

Poetry as a Means of Adding Depth to Character in Memoir

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For Cade and Stone and Payton and Lexi and Jayden,

Forever my Summer Siblings.

And for Mom, because she would be sad if I didn't include her.

Love y'all.

Abstract

The sections of this thesis proposal were written in a natural progression as the author pursued a yet-to-be-known truth she believed could be found within herself. The artist's statement details the domino effect of questions that led her to ultimately pursuing the concept of writing a memoir. It roots the reader in the mind of the author as she establishes exactly what it is she is wanting to do with her manuscript: to finally find her place in the world. In her critical theory paper, the author investigates the best way to tell her story by studying the impact of poetry on character development. She finds that the very present essence of personhood found within Art is that which determines the reader's connection, and thus, contributes to the overall experience of the reader. She concludes her thesis proposal with an annotated bibliography detailing relevant information regarding her research.

Acknowledgements

Before moving past this page, I would like the reader to know without any shadow of a doubt, that had it not been for my thesis chair, Professor Jennifer Bell, this would be where the manuscript ends. Therefore, I want to extend my deepest gratitude to her for bearing with me as I sorted through the tangled spaghetti of thoughts and ideas that I threw at her, even when it seemed like it was all a bit too undercooked to stick. You're an absolute *saint*, Professor Bell. Thank you for everything.

Also, thank you to my committee member, Dr. James Latta, for taking the time to read the messy poetry and sometimes tearful prose of a girl still trying to make sense out of life. Your consideration has been much appreciated.

I'd also like to take this time to thank my parents.

Dad, thank you for pushing me to be the best that I can be, for showing me how to love an adventure, and for always reminding me that I'm a little too much like you.

Mom, I'm sorry I'm more like Dad. I think everyone loses in this situation. Still, thank you for being my number one supporter anyway. You were right. You called this day twenty years ago. I hope to someday be half the woman you are.

And lastly, I would like to thank the Palmer family for the role they have played in my life these past twenty-five years. Thank you for always treating me as one of your own. This is kind of a love letter to y'all. Don't tease me too much for admitting it.

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Artist's Statement

INTRODUCTION TO THE MANUSCRIPT

When I was eighteen, my friend Sara told me that she was studying coming-of-age novels in her college English course. She had learned that “coming-of-age” was the time in a person’s life when he or she took off the proverbial rose-colored glasses and received an upper cut to the chin from reality. Then she looked at me very seriously and said that she “didn’t think I had hit my coming-of-age point yet.” I didn’t know it then, but she was right. My coming-of-age story wouldn’t start until after high school, when I was well into my twenties. I’ve always been fashionably late like that.

In my memoir, *Bird on Fire*, I wanted to capture the essence of those transitional periods in a person’s life. That time when the sum of everything you’ve worked for leads you to *the* decision—the choice you must make that will lead you down one path or another. And while there’s an argument for one having the right to change one’s mind, to alter one’s course, it can’t be denied that even this results in loss. If not a lost dream of what could be, then such a shift in direction most definitely results in lost time. Such is the reality of the human condition. We cannot escape this world without varying degrees of loss. Thus, the thing that separates us is how we cope, or preferably, how we thrive in the face of said inescapable truth of our limited time on Earth.

Consequently, this story is about trying to beat Life at its own game. It’s about trying to avoid loss at all costs and losing anyway. It’s about failing. Filling the pages of this manuscript are the questions we ask ourselves in the pursuit of contentment and the frustrations we feel when the answers are just out of reach. This story is about the moment when your life is at the tip

of your tongue. It is searching and longing and hoping for more, only to learn that you've overestimated your capacity. Most of all, this story is mine.

The title, *Bird on Fire*, alludes to the themes of escapism that I return to frequently throughout the work, as well as my ever-present fear of being trapped. In the manuscript I am the bird setting myself on fire in an effort to be free. Through poetry, memories, and anecdotes covering the course of the year I turned twenty-five, I have given up the most vulnerable parts of myself to be read, consumed, and perhaps burned. By letting go of the things that scare me the most, I'm hoping that I might rise from the ashes stronger than before.

PROCESS FOR THE WORK

I began this thesis project by forcing myself to sit in silence. As a reluctant member of Gen Z, I'll admit that choosing silence is more difficult for me than it should be. Having grown up in the era of social media and rapidly increasing technological advances, I act in solidarity with my fellow byproducts of the modern world, avoiding boredom at all costs. My free time consists of scrolling through social media, watching television and, most often, reading. I knew that these things had to be set aside in favor of complete silence if I were going to successfully come up with an idea for my proposal.

Originally, I thought that I would write a piece of fiction that incorporated everything I had learned in the past two years and would finish the program with a completed novel under my belt. However, in the quiet of the morning, as I sat with my blank notebook in front of me, I realized that I had no desire to make up a story. I didn't want to write a novel with a premise that probably wasn't even that good of an idea to begin with. If I wasn't going to write something

good, I didn't want to write at all. In fact, I didn't want to do anything ever again. I was stuck in some weird mental block. So, I started writing down everything that popped into my head.

I needed to write a thesis in order to finish my degree, but then I would have to figure out a plan for what I would do with my life after. And what if I hate the career I choose? Am I questioning everything I've worked for? Yes, I am. Why? I'm not sure. These questions led me to look inside myself where I found an empty space where my ambitions once resided, and I realized I wanted to investigate deeper.

Looking down at the scribbled words that now filled several pages of my notebook, I felt like one of those old shuffling robot toys that had been wound too tight. All I had were questions, most of them concerning my plans for after: *after* I write my thesis, *after* I get past this mental block. There was nothing to help me *now*. Unless I could do both at the same time. If I could just get to the root of my fears and insecurities, I could effectively rip them out and leave them in the past. But first I would have to look back and find the source. I glanced down at my book of questions and added one more. *What if I wrote a memoir?*

As I scrolled through the pages of ideas I kept in the Notes app on my phone, I realized I've been slowly building up to write the story of my life for years. I skimmed over countless memories hurriedly typed and ideas for poems I've wanted to write and decided I would use it all. I would craft a memoir around those thoughts and feelings I experienced in my early twenties, including the mediocre poetry, to give the reader something to compare to their own experience. The effect would be an accurate depiction of a girl trying to figure out what life is all about, and hopefully, I might find the answer along the way.

The process from there involved the "simple" act of narrowing down the timeline and finding the driving narrative within. When I had imagined my part in this exercise at the start of

the project, I imagined I would be like a sculptor lovingly chipping away at a block of wood. Though once the cutting began, I quickly discovered was that I was the wood. Hacking away at myself was more painful than I imagined it would be, but it had to be done to find the answers I needed to finally move forward with my life. I needed to know, what is the core of the story and what exactly do I need in order to tell it? What should be stripped away? I've always struggled with which details are necessary and which are not, but the line became even blurrier when I facilitated the collision between my past and present selves.

Once again, I started *Bird on Fire* by writing down everything. I spent weeks detailing all I could remember from the past year, focusing more heavily on the memories I found myself returning to most when I reminisced. I figured that the emotional collateral from the moments when I was happiest and the moments when I was destroyed held the most insight into my interior world, and thus, the narrative. My goal prior to beginning the project was to free myself from the mental block that was holding me back, and that hadn't changed. To my surprise, that initial goal turned out to be the narrative. I felt trapped, by a cage of my own making, and I had been lying to myself about the key.

In a way, the manuscript can be split into two mirrored halves. The first half follows an upward trajectory that seems to confirm my belief about which fear had been holding me back. However the second knocks me back down to where I started despite my repeating the same actions as before, forcing me to confront a truth I had been long avoiding.

As could be expected—or, rather, as I had hoped—the results of my merciless invasions into the inner workings of my own mind have been eye opening. While the state of my character at the beginning of the story resembles the desperate and confused girl I was at the start of this project, there is a crossover in the last two chapters when the me I was then became the me I am

now. By the conclusion of the manuscript, I am more aware of the lies I've been telling myself for most of my life, and with the true key in hand I finally find my freedom.

VISION FOR THE WORK

I wanted my manuscript to read like a literary novel. I had toyed with the idea of it being an open letter to an anonymous reader, some other lost girl maybe, but I didn't think I had enough insight for that. I did, however, work in one letter to my reader through my last poem, *A Confession*. I believe that the letter in that poem accomplished what I had intended, which was to give up the parts of myself I had been holding onto, trying to keep safe, in favor of true freedom.

While my goal was to give myself up to the reader—to my crippling fears of vulnerability and rejection—I wasn't trying to give advice. I was trying to discover a truth I didn't have at the time. For me, that meant embodying the unreliable narrator that I was. It meant finding humor in the messy situations I often found myself in and trying to put words to the spectrum of emotions I had experienced. It was praying that some semblance of wisdom would make itself known to me. It meant continuing to do my best with what I had, and then working to be better.

One of my favorite things about being human is that sometimes I get to read a piece of writing where the author left her soul on the page. Like when Michelle Zauner, first generation Korean-American and author of the memoir *Crying in H Mart*, wrote, "I could never be in both worlds, only half in and half out, waiting to be ejected at will by someone with a greater claim than me. Someone full. Someone whole" (107). There is nothing more beautiful than when a person strings syllables together, stripping themselves bare, and showing that we are never truly alone in our experiences. That is why my memoir will be punctuated by poetry. I want to throw

my heart out on a lifeline and see if anyone bites. I'm looking for connection. I figure if I need it, then others do too. I want fellow-seekers to find a home in my words.

I've seen more and more people opening up about the untethered feeling of life after college, and that's something I want to give voice to. If possible, I'd like to provide a narrative that helps people understand that feeling and how to get past it. *Bird on Fire* is not only my way of searching for answers, but also my way of giving them. It isn't advice. It's the roadmap I used to find a truth I always had inside myself, and I think maybe somebody else could use it too.

LITERARY CONTEXT OF THE WORK

There were several memoirs I read that made me think I might eventually write my own. Thanks to books like *Everything I Know About Love* by Dolly Alderton, *I'm Glad My Mom Died* by Jennette McCurdy, and *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed, I've been devouring other people's life stories for years, hoping mine might mean something to someone one day. Much like the work of Alderton, McCurdy, and Strayed, *Bird on Fire* aims to occupy space in the memoir genre under the specified circumstance of the female experience.

While trying to fit myself amongst these memoirists might lead to a certain feeling of what the feminists call "empowerment," I am more interested in the different ways in which we tell our stories as writers. The way each of these women demonstrate their craft inspires me to see how every element plays into the storytelling experience. I am inspired by how, in *Everything I Know About Love*, Dolly Alderton intersperses lists of the "unwavering" beliefs she has held over the course of her life that change and mature as she progresses through her twenties. I am inspired by how Jeannette McCurdy writes *I'm Glad My Mom Died* in the present tense, taking her reader with her as she comes to terms with the trauma she experienced as a

child actor, and especially her mother's role in it. I am inspired by how Cheryl Strayed limits her timeline in *Wild* to the several months in which she hikes the Pacific Crest Trail, reflecting as she comes to terms with her mother's death and the terrible choices she made in its wake. I am inspired by these women and their stories, but mostly in how they have written them. I drew from each as I approached my own manuscript, limiting my temporal agenda to the year I turned twenty-five, inserting my poetry as a signifier for where my character arc was at in each chapter, and narrating in the present tense so that the reader might feel a part of the story rather than like an onlooker.

Stylistically, *Bird on Fire* will follow an almost modern approach to the memoir genre. Like the examples given above, my memoir aims to create an experience for the reader in which truth is felt rather than simply understood. And if I am going to be so bold as to write a memoir at the sage, old age of twenty-five, it needs to feel like a conversation with a friend.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TOPIC AS A CHRISTIAN SCHOLAR

Part of what makes my memoir unique is my approach to life. I've found that many of the nonfiction books in this genre tend to follow a person's story as they stumble from one bad decision to the next. These books work because it is more interesting to see everything go wrong than to see everything go right. We like this because such experiences are familiar to us as it often feels like life is just beyond our means of control. Nobody wants to read a humble brag disguised as a book written by the one guy who got all he ever wanted without lifting a finger. We like to read about people who had to fight for what they have. Those people have character.

However, for some, part of that fight involves facing the demons they welcomed into their lives in an attempt to take a shortcut to happiness. Sex, drugs, and alcohol may be *rock 'n' roll*, but they're also a straight path to further heartache.

People who search for happiness in these things very rarely find it, as they are looking in all the wrong places. They seek worldly satisfaction rather than that which can only be found in the Lord, and so they will never be truly free of the things that bring them pain. While such deviances into the vices of this world can provide fodder for a great story of redemption, they more often end up leaving their partakers with a character development in which universal truth is simply stumbled into along the way. They do not have the wisdom to understand the foundations of that truth they discovered.

As a Christian, I am already operating based on the biblical truths I was taught as a child, which clearly state, "Do not love the world or the things in the world" (*New King James Version*, 1 John 2.15). Therefore, I try to avoid the things that I know will cause my family and I long-term harm. However, despite my trying, I am somebody who deeply *loves* the world. I love the feeling of being alive and often find myself chasing after what I imagine is life as God intended. I seek joy and new experiences constantly, which ultimately becomes the catalyst at the start of my manuscript. I define my identity by the love for life I've had since I was a child, so when the expectations of my early twenties forced me to grow up before I believed I was ready, I felt numb and like I didn't know who I was anymore. In *Bird on Fire*, I explore the joys of life by returning to the past, striving in the present, and imagining a hope-filled future, all to come to the conclusion that the best thing about life is the people you get to love along the way.

While I hope that my perspective through Christ is evident in my actions throughout the manuscript, I don't intend on this memoir being a means to push my faith on my reader. As a

Christian, it is so much more exciting for me to see a creative person putting her work into the world only to discover later that she is a believer in Christ. It feels like finding proof that Christians can be successful outside of the ministry-based box we often put ourselves in. I want to see real people, the ones living in the world and interacting with it, proclaiming their love for the Lord. I want the Christian culture to permeate the world outside of the church and to find like-minded individuals in every profession, especially the creative ones. It is important that my work contribute to that vision.

Another way in which my biblical perspective differentiates my memoir from others is that I know my purpose is to love God and to love others (Matt. 22.37-39). I am not trying to find the meaning of life as so many in this world are; I am simply trying to discover my place in it. How might my unique interests and desires add value? What can I do to make an impact while I'm here on this earth and what can I leave that will continue its influence long after I'm gone? What place do happiness and contentment have in the grand plan, and what do my own struggles to find them say about humanity?

I think life is about doing the best we can with what God has given us and trusting Him for the rest. My memoir is not technically Christian in genre, however, my faith is the foundation on which all my thought processes are built, so it cannot be separated from me as the narrator. A large part of my story is shaped by anxiety. It is the monster I face every time I attempt to cross the bridge into the unknown. Often, I have to remind myself that "all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to *His* purpose" (Rom. 8.28). That is where I find my hope, and I think that shines through in my manuscript.

I hope that by putting my experiences out there, I might not be another example of the blind leading the blind. I'm still searching for truth, and I think I always will be. But through the

biblical foundation on which my belief system is based, I hope that those who are like me—those who search for answers in others' experiences—will ultimately find that true peace is found in Christ alone.

Poetry as a Means of Adding Depth to Character in Memoir

Writing a memoir is an endeavor not fit for the faint of heart. In her book, *Handling the Truth: On the Writing of Memoir*, critically acclaimed author of five memoirs, Beth Kephart, warns that, to be a memoirist, one must be willing to “open themselves to self-discovery and in the process, make themselves vulnerable—not just to the world but also to themselves” (8). Vulnerability is key to not only writing a great memoir, but also in connecting with others. One might argue that the act of being vulnerable is similar to that of sitting down to write a poem. To put pen to page and translate the depths of one’s soul in a format that can be consumed—savored—is one of the most vulnerable things a person can do, no matter the genre of writing. However, no other form of the craft gives me that same sense of dread as writing a poem that I know will be read.

Despite my hesitation for the craft, I decided that I wanted to include poetry in my memoir for several reasons. The main reason is that the form itself is an experience of, perhaps even a delight to, the reader’s senses. If I want to bring the reader into the narrative, I want them to feel like they are living it in real-time with me. Another reason for including poetry is that there were things I wanted to write about that I couldn’t fit into a neat collection of prose—feelings that must be felt to be understood—and what better way to allow my reader to feel them than by crafting them into the experience through poetry? Simply leaving them out wasn’t an option as doing so would create little holes in the reader’s understanding of me as a character.

I refer to myself as a character because, in the world of my memoir, that is exactly what I am: simply a fraction of who I am beyond those pages. I don’t believe that we can ever fully know a person based off of their memoir. It is, after all, only a portion of their life whittled down to fit a narrative. Yes, to write a memoir is to seek the truth. However, truth can be subjective

depending on how much of the story you have at your fingertips. This is why I am using poetry as a means to bridge the gap between me as a person and me as a character.

Poetry enhances characterization in memoir by filling in the blanks left by the goals of the narrative. It provides that element of vulnerability we discussed earlier and thus a fleshed-out protagonist. By studying various memoirists, it is my goal to examine the influence of poetic language on character voice, poetry as a method of conveying the character's emotional arc, and the ways in which poetry acts as a conduit for vulnerability.

THE INFLUENCE OF POETIC LANGUAGE ON CHARACTER VOICE

Art is the means through which we process the world. In her book, *A Poetry Handbook*, Pulitzer Prize winner and poet, Mary Oliver, says that “the space between daily language and literature is neither terribly deep nor wide, but it does contain a vital difference—of intent and intensity” (Oliver 16). In an article in the *Kenyon Review* by poet and memoirist Jill Bialosky, titled, “The Unreasoning Mask: The Shared Interior Architecture of Poetry and Memoir,” Bialosky waxes poetic about how the writing of memoir and the writing of poetry is not all that different. Bialosky points out that “memoir and poetry (and fiction) are reliant on voice, language, craft—the use of image, metaphor, music, internal rhyme and meter—and memory to build a compelling narrative” (Bialosky). The reality of this statement was revealed to me as I read the recent memoir of Michelle Zauner, *Crying in H Mart*.

The book follows Zauner as she processes her childhood as a first generation American and her relationship with her immigrant mother. It takes the reader along as Zauner's mother is diagnosed with cancer and dies when Zauner is twenty-five. While her book follows the typical memoir format of prose narrative, Zauner toes the line of poetry with her vivid poetic

language—specifically, in her regards to food. Following her mother’s death, Zauner laments that the Korean food her mother raised her on “felt sacred now, imbued with new meaning. I drank the broth gratefully, chewing on bits of soft slick seaweed, the taste conjuring the image of some ancient sea deity washed ashore, feasting naked among the sea foam” (Zauner 201). This passage exemplifies Zauner’s poetic voice in the memoir as it makes use of several poetic devices, including symbolism, imagery, and metaphor.

According to Marry Oliver, “[t]he term *voice* is used to identify the agency or agent who is speaking through the poem” (76). If we are to accept Oliver’s definition of poetic voice as the “agency or agent” here, in the passage above, we see Zauner identify both. The way in which her words take on a mystical quality as she brings the experience of eating soup to life personifies the almost reverent place that food has in her heart as the agent. For her, food was always the place where she and her mother could find common ground, thus cooking and eating is a form of agency. However, now it is the very thing that allows her to carry her mother’s memory beyond her death. In a metaphoric depiction of her grieving process, Zauner writes about kimchi:

I had thought fermentation was controlled death. Left alone, a head of cabbage molds and decomposes. It becomes rotten, inedible. But when brined and stored, the course of its decay is altered. Sugars are broken down to produce lactic acid, which protects it from spoiling. Carbon dioxide is released and the brine acidifies. It ages. Its color and texture transmute. Its flavor becomes tarter, more pungent. It exists in time and transforms. So it is not quite controlled death, because it enjoys a new life altogether. (Zauner 223)

Poetic language creates the atmosphere in which the reader is able to experience the narrative, and further, the character. Mary Oliver notes, “Imagery, more than anything else, can take us out of our own existence and let us stand in the condition of another instance, or another life” (108).

By using imagery and metaphor in her handling of food, Zauner informs the reader of what is important to her by allowing them to experience it alongside her. She gives them a look into her soul at the very thing that transcends both time and space to make her into who she is. Food is her cultural heritage, her memory, and the thing she will keep with her all the days of her life.

The managing editor of *The Hopkins Review* at Johns Hopkins University, Kosiso Ugwueze, wrote a review of Zauner's memoir titled, "Joy and Grief in Tandem: A Review of Michelle Zauner's *Jubilee* and *Crying In H Mart*." In the review, she laments, "As I read *Crying in H Mart*, I felt the distinct recognition that happens when someone articulates something that you have held within you for so long" (Ugwueze). Such a sentiment is the ideal for which I believe all memoirists strive. She goes on to say, "In these works, Zauner shows that art can be as big in scope as it is intimate. We can touch on large topics while remaining true to the details. Ultimately, art, in its many forms, has the power to be both a tool of expression and a means of healing" (Ugwueze). Thus, through her body of work Zauner proves that Art—if it is to articulate a recognizable truth—requires a degree of introspection. In doing so, Art then reflects not only the intimate Individual, but also the greater Humanity.

Viewing art and poetry like a tool is helpful in that it gives the writer a mental inventory that they can evaluate depending on their needs. Need your reader to understand the plot? Give them some exposition through prose. Do you want them to understand the full scope of emotional wreckage you experienced? Throw in imagery, simile, metaphor, and any other poetic device you can think of to make them feel what you felt.

Ultimately, Bialosky's argument is that poem and memoir pull from the same toolbox. "Like writing a poem, memoir is reliant upon the persistence of memory, the obsessive, churning whirl of consciousness, the way in which the demands of the past contrive upon the present, to

unlock certain truths” (Bialosky). We unlock these truths in both the internal and the external, the past and the present, and then we transcribe them so that they embody their own fullness.

Mary Oliver says that poetic language is necessary for such imbuing of truth. “When one writes ‘the last apple on the tree,’ or ‘the one small peach as pink as dawn,’ one is beginning to deal with particulars—to develop texture... Such texture is vital to all poetry. It is what makes the poem an experience, something much more than mere statement” (Oliver 94). And is that not the goal that we set for ourselves? To create value and meaning with our words? To give them a life outside of ourselves?

POETIC FORM AS A METHOD TO CONVEY AN EMOTIONAL ARC

One of the more complicated poetic structures for students new to poetry to grasp is that of the least complicated poetic structure: free verse. Mary Oliver introduces the concept of free verse by noting the transitional period between traditional poetry of the past and the birth of a new form in the modern era. On this topic, she writes the following:

The poet was expected to be more friendly—less “teacherly” ... The emerging voice, it seemed, was determined to write about anything and everything. With such expectations—of intimacy, of “common” experience—the old metrical line, formal and composed, must have seemed off-putting. A new tone, reflecting this growing relationship between writer and reader, was called for... What was needed was a line which, when read, would feel as spontaneous, as true to the moment, as talk in the street, or talk between friends in one’s own house. (Oliver 69-70)

As culture has shifted to a greater form of accessibility in both social and educational settings, form in poetry has adapted in order to accommodate. Thus, Art continues its primary role of reflecting the state of mankind.

I would argue that the list-type-formats that journalist and author Dolly Alderton writes in her memoir, *Everything I Know About Love*, is a form of free verse poetry. Each list is intentionally crafted so that they convey an almost matter-of-fact tone, and each point is shared with a sense of comradery with the reader. Alderton expects the reader to receive her tongue-in-cheek wisdom as through the eyes of the young woman living that experience. She starts her book with “Everything I Knew About Love as a Teenager,” and goes on to state, “when I’m a single woman in London I will be extremely elegant and slim and wear black dresses and drink martinis and will only meet men at book launches and at exhibition openings” (Alderton 1). At twenty-one, Alderton writes, “the perfect man is olive-skinned with brown or green eyes, a big, strong nose, a thick beard, and curly dark hair. He has tattoos that aren’t embarrassing and five pairs of vintage Levi’s,” and “when you can’t fall asleep, dream of all the love affairs with olive-skinned, curly haired men that lie ahead of you” (78-79). Twenty-five-year-old Alderton knew that “on long, lonely nights when your fears crawl over your brain like cockroaches and you can’t get to sleep, dream of the time you were loved—in another lifetime, one of toil and blood” (163). Finally, at thirty, Alderton writes the following:

When you’re looking for love and it seems like you might never find it, remember you probably have access to an abundance of it already, just not the romantic kind. This love might not kiss you in the rain or propose marriage. But it will listen to you, inspire and restore you. It will hold you when you cry, celebrate when you’re happy, and sing All

Saints with you when you're drunk. You have so much to gain and learn from this kind of love. (357-358)

Dolly Alderton's lists provide an external signifier for her internal character arc as she matures throughout the book. From her teenage years with her idealized vision for what life would be to the wisdom she gains upon her exodus from her twenties, Alderton's language treats the reader to snapshot images of her character as it develops.

In her article regarding the structure of poetry and memoir, Bialosky notes, "A successful work of art retains this sense of fluidity. It contains the hills and valleys of experience. The reader enters the narrative or lyric, shaped by the author's hand, and is witness to not only what is said, but the mystery and miracle of what exists in the white space" (Bialosky). Alderton's lists exemplify this sentiment as her ideals at twenty-one and twenty-five and twenty-eight express what is unsaid regarding the shaping of her thought processes. An "olive-skinned, curly haired man" is set aside for the knowledge that "the perfect man is kind, funny, and generous. He bends down to say hello to dogs and puts up shelves. Looking like a tall Jewish pirate with Clive Owen's eyes and David Gandy's biceps should be an added bonus and not a starting point," (Alderton 327). Even the constructed form of each list indicates a growing level of maturity, developing from short and snappy little one-liners to brief assertions to carefully thought-out lamentations.

In award-winning novelist K.M. Weiland's book, *Creating Character Arcs*, she asserts that "whether the connection is immediately evident or not, the external plot is all about the character's inner journey" (25). While Alderton's memoir takes the reader through her time as a young woman in her twenties, her lists give the reader better insight on that inner journey Weiland talks about. There is a sort of mirroring effect that occurs between the external and the

internal that reminds the reader of what it feels like to grow up and try to make sense of the world.

In his book, *Poetry and Experience*, German historian and hermeneutic philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey notes German poet and playwright Friedrich Schiller's belief that "beauty is living form. This is produced when we intuit life in an image or whenever form is endowed with life. Form must become life, and life form" (qtd. in Dilthey 44). If then poetry is beauty derived from a life lived, what might that life say of the writer's character? Choices made, beliefs held, questions asked: all of these things make up the sum of a person. It is through art, poetry, and memoir that others are able to follow along on that journey. Dilthey goes on to state the following:

I shall designate as Schiller's law the thesis that the aesthetic process can either discern a liveliness of feeling in outer form and thus enliven what is visible or make life visible in outer form and thus give life form. This law thus involves the constant translation of lived experience into form and form into lived experience. (45)

Therefore, might one conceive the idea that poetry as a form of translated life or "liveliness" is at the essence of the perceived character of the writer? That which we see as true, and which resembles our own understanding of life touches on that inner yearning for beauty that is within all of us. It is *that* beauty we search for in the writing we read—and that writers carefully layer between prose and poetry—that unites us under the banner of "The Human Experience." Or rather, it is that ultimate truth—that our lives have limits—which is universally recognized as the very thing that connects us through one artform or another. After all, that hourglass of an unknown capacity that ticks away our minutes is the very thing that gives our time the meaning Art aims to explore.

Furthermore, Dolly Alderton shares her perspective on the universal concept of love in both the internal and external contexts, thus allowing the reader to better understand who she is as a character through the beauty of her lived experience. Though one might argue that it is the poetry of the “things she knows” that sketches an arc of growth and truly introduces the reader to who Alderton has become as a person.

POETRY AS A MODE OF VULNERABILITY

We’ve established that the genres of poetry and memoir each act within their own overarching goals. For memoir, it is about recording memory, and for poetry it is creating an experience with words. Though, Bialosky notes that “what the two art forms share are a tone of intimate connection with a reader as well as a closeness of subject and subject matter. These two genres, poetry and memoir, are closer to each other by far than fiction, particularly due to the intimacy of subject matter and the personal risks involved in their creation” (Bialosky). Such risks are the tightrope from which the writer reaches out to their reader. They are the hopes, dreams, fears, and insecurities that the writer holds out on a platter, as if to say, “These come from the deepest, darkest parts of me. Do you know them too?”

The poetry memoir, *The Apricot Memoirs*, treads that tightrope delicately. Written by Tess Guinery, an artist and business owner, the book begins with the admonishment, “I don’t want to slap glitter stickers across a / season I’m yet to fully articulate; a season / that demands more than my pen knows / how,” stating quite plainly for the reader that Guinery doesn’t have all the answers yet (1). Perhaps that is why she chose poetry for this specific memoir: to put down the words she does have in hopes that more would come in the future.

Guinery goes on to write about her experiences with joy, sorrow, love, and motherhood, but most of her poetry is about faith. Over the course of the two-hundred and eleven pages, Guinery chronicles her journey with faith and getting to know her Creator. It is not only a subject prominently talked about in some of her poems, but her faith is clearly present in the words she uses throughout the book. Words like “golden,” “sweet,” “moon,” “stars,” “dance,” and “freedom” litter its pink pages. The joy with which Guinery writes is a tactile thing, in such a way that each poem is a testament to “the One / who created time, beyond time, and out of / time” (68).

Though the surmounting message of Guinery’s work is one of joy and love, *The Apricot Memoirs* is not all sunshine and rainbows. She writes, “Although many bear witness to your joy, / few will know the battles you fight to keep it” (Guinery 89). Without those words, without an admission of struggle, Guinery’s poetry book is at risk of being dismissed as fluff. The pretty words and the happy connotations can only do so much in the area of connecting writer to reader. However, by suggesting that there is a battlefield on which joy is fought for, sometimes to be won, sometimes to be lost, is a very real experience for most readers. Likewise, when Guinery says, “Who cares if the tears fall and the / answers are ugly—I dig, I ask, and I let / the truth find me,” she laments the fact that sometimes the truth hurts (26). Sometimes, we don’t like the answers we find, but that doesn’t negate the importance of seeking truth anyway.

Guinery’s honesty often takes the form of calling things for what they are. “Living in fear and calling it life— // My greatest fear” (Guinery 165). Her lived experience shines in her short-form poetry as lines result in truths as she knows them. “Words received in pink when they were / spoken in fuchsia— // Miscommunication” (Guinery 169). Ultimately, her poetry acts as encouragement to her reader, calling them to “let those golden words tumble out of / your mouth,

and when it happens, almost / fortuitously, try not to rescue them too / quickly— //
 Vulnerability” (Guinery 48).

Oftentimes, when poets discuss their work, it can sound very methodical—technical even. Poetic devices achieve such a sense of achievement as that which is due according to their level of accomplishment. Though when a poem is stripped down to its essence, one would find *something* that *someone* deemed worthy of being said. Whether that be a thought, an idea, or a feeling, somebody somewhere felt that those words needed to be written down. Such would be that very human quality that pertains to all Art. Or, as Mary Oliver puts it, “And so there exists a definite sense of a *person*, a perfectly *knowable* person, behind the poem. In truth, it often seems that part of the poem’s *raison d’être* is precisely to give us information about the writer—whether or not these facts are actual—even sometimes to tell the reader the most intimate details of the writer’s life” (79). Do we not, as readers, then feel as if we know the writer that much more for the summation of their efforts? Does not a writer share such a piece of themselves in their work, and even in the act of crafting poetry, that an element of personhood is then known and understood by the reader? Such is the very factor that makes poetry the thing we carry with us, sodden into our hearts and minds as a truth we cannot ignore.

While vulnerability and the *person* might be inextricably linked in the poem, one cannot dismiss the notions of “Negative Capability” as defined by John Keats, an English poet in the early 1800s, which is as follows:

Several things dovetailed in my mind, and at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement...I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. (Keats, 1818)

Negative Capability as a concept suggests that the poet ought to be disconnected from the “reason” of their work, meaning that poetry should be separated from the logic of the poet. Beauty is as it is for no other reason than it is. In his article “Keats’ Negative Capability Explained,” published poet and poetry blogger Martyn Crucefix clarifies that what Keats is talking about is “a passive openness to the full range of human experience” (Crucefix). Furthermore, the term *passive* “implies the absence of a forceful or dominating self, full of preconceived ideas, words, precepts” (Crucefix). The absence of a dominating self translates in Keats’ work to feeling almost like omnipotence for the reader, as both reader and poet are slightly removed from the subject matter. For example, in Keats’s “Ode on Melancholy,” he writes, “Veil’d Melancholy has her sovran shrine, / Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue / Can burst Joy’s grape against his palate fine” (lines 26-28). By personifying melancholy, he touches on the feeling itself rather than the feeling through the eyes of man. He does not proclaim it as either good or bad, only that it is.

Mukesh Kumar, the Assistant Professor of English at Kurukshetra University in India, summarizes the concept in an *International Journal of Research* article titled, “John Keats: The Notion of Negative Capability and Poetic Vision.” He says that Negative Capability “is a poetic philosophy that flourishes on imaginative becoming. One that permits the completeness of surrender in perception and thus allows its adherents to become what they perceive and speculate on” (918). Thus, the poet becomes the vehicle in which a piece of reality is experienced without any agency of his own accord. For Keats, life is simply as man perceives it to be, and shouldn’t be pieced together to fit into his preconceived notions of truth.

There is something to be said for taking a thing at face value. However, to do so completely would mean negating any sort of Absolute Truth from the equation of poetry, which

happens to be one of the things we seek when picking up a book of sonnets, if not *the* thing.

Keats' argument did pave the way for creativity in form, allowing for the poet to separate himself from his work should he need to. However, it is impossible for him to completely remove himself from the writing of the work. Thus, he can never be fully absent as a conduit of human essence. On this subject, Mary Oliver writes, "Now, as then, the concept of negative capability goes to the heart of the matter—the 'mere' diction of the poem, in any age, is the vehicle that holds, then transfers from the page to the reader an absolutely essential quality of real feeling. Poetry cannot happen without it" (84).

While Keats may believe that there is no place for identity in poetry, one might argue that it is the identity of the poet that makes vulnerability possible. Kumar notes that "Keats's poetry is the conflict between the everyday world and destiny: the everyday world of suffering, death and decay, and the timeless beauty and lasting truth of poetry and the human imagination" (915). Topics such as these are not free from that vulnerability which makes a poet's presence known, even for Keats. To write of the human experience and our understanding of nature is to be profoundly subject to the insufficiency that is living in a limited plane of time. What could be more vulnerable than a recognition of mortality?

It is true that poetry should not be about pushing one's own preconceived ideas down the throats of their consumers. However, to avoid sharing one's experience with another through the art of verse for fear of appearing incompetent as a poet would be a shame. It is far more interesting to read various poets, each with different means for perceiving the world. As Tess Guinery said, "Yes, wisdom is a must, when unraveling in / spaces and places with vulnerability and / our art. But I'll call it a disloyalty to our / nature, if we wait until it's safe to reveal / our hearts. // What a catastrophe, if we never allow our / hearts to explore risk" (97). The worry that

often accompanies writing poetry—of sounding silly or uneducated, of doing it “wrong,”—is one of the many reasons that I resent Keats’s definition of *Negative Capability*. Who is to say what is right or wrong in Art? There are elements of design, theories of craft, poetic devices and tools that will help the artist achieve success. It is my belief that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. And what a tragedy it would be if all of the artists kept their work to themselves because it didn’t fall within the box of *Negative Capability*.

Perhaps it is human nature to want to know—what secrets are held within the stars, how it is we fall in love, why the sky is blue. But then might it also be in our nature to want to be known? Might that be the reason John Keats wrote a poem of encouragement for readers experiencing depression in his “Ode on Melancholy”? One could suppose from that piece and the fact that he died at the age of twenty-five that he must have had experience with such an ailment as melancholy. That same person might also develop a bit of sympathy for the late poet, now that she has a better understanding of his character.

APPLYING POETRY FOR GREATER DEPTH OF CHARACTER

The previous arguments made established an undeniably *human* aspect of poetry. Poetic language—the specific choice and arrangement of words—can inform the reader of who the writer is and what they value. When a writer wants to, he or she can implement tone and form in such a manner that conveys a considerable emotional arc or narrative. Furthermore, the very act of writing poetry involves some essential part of the human essence, and when done with vulnerability, provides intimate insight to the mind of the writer. Thus, poetry, when combined with memoir, has the capability of creating a deep connection between the reader and the writer by facilitating the multidimensional nature of the writer’s character.

In my own writing, I wanted to take what I knew of poetry in order to enhance the experience of my memories for my readers. As a young woman going through her early twenties, I have felt a range of emotions, from pure manic joy to gut-wrenching sorrow. It comes with the territory, I suppose. Furthermore, I wanted my reader to page through my manuscript and remember what it felt like to be twenty-five and confused. I needed fellow twenty-five-year-olds to read the words I've written and say, "Yes, that's exactly what I feel like too."

Poetry is a medium of human expression, and human expression seeks to be met across space and time by souls that take the same shape in the world. Michelle Zauner did it in her poetry of the tastebuds, and I have intended to do it through the simile of a shared experience.

A somewhat prominent part of author Cheryl Strayed's memoir, *Wild*, is the poetry that she carries with her on her journey, both physically and mentally. While Strayed hauls hefty tomes on her back, burning their pages as she reads them to alleviate weight on her journey, there is one book in particular that she keeps with her to the end of her trek: *The Dream of a Common Language*, a poetry collection by Adrienne Rich. Thus, poetry is a thing of sustenance for Strayed as she faces the ever-dauntless days of being alone on the Pacific Crest Trail. Additionally, there are five parts to Strayed's book, each opening with a line or two of poetry that give the reader a hint as to what will occur in the following chapters.

The way in which Strayed formats her memoir is very similar to the way I have formatted my own. Where Strayed uses poetry to introduce each sequential part of her book, mine is featured at the start of each chapter. Also, the lines of poetry that Strayed uses are quotes from her favorite poets and authors. My manuscript features my own poetry in order to achieve that allusive fully developed character this paper keeps dragging on about.

Another element that I have added to my manuscript is that of form and tone shaping my character arc. Like Dolly Alderton, each poem acts as a signifier for where my character is on her emotional journey. Beginning with short poems that explore form and control, my poetry develops throughout the narrative, expanding and shifting toward free verse as I mature, until I finally confront the limiting beliefs that used to cage me.

The character progression through poetry should add a sense of believability to the manuscript, allowing the reader to feel like they are reading my journal, feeling my feelings, and discovering truth in life at the same time I am. The experience of discovering is what I am looking for in this method, and it is what I want my reader to have when they pick up my manuscript.

Lastly, I have imbued every ounce of vulnerability that I have into these poems. I am not somebody who likes for people to know what I think. I am insecure and anxious, and I have reason to believe that people avoid those who display such traits whenever they can. Yet, I know that those feelings are not limited to me. If I'm going to put myself out there, if I am going to stand on a tightrope and hold my hand out to the faceless spectators, then I want to at least give them truth. If I fall, I want to be me all the way down.

Vulnerability, I had believed at one point, was my greatest fear. It was, perhaps, even greater than failure. After all, to be vulnerable is to give another person the means to hurt you. However, I know that if I want anything worthwhile in my life, I'm going to have to go out on a limb to get it. So, I wrote a memoir featuring original poetry. I am giving people an uninhibited look into my life and thought processes, knowing full well that they may not like what they find there. I am writing poetry about the angst of growing older when poetry was one of my worst subjects in school. I am doing the things that feel foreign and wrong because I *need* to, and I

don't like to let fear hold me back. By including vulnerability in my manuscript, the reader has access to a deeper understanding of my character.

I have always toed my way through life as if wearing a blindfold, feeling my way until something clicks as right. It is that notion that has always drawn me to poetry, despite my lacking a thorough understanding of the form. What I do know is that I recognize a heart that matches my own when I read one. I know it in the way hearts beat to the same rhythm, like when Tess Guinery wrote the following:

Something I'm made of wants to tell a story,

There are words in us,
our body carrying them.

Verses wrapped in paragraphs,
essays wrapped in paper—
lining soft walls within us.

I want to listen,

I want to tell.

There is beauty here,

there is beauty here. (192)

There is beauty in the knowing and in the being known.

Bird on Fire

By Kasey Carr

I Think I'll Unlearn as I Go

Up is
Down is
Upsides and
Silver linings and
Glasses half full and
Wishes riding on shooting stars
And you and me sleeping in cars
And our fluffy white dreams are
All that's left of our innocence
Swiftly taken by expectations
Set by generations
Whose inhibitions
Are no longer
Mine.

Chapter 1

All That's Left

I believe to the very core of my being that life is exactly what you make of it, no more and no less. So, if my life hasn't turned out the way I imagined it would by the time I was twenty-four (and it hasn't), I can blame nobody but myself.

Slumping over my desk where I work as an administrative assistant at my uncle's financial planning firm, I try to think back to a time before all the color in the world started leaching away—a time when the blue of the sky was vivid, and everything smelled like summer rain. I try to remember a time when I felt fully and completely alive, and my mind takes me back to my childhood, to the first time I tasted the thrill of adventure.

Peering through the eyes of my earliest memory, my tiny body hangs, arms locked around my dad's neck. We're stuck on a zipline we'd found in the woods, suspended at least fifteen feet above the creek below. My Uncle David and his two eldest sons wait for us on the other side, the details of how we got there as fuzzy as my then-staticky blonde hair that's long since turned into a mess of brown waves I still struggle to tame. I couldn't have been more than three back then.

My parents and I used to take walks on the old oil roads that wound through the woods behind our house. The roads were only used by trucks that serviced the rusting oil derricks that were still pumping for those last dregs of "black gold" left behind from the Texas Oil Boom of 1930. I would guess that the wells are just about dried up these days, but maybe that's because I haven't thought about them in over a decade. But now that I am excavating the deepest corners of my memory, searching for its edges, I'm there again, on that old dirt road. Parts of the world around me are hazy, like the sky and the trees—I can't quite bring them into focus to discern the

season or the weather. Other parts are like looking through a magnifying glass, blurring out everything except what my young eyes choose to focus on.

I see orange clay beneath my feet as I try not to trip on the uneven clumps of rock. I hear the distinct whining screech of metal moving against metal as we pass the faded blue oil horse churning like a seesaw, and it strikes me that I can't remember the last time I've seen one in operation. It's kind of sad to think I'd forgotten the reverberating song of my hometown.

We must have called Uncle David shortly after we came across the metal wire strung tight across a thirty-foot-wide creek bed in the middle of the woods. I don't remember that part, but he was there so it must have happened. What I *do* remember I see in flashes. I watch my two older cousins, Chris who was fourteen and stocky, and Colby who was thirteen and lanky, as they each took turns going across. I see them grasping the hard, green plastic handles of the zipline before running and jumping toward the shallow gorge, swinging their bodies to the other side with their momentum. Uncle David goes next, running to build enough speed to carry him to the other side, but he doesn't quite make it. The zipline carries him just short of the tiny cliff, forcing him to stretch his leg as far as it can reach to catch his toe on the edge before he can pull himself to safety. My dad laughs and jeers at his brother while he struggles, but the sound is muffled in my memory, almost like we're underwater or in a dream. Then Uncle David steps back to catch his breath with his hands on his knees, and Dad kneels down to my level. This, I remember clearly.

"Alright, Kase," Dad says, looking me in the eye seriously. "I'm going to have you hold onto me when we go across. Whatever you do, *do not let go*. If you let go, you'll fall and get hurt. So, you've got to hang on to me. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I say with a nod of my head, bouncing on my toes with excitement.

“I need you to promise me, okay? Promise you won’t let go until we’re on the other side.” He’s not breaking eye contact, waiting for me to acknowledge him.

Uncle David throws the zipline back down the wire, across the creek, and my dad stands up to catch it, eyes still on me.

“I promise I won’t let go,” I say with conviction and another strong nod.

“Okay, then hop on.” Dad squats back down and I climb onto his back. When my hands are locked, Dad gives them a little tug, but they don’t budge. “You ready?” he asks.

“Yes!” I shout, pulling myself tighter against his neck.

“Hold on. Here we go!” Dad takes one step back and then three steps forward before launching us into the air, and for a minute it feels like we’re flying.

The breeze blows my Einstein hair back from my face as Dad and I skim out over the creek, and I think, *I’ve never done anything as fun as this*. And then we’re slowing. We slide to a stop just past the middle of the creek, a little further away from the ledge than where Uncle Dave had landed.

“Crap,” Dad laughs, his large, 6’2” body dangling helplessly—my small 3’1” form clinging to his.

Uncle David and the boys erupt in a fit of laughter, and I don’t really understand why we stopped or what’s so funny, but I’m laughing too.

“Do you think you could pull us in?” Dad asks, swinging us forward a bit and kicking out his leg for my uncle to grab.

After coughing out a few remaining laughs and wiping tears from his eyes, Uncle David leans out and catches Dad’s ankle, trying to pull but there’s too much weight on the wire for us to budge. He would have to pull us uphill by a foot or two if he were going to move us at all.

“Stop! Stop!” Dad shouts. “I’m losing my grip. Dave, can you grab Kasey from there?”

“Yeah,” Uncle David says. “I think so. Here, Colby, Chris? Y’all hang onto my belt loops and pull me back when I’ve got her.”

My uncle and cousins slide right up to the edge of the muddy cliff, reaching for me from around my dad’s torso, but barely getting a few fingers in the waistband of my britches.

“Let go, Kase. I’ve got ya,” Uncle David says, voice strained from reaching.

I’m not quite convinced.

I shake my head. “I can’t.”

“You’ve got to let go, Kase,” my dad says.

“No! You said not to!” I’m scared now. Dad said not to let go. He said if I did, I’d get hurt. So instead of releasing my grip when I feel Uncle David give a strong pull, I tighten my arms around Dad’s neck.

We swing toward the ledge a little bit, and then away. I don’t budge. Uncle David, on the other hand, gives a surprised grunt followed by a loud splash. Tentatively, I look down to see the aftermath. Uncle David is pushing himself up from the muddy creek, the entire front of his body soaking wet. Chris and Colby fall into each other, laughing and pointing down at their dad, who’s turning to give them an incredulous glare.

“What happened?” Dad sputters, like he’s trying not to laugh too.

“She wouldn’t let go when I pulled her toward me,” Uncle David says, wiping mud from his face. “I was still holding on when y’all swung away. Pulled me right over the edge!”

“Okay, well, I’m about to slip. I’m guessing you can’t reach her from down there?”

Uncle David stands and the top of his curly black hair reaches about three or four feet below my dangling toes. He could probably catch me, but I wasn’t planning to find out.

“Not if she won’t let go,” Uncle David says, placing his hands on his hips.

“Kase?” Dad says. “I need you to reach up and grab the handles of the zipline.”

“I can’t!” I start to panic again, holding onto Dad even tighter.

“You have to,” Dad says firmly. “I’m about to slip, so grab it. Right now.”

“Daddy, I’m scared!” I cry, tears beginning to fill my eyes and stream down my cheeks.

“I don’t care. You have to do it. Grab it now, Kasey.”

I know that tone, and I can feel as Dad keeps adjusting his grip. I know there’s no time for debate. Crying, I reach up and take a hold of the handles as Dad slides his hands to the side a bit, moving out of my way, his fingers slipping quickly now.

“Hold on tight,” he says, voice straining as he struggles to maintain his grip. “When I drop, you’re going to swing around, but don’t let go.”

“Okay,” I sniff, tightening my grip as much as I can.

And then Dad lets go, dropping the four feet into the water below, where Uncle David has his hands raised, ready to catch me if I fall. I bounce around, hanging onto the zipline for dear life until I finally swing slowly to a stop.

“Good job, Kase!” Dad cheers with a laugh. “Dave, get up there and see if you can grab her when I pull her in.”

Dad proceeds to reach as high as he can, grabbing my dangling foot and pulling me to the ledge while Uncle David scrambles up and gets into position. Once I’m close enough, Uncle Dave grabs my shirt and pulls me the rest of the way across, where he takes me by the waist and sets my feet upon solid ground.

“Can we do it again, Daddy?” I ask, spinning to face my dad as he finishes pulling his mud-coated legs to the top of the little cliff, my tears now dry and long forgotten.

“Yeah, Uncle Dan! Go do it again!” laughs Colby, elbowing my dad in the ribs.

Dad shoots a teasing glare at my cousin before turning a grinning gaze back on me.

“Maybe next time,” he says. Then he picks me up and puts me on his shoulders as we take the long way back around the creek, crunching through the leaves and heading home.

As I blink out of the memory and back into the chair at my desk, I think that this might have been my beginning—not the beginning of my life, but the beginning of my love for it.

Even when my parents and I moved to Houston later that year, four hours away from the rest of our family back in White Oak, I was always trying to get back to that place in the woods. While we lived in the city, I devoured books about kids going on daring adventures, imagining that one day I could be an adventurer too.

We moved so that my dad could get a better-paying job as a basketball coach at North Shore High School, a school with one of the best athletic programs in the state. However, despite my dad’s interest in the school—or, perhaps because of it—my parents both agreed that it was in *my* best interest for Mom to homeschool me. She enrolled me in different programs with other homeschoolers during those years, but the friendships built in those Friday classes never lasted past the semester. For the most part, it was just me. Well, me and my books. I built imaginary worlds in my head to survive the monotony that had become my life, choosing to run away with the *Boxcar Children* in our tiny backyard instead of falling prey to the alternative: wondering what my cousins were doing back home in East Texas.

Reading became everything to me—it was escapism—a habit formed out of self-preservation. And it was also my means for exploring the world outside of what I already knew. Through books, I was already planning what I might want to do with my life someday. The

stories I was drawn to were about writers, filmmakers, and journalists—the closest thing we have to adventurers these days—and I couldn't wait to step foot into a story of my own. So, I alternated between living in those worlds within pages and the imagined future I built in my mind, biding my time until I could go home again, where I was free.

During those ten years that my parents and I lived in Houston, my Aunt Karin and Uncle Scotty let me come stay with them and their four kids during the summers. Cade, who is a year older than I am, and Stone, who is a year younger, were my very best friends in the world, and still are to this day. The three months a year when I lived with them and their two younger sisters, Payton and Lexi, were full of that rose-colored magic that dusts the childhoods of only the luckiest people. The summer I was nine, Cade, Stone, and I would run away into the woods every morning, mapping out our plans to build a treehouse and survive off the land as renegades. We would only re-emerge, setting our carefully documented blueprints aside, when we heard Aunt Karin calling us home. Then we would grab our bathing suits and towels before heading over to swim at Aunt Debbie and Uncle Tom's house, practicing our tricks and flips on the diving board until the sun went down and the mosquitoes came out.

Our summers smelled like Banana Boat sunblock and chlorine. They smelled like the pink bubble gum we won from catching foul balls at the baseball fields, the Tiger's Blood snow cones that stained our tongues red, and the freshly mowed grass on the football field by our grandparent's house, where we would run through the sprinklers at dusk. Sometimes there were even the unmistakable metallic notes of a bloody knee—usually mine, as I'm not the most coordinated and earned the nickname "Corpse" from my cousin Cass organically. Every day was an adventure back then, and every battle scar was joyfully earned. I miss it sometimes. I miss it *all the time*.

My parents and I moved back to White Oak when I was thirteen. It was around the same time the Palmers adopted Jayden, a one-year-old boy who officially became cousin number sixteen, and who made the Palmers a family of seven. Finally, I felt like my family had been united as we had always been meant to be. However, high school made me realize our time was borrowed, and that my time to begin paving the future I had once daydreamed about, was quickly drawing near.

I had my first panic attack during my junior year—when I realized time was running out.

Our school had this tradition of putting on a Senior Pep Rally at the end of football season at which the senior class of that year performed a slow-motion skit under a spotlight. The skit was always the same, going through all the sports and teams that the seniors of that class competed in throughout their high school career while sad music played over the speakers. It was cheesy, but we've all done it. During Cade's year, I found myself laughing as I watched him "throw a touchdown," then grab his tennis racket before rejoining the floor to "lose" a match against the girls' doubles team. I was laughing all the way through to the end when the lights came back on. Then I ran out onto the floor, pushing through the crowds of high schoolers grouping around their friends to tease them about the skit. Only when I threw my arms around Cade did I realize that I had tears streaming down my face.

"What's wrong?" he laughed, conceding to my hug.

"What?" I pulled back and wiped at my face. "Oh, I don't know. This just kind of happened." I grimaced a little as someone bumped into my back, taking a step out of the way.

"Why? The skit was lame!" Cade shook me a little as if that would help me see his point. "It always is." He was looking at me like I was crazy but fragile—like he had to handle whatever

was happening gently. I would have normally been embarrassed, but with the racing thoughts and my racing heart, I didn't have it in me.

"I think it just hit me that you're leaving after this year, and it'll never be the same again." I felt fresh hot tears flooding my eyes, so I looked up at the lights and blinked rapidly to try and keep them from spilling over. Cade's not a fan of things getting overemotional, and most days I'm not either. There were too many people we knew wandering around for such things.

"Yeah, it will," he said with another laugh, like I was being silly. "I'm going to come back home; I'm not going away forever. Also, graduation is still a long way away. You don't need to worry about it now." He nudged my shoulder, and I scrunched my face into a forced smile to assure him that my unexpected emotional outburst was taken care of.

"Right," I said, with a nod. "You're right." And he was right. Graduation was months away, and I shouldn't have worried about it then. But I was right too. Because when he did graduate, things were never the same. He ended up going off to Harvard, and the only times he was ever able to catch a flight home were for the holidays. When he did make it back, he sounded less and less like the kid I grew up with, and more like someone that I had to pretend to be smart enough to understand. He was still himself—it's not like he changed who he was—but it was never the same after he left home.

The next year, when it was time for me to go, I didn't. I *couldn't*.

For me, leaving meant sealing my fate. It meant making a choice that was going to lock me into a future, one way or another. And as of that moment, anything was still possible! All futures still existed in their retrospective timelines. Picking one would mean forsaking all others. But what if that path didn't measure up to the exciting and adventurous life that I'd imagined it would be, back when I was playing alone in my room all those years ago? What if I tried to

become something great—like Cade, or like our older cousins who became surgeons—and I failed? How could I come back from that?

I'd won an art scholarship at Kilgore College (the local community college), so I decided to take my basics there while earning my Associate degree in Fine Art before moving on to a bigger school. I told everyone it was because I was trying to be smart financially but, really, I was deferring my inevitable and looming decision by another year. When it did come time to pursue my bachelor's, I still didn't know what I wanted to do. I settled on applying for a degree program in the field of Communication, as it had the broadest list of somewhat interesting career options. I could figure out which one I wanted to go for later. With that sorted, I enrolled in the College of Liberal Arts at Texas A&M University because, by then, Stone was there.

Somehow, I managed to maintain my delusion that I would figure everything out later throughout the entire year and a half I attended A&M, graduating during the summer of 2020 (in the middle of a global pandemic, mind you), without anything close to resembling a plan. Consequently, something I've learned over the last three years since then is that if you don't have an objective for your life, somebody else will give you one that fits into their own.

I didn't have to wait long for Uncle David to swoop in and drop this gig in my lap. It's been a blessing for sure—to have had a job when the world was in chaos, but we're mostly out of it now and I still feel numb. Like somebody has replaced my hand with someone else's, I feel like I'm living a life that doesn't belong to me. But I don't know what else to do.

I'm twenty-four years old, turning twenty-five in October of this year, and I've trapped myself in a cage of my own making. I'm afraid that if I don't make a change now, if I don't take ownership of my life now—if I don't face my fears of failure—all I'll have left is a heart full of regret. And I think that thought might scare me more than anything else.

Falling Up

still striving
I'm

making the most
of
desperate days
everything—
ends
radically
Failing

Chapter 2

I'm Still Striving

My breath hitches at the sight of the email waiting for me. It's a continuation of a chain between myself and a film producer I've been talking to named Nicole Weider. She had posted on her Instagram story about a month ago that she needed some help with research she was working on, so I sent her a message offering my services. I've been helping her with the pre-production of her newest movie ever since.

The research I do for her typically involves sending her pages and pages of casting options based on the vague descriptions of the types of people she is looking for. She has yet to give me any further context on what kind of role they might be playing. She hasn't even told me what the project is yet. But I'm hoping that by helping her, I might get a better idea of what it's like to work in the film business, and if I like it as much as I had dreamed I would as a kid.

Her emails used to come at random intervals, a couple of times per week maybe, though I never knew when. But now they seem to be hitting my inbox every few hours.

I open the latest email and skim the message from Nicole, bracing for whatever she's going to ask of me next.

"Kasey— Can you please find (*blah blah blah*), (*skim skim skim*), and then (*blah blah blah*), (*more skimming*) -and also, we're filming in Florida sometime in March if you're interested in flying out and PA-ing—"

I stop reading and furrow my brows as my eyes catch on that last sentence. I jump back to the beginning and read it again. "We're filming in Florida sometime in March if you're interested in flying out and PA-ing for us. I'll give you the exact schedule in a week or two! Let me know if you have any questions!"

Leaning back against my creaky office chair, I scan the words over and over again as the realization of the offer begins to flutter around in my chest, gaining weight and sinking deep into my stomach like a morbidly obese pigeon. She wants me to fly out to be a Production Assistant? *In March?* That's only a month away! But this is exactly the kind of opportunity I was looking for, right? At the beginning of this year, I had decided that I would no longer let fear hold me back. However, now that I'm standing on the edge of my comfort zone and looking out at all the possibilities, fear is starting to look like a linebacker I'll never be able to outmaneuver.

Clicking out of my email, I go back to looking at the lists of numbers that make up our client's accounts and the strategies we implement for their fiduciary efficacy. The combination of words I just put together represents concepts I will never understand, nor ever care to. And if this film opportunity goes the way I hope, I won't ever have to (but I probably *should* if we're being honest and financially prudent).

I breathe out a sigh as my mind turns back to the email in my inbox, realizing I'm not going to be able to avoid spiraling with this new open door hanging wide, letting in every stray thought that wanders along. The clock says it's 4:45 p.m., so I go ahead and log out of my accounts, shoving my phone and notebook into my leather crossbody before stepping into my uncle's office to say a quick goodbye. I shout a goodbye to Cass too as I pass his closed office door and get a muffled *see ya*, in return. This is our routine. It has been for the last two and a half years, and I'm bored of it.

I should admit, at least once, that I really enjoy spending time with my uncle and my cousin. Getting the opportunity to know them in a context separate from family events and special occasions feels more personal. We're interacting with each other in our daily lives, in the parts where we build our very livelihood. What we do is an important part of who we are, and I

count myself lucky to have gotten to know Uncle David and Cass in this way. The stress, I think, that has often tainted my perspective, comes from this inner knowledge that I am not where I need to be. The green-grey one-story Victorian where my uncle built his office is beautiful, but it's also the physical representation of the cage I've allowed myself to be trapped in.

The sands of time running out at the same time as one's potential is a tired cliché, but so is the saying, "You've got all the time in the world, kid," because that's not really true, is it? We don't actually know how long we get, but we *dang sure* don't get all the time in the world.

For that reason, upon my arrival home, I walk immediately into the kitchen where my mom is home from school, cooking dinner, and tell her, "Nicole offered me a job on her movie. It doesn't pay anything, but I think I need to do it."

Just kidding. I wish that's what I did.

When I walk inside our small, but open ranch-style, the smell of baked chicken and roasted potatoes hits my nose. I drop my bag by the door and turn the corner to the kitchen, pulling out a leather-topped barstool and sitting at the granite island.

"Hey," Mom says, shifting some golden potatoes around on the baking sheet she just pulled from the oven. "How was your day?"

"Good," I say, resting my chin in my hand. "Um, you know how I've been helping Nicole with that project?"

"Oh, yeah!" Mom shoves the baking sheet back into the oven. "Did she finally tell you what the movie is about?" She throws her potholders onto the counter beside her and pulls her blonde curls out of her face with a hair tie before leaning back against its edge.

"No, actually," I frown, wondering why Nicole still hasn't said anything about that yet. "But she did offer me a job."

“Really? What kind of job?” Mom’s eyes light with excitement for me. She’s always been my biggest supporter.

“She said I could come PA in Florida next month,” I say with a shrug. “I’m pretty sure it’s on a voluntary basis, considering she didn’t mention any sort of payment in the offer.”

“Sure, but I mean, you have money saved,” Mom points at me with the spatula she’d picked up. “And this would be a great experience for you.”

“I know,” I nod and slump in my seat a bit. “I want to do it, but I also know *nothing* about it, and that scares me.”

“You know Nicole,” Mom points out, leaning down to pull out the potatoes again. They must be done because she doesn’t put them back in the oven when she’s done inspecting them, sliding them up onto the stovetop instead. “You kind of have to do it, don’t you?”

My eyes dart to hers in surprise. While Mom *is* the leader of my cheer section, she’s also Chairman of the *Potential Danger Club*. If there’s a hip new way that people are getting abducted these days, my mom knows about it and is promptly forwarding the social media post with the details my way. I wasn’t allowed to pick up any sort of plastic bottle I found lying around back in 2010 in the case that it might turn out to be a bomb that would blow my face off.

“Yeah,” I say, still a little unsure. “I guess I do.”

Sliding off my stool, I go to grab my laptop from my room and carry it back to the kitchen island. After I’ve logged back in to my email, I hit reply on the message from Nicole and accept the job.

This isn’t the first time I’ve worked with Nicole. It isn’t even the first time I’ve worked on a movie. I worked as a PA once before, but that was five years ago.

The opportunity came on a hot day in July of 2018. I was scrolling through Instagram while working my shift at our local snow cone stand, passing the time until the next rush of sweaty kids swarmed my window. I was refilling my own cup of shaved ice with a spoon in my mouth when a recent post from Nicole Weider caught my eye. It was a picture of a script. I set my cup aside and pulled the spoon out of my mouth to read the caption. In short, Nicole was announcing that she had signed on to produce a little Christian indie flick (as in, an independent film free from studio influence and thus, studio budget) that would be shot in the upcoming weeks.

At the time that she posted, I had been following Nicole on Instagram for years, but I didn't know her personally. She ran an online magazine for Christian girls called *Project Inspired* and I had found her personal account through that. I liked what Nicole stood for and was already interested in working in the film industry, so I decided to dig a little deeper.

I found the website for Mustard Seed Entertainment, the production company working on Nicole's film, and sent them a message. All I was asking for was some advice on how to get involved in the entertainment industry, but to my surprise, I received an email later that evening with a job offer.

"Hi Kasey! Thanks for reaching out!" the email read. "If you're serious about wanting to get your foot in the door, we're shooting a movie in Kentucky starting next week if you want to come volunteer as a Production Assistant? We can't pay you, as this is a low-budget film, but it would be a great learning opportunity! Let me know if you're interested. Sincerely, Alexandra Boylan, Actor/Producer."

I knew immediately that I had to jump on this opportunity. My parents took a little more convincing. They eventually agreed that it would be a good experience and let me go.

The seven hundred and fifty dollars I'd earned at the snow cone stand that summer went towards renting a room from a woman named Beth, who my mother found through a friend of a friend on Facebook. She was a middle-aged single mother whose kids had already grown up and left home. The addition of Beth to my travel plans made Mom feel better about the whole thing, since there would be somebody around to keep an eye on me. With the matter of lodging settled, and my parents fully on board, I loaded up my little red Toyota corolla for the ten-hour drive to Louisville, Kentucky, then emailed Alexandra to tell her I was on my way. She sent back an address with a date and time for the movie's launch party the next evening and said she couldn't wait to meet me.

When I arrived at the house where the party was being hosted, a woman in her late forties answered the door. She was taller than me, (that's not saying much as I stand at a whopping 5'5" these days), and she had short dark hair paired with pale skin.

"Hi!" she said, friendly but also looking a little confused. "Who are you?"

"I'm Kasey," I said. "I emailed Alexandra last week and she told me I could volunteer to help with the movie?"

Blinking slowly, the woman stared at me, as if searching her memory, waiting for my words to ring some sort of bell. Abruptly, she smiled. "Sure! Yes, that's my sister. Come on in! There's food in the kitchen!" She pulled the door open wide, turning as if to go. "I'm Andrea, by the way," she added over her shoulder. And then she disappeared.

I wandered in through the open door, closing it behind me, and followed the sounds of people talking over each other into a large living room that opened to a large kitchen. There were only about fifteen to twenty people milling about the two rooms, but I quickly felt overwhelmed by a wave of insecurity.

To fight the feeling off, I immediately went into the kitchen to pick up a plate, holding it as I browsed the vegetable trays and charcuterie boards so that I didn't have to look at anyone else. I didn't know what else to do, didn't know who to talk to, but it was okay because people came to me.

"Kasey!" called a woman in her early forties with what looked to be bottle-died red hair. She walked up to me and gave me a hug. "It's so nice to finally meet you! I'm Alexandra."

I didn't have time to respond before Andrea reappeared, dragging a man with a bushy brown beard over.

"This is our director," Andrea said, gesturing to the man.

He stuck out his hand for me to shake. "John K.D. Graham. Nice to meet you."

"Kasey just got here from Texas!" Alexandra grinned over at John, placing a hand on my shoulder.

"Really? Did you fly in today, then?" he asked, intrigued.

"No," I shook my head. "I actually drove in last night."

"You *drove*?" John's eyes widened at me.

"How old are you?" Andrea asked, and I could tell by the look in her concerned eyes that she was a mother.

"I'm nineteen," I said, turning the plate in my hands.

"Did you come with someone?" Andrea questioned, crossing her arms now.

"No," I shook my head. Somebody laughed loudly on the couch in the living room, and I shifted nervously on my feet. Then I shrugged as if to tell the adults frowning at me that it wasn't that big of a deal. "I wanted to come help y'all. I wanted to work on a set—so, here I am. Thanks for having me, by the way."

All three sets of eyes blinked at me before they all began to smile.

“We’re happy to have you!” Alexandra laughed.

“Here, come meet Izzy and Jael,” said Andrea, gently leading me toward the dining room where two younger girls were sitting at a long wooden table. “They’re my daughters. They’re a bit younger, but I think they’re going to love you.”

Little did I know that sixteen-year-old Izzy and twelve-year-old Jael would become my best friends on that set. Everyone else was so much older, or at least they felt a lot older than I was, and I had a hard time fully relating to them.

The makeup artist, Victoria, was only twenty-four, but to me she seemed to be decades older. Not that she looked old, just experienced. There was a sense of *knowing* in her eyes that, though I am now the age that Victoria was back then, I never seemed to develop.

Throughout the entire shoot I was a little insecure about being on set. I was never exactly sure what was going on and I was always afraid of getting in the way. Nobody ever gave me a script, so I learned about the film out of order by reading the “sides” (the pages of the script needed for that day’s scheduled scenes) each morning, catching bits and pieces of the story as I handed the stapled packets out to the cast and crew.

I had rented the first *Catching Faith* the night before I left for Kentucky to prep for this shoot, and it was cute. It was about a family’s journey to learning how to embrace the things that matter, like truth, faith, and family. The sequel, on the other hand, was about their acceptance of life’s changes, like new jobs, a wedding, and the loss of a loved one. As the jumbled scenes came together in my mind over time, I knew I would like the sequel best.

Often, I found myself leaning on Izzy and Jael, relying on them to help me figure out what was happening in the scenes we were shooting and, thus, what I should be doing. They’d

grown up helping their mom and aunt with movies, and I was scared to ask my questions to anyone else. Other people had jobs to do, jobs they didn't want interrupted by a kid who didn't understand that there was a time and a place. I understood that there was a time and a place. I just wasn't sure what that time or where that place was yet.

I met Nicole for the first time midway through the shoot. While she was an Executive Producer (the person who provides some part of—if not all—the funds needed to make the movie), she was also an actress. Part of me wondered if she believed that, by funding this little independent film and playing the bit part of the wedding planner, Clara Conover, she would finally be scouted for her talent and made into a big star. That was kind of the vibe she gave off from the moment I met her.

“Kasey?” called Alexandra the morning Nicole had arrived on set. We were shooting in the home of a church volunteer that day, and I had been passing out sides to the camera crew in the sprawling backyard. I handed off what I had left in my hand to the other PA, Nick, as he passed before turning to Alexandra.

“Yes, ma'am?” I asked.

“First, what did I tell you about calling me ‘ma'am’?” she put her hands on her hips and frowned at me. “And second, Nicole is here! She's asking for you.”

“Really? She is?” I couldn't understand why she would be. “Where is she?”

“Hair and makeup,” Alexandra said, already walking away. “She's excited to meet you!”

Confused, I walked through the house's side door to the living room, where Victoria said she gets the best lighting. There, sitting in the chair with her eyes closed as Victoria applied a soft brown eyeshadow, was Nicole.

“Hi, Nicole?” I asked tentatively as I approached.

Nicole sat back from Victoria's brush and opened her brown eyes, turning them on me with a beaming grin. "Are you Kasey?" she asked, her California Valley Girl accent thick.

"Yes, ma'am," I nodded with a smile.

Nicole stood up from her chair and, in half a step, she had me in a hug. A former model, Nicole was tall with long, silky dark hair. I think she was in her mid-thirties, but it was hard to tell. I'm pretty sure her skin routine included Botox, even back then.

"It's so nice to meet you!" she practically sang. "Alexandra said you were a fan of mine?" she blinked at me, still grinning, but now a touch expectant.

Wait, Alexandra said *what*?

I gaped at her for a few seconds before I recovered. "Oh... yes! Yeah, I am! I've been following *Project Inspired* for a long time," I smiled. "I like the articles you share."

Nicole let her head fall back as she grinned at the ceiling. "That makes me *so* happy," she said as her head snapped back up to smile some more at her biggest fan. "I'm so glad it's been a good influence on you and, that through my website, you've ended up here."

I grinned up at Nicole. "Yeah, me too."

Isn't it funny how there are moments in our lives that can seem so silly and insignificant in isolation, like placing a single domino on an empty table, but that ultimately cause life-altering consequences? Meeting Nicole was like that for me.

When I finished working on *Catching Faith 2*, I returned home and continued with my life as if I'd never left. I'd considered finding another project to get involved with, but quickly gave up that idea when it occurred to me that I'd no longer have inexperience as an excuse if I messed something up. Pursuing this career further would mean putting myself out there to be judged. At nineteen, I wasn't ready for that kind of pressure.

Can't Catch Me Trying

Close your eyes and count to
Ten
And when you're ready
Reach out your
Hand
And take me by the
Shoulders, scream into my ears

And when that doesn't work
Whisper my deepest darkest fears
Into the golden morning as the
Sun kisses the
Sky
Tell me that surely, I will not
Die

Should my heart bleed blue onto
A crinkled page
Softened by the dew that touches the
Blades of my green grey
Eye

And should the birds sing the words
I gave to the shadows that
Dance across my walls in the
White moonlight
Tell me a lie.

Tell me it wasn't in vain,
Tell me it's okay to try.

Chapter 3

When You're Ready

I pull up to my AirBnb after dark on March 1st and assess my new home for the month. It's located in a little neighborhood of beach houses in Redington Beach, Florida, close enough to the shore that I can hear the waves crashing against the sand beyond the larger beachfront properties. Stretching my back, arms above my head, I listen to the familiar quiet that accompanies the ocean at night and breathe out a long breath. Crossing my arms over my chest, I make my way across the quiet street, passing between two tall beach houses until my shoes fill with sand. Kicking them off and carrying them with me, I walk down the path that opens to the vast expanse of night, the sand like silk slipping between my toes.

In the moonlight, the beach appears to glow white, and as I walk to the water, I feel like I'm standing on the edge of the universe—like one wrong move and I could slip into oblivion. I can't shake the overwhelming sense that somewhere in the complex interweaving of my inner and outer worlds, the two have merged into one.

So, I stand here—reverently—a wary witness to the eclipse of my two selves. A rare and magical celestial event that lasts only but a few moments, and that cannot be ignored. When the moment passes, as all things usually do, I trudge back to my AirBnb to unpack.

Heaving my heavy suitcase and backpack with me through the front door, I fumble for the light switch until the room is flooded with a fluorescent glow. Dropping my bags by the closet next to the door and passing around the room slowly, I imagine my new life here. There's a queen-sized bed I'll be hesitant to leave every morning in the center of the room, I can already feel its magnetic pull. There's a kitchenette, where I'll make coffee, there between the closet, where I'll choose what to sweat in every day, and the bathroom, where I'll wash the remnants of

those days away. The AirBnb is beachy, as one might expect, with all white floors and walls and light blue accents. I love it. Until the loneliness starts to sink in.

Flopping down onto my bed, I Facetime Payton. Luckily, she's home from Baylor for her spring break, so I get to talk to her, Lexi, *and* Aunt Karin for a little bit. They're all lying across one another on top of Aunt Karin's bed like some sort of painting from the Victorian era, and we're discussing why *Pride and Prejudice* (the 2005 version, because we're cultured) is the best movie of all time. I've just started climbing my soap box about how much I hate Mr. Collins when I get a text from Nicole, and I stop mid rant, sitting up straight to read it.

Hey, just wanted to make sure you made it. I was talking to Jadon (our director) about you and was wondering if you would be interested in being his assistant? I gave him your number so he should be calling soon. Just let me know!

"What is it?" Payton asks, leaning closer to the phone and filling the little screen in the corner, squinting her green eyes as she tries to read my facial expression.

"My producer friend just asked me to be the Assistant to the Director." My eyes still on the words, I roll off the bed and begin pacing the room.

"What? Kasey, that's awesome!" Payton pulls back from her screen, beaming at me.

"Yeah," I say, non-committal. "But I was just wrapping my head around what it would mean to be a Production Assistant again, you know?" Finally, I swipe out of the text, bringing Payton back to full screen.

"No, this is great! You're going to be great!" she levels me with a look as she tucks a strand of her brown hair behind her ear. "You're going to have to tell me all about it when you get home."

My phone buzzes and an unknown Florida phone number pops onto the screen. I suck in a sharp breath. “Uh, I’ve got to go. He’s calling me.”

“Okay, well, let us know how it goes!” Aunt Karin calls, sitting up to peer over Payton’s shoulder. Lexi’s hand pops up from behind her to wave.

“Sure, I will. Bye!” I smile stiffly before ending the Facetime, then hit answer and put the phone to my ear. “Hello? This is Kasey.”

“Hey, Kasey. This is Jadon,” says the voice on the other side. It’s slow and easy going, like how I would expect a surfer to speak.

“Hey,” I say, but my own voice sounds too high in my ears, so I clear my throat. “Hi, what’s up?” What’s up? *What’s up?* I’m annoyed with myself, but what the heck else am I supposed to say to him?

“I don’t know if Nicole ever got in touch with you, but I really need an assistant—someone dedicated to helping me while I’m moving back and forth from being in front of and behind the camera. Would you be interested?”

“Yeah,” I hear myself saying, thankfully with more confidence than I feel. “Yeah, for sure. I’d love to.” I’m pacing back and forth between the bed and the kitchen island again, twirling a piece of my hair around my finger.

“Okay, cool. Can we meet tomorrow?”

“Of course.” I nod, aware that he can’t see me do so. The nod was for me. Why am I so nervous? This is embarrassing.

“Cool, then I’ll text you when and where.”

“Okay, I’ll see you then.” I stop all my anxious movement, slam my eyes shut, and tilt my head up to the ceiling, draping my arm over my face.

“See you then,” Jadon says.

He hangs up and my mind immediately starts to race. How am I going to do this? I don’t know how to be a Personal Assistant; I barely know how to be a *Production* Assistant! Working with the director is a big deal. What if he gets mad at me, or I screw things up for him? Also, I guess this guy’s going to be directing *and* acting if he’s going to be both in front of and behind the camera. Geez, I still don’t know anything about this movie! What am I even agreeing to?

I check the time and decide it’s not too late to call Cade, so I Facetime him immediately. He picks up after two rings and I see he’s sitting at his desk with a book in front of him and his lamp on.

“Hey, are you busy?” I ask, biting down on my thumb nail.

“I mean, yeah,” he shrugs. “I’m always busy.”

I roll my eyes at him because I know this, that’s why I asked. “Yeah, but like, do you have time to talk for a second, or are you too busy for that?”

“I’m just studying, so I can talk.” He leans back in his chair, spreading his hands as if beckoning me to go on.

“Okay, cool.” I proceed to relay to him the most recent turn of events, recounting the brief phone call with Jadon, trying to reel in some of my nerves.

“Wait, you’re shooting a movie in Florida? That sounds legit!” he grins at me through the phone, blue eyes all lit up.

“Yeah, yeah, I know—it’s cool. But how do I handle this new thing that came up?”

“What do you mean?” he laughs, tapping a pen he pulled out of nowhere on his open book.

“How do *you* handle it? How do you just, show up to places where you have to be somebody and do things you’ve never done and execute it all perfectly? I’m freaking out over here because I’m afraid I’m going to screw things up! How do you *not*?”

“I don’t know, you just do what you have to do I guess,” he snorts with a shake of his head, and I genuinely wonder how the dude has never been anxious about anything in his life. Where does his confidence come from, and why didn’t I inherit it too?

“But I don’t know what I have to do. I have no clue how to act in this situation,” I sigh.

“Well, you want them to think that you do.” Cade points his pen at me to punctuate his next line. “*Confident competence*. That’s what you’ve got to portray.” He’s spinning the pen across his fingers now, a neat little trick he learned in high school that I was never able to figure out. “You need them to believe that you’re confident and competent—that they can trust you.”

“I’m *not* those things, though.” I stop pacing and stare at him, eyes wide.

“Pretend to be,” he shrugs. “I’ve done it all my life. Once you get going, you’ll figure it out, and then it’ll be true.”

I nod, thinking. “Okay, pretend to be confident and competent. I can do that; I think. Probably not, but I can try.”

Cade laughs again. “Either way, it’s really cool what you’re doing.”

I smile at that. He’s right. I’m here, out on a limb, doing something interesting with my life. And the people I look up to the most see it. They see me. “Thanks, Cade.”

The house I pull up to the next morning is small and unassuming. Its peeling paint is evidence of many years spent standing against the salty wind that currently whips my hair from my face. I take a deep breath and count the three sagging stairs it takes to get to the front door

and before wrapping my knuckles against the worn wood. There is a horrible thirty seconds of waiting that follows, and somehow my heartrate increases tenfold in that time. The nerve of this guy, to make me sit out here in a ball of panic like this, after driving all the way from Texas—quite frankly, it's rude.

I would have continued to trick myself into believing I was annoyed rather than scared if the door didn't open to reveal the most beautiful man (boy? Maybe dude? The semantics are up for debate) I have ever seen in real life. Truly, my blood turned to ice the moment his eyes landed on mine.

I've only known him for about two seconds now (feels like three), but I can say with absolute conviction that Jadon is the type of person who makes one re-evaluate themselves. It's like, you meet him and then you've got this sudden need to find exactly where your presence is lacking in comparison to his. My mind trips through this train of thought rather quickly. Where his eyes are like a clear day on the Caribbean Sea, mine look like what probably happens when a storm hits a swamp. His hair, damp from what must have been a recent shower, is a dark golden color and is just starting to curl at the ends. I self-consciously tuck a strand of my own dull brown hair behind my ear, trying to ignore the fact that the Florida humidity and my straightener have some beef they need to sort out if I'm going to be working with a man who looks like *this* for the next month.

He is still assessing me from his front door, not saying anything, so I throw on the smile I know reaches all the way to my eyes and say, "Hi, Jadon? I'm Kasey. It's nice to meet you."

The corners of his lips hitch slightly as his eyes maintain unwavering contact with mine, this intensity in them that makes me want to squirm. He seems amused, which makes me feel warm and fuzzy inside. Not sure I like feeling fuzzy inside, seems like a sign of malnutrition.

“Hey, thanks for coming,” he says, his surfer dude drawl paired with that half smile he gives me sends my stomach plummeting. “Come on in.”

Following him inside, I shut the door and greet the chaos before me. The front door leads directly into the kitchen, where a long dining table is covered in papers and office supplies, so much so that I can’t see the actual table at all. This is where Jadon sits.

“You can move anything you need out of your way,” he says, gesturing vaguely at the document-covered spot across from him, his eyes already glued to something on his open laptop.

I slide into the seat he had indicated, dropping my backpack to the floor beside me and carefully gathering papers into a pile I can set aside.

“So,” Jadon says. “Nicole said you were in school?”

“Uh, yeah. I’m working on my Master’s.” I tuck my hair behind my ears again and then sit on my hands to keep from fiddling because Jadon’s eyes are on me again and I don’t know why but I can’t handle that dang intensity. It’s like he can see what makes me tick, which isn’t fair because I don’t even know what makes me tick.

“That’s awesome. What’s your degree in?” he asks.

“Creative Writing,” I cough. Back home, I struggle to tell people what I’m studying because I’m aware of how frivolous it sounds. Especially to people in my hometown where you either become a teacher like both my parents, get a blue-collar job, or become a doctor and get the heck out of dodge. Sometimes, I worry that what I’m doing *is* frivolous. I wonder if I should give up the childish notions of chasing passion and instead pursue stability. But then I get bored just thinking about it. All those “other options” really are, at least to me, are another set of bars—a socially acceptable form of imprisonment. (Disclaimer: I’m not against working. In fact, I’m very for it and don’t let my father tell you otherwise).

“So, is that what you want to do in the film industry? You want to be a screenwriter?”

Jadon closes his laptop and leans forward, as if he’s actually invested in my answer.

I pause at that. “Um, honestly, I’m not sure. I mean *yes, of course*. But there are lots of things I want to do.” Jadon keeps his bluer than blue eyes trained on me, waiting for me to continue. “Yeah, I mean, I just want to tell stories and I want to learn how this whole process works.” I gesture around the room then down to the covered table.

“So, you want to get experience with every part of filmmaking, yeah?” Jadon opens his laptop again. It looks like he’s searching for something.

“Yes, I do,” I say, pulling my own laptop from my bag and setting it before me.

“Well, I’m going to need plenty of help on this project, so that should be no problem.” He glances up at me from over his screen with a grin. “Do you have the script yet?”

“No,” I shake my head.

“What’s your email? I’ll send it to you.” Jadon types my email into his computer as I spell it out for him, and then looks up at me when he’s finished. “So, I don’t really have a lot for you as far as this Personal Assistant thing goes,” he says. “I’m just going to have a lot going on when shooting starts tomorrow, and I need to know that I can hand something off to you if I have to. Are you cool with that?”

I don’t like not knowing what to expect, but I nod anyway. “Yeah, of course.”

“Cool,” Jadon nods back, looking a little relieved. “I just need you to be like water, you know?” he holds his hands up and mimes water flowing into a vessel. “Filling whatever role we need filled.”

“Consider it done,” I smile, and I think I’m pulling off that fake confident competence thing because Jadon grins back at me like he believes I’ve got it all figured out.

“That’s what I like to hear!” he laughs before honing back in on his computer.

Mine dings with a notification for a recent email and I click open the file Jadon sent me.

In the center of the title page are the words, “*Off Rip*, written by Jadon Cal.”

I look up and across the table. “You wrote the script too?”

“Hmm?” Jadon hums, thumb pressing against his bottom lip, eyes not lifting from his computer.

“You’re acting, directing, *and* you wrote the script too?” I ask, incredulous. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-six,” he says, looking back up and shaking his head at me. “I wrote it a few years ago. I’m just happy it’s finally getting made.”

“Is that how you got involved with Nicole?” I ask. “You needed an Executive Producer to finance your project and found her somehow?”

Jadon scratches the back of his neck. “Um, sort of. My buddy Jake and I—he’s the DP on this project, so you’ll meet him soon—we got hired by Nicole for something else about a year ago. We were going to do the cinematography on that, but it didn’t end up working out. When that project fell through, we pitched this one to Nicole, let her read the script, and she fell in love with it. Now here we are.”

I’m about to tell him I think that’s cool, or something equally as lame, when there’s a knock at the door.

“Hold on one sec,” Jadon says, hopping up from his chair to answer it.

When he opens the door, I see a woman with long blonde hair tucked under a green backwards baseball cap standing on the front step grinning up at him.

“Jadon! What’s up, my dude?” She pulls him into a hug right there at the door. “It’s so good to see you!”

“Hey, Katrina,” he says wrapping his arms around her. “Come on in.”

The woman, Katrina, follows him into the house and I can already tell she has amazing energy. She looks a few years older than me, and she’s in an oversized black T-shirt, baggy jeans, and a pair of olive-green Converse that match her hat, the ensemble giving skater girl vibes.

When she stops in front of me, Jadon steps up and says, “Katrina, this is Kasey. She’s going to be my Personal Assistant on the shoot.”

Katrina’s eyes light up as she looks at me and says, “Well, that’s dope! Here, give me a hug. It’s so nice to meet you!” And then I’m up out of my chair and being pulled into a tight embrace. She’s an inch or two shorter than I am, but the fierceness of her hug suggests that her height hasn’t ever held her back from anything.

“It’s nice to meet you too,” I laugh.

“Katrina is my First AD,” Jadon says from over her shoulder, hands in his pockets.

“Oh, cool! I can’t wait to work with you!” I say as I pull out of Katrina’s arms.

It surprises me a bit that this woman is going to be our First Assistant Director. I mean, I’m not overflowing with experience or anything, but I remember the other First AD I worked with being a bit wound up. Everyone on that set had assured me that’s how First ADs always are, because their job is to make sure everyone stays on a tight schedule that includes fitting as many scenes as possible in each twelve-hour shooting day. However, I can’t picture Katrina being like that. Nothing about her says, “uptight.”

“I can’t wait to work with you either, Bug!” she grins. “It’s gonna be a lot of fun.”

First Day

They say bloom where you're planted,
 But who are they and have they ever tried
 To warm their leaves under these harsh fluorescent lights?
 The flowers are whispering.

I see them
 bending on their stalks, the tulips
 brushing Daisy's ear, Rose laughing as she
 paints herself red.

Iris was new last year, they say, but she was too
 sensitive.

She's gone now.

They're debating whether my roots will adjust to this
 new soil or if I will shrivel up under the pressure.
 I feel my brown shoots shiver from the cold deep beneath and
 join in on the debate.

Jasmine is sweet, reaching out, asking me to brunch.
 And there's a Narcissus here too. There's one in every bunch.
 I catch him smiling at me, winking at Lily, and then
 posting a shirtless picture of himself with the same
 sparkle in his eye.

I think there might be cannabis swaying in the corner,
 next to Poppy, who is glassy eyed and leaning into Black-Eyed Susan.

The tangled web anchoring me is still unsure of this
 new plot.

But it's only a short stint, I think as I stretch my tiny blue petals
 as far as they can reach.

Before the gardener plucks me from my perch,
puts me in a pot.

So, I guess all I can do is give everything I've got—
 to flourish, to make a mark, to make sure this garden will
 forget-me-not.

Chapter 4

Make a Mark

I read Jadon's script last night and finally have a better idea of what we're trying to accomplish here. Apparently, *Off Rip* is going to be the first full-length feature film about the sport of skimboarding. Personally, I don't know anything about skimboarding, other than the fact that you're supposed to throw the flat, football-shaped board across a wave as it hits the sand, and then run and jump on it while also somehow managing not to fall and break your arm. I didn't even know that people competed in skimboarding until now, so I guess it's a good thing we're making a movie about it—to raise awareness, and all.

Anyway, Jadon's playing the main character, Chris, a high schooler who's trying to balance his ambitions of becoming a professional skimboarder, with his responsibilities to his little brother and single mother as the man of the house. The storyline has some grit to it in the added element of Chris being forced to deal with the drug scene, and despite his best intentions, he keeps getting pulled into shady dealings by both his mom and his best friend.

As far as I can tell, this is an independently produced film. There are no big studios involved at this point—just Jadon, his script, and Nicole (who is backed by her wealthy husband, Eric Weider, of the Weider *Muscle & Fitness* dynasty). And although this is only my second project ever, this is the first time I've been excited about the prospects of the film itself. The Christian film in Kentucky was a blessing to be a part of, absolutely. But it was cheesy. However, my wanting to get involved in an industry that seems to take place anywhere but where I'm from? That doesn't afford me the luxury of being concerned with the quality of the films I work on. Not yet at least. But I think that *Off Rip* could be different. I think it might actually be good.

At the start of Day One, I show up at the address provided on the call sheet (the document with all the information needed for the shooting day, such as shooting location, call times for actors and crew, scenes for the day, and shooting order). And though I arrive right at my call time, I'm the first one on the premises of the slightly rundown-looking house where we will be filming. PAs are always the first on set as they have to get the tables of food (AKA "craft services," or, "crafty") ready for everyone else. Shortly after I arrive, the other PA, a guy who looks like he could be my age, shows up and introduces himself as Logan. We're getting to know one another when Jadon's mom, Jodi, arrives with the table, tent, and food, dropping it all off so that Logan and I can get to work for the day. We've just finished setting everything up in the backyard of the house when the rest of the crew begins trickling in.

It takes a minute for me to settle into my role, to remember that I'm supposed to be looking for things to do at all times, but once I do, everything feels vaguely like *déjà vu*. Despite not having thought much about being a PA in the last five years, I seem to have developed this new intuition that I didn't have back then. Let's call it, *becoming more self-aware of what's happening all around, and finding ways to be helpful*. Though, I suppose you could also call it common sense. The latter certainly rolls off the tongue better than that other mouthful.

If you don't know much about what a production looks like on the day-to-day, let me break it down for you.

First, there is a hierarchy of jobs on set just like there would be anywhere else. At the top of that pyramid is the Director, the Director of Photography, and the First Assistant Director. They're in charge of all the creative and practical decisions regarding the actual making of the film. On our set, that's Jadon, Jake, and Katrina.

In a separate, but superficially “just as valuable” category, are the actors. And I mean, yeah, that’s fair. You don’t have a good movie if the actors aren’t at their best. Still, I don’t think anyone would go so far as to suggest it’s the most difficult job, or even on the same spectrum as far as difficulty goes. It’s more emotionally draining than anything—but, like, so is juggling the wants and needs of forty people, so, perhaps touché?

The camera and sound teams are probably in the second tier of importance, as their job of capturing the footage and audio according to the Director and DP’s vision is paramount. Then comes the Grip and Electric team, as they’re in charge of working with the DP to light up the shots. Last, and certainly least, are the Production Assistants. Anybody can be a PA. And yet, while anybody could fulfill the role of a PA and be successful, it is very difficult for the film itself to be successful without them. They are the stabilizers of production, stepping in wherever they are needed to help the other teams run smoothly. I enjoy being a PA because when your job is to help everyone, you get to be a part of everything!

There is a certain vibrancy that comes with being on set—to being in this place where everyone is working toward the same goal: to create a piece of art that we can all be proud of. And yes, it is the type of place where varying degrees of egotistical people come together with stories of their glory days and ideas of how everyone else can do better, but you know what? So is my gym. Egos are everywhere if we look for them, and for the most part, people with jobs on set stay in their lanes.

I love being in the middle of it all—and as it turns out, I’m *good* at it.

Once filming on *Off Rip* begins, I fall into a sort of rhythm of constantly looking for ways to step in and solve problems. I run errands for everything people forgot or didn’t realize we needed for the scenes that day. I bring water bottles and energy drinks to everyone in the crew to

make sure they stay hydrated and alert. When we wrap, Logan and I clean up, making sure the location looks better than how we found it. We pick up trash, help the crew break down their equipment, make sure we get all the walkie-talkies back from crew members, and then charge them all up before they're needed again the next morning. I'm the first one on set every morning and the last to leave every night. Legally, crews can only work twelve-hour shoots, and as a PA, that means I am there an hour before the first shot, and I stay until everything is cleaned up after the last. When it's all said and done, I'll put in at *least* fourteen hours a day, if not more. Every night I barely make it out of the shower before I'm falling into bed, already half asleep.

The problem with Logan (not that *he* is the problem—he's wonderful) is that he can only work on weekends. He has another job and is volunteering for the experience like me, but unlike me, he couldn't afford to take a month off to run away and try out a dream. (It's a rare blessing and I'm aware that I'm lucky to have it).

Without Logan's help during the weekdays, I start to look for ways I can handle problems proactively—before they can become actual problems. I do this by making a habit of getting the phone number of our point of contact for each location so that I can call them if any issues arise. *Hello Sir, I know you just left, but where is the key to the storage room? We need to set up some lights to come through its window. Hi, sorry to call again, but can we get the A/C shut off for the entire facility? Why? Because it's causing too much noise for our Sound Mixer. Oh, and can we use the stadium? No? Okay, under what circumstances could we use it? No problem! I'll let you know when I get that done. Be ready to turn on the lights for us!*

Toward the end of the first week, after I finish making sure the crew has everything they need to set up at a local bar (our location for the next two night-shoots, when we will be shooting from 6:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m.), Katrina calls me over to where she is sitting at a tall bar table.

“You’re doing a really good job, dude,” Katrina nods at me. She’s up on a stool, leaning back with her elbows propped on the wooden table behind her. “Between us, I’m trying to get you a promotion.”

I scrunch my brows together. “A promotion to what?”

“Well, Key PA for sure,” Katrina tilts her head, her long blonde hair tumbling over her shoulder. “You’ve definitely earned that role, running things around here the way you are. But I want to get you higher than that. How would you like to be the Production Coordinator?”

I search my memory for any associations I might have with that title but come up empty. “Um, okay. That sounds amazing, really, but what is a Production Coordinator?” I realize I sound less than competent and rush to add, “I mean what does a Production Coordinator do?”

My second question isn’t much better than the first, but if my lack of knowledge is a problem for earning this possible promotion, Katrina doesn’t show it. She simply shrugs. “It’s the same thing you’ve been doing. And, actually, if you did become Coordinator, you’d be ranked higher than I am.” When I give her a look of alarm, she laughs and continues, “The Production Coordinator makes sure everything on set is running the way it needs to. They’re in charge of the locations, making sure everyone has what they need on set, making sure everyone knows the schedule and helping me make sure everyone stays on schedule. They *are* production.”

I nod, waiting for the part where she adds more work to my plate.

“It’s what you’ve already been doing this whole shoot, Kase. I just want to give you the title you deserve,” she smiles like she’s proud of me.

“Well,” I say, shifting from foot to foot and crossing my arms over my chest. “Thank you. That really means a lot.”

“I still have to get approval from the higher-ups,” Katrina says, hopping off her stool. “I’ve got to talk to Jadon, and probably Nicole, but I don’t see them disagreeing. I know Jadon’s already been telling Nicole about how great you’ve been around here.”

I feel my cheeks warm, and fiddle with my hands, unsure what to say or do at this point. “Thanks, Katrina. I really appreciate this.”

“No sweat. Here, come help me give the actors their cues for this first scene.”

I nod and follow her, my mind racing with the possibilities of what such a promotion could mean for my future. I had thought that I might like to be a writer/director one day, which is a scary thought to have. An ambition like that is nearly insurmountable, especially for somebody who comes from the middle of nowhere and has as little experience as I do. But, maybe—if Katrina is right about me—maybe “one day” is closer than I thought.

I’ve been living in Florida for nearly two weeks by the time I pull up to the Tampa International Airport to pick up my mom, who’s wisely using her spring break to visit her favorite daughter. One could suggest that I am, perhaps, ignoring the semantics of my being her only daughter. But as the kids say these days, a win is a win, and I’m glad she’s here.

Mom’s waiting at the curb when I pull up—her suitcase in one hand, backpack in the other—and she’s already dressed like she’s ready for the beach. I don’t think she would be upset at all if I decided to stay here forever. Then she’d have a good reason to fly to the ocean every weekend, should she wish it. And she would. Where there is salt and sand (and me, of course), there is my mother’s happy place.

I throw my Corolla into park and jump out to hug her, narrowly evading a passing car. Ignoring the annoyed honks echoing through the pick-up terminal, I throw my arms around my

mom, resting my head on top of hers. I'm not tall by any means (delightfully average, if anything. I think we established that earlier), but I am about four inches taller than she is. I like to use my superior height to fold myself over and around her to better absorb that comforting mom energy she carries around with her like a promise. I breathe it in, this piece of home I hadn't realized how much I'd missed until now.

"Are you hungry?" she asks, pulling away with a grin, ready to mother me to death for the full four days she's going to be here.

"Starved," I laugh.

I pop my trunk and load up her suitcase as she gets into the passenger seat, and then I'm driving my mom away from the mainland of Tampa and to the quiet shores of my secluded beach town. She finds a seafood restaurant called *Crabby's on the Pass*, which has good reviews online, and is only a few minutes from where I live. By the time we get there, the sun is already setting beyond the horizon.

We get a table in a dimly lit corner, and I immediately slump against it, propping my head up with my hand, my eye lids fluttering as they try to stay open. I'd already worked a full day today, our second day out on the beach actually. I'm so happy Mom is here, but I've also been completely drained by all those hours in the sun. And not to mention, burnt to an absolute crisp.

Mom, to her credit, doesn't seem to be too worried about my lack of energy. She seems content to allow us to sit in silence as we wait for our food. I close my eyes and lay my head on the table while she leans back and watches the families around us and it's peaceful.

After a dinner of fish and shrimp, we go back to my place where mom unpacks, and I crash. It's only about 8:30 or 9:00 p.m., but I can't keep my eyes open any longer. I've been running on four to five hours of sleep for the past two weeks and I feel like my body has

slammed into that reality like a brick wall. Nothing is functioning the way it should anymore, like someone's hit "Force Quit" on my systems and now everything is shutting down, whether I like it or not.

The next morning, Mom and I wake bright and early. We get up and get dressed in our swimsuits and then pull on a T-shirt and shorts before jumping in my car to get breakfast. I take Mom down the street to my local Dunkin' Donuts, where I have become a frequent regular on the mornings when I don't have to show up on set at the crack of dawn. I order my usual—a slice of avocado toast and an iced coffee—and Mom orders the same, along with a half dozen donuts she thinks we should try, because she's fun like that.

When we're done with breakfast, we're back in the car and driving up the coast to Crystal River, Florida and, by this time tomorrow, I will be a changed person. Because surely somebody who has swum with the manatees comes away from that experience with a wiser outlook on life, right? Gosh, I hope so.

It's a strange feeling, being in the water with something so big, even if it is supposedly harmless. After laughing and hyperventilating our ways into the skin-tight wet suits provided by Nature's Discovery Manatee Tours, and no longer looking like a couple of busted cans of biscuits, we took our snorkels and a boat down the river to look for manatees. Whenever Bill, the boat captain, saw a large blob in the murky water, all fifteen people on the tour jumped into the freezing cold river, paddling quietly toward where the captain said he saw the blob.

The water here is murky, like lake water. It's not crystal clear like the pictures and the name of the river make you assume. This makes the moment when the large dingy grey form appears out of nowhere, rising from the yellow-green depths to pass beneath my body, one of the most terrifying moments of my life.

It's bigger than I thought it would be. I mean, I've seen pictures of manatees next to people before, so I had an idea of their size, but this thing is double the length of my body. It passes beneath me as I try to stay as still as possible and, when I turn my head, I cannot tell where it ends or begins. I only see grey flesh speckled with mossy algae. Holding my breath, I wait to see what the manatee does, afraid it might continue its upward trajectory and ram into me. Then I remember. I love manatees! I've been in love with them since I was a kid and saw a video of this blob of an animal floating in the water. All I wanted to do was hug it. Now here it is, swimming below me, and I want to laugh at how absurd life can be. How crazy is my mind that as soon as I finally reach this thing that I've been dreaming of, I am covered by fear, terrified it will turn around and hurt me. I let the anxiety drain away, registering the cold of the water, and the joy of my present reality. And then I do something illegal. I reach out and stroke the slimy back of the manatee.

I only have one more day off before I have to return to set and, as it happens, I spend nearly the entire day sleeping. Turns out, I didn't fully recover those two weeks of sleep over the past two nights and my body decided to go on strike.

I feel kind of bad about it, with my mom being here to see me and all, but she keeps reassuring me that she's fine. She's been spending her time walking to Dunkin' to pick up coffee for us and then heading to the beach to read for the rest of the day. She's happier here than maybe I've ever seen her. I don't worry about her from that point on.

She stays for two more days after I go back to work, building her own routine between walking to Dunkin' and heading back to the beach. When I get home from set in the evenings, she rides with me to get dinner at whatever restaurant is open at that time, and when we get back

to the AirBnb, she lets me shower and fall right to sleep. At the end of her stay, I drive her back to the airport to drop her off before going to work a night shoot.

Mom wraps her arms around my neck at the curb of the drop-off terminal, holding me tight, and I hang on for dear life.

“Thanks for having me,” Mom says, not letting go.

“Thanks for coming,” I say, my voice muffled against her shoulder. “Sorry I wasn’t more fun.”

“Are you kidding?” she pulls back to hold me at arm’s length and looks at me with an incredulous grin. “That was my perfect vacation! I got to see you when I could and got to spend the rest of my time on the beach! It was amazing!”

I laugh and pull her back into our hug. “I’m glad you had a good time, then.”

“I’m so proud of what you’re doing out here,” she says into my ear. “I think you’re really coming into yourself.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“I love you,” she whispers, and I whisper it back. She tightens her arms before releasing me, then grabs her bags and waves goodbye. When she disappears into the airport terminal, I miss her more than ever before.

My Menagerie

The thoughts in my mind run rampant,
each growing legs and lives of their own

I'm afraid I can no longer manage it—
discerning what's real now that I'm grown.

I bought a Jeep I couldn't drive, because
the wind tangling my hair, soft and slow,

was like the gentle hands of my cousin
twisting the strands into a golden halo.

I kept two squeaking pups who wandered
into my dew-kissed arms one spring,

imagining hikes along dusty trails
as we spent our dog days exploring.

But now I still can't figure out that extra peddle;
the yard with the dogs is wrecked,

and when a cute boy told me I had a nice smile,
I quickly changed the subject.

Chapter 5

Discerning What's Real

Without Mom being in town, my life resumes its new normal of simply trying to stay afloat. I go to work when the call sheet tells me to, and I come home anywhere from fourteen to seventeen hours later.

Nicole flew into town yesterday and showed up on set last night with very little warning. We've all been on our toes ever since. It's funny how the people with the money can cause a ripple effect of tension amongst the people who work for them.

She'd been monitoring the progress of the shoot from her home back in Dallas, and wasn't supposed to come until next week, when she's scheduled to shoot her scenes as the mother of Rosie (a misunderstood girl with a guitar, a pair of Doc Martens, and a dream—also, Chris's love interest in the film). But now Nicole is here, ready to check in.

We're shooting in a parking lot by the beach tonight and the wind coming off the water is cold. I'm coming back to set after grabbing a sweatshirt from my car just as the clock strikes midnight and Katrina calls for the cast and crew to break for "lunch." I'm about to join the back of the line forming in front of the pop-up table where Jodi has laid out large tin platters of fish and rice, when Nicole takes my elbow and pulls me aside.

"Hi, Kasey. I need to talk to you," she says in her too-sweet Valley Girl accent.

"Okay," I look up at her and flip open the notebook I keep on me, ready to write down whatever it is she needs. I have to crane my neck a bit to make eye contact with her.

"So, I've decided to promote you," she says with a smile.

"Oh my gosh," I drop my arms to my sides. "Wow, thank you so much!"

She waves her hand as if the promotion is nothing. “Yes, well, I’ve heard you’ve been doing such a great job around here and I felt that such hard work should be rewarded.”

I wait for her to mention that Katrina had brought up my being promoted over a week ago, but she doesn’t mention it.

“And since you’ll be getting a higher title, I want you to take over the food situation from now on,” Nicole crosses her arms over her chest.

“Oh,” I blink at her. “I thought that Jodi was in charge of all the food.”

“Yes, well...” Nicole trails off and glances over my head toward where the crew is filling their plates with the food Jodi had catered. Now that Nicole had mentioned the food, it does strike me that there appears to be more of it than normal tonight. “I’ve received some less than positive feedback regarding Jodi’s methods of keeping people happy and fed.”

I stare at her, eyes wide as this news settles over me. I mean, it isn’t news to me that the food situation has been less than ideal on set. There has been more than one occasion when I wasn’t able to eat more than a bite or two of the catered food because Jodi hadn’t ordered enough. Sometimes, she made us ham and cheese sandwiches herself but, again, not enough for everyone to fully fill their stomachs before getting back to work. But what do people expect? Jodi told me Nicole gave her a budget of two hundred dollars a day to feed twenty to forty people both breakfast and lunch. She’s doing the best she can with what she has.

However, I’m sure Jodi’s attitude isn’t helping matters.

Jodi is the type of woman that, should I have to choose between fighting her or a bear, I would favor my odds against the bear. When something needs to get done, Jodi gets things done. I respect her, and likewise she respects me. But I can see how other people on the crew haven’t had the patience to win her over, writing her off as a crazy lady who’s out of touch with the

wants and needs of the people around her. I just don't see how me taking over for her would make any difference in the quality of the meals when the money is the real issue.

“Okay,” I say tentatively, picking up my notebook again, pen ready. “What’s the budget again?”

Nicole waves my question away like it’s nothing. “Don’t worry about the budget. I just want people to have as much to eat as they want.”

My jaw drops. Don’t worry about the budget? If the budget wasn’t a problem, we wouldn’t have found ourselves in this situation to begin with!

“Here,” Nicole says, taking my elbow again and pulling us toward where the camera crew has made a little picnic circle. “Let’s ask people what their favorite foods and snacks are so you can redo the craft services table tomorrow.”

My feet feel like they’re walking on autopilot as my mind turns over how little time I have in a day as it is. How will I be able to make time to do Jodi’s job as well?

“Take notes,” Nicole says, nodding to the notebook in my hands.

We spend the next half an hour talking to every person in the crew as I fill pages and pages with their individual food preferences, dietary restrictions, and favorite snacks. Afterward, I take my notebook and lean against the wooden railing that runs along at the edge of the parking lot, flipping slowly through the pages and trying to figure out the best way to consolidate.

“Hey,” I hear the familiar smooth voice and look up to see Jadon walking over to me. Despite the chill in the air, his wardrobe for the scene we’re filming is basically consists of a T-shirt and swim trunks. He’s completely wrapped up in the fuzzy blanket I pulled out of my car for him to use between set-ups. “I heard you got pulled into that whole mess between Nicole and my mom.”

“Yeah,” I cross my arms over my chest as he leans against the wooden railing beside me. “I’m apparently in charge of all the food now.”

“Are you okay?” he asks turning toward me. “I mean with everything else you do, adding this? It’s too much.”

“It’s fine,” I say with a cool shrug, but my voice breaks a little, utterly betraying me in my time of need.

“It’s not okay,” he says, shaking his head. “You’re working so hard for us, and I don’t want you to get overwhelmed by this,” he pauses, looking over at Nicole as she videos the crew with her iPhone while they set up the lights and camera for the next shot, probably for her Instagram. “I’ll talk to her.”

“No,” I say. “It’s okay, really.”

He looks at me like he’s unconvinced, so I hop away from the railing and turn to face him.

“Actually, I’m so glad you’re here!” I whip out my notebook and pen. “I need to know ALL of your favorite foods, dietary restrictions, and preferred milk alternatives.”

He laughs and shakes his head. “Don’t worry about me, honestly. I’ll be fine with whatever.”

“Right,” I nod seriously. “That’s okay. I know it all anyway.” I give him a shrug as I pretend to write something down, then squint back up at him. “Unsweetened vanilla oatmilk, right?”

He stares at me with surprise. “How did you—” he laughs as he starts to walk away. “You’re something else,” he says with one more glance in my direction.

“Just doing my job!” I call to his back. Leaning against the railing again, I watch him step onto set, handing my blanket off to someone else as they make some final adjustments to the lighting and the way it hits him where he stands on his mark.

I breathe in the salty night air and realize that the weight that had just been crushing my chest has lifted. I don't know how or why, but suddenly, I'm not as afraid of these next challenges to come. I mean, I'm still nervous about what the extra workload will mean for the quality of the job I do in general, but I also feel a sense of validation. Like, I'm not crazy for freaking out a little bit. I feel seen. Somehow, that alone makes me feel like I'm going to be okay.

When I pull up to the address Katrina had sent me at 5:00 a.m., the sun is still tucked away for the night. I'm exhausted from the events of the past twenty hours, but also giddy to have been invited to a production meeting with Jadon, Jake, and Katrina.

I get out of my car and Katrina is standing in the parking lot, waiting for me.

“This place is open twenty-four-seven?” I ask, looking at the small building we're approaching. The windows are dark, and aside from the dim “Open” sign in the window, I would have thought the place was abandoned.

“Yeah, it's pretty chill. Have you ever had kava before?” Katrina asks.

“No,” I shake my head and follow her up the steps.

Katrina opens the door for me, and I step into a dark room. My breath catches as I take in our surroundings. It's nearly just as dark inside as it looks from the outside. All the lights are off, but the ceiling is strung with strands upon strands of blue Christmas lights. There is dim lighting behind what I can see is the bar, but most of that is coming from the large flat screen TV that takes up the majority of the wall, which is playing *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (part

one, it looks like). In another corner of the room, I see a couch set up in front of another large flat screen TV. This one is hooked up to an Xbox and there's a dude lounging with his feet kicked up on a coffee table as he sifts through the gaming options. In the next corner of the room, there appears to be a lounge area set up with couches and bean bags, where somebody is sleeping on the couch, face tucked under a blanket. As I take a small step closer, I make out the form of a German Shepherd curled up on one of the bean bags next to the sleeping person.

I grin over at Katrina. "This place is so cool!"

"Isn't it?" she smiles back as she runs a hand through her hair. "I like to come here on my off days with my boyfriend. It's just a good place to hang out."

I look to the other half of the room where there are two people bent over a chess board at the small table by the window, as well as a large pool table that is currently being unused.

"So," I lean toward Katrina, feeling the need to whisper with so many people sleeping and all. "What is kava?"

"It's like, the opposite of coffee. It's made from this root that acts as a type of relaxant."

"Is it alcoholic?" I frown, trying to read the menu over the bar in the dim light, but my tired eyes aren't having it.

"No, not really. It has more similar effects to weed. Have you ever smoked?" It's the first time I've ever been asked that question in such a way that I didn't feel as if the person asking was waiting to pass judgement—be it positive or negative.

"No," I say.

"Then I would probably avoid the kava if I were you. You can try mine if you want, though," she says with a half shrug.

“Okay, cool,” I nod politely, knowing full well I’m not going to take her up on her offer.

“Thanks.”

We stepped up to the bar where I see all the typical flavor pumps that accompany a normal coffee shop, and I feel a touch of warmth rush over me for this odd place. I have a strange affinity for places and moments like this that feel detached from reality.

The guy who steps forward to take my order doesn’t say anything, and I can’t tell if he’s bored or tired. Maybe he’s just relaxed, considering the methods for such a state readily accessible to him.

“Um, can I get an iced latte?” I ask, still kind of whispering.

The man nods and types something into the cash register before taking my card.

Katrina orders a kava, and when we get our drinks, we make our way to a round wooden table between the two sets of couches.

I look around the room again. “Where’s Jadon and Jake?”

“I think they had to swing by Jadon’s house to get something. They’ll be here soon.”

I nod and sit forward, elbows on the table, eyes still scanning the room.

“So,” Katrina says. “How are you feeling about everything today?”

I slump in my seat a bit and turn my attention to my coffee, stirring the ice around.

“Honestly? Overwhelmed.” I’ve been trying to avoid thinking about my new “promotion” as much as I can tonight. The thought of adding more work—more responsibility, and thus, more pressure—on top of everything else makes me feel physically ill.

“Is she paying you?” Katrina asks, kind of suddenly.

My eyes shoot to hers in surprise. “Nicole?” When Katrina nods, I shake my head in response. “No, she said I could come out here as a volunteer.”

Katrina blinks at me. “What about the AirBnb you’re staying at, is she covering that?”

I shake my head again. “I live with my parents—back home, you know—so, I’ve been able to save up some money just in case an opportunity like this ever came up.”

She stares at me and starts shaking her head slowly. “That’s not okay. She should have at least put you in one of the crew houses.”

I shrug helplessly. “I mean, I didn’t know anything about any of this before I got here. I just came.”

Katrina looks away, thinking. When she turns back to me, her eyes are assessing. “We all knew you weren’t on the payroll, but we at least thought Nicole was paying you separately.”

I shake my head again. “No, but it’s been a good learning opportunity. I don’t mind paying to be here.”

Katrina smiles over at me, a bit of determination in her eye. “Yeah, well I’m going to see if I can fix that.”

It turns out that Katrina was right. Being a Production Coordinator didn’t change much about my job at all. There was a bit of a learning curve to planning out meals and pick-ups, but I’ve been able to balance it all between the help of the new PAs we recruited (I’m in charge of coordinating the PAs now!) and Nicole’s recently generous budget. Furthermore, Katrina and Jadon talked to Nicole, and now I’m getting paid to be here! My new salary doesn’t quite cover the cost of my AirBnb, but it’s more than I ever expected to get, so I’m thrilled!

Today is our last shooting day, and it’s supposed to be the biggest day of them all. We’re filming a skimboard competition on the beach and bringing in over a hundred extras who I will have to keep track of and feed (they’re getting pizza and they’re going to be happy about it). Not

only that, but we will have nearly our entire cast on set today, along with several professional skimboarders, including Lucas Fink. I didn't know who Lucas Fink was before all of this, but it turns out he's a big deal in the skim world. Like, a World Champion kind of big deal. In short, I've got a lot on my plate. Thankfully, I was able to phone a friend for some extra help.

My alarm sings me awake at 4:00 a.m. and, despite the soft, sweet notes I had carefully chosen to wake me gently, I seriously contemplate whether my phone would survive a brief but forceful collision with the wall. But then I remember that the ricochet would most likely result in the injury of the blameless bystander still sleeping on the floor.

I had picked up Stone from the airport (his dad is a pilot for American Airlines, so he flies for free) as soon as I could get away from filming yesterday. We had wrapped early, so after I picked him up, we still had time to run the countless errands I needed to complete before this morning. And when I say we had time to finish all my errands, I mean that we had enough time for two hours of sleep before our day would begin.

Rolling out of bed with a groan, I nudge my cousin awake with my foot on my way to brush my teeth. In minutes, we're out the door and on our way to set. I'm now bouncing with an energy that should be illegal before the sun rises, while Stone slumps lifelessly into my passenger seat, squinting forward and trying to blink the sleep out of his puffy eyes. Poor guy.

I grin over at him and think back to last evening, when I'd brought him back to my Airbnb to drop off his things before we had to speed around town picking up tables and tents, talking to restaurants about lunch pick-ups, and buying baskets full of drinks and snacks.

Stone had wanted to see the beach before all the chaos started, and so, slipping off our shoes, we padded out to the water's edge to watch the sky change from orange to pink.

“I think this is the prettiest beach I’ve ever seen in real life,” Stone said, eyes on the dipping sun, the cold, pale blue water licking our toes.

“Not better than Galveston though,” I remind him seriously.

“No, of course not,” he laughed. And then we grew quiet as the sun touch the horizon, listening to the seagulls and the children laughing in the distance.

Just as I was turning to head back, Stone looked at me and said, “Let’s get in.”

“We don’t have time.” I was already mentally calculating how we would fit everything that we needed to do into the hours we had left in the day. This would throw off everything.

“Kasey, you don’t understand,” Stone said. “I am *dying* to get in that water right now.”

I laughed at how desperate he sounded. “Fine, go ahead. I’ll wait for you.”

“No, you have to come too,” he said, already shedding his shirt, dropping it on the sand.

“Why?” I was pretty sure the last place I need to go closed at midnight, which gave me five hours to make all my stops, a few hours to unload and repack, then I’d have to shower...

“Because it’ll be fun!” Stone called over his shoulder, running out into the churning blue.

I grinned, then stripped down to my sports bra and ran after him, diving headfirst into the icy surf. I knew the water was cold, I had felt it on my feet countless times over the past month. But there was something about being fully submerged that ripped the breath from my lungs and made me thankful to be alive. Stone and I splashed around in the waves like little kids, screaming and laughing until only the memory of the sun lit the evening sky. Then we trudged back up the beach, shorts dripping down our legs, shirts hanging from our hands, and eyes alight with pure joy.

“Thanks for coming,” I smile over at him now.

“Anytime,” Stone smiles back.

This Is Who I Am Now

I'm a morning person.
I've just decided.
Gone are the nights over which
I once presided.
No longer will I feel the caress of
Smooth, cold silence
brush tenderly against my face
all soft in defiance
of the quickly rising sun
chasing the moon out of the sky
nor the thickly draped darkness
that protects me from my
most dangerous imaginings
that run rampant at night
and the thoughts that hold me
captive in the absence of light.
But how will I ever
Catch the worm
If from my mistakes
I never learn.
I'm a morning person now,
I've just decided.

I don't take easily to the idea
That I cannot change,
Or that what I once was bad at
Dictates my range.
Tell me I can't.
Tell me I won't.
Add fuel to my fire,
Consider my embers stoked.

I'm a poet now,
I've just decided.

Chapter 6

I Never Learn

This year feels like it's flying by faster than any year I've experienced before. I mean, it feels like I could have been in Florida just yesterday, but that was March. Now it's June and it's been three months since we wrapped on *Off Rip*. How have three months already gone by, and why do I feel like my life has been on pause ever since then?

Following the end of our last shooting day on the beach (the fourteen-hours I spent keeping up with hundreds of people under a very unforgiving sun, if you'll remember), Stone and I had celebrated at a wrap party with the cast and crew. We ended up shutting down a local karaoke bar before finally getting back to my AirBnb and passing out at around 4:00 a.m., getting a solid four hours of sleep before we had to wake up again. I dropped Stone back off at the airport, then spent the rest of the day packing for my long drive home.

Once I'd pried myself away from the sandy beaches that I'd called home for the past month and made it all the way back to the pine trees cradling my actual home in East Texas, I fell into my own bed eagerly. I spent the first week of April sleeping, recovering, and catching up on assignments for the classes that had started during that last week of filming. When I felt fully recovered, I returned to work with my uncle where I turned in my two-months' notice (because he said he needed that long of a head's up). Now it's nearly July, I've quit my job, and last week I received a text from a Line Producer in LA asking me to come out and work for her. Insert *Ferris Bueller* quote here.

The producer said her name was Pauline and that she was a friend of Jake and Jadon's. She was looking for a Production Coordinator on a low-budget production of *War of the Worlds: Extinction* for the streaming platform, Tubi. When she offered me the job, I took it. I'm even

getting paid upfront this time! But, for some reason, a sense of dread sits in my lower body cavity like the ominous and unwelcome parasite that it is. It feels a lot like having something to lose this time around.

On the bright side, my dad is in a good mood as he drives the two hours to Dallas Fort Worth International Airport. It's one of his rare moods he gets in when he's excited, like nothing can bring him down, which just so happens to be my favorite of his moods.

I do my best not to overthink about what's to come as dad and I pull up to the terminal's drop-off curb. He gets out of the car and pulls my suitcase from the trunk and then turns to me as I pull my backpack up onto my shoulders.

"Well, Kase," he says, pulling me into a hug. "You go out there and do what you do best."

I snort at that. "Yeah, whatever that may be." I keep my arms wrapped around him, dreading the moment when I have to walk away.

"This," he tightens his arms around my back. "This is what you're best at. Just go out there and meet new people, love on them, and do your best to solve their problems. It's as simple as that, and it's who you are," he shrugs. "You're bold—bolder than I ever was."

I close my eyes and rest my head against his chest.

"You're going to be fine," he says, finally letting me go and taking a step back to cross his arms over his chest. "I think you're doing what you were meant to do. Nobody else in our family, besides maybe Cade and Erin, have done what you are doing. And I think what you're doing might even be harder than what they did, because at least they each had a general blueprint to becoming a lawyer and a doctor. You? You're paving your own way in this world, and I couldn't be prouder of you."

It's rather cliché to want to make your father proud, but still, his words have me blinking and trying to keep the emotion stirring in my chest from reaching my face. It's just that he is one of the most difficult people in the world to please. He has the highest standards for life of anyone I know, and I've often felt less-than in the shadow of them. Every conversation we have seems to be aimed at reminding me of what's at stake, as if he doesn't see how hard I try to reach that top shelf he built to hide away his approval. But here, now, I feel like I've finally surpassed his expectations. It doesn't do much in the way of the vise clamping down on my chest, but it does give me something to hold onto. And that's not nothing.

I touch down in Los Angeles later that evening and pick up my rental car just in time to hit LA traffic. It's dark when I finally make it to my home for the next two weeks, but the view is still stunning. The room I'm renting is at the bottom of a town house that I am sharing with four others. Again, it's on my dime. But then again, I'm getting paid to be here this time, so I'm hoping to break even. The townhouse sits at the top of a hill in Burbank and overlooks the California valley. The Los Angeles skyline sparkles in the distance, purple haze draped over it like a blanket.

See? I ask myself. *I made it. I'm fine.* I turn away from the view and carry my bags toward my room. *Nothing about this is new. There's nothing to be afraid of.*

After I set down my bags on my bed and lock the door behind me, the first thing I do in my new room is pull out my phone to call my mom.

The next morning, I drive to The Asylum to meet Pauline. When she first told me to meet her there, I'd thought The Asylum was going to be some kind of kitschy coffee shop we would

be working at for the day, prepping for the shoot and what not. I didn't realize until I walked through the swinging glass door that it's actually the production studio we'll be shooting in for the next few weeks.

My eyes are wide as I take in the *Sharknado* toys and memorabilia displayed in a glass case by the desk in the front office, the realization of where I am finally dawning on me. I'm standing in the very studio that made the iconic *Sharknado* franchise films! This is real.

"Kasey?" A woman's voice calls from around the corner when the door behind me slams shut.

"Yes?" I call back nervously.

A woman with smooth, dark skin and straight, black hair walks into the room and stands across from me. We're close to the same height but I think I might be taller. She looks me up and down before offering me her hand.

"Pauline," she says as I shake it. "Nice to meet you. Come with me." She barely tosses me another glance as she spins around and leads me deeper into the building.

The Asylum is set up like an office building, with a reception area in the front and then a big open meeting room just past it. More shark memorabilia cover the entire place. A large plastic shark head sits at the center of the boardroom table in the meeting room and funky shark pillows decorate the lime green couch taking up most of the sitting area in the corner. Movie posters that look like ripped-off classics decorate the walls. Hanging over a leather couch that's pushed against the wall are posters for *Rise of the Zombies* and *Atlantic Rim*.

Pauline leads me through the meeting room and past several smaller offices, one of which houses a full-sized velociraptor hanging from a metal pole. Upon closer inspection, I see that the

undercarriage of the dinosaur is open, and just big enough for a person to crawl inside to operate the creature. Past the raptor and the offices is a door with a sign duct taped to it.

“Please keep this door shut at all times. We are fond of our set cats and would like to keep them,” the sign reads in scribbled marker.

Pauline heaves the door open, and we walk into a large warehouse, covered from floor-to-ceiling with every object you could possibly think of, including clothes, tools, and yes, sharks.

“This is our prop house, and also where we will be building a bunch of our sets in the next few weeks,” Pauline says, leading me around a zombified shark head that’s taller than I am. “Over here is our first set, the mission control room.”

I slide past a clothing rack full of various costumes and military uniforms toward a wall of plywood. It doesn’t look like much, just like somebody had found some wood and nailed it together to make a room-like box. But when I turn the corner around the entrance, I’m transported to the future. The room is wall-to-wall sleek black pyramid-like tiles that remind me a bit of a sound booth, with three long desks lining the walls, each decked with a row of computer monitors. All four walls are made up of TV screens, and on the fourth side of the room is an elevated platform where the commander’s desk sits in front of another TV wall.

A shorter man, maybe an inch or two taller than I am with dark hair walks into the room. He’s wearing a surgical mask (for fear of Covid I’m assuming), and a pair of thick black glasses balanced precariously on top.

“Hey, Pauline,” he says, voice muffled. “You wanted me to turn on all the monitors in here?”

“Yeah,” she says. “I just want to do a test run since we’re filming in a few days. You know, to make sure everything is still good to go.”

“Sure,” he nods. He looks over at me. “I’m Joe, by the way.” He leans over and extends his hand. I shake it.

“Kasey,” I say with a smile.

“She’s my new Production Coordinator,” Pauline tells Joe. She turns to me and adds, “Joe is Asylum’s Stage Manager, so if you need anything around here, he’s the one you go to.”

“Cool,” I smile over at Joe again. “Good to know!”

“Yup. And if you need me, I’m always floating about somewhere around here.” He looks down at the remote control he’d picked up from one of the desks. “Alright, so this should be pretty simple,” he mumbles to himself. “Right, here we go!”

He looks up and points the remote at the TV wall opposite the elevated desk. At once the screens come to life, turning blue. He does the same to all the rest and then presses another button so that the screens all take on all sorts of different data analytics and radar monitors, and I feel like I’ve fallen into a scene from *Mission Impossible*. This room looks just like the control room in every spy or military movie I’ve ever seen. Maybe it *is* that control room.

I grin as I spin and take it all in. It hits me then that I’m on a real-life movie set. We aren’t just setting up cameras to capture scenes in the real world, we’re building worlds around the cameras this time. It all feels simultaneously surreal and tangible in every way that matters. Because I’m here—I’ve made it to that place I used to daydream about and it’s real. Somewhere, in the softest corners of my mind, I hear a voice whisper, *I think I can do this*.

I don’t think I can do this. When Pauline and I had ended our tour, we made it upstairs to another boardroom table where she had set up a makeshift office. I’d barely taken a seat before she began listing everything I needed to do, and half of it was unintelligible. At least, to me it

was. Pauline spoke about things like deal memos, actor's contracts, and certificates of liability insurance as if I should already know to what she is referring. And I, in turn, took a lot of notes with a lot of question marks scribbled next to them. Then she left for a meeting with an executive producer in the next room.

I'm staring down at my notes, trying to make sense of them, when a boy with a mop of floppy dark hair walks into the room. He stops in front of the table and looks at me for a moment in confusion, then shrugs and pulls out the chair across from me, dropping his backpack beside him before plopping down in his seat.

"Hi," I say over my laptop.

"Hey," he says with a smile. He pulls out his own laptop and sets it in front of him. He's young—a high schooler maybe?

I'm trying to figure out what to say next, how to introduce myself, when Pauline walks back into the room.

"Hey, Sam!" Pauline calls as she walks toward us. "I see you've met Kasey."

He looks over at me and I give him a tight smile. "Yeah—hi, I'm Kasey." I raise my hand slightly, in awkward acknowledgment.

Sam, to his credit, jumps to his feet and leans across the table to shake my hand. "Sam," he says. "Nice to meet you."

"You, too." I instantly like this kid. Such good manners—*oh my gosh I feel old*.

"Kasey's my Production Coordinator I was telling you about," Pauline says, nodding at Sam. "And Sam is one of our interns," she says to me.

Neither of us have time to respond before Pauline switches back to business mode.

“Sam, I’m going to need you to get in touch with the guy from the Villa Serena location and lock down our shooting days,” she says, looking down at something on her phone.

Sam nods and turns to his laptop. “Sure, for Days Two and Three, right?”

“No, just Day Two. We’re moving the schedule around a bit. How much did he say he could give it to us for? Never mind. Whatever the price is, see if you can get him to lower it.”

“Got it,” Sam nods without looking up, his fingers already skimming over his keyboard.

“I’ll be right back. I need to talk to Mark about something.” Pauline turns on her heels and heads down the stairs, where I guess somebody named Mark awaits.

“So, how long have you been a Production Coordinator?” Sam asks, eyes still on his computer screen.

“Oh, uh, this is kind of my first time. Well,” I pause, trying to untangle the interjections coursing through my mind. “*Officially*, at least.”

“Officially?” he looks up at me, brows furrowed.

“Yeah. I got promoted to Production Coordinator on the last gig I worked on about halfway through the shoot. This is my first time being hired for the job from the start.”

“Sweet. How many movies have you worked on?”

I smile sheepishly at him. “This is my third.”

“Dang, you must be good if you’re already a coordinator on your third shoot.”

“Uh, no,” I laugh. “Actually, I’m drowning over here.”

“What do you mean?” he leans forward a bit.

“I have no idea what I’m doing.” I think about just leaving it there, but I’ve given the knot in my chest some air and now it’s expanding, causing the panic to spill out. “Pauline gave me this list of things to do, and I don’t know what any of it means. I’m trying to figure it out as I

go, but I just don't know what's going on—don't know what y'all have been doing up to this point—and I'm starting to freak out just a little bit." I look down at my notes and see that I'm gripping the edge of the table, knuckles white.

Wordlessly, Sam gets up and walks around the table to sit beside me. "What did she tell you to do?"

"What?" I glance over at him and am surprised to see him looking at me with patience.

"Tell me everything she told you and I'll help you figure it out," he shrugs.

I stare at him for a second—this kid who has shown more kindness to me in the first five minutes of knowing me than I know what to do with or how to accept. "Okay," I say. I flip to the front page of my notes and start listing the words that Pauline said to me in the order that she said them. It feels like reading a language I don't understand, these tasks I'm supposed to perform. But when I glance back at Sam, he is simply nodding, as if in thought.

"Well," he says. "This, this, and this," he points to a few of my bullet points. "Are things that Krystal and I can help you with. She's the other intern and will be here soon. Has Pauline given you access to the website she uses to send deal memos yet?"

I shake my head slowly, trying to convey that I know nothing about such a website, nor deal memos.

"Right. Well, ask her to get you signed into that when she gets back and that will solve a lot of these problems."

"Okay," I nod. "What about hiring more crew members? I don't know anybody out here and I don't know how to find people."

"Check Facebook," he says. "And Pauline will have people she already knows in mind as well. They tend to rehire a lot around here, so it shouldn't be that big of a deal."

“Alright,” I nod more determinedly. “Okay, I can handle this.”

“Yeah, just take it one thing at a time and I’ll help you however I can.”

“Thank you. Seriously. Also—just wondering—how old are you?” I squint at him.

“I’m seventeen,” he laughs.

“Wow, I wish I was like you when I was seventeen—heck! I wish I was like you now!”

“I’ve been around the business a while,” Sam says, leaning back in his chair. “My stepdad is the Chief Operating Officer at Asylum, so I know how it usually goes.”

“Well, thank you for your help,” I say, scrunching my nose. “You probably just saved my job.”

“Nah, you would have figured it out.” He gets up and returns to his chair across the table.

“Hey, I didn’t eat before I got here and I’m getting hungry. Are you?”

“Yes,” I breathe out a long sigh. “I’m *starving*. Are we allowed to leave and get food?”

“Yeah,” Sam laughs. “Let’s go tell Pauline we’re heading out.”

Stuck Somewhere in California

Who's to say that the mud under the orange trees wasn't waiting for us?
Or that its cold grasp on our worn tires and our tired toes wasn't an invitation to embrace the dark unknown?

"Stop and smell the orange blossoms," the icy sludge slurred as it clung to our numb feet.
One foot, two, together we shoved—but no, the heavy car wouldn't budge.

 "It's a lovely night. Look! Look at the mountains, all dusted in blue! What a beautiful sight! Not to mention, a wonderful adventure you two have been through!"

Panting in the crisp winter breeze as the stars came out to dance, we caught the scent of a color, and basked in the night, ripe with chance.

Chapter 7

Invitation to Embrace

It's the night before shooting on *War of the Worlds: Extinction* begins, and I feel like I'm in way over my head. It feels like every time I'm able to cross something off my list, Pauline remembers two more things we need to do, and then those two become four, and so on.

I'm drowning.

Everything in my body is screaming for me to swim to the surface—to break free of the ever-multiplying tasks that are wrapping themselves around my body and dragging me under—but I can't. I have a job to do. I just hope I can do it well, despite the water that is filling my lungs.

It's funny, trying to pour my heart and soul into something that I don't believe in. I mean, I will, because I said I would, and who am I if I'm not true to my word? I want to be somebody that others can count on, and who shows up and gives her all, no matter the circumstances. Even if those circumstances happen to include a poorly written script (that makes absolutely *no sense*) and the promise of being a sequel to its cheesy, terribly-made predecessor. But a job is a job, and I'm lucky to have a chance at having this experience. And *that* is something I believe fully.

War of the Worlds: Extinction is set to directly follow the events that took place in the first Tubi Original, *War of the Worlds: Annihilation*, in which the human race invaded an “alien” planet after destroying their own with global warming or something. Billy Baldwin (of the Hailey Baldwin—now Bieber—family line), stars as General Skuller, a military commander for the alien race whose goal is to defend his planet against the invading humans.

Without spoiling too much of the first film, because I know I'm really selling it, the plot of the sequel follows General Skuller as he travels to Earth to seek his revenge.

There's this whole storyline about a doomsday switch, which Skuller's ancestors had apparently installed in the earth hundreds of years before—you know, should the need for revenge ever arise. To flip the switch, Skuller must first find three keys (also hidden on Earth by the ever-wise ancestors) that will set off a series of catastrophic events when turned. The majority of the film follows the team from Earth as they try to stop Skuller before it's too late, but all anybody on the crew really cares about is Billy Baldwin's scenes.

It'll still be a few days before he gets here, but it still feels like everyone is just going through the motions, just getting past Day One and preparing for the bigger days that lay ahead.

But not me. I'm scrambling.

Because Pauline and I were so busy trying to make sure today happened. One of our actors called late last night to drop out from the project, because he had to play the organ at his church in the morning. He hadn't realized that as the star of the day's scenes, he would have such an early call time. Pauline and I had to bend over backwards to replace him, I never got around to ordering lunch for the day. I'd showed up to set at The Asylum by 6:30 a.m. utterly exhausted. Still, I tried to make up time where I could—setting up the craft services table with coffee and snacks, making sure my two PAs had jobs on set, and following up with the various crew departments to make sure everyone had what they needed. It took me three hours to make sure set was running well enough for me to be able to step away and take care of lunch. But now, as I call every restaurant I can think of, they're all telling me it's too late to place an order.

I thought this was L.A., gosh dang it! Aren't these places used to this kind of thing? But apparently our crew is too big for any "last-minute" arrangements.

“Nobody will take my order,” I say to Pauline as I carry my laptop over to her desk on the second floor of the studio. Even I can hear the panic edging into my voice. “What would you do?”

“Order from El Pollo Loco,” she says, still typing away about something on her computer. “They have these individually wrapped chicken and bean things that are really cheap and that everybody loves. You should be able to get an order in there.”

“Okay. Thanks!” I turn around and run downstairs to find a quiet corner where I can place my order. I choose the black leather couch in the front office, where I can see outside and watch the sun dance through the windows. I need some connection to the outside world to keep my sanity right now.

Since the first shot of the day went up at 8:00 a.m., lunch has to be RTS (ready to serve) by 1:45 p.m. if we’re going to be able to break on schedule without occurring any meal penalties. If, for some reason lunch is late and the cast and crew have to continue working past their legally mandated six-hour lunch break, Production has to pay each person an additional hour’s worth of their agreed upon salary. So, basically, lunch can’t be late, it’s already 11:50 a.m., and I don’t know how long it takes to make food for thirty people. Gosh, I hope I remembered deodorant.

Scrolling through the El Pollo Loco website, I don’t see anything about individually wrapped chicken, but I do find a party-sized platter of chicken wraps and bean burritos, which sounds like what Pauline was telling me about. I request for the order to be delivered by 1:25 p.m., check out with Pauline’s Production card, and then watch the delivery time come and go.

The food is running late. I’m pacing back and forth in front of the green velvet couch with the shark pillows when Pauline walks in.

“Where’s lunch?” she asks as she walks past me, heading toward set.

“Not here yet,” I say, my tone flat, my hands fidgeting with my phone.

“Why not?” she stops and turns to face me. “It was supposed to be here five minutes ago.”

I nod. “Yes, that’s when I scheduled it to arrive, but the delivery driver is just now leaving.”

Pauline levels me with an unimpressed look. “This is why we go and pick it up ourselves.” Her voice is even, but I don’t miss the accusing note in it.

“Yes, ma’am,” I say, swallowing the lump in my throat. “It won’t happen again.”

“Good.” She shakes her head, annoyed, and continues walking. “I’m going to try and stall to make sure they don’t call lunch. Let me know when it’s ready.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say again, heart in my throat.

When she leaves, I return to my pacing and texting.

The food makes it to the front door with five minutes to spare. After I meet the driver at the door, I snag the two bags from his hands, thank him, and run to the meeting room to get everything set up.

I set the bags down on the crafty tables I had cleared of snacks while I was nervously waiting, and stare down at their contents, suddenly feeling like I’m going to throw up.

The burritos are tiny—absolutely *miniscule*. This isn’t enough to feed everyone.

I do my best to set out the different types of burritos (all wrapped in foil with a sharpie-marked code labeling each type, making it near impossible to tell what was in each one), the side of chips and salsa I’d added to the order, and the platter of rice that came with it.

“That’s it?” Pauline is standing beside me, surveying the food I’d spread across the white plastic tables. “What did you order?”

“Three different types of burritos, the chips and rice, then eight special vegan burritos for the vegans and vegetarians. Here,” I pick up the plastic container holding the sad little burrito halves that are marked with a “special” sticker and hand it over to her. “These ones are for you. I’m setting them aside, so they don’t get mixed in with the rest.”

Pauline eyes the two and a half inch long rolls wrapped in tinfoil that I’m offering her and gives me a shake of her head. “Um, no. Thanks. I might come get one later.”

I nod my head and set the plate back to the side.

“What happened to the chicken wraps we talked about?” she asks, helping me adjust the food so that it takes up more space on the two craft tables, making it look like there is more than there really is.

“I thought these were what you meant,” I say softly.

“These aren’t what I meant.” She crosses her arms and sighs, taking in her work.

“Whatever, it’s fine. I’ll let Jordan know he can call lunch.”

I nod again and blink away the tears that are quickly forming, swallowing hard.

I hold my hands behind my back and step away from the table as people slowly trickle in, stopping to stare at the scraps of lunch I’ve provided them. I watch until I can’t watch anymore, then I turn on my heels and run upstairs. I’m barely able to lock myself into a bathroom and slam my hand against my mouth before the muffled sobs rack my body. I try to be as quiet as possible because I know there are people working across the hall from me, but I can barely contain myself. I let the tears run their course for as long as I can and then work on pulling it together, taking deep breaths while keeping my eyes trained on my knuckles, white from gripping the sink. When I feel I’ve regained some control, I look up and find my eyes in the mirror. They’re

bright red and glassy, and a small part of me wants to laugh at myself. So, I'm doing badly at my job. So what?

So, everything.

I take a handful of toilet paper and use it to dry my face and then blow my nose. I stare at myself in the mirror, blinking until I feel my face looks at least somewhat normal. It's still blotchy, but I can't hide in here forever. I've got to get out before I draw attention. Eyes still red, I slip out of the bathroom and down the set of stairs on the other side of the building, away from where everyone is trying to stomach their lunch. Once down the stairs, I push out the door and head outside to the parking lot, not stopping until I find a curb under a tree to plop down on. The tears begin to escape down my face again, but I wipe them away as soon as they appear.

The parking lot on the side of The Asylum's building sides right up next to another identical looking building. Both are plain and grey, suiting my mood just fine. The sun, however, hasn't caught on and is shining rudely right in my face.

I close my eyes as the wind brushes against my cheeks and through my hair, wishing it was strong enough to carry me far away from here. I pull my knees up to my chest and am finally feeling like I may be done crying when I hear footsteps approaching.

"Hey, what are you doing out here?" calls a friendly deep voice.

I look to the side and see a man in a grey T-shirt and cargo shorts walking toward me. He looks to be in his mid-thirties and has a thick five-o' clock shadow covering his face. His long black hair is slicked back into a ponytail at the base of his neck, and his slicked wide grin strikes me as a touch predatorial. I recognize him as my PA, Emon, and force a smile, brushing my face for any remaining tears as he sits on the curb beside me.

“Hey, Emon,” I say. “I’m just getting some fresh air and sunlight while I can, you know?” I tilt my head up toward the sun and close my eyes again, hoping that the redness will clear away before I have to reopen them.

“Oh, yeah. Sure,” he says, voice smooth like caramel. I open my eyes and turn towards him as he gives me what I’m sure he considers to be a megawatt grin, his white teeth contrasting against his dark skin. “Me too, that’s why I came out here.” He shrugs his shoulders and adds, “That, and I hadn’t seen you in a while. I thought I’d come looking for you.”

“Well, you found me.” I force another smile, hoping it reaches the corners of my eyes, but knowing it doesn’t. “Have you been having a good first day so far?” I ask, trying to steer the conversation in a direction that I can manage under my present circumstances.

“Me? Yeah, of course!” He has this way of speaking that is almost overbearing. It’s booming, and it contains way more energy than such mundane statements require. He kind of reminds me of a used car salesman. “I love this stuff! I’ve worked on a few of these for Pauline and—yeah, they’re a blast!”

I smile again to hide the grimace creeping onto my face as he shouts about how much he loves his job. At least one of us does.

“I just love being in the middle of everything!” He leans back on his palms and tilts his head at me. “And you know, I told you before, but if you need anything you can let me know.”

I nod and brush the hair blowing into my face behind my ears. “Thanks, Emon. I appreciate that.”

“And I appreciate you,” he says, voice suddenly lower, almost too serious. He leans forward again, tilting closer to me on the curb with a glint in his eye, and my stomach twists. “I

mean it,” he says lowly, dark eyes steady on mine. “If you *need* anything... you let me know and I can help you out.”

I squint at him, trying to read him, and laugh nervously. Then I look down at the notebook in my hands. I don’t like the way he just emphasized the word, *need*. Surely, he isn’t suggesting what I think he is. There has to be some sort of misunderstanding here, but I can’t overlook the tightness in my chest. I’ve never ignored my intuition before, so I clench my jaw before turning back toward him, leveling him with a seriousness of my own.

“Do you know what I need?” I ask him.

“Tell me,” Emon drawls with a quirk of his lips, leaning even closer.

“I need to find a porta-potty,” I tell him, completely deadpan.

“What?” he sputters, pulling back. I watch as he squints his eyes, looking away as if trying to register what I just said, and then whipping his head back toward me as if to see whether I was joking.

But I’m not really in a joking mood, so I simply nod solemnly. “Yeah,” I say. “I need to find a porta-potty by tomorrow’s shoot, but every vendor I’ve checked is closed for the Fourth of July—which is crazy because tomorrow is only the third!” I throw my hands up in exasperation.

“Oh. Wow,” Emon laughs, still a little taken aback. “That’s, uh, that’s not what I thought you were going to say.” He rubs his thumb across his bottom lip as he looks away again, hopefully thinking about where he could find me a porta-potty.

“No?” I tilt my head and draw my brows together, feigning confusion.

“No,” he laughs, shaking his head.

I purse my lips and slump my shoulders as if I’m disappointed, just waiting for him to leave. I think this is the hint that he picks up on.

“Well,” he says, clapping his hands together and standing up. He takes a few steps away from me slowly. “I don’t know anybody who has a porta-potty, or I’d give them a call for you.” He rubs his hands together and bounces from foot to foot as he backs away, and I nod, understanding. “So, uh, I wish you the best of luck with that.”

“Thanks,” I smile sweetly. “I’ll see you later!” I give him a wave and then look back down at my phone and notebook, pretending like I’m getting to work on that porta-potty situation. In all honesty, I probably should get started on it, because it genuinely is a problem and I have no idea how I’m going to solve it. But I don’t think I have the capacity at the moment.

Emon stands there for a few more seconds, watching me, before turning and leaving me alone. I breathe out as the tightness in my chest slowly releases.

When I go back inside, I can barely make myself look at the ransacked lunch table. The only evidence of food having been there at all is the stray grains of rice, beans, and shredded lettuce that litters the tabletop between the spatters of guacamole and hot sauce. That, and the three tiny halves of vegan burritos. I have to blink away tears again before setting to work cleaning up the mess.

My stomach feels hollow, but I ignore it. There wasn’t enough food, I know there wasn’t, so I won’t eat. I don’t deserve to. Somebody who didn’t get enough should have the burritos if they want them.

“Hey,” I hear Pauline say, and turn my head to see her approaching while continuing to wipe down the table. I glance away, unable to make eye contact with her.

“Hey,” I say.

“So, lunch was pretty good,” she says evenly, measured. I can tell she’s lying but I nod my head anyway.

“I’ll do better tomorrow,” I promise her.

“It really was good. Just, maybe next time, let’s get more.”

I keep my eyes forward and will them to stay dry as I nod again. I can feel Pauline watch me for a few seconds before she leaves me to finish cleaning.

The rest of the day is a race to plan for the next. By the time I get home, shower, and fall into bed, I have three and a half hours before I need to get up and do it all again.

I cry myself to sleep.

Happy To Be Here

I've built a home teetering on the edge of this
ledge slick with the sweat of the
pet I call *Persistence*. Perched at the top of an obsidian
drop is the helter-skelter house I use
to shelter the doubts of my capacity. Or, rather,
I suppose it's more of a tent where I belligerently pay
rent—with every inch I give I must learn
to live while losing an ounce of sanity.
To the highest bidder it goes, my mind wilting like a
rose, and all the while I'm slipping, and dipping, and pawing,
and clawing along the sharp, bloody edge, just trying to get back to my
ledge where I've built a home out of reach from those trying
to teach me a thing or two about
gratitude.

Chapter 8

Live While Losing

You know what they say: you live, and you learn. It's a bit cliché, but it's true, or else it wouldn't be. And you know what? It's kind of comforting, don't you think? This idea that not only can you learn from your mistakes, but that life goes on. We don't have to sit in the pain of our failures but can instead use those failures to propel us forward into a life well-lived.

I learned from my mistakes. Planning ahead for meals became my top priority rather than a simple side quest. I learned that feeding people in L.A. was completely different from feeding people in Florida. The people here are much more entitled, expecting me to cater to their individual preferences rather than simply being grateful, and it seems that no matter what I do I can't make everyone happy. And so, lunch is my daily Everest. It's my bolder that I am forced to roll up the hill, day in and day out, because if I'm not worrying about the food for today, I'm worrying about it for tomorrow.

When Billy Baldwin finally arrives, the mood on set shifts similarly to how it did back when Nicole showed up in Florida. Everyone is on their toes now, and I'm trying to handle all of Mr. Baldwin's needs without letting him know I'm at the end of my rope. And truly, I am barely hanging on to that rope's frayed edges. With only eleven shooting days to make this film happen, we have also run into the issue of going into overtime on a few of our twelve-hour days. My nervous system is shot from how often I get told at the very last minute that I need to find and provide second lunch within the hour in order to avoid that pesky meal penalty. So far, it's always been either pizza or McDonalds, which is a bit of a challenge to order vegan if you were wondering.

On the morning of our fourth filming day, Jordan, our First Assistant Director (the Katrina of this set), calls me while I'm packing up walkie-talkies at The Asylum. I got here at around 5:50 a.m. so that I could make sure we have everything we need as we move to our next location—somewhere in the Topanga mountains, I think.

“This whole shoot has been a shit show,” Jordan says. “Absolute chaos.”

“Yeah,” I say softly. “I'm glad I'm not the only one who feels that way.” I'm heaving the giant crate of walkies out the heavy backdoor of the prop house and shuffling into the parking lot. I hope Jordan can't hear the strain in my voice.

“Oh, no. You're definitely not the only one.” He pauses before his voice gets quieter, conspiratorial, like he's telling me a secret. “Actually, a couple of us are working under pseudonyms on this project, so that if shit hits the fan, we won't get caught in it.”

“Really?” I shove the crate of walkies into my trunk and then take my phone from where it was wedged between my shoulder and my face. “Like, it's that bad?”

“It's that bad. To be honest with you, this shoot probably should have never happened.”

“What? Why not?” I slam my trunk closed and lean back against it.

“The whole thing has been completely rushed.” He sounds frustrated, which makes me a little less so. “Everyone is busting their asses to make this thing happen right now and things are falling through the cracks. Things are going wrong because we haven't had the time to prepare for them, and the film is suffering as a consequence.”

I breath out as I listen to him, trying to think about the production as a whole rather than my little corner of it. Is everyone else shattering the plates they were supposed to be keeping in the air too? No wonder these days have felt like such a mess.

“And I’m going to be frank with you,” Jordan continues. “All of this is being pushed because Pauline has a vacation next week that she didn’t want to reschedule. That’s it. That’s why everything is falling the way it is. We should have pushed the shoot a week, maybe even two, but no. We’re making do with what we have, and I’m taking my hands off of it. I just want you to know so that you’re not surprised if I end up walking.”

“What? No! Jordan, you can’t leave!” If I’m being honest, I’ve never really been that attached to Jordan during this shoot. He’s nice enough when we’re not filming, but I don’t have the same relationship with him that I had with Katrina. He’s yelled at me a few times for not jumping to his beck and call while I’ve been busy with other things, and that was fine. I dealt. But it doesn’t mean I like his particular leadership style. However, now that he’s letting me on the inside a bit, I feel a new sense of comradery with him.

“I mean,” he sighs. “I hope it doesn’t come to that. Really, I do. But I just wanted to let you know that I’m at the end of my rope, and I’m getting ready to bail.”

“Wow,” I cross my arms, switching my phone to my other ear. “I thought it was just me. I thought I just wasn’t cut out for working on a set like this.”

“Oh my gosh, no!” Jordan exclaims. “Kasey, with all things considered—with everything you’ve had to deal with, and under the time constraints that you’ve had to contend with as well—you’ve been doing a fantastic job. Honestly. You’re really good at what you do, and you’ve got a bright future ahead of you, if this is what you want to do in the industry.”

I breath out an incredulous laugh. “Thank you. That means a lot, coming from you.”

“For sure, don’t worry about all this. Not all shoots are like this one, I promise.”

“Yeah, but they all say that,” I drawl jokingly, but not actually joking at all. I’ve never been on a set where they didn’t say that.

“Normally, you have time to plan ahead and prepare. Just know that you’ve been handling the chaos remarkably well, and we all see it.”

“Thanks, Jordan.”

“No problem. Hey, I’ve got to go check on something before I head out. See you on set.”

“See you,” I say, then end the call. I hold my phone to my chest and smile up into the dark blue morning.

It’s Day Nine and we’re spending the day filming at an abandoned a college campus called Cal Poly Pomona. Houses and buildings that are all made of the same pale brick and separated by paved roads and dead grass cover over seven blocks of the gated area. We’re shooting an alien invasion/battle scene in one of the campus’s neighborhoods, so Pauline and I agree on setting up basecamp with craft services and the Production Office in the cafeteria. It’s at the center of campus and only about three blocks from set. That way, we don’t have to worry about the twenty-five background actors we have waiting around here getting too loud while we’re rolling.

Other than the little tent-debacle this morning, where Aaron (my PA who drives the box truck full of production supplies) told me he’d decided the night before to unpack all our pop-up tents and leave them at The Asylum (which is now an hour away), today has gone pretty smoothly. I only panicked a little bit, and that was just because I had to tell Jordan after he had called me the night before with specific instructions to make sure we had all the tents ready to fight off the forecasted heat index. I had told him not to worry about it, that we always keep the tents on the truck.

Sam and I were able to speed over to Walmart to buy more and we got them up around set before they had even finished the first scene of the day.

Lunch arrives in the arms of Eli, Sam's best friend and fellow Intern. I grin as he walks through the cafeteria door and direct him on where to set up. With him and Krystal unloading the food, I radio Jordan and let him know lunch is here, on schedule, and he calls for everyone to break and head back to basecamp. I'm surveying everyone as they make their way inside, making sure that they all have what they need, when Chris, our director, beckons me toward where he's standing by the coolers with the crook of a finger.

"Do we have any Diet Dr. Pepper?" he asks, looking into the nearly empty, clearly Diet Dr. Pepperless cooler.

"Oh," I glance down at the remaining blue and red Gatorades I had refilled the coolers with before lunch. We were prioritizing electrolytes today due to the heat, so I hadn't bothered to pick up any more cans of soda while Sam and I were at the store. "I think we may have some at set, let me go check for you."

"Thank you," he says with a pleased wink. I run outside, planning to run the quarter mile to set and back when Emon pulls up on a golf cart.

"You need a ride, Boss Lady?" he gives me a look that makes me want to decline, but then I remember I need to get to set and back as fast as possible.

"Um, yeah. Sure. Thanks."

"No problem," he says as I step into the cart, sliding my body tight against the handrail that's supposed to keep me in my seat. It's as far from Emon as I can manage. "Hold on," he drawls slyly, that caramel voice dripping down my spine like a bucket of ice water. I shiver and am trying to grab onto the handrail when he whips the cart into a hard U-turn, the force sliding

my body into his. He's got his arm on the back of the seat, and he looks down at me with hooded eyes and a devilish smile. "So, how are you doing today? I haven't seen you much."

"Yeah," I say, voice clipped as I try to pull myself away from him, but he only whips the cart sharply to the side again, forcing me back into him. "You know me, always running around doing something."

Emon laughs like I said something hilarious. "Oh yeah, I know." He hits another hard turn. "You know what I always tell you. Let me know whatever you need and I'm happy to help, Boss Lady."

I'm thinking that I need him to fall headfirst from this cart, but I worry that even his generous spirit has limits. "Yep," I force a smile and shoot him a bit of a glare. "Thanks, I appreciate that."

"It's my pleasure." He pulls to a screeching halt in front of the tents that cover the video monitors, equipment, and crafty tables so I can jump out of the cart and run to the coolers.

I quickly find the one can of Diet Dr. Pepper that's left and run back to the cart. As I pass, I wave at Aaron, who's on "Firewatch," lounging on a metal folding chair under the farthest tent, keeping an eye on the camera equipment while the rest of the crew is at lunch. After making a mental note to bring back a plate of food for Aaron, I jump in the cart with Emon. This time, I lock my arm around the handrail and hold my body to that far edge. As Emon pulls back up to the cafeteria I leap from my seat before the cart comes to a complete stop, running up the steps.

"Be careful," I say, a little out of breath as I hand the can over to Chris, who's sitting at a cafeteria table with Jordan. "I might have shaken it up a bit on the way here."

"Thanks, sweetheart," Chris says, smiling up at me.

“Yes, sir.” I wave to him before grabbing some food and sliding into a seat next to Sam and Eli. I’ll have one of them drive me back out to Aaron when they’re finished eating.

My timing is perfect, because when I sit down, they’re talking about what a creep Emon is. I’m happy to add to the conversation.

At the end of the day, Sam pulls me into a hug and says goodbye. He’s going on a vacation with his family to Costa Rica, and just couldn’t put it off until after filming was done. I mean, I get it. I’d go too. But when he’s gone, I turn to Eli and tell him that *he’s* my favorite now. The kid beams at me, apparently thrilled with the promotion, and bounces off to finish cleaning.

As I’m leaving set, happy to be on my way home to get some sleep before our last day, Pauline calls me and tells me to meet her in a Pizza Hut parking lot she’d stopped at about a mile from today’s location. She said we needed to make some calls to the cast and crew to let them know what’s going on.

“What *is* going on?” I ask as I slide into her passenger seat, having just arrived at the Pizza Hut location she’d sent me to.

“Oh, we have to push shooting by a day.” Pauline’s eyes are on her phone, and when I peer over at it, I see she’s texting Jordan.

“Why?” I draw my brows together and turn to face her more fully.

“Rewrites. The writers are redoing the last few scenes of the script to make them easier to shoot, so we have to move some things around.”

“Oh,” I say, then pull up the calendar on my phone. “So, we’re going to be shooting on Sunday now?”

“Mhmm,” Pauline hums, still looking at her phone.

“Um, I’ve got my flight home that day.”

She whips her head to look at me. “Oh no, that’s not good.”

“Well,” I look into the distance thinking. “I mean, I could still coordinate from the airport? I’ll plan the food, schedule the pick-ups, stay in contact with the PAs to make sure everything is running according to plan?”

“No, that won’t do. I need you here.”

“So, what should I do? I can’t afford to buy another flight. I’d have to extend my stay at my Airbnb too. Then I still have to take my car back to the rental place…”

“Don’t worry about the costs, Production will cover it.”

I stare at her. “Really? What about the budget?”

She waves my questions away. “I don’t care about the budget—you’re irreplaceable. We’ll make it work. Change your flight—extend your stay—I’ll reimburse you for whatever it costs.”

I swallow, a little lost for words. “Okay. Thank you.”

“Mhmm, now start calling people and letting them know what’s going on.”

The last day on set, we’re back at The Asylum. It seems like everyone had the same idea to show up at the last minute and make do with what we have, because soon the first floor of the building is in utter chaos: clothes and makeup and crates of props and boxes of snacks are scattered so that it is hard to move through the meeting room. When I see Billy Baldwin has entered the room and is struggling to get to the makeup chair, I grimace and start looking for which problem should be solved first.

“Eli!” I call. He appears from another room, and I turn to face him. “Can you start setting up a crafty table by set?”

“Yes, ma’am!” he says, giving me a salute. He grabs a box of chips and carries it out of the room.

I assess what should come next. It looks like my PAs had carried all the boxes of snacks and drinks to the crafty corner before getting distracted by something else, because none of them are to be found and both tables (and much of the floor) are covered in piles of unorganized food. Somebody even left a bag of ice sitting on top of a cooler, where it is now melting and creating a puddle in the middle of the floor.

“Emon!” I call as I see him racing by. He slides to a stop and turns to face me. “Can you put this ice in the cooler and take it out to set?”

“You got it, Boss Lady!” He picks up the cooler and the ice like it’s nothing, carrying it out the way Eli had gone.

“Krystal,” I reach my hand out to stop her before she walks upstairs. “When you get a minute, can you make these crafty tables look nice? You know, organize it all so that it’s pretty, the way you do?”

She nods at me with a smile and starts categorizing the chips and granola bars by color.

I look under the table and find a towel, then drop down to the floor to sop up the large puddle of water, working as quickly as possible.

As I’m scrubbing, a pair of leather boots stop in front of me.

“Excuse me,” says a deep, authoritative voice.

I look up to see Billy staring down at me. I jump up to my feet. “Is there something I can do for you, sir?”

He levels me with a stare. “I just wanted to tell you that I see everything that’s going on around here—I’ve worked on *Asylum* films before and they’re all like this.” He waves his hand, gesturing to the chaos. “There are always a handful of people that have to wear four or five hats on these things, to pick up the slack, and I see that you’re one of them. You’re working your ass off and you’re doing a great job.” He held his fist out to me, and I stared at him, eyes wide as I bumped it with mine. Then he walked past me toward his dressing room, leaving me standing there blinking. *Billy Baldwin* thinks I’m doing a great job. I grin and carry that with me through the rest of the day. I pack it carefully in my bag as I clean out my AirBnb, and I ask the airport attendants to be careful with it until I can pick it up again at baggage claim. I tuck it gently into my parents’ trunk when they pick me up from the airport, and then put it on a shelf when I finally make it home.

When it’s all said and done, and the film has been cut, edits have been made, and this thing I worked on has been released to the public, I know that I’ll always have this: the knowledge that despite everything, I did a good job. *Billy Baldwin* said so.

My Best Friend's Wedding

I watch through tears as she walks down the aisle,
Marching toward the man of her dreams.
A swan dancing across a lake, undefiled,
All the well-wishers and wrens in the leaves.

Marching toward the man of her dreams,
I plaster a smile across my face.
All the well-wishers and wrens in the leaves,
Witnessing the hunter's grace.

I plaster a smile across my face,
As I mourn the end of a life.
Witnessing the hunter's grace,
He takes her to be his wife.

As I mourn the end of a life,
A swan dancing across a lake, undefiled,
He takes her to be his wife.
I watch through tears as she walks down the aisle.

Chapter 9

Mourn the End

I think I've slept for nearly three days straight since coming home. It's late July and my parents have a few more weeks before they have to go back to school. Thankfully, they don't seem too concerned about my new penchant for staying in bed. *I just need a week to recover*, I tell myself. *Then I'll get to work on whatever comes next*. But one week becomes two, and two becomes three, and nothing changes.

If I'm not sleeping, I'm reading. I can't seem to make myself do anything else.

"What are you going to do next?" my mom asks over coffee one morning. We're sitting outside on our porch, watching the cows graze in the pasture of our little green valley crowned with a ring of pines.

I give her a halfhearted shrug before taking a sip from my mug. "I don't know. Write my thesis? Finish school?"

"Right," she says, rocking a bit in her chair, letting the warm breeze carry her blonde, curly hair around her face. "But then what?"

I don't want to think about *then what*. I don't want to think about anything at all. I want to read as many books as I can, as fast as I can, because with every book I finish, I get to reap the benefits of the dopamine rush that follows a false sense of accomplishment. I want to start running again, because the half-marathon I signed up for last year is coming up in November, and I am severely out of a shape I was never *in* in the first place. I want to take a minute to breathe, and not worry about what comes next—*that's* what I want to do.

It bothers me that I feel this way. Something seems off, and I can't place it. Four months ago, I was overwhelmed with excitement for the future, and all the possibilities that working in

Florida seemed to have opened. But now, having returned from L.A. (the movie capital of the world and thus what should be the ultimate goal), I just feel overwhelmed.

Days are blending together and, before I know it, I've missed my deadline to enroll in the next term (my second to last term, the beginning of the end). *This will give me time to prepare for my thesis*, I tell myself. But then I don't prepare. I read and I sleep and I run, but I don't prepare.

On August 4th, I wake up late in a hotel in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I put on a face of makeup, curl my hair, and slide into a semi-formal dress, then get into a car to attend Cade's wedding.

He'd gotten engaged back in March (to a girl I've met twice) while I was in Florida. She's perfect and wonderful and I couldn't have picked someone better for him if I'd tried. Still, I can't help but find weddings to be more bitter than sweet, no matter how much I love the happy couple. And I do. I love them with everything in me. But I can't shake the feeling that covers me like a warm blanket in this already sweltering August sunshine, that while at the same time I'm gaining a family member, I'm losing a friend. Again. Relationships are never quite the same after a wedding, and everybody knows it. They still exist, but they change out of necessity, shifting to accommodate the reprioritization that must occur between the two to be wed. I get that. I understand that change is necessary for growth, but sometimes change feels a bit like the world is burning down around you, you know?

I remember back when we were kids, when I would have been about ten, that sometimes my parents would bring me to White Oak to surprise Cade and Stone. I would run into their house, not knocking because the Palmers' door is always unlocked and has always felt a little bit like my own, and I'd throw my arms around their necks as each of their eyes lit up in surprise. Then the two of them would yell, jump up on the couch, and ask over each other different

versions of the same question. Why was I there? Why had I come when it was the middle of the school year, when there were no holidays coming up? Why had I come home? Because I missed them, I would say, and it would be true. I always missed them. After the initial excitement would wear off, I'd plop down on the couch between them to play whatever video game they had going before I'd gotten there, and it was almost as if they had been saving that spot for me all along. It had always felt like that when we were kids. Like coming home to them was when I was finally able to slide into the place where I belonged.

But now, Cade belongs to someone else. Someday, Stone will too. Even Payton and Lexi are going to have boys carrying their hearts away soon if their college experiences are at all telling. And I believe they are because what boy wouldn't fall in love with them? They're two of the most beautiful, kind, incredibly smart, and funny girls I've had the pleasure of knowing in all my twenty-four years. Sometime in there, they even slipped their ways into becoming my best friends too, right alongside their brothers. I can't imagine my life without them, but one day, they'll leave too. All of them are going to build families of their own, just like our other cousins have, and their lives are going to take them in different directions.

And I'll be here.

What's next? That's what people keep asking me as I slide in and out of conversation with them as we wait for the wedding to start. "Where will you fly off to next?"

It makes me want to scream. *I don't know! I don't know what's next! Why does there have to be a next? Can't we just be? Can't we just stay here, like this, and just be?*

Of course we can't. Because people leave and things change, and that is the way of the world.

But if people leave, why can't I? Why do I feel trapped in my own inefficiencies? How come, when I finally stepped out on a limb to pursue the career I've always dreamed of and proved that I'm actually pretty good at it, I feel emptier than before?

Cade and Bekah's wedding is beautiful. It's held at an old manor in downtown Tulsa that appears to be carved out of dark grey stone, landscaped with thick hedges and crowned with decorative glass windows that make it look a bit like a cathedral. After the ceremony is held in front of the great wooden doors outside, we move inside for the reception. If the outside is nice, the inside is lovely. The manor reminds me a bit of the great house that the grandfather lives at in *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*. It is all hardwood floors, intricately carved crown molding, and sunlight filtering through the crystal-like windows.

Cade and Bekah hired a live band, and I can hear the covered melody of Frank Sinatra's *Somethin' Stupid* drifting from the sunroom, where I can see a few couples turning on the dance floor through the wooden doorway.

I move on past and weave around the round dinner tables laid with white cloth, China dinner plates, and the night's menu that fill the remaining rooms of the house, until I find a place card with my name on it. I'm not sitting with anybody else in my family—Cade, Stone, Payton, Lexi, and Jayden are all in the wedding party and are sitting at the long table in the main dining room. The rest of my family has been seated according to their own little nuclear families, all in the same room. Uncle David and Aunt Kelly have a table with his sons and their wives, and Aunt Debbie and Uncle Tom are sitting with their kids and grandkids. My mom couldn't make it, so my dad got put at a table with Grandma, Grandpa, Uncle Jon, Aunt Jenny, and their two kids. Me? I set my name card down and lean over to introduce myself to all six of Cade's friends from college.

They're nice, and I enjoy listening to them talk about the interesting things they've done, like working in the White House or on Wall Street or in Silicon Valley, but then I feel a bit of that listlessness I've been trying to avoid for the past few weeks slowly creeping in.

"What do you do?" Meg, Cade's best friend from school, leans over and asks me from where she's sitting on my right.

"Um, I'm a Production Coordinator," I say, trying to smile with confidence. "I work on movies."

"No way," grins Wes as he leans forward across from me, resting his elbows on the table. "What does a Production Coordinator do?"

"Well, I just kind of keep things organized, make sure all the departments have what they need to shoot, and then I handle problems whenever they pop up," I shrug.

"What's the last movie you worked on?" Meg asks, resting her head in her hand.

"Just this low-budget, alien invasion project I did with the people who made *Sharknado*. I actually just got back from L.A. a few weeks ago."

"Cool, how'd you like it out there?" asks Stephen from my left. He's the one who works in Silicon Valley.

I grimace but try to switch it to a quick smile. "Eh, it wasn't my favorite."

He shakes his head in agreement. "Yeah, I'm not a big fan of the West Coast. I miss living on the East."

"I mean, California is beautiful," I say. "But the people... I don't know. It just feels like it's a dog-eat-dog world over there."

Stephen nods emphatically. "It is," he says. "All anybody cares about is getting ahead."

"I mean," Wes interjects. "Isn't it like that everywhere?"

Meg raises her hand with a laugh. “It certainly is in D.C.!”

I look between them, taking in these people—who at one time defined the greatest of achievements in my mind—who are telling me that it’s rough at the top, no matter who you are or where you’re going. Logically, I already knew this. Of course, it wouldn’t be *easy* to achieve great success. But I’m still waiting for the part where one of them says that it’s been worth it.

None of them do. They just smile and commiserate with one another, writing off the difficulties in their lines of work as coming with the territory. And I realize that the career isn’t the answer. Whatever has been holding me back from living my life fully and freely isn’t going to be solved with a job, I think it might be deeper than that.

But then why have I only felt this way since returning home from L.A.? If the film career isn’t the answer, why didn’t I detach when I got back from Florida? What was the difference between my experiences on those two opposite coasts? Sure, one was certainly more enjoyable, but my performance was virtually the same on both projects. So, what happened? I don’t think that I would have shut down the way I have these past few weeks if it was just about the fact that I’d realized one place was a little more cut-throat than another. Like I said, this has to be about more than a job I’ve already proved myself in.

What’s next? What is it about that question that makes my skin crawl?

Well, if I did decide to further pursue my filmmaking career, then I would have to go where movies are made. I’d have to move to L.A. or Atlanta—at the very least I would need to move to Austin. My stomach clenches at the thought.

Suddenly, I remember my first panic attack. Not the one I had my junior year of high school, but my actual first panic attack—the one I’d completely forgotten about until now.

I was seven.

It happened in the middle of the night while I was staying with Cade and Stone. My parents were still in town, staying in one of the upstairs rooms at Grandma and Grandpa's, but I preferred to spend the night with the Palmers' when we were home. I've stayed with them countless times over the course of my life, and still do occasionally, despite now living less than two minutes down the street. This was the only time I ever asked to leave.

I was lying in bed trying to shut off my mind, but I couldn't. It was late, everyone else had long since fallen asleep and the house was quiet, aside from Cade's soft snores which were drifting from the top bunk. I tossed and turned in the little twin bed I thought of as mine, facing toward Cade and Stone's bunk and then flipping in the opposite direction when the nerves jumping up and down my legs demanded it. My mind kept turning this one conversation I had with my dad over and over, like a video tape stuck in a VCR that I was forced to watch. Every time the memory ended, I felt compelled to press the rewind button and start it over from the beginning. I couldn't stop.

In the memory, Dad and I were laying in my bed back in Houston, talking about life before I had to go to sleep, as we usually did.

"Someday," Dad told me. "You're going to grow up and move out."

"No," I said, frowning at the very suggestion of my leaving home. "I don't want to do that. I want to stay with you and Mama."

Dad laughed. "Maybe you do now, but someday when you're older, you'll want to leave."

"But where would I go?" I asked, turning to look at him with my scrunched brows.

"I don't know yet," Dad said softly. "School, probably. And then you'll get married and go live with somebody else."

That sounded like the worst idea I had ever heard. “No, I don’t want to live with somebody else!” I started to cry. “I don’t want to leave.”

“Hey, you don’t have to leave yet,” Dad laughed. “If I had it my way, you wouldn’t have to leave ever. I was just saying that someday, you’ll want to. When you turn eighteen, you’ll go to college, and you’ll never want to come back. Until then, I’m glad you want to stay.” He scooped me up into his chest and kissed my forehead, holding me until I stopped crying. Then he tucked me under my pink and blue quilt, kissed my cheek goodnight, and left the door cracked on his way out.

And as I lay in the slice of light shining on me from Cade and Stone’s open closet, I couldn’t stop the memory from starting over again. I couldn’t stop thinking of my dad’s words and how someday I was going to have to leave him and Mom. And then the thought hit me that someday, my parents are going to die, and I’ll lose them forever whether I ever chose to leave or not. It was such a lonely cycle of thoughts to be stuck in that I found myself sobbing and hyperventilating, needing to do something to stop the pain clenching my chest.

I crawled out of bed and tip-toed into Aunt Karin and Uncle Scotty’s room, where I shook Aunt Karin’s shoulder to wake her up and asked if she could call my parents to come get me.

Mom and Dad were parked in front of the house within ten minutes. As I crawled into the back seat, my tears finally dry and my breathing calm, my parents both turned to look at me.

“What happened, Kase?” Dad asked with a laugh.

“You never get homesick!” cried Mom, but I could tell she was a little pleased. They’re happy I missed them. I think that maybe, sometimes they worried I didn’t need them when I was with the Palmers. If they ever did, they would’ve been wrong. I did need them. I needed to know

that they were there, waiting for me to come home when I was ready—that they would come get me if I called. They're all I have that is just mine.

Mom was right though; I had never been homesick before. But I had also never seriously considered the prospect that someday I would lose everyone I loved until that night.

Now I see that it's something I've been seriously considering ever since.

I hadn't been putting my life on hold because I'm afraid of failure. No, I stopped living my life way back in high school because I could see how time was going to eventually pick off the people in my life one by one, and as it turns out, what I'm truly afraid of is being alone.

With this realization dawning on me, soft and swift like a punch in the gut, I return my thoughts to the different sets I worked on this year. In Florida, I was just trying to get my feet under me. I didn't have any expectations for what that job would look like going into it, but I ended up finding a group of people who quickly brought me into the fold and treated me like family. Between Jadon and Jodi, Jake and Katrina, I found people who had a genuine interest in helping me succeed. My success was their success, and we built real friendships based on that trust. In contrast, my time in Los Angeles showed me what it looks like when all anybody cares about is themselves. The whole time I was there I felt like if I let my guard down at any point, I'd be taken advantage of, and likewise, it seemed that everyone was expecting the same from me. I was lonely in L.A. in a way that I never was in Florida, and that difference is the takeaway I've been unknowingly stewing in ever since I got back.

How do I know which experience is the outlier? It's a flip of a coin at this point. Except that it's not. I've been on a set one other time—the tiebreaker.

I try to think back to Kentucky, and whether I was lonely there, and the answer isn't that simple. Because yes. I was lonely. I'd made friends with Izzy and Jael, sure, but they were

younger than me and didn't have as much of a stake in the making of the film. I mean they definitely helped and were on set every day, but they were there to help their mom. I was there because I wanted to learn what it took to be a real filmmaker. And while I would say I'd made friends with everyone on set, I still felt disconnected in the ways that mattered due to my age and lack of experience. It put me on edge, a lot like how working in L.A. did.

I'm not fully convinced that my time in Kentucky is the tiebreaker I was hoping for. I'm older now, more experienced, and I have a better understanding of how to help than I did back then. I think that if we were to reshoot *Catching Faith 2* tomorrow, I'd have a different experience entirely. And maybe that's the truth of it. Maybe every set is different—maybe every shoot has both good days and bad—and that's just the way it is. Sounds a lot like life.

So, I'm afraid of being alone. Good to know. Now what do I do with that? Facing failure was one thing, but I'm not sure I could survive loneliness. I don't want to throw away whatever time I have left with those I love. Maybe this is a cage I'm not meant to break free from.

A Confession

Dear Reader,

I underestimated the torrential nature of the creative process when I volunteered the golden furred muse of my inner wild to forge the expedition of recovering the child I once was. I did not foresee the fragility of my tender heart as it danced along the edge of my sanity like a flame riding the wings of chaos. But it is with renewed fortitude that I sing *Landslide* with Stevie at the top of my ribs, underlining Dickinson's line about Hope being a "thing with feathers" in the red ink that pours from my too thin lips, and I spread the dust of my ashes from the tips of my lashes, here—between these pages whose words are smeared with fears long suppressed by smothering laughter and frustrated tears. It is my *hope* that by facing these saber-toothed demons with you my *Dear Reader*, I can finally give up—no longer white knuckling this chipped porcelain cup bearing the bittersweet nectar of perceived poor luck. Nor will I hide its sharp broken edges with a rim of bright yellow wedges, sipping the bite and burn reverently—a baptism by poison brewed desperately. For I had believed faith and trust and mischievous shadows would be enough to save me from the shallows when I jumped headfirst, shooting for the second star but landing too far south of acceptance. But now I see the cage I built myself for what it is—fairy dust and whispers in the wind—so it's time to turn the page, if you'll follow me to the end of what was and on to what could be, where we are free.

Sincerely,
Me

Chapter 10

What Could Be

On the morning of October 27, 2023, I wake up twenty-five. It's a rather anticlimactic milestone, but it happens on a Friday, so at least there's that.

As a kid, I used to have these ideas about age, like each number represented a growth marker for where I should be at any given time, but I think I'm starting to lose my grip on that notion. After all, I'm twenty-five now, and wise beyond my years apparently (I'm joking, just so you know, in case the sarcasm doesn't translate). If my peers are all standing around comparing their stages of life with the keys to their first houses and kids on their hips, I'm in the back of the auditorium, my claps and cheers echoing between all the surrounding empty seats. To my surprise, I'm okay back here. I've brought a blanket and snacks, so I'm good, settling in for the long haul, actually.

All year I had expected this stomach dropping sense of dread to drag me down the moment I rolled out of bed today, but I strangely feel lighter than I have in quite some time. As if all the expectations and time constraints I had placed on myself—everything I thought I would have accomplished by now—has fallen away like cold, heavy shackles, and I'm finally free.

And I *am* free. I've just decided.

"You seem mad at me," Stone says, not even five minutes after we'd left his house to head over to our friend, Jake's for our bi-monthly Game Night. We've been spending most of our evenings together ever since Stone graduated and moved back home over the summer. Between our daily gym routine and our weekly plans with different friend groups (most of which we share), there aren't many days when we don't hang out at least at some point. I'm glad he's back.

“I’m not,” I say, my arms crossed, eyes focused out the passenger side window.

“Mmm, pretty sure you are.” Stone does this thing where he assumes that anytime I’m not obviously giddy with excitement, something must be wrong. I confronted him about this once.

“Do you think I’m a manic person or something?” I had asked defensively.

We were walking through the front doors of the gym we go to every evening, and he was waving a hand at one of our buddies, barely paying attention to me.

“What does manic mean?” he asked, pulling out his phone to scan the barcode for his membership at the desk. I scanned in after him.

“It means somebody who only experiences really high highs and really low lows with nothing in between,” I said as we walked to the free lockers to drop off his keys and my hoodie.

“Oh,” he said perking up. “Yeah! That’s exactly what you are!”

I gaped up at him and then stomped my foot. “Stone! Manic people are mentally ill!”

He raised his eyebrows at me and then shrugged. He *shrugged*, gosh dang it!

“I promise, I’m not mad.” I say now, rolling my eyes—annoyed (not mad).

“Okay, then what’s wrong?” Stone asks as he pulls to a stop at a red light.

I shake my head. “Nothing’s wrong. I’m just thinking.”

“Alright, what are you thinking about?” he glances over at me, eyebrows raised.

“I think I want to see a therapist.” Fine, maybe he’s on to something.

“Nah,” he sniffs a laugh, stepping on the gas as the light turns green. “You don’t.”

“Yes,” I sit up straighter and face him. “I do. There’s something wrong in my head and I don’t know how to fix it.” I don’t tell him that the thing that’s wrong is the fact that I can’t stop thinking about how I will cope when he leaves me one day. Seems kind of needy.

Stone tosses me another exasperated look and I feel I should add, “I’m not crazy, just stuck,” as I slump back into my seat feeling tired.

“You don’t need a therapist,” Stone says with a decided shake of his head. “I know you better than you do. Ask me what I think.” He gives me that sarcastic smile of his and I wait for his two cents, because whether I like to admit it or not, he’s kind of right. And because I fancy myself a seeker of truth, no matter how painful, I try not to shy away whenever Stone deems it’s time to offer an only slightly biased—albeit, unsolicited—opinion.

“Here’s the thing about you,” he says, and I brace myself. “You are incredible at setting goals and achieving them. I think your problem right now is that you have these ideas about what you want to do, but you don’t know how to reach for one without letting go of the others, so instead you’re not moving at all.”

When I don’t say anything, he grabs my shoulder and shakes it. “You aren’t trapped, Kasey Bo! You’re just trying to do too many things at once.”

His words cover me like the icy surf that pulled me into its frigid embrace back in Florida, reminding me a bit of something else he’d said years ago.

Back when we both went to Texas A&M together, Stone and I often carpooled home for holidays. On this night, we had just gotten back to Stone’s apartment at 1:00 a.m. after seeing *Ad Astra* in theaters, and randomly decided to grab our bags and head home for the weekend. Soon, we were back in my car and there was nothing to see but endless dark skies and long empty roads lit by our dim headlights.

“I think, if I were an animal, I’d be a bear,” Stone said, nodding slowly with that sage wisdom he had at all of nineteen as he settled comfortably in the passenger seat.

“Why? Because you’re so big and strong?” I rolled my eyes and let the sarcasm drip from my words.

“Yes, exactly.” Stone flashed me a quick grin. “I’m glad we agree.”

“The only reason I agree that you would be a bear,” I said seriously, “is because you could definitely eat your weight in sushi before sleeping through at least the next three days. Sounds like something you would do anyway, bear or not.”

“Fair,” Stone crossed his arms and tilted his head. “Also, I’m protective, but only when I have to be.” I couldn’t see Stone ever getting into a fight, but sure, if he said so.

“Okay, sure. Then what would Cade be?” I asked, turning on my blinker and switching lanes, just to give myself something to do.

“A wolf.” Stone didn’t even pause to think about that one.

“Why a wolf?” I asked with a confused glance. The first thing that came to mind when I thought of a wolf was its sharp, bared teeth, which didn’t align with the cold intelligence I tended to associate with Cade. I’d been thinking he might be an orca or something.

“Because he’s a leader,” Stone said. “And he’s strategic and calculating, just like a wolf. If he wants something, he’s going to find a way to get it.”

I nodded slowly. His assessment made a lot of sense and made me realize he was taking this game more seriously than I had first thought. I bit my lip and tilted my head toward him; my brows scrunched together. “If you’re a bear and he’s a wolf, what am I?” I almost didn’t want the answer. It’s scary to hear what people think of you, but I had been feeling pretty lost during those years, and I wasn’t sure who I was anymore. I was kind of hoping Stone could give me a clue.

College had been a weird time for me. I thought it had been because I still didn’t know what I wanted to do with my life and was forced into making decisions that I was sure I was

going to regret later down the road. But with gritted teeth, I got through it, hating who I was becoming along the way. I wasn't fun anymore. It was as if all the energy had been sapped from my bones, making my body into yet another cage I couldn't escape, constantly haunted by the thoughts spinning in my mind. Not wanting people to see me like that, I withdrew, isolating myself and making things worse. Looking back on it now, I realize that I was afraid. Things were changing too fast—out of my control—and I felt alone. Even though I wasn't.

“You?” Stone asked after having thought for a few long moments. “You're a bird.”

I whipped my head toward him and looked at him incredulously, gripping the steering wheel tightly. “I'm *a bird*? Why? Because you think I'm weak?” I was always afraid of that, I think—that the people I loved saw me how I saw myself. “Am I a bird because you think I'm scared of everything?”

“No,” Stone said patiently. “You're a bird because you're not like anyone else in our family.”

My stomach dropped and I felt a little sick as I stared out at the road ahead. So, it was true. I really didn't fit in with my cousins, and they all knew it.

“You're a bird,” Stone continued. “Because you're on a path of your own making. You don't like to sit still, and you flit from one idea to the next. You get anxious sometimes, sure, but you're also brave. You have all of these different things you want to do with your life, and you know what? I think you'll do them. I think you're the kind of person who can go out, do the things you set your mind to, and then come back home when you're ready. So, yeah. I think you're a bird.” He gave me another half-hearted shrug, as if he didn't just cut me down the middle, exposing to the world what he found hidden inside.

I blinked and glanced over at him, then leaned closer to the steering wheel, feeling a little vulnerable and raw from the aforementioned splitting. Normally, my cousins and I liked to keep things light. I don't like them knowing my insecurities or that I feel like sometimes I'm on the outside looking in. I'm afraid that if they were to ever figure it out, those insecurities would become a burden, and they wouldn't want to be around me anymore. Then they'd leave. But in this moment, it was almost like Stone was telling me, *I know you. You're different from the rest of us but you are one of us.*

I glance over at Stone. He's four years older now, but still has that same sparkle in his eye that he had back when he told me I was a bird. "What if I get to the end," I start slowly. "Spending years trying to become a writer or a director or something—only to look back and see that I missed out on everything along the way?"

"Who's to say you wouldn't miss out on everything by not trying?" he asks with a tilt of his head. "The adventure is in the doing, and you can do whatever you want. You want to write? Then write something. If you want to make movies, I believe you can. You just can't judge the entire film industry based on the one crappy experience you had in L.A., because they won't all be like that. But even if they are, you can handle it. I mean, you already have, so you could do it again."

"I know." And I do know. I can handle anything if I set my mind to it, I've already proven that. I just don't know that I'm ready yet. I haven't quite come to terms with the inevitability of leaving everyone behind to chase a dream. Really, what it comes down to is that I don't want to take on this world alone. I'm afraid I'm not built for it.

The last thing I'm looking forward to as this year draws to a close is my half-marathon. I'd signed up for it at the end of 2022, after I had completed my goal of running every day for a year, so that I would be forced to maintain the progress I had made. I'd started that steep climb toward health and fitness all those months ago and I didn't want to allow myself to slip and slide all the way back to where I'd started. I'm sure Sisyphus was jacked from rolling that boulder up and down the mountain—a true specimen of physical strength, I'm guessing—but he'd had an eternity to chip away at that goal he'd been sentenced with. Me, on the other hand? I'm already midway through my twenties and not getting any younger.

With the way this year had played out, I didn't get to start training until August, at which point my only goal was to increase my endurance from zero (despite my best intentions, I had in fact lost *all* the progress I'd made the previous year) to a place where I was confident that I could finish the race. I didn't care about my time, I didn't care whether I ran the full 13.1 miles or not, I just wanted to finish.

On November 18, the day of the race, I stumbled across the starting line the way I had tripped into every other adventure this year—completely unprepared.

Despite having been meticulous about preparing my body for long runs in the weeks leading up to the half-marathon, I had not prepared a plan for doing so on the day of the race. I usually spent an hour to an hour and a half prepping for a long run, fueling properly with starchy carbs, hydrating, and stretching/warming up my muscles for at least thirty minutes before my feet hit the pavement. However, my parents insisted I didn't need to arrive at my race two hours early and I believed them. Instead, we pulled up just in time for me to grab my bib with my number on it, hurriedly pin it into place, and join that first wave of runners taking on the 13.1 miles, my stomach empty, my muscles unstretched, but my heart full of the thrill of it.

The Pumpkin Spice Half-Marathon in Fort Worth, Texas, takes place about two and a half hours from home, and I think that helps with the running somehow. It's like the change in scenery has given me new life, and I trod along feeling like I'm slightly buzzing as I assess the scenery and the other runners.

We're running through a park with a large creek filled with ducks that runs between the two concrete walking paths. I'm at the back of the group, and I'm content with my placement. Until I realize that the two old women I keep passing (who look like they could be in their late seventies) are using me to measure their pace. Every few minutes or so, I will see them slowly jog past me and stop a couple feet ahead, only to start walking again as I steadily plod forward. It's funny for a moment, but then I stop to retie my shoe at Mile 2. When I get going again, I've lost sight of the two old women. It takes me six miles to realize I won't be seeing them again.

By Mile 9, I'm completely alone at the back of the race. The volunteers who are stationed with tables of water and electrolytes every few miles are packing up by the time I reach them. They always seem surprised to see me coming. Like, *oh! I thought everyone had finished the race a while ago! How is this one still back here in the single digits?*

But I relish the solitude. I like that as I follow the path along the creek, finally heading toward the finish, that I can see signs of the racers that came before. Crumpled paper cups litter the sidewalk, as do the empty Gel packets that the serious runners use to refuel in the middle of the race. I shuffle past it all thinking about the other runners and the choices they made—about what kind of habits they wanted to build, what kind of people they wanted to be—that led them here. And as I pass the marker for Mile 10, I realize that I'm here too.

And, yeah, of course I'm here too. That's not some big revelation, I know. But in the past, whenever I thought of this race or even when I was standing amongst the crowd of runners who

were bobbing with excited energy, I never considered myself to be one of them. Yes, I would be running the race, but no, I'm not a *real* runner like they are. I'm just me, and I've never been a real anything.

Except as I pass Mile 11 and then Mile 12, it sure feels real. My aching and blistered feet beg me to stop running, so doesn't that make me a runner?

I'm still pondering this as I cross the bridge that spans the creek, turning down the final stretch to the finish line, when I see my family standing there waiting for me. And it's not just my mom and dad, who are grinning and clapping under the giant blow-up arch that has the bolded FINISH printed across it in bright red letters. As I make that final push, sprinting the last one hundred yards, I see that the Palmers are here too. I didn't know they were coming, but there they are! Aunt Karin and Uncle Scotty flank both sides of the arch, while Payton, Lexi, Stone, and Jayden all stand a few feet before it. They're jumping up and down with homemade signs in their hands that read *You Got This!! Keep Going!!!*, *WAY TO GO KASEY!*, and a classic *Run After the Cute Guy!*. There's nobody else around but the few race volunteers who are cleaning things up, everyone else having long since finished and gone home. But my family is here, and they're cheering as if I won the race. And, in a way, I think I have.

All my life I've been afraid of being alone. I've been afraid of this inevitable exodus of everyone I love as they grow up and build their own lives, and thus, I've been afraid of who I might become when I lost everything. But as I fall across the finish and into my dad's waiting arms, I realize I'm not so scared anymore. I know who I am. I'm someone who's loved.

I straighten slowly as I begin to catch my breath and my family surrounds me.

"Way to go, Kasey Bo!" Uncle Scotty says, clapping me on the back.

“I can’t believe you just did that,” says Lexi or Payton, I’m not coherent enough to tell which one yet.

“We’re so proud of you,” Mom whispers as she pulls me into a hug.

Somebody hands me a medal as we start to walk toward our cars and Aunt Karin immediately shoves her kids toward me and pulls out her phone to take a picture. Shortly after, my phone buzzes with a text from Cade that says, “Hey congrats!”

As I look up from my phone at the smiling faces of my family, the thought occurs to me, *How blessed am I that I have people in my life that, were I to lose them, would cause my complete and utter devastation?*

And just like that, my perception shifts, and the fog in my mind lifts. I can see again. The sensation is just like when I tried on glasses for the very first time at eleven years old, and all those fuzzy edges that had been blurring together finally snapped into crisp clarity. I’m not alone in this world and I’ve never had any real reason to believe I would be. I’ve just been so afraid to lose everything that I chose to give up a bit of myself instead.

I think I was scared to take up space—scared of what people would say if they caught me trying—so I’ve been shrinking for years. I can’t do that anymore, and I don’t think I have to.

Should the worst-case scenario happen, and I fail attempting to do something worthwhile with my life—a real spectacle of epic proportions I would hope, because if we’re going down, we better go down screaming—I know I have a home to fly back to with my smoking tail feathers between my legs. That’s a reality I can live with. Because should I fail and burn everything down with me, I’ve got a solid foundation back at home where I can start again.

It only took a year of running and flying and burning to figure out what I should have known all along.

Annotated Bibliography

Alderton, Dolly. *Everything I Know About Love*. Harper, 2020.

As an author and advice columnist, Dolly Alderton writes her memoir, *Everything I Know About Love*, as a witty recount of the lessons women learn in their twenties and the often hard ways they go about it. Alderton's own experiences with friendships, her career, and dating, have an impact on what she believes about the world at any given milestone. I have chosen to include her work in my thesis for her character-defining, and often poetic, "lists" of the things she knows at different stages in her life, which were the very inspiration for the direction in which I aimed to steer the character defining poetry in my own memoir.

Bialosky, Jill. "The Unreasoning Mask: The Shared Interior Architecture of Poetry and Memoir." *The Kenyon Review*, 14 Nov. 2017, <https://kenyonreview.org/kr-online-issue/2013-spring/selections/jill-bialosky-656342/>. Accessed 12 November 2023.

Jill Bialosky is an author and poet who has written several books of poetry and a memoir. Her article, "The Unreasoning Mask: The Shared Interior Architecture of Poetry and Memoir," gives language to the comparison and contrast between memoir and poetry, allowing me to find the line so that I might better investigate what I needed my poetry to accomplish in order to further the character development in my manuscript.

The Bible. New King James Version. Bible Hub. Accessed 4 November 2023.

The Bible is a significant historical document in any context. However, the purposes for which I cite it in my thesis go specifically towards furthering the reader's understanding of my purposes for writing. Given my Christian background and belief system, there is always a possibility that my struggles will be met with push-back by Christians claiming

that I am not seeking answers in the right place, or that my anxiety and fear is indicative of a lack of faith. It is important for me to acknowledge my faith in Jesus while also being honest about my struggles as a human being, despite what I might know to be true according to God's word. The verses cited within the thesis are meant to acknowledge the truths I understand while also holding room for the doubt and pain of the experience.

Catching Faith. Directed by John K. D. Graham, performances by Bill Engvall, Lorena Segura York, and Garrett Westton, Mustard Seed Entertainment, 2015.

This film was referenced as a movie I watched to prep for my first time on a set. I believe this is a rare case where I feel the sequel is better than the original. But I may be biased.

Catching Faith 2: The Homecoming. Directed by John K. D. Graham, performances by Bill Engvall, Lorena Segura York, and Garrett Westton, Mustard Seed Entertainment, 2019.

My first experience on a set occurred during the summer of 2018 in Louisville, Kentucky. When this movie released, I brought my cousin Cade with me to walk the red carpet at the premier in Los Angeles. If for some reason, a reader was to ever watch it, they would be able to see me in the background of the final scenes as a wedding guest dancing at the reception. You can find my credit on IMDb.com.

Crucefix, Martyn. "Keats' Negative Capability Clearly Explained." *MartynCrucefix.com*, 17 Nov. 2015, <https://martyncrucefix.com/2015/11/17/keats-negative-capability-clearly-explained/>. Accessed 15 November 2023.

Published poet Martyn Crucefix's poetry blog was helpful in that it allowed me, a poetry novice, to better understand a concept that was coined well over two-hundred years ago. That concept of "*Negative Capability*," as defined by John Keats, is a concept that I don't relate to in my own understanding of poetry and what it has become in the modern era,

and thus, I needed it explained in layman's terms. By breaking down Keats's terminology, Crucefix allowed me to better explore the ins and outs of *Negative Capability's* scholastic merit within the context of character in poetry.

Dickinson, Emily. "'Hope' is the thing with feathers." *Poetry Foundation*, 1891.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42889/hope-is-the-thing-with-feathers-314>.

Accessed 28 April 2024.

I came across Dickinson's poem, "*Hope*" is a thing with feathers, toward the end of writing the final chapter of my manuscript. By then, I already knew that I was the bird referenced in the title, and the poem struck me as being an answer to the problem I entered into this thesis trying to solve. Because I have often lost hope navigating my early adulthood. I've lost sight of who I was at various points while trying to be who I thought I had to in order to move forward. I referenced Dickinson's poem in my own, *A Confession*, at the end of the manuscript to signify that I have found the thing that I was looking for, and that it was in me all along.

Dilthey, Wilhelm. *Poetry and Experience*. Vol. 5. Princeton University Press, 1985.

https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=VqGoDwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PR1&dq=poetry+enhances+experience&ots=p7HnHW_ipO&sig=TrxiOdyNP2nKPVUMQ8WaYNoOFDc#v=onepage&q=poetry%20enhances%20experience&f=false. Accessed 16

November 2023.

This book, written by German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey, is ultimately a collection of translated philosophies covering a variety of topics. For the purposes of my thesis, I focused on Dilthey's study on poetry and its purposes. I wanted to know if there was a standardized definition of poetry that was consistent across space and time and found that it is an ever-changing medium. What one man believes about poetry may be completely

different from what another believes, depending on when and where we find him in history. However, I did find that there was one belief about poetry that Dilthey touched upon that was consistent with my own understanding of the form, which was that art contains an essence of life that cannot be avoided in the making of art. Dilthey's study of such a harmony as that which exists between life and form furthered my argument for character development in poetry and solidified my perspective in the minds of the great philosophical thinkers of the nineteenth century.

Guinery, Tess. *The Apricot Memoirs*. Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2021.

It was important for the purposes of my thesis that I include an actual book of poetry, seeing as my argument of character development is based within the craft. I chose artist Tess Guinery's poetry book because of the experience it creates for the reader. Printed on pink pages and filled with uplifting messages of faith, hope, and love, Guinery's *The Apricot Memoirs* sealed my argument that poetry on its own has the capacity of conveying the essence of the character of the poet.

Keats, John. "Ode on Melancholy." *Poetry Foundation*, 1819.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44478/ode-on-melancholy>. Accessed 3 December 2023.

I chose to include John Keats's poem "Ode on Melancholy" because of the intrinsically human element in the emotions it expresses. For the sake of my argument, it was important that the reader had a taste of the type of poetry Keats wrote so that they might understand his style as a result of him "removing" himself from the work. Likewise, I also wanted to use Keats's own poem to show the reader that despite the lack of "self," even Keats' could not remove the intrinsic element of personhood or experience from his

poetry. I use this poem to argue that the act of writing the poem at all conveys the character of the poet, whether he intended for it to or not.

Keats, John. *Selected letters of John Keats: based on the texts of Hyder Edward Rollins*. Harvard University Press, 2005.

https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=eHgveEAAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PT10&dq=keats+letters&ots=36AVbX3uQN&sig=m_xyLtWe-H8yL_rRcnPACa-9CZI#v=onepage&q=keats%20letters&f=false. Accessed 15 November 2023.

John Keats was a remarkably accomplished poet in his short life, despite it coming to an end at the young age of twenty-five. It was important for me to address Keats's philosophical perspective of poetry as the poet's beliefs completely oppose my own by suggesting that the poet should remove himself from his work. In order to clearly defend my case, that there is value in the poet putting himself into his poetry, I had to first acknowledge that there is more than one way to look at the craft. Then, to establish credibility, I needed to defend my own perspective in accordance with that prestigious thinker to whom I was measuring myself against. As far as incorporating the letters themselves, I wanted to better understand the context for Keats's beliefs so that I might improve my own argument against him.

Kephart, Beth. *Handling the Truth: On the Writing of Memoir*. Avery, Penguin Random House LLC, 2013.

Reading memoirist Beth Kephart's book about writing memoir a year ago was the first time I realized that memoir could be interesting. Kephart's way of defining memoir as a quest for truth written by those who yearn really shaped my own understanding of the genre as I approached my thesis. With Kephart's advice guiding my intentions, it is my

hope that my memoir culminates in something honest and true, something that adds value to my reader's understanding of life. It is my hope that my memoir is not in any way self-elevating, but instead, a mode through which another might gain something of value.

Kumar, Mukesh. "John Keats: The Notion of Negative Capability and Poetic

Vision." *International Journal of Research (IJR)* vol. 1, no. 4, 2014: 912-918.

<https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=cc23dad3339784e73f2ad841cf5e2b275062263e>. Accessed 15 November 2023.

While I used a poetry blog to spell out Keats's "Negative Capability" in terms that I and my readers might understand, I felt that I needed a more scholarly analysis of Keats' opinions. By researching multiple reviews of Keats's contributions to the poetry community, I hoped to round out my understanding and thus my argument within the thesis. Mukesh Kumar, Assistant Professor of English at Kurukshetra University in India, wrote this journal article in such a way that not only explained what Negative Capability is, but also what Keats aimed to achieve with it. Mukesh's article defines Keats's purpose for poetry as "[trying] to enter the mind of the people" and thus gives me an understanding on which I was able to find some common ground with the poet (918). After all, we can both agree on the importance of seeking truth, despite going about it in different ways.

McCurdy, Jeannette. *I'm Glad My Mom Died*. Simon & Schuster, 2022.

I mentioned child-actress Jeanette McCurdy's recent memoir in my thesis because it was published recently, and I think it's important to be aware of the current content in the genre I'm pursuing. There isn't poetry, so I couldn't find a way to use it in my critical paper, but it should be noted that elements of McCurdy's storytelling inspired my own.

For example, the first-person perspective that she uses to bring her reader into the story with her is key to the experience I am attempting to create within my own memoir. It is often said that it is important to be well-read if you want to be a writer, and I think that couldn't be truer than when a writer is attempting to write outside of their comfort genre.

Off Rip. Directed by Jadon Cal, performances by Jadon Cal, Meghan Carrasquillo, and M.G. Barnes, New Terrain Entertainment, Release Date TBD.

Filmed in Florida, making this movie was the most fun I have ever had on a set. As the setting of Chapters 3-5, I learned a lot about life during my time here. I look forward to seeing how it turned out one day.

Oliver, Mary. *A Poetry Handbook*. 1st ed., Mariner, 1994.

As a celebrated poet and an icon in the world of literature, Mary Oliver is the best source I could hope to use to further my understanding of poetry. The Pulitzer Prize winner's book, *A Poetry Handbook* broaches the craft methodically, breaking down the elements of poetry into easily digestible morsels of information. This is the book that has shaped my understanding of what poetry is and what it can be, and thus, I can see no other source more valuable to defending my chosen argument. Oliver's perspective on character translates through elements such as voice, diction, intention, and tone. By pulling the individual poetic devices away from the poem as a whole, I am able to analyze poetic language within the greater context of memoir and therefore determine the impact such writing has on conveying the character of the writer.

Rich, Adrienne. *The Dream of a Common Language*. W. W. Norton & Company, 1993.

This book is referred to as almost life-sustaining by Cheryl Strayed in her memoir, *Wild*. Adrienne Rich, a poet and feminist activist wrote this collection of poetry in order to

explore her idea of Art acting as a common language amongst people. Similarly, my thesis argues that poetry deepens character development by touching on that innately human element found in Art. Perhaps what Cheryl Strayed was searching for in this book of poetry—what she found in it—is the very thing I hope to achieve with my own.

Strayed, Cheryl. *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*. Vintage Books, Random House, Inc. 2013.

When I first read *Wild*, I was inspired by author Cheryl Strayed and the journey she went on to pursue healing. Strayed and I have a lot in common in the ways that we react to life. Her decision to hike the Pacific Crest Trail alone in her early twenties is similar to my own decision to run every day for a year, though admittedly much more dangerous. Setting goals and using those as a distraction from inner turmoil is a theme that Strayed's memoir and mine have in common. Strayed's book is one of those in which reading it makes me feel like I have found another soul that mirrors my own.

Ugwueze, Kosiso. "Joy and Grief in Tandem: A Review of Michelle Zauner's *Jubilee* and *Crying in H Mart*." *The Hopkins Review*, vol. 15 no. 1, 2022, p. 161-165. *Project MUSE*, <https://doi.org/10.1353/thr.2022.0024>. Accessed 15 November 2023.

Kosiso Ugwueze is the managing editor of *The Hopkins Review* at Johns Hopkins University, and her review of Michelle Zauner's *Crying in H Mart* establishes the credibility of Zauner's experience as one daughter of an immigrant mother recognizes herself in another. Ugwueze compares her own memories of growing up with her Korean mother to Zauner's and finds that such experiences are best shared through Art as it works to achieve a multitude of results through its form, each of varying scopes and

magnitudes. The contribution this article makes to my thesis furthers my argument that art and language are first and foremost about connection amongst humanity.

War of the Worlds: Extinction. Directed by Christopher Ray, performances by William Baldwin, Michael Paré, and Kate Hodge, Red Basket Films, The Asylum, Release Date TBD.

When I flew out to Los Angeles for this project, I had felt like I had “made it.” I was nervous and as it turned out, I was right to be. This film was the setting for Chapters 6-8, and it forced me to confront the fears I’ve been hiding from for years. I am grateful for my time here, but I have very little interest in watching the movie when it’s released.

Weiland, K. M. “Creating Character Arcs: The Masterful Author’s Guide to Uniting Story Structure, Plot, and Character Development.” PenForASword Publishing, 2016.

If I am going to hold firm with my reference to the author of memoir as a character within their own story, I want to take a step back and look at character development structurally the way any fiction writer might. Award-winning novelist K. M. Weiland’s book provides the analytic breakdown of the character arc that I was looking for. By taking a step back from myself, Weiland’s book delves into the equation-like structure of character development that I aim to strategically apply to my own writing. It is my hope that by providing a degree of mental distance between myself and my character I might have better insight as to what it is about my story that might connect to the reader rather than what it is I’d like them to know about me as a person. As I stated before, my goal for my memoir is not for it to be a self-elevating endeavor.

Zauner, Michelle. *Crying in H Mart*. Knopf, 2021.

Crying in H Mart is the memoir of indie rock musician, Michelle Zauner. The book details her experience as a First Generation American as well as the up and down

relationship she held with her immigrant mother. Finding connection through Korean food and their cultural roots, Zauner demonstrates poetic language whenever she talks about the relevance of food in her life. For my thesis, I argue that this poetic language further reveals the inner world of Zauner as she attempts to reckon with and heal from that balancing act that so many children of immigrants find so familiar. By holding multiple cultures and desires inside herself at the same time, the language that escapes Zauner when she describes her cultural heritage is profoundly revelatory of that which Zauner regards as being of the highest value, and therefore, reveals her character.