

A person is seen from behind, wearing a brown, textured knit sweater and carrying a dark suitcase. The background is a blurred, warm-toned outdoor setting. The title 'Take Me With You' is written in a large, white, cursive font across the center of the image.

Take Me With You

One summer...
one life-changing
journey

CATHERINE RYAN HYDE

AUTHOR OF *LOVE IN THE PRESENT TENSE*

About the Book

Seth and his little brother Henry haven't had the most stable of upbringings. Their father has been in and out of jail; their mother took off years ago. A twist of fate could be just what they need.

August stopped drinking the day his son died. While making a journey that's close to his heart, a breakdown leaves him at the mercy of the local mechanic - Seth and Henry's father.

But then August is presented with an offer he doesn't expect: take the two boys with him for the summer, and pay nothing for the repairs.

As the unlikely trio set out on their road trip, the most unexpected, unforgettable friendship begins to take shape.

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Yosemite

About the Author
Also by Catherine Ryan Hyde
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TAKE ME WITH YOU

Catherine Ryan Hyde

Part One

Early June

August, Standing Still

August Schroeder stood at the rear door of his broken-down motorhome, looking out through the small, square window. Had he looked out any other window – the windshield, the side windows, the little window over the kitchen sink – he'd have seen the inside of a mechanic's garage. He wanted to see sky. He'd come out here to see sky. Not toolboxes and racks of new tires and hydraulic lifts.

He stepped out the door, down the two metal steps, turned and walked into the mechanic's garage.

He stepped in front of the open hood, where the mechanic could see him.

The man straightened up, stretching his lower back against one hand. He wiped his hands on a red shop rag. Wiped his forehead on one dirty sleeve.

He was unusually tall, the mechanic. Maybe six foot six or taller. His limbs appeared stretched, thin and lanky. His blond hair was long in the back, curling and tumbling and disappearing under the collar of his blue work shirt.

Wes. His name was Wes. August had been careful to learn this, because so much of his fate rested in the mechanic's hands. It seemed wise to remove as much of the distance between them as possible.

'How's it going?' August asked.

'I'm on schedule. If that's what you mean.'

August sighed. Took a seat on a stack of three unmounted tires, lowering himself with his hands. 'I don't even know what I mean. Just making conversation, I guess.'

Wes pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his breast pocket and shook one out, receiving it with his lips. 'What've you been doing to keep busy all day?'

'Not much. Just absorbing the fact that Yellowstone isn't going to happen.'

Wes lit the cigarette. Squinted at August through the smoke. 'You told me you're out all summer. Seems to me you'd still have plenty of time.'

'Time, yeah. I've got time. That's not the issue. Money is the issue. I budget just so much for gas every summer. Yellowstone is four states away.'

'You go out all summer every summer?'

'I do.'

'You a teacher?'

'Yes.'

'What do you teach?'

'High-school science.'

'Science,' Wes said. Like he was describing a shiny new car hardly anyone could afford. 'I used to be good at science. So ... maybe Yellowstone *next* summer.'

'Yeah,' August said. 'I guess.' But when he thought again about giving up the part of the trip Phillip would have loved, should have shared, the pain came back, slicing him into two parts. The old and the new. It was so familiar now, that pain. He almost welcomed it. He'd almost missed it.

'But it was the whole point of the trip this year. It was really ... kind of a big deal. But, anyway, you don't need to know all that, and it's kind of personal. I just won't be able to afford it, and that's just the way it is.'

He looked up into Wes's face, and saw something, but he didn't know what it was. Something that the mechanic was holding in. Something he could say, or not say. A weighing of options.

'I swear I'm not gouging you on this repair,' he said, but that wasn't the thing.

'I know you're not,' August said.

'I appreciate the trust.'

'It isn't exactly trust. I don't know you at all. I've known you for less than a full day. The reason I know your prices are fair is because my father owned a garage. I used to work summers there. I'm not exactly a mechanic but I know quite a bit about it. I know the things that tend to go wrong, and I know how many hours' labor it takes to fix them. If you were gouging me, I'd know it.'

About an hour later, August stood looking out his back door again, watching two boys play. One was maybe eleven or twelve, tall and lanky. He reminded August of a young horse - long-legged, and somehow managing to combine clumsiness with an odd grace. His hair was light brown and shaggy. The little one was quite little in comparison, maybe seven. His every move looked tentative. His very being had a tentative quality that drew August's eyes.

They were kicking a ball around in an enormous lot of dirt and weeds, close enough to the garage that August assumed they belonged to the mechanic into whose hands he had fallen. He guessed they were brothers, because boys of such disparate ages didn't tend to band together in play. Besides, they looked like brothers. They looked like two examples of the same theme.

As he stood watching, the long, familiar blade of pain sliced down from the pit of his throat, burned its way between his lungs. It was right there in his body, he now knew. It had never been in his head. It had always been real, but he had lived all those years without knowing it. Those years felt pointless and wasted now.

Woody wiggled by his left shin, whining. There was a low window, too, in the rear door. Woody could see the boys play, and he wanted out. His little docked tail quivered more than it wagged. The sound he made reminded August of the whine of his garden hose when the water was restrained by a closed nozzle.

He reached down and scratched between Woody's small shoulder blades, his fingertips disappearing in the wiry white fur. The dog let out a yip, almost as though accidentally. As though he'd been straining to hold it in, but then it got the better of him.

'OK,' August said. 'Why not?'

He opened the back door.

They were a good long way from the road. Even farther from the highway. Now, with the door open, August could hear it in the distance, the highway. Well, not the highway itself, but the cars on it. The distant drone of their travel. That sound sliced down through his chest, too. Because he was not on that highway with them. He should have been on that highway. He should have been gone. He should not have been here. Then again, the word 'should' repaired nothing. It definitely did not do engine repairs.

He stepped out of the air conditioning. Into the June heat.

He watched Woody blast over to the two boys, bounding up and down to chart his trajectory over the weeds. As he ran farther away from August, his image became distorted by wavy bands of rising heat.

The bigger boy's head came up, and his face brightened when he saw the dog. Woody was the perfect dog for a kid that age. A small-to-medium terrier mix, full of excitement, always up for play, happy to do tricks.

The littler boy turned to see what his brother had seen. He jumped, missed kicking the ball, and ran behind the tall boy to hide.

'He's friendly,' August called out. 'He just wants to play. He's been cooped up inside the motorhome too long.'

The little one emerged. Tentatively, as he seemed to do everything. Full of wonder and fear, warring with each other. August knew the wonder would win. He wished he could communicate what he knew to this frightened boy. But that never did any good anyway. People learned by

what they experienced. It mattered little what anyone said to anyone.

The small guy held a nervous hand out to Woody, but the dog jumped away again, running in a wide circle and then doubling back for another invitation. He didn't want to be petted. He could get that much inside. He wanted to play.

August walked closer.

The older boy stood straight-backed and tall as August approached. He took charge, that boy. It seemed to be his nature. There was something unusually mature about his stance.

It made August's slicing pain ease and withdraw slightly. Because the boy in front of him was not Phillip. The boy in front of him was only who he was. He was only himself.

The younger boy retreated behind his brother again as August drew near.

'That's your rig, huh?' the tall boy asked, pointing with his chin to the rear one-third of the motorhome protruding from the garage. 'That's a real nice rig.'

'Thank you.'

'Nice dog, too. Is he a Jack Russell terrier?'

'Maybe part. I'm not sure. He's from the pound.'

'What's his name?'

'Woody,' August said, and Woody's ears twitched.

'He do any tricks?'

'Lots of them. But right now he's feeling cooped up. He wants to let off steam. Tell you what. I'll make you an offer. If you can catch him, I'll give you five bucks.'

'He won't come when you call him?'

'Oh, no,' August said. 'That's not it at all. He'll do whatever I tell him to do. But that's his favorite game. When kids try to catch him.'

The tall boy's eyes grew lighter.

'Hey, Henry,' he said. 'Five bucks. What do you think?'

They took off in pursuit of the dog, zero to full kid speed in seconds. Woody ran a wide, delighted arc, looking over

his shoulder as if laughing.

They would never catch Woody. So it wasn't really fair. If they ran him until he was happy and worn down, August would offer them the five dollars anyway. Otherwise it was just a mean trick.

He wandered back into the mechanic's garage, because it hurt to watch children play. Despite the fact that he'd been doing so on purpose for some time.

About ten minutes after August took a seat on the stack of tires, the mechanic pulled his head out from under the hood. He looked at August as if he had something to say. But, if so, he never said it.

Instead he lit a cigarette, took a deep drag, then blew the smoke out again, watching it as if transfixed. As if he'd never seen such a thing before. 'How bad d'you want to make it to Yellowstone?' he asked.

'Bad,' August said. But it felt dicey. A little dangerous. There was an offer hovering somewhere. Everything was a mystery except the weight of it, which he could feel. 'If you have thoughts, I'd like to hear them.'

'Never mind,' Wes said, cutting his eyes down to the concrete floor. 'Forget I mentioned it.'

'You've got something to say, go ahead and say it.'

Just at that moment, the older boy stepped into the garage, carrying Woody in his arms. Woody's tongue lolled out, longer than seemed physically possible, and, as the dog panted, he flipped little drops of sweat on to the boy's bare arm. The effect was that of a wide grin on the dog's face. And that might have been exactly what it was. August looked up to the face of the boy. It was red and dripping from the heat and exertion.

'Seth,' the mechanic said. 'What're you doing with the man's dog?'

'It was his idea,' Seth said.

'It was my idea,' August said. 'He's doing exactly what I asked him to do.' Then, to the boy, 'I can't believe you caught him. Nobody ever caught him before. You must be one fast guy.'

'That's not how I did it. I didn't do it with my legs. I did it with my brain.'

Seth poured the dog into August's arms, and August set Woody on his paws on the concrete floor and went after his wallet. Pulled out a five-dollar bill and handed it to Seth.

'Pleasure doing business with you,' Seth said, with something almost like a small salute.

It seemed an odd expression for a child his age, until August considered that the boy lived in - or at least behind - a business. He must have heard it all the time.

August watched him walk back out into the shimmering heat.

'Nice boys,' August said.

No reply. Wes just crushed the cigarette into an ashtray on the workbench and stuck his head back under the hood.

August gathered Woody back on to his lap and watched for a few moments, to pass the time. But it was really no more interesting than staring at the sky. Right around the time he was ready to go back inside his rig, the upper part of Wes emerged again.

'When I finish up for the day,' he said, 'maybe you and me have a drink?'

'Oh. Um. I don't drink.'

'At all?'

'No. Not at all.'

'Oh. Well. The drink isn't the real deal of it. Coffee, then.'

August felt a rush of discomfort. This tall, odd man wanted something from him. And he couldn't imagine what it might be. He couldn't imagine what he had that the mechanic would need, or even want. He briefly tried on the idea that the man was hitting on him. But it didn't feel

quite like that. But it felt equally personal, scary, and emotionally important.

'I have coffee inside,' August said. 'Come knock when you're done.'

'I'll prob'ly work late. Eight or nine at least. All the better to get you back on the road.'

'I'll be up,' August said. 'Just knock.'

Then he spent the rest of the day wondering how big a mistake he had actually made.

At the end of the day, the mechanic put away his tools, shut off the lights, and let himself out of the shop through a side door. He didn't knock.

August drank the coffee himself, and, predictably, couldn't sleep.

This Will Sound Crazy

In the morning, as he was making a fresh pot of coffee, August heard a shy, tentative knock on the motorhome's rear door. Woody barked.

And barked. And barked.

'You're late,' he said, out loud, but to himself. Quietly. Too quietly to be heard through the door.

He'd already pushed the side window blinds up, but had not yet opened the curtains on the back door. That was a more involved task, as they were blocked by the screen door. He had to open the back door to get to them. So that always happened last.

'Shhh,' he said to the dog, but to no effect.

He finished plugging in the coffee pot, and turned it on to brew.

Then he unlocked and opened the back door.

In the dirt at the bottom of his two metal steps stood Seth, a baseball cap held politely in front of him, his little brother Henry directly behind.

'Good morning, Seth,' August said.

'How'd you know my name was Seth?'

'I heard your father call you by it yesterday.'

'Oh. That's right. And this's—'

'Henry,' August said. 'I heard you call him by it yesterday.'

'Oh. Did I?'

'What can I do for you boys?'

'Sorry to bother you. Sir. Hope it's no trouble. If it is, just say, and we'll go right away. We wouldn't've knocked if we

thought you were sleeping. We saw your shades go up. So we knew you were awake. Hope it's not a bother. It's just that ... Henry ... my brother ... and me, we're just wondering ... maybe could we play with that dog? No charge. We're not asking it for any five bucks. We just liked that dog. And we think he liked us back.'

'I know for a fact he liked you back,' August said. 'Look at him.'

He opened the door wider so the boys could see Woody standing on his hind legs - paws reaching up and raking the air - and jumping up and down. Yes. Jumping up and down on his hind legs only. Woody was half circus-dog. Woody could do that.

Henry let out a light shriek that August recognized only after the fact as excited laughter.

'He's good at that,' Seth said. 'How's he balance on his hind legs so good?'

'He's just built for it, I guess. He can walk all the way across a room on his hind legs.'

'We'd sure like to see him do his tricks sometime.'

'Sure. Maybe when you bring him back.'

Seth's face lightened, and only then did August realize the boy had been waiting for a yes or a no, and straining under the weight of the uncertainty.

'So we can take him out in the lot to play?'

'Sure.'

August opened the door wide for Woody and gave him the simple 'Go on' permission. The dog scrambled out the door and jumped all around the boys, and jumped up and put his paws on them, and licked at Henry's face, which he could reach by leaping.

'I like the way just that one ear on him is brown and the rest white,' Seth said.

'Yeah,' August said. 'I like that about him, too.'

'How long can we keep him out?'

'Well ... I'll tell you what. Stay where I can see you, and if I want him back for some reason, I'll let you know.'

'OK, thanks,' Seth said, barely able to contain his grin.

'One condition, though,' August said.

The boy's face fell, and he stepped back as if he'd been slapped.

'Nothing bad,' August said. 'I just want you to tell me how you caught him.'

'Oh, that,' Seth said, and relaxed. And began to look a bit proud. 'I used my brain.'

'So you said. But you really didn't tell me how.'

'Well. See. I noticed how every time you go for him, he runs. Even if you take a step at him. Even if you just move. But if I held still, or looked the other way, he'd come closer. So I got smart and sat on the ground and turned my back on him and pretended I didn't want nothing to do with him at all. And he just walked right up and climbed in my lap. But don't worry, 'cause we ran him real good before I thought of it. I don't want you to worry you didn't get your five dollars' worth.'

'I wasn't worried,' August said. 'You three have fun.'

August sat on the top metal step for half an hour or so, his feet on the bottom step, his elbows planted on his thighs, drinking coffee and watching them play. And waiting to feel the pain. But it didn't come. He felt for it. Poked at it. Questioned where it was hiding. Maybe it was because he knew the boys now, and they were so different from his own son. Maybe it was because he almost wanted the pain back, and it was determined to do exactly the opposite of what he wanted.

The weather was a thing of beauty, lightly cool, with no breeze at all. Over a distant mountain the sky still glowed faintly red from the tail end of dawn.

He heard a scuffling in the dirt, and turned his head to see Wes approach, head slightly tilted down.

'Morning,' August said. 'Not too late if you still want that cup of coffee.'

'Oh. Thanks, but I had mine with breakfast. Sorry I stood you up last night.'

'Up to you. You're the one who wanted to talk.'

'I decided ...' And then he tailed off, and stood still for the longest time, staring off into the distance like the answer was just on the line of the horizon. 'It was a stupid idea,' he said, finally. 'You would've thought I was crazy.'

August considered this for a moment, then decided he had no idea how to respond. He was curious now, but it seemed unwise to force someone's hand on an idea that was crazy even to the mind that created it.

Neither man spoke for a time.

August stared at Seth, off playing in the field. 'There's something ... very ...' Then he got stuck for a second or two, so he pushed the words harder. '... decent. There's something very decent about that boy.'

'Who, Seth?'

'Yeah. I'm not saying the little one isn't decent. Just that he hasn't said a word to me, so I don't know. But Seth ...'

'Decent ... meaning?'

'I don't know. There's something upstanding about him.'

Wes snorted laughter. 'Yeah, that's Seth, all right. He'll drive you crazy with how upstanding he is. And how upstanding he thinks you ought to be. You got any kids?'

'I had a son.'

'Had?'

August did not reply.

'Never mind. None of my business. Sorry.'

Then Wes got his feet unstuck and made his way into the shop.

August drained the last of his coffee and followed Wes inside.

The mechanic was going through drawers in a free-standing red metal tool chest as tall as his breast-bone. He

picked and chose, gathered what he seemed to think he would need, then laid those tools out on the workbench before going on to the next drawer. He knew August was there, that much was obvious. But he didn't speak, or even turn his head.

'This ... *thing*,' August said. 'The one you keep acting like you're going to say but then you don't say it. The one I'd think was crazy. Yesterday you made it sound like there was some tie-in between that and whether I could still afford to make it to Yellowstone. Was I right about that?'

'It was a possibility in that direction,' Wes said, without pausing in his tool selection or looking up.

'Do me a favor, then. Getting to Yellowstone was very important to me this year. More than you know. More than anybody can probably understand. So if you've got an idea, sometime between now and the time I get back on the road again, could you go ahead and spit it out? Let me decide for myself if it's crazy? I'll be driving away shortly after, and you'll never see me again, so I really don't see what you have to lose.'

'I expect to get 'er done tomorrow. But prob'ly late in the day. Seven, eight in the evening. Maybe later. If that was the case, would you drive out of here tomorrow night, or sleep another night and leave Monday morning?'

'Anything after seven I'd probably stay put for the night.'

'OK, then.'

'OK, what exactly?'

'OK, sometime between now and Monday morning I'll let you know what I was thinking so you can laugh in my face and call me a fool and drive away shaking your head.'

August held out his right hand. It took the mechanic a long time to notice. But then, when he finally did, they shook on that deal.

August didn't go out to the lot to ask for Woody back, because there was no reason why he should. And the boys

didn't bring the dog back until a quarter to noon.

August opened the back door and Woody jumped in, circled twice, and flopped on to his side on the cool kitchen linoleum, his tongue hanging off on to the floor, his ribs heaving.

'You broke my dog,' August said. But when he saw the panic in Seth's eyes, he jumped to repair the damage. 'That was just a joke. It's nice to see him so tired. Maybe we give him a little break before we ask him to do tricks.'

'We have to go eat lunch,' Seth said. 'My dad takes off work every day around noon. We got to go in and eat with him. Henry and me. Then we'll come back and see tricks. If you're sure it's OK.'

'I'm sure it's OK,' August said.

When August looked at the clock again, it was after 2.30. And the boys had not come back. He looked out the window to see what he could see.

Seth was outside with an ancient wooden tennis racket, slamming a ball over and over against the side of the shop. As if he had a grudge to burn off, the ball was the cause of it, and the racket was righteous anger. Henry was nowhere to be seen.

August tried to go back to his reading, but he couldn't make his attention stick on the pages.

He let himself out the back door of the rig, Woody following behind at an uncharacteristically sedate pace.

Seth looked over once when he saw August coming. Then he looked away again. And smacked that tennis ball. And smacked it. And smacked it. The mood of the place had changed. Something had changed. There was no explanation in August's mind, but also no doubt.

'Where's Henry?' August asked.

'Inside.'

Seth missed the tennis ball in the process of answering. August expected him to run after it, but he didn't. He just

dropped the old racket, turned, and flopped into a sit with his back up against the shop. Woody wiggled up to him, put his paws up on Seth's shoulder. Sniffed at the boy's face as though he'd lost something there. Seth wrapped his arms around the dog and drew him in, hugging Woody close to his chest.

August sat down next to them. Leaned back. It was a spot in the full midday sun, and August knew he wouldn't be able to stay there long. Seth lived out here in the hot valley. He must have been used to it.

They sat in silence for a time. How long a time, August found himself unable to judge.

'You never came by for dog tricks,' he said at last.

Seth said, 'Maybe some other time.'

Then more silence. August didn't want to ask straight out what was wrong, because he didn't feel it was his place to do so. And because he had rarely, if ever, met a young boy who wanted to talk about his heartaches and disappointments with a near stranger.

Seth startled him by speaking.

'Where're you going on your trip?'

'All kinds of places. National parks, mostly. Zion and Bryce Canyon on the way up. Salt Lake City. The big destination was Yellowstone, but I won't make it, what with the unexpected cost of breaking down and all. Then on the way back I want to swing east and see Arches and Canyonlands. Maybe Escalante and Capitol Reef. Maybe Canyon de Chelly. Depends on my timing. I like to leave things loose. It's the only time of year I get to.'

'That's a great trip.'

'I hope so. Didn't get off to much of a start. I'm hoping it'll pick up from here.'

'You got kids?'

August sighed. As quietly as possible. 'I used to have a boy.'

For the first time, Seth's head turned, and he looked right at the side of August's face. 'How do you *used* to have a boy? Isn't your boy your boy forever? Or do you just mean he grew up into a whole man?'

'He was killed in an accident,' August said. He waited for the pain to begin its path of travel. Nothing happened.

'Oh,' Seth said. 'I'm sorry. Was he my age?'

'No. He was older. He was nineteen.'

'I'm sorry that had to go and happen.'

'Me, too.'

A long silence fell. Seth was the one to break it.

'Do you miss having kids along when you go traveling?'

That was when the pain came back. Radiated down, almost more a burn than a slice, an irritating, humming burn. *So there you are again*, August told it, silently. *I wondered.*

It partially distracted him from the nagging sense that something was wrong in Seth's question. August had said he'd had one kid. One boy. Not kids, plural. More than that, though, was a sense of too much importance riding on what Seth seemed to be trying to camouflage as small talk.

'I miss him no matter what I'm doing,' August said. 'It never stops.'

Then neither said anything for a time, and August had just about reached his limit for sitting in the hot sun. He levered to his feet and walked to the open entrance of the shop, looking back over his shoulder once before ducking into the shade. Woody chose to stay with Seth for the time being.

He found Wes working under his hood with much the same energy Seth had used to smack the tennis ball.

'Whatever's wrong,' August said, 'please don't take it out on my engine.'

The mechanic's head appeared, and he straightened up to his full height and looked August in the eye, but only

briefly. 'What's that mean?' He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and shook one out.

'Just that everything seemed so sunny and bright this morning, figuratively speaking, and now it's like a big dark storm cloud set its head down on this place while we were all eating lunch.'

Wes didn't answer for a long time. Instead he pulled out a bright-blue disposable lighter and torched the end of his cigarette, drawing hard. A cloud of smoke hung around his head. It was hot, and the air didn't move. Not even a little bit.

'Can't always tell kids what they want to hear,' Wes said at last. 'Sometimes you got to break bad news.'

'That's true, I suppose.' August took his usual seat on the low stack of tires. 'Talk to me about this idea.'

The hand that held Wes's cigarette came up to his face. But, rather than finding his mouth, it landed over his eyes and stayed there for a long time.

'You'll think I'm crazy,' Wes said.

'So you mentioned. But go ahead and let me think what I want. I believe it's time to get this out in the open. Whatever it is.'

Wes sighed. Squatted down on to his heels, which put him somewhere in the neighborhood of August's level.

'Here's what I'm thinking,' Wes said. 'I can get you to Yellowstone by giving you this repair one hundred per cent free of charge. I'd even pick up the cost of the parts. I'll even take the cash out of my pocket you gave me for the tow and hand it back to you. Then you'll be right back where you were when this trip started. All you've lost is three days. And, like you said, you got plenty of time. Then you can go and do what you said was so important to you.'

August waited briefly, to see if Wes would continue on his own. He didn't.

'Yeah. That would get me there all right. But it leaves an obvious question. Why would you do that for me? Wait. Let

me phrase it more directly. If you were to do all that for me, what would you want me to do for you in return?’

Wes took another drag of smoke and blew it out in a series of perfect rings that bent and collapsed as they floated over a hydraulic jack. He didn’t seem inclined to answer.

‘You’re going to do this sooner or later, Wes. Please, let’s just get it over with already.’

‘Take my boys with you.’

In the silence that followed, August thought, *Yeah. You’re right. I think you’re crazy.*

But he only said, ‘All summer?’

‘Yeah. You’re coming back through before school starts, right? You can drop ‘em back to me then. Meanwhile they get to see the world. Some national parks. Geysers. They can go to Yellowstone and see geysers. You know what those boys’ve seen their whole lives? Nothing. Just what’s within fifty or so miles of here. And let’s face it. That’s nothing.’

August breathed deeply two or three times.

‘They don’t want to see those places with a stranger. They want to go with you.’

‘I’m not going. You are.’

‘Even so. They’ll wait for you. They want to be here at home with their dad all summer. They’ll wait for a time when you can travel with them. They want to be with you.’

‘Well, here’s the thing about that. For the next ninety days or so, they don’t get to be. This’s the part where you find out I’m not crazy by nature. More like desperate. You know. Fresh out of options. I’m on my way to jail for ninety days.’

‘I don’t get it.’

‘What’s there not to get? I got sentenced to ninety days.’

‘Then how can you be here? I thought when they sentenced you they put handcuffs on you and dragged you right out of court.’ Part of him wanted badly to go on to

ask, 'Sentenced to ninety days for what, exactly?' But he didn't. It was really none of his business, and besides, another part of him didn't want to know.

'Well. They can if they want. Judge can do pretty much what he wants to do. Thing is, I got these two kids. So I told the judge I needed a few days to get 'em settled in. You know. Make arrangements for somebody to take care of 'em. Kind of stupid, because I don't have much family, and what I have, I knew they were gonna say no. They said no last time. Why this time would be any better, I don't know. I guess I just figured if I had some time, maybe I could pull something out of my hat. So he gave me till Monday morning. Monday morning I have to surrender myself at the jail or they'll come get me and escort me there.'

'Where do the boys go if you can't pull something out of your hat?'

'County takes 'em.'

'Where did they go last time?'

'County took 'em.'

'Oh. Well. That's not bad, right? That's not the end of the world.'

Wes snorted, and smoke puffed through his nose. 'Not for *you*. But I'm sensing it's not such a great deal for them. Henry hasn't said a damn word since I got 'em back. I think he talks to his brother. But I can't prove that. It's just a suspicion.'

A long pause fell. August put it to good use by mentally rehearsing the kindest ways to say no.

'I'd send you with some extra cash for their food,' Wes said. 'They're good boys. You can see that with your own eyes. You said so yourself. Henry won't say a damn word. Seth is a talker but he'll stop if you ask him to. He'll do anything you ask him to. He can look after his brother, too. He's old enough. It's not like they're babies. You wouldn't have to watch 'em every second.'

'Wes—'

'No. Don't answer. Please. Don't answer yet. Just sleep on it. You got two nights to sleep on it. Tonight and tomorrow. Unless I get ahead of schedule. Sleep on it two nights and don't answer off the top of your head. They won't be much bother to you. They're good boys.' On the last sentence, August distinctly saw the mechanic's lower lip quiver.

'OK. I'll sleep on it.' *And then I'll say no*, August added in his own head.

"Preciate that."

A long, strained silence fell. August didn't like it much. So he worked harder to make it go away.

'Do they know you're on your way to jail?' But before the mechanic could even answer, August knew. 'No. Never mind. You don't even have to tell me. They didn't know before lunch. Now they do.'

Wes smoked in silence.

'Do they know you were going to ask me to take them?' But, again, he knew. He remembered Seth asking where August was planning to go. If he missed having kids along. 'Never mind. I think I know the answer to that one, too. How do they feel about that? Going away for three months with a stranger?'

'Thing of it is,' Wes said, 'there's strangers at that other place, too.'

'Right,' August said. And then fell back into the flurry of his own thoughts. 'Look,' he said, after a time. 'I know you're being the best father to them you know how to be. But you don't even know me. You don't even know for a fact that I can be trusted with a child.'

'I don't know everybody at the county can be trusted with a child, either.'

August didn't answer. Because he'd run out of arguments. The answer still felt like no. But he was out of logical reasons why it had to be. He wasn't going to do it because he didn't want to do it. Because it felt weird. Because it disturbed the familiar patterns he needed to

cling to. Too late to dress it up as anything more noble than that.

When he looked up, Wes was staring straight into his eyes. As if taking some kind of measurements. '*Can* you be trusted with a child?'

'Yes,' August said quietly.

'Yeah,' Wes said. 'I thought so.'

Then he got up, smashed out his cigarette, and got himself back to work.

3 New Deal

Around the time the sun was going down, August wandered into the shop area again. Wes was on his back on a rolling cart, half underneath the engine. He couldn't put the rig up on a lift, because it was too tall and too heavy, and the shop ceiling wasn't high enough.

Wes did not pull his head out.

'Haven't seen your kids around all afternoon,' August said.

First nothing. As though he hadn't spoken at all.

Then Wes said, 'I told 'em stay away from you.'

'Now why would you do that?'

'Didn't want you to think I was playing dirty, like telling 'em to follow you around and look up at you with those big brown eyes. I said, "Give the man time to think."' Still Wes did not slide out from under the rig. The sound just filtered up. 'Also ... if you're gonna say no, I don't want 'em to see it in your face.'

'Got it,' August said.

As he walked back to the door of the rig, he thought, *Yeah. Keep them far away if you don't want them to smell a 'no' coming.*

At twenty minutes to midnight, a knock blasted August out of sleep. Woody went nuts, letting off a stream of noise, more one long shriek than individual barks.

August stumbled to the door, rubbing his eyes. Woody followed behind him, close enough to bump the back of

August's shin with his nose, a rumbly, rolling growl escaping his throat.

'Who's there?' he called out.

'It's Wes.'

August sighed and opened the door, and Woody sat close by, leaning against his leg and wagging faintly.

'Sorry,' Wes said. 'Sorry I woke you up. Maybe I'm wrong to. But I told you to sleep on it. But then I rethought things and came up with a whole different sort of a deal. So now you're sleeping on the wrong thing. So, can I tell you the new thing, and then you go sleep on that?'

August looked at the mechanic's face in the half-dark. His hair was comically disarranged. Wes had obviously been in bed himself when the new deal had arrived in his brain. August looked over Wes's head, saw the moon hanging nearly full over the flat, mostly uninhabited landscape, and thought, *He's right. This is nothing. Those boys have seen nothing because there's nothing out here to see.*

'Well. I'm awake now. So I guess you might as well.'

'I'm giving you the repair. Either way. It's yours, no strings attached. I just decided. Know why I'm doing it? Because you need it. I'm seeing the need in you, one man to another, and we're both human, so I'm gonna reach out and help your situation. Because I can. If that makes you so happy you want to turn around and help *my* situation, that would be much appreciated. But whether you do or not, you're free to drive out of here when I'm done. No charge. So, congratulations. You're going to Yellowstone.'

August blinked a few times, too aware of his own blinking. He heard crickets. He hadn't heard crickets since he was a boy. At least, not that he could remember. Then it hit him that they must have been there all along, and he just hadn't registered hearing them. It seemed strange that he could be so unaware of it then and so aware of it now.

'I'm not sure what to say.'

'Don't say anything. Sleep on it.'

And, with that, Wes walked away, around the corner of the shop to whatever living quarters lay hidden back there. In the bright light of the full moon, August could see the little puffs of dry dust kicked up by the mechanic's shoes.

He closed the door and looked down at his dog.

'That was curious,' he said, and Woody gave him a puzzled look, like he should be helping August figure it out. 'I wonder what I'm to make of that.'

Woody tilted his head slightly, but left August to sort things.

'You know that just makes it even harder to say no.'

He sat down on the edge of the bed, set his forehead in one hand, and tried to figure out if the added sense of pressure had been purposely applied to him, or if the offer was a pure act of altruism and the guilt just a side effect.

He couldn't make even the slightest headway in telling the two apart, so he went back to sleep.

Eventually.

August slept much later than he meant to. When he woke, he dressed quickly and began the process of raising the window shades. He started with the driver's side, the window over the dinette table. The mechanic's face appeared just inches from the window screen, startling him. August jumped back and let out a small noise, immediately embarrassed that he had. Woody barked once, sharply.

'Sorry,' Wes said. 'Didn't mean to scare you. But I could tell you were up, because the rig moves a little when you walk around in it. You slept late. Did you know it's after ten?'

'Oh. Not exactly, but I knew it was weirdly late. I don't usually sleep in like that, but I was awake a long time in the night.'

'Right. Sorry. My fault, I know. Anyway ... I just had some news, so I been waiting to tell you. I'm ahead of schedule.'