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## **Inlet: Counter-Storytelling, Arts-Based Research, and the Disruption of Popular Culture's Portrayals of Two-Year Colleges**

Erin H. York

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INLET: COUNTER-STORYTELLING, ARTS-BASED RESEARCH, AND THE  
DISRUPTION OF POPULAR CULTURE'S PORTRAYALS OF TWO-YEAR COLLEGES

by

Erin H. York

Associate in Arts  
Metropolitan Community College—Longview, 2011

Bachelor of Arts  
University of Missouri—Kansas City, 2012

Master of Education  
University of South Carolina, 2017

Master of Fine Arts  
Converse University, 2021

---

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University of South Carolina

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Accepted by:

Christian K. Anderson, Major Professor

Spencer Platt, Committee Member

Julie Rotholz, Committee Member

Catherine Compton-Lilly, Committee Member

Tracey L. Weldon, Interim Vice-Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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## **DEDICATION**

For my parents, Mark and Carolyn York

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I dedicated this dissertation to my parents whose devotion to careers in education helped to shape my own interests and priorities. Thank you to them, and to Alycia Kelly, for supporting my dream of a doctoral degree for the years before, during, and after this pursuit. Thank you, of course, to my brilliant committee: Christian, Julie, and Spencer, the three of you were part of my HESA faculty from 2015-2017. Thank you for your continued influence in my life and for your assistance in my growth, personally and professionally. Thank you to Cathy whose course on critical discourse analysis, which was held over the first COVID summer, played a large part in shaping this dissertation. Thank you, also, Cathy, for your genuine care and continued interest in the students you teach. I would also like to thank my family, friends, and colleagues who stuck by me throughout the five years that I worked on my doctorate. You are too numerous to name, but I will do my best to mention at least some of you. In no particular order, you have my sincerest thanks: Ashley Korpela, Dakota DeLuca, Allison Anders, Sara Pound, Drue Barker, Geoff Herbach, Bryan Ellis, Melissa Eaton, Cathy Sillman, Larry Sillman, Stephanie Frazier, Janie Cohen, Linda Clements, Amanda Doty, Christine Schott, Nic Maxwell (may you rest in peace), Kaitlyn Hall, Brie McDaniel, Emily Davis, Janet Hagen, David Rotholz, Ed Schubert, Jamie Boykin, Allie Mason, Taylor Newcomb, Beth Saadati, the faculty in the EDLP department, my magnificent doctoral cohort, my brilliant friends from my MFA program, my CHP neighborhood community, and the researchers who came before me who have valued this area of study for two-year

colleges. If your name should be on this list, and you don't see it, you have my full permission to call me out, and I will blame it on Ph.D. brain.

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation employed arts-based research design and critical race theory's method of counter-storytelling to 1) challenge the deficit-based discourse about two-year colleges, most commonly known as junior, community, and technical colleges, that is present in popular culture, and to 2) rethink Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to center elements of community cultural wealth present at two-year colleges. The study takes the form of arts-based research through the design of the novel, *Inlet*, where each chapter explores thematically aspects of two-year colleges' community cultural wealth. Previous studies on popular culture's portrayals of two-year colleges confirmed students, faculty, staff, and various other stakeholders held harmful stereotypes and biases against two-year colleges. Deficit and farcical narratives about these colleges negatively influence stakeholders' attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs. Prior studies issued a call for educators and creatives, alike, to challenge popular culture's representations of two-year colleges; however, no study until this one has answered that call. *Inlet* is a new kind of novel in which stakeholders at all levels can engage with two-year colleges' community cultural wealth. *Inlet* disrupts popular culture's portrayals of two-year colleges and creates a counter-story that situates two-year colleges as 1) vital in America's system of higher education, as 2) institutions that disrupt the systemic marginalization of populations marginalized by society by encouraging social mobility, and as 3) of the utmost importance to their communities and the people they serve.

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Introduction**

Two-year colleges, commonly recognized as junior, community, technical, or state colleges, in the United States are defined not by their 120-year-old history, (Bahr & Gross, 2016; Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Coley, 2000) by their faculty, staff, and students, or their culture and community outreach, nor can they be defined only by any combination of these elements. Media representation and popular culture, from fiction to video games to film and beyond, also create portrayals of two-year colleges, which influence perceptions held by faculty, staff, students, and stakeholders—often in negative ways (Fain, 2012 & Reynolds, 2014).

Media representations and fictionalized accounts of higher education institutions are not unique to the U.S. two-year college. Scholars like John E. Kramer, John Thelin, Christian K. Anderson, Pauline J. Reynolds, among others, conduct research on and catalogue campus novels, television shows, films, and other types of popular culture that feature college campuses. These scholars' findings showcase the perceptions that popular culture creates for stakeholders about life in higher education. Stakeholders consume these representations and glean knowledges from them, rather than from real-life experience or research studies, and their behaviors and beliefs reflect these, often flawed, knowledges (Reynolds, 2014). Within the massive amount of popular cultural representations of higher education, two-year colleges have found their niche.

Slapstick, satirical, and farcical representations of two-year colleges, like the sitcom *Community* (2009-2015), campus novel *Mrs. Fletcher* (2017) by Tom Perrotta, and goofy movie *Community College* (2012), add representations to the limited body of work about two-year colleges; however, these portrayals fail to disrupt deficit-based narratives, which are narratives that take the form of harmful stereotypes perpetuated often by outsiders to the culture, about populations working at, taking classes at, or experiencing a day at a two-year college. They do not impart research-based representations of two-year colleges by insiders to various stakeholders, which not only include those actively engaged with two-year colleges, but also potential students and employees, law and policymakers, and government workers.

Campus fiction “stops at exposing and ridiculing what is wrong, as if to voice tacit agreement that some things cannot be changed” and is “the humor of complaint” (Reynolds, Schwartz, & Bower, 2000, p. 39). This reinforces socio-cultural and political hegemonies, or power structures, in popular culture’s discourse (Golding & Murdock, 1979), which, among other issues, undermines possible class, educational, and other mobility for current and prospective two-year college students. Additionally, this discredits community colleges’ relevance in the ongoing conversation about the United States’ meritocratic system of higher education, even though since their founding as separate entities of higher education, two-year colleges have proved vital in not only sustaining but growing the United States’ system of higher education (2000; Bahr & Gross, 2016).

Popular culture and media go beyond entertainment value and carry strong influence on viewers’ behavior, choices, and beliefs (Reynolds, 2014). Portrayals of

higher education in general, and more specifically of two-year colleges, represent an important—and understudied—area of research (DeGenaro, 2006; Hawk, 2014; Tucciarone, 2007). While some studies on popular culture’s representations of the two-year college and students who attend them and the faculty and staff who work at them have been done by scholars such as Travis J. Tyler and Kim Nehls (2017), Brian Bourke, et al (2008), and Nancy LaPaglia (1994), there remains a significant gap in the literature. Since Tyler and Nehls’ 2017 article, “Community College Pop Culture Portrayals,” no scholars have published on this subject. Nancy LaPaglia’s 1994 text, *Storytellers: The Image of the Two-Year College in American Fiction and in Women’s Journals*, remains the only book-length work on this subject. No studies exist at all where researchers employ arts-based research design to push actively back against media and popular culture’s deficit-based portrayals of the two-year college, despite a call for action that these studies have issued (Tucciarone, 2007).

In her study, “Community College Image—By Hollywood,” Krista M. Tucciarone encourages her audience to either use Hollywood to influence a positive shift in discourse about two-year colleges or to push back against its harmful messages; however, so far films, fiction, and television shows like *Community* that use humor to mask harmful stereotypes continue to dominate popular culture’s discourse about two-year colleges. In *Storytellers*, LaPaglia wrote that she worried television with its “stock figures who have stock reactions to stock situations” (49) would not “bode well for an increase in positive portrayals of two-year college characters (49), and, with shows like sitcom *Community* on the forefront of portraying two-year colleges, she was right to worry (1994).

I am a community college graduate. I worked for more than 10 years in student and academic affairs at individual community and technical colleges and then at the state-level in South Carolina before reaching the point of writing this dissertation. I am also a scholar and creative writer. In 2021, I received my master's in fine arts in fiction and creative nonfiction from Converse University. Central to my axiology, or values, as a researcher/writer is bridging the divide between 2- and 4-year institution of higher education and reaching communities in and outside of the Academy through the dissemination of my work. Because there is no arts-based research that answers the call from past studies conducted in this area to disrupt popular culture and media's deficit-based discourse about two-year colleges, for my dissertation, I have constructed a design that employs Critical Race Theory's method of counter-storytelling in the form of the novel *Inlet* and rethinks Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to center the elements of two-year colleges' community cultural wealth that are evidenced in the literature review and in my personal experience with these institutions. Arts-based research includes five well recognized designs, including the literary art of the novel (Wang, et. al., 2017).

Because popular culture has such strong influence on those who consume it, novels can and have challenged society, even changed it, in the case of books like *The Jungle* (1905) by Upton Sinclair and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) by Harper Lee. Novels also impact societal perceptions about higher education. One recent example is *Real Life* (2020), Brandon Taylor's debut, breakout novel, that moved the genre of academic fiction forward from a tradition of cis-heterosexual, white protagonists to a view of higher education that centers Taylor's gay, Black protagonist who is a STEM

(science, technology, engineering, mathematics) graduate student from the rural South (Orbey, 2020).

*Real Life* disrupted deficit-based narratives prevalent in popular culture's representation about who gains entry to and who excels at not only college, but in graduate school. Taylor reaches academic and commercial audiences with his book, reinforcing the importance of how researchers and writers disseminate their work. *Real Life* is now set to premiere a big-screen treatment that will star Kid Cudi (Murphy, 2020). Screen or television treatments for fiction, like *Real Life*, have become commonplace in American society. Movies and television series, like other mediums of popular culture, have the potential to alter harmful socio-cultural and political discourses about race, sexuality, other identities, and higher education that often dehumanize marginalized groups and caricature institutions that serve groups society has marginalized. Unfortunately for the two-year college, that has so far not been the case.

With two-year colleges' ongoing relevance in the United States, their service to communities systemically and systematically marginalized by society; the continuous fight for diverse, non-deficit-based representations in popular culture; and with the researcher's commitment to disseminating research beyond the Academy, this study, *Inlet: Counter-Storytelling, Arts-Based Research, and the Disruption of Hollywood's Image of Two-Year Colleges* not only addresses gaps in the current literature, but answers calls to action to challenge popular culture's harmful representations of two-year colleges.

## Definition of Terms

To follow the theory and methods of this dissertation, the following terms have been defined. The dissertation should not be read without a thorough consideration of these:

- ....**Academic Fiction:** The working definition of academic fiction is adapted from John E. Kramer's definition in *The American College Novel: An Annotated Bibliography*, which states academic fiction, which may also be referred to as an academic or campus novel, must be fictional works that feature a university, college, or campus as its predominant setting. Additionally, campus novels can feature post-secondary, secondary, or primary institutions. His book does not feature any genre works (1981 & 2004). While Kramer also included some British works of fiction, this dissertation omits those. This dissertation expands Kramer's definition beyond fiction to include other mediums of popular culture, including television series and films. Because so little popular culture features two-year college campuses as its primary setting, this dissertation takes into consideration works that mention two-year colleges as well.
- ....**Arts-based Research Design:** Scholar Shaun McNiff defines arts-based research as "the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts, as a way of understanding and examining experience" and research employs art, in any sense, to understand, represent, explore, and to challenge dominant views of human actions and/or experience (1998). Chapter four of this dissertation is designed as a novel that uses the literature review and the researcher's personal experience as a former community college student and career within two-year

colleges to examine two-year colleges and challenge their current representation in popular culture.

- ....**Counter-Storytelling:** Counter-storytelling as both a theory and method challenges deficit-based narratives and asks researchers to compose stories based in rethinking Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to center the cultural wealth of communities that are systemically and systematically marginalized by society. Stories of community cultural wealth challenge existing notions, which are often portrayed negative stereotypes, about minority groups. These negative stereotypes reinforce hegemonies, or power imbalances in discourse, and can often be found in popular culture. Counter-storytelling is a methodology from Critical Race Theory, which focuses on the emancipation of and justice for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) living in the United States (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).
- ....**Critical Race Theory:** Critical Race Theory (CRT) arose out of Critical Legal Studies and interrogates socio-cultural, political, and legal issues that relate to systemic and systematic racism and race in the United States (Yosso, 2005). Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, founder of CRT, argues the theory as a verb rather than a noun. CRT is a malleable and evolving practice of interrogating racism, race, and the marginalization of other minority groups in society. CRT understands race and other identities to be social constructs that marginalize BIPOC, while centering whiteness (Crenshaw, 2011). Two-year institutions provide access to higher education and social mobility for h\*istorically disenfranchised groups in America, like BIPOC, and often center non-white experience in scholarship and practices.

Two-year colleges have always been accessible to women and immigrants and are central to other groups marginalized by American societies; however, these institutions are often treated as less than their four-year counterparts, which traditionally served only cis, white, middle- and upper-class men. Kimberlé W. Crenshaw is also renowned for her work on intersectionality, which recognizes how identities, marginalized by society and centered in society, influence each other in individual's lived experience. Centered identities are empowered, while marginalized identities are disempowered. In addition to race, important socially constructed identities include gender identity, sexuality, social class, education, and many more, which appear in *Inlet* (Crenshaw, 2015). I applied CRT as the major frame behind counter-storytelling, rethinking Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, and intersectionality to disrupt these harmful deficit-based narratives, to challenge decenter the dominant discourses in American society, and to highlight the importance of two-year colleges in America.

- ...**Deficit-based Narratives:** The term deficit-based narratives arose out of Critical Race Theory and counter-storytelling. Often, stories about populations marginalized by society, including BIPOC, are represented through harmful stereotypes, especially in media and popular culture. Often, these narratives are written *about* these populations, rather than by or with them. Counter-storytelling invests in narratives based in community cultural wealth, which celebrates the skills, abilities, contacts, knowledges, and more possessed by marginalized populations. Often counter-stories are composed with or by these communities

(Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2002). I employ counter-storytelling in my dissertation.

- ....**Discourse:** Post-structural theorists, such as Michel Foucault, posit that speech acts and written works, which includes popular culture, contain and transmit power (1975 & 1976). In fact, discourse is the primary conduit through which power travels and appears even the level of what may or may not appear on a page. In terms of American academic fiction, centered identities appear in discourse, while marginalized identities are represented through harmful stereotypes, suppressed, oppressed, silenced, or erased entirely (Foucault, 1975 & 1976). However, there always exists the potential for disruption, for forces of relation to break h\*istorical patterns of discourse to trouble problematic messaging and give voice to the voiceless or create space at the table for those stories (1975 & 1976). Post-structuralists, like Foucault, study how power moves; however, critical theorists work toward justice and emancipation. I employ poststructuralism in my literature review to map how popular culture and media act as a conduit for power.

### **Research Questions**

- 1....How do popular culture and media portray two-year colleges?
- 2....What does community cultural wealth look like at two-year colleges?
- 3....How can this dissertation be disseminated a manner that reaches audiences in and beyond the Academy?

## **Justification for the Study**

The first two-year colleges, as separate entities of higher education were founded as junior colleges and arrived in the early 1900s. Eventually they begin a revolution in America for equity and access to higher education that has continued into the 21st century (Bahr & Gross, 2016; Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Two-year colleges, known also as community, technical, and state colleges, or simply as colleges, can be recognized by their heterogeneous makeup, varying in location, size, student populations that they serve, their institutional culture, sources of funding, governance structure, credentials that are awarded, their programmatic focus, and more (2016). Now, over 1000 public, private, and for-profit two-year colleges influence America's landscape of higher education, and without them, the United States would have no means to provide higher education for all who access it.

For two-year colleges, so many recognized as community colleges, the word "community" is foundational both as a descriptor and is purposive in describing the five principles that unite all public two-year colleges: comprehensiveness, open access, community centeredness, lifelong learning, and teaching focus (Bahr & Gross, 2016; Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Two-year colleges are complex and diverse entities entangled with political, social, cultural, and demographic relationships in the United States. Often, they serve first-generation, low-income, underrepresented, underprepared, and new/non-traditional students, though these are not their only populations served. More than one-third of students in pursuit of higher learning seek out two-year colleges for their studies. Finally, while generally receiving less funding from government bodies than four-year institutions, two-year colleges must continuously balance the United States' ongoing

debate as to whether higher education should be a human right or a private commodity, and whether higher education should be job training or the teaching of life-long learning and fostering of critical thought (2016; 2008).

However, how do stakeholders view two-year colleges? In popular culture, what does it mean to be a student at a two-year college? How do novels and short stories portray staff and faculty who work at or teach at two-year colleges? According to popular culture and media, what is exactly is a two-year college? When Jena Lee Hawk undertook these questions in her 2014 dissertation, *Making Meaning of the Reel: The Media's Portrayal of the Community College*, she found little research that addressed the subject. She employed an interview study to add to this understudied area. She found that the ways media and popular culture represented two-year colleges impacted her interviewees in negative ways.

Hawk's findings gave an explicit example of Pauline J. Reynolds' 2014 monograph, "Representing 'U': Popular Higher Education, where she pointed out that popular media does not solely provide entertainment value. Instead, it also teaches consumers new and often false knowledges about aspects of life about which they are unfamiliar, while also teaching them to expect situations to unfold in particular ways; therefore, popular culture's influence must be underestimated—therefore under researched—in how it shapes consumers. For two-year colleges, this means impacting current and future students, faculty, staff, and various stakeholders, from taxpayers to employers, and their choices, perspectives, and behaviors (2014). Popular culture's discourses about the two-year college includes the following: who attends, who teaches, works at, and otherwise occupies those spaces, and these discourses create potentially

problematic representations or erasure of communities marginalized by society. These discourses, for better and often for worse, shape the public's perception of the two-year college and its place and purpose in American society.

Representations of the two-year college in popular culture and media can and often do conflict with well researched publications on two-year colleges, their function and history; however, In an *Inside Higher Ed* article, Paul Fain argues for the continued inclusion of the two-year college in popular culture, stating "fiction is targeting community colleges, which may be a sign of the sector's deepening societal relevance," but he does go on to acknowledge that the Primetime TV show *Community*, which aired from 2009-2015 and was set at a fictional institution called Greendale Community College, worried "community college leaders and faculty members...when they heard network television would lampoon their slice of the academy," particularly with its slapstick humor (2012, pars. 1, 18).

Fear, humor, and societal marginalization go together (Reynolds, Schwartz, & Bower, 2000). While open access, social mobility, and diversity are central to two-year colleges' missions (Bahr & Gross, 2016), those in power often fear disruption, which can lead to changes in society, and so they use humor as an effective tactic to maintain the status quo. Because marginalization of certain groups and institutions is so deeply engrained in every act of discourse, every belief system, and in all of society's structures, individuals may believe it futile to push for change (Reynolds, Schwartz, & Bower, 2000). The sitcom *Community* employed humor as a method to reinforce harmful stereotypes about two-year college and its inhabitants and to forestall the very societal disruption two-year colleges are positioned to cause.

Diversity is one of two-year colleges' defining characteristics; therefore, no single novel, performance piece, or other work of arts-based research can fully represent the two-year college experience. However, by the year 2022, two-year college caricatures have become staples in sitcoms, and more representations of them now exist in popular culture than ever before. In general, representations of four-year institutions of higher education number in the thousands with two-year colleges still lagging. Two-year colleges also lag in additions that push back against deficit-based narratives. Now more than ever, two-year colleges need a *Real Life*, which was described by *The New York Times* as a different kind of campus novel that rejects the cliches present in most fictional portrayals of student life (2020).

Today's world of higher education, both two- and four-year institutions, faces a changing future and times of turbulence on many socio-political and cultural fronts. In America, conversations about free college, forgiveness of student debt, anti-intellectualism, accountability and accreditation, free speech, pandemic measures, decreasing federal and state funding, job training, economic uncertainty, political party tensions, continued globalization, immigration, and more directly impact higher education, but also those who rely on media and popular culture's representations of these institutions and the knowledges they create to shape their beliefs and behaviors.

### **Purpose**

#### The Theory

This study first employs Michel Foucault's poststructuralist work to understand that all acts of discourse, including popular culture and media, maintain existing relations of power in society, which often serve to reinforce the oppression or and violence against

populations that are marginalized by society (1975 & 1976). This theory manifested through mapping approximately a 100-year period of repetitive and harmful stereotypes present in popular culture and media's representations of two-year colleges, which has served over time to negatively portray these institutions and those who work at and attend them.

Secondly, the dissertation built upon Tara Yosso's reconceptualization of Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital theory to build out elements of community cultural wealth present at two-year colleges (Richardson, 1986; Yosso, 2002). The dissertation does this through challenging and reframing the cultural, societal, symbolic, and other elements of higher education to which society traditionally assigns value. This took form in the study through employing counter-storytelling in the form of a novel that embraces these elements of community cultural wealth identified in the literature review and from the author's personal background with two-year colleges. This also took form in the findings where the author showcased examples of these elements of community cultural wealth in relation to the text in the novel.

Thirdly, this dissertation used Kimberlé Crenshaw's work with Critical Race Theory as a major frame to acknowledge that social constructions, such as race, lead to identities marginalized (BIPOC) and centered (whiteness) by American society, resulting in the silencing and oppression of voices in marginalized communities and violence against these communities through work, like popular culture and media, written *about*, not by or for these communities, which perpetuates harmful stereotypes and systemic injustice. However, researchers may engage in theory as work that moves toward justice and emancipation (2011). This took the form of constructing a novel accessible to

audiences within and beyond the Academy, which challenges traditional methods of research methods and dissemination, to build bridges between larger society and the Academy.

From that major frame, this dissertation specifically employed the tenets of intersectionality from Crenshaw's (2015) writings in the construction of characters in the novel, *Inlet*, and counter-storytelling from Daniel G. Solórzano and Tara J. Yosso (2002), which appears in the dissertation as community cultural wealth present at two-year colleges.

### The Design

Studies that employ arts-based research designs emphasize findings can reach audiences in and beyond the Academy. Arts-based research may be more engaging for audiences than traditional dissemination in journal articles and conference presentations, and it can offer broader, more equitable access to research in locations such as the public library, public-school systems, and more. Many traditional qualitative studies also emphasize storytelling, though the presentation of findings takes the form of journal articles rather than films and fiction.

Consumers of media and popular culture often shape their perceptions and actions around imagined knowledges, rather than narratives based in research. Arts-based research design brings together research and storytelling and assists consumers in the development of their knowledges.

This dissertation takes the form of arts-based research design because the traditional qualitative studies that address how various stakeholders respond to the existing media and popular culture about two-year colleges have already been done;

however, what has not been done is answering the call to action these previous studies issued. This study first catalogues, then disrupts the existing deficit-based narratives about two-year colleges through the construction of the novel, *Inlet*.

Because two-year colleges operate with a mission that prioritizes open access, social mobility, lifelong learning, diversity, and community, the process of disseminating this study also prioritized those elements. This takes the form of a product meant for the mass market that interrogates and resists the current caricature of the two-year college. This looks like interdisciplinary work that pushes the boundaries of traditional dissertation design and blurs the lines between science and art. This study gives voice not only two-year colleges but to some of society's marginalized and silenced groups, who, if they are represented at all, often find themselves portrayed through negative stereotypes and talked *about*, rather than with or for. Hollywood, media, and popular culture are not the only institutions of power responsible for this problematic practice; the Academy is responsible, too. This dissertation resists that h\*story in the pursuit of justice.

### **Significance and Contributions**

Consumers of popular culture and media about two-year colleges include current and perspective students, staff, faculty, and stakeholders. Popular culture and media shape not only perceptions but actions of consumers (Reynolds, 2014). More than one-third of postsecondary students attend a two-year college, and in some way, millions upon millions of Americans are affiliated with these institutions (Bahr & Gross, 2016; Cohen & Brawer, 2008). However, when popular culture, media, and the Academy all participate in problematic discourse surrounding these institutions, harmful stereotypes persist from one generation to the next. That means justice can never be achieved.

Instead, the very purpose of the two-year college as a structure in American society for social mobility continues to be undermined, not only by Hollywood but by four-year institutions of higher education as well. This dissertation disrupts that discourse.

Recent breakout works about four-year colleges and universities have offered much-needed representations that challenge existing portrayals of postsecondary life. Unfortunately, two-year colleges have seen no such breakout work until this dissertation. *Inlet* answers a call to action to challenge Hollywood's "reel" image and embraces two-year colleges' community cultural wealth. *Inlet* represents what could be the first of many works that will no longer stand for deficit-based narratives about two-year colleges, their vital place in America's system of higher education, and the millions of stakeholders they serve.

### **Limitations**

The dissertation contains but is not limited to the following limitations: 1) The literature review explores many primary sources in media and popular culture that include representations of two-year colleges, but the list should be considered saturation, not exhaustive. 2) These sources can be considered data collection, and they are analyzed for their deficit-based narratives; however, they fit best in the literature review, rather than in chapter four because chapter four takes the form of arts-based design. 3) Research on this topic is limited. 4) This study does not consider media that two-year colleges produce, though that represents a valuable area of future research. 5) Because diversity is a defining aspect of the two-year college, no single study that takes up arts-based research design can encapsulate the two-year college, portray all its community cultural

wealth, or represent every individual it serves. This work is a representation, not representative. Future work, then, on this area is vital.

### **Overview of Methods**

This dissertation's uses counter-storytelling from Daniel G. Solórzano and Tara J. Yosso (2002), which is based in Critical Race Theory. Counter-storytelling disrupts deficit-based discourse in favor of community cultural wealth, which this dissertation applied to two-year colleges. This dissertation employs counter-storytelling through arts-based design. Literary art, which may take the form of a novel, is one of five recognized arts-based research designs (Wang, et. al., 2017). The result is the study *Inlet*. *Inlet* is a counter-story embracing elements of two-year colleges' community cultural wealth. *Inlet* rejects media and popular culture's deficit-based discourses about two-year colleges. Each chapter of the novel emphasizes aspects of the two-year colleges' community cultural wealth and is explored thematically in chapter five, along with implications for future research.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapter one serves as the introduction to the subject. Chapter two contains the review of literature. Chapter three explains the methodology and methods. Chapter four is the novel *Inlet*. Chapter five reflects on findings and future implications for research. References and the appendix appear at the end of the dissertation.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

Chapter two provides an overview of two-year colleges in America, explores the h\*story of higher education in media and popular culture, shares previous studies on two-year colleges in media and popular culture, analyzes additional portrayals of the two-year college in popular culture, offers insight into arts-based dissertations and the power of popular culture and media in shaping discourse, and interprets the literature using poststructuralism, Critical Race Theory, and rethinks Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital in order to prepare readers for the methodology, study, and findings and future implications.

#### **Overview of the Two-Year College**

In the year 1901, the founding of Joliet Junior College forever changed higher education in American. To date, Joliet is the oldest two-year college in operation in America (Bahr & Gross, 2016; Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Junior colleges, as community, technical, and state colleges were previously known, became separate entities of higher education at the turn of the century. During this era, America contended with the first World War where American citizens, especially immigrants and woman, began to seek new avenues of work and educational opportunities post-high school, which had become mandatory for citizens. Four-year colleges and universities, reluctant to share funding with two-year colleges, also could not handle the influx of Americans seeking higher

learning at this time. Pre-desegregation, both predominantly white two-year institutions (PWIs) and historically Black two-year colleges (HBCUs) arrived across the nation. After two world wars, two-year colleges, already vital to America's education system, became central in rebuilding the nation (2016; 2008).

After the founding of two-year colleges, the new sector of higher education experienced rapid growth in number. Within a few decades, what had been a single junior college standing separate from a high school now numbered in the hundreds. Early press accounts from sources like *Reader's Digest* and *Harper's* lauded the junior college as America's beacon for veterans, social mobility, healing from war, and democratic education (Bahr & Gross, 2016; Cohen & Brawer, 2008; DeGenaro, 2006). Junior colleges, news outlets boasted, would repair the nation's racial discrimination and provide underrepresented students access to higher education, which would increase social mobility and emphasize a kind of democratic higher education never conceptualized at the four-year level. While four-year colleges and universities in America barred entry to most of the country's population, two-year colleges represented access to post-secondary learning for all—for women, immigrants, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), persons with disabilities, and other groups marginalized by society (Bahr & Gross, 2016; Harbour, 2014).

By the 1940s, in states such as California, two-year colleges formed linked systems and relied on state funding. While America's wealth represented that of a first-world nation, four-year colleges and universities continued to balk against two-year colleges that they believed would cut into their own funds. To help manage the phenomenon of the two-year colleges, the American Association of Junior Colleges

guided their nation-wide development. At the federal level, President Harry Truman laid out a plan for two-year colleges that included expansion of the G.I. Bill, which was passed in 1944 and encouraged veterans to seek higher education at institutions like two-year colleges, among many other measures the G.I. Bill included to support soldiers who had finished service to their country (Bahr & Gross, 2016; Cohen & Brawer, 2008). By the 1960s, two-year colleges had spread into every state in America and numbered greater than 500 institutions; however, they found themselves struggling for legitimacy, not only to prove themselves to the well-established model of four-year colleges and universities but also to media and the American public (2016; DeGenaro, 2006).

Mass media news outlets solidified the two-year college's presence in the world of post-secondary education in the mind of the public; however, coupled with massive and sudden growth in two-year institutional numbers and a flurry of other national and international events, such as the two world wars and desegregation, two-year colleges failed to forge their own identities before mass media forged one for them (DeGenaro, 2006). Unlike four-year colleges and universities, which existed prior to the method of establishing discourse through national news, two-year colleges have always contended with the press. While media outlets initially provided non-deficit narratives for the rise of the two-year college and its premise of educational equity and access, critical backlash came swiftly and harshly.

Critics of the two-year college made national news headlines. Robert Maynard Hutchins, former president of the University of Chicago, wrote in *Harper's* that the two-year college would perpetuate a crisis of literacy and rhetoric in American education that he claimed already plagued the country (1936). Marion Coats, in *The Forum*, believed

two-year institutions would erode education by allowing the illiterate to sully institutions of higher learning (1928). A. H. Reinhardt wrote for *Sunset Magazine* arguing that two-year colleges students were too lazy to make it into four-year universities (1927), and George Herbert Palmer in *The Atlantic Monthly*, questioned the validity of two-year colleges in two separate articles (1927). Even in the 1960s, well after World War II, two-year colleges still found themselves considered an extension of secondary education, rather than legitimized institutions of higher learning. Two-year colleges also faced closing the doors of many of their HBCUs, including twelve colleges in Florida alone, which forced students to integrate into two-year colleges that were PWIs (Bahr & Gross, 2016; DeGenaro, 2008).

Both growth and critique of the two-year college continued through the 1980s into the modern era. Throughout these decades, two-year colleges provided educational remediation, allowed students to pursue occupational study, and ushered in first-generation college students (Bahr & Gross, 2016; Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Two-year colleges sometimes became places where the lines between job training and liberal arts curricula became increasingly blurred because two-year colleges recognized that job training meant social mobility for select student populations, which has historically not been a priority of four-year institutions of higher education that primarily served middle- and upper-class persons (2016; 2008). At this time, two-year colleges were still functioning without a single homogeneous mission in consistent practice, despite the homogeneous identity that had been established for them through national media's discourse (Savage, 1989).

By this point, the public was forming strong opinions about two-year colleges and their place in America. About one community college in Ohio, high school seniors said, “If you can’t go to college, go to Lakeland,” the local two-year institution, a statement echoed in other states and in other populations (Savage, 1989, p. 3). To Americans, open admissions came to equate “poor quality—that is, not a real college...the more selective the institution, the greater its quality was perceived to be” (1989, p. 4). Four-year universities and colleges have a tradition of offering higher education only to select populations, and they have continued to enroll students deemed high ability and of higher socio-economic status (SES). Meanwhile, in a longitudinal study for the 1980 high school sophomore and senior cohorts, findings included that 25.5% of those students enrolled at community colleges in the academic year 1982-1983 alone. Community colleges in this study also bore greater responsibility for economic and social mobility for American citizens because four-year institutions enrolled few students from lower SES quadrants and few students deemed lower ability. Despite this, community colleges did enroll 18.5% of high SES students and 14.1% of students deemed high ability, which constitutes a significant observation (1989).

In his article “Images of Community Colleges for the Twenty-First Century,” Daniel D. Savage points out that linking elite schools and high quality is fallacious (1989). Those affiliated with two-year colleges did not share the public’s perception that community colleges equate to low quality. Instead, overwhelmingly administrators and faculty employed at two-year colleges viewed these institutions positively (1989). Alike, “community college trustees, administrators, faculty, and students” were believed in the importance of “developing a positive, distinctive institutional image” for the two-year

college (1989, p. 6). The positive image for two-year colleges included the following points: comprehensive curriculum, transfer and articulation programs, centrality in their community, development of relationships with public K-12 schools, open access, rigorous degree and certificate programs, college publications to reinforce a collegiate identity, well-functioning foundations programs, and more (1989). Savage viewed the future of the two-year college's image positively, positing that over time, the negative stereotypes about two-year institutions would fade and that the development of the two-year college's image *from* two-year colleges would help alter the existing national discourse (1989).

Daniel D. Savage's hopes directly contrast Nancy LaPaglia's future projections where she writes in her book *Storytellers: The Image of the Two-Year College in American Fiction and in Women's Journals* that it would not be discourse from two-year colleges about two-year colleges that dominated the national discourse but rather Hollywood that solidified a negative image of two-year institutions (1994). Both Savage and LaPaglia agree that the existing discourse about the two-year colleges at the time of their studies in the late 1980s and early 1990s had come to be overwhelmingly based on negative stereotypes (1989; 1994).

By the early 2000s, public two-year colleges had solidified an image they wished to share with the American public, which included five common principles: comprehensiveness, community centeredness, lifelong learning, open access, and teaching focus" (Bahr & Gross, 2016); however, it must be noted that the two-year college's diversity also defines it and continues to make it difficult to define. Over the last decade, deficit-based discourse from the White House, with former

occupant Donald Trump in 2018 equating community colleges to vocational schools, to Hollywood's slapstick sitcom *Community*, that ran from 2009-2015, continues to dominate, despite the work two-year colleges are doing in America (Wong, 2018). Currently, two-year colleges persist in linking employment and education, offering developmental education courses, serving diverse populations, striving to keep costs of attending credit and non-credit classes low, keeping open admission policies active, prioritizing teaching over research, building transfer and articulation agreements with four-year institutions of higher education, and encouraging its community in myriad ways that include the pursuit of life-long learning (Bahr & Gross, 2016; Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

Two-year colleges, since their inception, contend not only with mass media portrayals of their form and function but with popular culture's representations as well. Film, fiction, and television shape public perceptions of all aspects of life, including life at colleges and universities (Reynolds, 2014). At times, those portrayals perpetuate deficit-based discourses through negative stereotypes, while at others they embrace the cultural wealth of communities marginalized by society.

### **Overview of Higher Education in Media and Popular Culture**

A host of films, novels, short stories, television shows, video games, songs, and other mediums of popular culture feature colleges and universities. The origins of the campus novel, or the American college novel, can be traced back to 1828 with *Fanshawe* by Nathaniel Hawthorne listed as the earliest recognized work in what has grown into its own genre (Kramer, 1981, 2000, 2003; Lyons, 1968).

Films about higher education go back to the Silent Era where in 1925, Harold Lloyd, stars in *The Freshman*. Then, *College* debuted in 1927, featuring Buster Keaton as the lead actor (“Buster Keaton’s ‘College,’” 2014). Television shows about campus life come later, starting in the 1960s, with black and white sitcoms airing like “Mrs. G. Goes to College” (Lackmabb, 2003). Recent examples of higher education in popular culture include “Discovery University,” an expansion pack that came out in 2019 for the fourth iteration of the life simulation game, *The Sims*, and the 2021 arrival of the television show, *The Chair*, that aired on Netflix.

American academic fiction can be recognized by its setting, which must feature a campus, a college, or a university located in the U.S. as its primary setting (Kramer, 1981 & 2004). Campus novels may feature primary or secondary institutions, such as in *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles, or college and universities, such as in *A Gate at the Stairs* by Lorrie Moore, *The Cheese Monkeys: A Novel in Two Semesters* by Chip Kidd, *Straight Man* by Richard Russo, and *Dear Committee Members: A Novel* by Julie Schumacher, and in more recent years, *My Education* by Susan Choi and *Real Life* by Brandon Taylor.

In John E. Kramer’s compendium, *The American College Novel: An Annotated Bibliography*, he annotates hundreds of examples of academic fiction and gives the genre more than a 100-year lineage (1981 & 2004). Kramer, despite annotating more than 600 works of American academic fiction, failed to complete in-depth analyses of the genre. Within the article “Campus Life Revealed: Tracking Down the Rich Resources of American Collegiate Fiction,” authors Christian K. Anderson and John R. Thelin state in their analysis of the genre that “campus novels are overwhelmingly set at private, elite

universities or large (and elite) public institutions. Nearly 37% of the annotated novels are set at [Ivy League] schools” (2009). Ivy League schools, however, comprise only 8 of more than 1000 four-year institutions of higher education in the United States, but they occupy almost half of the academic fiction shelf space.

Representations of Ivy League schools are followed with an abundance of Research-1 institutions, public land grant universities, and elite private colleges, while community or technical colleges lag far behind in numbers (2009). Furthermore, the majority of these novels are written by white men, showcase white male protagonists, and feature male, heterosexual characters. In Kramer’s second edition of *The American College Novel: An Annotated Bibliography*, which was published in 2004, he includes a section on academic fiction that features gay or lesbian and other marginalized identities; however, as a whole, this genre is one with a lineage of writers and characters that perpetuate hegemonic discourses within institutions of higher education, while voices from marginalized identities have largely been silent or silenced. This phenomenon is not unique to campus novels but can be seen in other mediums of popular culture’s representations about life in higher education from movies like *American Pie 2* (2001) and *Neighbors* (2014) to television shows like *Greek* (2007-2001) to *Gossip Girl* (2007-present).

While, in general, the last decade and a half of popular culture’s representations of higher education feature more voices from populations marginalized by American society and include examples like *Dear White People* and *Grown-ish*, the problematic h\*story of privileging white, cis-heterosexual, male, higher socio-economic status voices at elite four-year colleges and universities persists in a plethora of recent publications.

The way popular culture represents different aspects of life, including higher education, impacts consumers' beliefs and behaviors (Reynolds, 2014). What is fiction may be taken as hard fact. Popular culture about higher education reaches audiences both within and beyond its walls. Freshmen enter with opinions already formed about the college experience. Stakeholders at all levels determine actions based in part on existing fictional discourse that may be vastly different from the experiences of those working and teaching at the university (2014). Implicit in this process is the centering of certain identities and the marginalization of others (Crenshaw, 2011, 2015). This happens not only at the individual level but also at the institution level, as evidenced by the image of two-year colleges in media and popular culture when compared to four-year counterparts.

### **Studies about the Two-Year College in Media and Popular Culture**

Few studies interrogate how popular culture portrays the two-year college. The first and only book-length text on this topic is Nancy LaPaglia's 1994 book, *Storytellers: The Image of the Two-Year College in American Fiction and in Women's Journals*. The book is separated into two parts. In the first part, LaPaglia catalogues representations of two-year colleges in two separate categories: in the first she titles a list of single-mentions, in which two-year colleges are referenced in passing. In the second part, she details examples of popular culture that uses a two-year college for setting, plot, or character. She reviews various mediums of popular culture from film to fiction from prior to the 1970s to the early 1990s (1994). While John E. Kramer's two volumes of *The American College Novel: An Annotated Bibliography* contain more than 600 hundred of works about four-year campuses in novels, alone, LaPaglia celebrates when, in the 1980s, she locates a total of eleven pieces of popular culture about two-year colleges (Kramer,

1981, 2004; LaPaglia, 1994). LaPaglia points out that at the time of writing her book, two-year colleges in popular culture were mostly invisible. She writes in the preface of her book that American “society’s professional storytellers usually ignore two-year college people together...Society’s negative definition and ‘invisibilization’ of millions of people does them unwarranted harm” (1994, p. viii). She argues for the visibility of two-year colleges in popular culture and for those who work at or attend these institutions write these narratives; however, she is clear that Hollywood must not be allowed to continue to portray two-year colleges and those who work at and attend them.

Unlike Daniel D. Savage in “Images of Community Colleges for the 21st Century,” who believed national discourse about two-year colleges would improve with time, LaPaglia writes how she feared that television in particular would lead to a continued trend of “when marginal members of society are portrayed, negative stereotypes are the rule...This finding does not bode well for an increase in positive portrayals of two-year college characters” (1994, p. 49). Her fear bore fruit with the sitcom *Community* (2009-2015) that, along with bringing increased visibility to two-year colleges through popular culture, began a trend in sitcoms to portray deficit-based narratives about these institutions (Fain, 2012).

LaPaglia’s findings in her analysis of popular culture’s portrayals of two-year colleges included how “‘Community college’ and ‘junior college’ have become shorthand for a long inventory of pejorative, demeaning adjectives” (1994, p. 23). Because two-year colleges serve high rates of students who are BIPOC, this continues harm to populations already marginalized by society (Bahr & Gross, 2016). Students, LaPaglia shares, in Hollywood’s image of two-year colleges, “are shown as back-water

hicks, even as being dim-witted, and the faculty and staff portrayals are often just as dismal” (1994, p. 24). The two-year colleges, themselves, are mediocre at best. The persons attending and working at them:

are deemed hardly worth writing about in the first place. They are [perceived] to be full of “non-traditional,” low-status people. These are people closer to the margins: working class, women, minority groups, older, recent immigrants, or the urban poor (or the rural poor for that matter). They have little appeal to writers, unless they are shooting each other or dealing dope or saving the farm. The millions of middle-class whites who are also attending two-year colleges, quietly trying to improve their lives, are equally ignored or mocked. (p. 29)

These deficit-based narratives are not only based in harmful stereotypes, but they are blatantly false. The second section of *Storytellers* details students’ and faculty members’ personal experiences at two-year colleges. She follows the tale of twenty-three students and fourteen faculty members from five different two-year colleges and many different backgrounds and identities. In the journals, students wrote on like themes of agency and the joy of learning, while faculty wrote about their sense of mission and prioritizing actions that were generative or nurturing in nature (1994). While students and faculty did detail their struggles, it is important to note that students and faculty struggle at four-year institutions as well, though in place of slapstick and farcical representations of that about two-year colleges in popular culture, four-year institutions and those attending and working at them find themselves portrayed through satire instead (148).

The deficit-based narratives in popular culture’s image of two-year colleges that LaPaglia’s findings included were 1) shame associated with attending a two-year college,

while in fiction going to a four-year institution is most often portrayed as a positive, 2) no prestigious or even notable two-year colleges in popular culture, while Harvard and Yale are the universities of choice in fiction about four-year institutions, 3) humor is used to mask harmful stereotypes and deficit-based narratives about two-year colleges, 4) a misunderstanding about what a two-year college is in its fictive representations, 5) continued invisibility of the two-year college in works of popular culture, 6) among others, like punishing women (even killing them) for attending fictional two-year colleges (1994). While she notes a few exceptions to these findings, those were few and far between.

LaPaglia was not only the first to compile a text that compiled and analyzed the two-year college in popular culture, but she was also the first to push for a call to action to change the existing deficit-based narratives in both popular culture and the Academy in favor of diverse, moving, and rich experiences at these two-year colleges, not only written by their inhabitants, like in the case of student and faculty journals, but by professional storytellers as well (1994).

Unfortunately, in the nearly three decades since *Storytellers* was published, only a handful of studies have continued research on this topic. None of them include any form of storytelling that resists Hollywood, but instead, the studies follow traditional qualitative methods, such as interviews and content analysis. They have, however, echoed LaPaglia's call to action for storytelling based in the community cultural wealth at two-year colleges, rather than in perpetuating harmful deficit-based narratives.

One such study that reiterated the importance of two-year college insiders and storytellers, alike, disrupting Hollywood's portrayals of these institutions—and whose

findings detailed the harm popular culture's portrayal of the two-year college does to students at these institutions—was Krista M. Tucciarone's publication from 2007, "Community College Image—By Hollywood." Tucciarone analyzed how students in St. Louis' community college system interpreted the two-year college as it was portrayed in the film *Evolution* (2001).

In consideration for her study, Tucciarone searched for film portrayals of two-year colleges. At the time, she came across only two: *Evolution*, which she chose, and *Pumpkin* (2002). *Pumpkin* debuted a year after *Evolution*. The film is largely set at a four-year institution, so Tucciarone argued that it did not offer full representation of a two-year college; however, "one scene in the film condemns the community college for not being a respectable institution of higher learning" (Tucciarone, 2007, p. 38). For those reason, Tucciarone chose not to use it in her study.

At the time of her study's release, Tucciarone wrote, "To date, only one other study has been conducted that explores the community college image represented in film," which was LaPaglia's 1994 text, *Storytellers*. Tucciarone's study came more than a decade after LaPaglia's, indicating a significant gap in the literature. Tucciarone noticed this gap and addressed it by stating "Films, in general, are a pivotal information source for many viewing audiences" (2007, p. 37). She cites McClure's 1993 *Research Guide to Film History* when stating that films create and perpetuate discourse (2007). While viewers and stakeholders may have little insider knowledge about an area, like the two-year college, visual art like film and television create space for instant and often easily accessible learning opportunities, even when the information shown can be harmful and even false.

During the time of Tucciarone’s study, movie-going met its match with Netflix streaming. The “media [was] currently portray[ing] community colleges as the ‘Rodney-Dangerfields of higher education’” (2007, p. 38). Even at the turn of the 21st century and two years prior to *Community*’s popular reception, the two-year college found itself continued to be represented as the least desirable form of higher education—if it could even be considered higher education at all.

Tucciarone puts out a call to action in her paper: “Practitioners of higher education, if they do not already, need to care about their community college’s image as directed by Hollywood” (2007, p. 50). Not only should practitioners and faculty employed by two-year colleges care, but so should researchers, faculty, and staff at four-year institutions, who often are complicit in sharing this deficit-based discourse. Two-year colleges impact the lives of many Americans and share a vital role in landscaping America’s post-secondary education.

Tucciarone’s study found disturbing results. Students who viewed the film *Evolution* concluded that community colleges are second-rate schools. The classes are too easy, upper administration is absent, and “condescending remarks about the community college are laced throughout the film” (2007, p. 49). The co-stars depict college professors who want *out* of their teaching roles. Tucciarone argues that “in reality, community colleges offer a popular and cost-effective way to obtain two years of college, and the nurturing environment of a community college features faculty dedicated to teaching, which gives students the chance to flourish academically. In addition, students can engage in social activities, which provide personal growth” (2007, p. 50). At many two-year colleges, students live on campus, study abroad, and participate in clubs,

organizations, and sports. Tucciarone encourages her audience to take advantage of the slant in films and to create media that supports helpful narratives and detracts from deficit-based stereotypes. In closing, she states, “instead of being victim to the media, educators should use it to community the ‘real’ image of community colleges while challenging the ‘reel’ image” (2007, p. 50).

In 2009, the same year as *Community* hit the small screen, and two years after Tucciarone’s study, Brian Bourke, Claire H. Major, and Michael S. Harris released an analysis of two-year college students as they are portrayed in short stories, television, novels, and film titled “Images of Fictional Community College Students.” Because “fictional accounts may have a dramatic effect on public opinion” and the authors “contend that these images have implications for two-year colleges,” they analyzed written works like the short story “Shiloh” by Bobbie Ann Mason, the novel *Them* by Joyce Carol Oates, and the novel *The Women of Bruster Place* by Gloria Naylor. They also looked at television’s representations of two-year college students in *Growing Pains*, *Rosanne*, *Who’s the Boss*, and *Trailer Park Boys*, a Canadian comedy that also aired in the U.S. (2009, pp. 55-56).

Bourke and co-authors examined the lived experience of fictional students at two-year colleges, rather than at the image of the two-year college, itself. The findings from their analysis were positive in that they argued these representations included diverse portrayals of students, such as 35-year-old protagonist, Norma Jean Moffett, from “Shiloh” (1989) who hails from lower socio-economic status; the single African-American female protagonist, Kiswana Browne, from *The Women of Bruster Place* (1982) who comes from a middle-class background; and Maureen Wendall from *Them*

(1969) who sold her body to escape the slums after flunking out of a four-year university (2009).

Paul Fain, in his *Inside Higher Ed* article “Community Colleges as Fiction Fodder,” backed up Bourke and co-authors’ argument that the existing portrayals of two-year colleges and their students have positive angles (2012). Fain wrote, “community colleges have arrived on the national scene” thanks to their “starring role in popular culture” (2012, para. 1). Fain stated that *Community*, specifically, marked a change in popular culture’s portrayals of two-year colleges, primarily in the increasing number of their representations, and that the sitcom led the charge for two-year college’s visibility (2012). LaPaglia wrote extensively in *Storytellers* on the invisibility of two-year college students, staff, and faculty in media; however, she made mention that television portrayals and an increase of visibility could be disastrous (1994). Fain acknowledges in his article that many two-year college administrators worried over how *Community* was portraying their institutions, echoing sentiments from Post-structuralist Michel Foucault that visibility can equal vulnerability for populations marginalized by society (2012; 1975).

The first dissertation on two-year colleges as they are portrayed in film was written in 2014 by Jena Lee Hawk and titled *Making Meaning of the Reel: The Media’s Portrayal of Community Colleges*. Her dissertation made valuable inroads into understanding the impact of popular culture’s portrayals of two-year colleges on students’ decision-making and opinions about these institutions. Her dissertation was the first study on this topic to be released after *Community* had been on air (2014). Additionally, Hawk’s study backed up research that debuted that same year by Pauline J.

Reynolds who posited that not only are college students impacted by popular media about post-secondary institutions, but so are faculty, staff, and stakeholders (Reynolds, 2014).

In 2016, Hawk and co-author Lilian H. Hill published ““Hipster Freshman’: Popular Culture’s Portrayal of Community College Students,” which expanded on Hawk’s work in *Making Meaning of the Reel: The Media’s Portrayal of Community College*. In their article, the authors analyzed if media representations of two-year colleges influenced student enrollment at two-year institutions (2016). Both studies on this topic and portrayals of the two-year college have h\*istorically been sparse. From 1960-1990, they acknowledge no movie showcased nontraditional students at a two-year college, and Hawk’s dissertation work was the last study on two-year colleges in popular culture (2016). This 2016 article’s findings analyzed how students currently enrolled at two-year colleges viewed their experience: Students appreciated flexible schedules to complete coursework, the proximity to their homes, the ability to work jobs, the lower cost of tuition, the feeling of unity on campus, the opportunity to participate in programs, like sports, and the ability to receive not only a quality education but one that prepared graduates for the current job market (2016). On the other hand, students saw media’s portrayals of two-year colleges as making fun of them because they have been perceived as easy targets (2016). The students also argued that the media seemed to be created by outsiders to community colleges who fundamentally lack understanding about these colleges (2016).

Hawk and Hill echo LaPaglia (1994) and Reynolds (2014) when acknowledging how popular culture informs the public about topics about which they are unfamiliar (2016). Television, in particular, appeals to mass market numbers, which means

stereotyping two-year colleges, their students, faculty, and staff (2016). Instead of challenging harmful deficit-based narratives, “media creators do not have to invest money and effort to re-introduce new characters or develop their personalities” (2016, p. 37). The two-year college students involved in the study disagreed with the media’s representations of their institutions and argued in favor of their college experience (2016).

At the end of their article, Hawk and Hill encourage two-year colleges to “counter the content of these portrayals” (2016, p. 39). While Hawk and Hill speak of countering media in recruitment strategies and college mission statements, the media, itself, can be countered by the production of popular culture, especially by insiders like their student participants, that embraces two-year colleges’ community cultural wealth.

In 2017, Travis J. Tyler and Kim Nehls published “Community College Pop Culture Portrayals,” the last article on popular culture and its representations of two-year colleges to be released. Largely Tyler and Nehls reiterate previous publications about this topic and explore how *Community* and other portrayals shape discourse about two-year institutions, including “remain[ing] vigilant in studying and analyzing current trends in popular culture in order to counteract the misrepresentation of the mission and benefits of enrolling at a community college” (p. 21). They emphasize that multiple names in Hollywood attended two-year colleges, including Arnold Schwarzenegger, George Lucas, and Tom Hanks, and that, as of 2016, 45% of students attend two-year colleges; however, two-year colleges have become higher education’s punchline in a joke that is mean spirited in nature toward students, staff, faculty, and the institutions, themselves (2017).

Bourke and his co-authors highlight some positives in the portrayals of two-year colleges and in the diversity of students represented (2009). LaPaglia mentioned in *Storytellers* that overwhelmingly portrayals of two-year colleges are negative, though there are a few that counter that overall narrative (1994). Tucciarone and Hawk's 2014 dissertation emphasize that the way two-year institutions are portrayed in popular culture, especially in films, in a negative manner, can impact students considering or attending two-year colleges. Students and faculty in LaPaglia's study who kept journals on their two-year college experience contradicted popular culture's stereotypical portrayals of two-year colleges, in favor of community cultural wealth, a sentiment echoed by the students in Hawk and Hill's 2016 study. The community cultural wealth embraced by these students and faculty falls in line with Savage's 1989 study on the American public's negative image of two-year colleges with the American public and how two-year college administrators must work to shift it. This acknowledgement that the deficit-based narratives that persist in popular culture about two-year colleges need to be changed is echoed across almost all the studies; however, not one study has taken up this call to action. Since 2017, research on this topic has ceased publication, but media portrayals that repeat discourse based in harmful stereotypes about two-year colleges continues. Fain, Hawk and Hill, and Tyler and Nehls reference the sitcom *Community* in a largely positive manner; however, *Community* was a highly problematic portrayal of two-year institutions' disfunction disguised through humor, white saviorism, and other troubling narratives, and has solidified the current script about two-year colleges in popular culture.

## **Representations of the Two-Year College in Popular Culture**

The following section of the literature review is an analysis of representations of two-year colleges in film, television, and novels that have come out over approximately the last decade. This list should not be considered exhaustive but rather saturation of deficit-based narratives that continue to appear in popular culture about the two-year college. These largely echo the findings in previous studies and help shape the counter-story explored through arts-based design in chapter four of the dissertation.

### Films and Television Shows

In the pilot of *Community* about the fictional Greendale Community College, viewers meet the cast of the sitcom, including the focal character: a disgruntled cis, white, heterosexual male of non-traditional college age named Jeff Winger, played by Joel McHale, who has come to a two-year college after a board of law examiners revoked his forged license to practice. Winger, used to high-fashion, high-pay, and high-balling from his career as a lawyer, finds himself among a laughable group of misfits that, in his eyes at least, belong at Greendale Community College, while he views himself above them all.

In the pilot, he attempts to seduce a white female, cheat his way through his classes, and con the rest of the cast, from fellow students to the dean, into letting him slide through what is, in his mind, fake school, so he can return to the life he lost. By the end of the pilot, Winger becomes a white savior character, revered by the rest of the cast and the center for the show's future shenanigans (Harmon, 2009).

*Community* made it big on the small screen and ran for six seasons. The show won awards such a Primetime Emmy (2012), a Critics' Choice Television Award (2012),

a Satellite Award (2011), and two *TV Guide* Fan Favorite Awards (2012), showcasing its popularity within the world of television and viewers at home. Donald Glover, actor and singer/rapper who has taken the entertainment world by storm, rose to fame through his role on the show as Troy Barnes, an ex-football player, while the show hosted other huge stars, such as Chevy Chase, LeVar Burton, Jack Black, Betty White, among others (Mello, 2021).

*Community* created the formula—about which, in 1994, LaPaglia warned would happen if television was left to portray two-year colleges—for sitcoms to poke fun at two-year colleges. From *Modern Family* to *Big Bang Theory* to *Schitt's Creek*, sitcoms, popular with American audiences, reference two-year colleges. Some sitcoms feature entire arcs around these institutions, while others mention them only in passing. Overwhelmingly, the characters who attend two-year colleges are portrayed as less academically minded than other focal characters in ensemble casts. Many of the characters are white, cis, heterosexual, and several are of non-traditional age to attend college. These characters appear in shows like *Parks and Recreation*, *The Connors*, and *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*.

In a *Parks and Recreation* arc, Andy Dwyer, a quirky side character who is often portrayed as less intelligent compared to other cast members, attends a women and gender studies class at community college, along with his boss, Ron Swanson. By the class's close, Swanson has decided he will propose marriage to the female professor, and Dwyer discusses the feminist movement as equating empowerment for prostitution ("Smallest Park," 2011).

In *Modern Family*'s mention of community colleges, Haley, misfit and underperforming daughter in the focal family, does not need to study for her two-year college classes because she only has to bring in glue sticks for class.

In *Schitt's Creek* Alexis, a formerly wealthy, ditzy blonde character who did not graduate from high school at 18, receives a degree from the local Elmdale College, presumably a two-year institution. Instead of receiving her degree in public relations, her diploma declares "pubic relations."

Like in *Roseanne*, in *The Connors* reboot, viewers see Becky, who has always underperformed academically, attending class at a two-year college. Penny, another ditzy blonde, this time from the *Big Bang Theory* claims to have attended a two-year college to impress her CalTech boyfriend, Leonard, when she in fact, has not attended college at all. *South Side* showcases two Black male characters who graduated from a two-year college who hope to make it big in business, while they work dead end jobs. Kimmy Schmidt, in *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, is released from a cult that lived in an underground bunker for ten years, gets her GED, considers a two-year college, but ends up attending Columbia University where she struggles academically.

As recent as 2022, the examples continue. In the second season of the sitcom *Space Force*, the daughter of the main character, who is a white female failing high school, receives a recommendation to attend a community college from her high school, while her mother, who is incarcerated, argues against her daughter's attendance at a two-year college, instead advocating that she should apply to Brown, since she would be a legacy.

All of these sitcom use humor to disguise the repeating deficit-based narratives about two-year colleges as undesirable and worse about the students who attend them.

In film, there are few more recent portrayals of two-year colleges. The movie, *Evolution*, which came out in 2001, started the 2000s' representations of two-year colleges in films. *Evolution* falls into the comedic science fiction genre, in which two community college professors, a fire-fighter that is still a cadet, and "a geeky but sexy government scientist work against an alien organism" ("Evolution," 2021). On *IMDb*, the movie received a viewer rating of 6.1 out of 10 stars. The movie was adapted into an animated series titled *Alienators: Evolution Continues* (Perlmutter, 2018), then into a GameBoy Advance shooter game by Activision ("Alienators: Evolution Continues Releases," 2021).

In 2012, *Community College* came out in the midst of hype over the sitcom *Community*. *Community College*, is a proclaimed "love story between four dudes and their ability to get free drinks," had a low budget of ten thousand dollars, and was released straight to DVD in 2012 ("Community College"). The official website for the movie was [www.communitycollegesucks.com](http://www.communitycollegesucks.com), though that link is no longer active. *Community College*, a comedy had an all-white, all cis-straight male main cast that received 4.9 out of a possible 10 stars on *IMDb* from viewers ("Community College").

*Larry Crowne*, a romantic comedy featuring a 30-million-dollar budget and starring Tom Hanks and Julia Roberts, fared only marginally better than *Community College* in its *IMDb* rating, receiving 6.1 out of 10 stars. The film features a white middle-aged man who has lost his job and decides to attend a two-year college. There, he gets romantically involved with a white female instructor who is disenchanted with her

teaching career (2011). A review from Common Sense Media said about the film that “the supporting characters are, for the most part, stereotypes” (2011, para. 4). The review also called the movie “superficial” and “tonally confusing,” which may be in part due to the tired tropes and lack of diverse representation (2011). Other big screen portrayals include cameos of two-year colleges in *Rudy*, *Hoop Dreams*, and *Nobody’s Child*. While movies that use the two-year college campus as their primary setting do have a few titles, overall they have not done well on the big screen and are lacking in numbers. They feature many of the same narratives as the sitcoms that portray two-year colleges.

### Novels

Apart from television shows and movies, two-year institutions can be found in literature as well. In 2011, *Glorify Each Day* by John Banks hit the shelves and featured protagonist Tommy “Teach” Morrison who lectures at a two-year institution. The novel has 3 out of 5 stars on Amazon and is described as outrageous, wry, and humorous. In 2015, *Cow Country* by Adrian Jones Pearson came out, and main character, Charlie, an administrator at a fictional community college called Cow Eye, uses humor to negotiate regional accreditation and reconcile relations between vegetarians and meat eaters. The same year *Cow Country* was published, *A Crisis in Community College Leadership: The Philip Dolly Affair* also came out. The novel takes place in the 1960s and is described on its back cover as “comic” and “satiric.” One year later, *School Daze: The Hinkley Community College Chronicles* marked Craig Sullivan’s first work of satire and his second work of fiction. Its back cover states that it follows the rising and falling of a two-year, for-profit college in a county that has been scammed (2016).

Other notable works of literature about two-year institutions include *Mrs. Fletcher* by Tom Perrotta, which was expanded into an HBO series that aired in 2019, and *Iced* by Robert Grindy. Tom Perrotta has authored several works of academic fiction; however, only *Mrs. Fletcher* heavily features a two-year institution. Aside from the HBO series adapted from *Mrs. Fletcher*, Perrotta's novels *Election* and *Little Children* received screen treatments and were nominated for Oscars (Perrotta, 2022). Perrotta breaks the string of cis-heterosexual male main characters in recent novels about two-year colleges by exploring title character, Eve Fletcher's, decision to enroll at a two-year college after her son also departs for college. Eve Fletcher's character largely revolves her experience in her women and gender studies class, which seems to spur her to habitually masturbate to "MILF" pornography and ultimately engage in a troubling threesome with a fellow student who is 19 and a co-worker that she supervises. At the end of the title, she marries a man like her husband was before he cheated on her. The book also includes a problematic relationship between the adjunct professor of the women and gender studies class who is a transgender woman and one of her students. Notably, Eve Fletcher's son attends that same two-year college when he fails out of his four-year university. *Mrs. Fletcher* is Perrotta's lowest rated title on Goodreads.

*Iced* came out in November 2018 from Livingston Press at the University of West Alabama. Grindy, himself, taught at a two-year college, though he never attended one as a student ("Robert Grindy," 2021). *Pop Matters* reviewed the novel, stating the following: "*Iced* works as a crime novel, a mystery, a satire set in low-rent academia" (2018, para. 6).

*Iced* tells the story of a two-year college, cis-male, straight, white professor named Henry Streater who is on the cusp of being fired from the fictional Kickapoo Community College. Streater steals the idea for a novel from a previous student who has passed away. The student who has passed, Travis Connor, is African American, and the plot that he was never able to finish takes Streater from the community college into the prison system and beyond (Grindy, 2018).

The review from *Pop Matters* states that Grindy addressed race, diversity in two-year colleges, and cultural appropriation; however, the review calls Grindy “smart” for setting “his novel at the end of the 20th century, when issues of political correctness and diversity in the academic canon were strong but no social media meant no instant dissemination of spoken words or impromptu thoughts that danced to the wrong beat” (2018, para. 4). The small mention of women in the novel comes in the form of Streater’s hated ex-wife, his failed love interest in the form of a previous student, and, in his classroom, “pastor’s wives and teenage lesbian wiccans” (2018, para. 4).

Grindy and other authors, like many post-*Community* screenwriters, use humor to retell existing deficit-based discourse about two-year institutions, while failing—purposefully and “smartly,” according to the *Pop Matters* review—to delve too deeply into any critical areas outside of Streater’s disgruntled and self-serving character (2018). While *Iced* and other novels add pages to a shelf dedicated to works about two-year institutions, these, like so many others that have come before them, largely fail to challenge the existing image of two-year institutions, but rather they use humor to hide perpetuate stereotypes.

## **Arguing in Favor of Disseminating Beyond the Academy**

From Daniel D. Savage's 1989 work about the image of the two-year college to the more recent studies on the subject, deficit-based discourses persist in both the public sphere and through popular culture. These deficit-based narratives directly contrast insider knowledges, which largely embrace two-year colleges' community cultural wealth.

After applying post-structural theory to analyze how power is moving through the discourse in popular culture and media about two-year colleges and Critical Race Theory's counter-storytelling and rethinking Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to push for justice through giving voice and value to populations marginalized by society, findings from the literature review include that two-year colleges continue to be portrayed through stereotypes that are repeated by American society, its media, and even by four-year institutions. Therefore, the students, faculty, and staff who attend and work at them suffer in the discourses that have been created *about* them, rather than *with* or *for* them.

Counter-storytelling asks researchers to reconstruct the existing narratives in a manner that embraces a community's cultural wealth, instead of regurgitating harmful stereotypes. Stereotypes about two-year colleges and its insiders do harm in many forms: disempowering identities marginalized by society, perpetuating myths about who does and does not belong at two-year colleges, painting these institutions as academically less than four-year institutions, and more. These stereotypes exist not only in the Academy but also in the American public, and they are dissuaded by insiders, as evidenced in previous studies on this subject.

While studies on this subject are few and far between—and altogether nonexistent in the past five years—the findings from them largely compliment one another. While, certainly, more traditional research can be conducted about two-year colleges’ image in popular culture and media, one area remains untouched from previous studies’ call to action: the construction of a piece of popular culture that showcases two-year colleges’ community cultural wealth. Such a work can be disseminated in and beyond the Academy and is vital to disrupting the current deficit-based narratives. For that reason, this dissertation employs an arts-based design in chapter four.

Dissertations that have employed arts-based designs include *See the Stripes*, a dissertation in rap album form written and performed by A. D. Carson in 2017. Carson’s dissertation received significant media coverage and served as a powerful example of how arts-based dissertations can push boundaries, reach broad audiences, and disrupt existing and harmful discourses, such as in the case of the “Solid Orange” campaign by Clemson University, which failed to acknowledge the institution’s horrific h\*stories. Carson writes:

Clemson University’s [h\*story] has its dark parts that should be acknowledge—particularly the [h\*stories] of laborers who contributed significantly to its development: slaves, sharecroppers and convict laborers. As the stripes on The Tiger complete the picture of the university’s mascot, acknowledging the stripes on the uniforms of convict laborers, the strips of land worked by the sharecroppers, and the slaves, who bore stripes on their backs, help provide a necessary, more complete view of the h\*story of Clemson University. (2017, pars. 1-3)

Not only can dissertations that use arts-based research designs break new ground and reach audiences outside of the Academy, but they can be award-winning as well. In 2019, the ASHE (Association for the Study of Higher Education) Dissertation of the Year award went to Stevie Johnson at the University of Oklahoma for his dissertation *Curriculum of the Mind: A Blackcrit, Narrative Inquiry, Hip-Hop Album on Anti-Blackness & Freedom for Black Male Collegians at Historically White Institutions* (“Dissertation of the Year,” 2021). Johnson blended research with hip-hop in his dissertation at a prestigious Research-1 institution where he stretched higher education scholarship and created space for art to serve as counter-storytelling (Dulaney, 2019).

Arts-based dissertations can also take the form of graphic novels, such as in the case of *Drawbridge* by Ebony Flowers who received her Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2017. *Drawbridge* spans 364 pages of illustrations that explore “visualization as a multi-model process...widely explored in curriculum studies. [She] examined a facet of how people learn...moment-to-moment agency in ways of seeing and making images” (2017, para. 1). Flowers argues that her dissertation is three-fold, including rethinking the dominance of text in education research with the powerful practice of offering an alternative in her own dissertation (2017).

For Brian K. Mitchell, completing his dissertation in 2011 at the University of New Orleans on h\*istorical figure, Oscar Dunn, who was enslaved, freed, then appointed as the first Black governor in the United States during the Reconstruction Era was not enough. Mitchell worked with the Historic New Orleans Collection to reimagine his dissertation in a mass market publication that debuted 10 years later. *Monumental Oscar*

*Dunn and His Radical Fight in Reconstruction Louisiana* is a graphic novel more than 250 pages in length that details an h\*istorical account of Dunn’s story. Mitchell, who is related to Dunn, found his passion for the Reconstruction Era and Dunn, in particular, from oral h\*stories shared by family members, which have now been captured in this publication from The Historic New Orleans Collection (2021).

Not only do scholars utilize arts-based research designs for their studies, but many working artists and authors, themselves, trouble societal norms and even create social change through their work. Authors such as Samuel Delaney, Octavia Butler, Margaret Atwood, Leni Zumas, Ursula K. Le Guin, Tamora Pierce, Salman Rushdi, Kristyn Dunnion, and Aimee Ogden, among so many others utilize fiction specifically, literary and speculative and genre, to push boundaries and advocate for socio-cultural and political change, while recognizing the reach mass media has in perpetuating and shifting discourse. Many of these works have received screen treatment and are able to continue their relevance and to reach larger audiences.

It is time researchers in the Academy consider how art and science can meet, how findings can be translated and distributed to audiences beyond the ivory tower for a more equitable and just future. As “community” is a foundational factor in the mission of two-year institutions, this dissertation considers those in and beyond academia and encourages others to take up similar work.

### **Statement of Intent**

Based on the literature reviewed in chapter two, portrayals of the two-year college in popular culture represent an important area lacking in critical scholarship and, even more so, in representations that do not reinforce the existing deficit-based discourses

about these institutions, their students, faculty, and staff. Because of these factors, because of the importance of “community” in the two-year college, and because of the clear impact popular culture has on consumers and the knowledges they form and regurgitate, an arts-based research design on this topic is long overdue. Chapter three explores the methodology behind the study. Chapter four is the novel, *Inlet*, which has the capacity to take research done in the Academy to communities beyond it.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Chapter three details the methodology and methods for this dissertation. To restate from chapter one, this arts-based dissertation analyzed deficit-based narratives in popular culture and media about two-year colleges to craft a counter-story in the form of a novel that showcases elements of two-year colleges' community cultural wealth in a manner that can be disseminated to audiences within and beyond the Academy. The dissertation answers a call to action from previous research on the topic to disrupt popular culture and media's deficit-based portrayals for two-year colleges through a mass marketable counter-story. Methodologically, then, the dissertation employs counter-storytelling from the major frame of Critical Race Theory (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Crenshaw, 2011).

Furthermore, the dissertation consists of the following methods: 1) conducting a literature review of previous studies on this topic in chapter two, 2) using Foucauldian post-structural discourse analysis to analyze additional representations of two-year colleges in popular culture that have emerged over the past century in chapter two, 3) the construction of a counter-story in the form of the novel titled *Inlet* in chapter four, and 4) the mapping of how *Inlet* showcases elements of two-year colleges' community cultural wealth (adapted from Bourdieu [1986] and Yosso [2005] for two-year colleges) present in relevant literature and the researcher's personal insider experience with two-year colleges in chapter five.

Chapter three of the dissertation is organized into the following: the research design, the researcher's positionality statement, an explanation of the tenets of novel writing, the synopsis of *Inlet*, a discussion of the counter-storytelling employed through themes and characters, the challenges and considerations, and a summary of the chapter.

### **Research Design**

This dissertation employed counter-storytelling through an arts-based design to argue for community cultural wealth at two-year colleges in a way no previous study on the topic has done. In 1993, Elliot Eisner termed “arts-based research” at a conference for educators at Stanford University (Wang, et. al., 2017). Eisner “suggested arts could provide rich models for social and behavioral science research” (p. 7). Since the debut of arts-based research design in 1993, it has evolved into “research that uses the arts, in the broadest sense, to explore, understand, represent and even challenge human action and experience” (Savin-Baden & Wimpenny, 2014). Arts-based designs have the unique ability to incorporate and/or reach audiences both in and outside of the Academy, as well as “positively transform participants, communities, or society” through its process and products (Wang, et. al., 2017). In addition, arts-based research, also known as ABR, and its designs allow scholars to push for access to knowledge and academic literacy for all, as well as reinterpret what researchers view as instruments of data collection, even the data, themselves, and outcomes in order to draw out themes and findings, while also allowing audiences within and beyond the Academy to come to their own conclusions or findings (8).

Arts-based research and its designs can be classified in five broad categories with multiple subcategories. Those broad categories include “1) visual art; 2) sound art; 3)

literary art; 4) performing art; 5) new media,” while further classifications continue to be added, especially as new technology emerges (Wang, et. al., 2017, p. 16).

Table 3.1 provides a comprehensive view of arts-based research forms, though it should not be considered definitive. For example, sculpture, pottery, game creation (which includes but is not limited to virtual platforms), and architecture could appear on an expanded table.

Table 3.1: Arts-Based Research Designs

FORMS	CATEGORIES	SUBCATEGORIES (examples)
Visual art	Two-Dimensional	Photovoice (Wang & Hannes, 2014) Photocomics (Toroyan & Reddy, 2005) Drawing and Painting (Boydell et al., 2015)
	Three-dimensional	Quilt (Lawton, 2010) Upcycling (Coemans & Hannes, 2016a; 2016b)
	Time-based	Animation (Vaughn et al., 2013) Digital storytelling (Mumtaz, 2015)
Sound art		Radio (McKenzie, 2008) Soundscape (Kasat, 2014)
Literary art		Poetry (Tucker-Raymond, Rosario-Ramos, & Rosario, 2011) Fiction (Tanner, 2016)
Performing art		Theater (Sloane & Wallin, 2013) Dance (Na, Park, & Han, 2016)
New media		Virtual world (Lally & Sclater, 2013)
Multiple forms		(Skinner & Masuda, 2013)

(Wang, et. al, 2017)

Qingchun Wang and co-authors posit arts-based research can be conducted by those formally trained in fine arts but also by researchers in social and behavioral sciences (2017). Arts-based research, while in practice for nearly three decades now, still faces challenges to being viewed as a reliable and trustworthy methodology in the field of

qualitative studies, despite the field's background with its own challenges in establishing itself as a reliable way of conducting research.

Over time, three classifications emerged to aid researchers in evaluating their arts-based research and designs. In 1993 came Frayling's categories. Synthesized in Wang's 2017 article, Frayling identified three categories:

Research into art and design (including historical research, research into a variety of theoretical perspectives on art and design, aesthetic or perceptual research); research through art and design (including materials research, development work and action research); and research for art and design (referring to projects in which reflection is embodied in the process of creating and where the end product is an artifact that is meant to communicate knowledge visually, iconically and imaginatively). (2017, p. 9)

Secondly is Savin-Baden and Major's classification for the field of education, which was published in 2013. Their work consisted of three major classifications: 1) arts-informing inquiry, 2) arts-informed inquiry, and 3) arts-based inquiry (2013). Wang, et. al., synthesizes these three classifications in the following manner:

Arts-based inquiry is research where the artistic process is used to understand art itself or the art experience by the people who use it; arts-informed inquiry refers to the situation where art is used to represent findings of a study, or to represent a response to a situation studied; arts-informing inquiry is research where art is used to evoke responses from an audience to a situation. (2017, p. 9)

Thirdly, Wang, et. al., "suggest three core families that form the[ir] overall classification framework: research about art, art as research, and art in research" (2017, p.

14). Art, itself, can be considered a method of inquiry, and because art has the capability to induce change, art represents a valuable area of research. Research about art attempts to understand the processes behind the creation of art. Art as research is a process in which researchers and/or artists (often formally trained in fine arts) conduct research simultaneously with the creation of their art. For art in research, researchers design their studies with the intent of applying artistic methods at one or many phases of their project (2017).

This dissertation argues that the classifications founded in these studies into arts-based research designs are not exclusive in their applications, but each can inform the research and artistic processes, including in this dissertation. From Frayling, this dissertation includes research through art and design in chapter three and research for art and design in chapter two (1993). From Savin-Baden and Major, this dissertation combines arts-informed inquiry and arts-based inquiry, evidenced by the deficit-based narratives found in the literature review and challenged by showcasing community cultural wealth in chapter four (2013). From Wang et. al.'s classification, the dissertation is both research about art in chapter two, and art in research where a counter-story is told through the construction of a novel in chapter four (2017).

Steven Banks discusses how fiction specifically can delve into scholarship in that “the practices of fiction writers and non-fiction writers is blurry” (2008, p. 155). In fact, many authors and journalists use research methods in the construction of their works, though the process may not be structured into phases or carried out through formal design. Authors often enter writing projects with inquiries or research questions to guide their narratives. They may write for social change, to study societal phenomena, to tell

counter-stories, and to disseminate to specific audiences that are often larger than insular research communities. Banks states, “Many novelists conduct in-depth interviews, historical investigations, legal searches, media content analyses, participant observation, and similar fieldwork” over the course of constructing a work of fiction (p. 155).

Because of the blurred lines between conducting formal research in the social sciences and the process of creative writing, Banks structures his chapter around premises to evaluate fiction as scholarship: 1) writing must be a research practice that is generative in nature, meaning that it ends in some sort of product, 2) the writing must include or invite critique, and 3) narrative, or story, is fundamental, and 4) narrative in the form of literary fiction must explore phenomena and present findings in some manner, typically represented through plot and character arcs, which reach conclusions or findings (157).

Despite his clear criteria on how to construct and evaluate fiction that is also research, Banks addresses challenges that may plague traditional researchers’ understanding of the methodology. The word “fiction” is often synonymous with fabrication. Therefore, fiction can be painted as not only straying from the Positivist idea of “Truth” but also interpreted as point-blank lying, meaning untrustworthiness. Banks responds by paraphrasing a portion of Denzin’s 1997 work, *Interpretive Ethnography: Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century*:

A fiction is a narrative that deals with real and imagined facts and how they might be experienced, made up stories fashioned out of real and imagined happenings, and that tells a truth...researchers shouldn't be concerned about whether we present our subjects as real or fictional characters, but whether we can capture and well express the interiority of those persons. (p. 160)

In literary fiction, tenets of writing, much like the elements of reliable qualitative studies, include character (in many qualitative studies, composite characters to protect participant anonymity), theme (in many qualitative studies, data to categories to themes discussed in findings), and narrative language (in qualitative studies, output written for publication in journals and book chapters). Many qualitative social scientists employ each of these techniques in their writing already. Translating findings into fiction or building in arts-based design at any stage of a research study can impact broader audiences than traditional means of dissemination and invites audiences to consume research-based knowledges that are too often circulated only in the Academy.

Scholarly fiction can also be measured by lived truths, or individual meaning making, even that of the researchers, themselves (Richardson, 2000). This can be achieved by thematic content or content driven by theory, like this dissertation's frames that include a novel approach to cultural capital, in order to push social movements forward through cultural criticism (Denzin, 2000) and by the theoretical rigor, methodology, and presence of the work, which often takes the form of captivating and well-written prose (Clough, 2000). Finally, Banks reiterates Bochner's (2000) criteria: "[to seek] persuasive details of fact and emotion, structural and emotional complexity, a plot that shows transformation of character, ethical self-consciousness, commitment, and finally, 'a story that moves me, my heart and belly as well as my head'" (2008, p. 161). Readers, even those in the Academy, may prefer fiction—whether in the form of novels, television, video games, or films—to construct their knowledges of the world, rather than pursuing academic literature that can be dry, overwritten, and dense. To consider and to

reach broader audiences in the research process, scholars must be open to pushing traditional boundaries with their approaches.

Stories have a unique and undeniable power to move people. They have a persuasiveness to them, a humanness that impacts audiences in ways that traditional scholarship, whether qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods, cannot, does not, and will never do. Counter-stories, especially, can introduce new knowledges to audiences that disrupt stereotyping about populations marginalized by society and the existing relations of power in society. For these reasons, and for the centeredness of access to post-secondary education for all within two-year colleges' mission statements, I constructed a counter-story to popular culture and media's deficit-based narratives about these institutions in the form of the novel *Inlet* in chapter 4.

### **Positionality Statement**

Throughout my formative years, I was heavily involved in extracurriculars like sports, service, and clubs. I performed highly academically all my life, including graduating in the top ten of my class, alongside peers who attended four-year colleges that included MIT and prestigious universities in the state of Missouri. When I graduated at age 18, I had 31 credit hours of dual and CLEP college credit. I, then, tested out of all the general math and English required in the Missouri state system for a Bachelor of Arts.

I came from a middle-class family that could afford such luxuries as my own brand-new truck upon my turning 15 and the expensive hobby of competitive horseback riding where I even qualified for Nationals. My family is predominately raced white and white passing. Both of my parents have multiple graduate degrees. My father has a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction. My mother spent her career as a school social worker, and

my father worked as professor, chair, and eventually dean at the college-level and as an administrator for a national college system.

People often express surprise when I share that I attended a two-year college and that my three years there had a large part in shaping who I am today and what I value about higher education.

While I attended Metropolitan Community College—Longview, I lived at home, which meant I graduated with my bachelor's debt-free. I worked in the college's writing center where I bonded with a close-knit group of faculty, staff, and students. I became Editor-in-Chief of the international literary magazine, *Shorelines*, and I served as the Vice-President of Phi Theta Kappa, the two-year honor society from which I won a regional award for my leadership. Together, several other students with identities in the LGBTQIA+ community and I started a Gay-Straight Alliance. I won awards like the Crystal Fields Award for Creative Writing, a position on the All-Star State Academic Team, and a Coca-Cola Scholarship.

I decided to spend three years at MCC—Longview because of how much I loved the campus, its facilities, and the individuals I met there, though I could have graduated with *summa cum laude* in one. During those years, I had some of the most enriching and rewarding personal, professional, and scholarly experiences of my life to that date. I grew tremendously both inside and outside of the classroom.

In so many ways, I had what many might view as a traditional college student experience: attending college right out of high school, taking a full load of classes each semester, finding myself surrounded by friends my own age and in a similar stage of college student development, dating, working part-time, attending clubs, events, and

extracurricular activities at all hours and on weekends, spending much of my time in the library, cafeteria, gym, and other campus buildings—even partying; however, my story does not exist in popular culture and media’s representations about two-year colleges. Instead, outsiders to two-year colleges often perceive these institutions and the students who attend them as non-traditional, and many of these perceptions are driven by popular culture and media.

To paraphrase LaPaglia in *Storytellers*, I am but one of the millions of white Americans who attended a two-year college that has been rendered invisible because of the deficit-based portrayals of who attends two-year colleges and what these colleges offer American society. This does significant harm to not only white Americans but also to the many BIPOC who attend these institutions (1994).

In part it is because of MCC—Longview that I am so well educated now. My two-year college instilled in me an unparalleled love for college and the exploration of knowledges and self that it can represent. I have gone on to work for three other two-year colleges in three different states and one two-year statewide college system. I make it a point whenever possible to discuss attending and working at the two-year level of postsecondary education. My passion for the two-year college sector is, obviously, even the work of my dissertation.

Because I am openly queer and came out at the age of 17, I recognize stories (so often deficit-based) about persons like myself in popular culture. Queer kids from religious families either never bond with their relations and/or escape to four-year liberal arts colleges to find themselves (*Happiest Season, Wild Things*). Lesbians never get the girl. Or they do, and then they die (*Disobedience, The Haunting of Hill House*). Queer

people seldom hold doctorates or terminal degrees in popular culture, much less show up as administrators or professors. When they do, they engage in problematic relationships with those over whom they hold power (*The L Word*, *Loving Annabelle*). Often, they smoke, drink to excess, or abuse drugs (*Valencia*, *Blue is the Warmest Color*). Lesbians can be portrayed as sex addicts, womanizers, and hippies (*Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, *Concussion*). There must always be sex (*Room in Rome*, the climax, ironically, of [almost] every lesbian romance novel ever). I could list more common stereotypes about the LGBTQIA+ community that reinforce violences against us and as many works in popular culture that reinforce them. As a young queer person in the Midwest with few connections to people in the LGBTQIA+ community, I took popular culture's portrayals of queer people as "Truth." I lived them for many years, and I know many queer persons continuing to live them. Then, during my Ph.D. studies, I discovered Poststructuralism, CRT, intersectionality, counter-storytelling, and critical approaches to the theory of cultural capital, which showed me the difference between constructing narratives based in deficits versus in one's own and one's community's wealth. That has been life-altering.

Stereotypes about persons marginalized by society persist beyond sexuality. CRT, specifically, is centered in the experience of BIPOC in America. Intersectionality analyzes how identities, margin and center, construct individual narratives and dictate every interaction between person and person, and person and environment. Two-year colleges also exist on the margins of American society, despite their integral nature to this country's ecosystem of higher education. This means that, of course, these institutions and those they impact have been misrepresented through popular culture and

mass media by the outsiders constructing deficit-based narratives about them with no regard to the impacted communities.

I understand being misunderstood and misrepresented. I understand being misunderstood because I am misrepresented. This dissertation is an opportunity to use art and science to interrupt 100 years of misunderstandings about and misrepresentations of two-year colleges.

In popular culture's representations of two-year colleges and those who work at and attend them, I do not see myself or any semblance of my experience. While, yes, one aspect of my identity—my queerness—is a trope in academic fiction about four-year colleges and universities, queerness is, interestingly, all but invisible at the two-year level in both research and popular culture/media. Diversity, then, while a defining factor of the two-year college, does not seem to include the LGBTQIA+ community or the transformative impact two-year colleges and their close-knit community connections can have on young queer persons. I also do not see the student and faculty perspectives shared in previous studies on this topic in popular culture's portrayals of two-year colleges. Instead, mean-spirited, slapstick, and farcical comedy run rampant in today's sitcoms and novels about these institutions.

The image that has been curated by mass market media has sold false knowledges to consumers and continues to drive the existing harmful discursive relations of power that keep two-year colleges from being recognized as a central avenue for social mobility and societal change in America. Communities already damaged by popular culture's repetition of deficit-based narratives that are regurgitated by consumers continue to come to additional harm.

The Academy, as a whole, is no better about disrupting harmful discourse about two-year colleges (and has actively worked against two-year colleges) or disseminating research beyond the Ivory Tower. Instead, it favors exclusivity and elitism over access and community-centeredness. Yet, it is access to research for all and research that is accessible to all that can drive societal change; therefore, I undertook this dissertation and the writing of *Inlet*.

### **Writing a Novel**

As explored in chapter two, a breakout campus novel featuring non-deficit narratives about the two-year college has yet to hit the shelves or be taken as serious literature, especially since the release of the sitcom *Community. Real Life* by Brandon Taylor in 2020 made a splash in popular culture, just as *Community* did in 2009. Released just 11 years apart, these two seminal works that portray college life tell entirely different stories.

*Community* leaned into harmful stereotypes about two-year college and used humor and hijinks to hide its reinforcement of deficit-based narratives of those who attend, work at, and support two-year colleges. Certainly, the show contains its moments of character growth and heart-tugging fluff, but that is a sitcom tactic that wraps up in one episode and repeats the same foibles in the next. *Community* set up a formula for sitcoms, specifically, to poke fun at two-year colleges, and novels published during and post-*Community* have also followed in kind.

*Real Life*, on the other hand, offered a non-deficit narrative in fictive form about a gay person of color pursuing graduate work in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) who comes from a rural upbringing. Taylor broke new ground with his

novel and reached audiences inside and outside of the Academy with his work. He tossed out many tropes about campus life and gave a voice to identities often invisible in popular culture or negatively portrayed by outsiders. *Real Life* is now being translated for film (Murphy, 2020).

Over the last several decades, an increasing number of books have been optioned for film and television series. This includes well recognized examples like the Harry Potter books, works by Stephen King, *The Help*, *Murder on the Orient Express*, among many others. Books then have been able to reach fiction readers, then audiences who prefer movies and television. For this reason, and due to my own educational background, I pursued *Inlet* as a novel.

I reviewed a number of books on the craft of fiction over the course of my MFA, but the three seminal texts I consulted for the construction of *Inlet* were *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft* by Janet Burroway, *Save the Cat Writes a Novel* by Jessica Brody, and *This Year You Write Your Novel* by Walter Mosley.

Janet Burroway's text on creative writing is "the most widely used creative writing text in America" ("Janet Burroway," 2021). In her book, she divides the craft of writing into the following sections: writing process, showing and telling, characterization, setting, plot and structure, point of view, comparison, and revision and theme. In each chapter, she includes writing prompts and suggesting readings from diverse writers, such as Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, Sandra Cisneros, ZZ Packer, Alice Walker, Chinua Achebe, Ralph Ellison, Gabriel García Márquez, Margaret Atwood, Tim O'Brien, and Ursula K. Le Guin, and more (2019).

Walter Mosely works to “deepen the understanding and appreciation of Black life in the United States” through his writing (“Walter Mosely,” 2021). His book on craft contains not only sections on craft, itself, such as emotion, narrative voice, and character development, but also practical advice on researching the novel, editing, and getting published. His book includes a one-year timeline for constructing a novel from first idea to submitting polished drafts to editors and agents (2009).

Jessica Brody is the author of multiple volumes of fiction, and she worked for MGM Studios in business and acquisitions before transitioning into writing full-time. She revisited the best-selling text *Save the Cat!*, which was constructed as a book on screenwriting craft, and adapted it for novelists. Her approach to novel-writing can simplify the process of treating fiction for film or television (“Jessica Brody,” 2022).

The following sections of this chapter explain tenets of novel writing that include plot, setting, character, and theme.

### Plot

Overall, *Inlet* appears to employ a linear plot structure, which Figure 3.1 illustrates. This means *Inlet* is told through scenes that works toward a climax and conclusions. The linear plot structure is the most common plot structure employed in Western storytelling, making it accessible to a large audience (Brody, 2018; Burroway, 2019; Mosley, 2009).

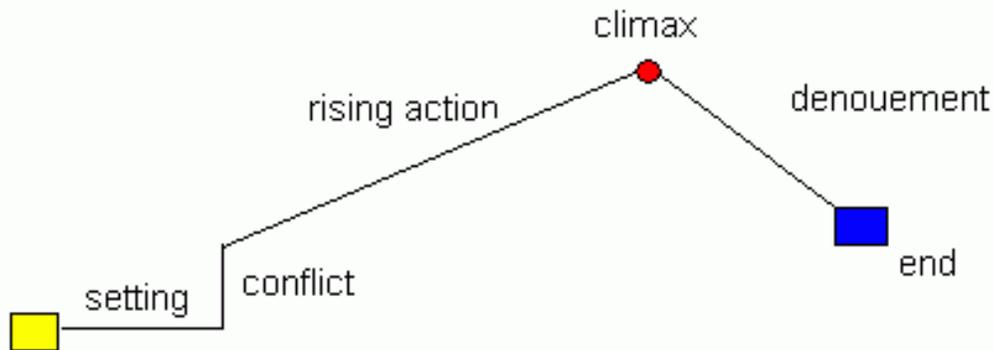


Figure 3.1: Linear Plot Structure (Chen, 2019)

(Accessible text: Figure 1 features a linear plot structure. A small, square, yellow box indicates the beginning of a novel. From there, setting is established. A straight line approximately a half-inch in length appears under the word setting. A vertical line approximately one-fourth in height connects to the straight line that indicates setting. This vertical line connotes conflict. Conflict is written next to the vertical line. A line that rises at approximately a 35-degree angle connects on the left side to the vertical line. The rising line is approximately an inch and a half in length. This line indicates rising action. The words rising action are written next to the rising line. Connecting on the right side to the rising line is a small, red circle. This red circle indicates the novel's climax. The word climax is written directly above the red circle. Connecting to the left side of the red circle is a line approximately a half-inch in length descends at approximately a 35-degree angle. This descending line indicates the *denouement*. The word *denouement* is logged next to the descending line. Connecting to the right side of the descending line is a small, square, blue box that represents the novel's end. End is written next to the blue box.)

Upon deeper reading, *Inlet*, however, is a series of vignettes that explore elements of two-year colleges' community cultural wealth through the main character's

interactions at Inlet Technical College. The main character's growth, including her racial awakening and connections to the technical college's local community, is represented through experiences that she could have *only* at a two-year college. The elements of community cultural wealth are drawn from the literature review and the author's personal experiences attending as a student and then working within the two-year college sector. The elements of community cultural wealth construct the counter-story to the deficit-based narratives in popular culture analyzed in the literature review.

*Inlet* follows the 15 beats for screenplay writing as translated to plotting a novel in *Save the Cat Writes a Novel* (Brody, 2018). The 15 beats for *Inlet* appear as plot points in the section below, while an overview of what each of the 15 beats portrays appears in Appendix A to orient readers to this method of storytelling.

### **The Fifteen Beats**

- 1) **Opening image:** A prologue that introduces readers to the book's primary setting—a fictional two-year college in the South Carolina's public technical and community college system called Inlet Technical College
- 2) **Theme Stated:** The main character, Charlie, comes of age through a series of experiences at Inlet Technical College, which teach her the importance of living one's truth rather than keeping secrets to maintain appearances, that she could have only at a (this specific) two-year college
- 3) **Set-up:** Charlie graduates from high school at the age of 17 and enrolls at Inlet Technical College on a statewide merit-based scholarship that offers free education at the two-year level to qualifying high school graduates who participate in South Carolina's College Reinvigoration Program, which is

designed to boost the number of SC residents enrolled in SC's two-year colleges. CRP includes transfer and articulation agreements with SC's public four-year colleges and universities after students' successful completion of an associate degree at one of the state's public 17 technical and community colleges

- 4) **Catalyst:** Charlie defies her father's orders to enroll in an extra business course that would count as one of the only electives in the transfer and articulation agreement for her program. She enrolls in a human sexuality course instead to better understand her own lesbianism and explore perspectives outside of her parents' home and church and the WASPish (white Anglo-Saxon Protestant) community in which she was reared
- 5) **Debate:** Internalized homophobia, racism, and other harmful biases have been drilled into Charlie from her religious, rural, Southern upbringing, which includes a family h\*story of owning enslaved people, so she fears her decisions to enroll in the human sexuality class and to socialize with people different to her and debates dropping the class and her new relationships
- 6) **Break into 2:** Charlie attends human sexuality where she meets Dr. Stone and persists in her decision to move beyond the views and biases from her upbringing
- 7) **B story:** Charlie remembers a high school crush and befriends Melina who might one day be more than a friend

- 8) **Fun and Games/Learning the Ropes:** Charlie attends classes. Makes friends. Experiences Inlet's clubs and activities. Visits residence halls. Goes to the gym. Plays on the intramural soccer league. She has "the college experience"
- 9) **Midpoint:** Charlie comes out as a lesbian to Melina. She feels it is at Inlet that she has truly been seen and understood for the first time in her life and that, in turn, she is seeing and understanding others. However, Charlie's stable middle-class life has been disrupted, and she is now living in her car
- 10) **Bad guys close in:** Readers experience the scene in retrospect that drove Charlie to living in her car. Her mother outed her, and her father kicked her out of the family home. Charlie and her family have been keeping this a secret from nearly everyone in their communities, as is the Berkeley family way. Charlie's paternal grandparents, whom, more than anyone else, Charlie cannot imagine disappointing, also do not know she is now experiencing homelessness
- 11) **All is lost:** Midterms encroach. So does winter. Charlie's grades and extracurriculars are slipping. She can't keep living in her car but has nowhere else to go. She finally shares her situation with her support system at ITC. Her sexuality studies professor, Dr. Stone, connects her to campus and community resources
- 12) **Dark night of the soul:** Charlie's paternal grandmother comes down with COVID. Charlie's parents forbid her to see her grandmother
- 13) **Break into 3:** Charlie and Melina go to visit Charlie's grandmother at the hospital anyway. There, the showdown between parents and child occurs.

Charlie's grandparents learn she has been kicked out of the family home and spill the biggest family secret yet

- 14) **Finale:** Charlie's grandparents accept her and invite her to live with them. She accepts and can continue to attend college at ITC where she belongs
- 15) **Final Image:** The community college changes countless lives, just like Charlie's. She's now free to be who she is, to pursue the future of her choosing, and to live life free from her family's tradition of secret keeping to maintain appearances, thanks to her experiences at ITC

### Setting

To be considered a campus novel by John E. Kramer's definition, the work's primary setting must be a campus (1981, 2000, 2004). Few pieces of popular culture showcase a two-year campus as the predominate setting. Most only mention two-year colleges in passing (LaPaglia, 1994; Tucciarone, 2007). For this reason, among the many others discussed throughout the dissertation, Inlet Technical College is a two-year college and much of the novel takes place there.

### Character

According to Brody, Burroway, and Mosley, character in a work of fiction does not only mean a person with a stock set of traits that escorts readers through a story, but character often also personifies themes (2018; 2019; 2009). Characters move plot forward with their every conversation and interaction with their internal self, environments, and other characters until readers reach the novel's conclusion. This means character traits must align with character decisions and actions, which shape the plot. This process brings readers not only to the conclusion of the story but also to the point where themes become

evident (2018; 2019; 2009). This perspective of character resulted in *Inlet* and informed chapter five.

A list of the major characters in *Inlet* appears below:

- Charlene “Charlie” Wilhelmina Berkeley
  - o Age: 17
  - o Race/Ethnicity: white
  - o Gender: female
- Melina Rivera:
  - o Age: 18
  - o Race/Ethnicity: Latinx
  - o Gender: female
- Dr. Ruth Stone
  - o Age: mid-40s
  - o Race/Ethnicity: Black
  - o Gender: female
- Ginnifer “Ginny” Berkeley
  - o Age: mid-50s
  - o Race/Ethnicity: white
  - o Gender: female
- Judge Coy Wade Berkeley
  - o Age: mid-50s
  - o Race/Ethnicity: white
  - o Gender: male

- Bernard “Benny” Berkeley
  - o Age: early 20s
  - o Race/Ethnicity: white
  - o Gender: male
- Josephine “Josey” Berkeley
  - o Age: mid-20s
  - o Race/Ethnicity: white
  - o Gender: female
- Grandpa Berkeley
  - o Age: early 70s
  - o Race/Ethnicity: white
  - o Gender: male
- Grandma Berkeley
  - o Age: early 70s
  - o Race/Ethnicity: white
  - o Gender: female
- Blessing
  - o Age: early 30s
  - o Race/Ethnicity: Black (South) African
  - o Gender: male
- Z
  - o Age: late-20s
  - o Race/Ethnicity: white

- o Gender: non-binary
- Jadya
  - o Age: early 20s
  - o Race/Ethnicity: Black
  - o Gender: male
- Dr. Li
  - o Age: mid-40s
  - o Race/Ethnicity: Asian (South Korean)
  - o Gender: male
- Miss Huaman
  - o Age: late-30s
  - o Race/Ethnicity: Indigenous American and Peruvian
  - o Gender: female
- Prairie “Floppy”
  - o Age: 17
  - o Race/Ethnicity: white
  - o Gender: female
- Coach Stoll
  - o Age: mid-50s
  - o Race/Ethnicity: white
  - o Gender: male
- Tamar Berkeley
  - o Age: late-20s

- o Race/Ethnicity: Jewish
- o Gender: female
- Ms. Stone
  - o Age: late-60s
  - o Race/Ethnicity: Black
  - o Gender: female
- Sherry Berkeley
  - o Age: deceased
  - o Race/Ethnicity: white
  - o Gender: female

### Theme

*Inlet* is a coming-of-age story. Coming-of-age is one of the most common themes in not only Western storytelling but other storytelling traditions, including many indigenous and Eastern approaches. Thematically, most stories can also be broken down into either person versus person, person versus environment, or person versus themselves (2018; 2019; 2009). From that angle, a coming-of-age story is a story of a person versus themselves—leaving the child behind to become an adult. Stories that deal with internal and external conflicts are some of the most powerful that can be told because they embrace the tensions humans experience within who they are internally and how they represent in the outside world (2018; 2019; 2009). *Inlet* embraces these various tensions the main character holds within herself, within her home life, and explores how a two-year college helps her develop the tools necessary to resolve these tensions in her life.

The two-year college is also explored in the novel through themes. These themes take the form of community cultural wealth. Each chapter focuses on a different element of community cultural wealth. These various elements of community cultural wealth that the novel presents to readers are broken down in chapter five of the dissertation.

### Novel Synopsis

Charlene Wilhelmina Berkeley, or “Charlie,” as she prefers, is an expert at secret-keeping. Her parents and the small, rural community in which she grew up all view her as a traditional Southern girl who embodies traditional Southern values. She goes to church, got good grades in school, and never acted out. Now, thanks to a merit-based scholarship she received from South Carolina’s College Reinvigoration Program, which offers two free years at one of the state’s 17 public technical and community colleges, she is on her way to a business degree to help manage the family’s HOA management company. No one, not even her closest friends from her high school soccer team, knows she’s a lesbian or how desperately she hopes the human sexuality class she enrolls in at Inlet Technical College can help her to understand herself. Inlet Technical College (ITC), however, will change her life in ways she could never predict.

To Charlie, living at home while attending ITC represents the perfect blend of keeping hold of the life she knows and starting to let go and grow up. However, when Charlie’s mom finds evidence in Charlie’s room that her daughter is not only enrolled in a human sexuality class and attending ITC’s LGBTQIA+ club meetings, but that Charlie also a lesbian starting on her coming out journey, Charlie’s secret explodes. She goes from the comfortable double life she’s always known to living in her car and cut off from her family’s home, land, business, and love.

As the weeks of classes and extracurriculars go by, Charlie finds it harder and harder to keep up, but she longs to persist at ITC. Already, she has met faculty, staff, and students who represent a new support system. Additionally, she has learned so much that has dispelled so many myths she grew up believing not only about human sexuality, but about the Confederate flag, South Carolina's part in inciting the Civil War, the Black Lives Matter movement, the #MeToo movement, white-washed h\*story, hegemonies, anti-intellectualism, police brutality, and the science behind COVID vaccines.

Indoctrinated into secret-keeping, thanks to her upbringing, Charlie refuses to share her current plight, even when other ITC friends share their struggles with academics, maintaining careers, and managing families. Instead, Charlie relies on ITC's facilities like the showers at the gym, the library, the free campus parking, and her best friend Melina's meal plan and access to laundry in the residence halls. When midterms encroach, and Charlie is too exhausted to continue working the dead-end job she took, keep her spot on the intramural soccer team, let alone persist with her coursework, she realizes she needs help.

Once Charlie admits her hardships, ITC is quick to respond with services and support. Two-year colleges, like ITC, often assist students with gas vouchers, campus food pantries, clothes for interviews, and access to community services like temporary housing. Charlie works with staff and faculty at ITC to receive the aid she needs not only academically but in her daily life.

Just when Charlie believes her circumstances may be changing for the better, her grandmother comes down with a new strain of COVID.. Though Charlie's parents forbid her from visiting her grandmother in the hospital, Charlie and Melina go to see her.

There, Charlie faces her parents in-person for the first time since they kicked her out of the house. When her father assumes Melina is Charlie's girlfriend and threatens her, Charlie recognizes that her blood is not her family any longer, but that she has those at ITC as family now. At the hospital, she also learns that her parents did not tell her grandparents about her sexuality, which means they did not know about everything that transpired after Charlie's mother forced her out of the closet.

Charlie's grandfather shares a family secret, showcasing that secret-keeping runs in their family. Charlie's father found his teenage sister's body when he was just a young boy. After being rejected by her family for coming out as a lesbian, she killed herself in the family home. Charlie's grandfather shares that he and Charlie's grandmother would do anything to bring back the daughter they lost because of their own hatred. They will not lose Charlie, too. In fact, it is time the family to stop keeping secrets.

Charlie's grandfather extends an offer to Charlie to live with them. She accepts. This means Charlie can continue her studies and personal growth at ITC, which is where she feels she belongs. At the end of the novel, Charlie drives through her old neighborhood, and when she drives away, she leaves behind the last of her secrets in favor of living out and proud the way she learned at ITC. Charlie finishes her first semester at ITC with great grades and prepares for a second semester with the support of family members who have stood by her and with the family she found at her two-year college.

*Inlet* is a coming-of-age novel where a young lesbian character from the rural South experiences an awakening of her self, as well as racial awakening about her whiteness and her family's problematic h\*story, because of her interactions at the two-

year institution, Inlet Technical College. *Inlet* is a novel informed by research on community colleges and framed by Critical Race Theory's tenets of intersectionality and counter-storytelling.

Charlie's journey shows how identities can clash within the self and how everyone's identities—from race to sexuality to class and more—shape their every interaction with others. Because two-year colleges serve many populations marginalized by society and have been represented in problematic ways in popular culture, *Inlet* leans into storylines that embrace the cultural wealth present at these institutions and how they change the lives of all of those that they touch.

### **Challenges and Considerations**

While I have an M.F.A. with emphases in fiction and creative nonfiction from Converse University, my committee members do not hold a similar degree. Rather, my committee members fill other roles: expertise in areas of American academic fiction, film, and television; higher education; the community college; discourse analysis; previous work on arts-based dissertations, and critical theory.

This dissertation is arts-based; however, one novel, one researcher, and one study cannot hope to encompass the whole of the community cultural wealth present at two-year colleges. Still, this one novel, one researcher, and one study can work to disrupt the deficit-based narratives present about two-year colleges in popular culture. Additionally, this novel answers the call to action in the literature review. Perhaps this study will pave the way for other researchers and writers to take up similar work based in community cultural wealth. With five years of silence in the literature on this topic, perhaps this study will reignite interest in this area.

The Academy considers arts-based dissertations non-traditional. However, after conducting the literature review and assessing my skillset, I saw no other option than to pursue *Inlet*. Not only does this dissertation answer a call to action, but it tasked me with uniting not only my Ph.D. studies, my M.F.A., my Women and Gender Studies graduate certificate, and my M.Ed. in Higher Education, but also with my professional work with two-year colleges. The product is a nexus of everything that I am professionally, creatively, academically, and even personally. My experience as a student at a two-year college certainly helped shape this dissertation. *Inlet* can reach audiences within and beyond the Academy, rather than keeping knowledges, like so many dissertations, within (and so often unread) the ivory tower.

### **Summary**

*Inlet* is an arts-based dissertation that takes the form a novel. The novel explores the main character's journey through a two-year college where she comes of age. *Inlet* is framed by several theories and takes up the work of exploring intersectionality of identities and counter-storytelling that embraces two-year colleges' community cultural wealth. This novel disrupts the deficit-based narratives that abound in popular culture's representations of two-year colleges. This dissertation answers a call to action to take up the work of pushing back against popular culture's harmful image of two-year colleges and composing a story that gives populations marginalized by society a voice. *Inlet* primarily takes place at a fictional two-year college set in South Carolina.

Novels and other forms of popular culture bridge gaps between the Academy and outside audiences, much the same way two-year college serve their larger communities, as well as their faculty, staff, and students. Since their inception, two-year colleges have

been a topic in first national news, then in popular culture; however, many of these stories have perpetuated harmful negative discourses about two-year colleges. The Academy, itself, has also been complicit in this discourse.

While *Real Life* by Brandon Taylor functioned as a break-out novel that disrupted hegemonic discourses that included deficit narratives for rural, queer people of color and their ability to access and excel in the Academy, two-year colleges have not seen such a break-out novel, television series, or movie that disrupts deficit narratives. Instead, the break-out show, *Community*, used humor to reinforce the existing deficit narratives and has instigated a trend of similar discourse in television, film, and fiction about these institutions. This dissertation disrupts this current trend.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE STUDY

#### *Inlet, A Novel*

##### Prologue:

Inlet, the college, had been built in the mid-1960s, a decade after segregation was outlawed in America. When the college was erected on South Carolina's shoreline, laborers constructed Brutalist learning environments out of rough-hewn stone. They built the humanities hall, the library, and dorms—known now as residence halls—on what once had been indigo fields where fallen petals the color of bruises turned the soil that enslaved peoples had worked especially rich and dark. Before enslaved peoples worked the fields for white owners, before the Spanish invasion of America, the land the college occupied had belonged to tribes, such as the Wando, Waccamaw, and Winyan.

In the 1960s, South Carolina carried out federal edicts for desegregation as slow as sorghum syrup drips: the state was, after all, the birthplace for the Civil War. That meant Inlet named its buildings and donated statues after past mayors of Georgetown and families that still owned significant acreage near the shore, despite an unrelenting tide of coastal tourism. Other past political figures, many of them dead Confederates, had their names etched in bronze on the cafeteria, the business and technology building, and the recreation center. When it was built, the college, in large part, failed to acknowledge the many people of color who held significance on that spot of shoreline between Murrells Inlet and McClellanville, failed the honor the indigenous peoples who'd been forced from

their homes. Those people were there though, telling their stories in the quiet of spring breezes and haunting every eve the cotton and tobacco fields still farmed. How many students and staff strolled the grounds without taking notice of those named and left unnamed, without listening close enough to hear the spirits?

During orientation, students learned the freshman tradition to shake the hand of the statue of former Mayor William Doyle Morgan of Georgetown after registering for classes. That meant the statue of the former mayor, who was long, long dead now, had one gleaming palm from the constant polishing of skin on metal, while the rest of him went green the way bronze does with age. The orientation leaders shared with their tour groups that Inlet now had its first female president, a white woman with grey hair like so many cumulus clouds that parted for the sunbeam of her smile. She smiled in the student center on a wall of photographs of presidents who'd preceded her—more than a dozen stern-faced men, only one among them dark-skinned.

Orientation leaders also gossiped about the large fountain clotted with lily pads dedicated to the founder of Pawleys Island, George Pawley, that was a favorite with graduates. “On graduation,” they told tour groups, “campus security doesn’t stop us from throwing caps and tassels in. Then, we all dive in after them.” They spoke of graduation with the same kind of reverence that filled some Southerners after attending a tent revival. “Sometimes it’s life and death—blood and tears—to get you across that finish line. It’s choosing school over your job, maybe even yourself over family.”

For the many students who commuted to Inlet, who had jobs and children in addition to coursework, graduating from college could mean doors opening not only for themselves, but also for their loved ones. Graduation meant Inlet changed the lives of

those who attended and the generations of their families that followed. It also often meant sacrifice. It meant that everyone who enrolled for classes didn't get to play among the lily pads.

Tour guides also spoke of removing the Confederate flag from campus in more recent decades. The capitol of South Carolina, Columbia, had only removed the Confederate flag from the statehouse in 2015. One faculty member, since fired from Inlet, bemoaned the capitol's gesture, calling it the end of democracy and an erasure of Southern history. Inlet, however, had pushed forward; it heralded a mission statement to welcome all persons, and it did well to follow through.

This mission statement was a reverberation of nation-wide sentiment from past media that it would be post-secondary two-year colleges' educational democracy that cured America of racism. College for one and all would atone for the nation's sin of slavery. In South Carolina, both the flagship and Research-1 institution, Clemson University, had been built on land stolen from indigenous people and constructed by enslaved persons who had no choice in coming to America, building universities, or, in the 1800s when the University of South Carolina was founded, attending college. Inlet, however, was neither a flagship or an R-1 institution, but rather a technical college, one of 17 public two-year colleges in the state governed by the South Carolina Technical and Community College System Office.

Inlet's main campus crawled through swampland, half of it through land perceived uninhabitable that no one, until the invention of modern technology, sought to own, much less to farm. Its recently rehabilitated recreation center now included a set of bulky kayaks in fluorescent colors that slithered like alligators through the maze of the

wetlands during marine science fieldtrips. Students also could rent the kayaks or take turns scaling up the outdoor rock-climbing wall to stare at out at the sea, while their faculty led trips at dawn to witness turtle eggs hatching, at midday when egrets posed for photographs against a vivid sun, and in the evening when spray from the pulsing tide illuminated the filaments of a dozen different types of wildrye that filtered sea water from fresh.

Outsiders who flocked to South Carolina during the summer months and over spring break didn't understand the swampland. Those people opted for resorts and overcrowded beaches, for flashing lights advertising carnival rides, and tourist traps that promised live pet hermit crabs and discounts to dinner shows like Arabian Tales and Pirates Clash. They came and went with the seasons and did not stay for the history. They came, and they bought fireworks that packed the kind of punch that could blow off such large chunks of a body they were illegal in most states. They left their litter on the beaches and in the streets.

These outsiders claimed the swampland smelled like corpses, liked to say the swamps needed to be drained.

They were wrong.

It was the shoreline that stank of rot when horseshoe crabs the size of a man's torso washed up and dried out or when squawking seagulls dropped clams on rockfaces and feasted on the helpless tongues twisting inside upon unforgiving, forgetful sands.

It was too much rain year after year that bloated the soil until bodies rose from where they'd been buried to face without skin the cruelty of a world build upon their backs once more.

But the greens and blues, the splish-splash of wild things, and the tenderness of ocean stroking earth that one could find in swamps meant one could forget who they were, what they had done, could make all pleased to be alive, if only for the privilege to look upon that better view.

Charlene Wilhelmina Berkeley, student at Inlet Technical College, grew up on South Carolina's shoreline. She knew swampland the same intimate way she knew the silk, off-white veil of skin that cloaked the veins in her grandmother's hands, or the crayon-scented residue of her mother's Avon lipstick smudged on her cheek after a kiss, and the odor of burning glass and melting metal stuck between strands of her hair when she visited her father's workshop where he soldered stained-glass windows as gifts for Southern Baptist churches. She knew the sound of grebe hatchlings crying for their next meal, the vast and intricate piping of cypress roots, and the gasping, pearlescent mouths of oysters at the turn of the tide. She knew the swamp as well as she knew her own family.

Unlike her older brother, Benny, who adored Alligator World when he was young, and her older sister, Josey, who, as a teen, had loved bathing herself in the unnatural blue of pool water that preceded the ocean at most resorts, Charlie most loved to visit the swampland on outings with her paternal grandparents. She loved traveling into a world so precious it had to be protected from people. In the swamp, she could disappear the same way the wildlife did upon the approach of unfamiliar footfalls. She could move out of her life, where she was always one step out of sync, and into a space that felt right, that felt like home.

She felt that way the first time she visited Inlet Technical College.

Faculty and staff called Inlet Technical College “ITC.” The students knew it as “Inlet.”

“Inlet,” as Charlie had picked up at orientation, was a thirty-minute commute from the family home on her father’s side that had been passed down for the past five generations. The drive up to North Myrtle Beach to visit her paternal grandparents in their condo was only fifteen minutes longer. The twins, her sister, Josey, and Josey’s husband, whose family owned the famous Mango Homes building company, lived 45 minutes to the south of Inlet, just outside of Charleston. Her brother, Benny, was the only one of her immediate family living out-of-state.

She was missing him more and more desperately these days.

Charlie was the first in her trio of siblings to attend college the fall right after she graduated high school at 17 years of age, though Benny had attended university on the G. I. Bill, and her father had his M.B.A. from Liberty University. With her high grade-point average, she had her pick of in- and out-of-state institutions to attend, according to her career counselor. But when she made the decision to enroll at Inlet, she couldn’t see herself going too far from home, away from the family’s HOA management business, or away from her older sister Josey’s twins, who were giving their mama heck now that they were out of diapers and into everything else.

She was nearly halfway through her first semester of college classes now, but none of it was going how it was meant to or at least how she’d imagined it.

It wasn’t Inlet’s fault.

It wasn't even the fault of the survey sent from the state's Department of Education that was she was currently taking that asked about her attendance at "one or more technical or community colleges in the state of South Carolina."

It was the fact that she'd been thrown out of her home by her parents a week and a half ago for being gay.

## Chapter 1:

In the hospital parking lot, Charlie bunkered down in a sleeping bag in her 2020 Subaru Outback where she'd folded flat the back row of seats, so she had more room to stretch out her legs. She had a view out of her tinted back window and through her moon roof of a sky that was either cloudy or discolored with light pollution, probably both. She was watching Tik-Tok videos on "how make living car bearable." She left out the words "to," "in," and "your" because algorithms didn't care about prepositions or her possession of her vehicle, though the latter was currently of the up-most importance to her.

It was past 11 pm, and she had an early class the following day when survey from the South Carolina Department of Education announced itself in her student inbox with a buzz from her iPhone that sounded like a heartbeat.

The survey came with the chance to win a \$100 Visa gift card, so she didn't see how she could afford not to take it. Literally. She swiped her thumb over her phone screen to close all apps other than her email. There was something about closing apps that she wasn't using that seemed to simplify her complicated life, even if it was a placebo effect.

The survey announced that it would take 20 minutes in total to complete, but it took closer to 25. Charlie glowered at the bold, accessible sans serif text that introduced the state's droning questions.

The Department of Education wanted to gauge its residents' perceptions of the 17 public community and technical colleges in South Carolina's system. The colleges in the system served over one-third of the state's population in pursuit of post-secondary education, offered non-credit and continuing education opportunities, and employed

thousands of residents in the form of faculty, cafeteria workers, academic advisors, and custodial staff, all while weathering the COVID pandemic that began in 2020 and had continued into 2021, along with an ever-increasing shortage of federal and state funds.

But how many people knew any of that?

The survey asked:

1) How many household members had attended at least one of the community and technical colleges in South Carolina?

2) How many would consider attending one of these colleges in the future? 2b)

Why or why not?

3) Community and technical colleges offer a first-year experience comparable to those at other institutions of higher education in the state: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral (or I don't know), agree, or strongly agree.

4) Community and technical colleges prepare graduates for the current job market: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral (I don't know), agree, or strongly agree.

On and on the questions went.

26) Would the survey taker be willing to participate in a follow-up survey?

27) Would the survey taker be willing to participate in qualitative portions of the study as an interviewee or member of a focus group?

Eventually the black text and white background blurred in Charlie's sleepy vision.

The survey did *not* ask questions about the delicious personal pan pizzas served every Friday in Inlet's campus cafeteria, the scent of new textbooks fresh out plastic wrap, professor's dry-erase markers squawking across white boards, the treasured student tradition of frolicking post-graduation amid lily roots, the industrial grade bleach dousing

biology labs after dissection days, or the vapors of dreams and love and tears wafting out from the residence halls onto grounds that, if one stood still enough, could still discern the faint tang of indigo and spilled blood of enslaved peoples speaking prayers to the dark sky.

Because it was optional, the survey would come and go from hundreds of email inboxes without ever being opened, even with the incentive to be \$100 richer. Some, the survey never reached because addresses bounced or had been missed in data collection. Others, Charlie had learned since enrolling at Inlet, actively distained community colleges and lauded the whole of America's public education system as a failure. Why, then, participate in something designed with an attempt to improve it?

Logic and apathy, or anger and logic, often do not pair together, Charlie had come to recognize with an insight that should burden no 17-year-old, after her family's reaction to her coming out as a lesbian, accidental though that unveiling had been.

Most unsettling to her was the gaping space at the end of the survey titled "Other comments." What the heck did the state want to know about her or *anyone* taking the survey? The survey guaranteed participants' anonymity and vowed results would not be sold to third-parties, but that did not placate her.

She was gay; she was homeless. She was hungry after only having a granola bar and bag of chips for dinner. She was uncomfortably cold this evening, despite her sleeping bag. And she was enraged at the survey for taking 5 minutes longer than advertised. Should she write that under "Other comments"? Should she identify herself with name and *no* current address.

She pictured the domed capitol building with Grecian influence at the center of Columbia out from which other state department buildings fanned. She had been to the capitol twice on fieldtrips, once in her seventh-grade history class and once in ninth grade civics. For some reason, she remembered the Columbia from her childhood with startling clarity. She imagined the small, windowless office down the street where the person who'd sent this survey worked exhausting hours for too little compensation. If she wrote this entire chapter of her life, would that person take the time to read it? Would someone care how she'd ended up in this place—physically, she was in a hospital parking lot where her Subaru, which had a stupid slogan about love, was parked for the night *again*? Metaphorically, she felt like she was abroad someplace where she hadn't learned the language and didn't have signal on her phone to search for even the most basic of phrases.

Before her freshman semester, she'd maintained the image of a nice girl who grew up in a nice, religious family that enjoyed nice things. Truth be told, she'd never expected it would be college that would take that away from her. She'd thought she'd keep up this double life of beloved Southern Baptist and burning secret lesbian for the rest of her life.

After another ten minutes of dithering, she left the "Other comments" section on the survey blank, then hit send. She closed out her web browser and her email on her phone. She checked her messages. There were no new notifications. Her heart curled shut like a clam in danger, and she scrunched down in her sleeping bag.

She hugged her stuffed turtle close to her chest. The stuffed animal was named Christmas. Her paternal grandparents had bought Christmas for her the first time the family went to Alligator Adventure together. Charlie had been a small child at the time.

Christmas' shell was no longer covered in soft, green fuzz. The turtle had different eyes now, obsidian beads Charlie's mother had sewn to her face when her glued-on, googly eyes popped off on the wash a few years ago. Christmas smelled like her and like home—or what had been her home until her mother had found that flyer from the LGBTQIA+ club meeting in her messenger bag with Charlie's scribbles incriminating her sexuality over the back.

Like the past several nights now, she cried and cried into Christmas' paunchy stomach. When she was done crying, she checked her phone one final time to see if her father had called or her mother had texted. Neither had. She had not even ghosts for company.

She kept her phone off silent mode the rest of the night.

No new messages came.

## Chapter 2:

Charlie awoke not long after sunrise to the sound of sirens. She wrestled one arm free of her sleeping bag, then the other. The motion sent poor Christmas careening up into the driver's seat. Her Apple Watch blinked the time: 6:24 AM. Her car smelled like B.O. and grass and fry rancid grease from the Cracker Barrel fryers.

Groaning, she pulled herself the rest of the way out of her warm cocoon and into the front seat where she landed on top of her stuffed turtle. She flipped down her visor, checked her teeth for evidence of her late-night snack of a third granola bar, then finger-combed her messy blonde locks. Her roots were thick now with her natural hair color, a rubbery kind of brown that she hated. She closed the visor with a slam, closed her moon roof, too, as if that shut the whole world out, and started the engine with a push of the button beside the steering wheel.

Once the car lit up beneath her, she plugged her iPhone, which was at a dismal 26%, into one of the USB ports in the console between the front seats. Yawning, she headed in the direction of campus, ignoring how her stomach insisted it was time to eat. The daily drive to her college would take 10 minutes, and food longer than that.

Inlet Technical College, Charlie had learned, along with other technical and community colleges across the nation, was misunderstood, like the marshes, and much like she was. Her sister Josey's husband said two-year institutions were there to provide job training, and for his family's company, Monty Homes, which partnered with several of the technical colleges in the state, that was true. Charlie's aunt, Penelope, on her mother's side asked her if she was going to ITC to get her cosmetology degree and if

she'd be giving family discounts on hair and nails. Her aunt wanted layers and a balayage the next time the family visited them in Wichita, Kansas.

Those comments were minnows compared to how her career counselor had railed against Charlie's decision to participate in South Carolina's state-wide initiative, called the College Reinvigoration Program. The CRP, pronounced "carp", had 3 objectives. The first was to provide incentive for current high schoolers to maintain high GPAs, complete a mandated amount of community service hours, and network within their communities. The second was to offer those high schoolers the opportunity to attend one of the 17 technical and community colleges in the state system for free for two-years, in which time the students would complete an associate degree. The final was to provide transfer pathways to the state's public, 4-year higher education institutions, which would help boost the number of residential South Carolinians enrolled at UofSC, Clemson, and the like, and off-set the staggering amount of international and out-of-state students the universities admitted, presumably for the higher rates of tuition they paid.

Charlie's dual credit teachers had bemoaned her choice, and along with the career counselor, they'd thrust booklet after colorful booklet of universities where she wouldn't waste away her potential. None of them ever mentioned institutions such as Harvard or Caltech, she'd noted, though they did bring up North Carolina's university system, the University of Georgia, even Vanderbilt. Her extended family insisted she consider Liberty University where her father had received his M.B.A. online.

Even most of her friends didn't understand why she'd chosen the carp program, the *crap* program, as they preferred to call it. "Doesn't your family have any money?" they'd ask. "What, are you gonna be, like, a welder or something? Girls can't even get

into a welding program, right?” was another favorite question. “Lady welders? Gross,” was the response, though not from Charlie. She didn’t particularly care who did a job as long as the job got done.

While her friends prepared extensive and expensive lists of items like curved 4k televisions, new Macbooks, and futons for frat mates and sorority sisters to crash on, that they would carry off across the country the upcoming summer, she was still carting casseroles from her mother’s oven to her sister’s household twice a week when she babysat the twins. While her friends competed for the highest SAT scores, she was still holding down her part-time job with her father’s HOA management business. She wasn’t messaging back and forth with the roommates she’d been assigned, breaking up with her high school boy- or girlfriend, or figuring out how to beg her parents to send her to Cancun for spring break with her new living-learning community.

When she graduated at 17, she was in the top ten of her class. She’d completed more than 200 hours of community service through her church, networked with local business owners at the Chamber of Commerce, and maintained a 3.95 GPA.

With her parents, she traveled to the South Carolina Technical and Community College System Office where she received a gold pin with the system’s logo and CRP engraved on the glossy surface. Reporters from The State, The Post and Courier, The Sun, Black News, and The Free Times snapped photos of Charlie and this year’s other high school graduates who had completed the program. She answered questions like “Where are you from?” and “What two-year college are you attending?” and “Where will you be transferring?” and “What is your major?” when the reporters stuck their mics below her mask to capture her response.

“So, Charlene, you’re going to college for two years for free!” one of the public relations persons from the tech system office exclaimed. He was a Black man whose voice drowned out all the others in the room. “Do you realize what this means?”

She opened her mouth, but he replied for her.

“You’re now part of a state network of 17 two-year institutions across South Carolina, and you have the opportunity to attend any public university in the state after you receive your associate degree 2 years from now. To all those who believe community college does not present important opportunities to make connections the way some 4-year colleges might, we’d like to challenge that assumption today with this bright young lady.”

He looked like he wanted to clap Charlie on the back, but stopped himself, an effect of the pandemic, Charlie guessed. Under her mask though, she smiled tentatively.

“Did you attend a community college?” she asked, and he said yes, he did, which started an entirely new conversation.

By the time Charlie’s family loaded up into her father’s pick-up to drive home, she was drunk with exhaustion. She leaned her cheek on the glass and closed her eyes, ignoring her mother’s phone conversation with Josey where Ginny recounted the day’s events in minute detail.

“Well, congrats, then,” Josey said to Charlie.

Charlie lifted her eyebrows, keeping her eyes closed. She wasn’t used to her sister acknowledging her unless she wanted something.

“Charlie?” her mom prompted when she didn’t respond.

“Thanks,” she grunted into the phone.

The conversation turned to Josey's twins who had learned Disney World was a real place, thanks to the Disney+ account the family shared.

Charlie thought back to what the reporter had said about challenging assumptions. She'd wanted to tell him that wasn't why she'd completed the program. She certainly had her reasons, but none so grand as he posited.

Her father was a businessman. He was constantly crunching numbers between his teeth. Both he and her mother wanted Charlie to attend college—and not after military service, like her brother, Benny. Her father, along with Charlie's paternal grandfather, made a handshake deal with her. If she kept working part-time at the HOA management business the family owned while she was attending Inlet Technical College, they would match the amount she earned when she transferred. Charlie, who processed quite a lot of the financial data at the company, had seen large numbers attached to dollar signs before. However, they'd never applied to her in any material way. They were just numbers on a long sheet of more numbers.

At the proposal, she counted the possibility of hundreds upon hundred-dollar bills that would belong to *her*, instead of sheep to fall asleep at night. She didn't know many kids from her high school who would be going to college without taking out massive loans. She had her father's head for business, he liked to tell her. Staying out of the red was in her DNA. So she shook her father and grandfather's hands and worked like a person possessed over the summer before she started at Inlet.

The second reason, which followed her around like an annoying younger sibling was the fact that she wasn't ready for such big change in life. After all, she was only 17,

unlike most of her classmates. The paperwork to live away from home at *any* college had include all sorts of waivers, special permissions, even death clauses.

She loved that Josey allowed her to babysit the twins, while otherwise ignoring her. She liked her room in the family farmhouse and liked living as an only child for the first time in her life. She adored being only 45 minutes away from her grandparents, who were her favorite human beings on the entire planet. She didn't even mind her job at the family's HOA company, especially now that her pay would be doubled one day.

Attending Inlet was a transition, to be sure, but she didn't want to be states or even *countries* away from where she'd lived her entire life, even though she knew her brother Benny was disappointed she didn't at least apply to any universities in New England to be closer to him. From all the TV shows she'd watched and books she'd read about going to college, she was apparently supposed to want to leave everything behind the moment she graduated high school. But she didn't. She still didn't want that.

Her phone vibrated in the cupholder, interrupting her thoughts.

She hoped to see her parents' home number flash on her dash. Instead, the call was from Benny.

She pushed the button on her steering wheel to answer. "Hi. I'm on the way to the gym."

"Have mom or dad contacted you?"

"Don't you think I would have told you if they had?"

"Hey, don't grouse at me."

"Hi, Charlie," came a second, higher-pitched voice through the car's speakers.

"Hi, Tamar," she said to Benny's wife. "How are you?"

“Worried about you. I’m going to send another Venmo transfer to you today.”

Charlie’s hands tightened on the steering wheel. “Please don’t. You know I’m working shifts at Cracker Barrel a couple days a week now.”

“The ol’ family favorite,” Benny said without a hint of reminiscence in his voice. “You know that place is racism and homophobic and has been sued a thousand times for shady business shit, right?”

“It feels comfortable,” Charlie argued. “Mom might come in while I’m working one day with her Bible study group.”

“A couple of shifts per week isn’t enough money in your bank account,” Tamar said before Benny could set off on another inevitable tirade about Cracker Barrel and other aspects of how the Berkeley children had been wrongly raised.

“I know you’re having trouble finding a job right now, too, Tamar,” Charlie said. “I don’t want to be a burden on you guys.”

“I keep applying,” Tamar said, and Charlie could discern the false joviality in her tone. “You’d think with all of the turnover in higher education, someone would need a professor of Jewish Studies on their faculty.”

“It will happen. I know it.”

Charlie could almost picture her brother placing his arm around his wife’s shoulders. Her guts twisted, knowing everything they had gone through to make their relationship work, despite both having families against their love for each other—a Jewish woman with a Southern Baptist man? Unthinkable.

Benny *got* it, or at least got a part of what she was dealing with right now. It was evident by his almost incessant calls and by the money he and Tamar pushed on her now

that she was living in her car, despite how tight things were for the two of them with only his income to support them.

“You’ll take the money, Char,” Tamar insisted. “And you’ll get a hotel room with it, yeah? I can’t stand knowing you’re sleeping outside of a hospital every night. Couldn’t you stay with a friend? Maybe that girl, Melina, you met at school?”

At the mention of Melina, Charlie’s cheeks went a little hot.

“No, that wouldn’t work. Things are weird in the residence halls because of COVID,” Charlie said.

“What about your family’s church?” Tamar pressed.

“No one from the church has reached out, so I’m guessing Mom hasn’t told everyone there. Probably too embarrassed.” Her face suddenly felt like it caught fire, and her insides churned violently. “Either that, or Dad forbade her from telling anyone. I’m sure Grandpa and Grandma know though.”

Her heart twisted at the thought of her grandparents’ disappointment.

“Asshole,” Benny said, and she could hear him grinding his teeth.

“You can always come live here with us,” Tamar said.

The kindness in her voice, coupled with her brother’s righteous rage, brought a stinging to her eyes.

“You know I can’t. I’ve got this scholarship thing. Hey, guys, I’m at the gym, and I’ve got to get a shower before class, okay?”

She didn’t wait for them to respond before she pressed her thumb gently against the button to end the call.

In truth, she was a minute or two from reaching campus yet, but she couldn't stand to be on the phone, forced to acknowledge this current existence—or what her parents had put her brother through—for one more second. She rolled down her window, welcoming in air that was already sticky with humidity. She stuck her hand out and let the wind ground her. Over and over, she attempted to grasp its teasing tendrils. Over and over, her palm came up empty.

### Chapter 3:

To the gym, Charlie carted in a duffel bag that contained her change of clothes for the day, though she didn't plan to work out. Too—and always—tired for that, these days.

At 7 am, the gym was bursting with people. She waved to her biology professor, Dr. Li, who was running sprints on the treadmill, his ITC shirt drenched in sweat. Over the course of using the gyms facilities to keep up a façade of hygiene, she'd learned Dr. Li arrived at the gym at 6:30 am on the three days he had 8:15 labs, so he could prepare for them immediately afterward.

She left the sweating, grunting people to their reps and headed downstairs to where the locker rooms were. There, she crossed paths with Jady, the custodial worker. He was whistling the tune to something she didn't recognize, his dreads swinging where they'd escaped his shower cap, while he listened to AirPods. He was so engrossed with mopping the pathway between the men's, women's, and non-binary changing areas that he didn't notice her until she was right in front of him, waving her hand to get his attention.

“Charles Brown,” he said, too loudly.

She frowned, gesturing at her ears.

He laughed and lowered his volume. “What's up? Want some gum?”

She accepted the piece of Sweet Mint flavored gum he offered her.

“You listening to your mix or somebody else's?”

“This guy named Astral Throb. He makes all these Industrial Darksynth mixes. He's a fucking genius. You'll like running to his stuff.”

*Yes, if I ran anymore,* she thought, but she nodded at him anyway.

She unlocked her phone, opened YouTube, and showed the app to Jady. “Is this him?”

He pressed a finger in dire need of moisturizer on a thumbnail, and a channel opened on her phone. “That’s him.”

“Thanks.”

“Sure. You keep telling people about my mixes.”

“I’m pretty sure I have the entire third floor of the Wilkes’ residence hall subscribed to your Tik-Tok and your YouTube,” she told him.

He laughed again, and she imagined his teeth gleaming against his poreless, dark complexion when he wasn’t wearing a mask but instead online making videos. He deserved to be famous and for a lot more than being good-looking.

“I know it. I saw my numbers go up. Over 500k now on YouTube.”

She popped the gum in her mouth, and the first flavors of the day washed over her tongue. She couldn’t help but swoon a bit.

“I’d stay and talk more, but I’ve got to finish up here,” he said. “See you later, Sis?”

“See you later.”

She’d tip-toed across the flooring that was slick with cleaner and had made it to the women’s locker room before Jady stopped her again.

“Sis, you good?” Behind his wire-framed Fendi glasses, his eyes were narrow with concern. “You came in your pajamas again, and I didn’t see you working out up there.”

“Pajamas are comfortable,” she shrugged. “We should wear them everywhere and to do everything in them.”

With another wave, she bypassed the yellow caution sign outside of the changing room and disappeared inside. Once she was tucked away in a shower with her little caddy opposite her, she sagged against the fogged glass wall. Did she need to start sleeping in workout clothes if people were noticing her unusual gym attire. She’d meant what she said to Benny and Tamar. She didn’t want anyone to know what had happened at home; she didn’t want to acknowledge it, herself.

Her tears blended in with the steaming shower, and she could pretend the water came out of the showerhead slightly salty. After the crying ran out, she angled herself in a corner of the locker room, so she had a view of the cyan colored lockers instead of the other women in various states of undress. She wondered if any of them felt as awkward changing in front of other women the way she did. Or was that just a gay thing? She tossed her towel over her shoulder, fisted her duffel bag, and escaped back to her car as soon as she could.

In her car, she spread out her towel across her front passenger’s seat, so it would dry. She organized her messenger bag with her laptop and textbooks for the day, then slung a stuffed full laundry bag over her shoulder. Hopefully after Melina was nice enough to do a load of wash for her in the residence hall, her car wouldn’t stink so much.

She considered, and not for the first time since she’d started sleeping in her car, dropping out of the intramural soccer league. She’d been so excited to join the team and be able to keep playing soccer after high school graduation, but right now pursuing her passion was more trouble than it was worth. It meant more laundry, more wear and tear

on cleats she couldn't currently afford to replace. It meant the intramural fees, travel to away games that disrupted her work schedule, and extra exhaustion when she already wasn't sleeping well.

Worst of all, soccer practice was during sunlight hours, during hours with other campus facilities were open. Before living in her car, Charlie had never considered how much light it took to be able to complete homework and readings—and she could only stand so long to be cramped in the back of her SUV before she needed to stretch out her long legs in the library or do work upright at an actual desk in the computer lab.

At home, she had a desk in her room and as many lights as she wanted. She had access to a kitchen and a bathroom at all hours. She had running water, electricity, heat and air conditioning.

A car was a mode of transportation; it was not designed to be a house, no matter how many Tik-Tokkers bragged about living in vans.

Her stomach growling again, she slammed closed her car doors and made sure to lock her Subaru. After all, it contained the entire contents of her life these days. She took a last look to make sure her ITC parking pass was visible from the windshield, despite the many masks also hanging from her rearview mirror. Satisfied it was on display, she tramped across the brick walkway from the parking lot to the cafeteria where she was supposed to meet Melina.

Charlie had met Melina Rivera, whose parents had moved from Ponce, Puerto Rico to Miami, Florida, during orientation. The two of them were as opposite as plain grilled cheese and spicy tomato soup, but just as those paired well as a meal, they seemed to pair well as friends. Or perhaps they were friends because Melina, a self-proclaimed

extrovert who had been living with her aunt and uncle in the Lowcountry since her junior year of high school, adopted Charlie at Inlet's orientation. There, Melina deemed Charlie the most introverted introvert she'd ever met in her entire life and probably all her past lives as well.

When she imputed her number in Charlie's phone, Melina had been much more woeful at the lack of contacts in Charlie's phone than Charlie had ever been.

"I like being alone," she told Melina later, while the two of them unpacked Melina's dorm room.

"No one likes being alone," Melina lamented.

Charlie changed the subject. "I didn't know the two-year colleges in South Carolina had residence halls when I applied."

"Not all of them do," Melina replied. "I'm glad this one does. I couldn't take living with my tía's 8 cats anymore."

Charlie tried to imagine 8 Frankies, her own family cat, living at her house, but she knew her mom, Ginny, was too much of a neat freak to deal with so many hairballs. Other than that, she liked the idea of all of them on top of her like a blanket that was not only heated but also purred.

"I wouldn't mind having 8 cats," she admitted. "If they were indoor-outdoor cats."

"But it's cruel to the cats to make them live outdoors! Coyotes could get them."

Argument unwon, they went about decorating Melina's side of the room with anime posters and mandalas on the walls, with fairy lights wound around the headboard and legs of the Melina's desk, and a flag that Melina informed Charlie was Ponce's

strung up across one corner. Melina then showed Charlie her aunt's "Catstagram," and they gave up on unpacking to watch an more than an hour of cat reels.

Today, in the cafeteria, Melina had doused her hair in a fresh coat of blue dye, this time a shade lighter than the Blue Raspberry Jolly Rancher shade she'd sported when Charlie first met her. Her forearms were covered in what Melina called "sex bracelets." The flexible, plastic bracelets came in all colors, and each one represented a different sex act that Melina hoped to do in the two years she'd spend at Inlet.

"That's a lot of sex," Charlie had told her.

"Duh." Melina had responded. "It's college."

Today, Melina wore a neck gaiter advertising My Hero Academia, which Charlie had learned was an anime, thanks to her introducing her to Crunchy Roll. Melina was tapping out a rhythm on the vinyl floor with her feet, which meant her Converse All-Stars that she'd ordered custom-made were lighting up the path to her table the way marshallers direct aircrafts to land on the runway.

"Morning," Charlie said when she dumped herself into the seat across from Melina.

"Oh, laundry," Melina said, eying the large sack Charlie had brought into the cafeteria. "For me? Oh, Charlita Billie Berkeley, you didn't have to."

She batted her glittery false lashes, and Charlie snorted. "Yes, you're so very welcome."

"Eat up, amiga," Melina encouraged. She pushed a tray over piled with breakfast in Charlie's direction. "And shut up. I had a date last night with that guy from my English class. It was horrendous, it really was. I have to tell you all about it."

Charlie did her best to listen, but her attention was fixated on the array of aromas bewitching her nostrils. Melina had brought the two of them a bit of everything: hashbrown casserole, turkey sausages smothered in white gravy, buttery biscuits, and French toast begging to have its broad surface area drenched in the 100% maple syrup the cafeteria was proud to serve. There were a couple of bananas, oranges, and apples, too. Charlie shoved a banana and two apples in her messenger bag for later, but she ignored the oranges. They were too much trouble to peel by hand.

“...so then he, like, expected me to kiss him, as if I hadn’t made it apparent that I just wanted to get back to my room. He had something in his teeth, some big black thing. I have no idea what it was because we’d only had popcorn at the movie theatre, so that means it had probably been there the entire date. Maybe it was a cavity it was so big...”

Charlie wrinkled her nose and decided to tune out this more appetite killing portion of the story. She fixated on the flaky biscuit melting in her mouth instead, and she worried suddenly that she might not have finished all her Intro to Economics homework. Was she supposed to complete the questions for chapters 6, 7, and 8? Or just 6 and 7? If she also needed to do chapter 8, she was going to have to squeeze it in between Human Sexuality with Dr. Stone, which ended at 1:45, and Econ, which met at 3. Was that going to be enough time?

“Hey,” Melina batted Charlie’s hand with her own fingers, which were perpetually too cold to be human. “You’re supposed to be smiling now. That’s what we do when our friends tell us they told the guy that he was just gonna keep having to fuck himself, instead of her.”

“I’m glad you told him to get bent,” Charlie said. “It creeped me out that he was wandering around your floor all the time.”

“I mean, it is a co-ed floor of the residence halls,” Melina said, “but yeah. I asked a few of the guys if they were friends with him, and nobody claimed him. I hope I don’t see him around anymore. Ick.”

“Let me know if you do,” Charlie said gruffly.

“Oh, you gonna protect me, Charlita? That’s so sweet.”

“Just do my laundry already.”

“But, honey, we’re not even married yet.”

“On a serious note,” Charlie said, giving her friend the evil eye, “if he doesn’t leave you alone, I do want to know.”

“And I shall tell you.” Melina mock curtsied, which really didn’t work, since she was still seated. “Are you done eating? You have class in a few minutes.”

“We both do,” Charlie reminded her.

Melina plucked at her bracelets. “But I don’t wanna go.”

“And I don’t want to live in my car.”

“Ugh, you had to pull that one out, didn’t you?”

“It seems to work.”

They bickered their way out of the cafeteria with Melina interrupting their conversation to shout “hi’s” at people she knew.

Once they were outside with the morning sun rapidly growing feverish, Melina took the laundry bag from Charlie.

“I’ll take this to English with me, then I’ll do your laundry after. Everyone in that class thinks I’m a bag lady now. I hope you’re happy. Then, do you want to come by my room? I can make us Chef Boyardee before we have Human Sexuality with Dr. Stone.”

“How could I say no to such a delicacy?”

“Hey, you have that meeting with her after class today, don’t you?”

Melina’s cheeks, forehead, and ears had turned an impolite shade of pink talking about Dr. Stone, as they always did.

Charlie frowned. “I do, and I don’t have any idea what it’s about.”

Then she remembered her potentially unfinished Econ homework.

“I have to go,” she said, whirling away from her friend to the direction of her biology lab.

“Hold it. Hugs first.”

Charlie gave Melina a half-hearted side hug before darting off.

As soon as she was in her bio classroom, she ripped open one of her hunter green and camo folders, which were getting increasingly weathered as the semester went on. She scrolled her index finger down her Econ syllabus where each week’s expectations were outlined in a neat Microsoft table. She arrived at the current week and tapped the homework.

Chapters 6 and 7. Thank goodness.

She straightened up in her seat and took a deep breath. She realized that her lab partner, Blessing, was staring wide-eyed at her.

“You looked like you were going to eat that paper whole,” he said in his South African accent.

She laughed, surprising them both.

“I don’t know about eating it,” she told him. “But I think I might have been about ready to rip it apart.”

“Are you that worried about midterms?”

Well, she hadn’t been until he said that. She’d just been trying to get through everything a day at a time. More like a minute at a time.

“Absolutely,” she answered.

“We have a study group. It’s all South African men, but you’re my lab partner, so we would welcome you.”

*Weird*, she thought before correcting herself. She needed all the help she could get.

She smiled at him. “I might take you up on that, Blessing.”

He gave her the weekly day and time the group was meeting, as well as the location, the nearby public library. She scratched the info in pen across the top of her syllabus for Bio. She was just finishing slipping the paper back into her messenger bag when Dr. Li entered the room, wearing the same ITC shirt he’d sweated through during his run that morning.

He scanned the class with his grey eyes, and when his gaze reached Charlie, they shared a nod. She didn’t tell on him for not changing after the gym, and in turn, he, well, he didn’t actually do her any favors. Still, a smirk tugged at her lips under the mask that they shared a little secret.

“Today,” he said, clapping his hands together, “we’re transitioning from cellular biology to organismal. This also means, at least in my opinion, our lab days will become just that much more fascinating.”

The class carried on from there, Charlie scribbling in one of her notebooks because Dr. Li did not allow electronic devices in his classes, especially not on lab days, unless accommodations had been made with the Office of Disability Services.

When bio ended, Charlie told Blessing she’d see him on Thursday. He reminded her about the study group, which would be going over the daunting 25-page midterm study guide Dr. Li handed out at the end of class. Then she headed in the direction of the Melina’s dorm room.

Inlet’s residence halls were tucked close to the swampland, giving students who woke up shoreside an exquisite view of the twisting cypress roots and wild rye. Students living on the opposite side woke up to the hustle and bustle of their campus that seemed like a living organism the bio lab could study.

The students who woke up facing campus had a view that included the cafeteria where many of them would eat, which was conveniently next to the Student Center. They could also be able to see the Student Support building that included a computer lab, tutoring services, disability services, and the library. Finally, they had a view of the buildings that cloistered the different disciplines within their walls, as if the secrets of each must not be shared among the rest.

Melina lived on the side that faced campus—and that suited her. If Charlie had known about the residence halls prior to orientation and filled out all the extra paperwork for a 17-year-old to be able to live there, she would have hoped for a view of the

marshland that spiraled out into proper ocean. If she had convinced her helicopter mother to allow her to stay in a dorm room...If she could have talked her father into footing the bill. If, if, if. But back then, she'd wanted to be a commuting student. She'd wanted all the comforts of home.

Melina had suggested Charlie fill out an application to live in the residence hall the upcoming semester, but since Charlie was still a minor and a dependent, she couldn't complete the paperwork without her parents' permission.

"The system's twisted," Melina said when Charlie reminded her of those facts. She slammed her fist down on her desk, making the microwave on it that was heating up Cup of Noodles thump. "You should file for emancipation."

Melina had an answer for everything. Charlie liked that about her. But she didn't have the boundless energy that ran beneath Melina's skin like a livewire.

Charlie felt like she was slogging through mud, carrying bricks instead of books on her shoulders, and the idea of trying to figure out the paperwork for emancipation—and if she was truly ready for such a final break away from her family—added another 500 pounds to the load she was lugging.

When Charlie met Melina at orientation, she knew her mother would never have approved of her new acquaintance. Besides Melina's blue hair and fixation with anime, she wore more make-up than a stage actor and cussed like the words helped her breathe.

But Melina was also alive, and free, and ridiculously excited about attending classes at Inlet and moving into the residence halls. When Charlie asked her if it was common for two-year colleges to have dorms, Melina had listed off dozens in the country

like Inlet that had them, including Denmark Technical College, another two-year college in South Carolina.

Like Charlie, Melina probably could have had her pick of colleges to attend, if only she'd chosen to apply herself in high school. She was sharper than a thumbtack but had a tongue like a pissed off rattlesnake. She liked art. She hated math, and anything Melina hated, she raged fully against. She'd made it through high school with a solid "C" average and proudly announced she had a detention record as long as the Old Testament.

Charlie and Melina had spent most of orientation together. They sat through the opening session side-by-side in the Inlet Theatre that not only hosted student events, classes, and the drama club, but also symphonies, plays, and performances open to the community. They choose the same tour group that took them through every building on campus, ending at the cafeteria where they ate boxed lunches. Melina had requested a vegan meal, while Charlie devoured her roast beef sub sandwich in four bites. Melina explained over lunch that she was a convenience vegan, meaning she ate vegan when it was an easy option and scavenged anything else when it was available.

"You can bet your ovaries I'll be eating free pepperoni pizza anytime it shows itself on this campus," Melina said.

Charlie winced. She put a hand over her midsection, decidedly against betting her ovaries on anything.

They only split up for Melina's session on residence hall living. While Melina went off with her future dorm mates, Charlie attended a session for commuter students. She hadn't been sure she'd run into Melina again. The day officially ended with advising

appointments, and when Charlie showed up to the packed advising center, she didn't see Melina in the crowd.

Charlie shook her head, clearing it of memories. Now, she stood in the center of campus, after bio had ended, near the famed fountain where graduating students dove in after their ceremony. She could smell the odor grilled meat and vegetables fanning over the campus from the cafeteria. Students milled around her, all ages, shapes, and ethnicities, so markedly different from the all-white neighborhood in which she'd grown up. There was the buzz of insects in the wild grasses that had replaced the immaculate lawns in the college's attempt to be greener, the murmur of multiple languages from students, and the cackle of turkey vultures circling overhead. The day was vibrant and loud, the sky a holy shade of blue and the humidity bearable, denoting the change in seasons from summer to autumn.

For a moment, Charlie felt the way she had the first time she arrived on campus, just as excited as Melina. That was one reason she'd gravitated toward the blue-haired girl. Then, she'd felt just as free, just as swept up in possibility.

#### Chapter 4:

On Charlie's father's side, the family had owned land near the shore in South Carolina for several generations, giving them an incriminating history with slave owning and the Confederacy, and a current alliance with Trump, anti-vaxxers, and the far-right Republican party.

Charlene's father, the only Berkeley boy born to his parents, inherited the family farm when Grandpa and Grandma Berkeley moved o condos in North Myrtle Beach. Most of the farming on the family land had moved off the ten acres by that time, but Black farmers still rented 8 acres to grow flue-cured tobacco and dry their curated crop in the open-sided barn that tourists to Pawleys Island and Murrells Inlet would sometimes stop next to and snap pictures in front of like they owned the place. Like Charlie's father's father, her father now fielded a constant flurry of contractors looking to acquire and build upon the family's land and that of their neighbors for a new generation of retirees who had named the shoreline of South Carolina as the new Florida.

"If my own folks didn't want to retire here, what makes you think other people will?" Charlie's father would ask them before telling them he was in real estate, himself, and slamming down the home phone which, yes, in the year 2021, was connected to a landline and loved to ring on behalf of telemarketers and robo-callers, despite being on the national do not call list.

In truth, the Berkeley's land wasn't close enough to the shore to drive up the price high enough for her father to actually consider unloading his inheritance that, on those 10 acres, included a half-dozen ramshackle buildings that hurricanes and hard summers had weathered beyond repair. Then, there was the entire arsenal of broken-down tractors,

trucks, and vehicles that Grandpa Berkeley first planned on fixing up, but abandoned entirely when he developed gout that took his left foot. Those vehicles would have to be towed away. The only buildings still in stand-up shape, other than the house, itself, and the tobacco barn, included a shed for her mother's gardening tools and a barn made of structural steel that her father used as workshop where he created artisanal stained-glass windows, proudly installed in many of South Carolina Southern Baptist churches. He'd had the barn raised in lieu of attempting to fix any of the buildings with historical significance on the land.

Charlie, her brother, Benny, and her parents had moved into the home the summer she graduated from middle school. The farmhouse had only been a ten-minute bike ride in distance from her old neighborhood where modest two-story homes had large enough lawns for privacy fences, riding lawnmowers, and backyard parties.

She'd remembered her father differently before they moved onto the family's farmhouse. It was as if with the expansion of land, he'd also expanded. Not at the waistline, but the way he voiced his thoughts, the way he enforced that he was head of the family, the way that one could feel a kind of omen upon his entering a room. It was enough that at dinners Charlie, her brother, and her mother would all drop their gazes onto their empty plates when he arrived.

Benny claimed that their father had always been that way, that it was just Charlie suddenly waking up one day to realize it. Why else, he would say on the phone, do you think I couldn't wait to join the Navy?

Reflecting, she could see now that they, her siblings, were all looking for a way out, a way to escape. For her brother, it had been enlisting in the military. For her sister, it

had been a pregnancy that trapped a well-to-do boyfriend whose family-owned Monty Homes.

For Charlie, it was being forced out of the closet. Though she hadn't factored homelessness into her equation.

In her imagined future, she finished her degree, worked diligently to expand her father's business beyond the borders of the state, and then she'd be out from under her hometown's scrutiny. But she'd still have her family. Have the cake. Eat the cake. Now there was no cake at all.

Her father had been there the day she selected classes she'd request during her first advising appointment at Inlet Technical College. So had her mother.

Charlie had been poking through the course catalogue at the kitchen table over orange juice with Frankie, the family tabby who lived half inside half the time and outside the other, purring on her lap. She'd been in a circle of early sunlight that made her mother's crystalline windchimes sparkle so brightly just outside that window that she'd scrunched over in her chair so as to not be blinded. She'd just finished a bowl of multigrain Cheerios with chia and pumpkin seeds and hemp hearts sprinkled on top for a morning burst of extra protein. The bowl still sat next to her, the chia seeds she'd missed with her spoon bloated and fuzzy in 2% milk.

She was stroking Frankie right between his soft orange ears, not really paying attention to the fact that Fox news had just shut off in the room across from the kitchen or to the shuffle of slippers on the floor toward her. It had been the smell of her mother's Avon perfume, which went by the name of Sweet Honesty, that had startled Charlie out of working a shard of a hemp heart from between her front teeth and petting the cat.

“What’re you looking at, Ham?” her mom asked.

Virginia, or Ginny to her close friends and family, had a habit of asking questions to which she already assumed the answer.

“Would you like another serving?” she’d ask, while a ladle full of this week’s casserole already hovered over a plate.

“Who’s that coming up the lawn?” she’d say when a friend of Benny’s or Charlie’s, who’d called in advance to say they’d be by, were nearly at the front door.

In bold letters on the top of the webpage Charlie was currently on said COURSE CATALOGUE in sans serif, high-contrast font and background designed to be accessible to all. As Ginny had entered a certain part of middle age and still bragged about her vision, both up close and far away, as 20/25, she certainly knew the answer to the question she asked Charlie that morning.

“School stuff.” Charlie’s answer had been little more than a grunt, all of those syllables slung together and lobbed over her shoulder at the fumes behind her.

“What classes are you taking? Did you look at those forms your advisor sent? You looked at that transfer agreement, too, right?”

Before waiting for an answer, she called into the next room.

“Honey, come in here. Ham is picking out her classes.”

“I’m tired,” Charlie’s father grunted when he joined them. “Damn ghosts had me up all night again.”

Then, what had begun as another quiet morning of a typical breakfast for Charlie, while her parents were entranced by the reporters on the television became a family affair

of such epic proportions that Charlie would be too physically exhausted by it all to go for her run afterward.

She already hated running enough; it was a necessary evil that came with the net, the cleats, and the soccer ball. Being turned to a vomit-like mush after too much time with her parents was just the excuse she needed to head back upstairs, crawl back under her blankets, and watch YouTube shorts about rescued wild animals until her mind went blank with sleep.

Together at the kitchen table, they chose a set of classes that each of them agreed would not only set Charlie up for success her first semester as a college student but also for continued academic excellence and a transfer plan that would keep her on track to graduate with her bachelor's degree in business from Clemson University in 4 years, not a semester more and not a semester less. Her parents ensured Charlie took meticulous notes to share with her advisor for when they would meet later that week, following her orientation.

“You know, I could go with you, Ham,” her mother offered. “To orientation and your advising meeting.”

It was, Charlie understood, the biggest of deals to both of her parents that she was going to college straight out of high school. Her older sister had no interest in any degree other than her MRS. Benny completed college, thanks to the G.I. Bill after 4 years of active duty in the military. Ginny hadn't gone to college at all, though her husband had. Charlie's father, Judge Coy Wade Berkeley, had achieved not only his bachelor's in business management but his M.B.A. online from Liberty University. Charlie represented

the last chance of a child attending college when American society said they were supposed to.

The classes that the 3 of them picked out together for Charlie to discuss with her advisor were not actually the classes she planned on taking. Well, 4 of the 5 were, but she'd been paging through the online course catalogue ever since it came out earlier in the summer, and she had a 5th course in mind that would eat up one of her few electives. In the entire two-year program before she transferred to complete her degree, she would only get to take two electives, so they were as precious as her grandma's heirloom bracelet and matching earrings were to Ginny and Josey.

She wanted to take Human Sexuality.

She wanted to know why she was the way she was. Gay. And damned because of it, even though she tried never to think of girls, even of her own self, naked.

Her dad wanted her to take an extra semester of accounting, so she wrote down Accounting.

But she wrote it in pencil

## Chapter 5:

The morning of orientation, Charlie's mother fussed over her daughter's breakfast, her clothes, her messenger bag. She even went so far as to open Charlie's messenger bag and sort through the two folders, each brand-new from Target and glossy camo print on the front and hunter green on the back. The folders contained print-offs from Inlet Technical College's website—the day's orientation schedule, a map of the campus, Charlie's program of study, the courses she'd written down to request enrollment with her advisor, a copy of her FAFSA, her temporary parking pass, a copy of her driver's license, and more.

At this point, the papers, to Charlie, had piled up like banks of snow in her messenger bag, making the contents soggy and sloppy, rather than serving their purpose. She'd grown up in a digital age, held a cell phone as soon as her hand had musculature and received an iPad from her school district in elementary school. However, her mother insisted on the documents' necessity. Her hands flurried around Charlie's face, adjusting stray hairs and even claiming to smudge a crumb from the frown crease at the side of Charlie's mouth.

"Mom!" Charlie finally exclaimed, stuffing the endless papers and the folders back into her bag. "I have to go, or I'll be late."

She killed her mother's next remark before it could be uttered *again*. "And now, you don't need to come with me. This is college."

She placed the messenger bag she'd ordered with her father's debit card from Amazon Prime, fixed her own hair, and marched out of the kitchen and through the front door. It was only when she reached her car that she realized she'd left her keys on the

hook in the entry hall. She took several deep breaths, staring into her reflection in the driver's side window of her SUV Outback, already sticky from the August humidity, before she trudged back inside.

Ginny stood a few steps into the hall, dangling Charlie's keys, so that they knocked against her worn, wooden Myrtle Beach keychain in the shape of a surfboard. The interior of the house was blissfully cool, the AM sunlight muted from the half-open shades, and it smelled like the ashy black coffee her father consumed before work every morning and the cinnamon rolls from scratch that had come out warm from the oven as soon as Charlie trudged downstairs a few hours earlier.

Her twisting heart reluctantly gave in, while she met her mother's small smirk.

"Thank you," she muttered.

She captured her mom in a minute of a hug before exiting once more, house key digging a mark into the flesh of her palm.

Inlet Technical College's main campus was thirty minutes closer to the shoreline than her home. She'd filled up her tank the day before orientation, had her tires rotated, alignment checked, and changed her oil prematurely to be ready for what was only a 30-minute drive. The length of the drive, itself, wasn't anything she wasn't used to. In order to reach her high school, her workplace, and the nearest town big enough for a Publix, a Target, and a locally owned coffeeshop and micro-brewery, she drove a similar distance, putting tens of thousands of miles on her Subaru, which had been new a year and a half ago when she turned 16. Still, she didn't want anything to go wrong the day of orientation. She wanted to be prepared, *over* prepared in ways different to her parents where her mother printed everything and ordered belongings that were not hers and

where her father stashed the family's zombie survival kits in his workshop. Her over preparedness was a way to put her fluttering heart and anticipatory hands into action; otherwise, she would probably have stroked all of the fur off Frankie's back or jogged her legs into the ground before try-outs for the intramural soccer team at Inlet.

Advising appointments rounded out orientation day's events. Charlie's advisor was a round woman who stood a few inches shorter than Charlie when she stood from behind her desk. The gesture made Charlie feel like someone important, like a celebrity or a member of a royal family, not just another in a parade of students with hopes and dreams, and perhaps disappointment if the classes they requested were full, scribbled in pencil on their program of study. She smiled behind her mask, and she liked to think that the crow's feet crinkling at the corners of the advisor's eyes meant she returned the expression.

The advisor wore a mask that said HIS HERSTORY in silver glitter against bright pink material. The mask was a far cry from her neighborhood where almost no one wore masks anymore, or if they did, they wore scraps of fabric ill-fitted under the nose affiliations to UofSC or Clemson.

Charlie stared at the mask, half-mesmerized by it and half wondering what kind of masks Inlet Tech sold in the campus bookstore. She imagined buying a mask like her advisor wore and wondered what part of the house her mother's afternoon Earl Grey tea would end up spat all over if she saw Charlie sporting it.

"I like your mask," she said tentatively.

“Thank you, honey,” the advisor said, and her eyes tilted up, indicating her smile once more. “Now, do you have all your paperwork with you? What’s your name, honey?”

Charlie didn’t mind the nickname when it came from a woman who exuded warmth and without a single ounce of condescension.

The advisor introduced herself as Miss Huaman. She had been working at ITC for 15 years and had gotten her associate degree at Midlands Technical College in Columbia, where the University of South Carolina’s main campus was located. She was opposite to Ginny in a multitude of mannerisms. While Ginny tended to flit around everyone and everything like a moth searching for a flame, Miss Huaman moved like she was made of warm butter. Her voice was soft with a distinctive accent, different from Ginny’s shrill Southern style, which, being from the Midwest, was not native to her person. Miss Huaman had a river of shimmering black hair and wore a loose-fitting, flowery dress and jangly bracelets. She had three piercings in one ear and five in the other. Her nails, which were a similar hot pink and silver to her mask, clacked purposefully every time she inputted something on her keyboard. On her desk was a poem in a language she told Charlie was Runasimi, or Quechua, and spoken by her ancestors in Peru.

Charlie had grown up in an all-white neighborhood and remembered that the few families of color who had moved nearby had all moved again within three years. Ginny had always said that was for the best, that people should be with their own kind. It was a sentiment that Charlie understood at a young age didn’t mean something kind, and every time her mother intoned that message, she couldn’t help but flinch. It was a sentiment she

could never share with Ginny. But with Miss Huaman, she felt instantly at home and like her every opinion mattered.

When they began to discuss the courses she'd written down, Charlie took a deep breath to steady herself.

"This isn't exactly the course load I'm hoping to take," she said.

Her father and mother shadowed the piece of paper she'd pushed across the large desk to Miss Huaman.

The advisor leaned forward conspiratorially. "Oh no?"

"Most of them are fine," Charlie hurried to correct. "But I was hoping you could tell me if there are still seats available in..."

She trailed off, fumbling with her phone to pull up her Notes app. She listed off the course number and the section, which would meet at the same time as the extra Accounting course her father had pushed.

"It's Human Sexuality," she finished.

"With Dr. Stone." Miss Huaman nodded at her screen. "Her students always come in here raving about her classes. She teaches some other courses in the Humanities as well."

The advisor squinted at Charlie's program of study, then at Charlie. "Are you sure you want to be a Business major when you transfer? We can always list you as Undeclared for now, and it won't have any effect on your scholarship."

"No, I'm sure," Charlie said quickly. "But thank you for asking."

"Uh huh." Miss Huaman stared so hard at Charlie that she could feel herself flushing under the scrutiny.

The advisor steepled her dark fingers in front of her. “You know, I see a lot of students come through my door. A lot of them come in with one plan in mind, and they leave having pursued something entirely other. May I ask?” She pointed her bright pink and silver nail to the extra Accounting course Charlie had written but rejected. “Are you doing what *you* want to do or what somebody else wants you to?”

“I don’t mean to overstep,” she continued, “but you’re an adult, Charlie, and this is college. This is where you get to decide your future.”

The speech was compelling. It had Charlie’s heart running sprints in her chest, but—

“Actually,” she said softly, “I’m only 17.”

“Graduated early?”

“Started school a year early.”

The lasers in Miss Huaman’s eyes died down a fraction. “Well, this is just your first semester of many, honey. You can change your major later if you want to, and we’ll figure out your courses together. I think you’re going to like it here at ITC.”

A million words clawed at Charlie’s throat. She wanted to spill that she was a lesbian. She wanted to say that she didn’t mind being a business major because it meant more freedom later, if not necessarily now when she’d only got to take two electives. But Miss Huaman was her academic advisor, not her therapist or a new friend.

Instead, she said, “I hope so.”

Once Charlie’s schedule was set, she collected her paperwork from Miss Huaman, placing it carefully into one camo and hunter green folder. The smell of her mother’s

Avon perfume wafted up from the insides. She snapped it closed, hiding away the courses she'd committed to.

“Thank you again, Miss Huaman,” she said, standing abruptly from her chair.

If she'd thought her heart had been sprinting before, it was outpacing itself now. No longer was her wish to take Human Sexuality just a note in her phone. She'd spoken that wish to someone. That someone had made her wish come true. The proof was on the official looking schedule Miss Huaman had printed with the class's room number and meeting time. She'd used her scholarship money to take this class, instead of an extra business course. She could practically feel her father's disappointment dripping from the ceiling and coating her body, making it hard to breathe. She nodded at Miss Huaman, and clutching her messenger bag to her chest, she burst out of the room and into the bustling lobby of the advising center.

She was brushing past bodies, beelining for the door when Miss Huaman's butter tone reached her ears. “Ms. Berkeley, you forgot something.”

She turned slowly to see Miss Huaman dangling a card from her bright nails. She traversed back through the room to take it.

“My business card,” Miss Huaman said. “Call or email me if you need anything, honey.”

The advisor reached out and squeezed Charlie's arm. That small physical comfort grounded Charlie back inside her skin.

“I appreciate everything you've done,” she said. She meant it.

“Just doing my job.” With a wink, Miss Huaman returned to her office to await her next student.

Charlie ran her thumb over the raised blue text displaying Miss. Huaman's contact information. She slipped the business card into her pocket, next to her phone, then she eased out of the advising office, accepting that at least one person supported her course load.

*No, she corrected, two people.*

Because she vowed to support her own decisions.

## Chapter 6:

Melina met Charlie at the Wilkes' residence hall's entrance and buzzed her in with her ID card. The photo on Melina's ID card showed her sticking her tongue out at the exact moment the photo had been captured. Melina refused to sit for a second shot, so she'd immortalized her personality and solidified her fame with the freshmen class at the same time with her ID. Charlie's ID was tucked in her messenger bag, instead of hanging on an ITC lanyard covered in a myriad of Disney pins around her neck like Melina's. Charlie's ID photo showed a rare instance when she wore her long hair down. She smiled blandly at the camera guy, which earned her no points with her cohort but lost her none either.

"I overcooked the ravioli," Melina confessed, tugging at a strand of her blue hair, while Charlie signed in with the resident assistant who was chewing gum open-mouthed and reading an Anne Rice novel.

"No worries. I'm not that hungry anyway."

Melina pointed a nail-bitten finger in Charlie's face. "You're a part of the Clean Plate Club now. You'll eat what I give you."

"Yo, Melina," the resident assistant said around a lot of gum smacking, "you read *The Claiming of Sleeping Beauty*?"

"Nope."

"It's freaky shit. Like BDSM. I'll loan it to you after I'm done."

"Kay."

Melina flounced away from the desk, leading Charlie through the residence hall's lounge area, which had become so familiar to her she could practically convince herself

she lived there. The smell of overcooked pop-tarts and feet. The interminable furniture that students still managed to destroy. The row of spider plants between the elevator and stairwell that students snipped cuttings from to grow in their own rooms. The bathrooms that no one except visiting parents used. She died a little every time she walked in with Melina now that she was living in her car, wishing to be a part of this community, despite Melina complaining about loud roommates, a stomach bug that made the rounds in early September, and authoritarian RAs.

“What’s BDSM?” she asked when Melina pushed the button for the elevator.

“Uhh,” Melina hedged.

Charlie could hear the RA laughing at the desk behind them.

“I have a video. Hold on.”

Melina searched furiously on her phone for something that made Charlie’s entire face burn up in flames, especially when the elevator doors opened up and a crowd of students exited, while the video was still playing.

Up in the safety of Melina’s room, she buried her face in one of the many pillows strewn across Melina’s unmade bed.

“Why would you want to read a book about that?” she moaned.

Melina stuck a single serving of Chef Boyardee cheese ravioli under her nose.

“Oh, please. This is college. We’re supposed to try out all kinds of stuff, and I don’t just mean taking classes in different subjects.”

She wagged her eyebrows at Charlie. “You can’t tell me you’re not a little bit curious about going wild, right?”

“I have no interest in having someone tie me up. What if they decided to murder me?”

“Great Goddess, girl, who hurt you when you were a child?” Melina’s hand flew up to cover her mouth. “Oh, Jesus, Charlita, I didn’t mean it. I know you’re going through shit right now. I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. Comes tu comida, chica!”

Melina stuffed her face with her own little cup of ravioli.

“It’s fine,” Charlie said gruffly. “At least my parents waited until I was almost an adult to do this to me.”

Instinctively she glanced at her phone to see if either her mom or dad had called while she was in class. No such luck.

She forced a smile. “You didn’t overcook this too badly. It’s almost edible.”

“Well, well, at least your laundry is in the wash. Sorry it’s not totally done. I didn’t have much time after class ended.”

“How was English?”

“Same old, same old. Our adjunct complained for half the class about her job, then reminded us we can’t use first-person in any of our other papers this semester. Why have the first assignment of the semester be written in first-person then? It’s confusing.”

All too soon though Melina circled back to the issues at hand.

“Seriously though, Charlita, I don’t get your folks. Like, your sister got preggo out of wedlock, and your brother basically ran away at 18. You said your mom was looking for him for, like, a whole week before he decided to write that he’d enlisted. But *you’re* the one they kick out? You’re the purest human being I know.”

“Is that a compliment?” Charlie asked suspiciously.

“Honestly, it really, really is.”

“You’re not making fun of me for being a virgin?”

“Virginity is a construct men made up to control women,” Melina said.

“That’s a bit of a stretch from how Dr. Stone explained it, but yeah, I get your point.”

“Oh, Dr. Stone,” Melina swooned. “I can’t wait to hear how your meeting goes with her. You’ll tell me everything, right?”

Well, so far Melina had expertly managed to extract even Charlie’s deepest secrets, so, yes, she probably would. But she didn’t say that. She handed her empty Chef Boyardee cup to Melina instead.

She and Melina first met Dr. Stone on the day of orientation.

After orientation ended for Charlie with her advising appointment, she contemplated going home, but she couldn’t quite bring herself to leave yet. Instead, in the lobby of the Student Center, she fished out her schedule. Most of her classes would meet in the same building—the business and technology building, which was one of the many that her tour group had walked through—but her Human Sexuality class would meet in the Humanities building. During the tour she hadn’t paid the building much mind because she figured she wouldn’t be spending much time in it.

She noted the room number for her class and decided to take herself on a second, private tour. Outside, the late afternoon doused her skin in an immediate sticky heat. She’d almost been chilly in the Student Services building, so she welcomed the sun’s intense gaze. She glanced at her map of campus, of which she had a duplicate, since her orientation had included one that was printed on bright yellow paper. That one she left in

her bag, while the one on white copy paper her mother had printed this morning was now wrinkled in one corner and smudged with mustard from her roast beef sandwich during lunch.

The Humanities building was located behind the Student Center, the walkway between the two buildings lined with mature trees that curved over the brickwork and provided much needed shade. On either side of the main walkway, brick-laid tributaries ran off to the other buildings, and in between the paths, the wild grasses that had replaced immaculate lawns meant the scents of Heliotrope, Toadflax, and warm chlorophyll dizzied the air. It smelled like paradise on the walk between the buildings, and without a tour guide commanding her attention and hustling the group along, she took her time on this walk, filling her vision with the contrast of the vibrant grasses with the clear sky. Here and there she noted students with their orientation packets spread out around them seated on benches or strapped up on hammocks between the trees. She had the urge to dig out her hammock from the family's camping supplies, which her father stored in his warehouse in the same closet as the zombie survival kits, to find the perfect spot to lounge and consume chapters from her textbooks. She made a mental note to check if her books had been listed on the bookstore's website for pre-order as soon as she made it home.

She reached the Humanities building and climbed the flight of stairs to enter the first floor. Cool air rushed over her when she stepped inside, bringing with it the smell of recently waxed flooring and the ever-present scent of chalk and old books that probably could never be entirely scrubbed out of any institution of learning. Compared to the brilliance of the sun outside, she had to blink to adjust to the warm, low lighting of the

hallway. She could hear a quiet murmur of voices nearby, and she moved instinctively in their direction.

It turned out, of course, the stairs and elevator were on the other side of the hallway, so she traversed back the way she had come, stopping to peek at the bulletin board ensconced in clear plastic that sat opposite the entrance to the building. One bright flyer caught her eye because of its rainbow background.

JOIN ITC's LGBTQIA+ ORG TODAY!!!

The flyer contained too many exclamation points for her liking, but it got the message of excitement across.

Charlie might not have recognized the meaning behind LGBTQIA+ had it not been for one student's attempt to bring more awareness about lesbian, gay, trans, queer, and intersex persons through a Gay-Straight Alliance at her high school during her sophomore year. The student's attempt had died almost before it started, and she remembered him eating lunches by himself and wearing all black with pale foundation that was often smudged as if he either slept in his face paint the night before or cried often. Like the others in her friend group, she'd avoided him religiously. In fact, perhaps she made an even greater point of giving him a wide berth for her own fear of him being able to look into her eyes and see the truth. If he did, would he have announced it over the school's intercom along with the rest of the morning announcements and fated her to the same ostracized existence as him. She never wanted to find out, and so when one of her friends from church had walked up to him in his corner at lunch and told him he was going to Hell, she'd been right next to her, not meeting his gaze but nodding along with

all she'd ever known. She'd been sick every time she thought of him since, and sick at her own behavior.

She leaned a shoulder against the clear plastic case holding the flyers captive. She read nearly every single other piece of paper decorating the cork but the one she most longed to see. But how could she even look at that flyer if she couldn't look at that boy from her school, if she couldn't even look at herself for who she was.

“Hey, Charlie!”

She'd never been so happy to hear her name as when Melina's blue hair crowded her and the girl's bouncy voice made the plastic vibrate. She wasn't sure if she'd see Melina again after orientation.

“Whatcha looking at? Clubs?”

A dozen clubs, from Cosplayers to Gamers Unite to Chess Club (We go to national tournaments!), littered the bulletin board with their search to grow their members. Charlie had been both surprised and pleased to see so many club offerings. She even noted a study abroad course from the history department that would go to Greece in the spring semester.

“I was thinking of trying out for Student Council,” Melina said. She slid strands of her blue hair between her lips, and they came away gummy with lip gloss. It was a gesture she'd been repeating all day. Charlie guessed she had a thing for textures because her nails had been gnawed down and her sparkly nail polish was spotty and entirely gone from one of her index fingers.

“Trying out?” Charlie chuckled. “You really were a theatre nerd, weren't you?”

Melina poked her tongue out in Charlie's direction before returning her attention to the board. "Nice, Anime club! I'm totally joining that. I don't want to pay for a Crunchy Roll subscription but maybe they'll show all the new stuff."

"A what subscription?"

Melina grinned. "A *Crunchy Roll* subscription. Jesus, *you're* such a jock. Why am I even hanging out with you?"

Everything about Melina was both casual and defiant from her light up sneakers she said were custom from All-Star to her hair that was the color of Blue Raspberry Jolly Ranchers to her fishnet stockings to her careless use of cuss words and the Holy Trinity's appearance as expletives and emphases in her sentences.

"Oh, lookie." Melina pointed to the exact flyer Charlie had been fighting with. "They've got a club for queers. I can say that—queers—because I'm part of the community. I'm bisexual."

She squinted at Charlie, and Charlie realized Melina expected some kind of revelation in turn.

"Uh," she whirred, "Nice to meet you, bisexual, I'm Charlie."

Surely this girl that she had met only hours earlier didn't expect her to reveal such deep secrets.

"Ew, dad jokes?" But Melina laughed. She patted Charlie on her shoulder. "It's okay. I'm sure they'll allow you in if you'd like to check out a meeting."

"Yeah, yeah." Charlie shrugged off Melina's hand. "I'm on the intramural soccer team, and I'm taking five classes, so I might not have time for much else."

She let the end of her sentence linger, hoping Melina would push harder against her hesitation. It worked. Melina leapt back into her personal space.

“Let’s go to a bunch of club meetings. We can see what sticks. If they’re awful, we’ll just leave. We won’t even stay for the whole meeting, okay?”

The suggestion was both horrible and perfectly reasonable. “Okay.”

“So what are you doing here anyway? I thought during the tour you said your classes would be in the Business and Technology building.”

“Right,” Charlie hedged. “One of my gen eds is in here. I was just going to see if I could find the room. I didn’t pay much attention during the tour.”

“I’ll walk with you,” Melina offered. “What class? What room number?”

“Um, it’s on the third floor,” Charlie said, then she rushed to change the topic. “But what are *you* doing here? Don’t you need to move into your dorm soon? What did they tell you about the residence halls?”

Thankfully Melina went with Charlie’s deflection. As they climbed the stairs to the third floor, she chattered about resident assistants, roommates, and the miles long manual that outlined what students were not allowed to do in the dorms.

“No alcohol, no smoking of any kind, no candles,” she ticked off, while they wandered along the halls of the third floor. “Can you believe it? I can’t bring my incense to campus. How am I supposed to make my room smell like me?”

Her genuine incredulity brought a chuckle to Charlie’s lips. “What if your roommate didn’t like your incense, even if you could light it?”

“Well, that—that,” Melina sputtered, “simply wouldn’t happen. Who doesn’t like patchouli?”

They reached room number 349, which was the last classroom before the hallway devolved into offices, most of which were tightly shut, the lights switched off.

“This is it,” Charlie said. She peered through the arrow slit of a window into the classroom.

She wasn’t sure what she had been expecting, but the room looked like any she might have found at her own high school—rows upon rows of desks that sported attached chairs and a white board at the front. For some reason, her inflated heart sank a little.

“Looks boring,” she said flatly.

“It’s not what the classroom looks like, it’s what’s being taught,” Melina said sagely. “And who’s teaching it.”

Her gaze turned suspicious. “What days and times does the class you’re taking up here meet?”

“Tuesdays and Thursdays from 12:15 to 1:45. Why?”

Melina cackled. “We’re in the same class! Sexy times with Stone! She’s got a chili pepper next to her name on Rate My Professor. And I thought you were a business major, but you’re just as kinky as me.”

“K-k-kinky?” Charlie choked.

“Yeah, all art majors and writers and stuff are kinky, don’t you know?”

“I didn’t.”

“Well, now you do.”

Charlie was so lost in her conversation with Melina that she failed to hear footsteps approach them and stall nearby until another voice entered the fray.

“So you’re aware, the chili pepper has been removed from the Rate My Professor website. It was used to objectify professors, especially women. I do believe my ratings remain high on the site, but it’s a known covenant amongst the professoriate never to look up oneself.”

Melina’s head swiveled in the direction of the speaker. Charlie felt her guts plummet into her shoes.

“I’m Dr. Stone, and I’ll be your professor for Human Sexuality. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but I believe anyone on this floor could hear the two of you talking.”

The professor was taller than the average woman. Charlie, who considered herself tall at 5’7”, only came up to her nose. She had short black hair cropped into asymmetrical lines and smooth dark skin. She wore a mask that said BLACK LIVES MATTER, a smart fitting silk blouse the color of sapphires, and a patterned scarf around her neck. Her charcoal colored pants had a stylishly high waist and cropped at her ankles. She radiated power and professionalism in a manner Charlie had rarely come across in women. She evoked the preacher’s wife from Charlie’s church from when she’d been in elementary school. She’d feared that woman because she was so different from the rest of the congregation. And the rest of the congregation had eventually run her out.

“I must say,” Dr. Stone continued, “if you’re enrolled in my class for kink, you’ll be vastly disappointed. While we will cover some non-mainstream subjects, you’ll find that I focus mostly on the history of human sexuality.”

She quirked a sculpted brow at Melina.

“That’s not the reason we’re enrolled,” Charlie said, recovering her voice from the brief shock. “I’d very much be interested to learn...” She gestured wildly, as if that would help her find the words, “how we got here. From a religious aspect.”

“I want to learn why we treat men and women so different when it comes to sexuality,” Melina chimed in. “I mean, it’s not fair that they get to ‘sword fight’ in the locker room with each other and compare size, while we’re raised to think our parts are dirty.”

Melina’s openness had Charlie’s ears going up in flame. She studied her sneakers with a fascination she’d not even felt when she picked them out.

“We’ll cover all of that and much more,” Dr. Stone assured. A shard of the ice in her voice melted. “May I ask your names? What year are you?”

“Freshmen, both of us. I’m Melina, and that’s Charlie.”

Charlie nodded and received the full stare from the professor, a gaze she could hardly bear to meet. It occurred to her suddenly she wasn’t sure how she was going to survive this semester if she could hardly look her professor in the eye or speak openly about the materials they’d probably cover in class.

“I don’t usually get many freshmen in this class,” Dr. Stone said, “and those who do enroll often leave after the first class. This will not be an easy ‘A.’ I would urge you both to think deeply as to why you’ve chosen my course.”

With handshakes a thing of the past, there was no brief physical contact accompanying the stark introductions.

“See you next Thursday,” Dr. Stone said. “Perhaps. And fix your mask.”

She pointed a nail with a French manicure in Melina’s direction.

Then she was gone. Her footsteps were heavy on the vinyl flooring, and Charlie wondered how in the world she and Melina didn't hear her approach. Dr. Stone disappeared into one of the only open offices near room 349. When her door closed behind her, Charlie let out the breath she'd been holding.

"That was *magical*," Melina exclaimed, bouncing forward and gripping Charlie's hands. "I'm going to take every class she offers."

*No*, Charlie thought, *that was horrible*. She was second guessing everything that had happened in her meeting with Miss Huaman. She pulled free of Melina's clammy grip and slipped a hand into her left pocket. She fumbled with the business card, smudging her thumb across the raised ink displaying Miss Huaman's contact information. Was it too late to enroll in something else? She could see if that accounting course still had seats. The comfort of the idea blanketed her against the air conditioning's chill in the hall.

"Hey, you okay?" Melina sucked her bottom lip into her mouth.

"You have to pull your mask up," Charlie hissed. "What if she comes back?"

"It ruins my make-up." But, pouting, Melina did as she'd been told, hiking her Sailor Moon neck gaiter over her nose. "Besides, I've had, like, ten vaccinations."

With a quick calculation in her head, Charlie doubted Melina had received that many shots since the pandemic's start three years ago, but she was one to talk. She'd been vaxxed against COVID because of her doctor's persuasion had worn down her mother's will. Her father still hadn't had a single shot, despite the CDC's warnings.

Suddenly irritated beyond words with Melina, she feigned looking at the time on her phone.

“Sorry, but I’ve got to go. I have work tonight.”

She didn’t. Her father’s offices closed at 7 pm, and it was close to 4:30 now.

What she would miss if she didn’t head out was family dinner, and she knew both her parents would be rabid to hear about her first day at Inlet. But she couldn’t very well tell that to someone who was 18 and would be living in the residence halls in a few days. Melina would have all the freedom in the world, even if she couldn’t light her incense.

It was true that she could light as many candles as she wanted in her room at home, but there were other rules, many unspoken instead of listed in a manual, that she had to follow there. Not discussing sex openly was certainly one of them. When her sister had gotten pregnant, she’d expected her mother to tell her the stork delivered the baby. The story hadn’t been much more involved than that, but she’d figured out that somehow Josey’s boyfriend figured into the equation, since the two of them were getting married.

“See you later?” Melina asked.

“Sure.”

She started to walk away when Melina caught her arm.

“Hold on. I’ve got to get your number. How else am I gonna find you again before class with Stone?”

Yeah, the class that Charlie would hopefully be dropping.

But, obediently, Charlie went through the mechanics of exchanging information. Then she was down the stairs, leaving Melina behind. She pictured Melina knocking on Dr. Stone’s door and demanding what she wanted taught and on what weeks those topics should be covered. She shook her head and left the Humanities building behind. She took

the brick walkway back to the Student Services building and cut through its cool interior to the parking lot where her Subaru had been baking in the sun all day.

When she sat in the driver's seat, she realized she'd been holding back tears. She cried through placing her messenger bag on the floor next to her. She cried while she adjusted her seatbelt over her lap and while she started the engine. It took her until more than halfway home to identify why she was crying. It wasn't because of Melina or her conversation with Dr. Stone. It wasn't because she'd enrolled in Human Sexuality during her appointment with Ms. Huaman—well, not entirely.

Crying was easier than saying all of the things that she wished to speak. Clearly she and Melina differed on that opinion.

She pulled into her home's gravel driveway, and her father's family history washed over her. Lights were on in the farmhouse where generations of her family had laughed together, broken bread, celebrated holidays, and mourned death. Beyond the farmhouse she could see the strange metal structure of her father's workshop and make out the tobacco shed much further down the grounds. The smell of worked land and burning metal entered her nose, and it was like she entered a different world, the one she'd known all her life, the one where she knew her place.

She parked beside her father's black pick-up truck and cut her engine. She pulled down her visor and checked her face. She forced herself to smile, and with the uptilt of her mouth she doubted her parents would be able to see she'd been crying.

The front door opened. Ginny waved. Charlie took a deep breath, grabbed her belongings, and left the strange new world of Inlet behind. She rushed into her mother's arms and let the long hug and the Avon perfume envelope her whole.

“Hi, Ham. I made your favorite,” Ginny said.

“Thanks, Mom.”

She tucked her hand inside her mother’s, and together, they entered the home where at 6:45 pm sharp, the family would sit down together for a dinner of cheesy chicken casserole. Tonight, Charlie couldn’t fathom leaving all of this behind, not for a class and not for some imagined woman who might come into her future.

She blinked away the image of Dr. Stone teaching God knows what in that class of hers, shook Melina’s electric blue hair out of her mind. It simply wasn’t worth it

## Chapter 7:

Charlie arrived at her first class with Dr. Stone twenty minutes early. The previous class was still meeting, so the door to room 349 in the Humanities building was shut tight. The third-floor hall had yet to be revived with a flood of students traveling from one class to the next with a 15-minute period between sessions, so Charlie sank to the scuff-marked floor and stretched her legs out long in front of her. She unstrapped her messenger bag from over her shoulder, then rubbed her thighs, especially around her knees. She could tell she needed to work in some time in the weight room if she was going to get back into top shape for soccer.

She'd had her first practice with the co-ed intramural team the previous afternoon at 4:30 pm. The team was unlike varsity, which she'd made her junior and senior year of high school, and it was unlike any of those her school teams had played. Not only were men and women mixed together, but people came from all walks of life from the retired female long-haul trucker to the non-binary ultra-marathoner as lean as a skim milk string cheese to the twin brothers where one skipped leg day and the other overdid it. Charlie was surprised to find herself one of the youngest members of the team. Many of them grabbed beers and burritos after practice together, while several others rushed home to their kids and significant others or jobs.

They also practiced on artificial turf instead of real grass, and the muscle memory Charlie had from digging her cleats into fresh dirt didn't apply. She fell several times after slip-sliding around on the surface and found all her reaction times, her punts, and her ball game were milli-seconds off. She'd walked off the field with a sore ego and a sore butt. At home she'd treated herself to a long Epsom salt soak and replayed the

practice in her mind until she fell asleep. It was strange to find herself needing to prove she belonged to this new team that competed only for fun and had players that were probably also having mid-life crises. She also found she didn't know how to play with men on the field. She'd been used to the boys' soccer team intermingling with the girls', but most of that came from players dating one another, crossing paths at practice time, and sharing assistant coaches. She'd expected the intramural league to be easy, her spot as a better than average player won without really being fought. She'd been wrong.

She was still lost in the memory of the slippery, spongy field when another student joined her on the third floor, sat against the wall opposite her, and waved.

"I'm Z," the student said.

She recognized them immediately. Z was the non-binary ultra-marathoner who'd introduced themselves to Charlie with "they/them" pronouns at practice the night before. Charlie had tried not to stare when they met because she realized immediately how creepy it was to wonder about Z's anatomy. The other half of her fascination had been from meeting a person with a non-binary gender identity for the first time.

Z had lovely large green eyes like two precious pieces of jade inlaid in their pupils. They dressed today in a skirt and heels high enough that Charlie winced thinking about all of the gaps in the campus' brick laid walkways that were lovely to look at but less predictable to walk on than solid concrete. She could see Z's dark beard peeking out from their plain white mask, which contrasted the pale highlights in their shoulder-length hair.

"Charlie, right?" Z said from their spot across the hallway.

"That's right. And you're Z. It was nice to meet you last night at practice."

“You too. I think you’ll love the team. By the way, you did some great defense work.”

“Not hardly.” Charlie dropped her gaze back to where her hands were still kneading out muscle knots around her kneecaps. She stretched her legs back out in the middle of the hallway. “We had a real grass field at my high school, and that’s what I’m used to playing on.”

Z waved a manicured hand. “You’ll get the hang of the turf. I think you might even end up liking it better. When you take those tumbles, it doesn’t hurt quite so much.”

Charlie laughed. “I don’t know about that. I’m pretty beat up today.”

“That’s just because you’re one of those fearless players. You pulled out moves I’d never have the courage to make. Too worried I’ll mess up my hips again.”

“Really?” Charlie sat up a little straighter against the wall, genuinely interested in Z’s perspective and also thankful that in all of her years of playing she’d never had anything worse happen injury-wise than a concussion she couldn’t even remember from when she was playing in the 10-year-old division of her county’s junior soccer league and a minor sprain her sophomore year of high school that she’d worried would mess with her chances to move from JV to varsity.

Most students didn’t arrive to the first class with Dr. Stone as early as Charlie and Z. The two of them talked practice for another minute before other people filtered onto the third-floor hall. Several spoke highly of Dr. Stone, mentioning they’d taken other courses with her. That included Z who described her as “tough but fair.”

Five minutes before the start of class, most students had settled themselves in the classroom. Dr. Stone was unpacking a briefcase at the lecture station at the front of the

room. Melina, on the other hand, arrived only one minute before class started. She and the others who were almost late received a reprimanding look from Dr. Stone that Charlie instantly decided she never, ever wanted to be on the receiving end of. It also meant Charlie and Melina did not sit together. Charlie didn't save her a seat because this wasn't high school home room. She was sure she'd look as young as she actually was if she'd insisted the seat beside her belonged to someone else.

At 12:15 sharp, Dr. Stone began class. Her voice was as firm as Charlie remembered from their first meeting, but it carried none of the over-the-top volume that Charlie's Econ professor's did. She'd moved from toward the front of that class to the back row to escape his overenunciated yelling. Instead, Dr. Stone's voice made most of her students lean toward her like little wildflowers chasing afternoon sun.

"This will not just be a syllabus class," Dr. Stone said once a student had finished handing out the booklet of stapled pages containing the course's trajectory. "We will use every minute of every class period. You will also find that while I assigned only one reader to be purchased from the bookstore that our reading load is quite heavy. If you'll flip to page 6 of your syllabus, we will go over the expectations for each week."

The reading load was heavy, and it would require either reading on a screen or printing out dozens of pages at the library each week, but Charlie calculated the cost of printing out the pages would still be significantly less than purchasing all of the books the selected readings would probably come from. Assignments included leading a class alongside Dr. Stone. Dr. Stone emphasized that part of the cycle of learning was teaching, which Charlie had certainly never heard before. It would also include a twenty-page final paper, longer than every paper, even the ones for dual credit classes, than Charlie had

ever written before. By the end of the hour and a half, her brain was as rung out as her body was feeling. She half-staggered out of the classroom and sagged against Melina who looked as drained as she felt.

“Are we going to survive this class?” Charlie asked her.

“We have to,” Melina said, patting Charlie on the back. “Because I’ve decided dearest Dr. Stone is life itself.”

To that, Charlie found she had no argument. The professor seemed to have a way with enthraling her students, despite all she asked of them in the classroom. They headed down to the first floor and found seats together near the building’s westward exit.

“We should probably start on our readings for Thursday,” Charlie said.

She and Melina pulled out their readers and began paging through the book’s introduction to the study of Human Sexuality.

On Thursday’s class with Dr. Stone, the herd had thinned significantly. Apparently, the warnings Dr. Stone had given the students about the workload had intimidated more than a couple of people from coming back. This time, Melina arrived earlier and snagged the desk next to Charlie.

Charlie found she liked the more intimate class setting better than her courses that were maxed out at 25 people. Still, she knew those classes of 25 students paled in comparison to the number of students in freshman lecture halls at most universities. Here, every time Dr. Stone’s eyes met hers, she felt truly seen, not just another number to tick off in a crowd of other numbers. She felt like Dr. Stone solidified her own understanding of herself as flesh and blood and power.

During that second class period, Dr. Stone introduced herself as a co-advisor to the campus's LGBTQIA+ club. She invited the students to the club's first meeting open to new members, which would be the following week. Melina practically punched a hole in Charlie's shoulder with her insistence that they should go.

"We already said we would. We're going to a bunch of club meetings, right?"

Charlie reminded her.

"Yeah, but Dr. Stoney-Stone is also the advisor. We can never have enough Stone!"

"Unless the stones are in your kidneys."

"Ugh, you're back to your dad jokes."

Charlie was glad her mask hid just how bright her smile was. She loved every minute of everything at Inlet so far. She loved the feeling of discovering she had wings and feeling herself take flight into territories that before she'd only dreamed. She felt seen, felt heard, felt *real*. Felt like for the first time she could be all of herself.

"You know, Melina," she said. "I think I'm gay."

Saying the words aloud, she thought she might burst into flames but not from shame but because she was a phoenix in full glow.

"Oh, Charlita," Melina said, patting Charlie's arm much more gently than before.

"You pinged my gaydar the moment I met you

## Chapter 8:

The first time Charlie and Melina hung out in Melina's dorm room after Charlie's coming out, Melina asked her a question.

“Who are you, Charlene Willamena Berkeley?”

It was late. Melina's roommate was asleep in her bunk. The fairy lights on Melina's side of the room danced for Peter Pan like dozens of Tinkerbells clad in every pastel shade. Charlie and Melina lay in Melina's bed together, Melina on her back. Charlie on her side with her back against the wall. It was the only way the two of them could fit on the narrow mattress. Instead of a pillow, Charlie had a couple of Squishmellows propping up her head, and their fur was far softer than Christmas', but she preferred her stuffed turtle, even if she didn't mind Melina's patchouli body spray that didn't quite mask her Candy Confection vape juice that didn't contain tobacco.

Who was she? Charlie was a tinkerer who enjoyed habits that others found strange. The boys didn't understand why she ordered her own cabin filter, topped off the fluids in her car, or could jack up a car to change a tire when she and friends inevitably had blow-outs on country roads littered with debris. She also liked to embroider, a habit passed down from her grandmother on her mother's side. She'd always found the practice of stitches carved like tributaries through soft earth. She didn't even mind the prick of the needle against the pads of her finger. In fact, she had found the bubble of red that would blossom up on some of the body's thickest skin from such a small puncture a strange kind of wonder. She didn't really like running, the way some of her teammates did, but she did it anyway because she hated starting the season with low stamina and loved, in equal measure, the push and pull of air from her lungs that was as steady as the way the earth

could be seen breathing through the tide. She liked reading novels that her mother described as gumdrops or other types of candy that could be popped into the mouth and swallowed within one or two bites. Since she was a child, she'd begged to go to the public library the way her sister begged to go shopping and her brother begged to take karate one year, then swimming the next, then drum lessons after that. Her sister hated the drive to the library that was in the same town as the Wal-Mart and the Publix. Her brother was too loud for the librarians' liking, and her mother didn't consume fiction. She preferred substantive reading like publications from their church's publishing house, devotionals, and her lady's book club that focused on the latest cooking, gardening, and home making texts and made for excellent holiday parties held in homes where the expectation was that members not only read the texts but put into practice the craft of domesticity with almost as much fervor as they practiced their religion. Still, her mother had humored her desires to read, probably because it meant she was quiet and out of the way, while her older siblings were quite the opposite to raise.

She wasn't like either of her siblings.

Charlie's older brother was off in New England now, working as an accountant for some textiles company that had offshored most of its unskilled labor. In fact, Benny, that was her brother's name, or Bernard on any official documents, mentioned the fact that he also might be shipped off to Indonesia or Malaysia to cut company costs at any second. But he liked traveling, had a taste for it, after four years in the Navy, which had gifted him access to the G.I. Bill and a career in accounting. He always mentioned his love for traveling, too, and while the thought of him in East Asia filled Charlie with a

distant kind of sadness, it was the notion of his continued international adventures that soured her mouth with jealousy.

The furthest she'd ever been was to Wichita, Kansas for a family reunion on her mother's side, and while they'd been to Cowtown Museum, eaten sliders at the original White Castle, and watched a Falcons' game football game, she'd been bored out of her mind by the endless stretches of grassland with no sizable body of water in sight. It was almost like her body had shriveled up without the wetland and sea nearby. Besides, her distant Midwestern cousins had been too into 4-H for her liking, and one of them smelled like the prized goats they showed all over the region.

She'd been desperate to get back home to more familiar territory where as long as there was the division of land and sea, she wouldn't get too lost. She couldn't name all the states in the Midwest correctly on her 9th grade Civics test, and she didn't want to. As far as she was concerned, the entire Midwest was one giant stalk of corn with kernels scattered about that had become the names of towns and cities she never planned on visiting. Even the name Wichita sounded fishy to her. It had "witch" in it for goodness sake! Later, she'd learn about the confederation of Southern Plains Native American tribes or the Wichita people, but that would not be in Civics or h\*story in high school. It would be on a placemat at a gun smoke restaurant in Orlando, while the family was there for her older sister's wedding.

Josephine, her sister who was named for a great-great-aunt on her father's side, married into a wealthy South Carolinian family with land in Charleston and Summerville, South Carolina. Josey hadn't attended college, but she'd done well in getting her MRS degree. Josey had worked her way up through their family's HOA management business

that had clientele, many of them wealthy and or retired neighborhoods, who prided themselves on supporting local business, who wanted that family touch, that Southern hospitality. That was how she'd met her husband who was also diligently involved in his family's real estate operations. It had been love, convenience, and a smart match at first sight. In Medieval times and in current times in some parts of the world, Josey's parents would have gifted her to him, along with a sizable dowry to secure the union. Instead, Josey gifted him something else.

A pregnancy.

They were married a month and a week after the families found out. And perhaps to make up for what Charlie's mom had called Josey's "lose legs," her father had taken out a second mortgage to pay for a wedding at Disney World. It was the biggest and fanciest event Charlie had ever been to, and despite whining, she'd worn a stiff dress, stiffer shoes, and thrown fragrant rose petals down the aisle for her sister to crush with her high heels.

The goal of the extravagance, one of the aunts from Wichita had said after she guzzled four glasses of champagne to Charlie, was to dazzle all the attendees into barely noticing the persistent bump of Josey's belly. "Get them talking about the wedding venue, the reception on the steamboat, or this champagne." The aunt finished half another glass in a single gulp, then leaned to whisper in Charlie's ear with breath that smelled equal parts alcohol and stomach acid. "Not that poor babe conceived out of wedlock. I wonder if your dad will hold this one." So the family in Wichita hadn't forgotten that incident when Charlie's father refused to hold one of the younger cousins because its

mother had kept it after getting pregnant during a drunken one-night stand. “I wonder,” her distant relative continued, “if she’ll go the way Sherry did.”

Sherry? Charlie had never heard of a “Sherry” on either side of her family before. Did she mean “Sharon?” Every family probably had a “Sharon” somewhere in the mix of second cousins.

She studied this woman who she barely knew but who supposedly shared some of the same DNA with her. As far as she knew, her sister didn’t know this woman well either—yet, the aunt spoke with an authority only one allowed intimacy into family affairs should be able to muster. Who’d told her about Josey’s pregnancy? Charlie didn’t lose much sleep at night over her sister’s well-being, but she already had a fierce loyalty to the potato-sized person that was currently earthed in the middle of her sister. One day she was going to be an aunt, herself, and she swore right then that she’d never join the aunt network, which seemed to be a game of telephone only with adults, more alcohol, and wrinkles that cropping up weeds in a lawn, no matter the number of facials and Botox treatments they applied.

“Can I have some champagne?” Charlie asked.

Her aunt had laughed uproariously, but she hadn’t said no. She handed the glass flute of shimmering liquid the color of watered down sun that she held in her *other* claw-like hand. Another part of the aunt network, Charlie had noticed, was double fisting. She took the biggest gulp of the champagne, which was much prettier to look at than her aunt’s melting make-up. She almost threw it back up. It was only with the willpower she’d come by honestly thanks to her father that she kept it down and stole a second swallow before her aunt wrestled the dregs from her and claimed them for herself.

A wave of dizziness had washed over Charlie, but it was a pleasant kind of dizziness, like she suddenly needed glasses to correct a mild astigmatism, like the inside of the steamboat had gone a bit dim. “I’m going to look for my cousin,” she told her aunt in slow motion. Her aunt had responded in slow motion, too, a nod that was more head-jiggling than a clear yes or no. Out on the deck, Charlie had welcome the slap of chilly air on her sweaty face. She’d stood out there, still trapped in slow motion, her limbs feeling fuzzy and her brain chugging slow. She’d learned she liked counting in her head then: just 0, 1, 2, 3, at the time, but later by 2s and 3s and 5s and 7s and 9s. Many nights that was how she fell asleep, counting the way numbers dancing up and down with one another, each of the times tables fitting together like a family. She wondered again who “Sherry” might be.

Then, she counted and counted, and it was late at night when she began also to count the ways that she was an odd number trying to crowd in with a family of evens. Worse still, she was prime number, not neatly divisible, not included in the patterns she’d memorized since she was young. She’d realized she was gay a long time before she came out, maybe it was at her sister’s wedding where Cinderella made a guest appearance, maybe it was the way Marley’s thick pigtails swished up and down on the swing in second grade, maybe it was since always that she’d been this way—and because she was gay.

When Benny and Josey were both out of the family home, the energy shifted toward a peace that would, unfortunately, prove to be temporary. Her father spent less time holed up in his workshop. Her mother ordered less from Avon and Amazon and other services that delivered enough cardboard annually to the home to destroy a forest,

but, hey, at least Frankie always had boxes in which to nap. And Charlie found herself taking up more space, in conversations at the dinner table, in corners of the home where she'd leave an article of clothing without worrying her sister would steal it or dream journals where she recorded shape-shifting into eagles or forgetting she'd taken an extra class all semester and had to cram for a final exam, or poetry prompt books where she scribbled about seeing God in family recipes and odes to soccer—from sweaty uniforms to her coach's purple whistle, to the nubs of her cleats that the turf wore down like bristles on stubborn grease—that her brother wasn't drawing penises in them with Sharpie.

Neither recording her dreams nor the poems she'd start made much sense to her once she reread them, and she figured that's why her mother never brought up paging through them, though Charlie assumed she did. She got used to being the center of attention when it came to grades and the monetary awards from her father that came with A's but also to the singularity of her parents' displeasure, like when she had to miss the Wednesday night service for school events or expressed her desire to skip prom altogether. "But it's a night you'll never forget," her mother insisted. And from her father, "I know the Stevenson boy asked you to go. He's a good kid. I like him. Say yes."

She didn't say yes, but she did go to prom, and she spent half the night adjusting her uncomfortable dress and the other half dodging offers to dance with boys' soccer team. She'd faked sick at prom and a couple days after to avoid her family's questions of how it went and to put into action words she knew she couldn't speak about wishing she was brave enough to wear a suit or to dance with one of the girls on the JV team, a junior

named Prairie with braces to fix her gap-toothed grin who had floppy legs and arms that Charlie had wanted wound around her since the girl first showed up at practice.

She'd even gone so far as to snoop in the girls' locker room while the teams were showering to see what shampoo Floppy used, then bought the same kind when her mother placed a Walmart order the following week. After that, in the shower in her ensuite at home, she'd been enveloped in wet heat behind a glass door, smelling Floppy, and immediately following a moment of such bliss that her entire body buzzed, then convulsed as if she'd been revived by an AED, she began weeping inexplicitly.

She washed the shampoo from her hair and from where it had contaminated the rest of her skin, then tossed the wet, open bottle out of the shower where it spilled glittery, pink globules of cashmere and rose into the grout. Rinsing herself, she opened her eyes. The sting of shampoo in her eyes and the chemical taste of it in her tongue felt like penance, like the one time her mother had washed her mouth out with soap when she mimicked a cuss word her brother had uttered earlier in the day among only the siblings.

She never cussed in front of her parents again. Those kinds of words only ever bubbled up in her mind in fits of rage. The unwelcome hot spring of those words became a part of her second, secret life, the one she didn't record in her poetry prompt books or her dream journals. This shampoo, and the sacred act of showering in the smell of that girl was supposed to be a part of that second, secret life, too. And it was, until it wasn't.

Maybe the glass door to the shower ruined it.

Maybe it was the watchful, male eye of God on her body.

Maybe it was the way she policed herself and every aspect of herself.

Likely it was each of these combined with that pleasure that she'd never known before.

So she sank to her knees, doubled over, and gave herself up in prayer, asking God that why, if He was indeed watching her while she showered, he wouldn't save her from herself.

*Who are you?* Melina's question still hung in the air between them.

"I'm not sure if I've ever had an orgasm," Charlie whispered.

"What?" Melina exclaimed, too loud as always. "Where did that come from?"

Right, Charlie thought, Melina wasn't privy to the legion of random memories that paraded through her mind at what had been a simple question from her friend.

Charlie held up a finger to her lips, then pointed that same finger at the lump of Melina's sleeping roommate.

Melina turned over to face her. It meant they were sharing breath. Self-conscious, Charlie made sure to breathe through her nose. Melina's breath, on the other hand, was sugary sweet from the vape she was not supposed to smoke in her dorm room, but that, of course, she puffed away at anyway. Her eyes were sleepy. Charlie braced herself to hear about each and every orgasm Melina had ever had.

"You know what?" Melina's eyes cleared for a moment from their smoke-induced haze. "I'm not sure I've ever had an orgasm either. I mean, it's felt good, better when I touch myself, honestly, than when I've been with guys. But..."

Her overblown pupils swirled once again with her high. She sighed out her candy breath all over Charlie's face. Charlie wiped away the condensation that came with it.

"What about when you've been with a girl?" she asked.

“I haven’t yet,” Melina said. “Not all the way.”

She held up her arm and indicated one of the many plastic bracelets. “That’s what this one is for. I can’t wait to break it. I bet I’ll come for sure then.”

A loud harumph came from across the dark side of the room. Melina’s roommate turned over, fumbled for something in the drawer of her bedside table. Both Melina and Charlie lay frozen in Melina’s bed, illuminated by the trickster fairy lights.

“Get yourselves each one of these, then don’t stop using it until you feel like you’re going to pee.”

Melina’s roommate chucked something across the room. It landed on Melina’s lap. For a moment, Charlie and Melina stared at it. The thing was teal and glittery, part of it rubbery and part of it plasticky. It reminded Charlie a bit of a Bomb Pop, though it had an extra appendage.

“Is that...your vibrator?” Melina asked.

“Fuck yeah,” said her roommate. Then she rolled back over and pulled her pillow over her head.

“Eww,” Melina exclaimed, loud enough for the entire floor to hear.

She kicked her feet until the vibrator tumbled off the bed and plopped onto the rug. To Charlie’s horror, it started vibrating on the ground and skittering across it like a cockroach flitting its wings. She half expected the vibrator to take flight it was going at it so violently.

From beneath her pillow, Melina’s roommate cackled.

## Chapter 9:

The afternoon of the LGBTQIA+ club's first meeting for prospective members, Charlie's legs stopped working. She was strolling through the first level of the humanities building with Melina who was bouncing a step or two in front of her when her feet froze, and she couldn't convince them to go again. Melina, meanwhile, skipped further and further ahead, oblivious to Charlie's problem. Soon it would be awkward to call after her through the hall, which was still bustling with students at 4:45 pm on a Friday.

"Melina," she croaked, then repeated louder, "Melina."

Her second plaintive cry reached her friend whose blue ponytail stopped swishing its way through the river of more naturally colored heads of hair. Melina stared at her for a moment, realized Charlie wasn't moving, and headed back toward her.

"What's going on? We don't want to be late." Melina linked her arm through Charlie's but failed to make her budge.

Charlie, was, much physically larger and stronger than her friend, though with Melina's giant personality, they were both prone to forgetting that fact.

Seemingly stymied, Melina stopped trying to force her forward and peered up at her. Charlie took a deep breath, then tried to place her predicament into words.

"I can't go to this meeting," she said.

"Why not? You forget you had other plans?"

Charlie shook her head.

"You forgot your phone in your car?" Melina did a pat check up and down Charlie's body. "Nope, it's in your hand."

"It's—If my parents found out, I went to this, they'd kill me," she whispered.

“Why?” Melina looked genuinely like she could not fathom a single reason in the entire universe why anyone’s parents wouldn’t support attending an LGBTQIA+ club meeting. “You’re gay, right? Don’t they want you to find your people? Get a pretty girlfriend, then marry her and adopt a dozen cute kiddos? Oh, Charlita, you’ll make the cutest moo-moo.”

“Moo-moo?” Charlie asked, barely able to keep up with the future Melina had just outlined on her behalf.

“Yeah, isn’t that an adorable nickname for ‘mom?’”

“Moo? You clearly didn’t grow up anywhere near a farm,” Charlie responded. “Besides, isn’t a muumuu some kind of dress?”

“It’s adorable,” Melina said again, eyebrows knitting together. “Now, stop being silly, and come to this meeting with me.”

“My parents,” Charlie started. She cleared her throat. “They don’t support gay people.”

The hallway was beginning to empty, indicating the start of another class session and the start of the club meeting.

“I don’t understand.”

Charlie turned her head sharply to retort, but she saw in Melina’s eyes that she meant what she’d said.

“What’s not to support? Humans loving humans. That’s a wonderful thing.”

It sure sounded like it, the way that Melina put it.

“My parents don’t see it that way,” Charlie said slowly. “Their church, *my* church, doesn’t see it that way. Being gay, it’s an abomination. It’s temptation from the Devil.”

“That’s insane,” Melina said. “Pretty much everyone is bisexual to some degree. That’s been proven by science, and it’s in all of history. Even animals are bi. And the devil? That’s some hu-ju boo-goo bullshit right there. Yet, I bet your parents wouldn’t like me because I’m a witch. I do not get, wait, let me guess, your parents are hardcore Catholics, right? At least mine are the good kind of Episcopalians. Live and let live. Love and let love is their motto. One of their priests was gay a few years back.”

“We’re Southern Baptist,” Charlie responded. “We have been as far back as I can remember.”

“*Worse* than Catholics then,” Melina said. She hissed, then held up the sign of the cross with her fingers toward Charlie.

“Ironic,” Charlie monotoned.

“You can do this,” Melina said, and her voice sounded like she was soothing Josey’s toddlers.

Charlie stared down the hall, not really seeing the patterns on the vinyl flooring or the doors to classrooms pockmarking the walls. This was *college*. Wasn’t this what she’d wanted? To grow beyond her high school, the church she’d grown up in, and her family’s expectations? She’d wanted a chance, a space to be all of herself, no longer compartmentalized and a keeper of secrets.

“It’s not like you have to come out to everyone,” Melina said. “You don’t even have to say much if you don’t want to.”

But that was the thing. A part of her was desperate to speak more and louder than she’d ever dared before in the entirety of her life.

“You could even go by another name.”

Charlie furrowed her brows at Melina. “Dr. Stone knows my name.”

“She knows your birthname and a nickname. But she of all people wouldn’t tell you that you have to go by Charlie or Charlene for the rest of your life.”

That made sense. They’d talked about dead names for a section on their last class.

“What about Billie?” Charlie whispered.

“Like Billie Eilish? I love it. I love her.”

It was hard not to get caught up in the excitement that accompanied Melina wherever she went.

“Ok,” Charlie said. “Billie can do this. Even if I can’t.”

Melina tugged on her sleeve. This time, she allowed herself to be propelled forward all the way to the end of the hall where only one more obstacle awaited them. The door to classroom where the meeting was being held was shut. Beyond it, Charlie listened to muffled voices. Through the arrow slit of a window, she watched bodies milling around.

Had it not been for Melina who did not let go of her and who opened the door without a beat of hesitation, she probably would have left. She was never so thankful to have a hand on her arm and a door opened as she was now.

They walked into the room side-by-side. The room was warm and smelled like warm sugar. Dr. Stone sat at the head of tables that had been moved into a semi-circle. A man sat beside her, the co-advisor who worked in the admissions department that Dr. Stone mentioned in class. There was iced tea and lemonade, along with a selection of fruit and pastries that students bustled around. A few eyes met Charlie’s; however, next

to Melina, she felt invisible, because all the attention turned to her and her bright hair and clothes. Charlie preferred it that way.

Only Dr. Stone held her gaze for a long moment. The professor tugged her KN-95 mask down to take a bite of pineapple. She was smiling, her teeth bright against her dark skin. It was the first smile Charlie had seen from her tough professor because it was the first time Dr. Stone had lowered her mask in front of her. It made Charlie's heart sing. She was suddenly so glad she'd come. She didn't even need to be Billie anymore. Dr. Stone saw her for who she was. Dr. Stone made her proud to be Charlie

## Chapter 10:

For Charlie, coming out to her parents didn't go like it did for Patrick on Schitt's Creek. There were no caring, queer co-producers writing a happy ending, no hotlines listed or websites like [itgetsbetter.com](http://itgetsbetter.com) after closing credits. Charlie hadn't even chosen to come out, but rather found herself outed by her mother. The conversation, not ever meant to come up in the first place, began when Charlie's mother was cleaning her room—snooping, more like, through the faux leather messenger bag from Target Charlie had picked out on their shopping trip two weeks before the start of her freshman semester at Inlet Technical College. There was certainly nothing to be cleaned out of that backpack by a mother, aside maybe from empty Sweet Mint gum wrappers and loose paperclips. Just as Charlie's mother had dug around between her mattresses, under her bed, and in every desk drawer when Charlie was growing up. As a result, Charlie had learned to be sneakier, to ask friends to hide things at their houses, to keep things like the cigarettes she'd tried (and hated) in a cobwebby fish pot in the backyard and to bury other things like candy wrappers deep in the trash where her mother didn't have the stomach to dig for them. Having a car, once she turned sixteen, made hiding things a bit easier because she had a friend hold onto her spare key and claimed she'd lost it, which meant no one from her family could get into her car without her key, which she took with her everywhere just to be safe. Coming out was never something she planned to do.

She'd convinced herself a few years ago that she would live dual lives like a secret agent, only her secret wasn't that she killed people for the government; it was that she liked girls. To Charlie's family, however, killing people for the government was much more acceptable than liking the same sex—they didn't throw military family

members out; they didn't prescribe them therapy, more time at church, or a claim a religious institution of higher education could fix their life choices.

It would arrive in Charlie's mind much later to wonder why her mother was so intent to expose her children's supposed crimes to begin with. Why did the woman have such a fixation on proving her guilt and worries? And why, if she did have to discover what she considered to be awful truths, did she have to spout them to others in the family? It was like the woman was cursed to go where she didn't belong and then blab about it to anyone who would listen. Those realizations, though, wouldn't occur to Charlie until much later in life when she had children of her own.

When Charlie's mother chose to go through her daughter's messenger bag with the guising of Lysol-ing the thing down, Charlie happened to be in the shower after intramural soccer practice—she should have been less predictable in her routine, apparently when her mother entered her room with an attached bath on the third floor of the family home.

In that backpack were things one might expect in any college student's possession—pamphlets overstuffing a folder from orientation a week ago, textbooks from the classes she'd had that day, a crushed Apple Pie Lara bar, and an Apple Macbook Air, the charger discarded in the backseat of Charlie's Subaru, along with her duffel bag from soccer practice. What not every parent will find or much less expect to find was a class the family had not chosen together when they went through the online course catalogue to help Charlie prepare for her first meeting with an advisor who would be enrolling her in classes. She also didn't expect to find, never would have fathomed to find, though she was most certainly in search of something she considered taboo, was a flyer for a meeting

for the campus's LGBTQIA+ and the feminine scrawl of a phone number amid notes she recognized her daughter had written.

The assault once Charlie emerged in only a towel with her hair still dripping wet from the attached bath was swift and brutal. Her mother tossed accusations, while shaking the flyer for the GSA like it was a magazine of bullets and Charlie planned to shoot up her school. Her face lit up like a stop sign. She'd recently redyed her hair blonde, so even her scalp turned that violent shade of red that could not be good for anyone's blood pressure. The yelling drew the attention of Charlie's father who also barged into the bedroom where his daughter wore only a towel. Charlie, herself, was shaking and blotchy, the fear stink luring every predator in the woods behind the family home to the lot. On the carpet, her tears and the droplets of water from the tips of her hair would look the same, would fade away until one couldn't tell the carpet had ever absorbed so much sadness at all.

The accusations though strangely weren't first that Charlie was gay; it was that she was supporting *them, the gays*. When Charlie tried to lie which she always had done to appease her parents once she learned that being sneaky was the way to survive living in such a strict home—her brother had chosen different, disastrous ways of rebelling that involved tattoos and yelling and eventually moving to New England to marry a Jewish woman. But by this time, her father had gone a deadly kind of silent, while he read the notes that Charlie had scribed during that meeting that would change her life in so many ways. He was not blind to the phone number either, though neither parent—and this was not actually a lie—would believe that it was from a *young man* who was an officer in

both the LGBTQIA+ club and Phi Theta Kappa, the national community college honor society.

But Charlie had written her heart, her own truths, which were not her parents' truths for her, down on that flyer, and while her mother was yelling, her father was silent reading them all. And instead of lovingly embracing the child that they had created for who she was, there was the accusation that *this* was not, could not, be their daughter—as though an interloper had crawled into her body. The look that Charlie's father gave her—that she was some *thing* and not a human being anymore—was enough to put a spring in her step when she packed up what she could fit into her car and drove away.

“We'll be in touch,” were her father's last words before he closed the front door on her, and she heard the lock click, though it was a gesture because he hadn't actually taken her key to the residence from her.

She didn't have anywhere to go. She imagined her mother would call her grandparents, then everyone in the church directory. Most of Al's friends from high school had gone away for college, and those who didn't probably wouldn't welcome a couch surfer late on a weeknight evening—besides, she wasn't out to anyone from her high school either. The school had shut down a petition for a Gay-Straight Alliance a few years ago, and most of the WASPs in attendance there had sentiments about gays, black folks, and other minorities that Charlie was hoping to escape in college. In her mind, the college experience didn't have to include moving to another state to disassociate herself with high school. She had planned to come out and to keep it a secret—but there was a saying her mother loved about plans: that even the best laid ones could lead straight to hell.

She'd never slept in the back of her Subaru before, though there were commercials with people doing that on camping trips. Her mother had always told her that if she had to sleep in her car over night to do so either at a police station or a hospital, those were the safest locations. So Charlie drove to the nearest hospital and bunkered down. She had enough money to stay in a hotel for several nights, maybe even for a few weeks—but she worked for her family's company, meaning that she was pretty sure that if she didn't have a place to live, then she probably also didn't have a job any long, so the money she had would need to last her until she could find somewhere else.

The entire situation was both so surreal and also somehow so expected that she'd had plans and disbelief spiraling in equal measures through her mind. Had they wanted her out so quickly because her sister would be by with her niece and nephew, and the family wouldn't want her exposing the children to her lifestyle—her nonexistent lifestyle because she didn't have a girlfriend. She'd never even gone on a date with another girl. She'd only had crushes on actresses and one friend in middle school who'd moved away before ninth grade. She'd kissed a few girls, but that had been in middle school, too, at a sleepover where the host said they had to practice to be ready for kissing boys. So she'd made it through high school wanting a girlfriend, wanting to kiss a girl who wasn't only tonguing her to prep for a boyfriend. She'd had dreams about the family's business expanding to places like Charlotte or Atlanta or even Orlando, meeting someone, and still being able to keep up a dual identity where she and her understanding girlfriend visited their respective families on the holidays. They'd share a dog and a cat, sure, but unlike kids, she could hire a pet-sitter or board the animals. With her sister popping out kids like Pez, Charlie was almost positive she'd never get the grandparent guilt-trip from her

parents. Her parents didn't like that cities tended to vote Blue, so she'd be safe from them visiting. It had been a plan laid with the best of intentions to protect her family from herself and to protect herself from her family.

Now, Charlie had been sleeping in her car for three weeks, and midterms were encroaching. The campus commons closed at ten pm, which meant she had to make sure that basically anything she needed to do that required a decent amount of overhead light was out of the way. The car, when turned off, was alternately too hot or too cold, and there wasn't much she could do about it. Food was a nightmare to come by without anywhere to refrigerate even a package of lunch meat, and she was showering at the gym and already worrying what she would do between semesters to stay clean. Charlie knew there was a local shelter, but there was something about growing up in the home she had in the family that she had that had instilled her a deep, if flawed, sense that someone like her could never end up in a space like that.

And then there were her classes.

And the lying to get through her classes.

She did not want anyone to know that the person she was when the semester first started and person that she was now were not and would never ever be the same.

## Chapter 11:

Charlie was almost asleep in the back of her Subaru, her brain finally shutting off the study guide she and the others in Blessing's bio study group had been reviewing for the midterm. She'd been the only woman there, as Blessing had warned her, and the only ghost face in a sea of darker ones. It was the first time she'd ever been around so many people who were Black and the first time she'd ever been from so many people from another country. They'd all been a little startled by each other at first, the men overly polite, and Charlie continuously wiped her sweaty palms on her jeans, hoping she didn't say anything offensive. But once they'd started Dr. Li's packet, there had been 25 pages of terms, calculations, and sample questions to tackle and no more room to stay wary of one another. They hadn't even gotten halfway through the study guide by the time their hour and a half of time in the public library was up.

"Do you have a ride?" Blessing asked her when they were packing up their things.

She picked up his pencil that had rolled off the end of the desks they'd smushed together to form a rectangle everyone could sit around.

"I do. I've got my car." She handed the pencil back to him. "Do *you* need a ride?"

"Oh no." He laughed. "I carpool. I'll walk you to your vehicle, if you don't mind."

Night had fallen while they were studying. She had never been to this library before, which was a small two-story building held together by duct tape and the librarians' love for books. Even the computers for public looked like they'd come from the landfill. Someone had plucked them up, washed off the dirt, then forced them out of

retirement to run search queries and stare blankly back at memoirists and students and others navigating the keyboards missing letters.

“Sure,” she told him.

They rearranged the desks into their original formation, shut off the overhead lights, then Blessing double checked the door had locked behind them when they left. They wound through the reference section back to the lobby. Blessing thanked the librarians, which prompted Charlie to echo him through her mask. He held the door open for her, while they exited, then he stood on the sidewalk, shifting his briefcase from one hand to the other. An SUV much larger than Charlie’s and located on the other side of the parking lot that could probably only hold fifteen vehicles max, tooted its horn and flashed its brites.

“My ride,” Blessing explained. He held up a finger, signaling for them to wait. “Where are you?”

She nodded to her SUV, which was next to the book drop-off. She probably wouldn’t park there again, she decided. She didn’t want to be side-swiped and had no money to put toward body work on her Subaru.

Blessing, true to his word, accompanied her to her car. She noted the rather wide berth he gave her, more than an arm’s width of space between their bodies. When they drew up to her vehicle, he paused to the side of her front lights, still an arm’s length from touching the grill. It was the nicest walk to her car she’d ever been on with a man.

“Thank you, Blessing,” she said. Then, she grinned. “Now I know why you’re named that. You *are* a blessing.”

He shuffled his feet. “You don’t have to say that. But I’m glad you came tonight, Charlie. I’ll see you in class, and then here again next week?”

She nodded vigorously.

He waved a hand in good-bye. Then, the large SUV, a Ford, Charlie realized, swung around. Blessing entered the back driver’s side door. The SUV lingered until Charlie had gotten into her Subaru and started the engine. The large SUV then lumbered off into the night like a bear that had done its business and was ready to bunker down.

She followed the same path to the exit Blessing’s ride had, flipped on her blinker, which click-clocked in the otherwise silent vehicle, then turned the opposite way the other SUV had gone. She lowered her window just a touch, while she drove in the direction of the hospital. The nights were growing cooler. Soon they might be uncomfortable to sleep through in a vehicle. But her sleeping bag was supposed to hold heat up to -40 degrees Fahrenheit. That was something she’d never thought she’d need to test, not that it would ever get that cold in South Carolina until climate change got much worse, but it would get below freezing this year if the Farmer’s Almanac was correct. She breathed in the fresh breeze, turning her nose to suck it in, letting the combined smells of her soccer and Cracker Barrel uniforms be forgotten on the road behind her.

An hour later, she was wishing she’d gone to the bathroom one more time before leaving the library. Accepting a Diet Coke from the member of the study group who’d handed them out to everyone for “thinking food” had felt like it made her one of the team. Her bladder felt differently, so she had to use her female urination device, aptly named a GoGirl, in the copse of trees behind the hospital’s parking lot. Her body settled after that, but her brain kept revisiting Dr. Li’s questions.

She wasn't sure she'd get any rest that evening when at last her eyelids fluttered, and her body got light. But that was when her phone buzzed. She jerked, sat up and hit her head on the roof. She didn't even have time to wince before she was fumbling with her phone, attempting to unlock it, praying that her mother had texted.

*U ok the message asked.*

But it wasn't from her mother.

It was from Prairie, or Floppy as Charlie had nicknamed her, the JV soccer player Charlie had fantasized about asking to prom, whose brand of shampoo Charlie had bought.

Her heart swam eager laps in her chest, bumping into her ribs, and thoroughly rattling her.

Three dots indicated Prairie was typing more.

*U never post anywhere anymore on ur socials*

No, Charlie agreed, she didn't. Sometime the summer when most everyone in her graduating class was off to colleges and universities in exotic, or at least interesting, places, she'd slacked off on updating about her life. It had been strange not to be counting likes or hoping her team captain commented or hoped her aunts didn't comment. It had been strange to still sift through other posts that seemed so much more exciting than her own day-to-day life, like everyone she'd known had transitioned to a new phase, another realm, and she was held back, and she thought, forgotten, until Prairie's message.

*Things have been busy.*

She spelled out three responses before sending that one.

*Is college hard*

Charlie squinted up at the time on her phone. It was after midnight. Both of them should be asleep. Both of them had school in the morning.

*Yeah, she wrote.*

*Im so scared of it I hate these applications Idk if Ill get in anywhere*

*Then, maybe I dont even want to go*

*You should go*, Charlie encouraged, and she meant it, even if she was messaging in her car on a phone that would die if she wasn't careful. Still, she couldn't bring herself to look away from the screen, not when Prairie's next text was already indicated by three dots.

*U should come to a game Coach S would <3 <3 <3 to see u*

She smiled at the memory of the varsity soccer coach, Coach Stoll. He had white hair that grew out of his ears and bushy, grey eyebrows that flared up at the end like he was a supervillain. His body was compact and gnarled with muscle. The first time he'd hugged her she'd expected him to feel hard and narrow like a sapling. But he'd been surprisingly gentle with touch, though he was nasty with his whistle and drills.

*You made V-squad!!!!*

Charlie couldn't help overusing exclamation marks. She knew how badly Prairie had wanted to make varsity. Senior year was her last chance, though she'd been on that refrain since sophomore year. This past summer much of Prairie's posts online had been about the six-week soccer camp her parents sent her to in Vermont. She'd come back more muscular. She'd had her braces taken off. She looked fierce in the Tik-Toks she uploaded, and the nickname Floppy no longer worked for her, though Charlie still liked it. She liked who Prairie was becoming.

*mb I should do the crap program, Prairie sent, which was followed quickly by, shit the CARP program my text autocorrected sry*

Charlie chuckled. *No worries. I heard it all the time in high school.*

*Come to a game*

*I'll try.*

*U could tell me abt inlet or whatever*

*Yeah.*

Their exchange ended there with Prairie leaving Charlie's half-answer on read, which she well deserved.

She wasn't sure if Prairie would reach out again. She didn't know if she wanted her to.

This wasn't how things were meant to happen between the two of them.

In her most impossible fantasies, if Prairie reached out, it would have been to ask Charlie to take her to prom.

## Chapter 12:

Dr. Ruth Stone's office, unlike Dr. Li's sterile space and the few items Miss Huaman allowed on her desk in the advising center, was an insight into the woman, herself. She'd bought bamboo shades to cover the two windows that faced the heart of campus—and made her the target of a heavy blanket of afternoon sun. Charlie had learned the number of windows in an office signified someone's importance at Inlet.

Dr. Ruth Stone was a very important person. Behind her refurbished walnut desk, her diploma for her doctorate from Vanderbilt hung in a gilded frame that might have been ostentatious, if not for the fact that Dr. Stone deserved the halo the frame created behind her head. A periwinkle electric tea kettle, scattered books, and statues from somewhere in Africa that Charlie couldn't identify gave the office's impressive personality. When Charlie arrived for her visit with her professor, Dr. Stone turned over a stack of student papers already marked up with her messy writing in the purple ink she favored.

“You'll all see those grades next week,” Dr. Stone promised. “Would you like a cup of tea?”

The sight of small, floral teacups balanced on saucers that looked as delicate as lace distracted Charlie from the uptick in her heart's tempo at the sight of the graded papers. She'd stumbled through several databases of secondary sources, searching to put meaning to her own experience with religion and sexuality. But all of the studies she found had been conducted by people she'd never heard of, and they used words unfamiliar to her tongue when she sounded them out, and it hurt to stand so close to the pain in her personal life. Should she have written about something else? Toxic

masculinity? First-wave feminism? Only, she didn't care about those things, and Dr. Stone advised her class to pick a topic that meant something to them.

*Don't think of this as something disconnected from who you are and how you move through the world. Write something that you'll remember, that will awaken something in you. That's what this class is about. An awakening. And that is what life is about, too.*

About that, Melina had said, "When Dr. Stone talks about 'getting woke,' she makes it poetry."

Dr. Stone had a powerful persuasion with words, and her voice was crisp and slow, though it carried no hint of the Southern drawl with which Charlie was so familiar. Her professor could probably voice audiobooks, Charlie thought. She could probably sell ice to Eskimos, though Charlie had learned to toss that statement into the garbage can, along with "gypsy" and "pot calling the kettle black."

Of course, there were a few students in class immune to Dr. Stone's hypnotism. Melina had informed Charlie that the little posse was only there to argue. They had no intention to change or to write about topics that asked for introspection and vulnerability.

The leader of the group of five belligerent students wore a cotton ball necklace made of pearls around her neck. It might have been inconspicuous enough, if she hadn't constantly tangled with it, yanking that little bundle of pearls that were probably real up and down the silver chain, making a distracting zip-zip-zip noise all throughout Dr. Stone's lectures.

Dr. Stone didn't seem to mind them. She didn't treat them differently than students like Melina and Z, who'd both sworn on their own graves to take every class Dr.

Stone offered, no matter if it counted toward their associate's or not. Charlie minded them a lot.

She knew them well. Knew the necklace the girl yanked around because her grandfather had given her one when she turned 13. It hadn't been made of real pearls or strung on real silver, which meant the opalescence of the beads flaked off, and the chain turned her neck green. When her grandfather had given her the necklace, they'd been sitting on the swinging porch, drinking Arnold Palmers mixed from sweet tea and lemonade that her grandmother steeped outside. He asked her if she wanted any Girl Scout cookies. All he had were Caramel Delights. The boxes of Lemonades and Peanut Butter Patties were already gone. Her grandfather had quite the sweet tooth, and it had made him pudgy and soft, so he felt good to hug, like his love melted all around her. Strangely, the Caramel Delights paired well with the Arnold Palmers, the coconut in the cookies acting as a palate cleaner between the opposing tastes.

Her grandfather poked her cotton ball necklace, which she'd secured around her neck a few minutes ago. "It's time I tell you some family stories," he said. He took a deep breath that inflated all his droopy fat, and then he told her about the Berkeleys and how they'd enslaved people who were Black. Their family home dated back five generations, as she knew, but she'd never really put together any connections between that and their family. She was not, as Melina put it, "woke." In fact, much of the South seemed to love to sleep on its history.

"We've made up for what all went on back then." That was the way he phrased it, no words like "slave" or "slave owner" spoken. He danced around the truth, but her grandfather wasn't a good dancer. Her grandmother said he had two left feet and knocked

her over during their wedding dance, though there were no pictures to prove this. He argued the point, probably because there was no evidence, or because he truly remembered differently. Their stories didn't often match up, and that's how Charlie learned memories could be false. Her family had owned slaves, owned *people*. Other human beings. Charlie stopped eating the cookies.

“We sold a lot of the land around here. We rent it out good and fair to folks who want to farm it now. And me...” He shuddered, though the sun had already melted all the ice that had filled their matching glasses, and it had dripped down onto their laps, looking like an accident. “Well, I'm seeing ghosts here. So it's time for us to go. Your grandma and I are moving up north. Got a nice little condo with a view of the ocean. It's time your father took over this place.”

Her grandfather swept his hand backward to indicate the farmhouse, but his eyes stayed fixed at a point on the tree line that separated their property from the Abernathys who lived next door.

“The ghosts, they came for my father, your great-grandpa, too. They come for all the Berkeley men. They've come for your father, too.”

He clapped her knee a little too hard, and his smile didn't reach his eyes. “Be grateful you're a girl living here. The ghosts leave the girls alone. Guess our lady ancestors didn't do things the way the men must've.”

It wasn't often she was praised for being a girl. Most of the time she viewed it as a deficit in his eyes. For that reason alone, she filed this particular memory away to hold onto in dark moments.

“That necklace is your reminder of who you are and where you come from. Don’t ever lose it, ya hear?”

She was a white person whose family had owned Black people, and her members of her family had done something so terrible that now ghosts haunted her grandfather and father. She wondered how many other kids had this conversation with their grandparents.

She didn’t know what to say, so she got up and went inside a house she’d known all her life that suddenly seemed entirely unfamiliar.

She lost the cotton ball necklace a few months later while swimming at a public pool. Her grandfather never asked her what happened to it. Moving to the condo seemed to free him up. He lost weight, started cycling. His sweet tooth fell out. His gout cleared up. He cooked Weight Watchers meals, though in Charlie’s opinion, her grandma had been looking thinner and thinner, too thin, as the years went on.

Charlie moved into the farmhouse with the rest of her family. She listened for the ghosts her grandpa told her about, but she never heard bump in the night or saw a vaporous figure at the foot of her bed.

The ghosts were there, however, of the people who’d been wronged, in everything that she learned about the South, and she decided eventually that her family deserved to be haunted for what they had done, to carry that around, but not as a mark of honor like the girl in her Human Sexuality class wore the cotton ball for, but like a chain heavy enough never to be forgotten, so what had happened could never happen again.

She wouldn’t yet say she was “woke,” but she was waking up.

In her office, Dr. Stone served Charlie a cup of Twining’s English Breakfast, though it was afternoon when they met.

“I’m all out of my Hobbs,” Dr. Stone explained when she shifted a clinking teacup and saucer into Charlie’s outstretched hands.

It sounded like an apology, but Charlie didn’t know the difference between Twining’s and Hobbs. Was Hobbs even a tea, or was it a kind of sweetener? She took a sip and hated the taste. She forced herself to swallow and covered her displeasure with saying, “Oh, too hot.”

“I should have warned you,” Dr. Stone said. “Are you all right?”

“Just fine,” Charlie said, though her tongue was scalded and felt about three times bigger than what was proper in her mouth.

She set the pretty teacup on a corner of Dr. Stone’s desk and vowed to let it rot there.

“My mother had this set when we packed her up. I asked her if she’d allow me to bring it to work. It was gathering dust in the back of a kitchen cabinet anyway.”

“Is your mom in a home?” Charlie asked.

Dr. Stone’s eyebrows raised. “Oh no, for now she’s moved in with me and my wife.”

*Her wife!* Charlie had the immediate urge to call Melina and put her on speakerphone.

Melina had an active imagination when it came to postulating about Dr. Stone’s private life—dinner parties she must throw for fancy people, a parade of lovers, maybe even a maid. Charlie guessed that when she told Melina Dr. Stone lived with her mother and her wife, Melina would hang on her every word.

“How is that?” Charlie asked. “Living with your mom and...your wife?”

She flushed at the statement.

She had known what it was like to live with parents. She hoped one day she would know what it would be like to live with a wife. Dr. Stone, however, was a grown woman of what Gina would call “a certain age,” so no doubt her experience was much different than Charlie’s.

“Between the two of them, there is never a dull moment,” Dr. Stone replied.

The room was dim, and her professor’s mask covered half of her face, so Charlie didn’t quite know how to interpret that, other than an overly long nod.

Dr. Stone cleared her throat. She placed her teacup back on its saucer more daintily than Charlie had, despite the fact that Dr. Stone was a woman as tall as most men and with a presence perhaps more powerful than a man’s because of that fact that she was a woman who carried herself the way that she did.

“I’m sure you’re wondering why I called you into my office today,” Dr. Stone said.

Charlie realized she hadn’t stopped nodding from when Dr. Stone mentioned her mother, so she nodded even more vigorously now.

Dr. Stone cleared her throat again. She leaned toward Charlie and steepled her fingers in a manner that felt reminiscent of Miss Huaman.

“A classmate of yours mentioned that you were having trouble at home. Well, no, they mentioned you’ve been living in your car for much of this semester. I hope I’m not overstepping, but I’m worried for you, Charlie. And if I can help in any way, then I view that as part of my responsibility.”

Charlie's face went cold, then too hot. Her hands shook, so she clamped them onto her bruised knees. The heat spread inwards from her neck and ears to her lips and cheeks to her eyes. She burst into tears.

Dr. Stone extended a box of Kleenex to Charlie so quickly the professor must have recognized what might be coming. Charlie accepted the entire box, then used the tissues as a veil to hide on the other side of the desk.

"Was it Melina who told you?" Charlie choked out in lieu of a yes or no response.

"It was," Dr. Stone admitted. "I'll take it she wasn't wrong?"

Charlie shook her head, unable to verbalize the truth.

"Okay, okay," Dr. Stone said, seemingly to herself. She nodded in the direction of the window. "Charlie, you're not the first student that this has happened to."

She fixed a stern gaze on Charlie's face. "And it is *not* your fault. You do understand that, right?"

Charlie didn't. It absolutely seemed to be her fault. If she weren't gay, then she would still have a home.

"Your family made the decision that you should no longer live with them, right?" Dr. Stone continued, "not you. Your family has decided that you should be judged for your sexuality, not you, correct?"

She shook her head. "I always find it difficult to fathom how members of the church judge others when the Bible says to do the exact opposite."

That part rang truth with Charlie, and she sniffed hopefully.

"Sexuality is not a choice or a lifestyle, no more than many of the other social constructs that we've discussed in my class this semester; yet, we use race, sexuality,

gender, and other social constructs to control others, empowering some, while disempowering others.”

“I’ve never even had a girlfriend,” Charlie whispered. “I just...want to...one day.”

“Sweet girl,” Dr. Stone said, her mask of professionalism slipping for the first time. Her smile reached her eyes. “I’m sure you do, and you are as deserving of love as anyone else.”

Charlie’s tears started again, this time from the wave of warmth emanating from her professor. “C-can I have a hug? It’s okay if you can’t. COVID and boundaries and all.”

“I think you need one.” Dr. Stone stood, smoothed her skirt, then rounded her desk.

Charlie practically dissolved in her arms. This was the first hug she’d had from an adult in weeks. If she closed her eyes and ignored the unfamiliar coconut perfume Dr. Stone wore, she could almost pretend it was her mother’s arms tight around her.

When they parted, Dr. Stone’s silk shirt was stained with Charlie’s tears, but she didn’t seem to mind.

“Now then, let’s talk options,” Dr. Stone said. “I’m well connected in the local larger LGBTQIA+ community. I know of some group homes that should be able to take you in, so you can eat real meals and sleep in a real bed. There’s one for those under the age of 18, and there is another for those 18-21. We’re going to get everything sorted, Charlie. You’re not alone.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“Of course you know there’s the LGBTQIA+ club here on campus, and I encourage you to keep attending meetings if you have the time. The club can serve as an important part of your support system, and it’s one way the students here at Inlet connect directly to the larger local community.”

Charlie nodded.

“And beyond that, there’s a food pantry here on campus. We can get you set up with some vouchers for books and gas. If you need a business casual outfit to interview for a job, we have a campus closet. You’re not alone. Many students, especially those at two-year colleges like Inlet, often have struggles like yours. That’s why we have these services. We’re prepared. You know we even have childcare on campus for our working parents? Anyway, I can make some calls on your behalf, if you’d like, or I can give you the contact information.”

“If you could help, that would be great,” Charlie said slowly. “Honestly, I’m exhausted. I’m overwhelmed. I can’t believe it’s almost midterms. Some days I don’t even want to leave my sleeping bag. But it doesn’t seem fair that you do all this. You have your own life.”

“My life includes a solid roof over my head,” Dr. Stone said firmly. “I’m happy to reach out for you. ITC has an excellent network of support and services for students going through rough patches.”

She checked her Apple Watch. “I do teach another class in a few minutes, but I’ll make calls after that.”

She studied Charlie’s drawn face for a long moment.

“You really are exhausted, aren’t you? I imagine you are. How would you feel about a homecooked meal tonight? My mother makes an excellent seafood boil.”

Charlie’s stomach rumbled its approval on her behalf, and Dr. Stone’s laughter broke the tension in the room.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

She took a post-it from her desk and scribbled down something, pushing it across to Charlie. “There’s my address. Come around 7 if that’s not too late for you.”

“7 is perfect,” Charlie responded. She would have shown up at 4 pm or at 11 if it meant savory shrimp and corn dancing on her tastebuds. “I don’t know how to thank you.”

Dr. Stone waved her hand. “Just tell my wife she’s pretty and my mama that her food is the best you’ve ever ate, and we’ll be all right.”

“Will do,” Charlie promised, then she scurried out of Dr. Stone’s office, imagining being in a real home at a real dining table eating a homecooked meal again. It was something she’d never take for granted again

### Chapter 13:

Charlie accepted the Crown Royal, neat, that Ms. Stone extended to her as an after dinner digestif. The tawny eye of the tumbler was testing her and the fact that she was an alcohol novice.

“She’s underage, Mama,” Dr. Stone, or Ruth, said when she returned from where she’d disappeared down the hall to say goodnight to her wife.

“She’s fine. She needed it. Drink up,” Ms. Stone encouraged. She reached a shaking hand to the base of the tumbler Charlie was holding. She tipped the tumbler up, and the whiskey branded Charlie’s throat.

She came up sputtering, thankful for each breath of cool air she could get. Her tongue felt like someone had melted red hots on top of it. Even her teeth felt funny. A second later, the woozy feeling hit her, which wasn’t so bad.

“This isn’t so bad,” she said, talking in slow motion.

Between Charlie’s blinks, Ruth’s expression changed from sour at her mother to concerned in Charlie’s direction.

“She doesn’t drink much, does she?” Ms. Stone asked, sniggering. “She’s much better behaved than you were while you were in college.”

Charlie propped an elbow up on the dining table and dropped her chin heavily into her hand. “What all’d she do in college?”

Her sluggish brain wanted to write all of this down to share with Melina. They could call it the Stone Challenge, and they could try everything that their perfect professor had done when she was younger.

“I think that’s quite enough out of you, Mama. I put your pills out in your bathroom. Can you please go and take them?” Ruth checked her Apple Watch. “It’s late.”

She turned to Charlie. “I’ll make you a cup of coffee.”

Dr. Stone gave orders, not suggestions, both Charlie and Ms. Stone recognized.

“It was lovely to meet you, Darling,” Ms. Stone said. She placed a hand on top of Charlie’s.

Charlie returned the gesture, tracing Ms. Stone’s veins absently the way she always did her own grandmother’s. A wave of warmth blessedly not from the whiskey slid down her esophagus when she swallowed.

“You’re welcome here anytime.”

Ms. Stone said “any” and “time” with emphasis, as though there were periods between each of those words. Charlie nodded, feeling the words more than she heard them.

With a final pat on Charlie’s hand, Ms. Stone stood slowly.

“You look like you could use a hug.”

Arms trembling, Ms. Stone opened them wide, and Charlie had to hold herself back, so she just didn’t leap into the other woman’s arms and crush her frail bones with the force of her embrace. Ms. Stone smelled like talc powder and shea butter, and Charlie breathed her in. She closed her eyelids against a sudden threat of tears. The fist that had been clenching her heart with all its might loosened, and she realized just how much she’d needed someone to love her.

She missed her parents and even more so her grandparents with a fierceness that had her clinging to someone else’s mother.

“There, there,” Ms. Stone said, one hand rubbing circles on Charlie’s back.  
“You’re not alone. You’re going to be all right.”

Ms. Stone waited until Charlie regained enough composure to pull herself away, but even then, it was as difficult for Charlie, like separating butter from warm bread.

Finally, Charlie straightened back up, proud that she’d kept herself from crying. From across the dining room, Ruth had reappeared silently in the doorway. Her tender expression softened the lines around her mouth. She held a steaming ITC mug of coffee in one hand.

“I’ll see you again, Charlie, I’m sure,” Ms. Stone said. With a smile, she took the long way around the table, so she could hug her daughter also, then she headed down the hall to the bathroom.

Charlie watched her go until Ruth pressed the mug into her hand.

“I didn’t know how you took your coffee, so I prepared it with creamer and sugar.”

“I don’t,” Charlie said. “I mean, I don’t drink coffee.”

Ruth raised a single brow before sinking into the seat her mother had vacated. “Why, a college student who isn’t addicted to the stuff? Did I think I’d live to see the day?”

Charlie chuckled, sat again, and took an obedient sip. An excess of sweetness exploded on her tongue, along with a nutty taste that was familiar, but she couldn’t quite identify.

“Wow, this is amazing.” She took another, less tentative swallow. “This doesn’t taste at all like the poop water my dad makes. I might start drinking coffee, after all.”

“Oh, please don’t. You don’t want to become another minion to the bean.”

“Minion...to the...” *Oh!* dinged in her head, which was growing less fuzzy with each sip she took.

Dr. Stone was attempting to joke.

She chuckled. “Are you a minion to the bean?”

“I am. And I’ll show you the secret as to why you like what I made you so much. I promise you it’s not because of the coffee.”

Dr. Stone left the table.

In her hoodie, Charlie’s phone buzzed. She ignored it.

*Geez, Melina, I told you I’d text you tomorrow.*

The phone buzzed again, indicating a call instead of a text. She slid her thumb against the edge of her device and hit the button to silence it.

Dr. Stone returned holding a family-sized bottle of International Delight, a lopsided grin on her face. “I present to you Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup coffee creamer.”

She plunked the bottle on the table between them, and the weight of it made the wooden legs creak.

“I knew I recognized this taste,” Charlie said. “It tastes exactly like Reese’s.”

“I know!”

“You drink this whole thing?”

Ruth glowered. “Of course not. My mom and I share it. My wife takes her black.”

“I thought all professors drank black coffee in their travel mugs.” Charlie furrowed her brow. “Or, vodka. That’s what my friend swears you all drink, instead of coffee.”

She clapped a hand over her mouth, then swallowed another giant gulp from the ITC mug. It seemed the whiskey hadn't entirely left her system, if she was spouting out the first thing that came to her mind. To her relief, Ruth let out a series of guffaws that ended in a decidedly un-Dr. Stone-like snort.

Charlie watched Ruth edge tears out of her crow's feet.

"Funny. Let me guess, that's what your friend Melina assumes?"

Busted. Well, Melina was.

Charlie nodded.

Then, speaking of Melina, her phone buzzed again.

"Do you need to take that?" Dr. Stone asked. "We can talk more about the youth home later."

"I guess I should," Charlie grumbled.

She whipped her phone out of her hoodie, prepared to verbally attack Melina for interrupting the first home cooked meal with actual adults that she'd had in weeks. But it wasn't Melina's number that lit up her screen.

It was her mother's.

Chapter 14:

“It’s my mom on the phone,” Charlie said dumbly.

“Do you want to take it?” Dr. Stone asked.

She nodded, deciding to appreciate later how Ruth phrased taking the call as a question rather than a given.

She slid her finger across the screen and held her phone up to her ear. “Mom?”

“Charlie?”

It was weird to hear her mother using her first name instead of “Ham” or another pet name.

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“I’m calling about your grandmother. Charlie, I’m so sorry. She’s in the hospital. We aren’t sure she’s going to make it.”

The room careened. Charlie clung to the dining table with her free hand, gripping it so hard her fingernails must have nicked the wood.

“W-what do you mean?”

“She came down with COVID a few days after you...left.”

The word “left” carried enough weight to crush Charlie’s lungs.

She squeezed her eyelids shut. “Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“We were sure she would get better, and your father—Well, your father said it was better not to bother you about it. But things have gotten more...complicated. Your grandfather took her to the hospital, and we found out she has pneumonia. She has ARDS. It’s, well, it’s a form of lung failure. I wanted to let you know. I know—”

“Where?” Charlie interrupted.

At the rage-filled word, Ruth's eyes jumped from a spot on the table to Charlie's gaze.

"Where what?" Ginny asked.

"Where is she? Where's Grandpa? I'm coming to see them."

"Charlie, Ham, I doubt you can. She's in the COVID ward at North Strand ER. We're here now, but we're stuck in the waiting room."

"Does Josey know? What about Benny?"

"Josey and her family have been by. Your dad hasn't let Benny know yet. We only just found out about the lung failure. I was going to call him next. Charlie, I—"

She pulled the phone away from her ear and hit the red dot on the screen to end the call.

It was the first time she'd ever hung up on her mother.

"My grandmother is in the ER. She has—has—" Charlie stumbled over the words, unable to speak them into the room.

"Acute respiratory distress syndrome," Ruth supplied.

"What's that?"

"It's ARDS, Charlie. Apologies, but I could overhear your mother."

"She didn't say anything about me coming home. She didn't even ask how I was."

The tears burned as they rolled down Charlie's cheeks at last. Her face felt hot. Even her hands were blotchy. They were trembling, too, like Ms. Stone's always did.

"I shouldn't care about that right now," Charlie amended. "I have to get to the hospital."

“Of course you care about your own well-being. You told me you haven’t spoken to either of your parents since the incident.” Ruth’s words were forceful. “Is there someone who can drive you to the hospital? It would be better if someone could be with you right now. You can leave your car in my driveway if you need.”

The irrational thought that Dr. Stone should drive her flashed through her mind before she chased it away. Dr. Stone had her own life to look after, and she’d already done more than any student could ever expect from a professor.

But maybe there was someone else.

“Melina,” she mumbled. “I’ll call Melina. Do you mind if I go out on the front porch? I need air.”

“Of course.” Ruth led the way to the front door and unlocked it. “I’ll be right inside if you need me.”

It had gotten dark, while Charlie was eating dinner with the Stones. Streetlamps gave the night meaning. The lamp closest to the Stones’ house was fizzing and popping, the bulb twitching anxiously inside the glass. Other than that, the neighborhood was quiet, the cicadas finally bedding down for the change in season. The homes on the street reminded Charlie of the house she’d grown up in before her family moved into the farmhouse—two stories in height with attached garages, primly kept lawns, and wooden privacy fences.

At the house across from the one Ms. Stone owned, there were two bikes propped up against a white garage. When the streetlamp flicked on, she could see one was powder blue with silver, pink, and darker blue streamers flowing from the handlebars. The other was bright yellow with black lightning bolts painted along its body and white tires

clouded with dirt. She remembered riding bikes with Benny any chance they could get when they were younger, while Josey never picked up the pastime. Always though, their parents reminded them to park the bikes inside the garage when they were done.

“We don’t want anything to happen to them,” Ginny had said. “Or to either of you.”

Now though, with Benny off in New England, clueless about their grandmother’s state, and Charlie seated on a porch to a home that wasn’t her family’s, it seemed fitting to see bikes left outside where the rain, rust, and robbers could weather them away.

Where an entire childhood could change overnight.

She called Melina.

“I’ll come, of course. I’m already on my way. I’m wearing my pajamas, but that’s okay.”

Melina sounded like she was chewing something when she answered the phone. Charlie heard keys jingling and music that sounded like one of Jady’s Synthwave mixes switch off in the background.

“Send me Dr. Stone’s address.”

Once Melina hung up, Charlie forced herself to breathe. In, out, in, and out, like she’d finished running uphill.

She called her brother next.

“Sis!” His voice was jovial and doubled by Tamar’s muffled, “Hi, Charlie!”

Somehow hearing him so happy made sharing the news much worse.

“Have you talked to Mom recently?” she asked.

She pounded her palm into the concrete of the porch to keep from crying.

“I haven’t.” He paused. “I take it you might’ve? So they finally called, did they?”

“Not about what you think. Not about...me.” But she couldn’t wallow in self-pity right now.

“Grandma is in the hospital. She has pneumonia from COVID. And it must be bad if Mom called me. Dad still isn’t speaking to me.”

“Grandma has COVID?”

“I think it’s really bad, B.” Her voice cracked at the end of her sentence.

“How bad?”

She switched from pounding her palm into the concrete to tracing one finger against the raised grains as hard and as slowly as she could.

“I don’t know. I’m going up there. Mom said she would call you.”

“Do you think I need to book a flight?”

“Ben,” she heard from Tamar, still muffled for some reason. Had they already gone to bed? Had she awoken them with this news? “The cost.”

“I can pay for it. I have that job now. At the Cracker Barrel near Inlet.” She put her dwindling bank account balance out of her mind. All of that work at the family’s HOA business, all of those dollars earned for college. Going, going, almost gone.

“We’ll figure it out,” Benny replied, and his voice was big brother firm. “I’ll look at flights. We have a couple of credit cards, so we’ll manage. You call me when you see Grandma. I don’t trust Mom to tell me the truth if she calls at all.”

His words were venomous, which masked the pain Charlie knew he felt. He’d always been a mama’s boy. He’d always butted heads with their dad.

“I will,” she promised.

“Be safe, Char,” he said.

“Yes, be safe,” Tamar echoed.

She ended the call. She picked her hand up from the concrete and examined the red marks lacing her skin. Her palm stung. She could tell the last of the scotch had left her system. She wasn't sure if it was the caffeine from the coffee or the thought of her grandmother alone in the COVID ward that had her heart already racing in the direction of the ER. The organ between her lungs was thumping so hard she thought it might shatter her ribcage. She didn't care if it did. Being without her parents had been one thing. She'd always prepared to leave them after college to move to another state someday. But being without her Grandma and Grandpa? For some reason, when she envisioned her future, that had never, *ever* been a part of it.

She waited on the porch until Melina's burnt orange Kia Soul crawled up the street. She was thankful Dr. Stone left her alone. She couldn't bear to look away from where her ride showed up.

“Charlie,” Melina said when she parked on the street and exited her vehicle. “Oh, Charlie.”

They rushed across the damp grass to one another. Charlie let Melina hold her, burying her face in her friend's jacket that smelled like pancakes.

“Did you tell Dr. Stone you're going?”

Charlie shook her head. Melina took her hand and led her back to the house. Melina knocked before Charlie mumbled, “S'open.”

Inside, they found Ruth seated in the living room. She had reading glasses on and a snifter of amber liquid like what Ms. Stone had given Charlie. In the other hand, she held a purple pen. She was grading papers—but that was a worry for another time.

“Dr. Stone, I’m here to take Charlie to see her grandmother,” Melina said.

The moment felt surreal, like Melina was asking Dr. Stone if she could take Charlie out on a date, not like she was shepherding her to the ER.

“Very good,” Ruth said. “I thought I heard you pull up.”

She placed her scotch and her capped pen on the coffee table and rose. She offered them both a small smile, then ushered them back in the direction they’d come.

“Please travel safely,” she said when they reached her front door.

“We will,” Melina said.

Charlie murmured something that she hoped sounded like a thank you.

Ruth held open the screen door, while they exited.

“You’re a good friend, Melina,” she called when they were halfway across her lawn.

Charlie had never seen Melina beam so brightly.

In the car, they rode in silence. The lack of chatter from Melina would have worried Charlie if she’d been clear-headed enough to realize it. In fact, all of Melina’s behavior had been strange after their phone call that evening. No, not strange, *mature* and *collected*. It was a side of Melina that Charlie hadn’t witnessed before. But she was immensely grateful, even if she couldn’t fully articulate it. Even if she couldn’t even truly see it.

The drive to North Shore ER was 45 minutes to the north from where Ruth lived with her mother. Because the crowds of late summer tourists had all depleted from along the shoreline, the roads were unincumbered until fog set in. Melina turned off her high-brites and scrunched closer to the wheel.

“D’you mind if I put on some music?” she asked, and the sound of human speech after the long stretch of silence startled Charlie out of her mindless pain.

“Of course not.” Her words sounded like her insides had rusted over. She cleared her throat and repeated. “Of course not. It’s your car.”

“But it’s not about me right now,” Melina answered.

Still, she fiddled with her phone, eyes darting between her device and the view out the windshield, until she landed on a Spotify playlist called “Bad Driving W.”

“What’s ‘Bad Driving W’?” Charlie asked.

“The playlist is called ‘Bad Driving Weather.’” Melina frowned down at her phone, which was currently playing ‘Hallelujah’ by someone named Leonard Cohen that Charlie had never heard of. “The title must’ve got cut off.”

They lapsed back into silence, aside from the voices filtering through Melina’s car speakers. The drive took an eternity, even though despite Melina announcing she needed to pee halfway through it, they didn’t stop. The fog made it worse, made it difficult to see exits and impossible to read mile markers. By the time, they eased into the hospital’s parking lot, Charlie had taken up Melina’s nail-biting habit.

North Shore ER was eerily familiar to Charlie, even though she’d never been there before. She realized, while Melina was scouting for a place close to the public entrance, the hospital was so familiar to her because she’d been sleeping in a lot like this

one for weeks: the bright lights, the tree-lined intersections, the rubber mulch, and the interruption of sirens.

She'd grown used to ambulances wailing in the silence of the 2 and 3 am hours. She could sleep through those sounds now. Why? Because, before now, none of those screams had meant anything to her.

"You don't have to wait with me?" she told Melina once the car engine had been cut.

"What do you mean? How will you get back home?"

*Home.*

The word was a punch to the face she knew her friend didn't mean.

"I can Uber."

"No way. Girls get killed in Ubers. I'll wait. I brought my backpack. I have a ton of English homework to do before midterms. I basically haven't turned anything in, except for the first paper. The adjunct prof gave me an extension. I think it looks better for her if students don't fail her class." Melina suddenly went quiet. "Sorry. You don't want to hear about all that right now."

But Charlie did. She wanted to be complaining about the 25-page study guide Dr. Li had given his Intro to Bio classes. She wanted to be telling Melina all about dinner with Dr. Stone, her wife, and her mom. She even wouldn't mind working on extra homework for Econ, her most loathed class, which didn't bode well because it was a part of her major, if it meant she didn't have to be here.

"It's okay," she said softly. "I wish I'd brought my backpack, too."

"Nah, you'll be busy with your family."

To that, she had no answer.

She allowed Melina to haul her by the arm into the hospital entrance. Without a tether, she was afraid she'd start drifting off in some direction and wake up sunburned with chapped lips out to sea.

Melina approached the front desk where a Black woman in scrubs fielded a computer, a phone call, and the folks in line in front of Melina and Charlie all on her own. Her eyes were shadowed with dark circles, the rest of her face hidden behind an N-95 mask with a surgical mask over that.

"We're looking for a patient," Melina said. Then she prompted Charlie.

"My grandma," Charlie said. She gave the woman her grandmother's name and the rest of the information her mother had shared via the phone.

The woman searched her computer, gave Charlie a room number, then said, "But I'm afraid you'll only be able to access the waiting room. The COVID ward is restricted to hospital staff."

"What?" Charlie's bellow echoed in the entrance hall.

Melina's fingers bit into her arm.

She gnawed at her lip, hating her tone, hating her anger, hating that she'd directed it at this woman whose work hours looked like they were eating her from the inside out.

"We'll go to the waiting room," Melina said. "Which way?"

Then, once again, she was hauling Charlie along, her backpack full of what seemed like an entirely other world bouncing on her back

## Chapter 15:

The North Strand ER's waiting room for the COVID ward was so full that, in order to follow the six feet of distance per family regulation, people spilled into the hallway, where they held small paper cups of coffee purchased from the hospital vending machine or slumped onto the floor and used their jackets like blankets, and outside the sliding glass doors, where smoke from vapes and lit cigarettes mingled with the dense fog.

“Our family is in there,” Charlie pressed the attendant who wore not only double masks, but a face shield, and a plastic gown as well.

The attendant eyed Charlie, then Melina, then Charlie again, clearly failing to see how the two of them could be related. But Charlie, who usually had the urge to confess any lie upon uttering it, stared the attendant down. It wasn't hard to do; this attendant looked as exhausted as the woman working the front desk. He finally waved Charlie and Melina into the waiting room without a word.

Charlie spotted her mother at the far end of the first set of seats. After weeks apart, Ginny seemed like a paper doll or a collection of vapors instead of an actual person who, for years, Charlie had loved and hugged and laughed with. In the unflattering glare of the fluorescents, her blonde hair looked like her last dye job had been spotty. Her make-up appeared several days old. The wrinkles on her clothes told a similar story, and Charlie wondered how long her parents had been at the hospital.

She saw her dad next. The top of his balding head looked like it had been greased, and he was smaller than she remembered. In her mind's eye, her father was a giant. He towered over everything she did. Here, he looked like any other person in the waiting

room—his face drawn, his energy sucked out, his eyes half-dead, and only his clothing holding him together.

She felt a rush of sadness and rage toward him. She longed for her mother to hug her, if only so she could push her away. The tears ran down her cheeks and wet her mask before she registered she was crying.

“Mama,” she said, voice weak and heavy with the Southern accent she suppressed by speaking slowly. She heard the little girl she’d once been in her tone. “Dad.”

Through the crowd, they spotted her instantly, instinctively, the way parents do when their child calls out for them. Her father’s posture stiffened. His hairy fingers that Charlie had called caterpillars as a little girl gripped the metal handles of the chair he sat in. Ginny’s pale face crumpled like tissue paper. She burst into tears, not crying silently like her daughter, but loudly and uncontrolled. It was the least put together Charlie had ever seen her parents. She wondered what the pastor would think of their family now. She wondered if he knew about her grandmother’s condition before she and Benny did. That thought was enough to still her tears.

She crossed the room, vaguely aware of people shuffling their legs or their bags out of the way. Melina followed behind her, an echo of dinner at Dr. Stone’s, of Inet, of the world where she now spent her days.

“Oh, Ham,” her mother said.

Her arms opened, and Charlie rushed into them. The hug felt like a warm Epsom salt bath after a crushing defeat on the soccer field, like cheesy chicken casserole at the dinner table with Frankie choosing to purr on her lap.

“What are you doing, Gin?”

The danger in her father's voice might as well have been ice water sloshed all over Charlie's shivering form.

"We talked about what we'd do if she showed up."

"She's my daughter, Coy," Ginny hissed. "Don't make a scene."

"*You're* making a scene, carrying on the way you are."

Charlie's arms had never felt quite so empty as when her mother pulled away.

The tears started again, as silent as ever. She hated that she couldn't stop them. She hated that she couldn't look her father in the eye and tell him to stop being a jerk to her mother.

Her mother moved as though she'd take Charlie against her breast once more, but in the end, she didn't. Her arms hung went as stale lettuce at her sides.

"I don't know why you're here, Charlene," her father said. He sounded like he was talking to a client late on their HOA payment, not like he was talking to his own flesh and blood. "This is hard enough without you bringing your nonsense here. I can't imagine if your grandfather had to see you while his wife is—"

He choked on his words, a sob that morphed into a coughing fit. Charlie marveled at how much compassion he showed for his parents and how he held none for her.

"I'm not here for you," she said. The vinegar in her voice shocked her. Never had she spoken to her father that way, not when Josey told him she was pregnant, not when Benny announced he'd fallen in love with a woman who was Jewish. Then, and dozens of other times, she'd just faded into the background, into a book or into music, made herself so small he forgot about her. She'd made herself small. She'd kept so many secrets so she could also keep the peace.

But this was about her grandparents, and she loved them just as much as he did.

Trembling, clammy, aware that her body must be splotchy from nerves, she faced him for the first time.

Maybe she'd expected him to back down, but he didn't. He never had. That was why that though Josey lived in North Charleston, he rarely visited. That was why Benny escaped to New England and spat fire every time Judge Coy Wade Berkeley came up in conversation.

That was why Ginny wasn't hugging her now.

"You brought yourself," he said. "And your sin."

He nodded in Melina's direction, though he didn't look at her. It reminded Charlie of how he hadn't held her cousin's baby because it was born out of wedlock. Was that why he didn't visit Josey? Because the twins had been conceived out of wedlock, too?

Her body felt like a volcano. Her blood was lava. Her words were an explosion.

"Melina isn't my girlfriend. She's a friend who was kind enough to drive me all the way up here, so I could visit *my* grandmother." Her face twisted, and she could feel ugliness and fire on her skin. Her tears were evaporating she was so hot. "I wish you weren't here. I bet my grandparents do, too. You make everybody around you miserable."

Her father's face went as red as hers felt. A vein pulsed in his forehead and under the greased skin of his balding scalp. He stood, and she knew why she'd feared him so much as a child, why she'd awoken one day and thought him as large as a building, the way Benny had already seen him. His fingers that she'd once told him as a little girl would one day turn into butterflies tightened into twin fists.

He was going to hit her, she thought.

He hadn't ever before, though she knew both Josey, once, and Benny, many times, had received his belt.

Still, she didn't move, couldn't move. Her feet had become part of the hospital's scuffed flooring.

No, she realized when he turned. He was going to hit Melina instead.

Her father rounded on the blue-haired girl who'd always been smaller than Charlie but who never seemed so tiny until this moment.

Melina, wearing light-up sneakers and an anime neck gaiter. Melina with her blue hair and bubbly personality. Melina who'd appeared at Charlie's side one day and never left it since.

Melina had been her family when her blood did worse than desert her.

She stepped into his path. She prepared to receive his wrath.

"Judge." A voice cracked through the waiting room.

Her father hesitated, became slightly smaller, though not small enough.

Still, Charlie yanked Melina into her arms, then shielded her friend behind her. Melina clung to her back, whole body shaking. Now it was Charlie who wanted to hit her father. She might have if her grandfather had not appeared by Ginny's side.

"Grandpa," she said at the same time her father said, "Pop," all the rage in him replaced with guilt.

"It's time for you to leave, Son," her grandfather said.

Though he was layered with wrinkles and propped himself up with a cane, he spoke as the highest authority in the room.

"Ginny," her grandfather said, "you may stay if you'd like."

“And you.” He poked his cane in Charlie’s direction. “It’s about time you showed up. Your grandmother’s been asking after you.”

“Seeing *her* would surely send Mother to her grave,” Judge argued. Once again, he refused to look in Charlie’s direction.

“Why would seeing Charlene send my wife to the grave?” Her grandpa asked. “A grandmother needs her grandbabies, the way a mother needs her young. I don’t pretend to understand women, but that I do know. We can’t keep them apart, Son. It’s not natural.”

“*She* is not natural. The church is clear on homo-deviance. She has been practicing a lifestyle behind her family’s back that—”

At the hand Charlie’s grandfather raised, Judge went silent.

“Is this true?” Charlie’s grandpa asked her. “Are you a homosexual?”

Slowly she nodded. She watched her grandfather’s brow furrow.

“Is that why you haven’t been by, girl?”

She nodded again, then said, “I didn’t know Grandma was here until Mom called.”

She could practically see inside her grandfather’s mind: puzzle pieces snapping into place. “Son,” he said to Judge, “you know your mother and I left that church in town behind years ago. It wasn’t just because we moved to the condo. Maybe we should have been more straightforward about it. Maybe your sister Sherry would still be with us if we’d left that place earlier.”

Sherry? Charlie had only ever heard the name once, from that drunk aunt at Josey’s wedding reception on the steamboat in Orlando.

Her father had a sister named Sherry.

At the mention of his sister, Judge paled. He sat back down in the chair like he'd had the wind knocked out of him.

"I'm so sorry, Son," her grandfather said. "I'm so sorry it was you who found her body. Every single day I'm so sorry. I know the ghosts haunt you, too. I know Sherry is among them, one white face in so many darker ones. They're quieter when they come for me now, but they're still there. They'll never let us Berkeleys rest, and we don't deserve to. Our sins are the ones we need to pray on, not Charlie's."

He surprised her with a wink. "The ghosts don't visit her."

Slowly, she shook her head. The ghosts didn't haunt the women in the family. She remembered her grandfather telling her that the year he gave her a cotton ball necklace composed of faux pearls.

Her father stared into space, maybe into a memory of his sister and her dead body. Maybe the ghosts had come for him right now. Wherever he went was a place Charlie couldn't follow him. She didn't want to. It was as if her father's soul had left him. She wondered if someone should shake him to see if he was still in there.

Ginny must have shared the thought with her because she shuffled across the small aisle and waved her hand in front of his face. "Coy," she called softly. "Coy, come back to me."

Once Charlie would have stepped in to help. Today she did not.

"Grandpa," she said instead, "this is my friend, Melina."

She didn't miss the way her grandfather's grip on his cane tightened. But then he seemed to overcome whatever knee-jerk response possessed him, and he said in a smooth voice, "Pleasure's all mine, Melina, and apologies, too. I raised my son better than that."

“Hello,” Melina said. She didn’t say she forgave any of them.

Charlie didn’t blame her. Melina seemed to have grown up in a magical fantasy land where being gay wasn’t a crime, and Charlie was sure Melina’s family hadn’t once owned human beings. She wondered if Melina would ever speak to her again after this night. If she didn’t, Charlie wouldn’t blame her.

“Do you want to see your grandmother?” Charlie’s grandfather asked.

“I thought we weren’t allowed in the COVID ward,” she replied.

“I know one of the doctors,” her grandfather said.

Of course he did, Charlie thought with a wry smile.

“We can go back any time you’d like,” he told her.

“Can I bring Melina?”

“Well, of course. The color of her hair? I bet it’ll make your grandmother smile.”

“Or she might think the doctors are giving her the good drugs,” Melina said, her tiny voice growing a bit larger again. “That’s what my Mima thought when I visited her a year ago when she had COVID.”

“I think they are giving her some of the good stuff,” Charlie’s grandfather said with a wink. “She’s been nicer to me than she has been for the last twenty-five years.”

Her grandfather offered Melina his arm. Melina took it.

Charlie trailed a bit behind them, while they headed toward the door that led to the COVID ward. Her grandfather swiped a key card his doctor friend must have given him, and the door opened. Before she stepped through it, she looked back into the waiting room.

Her father still hadn’t returned to his body.

Her mother still tried to coax him back.

But Charlie didn't belong with the two of them anymore. She didn't fight the door when it swung closed and cut off her vision of her parents.

She followed her grandfather and her best friend who were chatting like they'd known each other forever.

She thought of her grandmother who'd been calling for her.

*I'm here, she thought. I always will be. Unless you send me away, too.*

But unlike Josey and unlike her parents, her grandparents had learned she was gay, and they wanted her to stay.

When they reached the room her grandmother occupied, Melina and her grandfather made space for her to approach the bed.

"Grandma," she said, "it's your Charlie."

"It's about time," came her grandmother's response—a bit weak, a bit rough, but still the voice Charlie recognized.

*Yes, Charlie agreed. She took her grandmother's hand and held on tight. It's past time, and now that I'm here, I'm never letting go.*

## Chapter 16:

Charlie pulled up to her old high school. The parking lot was stuffed full of pick-up trucks, clunkers, and a few flashy sports cars. She recognized Coach S's white Ford Explorer parked where it always was, his signature spot, right next to the Handicapped spaces and the chain-link fence that led to the soccer green. The night was dark and cool now that it was November. Charlie thanked God fervently for the dozenth time in the last several days that she was not still sleeping in her Subaru in the hospital parking lot. She was home—not with her parents, but with her grandparents in North Myrtle Beach.

"I'm not as spry as I used to be," said her grandpa who still rode double-digit miles every day on his bike. "And it'll be a while before your grandma's fully recovered. What do you say to moving in and helping two old folk out? I realize it's probably less exciting than that house full of girls your professor Dr. Stone arranged for you live at."

"I don't think the group home is all that," Charlie said. "Or maybe it is. Either way, of course I want to live with you and Grandma."

"Then stay as long as you'd like."

She'd made the trip back to her hometown and her old high school because of Prairie. Other than that, she figured she didn't have much business left here.

She cut the engine to her car, gathered her phone and messenger bag, then slipped out of the driver's seat. The deafening roar from the soccer field sliced right through the chill in the air. Her heart beat a little faster. Adrenaline pumped warmth into her fingers and toes. She almost imagined she'd step out on the field for the last game of the season and play alongside all the girls, many of whom would be turning 18 around the same time she was, Floppy included.

She took a deep breath, and even from out in the parking lot, the scent of burgers, hot dogs, and funnel cake had her mouth watering. She patted the pocket of her jeans where cash tips from her shift at Cracker Barrel fattened it. She planned to buy everyone on the team a super-sized victory Coke with crushed ice brimming over the top of the Styrofoam cups. Coke tasted sweetest that way, with ice and fizz tickling a grinning upper lip. She wouldn't even think about defeat. The home team couldn't be defeated—not today.

A smile, uncharacteristically large for Charlie, erupted on her face, under her mask. She stuffed her hands into her pockets, fiddled with the little bundle of cash, and headed toward the gate. She recognized the ticket taker immediately, a scruffy little boy who followed the girls' soccer team around like a faithful mutt. He was always there and well-liked in the way pets become part of the family, and was good for holding purses or taking photos for Instagram. She guessed he'd also let her into the game without a ticket.

She lowered her mask for a moment, let her smile shine through, and said, "Hey, stranger."

His green eyes went wide, and he fumbled out, "C-Charlie?"

When his voice cracked, she smiled wider.

"I came to see the old team. Are you scraping by without me?"

"We're going to make it to State," he exclaimed, then sobered. "But it's not the same without last year's seniors. You guys owned the field."

She grimaced, thinking about how her mind had been in too many other places to focus on learning how to play on turf or the team dynamics of the co-ed intramural players.

“We were something, weren’t we?” she finished.

His adamant nod sent his unkempt curls flopping like fish on his forehead.

“So I’ll head in,” Charlie said. “Prairie invited me, and I’d like to catch up with Coach S.”

True to her prediction, the team pet didn’t ask for a ticket, just pushed open the gate so she could slide through. Then she stood next to the stands with a full view of the soccer field. The shouts were louder now. The girls were drenched in sweat, despite the chilly night. The field glowed an impossible shade of green beneath the floodlights. The game was too close for her liking. Everything was suddenly sharper, crisper, real.

She was back at high school. She took a deep breath to steady herself, but she didn’t need it. She was ready to be here.

She didn’t go to the packed stands. She made her way to the sidelines where she was spotted Prairie biting her nails to the quick. She flashed her face to assistant coach Myers who waved her through to the bench.

“Scoot over,” she said to Prairie.

Prairie’s eyes shot up to hers, first with irritation then surprise then delight.

“Charlie?” Prairie’s squeak caught the attention of the other girls, and heads swiveled in unison in her direction.

Charlie tried not to preen, but she couldn’t help but enjoy the reverence glowing back at her, like she was some kind of legend. She waved. The girls waved back, almost in slow motion.

“Scoot over,” Charlie repeated.

This time, Prairie squished closer to girl beside her and patted the few inches of space that cleared for Charlie's left butt cheek. She sat and tried not to think too hard about being pressed up against Prairie's warmth catching familiar whiffs of her strawberry shampoo and sweat.

"I'm glad you came," Prairie said quietly.

"Me too."

"I don't want to lose this game."

"I don't want you to either. Tell me what's been going on."

Prairie informed her the opposing team had brought in a new goalie from nowhere, and she seemed to radiate a forcefield that blew back every goal the home team tried.

"She has to have a weak spot," Charlie mused. "What's Coach S tried against her?"

Prairie went through a number of plays. Charlie studied her old teammates. They were exhausted, physically and mentally. Several of the girls on the bench were fresh or close to it. Their nervous energy radiated off them, and if channeled right, it could turn things around. Maybe.

"He should put some of you in," Charlie said.

"All the best of the best are out there."

"But they're not getting the job done, and they're wiped out. They're not used to losing."

"We've done really well this season."

“Too bad,” Charlie said. “Sometimes you have to lose to really appreciate your wins.”

She stood, clapped Prairie on her shoulder, then skirted around Myers to where Coach S was ready to lay on his whistle again. He didn’t notice her standing next to him for several seconds, but when he did, he jumped and dropped his whistle.

“What are you doing here, Charlie?”

She understood the irritation in his voice wasn’t directed at her.

“Apparently I’m here to save the game for you,” she quipped.

He stuttered, then laughed, then turned his gaze back to the green. “Oh yeah, you ain’t been back in a year, and you think you know my team better than me?”

“I know you should put Prairie in. You should give those girls on the bench a chance. They’re hungry.” She pointed at the varsity players on the field. “And they’re exhausted.

“That team knows every play you run, but they tripped you up when they debuted a new goalie. It’s time you did the same thing. Trip ‘em up, Coach S.”

Once again, she had her old coach’s full gaze on her. His bushy eyebrows had risen so high on his head they mingled with his hair.

“What’s gotten into you, Charlene Berkeley? Has the mouse finally found her voice?”

She scuffed her toe against the white touchline.

“You could have been truly great at this sport, you know that?” Coach S said.

“I wasn’t?” she teased.

“No,” he responded. He screamed something at one of the players before continuing. “You went with the pack, never really stood out. That was good for the team, but it wasn’t good for you. You had star quality, coulda gone to play anywhere in Division II, maybe even in Division I in college if you’d put your mind to it, but you played it safe. Too safe. I’d like to see you take some risks.”

“I’m the worst player on my intramural league,” she replied.

It felt good to say that aloud, a small secret set free.

“Then you musta had other things you’re focusing on. Otherwise, you’d be running circles around everybody there.”

“I have been busy.”

Coach S didn’t pry. It was one of the things she loved about him. She also knew he’d listen if she wanted to tell him the whole story. She didn’t.

In the end, he only took a portion of her advice. Prairie didn’t make it off the bench the whole game. In the end, it didn’t matter. The home team took the victory.

No one on the team said “no” to the Cokes Charlie bought at the concessions stand, though one sophomore Charlie didn’t recognize insisted hers come without ice.

“Ice hurts my teeth,” she whined.

Charlie bought a funnel cake for herself, too, and didn’t slap Prairie’s hand away when she snagged a bite.

“So good,” Prairie said.

“So good,” Charlie echoed.

They wandered away from where the team was celebrating with the coaches and the landslide of bodies that had tumbled down from the bleachers. There were more white

people here than Charlie had been around in some time, something she knew she never would have noticed before starting at Inlet.

“I didn’t think you’d come back,” Prairie said.

They sat on an empty section of bleachers where the floodlights didn’t quite reach.

“Proved you wrong.”

“I guess you did.” Prairie laughed. “How’s college going?”

Charlie groaned around a mouthful of Coke. “Midterms were the worst. My grandma was in the hospital because of COVID, and—”

“She okay?” Prairie interrupted.

“Yeah. ARDS isn’t as serious as it sounds. Most people recover from it.”

“Whew.”

They shared another section of funnel cake in silence, powdered sugar sprinkling a bit of snow on their knees.

“Most of my profs were understanding. I made it through everything with an ‘A,’ except Econ.”

“What’d you get in Econ?”

“A ‘B.’”

“Ew,” Prairie said. She laughed again. “I have ‘C’s’ in, like, 3 of my classes right now.”

“What are you taking?”

They spoke awhile longer about classes before the silence fell between them again. Charlie listened to her heartbeat, which was picking up speed, until she thought it might give out.

But she crushed a piece of ice between her back teeth.

She readied herself to say what she'd wanted to for as long as she'd known Prairie.

"Hey," she said. She cleared her throat when the word came out like a caveman's grunt. "Hey, would you consider grabbing coffee with me sometime?"

"To talk about the CARP program. I—"

It was Charlie's turn to interrupt. If she didn't, she might never make her point.

"No, more like a date, though we can talk about CARP, too, if you want."

"A date?" The last little bit of funnel cake, which had been on its way to Prairie's mouth, paused halfway to her lips. "Oh, Charlie, are you..."

"Yes, I'm gay," she finished when Prairie didn't seem to be able to form the word.

"I never would have guessed."

Funny, Charlie thought, that was the opposite of what Melina had told her when she'd made the same announcement.

"Well, I'm not, um..."

"Gay," Charlie finished again. "You can say 'gay.' It's not a bad word."

She forced herself to stay seated, to not run away from Prairie and the answer she'd most dreaded.

“Isn’t it though? They always tell us not to say it in school. Thanks for asking me though,” Prairie said, her voice a little too bright, glaring, in fact, like the floodlights.

“I’m actually dating Jaxson,” she went on. “We applied to Clemson together. I won’t be so scared to go away to college if it’s with him.”

“You and the team pet?” Charlie asked.

“Don’t call him that. He’s actually really sweet.” She embarked on a five-minute soliloquy that Charlie largely tuned out.

Charlie was waiting to feel devastated, to feel like the rejection had ruined her, and she wouldn’t be able to get out of bed for several weeks. The feeling didn’t come. She nodded at the right times, smiled here and there when it seemed she should.

She was already moving on.

Maybe she hadn’t been here to see Prairie after all, at least not on an ongoing basis.

Maybe it was to say goodbye.

To where she used to live. To who she used to be.

And so she did say goodbye, several minutes later.

She high-fived assistant coach Myers, and she sank into a familiar hug from Coach S that felt as good as it always had. She made empty promises to the team about coming to future games and buying them more victory Cokes.

When she returned to her car, she pulled out her phone and texted Melina.

*She said no to the date.*

The response was immediate. *Good. I’m convinced nobody deserves you.*

*You don’t have to console me,* she typed back.

*Don't I?*

*No. I'm not really that upset about it. Is that weird?*

*That you're not still into your high school crush? GIRL NO!!!!*

She laughed, practically able to hear the text in Melina's voice.

Another message came through: *See you tomorrow? Dr. Stone assigned soooooo many readings this week. Is she trying to commit murder by papercuts?*

The readings were brutal, Charlie agreed. If the students at Inlet had wished for any reprieve in their coursework after midterms, they had to be disappointed. The academic excellence that most of Charlie's classes expected had continued after fall break, and now that she was sleeping in a real bed again and eating fruits and veggies on a daily basis, she no longer resented the fact that community college wasn't easy the way a lot of television shows painted it to be.

*See you tomorrow*, she replied.

She pulled out of her parking space, drove away from her high school, and out of the town she'd called home her entire life.

She didn't look back. She didn't need to anymore.

## Chapter 17:

“Hey, did you see this?” Melina asked from her desk. She held her phone up to Charlie’s face where Charlie was lounging on her bed. Before Melina’s jell-o fingers could drop the device and break her nose, she plucked it from her.

“This is Jady’s Tik-Tok,” Charlie said, but she couldn’t hear any sound coming from it. “What’s he saying?”

“Oh, sorry.” Melina took her earbuds out and handed them to Charlie who popped them in.

“—news ever,” Jady was saying in front of the camera. “Y’all know I’ve been trying to quit that janitor job I’ve been working since high school, and I made it. Y’all, I made it!”

Cartoon fireworks exploded across the screen before text that read 1 MILL YT SUBS vibrated in neon colors.

“A million subscribers?”

Charlie dropped Melina’s phone on her stomach and fumbled for her own. She opened her subscriptions to Jady’s channel. The number actually said 999.8k, but she wasn’t one to destroy a mood.

“He said he’s paid off his debt, set his family up, and after he quits working at Inlet, he’s moving to LA. There’s, like, a whole thread of announcement videos going up on his Tik-Tok right now. And he’s going to make a special million subscribers mix that’s ten hours of Darktrap.”

“Pogchamp,” Charlie said.

Melina giggled. “Sounds like I may turn you into a gamer girl yet.”

“Don’t bet on it.” She handed Melina’s phone back to her, then typed out responses to each of Jady’s announcement videos.

It had been more than a month since she’d last seen him at the gym. After all, she had her own attached bathroom with a shower all to herself at her grandparents’ condo. The condo also had its own fitness center, golf course, and miles of trails set back several miles from North Myrtle’s beachfront. She was also sure Dr. Li was relieved to no longer see her at the gym before he came to class in the same sweat-soaked shirt he’d been running in.

“You still going to come to my game tonight?” Charlie asked.

“I wouldn’t miss it,” Melina said, batting glittery false eyelashes. “But I’m really going for Z, not for you.”

“I knew it,” Charlie said. “Dr. Stone never should have partnered the two of you for group work.”

“She unleashed the beast. Z and I are going to change the world.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Charlie said, and she meant it.

They exchanged smiles that went on for several long seconds. Charlie looked back at her phone, flushing suddenly, her heart beating like she’d already started warm-ups for the game.

“Oh, by the way, are you still coming with me to have Thanksgiving at my tía’s next week?”

“And her 8 cats?”

“And her 8 cats.”

“I can’t wait to meet pollo and mofongo. Did I say that right?”

“You did,” Melina exclaimed. “But did you say meet or eat?”

“*Meet*,” Charlie stressed. “I don’t want to eat the cats.”

“But also be prepared to eat.”

“You don’t have to worry about that.” Charlie rubbed her stomach. “Speaking of which, is our gourmet feast ready?”

“Indeed.” Melina opened the microwave and handed Charlie one of the two cups that had been rotating inside of it. “From *the* Chef Boyardee, himself.”

“I’m honored.”

“Guess we should get back to our final papers for Dr. Stone’s class then. We’ve got that draft due this Thursday.”

“Guess so.”

They lapsed into a comfortable silence. Charlie ate the slightly overcooked beef ravioli, doing her best not to stain Melina’s *Shokugeki No Soma* duvet. For as much as her friend loved that particular anime, which was all about cooking, her kitchen skills left quite a lot to be desired. But there was something homey about eating rubbery Chef Boyardee and listening to Melina hum, while they knocked out assignments together. An hour later, Melina’s roommate came in.

“Oh,” she said, her eyes darting from Melina to Charlie and back again. “Are you guys doing it or something?”

“Does it look like we’re doing it?” Melina asked.

She scrunched up her petite nose, looking quite a bit like a bunny rabbit. For some reason, Charlie had the urge to gently nibble it. She could feel her face growing hot again, and she did her best to hide behind the curtain of her hair.

“Not yet,” her roommate said. “But you probably will. I’ll come back later.”

She exited the room, leaving Melina and Charlie to stare at one another. Charlie tried a grin that probably looked like botched plastic surgery. Melina giggled, and it sounded higher pitched than normal.

“She’s something,” Charlie said.

“Rude is what she is,” Melina decided.

“Totally.”

They each went back to their papers, but Charlie could hardly concentrate. Ever since she’d put Floppy out of her mind, she’d started noticing Melina in a new way. In a way like her college BFF had some kind of glowy aura around her that made Charlie’s stomach wobble and her palms shake. She wasn’t sure if it was the way Melina talked or all her bright outfits or the banter they shared, but something had her sneaking glimpses out of the corner of her eye when Melina was in the room and blushing when they smiled at each other for too long. She couldn’t help but stare at the stupid bracelet around Melina’s wrist that Melina would break after she did it with a girl for the first time. She couldn’t help but be relieved to see the bracelet still intact every time they hung out.

But why?

“Religion, religion, religion,” she started chanting, “religion and sexuality.”

“What?” Melina asked, removing one earbud again.

“Oh,” Charlie said, “uh, just reading the title of my final paper.”

“I hope you have more than that written.”

She did, not that any of the letters she’d typed made sense in her scrambled brain right now.

“Melina,” she said.

“Yeah?”

*I think I like you*, said her brain.

“I think I’m going to head to the field early and get warmed up,” said her mouth.

“Oh? I thought we were going to ride together.”

“We were, but…” Her gaze traveled the room, searching for any excuse to escape. She poked the Chef Boyardee cup. “I better not have this sitting on my stomach. Might make me queasy when we’re playing.”

“Okay.” With a shrug, Melina turned back to her paper. “You can change here if you want.”

“No,” Charlie exclaimed, much too loudly, drawing out her friend’s confused expression again.

“I mean, it’ll be better if I stash everything in the locker room. Easy to shower and change again afterward.”

“Ooookay.”

“Okay.”

Charlie busied herself with packing up. “See you soon.”

“See you. Say hi to Z for me when you see them.”

“Ha ha,” Charlie intoned, and her voice came out about three times grouchier than she’d intended.

With a last bye, she fled the dorm room before she did anything else that was way too high on the weirdo scale.

She clattered down the stairs, beelining to the exit of the residence hall, only to be confronted by Melina's roommate who was chatting with the RA on duty.

"Hey, cleats, hold up," her roommate said.

Charlie thought about continuing her mad dash out the door, but she'd come face-to-face with her again at some point anyway.

"You don't look too good," the roommate said, and Charlie wondered when women shorter than her had become so intimidating.

"Too many cheap microwaveable meals," she hedged.

"Do right by my girl Melina, you hear?"

She fixed her gaze on Melina's roommate's afro, rather than meet her stern expression. "I have no idea what you mean."

"I mean don't be a fuckboi."

Charlie laughed. She couldn't help it.

"I'm not joking," the roommate continued. "I know your type. Sporty dykes are all the same. Don't hurt Melina."

"I won't," Charlie said. "She's my best friend."

She circled around Melina's roommate and exited the building. If Inlet had taught her anything, it was to look beyond the surface of everyone she met, to interrogate her assumptions and check her biases. She had Melina and Dr. Stone to thank for that.

But she supposed not everyone would extend the same courtesy toward her.

"A fuckboi?" She slid into her Outback, chuckling again.

She couldn't get a date with Floppy. Hadn't ever had a girlfriend. Hadn't even had a first kiss, not really. Practicing with girls in middle school for future boyfriends did

not count, she had decided. She was the furthest thing from a fuckboi that she could imagine.

After all, she didn't even have the courage to ask Melina out in her dorm room. The vibe had been right. She was sure of it. She'd even wondered when they smiled at each other for stupidly long if Melina might like, like her back.

If anyone was going to get their heart broken, it was going to be Charlie.

She parked at the soccer field lot. The turf called to her like a familiar friend now, instead of the enemy it had been when she first started with the intramural team. She wasn't the first to arrive; in fact, Z was expertly dribbling a rainbow-shaded ball before sending it flying into the goal.

At the sight of the green and sound of the solid thwack of foot connecting with ball, she relaxed. It was time to get her head in the game. This was the last one of the fall semester, after all. Coach S had said he might even make it. She wanted to show him she wasn't the worst player on the team anymore, that she didn't always play it safe the way he thought she did.

Unbidden, Melina entered her mind again.

Maybe she didn't have to keep playing it safe there either?

Maybe she could take that chance?

She decided then that if her team won the game, she would ask Melina out, no matter how much the idea made her feel like throwing up, shouting for joy, and peeing herself simultaneously.

That evening, when she saw Melina in the stands, wearing her jersey number on a t-shirt that looked hand painted, she played harder than she ever had before.

And even though the team lost their final game, Charlie asked her out.

Melina said, “Finally, Charlita, geez, I thought we’d be dead before you finally got around to it.”

“Me too,” Charlie admitted.

Then she treated Melina to burritos with the rest of the team that partied like they’d just won Worlds.

## Chapter 18:

Thanksgiving break came and went. The week before finals arrived shortly after. Along with Blessing and his study group, Charlie tackled another 25-page guide for Dr. Li's biology class. Melina and Charlie perfected their final papers for Dr. Stone. Charlie asked her grandfather an endless string of questions in preparation for her econ and accounting finals. Only her intro to computing class felt like a guaranteed "A."

"I didn't realize two-year college was so intensive," Charlie's grandmother said after she served her husband and granddaughter coconut clusters and homebrewed Arnold Palmers. The tastes evoked many vivid images from Charlie's childhood, like the farmhouse that had been in the Berkeley family for so many generations. She couldn't help but wonder if her father would be the last Berkeley man to live in it. She couldn't imagine Benny moving back to the South or reconciling with either parent. Josey might be offered the home, but then it would transition to the Monty name. But it wasn't a bad legacy to come to a close. In fact, it was one Charlie was adamant should end, even if she might never speak that to her parents.

That land, and all the horrors committed upon it, deserved a fresh start. The ghosts deserved peace. She wondered, while she bit into a second coconut cluster, if the ghosts haunted Benny, or if his choices had freed him from the Berkeley family curse.

"Inlet is really tough," Charlie told her grandmother. "Although, I think it depends on what professors you take. But it's probably that way with most colleges."

"Oh, to be young again," Charlie's grandfather rhapsodized.

"You could enroll," Charlie said. "They have noncredit classes on, like, guitar and fishing and stuff."

He patted her hand. “I fear I like retirement too much, though I don’t mind helping you out.”

He made the pages of her econ book flap like a bird, and after a laugh, they went back to work.

Charlie finished her semester with all As and one B in econ. Melina maintained her straight C average from high school.

“You have to get your GPA up. What if you want to transfer somewhere with me,” Charlie argued with her girlfriend, while they took gingerbread cookies out of the oven at her grandparents’ condo on Christmas Eve. Because Charlie had spent Thanksgiving with Melina’s tia and her 8 cats, they decided it fair they spend Christmas with Charlie’s side of the family.

“Yeah,” Benny exclaimed from the kitchen island where he was spiking the eggnog with spiced rum.

“That’s too much.” Tamar tilted the bottle back up. “We don’t need any more close calls with your grandparents this year.”

He nodded, then offered his wife a nip straight from the bottle, which she accepted before offering it to Melina.

“She’s underage,” Charlie blurted.

Tamar snatched the bottle back.

“Spoilsport,” Melina said, scrunching up her nose in that way that so made Charlie want to bite it.

She bit into a cookie instead but only because her brother was watching.

Minutes later, Benny carried the eggnog and Charlie the tray of cookies into the living room where the rest of their guests waited.

Charlie smiled around the room at the many faces that had become her family. Aside from her grandparents, her brother, Tamar, and Melina, who she considered blood, there was Dr. Stone, her wife, and Ms. Stone. There was Blessing, his wife, and his son. A couple she didn't know too well but who lived across from her grandparents had also joined their Christmas Eve gathering.

Together, they drained the eggnog, devoured the cookies, and in front of the fireplace, sang Christmas carols quite poorly—aside from Dr. Stone's wife who had a voice worthy of Broadway. While the group started on a rather melodramatic rendition of “Carol of the Bells,” Charlie slipped out to visit the bathroom.

When she latched the door behind her, she checked her phone one more time. She'd promised herself she wouldn't, but she couldn't help it. The moment took her back to those long nights alone in the back of her Subaru. Strangely, she could feel that time in her life more vividly now than when she'd lived it—the fear, the desperation, the treacherous hope that she'd see two names in particular flash across her phone screen.

“Mom,” she whispered around her tears. “Dad.”

She'd invited them to the gathering. But just like then, they didn't answer her.

A moment later, someone knocked on the door.

She swiped at her tears. Cleared her throat. “Just a sec.”

“It's me.” Melina's voice filtered toward her.

She flipped the lock, and Melina let herself inside.

“Oh, Charlita, what's wrong?” she asked.

She cupped Charlie's face with fingers that would always be cold as icicles. Right now, the cool felt good on Charlie's splotchy skin.

"Just thinking about my parents," she admitted.

Melina, who was several inches shorter than Charlie, managed to wrap her up in a protective hug.

"I miss my parents, too."

It was a rare bit of common ground that the two of them shared. Mostly they were opposites that had attracted, but Melina had moved to South Carolina from Miami to live with her aunt, due to the family's financial problems. It was also a topic Melina didn't talk about much. Charlie didn't press her now, just held her girlfriend as tightly as she could.

After a long moment, they parted.

"They're going to miss us," Melina said.

"Probably."

"Your grandparents are going to think you finally broke this."

Melina snapped the sex bracelet on her wrist that she'd sworn was now reserved for Charlie.

"Don't say that," Charlie exclaimed, her face flaming hotter than the oven that had baked the gingerbread cookies.

She was still red when she followed her cackling girlfriend out of the bathroom, but thankfully now it wasn't from crying.

After a few songs more, people were yawning, the party winding down.

“It was so nice of you to invite us over,” Dr. Stone said when Charlie handed her professor her coat.

“I wanted to pay you back for your help this semester,” Charlie told her, “though I don’t think I ever could. You—” She paused, eyes drifting up to hold Ruth’s. “You changed my life.”

“I did no such thing,” Dr. Stone protested. “*You* changed your life. Maybe I just gave you some tools.”

“Many tools,” Charlie was quick to agree.

“Well, then I’m doing my job.” She winked. “Will I see you again next semester? Melina has already told me I should be expecting to see her name on my roster.”

“I’d like that,” Charlie admitted. “I mean, I don’t think I’m going to take over the family HOA business anymore, so I’m not sure what I’m going to do with my life now.”

“You’re about to turn 18, right?”

Charlie nodded.

“Then I think you’ve got time to figure it out.”

Charlie nodded again, then she dove messily forward, enfolding her formidable professor in a hug.

“Oh,” Dr. Stone said, a surprised little laugh exiting her mouth before she hugged Charlie back.

“You...” Charlie started. “Other than my dad, you’re the only person taller than me that I’ve hugged in a long time.”

“Oh really?”

“Yeah. This was really nice.”

“It was,” Dr. Stone said, her smile gentle on her dark features. “I hope to see you next semester, but reach out to me if you need anything before then.”

“I’ll set up an appointment with Miss Huaman about my spring classes,” she said, and it was a promise.

Charlie waved to Dr. Stone, her wife, and mother while they drove away. She kept waving until Blessing’s family was out of sight as well.

Back in the living room, Charlie’s grandparents bid Benny, Tamar, Melina, and Charlie goodnight. Soon after, Benny and Tamar turned in.

Because her brother and his wife were staying in Charlie’s room, it meant she and Melina were relegated to the couch and sleeping bag in the living room.

“This is what it means to be the youngest,” Charlie told Melina while they settled themselves in for the night. “You’re always the one who gets kicked out of your room when family visits.”

“It’s not so bad,” Melina said. “The fireplace, the tree all lit up, and, of course, there’s you and me.”

“That’s definitely not the worst thing,” Charlie agreed.

She snuggled down deeper in her sleeping bag. It still smelled a bit like B.O. from her soccer gear and the spilled grease on her Cracker Barrel uniform from the months she lived in her Outback.

She held her stuffed turtle close, burying her face in Christmas’ pudgy belly. If she closed her eyes and listened to the sound of the tiny beans shift inside the faded velveteen fur, she could almost pretend nothing had changed from the day her grandparents bought Christmas for her at Alligator Adventure. But when she looked at

Christmas, all she had left of her mother now were the obsidian beads of Christmas' eyes.  
Of her father, she had nothing left at all.

Once she knew they'd loved her.

Maybe one day they'd love her again.

Maybe they wouldn't.

She wasn't beachfront like Josey. She wasn't Alligator Adventure like Benny.

She was and had always been the South Carolina swamps. Misunderstood by many, but there were those who truly saw her, who even protected her.

No matter what her parents decided, she now knew had no shortage of family here or at Inlet.

A hand reached for hers from the couch. She shifted Christmas from her face to the crook of her neck, then entwined her fingers with Melina's clammy ones.

"Wake me up when it's time for presents," came Melina's sleepy voice from underneath her *Shokugeki no Soma* duvet.

"Okay," Charlie agreed, a smile tugging at her lips. "But I think I've already gotten everything I asked for."

**END**

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSIONS

#### Overview

The purpose of this dissertation was three-fold. Firstly, the dissertation reviewed previous studies on this topic and analyzed portrayals of two-year colleges in popular culture media, in which deficit-based narratives made caricatures of these institutions and utilized humor to mask harmful stereotyping of not only the institutions but also those affiliated with them. Secondly, this dissertation mined the popular culture, the current literature on this topic, and the researcher's personal experiences with two-year colleges to identify community cultural wealth present at these institutions. Thirdly, the dissertation used arts-based design to disrupt the existing deficit-based discourse in popular culture and media about two-year colleges with the intent to showcase community cultural wealth. To accomplish this, the dissertation employed theories of poststructuralism, counter-storytelling, a reframing of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital for two-year colleges, and intersectionality from Critical Race Theory.

The arts-based design then took the form of the novel *Inlet*, which can be read in its entirety in chapter four. While an arts-based dissertation is considered non-traditional by the Academy, it allows research to be disseminated beyond the ivory tower. This puts the work of researchers in the hands of broader communities. Because two-year colleges center the communities that they serve as one element of their cultural wealth, it was

necessary to conduct a study that could be accessed by both the Academy and those beyond it.

Chapter five revisits how popular culture portrays two-year colleges, explores two-year colleges' community cultural wealth, and analyzes the process of writing the novel *Inlet*, its limitations, and future recommendations for research.

### **Findings and the Relationship to Current Literature**

Overwhelmingly, popular culture and media portrayals of two-year colleges are based in deficit narratives. From LaPaglia's book on this topic in 1994 to the most recent piece of scholarship by Tyler and Nehls that came out five years ago, researchers have identified repeating deficit-based narratives. Because the literature on this topic has been silent for the past five years, I also completed an analysis of popular culture's representations that have come out within the last 10 years and found a continuation of deficit-based narratives up through the year of 2022. One area for future study echoes a sentiment from LaPaglia's text. Once she began searching across decades for representations of two-year colleges in popular culture and media, she found herself stumbling across representations in her daily life, in conversations with colleagues and other parties interested in her work, and mining archives and other areas for additional representations. This dissertation and the work on it that has already come out from it has become a part of my research identity, and like LaPaglia, I expect to continue to track more representations in hopes of building past saturation of sources toward an exhaustive list to be shared with others.

Deficit-based narratives about two-year colleges in popular culture look like but are not limited to the following: 1) lack of representation, overall, h\*istorically and

currently of two-year colleges in film, fiction, television, and other mass media mediums 2) low-performing students, 2) negligent staff and faculty who want to escape the two-year setting, 3) white savior-like cis-hetero male main characters, 4) two-year colleges as the joke school or fake college, 5) humor employed by writers to mask harmful stereotypes, 6) inappropriate faculty and student relationships, 7) lack of resources to meet needs of students, faculty, and staff, 8) characters with marginalized identities portrayed in ways that reinforce harmful stereotypes, 9) misunderstanding of what two-year colleges are/their purpose is, and 10) the creation of a post-*Community* formula for negative portrayals of two-year colleges in sitcoms, among others (Bourke, et. al, 2009; DeGenaro, 2006; Fain, 2012; Hawk, 2014; Hawk & Hill, 2016; LaPaglia, 1994; Savage, 1989; Tucciarone, 2007; Tyler & Nehls, 2017). The findings in my analysis of deficit-based narratives largely concurred with the existing research on h\*istorical trends of how two-year colleges have been portrayed; however, I noted four distinct differences than past researchers.

Differences I noted in my analysis when compared to previous literature on portrayals of two-year colleges in popular culture included 1) an increase in portrayals of two-year colleges in popular culture, particularly in sitcoms, 2) that these sitcom portrayals follow *Community's* formula to showcase two-year colleges as undesirable spaces for low-performing, particularly raced white, characters to achieve some post-secondary education, 3) the conclusion that *Community* has negatively impacted the way two-year colleges are portrayed in popular culture and represented two-year colleges in highly problematic ways that included the reinforcement of deficit-based narratives, such as the white savior-like cis-hetero-male main character that impacts an ensemble cast that

contains diverse identities, and 4) that two-year colleges, unlike their four-year counterparts, have always contended with national distribution of news and media, which led to a formulation of their identity *by* media, prior to establishing and communicating their own identity to American society. Using poststructuralism to analysis discourse, then Critical Race Theory as my major theoretical frame with elements of counter-storytelling, rethinking Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, and employing intersectionality allowed for my findings to emerge where previous research had not identified these particular notes.

However, despite the ways popular culture has h\*istorically and currently portrays two-year colleges, those with insider knowledges (including students, staff, faculty, administration, and experts in the field) about these institutions remark on their community cultural wealth and push back against the deficit-based narratives. This emphasis on community cultural wealth in the study in chapter four comes not only from prior literature but also from my personal experiences and learned knowledges having attended a community college and worked at several others.

To identify community cultural wealth at two-year colleges, I, like Yosso did with CRT (2005) reframed Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to center the two-year college and the elements of community cultural wealth that insiders identify about these colleges, rather than to focus on deficit-based narratives about two-year colleges from outsiders that are not written for or by these institutions and those who attend and work at them. This reframing disrupts the traditional hegemony, or dominant power structures, of higher education in America and takes a critical lens to four-year colleges and

universities. This critical lens also represents an important area of future research when considering the rapidly changing face of higher education in this country.

Elements of community cultural wealth at two-year colleges look like but are certainly not limited to the following: 1) higher education that emphasizes access for all, rather than access for few, 2) affordable tuition and programs, 3) proximity to and relationship with local communities, 4) support for and service to marginalized populations in America, leading to social mobility and societal change, 5) providing space handle the increasing number of Americans seeking post-secondary education, which four-year institutions do not have the infrastructure to do alone, 6) faculty (who can achieve tenure) focused on teaching without the additional burdens of research and service commitments, 7) building community and campus unity, 8) transfer and articulation agreements with four-year colleges and universities, 9) job and career preparation programs that do not require a four-year degree, and 10) the ability to focus on jobs/careers and family life, while also attending college (Bourke, et. al, 2009; DeGenaro, 2006; Fain, 2012; Hawk, 2014; Hawk & Hill, 2016; LaPaglia, 1994; Savage, 1989; Tucciarone, 2007; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Tyler & Nehls, 2017).

Some specific examples of this community cultural wealth present in chapter four, the novel, *Inlet*, look like the following:

- Access for all, rather than access for few (Bahr & Gross, 2016; Cohen & Brawer, 2008):
- From the Prologue: “Inlet...heralded a mission statement to welcome all persons...Inlet [was] a technical college, one of 17 public two-year

colleges in the state governed by the South Carolina Technical and Community College System Office.”

- Affordable tuition, rigorous programs, and transfer programs/job training (Hawk & Hill, 2016; Savage, 1989)
- From Chapter 2: “...she was in the top ten of her class. She’d completed more than 200 hours of community service through her church, networked with local business owners at the Chamber of Commerce, and maintained a 3.95 GPA. With her parents, she traveled to the South Carolina Technical and Community College System Office where she received a gold pin with the system’s logo and CRP engraved on the glossy surface.”
- Faculty focused on teaching without the additional burdens of research and service commitments (LaPaglia, 1994; Tucciarone, 2007)
- From Chapter 12: “When Charlie arrived for her visit, Dr. Stone turned over a stack of student papers already marked up with her messy writing in the purple ink she favored. ‘You’ll all see those grades next week,’ Dr. Stone promised. [She’d] advised her class to pick a topic that meant something to them. Don’t think of this as something disconnected from who you are and how you move through the world. Write something that you’ll remember, that will awaken something in you. That’s what this class is about. An awakening. That is what life is about, too. Melina had said, ‘When Dr. Stone talks about ‘getting woke,’ she makes it poetry.’” Her professor could probably voice audiobooks, Charlie had thought.

- Building community and campus unity, while maintaining proximity to and relationships with local communities (Hawk & Hill, 2016; Savage, 1989)
- From Chapter 17: “‘Oh, to be young again,’ Charlie’s grandfather rhapsodized. ‘You could enroll,’ Charlie said. ‘They have noncredit classes on, like, guitar and fishing and stuff.’”
- Support for and service to marginalized populations (Bahr & Gross, 2016; Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Tucciarone, 2007)
- From Chapter 5: “When they began to discuss the courses she’d written down, Charlie took a deep breath. ‘This isn’t exactly the course load I’m hoping to take,’ she said. Her father and mother shadowed the piece of paper she pushed across the desk. ‘I was hoping you could tell me if there are still seats available in...’ She listed off the course number and the section, which would meet at the same time as the extra accounting course her father had wanted her to take. ‘It’s human sexuality,’ she finished. A million words clawed at Charlie’s throat. She wanted to spill that she was a lesbian. The advisor steepled her dark fingers in front of her. ‘You know, I see a lot of students come through my door. A lot of them come in with one plan in mind, and they leave having pursued something entirely other. May I ask?’ She pointed her bright pink and silver nail to the accounting course Charlie had written but rejected. ‘Are you doing what *you* want to do or what somebody else wants you to?’”

- Ability to maintain jobs/careers and families, while attending college  
(Hawk & Hill, 2016)
- From Chapter 15: Lessons Learned: “‘I’m not as spry as I used to be,’ said her grandpa, who still rode double-digit miles every day on his bike. ‘And it’ll be a while before your grandma’s fully recovered. What do you say to moving in and helping two old folk out?’”

The above examples are a limited sample from the novel of two-year colleges’ community cultural wealth presented in *Inlet*. Because fiction, unlike journal articles, allow readers to take away their own findings and conclusions from the text, I am hesitant to map the entirety of *Inlet*’s elements of community cultural wealth. Rather, I encourage in the spirit of conducting future research readers and researchers, alike, to complete their own analysis on *Inlet*. Where else did I showcase two-year colleges’ cultural wealth, and where did I perhaps accidentally slip back into deficit-based narratives? What would other insiders change about my novel in the creation of their own fiction about a two-year college? What other forms than fiction can arts-based research design be employed to showcase two-year colleges cultural wealth? I invite not only the critique of *Inlet* in classrooms, in research communities, or even in one’s own home during dedicated time for daily pleasure reading, but how else can *Inlet* be used to reach stakeholders with fundamental misunderstandings about two-year colleges?

*Inlet*, I want to repeat once more, is not representative of life at a two-year college. *Inlet* is one representation of one character’s experience coming-of-age under the influence of those she meets at her technical college. Therefore, we need more representations of two-year colleges in popular culture and media that showcase

community cultural wealth and disrupt deficit-based narratives. I hope that this dissertation can serve as a guide on one of what could be so many ways to do this kind of work.

To do this dissertation was not easy. It was my second advisor during my doctoral journey who entertained the idea of a student pursuing a non-traditional dissertation.

Others in my department and across the university also did not see the value in this work and encouraged me in different directions. However, I collected supporters along the way as well, those people became my committee, my confidants, and my colleagues, and many of them I thank in my dissertation acknowledgements. To those who also want to pursue a non-traditional dissertation, first, I applaud you. I believe in pushing boundaries and challenging the Academy. In large part, this is because of my experience at two-year colleges whose values often look so different than those at four-year institutions.

Secondly, I tell you to be brave and to press on. Naysayers who are comfortable in their theories and methods will be there, and they have the right to be. We have different methodologies and interests and that makes us stronger. I believe in collectives where each voice can have its say, even when those voices may disagree. You will find your supporters, however, if you press on. You will find your people. You will be able to do the work that you have been called to do, if only you keep at it.

*Inlet* answered a call to action issued in prior studies on this topic. In multiple studies, researchers like LaPaglia and Tucciarone noted that it must be researchers and educators, and those with insider knowledge, about two-year colleges that push back against popular culture's portrayals of these institutions and shift the tide of negative discourse (1994; 2007). Researchers like Hawk and Hill acknowledge that these deficit-

based narratives display a blatant lack of knowledge about what two-year colleges are, who they serve, and their function in society (2014; 2016). However, where prior studies stopped is what *Inlet* aimed to do.

Research on this area has gone unpublished for the past five years, while sitcoms and other mediums of popular culture continue their deficit-based portrayals of two-year colleges through the year 2022 when this dissertation was finished. Unfortunately, prior research on this topic has also remained largely within the Academy, rather than reaching the mass market audiences the researchers posit is necessary in shifting the discursive tide toward portrayals of these institutions that reflect community cultural wealth.

*Inlet* is a work of fiction, a novel, composed in accessible language for a mass market audience, and constructed with translation to film in mind because it employs the 15-beat structure of *Save the Cat* (Brody, 2018). *Inlet* is a novel that is rich with knowledges from the current literature about two-year colleges and the author's personal knowledges as someone who attended and worked within the two-year sector of higher education for more than ten years. The novel reflects the study of craft in an MFA program and serves the purpose of bridging gaps between audiences within and beyond the Academy.

After this dissertation, the novel will undergo further edits to move from dissertation to commercial publication. The process will include expanding the length to 60-75k words, selecting a genre, and massaging the backstory and elements of telling into full scenes. The organization of the chapters will probably also shift, and I may add in additional points of view. I plan to author an autoethnographic piece on this process of moving from dissertation to commercial publication. This would a research project of

analytic memos, archival data, and observation that I plan to begin as soon as the dissertation has been accepted by my university's system of publication.

In my work of decentering four-year colleges to focus on two-year colleges community cultural wealth I realized that the Academy has been complicit not only in furthering deficit-based narratives about two-year colleges, but also in h\*storically prioritizing exclusivity over access, equity, and justice and condoning practices that hold knowledges hostage from larger audiences, meaning that popular culture is left to create false and harmful narratives in place of research-based accounts. Those of us in the Academy, especially those of us engaged with critical work, must analyze how the research we do either perpetuates harm to the communities with/about whom we study or strives to repair damages. Art appeals to a vast number of audiences, those within the Academy and beyond it, and researchers, either on their own, or in teams, can and should consider dissemination beyond traditional means.

We must alter how we do and disseminate research. Art is one way to do this. I encourage other researchers to not only interrogate how they may contribute to deficit-based discourses about two-year colleges and alter that behavior, and I also invite them to engage in research and in the classroom in ways that blends art and science. Let us build a new generation of scholars who conduct arts-based research with as much confidence and support as every new methodology and method must earn, including at one time, qualitative research. This is one way to be the change in society for which we work so hard. Art has already changed the world. I have no doubt it will do so again.

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## APPENDIX A

### SAVE THE CAT NOVEL BEATS

Authors can use numerous methods to plot their work. The *Save the Cat* beat sheet was originally used in film and has been adapted for fiction. Using the *Save the Cat* beats adapted for fiction can simplify the process of translating novels to film (Brody, 2018). Because this dissertation employed this method of plotting, an in-depth description that expands on chapter three appears below\*:

- 1) Opening Image: A brief introduction to the world the author has created.
- 2) Theme Stated: Readers learn the central theme for the novel.
- 3) Set Up: Readers meet the main character.
- 4) Catalyst: An event occurs that starts the story's forward movement.
- 5) Debate: The main character chooses whether or not to engage in the story.
- 6) Break Into Act II: The main character engages in the story.
- 7) B Story: The B story references a subplot.
- 8) Fun and Games or Learning the Rules: The main character learns how to navigate within their changed world.
- 9) Midpoint: The stakes for the main character heighten.
- 10) Bad Guys Close In: Action begins to rise, and stakes continue to heighten.
- 11) All is Lost: The main character believes they have hit their low point in the story.
- 12) Dark Night of the Soul: A second debate where the main character must face their lows and the actions that took them to this place.

13) Break Into Act III: The main character discovers a way forward.

14) Finale: This is the novel's climax.

15) Final Image: A closing view of the world that either reflects or contrasts the novel's opening view.

\*These 15 beats appear in *Save the Cat Writes a Novel: The Last Book on Novel Writing You'll Ever Need* by Jessica Brody, though each beat's description reflects the dissertation author's interpretation.