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The People of Bone Gap

The people of Bone Gap called Finn a lot of things, but none of them was his name. When he was little, they called him Spaceman. Sidetrack. Moonface. You. As he got older, they called him Pretty Boy. Loner. Brother. *Dude*.

But whatever they called him, they called him fondly. Despite his odd expressions, his strange distraction, and that annoying way he had of creeping up on a person, they knew him as well as they knew anyone. As well as they knew themselves. They knew him like they knew that Old Charlie Valentine preferred his chickens to his great-grandchildren, and sometimes let them roost in the house. (The chickens, not the children.) The way they knew that the Cordero family had a ghost that liked to rifle through the fridge

at night. The way they knew that Priscilla Willis, the beekeeper's homely daughter, had a sting worse than any bee. The way they knew that Bone Gap had gaps just wide enough for people to slip through, or slip away, leaving only their stories behind.

As for Finn, well, they thought he was a little weird, but that was okay with them. "Yeah, that boy's nuttier than a honey cluster," they might say. "But he's a fine-looking nut. A sharp nut. *Our* nut." Finn, they were sure, had his heart in the right place. Just the way they did.

Eventually, though, they found out that there was a good reason for Finn's odd expressions, his strange distraction, that annoying way he had of creeping up on a person. A good reason he never looked anyone in the eye.

But by then it was too late, and the girl they loved most—and knew least of all—was gone.

May
Milk Moon

Finn

Roadkill

The corn was talking to him again.

It had been a warm winter and a balmy spring in Bone Gap, so everyone with a field and a taste for corn had plowed and planted earlier than they'd ever dared before. On the last day of his junior year, exactly two months after his life had burst like a thunderhead, Finn walked home from the bus stop past plants already up to his waist. It was his favorite part of the afternoon, or should have been: the sun bright and hot in the sky, the plants twitching their green fingers. Corn can add inches in a single day; if you listened, you could hear it grow. Finn caught the familiar whisper—*here, here, here*—and wished it would shut up.

His friend Miguel would have agreed. Miguel hated

the corn, said the plants seemed . . . alive. When Finn reminded him that, duh, of course the corn was alive, all plants were alive, Miguel replied that the corn sounded *alive* alive. As if it wasn't just growing, it was ripping itself out of the ground and sneaking around on skinny white roots. Scarecrows weren't made to scare the crows, they were made to scare the corn. It was enough to give a person nightmares. Otherwise, why would so many horror movies have cornfields in them?

Finn had nightmares enough, but not about cornfields. His dreams used to be filled with the typical stuff: getting naked with this girl or that one. Evading psychos with hatchets and roller skates. Showing up in class wearing nothing but a snorkel and a single plaid sock. Flying so high that not even the clouds could keep up.

Now? He couldn't close his eyes without seeing Roza's slim hands slapping at fogged glass, the gleaming black SUV swallowed up by the gathering dark.

He didn't sleep if he could help it. And he didn't listen to the corn anymore. Why should he, when it wouldn't stop lying?

Sweat prickled on his scalp, and he stopped to switch his backpack from one shoulder to the other. The cornfield stretched out for miles, but standing here, on a hazy back road in Illinois, you wouldn't know it. The

pavement in front of Finn ended in a wall of sky, as if it had been sliced off by the swing of a scythe.

He might have stood there for a while, considering the cutaway road and the perfect metaphor it was, if a murder of black crows hadn't shown up, cawing their stupid heads off.

Finn wasn't impressed. "What are you guys supposed to be? Set decoration?"

They'll pluck out your eyes before they peck you to death, Miguel would have told him. *Haven't you ever seen Hitchcock?* But Finn didn't like movies, and he thought the crows were nothing but jokers and thieves.

Which is what he called them. "Jokers."

The crows said, "Coward!" They cackled and flapped, the sun shining blue on their glossy wings, beaks sharp as hay hooks.

So maybe Miguel had a point.

Finn kept walking, feet heavy in the heat. His temples throbbed, sandy eyelids scratching his corneas. When he spoke, his voice creaked like an old door the same way Charlie Valentine's did as he yammered on about his granddad's granddad's horse farm, or how the railroad used to have a stop right in the middle of town, or the time he trapped an eight-foot-long beaver, as if the giants hadn't been extinct since the last ice age. Like Old Charlie Valentine, Finn wished he could turn back the days as easily as a farmer turning a page in an

almanac. He wished that the people of Bone Gap could forgive, and that he could forget.

He hiked up his backpack, worked on forgetting. *Think of something else, anything else.* Like his chores, which his brother would want finished by dinner. Like studying for the college entrance exams, exams he would need to ace if he had any hope of going away, getting away, though the thought of going made his stomach clench. Like the Rude boys, all five of them as mean as yellow jackets, boys who liked to hurt people who got in their way, and people who didn't.

The very same Rude boys who appeared on the road in front of him.

Finn froze up like a monument to cowards everywhere. Was it them? Was he sure? Of course he was. Finn could always tell, even from this far away. All five of them were short and bowlegged, making them look like a chorus line of wishbones. The Rude boys walked as if they were permanently saddle sore.

The boys hadn't been on the bus, they hadn't bothered to come to class. Finn had no idea where they'd come from or how he could have missed them. He was always missing things. Luckily for him, the Rudes were walking in the same direction and hadn't noticed him yet. He could turn the other way. Or, if the corn were higher, he could vanish into it, go missing himself.

But then, there was no use running, no use hiding, and he had nothing left to be scared of. He dragged his heels, and pebbles rocketed across the pavement.

One of the Rude boys turned around. "Hey, look. It's Moonface. Trying to sneak up on us again."

"Whatcha doing, Moonface?"

"Mooning at the moon?"

Mean as yellow jackets, dumb as dirt. He sighed, the sharp exhale like the hiss of the plants all around.

"Who you laughing at?"

And easy, too. "I'm not laughing."

"Yes, you are."

"Okay, I'm laughing."

"Not at us," said one.

"Not if you're smart," said another.

"Haven't you heard?" Finn said. "I'm not so smart."

Easy and easily confused, eyebrows scrunching like inchworms. The Rudes didn't know what he was going on about. Neither did he.

"Never mind," Finn said. "Just talking to myself."

"Yeah, well, you just keep talking to yourself, because we got stuff to do."

"Later, Moonface."

Later, Finn thought.

And then, *Nothing will be different later*.

He hadn't been laughing, but the crows? *They* were laughing. The corn kept whispering. The sun was a

yellow eye scorched in a blanket of blue. He looked at it too long, and it ate holes in his head. Just that morning, he'd gone to Roza's apartment and found all her stuff gone, the air a fog of Pine-Sol. Sometime in the night, God knew when, Finn's brother had cleaned things out, scrubbed things down, as if a girl could be washed from memory just by washing the floors.

More pebbles shot across the road, more words shot out of his mouth. "Now that you mention it, I was chatting with the crows earlier. They were wondering why you guys walk like you're wearing diapers."

The Rudes had him surrounded before he could think of a way out. Not that he wanted one. They circled him, old names and new ones dropping like crab apples.

"Spaceman! We're talking to you!"

Finn said, "What?"

"Whatcha got in the bag?" They ripped the backpack off him, searched it. The pack went flying into the field.

He could still turn this around.

"Hey! Shithead! Are you listening?"

He could dive into the corn—backtrack, sidetrack.

"Why do you have so many books when you can't read?"

Finn said, "Funny coming from guys who can't tell the difference between their cows and their girlfriends."

The first blow knocked the air from his lungs.

He bent at the waist, trying to catch his breath. He didn't even know which one had hit him—Derek, Erik, Frank, Jake, or Spike. None were more than eighteen months apart in age, all blond and freckled and sunburned, and who could tell one from the other?

Finn took a couple of rabbit punches to the kidneys before one of them grabbed a handful of his hair and yanked him upright. Finn blinked at the boy in front of him, his eyes zeroing in on that famous Rude underbite.

They weren't even trying.

He said, "Listen, Derek, if you thought that—"

"Are you messing with me?"

"No, I'm—"

"He's Derek," the boy said, pointing to another boy. "I'm Frank. And you're Roadkill."

The Rude boys suddenly forgot about the stuff they had to do, because they took their time and gave it their all, their knuckles almost as hard as their boots. And though Finn was tall, his arms and legs ropey with farm muscle, the Rudes were wider and stronger, and there were about four and a half too many of them.

When they were done, the boys gathered around and peered down at Finn, sprawled on the cracked asphalt. "You know," said one of them, "anytime Sean wants some real brothers, we could make room for him."

If Finn's teeth hadn't felt so loose in his head, he

might have laughed again. Everybody loved Sean, even the Rudes. When someone needed help, Sean was the guy who showed up, sirens blaring, arms pumping, black bag swinging in his big capable hands, sharp eyes taking it all in. And though Sean sometimes had to ask questions, he never asked too many, and never the wrong ones.

But it was more than that. The people of Bone Gap loved Sean because of Roza. Because Sean loved Roza.

Above Finn, somebody muttered something about being hungry. Somebody else said, "Shut it." Somebody's cell phone pinged. Somebody nudged Finn with his foot as if Finn were a possum. Only pretending to be dead.

He wanted to shout so that everyone could hear: *I loved her, too*. And it was true. But it had done none of them any good.

Finn spat the blood from his mouth. "I'll tell my brother you said hello."

The boys left and Finn was alone. After a bit, he decided that he should get up, just in case Old Charlie Valentine picked today to take his ancient Cadillac for a spin. He hauled himself up and off the road, fished his backpack from the field. He wouldn't leave his test prep books behind; even used, they cost a fortune. Sean would kill him.