

Of Water and Sky



# Of Water and Sky

The Seekin Trilogy: Book One

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Yesternight Press, LLC  
Washington

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ISBN: 978-1-947411-08-1

1.

## Pepper

The clock stopped at 3:33 a.m. Six militaristic strides to the balcony and Piper pitched the damn thing into darkness. The crunch of death by curb put a nasty crease in the quiet of night. She stood tall, inhaling the misty air, swallowing delicate notes of hostile diplomacy as others might their daily pharmaceuticals. Piper knew sleep once upon a time, before fate unpicked her family, stitch by stitch. But she didn't want to think about that.

*Not now. Not here.*

Piper felt ancient, much like the treasures she rummaged through at thrift stores, but less profound; maybe the feeling was closer to her worn running shoes, tramped and used, abused in a pleasurable sort of way. It must be 3:34 by now. The thought was just enough to carry her back into the bedroom, down the stairs, through the hall. She never bothered turning lights on, so when she flung open the fridge, sun-shock summoned a flinch. It was irritating; her instinct was to slam the door, but something squarish and green and furry caught

her attention, then curdled 2%. She really needed to go shopping. Screw it, she slammed the fridge shut, thumped her back against the door, slid into a slump-like puddle on the floor. The cold wood bit her bare legs.

*There*, she wasn't dead. The thought was a little promise, a good one, one that might be kept, honored even. She still had something to do; she just didn't know what the hell it was. But she didn't want to think about *that* either.

Somewhere in the night a dog's bark set off five distant *shut-ups*. Maybe she'd get one of those: a *dog*, not a person, or maybe a cat, definitely something nocturnal, something she could yell at in the middle of the night and not disturb. At least it would be something to do. She knew of only one man who could quiet that part of her brain resistant to sleep, but he was busy with another woman and Piper still had her self-respect. She'd get by. She always did.

It must be 3:35 by now.

~

Deftly stitched to the sea, the sleepy town of Bast had a peculiar way of ministering souls back to whole, or thereabouts, which was partly why Piper made the move back to this town she once called home. The other, more noteworthy, part was to bury her uncle. It was a blow, but a little white noise and a lot of red wine nursed the wound. Piper liked Bast well enough; liked it a bit more before hipsters rehabilitated the rowdy maritime town.

At least those damn beatniks left the lush, monster-sized forest alone. That emerald beast thrived on the landlocked side of town, weaving firs and fiddleheads, tussocks and hearty sprouts alongside sweetly-spritzed footpaths, around neighborhoods, through strip malls, down dead-end streets. It was a slow strangle no one seemed to notice.

When people talked of Bast, they started with the lake. A freshwater wonder where fishmongers collected their daily bounty; where, in the winter, children played shoot-the-duck until their knees popped; and, in the summer, runaways bathed in the cool,

placid waters, perfect for kayaking, kissing, and moonlit dips. But it wasn't the sea, the forest, or the lake that claimed Piper's heart upon returning home. It was an ordinary wooden bench. The sad structure seemed to spring from the blackened earth, covered as it was in moss and muck. The splintered cedar planks, weathered to a dusty grey, fused seamlessly to the backdrop of cypress and oak, cottonwood and weeds, a splattering of scented wildflowers. A mature elm arched over the bench, blocking what meager sunlight this neglected section of the forest could get. Few stopped to rest or take shelter, few noticed the bench at all, or its unspoiled view of the lake.

A little, lost, forgotten realm.

Piper gravitated toward it as a child to her mother. Every Saturday morning she made the trek, hours ticked by like hesitant seconds on a broken watch. She needed this. She'd forgotten the meddlesome insanity of small-town life. The only thing she craved more than Saturdays was one more conversation with her father. But it was Monday and her father was still dead, and a cantankerous crow cawed in her ear.

~

Two letters, delivered simultaneously, beckoned Piper home. The first, an invitation to join Uncle Oren in Bast. *There's much to do. It's been too long. Just after Blythe's passing? Dementia is the shits.* So full of excess, Oren's words always made her laugh. She never understood why he didn't marry. Everyone loved Oren.

The second letter also came from Bast, overnight delivery: *I'm sorry to inform you...please accept our condolences...Oren's sole heir...*

It began kindly enough, a fill-in-the-blank form letter; ended lawyerly with uptight filing dates, deadlines, and penalties. The fancy font made Piper sick. Even the paper smelled of money.

Having no wife, no children, and no known debts, Oren bequeathed his excessive stash of cash and musty possessions to the only Laurel left to accept it. With dry eyes and a firm handshake for half of Bast, Piper dutifully buried her uncle, signed stacks of forms faceless lawyers pushed at her, and took up residence in the

Victorian; quickly earning the small-town role of heartless bitch. Locals couldn't fathom Piper Laurel shedding one tear for poor Oren. But Piper did just that: many tears, in fact, for nine straight nights.

At the stroke of midnight, she poured a six-pack of Bud on Oren's grave; chugged another six in his memory. She learned early on how to cauterize a wound. *He* made sure of that. And that's what she missed most, his ability to motivate your ass; as if his grit reached into your chest, rousing your soul. It was his gift, his reason for going on when he too had little left.

Sure it had been years since losing her mother, more since her father went missing, but life was still a sour mix of bad luck, worse luck, and the nasty aftertaste of sugar substitute. Instead of facing the constant hurt, Piper ran away at seventeen, and never really stopped. The odd job would lead to a bad love, a worse break, then she'd bolt; set up in another town and press repeat. She did manage to finish high school and earn a bachelor's degree in History. She liked the irony of that; studying history to avoid her own.

Now back in Bast, Piper started again for the hundredth time. She embraced a robotic, almost ritualistic regularity to more easily compress days into months—work, home, not unpacking, not sleeping, work, home, not. She didn't *need* a job anymore, but routine gave the girl form; foundation to stand, but not build. And she loved wine, so brokering liquor had its perks. Still, if she slipped from her role of sassy salesgirl to chat with the girls over stale Panini and flat colas, it came at a cost: throbbing temples, turned stomach, maybe a quick hurl. That was typical for Wednesdays. Thursdays were better, closer to Friday, damn near Saturday. Sleep might make an appearance then, might not. That biological switch busted the night of her fifth birthday. When she came of age, Piper sought help, which didn't help, so she stopped seeking, went straight to surviving. Now, insomnia defined her in ways she failed to understand. She clung to it. Some things we just need.

Tonight, Piper drove home, radio off, windows down. She always



left the office at six, just after her boss, after sitting in his chair, stilettos propped on his macho mahogany desk for a minimum of ten minutes. She never snooped through the liquor sales slips or rifled through daily commission reports or gave a goddamn about company secrets. *This* felt good. She ought to be boss of something, someday.

A quick glance up and down the street settled her mood. A solemn funk. Contractors broke ground on a new development of one-story tract homes. Bastards. The unrestored Victorian she now called home would tower above the neighborhood like a temper-prone giant. Hers was the only occupied home on the street, the last of the original thirteen houses in the cul-de-sac left standing after a freak storm decimated the town decades ago. Selling wasn't really an option; Piper didn't think it was proper or *nice*, and she tried to be nice in front of others. She'd wait a year; hell, she might make it six months.

A crumbling front porch welcomed Piper home. She expertly evaded rot and slivers, spineless floorboards, and she usually tried to put a smile on her face while doing it. And she usually failed. Except for Fridays. Tonight, she smiled.

Piper fumbled through her sling bag, pushing aside her dead cellphone, coin purse, an unopened birthday card, a tin of mints, before retrieving her keys. Turning the lock, she steadied her stance, jamming her left shoulder firmly against the paint-chipped door. Steve was going to fix that but Piper couldn't stand his laugh another day. On Tuesday, between a 10:00 meeting with buyers and a triple espresso, she sent the text: *don't bother*. Then she deleted the panicked stream of calls clogging her voicemail, blocked his number. Steve knew what he was getting into; everyone, including Reggie, warned him.

Piper added the crumpled birthday card to the ones already in the trash, mumbling some nonsense; she either got poetic when exhausted, or plastered. And she didn't do hangovers on Saturdays. Piper pitched her house keys in with the cards, set a canvas bag of

new doorknobs on the table. It was tradition; didn't matter that she never gave out her key. Then she flung open the freezer, snatched a cylinder of frozen orange juice, popped off the metal top, shook the contents onto the kitchen table; a five, two tens, and a Benjamin skidded over the white cotton placemats. She tossed a five on the pile. Recent escapades had shrunk her ex-fund more than she cared to admit. Piper wasn't one for literal representations of her failures. That sort of thing only pissed her off. She crammed the can back in the freezer. Another damn detox.

Piper wasn't a celebrator, but she had manners, good ones if she put forth the effort. And a birth should be celebrated, even if it was hers. She marked the day with an expensive hot Italian sausage pizza and an inexpensive bottle of Chianti. This tradition started when that guy, what's-his-name, went into anaphylactic shock after enjoying a single slice and several swigs. She's a sucker for chaos.

She tossed her dinner in the oven, double checked every window and door before washing off the day. Blythe taught her to be cautious, her past taught her to trust her mother, and then there were the shadows. Piper patted herself dry, twirled a towel crown on her head. A lazy root through a laundry basket yielded nothing so she threw on her favorite robe, snagged on a forgettable trip with an even more forgettable beau. Crust crisping to burnt had Piper running, stopping only once to double check the living room window. Still locked. She popped in one of Steve's instrumental CDs before careening around the corner to save her dinner.

Finally curled on Oren's leather sofa, Piper jostled a glass of Chianti, thinking of past birthdays and exes and how much she hated instrumentals. She picked off a chunk of sausage, easing it onto her tongue, sensually closing her lips around it.

"Men," she cursed.

Alone is easy, simple parameters; way better than the incessant compromise of companionship, which makes for an unrelenting bitch of a day. And that includes friendships. Piper knew people, lots, and she knew the perfect smile, finely molded of faultless stone,

to ward off the nightmare of sleepovers, lunch dates, and the holy gossip hour. She had a friend, once: a pudgy snit of a girl who ate ladybugs, spat in the hose, and kissed all the boys, even the un-kissable ones. Piper often wondered what became of all those kisses.

Then there was Reggie, who was the perfect boy until he wasn't. Too young to know how to proceed, Piper's heart never set right, and she made permanent the damage by cutting the cast too soon. It was the only way to scratch the damn itch. And with no one around to tell her not to, she'd been scratching ever since.

Piper downed her wine, comforted by the predictable melody of a single ceiling fan and the sleek aroma of aged leather. The scent triggered a nebulous memory; a reunion with Dad meant a face full of Old Spice-soaked sheepskin, a gut-wrenching toss, and a breath-stopping hug. She felt the smother of his bomber jacket now. Her fingers dug into the sofa as they once did his flesh.

Kian's homecomings were occasions of ruckus. They were a family of soldiers, after all; a long line of noble warriors, heroes. They bled in all the World Wars, and Korea, Vietnam, from jungles to deserts, and long before that, many a crusade. Coming from such a line, much is expected. Restrictions on *being* are commonplace. One begins to think well beyond the individual; in terms of *duty* and *function*. It's a hard upbringing to shake; especially difficult if you believed the legends. And Piper did, every word. They were her truth, but not her future. It was a little deflating having superheroes as ancestors. Really, where can you go from there?

Piper ripped cheese from blackened crust, dangling the gooey clump over her mouth. She dropped it in, drank straight from the bottle. *Now* she could handle unpacking. *One* box. She reached in, pulled out a spiral seashell of black obsidian. "*From Faraway,*" was all they ever said. The Laurel brothers were known for their fearlessness; they fought like men with nothing to lose. But they had plenty to lose. Perhaps it was the strength of familial connections

that made them formidable soldiers; Kian, in particular, was so feared his weapon lay idle months at a time. Those were the stories, anyway.

Eyeing a mound of letters bound in bootlace, Piper measured the cost. She finished the wine, took up one letter addressed to her mother; the paper, so soft it might melt in her hands, was too tempting. But the sentiment, at once romantic and perplexing, magnified by Kian's meticulous hand, layered fresh ache over ache. Being the youngest, Piper held the giggly, triumphant memories of her father, while her brothers grew too big to be swept up into Kian's strong arms, and too wise to idolize the father they no longer knew. There was no reason to question what little she was told. She went willingly, believed it all; the way a child swears monsters stalk the woods.

Then one bitter November day, as an orange sun rose above the snow-dusted hillside bordering the Laurel home, a letter arrived. It would be Kian's last letter, his last celebrated homecoming. Blythe sobbed over his words every night for one year. The days grew shorter and the nights blacker. Time is fickle, it must be moving everywhere at once, and not at all. Much like boys becoming men. So when the time came, one by one, Blythe's sons went off to fight in the very war that claimed her heart; guided only by an aging uncle and their dead father's mighty words.

Oren returned home five times, alone.

By the time Blythe lost her will to sob, Piper grew too big to be swept up in anyone's arms. And tonight, when the clock ticked to the eleventh minute of the eleventh hour, Piper, quite alone, turned twenty-nine.

~

If it was shiny, Piper made chase. Adulthood wasn't so different; of course, there was no one left to derail her hunt or scold her recklessness. Sure, it was liberating, but it also left a permanent sore spot, a space for perpetual mourning. Like a true master, Piper kept the gloom anchored in the void; a trivial inconvenience, much like

sleep, and men. And if it was Saturday, she'd grab Allende—Isabel, not Salvador—maybe Austen, a lot of King, and wander.

Piper followed her morning ritual despite the forecast for rain; she grumbled off the couch, chugged four espresso shots and neurotically checked the time, including day and year. She trudged up the stairs, the words of her father's last letter—spoken in her mother's delicate tone between gasps and blustering sobs—swirling her thoughts. One peculiar passage, something she never quite understood, spoke of time's infinite qualities, forgiveness, and dreadful choices. Before signing his name, he penned what Piper now whispered,

“For leaving you, ten deaths may not suffice. I pray your love will allow but two. By your decree, I shall endure what lies ahead of me.”

She pulled on jeans, a Henley, and a snug hoodie before sitting on a simple stool across a vintage vanity. Staring blankly at her mute reflection, Piper put on a face to face the world. Before her mother's death, she opted for little more than a dusting of powder and lip balm. After, she ritualistically performed the task as Blythe trained her to do. It was less about obedience, more about honor.

As if entranced, Piper shaded honey mocha over her almond-shaped eyelids, painted thin black lines alongside her curled eyelashes, dashed mascara on the ends, then brushed powder over her olive skin, but not enough to undo her freckles. She wouldn't go *that* far; each one was a memory earned, proof of life. With clashing eccentricities, traces of the uncommon, Piper was not conventionally beautiful; even so, her natural poise, unassuming diffidence and graceful ways stopped passers-by. She smoothed her distressed black locks before untwisting a tube of red lipstick, Lancôme's *Rouge in Love*, her only splurge; she dabbed the creamy color on her finger before smearing it along her full lips.

“Life tastes better with a little lipstick,” she mimicked her mother's sunny disposition, believing none of it.

Faith was hard to come by. Piper banked on two things: the sun rising and the moon phasing to nothing. The antique mirror

perfectly reflected Piper's dusky grey eyes, but failed to adequately capture the depth of her steadfast gaze. A stream of diffused light shone through a part in the curtains, catching the jagged fleck of gold marring her left iris; a defect, the doctors called it. For Oren, ever the optimist, it was *the touch of gods*. A little fanciful, but it would account for Piper's prodigious perception and recall.

Before she could walk, she was creeping out her brothers with verbal lists of her daily marvels. Kian groomed this eye-spy talent, and by four Piper had won her first fistful of cash. The poor waitress lost a day's worth of tips to a timid girl who knew the eye color of all twenty customers in the diner: four brown, nine green, seven blue. Piper didn't want to take the money; her father saw things differently, smirked his cool counsel, "Never bet what you can't lose."

A good-enough sigh and Piper was off, skipping down the stairs and out the back door. The forest no one spoke of was now her backyard, which was about the best thing that happened to her in years. Of course, this wasn't Piper's first forest, but *this* forest held memories from her youth, from a time when nothing felt real. It was distinguished and humble, and never failed to fix what life broke.

The trek was cathartic, something that could be done without doing, without thought. Piper gracefully side-stepped surface-rolling roots, miraculously missed moss-obscured rocks; liberating mind-numbing nothings as she went. Piper understood the forest; its nooks and bends never felt impenetrable; they felt like home, more like home than her dead uncle's Victorian. No matter how long she wandered or which way she turned, she always found her bench. And it was *her* bench. She claimed it, would have fixed a flag next to it if she had one. She was certain no one would challenge her claim; the bench remained unchanged since she happened upon it months earlier. Eerily so. Even the forest seemed to disregard time; each visit she counted seventy-two bright red berries bunched on a holly bush growing behind the bench. Present and unchanging—she liked that.

Another few turns and she'd be resting comfortably on cracked cedar. She glanced behind her, then up; a sudden chill burning

through her, rattling goose bumps up her arms, down her spine. The air grew thick and the sky black. Piper tracked the clouds until plump droplets splashed sugar-soaked rain down her cheeks; there were notes of jasmine, peppery ginger, alyssum, orchids so pungent she thought of lilacs. *This* was Piper's cure, the way the forest filtered rain, gifting its crisp woodsy flavor, zesting crushed blossoms, tilled soil, and fresh-cut grass. She slowed to still, watching the sprinkling sky decide.

Cold rain slipped under Piper's skin, chilling her bones to a dull ache. Then the sky surged, and she started to jog. She targeted her grand willow, the mighty gatekeeper of her bench. She dashed under the willow's dense, drooping fronds just as a blast of wind drenched her face with rainwater; blinded, she slammed into a man. It was confusing. Who could possibly be under *her* willow? And the force should have instantly dropped them both. But it didn't.

Piper clutched the man's jacket, she'd know that texture anywhere—timeworn leather. She felt his hands smoothly move from her arms to the small of her back. He leaned away thoughtfully, studying her face. She kept her gaze down; sure, she was nearly frozen from the cold, but mostly she was flustered by a swarm of sensations. Then there was the unnerving, anesthetizing static, spinning her words incomprehensible.

She shivered.

The man pulled her closer.

*That* was unexpected, and kind of inappropriate. Piper assessed the stranger from beneath sopping bangs, the mind-numbing noise quieting; giving way to speech.

"Funny running into you like this," she kept it light, you never know.

By his expression, her comment stunned him more than the physical jolt. He recovered at once with a small but sincere smile.

"I wasn't prepared for *you*." He exhaled an involuntary sigh that seemed more than he meant to share.

She laughed timidly; marginally concerned he may be a psycho.

Recovering again, the man released her deliberately, taking one firm step back.

Transfixed by the subtlety of this stranger's indecision, Piper held her ground, content to just look at him, watching, waiting. So it wasn't until her gaze followed his gaze to *her* hands that Piper emerged from this bizarre fixation.

She loosened her stranglehold on his jacket, vainly smoothing wet leather. The stranger tensed under her touch. This didn't go unnoticed, by either of them. Deciding the stranger might be a psycho after all, Piper took two steps back.

"See ya!" She may even have said *farewell* or something equally horrifying. Then she ducked under the willow's protective fronds and was instantly pelted by firm slaps of rain. That helped. A little.

Piper didn't need to sneak another peek at the man. Her photographic mind had already catalogued every detail, from his shipshape cut to the fresh shave accentuating his rigid posture; or the way his thick lips pursed into a pout before lifting into a discerning smile; and those deep-set hazel eyes, which burned so hot they left her branded. So, *yes*, he was attractive—the imprint of tribal roots in his cheekbones and those hands—but there was something else, something Piper *didn't* see that bothered her.

She heard his voice, quickened her pace.

"See ya?" he followed her—step for step. "When might that be?"

"Uh," she eyed him cautiously; he was closer than she thought. "I was trying to be nice..."

"So you didn't mean it?" His tone fell somewhere between teasing and accusing.

Piper kept walking; glancing back occasionally to make sure the probable psycho wasn't going to do something stupid and predictable like pull a knife on her.

"I'm not sure," she deliberated before adding pleasantly, "Whatcha doin' out here?"

"I could ask you the same thing."

"Yeah but, I *know* I'm not a psycho. I'm not so sure about you."



"I think you know I'm not a psycho."

He was smiling at her, clearly entertained.

Piper faced him; arming herself with ample sass. "And how could I *know* that? I don't even know your name."

The stranger raised his brow, a smirk gathering in his gaze. "Is there some correlation between names and psychotic behavior?"

She gave him points for wit then challenged him with a look. "Depends on the name."

"Ah," he ran his hand down his face, raked back his wet hair. The downpour let up as his firm expression turned mischievous, "I'd better choose carefully then."

Piper glared. "That's exactly what a psycho would say."

He may have restrained a laugh.

"You gonna share or not?" she demanded.

He smiled. She didn't.

"Well, that's not very gentlemanly of you, sir."

"To the contrary, *my lady*, you initiated a rather intimate degree of physical contact back there and one could argue that customarily, at the very least, an introduction is required by the initiating party." His gaze hardened. "That would be *you*."

"You call *that* intimate?" Piper was aghast in a smiley sort of way.

"In some cases, albeit rare, marriage is the only acceptable outcome..." He stepped closer, smiling, dripping. "Let's just be clear," he continued, seriously now, "*you* threw yourself at *me*."

That's it! Piper pushed off her hood, pulled her hair into an angry twist then flicked the water at him. He tried not to laugh.

"Well, *sir*, I cannot accept your proposal at present," she professed contemptuously. "Decorum prevents me from marrying a man whose *name* I do not know!"

She postured, hands on hips, lips rising to a feisty sneer.

The stranger's almost-smile melted to a thoughtful pout. "You're gonna be trouble." Before Piper could retaliate, he presented his hand, "Name's Matthew Vynes."

Piper said nothing, an oddly familiar yet wholly foreign sensation burning her breastbone.

“Not too psychotic, I hope.” Matthew waited.

She thought about it, allowed a prudent sneer. “It’ll do.” She placed her hand in his, “Piper Laurel.”

Matthew’s warm crush of Piper’s cold hand flipped her stomach. Her eyes fell as her teeth buried in her lower lip.

“You’re freezing,” he drew her close. “Let’s get you home.”

It felt nice, too nice. Piper bolstered her judgment with thoughts of dead kittens and stupid people. It worked. She pulled away, though not very graciously,

“I know where *I*’m going,” she rebuffed, all gruff. “Do you know where *you’re* going?”

“Most of the time.”

“And today?” she practically scolded him.

“An old friend lives out this way,” he answered gravely.

“Name?”

“You and names...” Matthew focused on the path ahead, eyes stern. “It’s a strange preoccupation of yours, isn’t it?”

Piper started walking again, “Well, you’re a strange stranger, Matty. Not much like the strangers I usually slam into under willows during rainstorms.”

“Right back at ya, Pepper.”

“Pepper?”

“Matty?”

“You look like a Matty to me,” Piper downright christened him.

“And you’re a Pepper to me.” Matthew cocked his head to one side, catching Piper’s glare.

“Fine, *Matthew*.”

“Thank you, *Pepper*.”

Piper huffed, “And you said *I* was trouble.”

“I stand by my first impression.”

“And what impression is *that* exactly?” She was already offended.

“I’m not in the habit of oversharing...we only just met.”

“Typical, first he proposes and now he doesn’t know me well enough. That’s why I’m single. Stupid, stupid boys...”

Unmistakably unnerved, Matthew probed capably. Piper just laughed.

“That would be an overshare.”

He shook his head. “Like I said, trouble.”

“That’s what *he* said...right before he chose the other girl.”

Matthew busied himself moving branches out of Piper’s way, leading her with ease back the way she had come. This too didn’t go unnoticed.

“Things aren’t always what they seem, Pepper.”

Annoyed, Piper shoved Matthew’s shoulder. The jolt of something exchanged startled her, but the solid grimace playing on Matthew’s suddenly familiar face was more provoking than intriguing.

“You don’t even know me and you’re taking sides?” Piper lashed out.

“No.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Then what?”

“Emotions are intricate, that’s all I meant.”

Piper scrunched up her face. “*Intricate?* That’s a load of shit. Emotions are simple...you either have them or you don’t! The end.” Piper stalked past Matthew, head down. The wind coerced the rain into a punishing surge of piercing slaps. More penance. She was well into savoring it when she spied the Victorian. “It was nice while it lasted, Matty. Town’s that way. See ya!”

Piper’s words could have been stones by the fleeting expression on Matthew’s face. She knew the look of grief, it resonated with her, held her scarred-over stitches in place. He stood there, as if deciding how to proceed. Soaked in Matthew’s sudden sorrow, Piper made a choice, based solely on instinct; something she lived by that generally kept her safe, bored. *This* wasn’t safe, but that was kind of the point.

“You should come in...you know, get dry, have a drink...”

Unfortunately, she didn't stop there. Piper rambled on about the benefits of coffee, tea, beer, wine. She cringed during the bit about flavonoids; dammit, she even talked up her dead uncle, as if he was waiting to greet them on the front porch. She got a lot out, sadly, before Matthew approached, gently but assertively placing his hand on the small of her back. Only then did words fail, and Matthew escorted Piper home with all the natural assuredness of a man accompanying his woman about their day.

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As Piper pried her keys from wet jeans, she gave Matthew a sideways glance; several, in fact. The rain obviously didn't bother him. Matthew lingered back on the lawn, surveying the neglected Victorian. It could crumble at any moment. The wood siding—paper thin in spots, bulging in others—had lost its color decades ago; giant tufts of thick, green moss hid flecks of faded blue. The house may have been indigo at some point; now it suffered from jaundice and a nasty case of splotch.

During one of her glances, Piper saw Matthew release a full-body groan as his gaze captured rain seeping through four cracked window panes, the cloudy glass speckling fresh spores over healthy mold. When his inspection was complete, his focus found her. She balanced on a boulder acting as a step.

"Some people inherit jewels, Matty, but not me...no way! I get a broken house." She said this with pride; might as well, it was more than some get. She hadn't yet lost sight of that.

He was there, hands behind her hips. Just in case she slipped off the boulder. She glared.

"What?"

"You have a lady?" Piper's questions seemed more like accusations, even to her. She jammed her foot and shoulder against the front door as Matthew failed to or refused to provide an answer.

The extreme effort it took to simply enter her home drew a full smile from him. He followed her, barely using the boulder to spring himself onto the porch.

“Well?” she pressed.

“I’m sorry, was there a question?”

“You’re married, aren’t you?”

“No,” he answered quickly, with a straight face, “not really.”

She motioned him into the Victorian, churning over his terrible answer.

Standing in the foyer, he changed the subject. “I’m dripping on your beautiful floors.”

Piper scoffed, eyeballing the tarnished floorboards, tattered carpets.

“I’m serious. It won’t take much to get this wood back.”

“You know a lot about floors, do you?” Piper removed her soaked hoodie, muddied boots.

Matthew disrobed non-essentials, hesitantly. “Are you planning on restoring this place yourself?”

Piper said nothing; she was quite young when her God-given talent for ignoring men matured to fine art. Matthew offered remodeling recommendations, sharing specifics most homeowners would find invaluable; still, she said nothing.

“It’s a ton of work, but with a few friends it’s doable.” He glanced up from unlacing his boots.

She shifted her gaze the moment his eyes found hers.

“Oh,” he chuckled softly, “I know that look. Well, will you at least share my offense?”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“I disagree.” Though charmed by her quirkiness he said nothing more.

Dammit, she let it go. *Her* history was probably worse. “Dryer’s this way,” she ordered.

The house was sporadically furnished. A bulky table by the front door greeted guests, home-base for a sturdy steel bowl overflowing with coins, crumpled dollars, and a single set of keys. Piper only used cash, mostly because she found pleasure watching young cashiers struggle to count back change; pretty much made her day. Most of

the décor was Oren's. She wanted to take down the black and white photographs lining the hallway and throw out the checkered shag carpet, but didn't. And there were boxes everywhere, hogtied with duct tape, hand scrawled with locations—living room, closet, *Hell*—followed by big black question marks.

Creaking floorboards announced every step down the narrow hall. Off to the left, Oren's mismatched sofa and love seat framed his marble coffee table. The dinky television set with aluminum-foil-tipped rabbit ears was Piper's. She usually got the weather channel, left it on mute, just for the satellite images. Random knickknacks scattered along the fireplace mantle were the only signs of life in the dreary space.

In stark contrast, the kitchen, situated down the hall on the right, was well used and brightly lit. That space was *all* Piper. She gutted the kitchen and master bedroom her first day, leaving everything else untouched. The awareness of walking through Oren's life, and then her own, was somehow reassuring; she didn't need an entire house; something about every square inch representing *her* was nauseating. The only room she *needed* was a functional kitchen, and not because she liked to cook, because she didn't.

The aroma of coffee and cinnamon warmed the kitchen, masking the musk of sour carpet wafting in from the hall. Tucked in the far corner, a red wooden dining nook and three mismatched chairs—one white, two turquoise—defined the room, a little regal, a little farmhouse; inviting long, lively chats over cribbage and crumb cakes; which she neither played nor ate. Airy white curtains framed the window behind the nook, casting an ethereal view of the forest standing guard over the otherwise barren backyard. Rain showered the glass, streaming into an empty herb planter nestled on the outside windowsill. She was still undecided; rosemary and lavender for fragrance or sage and red clover for color?

Piper led Matthew past the kitchen into a small room crammed with wine crates, a washer and dryer, utility sink. She stopped in

front of a rickety metal shelf; reached up, tiptoeing the last inch to retrieve a cardboard box overflowing with flannel.

“Don’t ask,” she grumbled, “best I can do.”

“It’s more than you need to do. Thank you.”

Piper scrutinized Matthew head to toe. “And you’re *sure* you’re not a psycho?”

Matthew stood a little taller. “*You’re* sure I’m not a psycho, remember?”

With a fleeting grin, Piper closed the door behind her; images of dead kittens cluttering her mind.

~

Matthew waited in the hall, almost hypnotized by a picture of Piper as a young girl, maybe five, six years old; four happy boys kneeled on a grassy hill, another stood behind them, Piper hoisted on his shoulders; she balanced barefoot, utterly fearless, holding a bouquet of wild flowers in one hand and a handwritten sign in the other that read: Happy Birthday, Uncle O!

The Victorian’s squeaks and creaks didn’t lend to sneaking up on people, so Matthew was well aware of Piper approaching. It wasn’t as if she was sneaking, though. She thumped down the stairs in her typical rush just as Matthew turned.

“They fit,” she beamed, glancing at the photograph Matthew had been examining. Her throat tightened as she shoved down the sentiment it triggered.

“I don’t think burgundy is my color,” he tried to joke, tugging at the sweater that brought him back to his academy days.

“You definitely wear it better than the owner.”

Finding joy in his discomfort, she took a step forward. He took a step back. Piper smiled. Matthew frowned. It was quiet. Piper liked the sudden play of awkward. Matthew didn’t. He rushed to fill the space, inquiring somewhat naturally,

“What is it you do when you’re not throwing yourself at strangers?”

“Well, that *is* my specialty...”

He was curious and set on an answer. "I noticed your stockpile of liquor in the back. You don't seem an alcoholic..."

"I wish...sadly, I just broker fine wine, spirits, that sort of thing." The thought of work irked her. It was Saturday, dammit.

"You must meet a lot of interesting people."

He sounded intrigued, but she knew better.

"Sure," she humored him, smiling as a willful memory pushed forward. "Actually, an old acquaintance is now my main client...he runs a bar downtown. He's more brute than grown man, but he's certainly *interesting*. You just don't know what's coming your way, you know, karma and that. And you?" She moved closer.

He processed her words before responding simply, "I deal in antiquities."

Well that sounds shady! "So you work for a museum?"

"No, not really." The look Piper gave him now only fueled his amusement. "I don't work for *one* outfit. I freelance...retrieve antiques for collectors."

"Oh, I see."

"Do you?" he countered, as skeptical as her.

"Sure," she smirked, "you're the muscle rich bastards hire to get what they want...am I right?"

He didn't answer.

"I'm right."

He chuckled, "Mostly it's a lot of travel...dull, but it's legit. You don't believe me?"

"No, not really." Piper turned toward the kitchen.

Amused, Matthew went back to examining the pictures.

"Coffee?"

"Uh, sure." He hesitated before making his way to the living room.

There, he picked up trinkets—a lump of quartz; a knob of a woman, short and fat; stone money; train whistle; a matryoshka doll, its center missing. He turned each oddity over in his hands, feeling the weight, reading inscriptions, inspecting the craftsmanship.



“You *sure*?” Piper poked her head around the corner, inspecting him.

He looked up, etched bracelet in hand, his gaze a question.

“You didn’t sound *sure*.” She shot him a smart sneer before escaping once again.

The novelty of having company put Piper in a tiny frazzle; she usually didn’t give a damn, barely pointed out the bathroom, then went about her business. But with Matthew she felt an inexplicable desire to attend to him, to make him feel at home. It was in this unfamiliar rush to please that Piper bolted back into the hall, nearly toppling Matthew, again.

It was instinct; Matthew’s hands claimed Piper’s waist, steadying her steadied frame. Inches apart, neither spoke. The earsplitting silence calmed Piper; a bolstering wave of courage brought her hands to his chest.

“And you’re *sure* we’ve never met before?” she breathed, gazing up at him.

Inhaling thoughtfully, Matthew brought his hand to her cheek. Piper held her breath.

Down the hall, in the kitchen, on the counter, the coffee pot burbled to a sputtering stop.

“I should go,” Matthew released her.

“If you want,” Piper replied, her voice thin but grating.

He was unexpectedly contrite as he clarified, “I *should*.”

Piper couldn’t help but read more into his words, his conflicted demeanor as he pulled on his wet jacket and walked back into the rain.

“Can I drive you somewhere?” She grasped at anything in a manner so unlike herself it disgusted her.

He didn’t respond, didn’t turn back.

“Your clothes!”

“Give ‘em to your ex,” he suggested coolly, but Piper could see the tension pulsing through his temples, down his jaw.

Another moment and he was lost to the forest. Piper wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly too frozen to move.