## Ketchum – Chapter Two

## Nell

I’m thinking about what the man said, about the red snow, about his poor dead wife. I’m thinking about how he had to make up this tale, this illustrious serial killer, to explain it all away. I’m thinking about how one day Jane went to work and when she came back there was this thing she’d seen, this terrible, horrible thing, and how the police probably asked her for a statement and how her husband will have driven her into town to give it. I’m guessing they probably had to close the motel. I’m thinking of the money they lost, of *all* the things they lost, or had taken from them, or gave away, piece by piece.

I don’t realise I’ve hit something until I hear its bones crunch under my wheels.

I pull into the hard shoulder and open the door. A few meters behind me I saw what I hit – a cat about the size of my forearm, with peeled orange fur and startling green eyes. It’s breathing when I crouch down by its side. I reach out a hand hesitantly, stroking back the fur which is matted into clumps by the blood pouring from its stomach. Its guts are hanging outside its body. They’re thrumming as the heart continues to beat.

I turn to my side and throw up. The cat watches me, eyes big, pupils blown. I rock onto my hands and keep throwing up, choking on the hot bile rising from my stomach. My eyes are streaming. I continue to retch until all that comes out is water. The cat is still watching me.

I don’t know where the nearest vet is. I don’t know how to get the cats guts back inside its body. I don’t know how to explain any of this to the cat, who blinks slowly. I crawl back to its side and keep stroking the matted fur.

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“My father used to take me hunting,” I had told Adrienne, one of the first times she visited my little flat.

She laughed at this. She was laying with her head on my lap, hair fanned out. From that angle, I could see the tonsils at the back of her throat. I wanted to reach my hand down her throat and touch them. I wanted to touch every part of her, have her touch every part of me. In the light from the fire, Adrienne’s hair looked deep auburn, the ends trailing into the shadows.

“Did yours not?”

She sat up. Her sweater had ridden up around her chest and I was suddenly self-conscious. I looked at the fire. She tugged the sweater down. “Where are you from again?”

“California,” I said. Adrienne hummed. “You don’t know how to hunt?” I don’t know what I expected from her. I didn’t really know her yet. I wanted to know her.

“My father used to take me skiing.”

“I can’t ski,” I told her. I was hoping she’d offer to teach me.

She swung her legs onto the cramped couch and folded them. Sat like that, legs crossed, we were basically on top of one another. “Did you ever kill anything?”

“Sure,” I said. Her face didn’t change. “Does that bother you?” I had this desperate desire for her to be okay with this, with me.

She just shrugged, like she hadn’t made up her mind, one way or another. “I don’t know. Does it bother *you*?”

Once, after missing a shot and unloading a cartridge straight into a tree, my father had accused me of being some kind of pacifist. I bet if they drafted you, you’d dodge it, he said, and I’d said it doesn’t matter, I’m a girl and anyway Vietnam is long over, and he’d hit me for being unpatriotic. I don’t think he wanted a daughter. I don’t think he wanted a killer. I think he believed those two things to be the same.

“It was mostly rabbits,” I told Adrienne. “They tasted pretty good.”

“I don’t think I could kill a bunny. No matter how good it tasted,” Adrienne said, and then she kissed me, and she tasted like oranges.

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I lay the cat’s body in the back of the car, next to the baby’s seat. Its eyes are unblinking. Its face is frozen like its permanently scared, and I’m sad that the last thing it saw was me throwing up, and then nothing, forever.

I’m not sure where I’m driving until I see the slopes of the mountains and the wide, metal gates of the cemetery and then it’s obvious – I could never have been going anywhere else.

It’s Hemingway’s grave. He died in 1961 when he shot himself with his own hunting rifle. He was the fourth member of his family to kill himself, though his wife, Mary, lied for years about his fate. He lived most of his life in Cuba and Spain, wrote most of his novels drunk out of his mind on sunny beaches and balconies, yet he died here, in Ketchum.

I pull down the dirt track. The car stalls almost immediately. “Fuck.”

I can walk to the grave. If I abandon the car in the cemetery’s entrance way someone is bound to notice. But I can’t stay in the car either – can’t be here when it’s discovered, it’s too close to handing myself in.

It hits me, not for the first time, how reckless I’ve been in coming back here. The anxiety that’s been in the pit of my stomach all day has intensified to a dull roar, and if I hadn’t thrown up earlier I would be now. I grip onto the steering wheel, force breath into my lungs. I turn back to find the cat still on the backseat of the car. Its beady, black eyes watch me, unblinking. I scoop up its tiny fragile body, wrapping it up in my coat and clamber out of the car, feet skidding on the icy ground.

I grab my backpack from beside me and sling it over one shoulder, holding the bundle of cat and coat closer to my breast. The air is cold, stinging my face, and I can feel the spread of goosebumps across my legs, wind chilling through my thin trousers. Scanning the car, I confirm what I already knew – how easy it is to get rid of any trace of me. I slam the door shut, slipping forwards towards the grave.

The cat is cold in my arms. As I trudge through the ice, careful not to slip on the darker parts, I think I can hear it purring. I keep peeling back the coat only to be greeted by the empty look in its eyes, and the mortifying realisation that it’s dead, and that I killed it.

Two hundred yards quickly melt into half a mile. I was deceived by my memory, in which everything is instantaneous and all the landmarks of my past float together. The wind whistles past my ears, and I can still hear the cat purring. The cat isn’t purring.

The grave is the same as it’s always been. Same dusty wine bottles, same battered books, same flower petals that have faded to damp brown leaves. The inscription remains. He still died at 61. His body is still here, beneath the layers of earth.

I crouch down and examine the slab closer up. Everything is older than it was the night Adrienne showed me the grave for the first time, older than the last time, when she had hugged herself against the wind and told me what she always knew, what I was always scared of. I pat the earth next to the grave. It’s dry and course, giving way beneath my fingers.

I set the cat down next to my feet and scrabble more at the earth, burrowing my hands into the grit and rocks. I pull it way, bit by bit, until there is a small hole, right next to the grave. Rocking back on my heel, I stare into the small pit, then gently pull the coat from the cat’s corpse, and lower it into the hole. I have to bend its neck a little bit to make it fit. When it’s done I slowly pull the dirt back over its body until all that’s visible is a small mound. I take one of the dying flowers from the grave and lay it on top. There’s a lump in my throat, and my nails are caked in dirt, and I want to throw up again, or cry, until there’s nothing left in me. Instead, I grab my coat and my backpack, and start my way down the mountain path into town.

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## Bailey

I’ve always had problems sleeping. As a baby, I was colicky.

My mom says that I worried her sick. Actually sick. She used to listen to me cry, trying to wind me, crying until she made herself throw up in the toilet. She convinced herself very early on that I was too sickly to live. When she took me to the doctor, they said it was just gas. There were exercises, they said, special tricks to get it all out of me. She tried them until I stopped crying, until she stopped crying, until my father finally had two girls who weren’t making themselves sick with nerves, or with milk. Even then, I didn’t sleep.

“I thought you’d drifted off,” my father says, setting a tray down and sliding into the red vinyl booth opposite me.

I’ve got my chin propped on my hand, watching cars dawdle in and out of the parking lot. I can feel my hair hanging in front of my face. From this angle, it will be obscuring my eyes. I’m not asleep. My father knows this.

“Big night?”

I dislodge my elbow and tug at my hair, self-consciously. It’s longer than it ever has been, trailing down to the knot of my spine. It’s dry too. The ends are splintering. I haven’t had it cut since before I left home for college.

“No later than normal,” I tell him. I pick at the fries on the tray in front of us. They’re overly salty. I reach for a soda. “A bunch of us went to the commons.”

It’s a clear lie, but he doesn’t seem to notice. He’s peeling back the paper wrapping from a burger. I watch the cheap plastic cheese that clings to it. “Sounds nice.”

I nod. I look back out the window and see a car book it down the highway. I keep my eyes out the window, so I don’t have to watch my father eat with his mouth open. It makes me sick, watching the food congeal between his teeth. I often wonder if mom left him because of his manners. She’s always had a weak stomach. We’re different in most ways, but we’re the same there.

The waitress comes round and tops up our coffee. My dad smiles at her, a genuine smile, not a leery one, but it still makes me uncomfortable. I mutter a thanks under my breath and cup the mug between my hands. They’re still not readjusted to the temperature drop. They’re grateful for the warmth.

I watch the waitress walk away, in her cotton tights and bright white apron. She is a few years older than me. I can tell by the slow way she tilts to pour the coffee that she has been doing this a while. If we were still in school she would be a few grades above me and mean. The blondes are always mean. Now she is probably married and living in a new development a few miles from the diner. It will have a park, and a shop, and big metal gates to keep people out. Not to keep people in. No one who lives here in Idaho will ever think about leaving.

“You’re not eating,” my father says, so I pick up the carton of fries to appease him. He smiles and I smile back, though I know from the feel of my lips twisting that it is a mocking grimace. He doesn’t notice.

I’m not hungry but I pick at the fries. The salt burns my lips.

My mind is miles away, back on The East Coast, back in the cramped dorm bed that we squeezed into. He is miles away now. I will not see him until break is over. My phone is burning a hole in my pocket, the knowledge I could call him, but he will not answer. It is not the same when we’re apart. We have never been apart, but I know this already. I am not delusional by nature.

The waitress comes back to take the empty tray. I start to tell her we’re not finished, but my father interrupts.

“Cold one, yeah?” He says. His voice is ten times louder than it was talking to me. Booming. I wince.

The waitress nods enthusiastically. “Sure is! It’s meant to snow!”

It’s the same dance everyone out here does. It’s the way they communicate. I put my chin back in my hands, looking determinedly out the window.

“Ah,” my father says, waving her away in a manner that people in The East would see as rude, but here is affectionate. “It’ll freeze over by the morning.”

The waitress laughs piercingly. She slides the tray into her already wrinkled hands and scampers away. My father watches her go. I watch the first stray snowflakes cling to the diner window.

My father is a good man.

I know this when we get to the car, and he rounds it to open the passenger side door for me. He’s almost bowing when he does it, body stooping out the way so I can climb in with ease. He closes it gently behind me. I’m surprised he doesn’t lean across to buckle my seatbelt.

He is a good man. I have often laid in bed at night, tossing and turning, trying to find some justification for why he is so good, so kind, and why I find all his simpering so infuriating. I often long for some repressed childhood memory to float to the surface, just to give me pause, something to level against the feelings of annoyance. I could hate him for leaving my mother, which would be easy enough if I didn’t know her. She would drive any man to leave. If anything, he’s a saint for staying so long.

I don’t think my mother ever cared for him much, even when I was born. They married when I was five. There are pictures of me as their flower girl, with daisies in my hair, beaming with every tooth I had. There are no pictures of my mother in her wedding dress.

He gets in the driver’s seat and starts the engine. He gestures at the wheel with his big, flat palms pointing towards the sky. “You sure you don’t want to drive?”

I nod. I know how to drive, I just don’t like doing it out here, with all the ice and snow and Idahoans who never learnt the highway code. They think they’re above the rules. Besides, I don’t need to practice right now. There’s a car rotting away on the drive at home that will have to be driven while I’m back, otherwise the engine will finally pack it in. Either that, or the gas will freeze in the tank. It’s happened before.

My father is a good man, and he’s a good driver, too. The road is slippery with the pathetic beginnings of snow, but he manages to keep the car going straight, going forward. That is impressive around here. Most people swerve at least twice every journey. I’ve seen ice road truckers lose control and plummet down the banks into the rows of evergreens. If I had a dollar for every time someone spun off the road and hit the walls of the embankment, I’d have as many dollars as the highway EMT’s have dead bodies.

The diner is the last sign of civilisation for a while. Mostly the drive is just stretches of highway, road signs, billboards. One billboard reaches halfway across the road and is tilted slightly down so it feels like it’s going to fall and crush you. On it there is Jesus strung up on the cross, engulfed in flames. The red text screams: **We have condemned him. He has forsaken us.** It isn’t a particularly Evangelical message, but it gets its point across, if its point is that we’re all damned and Jesus doesn’t give a fuck.

“Cheery,” I say to my father, jerking my thumb in the direction of the sign, but he doesn’t look back. He is too busy watching the road.