

## Prologue

*Gunsmoke, Illinois, 1997*

Heather Bunson was blowing Benny Hopper, but thinking about Wade Stout.

Her gaze roamed around the room. Dirty clothes littered the floor. A forgotten slice of pizza grew moldy under the bed. The dresser was falling apart after going unused for at least two years. It was a tiny room, the brown walls decorated with pinup girls from as far back as the 1960s and most recently as the December Playboy centerfold.

Jefferson Starship's "White Rabbit" ended, and the haunted piano notes of Celine Dion's "It's All Coming Back to Me Now" took over.

"Shit, sorry," Benny exclaimed, reaching for the radio.

"No, I like it," Heather Bunson said, lifting her mousy red-brown hair away from his cock long enough to mutter the words. Her fingers continued stroking his member while her haunting blue eyes met his brown with purpose; challenge. If he changed it, she would stop. Her mouth dropped lower as his fingers returned to the bed.

He threw his head back with a moan and relented. "Okay, okay. Don't stop."

She continued until he pulled her head out of the way and finished emptying himself onto the dirty bed sheets.

Heather hopped to the other side, watching with amusement until he turned back.

“Eventually, you have to let me return the favor,” Benny said, straddling her and reaching up her skirt.

She pouted.

“Where’s my treat?”

She always gave him head as long as he gave her the baggie hidden in his nightstand.

“Virginity is overrated,” Benny scoffed, massaging her breasts through the short gray jumper.

She smacked his fingers away, eyes narrowing.

“Yea, yea. You’re waiting for Prince Charming. Damn, Heather, you’re scary,” he muttered, climbing away and retrieving the coveted Ziploc.

She took the bag and counted the pills.

“Thanks, Benny-boy,” she said, smacking his chubby cheek playfully.

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Someone spilled alcohol on the staircase. Barefoot, Heather stepped around it. She went slowly, taking in the scenery. Despite the blasting music, she could only hear, “White Rabbit.”

The stairs overlooked the living room on one side and the kitchen on the other. Heather peered left and found Wade.

She always did; always gravitated toward him. He was in mid-conversation with a bubbly volleyball player, but he felt her, too. He met her gaze, eyes disapproving of where she’d been.

Heather hopped the last few steps and stood beside him despite the annoyed look the volleyball player, Val, gave her.

“Wade, my love, my darling,” Heather breathed, leaning back to chest, taking his hands and wrapping them around her shoulders like a shawl. “I’ve got something I’d like to share.”

She felt Wade's annoyed sigh rumble through his chest, more than heard it. Heather batted her eyes innocently at Val.

"Come find me when you ditch Bunson-Burner," Val snapped, stalking away on her heels.

"Val—!" Wade protested, taking a step. Before he could get anywhere, Heather spun around and leaned over him, claiming an abandoned cup of Pepsi and vodka.

"Hey, no drinks," Wade snapped, snatching the cup away.

Heather laughed, the image lighting up the pale freckles across her face. Soft hands wrapped around his as Heather brought the cup to her lips, downing a long sip. Her crystal blue gaze didn't waver from his hazel. Despite himself, Wade's heart galloped.

"Knock it off," he snapped, pulling the cup at the same moment when Heather went for another sip. The liquid spilled everywhere. Heather laughed harder until she choked on the mixture in her throat.

Any mild attraction Wade felt vanished at that, and he scrambled to clean the tiled counter and floor. While he was distracted, Heather uncapped the vodka and chugged another cup.

Wade Stout and Heather Bunson. *Heather Bunson-Burner* they called her in middle school. The name stuck when she was busted the first time smoking pot behind the rec center when she was supposed to be in Freshman Lit.

She was a week away from her seventeenth birthday junior year, and Wade could barely look at what she'd become. The stoner in freshman year was now a girl who traded tricks for treats at house parties. It was a far cry from the girl who thought she was a dragon growing up.

“Let’s go,” he said in a stern, fatherly tone, dragging her into the living room. “You’re a damned mess. I can’t take you home like this. Your father will kill me.”

“Not before *he* kills *mee*,” Heather sang.

The bathroom had a long line, prompting Wade to scowl.

Heather draped herself over his shoulder. “There’s a laundry room around the corner,” she whispered, mouth at his ear.

He shrugged her off, both hating and loving the feel of her skin by his. She was close to drunk, but not drunk enough to turn off their connection, and he was painfully aware of what was on her mind.

*Cheap wine and Power Rangers cups.*

Wade ground his teeth, pushing Heather through the laundry room door with his plaid shirt, leaving just a maroon tee undershirt for himself. He slammed the door closed before she could beg him inside.

How long had he been fighting her advances? She wasn’t even overt about it. Not intentionally.

Wade leaned against the wall, nodding absently to several of his friends on the basketball team as they passed by. They were all there—some hockey players, too. It was the last get-together before winter break next week. Wade chewed on his bottom lip as he waited.

Finally, Heather stepped out, his oversized plaid hanging just above her knees. It was shorter than her jumper—now in a plastic bag between her fingers—making her pale runner’s legs stand out. Wade was startled to see them—she usually wore pants or tights to hide the limbs.

Heather closed the space between them. Her breath wreaked of vodka.

“Don’t you ever tire of waiting for tomorrow?” She wondered, twisting the fabric of his tee. She was almost as tall as him, her lips close to his even as she kept her gaze on the fabric between her fingers. He held his breath as her palms sensually traced over his body. Until she reached for his pants. Then he smacked her hands away.

“I’m just trying to survive today,” he insisted.

“You wouldn’t stop Val,” Heather pouted.

“Val wasn’t just upstairs blowing Benny Hopper,” Wade said stiffly.

“I’d brush my teeth if I thought it would make a difference,” she replied cheekily.

He caught her arm when she tried to breeze past.

“Did you take anything in there?”

She laughed, freeing herself, holding her wrists behind her back, and tossing him bedroom eyes.

“You can search me if you like.”

He didn’t bother asking a second time. Heather’s eyes were dilated the moment she entered the kitchen. If it wasn’t noticeable before, it definitely was now.

Wade sneered with disgust and found his letterman jacket.

*It’s time to go.*

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“Why do you hate me so much?” Heather asked, pulling his flannel shirt tighter around herself two blocks from Benny’s. She didn’t bat an eye at the ten-degree Gunsmoke weather. *Warm blood*, she always said when she played in the snow without a coat. *Dragons have warm blood.*

“I don’t hate you,” he muttered gruffly.

“Why didn’t you tell Val you realized we’re madly in love, and you’re taking me home to ravish me?”

His cheeks turned pink at the thought. “See? That’s why I can’t be friends with you anymore. Why can’t you be normal?”

She chuckled, tilting her head back to catch a snowflake. Her cheeks and nose were flush from the cold. Wade could see it clear as day with her head bent back, hair falling away from her soft, feminine features.

“We’re *not* normal, Wade.”

He tightened his lips, shoving his hands into his pockets.

They were different. Wade knew it as much as Heather did, despite his adamant denial. Since they were babies, they shared a connection more intimate than twins. They could feel each other’s emotions, breaths, heartbeats. His whole life, he’d never known anything different.

Not until Heather took up drugs to dull her overwhelming psychic senses.

Now, Wade would do anything to be free of it.

She laughed.

“Why do you need to be like *every other* miserable person on this planet?” Heather continued. She skipped backward, her chin-length curls blowing across her heated face. “Normal fuckers work their shitty nine-to-fives, come home to their shitty little shacks, take care of their shitty little families, and die of heart disease after *decades* of overeating and over-drinking to deal with their misery. But that’s not us! That doesn’t have to be us!”

Wade moved around her, quickening his pace.

“You want to be like all those other douches? You want to fuck Val before school’s out? Not even think twice about her all summer?”

Wade's back stiffened. He hated when she did that—claimed he would do something. Mostly because she always ended up right.

“It's a wonder you haven't bent her bubble butt over a desk at school and—.”

“Just *stop!*” Wade cried, finally tired of her tirade. “I don't want to hook up with *anyone!* Not you, not Val, not anyone!”

“...Why not me?”

Wade faced forward again, tightening his jaw. Heather was heading towards a downer, he could tell. Soon would come the depression.

“You wanted me before.”

“Shut up.”

They passed the lone town bar, another hopping Saturday night for the local singles. Lonely forty and fifty-year-olds trying to reclaim their youth. Heather peeked inside to keep Wade from spotting the wet glimmer in her eyes. Wade kept his gaze on the pavement.

“I don't mean the before,” she finally said, catching up. “You said you'd marry me one day.”

“When we were *five!*” Wade exploded, rounding on her. “I also said I would be a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle when I grew up. Why do you even care? You're always off sucking Benny or one of the other stoners. Why do you need me to be a part of that?”

“I don't.” She pushed around him, making sure to bump his arm. “I don't need you for anything.”

He drew a sharp, angry breath, staring at her receding figure. They were five houses away from his, but it felt like miles.

The Stout house stood out as the only one without Christmas decorations on the entire street. It embarrassed him when he was little, and still embarrassed him now. Even Heather's house, three down from his own, had something. Creepy, over-the-top elf children, but still *something*.

Wade wasn't in the mood to deal with Heather's dad, and he couldn't trust her to walk the quarter-mile distance between houses alone.

Wade glanced back at his darkened door with a reluctant sigh.

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Holly Stout greeted them, Heather standing stiffly at his side.

"I *know* you two didn't walk all the way home in just that," Holly chastised.

Heather lifted Wade's flannel shirt as a wave.

Holly sighed disapprovingly, gesturing both children inside.

"You're lucky your father's not home," she called over her shoulder, gesturing Heather to the bathroom to clean up.

Holly swept back to the hallway a few minutes later, dropping clean clothes outside the bathroom. She turned an accusing eye toward Wade.

"That girl *reeked* of alcohol," she snapped.

"Mom, I was trying to take it back from her, and she spilled it. She barely got two sips."

Holly pinched the bridge of her nose. "Deities weep, what her mother would think if she saw her."

The redhead moved down the stairs to the laundry room.

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Heather found him fifteen minutes later, bouncing a ball against the wall. He spared her a passing glance, a dim sense of euphoria churning in his being. He always picked up on a third of what she was feeling in the first half hour. Usually, it wore off by the time it hit her fully, severing their connection for a brief reprieve.

Heather was in his old sweatpants and a preppy red and pale blue shirt. She brushed her dark locks from her face, making her dilated blue eyes stand out.

“I feel amazing,” she breathed, rubbing the shirt’s fabric between her fingers. She came fully into his room. “Take one with me. I want to touch everything.”

Wade didn’t need to.

She moved around the room, running her hands across everything. When she got to Wade’s bed, she shot him a quick look before lying down. He watched her, an inexplicable feeling rising in his stomach as she writhed between the sheets to get comfortable. He wasn’t sure how much of it was him or her.

“The energy in your room is so calm. There’s no chaos, like in my house.” She sat up and looked at him. “Hug me?”

“No.”

“Please. I want to feel something.”

Wade’s heart sped up, and his resolve fell away as it always did. He abandoned the desk to join her. She grabbed his arms, wrapping them around her like a blanket.

Heather was silent, much to his relief. She just lay there, listening to the sound of his breathing, his heartbeat. It drummed the most magical song into her head. Heather lifted her fingers, dancing them along an invisible rainbow he could *almost* see.

Wade was nearly asleep when Heather turned over and took his hands. His weighted hazel gaze flickered up to meet her blue.

“Hunter’s not my dad.”

Wade frowned, shifting to search her face. “What are you talking about?”

Heather’s mother, Amba Pantera, died in childbirth. Until Heather was four, it was just her and her father, Hunter Bunson. Then he married Jackie, a schoolteacher, and they had J.J., Heather’s younger brother.

“I think I’ve always known,” she continued, digging a necklace out of her shirt. Wade had seen the silver line plenty of times, with its oval locket and wedding band. She’d worn it almost daily since she was eight.

Heather held the locket to Wade, tracing the swirls over the front.

“Do you feel it?”

He met her pointed look with an equally bewildered one, before closing his eyes and letting his thumb drift over the silver.

He’d seen her mother before. A fierce-looking Native American with half-black, half-rainbow hair—a swatch of which sat coiled inside the locket. The hint of another person was fainter. A man with black hair and ice-blue eyes like Heather’s.

*Horace.* The name struck Wade, and with it came the image of the man clutching Amba’s cheek in his hands. The overwhelming sensation of adoration embarrassed Wade.

He dropped the necklace with a gasp, meeting Heather’s eyes again.

“Who...? Does your dad know?”

“Why do you think he hates me?” Heather countered, slipping the necklace and ring away.

“Hunter doesn’t hate you. He just...”

Wade couldn’t think of a way to explain the relationship between Heather and the solemn, imposing military contractor Hunter Bunson.

“My real dad...” she sighed, rolling onto her back and staring at the childish solar system still decorating Wade’s ceiling. He’d have to take them down soon. “He left us, I think. My mom gave me to Hunter when she knew she would die. Hunter got stuck with me. Then he met Jackie, and they had J.J., and I have...”

Her eyes darted back and forth along the ceiling absently. “I have me. I always have me.”

Her sudden depression assaulted him, bringing him down. He felt like he was bathing in it. Silence surrounded them until a new thought took Heather’s mind.

“What were you excited about yesterday?”

Wade’s back stiffened.

“What?” He asked, the word rolling from his mouth like molasses.

“Yesterday. When we got home from school. There was this explosion of happiness.”

She turned onto her side, that haunted gaze probing him.

“Nothing.”

“You’re lying to me.”

She blinked curiously, her fingers tracing swirls absently over his chest. This far into her high, she probably didn’t even know she was doing it. She didn’t seem angry—not that Heather was the type to get angry. She was one of the most relaxed people Wade knew.

“I don’t want to talk about it right now,” he settled, fists tightening beneath his head.

Heather dropped her head on his sternum, arm wrapping over him like she used to do when they were kids. She hadn’t been to his house like this since they were fourteen.

*Cheap wine and Power Rangers cups.*

Within a minute, she was asleep. Wade swiftly joined her.

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Wade dreamed of a beautiful woman begging a large red-headed man not to hurt him. But the man didn't listen, and someone shot Wade. His last sight was of a weird-looking butterfly.

When Wade drifted awake, Heather was spooning him, her hand under his shirt, twitching anxiously against his flesh. He brushed the hair away from her face as gently as possible. Asleep, she looked like the hyper but creative girl he grew up with.

A glimpse of her dream struck him. Flames licking her skin and a pale man with a lean face laughing at her screams.

Heather muttered something under her tongue and tightened her grip, talons pinching Wade's skin.

"Ouch!" he finally snapped, smacking her fingers away and forcing her to the side.

The sound startled Heather awake. She gasped in air, adjusting to her settings.

"Get off of me," Wade ground out, pushing her away and swinging out of bed before she could speak.

Heather glanced at him once, then rolled over and appeared to go back to sleep.

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When Wade got downstairs, Holly was already at the table sipping on coffee while his father, Jensen, groggily made a cup.

"You're up early," Jensen muttered, barely looking in his son's direction.

"Mom, why did you let her stay here?" Wade demanded, ignoring his now confused father.

“Who’s here?” Jensen asked.

“Heather,” Holly replied.

Jensen groaned, disconnecting from the rest of the conversation.

“I had a talk last night with Hunter, and he said she should just stay. She’ll go home this morning,” Holly said simply.

“She could have slept in Leip’s old bed,” Wade argued, thinking of his brother’s room at the end of the hall.

“She was already in yours.”

“You let a *girl* sleep in his bed?” Jensen demanded, giving his wife a pointed look.

“It was just Heather,” Holly replied, rolling her blue-green orbs.

“I’m not worried about Wade, I’m worried about Heather,” Jensen muttered.

“They’re not us, love,” Holly said with a cheeky grin. Jensen narrowed his eyes even as Wade’s nose turned with disgust.

Jensen shook his head, collecting his drink and loosening his soft blue officer shirt as he headed for the stairs. He’d been home maybe fifteen minutes.

“Dad okay?”

“He’s fine. Just thinking of home.”

Wade knew what home meant. Tamlin, the so-called other world where the Stouts and the Bunsons were from. Another dimension, ripped apart by a war that prompted the two families to flee to this place.

Wade had no reason to doubt his parents when they told him about this other world. Even so, he awaited the day when cops arrived to tell him his parents were actually crazy.

*Where's my Terminator Two moment?* Wade wondered, only half-joking. *Your parents are crazy, kid, didn't you know?*

“Did you tell Heather about your letter?” Holly wondered, redirecting his thoughts.

“No,” Wade ground out, glancing at the stairs and expecting to see Heather standing there, listening in.

“You’ve been friends since you were babies. You need to tell her,” Holly pointed out.

“Who knows—maybe it will...light a fire in her, or something.”

Wade blanched at the phrasing, thinking of Heather’s nightmare.

Despite Holly’s narrowed eyes, he helped himself to a cup of coffee and sprawled into a chair.

“I just want her to get out of my life,” he muttered. “I’m tired of playing babysitter.”

“Be patient with her,” Holly said, squeezing his hand comfortingly. “And tell her the truth. Sooner, before it blows up in your face.”

Wade grunted non-committally into his coffee.

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“Please tell me you have some Cocoa Puffs,” Heather demanded, hopping down the staircase five minutes later.

Her eyes were normal, and her mouth turned up in its usual grin.

Holly pointed sternly at a glass of water, using her expert ability of parent non-verbal communication to tell the shaggy-haired girl she would hydrate before anything else.

While Heather was distracted, Holly gave her son a deliberate look and then packed up her coffee to check on Jensen, ignorant of Wade’s pleading look to play buffer.

“Let’s go outside for a few minutes,” he finally said while Heather dug through the cabinets.

“Dude, it’s five degrees out.”

“Just for a couple of minutes,” Wade insisted. He didn’t want Heather near the knives when they talked.

Heather hesitated a second, then followed him to the backdoor. She snatched his jean jacket off the hook, wrapping it around herself. Wade didn’t bother with a coat.

Outside, Wade rubbed his hands together and regretted that decision. He cleared his throat a few times as Heather waited expectantly.

“We have to think about the future, Heather. Scholarships and college, and jobs, and...stuff.”

Her brows were in her forehead. “Did Mom give you that speech this morning? My dad tells me that all the time,” she scoffed. Then she took on her father’s rumbling, deep voice. “*Think about the future, Heather. What would your mom say if she could see you? A bunch of bullshit.*”

She bent down, working on a snowball.

“It’s not bull. Some of us need to think about it more than others.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Wade huffed, tightening his fingers into fists at her usual disinterest. She didn’t even look at him when she asked.

“Look, if you want to live some roach life in this rat town, by all means. But I want to get out of here. I want to do more with my life than spend Saturday nights at Benny Hopper’s house.”

Heather chuckled, lifting the ball into the air and bouncing it in her bare fingers.

“Where will you go? You don’t belong anywhere. Neither of us do.” She turned back to the house as if that was the end of the discussion. “Come on, I think I can talk your mom into making pancakes—.”

“I’m going to college,” Wade said.

She glanced back at him as if she did not comprehend. “Okay. You do you, man.”

“I have early admission.”

Silence settled around them, save for the soft rustle of the wind. Heather finally turned fully to face him. At first, she was confused, so he continued.

“I’ll have finished all my high school credits by the end of the school year. I’m going to college in the fall.”

Hurt flashed across her face.

“What about me?”

“What *about* you? You could go to any college you want if you did *something* besides skipping class and burning weed all day.”

Her jaw tightened.

“You know the answer to *every* question—you could probably get in on a full scholarship next year if you tried. They would eat up some half-assed essay about getting on the straight and narrow.”

“I don’t want that.”

“Well, what *do* you want?”

Her nostrils flared in offense.



“Not the cookie-cutter housewife shit they shove down our throats! I’m better than—  
*we’re* better than that!”

She reached for his hand, but he waved her away. He felt the shock of his rejection ripple through her, and she reached for him through their connection. He did his best to shut it down, block her off. He’d been experimenting with it for when he left, and he was pleasantly surprised when her turmoil faded from his mind.

“What do you expect me to do?” he wondered, suddenly finding the strength to tell her how he really felt. “Stay here and wait to wake up to your corpse some morning after an overdose? Follow your reckless behaviors until you get me killed? Again?”

Heather crossed her arms over her chest. They never spoke about it. About what they both understood was their lives before this one. Call it reincarnation, rebirth, samsara—it all amounted to the same thing. Heather and Wade shared memories with other people who lived in the same world that Wade’s parents grew up in. In Heather’s case, someone the Stouts had been close, personal friends with.

To his horror, fat tears populated her eyes. She was probably thinking of her nightmare and how her counterpart, N’mutua Bhaldrraith, had been burned to death seconds before Heather was born.

“Why do you want to be like them?” She wondered, changing the topic like she always did. “Why do you have to be some...prepped-out future lawyer with the perfect wife and life and—why can’t I be enough?”

“What am I supposed to do, Heather?” He asked, his voice softer than he wanted. He wanted to be cruel, to chase her out of there for good. He tried to strengthen his resolve. “We’re not even friends. Haven’t been best friends in years. We’re sure as hell not lovers—.”

“I’ve been waiting for you,” she sobbed, choking with embarrassment at the confession. She raised her head so that her eyes could meet his.

“What?”

“I’ve been—,” she hiccuped, wiping her face on the sleeve of his stolen jacket. Her face squished up, and she looked close to hyperventilating. She couldn’t meet his eye any longer. “I was...I was...” she rolled her blue orbs, “...*saving*—.” The word came out as a whispered squeak. She looked away, humiliated, unable to finish her sentence.

It took a minute for him to understand.

“*Why?*” He asked, throwing his hands up in frustration. “Why would you think *anything* would happen between us?”

She snapped her mouth shut. For the first time in Wade’s life, he watched her wrestle with her emotions, but he didn’t participate in the turmoil.

He made no movement to comfort her.

Heather turned away, putting her hands on top of her head as she sucked in air.

“I’ll have no one,” she gasped.

Feeling unexpectedly cruel, Wade called, “You’ll have you, right? That’s what you said last night. You always have you.”

Heather turned and gaped like a goldfish. He’d never seen her look hurt. Not that he could remember, anyway. Heather could find the good in any crap situation. That edged a crack in his resolve, just a little one. He’d crossed a line, and he knew it. But he kept his wall in place, blocking himself from her overwhelming emotions.

She nodded absently, finally understanding what his leaving meant for both of them. What he needed it to mean for their connection.

With a final ravaged breath, Heather turned on her heels and moved to the gate. She spared him only one last look back, and he almost caved at the sight; almost called her back to apologize.

But then she slipped out, and the gate slammed shut, and she was gone before he could say a word.