

Chapter One – Stranger

Saturday, July 3rd

The warm drape of twilight has descended on this little town of ours, painting everything in a sleepy glow you'd be lucky to find anywhere else; you can practically hear the yawns slink from every house you pass, taking off into the sky like dandelion seeds on the warm winds of summer. Wispy clouds of cream lazily drift on the orange ocean hanging just above our heads, coaxing out memories of happier times you'd thought to never see again.

When I look up, it's almost like I'm a sailor, sifting through an unending stream of thoughts I had presumed long since buried and others yet that harken of a time I have yet to live through. I feel as if I command a grand vessel of my own making, standing at its helm and steering it through waters untraveled to a destination that not even I myself am too sure of.

When I gaze up at such a grand view I can't help but feel like I'm off in place of pure fiction, as if I were a young man being swept off into a life full of countless adventures that have yet to unfold before me; to wander into innumerable directions and to meet people of all stripes and colors, enamored by the sensation of discovery and newfound understanding.

It's evenings like this I wish I could share with someone else... to be content with his company and to be lovingly tender without doubt or worry. To enjoy the quiet warmth of our interlocked fingers and to just watch the sun set together... to be like two vagabond seafarers drifting on the undulating ocean waves, leaving behind our worries and only seeking to fulfill our desires. What a life that would be...

I take the last swig of my iced tea before taking a long, deep breath of the warm summer air.

Still too wordy. Need to be more precise with what I say. But I guess this'll have to do for now.

I glance up at the sky, painted a distinct shade of lavender melding with a voluptuous red.

It's getting late... better head back before it gets too late. Don't wanna be caught out after dark.

I snap my small, leather-bound journal shut, carefully returning it to my backpack along with my pen and empty bottle. With a single, swift motion, I zip up my bag before pushing myself up and onto my feet.

I quickly sling the single strap across my chest before I begin my venture home. The tender summer breeze licks at my face and ruffles my hair as the cool rushing sound of the nearby river coos enticingly, almost as if it were begging me to stay for just a moment longer. I shake my head, as if replying to my unseen seductress, that I must go but shall return whenever my wanderlust gets the better of me and carries me back to this place I call my own.

Swift steps carry me from the heart of the woods and back to civilization, the soothing song of birds permeating the air as the engulfing heat of July swallows me up.

Just another normal summer's eve, I guess...

The day seemed to have dragged on forever, hardly any costumers arriving to disrupt the quiet atmosphere that had enveloped the store. My boss eventually just told me to head home, since there hadn't been enough customers to warrant an extra hand lingering around. I did as she asked of me: I clocked out and decide to head off to the woods to give myself a moment of respite from the daily drudgery of work.

As of late, that's all that seems to really bring me much enjoyment. The casual conversations between Bryan and I are enjoyable enough, though nothing seems to make me smile like a quiet evening to myself where I get to sit down and write out what I've had on my mind all day. Sometimes it's poetic and creates a wonderful piece I keep for later. Other times, it sparks a little story I attempt to write to its completion, or grow bored of it and set it aside for a later date. And sometimes I just write out what I feel, since conversations regarding the tender matters are rarely a point of discussion between Bryan and me. He does fancy the occasional philosophical bout, though such a thing is a spontaneous treat, one I relish any time I am able to.

However, I've recently found myself unable to shake the desire for the company of someone else. It's nothing new for me to go through lingering periods of loneliness, though this isn't really like all the other times. This seems more like a lost thought just asking me for attention, like a puppy looking for a home to call his own.

The familiar sound of quiet conversation and friendly remarks pulls me back from my thoughts, my restless gaze shifting impatiently to scan the scenery of this quaint little town. As per usual, not a thing is off.

Just like always...

I turn the corner by the florist shop, wandering past the tightly packed stores that comprise our little shopping district. After only a short distance, I take another right onto a practically empty street, only two noteworthy buildings populating the desolate section of road. One of the two happens to be the apartment Bryan and I

share, while the other is an old three-story motel that's been shut down for years now. However, something quite peculiar catches my eye as I approach the apartment complex: an unfamiliar truck painted a queasy shade of green sits near the end of the street, its engine groaning in unison with the hum of the cicadas.

As I move closer, I'm able to make out two figures, one being clearly human while the other is a bit harder to make out. Obvious details like a slender frame, big ears, and a coat of greyish fur immediately stick out, but the finer details of the figure's physique remain a mystery to me. The two strangers seem to be talking to one another, their conversation barely intelligible from this distance.

Both of them are guys... the human's got a bit of an odd accent, though... a foreigner, perhaps?

The low growl of the car's engine suddenly sputters into a lively rumble, the hoarse cough and pungent fumes that follow speaking rather poorly of the car's condition. The vehicle slowly pulls up beside me, the human's gaze shifting to meet mine before he explains his dilemma and politely asks me for directions to the highway.

Typical... No one ever stays here for long...

"Head out to the end of town and take a left. Drive that way for about fifteen minutes and you should see a sign that directs you to exit sixty-four. From there, keep heading that way until you start to see signs directing you to exit fifty-five. Once you're there, you shouldn't have too much trouble finding your way back."

"Thanks for the help, man. Have a nice day," he replies before driving off in an all-fire hurry, zipping around the corner and disappearing from my view.

What the hell was someone from the big city doing here? Visitors are normal, but I have my doubts he was just any ol' visitor. And what happened to the person that was with him? He couldn't have just disappeared when I wasn't looking, could he? No, there's no way he could just make off like that.

I look back to the spot where the figure was standing, not a trace of his presence remaining. An eerily cold chill runs down my spine before I shake my head and continue my commute home.

He was standing right there, though... where did he even go?

As I approach the front door of the apartment, I fish out my keys, clumsily inserting the biggest of the bunch into the lock and twisting it to the left.

"I'm home from work, Bryan," I announce as I step through the door, quietly shutting it behind me before slipping out of my brightly colored sneakers.

As I've come to expect, no reply follows.

Guess he's not home yet...

I trudge through the hallway and into my room, setting my bag at the foot of my bed as I tiredly flop onto the worn mattress.

Who was that out there? The young man standing by the human... he must've had something to do with him... but what?

I think back to the fuzzy image of the figure in an attempt to discern more of his features, though nothing in particular strikes me. If anything, I found the human to be a bit off. I couldn't quite seem to place his accent or why he was here, though that's likely due to my own lack of worldly travels. The disappearance of his companion still perplexes me, though... where did he go?

I shake my head and sigh, hoping to occupy my mind with something else.

"Who knows... maybe he'll show up in town or somethin'. It'd be nice to have someone new around," I mutter to myself before closing my eyes.

The long, drawn out groans of the cicadas drift through my window, barely cracked, coaxing a faint smile out of me the longer I listen.

However it is, it is; not much to be done about it beyond that. I just hope he's alright...