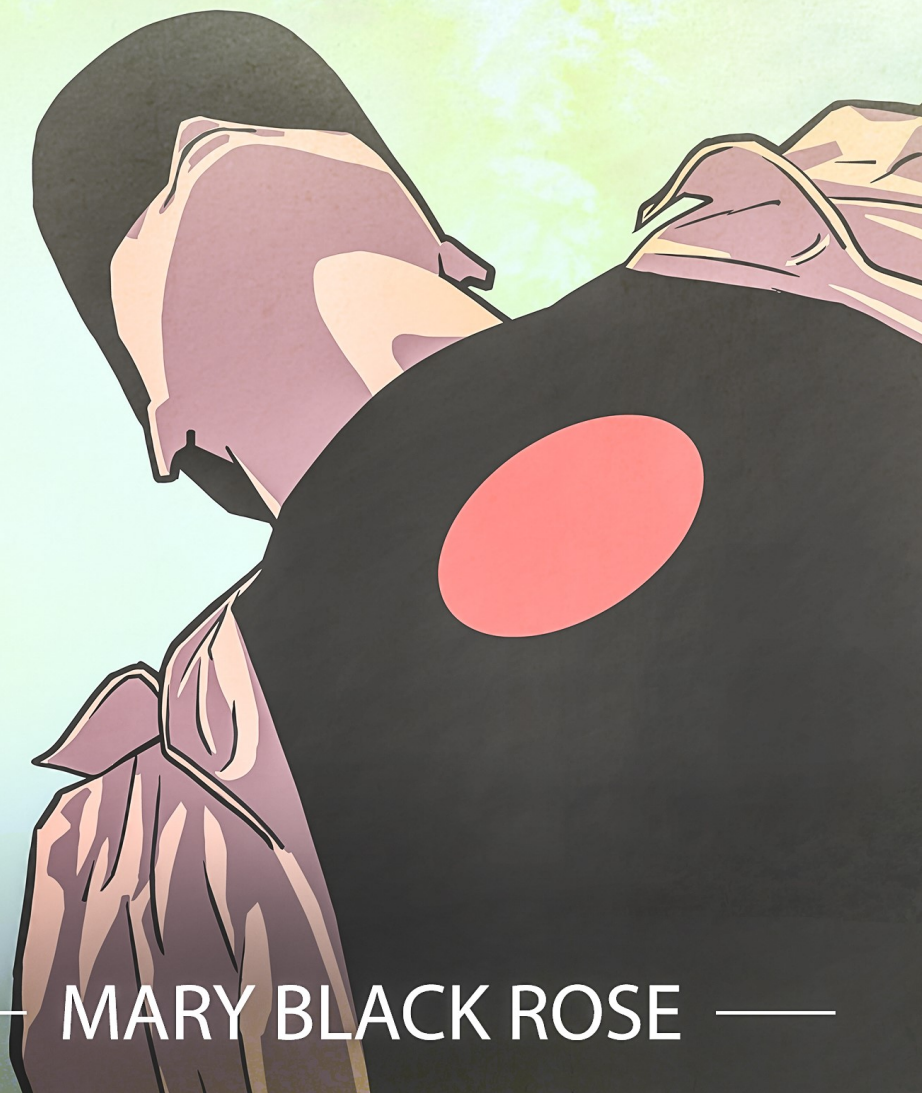


— THE —  
**STRANGER**



— MARY BLACK ROSE —

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## CHAPTER 1

When The Stranger arrived in the small mountain of Baylor, he moved in quietly like a gentle autumn breeze. In much the same way the winds of nature may change things subtly and imperceptibly, the residents were also changed forever. The more peculiar thing - no one realized it was The Stranger responsible for all the oddities that unfolded.

Not dissimilar than other small towns, everyone knew everyone, and everyone liked to know everyone else's business. They provided for themselves. They knew a little something of this and that, and then some; making them industrious and self-sufficient.

The town was nestled in a remote and beautiful valley among majestic mountains, which was half a day's travel from anywhere else.

Visitors rarely came to town. When The Stranger arrived in town on a dark blustery Wednesday in October, bearing nothing on his person but an old worn gray duster, an ancient olive green satchel, and a navy blue baseball cap that matched his eye color, the residents of the town should have taken notice. They saw him as little more than a passing traveler.

The first person he encountered was young Evie, who was just a little more than half past childhood and not quite a full turn to adulthood yet. She was gathering her flock to bring them in. A storm was brewing, and the sheep were becoming restless.

He stopped at the fence and watched her impassively as she maneuvered the flock. She turned abruptly and was startled when she saw him there.

"Oh my goodness." She smacked her hand over her heart. "You scared me senseless, stranger!"

She recovered quickly, then smiled more broadly as she noticed that The Stranger couldn't be much older than her. She fluttered her eyelashes prettily, hoping The Stranger might take note that she had the longest eyelashes of any

girl in town. He was tall and trim, muscular under his worn coat, and had the deepest blue eyes, rivaling the skies of the coming storm.

He smiled apologetically. "Do you have a tavern here in this fine town of Baylor?"

"Of course! It's just down this road." And she pointed just up the way. "The only road that leads into town, and it will be the second building on your right."

He tipped his worn ball cap like a cowboy from an old western movie, and she watched him walk away. Evie slumped and sighed with disappointment as she returned to herding her flock on towards the barn.

The Stranger pushed open the old wooden door to the tavern. All eyes looked up, but only when he fully entered the room did the silence of jovial conversation cease. He sat down at the bar. The old bartender, whom the locals simply called Barb, approached him.

Barb studied The Stranger, noticing quickly he appeared to be the same age as herself. He was an older man. Perhaps a few years past her own life span but not quite a full turn to senior status yet. What little hair she could see peeking out beneath the well-worn navy ball cap was streaked with gray. Lines etched the old stranger's face, and he was perhaps thin and frail under the tattered gray duster.

Despite his unimposing appearance, The Stranger did have one feature that was striking. His eyes were intensely fixed on locking eyes with Barb's. The Stranger held no expression except a slight twitch of a smile pulling at his lip.

"What'll have stranger?" Barb asked.

"You make a house brew?"

"Sure do." Barb proudly placed her hands on her hips. "Ole' family recipe. Can't beat it."

"Alright, I'll have that."

The handful of other men and women in the tavern scrutinized The Stranger with both curiosity and wariness. Each of them whispering in turn, trying to puzzle out his motives and purpose for being there. They never

received strangers this late in the year. Summer brought them the occasional mountain 'adventure-seeking' hikers looking for a place to rest up and rejuvenate, but never this late in the autumn.

Meanwhile, Barb polished glasses and hummed quietly as she often did. The Stranger sat and sipped his ale nonchalantly, as if it were perfectly normal for a stranger to cause such a sensation in a remote mountain town.

Just as one of the locals was about to open his mouth and say something, the door swung open swiftly, as if caught in the gust of the coming storm. A slightly short plump woman, about the same age as Barb, struggled to pull the door shut. She entered the dimly lit room, stood in the entryway a moment stamping her feet to remove the cold, and shook her honey and white streaked ringlets away from her shoulders.

The stranger watched the new arrival with what appeared to be nonchalance. On the contrary, he did take notice that her eyes had lit up just a notch as she smiled at Barb.

As the woman's eyes adjusted to the dim lighting of the tavern she noticed The Stranger sitting alone at the end of the bar, instantly smiled, and without hesitation took up a bar stool right next to him. She had a pleasant cherubic round face. She was plump yet curvaceously attractive in her own way.

"Well hello, stranger."

"Hello." The Stranger smiled pleasantly at the woman.

The woman studied The Stranger, noting that he was about her own height, stout and plump like her. Oddly the same color hair as her own! How strange she thought. She extended her hand to shake his. He took her hand amiably and shook it. She happened to glance at his hands. They were worn and well worked like her own. *A hard-working man!* In her years of experience, it likely meant she could trust him. Then again, there was something not quite right about him that set her a bit on edge. After studying him for a moment she placed it. *His eyes! My goodness, those eyes! Not quite normal...*

Barb approached her and broke her train of thought concerning The Stranger. "The usual Greta?" She asked her and winked playfully.

The Stranger studied the exchange and took note of the slight blush that crept into Greta's cheeks. "Yes, Barb. Big storm brewing out there. Hope you got your roof all patched? It might be a long one."

"I did, I did," Barb said as she filled a large stein with the homemade ale and set it down in front of Greta.

"I set aside those eggs for you, but darn it all I up and forgot them. I'll bring them by first thing tomorrow before I get started on the day's first batch," Greta said.

Up until this point, the stranger had only been watching, and remarkably like a passing evening shadow, had all but been forgotten. Until he spoke up, asking innocently, "First batch of what?"

All eyes once again turned to him, startled that they had so easily forgotten him. "Greta's our town baker and makes the finest home-baked bread you'll ever eat," Barb said with pride that paralleled her own when she was boasting of her homebrew.

Greta straightened her back on her stool, yet blushed all the same.

The Stranger cocked one eyebrow up and said, "Huh. Is that so?"

Greta sniffed then said, "Oh, don't listen to her. Bread is bread. Fills your stomach and keeps ya alive. It's well and good."

Barb argued. "Phssh. Not true. I think I might have ingested stones that taste better than some bakers' bread to be sure!" There was a twinkle in her eyes as she said this. Eyes fixed only on Greta.

"Now they weren't a baker then, were they? They'd be a mason! And you'd be confused as to which establishment you were in, Barb!"

With this, the patrons at the bar guffawed loudly, as did Barb. The Stranger merely observed with no laughter. Yet if one were to inspect him closer, that sly smile was ever present, dancing in his eyes and tugging at his mouth.

## CHAPTER 2

All throughout the evening the storm rattled the window panes with gusto. The locals went about their evening business of drinking, storytelling, and raucous laughter without paying much mind to The Stranger on the bar stool in the corner. In fact, the angry reminders of the nasty storm moving in gave them pause more frequently than the oddly dressed and unassuming stranger.

Although every now and again a local would look up and see him there watching them. An ill-at-ease feeling would nag at the person, and they would turn to say something to their neighbor about the odd fellow. However, the second they would lean into their neighbor's ear, the thought they had been holding in their mind would move right through their brains just as swiftly as the early autumn storm winds, and *whoosh*—out it would go again! A haze would pass their consciousness, and they found themselves scratching irritably at their scalps as if it could bring the thought back. And so it was with every single person in the tavern that evening.

The Stranger sat and watched all the townsfolk. He drank in the scene and its inhabitants slowly, in much the same way he sipped his ale. When the last person had left, it was only The Stranger, Barb, and Greta left.

Barb leaned over the bar in quiet conversation with Greta. The Stranger was sitting somewhere on the periphery of their minds, but they did not acknowledge him openly as they talked.

“Greta, you know how I feel about you. I don't want to press but—”

“I know, Barb. I know I need to move on. I just feel torn not knowing for sure.” Greta drained the last dregs of her ale and set her stein down quietly. She stared at the last droplets in the cup intensely.

Barb came over and placed a hand on hers. Greta looked up, and there were two single tears falling down each side of her face. “I loved Tomas. I did.

I'm certain he's passed. It's been 14 years since the war ended, and if they were going to find him, I'm sure they would have by now. I just—" She broke off. Looking away sharply. She chastised herself inwardly for her lack of control and the sentimentality she took great pains to conceal more often than not.

"Greta, I'll wait. I've waited this long. What's a few more months or years." Barb patted her hand gently.

"It's not just Tomas. You know the townsfolk will talk. They'll treat us differently."

"You think they don't already know how I feel about you? They'll talk for sure, but let em'. I don't care anymore. If you need more time though, time is what I'll give you," Barb said.

Greta smiled weakly and nodded her gratitude. Then she wiped at her eyes briskly and shook her long mane of ringlets off her shoulders. "Well, I've stayed later than I should—as usual." She sighed emphatically. Her 'no-nonsense' demeanor was back in full swing. She gathered her things and left. She did not even say goodbye to The Stranger. For that matter, she had completely forgotten he was there.

Barb was happily polishing her glasses and moving about her nightly closing routine of tidying up and setting up for the coming day.

The Stranger spoke. "Do you have a room I might rent?"

Barb startled. "My goodness man, I thought you'd left already." She mumbled and then walked over to the end of the bar where The Stranger still sat. "What'd you ask me?"

"I was wondering if you might have a room I could rent? Your young shepherdess on the edge of town said this was the place to come."

"Ah, yes, that would be sweet lil' Evie. She would be right, and as a matter of fact, I do. It might be a bit dusty though. The season for visitors is a month past, so I haven't cleaned it."

"As long as it's warm and dry, a little dust never bothered me."

"And how long will you be renting it for?" Barb inquired, hoping to glean a bit of information about The Stranger.



"Well, that depends —"

"Depends on what?"

"Depends on how long it takes to get my work done. How about each morning I come down for breakfast, I pay you for the next day's occupancy? Would that be acceptable?" Barb was about to open her mouth and object, but then The Stranger quickly added, "I forgot to mention, I'll pay you twice the daily rate of your normal seasonal rates."

Barb's brow furrowed, and it was clear she was struggling. Twice the daily rate would be ludicrous to refuse! She sensed the man was guileless. Gods knew she had seen her fair share of people from every tapestry of life. She didn't think the man to be dangerous, but there was something unsettling about this stranger she couldn't quite place. The Stranger merely watched Barb in her struggle and waited patiently for a reply.

"Alright, stranger, I suppose I'd be an idiot to turn down such a business proposition as that. I'll expect you to hold to that agreement and pay me every morning if you plan to stay another day. Would you rather pay weekly? Seems that would be more convenient?"

"Convenient for whom?" The Stranger said simply, without bite or bitterness.

"Oh—well, I meant no offense—" Barb stammered and rubbed the back of her neck, looking embarrassed. "Have it your way, sir. If you want to pay daily, it's fine by me. Follow me and I'll show you to your room."

The Stranger stood up and followed Barb to his room. It was cozy and suitable for an occupant of one. A small fireplace was nestled in the corner, with a simple bed and bureau for clothes.

"Will this do?"

"It's perfect," The Stranger said pleasantly, and he meant it.

"Alright. Well, the wash room's down the hall on your right."

The Stranger had entered the room and was looking around. Barb stood in the doorway. She was about to ask The Stranger something. The thought

was there, hanging loosely on the tip of her mind, and just as she was about to say it, The Stranger said, “Well goodnight, Barb.”

“Uh yeah. Goodnight to you too.”

Barb scratched her head, trying to think what it was she was going to ask but just couldn't remember. Finally, she climbed the stairs to her own modest living space and got ready for bed. Upon getting in bed, she only vaguely remembered that she had a guest in her visitor quarters downstairs, and she had a mind to ask them for their name. However, that was quickly forgotten as she slipped into deep slumber, only dreaming of a familiar pretty lady with golden tresses.

## CHAPTER 3

Over the next few days The Stranger would sit down to eat breakfast and as promised, he would pay in full for his next day's room and board. It only took about three days for Barb and the townsfolk to lose their memories as to when The Stranger had shown up, recall how long he had been there, or why he was there at all.

They often forgot his presence entirely, and when they were reminded, they didn't think on it all too much. He became a fixture, like a light pole on your neighborhood street that you may only notice on occasion when the bulb flickers or goes out entirely. The Stranger would 'flicker' around their daily lives, and the people just came to accept his unassuming quiet demeanor with the ease one might accept that unobtrusive light pole.

One bright and cloudless day, the sun was gleaming, yet a slight nip in the air whispered the coming winter season. Two men of the town could be heard arguing. The townsfolk ignored this. It was only Harold and Seth after all, and the residents couldn't deem it an ordinary week unless the raucous bantering of these two neighbors was heard at least every few days. At least such had become the norm for about the past year.

The Stranger just happened to be meandering up the road when he heard the commotion. He stopped and rested against the fence, watching them with interest.

"If you don't keep that cow off my damn property, Harold, I swear I'm going to be having steaks for dinner this weekend! She's trudging all through my garden!" Seth screamed. For a short man, he certainly was drawing himself up to the tall and lanky height that was Harold.

"Well, maybe you need to fix ya fence! It's not my business to fix ya fence!" Harold countered.

"I can't fix my fence until you return my hammer!"

“I told ya once, I told ya thousand times, I gave ya that hammer back well over a year ago!”

“No. You didn’t. I think I’d know if you returned one of my tools or not, and you haven’t!”

“Why don’t you just go buy a new one?” Harold suggested with an exhausted huff.

“It’s the principle of the matter. You just need to return my hammer like a goodly neighbor should!”

“I don’t have your damn hammer, Seth!”

At this point in the argument, The Stranger meandered over a bit closer to the two men. When they saw him, they ceased arguing immediately and turned to him. Their mouths gaped open at the shock of realizing they had an audience.

The Stranger tipped his hat and flashed a wry smile. “Don’t mind me. I’m just out enjoying the fresh air.” With that, he pulled himself up to sit on the edge of the fence.

They continued to gawk for a moment. Then something strange happened to Harold. He looked directly into The Strangers eyes. It was an accident, but he felt a pull and couldn’t look away. He fell silent. He felt as if he were daydreaming but not quite.

Seth stood watching The Stranger for only a second, then turned and noticed his neighbor was seemingly half conscious. For several seconds which stretched into half a minute, Harold seemed frozen in place. Seth waved his hand in front of Harold’s face, but it was as if Harold didn’t see it.

Harold felt a thick haze pass across his eyes, and images began to flurry in his mind. Slowly like cream churned to butter, the images turned over and over until they came into focus. They became clear, resonant, and sweet.

Harold was seeing his neighbor Seth vividly. It was like watching a show on a television through his mind’s eye. He saw Seth taking back the borrowed hammer from himself, and then he watched himself walk away. Harold watched as Seth stood in his living room for the longest time not moving. After

many minutes Seth ambled to his room and tucked the hammer way at the bottom of his bedroom bureau of drawers, under a thick pile of sweaters.

Harold then saw Seth on a different occasion. He was wandering out in the dark cold of the night, dressed in pajamas. Seth again was seen slowly ambling around his fenced-in backyard, and only after some time became aware of his surroundings. Harold's heart clenched with the same fear and anxiety that was written all over his dear old friend's face.

Then another scene flashed before his eyes. He saw Seth sitting at the table far past the breakfast hour, as if he were daydreaming, yet well past a reasonable time. Seth then came out of the long stupor and upon realizing half a morning had passed, buried his face in his hands and cried.

Harold wasn't just seeing all these events. He could also feel the emotions that each terrifying experience was bringing his friend. Seth was scared and lonely, and with each new experience, Harold felt his friend sink deeper and deeper into despair.

Then just as suddenly as Harold's mind had been swept away with these strange visions, he snapped out of it.

He looked at Seth and his face shifted. He choked back tears and thought back to a time when they didn't argue. They were neighbors and friends not so very long ago. The best of friends actually, keeping each other occupied many a night at the tavern drinking and sharing old stories. As each of them in turn had lost their own wives to the cruel clutches of death, they had found peace and solace in keeping each other company through simple past times: a game of cards, a shared smoke on the porch.

Harold wiped the tears away and placed his hand on his friend's shoulder. "Seth, I think I might know where your hammer is."

Seth's eyebrows arched up in surprise. It was the first time in over a year either of them had spoken to the other in such respectful tone.

Harold stepped in front of Seth and quietly went to the bedroom. He crouched down in front of the bottom bureau drawer.

As he was opening the drawer, Seth had begun to protest. "Hey now, you can't just barge in here—" Then he stopped when Harold reached in and plucked the hammer from the very bottom of the pile and held it up triumphantly. Seth flushed with embarrassment and suddenly it all came back to him. He stammered. "Well I... I forgot..."

"I know, old friend," Harold said mournfully. "Seth, when's the last time ya been down the mountain to the doctor?"

Seth's expression hardened. "I'm fine. I'm in no need of a doctor. I'm fit as a fiddle."

Harold's eye's bore through him. "Seth, I think you need to see a doctor." He pressed.

For a moment all their old resentment hung between them as their expressions challenged each other. But then Seth saw something in Harold's eyes that he had not seen for over a year. With this, Seth's shoulders slumped in resignation, and he sighed a great huff of defeat. "I guess you're probably right, Harold. Maybe it's about time. I'm sorry I forgot that you returned that damn hammer after all."

Harold and Seth exited the house and together they quietly fixed the fence, herded the old cow back to her pasture, and went about their other daily chores. They didn't notice The Stranger, who had left his perch on the fence and was now meandering down the old dirt road, humming a tune of random notes with a sly smile spread across his face.

## CHAPTER 4

Some days later, or perhaps many, or just a few—no one could really say—The Stranger could be seen wandering down the road. He happened to stop where Evie was out tending her sheep as usual. He quietly approached the fence. As before, she did not hear or see him as he stood watching her.

She was lying on her belly and plucking at a daisy. “He loves me. He loves me not. He loves me. He loves me not...” Her face turned down into a pouty frown as she plucked the last petal.

“What are you doing?” The Stranger asked her.

She startled and looked up, blushing furiously at having been caught playing an old game. A past time usually only the younger girls foolishly indulged in, not someone of her age.

“Oh, just being silly to pass the time.” She tossed the stem over her shoulder and stood up to approach The Stranger at the fence.

“Didn’t seem silly to me. If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were struggling about a decision? Am I right?”

Her cheeks were rosy again and she looked down shyly. “Yes, I suppose I am.”

“Would it be prying if I asked what decision it is you are having difficulty with?”

But when she looked up and stared into The Stranger’s eyes, searching for his motivation at the inquiry, she had a feeling all at once that he already knew what she was struggling with.

Before she could examine that feeling, a funny thing happened. She felt as if she were falling. Not in that terrifying way that one slips off cliffs and falls forever sometimes in dreams. More like being caught up in a gentle yet firm wind and passing through clouds as she bounded downward, one through the next, descending down and down.

When she landed perfectly on both feet, she gasped at the sight before her. She saw a woman in a small house. The woman looked so familiar, but she couldn't quite place how she knew this person.

The woman was perhaps twenty years older than herself. She was heavy set with both a physical weight and something else. The burdens of a hard life etched in the lines of her face. Despite the roundness of the woman's face, there was a sunken lifelessness in the woman's eyes.

Evie stared in awe as she saw one of her present day suiters stride into the house. It was unmistakably an older version of Bill. Evie tentatively took up a place by the stone hearth, to be out of the way, afraid that this 'older' Bill would see her intruding on something she was sure was meant to be private. The older woman seemed devoid of life as she barely gave Bill a glance and continued to mechanically chop vegetables in preparation for the evening meal.

"Evie, are you stupid?" Bill trudged across the floor to stand by her.

"No." Barely a whisper of a reply as the woman shrunk with fear.

"Seems to me like my pig in the pen out back has more sense than you! What'd I tell you just yesterday? What!"

Evie watched in horror as Bill hovered menacingly over this other woman, mere inches from the side of the woman's face. She gasped in shock and slammed her hands over her mouth to muffle the sound. She suddenly realized why this woman looked so familiar. She realized this woman was her in the not too distant future. Somewhere in young Evie's mind, she knew that it should be impossible for her to be seeing her future self, but that thought took a backseat to the curiosity of wanting to know what would happen next in the tiny kitchen.

Old Evie did not turn to look at him. "I... I..." Her older self stuttered.

Bill's hand was so quick, and young Evie gasped again. Bill's hand struck older Evie across the face. She watched her older self struggle to contain the tears.



Young Evie touched her own cheek. It was as if she could feel the sting of the blow. The intensity of the emotional and physical pain somehow throbbing in her cheek despite not having taken the blow.

“Dinner best be ready by the time I get done cleaning up woman. You hear me!” He spat the words in utter disgust at her.

Young Evie gaped in horror at the scene that had unfolded before her. As older Bill left the room, she watched her older self continue to chop vegetables. Her tears fell, seasoning their nightly dinner with bitter remorse and regret.

Young Evie felt an inexplicable swelling of tears coming to her own eyes. She blinked them back, but as she did, she felt the room around her begin to swirl and whirl. Everything around seemed to be caught up in a twister, and she was at the heart of it.

As the room settled, she saw herself again. It was the same setting but not? Was this a replay? She wasn't sure. She felt afraid to look on again. Anxiety welling up at having to replay the awful scene she had just witnessed.

Finally, she did dare take a glimpse at her older self. She cracked one eye open, inhaled a sharp breath of surprise, and both eyes popped open. This time her shock was rooted in something entirely different.

Something had changed. She saw herself again. Older, but a straightness in her posture. Still plump, but different somehow.

She watched herself preparing the same meal as before. This time she hummed a soft sweet tune. There was a hint of color in her cheeks to replace the sallowness of before. There was a lightness in her motions of even the simple task of cutting that same carrot. Her eyes seemed to be alight with something that younger Evie couldn't quite place.

The door was flung open, but this time in walked a very old version of her other present suitor: Mike. As soon as the door opened, she watched her older self immediately drop the knife and carrot, and she went to him, throwing her arms around his neck and giving him a tender kiss on the cheek. His tall, thin frame overshadowed her, but Evie's younger self could tell Mike enveloped the

older Evie with warmth and safety, not like the ominous shadow Bill had cast hovering over her.

She felt the old couple's love radiating like a lighthouse beam. It penetrated the room with such force, it became a beacon piercing the innermost caverns of young Evie's heart.

“Hello, my princess.” Mike grinned.

“Oh, Mike, stop that,” she said playfully, but young Evie could see it in her own older eyes that she relished the affection.

“What’s for dinner, love?” Mike asked as Evie wriggled from his grasp. Mike reluctantly released her.

"Making a stew with the rabbit you caught yesterday. I'm sorry it's not done yet. I had an incident with the cow. She got out and was all the way down at the schoolyard before I got her corralled back in. Old Ms. Fletcher was none too pleased with the ruckus it caused with the children. You should’a seen her face, Mike.” Older Evie stole a glance at Mike to relish the reaction she knew it would invoke.

Mike chuckled. “Ahh, I suppose the boys left the latch half fixed again? You’ll tell me the whole story over dinner?” He said with a mischievous glint in his eye.

“I’m counting on it!” She saw her older self return the grin.

“Well, I’ll just be a bit my sweet. Going to clean up, then I’ll help you get dinner finished up.”

She watched her older self continue to hum contentedly.

Suddenly young Evie was swept away from the scene she had been watching. She felt herself move up and up. As if she were moving in reverse from the clouds she had just fallen through only moments earlier. Her feet touched down in the pasture, and she was staring dumbfounded at The Stranger's self-satisfied face.

She suddenly felt a calmness about the decision she had previously and painstakingly lingered over for months. It seemed so obvious to her now, as she thought about the character of each young man in question. Of course Mike

wasn't nearly as handsome as rugged Bill, but her heart knew which suitor was the best choice. She realized some part of her probably always knew, and now she felt content.

The Stranger's deep ocean-like eyes were fixed on her intently. "Do you think you'll struggle with making that decision now?" He asked.

She merely gaped and shook her head. He nodded and turned on his heel to make his way back up the road again.

## CHAPTER 5

Another day come and gone; and another, and another. The sun was beginning to dip low in the sky, painting its vivid late autumn hues above the rim of the mountain. The Stranger decided it was time to make his way back to the old tavern.

He arrived, entered the tavern, and approached the same stool he sat on every night. Barb and Greta were there, and they barely noticed him enter the room. Their heads were bowed over the bar, Barb on the serving side, and Greta on the patron's side, having a conversation that had Greta laughing so heartily The Stranger had to cock an eyebrow inquisitively.

After their laughter had faded and Greta wiped a tear from her eye, Barb said to her, "Will you keep an eye on the room for me? I gotta go out back to the storehouse and get some supplies before the dinner crowd arrives."

She nodded her agreement, and not a moment after Barb left, Greta became fully aware of The Stranger at the end of the bar.

"Hello there! I didn't even see you come in! What can I get for you?" She said as she walked behind the bar, ready to serve the man.

"An answer."

Greta stopped walking to the tap where she was prepared to pour him a stein. She turned to face The Stranger. "An answer, eh? Well, I suppose that would warrant a question first, stranger." She grinned and waited.

"I suppose it does." He supplied a slow lazy grin. "A refreshment first perhaps." And he nodded to the tap, giving her the signal to go ahead and fill up a stein for him.

She filled a metal stein with honey colored ale and placed it on the counter. Then she leaned across the bar from him, her elbows propped playfully under her chin. "So what was it you'd like to ask me?" She stared into his impossibly blue eyes and suddenly her breath caught as she faded into a waking dream.

She drifted and drifted. Floating above the bar and then settling right into Barb!

Suddenly she saw Barb out back, but not in the normal way of standing across from her. She was seeing Barb through her own eyes! She was watching items come out of the storehouse as she gathered them and put them in the crate. She was seeing the mundane chore unfold from her own eyes but through Barb's body. She had slipped into Barb's skin. Yet Barb was not gone. It was as if Greta was spying on Barb's mind through Barb's own being.

*How is this happening?* Greta marveled. She felt as if she should be afraid, but she was not. Only intensely puzzled.

Barb stopped, and Greta saw Barb's hand reach for a hankie and wipe her brow. Barb sat for a minute and rested. The sun was setting, but its wrathful presence was still blazingly prominent. Barb sat down, and Greta, as the passenger inside Barb's mind, had no choice but to sit as well. She felt bashful that she was an intruder to Barb's mind and soul, yet she had no choice but to allow herself the ride. Barb didn't seem to notice Greta's intrusion. Greta wasn't sure how she knew this but simply did.

Suddenly she felt an ache that consumed her like the blaze of the raging sun overhead. She recognized this ache. It was not hers. It was Barb's, but in that intense washing feeling that Barb was experiencing, she was brought to the memory of the same ache she had carried for years, for her late husband Tomas. For almost twenty years she had borne the weight of that same self-absorbing pit of loneliness and hurt.

It began the moment Tomas received the letter calling him off to foreign lands, and then grown steadily as he took that first step off their front porch. Just as she didn't think that terrible ache could get worse, the feeling deepened as she watched him walk down the dirt road, never to be seen again. Eventually, she even stopped clutching the old black and white photo of their wedding day—the only way she could keep his face vivid in her mind. With time the picture found a purpose of harboring dust, yet the ache continued. She nursed it and coddled it.

Some part of her knew but didn't quite acknowledge, that she had perhaps loved Tomas but was not in love with him. He represented everything stable and secure that life should be—shouldn't it? She wondered now, if she let go of that ache, would it mean somehow she was not loyal to Tomas? But was it loyalty she nursed? Or was it safety? She had nursed it close like a maturing child might hold a tattered and torn rag doll to their bosom, long past the time for it to be retired to the nursery shelf.

She explored this similar feeling inside of Barb and wondered why her old friend felt this same ache? She felt abashed at exploring this emotion enshrouding Barb's entire heart. She probed and prodded, feeling a bit guilty at the intrusion, but her curiosity was too great not to. Suddenly her breath caught.

She realized this feeling was for her! Barb's thoughts drifted to a fantasy of holding her hand and taking walks in the meadow. She could see Barb's fantasy continue into long evenings spent in each other's embrace. Barb longed to plant gentle kisses all over Greta's face and neck and... Oh! She felt a rush of heat run through her that was not caused by the imposing sun. A heat caused by a fire that had long since been kept suppressed and concealed. She was surprised to realize the embers had been blazing low and longingly for such a long time.

Then, like a fisherman's line, she was jerked back into her body again. All that she had just experienced instantly became a raging storm of tumultuous emotions inside her. It took her a moment to regain her bearings, and as she did, she noticed The Stranger was staring at her intensely with that old sly smirk twinging in the creases on his face.

She felt flush with embarrassment as she thought for one silly second that The Stranger could see Barb's titillating thoughts, which she also realized were not a far stretch from her own. Before she could turn, his hand quickly shot out, and he placed it gently over hers.

“Greta, I didn’t ask you my question yet. I was wondering if you think Tomas and those here in Baylor who are your true friends would want you to be happy?”

She stopped and stared in wonderment at The Stranger. Then as his words gripped firmly at her heart, tears began to form in her eyes. She thought about this and how deeply Tomas had loved her. How the men and women in the tavern smirked when Greta and Barb stood across the bar smiling ‘stupidly’ at each other.

Perhaps she and Tomas had not been in love, but they had managed to find a comfortable union during that short time in their lives. He was a good man. As good as they came, and he had wanted for nothing but her happiness.

For the most part, the people of Baylor were like family to her and Barb, and she knew her friends did want for her happiness in the same way Tomas had.

At that moment, she heard Barb grunting and struggling with the overloaded milk crate full of supplies. She turned to look at Greta, and upon seeing her tear-streaked face, she dropped the crate and rushed to her.

“Greta! What’s wrong?”

Her tears began to flow now, but from an internal fountain of a different purpose. She ran to Barb and gently touched her face with both her hands. Then, before Barb could speak another word, Greta kissed her softly at first, then as the kiss increased in urgency, Greta fell entirely into Barb’s arms.

Tears fell on Barb’s face; bittersweet tears of loss and hope. Barb reached to cradle Greta’s face in her hands and returned the kiss with all the passion of a fire no longer concealed.

With this, The Stranger hopped quietly off the bar stool and slipped out the door without being seen. He felt content with the work he had accomplished in the tiny town of Baylor, and he hummed a gentle, upbeat sort of tune of self-satisfaction.

He moved down the lonely mountain road leading into or out of town depending on your destination. Evie was lying in the same field on her

stomach, lazily watching the grass and daisies dance with each other in the gentle breeze. Upon seeing the man, she jumped up and ran to the fence.

“You’re leaving so soon?”

“Yes, we all have to move on. In my case, sooner is always better than later, but usually later is always how it occurs.” He stopped only briefly to wink at her and kept walking.

Evie scratched her head. Then she called after him. "Hey, I don't even know your name!" At this, he did stop and turn around, and he was sporting a mischievous smile. "No one ever asked."

She waited expectantly for a moment, and he merely stood there saying nothing. She finally huffed playfully and said, “Well what is your name, stranger?”

“Perspective.”

Then he winked at her and tipped his ball cap in that same manner as the day he had arrived.

“Perspective?” She scrunched up her nose and laughed. “That isn’t a real name.”

"Well, I guess it's all in how you look at it." He chuckled mildly and pulled the collar of his old duster around his neck and was about to continue on. Then he stopped and turned back to Evie, who was still trying to work out the meaning of his words. “By the way, in a few months my cousin will be headed this way. I’m sure you fine townfolk will receive her with all the same warmth and hospitality you bestowed on me.”

“Oh, what’s her name?”

“Mischief.” The Stranger grinned knowingly and loped on down the dirt road until he disappeared completely from sight.

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Thank you for reading my short story! Continue on, to find out what happens when Mischief comes to Baylor, and consider leaving me a review. It helps immensely to improve my writing! Thanks again!

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# Chapter 1 - Teaser for: Ayame

## City of Avalon Series

Ayame ambled along the promenade with her friends from work. When the group learned a carnival had come to their mid-sized town of Avalon, Massachusetts, they jumped on the chance to go. The lights and scents of whirling rides, screaming children, burnt sugar, and heated dust, bombarded her with a wonderful heady fragrance of summer fun — a conjured feeling of childhood days long past. Blissful organized chaos, magic in the air, only such an event on a warm summer night can stir up.

She cast a sidelong glance down the row at her four friends as they walked shoulder to shoulder, ignoring the taunting cries of carnies trying to lure them to their booths. They were a mismatched group resembling something like the line-up from *The Wizard of Oz* - plus one.

Danika, in the middle of their line, shimmied herself to the end around Ellie, Erik, and Janet and positioned herself next to Ayame. Danika helped herself to Ayame's cotton candy.

Ayame felt light and carefree like she was twelve again instead of twenty-five. That was until Danika asked innocently, "So have you picked out a wedding dress yet?"

Most brides would have taken this moment to gush and share every blissful detail of their dream gown with their best friend. Ayame, on the other hand, felt as if her veins had been flushed with ice-water. Her whole body tensed as her brain worked out the best excuse she could supply. Nothing came.

In an attempt to hide her discomfort over the innocuous question, Ayame gingerly tore a piece of fluffy blue confection, popped it into her mouth,

and licked her fingers. Her gut turned over as the sugar hit her tongue, but she was sure it wasn't the cotton candy causing the upset stomach.

"Oh, not yet," Ayame finally said with forced lightness. She then pushed a strand of her jet-black hair behind her ear, sighing as she realized she'd just smeared wet sugar in her hair.

Janet piped up, "I already have *my* dress picked out, now all I need is a groom," she declared smugly. As if this minor detail to her life plan were simply equity in an account, and she was waiting to make her 'groom' withdrawal once it was matured to the desired goal.

Danika scowled at Janet.

Ayame's mind flashed with an unbidden image of Janet in a wedding dress. Her long stringy waist-length black hair pulled up into a severe bun. Her modern corseted gown falling off her tall garish, flat chested, frame. Her fake tan clashing with the stark white of the dress, and Janet dragging her groom up the aisle by the collar as he tried to run away.

Ayame had to suppress a smile at the imagery her mind had randomly produced.

On the other hand, when she turned to look at Danika, she envisioned her friend's short, full-bodied figure in a beautiful ivory brocade, holding a tender bouquet of pale white lilies. The soft ebony of Danika's skin highlighted with little makeup, and her wavy hair adorned with flowers instead of a veil. She couldn't say why, but Ayame imagined a towering man, rippling with muscles, and sexy as hell, staring down adoringly at Danika. They'd lovingly exchange their vows in a romantic, quaint little chapel.

"So? Why haven't you picked out a dress yet?" Danika pressed, rousing Ayame out of her strange imagery. She blushed realizing she'd been daydreaming again, something she'd been prone to since she was little.

"Oh, too many choices, I guess." Even as the words spilled out, she knew it didn't sound convincing.

“Uh-huh,” Danika mumbled but didn’t press further.

As they strolled along, Ayame couldn’t shake thoughts of the wedding now. She dragged the toe of her sneaker along the ground as they continued to walk, stirring up dust.

Ayame’s athletic body and Asian-American skin tone lent way to wearing just about any style she preferred. It wasn’t a matter of what looked good on her or not. And it wasn’t about ‘too many choices,’ it was about too few.

*What I want...*

Suddenly an unbidden image of herself came to mind. She was standing on a bridal suite platform in the wedding boutique of her mind’s eye.

She envisioned her face framed with an ivory tulle veil. It cascaded down past her shoulder-length black hair. Her wide doe eyes were lightly painted with pink eye-shadow. She had always hated her slightly aquiline nose and wished for fuller lips on her heart-shaped face, but at that moment, she could see herself as beautiful.

Then she saw herself in ‘The Dress.’ It molded to her perfectly like a second skin. It changed her mood for a moment, as well. Feeling her emotions soften like the warm glow of the lighting in her imaginary boutique.

Perfection.

‘The Dress’ was a smooth ivory color, almost champagne tinted. It had delicate chiffon ruching draped around her shoulders just above her cleavage. Her eyes trailed along the bodice made of raw silk, a fitted cut that hugged every curve of her bust and waist. The skirt flared just below her hips in a 50s style knee-length fashion. It was a wonderful mixture of modern and simple vintage qualities she adored.

She would have loved to have shown ‘The Dress’ to her friends, but that also meant explaining why she couldn’t have the dress. They would have been utterly perplexed as to her self-denial of the gown she truly wanted.

*Why?* They would simply ask, *Why can't you have it?*

The answer in her mind was simple and obvious, but to make them understand was complicated.

It was difficult to explain what it meant to be Mormon. Young worthy members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints - or LDS Church for short - were to marry another Mormon, in a Mormon temple if they wanted to attain the highest degree of heaven, and only other worthy Mormon temple recommend holders could attend the wedding inside.

How could she give them a lifetime education on her beliefs and culture inside of fifteen minutes and make them understand? She couldn't. They would have suggested innocently enough, 'just get the dress you like and alter it a bit so you can wear it in your temple,' after telling them the dress had to be modest.

Sure, Mormon brides-to-be took their gowns to alterations shop and got them 'filled' in all the time so that they would be appropriate for the ceremony. But when she thought about 'The Dress,' there was no way to modify it for the Mormon temple ceremony. The skirt would have to be lengthened to her ankles. The shoulders would need to be covered up to the neckline. The color would have to be white, not ivory. After all those changes, it would ultimately defeat the purpose of why she loved the dress to begin with.

She knew she probably shouldn't have, but she had printed the picture from the wedding site, folded it up, and placed it in the back of her wedding planner. Keeping it served no point other than to tempt herself with something she couldn't have. She'd felt tremendous guilt for even wanting something that was not appropriate in God's eyes. Yet, something had prevented her from dismissing the dress. She'd felt like a rebellious child stowing a tin with forbidden candies into the back of her closet, scared her father would discover it and beret her.

"Isn't there a bridal fair in Boston - in October?" Ellie suggested timidly, rousing Ayame from her conflicted thoughts. "We're only an hour's drive. We

could go with you.” Ellie blushed, and her normally pale freckled face was almost red enough to match her auburn hair.

Ayame hesitated a moment before answering.

Ellie sensed her reticence and became more self-conscious than usual. “It’s okay. We don’t have to go if you don’t want to.”

“I think it could be helpful,” Erik said, elbowing Ellie in the ribs lightly. “It’s a good idea.”

Ayame smiled at them both. She often mused that the two could have been siblings. Both pale-skinned gingers, and practically in competition over who was the most painfully shy. Erik with a shock of carrot-colored curls and Ellie with a light auburn mane of wavy tresses that most models would have killed for. Erik and Ellie. Their names even sounded like siblings, except they weren’t. The most significant difference besides gender, Erik towered over all his friends like an overgrown stalk of corn in the middle of a wheat field with a perpetually stooped posture, and Ellie struggled to top Erik’s shoulder at barely five feet.

Ayame was quietly thinking of how to respond to Ellie’s suggestion. “I think I’d like to go,” she said slowly. “I just don’t know how helpful it will be. You know how Mormon weddings are kinda unconventional.” Ayame bit her lip hesitantly. She didn’t want to have this discussion right now.

Danika and Ellie nodded quietly to be polite. She spared a sidelong glance at Janet, who bristled and pursed her lips into silence. Erik seemed distracted by the carnival, and Ayame wasn’t sure if he truly was.

Ayame’s head popped up when Danika cleared her throat and tried to break the uncomfortable silence that had rippled through the group. The discomfort each was feeling was an affront to the celebratory atmosphere that whirled on around them, and Danika was determined to keep the mood festive.

“We’ll be having a bachelorette party for you, right? No alcohol, I promise,” Danika added on quickly. Danika was slowly becoming educated on

the Mormon culture since the announcement had been made. Even if she didn't seem to understand everything, she was determined to support her best friend.

"Of course we are!" Janet answered before Ayame could. "And Ellie, you have to come! You're such a homebody, I swear."

Ellie nodded shyly but didn't argue.

"So, when are we having a bachelorette party?" Janet looked around the group for a consensus of support.

Ayame smiled wryly. "I don't care either way," she answered. "What about Erik, though? Aren't they usually a 'girls-only' sorta thing?" Ayame turned to Erik and asked him, "Do you even want to come?" She nudged him lightly.

"I wouldn't miss it," Erik said and grinned sheepishly.

"Ooh, we should get those little cake pans shaped like penises and make penis cupcakes!" Janet shrilled enthusiastically.

"We are not getting penis cakes," Danika scoffed.

"Why not?" Janet asked. "It's what you do when you have a bachelorette party."

"Pretty sure they have those at bridal showers, not bachelorette parties," Erik said.

The women turned to gawk at Erik as silence blanketed the group momentarily.

"How would *you* know that?" Ellie asked.

Erik shrugged. "My sister got married last year. We're close. She shared *every* detail of her planning."



Laughter rippled through the group.

“Pretty sure you can have penis cakes at a shower or a bachelorette party, but I don’t think Ayame should have penis cakes. She might get excommunicated,” Danika half-joked, her tone wavering as if she wasn’t sure if that might be true.

“I’m not going to get excommunicated,” Ayame sighed. “But really guys, you don’t have to bother throwing me a party. My mom and sister-in-law are throwing me a bridal shower, so a bachelorette party is probably overkill.”

“It’s not!” Janet said. “A bachelorette party is completely different than a shower. You have to do something wild and crazy before you strap on the ole’ ball and chain.”

Danika nudged Janet. “Stop that. She’s not strapping on anything she doesn’t want to.”

“Really?” Erik snorted, looking around with disbelief that he seemed to be the only one laughing at the sexual innuendo.

Ayame tried to smile at the joke, but something about the statement caught like a barb inside her and itched with discomfort.

She brushed the uncomfortable feelings aside as she’d been doing for weeks. The dust of residual worries, piling up under the rug of her subconscious mind.

They had moved to a particularly long line for the Gravitron. Janet had been insistent they had to ride this one at least ten times before they left.

As they stood in line, Ayame’s mind drifted back to the first day of work she’d shown up wearing the engagement ring.

“Oh my God, girl! Is that what I think it is?” Danika shrieked with delight and bounced up and down as the others crowded around her.

Then the questions began. It was natural they thought they'd be a part of the wedding. They'd been co-workers and friends for several years now. At the very least, they assumed they'd be able to attend.

With each question answered, the excited demeanor of her friends deflated like a withered hot air balloon being pierced by small arrows one by one.

Janet tried to smooth things over in her own 'Janet' way. "You could just have two ceremonies. Like one for your Mormon friends and one for your not-Mormon friends. You said there's no site fee for getting married in your temple. Have a little ceremony at the reception site for all of us, then we can be included, and it wouldn't cost extra!" Janet had beamed as if the issue were solved, and brooked no further discussion.

"True, it wouldn't cost extra, but..." Ayame stalled, trying to figure out how to explain this without hurting Janet's feelings. "...I can only have a ring ceremony. Not an actual second wedding ceremony."

Janet was visibly confused. So perplexed, she couldn't seem to form a rebuttal.

Since Ayame had announced the wedding a few weeks prior, the subject had become somewhat uncomfortable to broach, and her good-natured friends still made attempts to support her. Each time the subject came up, though, it never seemed to end well.

Ayame had made a valiant effort to explain her faith, and why they couldn't be at her wedding. It was clear they wanted to support her wedding and her faith. It was also apparent they were hurt.

The encounter left her feeling as if she were defending a choice that no one else could possibly understand. Like a rebellious teenager justifying her undying love of her 'tattoo-wielding-motorcycle-riding-bad-boyfriend,' to her kind and loving parents who could not fathom why she'd choose him over them. All the while, listening patiently despite their confusion.

Guilt and shame coursed through her. It would be one thing if it were actually an unruly-tattoo-wielding-man, but it wasn't. It was her religion. To use the word *religion* to describe what Mormonism meant to her, seemed trite. Her faith was so interwoven into her existence, that it was like the daily ritual of sleeping and waking. She didn't think about it. It was just there like the rising of the sun, day in and day out.

Not everyone could grasp the truth, the way, the light of life. She wished she could get her friends to join the fold, to partake of God's Great Plan of Happiness, but the world made it hard for people like her friends to see what they were missing. Because many temptations muddled the light of truth, outsiders were hard-pressed to see the light and the way.

She was no stranger to temptation herself. Days like that one, where her friends had learned of her engagement, often provoked a taboo desire where she wished she could break away from being Mormon. To not live by God's way, even if just for a day.

The thoughts would snake around her mind, just as Satan tempted Mother Eve in the Garden of Eden, writhing around branches with shallow promises. Giving in to sin, even a little bit, would provide temporary pleasure, but not lasting joy.

Still knowing this didn't make it any easier. She would have to make a concerted effort to let go of her worldly daydreams. Because if she dwelled on these thoughts too long, it would be all too easy to act on them. Once acted on, she would find herself on the dismal path of unrighteousness. It always started with seemingly inconsequential choices. Better to nip those thoughts in the bud right away.

However, thoughts alone could feel like she was waging war on the battlefield of her mind. She'd feel consumed with guilt for even wanting something that was not in alignment with God's path for her. The temptation would reach with an outstretched and injured arm, like a mangled soldier.

Sometimes she couldn't shake 'him' off. She felt conflicted for harboring soldiers on both sides of the 'the line.'

Yet, thoughts were not actions. She took comfort in knowing that so long as she didn't act on her temptations, it was not a sin to bear the thought unto itself.

So yes, she entertained what it might be like to get married as the rest of the world would. If she could have chosen, she would have decided on a little back-yard-gathering, in the garden of a quaint bed and breakfast, only inviting the closest of family and friends. It would be intimate, romantic, and practical.

However, if she was to be faithful to her Father in Heaven, she could not have this. Marriage was a sacred institution, instituted by God. Sacred ceremonies had to be held on holy ground. Marrying a worthy priesthood-holder in their temple was God's way.

Her friends had moved on to chattering about various lighter topics while Ayame mulled over her warring thoughts.

When she couldn't sort the thoughts out, she swept them away again.

*It's just wedding jitters. It will pass. Everyone has nerves when they get married. I have so much to do. I'm just overwhelmed. That's all.*

This is what she told herself constantly. It had become almost like her mantra — a soothing lullaby to keep her nerves calm. Except in the deep recesses of her subconscious mind, she felt this was like trying to soothe a colicky infant with bourbon.

Her friends meandered towards a line where they got on another ride. She mechanically followed along. They boarded a great octopus looking machine. The contraption whirled and twirled, literally shaking the wedding concerns, from Ayame's racing thoughts. The ride was too long and ended all too quickly, as is the case with amusement park rides.

As they exited the platform and continued to peruse the fairgrounds, Janet spotted something and pointed, “Hey, let’s check it out!”

It was a red threadbare cloth tent adorned with a garish sign hanging from the door that read: “Get Your Fortune Told!”

“Uh not really my thing,” Erik said.

“I second that,” Ellie offered quietly.

“You would say that,” Janet grumbled.

Ellie remained quiet and gave her a perplexed look. Erik averted his eyes. Janet ignored them both and turned to rally Ayame and Danika to her cause.

“C’mon you guys. It will be fun. I don’t really believe in this stuff either,” Janet continued.

Danika put a hand on her hip, stopped walking, and stared at Janet poignantly. “This comin’ from the woman who is reading her daily horoscope at her desk religiously before she can even boot up her computer every morning. Uh-huh. Don’t believe in this stuff – my ass.”

“Okay, well, I’m going in. Join me, or I’ll catch up with you all later,” Janet huffed and stormed ahead of them into the tent.

“I’ll go with you,” Ayame shrugged. “Just for fun. What the heck.”

Danika and Erik sighed begrudgingly, and Ellie followed without comment into the fortune teller's tent.

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Ayame will be released on September 28<sup>th</sup>, 2020

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