

# Shelter

The three boys drive in silence.

It's March, the ugly part of the winter when the snow on the sides of the road is brown and spiky and refuses to melt. Late enough that the darkness beyond the cone of their headlights is black and heavy and seems solid enough to lean against. The boys' eyes are forward, avoiding each other, studying the night. They're dressed for job interviews—rumpled baby blue button-downs with ties that don't quite match—because they're too young to own funeral clothes. Or to know that wakes don't serve much more than cheese and crackers. Their groaning stomachs echo in the otherwise silent car.

Max is in the backseat. He catches a glimpse of his face, thin and pale, in the rear-view mirror and wishes that he hadn't. He can't shake the image of Wyatt's dad in the open casket. Dressed smartly, in a suit, but the face had been all wrong. Bloated, like they'd pumped him full of something. Flesh colored makeup caked between his hair and his ears. Max hadn't known him well, but Wyatt's dad was a loud, boisterous guy. A presence in every room. The type of person that you could not see for months and still practically hear his voice in your head. Seeing him like that, stuffed into a box, made Max nauseous. At the wake, after hugging Wyatt and his mother, Max hovered at the far edge of the room, staring at the ceiling. Hours later, he's still antsy. For the first time in his life, he's uncomfortably aware of the fragility of his body. Just a sack of skin keeping everything in place.

Aidan, in the passenger seat, tries to fall asleep but can't. He's thinking about the wake abstractly, less about Wyatt's dad in particular than about death itself. He and Wyatt had been in a car accident the month before. Aidan had been driving. They'd hit a patch of ice on the highway's shoulder, skidded across two empty lanes, and ended up in a snowbank. The front of Aidan's car crumbled, totaled, but he and Wyatt were completely fine. After the shock wore off, they'd laughed about it, leaning side by side against the folded metal as they waited for a tow truck and the cops. They'd felt invincible.

Now, driving home from the wake, Aidan does cosmic calculations in his head. Had their dumb luck cost Wyatt his dad? Aidan feels guilty, then ridiculous for having such a self-important thought in the first place. He doesn't mention it to the others. Instead, he watches the beginning of a snow flurry on the other side of the windows, terrified, for the first time since his accident, of the road. It's as if every rumble beneath their feet is the car losing traction. The start of a slide. Their dumb luck from the month before finally running out.

Chris, behind the wheel, is too exhausted to feel much of anything. Nearly three hours, with traffic, to Westchester that morning. And two more till they're back home. The snowfall has him on edge. The roads aren't well lit. His eyelids droop during the stretches of dark road and are jerked open again by the rush of light from each passing car. Chris knows he needs to stop, rest his eyes, or get a coffee, if he wants to make it home. Still, he can't bring himself to stop. He's thankful for the distraction of driving, of having something to do with his hands. Anytime he made the mistake of relaxing, letting his guard down, his thoughts would wander back to Wyatt's family, to Wyatt's brother in particular, fifteen and suddenly fatherless. Standing last in line at the wake, shell-shocked.

It makes Chris think of his own family, his own brother. Ten years older than Chris, almost thirty now, with Down syndrome. Living at home with Chris's parents because all the group homes and inpatient services are a crooked mess. The brother who, in an unspoken understanding, everyone in Chris's family knows will be the first of them to go. Then it will be Chris's turn to shake hands at the wake. Letting his friends watch him grieve in real time.

Chris focuses on the road. On reality. On *now*. The stress of driving in the snow keeps him sane.

A blip of yellowish light pokes through the trees. The boys, stomachs growling, round the a turn in the highway and the light grows, comes into focus. Tucked between an exit ramp and a wall of barren trees is a little two-road

town. Most of the buildings are dark and abandoned looking. But close to the exit ramp, a few building lengths away from the others, is the source of the light. An old-timey diner with reflective metal walls and an empty parking lot, clashing like a bad joke against the dead winter night.

Lorena eyes the boys as they walk inside. She doesn't like what she sees. Three of them, college-aged, overdressed in boat shoes and loose ties. She sets down the glasses she'd been hand-drying to keep busy and intercepts them by the front door.

"Can I help you?" She stands between them and the bar.

The boys squirm, steal glances past her. For a moment, Lorena is embarrassed—for her empty dining room with its scuffed tabletops and reruns playing on the TV. For running the type of place where she, the owner, was pulling triple duty as hostess and server and kitchen help, too. For how pathetic it was that any through traffic, any customer, might make the difference in affording the lease.

"It's just the three of us," says the tall one. He's at the point of their triangle. The only one looking Lorena in the eyes.

She leads them to a table by the window, overlooking the parking lot, far away from the kitchen. They sit down without a fuss. There's snow still caked to the bottoms of their shoes.

Behind the kitchen's double doors, Oscar, the only other employee working, shoots her a look. "What's up?"

Lorena just shrugs. "Guess you should fire the flat-top back up." After the week they'd had, she'd told most of the kitchen and wait staff not to come in. Things were slow. Losing- money-each-night-they-kept-the-lights-on slow. Telling-Oscar-not-to-prep-*anything* slow.

She walks back to the boys with a handful of menus, preparing herself for whatever bullshit they're about to pull. Fake IDs or made up allergies or any of the other issues that the highway traffic Lorena depends on inevitably dragged up. But the boys just thank her quietly and stare at their menus, seeming glad to have something to do. Lorena leaves them alone.

As Oscar fiddles with the grill, Lorena watches the boys over the lip of the kitchen window. The tall one is playing with a paper straw wrapper, absent-mindedly shredding it into smaller and smaller and smaller pieces that Lorena knows she'll have to pick up later. The small one is just sitting there, blankly. There are dark, deep bags under his eyes. The third is typing furiously on his cellphone. Then he stands up, walks out the restaurant's front doors. Through the smudgy glass window, Lorena watches him pace the length of the parking lot, cell phone to his ear. He talks with his hands, looking frustrated, and

hangs up aggressively. When he comes back inside, his cheeks are red from the burn of the wind.

“They look sad,” says Oscar. Lorena blinks. Oscar’s English isn’t great but, for once, it doesn’t have to be. Lorena turns back at the boys. They really do look sad, she realizes. Their eyes trained on the ground instead of each other. Their slouched backs. She feels antsy, uncomfortable with how she’d misread the situation. She feels like she should go say something to them. Apologize for her earlier gruffness.

Next time she comes out of the kitchen, she greets them properly. “Did you guys just get into town tonight?” She knows her tone is too chipper. She hopes her smile isn’t too pushy. The boys look at each other, uncomfortable with her attention.

“We’re just passing through,” says the tall one. “We have a long drive.”

“Well, stay as long as you need,” Lorena says. “It’s getting nasty out there.” She gestures out to the half-inch of snow already covering the parking lot. As if they hadn’t noticed.

The boys thank her, but Lorena can tell they’re eager to eat and get out. To get home. She takes their orders with a cheeriness she hopes comes off as comforting. The first two boys order the cheapest entree on the menu. The sick-looking one just asks for a cup of soup.

Oscar hums as he works, matching the melodies of the oldies playing out of the restaurant speakers. The music reminds him of his grandmother’s house—songs with lyrics he can’t understand, but the melodies that had once struck him as old-timey and quaint are suddenly lush with memories. Good memories. He hopes that, even forced, his cheeriness can cut through the tension in the restaurant’s air.

Next to him, prepping the vegetables with an untrained knife, Lorena is flustered. Well, Lorena was always flustered—had been every day for the eight months Oscar has been working for her. Longer, if the other chefs were to be believed, constantly in the middle of one crisis or another—but something about the boys in the dining room had set her off even worse than usual. She’d been almost angry when they’d walked in, as if they’d ruined the illusion of her empty restaurant as something other than it really was. And once Oscar had built up the nerve to say something, her sudden hospitality was just as overbearing. In English so fast that Oscar couldn’t decipher any of it, she’d lingered at the boys’ table with questions that they didn’t want to hear.

Oscar flips the chicken over in its pan and sprinkles more seasoning over the half-cooked flesh. To his right, there’s a dull thud of metal on wood as Lorena fusses with the vegetables.

Oscar's fiancée teases him about Lorena, saying the only reason she keeps him around on slow nights was in the off chance he'd sleep with her. But Oscar knows Lorena isn't like that. After so many shifts like these, selling so few entrées that the entire night was a loss, he feels bad for her. Middle-aged and childless, mad at the world for the dying restaurant dragging her down with it. And she was the one paying him, wasn't she? Eighty bucks out of the register at closing time, untaxed cash. Eighty bucks the restaurant hadn't earned. Lorena knows about Oscar's baby, knows about the second one on the way, and kept giving him shifts when she could barely keep the lights on. That had to count for something.

Spending night after night with this sad woman his mother's age, an entire language barrier between them, Oscar wishes he could do more. He feels a guilt he can't articulate that, after everything Lorena has done for him and his family, all he can do for her in return is cook her a meal with ingredients she'd paid for. A meal they'd split in silence, standing side by side at the otherwise empty bar.

Lorena sweeps the peppers she'd been cutting onto the grill. They sizzle in the oil, harmonizing with Oscar's hums.

"I love that sound," says Oscar, in English. At first, it seems like Lorena doesn't understand what he means. Then she shakes her head, snaps back to reality, and turns to him.

"Me too," she says. "The smell, too. It reminds me of cooking with my mom." She talks slowly and articulates enough that Oscar can make out every syllable. He smiles but focuses back on the grill. Lets the sound of dinner cooking say what he can't.

Oscar watches as Lorena brings the boys their food. They have a quick exchange that Oscar can't make out. But after, Oscar is glad to see, she leaves them alone. The boys take giant bites of their food, even the sick-looking one. They're finished in a matter of seconds. The snow outside is still falling, and no one seems eager to pull his coat back on and march into the cold. Then, so subtly Oscar almost doesn't notice, there's a hint of a smile on the quiet one's face. Color in his cheeks again. A little bit of warmth.

And then, stomachs full, fingers thawed, the boys start talking.

The five of them are like a diorama, frozen in time, backlit by the restaurant's yellow light. Outside the storm picks up. A half inch of snow covers the parking lot and the tops of the cars. Their footprints have long since filled in. But inside, protected from the wind by a thin layer of glass, the five of them huddle for warmth and for food like animals in a cave. The young man watches the old woman and the old woman watches the boys and the boys watch each other but really, it's not important who's watching who. They all

watch each other. They're an unlikely pack just trying to make it through the night. All they can do is eat, rest, and be together. Maybe, if they can muster up the strength, howl at the moon.