

THE HITCHHIKER

AMBER HATHAWAY



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Nick's pickup truck bounced over a crater in the dirt road, and he gritted his teeth. He should have replaced the shocks ages ago, but the auto repair shop was such a pain in the ass to deal with. The mechanics couldn't just focus on one problem; they always managed to scrounge up a dozen other "urgent" issues to address. He barely had the money for the shocks let alone whatever else they would insist he needed.

The truck rounded a curve, and a young woman with long, red hair appeared on his right. She hung back by the edge of the dense forest, swaying from foot to foot, and held her thumb out. The yellow fashion scarf secured around her neck contrasted with her black sequined mini-dress and black stilettos. Looking at her exposed limbs sent a shiver down his spine. How was she not frozen?

His pulse quickened as a makeshift wooden cross rose up on the opposite side of the road. He stole a glance at the woman from the corner of his eye and shook his head slightly. *Get a grip, Nick.* The last murder occurred years ago. Besides, the woman was maybe one hundred pounds sopping wet. No way could she strangle men twice her size. If anything, she would make an easy target for the killer.

He pulled over and pushed open the passenger door. Her eyes widened, and her lips parted. She stared for a moment before her face leveled out.

He rubbed the back of his neck. "You look like you could use a ride."

She nodded and climbed inside. Her gaze skittered over his face and then fell to her lap. His stomach tightened. She was scared. Of *him*. Not that he could blame her. Stories like this cropped up with sickening regularity: a girl hitches a ride, and the next person to pick

her up is the coroner. How could he prove to her that he wouldn't hurt her? Saying, "By the way, I won't murder you," probably wouldn't inspire confidence.

He held out a hand. "I'm Nick."

Her lips contorted into a smile as stiff as a porcelain doll's. He flinched as her frigid fingers met his skin.

"Teresa."

"You're freezing. Here." He cranked up the heat, and she held her hands in front of the vents. He reached for his jacket zipper and hesitated. *Don't lend out anything you're not willing to part with*, his mother's voice chided from the depths of his memory. He certainly wasn't ready to let go of Grandad's final gift to him, but god knew how long Teresa had been out in the cold for. She could be at risk for hypothermia.

Nick slipped off his jacket and held it out to her. "You can borrow this if you'd like but just for the drive. It's my favorite, so I don't want to lose it."

She plucked the jacket from his hands. "Thanks."

Her nose wrinkled as she pulled on the jacket. Nick's face heated, and he turned back to the road. Maybe he should have gone with a different cologne. But a slightly smelly coat had to beat freezing to death, right?

"Which way are you headed?" he said.

She pointed through the windshield. "Just keep going dead ahead for a couple of miles."

He shifted the truck into drive and pulled onto the road. His skin prickled as the engine's grumbles filled the cabin. He should say something. What though? Normal people would probably talk about the

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weather, but that made no sense. He and Teresa were experiencing the same conditions. Saying it was wicked cold out wasn't exactly revelatory.

"Your cologne smells so familiar," she said.

"My old roommate, Zeke, left it behind when he moved out. Figured there was no point in letting it go to waste."

Her eyebrows lifted. "Wait, was your roommate Zeke Hanscom? He sat behind me in calc. Although he was a bit more heavy-handed with the cologne."

Nick's face scrunched. How was that possible? He had pegged her somewhere around eighteen, but if she had taken calc with Zeke, she had to be pushing thirty. "Uh, yeah. Small world."

Her gaze dropped. "Sorry, I didn't mean it in a bad way. I just ... I mean ..."

"Hey, no worries. I'm surprised you went to school with Zeke. I thought you were maybe twenty, tops."

"People say I look young for my age."

Understatement of the century. "So you probably would have been at UMaine for some of the time I was there. I started in the fall of 2009."

Her fingers rubbed at her décolletage. "Just missed you. I ... had to drop out part of the way through my third year."

A twinge prodded his chest. This was why he shouldn't be allowed to make small talk. "Sorry. I dropped out after my second year. The whole college thing was too much. I'd love to finish my geology degree someday, but it's not a priority right now."

She stared at him. "Geology? No way. I wanted to be a middle school science teacher, and geology and Earth science more generally

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are what sparked my interest. I was the kid collecting rocks and flowers and trying to befriend all the animals. I guess I never outgrew that.”

He smiled. What a coincidence. “Same, and I’m a rock collector too. As you might expect.”

She clapped her hands. “Ooooh, what’s your favorite type of rock?”

“Basalt. You?”

“Rose quartz.”

“Have you been to the Mount Mica Quarry?”

She nodded. “My parents took me once as a kid, which, funny story.”

She launched into a tale about wandering away from her parents and the rest of the tour group when something shiny caught her eye. The gilded sunlight streaming through the windshield painted her a heavenly aura, and her brilliant smile added to the angelic impression. The lingering tension melted from his muscles as he returned her grin.

“So I go to grab it, and ...” She winced as her voice cut out. “Wait. This is my stop.”

He pulled over. His forehead wrinkled as his eyes traced the seamless lines of evergreens and barren deciduous trees that stretched along either side of the road. No houses nor footpaths peeked between the trunks, although the shriveled, desiccated leaves that blanketed the forest floor could easily have concealed a trail.

“So what happened next?” he said.

“At the quarry?” He nodded. She stared at him a second longer and then continued, “I grabbed the rock, and this haunting voice wailed, ‘Who stole my rock?’ Kind of like the voice my dad used when he read me the Alvin Schwartz story about the big toe.”

“Oh yeah, I remember that one!”

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Teresa explained that her dad convinced her that the “ghost” in the quarry existed to snatch up children who wandered away from their parents. She then became convinced that every rustle of wind or creaky floorboard was a ghost, until her mom figured out what was going on and made her dad fess up. Teresa became increasingly animated as she spoke, and Nick chuckled at her exaggerated expressions. Her melodic laughter soon chased his.

Their giggles died, and a heavy stillness enveloped the truck, the quiet of a long-forgotten burial ground. Her eyes dimmed, and her tone flattened. “Well, I guess I should let you get going. I’m sure you have places to be.”

“Just my sister’s Halloween party. You could come if you wanted. She’s always down to meet new people.”

“I’m not really a party person these days.”

“Me neither. Dinah’s the social butterfly of the family.” He glanced at the dashboard clock. Dinah’s party started in half an hour, but she wouldn’t mind if he ran late. “I’m not in any rush if you want to talk more.”

Teresa’s grin returned. “Sure. It’s nice to speak to someone I can have a two-sided conversation with.”

Nick stared into the woods. Did she really live out there all by herself? That must get awfully lonely. No wonder she was so eager to spend time with him.

The silence that blanketed the cab had lost its harsh edge, but the need to fill it nagged at his gut. “So, uh, where are you from?”

“Not too far from here, actually.”

She regaled him with stories about the lazy summer days she spent at her grandparents’ farmhouse, playing in the creek with her cousins

and sneaking table scraps to the barn cats. Their discussion segued easily, and when it died, a companionable stillness settled between them. Nick had met a handful of people over the years with whom he “clicked,” but it was such a rare phenomenon. To think, if he had driven by earlier or later, he might have missed this moment.

His eyes periodically flicked to the gas needle. A hollow formed in the pit of his stomach. Already down to half a tank. The last thing he needed was to run out of fuel miles from the nearest gas station.

“I’m gonna turn the engine off,” he said. “The gas gauge is getting a little too low for my liking. You gonna be okay if I do?”

“I’ll be fine. The cold doesn’t bother me these days.”

He glanced at her outfit. It seemed borderline unhealthy how unconcerned she was with low temperatures. But she had his jacket, and he could dig out the emergency blanket for them to huddle under.

He cut the engine and then dragged the gray wool blanket from its spot beneath the backseat. He held out a corner, and she shook her head.

“It’s here if you want it,” he said.

He drew the blanket over his chest and shoulders. She might have some superhuman ability to withstand the cold, but he most certainly did not.

A beat passed, and then she slid under the blanket and scooted toward him. Sweat seeped into the underarms of his shirt. She was sitting awfully close. Did she expect him to make a move on her?

Goosebumps pebbled his skin as he eased his arm around her. Her body tensed. Was that just nerves? Or was she uncomfortable?

“This okay?” he said.

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“Yes, but it would be better if you asked first next time so I can be prepared. I’ve had some bad experiences in the past.”

His throat thickened. “I’m so sorry. You’re absolutely right; I should have asked, and I definitely will in the future.”

She smoothed a section of her hair behind her ear. “Just so you know, I’m not interested in anything beyond cuddling. I’m asexual.”

Seriously? Maybe soulmates were a thing after all. “Okay, no worries. I’m good with cuddling.”

Her lips parted slightly as she studied him. His foot bounced against the floorboard. “You’re looking at me like I have three heads.”

She stared at her knees. “Sorry, it’s ... Usually when I tell people, they insist I’m broken or swear they can change me.”

His heart tightened, and his veins ignited. Those assholes. He squeezed her shoulder. “I’m sorry that’s been your experience. I’m also ace, although for me, sex is whatever. I don’t really need it, but if I’m with someone who enjoys it, then fine. If you’re broken—and I don’t think you are—I must be too.”

She smiled and leaned her head against his shoulder. “It’s so nice to finally meet someone who understands.”

An expansive sensation filled his chest, as though a weight had been lifted, and he was finally able to breathe. He leaned his head against hers. Nice didn’t go far enough.

He hadn’t been through whatever physical invasion Teresa had experienced, but he had dealt with subtle pressure from past partners. If he didn’t initiate enough to their liking, which happened more often than not since sex was generally the furthest thing from his mind, the barrage of questions began. *Why don’t you like me? Aren’t you*

attracted to me? Is there someone else? People couldn't seem to grasp that having a dick didn't automatically make him a sex fiend.

Teresa's head shifted against his shoulder, and she looked up at him. "Penny for your thoughts?"

His mouth opened a fraction and then closed. Maybe another time he would tell her about his experiences. She might actually get it. But he had just inadvertently dredged up some difficult memories for her. He didn't need to pile on more negativity. "I'm glad I drove by today when I did."

She beamed. "I'm glad you did too."

Nick and Teresa's conversation ebbed and flowed as the hours slipped by. They launched into favorite rock puns, and each of hers drew a smile or a chuckle from him. He hadn't laughed this much in years. If only every night could be like this, the two of them curled up together, talking and laughing. That would be heaven.

He started the truck intermittently to bring the temperature back up. The lights came on, and the engine roared. He glanced at her and smiled. Her eyes crinkled as she returned his grin, and his heart swelled. How could he have thought that she might be dangerous?

"You know what's funny?" he said. "When I first saw you, I almost didn't stop. I know it's ridiculous, but a small part of me thought you might be the Halloween Strangler."

Her face wrinkled. "The Halloween Strangler?"

"Every few years, someone is found dead near these woods right around Halloween. The police still haven't caught the killer, but people have nicknamed them the Halloween Strangler, for obvious reasons."

Her upper lip curled. "Maybe the guys deserved it," she said quietly.

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His muscles stiffened. "Are you sympathizing with the murderer?"

Her gaze slipped to her lap. "I don't want to think something like that would happen to innocent people."

The tension melted from his body. "Right. Yeah, of course. I get that."

Her eyes flicked to the dash, and he followed her gaze. Neon blue numerals read: 11:55.

"Shit," she said. "I have to go."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "How about a hug good night?"

"A hug would be fantastic."

His brain barely registered her body's chill as she wound her arms around him. He pulled her into his chest. She settled against him for a moment and then jerked back.

"You okay?" he said.

She smiled, although the expression appeared strained. "Yeah, just a spasm of pain."

"Those are the worst. My brain always thinks it means I'm dying."

A thin, reedy laugh escaped her lips. "I used to be the same way, but I'm over it now."

"That's good you were able to work past it. So, uh, any chance I could get your number?"

"Oh, sorry. I'm more of a free spirit. I don't have technology."

"Is there another way we can stay in touch?"

"Drive this way the same time next year, and you'll find me."

His heart sank. Of course, he had misread signals again. But even if she wasn't interested in anything romantic, maybe they could be friends.

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Icy fingers brushed the back of his hand. "I would love to see you more, but my situation is ... complicated. But I promise I'll be here next year."

She slipped his jacket off her shoulders.

"Keep it," he said.

"But it's your favorite."

"That's okay. I have others." She clearly needed a coat, and Grandad would have felt honored if he knew his gift had been used to help someone else.

She pulled the jacket back on and reached for the door handle.

"I'll see you next year," he said.

"I hope so." She met his gaze. "Make sure to come back at the same time. It's the best chance we have."

His forehead scrunched, but he nodded as though her statement made perfect sense. "Okay, gotcha."

She jumped from the cab, waved to him, and bounded into the woods. Her form seemed to shimmer, and then it disappeared, becoming one with the dark forest. He blinked. Time to stop putting off that vision test. Assuming insurance would cover it, which was a big "if."

He shifted the truck into drive. A smile played at the edges of his mouth. This had been hands down the best night of his life. What he wouldn't give to spend more time with Teresa.

He made a u-turn and drove home. Maybe next year, if they did indeed meet up again, he could bring her to his apartment and show her his rock collection. It wasn't the most impressive, but she still might appreciate it.

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A twinge needled his gut. Although maybe their second meeting would be a little soon to invite her to his place, especially given the implications that usually came with such an offer. He wouldn't do anything, but he couldn't expect her to take him at his word. If growing up with a sister had taught him one thing, it was that creeps could hide behind all manner of guise.

He turned into the lot for his housing complex and squeezed into the only unoccupied parking space. The moon bathed the clustered vehicles and the labyrinth of blocky, nondescript buildings in cool light. Frigid air tunneled beneath his flannel shirt as he exited the cab, and he hunched his shoulders. Hopefully Teresa hadn't had far to go. This was not ideal weather to walk around in sans pants.

He pushed through the front door of his small apartment and slogged down the hall. He fired off a quick text to Dinah apologizing for missing her party, hurried through his bedtime routine, and curled up beneath the hand-me-down quilt thrown haphazardly across his bed. His eyelids had grown heavy, but replays of the night's events zipped through his head at lightning speed. He and Teresa had shared that elusive near-instantaneous connection. How could he wait a whole year to see her again?

Maybe he wouldn't have to. She had said she didn't have technology, but maybe she used it sparingly. After all, she had to have some way she kept in touch with the outside world. He wouldn't have much luck finding her on social media without her last name, but maybe Zeke knew it. Not that Nick would receive a coherent response from him at this hour.

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Nick sent the text anyway, but after fifteen minutes with no reply, he set his phone aside. He sighed and sank into the mattress. Daylight could not arrive soon enough.



The blare of an alarm pierced Nick's ears. Morning rays jabbed his eyes, and he rolled onto his side, away from the window. He fumbled for his phone. After a couple of failed attempts, the alarm fell silent.

A message notification had appeared in the upper right corner of the screen, and his heart skipped. He sat up and clicked on Zeke's text.

Im gonna need more than that lol dont remember those years well

Nick rolled his eyes. The natural consequence of showing up to everything stoned. It was a wonder Zeke had managed to graduate.

Nick texted Zeke he was on his way over and called out sick from work—not like he would be able to concentrate on data entry this morning anyway. He threw on clothes from the lump of somewhat clean garments piled beside his dresser, pulled his hair back in a ponytail, filled his thermos, and set out.

Fifteen minutes into the drive, he rounded the bend in the road where he first spotted Teresa. Hope sparked in his chest as his eyes scoured the forest's edge. The cross appeared on his left, but the opposite side of the road remained deserted. His shoulders sagged. So much for wishful thinking.

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His fingers tapped against the steering wheel. She was close by. She had to be. But he couldn't seek her out without coming off as an absolute creep. If she had wanted him to find her, she would have said as much.

The dead oak emerged ahead. His skin prickled as though under the gaze of an unseen presence. Could it be?

He parked along the side of the road and climbed out. A voice came through beneath the hissing wind. "Nick."

His heart missed a beat. He rushed toward the oak, his eyes darting between trunks of neighboring trees. "Teresa? That you?"

Bird calls whistled through the forest, but otherwise, the world held still. He cupped his hands around his mouth. "Teresa!"

A black stiletto was nestled amidst the dead leaves blanketing the base of the oak. He crouched and lifted the shoe. Frost glistened on the faux leather, and mud caked the heel. It had to be Teresa's. Maybe he could—

A crow cawed, and his head jerked up. The bird landed on one of the oak's mid-level branches and stared Nick down with its beady eyes. Bloodied patches stood where some of its feathers had been torn away, and one of its wings listed in the middle as though broken.

Nick's heart thumped against his ribcage. The shoe tumbled from his grasp. He held up a hand in front of his chest and staggered to his feet. "Nice birdie."

The crow cawed again and swooped down. Nick lurched backward a few steps and spun around. His feet slipped against frost-slicked leaves as he barreled toward his truck. Getting pecked to death by a rabid bird was not on his agenda for the day.

He leaped into the driver's seat and slammed the door. His breaths came in heavy and staggered, and his eyes riveted to the passenger window. The crow rose through the air, clutching the shoe in its talons. There went Nick's chance to return the heel to Teresa.

He stared into the woods a moment longer and then shook his head and turned the key in the ignition. What a way to start the day.

A few minutes later, Nick pulled up in front of Zeke's parents' house, a single-story colonial-style home situated at the base of a lengthy unpaved driveway. Zeke ushered Nick into the beige-hued living room, and the two settled onto the sectional. Pumpkin-scented candles burned in the corners of the room, although the odors of marijuana and Zeke's heavy cologne overwhelmed the autumnal fragrance.

"You look like shit," Zeke said.

Still as blunt as ever. Nick rubbed his eyes. "I barely slept last night." Not to mention, he had also narrowly escaped an attack from a shoe-stealing, half-dead bird. But if Nick said as much, Zeke would probably wonder what Nick had been smoking.

"Really hung up on this chick, huh?" Zeke ran a hand through his shaggy mane. "I knew a couple Teresas in college. I don't remember either one very well, though."

"She said she was in your calc class. Petite redhead."

Zeke's eyes bulged. "Wait, you saw her? I figured she was dead. She went missing in the middle of the semester, and, as far as I know, no one's heard from her since."

Nick straightened up in his seat. "Are you sure we're talking about the same Teresa?"

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Zeke pulled out his phone. “Hang on a sec. I think I still have her on Facebook, unless her account’s been deleted. Ah, here we go.”

Zeke handed Nick the phone, and Nick’s stomach tightened. The profile image showed Teresa in a black sequined dress identical to the one she had worn the previous night and cat ears. The name “Teresa Graves” appeared beneath the photo in large letters.

He scrolled through the feed. The most recent post on Teresa’s wall had been added several weeks ago. A woman named Laura Graves had written,

Happy birthday wherever you are my sweet baby girl. I love you always and forever <3

Nick’s heart quickened. He scrolled back further. A handful of posts commemorated Teresa’s birthday and the anniversary of her disappearance, but the bulk of the activity on her account had come from 2008. Facebook friends had tagged her in missing persons posters and news articles about her disappearance. Nick clicked on one of the articles.

University of Maine Student Missing

Teresa Graves, 20, a third-year student at the University of Maine studying science education, was last seen on October 31st, 2008. She left her parents’

home in Shady Elm around 1:00 p.m. to help a friend set up for a Halloween party. Later in the afternoon, the pair got into a spat, and Teresa stormed off. She was last seen in a black sequined dress and black heels walking along Forest Road ...

The surrounding text blurred as Nick's eyes homed in on two words: Forest Road. That was where he had picked Teresa up yesterday.



Nick made the lonely trek down Forest Road every chance he got. It became a ritual; any afternoon when he wasn't working, he would climb into his truck as soon as the clock hit quarter to three. Snow had fallen the day after his meetup with Zeke, and it wasn't long before the drifts stretched chest high in places. Unease nagged at Nick's gut. Teresa must leave the woods sometimes if only to get food, but there were never any footprints or snowshoe treads leading to the road. But maybe she had found somewhere else to stay for the winter.

The weeks dragged by, but eventually, the snow melted, and buds unfurled. Nick had stopped his drives midwinter, but Teresa was never far from his thoughts. Interesting rocks, silly puns, flashes of red hair,

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old farmhouses with a cat on the porch—there was always some trace of her wherever he went.

Days shortened. The heat of summer gave way to the crisp chill of fall. He took a decent chunk of his meager savings and bought a necklace with a rose quartz heart. Was that weird? It probably was. But he could see how the night progressed (assuming they actually met up again). If things didn't feel right, he could always return it.

On Halloween day, he told his sister he would try to make it to her party but no promises.

"Why?" Dinah said. "You got a date?"

Nick rubbed the back of his neck. "Maybe."

"All right, well, if I don't see you tonight, have fun and be safe. And tell this mystery date if they hurt my baby brother, they'll have to answer to me."

Nick's face heated. "I will not tell her that."

"Fine, suit yourself. But I expect to hear all about her tomorrow."

Dinah's words echoed in Nick's head as he strode toward his truck. Maybe Teresa would be more comfortable with him this time around, and he could bring her to meet Dinah. Or was it too soon? Probably. But maybe they could set up a date? Or a friend outing. It didn't matter which, as long as he got to see her more than once a year.

Nick's heart raced as his truck rounded the bend in Forest Road. Teresa stood opposite the cross, her thumb extended. She wore the same sequined mini-dress, yellow scarf, and black heels she had last year and had pulled the jacket he gave her over her outfit. A grin blossomed on her lips, and he returned her smile.

He pulled over, and she bounded inside the cab. "You came back," she said.

"I couldn't pass up the chance to see you again."

Her grin widened. She clapped her hands. "Oh, I have something for you."

She retrieved a small, gray, heart-shaped granite stone with a white quartz band through the middle from her jacket pocket. "My favorite rock."

"Thank you." What a thoughtful gift. Maybe he should have drawn from his collection instead of buying her present.

He tucked the rock into his pocket and then withdrew a jewelry box. His face flushed. Was this too much? Too soon? "I, uh, brought something for you too."

She opened the box and lifted a hand to her mouth. "You remembered."

"Of course."

"I know you like basalt, but, you know, volcanoes ..."

He touched her shoulder. "Teresa, it's the perfect gift. Thank you."

She freed the necklace from its box. "I don't wear necklaces but ..."
She wound the necklace chain around her wrist, fashioning it into a makeshift bracelet. "There."

She beamed and threw her arms around his neck. "Thank you."

He returned her squeeze. "You're welcome."

Although the press of her skin raised goosebumps on his arms, his heart ached when she pulled back. She buckled in, and he shifted the truck into drive. The articles about her disappearance surfaced in his mind, and he cleared his throat. "I talked to Zeke."

"How's he doing?"

"He's fine." Nick stole a glance at Teresa. Her grin constricted his throat, but he managed to force the words out. "He told me that when

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he took calculus with you, you ... went missing in the middle of the semester. He showed me your old Facebook page, and you were tagged in missing persons posters as well as a couple news articles about your disappearance.”

She smoothed the bottom of her dress. “I didn’t have a choice.”

Nick rubbed the back of his neck. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to bring up painful memories. I just ... never mind.”

The silence that settled over the cab needled Nick’s skin. Why did he always say the wrong thing? He should have left well enough alone, but he had to go and ruin the day with his big mouth.

“Anyway, now that I’ve thoroughly killed the mood, you wanna hear about Dinah’s new kitten?” he said.

“Um, yeah.”

Nick told Teresa about the kitten’s fascination with soap bubbles, and how her fixation had led to an inadvertent bath with the dishes. Teresa’s melodic laughter eased the tension in his lungs. Maybe he could still recover from his screw up.

He parked in the same spot he had last year, and he and Teresa settled into the truck bed. “Is it okay if I put my arm around you?” he said.

“Yes, and thank you for asking.”

He wound an arm around her, and she leaned against him. Sun warmed his head and shoulders, but a gentle breeze kept the unseasonable heat at bay. A grin bloomed on his lips. It didn’t get much better than this.

A wounded crow swooped down and landed on Teresa’s thigh. Nick’s heart accelerated, and he tightened his grip on Teresa. “Holy

shit!" It couldn't be the bird he saw in the woods last year; that thing had to be long dead by now. Was the forest full of rabid animals?

"Don't worry. I know he looks a bit ... different, but he's the sweetest little guy." Teresa scratched the bird's head with one finger. "Nick, meet Sir Featherton."

Nick swallowed as he studied the crow. Why was she acting like it was normal for a half-dead wild animal to perch on her? "Sir Featherton?"

"Not the most creative name, I know, but he likes it. Don't you, Sir Featherton?"

Sir Featherton cawed as if in agreement.

"What happened to him?" Nick said.

"He was attacked by a hawk. I managed to scare it off, but the damage was done."

No kidding. That bird shouldn't be alive, much less flying around like nothing had happened.

The crow clenched a small, metallic object in his beak. Teresa held out her hand. "Is that for me?"

Sir Featherton hopped from Teresa's leg to Nick's. Nick flinched. His stomach tightened as he stared into the bird's beady eyes. Tomorrow's headline: Man Pecked to Death by Rabid Crow.

"Maybe it's a gift for you?" Teresa said.

Right, because half-dead birds gave gifts now. Nick slowly extended his hand. What had gotten into him? Impressing Teresa wasn't worth his life. But the crow hadn't mauled either of them yet, so maybe it was okay?

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Sir Featherton deposited a crescent moon charm in Nick's palm. Gross. Who knew what germs the bird carried? Nick would have to wash his hands a hundred times as soon as he was near a sink again.

"Back," the bird cawed. He then took off, zooming above treetops.

Nick stared after Sir Featherton. "He talks?"

"He's a mimic. I don't know if he understands what he says."

Nick held up the charm. A gritty black patina dulled the metal surface. "Looks like real silver."

"At least it's not a dead rodent."

Nick wrinkled his nose. For all he knew, Sir Featherton could have been chowing down on mouse guts before he picked up the charm. Nick stuffed the piece of metal into his pocket and wiped his palm on his jeans. If only he had brought hand sanitizer.

Teresa chuckled, and the corners of Nick's lips quirked up. There was something sweet about how she cared for Sir Featherton. Even if the bird was creepy as fuck.

As the sun began its descent, the temperature fell. Nick and Teresa snuggled beneath the blankets Nick retrieved from the cab. Cricket chirps filled the air as their conversation lapsed. Stars twinkled in the darkening sky like snow crystals atop a stretch of black ice.

She snuggled closer. Now would be a great time to kiss her, if she was into that. His throat had grown parched, and it took him a moment to find his voice, but eventually he forced the words out. "How do you feel about forehead kisses?"

"Definitely a fan."

His lips brushed Teresa's temple, and warm emotion flooded his chest. Fuck, he was falling for her. Hard.

"I wish every night could be like this," she said.

He swallowed. "Maybe it could be."

"I can't leave here."

"Then why don't I join you?"

The words escaped his mouth before he had time to think them through. It was a ridiculous idea. This was basically their second date. How did he know for sure she wasn't a serial killer? And even if she wasn't, was he willing to give up everything to live in the middle of woods? Although it wasn't as though his current circumstances provided much to write home about. A shitty apartment, a job he didn't totally hate, a couple of friends he talked to once in a blue moon. There had to be something better out there. Maybe this was it.

"I don't think you'd like that," she said in a voice barely louder than a whisper.

"Why not?"

She was silent for a moment and then said, "Let me show you something."

They climbed out of the truck bed. She slipped her hand into his and led him into the woods. The canopy overhead blotted out much of the moonlight. Trees closed in behind them, swallowing all traces of the road. His heart sped up. No way would he be able to find his way back to the truck on his own.

Teresa halted inside a small clearing. He frowned. Darkness swallowed the fine details, but it was literally just trees and wilted grass as far as the eye could see. If she wasn't taking him to see her place, what were they doing out here?

Shadows darkened her expression, and her tremors vibrated his arm. His heart constricted. Maybe she was afraid he would judge her

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based on the state of her house, and she couldn't bring herself to lead him any closer.

He squeezed her hand. "It's okay. Take your time."

She pulled away from him. Her fingers fidgeted with the scarf. "Please don't freak out. I'm a bit self-conscious about the scar."

The scarf peeled away from her neck, and Nick's eyes bulged. A crimson gouge spanned her throat. Although the blood had congealed, the incision looked recent, no more than a few hours old. "Oh my god, Teresa! What happened? We have to get you to the hospital."

"No doctor can help me. I'm not alive."

He froze, his feet rooting to the ground. The Facebook posts and news articles rushed through his brain. He shook his head. "No. It can't be. You can't be dead."

He flinched as her hands closed around his. Hurt flashed across her face. "I wish it wasn't so," she said. "But that's why I feel so cold to you. Why I can only see you one night a year. Because I don't belong in this world anymore."

"So you're what? A ghost? A zombie?"

"Well, I don't think I'm a zombie. Never had a hankering for brains."

He stared at her. How was this possible? "You died on Halloween 2008, the day you disappeared. And you've come back on Halloween every year since."

She nodded. "Exactly."

A memory tugged at his mind, and his stomach twisted. When he had told her about the Halloween Strangler, she had said that maybe the guys deserved it. "The guys who died on Halloween, you didn't kill them, did you?"

She stared at the ground. She seemed so small, so pitiful. The urge to hold her tugged at his arms, and he clenched his hands at his sides. For fuck's sake. She was a murderous ghost. One wrong move, and he would end up like those other dudes.

"I didn't have a choice," she murmured. "They wanted to hurt me, just like Brock, the man who killed me. The world is better off without them."

Nick's voice trembled. "Are you going to kill me?"

Tears glistened in the corners of her eyes as she met his gaze. "It's the only way we can be together."

Dread wormed through his intestines. Hell no. They had been on two dates. No way was he ready to commit to her eternally.

He yanked free of her grasp. "Look, Teresa, you're a cool person ... or ghost or whatever, but I don't want to die. But maybe I'll swing by and see you next year? How's that sound?"

She turned away from him, and he took a step back, his heart pummeling his ribcage. "I've gotta run," he said. "Dinah's expecting me. Good luck with your afterlife."

Branches and bramble tore at his face and clothing as he ducked through gaps between trees, although the pain barely registered. He had to get away from Teresa and fast, before the Halloween Strangler made her next kill.

Teresa's footsteps crashed through the woods behind him. "Wait, Nick. You're going the wrong way."

Like he was foolish enough to fall right into her trap. Besides, getting lost in the woods seemed far less terrifying than being murdered by a ghost. If he made it out of here alive, he was done with dating.

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Done with people in general. Socializing was usually a pain anyway. Highly overrated.

The forest opened onto a clearing painted in shades of charcoal and silver by the moon above. A cabin rose up from the center of the clearing. His heart skipped. The windows were dark, but maybe whoever lived there had turned in early. If he could borrow their phone ...

The toe of his sneaker caught on a root, and he pitched forward. His arms shot out, fingers sailing through the air. Blackness as dark as the night sky above rushed up at him as he tumbled into a hole the size of a waiting grave.

Agony punctured his throat as his body smacked against the ground. Shocks from the impact shot through him, but the pain in his neck all but obliterated them. Warm wetness pooled beneath his upper chest, and the copper tang of blood flooded his mouth. He rolled onto his back. His chest burned as he tried to draw air. Panic as deep as the ocean submerged him. He couldn't breathe.

"Nick!" Teresa shrieked.

Her bare feet made a light slapping sound against the dirt as she landed in the hole. She crouched beside him. Moonlight glinted against her tearstained cheeks. "I'm so sorry," she said, her voice thick. "I wasn't going to kill you if that wasn't what you wanted."

The burning in his chest intensified, and the searing pain in his throat continued. A frantic scrabbling filled his consciousness. *Help! Do something!* He opened his mouth to speak, but only a gurgle slipped out.

She wiped her eyes. Her palm moved in front of his nose and mouth, and he flinched. Was she trying to suffocate him? Not that he could breathe anyway.

Her hand dropped back to her side. Tears rolled down her face. "I'm sorry. You're not breathing, and I don't know how to fix that."

He reached for her, and her frigid hand closed around his. Even after everything, her touch still provided a measure of relief. The frenzy rushing through his head subsided, and the pain faded as darkness consumed him.



Five years later

The low rumble of an engine cut through the chatter of birds and insects. Nick planted a peck on Teresa's forehead. "It'll be over before you know it," he said.

She nodded and then stepped out of the woods, taking her place beside the dirt road. She adjusted the yellow fashion scarf and then held out her thumb.

Nick watched from the tree line as a red Ford pickup pulled up beside her. The passenger door swung open.

"What's a pretty girl like you doing out by your lonesome?" a gruff male voice said.

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Teresa stared at the ground. “I had a fight with a friend. She was supposed to give me a ride home, but that’s not happening now.”

“Well, hop on in, little lady,” the man said. “I can take you where you need to go.”

Teresa climbed into the passenger seat and pulled the door shut. Nick’s throat tightened. If only he could take over her mission so she wouldn’t have to do this anymore. But the universe had made it clear, this was her curse to bear and hers alone.

The truck pulled forward. Teresa met Nick’s gaze through the window. He waved to her and then jogged back into the woods. He might not be able to shoulder this burden for her, but he would be waiting for her when she came home, ready to help her through the aftermath.