

It was a foggy morning when he arrived at the lake, as would be many of his mornings there. He stepped out of the car and took a long, deep breath. As it reached his lungs a chill set in all over his body, but he welcomed it because he knew it was a clean chill. He would get used to the air shortly. Reaching into his pocket he hit the button to open the trunk of his SUV. Ben came bounding out and took off to explore all the new smells. It was quiet here. Save for the scurry of Ben's paws and the occasional bark, the only sound came from the near frozen ground as it cracked and shivered with every step he took, his footprints etched in the frost tipped grass. At first view the cabin was much as he remembered. The twin pines blocking most of it from view but leaving just enough space to see the bathroom window and the once deep brown wood from which it was built. Before going in he walked once around the outside, taking it all in, letting the memories wash over him like water on the million year old rocks lying on the beach down below. He saw himself laughing as he hid behind a pile of tires by the shed. He saw his cousin frantically climbing down a tree after awaking a colony of bees. He saw his grandfather sitting on the porch with pipe smoke hanging overhead, waiting for a breeze to drag it out over the lake. But the closer he looked the more he noticed the cabin was not quite how he remembered it. A tree had fallen sometime ago and mangled the northwest corner of the deck. Wind and snow had beaten the roof thin. The screen door had blown off and settled in the woods and was now overgrown with grass and weeds. He knew the place was going to need some fixing up, but he welcomed the challenge. Pushing the door open, he stumbled in the dark to the windows that faced the lake and pulled the curtains open. The dim light of morning flooded into the room, illuminating years of happiness and dust that had once hung in the air and now settled on the furniture. He leaned on the window sill and shook his head in wonder. Somehow he knew he had made the right decision in coming up here.

The next few weeks would go by slowly, but that was alright, that was simply the way life moved up on the North Shore of Lake Superior. Aaron's time would be spent mostly in repairing the old cabin and walking on the rock beach with Ben. This morning was like most mornings. He woke early, made coffee, and sat on the deck as the sun crept its way across the lake. Ben lay beside him. After drinking two thirds of his cup, Aaron set it down for Ben to finish. Around 8am the pair headed into town to get the supplies they would need for today's project. The mom and pop hardware store had been there since Aaron was young, which comforted him. It still had the same layout, the same rusty sign out front, hell it even had the same smell. Turning the corner he half expected to see his grandpa talking with the old man who used to run the checkout counter. Instead, he saw a young woman. After twenty minutes Aaron had everything he needed and made his way to the front of the store. The young woman was still there.

"Did you find everything you needed" she asked politely.

"Sure did," he replied.

"Good to hear." She began punching furiously at the cash register. Aaron marveled at how they managed to run a store without a barcode scanner. "This might be way off, but are you the Holmes boy that used to come up and stay with your grandparents?"

Aaron laughed, amazed by her memory. "Yeah that's me. How'd you know?"

"I remember seeing you come in here with your grandpa all the time. I was one of the little girls causing trouble in the aisles." She paused, "You look just like him you know? Minus the gray hair of course."

Again, Aaron laughed. He ran his fingers through his brown hair. "No grays yet."

"We were so sad to hear about him passing away. He was never the same after your grandma passed."

"I know," replied Aaron sullenly. "But they were happy when they were together, and that's

what counts I think.”

“Definitely,” she agreed. “Well, your total is \$67.85.” Aaron pulled out a wad of bills and counted off what he needed. She quickly handed him his change.

“Thanks,” he said coolly, sliding the money back into his pocket, “it was nice talking to you...” he paused.

“April,” she finished.

“April.”

“Gonna be here awhile?” she asked causally. He nodded as he started for the door. “Then I’ll see you around...”

“Aaron,” he called from the doorway.

“Aaron.”

Ben was waiting patiently for him by the door just as he did when they went anywhere. Aaron loaded the wood and hardware and started the car. Rolling the windows down and turning the country music up (Ben liked country) they made their way back home through the windy highway and onto the dirt road leading to the cabin. Aaron liked the sound the tires made on the gravel. He liked the bumps and divots. Maybe it was because that’s how he imagined his life’s path. It had never been smooth, always rough; dirt and rock and mud. He would have preferred a nice blacktop but he had accepted this road long ago, and now, years later, he was secretly proud of it.

The work on the deck would stretch late into the afternoon. Before dinner Aaron and Ben made the short walk down the wooden walkway that stretched across the large black rocks to the dark pebble beach. Ben quickly found a piece of driftwood and spit it at Aaron’s feet. Aaron sat down and tossed the stick making sure it didn’t fly into the water. It was far too cold for Ben this time of year and the last thing Aaron needed was a sick dog on his hands. Sitting on the beach, Aaron gazed out over the water. It

was peaceful. Waves lazily lapped upon rocks. A bird would call out now and then. Off in the distance he could see the lights of a cargo ship as it inches along the horizon. He tossed Ben's stick again. He thought back to the stories he was told as a child, of the Edmund Fitzgerald, the mighty ship who rests somewhere on the lake's floor. It was amazing how the lake could be so calm and peaceful one minute and the next roar up into a tempest. Aaron shook his head, realizing that's exactly how he ended up here. One moment calm, the next chaos.

After deciding he was too tired to make dinner the pair headed back into town. Brad, the owner of Sandy's, knew Aaron's grandpa pretty well and didn't mind having Ben sit by the bar so it quickly became their favorite place in town. Aaron had the Friday night pork chop special. Ben stuck with a bone and water. There was a basketball game on above the bar which held most of Aaron's attention so he didn't notice when someone came and sat two chairs away from. It wasn't until a beer came sliding down the bar top that he noticed April.

"For me," he asked innocently.

"Well yes, unless of course your dog drinks beer," she joked.

"Ben? He does, but he's trying to quit."

"Well then I guess the beer is for you."

"Appreciate it," he said with a nod, turning his attention back to the game. She paused.

"A girl buys you a beer and you don't offer her a seat next to you? Things must be different down in the city."

"I'm sorry," he replied sheepishly, "you're totally right. I guess it's been me and Ben for so long that I've lost a step or two in my manners. Please, slide on over." He pulled out the chair next to him. Ben's head perked up. Aaron shook his head no. He went back to his bone. April grabbed her coat and draped it over her new chair. She slid her beer and sandwich over too. Hopping a bit, she elbowed up to the bar.

“Ben seems like a good dog. How long have you had him?” Aaron scratched his head, trying to think back,

“Been about six years now. I got him shortly after my grandpa died. He was living in the dumpster behind my house so one day I left the back porch open and he came inside. He’s been with me ever since.”

“Wow! What a great story. What kind of dog is he?”

“He’s a Shiba Inu, or at least that’s my best guess. It’s a Japanese breed,” said Aaron, taking a sip of his beer.

“Ben’s not much a Japanese name. Where did that come from,” April inquired.

“It’s short for Benedict. St. Benedict is the patron saint of the homeless. I think it fits me and Ben pretty well.”

April smiled, “I get why it fits Ben, but why does it fit you?”

“Well, let’s just say I don’t come from a ‘Leave it to Beaver’ household.” Aaron laughed as he did when he was uncomfortable. He looked over at April. She was obviously not satisfied with his answer. Her eyes never left him, even as she lifted her beer to and from her mouth.

“Come on, let’s hear it. If we’re going to be friends we need to get to know each other a little bit.”

“Oh, so we’re going to be friends,” questioned Aaron lightheartedly.

“There’s not a lot of people in our age group up here. Its either me or you’re hanging out with Brad over there.” Brad threw up a middle finger salute from his perch behind the bar. “Back at ya,” called April. “So come on, let’s hear the Aaron Holmes story.”

“Alright well, if you insist. But first of all, my name isn’t actually Aaron Holmes. It’s Aaron Barnes. My mom was a Holmes. Her parents were the ones who owned the cabin. I was born out in Oregon, where my mom met my dad. My dad split pretty quickly after I was born so we moved back here. We

bounced around until I was about three then moved back in with my grandparents when my mom got sick. She died a few months later. From then on I was raised by everyone and no one. At first I lived with my aunt and three cousins, but money got tight and they couldn't afford me. I moved back in with my grandparents for a few years before one of my mom's friends offered me a place at her house. I lived with her and her husband until I got to high school. They were good to me, but they weren't family, so I moved back in with my grandparents. I stayed with them until I turned 18. I tried going to college and made it through the first few semesters before grandma passed away. I came home to be with my grandpa, look after him ya know? Well as you know, pretty soon it was just me. They left me everything in the will. I sold it all, everything but the place up here. At the time I had no intention of ever coming back here, but it just didn't feel right selling it. It had been the only constant in my life. Even with all the moving, every summer I was up here. No matter how bad things got I always had the lake to look forward to."

"What made you decide to finally come back," asked April, who had been listening intently to his narrative.

"Things in the city can be rough," Aaron replied curtly.

"What does that mean?"

"I'd rather not talk about it," he mumbled, obviously uncomfortable. April knew to drop it. Ben's bowl was empty. Aaron bent over and poured the last few drops of his beer into it. Ben licked it up violently.

"I thought he was trying to quit," chuckled April.

"He's on a ten step program," laughed Aaron, placing the now empty bottle back on the bar.

"Thanks again for the beer. I'm sure I'll be seeing you around." Aaron swung his coat around his shoulders and pushed in his stool. "Good night April."

Beer and eggs; it was a Saturday morning tradition that had been around since Aaron was old enough to get someone to buy beer for him. Sitting at his table looking out the window, Aaron marveled at the beauty of it all. The city, with its noise and smog and anger and stench seemed to exist on another planet. He was worlds away from that now and that made him smile. Ben suddenly perked up from his spot on the floor, his eyes fixed on the door. Aaron tensed. With a jolt he sprang for the cupboard above the refrigerator. There was a knock at the door. Aaron froze, his hand on the knob of the cupboard. A voice called out and immediately a wave of relief washed over him. It was April,

“Aaron are you home?”

“One second,” he called back. Walking to the door he undid the deadbolt and the chain, both new additions. “Good morning,” he said with a smile as his eyes met Aprils through the screen door, “come on in.” April step in and immediately began rubbing behind Ben’s ears. She took stock of the place, her eyes finally settling on the table.

“I see you boys have the bachelor lifestyle going in full swing around here. Beer and eggs huh?”

“It’s a Saturday tradition,” Aaron smiled. Ben barked.

“Well I’m sorry I interrupted. I was just stopping by to see what you were up to. Mom’s got the register so I’m free today.”

“Well today me and Ben were going to finish the deck, but if you have something better in mind we could definitely postpone it until tomorrow.”

“Are you serious? I work in a hardware store. I love fixing things. Can I help?”

“Of course! Ben’s really only good at warding off bears and grabbing beers from the cooler so some extra hands would be greatly appreciated. I’d offer you some beer and eggs but I think that’s the last of both,” said Aaron, motioning to the table. April walked over and ate the last forkful of eggs.

“That fine. I’ve got a case in the car.” They spent the morning and afternoon drinking beer and finishing the deck. Their conversations wandered, always easy and forthcoming, although whenever

they strayed towards Aaron's past, he was quick to steer them in another direction. At first she just thought him shy, but the more it happened the more curious April got.

By the time the deck was finished the sun was sinking quickly across the lake. They took Ben down to the beach and Aaron quickly made a fire up near the black rocks that jutted out from the side of the hill leading up to the cabin. With his back against them, Aaron let April slide in close and rest her head on his shoulder. As time wore on he sensed her tiring. Her sentences became less and less profound, her words less and less calculated. She grabbed his arm and put it around her own shoulder and became quiet. Ben came over and settled in on her lap. Aaron, who was not tired at all, sat awake, thoughts floating through his head like the tiny bits of wood that glowed red as they were lifted from the fire by a passing breeze. Gracefully they glided skyward, flickering until at last the wind extinguished them or blew them into the frigid October water. After an hour, with the fire now little more than embers, Aaron stood up, picking up April in his arms as he did. He carried her up the wooden stairs, across the walkway and back to the cabin. Slowly he lowered her into his bed and tucked her in, hoping not to wake her. As he turned to leave and make a bed up on the couch he felt something tug at his hand. April had indeed woken up and she silently pulled him back to his bed. She pulled his hand close to her, continued up his arm, to his shoulder, and then finally pulled his face in to hers. Aaron had been kissed many times in his 27 years of living, but never before had he been kissed like that.

Over the winter Aaron found himself up at the hardware store more and more frequently. He had been hesitant at first, emotional vulnerability was never a strong suit of his. But the more time he spent with April the more at ease he became. April was quick to introduce him to her family; keeping secrets in such a small town was near impossible. One night at April's apartment, Aaron was sitting on the couch with April's head in his lap. She looked up at him, her blues meeting his green. "Did something happen?"

“What?”

“To make you come up here, did something happen?”

“April...”

“Aaron, I don’t care what it is, but whatever it is I want to know. I promise it won’t change the way I feel about you, I just can’t stand this feeling. It’s like walking through one of those haunted houses, I just know something is out there waiting to jump out at me.”

“April, you know that I care a lot about you, but there are some things about me that you’re better off not knowing. Trust me, if there were another way to do this I would do it, but it’s complicated and I don’t want to throw you in the middle of it. I came up here to get away from my life back there, and I know it’s not easy for you to hear, but for now I need you to just trust me and believe me when I say that nothing back there is as important to me as what I’ve found here.” He squeezed her hand. Silently, she squeezed his hand back.

Winter turned into spring. Spring turned into summer and April forgot all about their conversation. Things in town got busy again as tourists came in droves. April’s grandpa decided to hire Aaron part time to help when things got crazy around the store. When he wasn’t working up at the store Aaron did free lance carpentry. Especially after the long winters, most cabins and houses on the lake needed repairs so with the help of April’s grandpa and his many contacts, Aaron quickly became the most popular fixer-upper in the area. One Saturday morning, as Aaron was waist deep in the lake installing a costumer’s new dock, April came walking down the path. She looked beautiful in her purple sundress. Aaron smiled and waved with a free hand. He was shirtless and April couldn’t help but marvel at his chiseled features. She patiently waited on the shore until he put the last pole in place and waded back to meet her. Still standing in the water he called her down, “Come test her out,” as he patted the newly finished dock, “or do you not trust my craftsmanship?”

“I do,” she replied tentatively as she stepped out over the water. The dock held steady. She leaned down to kiss him.

“What’s up,” he asked, stepping onto the shore and putting his shirt back on.

“Well, I just got a call from my friend Maggie who lives in the city. She’s getting married in a couple of weeks and wanted to double check if I was going to be able to make it down.”

“Oh that sounds fun. Are you going to?”

“Well...” April paused nervously, “I was wondering if you wanted to come with me.” The smile quickly faded from Aaron’s face.

“Come with you? To the city? April, I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why not? What’s so bad about the city?” April’s voice got higher as she got excited. “It’s not some evil lair that you escaped from. I promise it won’t bite. Plus you would love Maggie and her fiancée is amazing. I promise you’d have fun.”

“April I’m sure Maggie’s wonderful but... I can’t go back there. I’ve got a real good thing going for me here right now. I have you, I have the house, I have two jobs that I like. Going back there would put all that at risk and I just can’t do that.” He tried to grab her hand as he finished. She pulled away.

“Okay,” she said, “I understand.” It was obvious that she didn’t understand and that she was upset, but she didn’t argue her case any further. She turned and walked back up the path back to her car. When she was out of sight Aaron grabbed a rock from the shore and hurled it out into the water, yelling as he did so,

“Aaahhhhhhhhh!” From up the hill April heard him. Pausing to wipe a tear from her eye, she got in her car and drove off. “Dammit Ben,” Aaron yelled. Ben came over and Aaron began rubbing his fur, calming both of them down. “Why can’t things just be simple for us? What did we ever do wrong?”

The next few weeks came and went quickly. Both April and Aaron were very busy. Neither spoke of the upcoming wedding, both knowing that any further discussion would leave both parties with a

sour taste in their mouth. Before she left April came over to Aaron's cabin. She kissed both him and Ben, saying she'd say hello to the city for them. As she drove away Aaron waved, Ben by his side. "Am I doing the right thing," he asked. Ben's dark eyes looked up at him as if to say, 'I hope so.' "Me too Ben, me too."

It had only been a weekend but Aaron was anxious to see April. He hoped that she would be as excited to see him and forget about the way they had left things. Ben perked up, hearing the car before Aaron did. He rushed to the door; apparently he had missed her too. When she had been gone Aaron tried to picture her in his head but as she stepped out of the car he quickly realized his imagined version paled in comparison to the real thing. She marched up the steps and flung herself into his arms, kissing him as if he had just returned from fighting a war. Aaron was always amazed at the effect weddings had on non-married women; either it sent them into a spiral of self doubt and worry, or it made them excited and hopeful believing themselves to be the next to walk down the aisle. April appeared to align more with the latter. "How was the wedding? Tell me everything." They grabbed beers and moved to the porch. April recanted the whole ceremony, every detail, from the beautiful dresses, to the music, right down to the color of flower petals that were sprinkled on every table. Aaron listened in amazement. It was obvious April had caught the wedding bug. She told him all about the many friends she got to see again and the adventure they had downtown the night before the wedding. Aaron laughed as she recounted their drunken 3am trip to the hotel pool and their failed attempt to have McDonalds delivered to their room. After April was finally talked out, Aaron got up to grab another beer, but she stopped him,

"Oh I almost forgot. I saw the house you used to live in with your grandparents." At first Aaron was confused.

"What?"

“Yeah, I thought it would be neat to see where you grew up, so I got the address from my grandma’s old Christmas card list and stopped by on my way back this morning. You always talked it down, but it really seems like a nice neighborhood.” She looked to Aaron, expecting to see him smile. His face had paled.

“April you shouldn’t have done that,” was all he could manage to say. Now it was April’s turn to be confused.

“What? Why?”

“I left the city for a reason. That part of my life is over, and it needs to stay over.”

“Okay okay. I’m sorry. I should have asked you before I did anything,” she looked over to Aaron, whose face had regained some of its color. She continued, “I just think completely leaving your old life behind is unhealthy. You can’t just up and leave and expect people to forget all about you. One of your friends was outside the house looking for you, so obviously people miss...” Aaron cut her off.

“Wait, what did you just say?” His face has quickly turned ghostly again. “What friend?” April was suddenly very scared. Aaron was grabbing her arm, harder than he intended.

“He didn’t tell me his name, but when I got out of the car he asked if I’d seen you. I told him you moved up here.” At hearing this Aaron sprang from his seat.

“You need to go now.” He pulled her up and grabbed her purse from under the table. April was flustered. Not knowing what she did wrong she asked for answers,

“Aaron, what is going on? Why do I have to leave?”

“There’s no time to explain right now, just get in the car and go. Go straight home. I’ll come get you when I can.”

“No!” she screamed. “I’m not going anywhere until you tell me what’s going on.” The sound of her scream shocked Aaron and made him realize how she must feel.

“Okay, if I tell you what’s going on do you promise to do whatever I say?”

“Yes,” she replied solemnly.

“Okay, about a year ago I was pretty depressed. Whenever I needed someone to talk to I went to the cemetery and sat at my grandparents’ graves. One night I was there pretty late and I fell asleep. I woke to shouts. There were two men holding guns to the back of another man’s head. He was begging them for more time, for forgiveness. Then they shot him. It was dark so they didn’t know I was there, but they were standing in the headlights of their car so I could see them plain as day. I went to the police station and told them everything. Apparently the guys were very dangerous men with a lot of dangerous friends so the police offered me witness protection but I told them I would come up here until the trial. No one knew about this place so they’d never be able to find me up here...until now.” April, realizing what she had done, put her hand over her mouth. Everything finally made sense.

“Oh my god Aaron. I’m so stupid. I’m sorry. I had no idea. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she repeated as he ushered her towards the driveway.

“It’s okay, I’ll figure something out. But for now I need you to go home and call the police and tell them...” Aaron stopped short. He covered April’s mouth and put a finger to his own. For a second they stood there in silence. Aaron broke it, “I can hear a car coming. Back into the house! Hurry, hurry, hurry!” They scurried back inside. April’s heart was now beating very fast; Aaron could feel it through her hand. Moments after they shut the door a black sedan turned the corner and headed slowly down the driveway. Aaron saw it from the window and quickly drew the blinds. He ran to the fridge and opened the cupboard above and pulled out a shotgun and a small handgun. The handgun he immediately tucked into his waistband, the shotgun he cracked open and slid two shells into the barrel.

“Alright, April, I need you to listen very carefully. You are the most important thing in the world to me, so if I tell you run, you have to run. Okay?” She nodded her consent, too frightened to speak. A man dressed in a dark blue sport coat and jeans stepped out of the sedan. Calmly he walked towards the cabin. “Is that the man?” Aaron mouthed. April nodded. Aaron squeezed her hand. She squeezed back

harder.

“What are we going to do,” she quivered. Aaron waited to see what the man was doing. He lost sight of him as he approached the steps. A knock at the door tore through the house like thunder. Aaron could now feel his own heartbeat pumping in his chest. Every muscle in his body was tense. He looked down at April. He could see that she was terrified. He whispered in her ear and she nodded. Quietly he snuck to the back door, patting Ben on the head as he crept by. Silently he opened the door and was gone. April waited like Aaron had said. She counted to twenty in her head, interrupted by a second knock at the door. Slowly she raised up from her crouch and undid the chain and then the dead bolt. With a deep breath she opened the door. As she did Aaron jumped from his hiding spot on the side of the cabin and thrust the barrel of the shotgun to the man’s temple, cocking it as he moved.

“Who are you,” he demanded. The man threw his hands up.

“My name is Christopher Barnes. I’m here looking for my son.”