baywatch hair flip, but elegant in the moonlight all the same. Her auburn curls had been flattened along her face, dark brown to his eyes.

“What? It’s dark, why worry about losing it in the lake.”

“Losing...” Their inhibitions? Their dignity?

“My two-piece. It tends to float with into own motives, and I hate buying new bottoms.”

Aaron wanted to see her expression, which he'd suspected was a cocky grin, but... What if he accidentally touched her? All the good work of the cold water would be eroded if he couldn't keep some distance here. His choice was made for him, Barb thrust herself into a backstroke and began a languorous circle within range of the pier.

The moon was so close to whole. Aaron marveled at it, content to float with the eddy and flow of the lake while his compatriot made rounds. To think, this entire adventure had been one miscommunication away from complete cancellation. If Madison had had the composure to just call him and cancel, he'd be home right now. Likely on probation - Dale had made in very clear he was unwelcome back in the office until he's leveled out - but on the couch, watching old sitcoms.

Instead he was acting a greek drama with an accomplice. It was a miracle Barb had even agreed to stay, really. Sure, she was in a rush. He got that to a point. But she was so dedicated, committed to each tiny aspect of her life. Somehow her dedication to this dream trumped her dedication to their mutual acquaintance.

The question came out dreamily, as though he was praying it. “You don't feel... guilty? Doing this with me?” Barb stopped mid-stroke, not a fathom away.

“Does it matter?” The splashing of her strokes was conspicuously absent, allowing the once distance sounds of owls and water-suction against the dock to seem out of measure loud. Barb swam closer to him, he could see the curve of her shoulders bob beside him. “Madison... I just need to take care of what I need right now. If she’d been honest, I’d have been satisfied with a hug and happy hour. So no, I don’t feel guilty. You shouldn’t either, you owe her less than nothing.” Her defiance seemed forced.

Taking care of her needs, huh?

“Wait, *less* than nothing? That sounds nice, but we were both in that trainwreck of a relationship.”

“Oh? I assumed you might have felt like I did - lonely, even though she might have been there.” Aaron felt something fearful curl around his heart, a weakness.

“If you were so lonely why didn’t you ever - why did you stay away from guys, or girls, if thats—” Barb dove under the surface, a ripple and splash occasionally betraying her trajectory. When she resurfaced, he was ready. “You won’t risk a relationship? You seem willing to take every other type of risk.”

She was at the ladder, climbing up. Aaron felt his heart race, nervous both that he’d misstepped - broken the tenuous connection they’d been building and at the sight of her in the

pale lunar blush. Her voice echoed softly, directed down through the slats of the dock and rippling across the water back to him. “A good point. I don’t have an answer for that one.” She’d shimmied back into the wet nylon, spared him a glance back, her body twisting to face the lake. Barb’s eyes were muted, flat, her mouth turned slightly down in a remorseful line.

End of this scene?!

### Evening at the Cabin

Introduction paragraph

“We’re both tired and sore. Just get in bed.”

“I’m fine on the floor, it’s my turn.”

“What, are you scared? You think you won’t be able to resist my charm?” Yes. Yes that was exactly what she was scared of. *Intimacy Yoga* had seriously fucked with both her head and overall self control.

“I just don’t think I’ll be able to sincerely apologize when I elbow you in the face, so I’m not putting myself in that position.”

“It would hurt too much to roll over after today, I think I’m safe.”

She watched him with wary eyes, her gaze darting to the bed. It looked so soft, welcoming compared to the sad nest of blankets they’d taken turns using as a futon.

“Fine.”

She snuggled into the covers, quickly hiding her face and curling into a fetal position. Aaron’s footfalls echoed dimly in the room as he moved to the bathroom. The sound of the shower running reminded Barb of rain, and it lulled her closer to slumber. Her mind was foggy as her body registered the slant of the mattress and a warm body sliding in next to her.

She rolled to face him, resting her jaw on folded hands.

“Thanks for this. If I- if we wake up in a funny position tomorrow, well. You get a free pass. I’m willing to bet the impropriety is less painful than a compressed spine.” Her eyes were almost completely closed, really just slits allowing the amber glow of the last lamp in the cabin to cast shadows. The warm chest next to her rumbled.

The thought slid through, unbidden. *Put your arm around me.* The warmth of a snug on that muscled chest was the last missing piece to put the day to rest. Aaron shifted, and for a second Barb thought he might actually reach across. Instead he patted her shoulder, and the

closest he got to intimacy was a few brief flexes of his thumb on the skin there. Barb shivered, and closed her eyes.

Time to sleep. Asleep, she might not have such reckless hopes.

### **Morning before Group Skit - Aaron POV**

#### **Group Skit**

Barb lingered in the back of the crowd, hoping her fears wouldn't be realized. The tiny theatre allowed for a certain degree of anonymity by the madness of proximity to her companions. Bearclaw towered over the group without significant effort from his vantage point at the front of the room. She'd made the mistake of listening to instructions instead of identifying escape route during *intimacy yoga*, and that wasn't misstep she intended to take twice.

“During your interviews and sessions with your medical providers, you as a couple identified moments from literature and theatre the resonated with you as representative of your current struggles. We have assembled scripts of key moments from those works and edited them with guidance from your counselors to be workbook friendly exercises.” Excellent, this would

limit the opportunities for *guidance* from Bearclaw. Allowing him to continually intervene in the therapeutic teamwork for her and Aaron logically only advantaged her eventual goal, but that didn't make the exchange any less embarrassing. Surely if she *was* at camp to reconnect with her ex, she wouldn't be so frivolous as to make passes at the other campers. Which, upon further examination, reinforces just how unlikely it ever was for Madison to attend this trip in any universe, let alone this one.

The crowd jostled like a game of boggle as Bearclaw forced his way through the crowd, handing out thick stacks of paper clipped together by heavy duty office clips. Most of the reactions were muted, although there were distinct outliers. Stacy and Tara's faces were alight with glee, understandably as they had already made significant progress over the last four days. As Bearclaw lumbered up to her, his face creased in slight concern.

"I'm not sure how *this* got assigned, but you two will be doing a scene from *Midsummer Nights Dream*." The ream was thinner than some of the packets, and Barb glanced down with curiosity. Bold letters headlined the front page - "MADISON - HELENA." Of all the Shakespearean comedies, this one made Barb the most uncomfortable. **Something about watching a bunch of matchmaking fairies roofie a group emotionally damaged teens just didn't hit right.** Top it off, she would be playing the desperate and discarded pity-fuck character.

Aaron on the other hand looked very pleased. His body swayed from side to side as though he was fighting the urge to bounce boyishly. Bearclaw gave only a slight

acknowledgement, raising his eyebrow in disapproval. After the burly director turned to continue the distribution, Aaron turned to Barb with a smug look on his face.

“Our therapist knew her shit. This scene is Helena begging Demetrius and being rejected. This was targeted to see if Madison could empathize with being rejected.” She couldn’t help it, disgust sneaked into her cheeks. “What? What’s your deal?”

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe being the unlovable sidekick to the beautiful heroine is a bit trite.” Aaron stared at her while she forced air through her nose. Perhaps the fancy breathing techniques from yesterday’s yoga would help her maintain composure. Resentment twisted down in her gut, and a bit of shame for allowing such a stupid thing as a skit bother her to this extent.

“But, Helena isn’t a sidekick.” Aaron’s face had moved from uncomprehending wonder to something softer, eager. “Demetrius is like a villain, Helena is the main protagonist. Hermia is just a spoiled girl running off with her first love.”

“Wait, you like this stuff? I did not take you for a thespian.” He spluttered in response, a blush creeping up his neck.



“The movie has Kevin Kline in it, and it was date night.” Barb didn’t buy it, this theory of his sounded like the poetic waxing of a fanboy. Further teasing would probably just make the tension on stage worse, so she abandoned three or four jokes that had queued up, ready to go.

On stage, the skit played with as much pain as she anticipated. In the wings, watching the other couples swing from either totally no effort to way too much, Barb felt the competitive urge in her heart. Sure, the last time she’d been on stage with any role to play was high school as a random child on a sled - no lines. But she’d acted the hell out of that. Best silent-child-on-sled in the history of *The Christmas Story*. She could be the best Helena, put these scared ninnies to shame.

For the first few lines, that was fun. The feelings were real, but not too real. Up until the lines that had confused and upset her whenever this play had come across her path.

“I would be your spaniel - though you spurn me I shall always follow!” The bile rose in her throat. Tears threatened to flood her eyes, her voice cracked. Aaron, who’d been saucily pretending to be the uninvested playboy, looked back in surprise. The concern on his face must technically be a break in character. She choked down the breath that had caught her unprepared and gestured weakly with her hand, hoping Aaron would move on to quickly finish the scene.

“You do impeach your modesty too much to leave the city and commit yourself into the hands of one that loves you not,” Aaron was much less convincing by this point. Worry showed

cleanly on his face, out of character empathy coloring his delivery. Barb almost giggled as the line delivered, realizing how close she'd come to truly abandoning her dignity. To think she'd imagined only last night actually trying to *seduce* this man, who'd only last week intended this retreat to revive his tenuous connection with her friend.

His voice cut through her thoughts, the tenor of it dispelling the rhythmic pulse of the scene. "Bearclaw, we're taking a break, put someone else on." His large hands curled around her bicep & back, pulling her up from where she'd knelt Helena to beg. The crowd of fellows watching spun past, a momentary witness until they were cloistered behind the cheap camp blankets strung up to serve as a curtain. "Barb, look at me sweetie. You're no spaniel, okay?"

"Ha," she choked out, trying to straighten her spine as bitter tears began to spill down the line of her nose. "I know I know, don't worry, I just can't play Madison *and* Helena at the same time. It's a bit sad to realize I'm much better at the latter role." His hands framed her face, the heat of them comforting on the skin exposed to what she was realizing were well-marked tear tracks.

"You're putting me to shame out there - playing Demetrius is much harder than I expected." His thumbs began to drift, softly caressing her lips. "How I am supposed to ignore you?" Aaron's voice, already low, dropped to a whisper. "What good would it do?" Her lungs ached, begging for fresh air that Barb was unwilling to take at the risk of breaking the hold of Aaron's gaze. Slowly, he pulled her face close to his to claim her lips softly. His lips, dry and

warm, dismissed the corner of her brain demanding poise to the far reaches of her mind. A hand moved from her cheek to the back of her neck, pulling her close again and coaxing her chin to tilt up, meeting him with a welcome expression.

The caress of it was gentle at first, beguiling. Aaron's firm grip on her neck was intoxicating, and without second thought Barb found her lips parted exhaling a tensely held breath as Aaron's attention shifted. Shy kisses changed, becoming damp and fevered. She could taste him as he began to explore the deeper mysteries of her mouth. Pressure at the small of her back shifted to her hips, his long fingers wrapping around her hip to guide her backward until her spine met the log wall.

The heat of his chest pressed tightly to her kept Barb docile, dazed. Her arms remained limp in shock - the whirlwind change from scripted hopelessness to this banked heat left her scrabbling for purchase. Aaron drew her lower lip into his mouth, biting lightly and exhaling forcefully in frustration.

"Want me to beg, Lewis?" His voice was low, gravelly, as though he could growl it into her. Barb shivered as his hands kneaded into her sides, smoothing up along her ribcage before dragging those lost arms over his shoulders.

When she finally found her voice, it was rusty and low. "Later." Her hands awoke, fingers weaving together at the nape of his neck, pulling him back down. His lips didn't return

to hers, instead finding purchase on the thin skin of her neck. Barb instinctively released her head, allowing it to fall back and her eyes to gaze unseeing at the makeshift theatre. Teeth and tongue laved, kneaded, as though trying to get to the center of her. His hands had found their way under her practical flannel button-up, thumbing and pinching her nipples through the thin fabric on her bra, eliciting soft gasps.

Aaron tore away, moving to the shell of her ear. “Shh. Shh.” The whoosh of air along her ear did not distract her from tracing the sly movement of his hand from her breast down, caressing the apex of her thighs through her jeggings. Never before in her life had she thanked the consumer gods of America for inventing a fabric both so publicly appropriate and privately conducive of pressure. The delicious friction along the sensitive flesh of her inner thighs sent her into a compulsive frenzy. She hitched her knee up, attempting to hook her calf on the gentle slope of Aaron’s ass and grind into the attention. His thumb lazily traversed fore and aft on her bundle of nerves, slowing as the fabric dampened.

Barb couldn’t hold it, she began to release a high-pitched keen. Aaron muted her, covering her mouth with his, pinching her gently between a crooked finger and thumb. As he released her to breathe, he stepped away. Not a moment too soon - the couple on stage was taking a bow to the sad, bored applause of the campers. Barb’s vision had only barely returned to this plane of existence when the pair was tromping past her, ducking back into the main room from behind the forest green blanket.

The glimpse of the crowd not five feet from them cooled the fire in Barb's blood. Her eyes met Aarons, his brown gaze boring into her and his chest still heaving slightly.

How am I gonna end this?

### **Camp Warfare - Vandalizing Ads for local Divorce Attorneys**

Aaron watched his roommate like a predator. Barb had been biting her lip and fidgeting as she lay on the bed in their cabin, pretending to read ever since dinner had ended. She'd been avoiding his gaze. Normally this kind of behaviour would be a cold shower on his instinctual enthusiasm, but Aaron couldn't help but feel her expression betrayed her. Barb had been biting her lip and fidgeting as she lay on the bed, pretending to read ever since dinner ended. He'd glanced up periodically from his pretense of working on his laptop, keeping the memory of how those curves felt under his palms at the forefront of his mind.

Someone knocked on the door and Barb jolted.

"Alright campers, time for the fun to start!" The raspy voice of the Viking Goddess of breakfast victuals echoed through the thick wood. Aaron beat Barb to the door, but only just. He pulled it open to encounter Audrey's mischievous expression. "Grab something dark, and get in the van!" Wide eyed, the pair hustled to obey.

They piled into the van, squishing in amongst the other couples with youthful recklessness. Aaron forced his ass onto a seat between Abigail and Angelo and with fit of conniving genius wrapped his arm securely around Barb's waist, ensuring that her most natural and secure perch was his knee. At first she seemed uneasy - obviously they stood out even amongst the rowdy crowd Audrey had already gathered.

Once the van began its rumbling voyage, Barb seemed to relax into his hold. He allowed his hands to creep with every jolt and pothole, one spreading wide against her sternum and the other bracing her hip, thumb tracing warm circles. The darkness pressed in on all sides, and their companies caroused as they drove.

Abigail launched into a musical series of limericks, distracting them all thoroughly. Even Barb joined in with a particularly raunchy contribution. It was good to know where her thoughts were heading, even if he'd have to set a stage before they could act on them.

The bus trip took maybe eighteen limericks before they reached their destination. Audrey pulled the brake twisted back towards the group, a demonic glint in her eye.

"Alright folks, it wouldn't be camp without a rival camp nearby. Take these markers and get to work making Camp Hiawatha proud!" Audrey threw a thick bundle of black permanent markers back into the van, watching as her charges hesitantly passed them around.

“We have a rival camp?”

“There is one group whose purpose is in direct conflict with ours. Extra bacon tomorrow for whoever can guess...” Silence met her. “Fine, fine. There’s a cluster of signs, benches and ads for a firm of divorce lawyers in this area. Get going. Bacon goes to the most creative artist.” The gaggle disembarked, disoriented in the dark until a shadowy figure in front of them cracked glow sticks to light their feet. Audrey’s face looked eerie in the synthetic green light. Sensing their hesitation, she pulled one last prop from her coat - a small bottle of tequila. “Get going, lovebirds!”

Barb was the first to the tequila, taking a long swig before returning the bottle and claiming a glowstick. With a brief glance back to him, she disappeared into the darkness presumably to find a lawyer to deface. They bustled along, and Aaron found himself next to Samson yet again. Samson looked exhausted, beyond the help of tequila or tomfoolery.

“Not up to pranks tonight Sam?”

“Abigail skipped lunch again. So no, I’m not really excited to deface the ads of the people I’ll likely be calling next week.”

“Wait, what? I don’t follow your logic.”

“The hook-ups. They meet before afternoon therapy sessions. Abigail’s been ditching lunch to play around on me before we meet for fucking therapy.” Samson’s face was drawn, pale, or at least seemed so in the eerie light of the glowsticks.

“I’m sorry man, that’s rough.”

“I’ve been reading articles all night about how to work through infidelity and all that, but...” Samson shrugged. “I just don’t see a path back anymore.”

Aaron walked quietly with the glum man until they reached a billboard, perched upon a pole ten feet in the air. A considerate metal ladder led up to a narrow balcony.

“I, ah, I guess I know how you feel.” Aaron rubbed the back of his head, only remembering at the last minute that his goal here was to convince everyone that he and Barb were doomed to fail. “Sometime it’s not worth fixing.”

“Well I thought that when I got here, but... The program seemed to be working for the others. You and Madison seemed to be doing well. I got my hopes up.” Samson began climbing the ladder, calling down over his shoulder. “Guess you guys were lucky.”

Aaron stared at the pole, not following the progression of his compatriot to the balcony above. He should be nervous, it should terrify him that already two people had spotted the



natural chemistry between him and Barb. But the only feeling he could register was anticipation. Samson was right - he and Barb were lucky.

“I...I’ll be right back Samson. You got this one, right?” Aaron spun, moving purposefully back toward the van despite not truly knowing where Barb had run off to. He’d find her, it was guaranteed. Dancing around whatever it was that all these people could see between them was a waste of time. Out of the corner of his eye he spotted a cluster of green glowing stick illuminating familiarly patterned leggings and curling hair - she’d tucked one of them behind her ear like some faerie.

She was kneeling on bus bench, intent on a cartoonish zigzag mustache she’d drawn over the attractive lawyer “Susan Bingham”.

“Poor Susan. She’ll never get another client with facial hair like that.” Barb peaked over her shoulder before resting back on her heels. He couldn’t see her expression clearly - the fluorescent glow tinged her expression. It wasn’t a smile, though. Fine, she could be wary. She’s see reason in the end.

“I do feel bad. I’ve got no reason to do this to Susan anyway. It’s not like I’ll ever have to deal with her in person.”

“Because you’d never get divorced?”

“Because I’ll probably never get married.”

“You’ve got time, you know. It can’t hurt to wait for-”

She cut him off, her jovial tone transforming to something rushed, edgy. “Listen I tried that already. I tried the whole *one day my prince will come* schtick. It never pays off. I’m not going to sign up for a Disney package that delivers on on my deathbed.” He pictured her, sitting on a stoop waiting for something with an anxious heart to find it never was shipped. Aaron could hear the fear, and found himself taken aback by it. Sure, plenty of people swore off love when they were young. It was easy to make broad, unforgiving rules with no experience to poke holes in the logic.

He sat on the bench next to her, carefully leaving the recently scribbled mustache between them.

“Wouldn’t it be worth it? Everyone thinks it takes forever, why do you think I never risked what I had with Madison?”

Barb’s visible eye narrowed. “See, even you hid from that idealistic farce. You just hid next to a person, and I’m boldly avoiding it.”

“Boldly avoiding.” She had a point, he supposed. They’d both chosen paths they could be sure of. He’d known when he’d met Madison what she wanted.

“Fine, prick, I’m hiding from it. It’s not like outlook changes the results.”

“Sure it does.”

She crossed her arms. “I have empirical evidence it does not, thank you.”

“Really? How many guys have you confessed to?” God - he’d never paid attention back then. Barb had been so stoic, he’d just assumed she’d found them all to be unworthy.

“One a year through college. None after— ”

“After?” She fidgeted.

“A particularly interesting candidate performed in an especially disappointing fashion.”

His interest was peaked. “What year? Was this after I met you?”

Her face flushed. It was mesmerizing. “Technically, yes.”

“So I know him, eh?” Aaron leaned back, running his hands through his coiffed hair, pleased with the challenge.

Her face was tight, lips twisted in a grimace. “Ugh.”

“I bet I know him. You never told him. Why didn’t you?” His eyes were trained on her heels, as though the shimmy of her sandal would serve as a lie detector.

“You don’t know him. He liked Madison. They all do.” Infuriating.

“How long did you wait to test that theory out?”

“What makes you think I waited?”

He paused, watching her carefully.

“So one college idiot makes a naive choice, and you give up on a loving relationship?” He watches as Barb turns, taking a more normal seated position on the bus bench. Her body is still, as though she’s holding her breath.

“You’re making it sound like I have a vendetta. I just don’t want to hold my breath, okay?” Her eyes turn back to him, imploring his empathy. *Don’t call me crazy*, they seemed to

say. "I'm not scared, I just want to keep my expectations realistic." It sounded so rational when she said it like that. Somehow, it made his stomach boil. With a promise like that, only realistic expectations, she just seemed to assume that they'd all disappoint her.

Like *he'd* only disappoint her.

"Did you have expectations of that guy? The promising one?" She blushed - it was a dark green on the light green tinted skin. Her expression muddled, her eyes left his to stare into the dark around them.

"What girl really has expectations at that age? I was young - it was more of a fantasy. Now though, those fantasies come with more baggage. *I* come with baggage."

Fantasy. Shit, if that didn't word didn't send something electric down his spine. It made him hungry. Some loser had been Barb's *fantasy* and hadn't even noticed. What a fucking waste. Aaron desperately wanted to know - could he be her fantasy again? What would it be, now? But there was no way to ask, no amount of finesse could make that a natural question.

Her hand rested on his thigh, bringing his attention back to her from the distant reaches of regret he'd be exploring. "This all sounds so sombre, but it doesn't have to be." She smiled at him, the expression straining at the edges. "I haven't given anything up. You don't have to fix me, that's not what this camping trip is for. But thank you, for helping me out of that skit."

Aaron could feel his heart up in this throat, his mind casting back to that afternoon. To the way she'd felt in his arms, to the way she'd looked kneeling on that tiny stage. Her face had been open, vulnerable, aching. He swallowed hard, resting his hand on top of hers, fighting the urge to weave his fingers between hers.

“Any time.”

**In which Abigail throws some jabs, Barb tries to choke a bitch, and Aaron preserves the peace by the thin margin of a towel**

Morning light had begun to alleviate their desperate reliance on the lime green glowsticks before Audrey had them pile into the van to return to camp. Barb was more than ready to return to the relative comfort of her cabin.

Stupid Aaron and his stupid questions and nothing- *nothing*- got to her like those strangely poetic mornings when you felt like an indie band could have been the backing track. Her permanent marker had only just begun to go dry, thanks to an hitherto unforeseen artistic streak that led her to color in the intricate weave of lines in the background of the ad on her bus seat. Aaron had sat next to her, silent and focused on his own Banksy-project, both of them unwilling to touch the sensitive bundle of memories she'd finally exposed.

That she'd even dared to admit to him, in the most obscure terms she could think of, that he'd been the one that had broken her last grip on naive hope - she couldn't really believe it had happened. Barb Lewis, the law-maker, rational voice in a world of chaos, had confessed to heartbreak. It was inexcusable.

Or, at least, it was telling.

No woman admits to a secret crush unless that crush still flourishes. Barb knows it. Perhaps it's been shame, not creativity, that had motivated her extensive scribbles on the cheap plastic board below her.

"Alright guys, let's scam before the fuzz is back on patrol." Audrey, clapping and snapping, began to draw her lemmings back together. Barb followed the crowd dreamily, her only intention being to not appear to be directly following Aaron. Filing onto the bus, she grabbed her own seat. Six hours ago he had planted her on his thigh, held her along her ribcage, sent butterflies of anticipation and fear down her spine. Not again sir.

Perhaps he'd allowed her sit in her own space this time, but apparently her silence had not fully dissuaded him. Aaron sat immediately next to her, his hand twitching as it rested on his knee, drawing her full attention. Perhaps if she just grabbed it- no.

Watching his hand twitch was a strange experience. The van began to pull away, and Barb was only vaguely aware of the compressed presence of her campfellows. All she could see was the hand, entreating her to join him once more. Barb's mind replayed the last time that hand had been at her service, had crushed her sense of failure and isolation as surely as it had crushed her to him.

The memory was heady, to say the least.

Sleep deprivation- she'd heard that sleep deprivation had this effect.

Barb was oblivious, even to the steadily growing debate one row back between Abigail and Samson. She heard them, of course, but it was a buzz. Barb was almost thankful that they could disrupt the haze she found herself in.

When they'd finally clambored out of the car, the sun had risen above the horizon. It was still obscenely early. The morning air was empty of bird song, empty of insect chirps - wholly dew and sunbeams. Still Aaron was silent.

Barb could feel his eyes on her, could sense it like an arrow trained on her back. With slow, heady steps she moved toward the cabin. A shower would serve her well.



When she finally broke from the bathroom, steam following her like a trail of exhaust, abrasive knocking at their door greeted her.

Abigail stared through the screen, her face ruddy and twisted. Aaron sat on the bed, apparently relying on Abigail's sense of propriety to save him from whatever foul purpose she'd come to fulfill.

"Abby, what are you doing here?" Barb pushed through the screen door despite the relatively little covered her towel afforded her, out on the porch to console the previously amiable woman. She was woefully underprepared for the Dr Jekyll - Mr. Hyde transformation that awaited her.

"You stupid bitch, and your slut of a fiance - why don't you just mind your own business?" Abby's face was stormy, rife with fury and loss. Even so, the insults dripping from her lips caused Barb's spine to stiffen with offense.

"Come here and say that to my face, Abigail."

"Are you blind too? That's what I'm doing. You been telling Samson all your idealistic bullshit, but I know Aaron's been hanging out at the hook-up club. You're phoney. You're fake and now Samson thinks that you're some fantastic pair that puts us to shame."

“How dare you.” Barb started forward, her arm swinging back in an instinctive twitch to literally smack sense into the harpy in front of her, but her momentum was halted by a tug on her midriff. A glance down revealed Aaron’s hand had snuck along her front, just under the overlap on her towel. The under-edge was tightly pinched in between his long fingers, and she followed the line of them back up to his eyes, dancing with amusement. “You have to be kidding me.”

“If you’re gonna give me a show, make it one I want to see, dear.” The tension on the rough fabric was quite clear - if she moved forward even an inch, she’d lose this last stitch of modesty.

“She deserves a- How are you not upset?”

“I don’t need to be. But I’m flattered that you’re so ready to defend my honor.” Barb felt a flush unrelated to the battle fury heat her skin.

Abigail’s voice screeched, clearly aggravated by losing the spotlight. “Aargh! Disgusting!” Barb turned slightly to catch a glimpse of Abigail storming off huffily. They must make quite a picture - imagining it herself exacerbated the spread of heat along her face. Her hands relaxed from warrior’s fists, allowing the white knuckles to tingle from the resurging circulation.

“Come back inside dear, you’re making a scene.” God, his grin was shamelessly wolfish. Barb couldn’t tear her eyes away, even as his hand flattened out along the line of her torso, fingers extending beyond the coverage of the fluffy pink terry cloth to her damp skin below. Aaron tugged playfully, leaning down to guide her off of their narrow porch back into the rustic privacy of their cabin.

The tiny room had seemed enough space for them back when they’d been ambivalent acquaintances, but now it seemed cramped, tight, forcing the two of them into close proximity. Barb knew the inflection point- knew that the moment he’d pulled her up from her knees on that shitty stage she wouldn’t be able to fully maintain her composure. Now every environment seemed hell bent on reminding her of the swooping sensation Aaron had taught her years ago.

Aaron guided her over the threshold, firmly shutting the door while his eyes devoured hers. Would he say his brown eyes were oak, or more of a chocolate color? The lights were too low to tell for sure - they’d left them off when they’d arrived, and now the rising sun dimly warmed the room with the mellow hues. Her back pressed into the wall, his arms braced around her. Aaron wasn’t really that much taller than her, but in this position he seemed to take up all the air.

Barb could feel her spine lined perpendicular to each log in the wall, all except those few vertebrae that had begun to peel inward to support her buckling knees. His hand was lazily

trailing her arm, disturbing the delicate hairs there and sending shivering sensations into the pit of her stomach. Soft puffs of breath caressed the shell of her ear as Aaron's head bent over hers.

Feeling his tongue on her earlobe, tugging the flesh in between teeth, broke her control. A strangled noise ricocheted from deep in her throat. Barb's hands were hot, heavy, cramping from their chokehold on her towel. Aaron reached for one, tangling his fingers with her and pulling her arm back above her head. With her wrist pinned against the wall, Barb could feel her ribcage stretch, exposing her heart.

This was not shaping up to be one of those nebulous interludes, open to interpretation after the fact. Barb felt her heartbeat sink into its new rhythm, reminiscent of an EDM track from her aerobics class. Nothing could tempt her to pull away now, even knowing that the hunger driving her forward was exactly the sensation she'd been trying to avoid for her entire adult life.

Water droplets from her still-wet hair dripped down her neck, their cooling path proving a stark contrast to bewildering heat from her skin. Aaron followed their path with his mouth, pulling the tissue in between his teeth before soothing the welts with his tongue. He'd reached her collar bones before Barb had a chance to panic.

She'd expected him to continue down, to force them to the next level of vulnerability but he surprised her yet again. His head worked its way back up to the other side of her neck.

His instructions came urgently. “Grab my neck.” Barb frantically tucked what she could of her towel, freeing her hand to cup the nape of his neck. Aaron rewarded her, claiming her lips, pulling the bottom lip with his teeth and collapsing his hold from the wall down to press firmly beneath her shoulder blades. Barb’s skin itched, as though she were sewn into a snug casing. She writhed, her legs begging for support.

Aaron had been playing with her mind for the last two days, he’d been distressingly obvious about it. She knew when she’d chosen not to shut it down that they’d reach this point. Somehow the knowledge of it didn’t help keep her heartbeat in a casual rhythm.

He pulled her wrist from the wall, realigning her arm to pull her body flush against him. Barb could feel her breasts flush against the hard line of his chest, and bashful, turned her face to nestle in the curve of his neck. Aaron began to walk them backwards, stopping only when the side of the bed interrupted his path, and sitting back on the comforter.

Barb began to fall forward when Aaron caught her, pulling her onto his knee, fisting his hands into the terrycloth. He still smelled musty and wild, the natural spice of his own body dim underneath the evidence from their adventure with Audrey. She found herself leaning closer as though she could identify the source. Even so slight a movement as that caused a delightful friction where she straddled his thick thigh, and Barb gasped lightly at the sensation.

Barb began to rock back and forth, leaning on the support of the towel which Aaron was still gripping tightly, strung like an elastic band to hold them together. The pressure began to build, and she narrated the journey into his earlobe with delicate moans. She could feel her pleasure increasing steadily, unlike the strange fits and starts of her more common solitary efforts. Finally it became too much, Barb needed to reach her pinnacle - she reached down to take herself the rest of the way.

“No, trust me. I can get you there.” Aaron was suddenly holding her hands in his, the towel abandoned upon the floor behind her. He invaded her mouth, pulling her flush against him yet again until she could feel the heavy weight of him trapped beneath his jeans. His tongue was swallowing her cry of distress, of frustration at being thwarted.

Eyes tightly shut, focusing her senses on the achey slide of lips and tongue, Barb felt gravity take hold of her. Without time to consider the implications her back was suddenly pressed into the polyester blend of the comforter. Aaron’s weight disappeared. If that fucker thought this way good way to get her to trust him with her orgasm he better take a freaking health class.

Her eyes found him, standing at the edge of the bed slowly pulling off his shirt. He was fucking *smirking*. “I swear to god Aaron-”

“Not yet. But you will.” She choked a bit. *Damn.* Aaron had a swimmers’ body, broad shouldered and lean. The heat and constant sun had darkened his skin in strange patterns, most noticeably along his arms as his reached down to her again. Her eyes closed when his touch finally resumed, trying to narrow her focus to the sensation of his fingertips along her skin. The pads of his fingers lazily perused the skin of her thighs, drifting down along the sensitive boundaries likely as far as they could go from his towering position. A scraping noise, a small pop, and then his fingers increased their pressure with a silky slide of lubricant.

Aaron apparently wasn’t about to pull punches.

The wide pad of his thumb slowly worked around the shy nerves so indecently displayed before him. Barb held her breath, anticipating the sporadic flares of pleasure which increased in frequency as her body enthusiastically responded to his ministrations. At first she’d been able to restrain her movements to minor twists enabling Aaron to maintain his momentum, but stroke by stroke she lost control, her calves and thighs tensing and locking upward. Barb gripped the fabric below her hands reveling in the tension strumming along her tendons.

His low chuckle preceded him as Aaron leaned forward, pressing her legs up and away from her core. “Hold this, then.” He waited, his palms burning the skin while her own wrapped around the limbs, searching for sustainable orientations. “Good. Very good.” The timbre of his voice had dropped, shaking a little even with so little to say. Disgusting, how much excitement

slithered through her at the prospect of being so vulnerably splayed, aching for the meager praise he'd deigned to deliver.

“Shut. Up.” The words spilled out between gulps of air.

His thumb sped up, joined by deft fingers exploring and expanding the channel below. Barb's eyes cracked slightly open, confusion flooding her when she was met with empty air. Confusion until his thumb was replaced by the cool damp of his tongue. She whimpered, brain unable to translate the sensation into her standard lexicon of erotic touches. Looking down, trying to see and understand, proved fruitless. Aaron's mop of hair blocked her view of all but the curve of his eyebrow, contorted with intense focus. Satisfied with the idea that he would take this service so seriously Barb allowed her head to fall back, staring at the bare beams of the cabin with absent approval.

She wasn't prepared for the lightning-surge of pleasure when his lips firmly sucked the sensitive nub, eliciting a broken sob. He'd been playing her like a cello, and each tug served as an aggressive note until finally the string snapped. Barb felt a warm flood of sensation, unfamiliar and addictive. Drunk and flushed, she tried again to look down at him. Now he met her gaze, his face slick with the evidence of her release. One arm was slung up along her torso, and the other hid from view. Aaron's eyes too were distance, distracted.



He stood, and Barb blushed at the haphazard arrangement of fabric to obscure his erect cock. Clearly, he'd been trying to assuage something while she returned from the astral plane he'd sent her to. Aaron moved with languid grace, leaning to grab a fistful of foil packets from the bedside table.

“This is where you sign the release form and I make you blaspheme.” Cocky son of a bitch. Aaron had already tossed the condoms onto the bed next to her, peeling the wrapper of a single packet open while carelessly wiping his face on his arm. Euphoria bubbled up, sending a throaty burst of laughter up and out.

Aaron glared playfully at her, apparently unwilling to break character from whatever action hero he thought he was playing. With a coy tilt of her head, Barb met the challenge. “Yes sir.”



Barb felt the cool of the sheets on her fevered cheek, a sobering influence fighting the sentiment swirling inside prompted by the weight of Aaron's arm around her waist. This... this couldn't be ignored. She couldn't forget how strong she felt, even knowing they had so much at risk, the strength of having a partner in crime. Aaron's breathing was steady - he must have drifted off.

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## MIDPOINT

Aaron's lethargy was disturbed by successive intrusions. First a vibrating and beeping contraption attempted to wake him, then the cold air replacing Barbara's warm body crept in amongst the covers of their cozy nest. He'd have endured the first if not for the second.

He sat up, allowing the sheets to pool around his waist. Sleepy residue had crusted around his eyes, and his throat clamored for relief from the nighttime leaving a strange taste in his mouth. Looking to the bathroom, Aaron saw the shut door. Ah, that would explain where Barb had escaped to.

Her temporary absence provided an ample opportunity to dwell on the recent memory. The way she'd arched under his touch, relaxed as he'd demonstrated his thorough method. The soft cries she'd made as he'd edged her closer and closer to her climax would haunt him, hopefully forever. Her success had felt like his personal victory, a badge of honor.

Aaron had replayed it all, step by step, three times before he began to feel concern for Barb sneak in. She'd camped in the bathroom for what seemed an excruciatingly long time,

especially as his own body twinged for relief. Impatient, he crawled out of bed to pace the room. Movement did not provide the distraction he hoped for, but he was not left with his thoughts long. Barb's voice leaked around the door, tremulous and earnest.

“--don't know. Is it..ethical?”

“That's how it started but it's changed.”

“You're... you're right. Of course you're right.”

Barb must be on the phone, and she sounded concerned. The soft click of the phone hitting porcelain was the only indication that the call was over, and Aaron scampered back to the bed to hide his snooping. The door creaked open before he could climb back under the covers, and Barb was in stead greeted with his full naked form standing awkwardly in the middle of the room.

“Oh! Oh, sorry, the bathroom is free. I hope I didn't wake you.” Her hair was tousled, auburn curls in every direction. Barb began to move towards him, awkwardly judging the path that would be both close to him but not so close as to be presumptive. Aaron reached out, trailing his hand up her wrist to the inside of her forearm to firmly lead her back to him.

Her eyes were wide, entreating. Aaron claimed her lips, lingering over them as he rested his hand on her hip, lazily rubbing circles into the bare skin. “Good morning.” She blushed prettily, the easy reaction soothing his primal need to have power over her in every way.

“I think we can sleep in a bit longer. Give me a second and I’ll join you.” He rushed to the bathroom, speeding through the motions with just enough time spent on removing his morning breath. When he returned to the main room, she was tucked under the comforter, the rolling fabric hinting at a luxurious spread into what had been his half of the mattress.

## Round 2 round 2!

### **Aaron gets his girl all the potatoes**

Barb looked down at her array of victuals, bravely won from the stoic guardian of foodstuffs. Something was amiss. Two scoops of macaroni casserole, one bowl of cheesy potatoes, one fudge bar, one apple, one banana, one bowl of cheesy potatoes - wait.

Her eyes rested on the second bowl of delicious, magical potatoes. Audrey, while no enemy of the people, was not generous. She would never have allowed anyone other than her few favorites to walk away from the line with *two* bowls of the precious tubery goodness. And try as she might to be charming, Audrey would not melt her icy exterior to bond with Barb.

She cast her gaze a few inches across the table, suddenly sheepish. There was only one explanation. Aaron had secured her a second helping. But why? She wasn't exactly at risk for malnourishment.

Perhaps he just hadn't wanted his. That made sense.

The potatoes were tasty, at least. Something warm threaded through her, most likely the sunshine through the cracks of the blocked wooden shutters lining the mess hall. All was right in the world, until *she* walked in.

Barb had sworn that no woman would ruin the flavor of her meal back when she'd first realized that a competitive streak ran through her as surely as blood through a vein. Apparently the lessons of college had faded into the background - god forbid. And so the tainted wave of emotion rose from the rustic wood paneling at her feet, past the cheap plastic salt shakers, until it rested at eye level to taint every impression of the world.

Abigail seemed chipper, untouchable. She'd be a bitch, except it was hard to hate the person that proved a catalyst for, well, a damn good time. The best course of action would be to avoid eye contact, avoid Abigail entirely. Defiance flooded her senses, just as Barb resolved to be passive.

Screw this woman that tried to come at her and her- the man. Screw. Her. She wrenched her gaze up from the romantic potatoes to peruse the hall, projecting the fearless warrior she wanted to be. Abigail could come at her, brah.

The actual conflict was less satisfying than her euphoria over embracing the idea of conflict.

“Barb.”

“Abigail.”

“I hope you had a pleasant evening.”

Barb could hear the potential responses reverberating in her mind. She had to choose wisely - whatever she didn't say would follow her into every bathroom for weeks, part of a compulsive role play. “I did, and you?”

Abigail huffed, cheeks flushing. “No. I've been hungover for hours. I'm sorry, I was apparently a bit of a-” Heinous bitch? Feckless mongrel? Tyrant shitwaffle? “Bully. It was a mistake. I hope you can forgive me.”

Ugh. For a human enduring a hangover, that was a quality apology. It wouldn't do to be *that girl* that couldn't rise above discord. Abigail would not be allowed to sour the camp on top of her already disillusioned breakfast.

"I appreciate the apology Abigail. No harm done. Sit down, there's only a few minutes before Capture the Flag starts on the quad." Ufdah, hearing 'the quad' come out of her mouth gave her a severe case of vertigo. Barb could almost feel the pimples awakening from their pubescent slumber, eager to ruin her life once again.

Luckily distraction for both her and the burgeoning acne arrived, in the unanticipated form of their pseudo king and queen of camp. The voices of Audrey and Eustace lilted in between the wooden slats dividing the cafeteria from the lush outdoors.

"What the fuck were you thinking? We need the county to be on our side, Audrey."

"I'm thinking our camp needed a little rivalry, and that bitch tried to drain you dry during the divorce. Call me crazy."

"That's cute. Call you crazy. What makes you think that would be a stretch at this point? You're becoming a liability."

"Oh come on."

“If anything happens like this again Audrey, I’ll have to have to leave. I can’t have pissed on lawyers driving up here from town.”

“You. You can’t be serious. I’m not even in the way, I just serve food.”

“Yeah, because I can’t trust you to be a counselor any more.”

“Fuck you. I am as important a figure in our camp as I ever was.”

“My camp, Audrey. Mine.”

“Eustace I swear on the soul of my own dissertation that if you *dare* tell me-”

“*Listen* to me Audrey. I can’t deal with your shit. You signed the documents. I can’t help why you did it, you just did it. This is where we are now. So when I tell you you’re on thin ice, you better fucking believe it and shape the hell up.”

Listening in quickly become untenable when Audrey burst through the main doors, pausing only momentarily to glare at the campers. Their sassy, cool valkyrie hero’s cheeks were blotchy and red. Her black ponytail whipped furiously as she fled into the kitchen. Like shamed children watching mommy and daddy fight at the dinner table the campers ate in silence.



## **Adventures in Hiding the Familiarity of Recent Fucking**

Aaron's POV

### **Moar Vittles**

Barb bounced on her toes, humming to herself. She knew she was making a minor spectacle of herself, but there was song in her head that she couldn't shake. If anyone asked her to name the tune, she'd have an issue - it was a strange combination of a pop song and a musical theatre solo she'd done once in school, spliced into a pattern that supported a ceaseless refrain of 'Tapioca, tapioca pudding.' Sometimes there were other lyrics - 'Oh so sweet,' 'Classy treat,' 'Like to eat', and so forth.

Aaron stood in front of her, cheating a glance over his shoulder in what could be considered fear. If he knew what was good for him he'd turn right around and mind his own business.

The line moved quickly this evening - clearly her comrades were finally getting the hang of cafeteria dining. Easy-to-serve fried fillets of cod and premeasured paper cups of tartar sauce were efficiently distributed to each camper's tray, culminating in the coveted cup of creamy dessert.

Barb watched it slide on her tray as she dreamily followed the blob of color she knew to be Aaron back to their galley table. After a mumbled “Looks decent,” and a brief detour to refill the transparent red plastic water cups stacked on their table, the two of them tucked in.

Half the fish and all of her tartar sauce was gone before she noticed it.

A second dainty bowl of tapioca pudding.

It sat unobtrusively on the opposite side of her tray from her original bowl.

Barb leaned back, trying to pass the movement off as a readjustment on the bench. Her covert glance confirmed that Aaron still had his own bowl.

He’d... he’d gotten her a second bowl. Audrey with her extreme favoritism had granted him extra goodies and he’d slid them under her nose like a bashful toddler. Barb pursed her lips together, trying and failing to fight the pleased grin spreading across her face. She picked up the bowl - the extra one he’d secured for her - and carved into it with gusto. As she savored each bite, she allowed her eyes to rest on Aaron, daring him to look up.

Aaron did not look up. But he did turn bright red.

**Dale calls to check in**

**When is he getting this call? He's got to be alone, in a good mood**

At first, Aaron doesn't recognize the tinny noise coming from his luggage. *"I'm right I know I'm right-*" The cellphone snaps open in his hand, automatically accepting the call in response to the calibrated motion.

"Aaron! You answered! I expected to need to leave a voicemail, and be satisfied with a half-hearted text sent back in the middle of the night."

"No such luck bud - I only send you night texts when it's my turn on the floor."

"You sound pretty chipper for a man spending half his weeks on the floor." Aaron can't choke down the chuckle leaking from his throat. Dale is silent for a few moments, perhaps wondering if he's hearing correctly. "Does this mean that things are going well with Madison?"

"Phht." Anxiety starts to weave its way from his animal brain to his prefrontal cortex. How much can he really tell Dale? Dale who secured special leave to ensure he'd have this opportunity to work out the damage from Madison. Dale who was his close friend but also his *boss*. "Well, I won't be hung up on Madison when I come back to work."

"Then the leave has been well spent. Now give me the details."

“So, funny thing, it turns out Madison-”

“Is an illegal immigrant from France and has been deported? Has turned communist and will be moving to a nudist sanctuary in California?”

“Accidentally sent a friend from college to this retreat instead of attending herself.”

Dale was silent. Aaron briefly considered pulling up a game of minesweeper to stay occupied while his friend processed.

“Is this friend female?”

“Thank god, yes.”

“Is this friend... interesting?”

“She’s sure kept my attention.”

Dale wheezed a laugh. “Well that’s good news. You needed a good fling anyway.”  
*Fling.* Fling. Aaron tested the word out silently, trying to figure out why there was suddenly a stone resting in the bottom of his lungs.

“I mean, I don’t think I needed a *fling* persay.”

“OH. Oh, well, good for you. I’m glad she’s fling-plus. Are you saying you... are attached to this friend of your ex-girlfriend?”

“Hey, Barb was my friend too, back then. I knew her as well as I knew Madison, outside of the more fun type of knowing.” Silence met him. His spine tightened, and Aaron knew it was defensiveness, and it was shameful. Dale would never *attack* him, there was no need to feel like he had to fight. “Listen, I know it sounds like I’m just looking for a rebound. Barb isn’t a rebound. I know what it’s like to have a body next to you because you don’t want to be alone. That was Madison. Not Barb.” Never Barb.

Dale huffed. “Aaron, I just don’t want to see you get hurt again right away. You’re a grown man, you know what you want.” Relief flowed from behind his ears down to his fingertips. “But do you know that’s what this is for her?”

“She-” Aaron cut himself off. Barb wants a family, that’s for sure. Barb hasn’t had a major relationship, because of general lady anxiety reasons from what he can tell. There isn’t a reason she would *not* want to, well, explore their options. But how would he know that the exploration was about him, more than just curiosity?

If it was just curiosity, he'd be lying to himself to say it would be okay. Sure, he'd survive. But he wouldn't be okay.

"I'll make sure I know what it is." Silence stretched on. Dale's concern was palpable. Knowing that Dale would just want his friend back at the end of this adventure, not the moody monster that had haunted the halls of their building, was perhaps a bit of a burden. Somehow in the moment it also felt like an anchor holding him down to reality while the camp tried to whisk him away into a faerie therapy land.

"So." Aaron's voice was dry, brusque as he changed the subject. "How are the newbies doing while the cat is away?"

"Oh I have no idea. I think I might have heard the sprinklers go off on that floor. Did you leave them with anything flammable?"

### **Ballad of Eustace and Brenda**

Audrey weaved drunkenly down the path towards the glow of fire, each step memorized from years of routine travel. Only muscle memory could protect her now, after she'd broken the seal on some *very* dubious liquor left in the kitchen. Someone was cracking jokes as she went. "Oh Audrey, you're so dependable." Where had she heard that before? Oh yeah, from *Eustace*.

The charming perpetual bachelor, dedicated to giving these screw-ups a second chance. She paused, having spotted a condescending smirk in the bark of an oak.

“What, you think you’re so special? What’s the camp got that I haven’t got?”

Of course, who gave a shit what the oak thought. It was Eustace’s opinion she wanted. She already knew the spiel - Eustace grew up a lover of amenities. His older sisters would command the remote on weekday nights when their parents were out, forcing him to suffer through old romantic flicks contrasting a big city hero with the suburban girl next door, and the memory was preserved with a protective coating of disbelief. Anyone who’d lived in the metropolis, embraced with community and moving with urban rhythm would require more than mere infatuation to sacrifice it for the wilderness.

That was the Eustace she met, in the beginning. Inherently relatable, when they’d started the program together. The years through their graduate, masters and doctoral education dulled the passionate attachment to civilization. Dulled, not destroyed. It was dim enough that when their fellow counseling psychology practitioners planned a celebratory trip through the Panamanian jungle, he’d casually opted in. *Not* attending was sure to feel worse in terms of abandonment than roughing it in a forest.

Audrey patted the oak, and four others like it as she moved along the path. “You’re no Panama, oak.” They may have been mocking her, but all the same the steady oaks guided her to

the bustling group of campers roasting marshmallows. Silence swallowed up their lighthearted weather-based banter, leaving an insulting wound of discomfort in the clearing.

“What?” The box tucked under her arms jostled loudly as she sat, forcing herself between the two losers on the nearest bench. “You telling ghost stories?” The faces turned to her, politely masking their alarm. Whatever, they were all accomp. Accompli. They were in on it. Abigail though, she just looked interested.

“Once upon a time there was a Prince with a stick up his butt. He went on an adventure with his trusted advisor, and saw the world.”

Their comrades had been small in number, five or so that coordinated to minimize taxi and luggage costs. Their era of making enough money to survive were just about to start, making this adventure an indulgence they couldn't officially afford. Despite that, as their unofficial coordinator Audrey had hired a guide to ensure they maximized the experience.

She gulped, the firelight making her thirsty again. After a quick swig, just enough to wet the lips for her story, the words flowed. “The advisor wanted the adventure to go well, especially for the Prince, so she hired a witch that knew the land well.”

When Eustace had met their wilderness guide Brenda his conviction to remain a city boy was demolished. Brenda, whom always seemed to look perfectly comfortable and poised in



completely unpredictable situations. Night after night they'd fall into easy rapport over the campfire, him explaining his couples counseling aspirations, and her telling stories of the people she'd seen fall in and out of love over the course of her curated adventures. Eustace was mesmerized, his imagination fully captured by the wealth of her informal experience.

Somebody finally spoke up, reminding Audrey that the pauses for effect only worked if the orator kept going eventually. "The witch was Brenda. Fucking Brenda. She bamboozled the Prince, and the adventurers went home none the wiser."

The first year, his first major job after becoming a doctor, fed into the new idea of dissatisfaction with the fast-paced city life. Clearly everyone was swamped with stimuli, with stress. His patients couldn't focus, couldn't take time to formulate the words to express their more complicated feelings. Some of them clearly just needed to take a step away, take away the distractions and obstructions. He'd dreamed of it, but kept his nose to the grindstone. Three years flew by. Brenda reached out to their group, offering a discount on a reunion trip. They'd all pounced on it.

Audrey had changed the most of all of them since their Panama adventure. Her career hadn't gone according to plan, and she'd had to take a more creative path. The rest of them had stuck to the established trajectory, were comfortable if slightly burnt out. Brenda guided them through a safe domestic camping trip, nothing more exotic than canoes and geese. Even without the thrill of getting through immigration and determining what is or is not potable drinking

water, their spirits perked up. Their jokes became less safe, their laughter less controlled over the course of the week. Audrey seemed to relax slower, and perhaps never really fully let go.

Brenda cut through any caution or hesitation like a hot knife through butter. She was exactly as Eustace remembered, bold and beautiful. He never wanted the trip to end. He said as much over the campfire on one of the last nights, after the group had polished off a bottle of scotch and bag of marshmallows. After his emotional slip, other things began to fall from his lips. Dreams and conjecture he'd never told his coworkers or peers before, as they'd presented only a niche opportunity.

But Brenda wasn't concerned with how his ideas fit in with established counseling structures or the healthcare system. All Brenda cared about was that those ideas combined something she knew intimately with something he knew. In her eyes it was flawless, guaranteed to soar. Her glowing endorsement, enthusiasm, rocketed Eustace forward.

It wasn't a year before he'd purchased the land in the northern district of the state - an old YMCA camp that ran out of campers. Not two before he'd proposed to Brenda, eyes gleaming with a manic tinge. Not three before the whole thing was about to flop, ruining her friend's career.

“When the witch had finished her game, she steered the Prince to a cliff and told him to fly.” The faces around the fire were no longer facing her. Each one stared into the fire, as

though the flames were dedicated dancers for each story they'd wanted to hear. "So the advisor took all of her wisdom and turned into a tree." What would she be, hmm? One of those exotic Panamanian varietals? "An oak. And she reached out into the ravine, plucking the Prince from danger."

"This story sucks." The blurry figure of Sammie rose from the other side of the fire.

"Shut up, Samson." One of the chicks was sticking up for her, huh? How sweet.

"Yah, shut up Sammie. It's a metaphor, it's deep."

"You guys are going to endure this trash? She's just moaning over Counselor Bearclaw."

Indignation, and maybe a pinch of nausea had her swinging to her feet. "Moaning? I'm fucking deep, asshole. I'm a real therpis-" The box spilled from her arms, papers and a wooden carving flying from the lid now askew. Fire claimed the figurine quickly, but the papers fluttered like feathers in the night before settling nearby in the firelight.

Someone picked up the thick sheif that had flopped nearest to her now spinning feet. "Is this a deed?" The voice sounded tremulous, disbelieving.

"Tcheah, it is. I owned half this shit. And I sold it to Eustace."

“Is this an *installment plan*? Laid out for forty years? This is the worst financial arrangement I’ve ever seen. They teach therapists about contracts in school, right?”

What did they know, they couldn’t understand. None of them knew how to savor another person. Not like she could savor someone. Her lip trembled, asking for another swig of whatever was burning so pleasantly down her throat. Hard to tell at this point what it was. “We were partners in all the ways that mattered. This was his dream and *I saved it*.”

They didn’t understand. They couldn’t. Eustace would get mad if he found out she was airing the dirty laundry to their precious clients. *Counselor Bearclaw* had his own campy version of professionalism to maintain, after all.

Audrey jolted as human hands, not the skin of her oaks, circled her arms as though to contain her. A familiar voice mumbled, before another shadowy figure began to loom behind him. “Audrey, you remember me right? Aaron? Samson and I are gonna walk you back to your cabin. Don’t worry, we’ve got your stuff right here.” Her head felt so heavy. The swirling greens and greys of the woods had darkened to red and black.

“Mmm. Aaron.” He - he’d been funny, maybe. Angry, too. At least, he hadn’t been one of the sad ones. Audrey grabbed at his shoulder, squeezing as though appraising an avocado. “Ripe.”

The boys spun her around, guiding her over the log and back into the night. Their arms locked around her elbows, making every step float like a cumulus after a storm. She would be set away again, her attempt to be vulnerable rebuffed in typical camp fashion. Tears pricked at her eyes, and for the first time that night Audrey was happy to know she'd probably only remember half of the evening.

### **Samson and Aaron play a prank**

Audrey had been a stone cold bummer on their fire. Just a few peaks at Barb had made it very clear to Aaron that if that particular sob story wasn't wrapped up and poured into bed, he'd have a sobbing creature in his bed instead of... well. Abigail on the other hand seemed totally enraptured, somehow managing to not expose herself to empathy in Audrey's fairytale. Barb though- she looked like she'd seen a ghost. Except that people these days were less likely to die of heartbreak and haunt a moor. At least people other than Audrey.

"Do you think we can right the ship after this?" Samson appeared to give his question some thought before responding. For better or worse, Audrey's quarters were far removed from their fire pit, making it all the more impressive that she'd found them in the first place. The bottle she'd sloshed from in between sentences was empty by the time they'd had the good sense to try and restrain her - it was anyone's bet if it'd been brandy or something more hallucinogenic.

For his own sake Aaron had his money on absinthe - that screwed up fairy tale would be more tolerable as a bad trip, instead of reality.

“Sure, we just need to do it forcefully.” Samson seemed confident - perhaps he’d done this before. Saved a shit evening with a little misdirection. “Humor won’t work though, we’ll have to spook ‘em to get their minds off of Audrey.”

“Spook?”

“What, you’ve never played a prank? Damn, Aaron. It’s a good thing you finally came to camp. You’re long overdue for a little chaos.”

“Pranks are not spooks. Spooks are what you find in a B horror movie before the slutty character gets eaten by a mutant frog.”

“Oh come on Aaron. I need to get that gleeful look off of Abigail’s face for, like, five seconds.” The engrossed expression on Abigail’s face *had* been... disturbing. Wiping it off for a moment would be satisfying.

“Fine, what’s the plan?” Already the early sketches of a perfect heist, drawn from years of movies and comic material ran through his mind. “Scary story and a jump? Fake spider? Bear attack?”

Samson appeared unimpressed. “Like those will be enough to scare Barb. If Barb stays chill, Abigail will too just to save face.” Any traces of twilight on the horizon had winked out, leaving Aaron to puzzle over Samson’s intense focus blind. “Okay, here’s the deal. You’re gonna plunge in, say something got me, and be really freaked out.”

Aaron nodded along - so far this seemed innocent enough.

“Then, get them out in the woods to look for me and I’ll take care of the rest.”

“You’ll take care of it? Are you going to murder us all or something? Did you miss your meds this morning?” Samson laughed, and it sounded normal. God, that better be what normal laughter sounded like, suddenly Aaron couldn’t be sure.

“I got this. Alright I’ll dip out here. Bring them out on the north side of the fire, like you lost me on our way back from Audrey’s.”

And then, like a ghost in the night Samson was gone. The only way through this was forward at this point. Aaron walked steadily back along the dark path to the firepit, following the sounds of their ladies’ laughter. Somehow the two managed to enjoy each other despite fundamental differences in temperament, which never failed to astonish.

Just before he broke the light of the clearing, Aaron paused. He had to get into the right mindset if he was going to be convincing. There had to be a memory that would serve - nothing actually camp related to draw from, as he'd been a tired camper in his youth and never stayed up late enough for pranks. No, it would have to be something abstract. Next closest approximation of the panic he had to inspire was the last time he'd taken Madison to Lollapalooza. She'd dosed on something, or so he'd thought, and wandered into the crowds with her phone off. He'd been consumed by frustration and fear, that she'd redirect his focus for the entire weekend to ensuring that she hadn't been spirited away.

He was ready.

Aaron burst into the clearing, looking first around the empty seats as though Samson would have beat him back. "Samson? Ah shit." The ladies twisted to face him, making as if to stand. "You guys haven't seen him have you?" Before they could answer, he ducked back into the dark. Adrenaline began to course through him - this *was* fun, after all.

He could hear them mumbling, enticing him to crawl closer. "What was that about?" and maybe "Should we follow him?" Time to work the crowd. Aaron plunged forward again, but this time they were ready for him.

"Aaron, what the fuck is going on?"



“I can’t find Samson. We were goofing off on the way back from Audrey’s and-”

Abigail did *not* apparently like that.

“You just abandoned him?” God her face looked different when it was serious.

“No, come on don’t be like that-”

Barb came to his rescue. “Listen, this is a waste of time. Let’s just look for him.” They grouped together briefly, caught in the narrow gap of the two logs that had been their seating. Aaron broke through first, leading them back into the woods where mischief awaited. Darkness crowded close, eavesdropping on their every murmur.

“So, what were you even doing when he, er-”

“We were walking back and thought we heard someone off the path, sounding not so great.” Aaron racked his mind, desperate for a story both believable and terrifying. “We thought maybe Bearclaw went on a bender too, and might need some help. After looking for a while we gave up and turned back to the path. I could have sworn he was right behind me-”

“Oh shut up *shut up*.” Abigail’s voice twisted into a squeal of displeasure, punctuated by a weak smack on his arm.

They set to the search, plaintively calling for their friend into the inky night. Barb and Abigail stayed close, hands never more than an inch away from the others' arm as though in danger they would cling together. Something about it rankled, and it only took a moments curiosity to realize the subtle anger was green tinged.

Aaron debated the prospect of creeping closer, becoming the logistically practical source of comfort - sure, he'd be less able to spot Samson's prank when it finally happened, but when it *did* happen Barb would be almost guaranteed to jump into his arms. It would be worth it. Aaron started forward, calling softly to Barb. Just as she turned back to face him, something grabbed his legs and whipped them out from under him, dragging him despite his panicked shouts back into the brush.

The screams of the women followed him, echoing in his ears just as his eyes began to adjust from his new position within the brush. Samson loomed over him, knelt beside his prostrate form. "Come on Price, we gotta find a better vantage point." And with so little overture the poltergeist of a man leapt away, back into hiding.

Aaron's body ached, protesting the violence of it all. Yet if he didn't move all the effort would be useless, so he motivated himself up into a crouch and around to a discrete place along the path they'd walked.

Barb was supposed to be the level-headed one, that was the only reason he'd thought this would be any fun in the first place. He'd never in his wildest dreams expected to be peering at her through the gaps in the bushes, watching her sob brokenly after Abigail inquires, voice timid and small, "Do you think he's okay?"

All he can see is her shoulders, the light from the campfire too distant to do more than cast long shadows between the innocent pine boughs.

"I saw him-" a wet gulping noise interrupted her attempts to speak. "Something pulled him out over the- "*wheeze* "over the ledge. I couldn't see" *hic* "I couldn't see him from-" No, no this wasn't going to fucking fly. Samson would have to forgive him for ruining the joke, but this was too much to watch.

With as little drama as possible, Aaron stood from the bushes to quickly reach his prey. "It's fine, it's fine, it was a jo- " Better not get her angry at him quite yet, "Everything is okay." He leaned around her, wrapping one arm full across her shoulder blades, his bare knees wincing in pain as he kneeled at her side.

Barb jolted, revealing watery eyes and blotchy cheeks. Her bottom lip trembled before she squeezed her eyes shut, forcing air through her nostrils in what might have been an attempt to remain calm. "You. You are okay. *How* are you okay?" By the end of it the tightness of her

eyes transformed from an act of control to an expression of suspicion. Rubbing her back in tight circles, attempting to sooth, was becoming rapidly less effective.

“Samson and I-” and there, there was rage. The way fury transformed Barb’s face was actually magic. It was a pity there were so few opportunities to truly observe it without getting punched in the gut immediately after. Her fist shot forward into his stomach like a piston, a stealthy and forceful weapon befitting the night around them.

“*Oh*” It came out as a breathy moan, the only exclamation his lung could complete. That- he’d deserved that. Maybe not for the original intent, but definitely for the final outcome. Not to say that he regretted it, exactly. It was unlikely that he’d forget the fierce satisfaction that ricocheted between his ribs when he’d realized that Barb had firstly followed his disappearing body almost over a ledge, and then mourned him with what a romantic would call passion immediately after.

It was harder to recall right now exactly, curled into the fetal position watching the two women return to the fire in the distance and waiting for the pain to subside. But later.

**Transition from spooky romp to cabin**

**What happens between call with Dale and call with Madison? Something to reinforce that he needs to find a definitive answer**

Samson never showed up - clearly having smelled the pungent tinge of resentment, he'd known not to dare show his face. Barb stared into the fire, Abigail seated close on the same log. A clear message to the men - *we are not waiting for you*. Abigail seemed uncomfortable with the silence stretching endlessly. She twitched with the crack of every stick amongst the embers, but even knowing that her accomplice was uncomfortable failed to inspire peacemaking in Barb's heart.

Rustling from behind them grew louder over the course of a quarter of a hour. A part of her was terrified that something else was there, something truly terrifying that would take advantage of her wounded pride. That traitorous voice within her was easily subdued with the recollection of her shame - stupidly believing that god damn Aaron Price was hurt. Foolishly panicking about his welfare at the slight provocation of a camp prank. The swooping sensation when he'd suddenly been gathered close around her, and the hot burn of shame when she'd realized just how much she'd exposed herself were vivid reminders of just how much steel needed to be put back into her spine to survive this trap-camp.

Bearclaw would never believe that they weren't reconciling if he'd seen a display like that. And convincing Bearclaw of *that*, believe it or not, was why she was here at all. Without

the incentive of the retainer fee promised by Aaron, she'd have packed up on day 2 and trucked back to town just in time for dinner with Dad.

Finally the rustling of the bushes ceased, and Aaron appeared. He hobbled weakly around the bushes, watching her with wary and entreating eyes. There was something else different about his expression - determined. Abigail broke the silence, and Barb thanked her silently for it. She would not speak to this con-artist whom had stolen the body of rule-following fuddy-duddy Aaron.

“So... Samson didn't go missing?”

He huffed a laugh, but it came out about three pitches higher than his normal baritone. Good, that meant his balls remembered her fury. “Nope, Samson just wanted to lighten the mood.”

Barb found the idea ridiculous. Samson, whom had been a complete push-over for the last eight days suddenly decided that spooking folks was a good idea? To be fair, he wasn't *wrong*. Audrey's story had sent her deep into her own thoughts, and she'd been planning to leave for the cabin as soon as they'd arrived back at the fire. A palate cleanser would have been nice- but the path to hell was paved with good intentions like Samson's.

Aaron sat, legs bending over the edge of the log nearest her, his body leaning as though to entreat what he had better not fucking dare say in front of Abigail. If he even *attempted* to acknowledge how much of a mess she'd become, she was staunchly prepared to thrust his floppy mop of hair into the bonfire.

His physical presence did grow hard to ignore, however. It felt like his nose was second by second inching towards her cheek, and she couldn't afford to look. She would not acknowledge him. He *would* be unimportant to her, feelings and instinct be damned. Barb hadn't expected to feel any positive emotion toward Samson from now to eternity, but when he emerged from the bushes on the other side of the fire with a loud thrash a slick surge of relief rocketed up in her lungs.

He looked jolly as fuck. "Ladies," The puckish asshole bowed with a flourish.

"Where the fuck did you get the idea that this was a cool move, pal?"

"Um, it *was* a cool move. Now neither of you can possibly moan about Audrey being a complete sad-sack. You're both welcome."

Barb stood, noticing her hands had balled into fists and not bothering to soften them. "Next time, no thank you. I'm not into your type of topic change." She could feel Aaron stand behind her, could sense the heat of his hand reaching to her shoulder to placate. Barb waited for

it to touch down, wanting the satisfaction of making his body move when she finally wrenched away.

And it was satisfying.

“God Abigail, how did you pick this jerk anyway.” Abigail began to answer before cutting herself short. The orange light of the fire flickered over her face, framing the shifting expression as it moved from rebellion to confusion. She cheated a look to Samson.

“I... I was in trouble with one of my old boyfriends. Things were getting ugly, and Samson stepped in.” She stopped there, as though there was nothing more to tell. Samson shifted in the darkness, shadows highlighting the softening of his brow. Silence stretched on, until the intimacy of the look between the two was almost unbearable. Aaron coughed from behind Barb, startling everyone.

Abigail’s jump was accompanied by a furious blush. “And you? Was Aaron’s drama skill what reeled you in?” Barb considered the question. She was so tired, pretending to be Madison felt like a burden she’d underestimated. Aaron beat her to it.

“We met in college. She was hard to read, but I was too desperate to wait and jumped her at her apartment when her roommate was out.”



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“Hey hold up.” He reached for her, patience for walking two steps behind clearly fading. Barb tried to evade his hand, but stilled when the warm grip wrapped loosely around her wrist.

“Yes?”

“I didn’t realize you were such a chicken.”

“Sorry, I didn’t realize I had to keep my cool while watching an abduction to get points with you.”

“Your whole face went white, ghost white.”

“I can make your face turn purple, just get a bit closer.”

“Ooh, is that a threat?”

“Damn Skippy.”

“The idea of you even trying turns me on a little.”

“Autoerotic asphyxiation, huh? I wouldn’t have thought.”

“Maybe I just like a little show of force.”

“I know *I* do, watching you scream in fear made my clit cold.”

“We can’t both be submissive all the time Barb. I’m gonna need you to step it up once in a while to keep things spicy.”

Barb choked a bit on the instinctive rebuttal. Whether her intended it or not, his joke implied many iterations of their maiden voyage on the sexytime express. She racked her brain, trying to hit the tone she wanted - casual, lighthearted, engaging, not clingy.

“Listen, don’t fake me out like that okay? If someones’ gonna fake death pick Abigail or something. You’ll still get a reaction, and then I don’t have to resent you for hours.”

“Hours?! It’s only been like thirty minutes— “ Barb glared at him, willing her face to be as baleful as puppy after one too many fake tosses during fetch.

“Come on, we haven’t got hours to kill here. Forgive me.” He grabbed her hands, holding them between his own in a mockery of supplication. Barb tried to fight her hands free, tugging with half-hearted panic. Despite the jerks and starts she found her torso inching closer,

His forehead seemed larger with each passing moment, but that paled in comparison to the knowing hunger in his gaze.

Shit. She had to get herself together or she'd be pulling leaves and gravel out of orifices for the rest of camp. Barb whirled, still unable to wrest her hands free and thus settling for inadvertently dragging Aaron back toward their camp with single-minded focus. "Alright I forgive you already, just drop it."



Surely the fluttering of nerves in her stomach were in anticipation of what *could* happen when she finally left the safety of the bathroom. It was the idea of the... oh god, blushing at trying to name it, even alone. Barb stared at the wanton redhead in the mirror, too afraid to speak and hear her own voice reflect back.

Or maybe it would be Audrey's voice, cracking with the weight of failed expectations. Listening to her had been a cold bucket of water, plunging into the memories of her father. Barb took solace in the concrete facts - she didn't look like Audrey, didn't seem to have the pale desperation hanging around her skin. She could have this and survive - maybe even be better for it.

Aaron... Aaron was out there. He couldn't know, not really, just how hard she was working to not flee into the night. He was waiting in their room, having seen a glimpse of what a courageous Barb looked like and expecting he'd hit the center of the tootsie-pop.

Not a chance, buddy. She had some candy coating yet.

Maybe tonight she'd just cool it. Say no, thanks but no thanks. Even trying to mouth the words sent a tremor through her. She wanted more, and leaving it on the table was like trying to go paleo on Thanksgiving.

Aaron was not Eustace. And Audrey had clearly been weak, one of the pathetic others who decided far too late where her boundaries were. That would never be Barb. For a second, maybe, she'd considered the idea of floating free into naivete - writing their names on paper with hearts doodled. For a day, perhaps.

If Audrey hadn't been enough to snap her out of it, Samson fucking was. That complete utter neanderthal provided an ample reminder that for every moment of joy in romantic attachment there was a matching beat of fear or pain.

God, that moment when she thought he was hurt, gone. The panic that had set in was irrational - she could see that here, in the safety of ceramic bowls and running water. Abigail

had been in good spirits, there were no bear warnings, Samson was conspicuously absent. Her reaction hadn't been born of logic.

Which was the straw that broke the spell.

If logic could flee her so easily... she'd be just like her dad. Broken in a moment, broken from that point on.

The towel was damp, having not had time to dry from their morning ablutions. Still, Barb dried her hands on it, ambivalent to the clammy sensation. She turned, resting her hand on the door.

She had to know, now before she turned the knob and rejoined him, if she had the fortitude to continue this... tryst without risking her independent heart. It had to mean nothing, had to be cheap enough to leave behind like so many friends from day camp.

In which Aaron detects a note of concern

She stood in the doorway to the bathroom, backlit into the dark of the cabin. Her curls were wild from the rough and tumble adventures in the woods, lending a playful tone. It would only take a few steps to reach her but-

No, this time she had to come to him. It was only right - he'd led that morning and these things had to remain balanced. Dale's words of caution rung in his ears, tempering the metal coiling between his lungs.

The look in her eyes before she'd knocked the wind from him had been flooded with relief. Obviously she cared, she was not a good enough actor to be faking that. Still, it didn't mean she wanted...

There were probably rules about this sort of thing. If he hadn't already turned out the lights, he'd have been able to inconspicuously search for a guide on his phone. Aaron had too confidently assumed that his observations of human nature would be enough of a resource - if he'd the lights on, they would have played house until something changed the environment. With the lights off by the time she opened the door, that alone would probably be enough of a signal to subtly indicate... well.

But she stood there, staring at him most likely. Her stance was steady, not sassily bent to lean on the door jam or saunter in to seduce him. Anxiety began to curl in his stomach. If she regretted it- oh fuck, if she regretted it that would be a nightmare.

He wanted to call out to her, wanted her to reassure him. Say anything, anything at all- but she had to make the first move, there was a *balance* that had to be maintained.

“You scared me tonight Aaron.” Air whooshed from his lungs, relieving one of many sources of tension. She started it. Now he could fix whatever was broken between them.

“I’m sorry, Barbara.”

“I thought you were hurt.”

“I’m sorry.”

Silence stretched on. Her face was inscrutable in the dark, and he felt an inkling of fear that must have mirrored, poorly, her own anxiety. Fear soothed away by her sultry promise.

“You’re going to make it up to me.”

“So do you like dirty talk?” Fuck. This would be horrific if he let her continue.

“Oh, yeah, definitely.” Her eyes flashed in concern, before her face froze in the darkness into what she must have thought was an empowered sultry expression.

“Well then, let’s get a look at your staff.”

“My... staff?” He pointed down at the bulge in his shorts, before squinting back at her, incredulous. Barb looked flustered.

“Ah. Yeah. I’m gonna make it blossom into—”

“Hold the phone. We are not moving forward with you calling my dick a staff or using *blossom* as a verb for getting hard.”

“I thought you said you like dirty talk!”

“What you just said is equivalent to me asking if the petals of your womanly flower are ready to unfurl for me.” Barb’s face twisted in disgust.

“Oh god. Ew. I’m sorry.”

“So start again.” She blushed.

“You got me out of the mood, I can’t try it again.” Aaron deftly handled his phone, barely breaking eye contact with the skittish woman across the bed. With a few artful taps, soulful jams resonated from the speaker.

“Here’s a mood for you.” Barb seemed to steel herself, the tendon of her cheek spasming as she shifted between facial expression before finding one sexy enough for attempt number 2.

It took a few moments longer than he would have expected, but when she finally turned to him again it was with soft supplication that he hadn’t known she could offer. She leaned close, her arms bracing her above him as she whispered into his ear.

“Aaron. This morning you had my slick all over your face. You licked your lips.” He hadn’t needed reminding, but damn he was glad she had. She’d been splayed on the bed, obedient and excited. The blood then had already flooded south, but the emotions had been heady enough to freeze every color and texture into his long term memory until eternity.

He wet his lips, afraid to speak. No crime could be greater than interrupting her now. Silence stretched on, punctuated by heavy breaths.

“Good start.”

Her voice took on a breathy, imploring tone. “Would you… help me? Again? It’s never been like that before.” Pride rushed through him in strong tide, leaving him slightly dizzy. He caught himself nodding furiously before remembering that Barb was clearly new to this, and wouldn’t take many risks here. This was a fantastic start, but if he gave in so easily she’d never learn the… advanced lessons.

“How do you want me to make you come, Barbara?” She pulled back from his ear to meet his gaze, unsure despite her stunning performance thus far. Aaron’s mind raced with the possibilities. His hands wandered without permission, tracing the elastic edging of her black underwear to the small of her back. She tensed as he kneaded the firm flesh of her ass, biting her lip.

Biting her god damn lip. This woman would kill him.

Her eyes flashed with inspiration. “This time I’ll return the favor, if you help.”

“I should hope so.”

“Dammit Aaron, how much naughtier do I have to make this before you kiss me already?”

He couldn’t keep the smile off his face. “Are you getting yourself turned on, you horny monster?”

“Go ahead and check, ass.” He pulled her close, bringing her belly-button flush with his chest. Her skin was so soft, pliable. The coy teasing was driving him insane. This was what

he'd fantasized about ever since their adventure to Nooky Point. If she'd only been this forward that night...

Aaron stretched his arm down between her thighs, spread wide as she straddled him, grazing the fabric of her panties only to be met with—

“You, Barb, are fucking *dripping* right now.” The pads of his fingers worked the fabric where he knew the nub of her clit would rest. Her gasp signaled he'd hit it dead on. This time, though, she'd return the favor. Luck favors the well prepared.

Aaron pulled aside the fabric obscuring her from him, determined to distract her from the brush of cold air by pressing one finger up into the slick channel. Barb's hands moved from the backboard to his shoulders, clenching tight enough to bruise.

It couldn't get better than this, it just couldn't.

But then she began to gently bounce, fucking herself on his finger. He went hard as stone, suddenly unwilling to wait for her to come to completion on his hand before freeing his cock.

Aaron moved his hand to press against the tender skin above her clit, plunging two additional fingers into before curving them to scratch the itch he knew would be building within her.

“Come on, come on them, I’ve got plans for these fingers.” Barb sped up, choked moans spilling broken from her hips. Aaron let his thumb sporadically flick her clit, sending her pitch up into a soprano register. Finally he felt her clench furiously on his fingers, a long low moan punctuating her sudden slump on his shoulders, strength spent.

It would be rude not to let her come down.

Aaron waited for her eyelids to flicker open, her hips to twitch impatiently on his hand. As she shifted restlessly, he coaxed her back up to her knees. Frantically shoving his boxes down, his cock sprung up, weeping with precome and ready.

He guided her down, pressing the head delicately to her entrance. She surprised him, shifting her knees out wide, quickly taking him in up to the hilt.

“You better take the reins, my legs are jello.”

Aaron took her lips, tongue tangling with hers as she panted from the sensation of every tiny shift of their joined hips.

“I got you.” He shifted his own legs, guiding her back to lie on the mattress. Languid thrusts set a rhythm, with minor pauses to adjust the curve of her back until her pitch crept back up to that decibel, like a tea pot about to boil.

She kept clenching around him, and every time it took everything in him to hold back. The steady pace he’d set sped up until he could hear a distinct *thwack* as his balls met her slippery skin. Barb tensed again, her muscles squeezing with determination.

“Fucking A, Aaron—” He lost it. The orgasm rushed through him, a hot wet sensation that he felt in his toes. He dropped from his hands to his elbows, only barely managing to avoid crushing his chest into Barb’s. It was a move driven partly by exhaustion, partly by a passing fancy. He’d wondered if the condensation on her skin would taste like how she always smelled - lemon and vanilla. She tasted like salt and something heady, sweet.

The playlist on his phone progressed to the next song. The BeeGees began to play, and he responded with urgency. Men singing in falsetto would not be allowed to ruin this moment. His phone flew across the room, a sad thud against the wall. Barb giggled quietly, burying her mirth in his shoulder.

In Which Madison Makes a Deal with Aaron

He'd never really been a big fan of phone calls, but apparently removing himself from civilization made him a hot contact. Sadly the next time *Vindicated* played from his phone, the caller was much less inclined to have his best interests at heart.

“Aaron.”

“Madison.”

“What are you playing at?”

He played innocent. Obviously it would only serve to delay in the inevitable, but toying with the hothead on the other side of the line would be worth it. “I am not sure what you’re referring to.”

“I’m referring to the fact that I haven’t heard from you *or* Barb for the last six days, and I know for a fact that I am owed at least two freak outs. Or at least a request for my blessing.”

“We’re trying to get the refund, Madison.”

“And you think I’d let you just cut me out of the refund? I put cash down too, that makes this stealing.” This, *this* was why people used caller ID. To keep dramatic former flames from bursting in, disrupting the carefully prepared ambience of a man trying to write an apology.

“There’d be no money at all if Barb hadn’t agreed to play this out, why should you get fucking anything?” If she stayed there for more than five minutes, half her wardrobe would be sent to the dry-cleaners at 6am tomorrow. Before, he’d have shrugged and choked down the annoyance but after three weeks of living with Barb the extravagance of it irked him.

“If I talk to our therapist you won’t get *any* money back, so how about you play nice Aaron.” Her eyes glowed with victory, as though she’d pinned him to a board to be dissected with the other frogs. Aaron’s heart rate dropped - maybe hiding his heat signature would help him survive the encounter.

“So how do you see this playing out? Barb agreed to do this so she could get her adoption processed, you would take that away from her?” Madison’s gaze fixed over his shoulder, her expression momentarily dazed. Hopefully she hadn’t realized Barb’s crazy, noble intentions and would feel so shitty for trying to sabotage them that she’d just turn and leave.

Madison’s response was measured, even. “I don’t care what scheme you cooked up. If you stay here with her, I get my half. Otherwise I out you. Figure your shit out on your own time.”

“Let me get this straight - you don’t care Barbara has shared a cabin with me for three weeks, but you do care if we short your cash?” Madison turned, her glower fierce.

“Barb knows everything about us. She knows you’re a limp noodle, and she’s got enough pride not to mess with my leftovers.” Leftovers. The words left bile in Aaron’s throat.

“You’re underestimating both her and me.”

Madison sneered. “Ooooooh, I’m Aaron, I met a girl who’s a full point lower than me on a scale from 1 to 10 and I think she’s *the one*,” Her sing-song voice was merciless. “Listen pal, even Barb is looking for someone more exciting than you. Don’t get attached. She’s here for just as material of reasons as I am.”

An idea struck. He’d zoned out halfway through her diatribe, knowing that no good ever came from holding Madison to the shit she said in fury. Instead he revisited the memory of the campfire night when, laid bare by a childish joke Barb had made his whole body swell with satisfaction. “Madison, shut it for a second. I’ll give you your half on one condition.” She went silent.

“Okay, spit it out.”

Madison Brings her Milkshake to the Foursquare Court

Madison stepped cautiously from the clean, comforting ambiance of her beemer into the gritty parking lot reserved for employees of Camp Hiawatha. Whatever- she wouldn't be here long enough for anyone to notice. Not to mention she'd paid some of their freaking salaries single handedly based on the exorbitant fees.

It was quite frankly astounding she was here at all. In the end, she was apparently a butterball that melted at a romantic story. It just so happened she was the villain in this one.

Aaron had been reliable, and took care of her. She never asked him to, she never *needed* him to do it, but she'd had so much more fun by letting him handle all the boring details. And he seemed happy to do it. A little unengaged, maybe. He didn't really get mad when she flirted at bars, and she got into the habit after a few test interaction. They both made a lot more friends on that dynamic, probably. She surely saved him some cash off the free drinks.

By the time they'd moved in together, they were really just roommates in Madison's mind. He didn't seem interested in sex, so they'd quietly sleep facing opposite directions. "I love you's" were common, but casual.

She'd felt a little guilty- how long could they sustain this? None of the men she'd met out and about were worth upsetting her baseline, her utilities payments and wine of the month club. Rent would jump up if she got all lone-rangery. But at the same time, this charade would just keep going...

When Aaron brought her to the pet shelter, the jig was up. It was a little shocking - she'd never thought he'd really *wanted* to settle down with her. Aaron had never seemed hungry for a domestic life, and if he'd been lusting for kids she would have thought he'd have shown more interest in the act itself. Maybe she'd been hard to please - his face had gone blank like facing down a bear, hoping to prevent fear from leaking out of his pores when she'd shown him the array of exotic toys she'd hoped to incorporate into their regimen.

Procreation simulation aside, the dog would have been a promise she'd had no intention of keeping.

Still, she'd wouldn't have just done this for Aaron. Sending Barb out here with him had been a mistake pure and simple. She'd originally meant to call Aaron and tell him not to go, let Barb have the trip. Work had distracted her at the optimal moment, and since then the entire arrangement had fallen to the wayside.

Barbara had been a good friend during college and immediately after, to a point. She'd had decent taste in pop-culture, allowing their conversations to flow easily. The best part of it was when they were both in a mood to be unforgivably catty. Barb had seemed to need an outlet, although Madison had found it more of a reflex than a release. Sometimes hanging out with Barb made her feel bad - watching guilt fly across her friends' face made her wonder *should I be more ashamed of this than I am?*

But Barb was the one coming back to her, scheduling dates, keeping her days wide open just in case they could hang out. Madison was pretty confident that was an indicator that her own perspective was the healthier of the two. Healthier, except on those days Barb wasn't responsive. When the texts went unanswered, when Barb's other friends started to take up her time, it was unbearable. It took quick, drastic correction in tone and timing to ensure their tenuous connection was maintained, but to this day Barb was on her media feed, liking her memes.

When Barb came back to town, it was both a blessing and a curse. Maintaining a relationship felt so much easier when the expectation was an emoticon response to a photo, maybe once a week. She could feel the challenge in Barb's first request, a girls weekend. If she failed, and she knew she was bound to eventually, Barb would officially be the better, more responsible person. The tiny voice in her gut was totally satisfied with that, unwilling to make any further effort. It was the competitive spirit that rose up, determined to show Barb that she intended to be a grade-A bestie.

Immediately after hanging up the phone, her mind went into low-grade panic. What possible girls weekend could she even arrange? She had family receptions, networking events, professional conventions, *her getaway*, all lined up to consume the next two months of free time. She was even double booked, she'd have to cancel that trip she'd promised Aaron's parents --

well. There was an option. Barb needed to get away, and a three week trip to the Hiawatha Nature Reserve would for sure cover that.

She quickly emailed the travel details and flier to Barb. With a swooping noise from the laptop, the plan was in progress. Setting a reminder to call Aaron, asking him to bail on the trip, Madison shifted her attention to more important matters. The worst case scenario, even as things has panned out, was that Barb and Aaron would relieve to old college days when they'd snarked and tolerated each other. Somehow though...

Of course Aaron would call in to save the day. Begging, yet again, for her to work her magic.

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### **In Which the Real Madison Appears to Barb**

**Intro, when does this happen, pov**

“Oh *Madison*, it’s so good to see you!” The leggy blonde called across the expanse of grass, home to a foursquare plot and tetherball. Barb stopped, frozen as deer in headlights.

“Hey!” The joyful tone was forced, even a child would be able to tell. Fuck, this wasn’t how it was supposed to go. Warning bells jangled in her ear, deeply embedded memories of Madison’s righteous fury running like a highlight reel behind her eyes. “Barb? You’re at the

wrong camp - our girls weekend is *next* month.” A quick glance around the clearing confirmed none of her nosy new best friends were within earshot.

“Yeah, but I knew that spending three weeks with your ex would drive you up the wall and thought you could use a friendly face.” The gap between them closed at a measured pace, Barb’s steps small and Madison’s large. Barb was enveloped in a hug, her nose buried by habit in the voluminous waves of Madison’s mane. The grip wasn’t painful, her friends muscles didn’t seem tense. Maybe...maybe this was going to be fine?

“Well, um, I would show you around but I’d hate to put you in the way of some of the campers here. Turns out toxic relationships and infidelity sculpt a group of thirsty weirdos.”

“Infidelity, huh?” Barb couldn’t read the expression on Madison’s face, but it made her nervous. “Funny.” With that, the beautiful woman launched forward, pulling Barb along by looping an arm around Barb’s waist in a mockery of a sorority sister. “So you’re living with my ex. I trust it’s going well?”

“Hold on a second, you stuck me with this guy. I don’t appreciate your tone.”

“I stuck you with a bus buddy, by this time you should have found your way home. You’re in fucking therapy sessions, Barb. This isn’t Freaky Friday.” Barb was impressed -

Madison had simultaneously dropped her volume to a whisper while sliding into a steel tone like a guillotine blade.

Barb swallowed. Would she regret this? Maybe this adventure wasn't worth taking a stand. "I asked you for some time to help me heal, and you flaked. Flaked to go to bone-zone with my college crush, if I might add." If she thought Madison would stutter or pause, Barb would have been sorely disappointed. Stride by stride Madison pushed them along the path, following signs for the cabins. Heading with a torpedo focus on the most dramatic conflict imaginable.

"Flaking is one thing, fraud is another." Why? Why did Madison care so much? For two weeks this incident hadn't even merited a text. No communication aside from careless snapchats of the power couple moving from bar to bar in thoughtless freedom. Barb stopped cold. Madison's grip slammed along the tender flesh of her waist with ruthless force, yielding only when it became obvious that Barb no longer cared about appearances.

"Your deposit. You were expecting it to refund when they figured out what happened." At first Madison panned side to side, moving her hands to rest bossily on her hips.

"Yeah, my money. \$30K is no joke, Barb."

“If it was no joke why did you bail? You put that cash down in the first place, he must have meant something to you. So why?”

Madison stared at her like she'd grown a second head. Red flushed up her neck, and her graceful hips began to shift side to side. Barb's mind raced, trying to add up the pieces.

“Did- did he hurt you? I didn't even think- you would have told me, right? You wouldn't have let me get on that bus if he hurt you, would you?” Madison heaved an impatient sigh.

“God Barb, it's so *you* to make this into such a big deal. No, okay? No he didn't hurt me.” Madison's eye narrowed. “You didn't even think? What's that about? You think he's some prince charming, that he's the victim in this?” Ick, Barb struggled to keep her stomach down at the proper end of her throat.

“I knew him going in, it's not like I've been brainwashed.” Madison stilled, her eyes boring into Barbs' like she could drill down into her soul and remove the core of her.

“Listen, I need to talk to him. Clear out so I can clean this up, and then I'll go. You might as well have your vacation, even if its a shit one with him around.” Barb didn't move a muscle, suddenly protective. They'd made so much progress, were so much better than they'd been on that bus two weeks ago. What if Madison ruined it? Madison's eyes narrowed, brows

tilted into a fearsome expression. “I hope it is shit, because if it’s not then we’re not friends when you get back.”

Madison blew past her, driving a bony shoulder into Barb’s side and temporarily sending her spinning. It wasn’t right, Barb knew, to feel this way about Aaron. It was hypocritical, it was selfish. He wouldn’t fit in any of her plans, and she couldn’t expect him to think she fit in her his.

The only hope she had was that a Madison-shaped hole in her heart would hurt less than an Aaron-shaped one.

### **Aaron asks Madison to come to camp**

“For the record, this plan is terrible.” Madison sat slouched along several shallow steps leading into one of the craft halls, absentmindedly swiping on her phone. The sky-blue casing was dusted with gold glitter, and a hint of rainbows peaked through the gaps between her manicured fingers. Aaron could hear the quiet popping noise of gum too long chewed squishing in her molars even from his lookout along the path.

“So you're telling me you didn't do this exact maneuver in college when you thought I was getting lazy?”



“You *were* lazy, so it was justified. Barb has a bit more initiative than you did.” Her tawny eyes drifted up from the screen to fix him with a look of utter disappointment. “But yes. I did invent this. And it works.”

Aaron felt the tempestuous swirl of vindication and nerves in his stomach. Madison might be mean, but to say that Barb and he would react differently to his... ploy.

“Psst, she’s coming, get over here-” Madison rose from her position of ease with the grace of a person who couldn’t care less. Aaron faced her, his palms sweating. Shit, shit, they hadn’t really scripted out the scene. He could sense Barb’s approach, knew that he and Madison would quickly come within the range of her vision.

Hopefully Barb’s hearing was shitty.

Madison kicked it off, rolling her eyes in the face of his panic.

“Aaron, I can’t believe you’re staying here with her.” She was... surprisingly believable. Her body language had changed from apathy to battle-ready.

“Uh- “ God, what now?

Madison glared, whispering fiercely. “You’re so fucking lucky she’s like 200 feet away or you’d be blown. God you’re terrible at improv. Act like you want to hurt me, like you want revenge.”

His eyes narrowed. It wasn’t so hard to believe.

“You sent a body double like this meant nothing to you. If you don’t have to care, neither do I.”

Barb was closing in. He could see the bright t-shirt out of the corner of his eye, and had to fight not to sneak a peek at her frizzy red mane.

“I made a *mistake*, Aaron. I was wrong. Aren’t I allowed to be scared? But I’m more scared of losing you.” He had not expected that sentence to ever come out of Madison’s mouth. She’d said the opposite when they’d finally parted ways. It shocked him into a standstill.

Madison was not paralyzed however, and moved forward to slide the palms of her hands over his biceps to his shoulders. Heat from her hands seeped into tightly coiled tendons, and began to pull him close.

His stomach began to fall out at the bottom, confusion and uncertainty acting to roil the balance in his body. This very scene months ago would have been his dream outcome, and now the thought of it was enough to send him staggering back.

Luckily further action was unnecessary.

“She’s gone.” Madison pushed back from him, her hands flexing as though to relieve the pain of carrying shopping bags a mile too far. Aaron couldn’t focus at first, still sorting out the swirl of emotion into pro-con columns. When he finally met her gaze, his heart had steadied. Madison however looked more unsure than ever. “Barb saw. She’s gone. I don’t know if I’ve ever seen her so...” With a forcible exhale, Madison forced her hand through her artfully ruffled blonde hair. “Maybe that time before she moved, but I can’t even remember what that was about.”

“Well, that’s good then. I need to know.”

“It’s utter crap that you’re too chicken shit to just ask.”

“You can’t *ask* what I need to know. If I don’t matter more than whatever useless thing she fought you about before, than this isn’t going to be what I need.”

“You don’t deserve Barb.”

“Then why did you agree to help?”

Madison shrugged, staring over his shoulder. “She deserves more than to be alone.”



### **Lunch Before Evening Activities (Aaron POV)**

Madison had appeared and disappeared like a spectre days ago, but her words haunted him. He hoped Barb hadn't noticed. They'd been going through the motions, fighting and leaving awkward silences when the group or Bearclaw was around. The charade flaked away within the safety of the cabin, falling into a comforting rhythm of card games and casual touches.

At first it had been easy to disregard Madison's nasty commentary. The hard words of even Barb getting bored of him eventually rang false when she first said them. Two days later, Aaron found himself dissecting every muscle twitch on her face, looking for restlessness or disappointment. It became progressively harder every hour to be sure he wasn't hallucinating.

Furthermore, that conversation she'd had sneakily in the bathroom echoed in his mind. *Is it ethical*, she'd asked. She'd slept with him, and then asked someone if it was ethical. He

couldn't ask, she had purposely gone to the bathroom for privacy and to admit he'd heard her would force him to admit just how vulnerable and nervous he'd been.

Aaron's mind was racing, and it infuriated him. Madison shouldn't be able to mess with his head this easily.

"Why are your hands so clammy?" Barb's voice broke through the haze of his thoughts, bringing him back to the hubbub of the dining hall.

"Are they? I hadn't noticed." Barb was trailing her fingers in his palm, which she'd taken from his thigh and held beneath the table away from potentially prying eyes.

"You aren't nervous about dancing are you? It's not that hard. This event is supposed to be a fun goodbye for us all." It was ridiculous

She wasn't reacting the way he needed her to, and it was driving him insane. Barb was supposed to see Madison and flip her shit from jealousy, that was how it worked. If she stayed now, stayed to get the money as though nothing had changed since they'd rode to this oasis on that rickety yellow chariot... he'd have to walk away. Aaron couldn't justify risking his heart and goals on another ambivalent passenger.

Something else has to happen here

### **In Which Barb ruins Dance Lessons with her Finger**

The image of the two of them, close and personal, haunted her. The end of the camp, the split of the refund after they staged their explosive finale, was only a few days away. She had to hold out now. The money had to come first, above her stupid infatuation with the sociopath standing next to her.

But man, dumb move Barb. It wasn't as though she didn't see it coming. Fool me once, shame on you and all that collective wisdom.

“What are you doing?” Aaron's voice intruded into the poetic calm Barb has intentionally crafted to endure the class. It was the last night of the retreat, the last edutainment session they' be provided before tomorrow's exit interviews and the long bus ride back to civilization.

“I'm closing my eyes so I can let you lead.” Her eyelids screwed shut, determined to hold fast her to idealistic concept of dancing. Aaron was either chuckling or scoffing, it was hard to tell.

“If you poke my eye out, I'll sue.”

“Go ahead, I have a twenty in the cabin and that’s about it for you.” Aaron’s hand enveloped hers, his arm wrapping loosely around her waist. The heat of the almost-embrace was almost as distracting as she’d expected his direct gaze from this close proximity to be. As the music crept along the room, Barb forced herself to exhale and relax her shoulders.

The rhythm presented itself. The jazzy notes set the mood. Aaron pushed, and she moved. At first, the synchronicity left something to be desired. Barb knew the steps, and relied on her knowledge even knowing that the point of keeping her eyes closed was to force Aaron to freaking do his job. Yet leaving it to him, as though she wanted to prove he would fail, felt wrong. Step by step they shuffled, likely across the room. Steady pressure guided her raised arm, forcing the shoulder to torque into spins.

After a classic under-arm maneuver, Barb didn’t have to work as hard to keep her eyes shut. Tension in their connected limbs guided her quite fully, and they managed to maintain the magic into the next song. A woman crooned about honey, too much honey as they started a new beat.

“If you keep this up, people will think we’re getting along.” Aaron’s voice was hot in her ear as they swayed in closed position. The connection soured, Barb couldn’t stop her lips from twisting down into a grimace. This was a farce, they were a fake couple. Every moment she let herself relax into Aaron’s arm was an admission of intolerable weakness. He spun her out, and

twirled her back in. Unlike the numerous earlier iterations, her returning hand was harsh - unreceptive.

“AGH BAR- BITCH,” Aaron’s voice shocked Barb, her eyes jolted open and her head whipped to and fro to find the subject. Aaron was clutching his face, standing two feet away from the scope of their embrace. She wanted to apologize, could feel it tumbling from her lips. Her stupid desire to look like she knew how to do this freaking activity had led her to sticking her stupid finger right into his stupid, pretty eye. Barb crept closer to him, until she noticed his hand clutching by his elbow.

...Waving her away? She glanced back to his face, catching a brief moment of eye contact where he was executing a particularly ridiculous eyebrow twitch. Ah, a dramatic moment. She backed off, dropping her gaze to the floor and focused on summoning righteous fury. Indignation wouldn’t work here, Madison had never been a walking bomb. She’d been a petulant at her worst. Petulance would be easier here than fury anyway.

“Well,” Barb drawled, pushing as much poison as possible into the single word, “maybe if you didn’t grab at my ass like an ape you’d have been able to catch my hand, Aaron.” She turned away from him, as though the idea that she’d stuck her unmanicured paw into his perfect face didn’t bother her. Aaron’s grunts of pain still sounded real, eye-roll or no eye-roll.



Bearclaw suddenly filled her line of vision, even as it was directed at the floor. The bulky counselor took her chin in his hand, and forced her to look up. “Madison, are you okay?” Barb was wide eyed - Aaron was two feet away, moaning in pain and this Rocky knock-off was coddling her? There wasn’t much time to ponder the inappropriateness of the event before she was swaddled into his open hold, steering her through an inside-turn.

“Uh, um yeah. Yes. I’m fine.” *Madison would have loved this.* Well W-W-M-D was the theme of the day, the week, so it only followed that she should lean in. “Thanks Bearclaw, I was starting to wonder if I was just *useless* at this all together.” Bearclaw beamed at her, tucking her into closed embrace before sneaking glances around the room. Apparently the other couples were occupied enough with their own quasi-marital strife to ignore this...episode. In a spin, Barb caught sight of Aaron for only a second.

He was not holding the act as successfully as she’d expected. If she knew a squabble - and boy, did she - he was supposed to move to the side, grab a drink or his phone, and scoff from afar. Instead, he was creeping closer. Aaron wasn’t as tall as Bearclaw, but he was no slouch and it was starting to look like he intended to make a point of something.

*Spin - Spin - Basic - Dip* - Barb glared in warning from her inverted position.

Her heart was racing as Bearclaw propelled her back into a standing position, and she held onto his shoulder as the only stabilizing force in her immediate vicinity. Aaron’s face had

been almost terrifying - eyes glimmering darkly at the dancing pair. The walls of the dancehall turned counterclockwise, likely a result of Bearclaw's indomitable momentum.

"Excuse me, *Eustace*, but I'd like to dance with my fiance." They'd abruptly stopped, stepped back out of the line of couples promenading around the floor.

"I don't know if that's really a good idea." Bearclaw scoped Aaron from head to toe, sizing him up as though shopping for a body bag.

"Oh? Speak on that, counselor."

"I think you'd do well to give her some space."

"Space? She doesn't *want* space, she wants to be up in this so bad she's sticking her digits into my orifices, sir." Bearclaw reeled back, disgust and defiance warring on his features. Barb could tell when the recognition of the double entendre connected in Aaron's mind, and fought not to laugh as his cheek twitched in subdued horror.

Bearclaw stepped close, and it became Barb's turn to feel horror. She pushed him away, physically blocking the two from each other, and placed her hands on either side of Aaron's face.

“Aaron. *Aaron.*” He was fuming, tendons along his shoulder corded in what must be painful tension. He wouldn’t look at her. The impending battle set her stomach into a tizzy, the adrenaline sparking wistful emotions.

Barb slammed her foot into the floor abruptly, infuriated with the display and with herself. Nothing could be worth this - watching him pantomime a territorial display as though *he* was the injured party. Every single dollar he gave her for enduring this would leave paper cuts. “No. I’m done. I can’t carry this any farther.”

That got Aaron’s attention. His eyes burned into hers, face impassive. “Madison?”

Just hearing the name was enough to set all her carefully laid plans aflame. “I won’t carry it any farther. If you wanted Madison, you should have gone for her instead of fucking with my head.” Tears pricked at her eyes. She’d heard someone call them women’s weapons once, someone who’d obviously never been stepped on with a high heel.

Bearclaw look bewildered, unsure of what page of their notes this fight was drawing from.

“Listen, I get it, let’s talk outside-” He had the nerve to touch her arm.

“No. I’m leaving. I don’t care if you get your fucking money back. You don’t deserve it, and I deserve better.” She pivoted. Abigail applauded as Barb stormed from the room. Aaron’s heavy step followed behind.

“Wait, wait you don’t know— ”

“That she came here? That she wants you? More importantly, that you want her? Yeah I know.” She shook her head, willing the blurs of tears to hold off just a few seconds longer. “I let you sweep me away again, just like before. Fool me twice, Aaron. Shame on me, I suppose.”

“I *asked* her to come because I needed to know how you’d react, Barb.” She paused, processing. The sentence ran through her mind, almost visible as it progressed earlobe to earlobe.

“No. No, that’s ridiculous.”

“I needed to know this-” he gestured wildly in the space between their bodies, “mattered more than the money.”

“So let me get this straight. You called Madison here to trick me into giving up on the deal *you* concocted because in your freak reality that was the best way to judge my sincerity.”

“Well when you say it like that-”

“So I exposed my heart to you, and the risk *wasn't* that you still love Madison, but that you're totally self-absorbed and egocentric?”

“Egocentric seems a bit har— ”

“And you're thinking what now? That now I'll swoon and you'll have a perfect love, and move into your perfect fucking house and get your stupid dream life?” His face went blank. “You just sacrificed all of my dreams for yours, because you couldn't trust me to know my own heart.”

“Hey you're the one that always is telling me to break rules to ensure *my needs get met.*”

“Well I needed you to protect me, if you were going to love me. I feel like that was a reasonable expectation. Instead you tested me, like some law of nature.”

### **In Which Aaron Gets a Fuckin' Clue**

Aaron stood, still stunned from their altercation. The night sounds slowly increased in volume recovering from the violence. She'd said *fool me twice*. Like he'd done this before.

Like she'd been so vulnerable and ready to be his at one moment in time and he'd used that moment to instead go to Madison. The memory swam in front of him, turning his insides to ash.

Barb *had* waited, had *never* expressed an interest in him. He would have noticed.

Because he'd been waiting for it. Bar after bar across the fucking college town. Madison had been aggressive, transparent. Barb had sat back, watching him, apparently waiting for him to make a choice.

Fool that he was, he's assumed it was apathy. And his own cautious nature sent him barreling down a path towards his chaotic future with Madison. If they were really that similar, she'd never forgive him. It had taken him a while to forgive her - had practically tried to force her to admit the natural chemistry between them at her apartment one morning. Her cool, controlled expression had been the thin thread tying him to reality that day.

And it turns out it had never been reality. Not a complete picture, anyway.

### **Barb leaves for cabin to pack**

Barb could hear someone following her. She wouldn't give them the satisfaction of trying to sooth her. This fury was important, necessary, the fuel to get her out away to safety before crumbling into the cold coals of reality.

Aaron had fucked with her head. On a whim, just because he was too afraid. Well she could teach him a thing or two about being afraid, but the time had passed. All of that effort, trying to choke down the instinctual fear and shame, ruined.

“Madi- um. Ma’am. Once you’re packed, I’ll drive you back.” Barb whipped around, strands hair caught in her lips serving to obscure Audrey. But the voice was unmistakable.

“Oh. Hi. Yeah, thanks Audrey.”

“No problem-”

“I’m Barb.”

“Nice to meet you.” Barb huffed in response, an attempt to reassure her chauffeur that this trauma hadn’t compromised her sense of humor.

“Sure it is.”

Barb blew into the cabin, feeling at once underwhelmed and flooded with the prospect of dismantling the cozy love trap the hut had become. Clothes were scattered across the floor, mixed with crafts and bath items. The sheets were still ruffled from where they’d-

“Are you okay?” Audrey called from the path, no doubt wondering why Barb had stopped in the doorway with a ghoul’s grip on the frame. The reminder of an audience galvanized her to action.

“I’m fine.” Fifteen minutes later, her bags were packed and sunglasses perched saucily across the bridge of her nose. The sun had started setting before Aaron had- before she had-. Anyway it was too dark to really merit tinted lenses, but she needed the physical barrier between her eyes and the camp itself.

Audrey was silent as they walked to the employee lot, silent for a good part of the four-hour drive back to civilization.

Barb didn’t need silence by the end. “You know, I thought you were scary. And then I thought you were pathetic.” Audrey stiffened visibly - Barb could only tell because of the light from the dashboard highlighting the grip on the steering wheel.

“That’s a hell of a thank you.”

“I mean, it’s crazy that you hung on for Bearclaw all these years knowing that he.. He’d never get over whoever that witch was.”



“Brenda. The witch was Brenda. And yeah, I’m crazy.” Barb nodded, turning to watch the brush along the highway stream past.

“I was crazy too. I thought I might be - it runs in my family. So maybe you’re pathetic, but I am too.”

“That’s sweet, but I think I’ll have someone else do my eulogy.” Silence stretched on. “You’re not exactly being fair comparing Aaron to Eustace. Eustace knew I’d do just about anything, and didn’t care if I overextended. Aaron seems to really love you. We all saw it, all the campers are grossed out by how sweet you two are.”

Okay, sure, he wasn’t going back to Madison. And he was playing puppeteer to discern her interest. That was empirically flattering. What wasn’t flattering is that he had implied that it was impossible to tell in casual conversation if she was prostituting herself or actually falling for him.

Fuck. That.

Nobody gets to just override her plans and timeline and goals for something so cowardly and crass.

“He lied to me, pretended to fall back in love with his ex-girlfriend to get a reaction out of me, and broke the deal which he knew was my ticket to something very important to me.” Barb’s voice wobbled. She let it - Audrey might as well know this stunt had real world repercussions. “His fear was more important than my feelings and my goals. That’s as big of a red flag as you can get.”

Audrey shrugged, and fell silent.

### **Grand Gesture**

She could picture the adoption application on her sturdy wooden kitchen table in the tiny apartment that awaited her. At least now she’d have the cash to file the application. Her newly formed *community* would have to be enough to get her through. If she got rejected again - had to continue to live in that anonymous way without her own nuclear family... It seemed bleak to say the least.

When the bus finally stopped, Barb was on her last thread of control. She kept imagining that Aaron was softly calling her name, but couldn’t trust her own senses. Even if he had been, what would he have said? Another scene in front of these pseudo-strangers was the last thing she needed.

They disembarked, and she fled to the relative safety of her car.

### **Barb's mom shows up to give advice**

Steve had only been able to tolerate two successive Monday's of Barb's blue mood. The third week when she'd let herself into the house with plaintive call, a softer feminine response met her. In the kitchen, the swap was made clear.

Laura. "Oh. You're here."

"Your dad asked me to stop by. Said you're" Laura paused, tonsils and throat rippling with some unsaid struggle. "Said you're planning to have a kid."

"I was. I am. Just...waiting to straighten out a few things."

"Steve said you wanted to do it alone."

Barb's eyes hardened. What the hell did her dad think this conversation would do?

"What of it? Clearly I know it can be done."

"Do you though? It's not like Steve raised you alone. You may have conveniently forgotten, but for eleven years he and I gave our lives to you. Because we love you."

“If you’re so on top of the loving bit of it, how could you not love Dad? He gave you everything he had.”

“God, you’re still such a kid. I get it, I failed. Steve and I failed. We had to show you how things go wrong, instead of showing you how things go right.” Laura looked down at the hands, resting as though ready to pray there on the kitchen table. As though asking some higher power to grant her strength.

“You can’t be so scared of it, Barbie. Sometimes the only way we get to do things is by doing them wrong. Loving people goes wrong sometimes.”

Barb’s fury broke. “I know, alright! I know. And I tried and it *failed*, miserably, okay? I gave it everything, and he didn’t need *me*. He just needed a body to play house for a while. And it hurts, and now even if I get what I wanted he’s always going to be missing.” Laura leaned back in her chair, gazed fixed on Barb’s fist.

“You know, as much as you might hate me for it, I think I understand how you feel. I remember knowing that something I needed was missing. And I had to go, had to get it.”

Laura’s expression cleared, and returned to meet Barb’s fiery eyes.

“What, like Dad should have chased after you? After you rejected him?”

“Your dad would have chased after me, if he’d needed me. Maybe he thought he did, but... he didn’t really try. It’s better that he didn’t - it saved us both a lot of pain. I think he doesn’t know what he’s missing yet. It’s quite possible he wasn’t missing anything, Barbara.”

Soft sobs echoed through the kitchen. They became louder, more painful as Barb realized they were hers.

“How- how will I know? If it’s real, or if I’m just in pain?”

“Take your time, for now. The feeling won’t go away if it’s real.”

### **Dale welcomes Aaron back to the fold**

Aaron cruised into the office, a cool fifteen minutes late. He could feel every set of eyes on him - or at least that’s how it felt. Looking around, cubes and elevators were at best half full. He could’ve gotten away with that behavior, if he hadn’t spent so long setting a different precedent entirely.

Flipping the light in his office, Aaron tumbled in spilling a briefcase and coffee cup haphazardly over his desk. The office chair wheezed in protest as he threw himself into the task

of starting the aging computer up. He was just beginning to type in credentials when movement outside his door caught his eye.

Dale, whizzing past the office nonchalantly. Odd - Dale worked two floors up.

On a regular day, he'd always blocked off the first half hour of the day to get situated. Any attempt to intrude on those sacred minutes were met with very negative results, and he'd trained his team well to respect it. Dale, while not subject to Aaron's rules, was kind enough to respect them.

It was precisely 8 am when his friend slid in to commandeer the rickety chair meant for guests.

"You're late again. What if I'd needed you for a meeting?"

"What are you talking about - you've never scheduled a meeting before 9 am."

"But you've always come in when I come in just in case. Are you breaking up with me?"

Aaron glared, refusing to admit that the turn of phrase alone was able to send his thoughts back to Barb, turning her back on him. "I hit some traffic, Dale. You have my cell phone for emergencies."

Dale pouted. “Oh come on Aaron, let your hair down just a second. You’ve been back a week and still haven’t told me any details. And now you’re showing up late to work. I thought you were going to start walking to work, since you’ve got the condo-” He broke off, eyes widening in suspicion. “Traffic? You’re still commuting from the house?”

“It’s taking a while to sell, and-”

“So when I go back to my desk and check for the listing, it *will* be there?”

Aaron fidgeted like a guilty child. Dale was still, silent as an executioner. With a sigh of capitulation, he acknowledged the truth of it. “I’m waiting a few days to list it. Just... just give me a few hours to work like a normal person and we can talk after end of day.”

He wanted to make sure he explained it to social Dale, not business Dale. When the end of the day finally arrived, Aaron’s inbox had decreased from some 700 unread entries to a more manageable 217. The rest of them would require actual thought, and that was too much to expect. Dale appeared again, bag packed and sunglasses on. “Your boss says it’s time to go.”

“You know I don’t like that joke.”

“Yeah, but I don’t compartmentalize as well as you so you’re going to have to deal with it.”

The walk down two blocks to their favorite pub was innocent - weather commentary and work gossip. It wasn’t until they’d sat down with wings and beer that Aaron felt the pinch of expectation.

“Why are you still living at the house Aaron? You said after Madison you were going to sell it.”

“Well, I still could. I’m leaving my options open.”

“Is this something to do with your friend? Am I going to meet her?”

“I wish.” Dale’s eyebrow arched in confusion. “I... took a gamble to make sure she, you know, was on the same page as me.”

“Aaron Price, gamble?”

“I got nervous, so I wanted to make sure she wasn’t just staying for the money and then planning to ghost.”



“So there’s money involved.”

“What? Oh, yeah, initially the plan was to get the refund for dissatisfied couples. We’d just flunk the exit interview and get the cash back.”

“Okay, I guess I see what you’re worried about there.” Dale nodded meekly, waving his hand in permission to continue.

“So I tried to make her jealous to see if she’d risk losing the money.”

“Oh Aaron, no.”

Aaron bristled. “I didn’t think it was something I could ask, and when Madison pulled the stunt on me it wasn’t that big a deal-” Dale’s moan of pain only momentarily preceded his head hitting the smoothed driftwood table. Aaron waited for Dale to return to normal civilized conversation before continuing. “So as you clearly would predict, she’s mad at me. She loved me, at least more than the money.” God, the relief when she’d started in on him at dance class. Barb had taken her dear sweet time letting him sweat, not knowing that her fury was the balm he needed. “But she is standing on the moral high ground. I want to have the house when she comes down.”

Dale stared blankly. “You want the house for- aren’t you jumping a few steps?”

“So?”

“Well Mr. Methodical, you don’t particularly embrace deviations from the formula. And it sounds like she’s not giving you a reason to suspect she’s game to jumpstart a life in the suburbs with you.”

“Dale, she fits there. I can’t explain it. She just fits, and I know she’ll see it eventually.”

Dale stared at him. “What did she say when she found out you punked her?”

Aaron felt the muscles in his face go lax. *‘I needed you to protect me’* rung in his ears. “I can’t remember exactly.” Dale rolled his eyes.

“Perfect, that bodes well. So you’re just waiting her out?”

“If she wasn’t going to listen there, what was the point of getting all-”

“You’re hopeless. I bet you don’t even change the settings on your HD TV, just sit there and suffer through soap opera effect until death finally takes pity on you.”

“Hold on a second-” Dale stopped with a hopeful expression. “What is soap opera effect?” With a little scream of modulated rage Dale smacked Aaron in the temple, leaving a barbeque smudge.

### **Barb starts new job, schedules follow-up adoption appointment**

She hadn't expected to feel lonely here. North Carolina had been tough the first few years, but that kind of loneliness was almost freeing. There was an inherent challenge - you will be lonely until you take every moment in your hands and force the world to welcome you. Back home, the places were familiar. People were familiar. Any excessive agency was met with bewilderment.

It might also be thanks to living in a one-bedroom alone after sharing literally every moment of every day with someone for almost two weeks straight. Every time that explanation swam up to the front of her mind, she found it slightly easier to tolerate.

The honeymoon was over - she'd found a position translating import contract language, and the rhythm of office work soon drowned out the symphony of tiny violins she'd been playing for herself. It was not loud enough to drown out the ringtone on her cell phone, however. Steve called regularly, ignoring the elephant in the room but eager to be a force for good all the same. Madison also had been calling.

Barb wasn't sure how to handle that conversation. Would Madison be mad? Or had that entire interaction been part of the con? Furthermore, it was tough to tell if their friendship could survive after all this juxtaposition and insecurity. Eventually Barb found the courage to listen to the voicemails.

*“Barbara, I'm gonna give you a pass on dodging my calls but it only applies if you eventually call me back.”*

*“Barbie I can't tell from your radio silence if things went good or bad. Please call me.”*

*“Barb. Aaron told me what happened. Honey.”* It was the last one that got her. Barb curled up under a comforter, air-conditioning on a setting suited for a meat locker. This way, if the call made her flush with adrenaline or freeze in panic, she could adjust.

“Madison?”

“Barb.” Madison seemed to exhale into the phone. “Thank christ.”

“I feel like I should both apologize and/or cut your hair while you sleep.”

“Don't— ugh.” The eye-roll was almost audible. “Listen, we are friends because we are both petty, power-hungry people at some level. Don't apologize. And please don't cut my hair.”

Barb found herself laughing, a muscle memory. It felt good - it felt like it had been too long. She laughed long and hard, letting it distract her from the question lingering on her tongue. It lingered long enough to transform the laugh into a hiccup.

She swallowed the sob down. "Why did you do it?"

Madison was quiet. It was hard to tell if it was because she wanted to avoid the answer, or because she was really thinking. The soft timbre of her friend's voice when it finally floated through the speaker was the sign, soothing the anxiety Barb had felt. Barb began to uncurl, her legs spreading down along the couch. "Aaron really is a good person, he's just not my person. I want a good person for you Barb. You must drive him a bit nuts - I've never seen him willing to implement a scheme to lure a girl."

"Woman, Madison. We're women. Not kids anymore."

"I work in retail, and I beg to differ. It might as well be college all over." Barb wondered at how much laughter echoed through her ribcage. The sound reverberated on the empty walls of the apartment.

"I'm scared Madison."

"Of Aaron?"

“Not, not of him. It’s so empty here now. I wanted to always be okay, even if I didn’t have an Aaron.”

“You would be, doll. You would be okay. But you can be better than okay. Don’t give up on better.”

Barb cancelled the appointments with Mrs. Brooks.

### **Aaron meets with his parents about the family home**

Sarah and Paul sat across from him in a slightly-too-small booth in the only coffee shop in Longfellow Township. Sarah’s face reflected deep apologies, as was right and good. Paul was not offering any sympathy, but then he was still mad that Aaron had the gall to list the house for sale.

“Honey, we’re very happy to see you’ve moved back into the house. That place was meant to be yours, with or without Madison.” Without. Without Madison for sure. Aaron hadn’t thought of her for weeks, couldn’t picture where she’d have fit. Barb was everywhere instead. Her hair disappeared around corners as he moved from room to room.

“Well I’d hoped to have a good reason to take it off the market.”

His mother's cheerful, placating face creased into concern. "Hoped? Aaron, is everything—"

"Everything is fine. I met someone while I was away." This apparently perked Paul's interest.

"What, a new one so soon?"

"A woman I knew from college. We didn't really think it would be serious, but the best laid plans of mice and men often go fucking haywire."

"Aaron, language." Ah, the comfort of a parent's censure. He hadn't suffered much of it, having been dedicated to exceed his father's exacting expectations. Swearing though- that was his little rebellion. "And this woman? Are you going to introduce us?" Aaron felt the weight of his shoulders, as though the muscles holding them back had disintegrated with the effort of waiting for Barb.

"I'd hoped you would have met her by now, but it appears she's not willing to forgive me."

"What did you do?"

Ha. Same thing as always. “I assumed she wanted what I wanted.”

“Honey, don’t be evasive, we’re worried about you.” Sarah stared him down, growing frustrated. Paul placed his hand long her arm, unwilling to play along.

“Dear, he doesn’t really want to tell us. He can handle it. Let’s-”

Aaron knew Paul’s attention was waning, repulsed by the touchy-feely topic. “We had a plan to trick the camp into refunding the fees, since Madison never showed up. We would have split the money. But I freaked out- I needed her to want me more than the money. So when I threw the plan out the window, I ruined her plans.”

Sarah was clearly working very hard to understand what had happened, trying to read between lines that barely existed. Paul had stopped patting her arm, staring at the wood paneling behind Aaron’s head.

“She wants to adopt a kid, so when I promised her the money it meant something to her. To me it was just cash, and just my pride. I forgot that more was at risk for her.” He sighed, stirring the cold latte in front of him. “She was supposed to forgive me by now. That’s why I haven’t listed the house. I keep picturing her in it.”



Paul seemed to jump back into action, sensing a topic upon which he knew he had an opinion. “What kind of equity do those condos downtown get anyway? And how would you raise a family? We gave you this house so you wouldn’t have to worry about those things.”

His mother leaned forward, undercutting Paul’s regularly scheduled programming. “Aaron you have to make this decision for yourself, even if there are consequences. That’s the only way she will know you care.”

It sounded familiar in his ears, sounded correct but also perfectly opposite to his own instincts. Aaron stared at the wood table separating him from his parents, tracing the grain of the wood. A small heart was scratched into the corner. He traced it with his finger absently, until Paul grew impatient. “I guess I could carve something for myself.”

“God damn hooligans. Is this what you mean by carving? It’s unnatural and rude.”

Aaron exhaled wistfully. “It’s romantic.”

## **Grand Gesture**

For as responsible of a decision that it was, Barb felt like she’d lost at least 15 adulting points. Canceling her adoption interview, withdrawing her application, hearing Mrs. Brooks

condescending platitudes just set a tone of failure for the day. That meant she'd moved home from the east coast, had a broken heart, and was now waiting for life to start happening again.

It had felt like college, so she went back. The bahn mi from the university cafeteria was a comforting flavor of the past. Hours later, her fitness tracker blinking in victory from all the steps, she found another familiar flavor in the Red Stripe at Kings Crown.

God, this place was disgusting. A miracle, quite frankly, that it was still in operation.

“What are you doing here Aaron?”

“Let's go with I'm lost. It's possible. You know my navigation sense is basically shit.”

“Okay.” She nodded, seeming to go silent as she stepped forward, stride more of a side to side motion than a front to back. “Can I steer you in the right direction?”

“You better walk me there, I might get lost.”

“If memory serves, you grew up in the next neighborhood over.”

“Yeah, but nostalgia might lead me down the wrong street.” He scuffed his shoes along the sidewalk, the clean lines of his work attire looking out of place.

“So. What did you do, after I left?”

“Typical Barb, cutting right to the pudding.” He stuck his arm out, an invitation. “I explained what we’d done to Bearclaw. Oh, by the way Abigail wanted you to have this.” He rustled in his jacket pocket, before pulling out a card with a number and address scrawled in loopy letters. “She wants you to call her. ‘Girls gotta stick together’ or some shit like that. Also, this is for you.” He shoved another paper in her hands - an envelope.

“This isn’t- Bearclaw wouldn’t’ve-”

“Oh! No, no he didn’t. He was not amused with our con. He *did* seem impressed with your meta-analysis of Madison, but that wasn’t enough to save the plan.”

Barb opened the envelope, her breathe visibly catching as sunlight graced the flimsy paper within. “What- What is this from, then? How could you think I want this from you?”

“You were right - I welched on the deal. And you had plans. It’s only fair I make you whole.”

“This is absurd. What drug store did you rob? Are you trying to use me to launder money?”

“No! I sold the house, that’s all. It’s all free and legal, I didn’t go totally off the deep end.”

“Oh... That’s really sweet Aaron. I would accept, and *man* this goes on the list of top five apologies I’ve ever had to brush off but— ”

“Barb, I really want you to take it. I got the message, I know you can’t really forgive me. I need you to know that even if I’m not a part of them that your dreams do matter to me.”

Tear began to swim in her eyes, but refused to fall. “God that’s- *ahem* - very considerate but I still can’t take it.”

Frustration showed on his face. “Why? Why can’t you? What’s the right move here Barb? I just want to make it right, and show you— ”

“I cancelled my adoption appointments. I’m going to wait. So I don’t need your money.”

The indignation spluttered and died. “Cancelled? Why?”

Barb shrugged. “I think you’d called me a martyr, right? I see it now. I think I must have been as alone before camp as I’ve been after, and adopting a kid would be an irresponsible bandaid for that.”

“So... you’re waiting to meet someone then.”

Her face blanched. Her expression was baleful, voice small. “I guess so.”

They walked in silence.

“I know someone, an old college friend I think it would be great to— ”

“Dear God Aaron, read the room, I don’t want you to set me up.”

“No really, he’s a great guy!”

“You freaking jer— ” His hand settled on her shoulders, stilling her from the frantic attempts to smack him.

“He’s been in therapy a while but I think he likes you. You should just give him a sign.”

“He likes me, huh?”

“Barbara.”

## **Epilogue**

Mrs Brook eyes the couple warily. Technically everything was in order, but something niggled in the back of her mind.

The woman in front of her was familiar. She couldn't put her finger quite on it - but something about that sunny, confident expression was baked into her memory.

The man, though, was new. And charming as all get out. The air of a young Cary Grant, meant to rise in the ranks of society, and the twinkle in his eye of a rogue.

“We're just about to close on a house, just around the corner from Barb's father.”

“Any age range is fine for us - we've got a big enough yard to accommodate an active lifestyle, and I work flexible hours at my marketing firm.”

“My parents run the Longfellow Township Courier, have you heard of it? They live half the year in Florida now, but when they're up here they're excited to be a resource for us.”

It was tough to keep up with them. Mrs Brooks tried to maintain her critical eye on their application. “I see here you’ve only been married for a few months. Is adopting a child the most prudent thing for the two of you?”

“We had premarital counseling already, so I’m pretty confident that we can handle it.”

“Ah yes, I see your letter of recommendation from Dr. Audrey Velasco.”