

I felt something push against my arm. Brushing it away, I repositioned my hands underneath my head, trying to return to my slumber. I felt the poke again, this time harder and more intentional.

“Jason? Jason, wake up!”

I mumbled something even I couldn’t decipher, then opened my eyes, though squinting.

“We’re here!” my little sister Alexa exclaimed, here grey eyes beaming.

Sitting upright, I leaned to the side, looking out the front windshield of the family sedan. The sun was setting outside, but there was still enough light to see my uncle’s log cabin, placed on the edge of a steep hill and surrounded by a forest of browning oaks and soaring pines. Colder weather was only just beginning to settle in down here, so it looked more like Autumn in comparison to my home state of Virginia.

The trunk opened up behind us, and I heard my dad’s muffled voice through the back of the car. “Come on out and help unpack you two.”

My sister flung her door open and replied with an eager “Yes, sir,” while I simple rubbed my eyes and silently dragged myself out of the car; perhaps I should have done something to stay awake during the ride over, but a ten-hour drive can make pretty much any phone game dull and boring. I grabbed my big, fat cinch sack, asked if there was anything else that my dad wanted me to take, and found myself holding the road snacks and my mom’s purse. Laden down in this manner, I shuffled to the cabin, my sister a few steps ahead of me.

Seeing as Alexa had a heavy bag in either hand (one of them was her backpack, which was not on her back for some reason), I knocked on the door with my purse hand and waited for it to open to us. Muffled footsteps approached from within, and in time I heard a lock click out of place, followed by the door cracking open. A stubble-chinned face peaked out, many of his features silhouetted by the light from the other side of the door. “What’s the password?” the man asked gruffly. It was at that point he looked down and saw the snacks I was holding. “Ooh, cookies!” he said gleefully, grabbing the bag from my apathetic grip and slamming the door shut.

Alexa giggled while I stood with a blank expression, waiting for Uncle Rick to open the door again. When he did so a moment later, he had a Chips-Ahoy in his hand and crumbs in his stubble. “Come on in,” he smiled with that voice that says, “I was just having a bit of fun.”

Alexa hopped over the threshold and I followed. Our parents had caught up with us in the time it took Uncle Rick to have his fun, and they stepped in behind me. The entryway was brightly lit, while moodier lighting could be found in rooms closer to the back of the house. Very simple, rustic décor was mixed with modern furnishings and devices—a flat screen television set rested on a rough-hewn table, cushioned rocking chairs surrounded an old-fashion looking rug, and candle light mixed with that of ceiling fixtures; all around, the whole place held a unique and cozy feel, well suited to several tastes.

Despite all this, I was more focused on finding a spot to lay down my burdensome load. Before I could ask, however, Uncle Rick spoke.

"Hello, Julia! And Carter, long time no see!"

"Hey there, Rick," my dad replied. "Thanks for having us over."

"Oh, the pleasure is all mine!"

"If you say so; say, have any of the others arrived yet?"

"No; your family is the first here. Everybody else will be coming and leaving tomorrow."

"Okay, okay..."

Sensing a break in their conversation, I butted in, my deep voice made even deeper from sleep. "So, where should we put this stuff?"

"Oh, forgive me," Uncle Rick said. "Forgot you had all that; go ahead and set it against the wall there."

I complied, then turned to my mom. "Anything else that needs to come in?" In truth, what I actually meant by these words were, "Can I sit down without getting reprimanded for being lazy and unhelpful?" When she told me that everything had been taken out of the car, I found a spot on my uncle's large corner couch, curled up against an armrest, and promptly fell into a state of half-consciousness.

The rest of the evening passed as expected—I was awakened once again for dinner, where I ate silently while my parents and uncle conversed; granted, I did answer the occasional question that was directed my way, but the discussion was mainly among the adults—something about fixing the sedan's heater, and a good deal about Aunt Sara's inbound baby. After the meal was over, Alexa went off to play with Uncle Rick's dogs, the adults continued talking, and I tried to entertain myself with Minecraft PE, but I had played too much of it on the way over and had lost interest by this point. So, without much else to do, I simply asked where I would be sleeping and crashed out on the couch again.

* * *

When I awoke the next morning, I didn't feel nearly as tired, but it was only seven twenty-three and the house was still silent. I looked across to where my sister was sleeping on the other section of the L-shaped couch; she was normally a morning kid, but the trip yesterday seemed to have taken a lot out of her.

I reached over to where my phone was charging on a red oak side table and fired up Minecraft, deciding I would expand my creative world. The only problem was that I didn't know what to build, and I wasn't having any sudden bouts of inspiration. I thought about a house, but I didn't really have any new styles to try. A tower came to mind, but I wasn't yet willing to start any large projects. So, I simply flew around the virtual world, reminiscing on each build I

came across. This kept me occupied for a bit, but after visiting each structure, I still had no good ideas of what to build, and so gave up for the time being.

I turned off the game and checked the clock again. It was only seven forty-one. Exhaling, I stretched and stood up. "This is gonna' be a long week..." I mumbled to myself.

The house was still quiet, so I figured I'd go outside for a bit. Stepping silently so as not to disturb anyone, I opened the wooden back door and walked out onto the balcony.

"'Bout time somebody woke up."

I whirled around, surprised; I hadn't noticed Uncle Rick slouching down in a chair nearby, despite his bright yellow T-shirt making him quite easy to spot. He faced outwards over the embankment, which dropped off steeply and allowed us to see the tops of those trees that were rooted at the bottom of the slope; in his hands was a hardbacked book, and on either side of him lay his dogs, both the larger, fluffy one, and his miniature pinscher, which must have thought it was just a regular pinscher, as it stood up and began growling and barking at me like it was my own size.

"Oh, calm down, Cherry," my uncle said, reaching down and scratching the scruff of the pinscher's neck. Oddly enough, Cherry actually did quiet down and go back to relaxing. Chuckling, my uncle returned his gaze to his reading. "It's always the smallest ones who think they're the biggest."

I stood for a bit, waiting to see if he would say anything else. When he didn't, I continued the conversation myself. "And the biggest ones?"

"Well, way I see it," my uncle began, looking out over the treetops, "they know exactly how big they are, but recognize that there's no need to abuse that size. Instead, they choose to use it to help others, and only use it in an offensive manner when they need to protect themselves, their friends, or those who can't protect themselves."

Again, he continued reading, but this time I didn't find any response to his statement. So I stood there, gazing around; I noticed a second wooden chair to the right of my uncle and his larger dog, and although I thought about using it, I didn't want to just stroll over and plop myself down without being invited to. So, I turned my gaze elsewhere, anywhere, so long as I could look at something that would relieve my boredom—to the forest, the mountains in the distance, the deer antlers and fishing nets that hung on the house's wall behind us, and the rough, stone fire pit that was set up to the left of the balcony. When these failed to remain interesting, I chanced bending downwards and looking at the book's cover; I hoped Uncle Rick wouldn't notice, because the action felt like one of those things that could be considered intrusive, like looking over your older sister's shoulder while she played *Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga*. (Donna never did take kindly to that....)

The slight bend I was performing was not enough to properly see the title, however, and as I lowered my chest further to the ground my uncle spoke. "*Forgotten Past*."

I jerked upright again and made a show of rolling my shoulders, pretending that I had simply been stretching. “What?” I grunted, feeling both sheepish for being caught and grateful for another conversation.

“You were trying to read this book’s title,” Uncle Rick said, turning his grey eyes towards me again, “and I helped with that.”

“What’s it about?” I asked.

“Oh, you wouldn’t be interested,” he replied, obviously trying to make me even more interested.

In bending down earlier, I had caught a glimpse of the novel’s cover art. “Well, judging by the wolf dude with scars on his face,” I said, stooping over once again to confirm what I had seen, “I think I would be interested.”

Uncle Rick grinned. “Well then,” he said, adopting the voice of a stereotypical old story-telling man, “let me tell ye’ about it, Sonny.”

“*Finally!*” I thought to myself, hopping across my uncle’s outstretched legs to rest in the second chair.

“In a world not our own,” he began, keeping the old man voice. He proceeded to tell of an exciting adventure set in a sort of medieval fantasy world, just the kind of setting I enjoy. In short, the story involved a “weird wolf-human thingy,” as Uncle Rick put it, a “jerk-bag king,” and what sounded like loads of adventure; so, pretty much two of my favorite things—wolf-dudes and adventure. My uncle finished his explanation with much excitement, shoving the book in my face and asking if I wanted to read it.

When he thrust the book at me, I leaned back, surprised by the sudden motion; I remained leaning backwards for a couple moments, my eyes wide and struggling to focus on that which was being held two inches from my face. When my uncle didn’t retract his arm, I realized he wanted me to take the novel. “Uhh, okay,” I said, accepting the hardback. I rested the book in my lap, but then had a thought. “You sure you don’t want to finish it first? You didn’t seem to be very far in....”

“Nah,” my uncle said in his normal voice. “I read it plenty of times while I was writing it.”

I gave him a surprised look, then looked at the bottom of the cover; sure enough, I saw the name “Rick Caraway” written there. “You’re an author?”

“Well, I’ve written a few others besides this one, but I’ve still got a more traditional job that I work. I like to think of this as a hobby that comes with profit,” he smiled. “Regardless, I have a feeling you’ll like this, especially seeing as you could use something to do while you’re here.”

I looked back at my uncle’s novel, a goofy half-smile tugging at my face; maybe this visit wouldn’t be so boring after all.