



what
the
woods
took

A NOVEL

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WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK

Author's Note

What the Woods Took chronicles the journey of five “troubled teens” in a behavioral therapy program. Therefore, some of the thematic material included contains mentions of substance abuse, child endangerment, sexual assault and child sexual abuse (CSA), and suicide. Included also are depictions of gore and violence against children. For a more detailed description of sensitive content, please visit gouldbooks.com/wtwt.

While many of the speculative dangers the characters of *What the Woods Took* face are fictional, details of the program they are enrolled in are taken from many real-life wilderness therapy programs that are still in operation today. These programs are often inhumane, meant to exploit children and their families both emotionally and financially. Activism from groups such as Breaking Code Silence and testimony from survivors of the troubled teen industry have made massive strides in outlawing the kidnapping and forced institutionalization of many teens in the United States. While these programs are beginning to face consequences for their abuse, there is still work to be done. If the treatment of the characters in this novel at the hands of REVIVE disturbs you, please consider donating to one of the many organizations fighting against the injustice of the

troubled teen industry. For a list of legislative changes, articles with more information, and organizations to donate to, please visit gouldbooks.com/wtwinfo.

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Patton,

We are delighted to share that your application to enroll Devin Green in REVIVE Teen Rehabilitation Journey has been accepted.

At REVIVE, we believe that any teen's path can shift with supportive guidance and mentorship based on mutual respect. Your teen might be struggling to find footing in this difficult, rapidly changing global landscape. We believe that separating them from the harm of the modern world is imperative now more than ever. As Aldo Leopold once said of youth in nature, "... wilderness gave them their first taste of those rewards and penalties for wise and foolish acts which every woodsman faces daily, but against which civilization has built a thousand buffers."

At REVIVE, we believe in shielding your teen from harm, but not discomfort. Your teen will face many situations meant to deeply disquiet them. By bringing your teen back to their baser instincts, we will rebuild their decision-making skills in uncomfortable situations, making your teen stronger and wiser than before. When these fifty days end, we believe you will see a new teen, rebuilt and renewed. Your teen may resist or resent this process at first, but know that we are not here to punish them for the hard hand they've been dealt. We thank you for trusting REVIVE with your teen's health and well-being, and we look forward to the day you reunite. Enclosed, you will find an invoice for your down payment and details of your teen's individualized plan.

Thank you once more for entrusting us to plant the seeds of Devin's great journey to the light.

*Warmest regards,
The Staff of REVIVE*

I



Devin feels them before she opens her eyes.

Two men. The mass of them—one at the foot of her bed and the other standing beside her—is heavy in the night. At first, she thinks it might be a bad dream. But bad dreams don't smell like sweat and cheap deodorant. These men are real.

It can't be morning yet; Devin's limbs are still weighty with sleep. She breathes deep and stays still, keeping the rise and fall of her chest steady through the fear. She needs to get out of here and her options for doing so are limited. She doesn't know this bedroom like the last one. She doesn't know how to slip out in an emergency. If there are places to hide, she hasn't uncovered them.

Behind her eyelids, Devin makes a map. It's something she should've done the moment CPS moved her here. There's a window behind her, but in the six months she's been here, she hasn't tried opening it. She could attempt to pry it open and get out before either stranger grabs her. The bedroom door is just beyond the foot of her bed, but with strangers in the way, it's off the table. A door to her left leads to a shared bathroom with the other kids. She could probably get there, but then what? Lead the strangers to *more* children?

She knew every in and out of her last foster home. Knew how to disappear in a moment's notice. Whoever these men are, though, they've caught her off guard. She doesn't know what they want. She's unprepared and it's her own fault. Six months of peace and she made the mistake of getting comfortable.

"Devin Green?"

This voice comes from the man at her shoulder, too loud to be discreet. Devin doesn't open her eyes, but her breath hitches. He isn't afraid of being caught, for some reason, which means he either thinks he can take everyone in this house, or . . .

She doesn't want to think about the alternative.

"Wake up, Devin," the man says. "Please."

Devin opens her eyes, but the room is still black. She can't see the men's faces, but their silhouettes are massive. They don't immediately reach for her—a mistake she doesn't plan to waste.

The window will have to do.

She sucks in a breath through her nose and twists to grab the window latch behind her, fumbling to wrench it open. She pulls hard at the bottom of the window, but it doesn't budge. A smooth stroke of paint is hardened at the crease. Painted shut.

When a hand closes around her ankle, Devin screams.

"*Shh*," the voice at the foot of her bed hisses. "You're gonna wake people up."

Devin turns over in the stranger's grip, pushes off the bed with what momentum she has, and plants her fist squarely to her attacker's nose, earning a *crunch*. It's not enough to take the man out, but at least it'll buy her a second to run. The bed creaks as Devin swings her legs over the lip of the mattress. It doesn't matter what they want; the only thing that matters is escape.

"Shit," the man snaps. "Grab her arms."

The one at the foot of the bed scurries to Devin's side before she can get up, grabbing her wrist and forcing it back to the mattress. The springs screech, too noisy not to wake the others. She claws at the man's arm with

her free hand and the part of her that only knows how to survive takes over. The air is too shallow to breathe.

“*Diane*,” Devin cries with what breath she has. “*Henry*.”

A hand claps over her mouth.

Devin’s been in dozens of homes over the last few years, all with their own sketchy situations, but the Pattons were supposed to be different. They live in a quiet neighborhood, mostly populated by old people. They ask if she wants water before bed, what kind of lunch meat she wants in her sandwiches, offer to drive her to friends’ houses on the weekends so she doesn’t have to walk. Of all the places she expected to be attacked in the middle of the night, this was last on the list.

“You’re not in danger, Devin,” the man with a hand over her mouth snaps. “Please calm down.”

Devin holds still long enough for the man to remove his hand from her mouth.

Then, she screams again.

Finally, footsteps thunder down the hall. Her bedroom door opens, not in a slam but in a hush. Diane Patton, her foster mother, sweeps past the men and kneels at the side of Devin’s bed, eyes wide. Her dark hair, at one point knotted at the back of her skull, falls in wisps along her round face. Something about her expression isn’t right. She should be afraid of intruders, afraid of something happening to her or the foster child she’s only had in her care for six months. But the men seem unsurprised by her, unafraid of being caught. Like she knew they’d be here.

Devin freezes.

“Did you hurt her?” Diane snaps.

“Look at my nose,” one of the men says, voice slightly curdled by his newly clogged sinuses. “*She’s* the violent one.”

Diane turns back to Devin.

“Devin, please,” Diane whispers. “You’re not in danger. I promise.”

Devin bucks against the hands holding her again. The muscles in her chest, arms, legs all burn with the force of it, but the men don’t give. Behind Diane, her willowy husband, Henry, enters the room. The floorboards

on the other side of the bathroom door creak. The other kids stir, but they don't open the door. They're listening.

They know.

Everyone knows what's happening except Devin.

"We're trying to help you, Devin," Diane whispers. Her eyes are glassy. "I'm so sorry, but I know it'll help. Please."

"What's happening?" Devin breathes.

Diane reaches to stroke the side of Devin's face.

Devin bats her away and one of the men grabs her arm. They haul her to her feet and Devin can't find the air to scream. Her head churns, trying to make sense of it. *We're trying to help you.*

The men drag her out of her bedroom, into the dark hallway. One holds her against the coffee-colored hallway wall. She doesn't take her eyes off the Pattons, waiting for them to change their minds and save her. That's supposed to be the point of guardians, right? To guard? Devin kicks herself for believing that, even for a second. She was tricked by shiplap walls and a two-car garage when she should've stuck to what she knew.

One of her kidnappers turns to Henry with a hard expression. Quietly, he says, "I don't think we'll get her to pack for herself. I need you to gather up a few things. Underwear, toiletries, stuff like that."

Silently, Henry obliges. He doesn't look at her, either from shame or hatred. Maybe they do hate her. Maybe it's because she's spent the last few months wandering Portland in a haze. Maybe it's because of the money missing from their piggy bank in the hallway closet. It's probably about the fight last week. She's been tossed out before, but she'd thought the Pattons were too passive to get rid of her this close to her eighteenth birthday, and these men certainly aren't CPS.

Once Henry hands over a bundle of her things, the men push Devin the rest of the way down the hall and through the front door. The cold night air slaps her in the face. The streetlights buzz, ring in her ears. The black sky tilts and spins and reality sets in. She's being abducted, right? Devin stares into every dark window that lines the street and imagines how many would stir if she screamed right now. But when she tries to

muster it, she comes up empty again. It's like a nightmare. She opens her mouth and there's nothing.

Across the street, a tall white van waits with its door wide open, obscuring what Devin is sure is a logo. She can't make out the shape of it. Waiting for her in the backseat is another teen; a boy in an oversized white T-shirt and a beanie. She can't quite see his face in the dark, but the cool light from the streetlamp shines in rivulets on his cheeks. He's been crying.

One of the two men places his hand at the top of Devin's spine and she snaps to life, shoving him away. She might be short, but she's been outnumbered and out-sized before. She's taken kicks to the gut, hair pulled from her scalp, the kinds of punches that make you see stars. Before she can fight back, though, the men grab her by the elbows. They lift Devin from the pavement and throw her into the backseat of the van, slamming and locking the door behind her.

Devin gasps for air. She kicks the back of the driver's seat with all the force she can muster, but it's pointless.

The boy in the backseat clears his throat.

"*Do* something," Devin hisses.

The boy looks at her. "Like what?"

Devin screams as loud as she can, finally finding the air to get the noise out. Instead of joining her, the boy covers his ears. Devin screams until her throat is raw. Outside the van, the men wait for her to finish.

"Are we not being kidnapped?" Devin breathes, hoarse. "Are people cool with that now?"

"Guess so," the boy offers. His voice is hoarse, too. He gathers himself, eyes trained on the floor of the van. "I don't think we're being kidnapped. My dad unlocked the door for them."

Devin looks at the boy for a long moment. Cold light flickers into the van from the streetlight outside, cutting a sharp line over his pale knuckles. His fingers twitch against his thigh. His curly hair is the color of wet sand and his face is gaunt like he hasn't eaten in weeks.

Softer, Devin asks, "Do you know where they're taking us?"

The boy shrugs.

“How long ago did they take you?”

“Half hour, maybe?” the boy offers. “I don’t know where we are now, but they got me from my house in Portland. Lents.”

“Still in Portland,” Devin breathes. “We’re in Eastmoreland.”

The boy nods.

Devin considers him. “What’s your name?”

“Oliver,” the boy says. “Ollie.”

“I’m Devin.”

“Devin. What are they—”

The driver’s side door of the van swings open and one of the men hoists himself inside. The cabin light finally makes the details of him clear. He’s mid-forties, white, face hard and unreadable. He’s indistinct in a way Devin imagines would make it impossible to pick him out of a lineup. His green baseball cap reads NORTHWEST TRANSPORTATION SERVICE in all caps.

“*Quiet,*” the other man snaps, climbing into the passenger seat. He turns around to face Devin and Ollie with furrowed brows. He’s just as indistinct as the other man save for the thick black of his eyebrows, the unnerving blue of his eyes, and the splotchy bruise just forming across the bridge of his nose. “It’s gonna be a long drive and we’re only stopping for gas. Let’s cover a few things right away and make this painless, okay?”

Ollie nods.

“What do you—” Devin starts.

“First off, we’re keeping talking to a minimum. All questions will be answered when we arrive, but until then, be quiet. If you need food or water, let us know and we’ll get you something.”

Devin looks at Ollie, but his gaze is trained out the window. He watches the dark windows with the same somber resignation Devin felt moments earlier. There are dozens of people on this street who could help them, but Devin isn’t surprised they don’t. Seventeen years of jumping from house to house teaches you that what should happen rarely ever does. Counting on someone else to help is like waiting to pay your bills until you’ve won the lottery. If you don’t figure out how to take care of yourself without it,

you've already lost. She thought the Pattons were good ones, but they were just another lesson.

"You both understand?" Passenger Seat asks. "We're on a tight schedule. No running, no talking, no causing a scene, okay?"

Neither of them says a word.

Passenger Seat reiterates, "Do you understand?"

Ollie nods.

Devin narrows her eyes. "Get fucked."

Passenger Seat looks at Driver's Seat and shrugs. He slaps the back of the driver's seat and says, "Good enough for me. Let's roll."

• • •

Ollie Baker is out of chances.

Clearly that's the message his father is trying to send by having him abducted in the middle of the night. As the van rattles out of Portland in the pitch-black night, Ollie lolls his head back and thinks about his last week at home. He tries to pinpoint the moment his father gave up on him.

No, actually—Ollie already knows the exact moment. He saw it happen, the two of them standing arm's-length apart in the kitchen, his father with an empty pill bottle in his clenched fist. It's been a week, but when Ollie closes his eyes, he still sees his father's dull stare, anger warping into something softer but harder to fix. It turns out there's a feeling worse than rage.

He assumes the men are taking them to juvie, though he hasn't actually been charged with anything. Maybe it'll be boarding school or military academy. Somewhere parents ship their useless kids when they realize it's no longer worth the effort.

Ollie's never been good at directions, the instructional kind *or* the geographical kind. Beyond Portland, he knows there's a scattering of towns in central Oregon where old people go to ski, but beyond that, he's at a loss. The farther they drive from Portland, the more the pleasant possibilities fall away, leaving Ollie with only a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

They make it out of Portland before the sun rises, tear down the gold

spill of the Columbia River Gorge until their route bends south. They stop for gas six hours into the drive in a desolate little town called Ontario. Ollie fruitlessly tries to make sense of his surroundings without speaking to the girl in the other seat. They're already in deep shit, and he's not trying to break rules and make it worse.

A sign at the side of the highway declares that they might split west to Snakebite or east to Boise. When he spots the strip malls beyond the highway, each storefront toting a neon OPEN sign, he imagines he might be able to reach the coin laundromat before the men catch him.

And then what? Find his way home?

The girl seems to have the same idea minus the doubt. For her, most of the drive was spent glaring into the headrest in front of her, quietly fuming so hot Ollie felt the temperature climb. Even now that they're stopped, her hands twitch like she's a cat considering an open screen door.

Devin, he thinks, though he's not completely sure. Listening to her speak in the backseat of the van at two in the morning was like trying to hear underwater. Ollie is sure he's never met her, but she looks like someone he'd be friends with back home. Her hair is shorter than Ollie's, a tangle of chestnut brown cut close to her scalp. Her eyes are dark, cheeks full, knuckles bruised. She can't be taller than five-three, maybe five-four, but she's stocky and boyish. Her presence fills every inch of the van. Her presence swallows Ollie's alive.

Before Devin has a chance to bolt, their driver pulls himself back into the van with a sigh. He eyes Devin and shakes his head. "I see you looking. You're probably faster than both of us. You think you could find someone if you ran? Get them to call the police?"

Devin doesn't answer. Without moving a muscle, her rage burns even hotter. Ollie looks away.

"You can run. But I've got something that'll bring you right back." He fishes through his jacket pocket, freeing a laminated square of yellow paper. NORTHWEST TRANSPORTATION AUTHORIZED STAFF, it says. A small logo is printed in the bottom corner. "I got a letter from both of your parents explaining what's going on here. It'll tell anyone who's got concerns

that your legal guardians have given us permission to take you from point A to point B. They trust us to get you there safely, okay?"

"You didn't tell *us* where we're going," Ollie says.

"You're going to a special camp. Both of you." The man sighs. "It's a good thing. We're only doing this because your parents knew if *they* tried to explain it, you wouldn't go."

After stewing in silence for hours, Devin finally scoffs. "I don't have parents. Let me out."

"You can get out if there's something you need."

"I need to pee."

The man stares at Devin for a long time. His gaze slides to Ollie. "You need to use the restroom?"

Ollie swallows. He looks out the van window at the 7-Eleven and frowns. He gets the idea that if it's not both of them taking a break, it'll be neither of them. Sitting alone in the van waiting for his kidnappers to return makes him queasy. Wordlessly, he nods.

The man sighs. "Kay, then both of you can unbuckle and come with me."

Without a word, Ollie unbuckles and waits for the van door to slide open. The air outside is crisper than he expects, tunneling softly into the van. Ollie pulls the neck of his T-shirt over his nose to trap the heat. He climbs out after Devin and plants his feet firmly on the gas station pavement. There's something about the oil-slicked, stubby expanse of the parking lot that makes him crave a joint. He's sure their transporters would *love* that.

The other transporter—the stocky man with an ever-darkening bruise like a nasal strip—eyes them as they leave the van. Eyes Ollie, rather. His gaze skirts past Devin.

"Be good in there," he says.

Devin laughs under her breath.

Their driver guides them into the 7-Eleven, putting a hand on each of their shoulders to press them toward the bathrooms. Devin heads in without hesitation, but Ollie pauses. He turns back to the driver. Whatever snarky comment he means to make dies on his lips and all he can manage is, "Can I have a jerky stick, too?"

The man sighs, deeper this time, and motions to the bathroom.

It's not a huge bathroom. Ollie doesn't bother making for the urinals. He stumbles to the sink and looks himself hard in the face.

His father sent him to camp, then. Maybe it's some type of rehab. That would make sense from his dad's view. Ollie closes his eyes and there's the pill bottle again. He was never supposed to take the last one, never supposed to ring the alarm bells like that. Maybe it would've been better to tell his father the truth. Maybe, if his father knew Ollie wasn't taking them for himself, this whole thing could've been avoided.

Maybe it wouldn't have made a difference.

A sharp knock breaks his daze. Ollie realizes he's been staring at the bathroom mirror since he entered the room. He turns the faucet on, fills his palms with cold water, and splashes it over his face. It's time to wake up.

This is the reality he's got.

He steps out of the bathroom to see their driver knocking on Devin's bathroom door. He eyes Ollie but says nothing. "We gotta clear out. Wrap it up, please."

Behind them, a young couple pauses. Ollie thinks about approaching them while the driver focuses on Devin. He thinks about saying it quietly: *I'm being taken against my will. Please call the police.* He glances back at their driver. The yellow corner of the authorization slip juts from his pocket and Ollie's stomach sinks.

The driver raps on the bathroom door again. "Verbal acknowledgment that you're wrapping it up, please."

"Yeah, yeah . . ."

Devin's voice is muffled. After a moment, there's a *thud* from inside. The driver straightens his spine and wraps his fingers around the door handle. "Alright, I'm coming in."

When he pushes the door open, Ollie just barely catches sight of her. Devin has climbed to the top of one of the deep-green bathroom stalls where narrow, frosted windows let in shallow slots of light. She's wrapped her elbow in her hoodie and is about to strike the glass again. She's braver than him. She thinks faster. She's got a reason to get back home, maybe. Unlike Ollie.

The driver rushes into the bathroom and the door groans shut behind him.

With only a second to think, Ollie swallows hard. He turns to the counter and presses his hands to the plexiglass that covers an assortment of scratch-off lottery tickets. He gathers up what courage he has, clears his throat, and says, "Excuse me?"

The cashier doesn't hear him, too fixated on the bathroom debacle.

"Sir?" Ollie says again. "I need some help."

The cashier looks at him and Ollie's face burns. His racing mind screams that there's no point. If he manages to get out of this, he either ends up back home with the man who sent him away, or he ends up on the streets. He meets the cashier's gaze, tries to muster up the right words. *I've been kidnapped. I've been abducted. I've been—*

The bathroom door crashes open. The driver has his thick hands on Devin's shoulders, forcing her out of the bathroom. He casts a glance at the cashier and pulls the yellow slip from his pocket. In silence, the cashier reads it.

"Northwest Transport," the driver says, out of breath. "We got authorization to move these kids. I have credentials if you need them."

The cashier looks back at Ollie, then nods at the driver.

That's it, then. No rescue in sight. Ollie wants to shrink until he vanishes because he blew it and now there's no chance for either of them. The driver puts a hand at the nape of Ollie's neck and redirects him from the counter. He scoots them out the door and into the chilly morning. The van door is still open and the other transporter sits in the passenger seat, unwrapping a candy bar. When he spots them, he steps out of the van and stands at attention.

Devin pauses when they reach the van and eyes both men. She straightens and spits on the concrete between them.

"Alright, alright . . ." the bruised transporter says. "In you go."

Devin climbs in and presses herself into the very back corner of the van. Her eyes are dark, but they're vicious. She folds her arms over her chest and says nothing.

Before Ollie can climb into the van, the bruised transporter stops him. “You keep up the good behavior and I have an extra candy bar with your name on it. Just a few more hours and this will be over.”

A candy bar. That’s all he has to offer for good behavior. Ollie feels the razor-sharp sting of Devin’s glare and he shakes his head. He wants to be as passionate about fighting back as her, wants to make it impossible for these men to keep him contained, but he just doesn’t have it in him.

“Your choice,” the man muses. “It’ll be a lot better than the food there.”

“Tucker,” the driver scolds. “Cut it out.”

The bruised man waves a dismissive hand. They guide Ollie into the van, shutting and locking the door behind him, and then they’re off again. They leave Ontario and Oregon completely, bumping along an increasingly narrow highway. The mountains climb, eventually steepening into snow-capped peaks while the trees thicken and knit closer together. The forest grows so dark Ollie can’t see between the trees, met only with a wall of boughs and bark in all directions. He leans his forehead against the window and tries to sleep. An hour turns into two, then four and, the whole time, Devin is motionless in the backseat. They continue like this, occasionally picking up patches of radio signal before eventually losing all touch with reality.

When the van finally slows and turns off the highway, Ollie’s nausea deepens. They ease the van down a gravel road before reaching a grassy parking lot between the trees. There is no rehab facility or campsite waiting for them amidst the bright, summer green. There’s only a group of kids his age sitting in a circle, mounds of bags at their feet. The van clicks off and Ollie puts his head in his hands.

If this is what he thinks it is, then he should’ve asked for help from that cashier or the couple buying potato chips or anyone else he’s had a chance to grab since he was pulled from his bed in the middle of the night.

If this is wilderness therapy, Ollie really is out of chances.



The transporters waste no time hoisting Devin and Ollie from the van, depositing them in the grassy parking lot. The sun beats down hotter than it was at the gas station. Judging by the way it sits straight overhead, it's probably about noon. They're in Idaho, Devin thinks, though they ran out of road signs not long after leaving Oregon. If someone asked Devin to find them on a map, she'd be at a loss, a thought that makes her stomach turn.

Devin looks back at the transporters and wishes she'd managed to punch them both.

Beyond the parking lot, the small group sits in the grass and watches them. Three teens about Devin's age with backpacks and piles of hiking gear at their feet. A man and a woman, only a few years older than the rest, stand side by side in the center of the circle. All of them wear matching green shirts that read *REVIVE*. Devin doesn't make eye contact with anyone. Not the adults, not the teens, not the transporters, not even Ollie. She doesn't need to be oriented to this group. She needs to find a way out.

"C'mon over," the male counselor calls. "The others just got here, too."

Driver's Seat meanders toward the two adults, giving them each a fist

bump. He leans in close and whispers something in the man's ear. On cue, both adults look at Devin. A warning. *Watch the girl*, she's sure he's saying. *She's a flight risk with a right hook.*

Any other day, she'd be proud.

"Get over there," Passenger Seat says from behind them. "Meet your new friends."

Devin looks at Ollie, who shrugs and makes his way toward the group. Devin follows, but her eyes cling to the trees beyond the parking lot. The air here is quiet in a way she's never felt, uninterrupted by the pattering of old engines and the distant crash of machinery. Whether the nearest town is five or five hundred miles away, it's clear the only thing she'll find if she runs now is more trees. Her skin itches, lungs tightening with panic.

When they reach the circle, Devin gets a better look at the others. A boy with a round face and thick-rimmed glasses sits next to the adults, fidgeting with the zipper of his backpack. Next to him, a girl with a short brown bob and bangs that nearly cover her eyes fiddles with her cross necklace. Both of them look up as Devin and Ollie approach. When their eyes find Devin, it's like they see nothing.

On the other side of the adults, another teen girl sits alone. Her shaggy hair is lavender, murky brown roots sprouting from her scalp like a smudge. Her T-shirt and pants hang from her thin, pale limbs. When she looks at Devin, she arches a brow but says nothing. It makes Devin's skin crawl.

"We're so glad you two could make it," the male counselor says with a hearty clap. He looks like the kind of guy that frequents the cafes in downtown Portland, all shoulder-length unwashed hair and too-wide smiles. "It must've been a crazy long drive. We can get started on some introductions, and then we'll tell you a little about how this program works. How's that sound?"

The group is silent.

Devin feels Ollie's stare slide to her, but she doesn't turn her head.

"My name is Coach Ethan," the counselor continues. He motions to the blond-ponytailed woman next to him and she gives a quick wave.

“This is Coach Liv. The two of us will be your guides for the next fifty days. Before we get into the good stuff, let’s go around and say our names and where we’re from.”

He motions to the spectacled boy at his side.

The boy looks around the circle and his cheeks go red like he’s on the verge of a panic attack. “Oh, uh, I’m Aidan. I’m from Bozeman. Montana.”

“I’m Hannah,” the girl with the bob says, dropping her cross necklace. After a long silence, she manages, “I’m from Sacramento.”

All eyes turn to Devin.

She doesn’t want to participate, doesn’t want to give them a name. She doesn’t want to be familiar to anyone in this group. She folds her arms over her chest. “Devin. Portland.”

Next to her, Ollie shifts from one foot to the other. Even after ten hours together on the road, she can’t get a good read on him. He didn’t try to run at the gas stop, and even though he was crying when she first saw him, he doesn’t seem especially sad now.

“Ollie,” he says. “Also from Portland.”

Finally, all eyes land on the lavender-haired girl. She leans back on her palms, grass jutting between her fingers. Her lips curl just enough to hint at a smile without really smiling. She looks at both coaches and shrugs. “I don’t know. I forgot.”

Coach Ethan’s expression is unmoving, but there’s a twitch to his right eye. His smile broadens. “I’m sure if you think about it, you’ll remember.”

The girl shakes her head. “Nope. It’s gone.”

Her voice is deeper than Devin expected, flat with a vocal fry that makes her sound deeply bored. Any other day, Devin might think this is funny, but with the sun beating down on them and the day wearing on, all she wants is these introductions to end so someone can explain what they’re *doing* out here.

Ethan sighs. “Everyone, this is Sheridan. Sheridan is from Seattle.”

“*That’s* what it was,” Sheridan says.

“Okay, moving on,” Coach Ethan says. “We work for a program called REVIVE and our mission is to help you cope with some pretty tricky

turns your life has taken lately. You can think of this as a summer camp, though it's going to be a little different from any summer camp you've been to."

Devin scoffs at the same time as Sheridan. Briefly, their eyes meet.

Coach Ethan's smile fades and he motions to Devin and Sheridan in one sweeping motion. "Did you have something you wanted to add?"

Devin shakes her head. In all the summers she's spent moving around, Devin has *never* been to a summer camp. The idea that she'd even have a point of reference for one makes her laugh, but that isn't Ethan's business.

Sheridan is, unsurprisingly, less shy.

"It's not summer camp," she says. She doesn't look at either coach when she speaks, eyeing the grass between her fingers, instead. "It's wilderness therapy. Very different."

Ethan and Liv exchange a glance. Softly, Ethan says, "Yes, this is a type of wilderness therapy. I won't lie to any of you, because that's not the kind of relationship we're going to have here. Maybe you've heard things about wilderness therapy before. Any of those bad rumors, though, I want you to give us a chance to prove them wrong. REVIVE is a brand-new program and we're going to do everything we can to get this right for you *and* your families. Does that sound okay?"

Aidan nods feverishly, but the rest of the circle is silent. Coach Liv steps forward, placing her palm squarely to her chest like she's about to sing the anthem. "Coach Ethan will be your moral support for the next fifty days, and I'll be your field support. That means, as your mental journey gets tougher, Ethan will be there to help you meet your goals. But I'll be the one keeping you alive and healthy out here. REVIVE lasts fifty days. That's fifty days of hiking, camping, making your own food, and learning some really cool survival skills. Every week, our group will reach a new milestone, which represents a new step for you both emotionally and physically. We'll be spending every day out here getting closer as a group and really thinking about the kinds of lives we want to lead when we get home. That means we have to learn to trust each other. Does that sound doable?"

"It might seem difficult," Ethan cuts in with a little laugh like he's told

a joke. “But we learned a lot about each of you already from your parents. We know you’ll get along just fine.”

Devin laughs under her breath again and Ethan’s gaze snaps to her.

“Yes, Devin?”

“It’s nothing.”

“It seems like it’s something important to you,” Ethan says, condescending smile widening. “I’d love if you shared.”

“You’ve never spoken to my parents,” Devin says.

Ethan nods. “Devin, I’m not going to share your personal information with the group, but I want you to know we spoke with people who care about you very much.”

Devin rolls her eyes. If it’s the Pattons they spoke to, that’s a lie. If it’s people at school, Devin can’t imagine anyone had much to say. She would have to go to class to make a real impression. She doubts they spoke to any of the “friends” who dropped her after the incident at school the other week. The list of people who *care about her very much* isn’t just small, it’s empty.

Liv clears her throat. “Devin and Ollie, I want you to pick up the backpacks at your feet. You’ll find a fresh set of hiking clothes and shoes, which we’ll have you change into before we get started. Go ahead and do that now.”

The breeze trickles between the trees as, behind them, the transporters mutter a brief goodbye and pile back into their van. They tear away from the parking lot without hesitation, taking the only vehicle—the only chance of escape—with them. As Devin and Ollie go to change, the quiet of the woods settles in.

Once she’s out of sight, Devin hesitates. She clutches the green T-shirt and pants to her chest and slides down to the base of the tree, closing her eyes. She’s weaseled her way out of bad situations before, but never anything like this. For only a second, she wonders if she should’ve pulled it together back home. She knew the Pattons were getting worried, but worried usually means moving homes, not whatever wilderness therapy is. If she’d come home on time, if she’d just ignored Danielle after school, if she’d just kept her head down a little longer, maybe she wouldn’t be here.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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