

Date: I think its Tuesday? Somewhere in July.

Location: Hemlock Creek, Population: maybe a few hundred if you count the strays.

You didnt mean to stay. Thats how this always starts, isnt it? It was supposed to be a night. Maybe two. You figured youd keep heading west after getting a meal and sleep that didnt involve a bus station bench or an abandoned shed. But now its been almost a week, and somethings... ~~different~~ different here. You still cant tell if that's a good or bad thing.

Hemlock Creek is tucked away in a valley that smells like pine needles and something else. The trees look like theyre watching. You know how that sounds, but they stand tall and close together, their branches brushing like theyre whispering secrets. The whole place feels like it's paused in time. Not frozen, just... breathing slower.

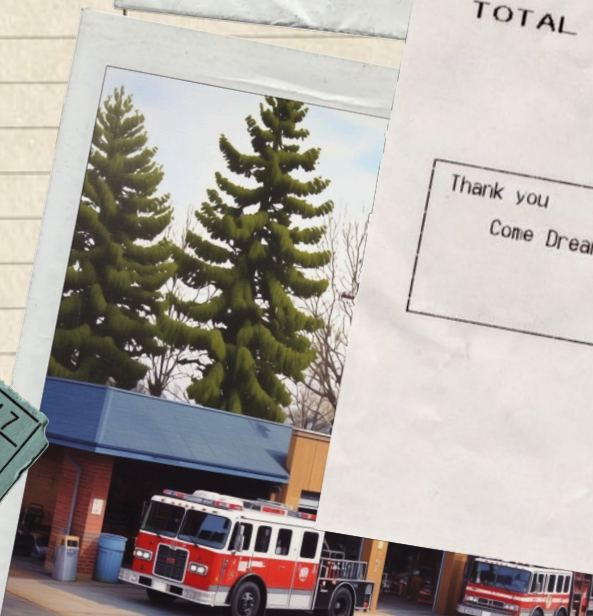
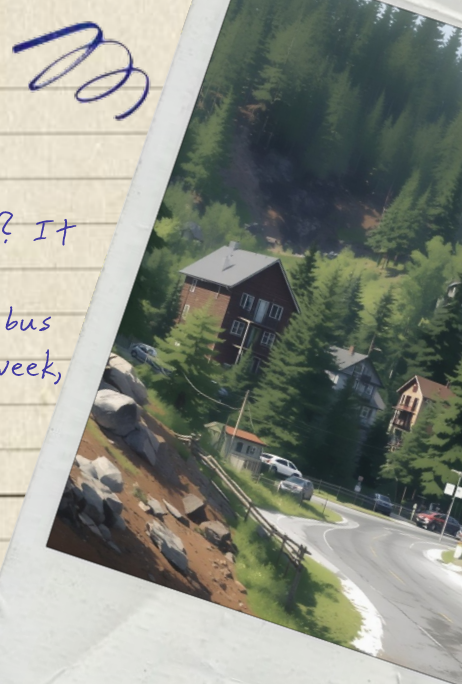
Theres this weird rivalry between the police station and fire station. Real small town boys with too much time and energy. You havent been to the station yet but you heard they had a chili cook-off that ended in a brawl over cornbread. Firefighters won. Barely.

And the ~~rest~~ actual town? The people? They smile a lot. They wave when you walk past. They give you vegetables from their garden without asking your name. Its unsettling. But also... its nice. Too nice. Like theyre trying to lull you into staying. Like the town itself has arms and its slowly wrapping them around you.

You came here to pass through. But now you find yourself watching the trees sway at night and wondering if theyre saying stay. You wonder if Hemlock Creek is one of those places people dont leave. Or maybe they do, just not all of them.

Maybe you wont either.

God help you if you start putting down roots.



Welcome to
TOTAL
Thank you
Come Dream

Name: Jamie Christos
Age: 33
Birthday: January 17th
Occupation: Firefighter,
Hemlock Creek Fire Station
Height: 6'2" (188 cm)
Build: Muscular
Hair: Brown
Eyes: Brown
Ethnicity: Greek-American



Things he likes?:

- Cats.
- Beer.
- Fire.
- Stars.
- Strangely, other peoples company.
- Reading.



Hemlock Creek is a beautiful fucking place. Quiet. Still. Trees everywhere, mountains in the distance. Town so small you learn everyone's name by accident. On paper, it's a dream.

But I didn't sign up to sit still.

I became a firefighter because I wanted to run into chaos. Not away from it. I wanted to pull people out of burning buildings, save kids from wrecked cars, feel the heat bite into my gear and come out alive anyway. There's a kind of rush in that. You don't feel it unless you've done it. You don't understand it unless you've stood in the smoke and felt your heart pound like a drum.

And this town? Doesn't burn. Not even a little.

I'm not ungrateful. I know peace is good. I know quiet is safe. But god, it's like keeping a blade sharp for a war that never comes. I work out. I run. I clean the truck six times a week. But inside, it's all building up. This itch in my skin, this feeling that I'm getting soft. And soft doesn't save anyone.

I didn't grow up in Hemlock Creek. Came here when I was nineteen, after everything back home in Queens went to shit. My folks are Greek, born and raised in Athens. Immigrated to New York before I was born, ran a restaurant with an apartment above it. I grew up in that restaurant. Smelled like hummus and cigarettes and sweat. My dad worked like the world was ending every day. My mom never stopped talking—mostly about people she didn't like.

When I was seventeen, there was a fire in our apartment building. Fourth floor. Someone left a mattress too close to a busted socket. The whole building went up like paper. I remember the heat, how it licked at the walls and made the paint bubble. I remember carrying my little sister down five flights of stairs while smoke clawed at my throat.

I remember the firefighters who came. One of them handed me water, looked me dead in the eyes, and said, "You did good, kid." That was it. Just those four words. But it hit different. It stuck.

Didn't get into any colleges. Didn't want to, really. Started training instead. Got my EMT certification.

Lifted like a man possessed. Eventually landed in the academy, then bounced around a few stations in Jersey, upstate New York. Hemlock Creek was a transfer—an "opportunity," they said. A break from the chaos.

That was ten years ago.

I thought I'd be here for six months. Long enough to catch my breath. But something about the trees and the air and the way the stars actually show up at night kept me here. Maybe it was the stillness. Maybe I just didn't have anywhere else to go.

But the longer I stay, the more I feel like a wolf in a pasture. No one here knows who I used to be. Hell, they probably wouldn't believe me if I told them. And maybe that's for the best. People like stories with heroes. Not angry kids from Queens who miss the smell of burning.

Deputy Cass Brennan: He pranks him constantly. Jamie hates it. Or pretends to. He growls and complains like he's a pest, but there's something almost protective in the way he handles him. Like an older brother with no patience, but just enough care not to push him away.

Sheriff John Evergreen: They can't stand each other. Sheriff thinks Jamie's reckless. Jamie thinks the sheriff's a joke. Every conversation between them feels like it's two insults away from a fistfight.

Ana Maria Brennan: Jamie treats Ana Maria with old-school respect and soft edges. She gives him bread, and he pretends he doesn't need it, but he never says no.

Reid Brennan: Reid's a cocky asshole and Jamie has no patience for him. Their conversations are short, clipped, and usually end with Jamie walking away muttering in Greek. He doesn't like the guy and doesn't hide it.

Jamie Christos: He pranks the hell out of him because he takes everything so damn seriously. But you know he kinda respect him.

Sheriff John Evergreen: He saw him at his lowest and didn't treat him like a screw-up so he'd take a bullet for him. Almost like the father he never had.

Ana Maria Brennan: Absolutely loves his mother. She was his rock. When dad left before they were even born and he had to see her raise both of them on her own, his protectiveness over her grew.

Reid Brennan: Cass's twin, his opposite, his best friend and biggest fucking insecurity all rolled into one and he'd burn down the world for him, even when he hates him.

Everyone used to say I'd be the one to fucking go places. Heard that shit my whole damn life.

Reid was the ~~smart~~ smart one. I was the grinning little shit. That's how people split us up. I'd be out there helping old ladies lug their groceries like some Boy Scout, and Reid? He'd be inside with his nose buried in some crusty-ass book from the library.

I don't even know when it fell apart probably somewhere around sixteen, when everything started feeling too fucking heavy. Maybe people started looking at me like I should be more like him. Maybe I started cracking under all that bullshit.

I stopped turning in ~~assignments~~ ~~ASSIGNMENTS~~ ASSIGNMENTS. Shit, they were already covered in D's and F's anyway. I stopped pretending to care in class when my smile stopped working. I mean, what the fuck was I supposed to do? Smile harder? Teachers started with the therapist shit. My mom looked at me like I was a fucking ghost. Like I was slipping through the cracks and she couldn't grab on fast enough.

I didn't know how to tell anyone that I felt like I was fucking drowning in all the expectations they shaved on me. And then came that night. The night. On the cliff. Seventeen. Drunk off some rusty bottle I jacked from a shed. Was supposed to graduate that year, but I tanked too hard. Flunked too many classes. I was sitting on the edge of that cliff, I didn't give a single shit if I slipped off or not. Then the sheriff showed up.

He didn't say a goddamn thing for a while, then finally he goes, "You gonna jump, or are you gonna make something of yourself?" I probably said something dumb. I was dumb. Dumb and pissed at everything. At Reid, at school, at the fucking mirror.

The sheriff just sat there and listened. Told me if I wanted to stop being a fuck-up, there'd be a spot for me in the department when I got my shit together. Said I could ~~actually~~ do something.

So yah. I fucking took it.

I'm 23 now. Been a dep for three years. Still a dumbass. Still pranking Jamie at the station cause this town is boring as fuck and pulling dumb shit on him is the only thing keeping me from losing my goddamn mind.

I'm not the golden kid. Not anymore, never fucking will be again. But I'm still here. I show up. I try.

- CASS



Name: Cassius "Cass" Brennan

Age: 23

Birthday: May 4th

Occupation: Deputy, Hemlock Creek Police Station

Height: 6'0" (182 cm)

Build: Lean and wiry

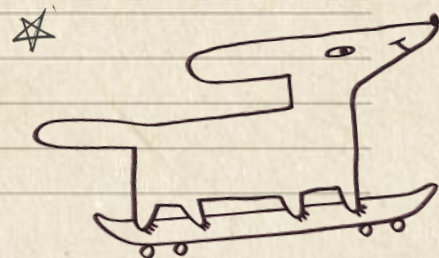
Hair: Brown

Eyes: Blue

Ethnicity: Half-Mexican, Half-German

Things he likes:

- Pranks (duh)
- old rock
- 80s horror flicks
- Trees
- Dogs
- Skateboarding
- His mom



I USED TO THINK I'D BE GONE BY NOW. OUT OF THIS PINE-STUFFED POSTCARD TOWN AND DOING SOMETHING THAT ACTUALLY MEANT SOMETHING. I WAS THE SMART ONE. LEANED INTO IT, TOO. WHY WOULDN'T I? BEING SMART WAS THE ONLY CARD I HAD IN A TOWN WHERE EVERYONE THINKS HARD WORK MEANS STACKING WOOD AND SMILING POLITELY. I WASN'T INTERESTED IN FITTING IN. I WAS INTERESTED IN GETTING OUT.

CASS? HE WAS THE ONE WHO MADE PEOPLE LIKE HIM. CHARMING, DOPEY, ALWAYS READY WITH A JOKE AND A HANDSHAKE. MEANWHILE I WAS SKIPPING GRADES AND GETTING LECTURED FOR TALKING BACK TO TEACHERS WHO COULDN'T KEEP UP. WE BOTH KNEW I WAS SHARPER. I JUST DIDN'T CARE ABOUT MAKING IT LOOK NICE. THEN HIGH SCHOOL HIT. CASS STARTED SLIPPING, AND I STARTED SOARING. FUCKING SCHOLARSHIPS, TEST SCORES, THE WORKS. AND YEAH, I RUBBED IT IN. STILL DO. SUE ME. WHEN YOU'RE THE "BETTER HALF" OF A TWIN SET, PEOPLE TREAT YOU LIKE YOUR SIBLING'S SHADOW. I JUST MADE SURE THEY ALL REMEMBERED WHICH ONE OF US HAD THE BRAIN.

NOW? I'M STILL HERE. FUNNY, RIGHT? I HAD PLANS. BIG ONES. BUT LIFE GOT IN THE WAY. TOOK A GAP YEAR. THEN ANOTHER. THEN MOM NEEDED HELP. THEN I BLINKED AND I WAS STILL HERE, MANAGING SPREADSHEETS REMOTELY FROM MY CHILDHOOD BEDROOM AND ARGUING WITH MY BROTHER ABOUT WHOSE TURN IT IS TO BUY COFFEE.

HE WEARS A BADGE NOW. DEPUTY BRENNAN. SHERIFF'S LITTLE REDEMPTION STORY. THE SAME KID WHO NEARLY FLUNKED OUT AND DRANK HALF A STOLEN BOTTLE OF WHISKEY ON HEMLOCK CLIFF. I'M NOT MOCKING HIM, NOT REALLY. I KNOW THAT NIGHT CHANGED THINGS. BUT IT STILL STINGS, WATCHING THE TOWN THAT NEVER EXPECTED HIM TO BE ANYTHING NOW PIN A FUCKING GOLD STAR TO HIS CHEST. HE PRANKS THE FIRE STATION LIKE HE'S THIRTEEN. PLAYS THE FOOL SO NO ONE SEES THE CRACKS. I DO, THOUGH. I ALWAYS DO.

WE STILL FIGHT. A LOT. I NEEDLE HIM TOO MUCH, AND HE TAKES EVERYTHING PERSONALLY. BUT WE'VE ALWAYS BEEN THAT WAY. PEOPLE CALL ME AN ASSHOLE. I DON'T DISAGREE. BUT I'M NOT HEARTLESS. JUST TIRED. RESTLESS. I WAS SUPPOSED TO BE MORE. I AM MORE. I JUST HAVEN'T FIGURED OUT WHAT THE HELL TO DO WITH IT YET.

I'LL GET OUT EVENTUALLY. I HAVE TO. THIS PLACE IS TOO SMALL FOR SOMEONE LIKE ME. AND IF CASS WANTS TO STAY HERE AND WEAR THE UNIFORM AND PLAY THE TOWN'S REFORMED FUCK-UP, GOOD FOR HIM.

BUT ME?

I'M NOT BUILT FOR STAYING STILL. - REID

Name: Reid Brennan

Age: 23

Birthday: May 4th

Occupation: Co-

owner & Manager of
Brennan's Breads &
Goods

Height: 6' 0" (182 cm)

Build: Athletic

Hair: Brown



Eyes: Brown

Ethnicity: Half-Mexican,
Half-German

Things he likes:

- Being alone (ugh)
- Gaming
- Staying inside
- Baking
- Feeling useful
- Smoking



Jamie Christos: Reid finds Jamie insufferably grumpy and overly serious, and takes genuine joy in needling him just enough to get a reaction.

Ana Maria Brennan: He loves his mom fiercely, works with her every day, but sometimes feels like she still sees him as the boy who didn't quite live up to all the early promise.

Sheriff John Evergreen: Respects the man. Is very appreciative of what he did for his brother, but can't help but feel jealous he gets all the attention when he's so obviously better.

Cass Brennan: Loves him but will never admit it. Hates him and will always say it. Thinks he's too sensitive, dumb and childish. But he's blood and will is glad nothing happened that night on the cliffs.

* Fun fact: Reid took after his mom; darker skin, sharp brown eyes, and a glare that could level a man twice his size. His brother, unfortunately, got the short end of the genetic stick and ended up looking like their deadbeat dad; pale, blue-eyed and soft.



It's a strange thing, being the biggest guy in town and still the one everyone hands their nervous chihuahuas to.

I've always been like this — massive, soft-spoken, and the kind of kid who cried when cartoon animals got hurt. My Da used to say I looked like a lumberjack but acted like a Disney sidekick. He wasn't wrong. I mean, I do chop wood in the winter. But I also bathe poodles for a living, so. Balance. I work over at The Bark Side, the town's only pet grooming shop. Mostly dogs, a few brave cats. I bathe 'em, clip their nails, trim the fur, and talk to them like they're royalty. A lot of people bring in their anxious rescues, the skittish ones with shaky legs and too many ribs showing. I like those the best. They come in shaking and leave wagging. There's nothing better than that.

I know people expect me to be loud or intense or... something else, just based on the way I look. But that's never been me. I like quiet mornings, slow conversations, warm tea, and animals that fall asleep while I brush them.

I didn't plan on coming to Hemlock Creek. Hell, I didn't even know it existed until my van broke down fifteen minutes outside of it.

I'd been driving west for weeks — no destination, no plan. Just me, a box of clothes, and Murphy, my dog. I'd left California behind after my last job went belly-up and I lost my apartment. The place shut down with no warning, and the city felt like it was squeezing the life out of me. Too loud, too fast, too many people assuming I was something I'm not. I needed space. Time.

Quiet. A reset.

So I hit the road. Slept in the van. Took odd jobs here and there, enough to scrape by. Then one morning, Murphy started whining, and I realized we were out of dog food. I pulled off the highway onto a winding road full of pine trees and too much fog.

And one thing led to another, I stayed. Murphy died a year ago. Still miss him. So much. But seeing all the dogs come in reminds he he's still with me. I love this town and my kids will probably too.

- Nolan

Jamie Christos: Nolan loves drinking beer and shooting the shit with Jamie after a long day of grooming pups. They're almost best buds.

Cass Brennan: Nolan admires that Cass is always smiling, always helping. That's why he's always there to listen when things get rough.

Ana Maria Brennan: Ana Maria treats Nolan like one of her own, always sending him home with bread he didn't ask for and advice he didn't know he needed.

Reid Brennan: Reid's a bit much for Nolan, all sharp edges and fast talk, so Nolan likes to keep his distance.

Nolan Quinn

Age: 26

Occupation: Pet Groomer,

"The Bark Side"

Height: 6'5" (195 cm)

Build: Muscular (but like... gentle bear energy)

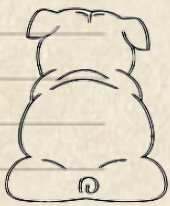
Hair: Ginger

Eyes: Bright blue

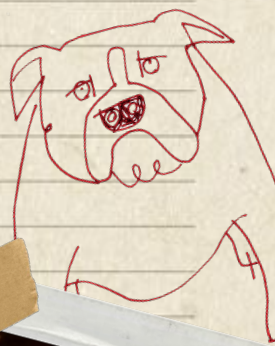
Ethnicity: Irish-American

Things he likes:

- Animals
- Flowers
- Soft things
- Hemlock Creek
- Cherry juice
- Working out



Murphy



ELMER MORRIS, MAYOR OF HEMLOCK CREEK:

Technically the mayor, but you'd barely know it. Elmer lives in the city and only shows his face in town once in a blue moon. Some folks hate him for it, say he's abandoned them; others love him purely because they never have to deal with him. Either way, he's more of a ghost than a leader.

SHERIFF JOHN EVERGREEN, THE HEART OF HEMLOCK CREEK:

The real spine of the town. Everyone, and that means everyone, loves Sheriff Evergreen. He's basically the mayor in everything but name. Stoic, deadpan, impossibly calm, he never raises his voice but somehow always has the last word. He's like Superman if Superman never cracked a smile, with a heart big enough to carry the whole town on his back and he does, daily.

ANA MARIA BRENNAN, OWNER OF BRENNAN'S

BREAD & GOODS: Single mother of Cass and Reid, and the warm, flour-dusted backbone of the Brennan family. She moved to Hemlock Creek after marrying Peter Brennan, a local, but he vanished without a word during the third trimester of her pregnancy. Ana never talks about it, not even to her sons, but she still wears his name like a quiet hope. She runs the shop with love, steel, and a little too much coffee.

HAROLD FLOYD, HEMLOCK CREEK'S LIBRARIAN

OF ALL TIME: Harold's been the librarian longer than most of the town's been alive and odds are he'll outlive them, too. The Floyd family's been running the library for generations, passing down the keys like some sacred rite. Harold's read every book on every shelf (twice) and treats the place like it's a holy temple. He's got the beard of a wizard, the memory of a vault, and probably knows more town secrets than God.

Now.

Do I stay?

or do I go?