The Story of You

By Michael Maillaro

Dedication:

To Mom and Dad. None of this would exist without you. I miss you every day, and I hope I make you proud.

Chapter 1- The Fog Gathers - Sunday, August 1, 2 AM

Ethan Blackwood sat in his stifling rental car in the parking lot of Big Jerry's Fuel and Feed on the outskirts of Ashford, Iowa a haunted man. His fingers had clutched the steering wheel so tightly they left deep indentations in the leather. Ethan had to force a long, ragged breath out of his lungs just to will his muscles to let go. He looked down at the dashboard clock again. 2 AM. A familiar knot of dread tightening in his stomach. How had he possibly let himself get this far behind schedule again?

He should have just pulled off the highway two hours ago and checked into that sketchy roadside motel he saw. But, he had been terrified to stop. He knew what would have happened to him trying to settle down alone in a dark, silent room. The claustrophobia and the crushing weight of hopelessness would roll in. Instead, he drove straight through the night out of pure, desperate survival, keeping the needle at seventy just to force his brain to move faster than his anxiety.

This wasn't his first time passing through Ashford, but it was the first time he had arrived so late at night. Everything else in the county had long since closed, making this neon-lit oasis his only hope.

He forced himself to let go of the steering wheel, and slowly got out of the car, walking into Big Jerry's. The first thing Ethan noticed was that several of the fluorescent lights in the ceiling were buzzing. They flickered severely out of sync, a strobe-like rhythm so violent that if he were writing a Yelp review, he'd feel obligated to post a warning for anyone with a seizure condition.

There were no other customers, and only one person working. She sat cross-legged right on top of the laminate counter in an oversized gray hoodie, a paperback book balanced in one hand and a steaming paper cup of coffee in the other.

The massive sweatshirt completely swallowed her frame, making her look smaller than she probably was. She almost looked like a grey ghost of some sort. Ethan guessed she was somewhere in her late twenties, maybe a year or two younger than him, standing barely five feet tall.

She certainly wasn't going out of her way to impress anyone, but Ethan found something compelling about her immediately. She possessed a quiet, absolute comfort in her own skin, entirely unconcerned with what a late-night traveler might think of her. She had piercing dark brown eyes, and her chestnut-brown hair was gathered into a low, loose ponytail at the nape of her neck, with several unruly strands escaping to partially cover her face. A small silver compass hung from a fine chain around her neck. It was such a unique piece, Ethan immediately wondered what the story behind it was.

A black cat sat next to her on the counter giving Ethan a stern look. Ethan approached the counter, clearing his throat. “I need twenty bucks on pump three.” He absently reached over towards the cat, she immediately headbutted his knuckles, closing her eyes in sheer ecstasy as his fingers found the exact sweet spot behind her ears.

The woman in the hoodie looked up, her dark eyes tracking him with curiosity, Ethan stood six-foot-two with wide shoulders that tapered down into a lean, swimmer's torso; he wore a faded Cleveland Guardians T-shirt that hung cleanly off his athletic frame. He carried the deep tan of someone who spent a lot of time outdoors, and she noticed his hands were heavily callused. His dark hair curled wildly, defying any attempt to style it. But what really caught her attention was his blue-gray eyes. They were warm, endlessly curious, and almost incapable of hiding what he was feeling.

“Queenie usually doesn’t like people. She tends to get scratchy.”

Ethan gave a slight bow to Queenie, “Well thank you for allowing me to pet you, your majesty. She work here too?” Queenie purred, rubbing herself against Ethan’s hand once more before hopping off the counter.

“No, she’s one of my roommates. She must have followed me here tonight,” The woman slid off the counter with a surprising, fluid grace to punch the numbers into the register, leaving her book and coffee behind. Ethan looked down, his stomach doing a sudden, violent drop as he recognized the cover art instantly. *Beneath the Highland Sky.* Of course it was.

She caught him staring and arched a sharp eyebrow, leaning against the counter. “You have a problem with my book choice?”

“I guess that depends. What do you think of it?”

She shrugged, tapping a short tapered fingernail with chipped black polish against the spine. “The dialogue is a little rough to read sometimes, and the ending is so cliché. And don’t even get me started on that opening line. *'Ewan McWhorter was born wielding a sword under the Highland Sky...'* What is that even supposed to mean? Did he come out of the womb wielding a broadsword? I'm sure Mother McWhorter wasn’t particularly thrilled about that.”

She had recited it exactly right, word for word, without having to glance down at the pages once. He managed to choke out, “I think it’s supposed to be a metaphor.”

“I don’t think the writer would have any clue what a metaphor was if this is his idea of fine literature,” she countered easily, a tiny, amused smirk playing on her lips. “But it’s a fun read if you like the whole Scottish Romantasy thing.”

He asked, “Do you like that kind of thing?”

“I guess. It sure beats staring at the fluorescent bulbs waiting for the sun to come up.”

“Can I see it for a second?”

She eyed him suspiciously. “Why?”

“I am not going to steal it. I promise.”

She hesitated momentarily before she handed it over, curious as to what he had in mind. He flipped it to the back cover, locating the About the Author page, and handed it back to her, pointing at the text.

She read it out loud, still not entirely catching his drift:

> *Ethan Blackwood is the internationally bestselling author of Beneath the Highland Sky, The Inn at Glenmorrow, and The Piper of Blackrook Moor. Renowned for weaving intricate magical lore with sweeping, high-stakes romances and atmospheric settings, Blackwood’s novels have captured the hearts of readers worldwide and been translated into more than twenty languages.*
>
> *He lives somewhere considerably less romantic than the worlds he builds, usually under a heavy fog of coffee and impending deadlines.*”

She commented, “He sounds about as phony as his romance stories.”

But then, she finally put it together. She looked at the picture, then at Ethan. Then she looked back at the picture. The man in the jacket photo was draped in moody shadows and dressed much more stylishly than the man currently standing in front of her. Dark jeans, a crisp blue button-up, and a slightly faded tweed sports coat, but it was undeniably the same guy.

Her jaw dropped momentarily before she quickly tried to regain her composure. “Is that supposed to be you? That picture barely looks like you. Was it taken in the dark?”

“HarperCollins really embellished it,” Ethan admitted, giving her a sheepish smile. “They wanted to sell the whole idea of the mysterious Ethan Blackwood, brooding writer of romantasy novels set in the Scottish Highlands.”

“I always thought you would have an accent.”.

“I get that a lot. And I *do* have an accent. I am a proud son of Yellow Springs, Ohio.”

“You know what I mean! A real accent! A Scottish accent!”

“Sorry to be such a disappointment.”

A small smile cracked through her defensive shell, “So, how did you end up in Ashford? You must have gotten incredibly lost. How many of these books have you written now?”

“Five in this series, six total. The new one is just hitting bookstores now, actually.” He glanced over at the candy offerings displayed on the counter. “I can never decide. What’s your favorite candy?”

“Sour gummy worms. The cheap kind in the big bag.” She held up a finger, forcing Ethan to notice the chipped black nail polish again. “But only if they've been sitting in the back of the shelf long enough to get real stale. The more rubbery the better.” She caught the doubtful look on Ethan’s face and smirked. “Don’t knock it 'til you’ve tried it, Bard!”

“Bard? Just jumping right in there with the nicknames, I see.”

He reached his hand deep into the very back of the metal rack to find the oldest, most neglected bag of sour gummy worms on the shelf. He set them on the counter. “These are for you.”

She blinked, genuinely surprised by the gesture. “Oh. Thanks.”

“It’s a bribe. Hopefully it will make you feel better about my metaphors, lame dialogue, and cliché endings. That way, when you tell the story of tonight to your friends, you can at least say he bought you stale candy and left a decent tip.”

A faint blush crept up her cheeks. “I guess I put my foot in my mouth there.”

He shrugged. “I have heard far worse from my own moms. You should hear what my mom said about my last book.”

“What did she say?”

“She said…and I quote, ‘Could you have a little less brooding in the fog? The book would be a hundred pages shorter!’ ”

They both laughed about that.

“I like your mom already!”

He paid for the gas and the candy, then slid an extra twenty-dollar bill across the counter. “And a tip, as promised!”

She smiled, smoothly pocketing the cash. “So, seriously, what brings you to town?”

“Book signing. I’ll be at Prairie Sky Books later today.”

“Is that an invitation?”

“My publisher insists I have to bring in the customers, one at a time, if necessary! Just make sure you save me some sour gummy worms. I hear the stale ones are the best ones.”

With a final wave, Ethan turned and headed out into the cool night air.

She watched him go through the glass doors, shaking her head with a quiet laugh. “Probably should have gotten a picture with him. No one’s going to believe this. Not in this dump.”

She picked up the paperback, flipping back to the About the Author page to stare at the brooding, shadowed portrait that barely resembled the rumpled, warm-eyed man who had just bought her stale candy. She didn’t even realize she was smiling when she closed the cover. Queenie hopped back on the counter and made a mewing sound at the book.

"A sweeping, high-stakes triumph of Scottish Romantasy."
— The Edinburgh Review
BENEATH the HIGHLAND SKY
BOOK ONE OF THE HIGHLAND CHRONICLES
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ETHAN BLACKWOOD

Excerpt from Beneath the Highland Skies by Ethan Blackwood

Prologue - The Assassin

Ewan McWhorter was born wielding a sword under the Highland Sky. This evening, Isobel Campbell had been tasked with making sure he died the same way.

Isobel checked her ropes and harness carefully, and repelled down the Crag of Echoes toward the United Clan's secret camp. She landed mere inches from a sentry who heard nothing and saw even less. She drew her twin daggers from the sheaths hidden deep within her robes as she shook her head in disgust. Untrained. Undisciplined. It was truly outstanding that Ewan had been able to bring these men this far against her father, Chieftain Murdoch Campbell.

Isobel moved through the shadows of the camp like smoke, reaching the warlord's tent undetected. More sentries stood guard, but they were lulled into a false sense of security, convinced no one could penetrate this deep. Isobel could have slit their throats just to prove them wrong, but that wasn't her task. There was no need to spill the blood of ten men when only one was required.

With one fluid motion, she slipped inside. She rolled under the cot, lying still in the dark, gathering every ounce of her will for the final thrust. With a savage, guttural scream, she lunged upward, driving both blades through the mattress, one where Ewan's heart should have been, the other through the space where he should have rested his head.

Both blades stuck fast in the wood frame with a jarring thwack.

She retrieved her blades, and rolled out from under the bed. The tent flap fluttered open. Ewan McWhorter stepped inside, his brow furrowed from a late-night stroll.

He looked at the shredded cot, then shifted his gaze to Isobel. He reached for the broadsword leaning against the corner. "You almost got me that time."

He swung the sword in a practiced, heavy arc, but Isobel didn't retreat. She slipped under his guard with the grace of a dancer, wrapping her arms tightly around his waist in a warm embrace. "You're getting predictable," Isobel replied.

He looked down, the mischief fading from his eyes as he tilted her chin up to kiss her.

Lachlann Robertson stepped into the tent behind him and let out an exaggerated, weary sigh. "Good evening, Isobel. Sent to kill us all, I wager?"

"My father only sent me to kill Ewan, Lock. Father seems to think the rest of the United Clans would fall apart the moment he's gone."

Lock crossed his arms. "Oh, sure. Let's kill the hero. He's so bloody important."

Isobel teased him, "Are you looking to die, then?"

"No," Lock grumbled, "I just want to be important enough that someone actually bothers to try!"

Isobel finally separated herself from Ewan, giving Lock a soft, familiar squeeze on the arm as she passed. "Don't worry, old friend. I am sure someday I will have to kill you, too." She reached into her sleeve, unfurling a concealed scroll across the bed. "Come see, Ewan. I have the latest field reports."

Chapter 2 - The Beacon in the Bleak

Sunday, August 1, 10:30 AM

Ethan arrived at Prairie Sky Books at noon. Prairie Sky was sandwiched between a hardware store and The Main Street Diner, a breakfast place that never seemed to be open. It was pretty sizable for a local book shop, with plenty of room for a book signing.

Ethan made his way to the back entrance, warmly greeting the owner, Carol Jensen, and her twin daughters, Crystal and Cheryl. When he was starting out, Carol had sent him a personal letter asking him to come do a book signing here. Ethan still had that letter framed and hanging up in his office. Even now that he was starting to become a household name, he insisted that Prairie Sky had to be the first stop on any book tour. Call it superstition, but it certainly worked for him. Each book had sold more than the last, and Ethan made sure that Prairie Sky always had extra signed copies to sell.

Carol was somewhere in her seventies, though nobody in Ashford seemed entirely sure exactly where. She was a widow, though she didn't talk about her deceased husband much. Ethan had tried to get more, but Carol was a closed book. Her silver hair was gathered into an untidy bun that would likely come apart by lunchtime. She wore oversized cardigans no matter the season.

Her two daughters, Crystal and Cheryl, were in their late 40's. Ethan could never tell them apart. They looked alike and dressed alike. They sort of looked like what you would expect the twins from The Shining might look like if they had grown up. They were both tall, skinny, with long dark hair. They were not your conventional idea of good looking, but they were both married and had children, so Ethan certainly was not going to judge.

Their Borador, Slade, raised his head from the floor to greet Ethan. He was the most chill dog that Ethan had ever encountered. Carol told everyone that it was Slade who really owned the shop, and she just paid the mortgage. Ethan gave him a pet behind the ears and when the Jensens weren't looking, Ethan snuck him a treat. A wad of cheese he had smuggled in just that exact purpose. Satisfied that his tribute had been properly paid, Slade dropped his head back to the ground, his tail smacking the floor.

As Ethan looked around the shop, he saw there was a display of his books, arranged to look like a castle. There was a handpainted sign that said Castle Blackwood hanging on the display. Ethan circled it twice. "This is amazing! Come on, we need to get a picture of this!" Carol and her daughters came over for a selfie they could post on their social media.

HarperCollins had sent over some promotional posters, most featuring his newest book, *Where the Heather Blooms.*

Ethan flipped over a copy of the book sitting on the table and absently read the description on the dust jacket:

> *The Highlands are burning.*
>
> *The fragile alliance of the United Clans hangs by a thread as English forces tighten their grip and old rivalries threaten to tear Scotland apart from within. Ewan McWhorter was born beneath a sky full of prophecy and destined for greatness, but destiny has never felt heavier than it does now.*
>
> *Because his best friend is dead.*
>
> *Lachlann Robertson, the druid apprentice known simply as Lock, fell beneath Ewan's blade at the Battle of Blackstone Ridge after dark magic twisted him into a weapon of the Usurper King. Though Ewan saved the Highlands, the victory cost him the brother he loved most.*
>
> *Now whispers spread across the glens.*
>
> *Whispers of heather blooming where no heather should grow.*
>
> *Whispers that death may not be the end.*
>
> *As ancient secrets buried beneath the Highlands begin to surface, Ewan and Isobel Campbell find themselves chasing a legend older than the clans themselves, a forbidden druid ritual capable of restoring a soul thought lost forever. To complete it, they must cross enemy territory, and venture into the shadowed realm of the Usurper King himself.*
>
> *But some things refuse to stay buried. Because if Lock returns, he may not return as the man they remember.*
>
> *Heartbreaking, hopeful, and filled with the sweeping romance and Highland adventure that made the series a worldwide phenomenon,* ***Where the Heather Blooms*** *is a story about friendship, sacrifice, and the impossible lengths we travel for the people we love.*
>
> *For in the Highlands, legends are not born beneath crowns.*
>
> *They bloom from the graves of those who refuse to be forgotten.*

Advance Praise

"A breathtaking masterpiece that shattered me and then somehow stitched me back together again."

"Blackwood delivers his most emotionally devastating novel yet. Readers should clear their schedules-and stockpile tissues."

“I spent the final hundred pages alternating between crying, cheering, and yelling at the book. An extraordinary achievement."

"The friendship between Ewan and Lock remains one of the most compelling relationships in modern fantasy."

"I was furious at Ethan Blackwood after *Shadows Over the Glen*. I am furious at him again after this book. Five stars."

"Blackwood understands something many fantasy authors forget: saving the world means nothing if you cannot save the people who matter most."

Carol was standing next to him, “Is this one going to make me cry too?”

“One of the early reviews on Amazon said ‘I finished it at two in the morning and cried in my kitchen. The last time I cried was when my mother died eleven years ago.’ So I mean, it has that going for it.”

Carol patted him on the arm, and he softly took her hand, “It’s really good to see you, Carol. Thank you for setting this up.”

“Why are you thanking me? All I have to do is hang up some signs and open the doors. Your name does the rest.”

“You know it’s a lot more than that. When I started out, I constantly felt like I was drowning. Your letters. Just knowing someone believed in me. I don’t say this lightly, Carol. I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for you. And I don’t just mean Ashford.” He kissed her gently on the forehead.

Carol shoved him away playfully, “I am not one of the characters in your books, Mister Blackwood! Save your charms for someone much closer to your age! I think you would have always found your way, but if you want to give me some credit for it, I am certainly not going to say no. I am not that modest, young man!”

Carol headed outside to greet the customers. Carol’s special talent was that she remembered people. Their names. Their children. What book they'd bought three years ago. What job they

had retired from. She treated every person who walked through the door like their story mattered. She was who Ethan wanted to be when he grew up.

Ethan looked over the crowd, half-hoping to catch a glimpse of dark, messy hair or a pair of cynical eyes. But there was no sign of Sam from the night before.

He let out a quiet huff of laughter at himself, adjusting his collar. *Did you really think you left that big of an impression on her? Now who's the one failing at modesty?*

Still, it was a nice, relaxed crowd. He scanned the room again, checking the lapels of the older women and the college kids in the back, and felt a wave of relief. He didn't see a single "Justice for Lock!" button in the entire audience. No effigies, no pitchforks, no angry manifestos. This was exactly why Ethan loved starting his tours here. It was a safe haven.

At 11 AM on the dot, Crystal and Cheryl opened the doors, and the crowd started to filter in.

Ethan turned up the charm and started to greet people who came to the table. It quickly became overwhelming. He had forgotten what this was like without an assistant to help. Make small talk, ask the reader's name, open the book to the title page, remember the name, ask them how to spell the name, then ask again because you weren't paying attention the first time, sign your name, blow the signature to help it dry, smile for a selfie, make sure you give each person a moment, listen to their story. Move on to the next person even before you can process any of it, repeat the whole process over again. There was a pile of Post-It pads so he could get people's names before signing, but that sat abandoned. He probably should have recruited Crystal and Cheryl to help him out, but he didn't really even think about it at the time. This crowd was much bigger than he expected at such a small venue.

Within minutes, he could feel the warning signs. He was finding it hard to breathe, he felt a tightening in his chest. There was too much noise. Too many people. Everyone wanted something from him. Some small piece of him. He started to clench his hands into fists. His hands were getting sweaty. It was hard to hold on to the pen as the next copy of *Where the Heather Blooms* was shoved at him. Who was this one for? Was her name Janet? Jane? Jake? No, that probably wasn't right.

Ethan tried to force a smile, tried to sign the book, but his fingers felt entirely numb. The room tilted just a fraction, the edges of his vision beginning to blur into a soft, terrifying gray. He was alone, his schedule was a wreck, his body was short-circuiting, and if he couldn't even handle fifty polite people in a well-lit bookstore, the rest of this tour was going to absolutely eat him alive.

“Is it getting hot in here?” he asked the next customer. Another little old lady, this one with pink highlights in her hair. She was saying something about her granddaughter. Ethan couldn’t quite process it. He nodded at her blankly, “I’m sure she’s a lovely girl.” The tilting room had started to go into a full spin now. Ethan felt like he was going to throw up, scream and run away. All at the same time.

Someone yelled his name. The voice was familiar. But he felt like it was coming from a million miles away. There was concern in the voice, but it was too little too late. Ethan’s heart felt like it was going to burst out of his chest. Was he having a heart attack? Cynically he thought, *“That would definitely help with the sales of this book. HarperCollins would be thrilled, ‘Phony Scottish author collapses and dies in a castle made of books with his name on it’.”* He laughed at that thought, and it came out sounding a bit hysterical.

The voice again, this time firm and right next to him, “Bard! Focus, we got this.” He looked up and saw the chestnut-haired critic from the gas station from last night. It was his grey ghost girl… She was wearing the same grey hoodie. Ethan forced himself to focus on that thought. She had been holding a bag of gummy worms, but it tumbled from her hand as she gently touched his shoulder. She bent down to look into his eyes. She clearly didn’t like what she saw.

She turned to the crowd, “I am going to need everyone to take one giant step back right now. We have a bit of a medical emergency here. Don’t worry, I’m a trained professional.” She leaned down to check on him again, “You okay? You look like you are in a galaxy far, far, away.”

“Trained professional?” he managed to whisper, “I thought you worked in a gas station.”

“One of my roommates is a nurse, and I work the graveyard shift in a gas station in the middle of nowhere. I’ve had customers literally OD right in my restroom. Call it on the job training.” She gestured for Cheryl to get him some water quickly and started to take Ethan outside.

Carol arrived on the scene and started to manage the crowd, announcing a five minute break.

Moments later, Ethan leaned against the dumpster behind the building trying to catch his breath, “Ghost Girl? What are you doing here?”

“Ghost Girl? My name is Allison. You invited me, remember. I had to bring you your gummy worms!

He looked at her with great sincerity, “I am about to throw up now. Sorry.” He opened the dumpster and started to puke up his hotel breakfast.

Allison took a step back to stay out of the splash zone, but still close by since he looked like an even mild wind could knock him down, “So, what happened back there?”

Ethan hesitated before admitting, “Panic attack. I thought I had been getting better about them, but you saw what just happened.”

“Shouldn’t you have an assistant or something?”

Ethan wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve, “I am sort of between assistants. Moira, my last one, ended up getting hired by my publisher. Any day now, she’ll probably soon be sending me inane notes about how I can broaden my brand. Whatever that means.”

Allison made a decision at that moment, “All right. How can I help?”

Ethan looked at her confused, “What do you mean?”

“You clearly need help, and I am free the rest of the afternoon. I certainly don’t wanna read your obituary tomorrow. Now, THAT would be a ridiculous ending.” She brushed a lock of hair out of her eyes, “I’ve never worked a book signing before, but I am sure it’s not rocket science. Tell me what I can do to help you get through this.”

Ethan was feeling too miserable to put up much of a fight, “All right. I guess we’re doing this then. I can pay you for the afternoon.”

“Damn right you can. That Netflix deal has been all over the news the last few days! I heard they said Tom Hiddleston was interested in playing Lord Starling.”

Ethan leaned against the dumpster, almost as if she had smacked him. He seemed to fade some when she made that comment. His guts churned. He had thought he had made a connection with Sam/Allison last night, but like everyone else, she just wanted a piece of him.

Allison instantly froze, realizing she had gone too far. She softened, her voice dropping into something genuine. “Sorry. My mouth sometimes gets way ahead of my brain. It was just a dumb joke. Let me help you get through the rest of today. Please.”

She held out her hand in a tiny, tight fist. It took Ethan a moment to realize what she wanted. He reached out and gave her the most awkward, uncoordinated fist bump in human history.

“Sterling.”

She paused, looking back at him. “What?”

“His name is Sterling, not Starling," Ethan corrected quietly, the tension finally starting to leave his chest. "And yeah. Tom Hiddleston would be pretty awesome.”

Allison held the door open for him and led him back to his seat. The crowd cheered for him. Carol looked relieved. Even more so, when Allison parked herself at the table and started to play handler. Allison picked up the bag of gummy worms, shoved one in her mouth and handed the rest over to Ethan.

Allison immediately took charge, surprising herself with how easily she was able to spin this, “All right folks, break time is over. We have still got a lot of people to get through, and I am sure everyone wants to have their moment with the Ba…” She caught herself, “With Mister Blackwood. When I point to you, come to me. AND ONLY ME. Give me your books, tell me your name, I will write it on these Post-It’s and when Mister Blackwood is ready for you. AND ONLY WHEN MISTER BLACKWOOD IS READY FOR YOU, you step over to meet him. Pictures are allowed and encouraged, but remember you have a lot of people waiting behind you, so be mindful of all of our time. The rules are simple, right? If anyone breaks them, you are going to the back of the line.” She stared straight forward at the crowd, not giving Ethan any opportunity to contradict her. A small smile crossed his face, followed quickly by the start of a crazy idea.

Allison picked up the stack of Post-It’s on the table, twirled the marker like she was a gunslinger showing off and got ready to kick ass and take names. Literally. Well the taking names part. She hoped she wouldn’t have to kick anyone’s ass. But if she did, she was ready for that too.

With Allison taking charge, everything started to move more smoothly. There were some hiccups to start with. Like Ethan freaking out because he couldn’t find his favorite silver marker. Only to realize it he was holding it in his hand.

Then there was the Scotsman.

A man approached the table in a full kilt and a thick accent, “Aye laddy! Yer books are beautiful. I always feel like they are telling my story. What part of Scotland did you grow up?”

Ethan got this a lot and never quite knew how to answer. This time Allison jumped in for him, “Ohio.”

The Scotsman blinked at her, “What?”

“He’s from the Ohio part of Scotland.”

Ethan looked at Allison, wondering if he had made a big mistake here. But the Scotsman boomed a laugh, “Well, laddy, if you aren’t really from Scotsland, you certainly have fooled me. I am declaring you an honorary Scotsman!” He practically picked up Ethan with the massive bearhug he gave him.

After that, the rest of the day went smoothly. Ethan and Allison quickly had a rhythm going. When Ethan started to feel overwhelmed, Allison would slow the line down, taking more time to talk to the customers as they came up, giving Ethan a chance to catch a breather. Since she was from town, most of them already knew her, so she was able to chat them up easily enough. But she was so natural at this, Ethan started to suspect that she might be pretty good at this anywhere, not just in a small bookshop in Ashford. That crazy idea was starting to grow.

The crowd quickly started to dwindle, but Ethan seemed to genuinely be enjoying himself by the end of it, spending more time with each remaining customer.

Allison caught Ethan leaning across the table toward a woman who looked to be a very spunky eighty-five. His voice had dropped into a conspiratorial whisper. "...and that's why," he concluded gravely, "one should never attempt simultaneous declarations of love and removal of a corset."

The older woman gasped, letting out a delighted, papery giggle that echoed in the quiet shop, before slapping a folded piece of paper onto the table and sliding it toward him.

She loudly claimed the phone number was for her granddaughter, but watching her wink at him, Allison was pretty sure she was trying to rob the cradle.

She glanced at Ethan, who didn't miss a beat. He picked up the paper, gave it a suave press to his lips, and offered the lady a theatrical, hand-over-heart bow.

Or maybe he's trying to rob the grave? Allison thought, quickly putting her hand over her mouth to stop from laughing out loud.

Over in the corner, Cheryl watched Ethan and Allison. She leaned over to Carol and whispered, “Are they together?”

Carol shook her head, “I don’t think so. That is Ally from the gas station. You went to school with her aunt.”

Crystal said, “They should be together.”

Carol chuckled at that, “Maybe. They do make a cute couple. But I don’t think it will happen. Not yet anyway."

"How can you tell?"

"Because they're still pretending."

There were still a handful of stragglers in the store, but it seemed like everything was winding down. Ethan asked, “Is that everyone?”

Carol responded, “Looks like it. Thank you, Ally. You really saved the day.”

Allison got up and stretched, “I just came to bring Mister Blackwood’s gummy worms. He special ordered them. I am heading home to sleep. You going to be okay?”

Ethan nodded, “Thanks to you, yes.”

Carol took fifty dollars out of the register and pressed it into Allison's hand.

“Carol, you don't have to do that,” Allison said. Internally, her brain was trying to physically hijack her arm to grab the cash. *Do not play polite right now, Allison. You have negative four dollars in your checking account, and your landlord doesn't accept good manners for rent.*

"Nonsense. You worked hard today; you more than earned it. Besides, Ethan will reimburse me. And frankly, if we waited for him to figure out Venmo, we'd both be dead of old age.”

There was still one last copy of *Where the Heather Blooms* sitting on the counter. Allison asked, “Carol, would you mind ringing that one up for me?”

Carol and Ethan both said, “Take it! No charge!” at the same time.

Allison said, “Okay, that was just weird. But thanks.”

Ethan was about to ask her if she wanted him to sign it, but she was already out the door.

Cheryl chimed in, “Aren’t you going to go after her?”

Ethan looked confused, “Why would I do that?”

Carol shook her head and said to her daughters, “I told you.”

Chapter 3 - The Hearth is where The Heart Is

Sunday, August 1, 3 PM

Allison entered her apartment and dropped right into the couch face down, her copy of *Where the Heather Blooms* sliding under the couch. Queenie hopped right on her back and meowed a question. “Queenie, no!” Allison tried to swat her off, but it was impossible from this position. Allison gave up, her eyes heavy and already starting to drift closed.

Paige came out of her room to see what all the noise was. Paige looked like the kind of person you immediately look for in an emergency. She had broad shoulders and the kind of stamina that came from pulling grueling twelve-hour floor shifts at the hospital. Her skin was a sun-warmed olive, and her dark brown hair was chopped into a practical, no-nonsense bob that she routinely pinned back to keep out of her eyes.

Paige’s movements were perfectly efficient, the practiced, vigilant economy of motion unique to trauma nurses. Paige’s eyes were a steady, unchanging hazel, completely devoid of panic, looking at a broken car engine, a bleeding gash, or a room full of chaotic people with the exact same calm, analytical assessment. Or exhausted roommates for that matter.

“Are you just getting home? I thought your shift ended hours ago.”

Allison muttered something into the couch cushions.

“Try that again?”

Allison forced her head up, which Queenie did not like at all and told her so with an angry mewing sound, “I had a stop to make. It took longer than I expected.”

“Have you eaten anything today?”

“I had a gummy worm.”

“Let me make you lunch,” Paige ran her fingers through Allison’s hair softly, “You can’t keep going like this.”

Allison dropped her face back into the cushions and was once again incoherent, but Paige already knew this script well, “Maya and I can take care of rent this month, you don’t need to do all these extra shifts.”

Allison finally replied with a snore. Paige looked at Queenie, “She never listens to me, you need to talk to her!” Queenie stretched out and started to knead a bed into Allison’s back.

Paige headed into the kitchen to make a quick lunch. Maya came in lugging her yoga mat behind her. Paige made a hushing sound and gestured at Allison sleeping on the couch.

If Paige was bedrock, Maya was the oncoming storm. Slender and lithe, with a restless, feline grace that made it look like she was constantly vibrating on a frequency the rest of the world couldn't hear. Her complexion was a pale, freckled porcelain, completely dominated by a pair of wide, glittering green eyes that were perpetually alight with mischief, curiosity, or an impending bad decision. Maya's hair was a wild, asymmetrical tumble of copper curls, a vibrant halo that matched her unpredictable energy.

Everything about Maya was fluid and expressive. She never just stood still; she leaned, she stretched, she draped herself over furniture, her long fingers flying through the air as she spoke. She dressed in a chaotic, effortlessly cool patchwork of oversized vintage leather, sheer fabrics, and heavy stone rings that clicked like castanets whenever she gestured. She radiated a fierce, magnetic confidence, the kind of girl who walked into a room expecting everyone to look at her, and who possessed the exact combination of sharp wit and total fearlessness to make sure they did.

Maya whispered, "Is she just getting home?"

"Yeah. I think she barely made it in the door. She's lucky the couch broke her fall this time."

Maya winced, "I said I was sorry! I moved it back, even if it does really ruin the flow of the room. Are you making lunch? Let me help!" Maya joined Paige in the kitchen area, which really wasn't big enough for two people, but Maya had a poor sense of personal boundaries, and Paige was used to it by now.

Paige poked around in the fridge, pulling out some sliced turkey. She gave it a sniff before asking Maya, "Is this still good?"

"It should be. Does she have another shift tonight?"

"Yeah, I don't think she's had any real time off in weeks."

"Do you still have those handcuffs from last Halloween? I could chain her down to the couch."

Paige rolled her eyes at Maya, "This isn't prom night, Maya."

Maya stuck her tongue out at Paige, "You weren't complaining then, North Star."

“So mature.”

Maya stood back to admire the sandwich she crafted, “Perfection! Do we have any more of those spicy chips she likes?”

“Top shelf above the dryer.”

Maya stood up on her tippy toes to get the chips, her tank top and yoga pants pulling taut. Paige watched with more than a little interest. Maya teased, “I can feel you staring at me!”

“I am. But today all I have time for is staring. I have to head to the hospital. My shift starts soon. You going to be awake when I get home?”

Maya kissed her, “Yes, I will stay up for you.”

Paige kissed her back, “Promise? Last time, you were out cold.”

“You can always wake me up.”

“Last time I tried that, you ended up punching me!”

“I am a heavy sleeper!”

Paige gave her another kiss and headed out the door.

Maya crept back into the living room, setting the sandwich and chips down next to Allison. “Sleep well, Hart. You deserve it.” Queenie hopped off Allison and followed Maya back to the bedroom she shared with Paige.

Chapter 4- An Alliance Forged

Sunday, August 1, 9 PM

After a quick dinner, Ethan headed back over to Big Jerry's hoping to catch Allison before he left town. He was scheduled to be in Des Moines the following morning, so couldn't stick around much longer. He didn't have a lot of time to give his crazy idea a try.

Ethan peeked through the window, and he spotted a mountain of a man holding down the fort behind the counter. The guy was almost as wide as he was tall, sporting an out-of-control beard and massive hairy forearms that looked like they belonged to a grizzly bear. Ethan stared for a second, this man would make an absolutely incredible background extra for the Scottish clan war.. Big Jerry himself, Ethan assumed. It was a good name.

A car pulled up behind him. He turned around just in time to see Allison getting out, "Bard? That you?

Inside the store, Big Jerry had taken notice of Allison and Ethan. He came outside to make sure everything was okay. Ethan walked over to him, "You ever think about getting into acting, Big Guy?"

Jerry responded, "Yeah! All the time!"

Allison was at his side, "Jerry, this is Ethan Blackwood."

Jerry looked down at Ethan, which Ethan had to admit was a bit of a new experience for him, "Like the author?"

Ethan said, "Very much like the author. Are you a fan?"

Jerry considered, "No. My wife is though. Can I get an autograph for her?"

"Sure, but in exchange for the autograph, I need a few minutes to talk to Allison?" Jerry agreed, so Ethan poked around in his backseat, emerging with a copy of *Where the Heather Blooms* and his favorite silver marker. Ethan signed the book, and Jerry headed back into the store.

Allison turned to Ethan. "I wasn't expecting to see you again. Run out of gummy worms already?"

Her tone was cautious. Ethan seemed like a nice guy, but Allison had been burned by "nice guys" before, in her experience, some of the worst stalkers started out exactly like that. Her eyes

flicked toward the storefront. Seeing Big Jerry standing close to the glass door brought a sudden wave of relief, a reminder that she wasn't entirely on her own if this situation went south

“I wanted to ask you something…” Ethan took a deep breath and said all in one word, “How-would-you-like-to-come-work-for-me?”

It took her a little while to parse all that, “Wait. Are you offering me a job?”

“Yeah, you said before how badly I need an assistant.”

“What makes you think I have any idea how to be anyone’s assistant?”

He shrugged, “Earlier today, my entire world started spinning sideways. Everyone else in my life panics when that happens. You didn't. You took charge and made it so I can breathe again. I don't care about a résumé, Allison. You are the right person for the job.”

“What would being your assistant even look like?”

"Answering emails. Coordinating travel. Handling schedules."

"That makes sense."

"Sometimes you might have to remind me where I'm supposed to be. Or where I actually am."

"That's concerning."

"OH! And this might be the most important part. You will need to prevent me from buying books."

"What's wrong with buying books?"

"I have a problem."

"What kind of problem?”

"I own six copies of The Hobbit. Not six different editions. Six copies of the exact same book"

"Why would someone own six copies of The Hobbit?"

"What if I lose one?"

"You would still have five more!"

"Unless something happens to those five too!"

"So, basically, you need adult supervision."

"Yes, that's the job exactly!"

“What’s it pay?”

“How much do you make now?”

Allison did some quick math in her head before giving a number that was a little more than double what she actually made last year even counting all the overtime she had been working. Might as well see if this guy was serious.

He did some math of his own before saying, “I can triple that and pay all your expenses. Clothes, hotels, food. We can even set up a per diem for random expenses that you may have come up. Honestly, my last assistant was able to basically bank her salary and live off the per diem. It’s a good deal.”

“What’s the catch?”

“It’s a lot of travel, the hours kind of suck, and your boss is prone to panic attacks and terrible at asking for help.”

Allison looked into Ethan’s eyes waiting for him to laugh at her. This had to be some kind of prank. This kind of thing doesn’t happen to people. Especially not to her. While she saw a lot of trouble and mischief in those expressive blue-gray eyes, this didn’t seem to be a joke.

“Wait, you are not some kind of sex freak, right? A lot of authors are into some freaky stuff. You are not planning on tying me up in your basement and making me listen to Coldplay, right?”

“I don’t even have a basement. How about I give you the numbers of my past assistants so you can check up on me if you want?,” He paused for a second before asking, “Coldplay?”

“I don’t know what sex freaks are into! Give me those numbers. I need some time to think about it.”

He reached into the car, getting a pen and McDonald's napkin. He jots down a few numbers. At the bottom he adds his own, and someone named Martin Keller.

"I am all over the map for the next few days. Des Moines, Omaha, Kansas City. If you can't get me, call my agent. Martin usually the best person to actually track me down."

"What about benefits?"

"Yeah, medical, prescriptions, some kind of retirement thing. I think we have dental?"

Allison gave him a look that was equal parts concern and exasperation. "You aren't exactly making me feel encouraged, Bard."

"When you call Martin, he can run you through all that corporate HR-ish stuff," Ethan said, shifting as he realized the silence was lingering a bit too long. "That all sounds like adult supervision stuff, and I don't keep track of that well."

Allison stared at him, her expression hardening just a fraction. *Must be nice to have never had to worry about a premium in your life.*

Ethan seemed to catch the shift in her energy, and the casual grin faded instantly. "I'm sorry. That was callous of me. I didn't mean it like that."

He rubbed the back of his neck as he tried to find the right words. "Look, if you need a specific type of climbing shoe for a mountain trail, or a custom carving knife, I am your guy. I will research for days to make sure you have the tool you need because those things are tangible, and I can hold them in my hand and in my brain.. But insurance and all that. That gives me headaches. The second someone asks me to choose between Aetna or Horizon, it all just feels the same to me. My brain just rolls over and shuts down. I'm not dismissing what you need, Hart. I'm just... genuinely terrible at the invisible stuff."

He looked at her earnestly. "Talk to Martin. Tell him what you need, and I'll take care of it. I promise."

Ethan started to head to his car; he raised a hand to Big Jerry, who waved back at him. Ethan realized he should get out of here before Big Jerry found out he was trying to poach his employees.

"I still don't get it. Why me?"

"I need someone who's organized enough to keep me pointed in the right direction, stubborn enough to tell me when I'm being an idiot, and who knows where to find the best stale gummy worms in Iowa. I really think that's you. One thing though, if you are going to keep calling me

Bard, I need some kind of nickname for you too. It puts our relationship on an uneven playing field."

"People called my Ally growing up, I've kind of always hated it…"

"Definitely not Ally then. What do your friends call you?"

"Hart mostly."

"Why Hart?"

"Because it's my last name."

"Allison Hart," he repeated back to her, mulling the name over as if he had never heard it before.

"It's a pretty common name. There are a lot more Harts than Blackwoods."

"Allison Hart sounds like the name of one of the characters in my books."

"Your character's names have a lot more vowels in places that make no sense to the rest of the English-speaking world."

"So, Hart? Do I get to call you that?"

"Are we friends, Bard? Stick to Allison. Maybe you can earn your way up to Hart."

"That's if I see you again," The words slipped out before he could stop them.

For the first time since they'd met, Allison seemed momentarily caught off guard.

A long pause settled between them. Then she nodded toward the gas station,"I need to punch in."

She took a step towards the door, though she definitely lingered for an almost imperceptible moment. "I will call you either way, I won't leave you hanging." She said as she left him standing alone in the parking lot.

She yelled from the door, "Hey, Bard?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't buy any more books while you're waiting for me to call."

Ethan watched her disappear through the door. Then he looked at the bag of books sitting on the backseat of his car that he bought from Carol, “That's fair.”