

“In the shadows of Stinging Nettle”

by Mason F. Savikian

Chapter One:

Usually you can pinpoint the cause of a mistake by one action. This one event caused a chain of events and that's how you ended up in shitsville. You then start to wonder if there was any way of preventing this particular action, and what would be the new outcome. Would shitsville be nonexistent? Or would life just be shittier?

Considering I've had my whole life planned out for me since my birth, I never exactly thought much about this stuff. Let alone thought I'd ever be in this situation.

Super star collegiate athlete, expelled from an Ivy League institution, sitting in the back seat of my wealthy family's limo. Being driven to the airport, to send my disappointing ass away.

My older sister is probably sitting in her lab at NASA shaking her head in disapproval, as our mother tells her the whole story over the phone. My brainiac little brother probably got the whole loud argument about the ordeal on video.

Most likely with a close up of my Republican Senator father's beet red face, cursing me for besmirching the great Whitaker name.

I think subconsciously I wanted my whole perfect life to fall apart. I wanted to be the troublesome child.

Maybe it was all just middle child syndrome.

I felt Vin, my family's personal assistant, peering at me through the rear view mirror from the driver's seat. I tried to ignore it by focusing on the buildings of Washington, DC passing by, and the sweet voice of Freddie Mercury blasting through my cheap earbuds. My chipped nails picked at the fine leather seats, and my legs bounced anxiously to the beat of “Under Pressure”.

A lot of people would think growing up in the capital of our country would be amazing. There's a lot of history here in DC, it's pretty much everywhere you turn. Change happens here.

To me it's just a reminder of how much farther we needed to go. I was excited to leave despite the circumstances.

I jumped when the window started moving up and down, gaining my attention. I turned to see Vin waving at me through the mirror, a reassuring smile on his face. I tried really hard not to roll my eyes. Vin was very nice, but I have a hunch that he was my parent's personal spy, to gain into the secret lives of their children.

Reluctantly I took my ear buds out, and before I could even acknowledge him, he started eagerly talking to me.

"When did you get the new hair cut, Miss?"

I visibly cringed at both the question, and the familiar title. Not that he probably didn't already know what was happening. I think the very loud confession to my already disappointed parents could have been heard in hell with my equally judgemental grandparents.

"I got it a month ago. I was tired of my long hair hitting me in the face."

I ran a hand through my army cut short brown hair. Truth is my hair has been this way practically since I started my senior year of college, and I barely remember the tickling of strands on my neck anymore.

He hummed in understanding.

"Well it suits you if you don't mind me saying. You can see your green eyes much better. I bet you get many suitors constantly at your door."

A memory flashed in my mind, and my hand rested on my freckled cheek. I felt the ghost of soft lips there, and the distant smell of expensive perfume in my nose. I could get lost in these memories, maybe even go insane because of them, but it was usually cut short by the sting of betrayal poking at my heart.

"Oh, yeah." I huffed returning to look out the window, before muttering to myself. "A fuck-load."

The last time I was in North Carolina, it was in my freshman year of college for a track meet. I remember I lost the race by a hair, and my parents had flown all the way down to watch. They left before I had even stepped off the track.

Other than that, maybe the occasional trip to the Outer Banks. I loved the ocean. Now I was going to live nearly six hours from the closest shoreline. But for some reason this was the only place my parents thought I belonged.

Apparently the outcasts lived in Asheville, North Carolina. Or at least my cousin Johnathan did.

I initially protested when my father called up my uncle, then told me I was to live with my older cousin. Who by the way, hasn't been in contact with our family since I was sixteen. I never exactly knew why, but honestly I didn't care. My earliest memory of my older cousin was him taking glue and putting it in my pink tails. I remember him being absolutely obnoxious, and I was not upset to hear that he would no longer be attending family gatherings

However, as annoying as he could be, it was better than being poor out on the streets with no college degree.

It was early spring in the Appalachian Mountains. The harsh winter was starting to subside, but I still felt the crisp wind on my cheeks, and I shivered not expecting it. I didn't have much with me, except for my backpack and a suitcase of clothing that I dragged behind me to the edge of the sidewalk. Just by looking at me, you wouldn't have guessed I was the child of one of the wealthiest families in the world.

I looked around trying to find some indication that my cousin was here to pick me up.

"How the hell am I-"

"Hey cuz!"

I jumped when I heard the familiar scraggly voice, followed by the sharp spluttering of a pick up truck. Which is what I assumed it was supposed to be, as a hunk of junk pulled up to the curb of where I stood.

As familiar as the voice was, it did not match the face I remembered of my older cousin. The Johnathan I remembered, had slick back black hair, wore cashmere sweaters, and would occasionally join our fathers on the tennis court.

However, the Johnathan that stepped out of the crappy Chevy, was the exact opposite of what I grew up around. He had a scruffy face, with a trimmed mustache. Denim adorned his

body, from the jacket, to the dirty jeans. I could see the black hairs sticking out from his trucker hat, indicating that it was probably all shag underneath.

I was paralyzed by either complete shock or fear, and I didn't see the bear hug coming, knocking me off balance. The smell of dirt and grass entered my nostrils, which wasn't necessarily a bad smell, but not a one you would not find on your average Whitaker man.

"Damn Hen, it's been so long!"

He pulled back flashing me a smile, and I cringed seeing dirt in between his teeth.

"Johnathan?" I squeaked uneasily.

He laughed, nudging my shoulder.

"Most people just call me Johnny now. I probably look a lot different then last time you saw me."

I didn't protest when he took the bag I was carrying and threw it over his shoulder, then the suitcase under his arm. My eyes widened at the strength I do not exactly remember him having.

"Yea like... alternate reality different? Did you have a psychotic break? Or is this like some sort of protest?"

He popped the trunk of his truck and placed both of my bags in the back, before turning around and shrugging.

"Uh, both I guess? Although by the state of your new get up, I wouldn't be talking, Hen."

My body tensed underneath my stylish get up of baggy grey sweats. If only he knew it was to hide the parts of my body I didn't exactly enjoy looking at.

He closed up the back and gestured for me to get into the front seat, which I was about to do when something colorful caught my eye. Reflecting in the sunlight was a rectangular shaped rainbow sticker, right there on the back of his manly truck.

Maybe someone put it there when he didn't notice. Or maybe he had heard what I told my parents and he was making fun of me. I decided to settle on that thought, as I angrily got into the passenger seat.

Johnny looked over at my brooding expression, but shrugged, proceeding to start up his ghastly vehicle. Then he said a name that made me want to vomit.

“Well Henrietta Whitaker, welcome to Asheville.”

It was getting dark, so I could barely make out the shadows of the mountains that surrounded the city. My cousin pointed out a few small businesses as we drove by. A lot of coffee shops, breweries, bars, and artsy stores, but to be honest I was barely listening to what he was saying.

The apartment complex we arrived at was right near the banks of a river, a few picnic benches were further down towards the edge, which really seemed to be the only nice thing about it. The rest of it was just a few stories tall, completely made out of red clay brick, and rusted black balconies lining most of the windows.

“It's not much, but it's home.”

“This. This is where you live.”

Johnny grabbed my bags from the back, again carrying them for me.

“What part of ‘home’ did not compute?”

I'll have to admit that the inside was a bit more cozy, but not exactly the manly man style I remember Johnny having.

Dried flowers hung from the hanging lights over the kitchen table. An ugly plaid sofa was facing a stone fireplace, which had picture frames on the mantel, which I didn't bother to look at. Two large bookcases stood on either side, with an array of different stories. Some knick knacks lined the shelves like figurines, pine cones, acorns, and more. The walls were painted a forest green, with large paintings of mountains hanging up all around the apartment. I smelt cinnamon and lavender, and realized it must have been from the candles on the wooden coffee table.

Johnny was already in the kitchen preparing us something for dinner, humming to himself as he navigated the area.

“I heard you were a vegetarian, so I hope you like vegetarian chili.”

I rubbed my arm awkwardly, coming to sit at the kitchen table.

“So do you have a girlfriend or something?”

That very question turned his mood from chipper, to tense, as he stopped what he was doing.

“No, why do you ask?”

“I don’t know, the candles and such. Doesn’t exactly scream ‘you.’ ”

“And how would you know that?”

I scoffed.

“Oh come on Johnny, it hasn’t been that long. This is coming from the guy who called my brother ‘gay’ when we painted his nails in his sleep as a prank. Your bedroom used to be lined with Dodgers posters, and Scarlett Johansson. You can’t possibly be responsible for this interior decorating.”

“Well, Jessie did have a hand in it.”

A satisfied smirk graced my features at knowing that I was right.

“See, knew a girl had something to do with all this.”

Johnny visibly got angry, as he started stirring a pot, not looking me in the eye.

“You don’t know shit, Henrietta-“

Swiftly I slammed my hands on the table causing it to rattle, and his head shot up at me.

“Don’t call me that!” I practically screeched.

The tension between us could barely be cut with a knife from how thick it was. My labored breathing was the only sound in the room as I tried to calm myself. I’ve had too many self-started panic attacks in the last few weeks to last a lifetime. I did not plan to have one in my cousin's kitchen.

Slowly he put his stirring spoon down, and started walking towards me. His face was hard to read, as he sat down across from me trying to catch my eyes. After a while, he asked very calmly.

“Ok then. What would you like for me to call you?”

My heavy breathing stopped, and suddenly the tension in my body gave way. I realized then I had never been asked that question during this whole thing. No one asked if I was okay. Or what I was going through. If I needed help. However this singular question, felt like it had all wrapped up in one.

“Henry.” I finally squeaked out. “My name is Henry.”

Chapter Two:

Dinner was awkward the rest of the night, and I think we barely got out a “good night” before I was shown my room. It was small but had a nice balcony out the back. It was fitted with a twin size bed, a night stand, and a dresser. It was smaller than my college dorm room, but I guess I didn’t have much with me anyways.

I wanted to sleep the entire next day, wanting to chock this all up to just a really bad dream. But every time I woke up from a recurring nightmare, I was still staring up at the ceiling that was now my room.

I heard shuffling in the living room around 6am, and what sounded like another voice. Johnny did tell me he started work rather early in the morning, and as for the other voice I assumed it was a coworker. He hadn’t yet told me what he did, but considering what he was wearing, it definitely didn’t have anything to do with accounting which I knew he had planned to go to college for. Well before being kicked out.

It wasn’t till noon that I decided to pull myself from bed, groaning from the splitting headache. It felt weird sleeping in, I was so used to waking up before the sun, and going to practice. Now the very thought of working out made me sick.

I threw on a baggy sweatshirt, and sweatpants, before trudging into the living room. I, however, froze when I saw the scene before me. My jaw dropped to the floor, and I had several thoughts of just running away. But it felt like my feet were glued to where I stood.

A man I had never seen before was dancing in his boxers, blasting Dolly Parton music over the small speaker, shirtless. His skin was tan, freckled, and he actually sang pretty well but with a southern drawl to it. His hair was the color of bronzer, and if I was interested in someone like him, I think I would have swooned. He was flipping a pancake midair, when he finally opened his eyes which landed on me.

The pancake fell to the floor with a loud “splat”.

His eyes snapped me out of my trance, and suddenly we were both screaming. I covered my eyes, and he covered his body before running past me into Johnny’s bedroom.

“Shit shit shit shit!” The stranger shouted before slamming the door behind him.

My feet finally got feeling into them, and I ran into my own bedroom, sliding underneath the bed.

I cursed myself, realizing I left my phone out on the kitchen table, my only form of communication to any help I would receive.

There was an extremely hot stranger in my cousins apartment, and I couldn't do shit about it

I yelped when I heard a soft knock on the door.

“Um, Heneretta? That's your name right?”

“Go away! I'll call the cops!”

“Hey look-jeez this is awkward... listen I'm sorry I didn't know you were here. My name is Jessie, I'm your cousin's boyfriend.”

The word echoed in my head.

Boyfriend.

Boyfriend

Boyfriend.

I slowly crawled out from under my bed, as he continued rambling on.

”Oh shoot I'm sorry! Johnny mentioned that you didn't want to be called that anymore, which girrrrl I totally get- or boy! Sorry I say girl to like everyone but, truly I don't believe in the concept of gender-“

I swung open the door, causing him to yelp and pause in his rant. He was no longer practically naked but in a floral lavender colored button down, and a pair of khakis. Not exactly the best fashion choice but I'll take it over completely shirtless.

“It's Henry.” I said sharply, causing him to tense up more “And what the hell do you mean boyfriend?”

It was his turn to look confused.

“Well the same way anyone else means when they say , ‘that's my boyfriend.’ ”

“Johnny doesn't have a boyfriend.”

This beautiful stranger laughed, then walked over to the fireplace mantel, and picked up one of the photos that I couldn't have cared less about yesterday. Jessie practically shoved it in my face, and I grabbed it from him.

The picture was clearly of my older cousin, with this man, kissing near an overlook of the Blue Ridge Mountains. There was no denying that it was them. It felt like everything I knew about my older cousin started to fade away, to someone I barely recognized.

My uncle Dylan, Johnny's dad, was almost as strict and ruthless as my father. If Johnny was truly gay, well as I've learned in the last few weeks, that definitely wouldn't fly. The sudden realization of why Johnny was kicked out of the family started to dawn on me, and a sudden guilt I never thought I would feel towards another family member started to poke at me. As well as a bit of anger for not telling me.

"Oh fucking hell."

"I mean it doesn't shock me that you didn't know. I first met Johnny when he arrived here. He had been hitch hiking around before finally landing in Asheville. I found him sleeping on a bench, took him back to my place, and he never left. We share that apartment by the way, so get used to seeing me around."

Unlike yesterday, I was fully engaged in this conversation. It felt like a whole different person I was learning about, as I sat in his SUV passenger seat, a lunch box in my lap. Although I'll admit, it was hard to fully listen with the beautiful scenery around me.

We were taking the Blue Ridge Parkway towards where my cousin worked. The leaves were just coming back for the spring, light reflecting off them from the afternoon sun. Occasionally we would pass an overlook, revealing how high up in the mountains we were. Tourists pulled over to the side of the road to take photos.

"Sorry this is just a lot to take in. The Johnny I remember... was just very different."

"Well maybe you just never knew the real Johnny. From the sounds of it, there wasn't much room for being different in your family."

I snorted, running a hand through my short hair

"Oh? And what the hell do you know about my family?"

Jessie seemed to visibly tense. I could tell he wasn't exactly the abrasive type and I probably intimidated him more than he did I.

"Enough to know, that hair cut doesn't scream 'hello straight boys come and get me.' And is probably just one of many reasons they sent you here."

My face must have looked like the 'Meh Emoji' staring back at him, at a loss for a clever comeback. The side glance with the smirk he gave me, gave way to the satisfaction of him finally getting me to shut up.

Minutes later we took an exit on to a long dirt path that cut through the vibrant green. A sudden thought crossed my mind that maybe this guy wasn't what he said he was, and he was driving me out to the middle of nowhere to kill me. I was actually about to tell him to stop the car, when suddenly the trees parted and a large barn came into view.

The barn was a shade of green that could practically blend in with the forest around it. If it wasn't for the white trimming around the windows I'd probably miss it.

There were several fields fenced off around the barn, where horses grazed, and some looked up as our car drove over the gravel. A few people were on the other side pointing, laughing, and trying to coax them over.

Jessie finally pulled in next to a few other cars, then took the lunch box from my lap.

"Look I can maybe get past the fact that my cousin is gay, but if you're about to tell me he works here..."

"How bout you come in Henry? I think you'd like it here." Jessie was clearly over my bullshit.

Speaking of shit, I eyed a pile that looked about the size of me, right on the other side of my door. I crossed my arms and slumped back into my seat.

"I think I'll pass."

He shrugged

"Suit yourself grumpy pants."

And with that comment he left me contemplating everything I know, in the passenger seat of his car. I sighed heavily looking out the window at everything around me. I can get past my stubbornness to admit this was a beautiful place. The sun was shining through the trees, casting shadows over the landscape and backs of the horses.

I never had an interest in animals. Hell, I don't think I really had an interest in anything.

That was until I spotted her on the back of a bay colored quarter horse, wearing a black pinch front cowboy hat. I could hear her voice through the crack in the window, calling out to the other riders behind her.

“Alright y’all we’re about done with our ride today! Thank y’all for coming out and enjoying the beautiful scenery of our Blue Ridge Mountains. I’m gonna tell you all to come in one by one after I hop off Cyprus here!”

The cowgirl gave her horse a little nudge, then proceeded to walk into a fenced area with stalls that was right where I was parked. Someone greeted her at the mounting block, where she gracefully jumped off her horse.

I was able to get a better look at her then. She had dirty blonde hair, tan freckled skin, and blue eyes that sparkled when the sun shined in them. The ring in her nose twinkled, I could just make out the tattooed moth on her neck. Not to mention her arms were also covered in different floral tattoos. The sleeves of her black riding shirt were rolled up, a belt buckle with a bucking horse carved into it, held up her dirty jeans. Her black boots clicked against the ground as she walked over the horse to a stall, which happened to be facing me.

My breath caught my throat as I realized she had noticed me staring through the window. The mysterious hot cowgirl gave me a little small wave, while I.... kept staring like a creep.

“HENRY!”

“SHIT!”

I jumped up at the voice, smacking my head on the roof of the car. I whipped around in my seat to see my cousin laughing at me through the window. His supposed boyfriend was pinching his nose with a deep sigh behind him.

I practically growled, getting out of the car, and shoving him roughly.

“Are you kidding me?! You almost gave me a heart attack!”

“Dude I’ve been tapping on the glass for nearly a minute but you seemed to be focusing on something a little more interesting.”

Johnny gave me a nudge with a raised brow, gesturing at the cowgirl who seemed to get over my awkwardness, and was now helping a little girl get off her horse. Heat rises to my cheeks, and he laughs while cringing away as I continue to punch his shoulder.

“You have no right to make fun of me when you didn't tell me about your dirty gay secret! Did he tell you huh? How I walked in on him practically naked-”

“Excuse me!”

We both stiffened at the voice, and suddenly Johnny's face was as red as mine. Our heads turned to the side to see... a very tall and muscular woman, who looked like she could knock me out with her pinky. Her skin was darker, with black hair tied into microbraids coming down from her brown cattleman hat. She had a similar outfit on to the cowgirl I saw before, but with a large brass sunflower buckle on her belt.

I noticed not far behind her was a parked wagon carriage with two large drafts. There were two individuals staring at us from the seats. I could tell they were trying not to laugh and I glared at them, before the lady spoke, gaining my attention.

“Can we maybe continue this self discovery sometime later in private?”

Johnny cleared his throat, flustered, while Jessie was giggling behind his hand. It was very obvious that this woman held some sort of authority here, because my cocky cousin sobered up real quick.

“Oh sorry Phoebe, we didn't realize how loud we were being.”

I grunted as he suddenly pushed me in front of him, his hand on my shoulder.

“This is my cousin I told you about, Henry. He just got in last night.”

I gulped looking up at the woman, nervous about what he was going to say. Johnny had just used my preferred name and pronouns all in one sentence. I hadn't even told him out loud what I preferred, which I still don't know if I should be angry about. My heart was pounding to see what this woman would say.

To my surprise she chuckled, and I yelped when her unusually strong hand gripped mine.

“Well nice to meet you young man. Welcome to Stinging Nettle Trail & Carriage.”

It was weird watching my cousin kiss a boy goodbye. However, if I was being honest I had never really seen him kiss a girl goodbye either. I guess he was just truly good at hiding it when we were younger, or maybe I was too self-involved with my own issues that I never noticed.

That being said, I watched Jessie tip down Johnny's own cowboy hat playfully, which Johnny laughed, giving him a playful kiss on the cheek, while pulling him close. It was disgustingly cute, and I envied him for it.

"Alright Johnny, let him go, and let's all have a chat."

The two lovers kissed one last time before, Jessie got into the car, and drove away. My cousin sheepishly trotted over to me, and we walked together behind the warrior women.

"So we are just not gonna talk about this?" I whispered to him as we walked around the property.

"There's nothing to talk about."

"Johnny this is all too much. You're gay. You have a boyfriend who you live with. And this is your job? What even is this place?"

The lady turned around to face us in the doorway of what looked like an office. With her hands on her hips she said,

"Stinging Nettle is a trail and carriage barn. We give folks horse rides and Johnny here is actually our maintenance man. How about you step inside my office? Wipe that horse shit off your boots first, we may work around it but that doesn't mean we need to bring it inside."

I gagged when I looked down at my ruined sneakers, realizing I never dodged that pile of crap near the car. I tried scraping it off the best I could before following inside.

The only offices I had ever been in were my dad's, and my coaches. My dad's was high up in a building, smelt of Lysol, and often was full of important men coming in and out. My coaches was not as fancy, but I got to know them pretty well... it's actually the location where this whole mess started.

This office however was completely different. It smelt kinda how Johnny smelt when he hugged me; like grass and dirt. Her desk was littered with papers, held down by rusted horseshoes. Several hats lined the walls, and different boots on the ground. She gestured for us both to sit down in the dusty chairs across from her.

As I went to sit, my butt was stabbed by something sharp, and I yelped jumping up. To my horror I actually sat on a pile of bones, causing me to screech. Unaffected by my reaction, my cousin grabbed the bones from the seat, then handed them to Phoebe.

“I’m guessing these are for Blake?”

The lady laughed

“Ugh that little gremlin must have left those there last time we talked. I’ll give those to them before they leave.”

“T-Those are bones!” I screeched.

“Yes and you’ll probably see all sorts of animal bones while you’re working out here. It is Appalachia after all.”

“Yea but if you see any make sure to give them to Blake, they collect them.”

It almost went over my head what they were saying as I was trying to get over the fact I sat on a bunch of bones, but when it dawned on me I snapped my head to my older cousin.

“Wait wait wait, did you say work?”

Phoebe chuckled before once again gesturing to the seat.

“You sit. I’ll talk.”

“Just give us a chance Hen.”

I stood there a minute debating if I should make a run for it, but decided it wouldn’t be in my best interest to get lost in the mountains, so I sighed and sat down.

“Now then. I’ve been made aware of your situation. This place is no stranger to outcasts like you. Believe it or not your cousin looked worse then you did when Jessie drove him here begging me to give him work.”

“You know nothing about me.”

“I know that you’re different and not many have given you a chance to be yourself. I’m giving you a chance to do that, and decent pay, in exchange for some hard work. I promise you will not receive an ounce of judgement here.”

I snorted.

“I’m sorry I never applied for a job, nor do I have any desire to work here. I mean have you seen me? Do I look like I can be around horses?”

Johnny interrupted.

“I didn’t know anything before I came here either. Phoebe and everyone who worked here was patient with me, and taught me everything. Now I do all the pasture maintenance. I even drive a tractor.”

“We need a new barn hand, and a tour guide to sit up there on the carriages and talk about the landscape. It’s straightforward work, and we can help you as you go along.” Phoebe added.

“And what do you think the family would think about this?” I snapped turning to my cousin.

Things got very quiet in the room, like the oxygen got sucked out. I knew this was teetering on a more private conversation the two of us should be having alone, but I think given the overwhelming amount of news I’ve received the last few hours I was beyond caring. Phoebe stood up.

“How about I give you both some privacy, and some time to talk it over.”

The minute the door had closed, I was already starting my rant.

“Wow thank you Johnathan, truly thank you for ambushing me. Did you tell your naked boyfriend to kidnap me and bring me here and force me to work in this living country song?”

“Why the hell do you keep focusing on the fact that he was naked?”

“It’s a factor that’s a little hard to get over, and that’s not the point of this conversation!”

He groaned, rolling his eyes.

“It’s not like that Hen, and truly I didn’t mean for you to meet Jessie like that. I thought maybe he had left before you woke up. When I found out you were already here, I thought I’d just keep the ball rolling.”

“How long?”

“How long, what?”

“How long have you known you were like this? Gay, I mean.”

Johnny sat back in his chair with a heavy sigh. He took off his cap, running a tired hand through his greasy hair.

“Since I was ten okay? I... I was outed by someone close to the family right when I entered college. I thought we had something... I was wrong, and he told my dad. My dad then cut me off completely, pulled me from college, told everyone I was kicked out, and well... I ended up here while hitchhiking.”

This was, I think, the most vulnerable I’ve ever seen a member of the Whitaker family. His voice struggled not to crack as he spoke, and I noticed him picking at the skin around his nails. It felt like a little boy admitting to breaking something important, or failing a test. In a way I guess he did.

“Like Jessie told you, he found me sleeping on a bench my first night in Asheville. I don’t even really remember how I ended up here, it was like fate. Jessie took me home, cleaned me up, and took care of me. Eventually he brought me here. Phoebe owns the place, and is known for taking in people that have nowhere to go. Specifically people like us.”

People like us.

Those last words echoed in my head a few times much like the word, “boyfriend” did before.

“I’m assuming someone in the family told you then?”

“Henry, based on how you’ve been acting in the last 24 hours it wasn’t hard to piece together. So what are you? Trans? Non-binary? Still trying to figure it out?”

“Why do you care?”

“Because I’m sorry Hen, no one else in the family is gonna. Look where your sitting! Someone has to care about you, and dammit if that’s gonna be me then you should just accept that.”

His words held more truth than most would know. Our family of politicians have been against people like us for ages. I remember sitting in a rally in 2015, as gay marriage was legalized, and my dad giving a speech about the values of marriage being besmirched.

“I’m not gonna tell you my whole dark queer background here in this disgusting office. But you got the pronouns right ok? I’m a guy.”

“Clearly.”

“Shut up! And I’m not gonna work in this place ok. You can’t make me.”

He narrowed his eyes at me, and smirked.

“I didn’t want to have to do this, but you left me no choice.”

He pointed a finger at me and spoke to me as if I was his child.

“Here’s the price for living under our roof. You are going to get up, come with me to work, same time, sunup to sun down. If you don’t, fine. I can’t help you then. Your other option is to find help elsewhere, on the streets on your own.”

“You are forcing labor on me.”

“Damn straight I am! When your sister called me up and told me you were expelled and had nowhere to go, I fought tooth and nail to get a hold of your parents. I had no idea why you were kicked out but I remember how hard it was for me. I didn’t want it to be that way for you.”

Knowing that my nosey sister was the culprit behind getting sent to Johnny’s wasn’t all too shocking to me. I mean if everyone knew he was gay, why else would I be here?

We stared at each other not really knowing what to say now, after that heartfelt speech he gave me.

I could hear everything outside. The hooves of the horses going by. The laughter of children excited for their rides. Even the wind rustling the branches of the old oak and pine trees. I was never a spiritual person, but I had this feeling that everything was going to change in this moment.

He stood up, dusting off his pants, and cleared his throat.

“Well, what do you say? You don’t really look like the hitchhiking type.”

“I don’t exactly look like the horse wrangling type either.”

“No, but we can fix that. Get you some boots, a belt, and a hat to cover up that awful haircut of yours. I’m kinda also over this baggy sweats look.”

I glared up at him before grumbling.

“Well I guess I don’t really have a choice do I?”