

4,400 words

CHAPTER 1: ALMOST HEAVEN

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MAY 2018. HIGHWAY 93.

The engine rattles as they speed through the fog on Route 93, a hundred miles or so north of Missoula. Rain echoes on the roof and leaks through the top of the door, making a damp spot above the passenger seat.

Allan keeps his cheek pressed against the cool window until the rattling threatens to give him a headache.

He lifts his head as Jackie pulls the truck over onto the muddy shoulder and says, "What about here?"

It's earlier than they'd normally stop, barely four o'clock, and in June that's another five hours of daylight, at least.

"It's raining," Allan mumbles. He hates setting up the tarp when it's already raining.

"I know, but look." Jackie points through the windshield.

At first all Allan sees are the same towering pine trees that have lined the road for more miles--more hours--than Allan cares to remember. There's a patch of long, wild grass in front of

them, flattened in the downpour.

Then he sees it--the waterlogged remains of an old church, stripped by time of past paint jobs, rain-soaked wooden siding almost blending in with the trees. The steeple tall and dark against the pale gray sky.

"I'm not going in there," he says. "What if the roof collapses?"

"We don't have to go in, but come on. It's a good spot."

Allan doesn't understand until Jackie glances over his shoulder.

The shoebox tucked behind his seat, kept carefully in the periphery of Allan's vision for the past seven months, closes in on him. The weight of it, maybe light enough if dispersed over time, looms. Will crush them flat in the muck if it falls.

"Yeah," Allan says, mouth dry. "Good spot."

Jackie twists around to pull out the shoebox, handling it carefully like a baby, or a bomb.

He lifts off the lid. The plastic gallon bag inside is full, almost to the top, and when Jackie pulls it out his fingernails go white.

When Dad died, Allan didn't see the body. Jackie had already identified him, and they didn't have a wake before the funeral, so he didn't have to. For a few days, he privately dreamed that Dad wasn't dead after all, that he'd just taken off on his own, to start over. Searching out something he wasn't going to find with the two of them bumbling behind him. Allan lived in that sweeter world until they got the ashes back, the bag so full it couldn't be anything but a whole person.

The weight of the ashes pulls back like a tide, leaving Allan untethered. They're going to leave Dad here? Where is here? How will they ever find their way back if they want to, if they

need to?

"It's raining," he says again weakly. But Jackie is already slamming the door.

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They make their way behind the church, where the remains of a cart, or maybe a wheelbarrow, are rotting into the earth. Bunches of yellow flowers have sprouted up between the rusted-out spokes of a wheel.

"It's no cemetery," Jackie says.

Allan picks out a spot against the church wall, where the overhang of the roof doesn't actually do anything to shield him from the rain. He drops to his knees and sinks his fingers into the mud, and digs.

"What are you doing?" Jackie asks.

Allan keeps digging.

"We can't just leave him in a pile out here," he says. "He'll blow away."

Jackie's quiet for moment, considering the plastic bag in his hands.

"The blowing away is usually a part of it," he says, but he sits down with his back against the wall and waits. The bag sits flat on his upturned palms like a collection plate.

"Don't help me or anything," Allan mumbles, knuckles scraping in the wet dirt.

He scoops out handful after handful of soil speckled with gravel. Bits of shale stick to his skin. Jackie watches.

Rain starts filling in the hole, making a murky puddle at the bottom. He pauses, watching the water seep back into the earth. They're lucky that it's raining, in a way--even the softened dirt is scraping his fingertips raw; dry and hard-packed, the task would be impossible.

"You think that's deep enough?" he asks.

Jackie gets to his knees and leans over Allan's shoulder. The hole is maybe two hands deep. Jackie hums.

"Looks fine to me," he says, but doesn't move, just keeps peering down into it.

"You're dripping on me," Allan grumbles, shouldering him away. As if they're not both drenched anyway.

Jackie doesn't take his eyes off the hole, but he shakes his head like a dog, splattering Allan's face with more rain.

Allan wipes his wet face with his wet sleeve and grimaces.

The top of the bag is pinched shut with a zip tie. Jackie sets it down on the ground and tries to press a hole into the thick plastic with his thumbnail. When that fails, he digs the car keys out of his pocket, and uses the tiny pocketknife he keeps on the keyring to slice an opening from one side to the other. He looks up at Allan through wet, clumped eyelashes.

"You good?"

Allan rubs his hand along his mouth, getting bits of gravel stuck to his face.

"Yeah."

Jackie lifts the bottom of the bag and white-gray ashes spill out into the dirt, fine and heavy, like sand, smattered with off-white specks.

"What's the white?" Allan asks, even though he knows the answer.

Jackie swallows.

"Bone, I guess."

Allan tries to shelter the hole with his body.

"This isn't what it's like in the movies."

"No," Jackie says, crumpling the empty bag and stuffing it into his pocket. And then, "What's it like in the movies?"

"Not raining. And there's never this much. They make it look like a handful, or something."

They stare at the hole in silence. Allan's fingers are sore, and his arms feel heavy.

Jackie pulls himself to his feet and kicks a bit of dirt back into the hole. It mixes in with the ashes. Once he's started, it's not so hard to help.

They fill in the hole and stomp the top down firm, scattering the leftover dirt with quick sweeps of their sneakers. They don't say any words over the grave.

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Allan walks behind Jackie, around to the front of the church. The seat of Jackie's pants is wet in the shape of his ass from sitting on the ground.

"It looks like you peed your pants."

Jackie pats his jeans, feeling the damp spot. He looks over his shoulder at it.

"Really? Do you pee out of your butt?"

It could be the start of something, a bit, or an argument, but Allan doesn't have the fire to keep it going.

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The inside of the church is better preserved than the outside, and the ceiling actually looks pretty solid. Flat, sturdy beams, no warping or sagging.

The interior walls are still whitewashed, and the pews are arranged in neat rows. A rope

hangs by the door, snaking up through a small square cut into the ceiling. Jackie pulls on it and the low, dense ring of a church bell vibrates through the walls.

The silence, the interruption of the silence, makes Allan feel like they shouldn't be here. It doesn't help that, from the inside, the church looks ready for a Sunday service. Maybe it is still in use after all, although they hadn't seen any houses for miles the way they came. Maybe the churchgoers like making the long, quiet drive once a week.

Maybe an angry pastor is about to manifest from the back hallway and turn them out into the rain. A side door near the pulpit rattles in the wind.

The clanging of the church bell fades, and no one appears to kick them out. Jackie moves up through the pews, and Allan trails behind.

They stare for a while at the giant wooden carving of Jesus on the cross hanging on the back wall. Emaciated, ribs caving in at a steep angle into his smooth stomach, spindly outstretched. Jackie studies the painted scabs on Jesus' feet. Allan picks at his fingernails.

"You think all this is real?" Jackie says. "God, and everything?"

Allan smooths his pinky nail with his teeth.

"I don't know. Guess I haven't thought about it." The silence between them lingers until he adds, "Do you?"

Jackie shrugs.

"Maybe," he murmurs. "Hard to say."

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Allan is going through battered sheet music he found near the tuneless, upright piano. Jackie has disappeared into the hallway that runs behind the pulpit. When he reemerges, he's got

a bottle of wine in his hand.

"Communion wine?" Allan speculates. Jackie shakes his head.

"I don't think so. Found it under a floorboard back there."

Allan eyes the dusty green bottle. "So the pastor was hitting the hooch."

Jackie lets out a little bark of a laugh, and then another. It wasn't even that funny, but he laughs so hard he has to sit down on one of the pews. He laughs the same way Dad laughed, in a silent, airless wheeze.

"Hooch," he mumbles when he gets a breath "That's good." He wipes his eyes, starts laughing all over again.

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When the rain stops, Jackie sets up the camp stove on a tree stump outside, and sits on the cooler. The ground is still wet, so Allan squats over a rock. They feast.

Jackie tears up a slice of cheese and melts it into their scrambled eggs. They eat off buttered slices of sandwich bread, drizzled with warm tomato soup. They split the remaining soup, drinking it straight from the can. Allan eyes the big gulps Jackie takes, but doesn't hassle him about how much is half or what's fair.

They never go hungry. Jackie would never let them go hungry. Allan doesn't want them to go hungry either, and he has money of his own, but when he runs low Jackie always seems to have more stashed away.

Sometimes they eat at restaurants, diners and drive-throughs and local taquerias. Sometimes they eat out of the cooler, which usually stores cheese slices, mayonnaise, and eggs in a yellow plastic carrying case. There's always bread and peanut butter floating around, and

sometimes Allan eats two or three peanut butter sandwiches in a day. He sleeps best on a full stomach.

After the tomato soup is gone, Jackie opens up the pastor's wine.

They own two cups. Jackie's is a mug with a howling wolf painted on the side in shades of blue. On the bottom, in permanent marker, there's a fading letter J.

Allan's is a washed-out jar of spaghetti sauce. He can see exactly how much wine Jackie pours him. He can't see how much Jackie pours himself.

Allan nearly chokes on his first mouthful. Jackie laughs.

"This shit is disgusting" He furiously wipes his mouth. "I hate wine, why does anybody drink this stuff?"

"Come on, this one's really vintage," Jackie says, but Allan catches him shudder a little as he swallows.

Jackie chugs the rest of his glass, maybe to get it over with. Allan drinks his in a million tiny sips. He feels the warmth bleed through him right away, and his arms get loose, the heaviness from earlier gone. Jackie's cheeks are flushed and a secret smile plays on his mouth.

"Come see what I found," he says.

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The sunlight is fading, filtered through the clouds, turning everything inside the church flat and gray. The back hallway is especially dark, two dimensional. Allan puts out a hand on the whitewashed wall to anchor himself to it.

"Look," Jackie insists, and Allan squints down towards the end of the hall. "There's a ladder."

They climb up onto the roof through the bell tower. There's a narrow ledge caked in pigeon shit, just wide enough to squeeze between the half-wall of the tower, and the bell. The bell is tarnished and cool to the touch, and even a light bump makes it sway. The view from the tower might be nice, if Allan could ignore the cold mass of it behind him.

"You're going to kill yourself," Allan says, when Jackie jumps on one foot to hoist a leg over the half-wall, and again when he fumbles his footing and almost slides off the edge.

Allan keeps three points of contact at all times as he carefully rolls over the wall, and lowers himself to sit on the steep slice of roof sloping down from the tower.

With no real sunset to speak of, the only view is of endless dark pine trees stretching up and over a ridge in the distance. The sandpaper grit of the shingles makes Allan feel safer as he scoots backward, away from the edge. There's a loose nail near his hand, and he fingers the edges of it, trying to pry it out. It's loose, but still stuck.

"Remember when we were here as kids, and I stepped on the nail?" he says.

Here, not meaning the church, or the highway, or even a hundred-mile radius of where they are. They lived outside of Billings for a few years, when Allan was in elementary school. It's hours south on I-90, but it's the same state. More here than a lot of other places.

Jackie snorts.

"Yeah, I remember."

Allan always ranks it as the worst pain he's ever felt, but when he really thinks about it, he can't remember what it actually felt like. He remembers the shock more than anything, the fear, the keeping it a secret.

"Why didn't we want to tell Dad?" He remembers how important it seemed at the time,

but not why they'd actually want to keep it from him. He wasn't home when it happened, but they could've asked for help when he got back.

"It was in the shed," Jackie says distantly. "We weren't supposed to go in there."

That's right, they were renting the house, and the shed in a back corner of the yard was filled with junk from the landlord. It was dangerous, that's what Dad told them, he'd said, "Don't go messing around in there. That stuff's not yours, and you could get hurt."

"I guess he had a point," Allan says.

Jackie shakes his head.

"Dad would've killed me," he says, but a smile starts creeping into Jackie's voice, Allan can hear it without having to look. "Going in there when he told us not to, and you got hurt? Lethal combo. He would've kicked my ass."

Allan laughs. It's not really funny, especially not with what's left of Dad crumbled up in the dirt underneath them, but Allan's head is light, and it feels good. He drops to elbows, and then onto his back, feet flat and knees bent to keep him steady. He watches the gray clouds begin to part, revealing a bright theater of stars. He picks out the Big Dipper, especially clear against the soft darkness.

He searches for Orion's belt, but he can never remember which direction to look. He turns his head to ask, but Jackie has his eyes closed. He's lying on his back too, arms splayed out. Allan thinks of the wooden Jesus on the cross downstairs. Jackie's hair has started getting long in the front, casting strands of shadows on his face in the slowly spreading moonlight.

They don't look like brothers, everyone says that. Jackie got fine, blond hair that must have come from Mom, while Allan has Dad's, thick and dark. For a long time he kept it buzzed

short like Dad's, too, but these last six months he's let it grow. It's wavier than he thought it would be. Sometimes he catches sight of himself in the polished steel mirror in a rest stop bathroom and is relieved to see a stranger.

Allan never realized how often he saw his own reflection at home until he wasn't home anymore. Most days he has no idea what he looks like and forgets to think about it until someone stares at him in a gas station or a grocery store, and he starts to wonder. He sees himself in the side mirror in the truck on warm days when he has the window down, but the reflection is dim, spotted with dust and dead bugs. He looks different there than he does anywhere else, and he doesn't spend that much time looking, anyway. He spends the bulk of his time in the passenger sleeping.

He sleeps half the day, and all night too, without trouble. They could set up camp here, even, and he'd doze right off. But then he thinks about dying. They might accidentally roll off the edge, or suffocate on the humid, heavy air from the storm. No one would ever know--they'd just be two skeletons and a pile of ashes, out behind a church in the middle of nowhere. A family plot. Allan shivers.

"I'm cold," he says, even though he's not really, and watches Jackie blink his way back to earth. "Let's head back."

Jackie nods, dazed, a little drunk maybe. He starts inching towards the edge of the roof.

"What are you doing?" Allan says, too loud, rushed, because he needs to get the full question out before Jackie falls.

"I'm going to jump." He swings his legs over the edge and looks back at Allan, eyes clear, wide awake now. "Come on, it'll be fun."

Jackie says these things with no trace of irony, like he has no idea how many horrible, gruesome deaths have started with it'll be fun.

"Um, no. How far is that? It's like twenty feet, you could die."

Jackie waves him off.

"Fifteen max, it'd take way more than that to kill you."

It's like Jackie doesn't understand that you can drown in an inch of water. Like he doesn't know that people trip and hit their heads and die every single day.

"The trick is to not try to land on your feet," he's saying, "so you don't break your legs. You have to roll with it."

"Jackie, don't. You're gonna break your neck and I'm not gonna take care of you, just use the ladder."

"Chicken," Jackie says, and free-falls over the edge.

If his landing makes a sound, Allan can't hear it. He tries to scoot close enough to the edge to see, but not far enough to send himself over too. Jackie is lying in a still heap on the grass. He rolls over onto his knees.

"See, it's nothing!" he shouts, as he gets himself sitting upright. Blood is rushing from his nose in a dark, glimmering waterfall.

"You're bleeding!"

Jackie puts a hand to his nose, and looks as surprised as Allan when it comes away wet. There's a matching stain on his jeans.

"It's fine, I hit my face on my knee, rookie move," he declares. "Just don't do that, you'll be fine."

"I'm not jumping!"

"Fine, I don't care. Use the ladder."

Of course Allan is going to use the ladder, that's the smart thing to do--Jackie thinks he's the smart one, but he makes stupid ass decisions all the time, like jumping off a fucking roof--but when he tries to crawl back up, his sneakers slip on the shingles and his stomach twists. He freezes, takes stock of his limbs. Sits back down. Carefully pulls himself to the edge.

Jackie is down below cupping his hands underneath his nose, catching the blood. Allan isn't sure why he's bothering to collect it, dumping it in handfuls onto the grass, but at least he's not tilting his head back. At least he knows that you can choke on your own blood if you tilt your head back. When he sees Allan at the edge of the roof, he whoops.

"Yeah, come on, do it!"

Allan takes a deep breath and lays back on his elbows before he lets his legs dangle over. He sits up slowly.

"Don't think, just jump!" Jackie shouts. "Don't think just jump!"

"Okay, shut up!" Allan yells, and jumps.

He has very little time to think about not landing on his feet, and rolling, and not hitting his face on his knee. The rush in his stomach is so terrible that he barely has time to notice he's hit the ground.

When the buzzing panic in his chest fades, he can still feel all his limbs. Nothing hurts.

For a moment the moon has become a stranger again behind the clouds, casting the towering sentinel trees in deeper shades of black. Allan can't see Jackie, or hear him.

"Are you okay?" he whispers.

The clouds pass, and the moon returns its bright white spotlight over them. Jackie's kneeling on the ground still, and Allan has to help him stand.

"Good, right?" Jackie rasps.

"No, not good. Terrifying," Allan snaps. "You're gonna die."

The blood is thick and black on Jackie's skin, caked over his lips, splattered on his white t-shirt. His nose is crooked in a way it wasn't before. Allan is going to throw up.

"You broke it. Holy shit, it's broken."

Jackie tenderly feels for his nose, prodding the bridge with his fingertips, and laughs. There's blood etched into his teeth too.

"It's not funny, you fucking psycho, you need to go to the doctor."

They're a million miles away from a doctor. They're a million miles away from anything, and Allan can't drive, and Jackie definitely can't drive.

"It doesn't even hurt, I'll sleep it off. You can pack it for me when we get back to the truck."

"I don't know how to do that! Your nose is broken."

Jackie turns and shuffles away through the shadows.

Allan trudges after him as he wanders back to the truck and slumps into the front seat, leaving Allan to pack up the food and the stove before it attracts a bear, or raccoons.

Allan bundles everything back into the truck bed and ties down the tarp, muttering "Yeah, jump off a fucking roof and make me do all the work," just loud enough for Jackie to hear, if he's still conscious.

Allan climbs into the cab and slams the door.

"Are you okay?" he says again, not in a whisper, loud enough for Jackie to hear even if he is unconscious.

Jackie's head is back against the seat, and he rolls his neck to look at Allan. His eyes are dark blue, unfocused.

"Peachy," he says, lingering on the p. "Divine, even."

Sure, Jackie might or might not believe in God, but breaking his nose is a fucking miracle.

The thing is, Allan doesn't have a driver's license. Should, maybe, but doesn't. Should, definitely, given that in last month alone they've driven over a thousand miles. But doesn't. The thought of driving anything, never mind the truck, makes him nervous. Usually it doesn't matter, because Jackie prefers driving, prefers picking the music and the route.

Allan doesn't know a lot about Montana cops or Montana traffic laws. He doesn't know how strict they are, or what the fine is for driving without a license, or if it goes on your permanent record.

If their roles were reversed, Jackie might take the chance. In the middle of the night, in the middle of nowhere, with his brother in need of medical attention in the passenger seat? He'd absolutely take the chance.

But Allan is not Jackie. He digs out cotton pads from their dwindling first aid kit, and masking tape from the glovebox. He stops just short of actually touching Jackie's nose, and Jackie cracks an eye open to look at him. When Allan doesn't move, he pinches his nose between his thumb and the knuckle of his forefinger.

"Fuck," Allan says, because there's nothing he can say to stop Jackie now, and flinches at

the crack when he snaps his nose from right to left. Jackie makes a sound a little too high pitched and hysterical to be a laugh, and his eyes water.

"Okay," he says roughly, "just--"

He waves a hand vaguely in front of his face, which is no instruction at all, but Allan gets the general idea. Hold the nose where it is, keep it from slipping back in the wrong direction. He gingerly cushions the break with cotton pads, and tears off strips of tape with his teeth. He pretends not to notice Jackie's hand sitting low on the steering wheel, gripping it tight.

The result is lumpy, and less than perfect, but Allan doesn't want to fuss with it more than he has to. Jackie doesn't try to examine it. He keeps his eyes closed, and his hand goes slack on the wheel as he falls asleep

Allan sits awake for hours, watching Jackie's chest to make sure he keeps breathing, to make sure he doesn't choke on his own blood during the night. The clouds return and the rain begins again. It's cramped trying to sleep in the truck for a whole night, legs crowded in the footwell, pants sliding when he tries to shift on the tan leather seats.

The interior smells faintly like cigarettes, even though Allan's never seen Jackie smoke. The way anything from the '80s smells like cigarettes, and dust, and the musty remnant body odor of somebody else. A better smell, at least, than when they forget to clean up their trash and it smells like French fries, or they go too long between showers and are left stewing in sweat stink.

In the stifled hush of the cab, the night is already starting to feel hazy. Maybe under watery sunlight none of it will be real--the church, the blood, the ashes.

Except Jackie will have dark bruises under his eyes, and his swollen nose will still be

crusted with blood above his lips. The empty space behind his seat will be a crisp daytime reminder that it wasn't a dream.

Allan closes his eyes and thinks exorcism, thinks, excommunication. Maybe when Jackie said the church was a good spot he meant, good for haunting. Or maybe he just meant, out of sight.

It takes a while, but Allan does eventually fall asleep, and he doesn't dream. Everything in his head is drowned out by the creak of the truck in the wind, and the soft singing of raindrops on the windshield.

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