

ASHES

♦ IONA WAYLAND ♦





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*For all the survivors who braved the forest.
And for those still finding their way, trust yourself.
Let your intuition guide you.*

“And into the forest I go, to lose my mind and find my soul.”

—John Muir

Content warnings include: graphic violence, foul language, homophobic language, sexual situations, abuse, assault, drug usage, and suicide.

CHAPTER ONE

The rip of tape is loud in my quiet apartment as I wrap layer after layer to secure the lid on Donny's urn. I place him in the pack along with other survival gear. My brother is cushioned and snug in one of his favorite sweatshirts. It's the soft, blue hoodie he wore on windy days at the beach. It still faintly smells like him, sea salt, and cigarette smoke. I secure Totto, the machete I "had to name so it wouldn't turn on me" to the side. If Donny were here in person, he'd say, "Angela, stop it. Don't go through with this." But, this isn't his decision.

I take my time lacing my hiking boots and folding my socks how the backpacking guy at the trail store showed me. I'm fucking crazy for doing this. I don't know how to hike and can't even remember the last time I worked out. God knows I can barely get myself to leave my apartment. Yet here I am, struggling to lift this giant hiking pack and locking up my apartment for what might be the last time. The place that once radiated warmth, that I called home, is now cold and empty as the key scrapes its way into the lock. But I can't think like that. I need to keep my spirits up – for Donny, for my own survival.

My boots clang against the stairs, slick with morning dew.

The soles of my new boots grip better than I imagined while I make my way down to Donny's beater 1997 Jeep Cherokee that's right where he left it. I don't have a car of my own and it makes me feel like my brother is still with me. I guess by Jessica's standards, his spirit is. I close my eyes and sigh when the engine starts up, bringing a flood of summer memories. We'd just drive, the sun baking our skin. It was easy to laugh then. Donny's smile was always contagious. He'd rest his arm out the window and slap the side of the car to the beat of our music. He'd look at me with his sparkling, dark black eyes that everyone said we shared.

I pull out of the lot a little too fast with a jolting start. I have to get used to the stick shift. Donny's ashes lurch next to me in the passenger's seat of his shitty car while I blare ODESZA and The Chainsmokers. I try to remain open-minded while I drive, just as Jessica advised me. I roll down the window, tasting the brine in the air. The ocean becomes just a thin blue line and then fades out of view. The hours pass and the beach transitions to cornfields, and then forests. As the flat roads undulate, I catch sight of Donny out of the corner of my eye. He faces forward with a dark, sad gaze. When I turn to him, though, my giant backpack is there instead.

The air still feels heavy, like his eyes are on me. I turn off the car's staticky stereo system and take a shaky breath. I want to talk to my brother.

"I know you were probably there when Jessica told me what I needed to do with your essence, and so I have your ashes and everything else on the list. I know I do, because I quadruple-checked. It's what's in Hollow Forest that I'm honestly petrified of."

I wait, expecting Donny to respond somehow. Nothing happens.

“She said how important it is to keep calm and not let myself be detected, that the things in there can smell indecisiveness and fear. But why the Hell would she say that? I’m already afraid. Trying not to be makes it even worse.”

My hands cramp as I grip the steering wheel. “I don’t even know what half the words were that she said. Like, what is,” I shuffle to grab at the papers with my scrawled writing, my sweaty palms making them damp, “the ‘Canid Carey’? She said how it couldn’t touch me if I just keep my doubts at bay, like shove them deep down. I do that well already, right?” I give a humorless laugh. “If I just think of it like those haunted hayrides, like I’m doing this on purpose, I’ve signed up for this – if I don’t lose my shit, it, they, whatever, can’t hurt me.” I force out a sigh.

It’s quiet for too long. My face becomes hot and sweat beads at my temples. It’s mid-April, but my perspiration has nothing to do with the temperature. With trembling hands, I clutch the steering wheel even tighter, crumpling my notes. It gets difficult to take full breaths, so I turn the electronica back up. It’s our music, and I let the pulsing rhythms move through me like a current.

Jessica told me, “Angela, the Hollow feels like an empty heart within the forest itself. It’s somewhere in the west, but after that, you need to let your intuition guide you.” I felt like she was being so condescending when she said that it was “a calling” and had practically looked down her little nose at me when she told me that if I wasn’t *open* enough or *intuitive* enough, that it might not happen at all. Wherever this intuition guides me is where I’ll release my brother. I have a little more than a month to figure it out.

Trees flash past until I automatically follow a side road that leads into a wooded area. Dirt and leaves fly back in a cloud

behind us. The all-season tires crunch over small rocks and old branches that are strewn across the road, tall trees stretching high above on both sides. It creates a tunnel effect, deep green and shadowed. Bits of golden light reaches into the car and flash between the foliage as we travel.

I'm on the dirt road for about an hour and a half before I feel something. It's a tug at my chest, a flinch in my arm. It's a pull, a compulsion, so clear and instinctive that I drive toward it. I don't even need to use that sage to clear my mind or whatever. It didn't do Donny any good and I'm not going to rely on it, either. A half-mile sails by and I know where to pull off the dirt road.

We are in the right place.

I shove my license, phone, and charger into the console. I'm not meant to bring them.

When I cut the engine, it feels so still. It isn't until I get out and secure my backpack that I realize how completely silent it is. No birds. No pitter-patter of paws on the forest floor. Not even the leaves flutter in the breeze. The zip of nylon straps as I adjust my pack and my unworn boots crunching on pebbles are the only sounds. There is a little incline that gently slopes up from where the road cuts into the earth. I keep my breathing steady as I hike and search. I follow the lure of the pull into the woods. After about a minute of walking, there's a gate, just as Jessica described.

It's worn yet sturdy. With a slightly crooked slant, the short gate tilts between two waist-level posts. The top of Donny's Jeep is still behind me when I look over my shoulder. I can turn back if I want to. But then, who knows where my brother would end up. His soul would be lost forever. I trudge closer to the stand-alone fence. Carved into its rain-stained wood is the message,
KEEP SHUT.

It's almost comical how I can see over it. If I didn't know

better, I could just walk around or hop over it. But that sign was carved there for a reason. It's there to separate, to keep certain things out, and certain things in. But here I am, willing to walk right into the entrance of Hollow Forest.

The air is thick and hazy. My hair stands on end as I draw closer. My throat tightens when I unlatch the gate. Tears prick my eyes and I fight the tingling in my legs that beg me to run away while the pull feels like it's singing in my skull. He was gone. I didn't have to do this. If I walked in, I might never walk out. Why would I risk myself? But my brother was someone, is some-one, I'd die for. I picture Donny, before it all. He's telling one of his corny jokes. I can almost hear his raspy laughter. He deserved to laugh again. A sob rakes its way through my chest, but I swallow it down.

The chain is heavier than I thought it would be and feels cold and scratchy from the rust buildup. It scrapes and clunks as my quivering hands untangle the slackening links. I open the gate just enough for me to slip through. The same warning is carved on the inside. I take care to latch it again before turning around to face what's ahead. I can't see the Jeep or the road anymore; it's like I'm suddenly in the thick of the forest. I force myself to take a deep breath through my silent tears and trek toward the magnetic pull.

CHAPTER TWO

It's no longer silent. Everything vibrates with noise, teems with life. It smells overwhelmingly of pine and sap so sweet, I taste it in the air. I stop for a moment to gaze at a tree that has bark as smooth as polished leather. I let my hands lightly brush against the trunks, but stop when there's scurrying beneath it. Donny clangs against my back as I trudge deeper.

I don't know if I can tell you when my brother Donny actually left me. It could have been when my parents kicked him out. Possibly, it was when he first stole pills or when he transitioned to piercing his veins with poison. Or maybe, it was when his beloved Zach was gone. I just know that he's been restless for as long as I remember, even before his death.

Donny was seven and a half years older than me, and he always said that it was his job to protect his "Angelita". He and I had different views on what protection really was, though. Donny thought that meant he should keep the fact that he liked boys a secret. The look of relief on his face when I said "I already know" after he finally came out made my heart crack in two.

Everyone danced around his desires like he was contaminated. My parents thought I didn't know why he was kicked out

when he turned eighteen. They tried to say they didn't like his "lifestyle," and that now that he was an adult, he had to leave if he was going to "act that way." Which is laughable, because it just forced him to move in with his first boyfriend anyway. But I should have stood up for him. I should have told my parents that their conditional love started chipping away at him long ago. I was part of the problem, a part of Donny's hurt.

Maybe that's why he always felt like he was in pain. Once, when he visited me in my college dorm, he just popped a pill right in front of me. When I looked at him, horrified, he realized that he hadn't hidden his habit. It was such an easy motion for him. No thought, just a tilt of his head, a gulp, and he was off to oblivion. Donny tried to say they were antibiotics. Antibiotics? Come on. And I continued to play along, forever accepting my role as the innocent angel everyone thought I was.

At first, I thought the pills were a phase, an experimentation. But soon I began to worry. He'd throw some back after we grabbed dinner before he'd get in the car with me, and sometimes he'd chase some pills with beer he smuggled into my dorm. What could I do, though? Confront him and drive him away? What if he stopped visiting me? I had already missed him for huge parts of my life because my parents wouldn't let him attend with whatever guy he was dating at the time. My high school graduation, taking pictures before prom, when I got my license – he wasn't there. He'd meet me afterward and treat me to dinner and I'd show him pictures, but it wasn't the same. But now, he was consistently in my life and I didn't want to mess that up. We talked freely and had adventures without the angsty sighs, silent tears, and a heavy dose of disappointed head-shaking. If he had my support, then maybe it could undo the damage he was dealt from my family.

So I included him in everything. I told him about my classes in mass communication, the podcast I was working on that delved into myths and legends, and introduced him to my friends. We'd talk about the guys we liked and I took him to some college parties. But it only got worse when he entered the party scene. He melted into my university's raves like he belonged there. He was an eel in a sea of strobe lights and MDMA. After a crazy night, he'd crash at my dorm on a blow-up mattress. We'd talk all night about his adventures and then he'd sleep all day. My roomie thought he was hot with his dark, sad eyes, so she didn't complain. That *homme fatale* look really hooked her.

Donny would use thick eyeliner and take careful precision with his curls as if he wasn't going to be completely covered in sweat later and mess up his artwork anyway. He'd spend hours picking out my outfit and helping me with my cat-eye that I never could make symmetrical. Then we would go out. He searched with ferocity for something that would make him whole. Something or someone that could complete him enough so that he could drown out the guilt and disappointment my parents had layered over him, causing him to suffocate. I used to go with him until I got swallowed whole. It's funny, really. All that talk of machismo and wanting to protect, and yet my brother left me at those parties to fend for myself. I had to claw my way back to reality to try and make my life normal again.

It was when I was ditched at one of those raves that he found Zach. He and my dad are so much alike. They just don't know it, or don't want to acknowledge it. Donny is attracted to naiveté, like my dad always had been. That's why my dad chose my mom when she was new to America with her Latina views of *el flechazo* and without knowing a word of English. He wanted to wrap someone in comfort and wisdom. He wanted someone that

looked up to him with stars in their eyes. That had to have been what Donny saw in Zach. That newly-out, music majoring, oboe-playing, freshman spirit zapped Donny like a lightning rod.

The first time I met Zach, Don was high and glassy-eyed with his guyliner smudged and his laughter rasping from inhaling nothing but smoke the entire night. Zach nervously greeted me, with those big, blue eyes. Zach looked like he was plucked straight out of the Midwest with his sandy hair, khakis, and billions of freckles speckling his skin. He was freshly combed and had chapped lips from kissing his very first guy. Zach probably felt like his world would be so much better. I felt sick, knowing I probably looked like that, too. Knowing that was probably why I had been hunted and gobbled up when I went to those parties. Why I was hand-picked by *him*. I try not to think about all the things I could have done differently. I'm fixing it now.

The trees are denser as I walk. Even with the special gel packs, my shoulders are sore. My feet are killing me worst of all and I have to sit down for a minute to check them out.

When I unlace my boots, it feels like I'm opening a dam. The looser it gets, the more pain my feet are in. There are stains on the bottom of my socks and the balls of my feet sting. I peel off one of my socks and it rolls up in a sweaty bunch of cloth. Blood drips down my upraised foot and slowly makes its way down my ankle. Somehow, seeing the fresh blood makes it hurt even more. I wince when I take off my other sock. Huffing, I drag my backpack over to me and dig around Donny's urn for the little First Aid kit. I put some antibiotic ointment on my open blisters, and pry the lid off of the Band-Aid tin.

"Ooo, that looks like a nasty wound there."

I jump and practically dump all the Band-Aids from the tin. It's a woman's voice that comes from deeper in the woods. I look

for the source of the voice. A young woman makes her way toward me. She has a long, messy, dirty-blonde braid that hangs over her shoulder. She must be about thirty and a fellow backpacker. She's carrying a decked-out pack. There's a tent roll that Jessica told me not to bring secured at the top of her supplies. I think of how adamant Jessica was when she said: *Always sleep within view of the sky*. No tent for me, just a bare sleeping bag. The woman also has one of those water pouches that has a straw leading from the backpack right to her shoulder so she can take a drink whenever she needs to be refreshed. Her skin has a golden glow to it, and her eyes sparkle.

"Are you alright? That looks like it hurts a lot," she says, her voice like honey.

"Yeah. I'm fine. It just serves me right for not breaking in my hiking boots before going out on this venture." I want to laugh in relief.

"Been there," she says. She takes off her humongous back-pack and gently sits it on the ground across from me.

A chill runs down my spine when she squats down to look at my foot and tilts her head when she sees the blood trail. I use a cotton ball to wipe it away. This lady is a bit too focused on it.

"I'm fine. I swear," I say, slapping some Band-Aids on the bottom of my feet. I can wrap it later. I'm too vulnerable barefoot.

"Have you backpacked for very long?" she asks, standing up while I lace my boots back up. My feet protest the entire time.

"Nope, this is my first time." I try to cram the kit back into my bag. She cranes her neck to see what's inside.

"What's that?" she asks, pointing at the little glint of Donny's silver-brushed urn peeping through the sweatshirt. Her forehead creases with concern.

“Just some extra clothes,” I say, zipping up the bag. I’m not asking her what’s in her bag. Though, maybe she’s here for similar reasons as me. Maybe she’s just looking for a comrade, or maybe she’s laid someone to rest, too. “How long have you been back-packing?” I ask.

“Oh, it feels like forever.” She smiles but looks tired. Crow’s feet crease the outside corners of her eyes.

“Well, you definitely know what you’re doing, it looks like.” I motion at her pack on the ground. When I look at her back-pack, it appears more weathered and has some holes in it that I hadn’t noticed before. I greedily try to catch a glimpse of anything through the holes inside her pack. She picks it up, though, and secures it on her back and around her waist.

“Yeah. I made sure to get the best of the best.” Her braid is knocked a little looser and is fraying. “I didn’t know how long I’d be out here.” There’s a hint of melancholy to her voice.

“How long did it take you?” I ask, dancing around the elephant in the room. “You must be close to the end because you’re going back to the gate.”

Her eyes are wide. “You know where the gate is? Can you show me?”

She grips my shoulders, and when I look at her hands, they look thin and not as golden as before. I gasp. It’s as if her face has aged a decade in just a second.

“Y-yes. Um, it’s back that way.” I jerk a thumb over my shoulder, showing the way I came from. “It’s about a two-hour hike.”

“You don’t understand, do you?” Tears stream down her wrinkled cheeks. “There are no directions here, only intuition. I don’t have it.”

She releases my shoulders to cry into her hands. I stare at the top of her head as she sobs and shakes. Her hair has dulled and

her backpack is missing the tent. There's a slash in the side where her water pouch had been. She and her pack are covered in mud splotches, dirt, and pieces of dead leaves and grass.

"But, you have to. How did you find the gate in the first place?" The pull is so clear. I just know where to go.

"I didn't find it," she screeches, probably exhausted from crying and carrying and searching. She looks up at me, her face taut and wrinkled, her hair thin and missing in patches, her cheeks sunken in. Her voice wavers and is difficult for her to control. "I followed someone in here. I wanted to help them. My friend," she says, spitting out some of her teeth when she said the word 'friend'.

I cringe as her yellowed teeth fall on the leaves at my feet, making a pitter-patter like rain would.

"You just have to, you have to," I stammer as her bones protrude, her thin skin stretching over them, "be open. You have to open your mind and let yourself feel—"

But she won't be feeling anything anymore. She's a corpse and then dust, just like my brother.

With numb hands, I hoist my pack on my back. I have to get away from here. Electric pulses run through my limbs. Despite Jessica's warnings to remain calm and steady, I sprint as fast as I can, flight taking hold. Each footfall and leap stings, but it makes me feel like I'm real and still alive. Panting and sweating, I allow Hollow Forest to suck me in deeper, grateful for the lure, grateful I'm not lost.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Iona Wayland is a Writer, book lover, and tea enthusiast. She considers herself a child of the forest, and is a devoted animal mom and mental health advocate. She depicts aspects of the human experience often in fantastical ways. Common themes of her work include: grief, surviving trauma, and finding purpose and strength.