

Mayfly

Chapter 1

"You going tonight, Mare?"

"I don't know."

"Come on. It'll be fun. You love it."

Marianne dumped the soggy coffee filter in the trash and started up a fresh pot. The smells percolated through the air: shitty coffee, grease from the fryer, engines and tools from the adjoining garage, and the stench of gas from the pumps outside. On busy days she barely noticed, but it was late into her evening shift, and there was almost no traffic. The garage was closed. No one was stopping for cheap food and cheaper cigarettes. She had time to feel the odours sinking into her skin.

"Bobby'll be there."

"Are you sure that's not why you want to go?"

Charlene turned red, but shook her head, ringlets dancing. She looked like Shirley Temple. That was the first thing she said, all the way back when she was the new girl in first grade. *My name is Charlene. I look like Shirley Temple.* She'd had a picture to show. Marianne hadn't known who Shirley Temple was. The picture, and Charlene's notable resemblance to her, instantly made her jealous. She'd fried her hair plenty since then, trying to make her own straight blonde strands take on body. Charlene was cute and curvy and rich. She was nice, too, and she'd stayed nice even when everything in Marianne's life turned to shit. Marianne never could figure out why she was always single.

"He's all yours" Charlene said. "You know it, too."

"He's a dumbass."

Charlene giggled. Marianne looked down at the end of the counter, where her sole customer perched. The dark-haired woman had been camped out there a good four hours, nursing a cup of coffee. She never saw her take a drink. She barely even saw her move, no matter how uncomfortable the blue vinyl stools were. Marianne rolled her eyes at Charlene and went to check up.

"Fresh pot'll be ready soon."

"That'll be grand." The customer's voice was touched by the faintest lilt. Marianne cocked her head.

"Grand? You from England or something?"

"Good guess. Lots of places. Started off in Ireland though."

"Sorry. I know you guys have a thing."

"So we do." The customer smiled. Her lips were red, dark against her pale skin, and her teeth were blinding white. People said that Marianne's complexion was a shade called fish-belly but this woman made her look like a sun-kissed California girl in comparison.

"Going up to Alaska?" Marianne's voice was too thin and high. She cleared her throat and told herself to stop staring.

"I heard the northern lights are a thing of wonder."

"You can see those here, even. In winter, though."

She had an urge to keep talking, but managed to shut up. The woman's thick brown braid slid over her shoulder, gleaming even in the sick florescent light.

"I should stay here, then, until winter?"

"God, no. There's nothing to do here."

Her eyes were dark, too, and sharp. Intent. Marianne looked at her hands, instead, focussing on how pale and smooth they were. Just like the sturdy ceramic mug they held. Marianne rubbed her fingers together, wondering if the woman's skin would feel as smooth as it looked.

What the hell?

"It sounds like you have plans."

"Nothing very interesting. Just going to the pit."

"The pit? Sounds infernal."

Marianne laughed. "Not that cool. It's just where we hang out."

A stool squeaked; Charlene was getting fidgety. Marianne would need a ride out if she was going to go, and Charlene was borrowing her brother's car.

"Um. I'll get you some more coffee when it's ready."

"Thank you."

"So you'll come," Charlene said when she returned.

"I guess. I don't want to get stuck out there all night, though."

"Someone will be coming back in. You can catch a ride." Charlene grinned.

"Awesome. I'll come by and pick you up when your shift's done."

Marianne followed her outside. The amber lights over the pumps gave off a low, buzzing hum. They weren't far off the highway and caught a lot of traffic from people who thought the little patch of town to the north was the last of it, when most of it was still ahead. The lull stretched on; the gas station was a lonely, glowing bulb clinging to the black cord of highway, with nothing but impenetrable forests all around.

"I don't know how you put up with the weirdos."

Marianne blinked. "What?"

Charlene made a little face, fiddling with her keys. "That woman. She's freaky."

"How was she freaky?"

"I don't even think she moved the whole time I was in there. She kept staring. And I think she was even eavesdropping."

"She moved! She talked to me and stuff."

Charlene shrugged, glancing back once at the solitary form. Marianne followed her gaze. White shirt, red and black plaid pants, and a black jacket and bag slumped on the stool beside her. Nothing strange.

"I just don't think I could do it."

She'd never have to, either. Her parents were made of money. The only reason she had to borrow a car was because her birthday present had been a trip to New York instead.

"I'm done at midnight," Marianne said.

"Great! I'll come get you then."

Marianne watched her run off to the car, curls bouncing, then pulled open the door, bell ringing.

"Sorry. I'll get you that—"

The stool at the end of the counter was empty. She went around to the bathrooms. The doors stood open, stalls vacant.

"Shit."

At least it was only coffee. Last week someone took off with a full tank of gas during a rush. The only reason it hadn't been taken out of her cheque was because Dave had still been working in the garage and told the owner to fuck off that way that guys could, without getting fired. Marianne scooped up the cup and saucer then nearly dropped them. Next to the unused napkin she found a hundred-dollar bill.

Todd came in a little early for his overnight shift, and kept her company until Charlene pulled up behind the wheel of her brother's Mazda. They headed east, leaving the town behind. The pit was a multipurpose wasteland at the end of a forestry road. A flat stretch of rocky ground was fringed with scrawny pines, wide enough for guys to mess around with their cars. On one side a rocky hill rose sharply, too steep to climb, but someone was always getting drunk enough to try. It was the unofficially official target range; broken glass at the base reflected their headlights back in a sparkling line. Along the

other side was the Snake River. It wasn't deep enough for anything more than wading, but it was great for tubing as long as you got out at the bridge to walk back up along the highway. Nothing after that but wilderness.

By the time she and Charlene got there about a dozen cars and trucks were already parked. The fire was built high, sparks flying up into the stars. Even in the car she could hear the muffled sound of music from some busted out stereo. Country or metal? Once the door was open she heard the boom of drums, not the slide of a steel guitar.

Nights were always cold in their part of Canada, even in summer, and it was only June. She pulled her sleeves down over her hands to hold her beer and sat as close to the fire as she could.

"Ooh!" Charlene grabbed her arm, making a little warm spot. "Angie and Jen are here. Do you mind if I go say hi?"

"It's cool. You don't have to ask."

"It's just that I know...Well, anyway. Back in a bit."

She watched Charlene from across the fire and drank her beer too fast. Angie and Jen had been her friends too, once. Right up until her dad's accident, anyway.

"Hey."

"Hey."

Bobby sat down beside her, the frays in his ratty old jeans giving way to a flash of pale leg. One lunch time she'd drawn something on those jeans in felt pen. She couldn't remember what it was. Probably some stupid in-joke that stopped being funny a minute after she'd done it. It was faded out now, too much to tell. He'd loved it at the time, and she got a thrill out of feeling his leg beneath the denim. They'd been in a lot of the same classes in the first year of high school. Her crush was crazy strong and immediate. And probably embarrassing. But he was the guy with the guitar, sweet eyes, and tousled hair. And nice. He'd been nice.

Still. He was still nice.

Or he was habit. Other people had cigarettes. She had Bobby. It seemed like they barely spoke anymore. If she hadn't come he probably wouldn't have noticed. She shifted on the hard ground; she probably wouldn't have missed anything, either, by going home.

Someone sent a joint around the fire. She let the smoke fill her lungs. It was a big fire. By the time Bobby handed it to her again her brain was pleasantly fuzzy. She looked at his hand a minute, thinking of it fumbling around, and took another drag.

He leaned close, rubbing her thigh. "Wanna get out of here for awhile?"

"Sure, I guess."

His old pickup was parked at the edge of the pit. He could have had a nice, new car, since his parents had the money for it. He'd opted to get an old junker. His dad was giving him money to fix it up. It was real, to work with your hands, he said. He hadn't done much so far; she could feel the rust-pitted metal through the sleeping bag as he moved on top of her.

She knew him well enough by now. When his grunting took on a particular, uneven rhythm she reached down, hoping to get herself off before he finished. He grabbed her hands and pinned them above her head. His face appeared, blocking out the stars.

"You like that, don't you? You can't even help yourself. You fucking love it."

Stop talking.

She made herself moan. He grinned, looking away when he went stiff. Was he wearing a condom?

He panted on top of her, then rolled off. "That was great, Mare."

No condom. She'd seen him put it on. When she sat up, she saw the limp bit of latex dangling from the corner of the tailgate. He must have taken it off while they were doing it. Again. She sighed and used a corner of the sleeping bag to wipe herself off.

"What the fuck? Don't do that!"

"What?"

"Shit, now I'll have to wash it."

She looked at the sleeping bag, wracked by a bone-deep shudder. How far was it to the nearest shower?

He hopped down and pulled up his jeans.

"I'm gonna get a beer."

She watched him shamble back to the bright noise of the pit.

"Yeah, thanks. I'd love one."

Heavy bass bounced between the trees, so much detail scrubbed away that she couldn't tell the song. She straightened her clothes and pulled up her jeans. Was it Zeppelin? Someone's dad's music. Retro. Vintage. Real. She bobbed her head along for a few beats, feet swinging over the edge of the tailgate. The movement trailed off without her noticing.

She looked up at the sky again. Once past the glow of the pit, her eyes could pick out more and more stars. The black sky became blue. Wind rushed through the trees, bowing them briefly down, then it faded. The music changed over to Nirvana before vanishing too. She could only tell a couple of constellations. She liked Orion, but she couldn't find it. Maybe it was the wrong time of year. She could see the dipper, though. She watched it, beer and weed making it swirl like it was underwater.

Ursa. Ursula. It was a pretty name. One of her classmates had a kid, already, by graduation, and she'd sat at lunch listening to girls talk about names for it. Not even done with high school and she had a kid. People whispered, but now that she was engaged to the father it was okay. At least he did the right thing, her mom said. They did the right thing. Good kids, she said. Such a shame. But they were doing the right thing.

The quiet thickened. A mist spread out from the trees. It was like the icy cold mist that came in winter, and made water droplets form on her lashes. She blinked and rubbed

her eyes, but everything stayed blurry. When she shifted her weight the creak of the truck sounded too sharp and loud.

I should go back.

She didn't want to see Charlene and her friends or listen to music that she was beginning to fear was as shitty as her mom said it was. She wanted to stay here, waiting.

"What a gentleman that one is."

The lady from the gas station was standing at the edge of the trees. Marianne blinked rapidly; it was her and not her at the same time. Like when she got really drunk and straight edges didn't line up. Her stomach twisted. She wasn't that drunk. There was something wrong.

There was something wrong.

"How did y...Did you follow us?"

"I was invited." She waved her hand. It was graceful, not thoughtless, meaningful, not vague. It didn't make sense to Marianne that someone would invite a perfect stranger. Then again, she was hot, in an hourglass way. Guys might talk about supermodels, but they all got off to porn stars with big boobs and tight waists. Bobby sure did, no matter what he said about Marianne's less-than-buxom figure. The strange woman had the right curves, minus the trashy clothes. Approachable. Guys would do anything if a girl was hot.

She looked down at herself. She still wanted a shower. She tried to move, commanding herself to slide down off the tailgate. Charlene would take her home if she asked. Everything would be okay if she was behind her own door, in her swaybacked bed.

The woman sat beside her, fluid and silent. She crossed her legs at the ankles and swung them slowly, the buckle on one chunky platform gleaming. Marianne watched. It was so weird; she could feel her heart pounding like a bird against the cage of her ribs, but she sat still, as though there was nothing wrong at all. She knew without even trying that she wouldn't be able to move.

The woman smelled...cold. Like winter mist. Cold, and barely there.

"What's your name?" Marianne's voice was a croaking whisper.

"You can call me Ash."

"Is that your name?"

"Part of it."

"It's cool."

"Thank you. I like yours, too."

"Just lucky. One grandmother was Mary. One was Anne."

"You carry your family forward in your blood."

Marianne hoped not. Her father and his family had been riddled with cancer. Her mother was three careful years sober.

"Forgive me. A painful topic."

She shifted, not sure what to say. The apology was so gentle and sincere.

"It's okay."

They sat in peaceful silence. The music changed. Some screaming thrash metal, distant between the trees.

"It sounds like war," Ash said.

"I guess. It's good for when you're angry, you know."

"So is war."

Marianne smiled. Ash seemed to glow in the mist, she was so pale. Her lips were so red. Her braid gleamed.

"I didn't think there were any wars in Ireland recently." Marianne forced herself to look away.

"There's always a fight on, somewhere, both the visible, and the hidden."

Maybe she was talking about some other place, not Ireland. It seemed like she moved around.

"The young are full of passion and desire. It turns to rage so easily." Her voice was rich and deep, echoing in her head. "What do you want, Marianne?"

She looked down. Her fingers had found a patch of rust, pulling at the flakes, fragmenting the truck, bit by bit.

"I want to go away. I wanted to go away to university. Be somewhere else. Someone else. I don't know who or what. I could figure it out, you know. Everyone who can leave here gets out when they can."

"Where would you go, if you could?"

"London. Paris. Rome. Cairo. The Alps. I don't know. Everywhere."

"A fine ambition."

"It was, I guess."

"Your life isn't over."

"I needed a scholarship. School. A good job. I wasn't good enough, though."

Ash nodded. How old was she? Maybe twenty? Travelling the world. She must be rich.

"Not rich," Ash said, with her musical lilt. "Not at first."

"You read minds?"

"You spoke aloud."

"Fuck. That pot must have been laced with something."

Ash laughed. Marianne felt it in her spine. It was a quiver, like when you drove too fast, or climbed under the bridge to wait out a train. It was excitement. It was like...

"Do you want to know what I want?"

"Yes." She did. She wondered about her. Marianne thought she saw her move. Her hands cupped Marianne's face. She couldn't drag her gaze away from those strange, dark eyes.

Her skin is really that smooth.

Marianne fought for breath. The touch shouldn't feel as nice as it did.

"I'm not..."

"Not what?" Her voice was as warm as she was cool, spreading like warm honey.

Marianne blinked, eyes heavy. Ash brushed back a lock of Marianne's hair. All Marianne could hear was her own thundering heart.

Lips brushed hers, drifting like feathers down to her neck, cool and soft. Marianne moaned. She felt a tongue, warm and wet.

Then fire poured through her veins, and ice followed. She twisted, eyes wide. Ash's arms were so strong, and the pain at Marianne's throat burned down her arms and legs.

Wait. No. I want. I want to see. Not yet.

The stars blurred and dimmed.

I haven't seen anything, yet.