

Chris-Andre Bernhard

Fautunia

Book 1, Volume 1

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Fautunia

The Awakening

Fantasy

Text: © 2025 Copyright by Chris-Andre Bernhard

Cover Design: © 2025 Copyright by Chris-Andre Bernhard

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Production: epubli – a service of neopubli GmbH,

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FREE READING SAMPLE: Chapters 1 - 3

Welcome to Fautunia!

The story begins with Grandma Mathilda, who reveals a great secret to her grandchildren — the existence of another world called Fautunia.

After that, we follow Haylie, a 15 - year - old girl who is involuntarily sent to a summer camp...

Enjoy reading!

I

A Story is Told

Grandma Mathilda could hardly wait! She was practically glued to the window, her gaze fixed on the dusty country road. For days she had been counting down the hours until her grandchildren, Rehteah and Tom, arrived for their visit. A weekend full of adventures, laughter, and of course cake! The thought of seeing Rehteah's bright blue eyes and Tom's shy grin made her heart beat faster.

Over the past few days, she had polished her little cottage until it gleamed. Not that it had been strictly necessary. She simply loved it when everything was perfect for the arrival of her favorite people. She had even prepared a list of secret activities that she shared only with the two of them. The entire house smelled enticingly of her famous stardust lemon cake. A hint of magic always hung in the air when she baked.

While she stood at the window, memories of past adventures flitted by: wild chases through the garden, exciting board game evenings and stories by the crackling fireside. She and her grandchildren had a special connection—an invisible bond that was stronger than any distance.

At last! A pale blue car turned into the driveway, and her smile grew wider. How long had it been since she had seen them both! She watched as her daughter Sarah got out, followed by Rehteah and Tom. How they had grown!

Rehteah, with her wild mop of curls, immediately ran toward her, arms spread wide. Tom, now a gangly teenager, nodded to her shyly, his hands buried in his pockets.

Grandma Mathilda hugged her daughter warmly and then said, her eyes sparkling:

"I can hardly wait to spend this weekend with my two little stars!"

Rehteah tugged at Grandma Mathilda's skirt hem and looked up at her with a curious expression.

"Grandma, did you really buy all the ingredients for our stardust cake?"

"Of course I did, my little sweet tooth! I got everything we need for a galactically delicious cake."

"Can I help you bake, Grandma?"

"Of course, my little whirlwind! Together we'll work our magic and transform the universe into a cake!"

Sarah hauled the children's suitcases out of the trunk and set them down on the driveway. Rehteah and Tom, bursting with impatience, were already rushing toward the front door without so much as a glance at their luggage.

Grandma Mathilda chuckled at their enthusiasm and turned to her daughter:

"Let me help you with the suitcases, dear."

"It's been forever since we were last here," Sarah remarked as she followed her mother into the house.

"Oh yes, that's true. A whole year has passed since we were all together," the grandmother answered, remembering the last time this house had been full of laughter and harmony.

"It wasn't an easy time, Mom. The divorce from Jack was just awful."

The grandmother nodded understandingly. She saw the exhaustion and sorrow in Sarah's eyes.

"I know, sweetheart. But you're strong and you got through it. And now we're all here together, ready for new, hopefully better memories and a little carefree time."

Sarah sighed. The weight of responsibility weighed heavy on her shoulders.

"Speaking of time, Mom... I'm just going to drop the kids off. I have to head right back and unfortunately work all weekend."

Grandma Mathilda's expression darkened, disappointment reflected in her eyes.

"Oh, but Sarah, I was hoping you'd stay. You drove two hours just to leave us again right away?"

Sarah took a deep breath. It wasn't going to be easy explaining the situation to her mother.

"Oh, Mom, I know. I should have told you sooner, but what am I supposed to do? I have to take care of them both by myself. Jack... he's just no help at all."

"Oh, my dear. You shouldn't have to go through this alone. Have you at least tried talking to Jack about it?"

"Oh, there's no point with that idiot! He never answers his phone, never responds to messages, and he's never home either! You know what, Mom, I'm tired of chasing after him!"

"Then find yourself a good lawyer, dear. Don't forget that you don't have to handle all of this alone. We're here for you and we'll help you wherever we can. We love you and we'll always be here for you."

She hugged her daughter tightly. Together they set the suitcases down in the hallway.

Tom had already made himself comfortable on the couch, while Rehteah enthusiastically rummaged through the kitchen cabinets, pulling out bowls and baking utensils.

"Rehteah, what are you doing?"

"Oh, Grandma, I'm just getting the baking stuff out!"

"But Rehteah! We'll do that later. Come on, go upstairs with your brother and get yourselves settled in first. And take your own suitcases up, please. I'm not going to carry them up for you!"

Rehteah and Tom made their way upstairs. The little one laboriously dragged her heavy suitcase up the stairs step by step. Once in their rooms, they both began unpacking. Tom had brought his favorite books and board games, while Rehteah had packed her colored pencils, sketchpads, and her diary to record her experiences.

"Thank you for everything, Mom," Sarah said and hugged her mother tightly.

"I really have to go now. Please give the kids a big kiss from me. I'll call you as soon as I get home safely."

"I know, Sarah. Well, I would have loved it if you could have stayed. But I'll make sure the kids have a wonderful weekend. I hope we can plan another visit soon when you have a bit more time."

"Thanks, Mom. I'd love to stay longer too, especially after this whole divorce. A little break would have done me a world of good. I promise we'll spend more time together soon."

"I hope so!" her mother teased before giving her one more warm hug goodbye.

"Drive carefully, dear, and don't forget to call me when you get home."

With one last kiss, Sarah made her way to her car and started the engine. As she drove away, she felt a pang of sadness. She wished she could stay longer and spend more time with her mother and the children, but work was calling.

Meanwhile, Grandma Mathilda went back to the kitchen to tidy up. She picked up the bowls that Rehteah had pulled from the cabinets and put most of them back in their places. She left only two on the countertop, ready for use. She called up the stairs:

"Rehteah! Tom! Come down, we're starting!"

As Rehteah and Tom came down the stairs, Grandma Mathilda couldn't help but smile warmly. She loved having her grandchildren around her and cherished every moment she spent with them. Their energy was contagious and invigorated her as well.

Together they set to work: measuring ingredients, stirring, and finally pouring the batter into the cake pan. The sweet aroma of vanilla and lemon filled the kitchen, and their shared laughter echoed through the house.

"Rehteah, please cut the lemon in half, but be careful—the knife is very sharp," Grandma Mathilda instructed her, handing her the kitchen knife.

"Sure, Grandma," Rehteah answered dutifully. She carefully cut the lemon in half and then placed the knife gently on the countertop.

As they continued baking, Grandma Mathilda told stories from her own childhood and about the baking recipes she had learned from her mother. She spoke of old family traditions and the importance of spending time together.

After they had put the cake in the oven, they gathered around the kitchen table. They reveled in nostalgic memories of shared experiences and openly discussed their current worries and joys. As they chatted, the aroma of the baking cake grew more and more intense throughout the room, making their mouths water.

Suddenly the timer beeped—the cake was done.

Grandma Mathilda asked Tom to get the knife that Rehteah had used and left on the countertop. Tom jumped up, grabbed the knife, and handed it to his sister. But as Rehteah reached for it to cut the cake, she accidentally grabbed the sharp blade instead of the handle and cut herself deeply in the hand.

The room was suddenly filled with panic. Rehteah screamed in pain, tears springing to her eyes, and she pressed the injured hand tightly against herself. Tom immediately apologized and tried to calm his sister down, but the damage was already done.

Blood dripped onto the kitchen table.

Grandma Mathilda hurried over to Rehteah to comfort her and stop the bleeding. Tom, completely distraught, desperately suggested taking her to the hospital, fearing their mother would be beside herself with worry if she found out about the accident. Grandma Mathilda tried to remain calm and assured him that she would handle the situation without alarming Sarah.

"We'll be fine. Just stay calm. Come on, show me your hand, sweetheart," she said with a calmness that stood in stark contrast to the chaos that had just filled the room.

Rehteah hesitantly opened her palm. Blood welled up from the deep cut and dripped onto the kitchen table. Grandma Mathilda gently took the small, injured hand in her own.

The moment their skin touched, something unexpected happened.

A warm, pulsing light emanated from Grandma Mathilda's hand—not blinding, but rather like a soft glow. It seemed as though the air around their hands vibrated, and a faint, humming sound filled the room, so subtle that one could almost miss it.

The children stared transfixed at the spectacle. Grandma Mathilda closed her eyes, her expression peaceful and concentrated. Strange, intricate glowing symbols flickered briefly across her skin, then vanished as if they were merely an illusion. The light grew brighter, permeated Rehteah's hand, and seemed to push the blood away. It was as if invisible threads were drawing the wound together, healing it, mending it.

As the light slowly faded, Grandma Mathilda opened her eyes. They were a deep, emerald green color, which in the next moment shifted back to her usual brown. She smiled reassuringly at Rehteah.

"There, all better."

Rehteah looked at her hand in disbelief. The deep cut had vanished. In its place was only a pale pink scar that was already beginning to fade. It was as if time had been accelerated at that spot, as if the wound had never existed.

The children stared at each other in confusion. With a trembling voice, Rehteah asked:

"Grandma, how did you do that?" She turned her hand over and over, marveling at it.

"I'll explain that to you another time, dear. But... don't tell your mother about this. It's our little secret."

"But why not? That was so cool, what you did!" Tom protested, still bewildered by what he had witnessed.

Grandma Mathilda sighed softly.

"Your mother has always had... difficulties with things she can't immediately understand. I promised her I wouldn't mention it when you two are around. Well..." She paused briefly and gave them a conspiratorial smile. "...that was a bit of an emergency, wasn't it? So let's keep this between us for now. Is it a deal?"

The children nodded eagerly and pledged their silence with a secret grin. Then they all cut themselves a slice of cake as if nothing unusual had happened. Yet there now hung in the air an unspoken knowledge, a hint of magic that bound the family ties together in a new, thrilling way.

The children spent the rest of the afternoon in cheerful company with their grandmother. They played old board games they found in the cupboard, laughed at silly jokes, and told each other stories about their experiences.

As the sun slowly set and evening approached, they gathered around the dining table to enjoy a delicious dinner that Grandma Mathilda had prepared. The aroma of the freshly cooked food filled the air, and the children's stomachs rumbled in anticipation.

After dinner, as the children slowly got ready for bed, Rehteah asked expectantly:

"Grandma, can you read us a story?"

Grandma Mathilda smiled warmly.

"Well, Rehteah, I could read you something, but what do you think about me telling you a story instead—about how I came to have my special powers? Wouldn't you much rather hear that?"

Tom exchanged an excited glance with his sister. Immediately they gathered eagerly around their grandmother, ready to listen to her words.

"Are there monsters in your story, Grandma?" Rehteah asked excitedly, while Tom looked somewhat more skeptical.

"Yes, my dears, there will be, and much more besides," Grandma Mathilda answered with a mysterious smile.

"It will be about courage, friendship, and the struggle against the unknown."

And with that, she began to tell her story. Her voice was soft and soothing, yet full of life, and it immediately captured the undivided attention of her listeners.

"It all began many years ago, with a girl in a land called Fautunia."

"Wait, Grandma! Doesn't the girl have a name!?!"

"Yes, Rehteah, of course she has a name, but I'll tell you that later. We need to keep it exciting, don't we?"

"So... where was I? Ah yes... Fautunia was no ordinary land. It was a place teeming with adventures, but also with sad stories. And it all began with a girl who one day would set out on an unexpected journey. The land of Fautunia was a realm full of undiscovered corners and mysterious paths. It was a land where nature in all its facets was alive—from gently rolling hills to deep, unexplored forests. The rivers rushed and gurgled, and in their depths strange, unseen creatures were said to live. In the sky, majestic birds circled, their calls echoing across the land's vast expanse. And behind every cluster of trees, behind every rock, a new adventure could be hiding."

As Grandma Mathilda spoke, the children listened spellbound and let their imaginations run wild. They pictured a land that was different from anything they knew.

"But Fautunia also held dangers. Wild, untamed animals roamed the forests, and unknown threats lurked in the shadows. Before the girl, whom I will tell you about, came to Fautunia, she knew nothing of all this. She had no idea that her life was about to take a turn that would lead her into a world full of secrets and adventures. She didn't know that within her lay a power that would make her grow beyond herself... and this story begins in her very ordinary home, on a morning that would change everything."

II

Camp Against My Will: Between Hope and Horror

The beeping of her alarm clock filtered faintly into Haylie's ear. The loud ringing tore her abruptly from a beautiful dream. She knew it was time to get up, even though every muscle in her body protested. Slowly, she opened her eyes and fixed them on the blue display of her alarm clock. 7:30 AM glowed back at her — a relentless reminder that the day she had dreaded had arrived.

Her mother had enrolled her in a summer camp, what felt like an eternity of seven hours away from her beloved Littleton. Four days ago, Haylie's mother had told her that it would do her good to make new friends. Haylie had disagreed inwardly, convinced that her mother was simply wrong on this point. The thought of meeting complete strangers did not appeal to her at all. She had Maria, her best friend, and that was all she needed.

They had known each other since preschool. From the very first day, they had been inseparable. Their connection had grown stronger over the years — they were like sisters. They shared their deepest feelings, laughed and cried together, and trusted each other blindly. Haylie could not imagine a life without Maria, and she definitely did not need other friends.

And then there were Bo and Ben. Two hamsters she had gotten for her birthday a year ago. They were simply adorable and lovable. Every evening they came out of their little house and explored their territory with curiosity. Haylie watched them for hours and often laughed at Ben and Bo as they romped around in their cage. There were nights when the hamsters were so active that Haylie went over to their cage and jokingly

asked them if they were throwing another party. That question was usually answered with a loud chirping sound.

With a heavy heart, Haylie forced herself out of bed. She pulled back the curtains, and the soft light of the morning fell across her face. It was a brilliant day, summer vacation had finally begun, and of all people, she was being shipped off to camp!

For weeks, Haylie and Maria had meticulously planned every single day of their vacation. They wanted to go to Lenny Lorenz's candy store to enjoy the delicious ice cream and watch the guys play basketball. Haylie had a particular interest in one of the players: David Thomsen, a classmate and member of the basketball team. He was athletic, handsome, and had a charming way about him that had captured her heart completely.

Unfortunately, David knew nothing of Haylie's feelings for him. An opportunity to confess them to him or even hint at them had simply never come up. And truthfully, she knew she could never tell him anyway. For one thing, she was far too shy, and for another, his girlfriend, Stacy Stone, was always hanging all over him.

Haylie stormed to her closet, seething internally.

"This damn sneaky bitch! She's not it at all! David deserves so much better. What does he even see in her? Sure, from a distance she might look decent enough, but the second she opens her mouth, she's just cringe. Her stupidity and her ridiculous superficiality are just pathetic. I seriously don't get what David sees in this chick. She's not worth being near him — he could have so much more if he wasn't so blind."

She stopped in front of the mirror, made a face, and then picked up her brush to run it through her stubborn curls. Then, with a theatrical sigh, she called out:

"Hey, mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the queen of them all? Oh wait, wrong movie. I'm a five-foot-one powerhouse and I'm gonna show Stacy who really has style!"

She swung the brush like an imaginary microphone.

In that moment, the door opened and her mother came in.

"Are you ready yet, sweetie? The bus leaves soon—we should get going."

Haylie rolled her eyes.

"Chill out, Mom! You know I don't want to go. Just let me stay here. Maria and I have our entire vacation completely planned out. Camp is totally unnecessary. This is such a lame move!"

"Don't you think we've already discussed this enough times? You're going, so get ready now!"

Her mother spoke with emphasis. Her patience seemed to be running out. She closed the door behind her, leaving Haylie alone.

"That's seriously uncool," she thought as she shuffled frustratedly into the bathroom. She showered, brushed her teeth, and then quickly threw on whatever clothes she could find. Haylie looked at herself in the mirror again and combed through her curly red hair once more.

"In three years I'll be eighteen and can finally do my own thing," she thought, and was about to leave when it occurred to her that she still needed her suitcase. She looked around her room, but couldn't find a suitcase anywhere. She knew her suitcase had been packed for two days already—but she hadn't realized how her mom had secretly dragged it downstairs. When her mother had asked her two days ago to help with packing, Haylie had simply gone to Maria's to escape the "forced labor." That her mom had handled the luggage on her own had completely escaped her.

Puzzled that her suitcases were missing, she stormed down the stairs. In the hallway, right next to the front door, there they were: her travel bags, ready for the unwanted trip.

"Why did you pack my suitcases? Do you think I wouldn't have figured it out eventually? There was plenty of time anyway!"

"Would you have actually gotten it done in time?"

Her mother came closer. Her expression was serious, but her eyes betrayed a hint of concern.

"Yeah, I thought I'd start after breakfast! It's not rocket science to throw a few clothes into a suitcase!" Haylie stamped her foot demonstratively.

"That's not enough, Haylie. You would have forgotten half of it. And then you would have whined in my ear because I hadn't checked everything beforehand!"

"There would have been time to check! But now you've probably packed some unnecessary junk that I don't even need or wear, and forgotten my most important stuff!"

Her mother looked at her exasperatedly.

"I spent two hours packing your bags. I honestly don't care what's in there and what's missing. If you didn't just run off next time, you could help me, and everything would be perfect. Just be a little more grateful for once. Sit down now and eat something."

Haylie decided not to pursue the argument further. She was aware that her mother always came out on top in the end. Then she glanced at the table and saw delicious pancakes, scrambled eggs with bacon, and freshly squeezed orange juice. It looked appetizing, but it still felt like the last meal before an execution.

"Enjoy my last pancakes for the next two weeks," she thought dramatically.

"Sit down and eat, we really don't have time to waste!"

Her mother spoke with emphasis again, and Haylie felt pressured.

"You just want to get rid of me as fast as possible anyway," Haylie countered stubbornly as she sat down at the table.

"What's that supposed to mean? I'm just trying to be nice. The bus station isn't exactly around the corner, and the later we leave, the more likely we'll hit traffic. Then we'll miss your departure, and I'll have to drive you to camp myself. Do you even have any idea where that is?"

Her mother wiped down the countertop as she spoke.

"Yeah, I know, Mom! Somewhere in Utah, I get it!"

Her mother tossed the dish towel into the sink with a sigh and turned to her daughter.

"That's right, Utah! And the bus ticket is already paid for! If I had to drive you myself, I might as well throw that ticket in the trash and spend extra money on gas!"

"Okay, I get it, Mom! Chill out! I understand!" Haylie poked listlessly at her scrambled eggs.

"Could this get any more uncomfortable?" she thought. Haylie could have started a fight to buy herself more time, but she knew that would have been a lost cause too. The drive to the bus station would be filled with silence. Haylie just had to get through these two weeks of camp now.

"After that, I can finally do my own thing again. Hopefully..." she thought, feeling slightly resigned.

"Alright. Eat or don't, but hurry up! I'm taking your suitcases to the car."

Her mother grabbed the suitcases and disappeared. Haylie heard the front door slam shut.

"Well, this should be fun..." Haylie thought.

At that moment, Sir Jo - Jo arrived, a white, elderly tomcat who had shown up at their place five years ago, completely malnourished and filthy. They had nursed him back to health, and ever since, he had shown his gratitude either through extensive cuddling sessions or, somewhat less appetizing, by presenting dead mice in front of the door. Haylie stood up, scratched the old tomcat behind his ears, and then went to the closet to put on her sneakers. Sir Jo - Jo followed her every step of the way, weaving between her legs and meowing at her as if to say goodbye.

"I'll be back soon, Jo - Jo. You keep an eye on things and entertain Mom while I'm gone, okay?"

She gave him a kiss on the head before she left the house.

On the way to the car, Haylie's phone vibrated. She pulled it out of her pocket, looked at the display, and saw that Maria had sent her a message. She opened the chat and read:

"Hey Bae! Sorry I couldn't say goodbye. Things are total chaos here at home, you know how it is. Still try to have fun, as best you can! In two weeks we'll make up for it, I promise! Miss you already, I'm really sorry."

Haylie was furious by the time she finished reading the message. She knew that Maria was unreliable, and now they wouldn't see each other for two weeks. Of course, Maria had a lot of responsibilities at home—she had to look after her three younger siblings since her mom was a single parent. Haylie always tried to understand the situation, but this was too much. "She can go to hell!" she thought, and slammed the car door shut.

Haylie slammed the door with so much force that her mother flinched.

"What's going on here?" her mother asked as she started the engine.

"Maria sent me some lame excuse in a message saying she can't come say goodbye! Something about 'stress at home.' Seriously? That girl can go screw herself!" Haylie hissed and stuffed her phone back into her pocket.

"Mom, I always understand when Maria has to step in at home, but not today of all days! We won't see each other for two weeks now. What's the point of this, seriously?"

"I understand your frustration, sweetie, and I'm sorry too. But it's not easy for Maria either. Her mother is a single parent and has to work. She needs Maria's help."

With those words, they drove off.

"No, Mom, come on, she knew forever that I was leaving. She should have told her mom about it. Even if she'd dragged her annoying siblings along, I wouldn't have cared as long as she'd shown up to say goodbye. But nope, she just didn't feel like it. Total fail!" Haylie rolled down the car window as she spoke. Her mother said nothing, because she knew that Haylie was right.

During the drive to the bus station, Haylie watched the bustling activity on the streets. An elderly woman was just coming back from shopping with her arms full of bags. A man was mowing his lawn at that time. Children were running around, playing, and having fun.

They had to wait at a red light. Her mother turned on the radio. Haylie listened to the announcer as the news came on. It was always the same:

Some guy had robbed a gas station the night before and gotten away with four hundred and fifty dollars. The gas station attendant had only suffered a minor head injury.

After the news, the announcer announced Haylie's favorite song by Jared Smith — Summer Days. Haylie would have sung along, but she wasn't in the mood today. She was disappointed by Maria and had no desire for the silly summer camp.

Soon they reached the bus station in Denver.

"Do you know which gate I need to go to, Mom?"

"I packed the ticket in your backpack. It says right on it which gate you're leaving from!" Her mother explained it as if it were obvious. Haylie was completely confused.

"Which backpack, please?"

She hadn't had a backpack with her when she got in the car. Could this be her chance to escape camp? Her mother hadn't mentioned a bag either, neither at the table nor when getting into the car.

"Hell yes! No backpack, no tickets, and no camp trip!" she thought.

"I put your backpack on the back seat. I know how forgetful you are."

Haylie was shocked and turned around, only to see her red backpack. She couldn't believe it. Annoyed, she grabbed her backpack from the back seat and ripped it open. Her ticket was right on top, followed by her lunch box and a book. Her mother had even thought of her headphones.

"At least I can listen to my playlist on the bus," she thought. She took the ticket and read it out loud and angrily:

"Gate B19, Mom!"

"Okay, thanks, then we can get out."

Haylie was surprised that her mother had already found a parking spot. She slowly opened the door and got out.

"Hurry up, Haylie!"

Her mother hauled the suitcases out of the trunk and dropped them on the ground.

"These are so heavy. I have no idea what you packed in here!"

"I packed everything you need for two weeks, even your stuffed animal!"

"Mom, are you crazy? Do you want me to be completely embarrassed? That would be soooo cringe. Everyone would laugh at me if I showed up with a teddy bear. Can someone please just kill me right now!"

"Then just leave it in the suitcase."

"That's exactly what I'll do, Mom!" she replied irritably as she threw the teddy back into the trunk. Haylie slung her backpack over her shoulder, and they each grabbed a suitcase and rolled it toward the check-in counter. Fortunately, they had those practical rolling suitcases that made the dragging at least somewhat more bearable.

Suddenly, Haylie saw Stacy Stone and her parents getting out of their SUV.

"This day just keeps getting better..." she thought sarcastically.

Stacy was Haylie's classmate, had long blonde hair, brown eyes, and looked good. She was also arrogant and condescending to Haylie and the other students, except to those she liked.

In kindergarten, they had gotten along well and often played outside together with Maria. Unfortunately, Stacy's father died early from cancer, which made things difficult for her mother. The other kids at school teased her because she didn't have the latest things.

Haylie had been more fortunate. Her mother left her father when she was five years old, but he had made a lot of money through his business ventures and sent her mother enough money every month. He said, "Haylie should never lack for anything."

Stacy hadn't been so lucky until her mother married a wealthy surgeon. From that point on, Stacy became increasingly arrogant. Unlike Stacy, her mother and stepfather were always nice and threw great barbecues. Haylie's mother and Stacy's mother got along very well and often went to the gym together.

When they spotted Haylie, the three of them waved and came over.

"Do we really have to walk to the meeting point with those people?"

"Oh come on, they're nice and you used to get along with Stacy."

"Yeah, when we were little. Now she's mega stupid, Mom!"

"Haylie!" Her mother spoke in a raised voice and gave her a warning look. Mrs. and Mr. Stone greeted them warmly.

"Hi Haylie, hi Petty. Nice to see you. Are you excited yet, Haylie?"

"Hello Mr. Stone. I was just about to say..."

"I was totally freaking out that I wouldn't know anyone here," Stacy interrupted Haylie and threw her a look that said, "I'm way cooler than you."

What was this supposed to mean? Haylie had a feeling, but she absolutely did not want Stacy to be going to camp too. But Stacy had suitcases with her, and lots of them.

"No, this can't be happening, Stacy has to be going to summer camp too!" she thought.

Maybe Stacy was going somewhere else and was just excited that Haylie was on the bus so she'd have someone to get on her nerves.

"She can forget about sitting next to me on the bus!" she thought bitterly.

"I think it's really great that I enrolled Haylie too. It'll do her good," her mother said.

Stacy's stepfather just said that the two girls would definitely have a lot of fun. Haylie couldn't believe her ears. Fun? She was really coming?

"Seriously, they can't be serious!" she thought.

Stacy Stone and Haylie together in one camp. First, she didn't want to go to camp, and second, now her biggest rival was coming too. These would be the worst two weeks of her life. She wondered what Stacy even wanted to do there, where it was way too dirty and boring and David would be staying in Denver anyway.

Or maybe David had planned some amazing surprise and would jump out from behind some bush and kidnap Stacy? That would of course be the absolute dream, and then Stacy would never have to come back. He could just leave her somewhere out in the wilderness. Stacy wouldn't

survive three hours, and then it would be the happy ending where David came to camp that same day, rescued Haylie, and of course asked if she wanted to be with him.

She giggled internally at the thought of Stacy getting lost in the wilderness, but at the same time turned bright red at the thought of David adoring her.

They all made their way to the gate, but unfortunately David didn't show up, and Haylie's hope for a relaxed camp experience was thus dead. The parents talked about work, politics, and other topics that didn't interest Haylie. Stacy pretended to understand everything and nodded her head the whole time like a bobble - head doll.

At the bus station, all hell broke loose, and there were a lot of people standing around at the gate. When they finally got there, the bus driver checked the tickets and stowed the luggage in the trunk. The bus driver yelled:

"Alright people, get on the bus now! We're leaving in five minutes!"

It was time to say goodbye. Haylie's mother gave her a kiss on the cheek and wished her a good time. And of course, the obligatory reminder to behave couldn't be missing.

"Behave yourself, Haylie!"

"Yeah, Mom, it's fine!"

She got on the bus and looked for an empty seat. She liked sitting in the back because that way she had a good view of everything that was going on. Stacy had of course already claimed a spot way up front, so the back section was now hers.

People slowly got on the bus and looked for a seat. Haylie saw a small boy with brown hair and chubby cheeks sitting not far from Stacy. He was sitting next to an older woman. She wondered if the two of them belonged together. The boy had a book on his lap and seemed absorbed in his reading.

She continued on and hoped that the back row hadn't been taken yet, since not many people had found their seats yet.

Suddenly, a paper ball hit Haylie square in the face. A tall, skinny guy with short blonde hair had shot it at her with a blowgun.

"Right in the face, man!"

Haylie was totally disgusted, wiped the paper scraps from her face, and saw that he was already loading up again.

"Kenny, cut it out! Otherwise we're getting kicked off, and I'm not in the mood for Dad's lecture!"

An obviously older boy spoke energetically to his brother.

"Hey, sorry, my brother's always down for stupid stuff. Did it hurt?"

"Nope, didn't hurt! Just super gross! Actually, your brother should apologize to me, not you!" she answered disgustedly.

"Kenny, apologize now!" The older brother punched him on the arm.

"Ow, man... I'm sorry," Kenny mumbled and looked down at the ground.

Haylie accepted the apology and continued on. When she reached the back section of the bus, she saw that there were still empty seats available. She quickly sat down and put her backpack next to her. She opened it and took out her lunch box. In the box were two sandwiches, an apple, a banana, and two chocolate bars. Her mother had always warned her not to forget the chocolate bars.

Since she wasn't hungry, she packed the lunch box away again and took out her headphones instead. The bus started, the doors were closed, and Haylie looked out the window. She saw her mother, who met her gaze and smiled at her.

Haylie felt no resentment anymore, just sympathy. She had to get by without her for two weeks now. In the evenings, they liked to watch TV shows together and make jokes, and they always laughed a lot. After that, they got ready for bed together. A loving goodnight kiss on the forehead was a regular ritual. Now they both had to go without that for two weeks.

The bus rolled off toward Route 70 heading to Utah. Haylie's mother blew a kiss into the air, and Haylie could make out an "I love you" on her lips.

Suddenly, a good - looking boy said to Haylie:

"Hi, I'm Nathan and who are you?"

Haylie was totally shocked and whipped her head around.

"Who is that?" she thought. Without her noticing, the guy had just sat down next to her. Dark hair, blue eyes, and totally muscular. He ran his hand through his hair and casually pushed the strands to the side. He looked at her with his beautiful blue eyes, and Haylie was instantly smitten.

"Wow. Stacy can keep her David for all I care. Here's the man of my dreams," Haylie thought and daydreamed.

"What's your name?" Nathan asked again, pulling her back from her dream world.

"Um, I'm Johnsen, uh, Haylie Johnsen."

"Cool to meet you, Haylie. Are you heading to summer camp too?"

"Yeah... well... actually I didn't want to go... but now I'm here... you know what I mean..."

"That's a little hard to understand, what you're saying there, but let me try. Where are you from?" He smiled at her.

"I'm from... Littleton... No, I mean... I come from... Littl..." She choked on her words and had to cough.

"Oh, Littleton. I'm from Colorado Springs, not far from Littleton. I'm glad you're coming to camp. Maybe we can get to know each other better. Is it okay if I close my eyes for a bit? I had a really exhausting morning."

"No!"

She somehow got it out, but it came out more like a squeaking pig. He smiled at her, turned his head to the side, and closed his eyes.

Haylie was embarrassed by the conversation they'd just had. She quickly put her headphones on, started her playlist, and enjoyed the music while looking out the window at the passing houses. She had to get through a 7 - hour bus ride to get to her personal hell. But then she thought of Nathan sitting next to her, and that made her smile; he could make these two weeks bearable for her.

Then she looked around the bus and noticed that everyone was sitting quietly and relaxed in their seats. She looked back out the window and saw the sparsely - traveled Route 70. She admired the wilderness with its mountains and trees in the distance. She remembered the days she had spent with her mother in the mountains outside of Denver, exploring the wilderness and enjoying the sunshine.

She continued listening to the music and closed her eyes. She felt like a baby in a cradle as the bus gently rocked her. She fell into a deep sleep, unaware of the exciting, dangerous, and adventurous journey that lay ahead of her.

III

Descent into the Abyss

Haylie was jolted awake in the bus by a sudden jerk. She looked to her right and noticed that Nathan was already awake. He seemed to want to tell her something, but since she had her headphones on and music was still playing, she didn't catch a word. She turned off the music and took off her headphones.

"Sorry, I totally didn't catch that. I was just listening to music."

"I just asked if you slept well?"

"It was okay, just a little uncomfortable here on the bus."

"Yeah, really sucks," Nathan agreed.

Haylie checked her phone to see what time it was. She had slept for about two hours. When she looked out the window, she noticed several cars on Route 70.

"In about an hour we'll make our first stop at a rest area. Good thing, my legs are already killing me from sitting," Haylie thought.

She looked forward and surveyed the passengers. Most of them were either staring out the window or sleeping. Stacy was nowhere to be seen.

"So Haylie, you're from Littleton. What do you do all day out there?"

Her gaze turned to Nathan as he asked her. She felt a warm feeling in her chest and feared that she would start stuttering again. She took a deep breath.

"Not much. School, homework, taking care of my pets. Nothing special, I guess."

"You have pets? Cool. I have a dog. Russell. He's such a sweetheart and super loyal. What do you have?"

"I have two adorable hamsters. Bo and Ben. And a cat. Sir Jo - Jo. They're my babies."

"Nice. But honestly, don't you have any friends? A pretty and cool girl like you definitely has more than just hamsters and a cat, right?"

Nathan grinned cheekily at her. Haylie could hardly believe it. Nathan thought she was attractive and was trying to flirt with her. She had to stay cool. She felt the blush creeping into her face and knew she was turning bright red. She tried to stay relaxed and act like she hadn't heard his compliment. She wanted to change the subject, but nothing came to mind. She felt Nathan's gaze on her and her heart was racing. She felt completely caught and embarrassed, but she managed to smile and keep her composure.

"Of course I have friends, but really just one really good one. Maria, she's in my class. The others are okay, but I'm not that close with them. And you? Do you have friends too? I bet you even have a girlfriend, like... uh... with your looks... I mean..."

She trailed off, unable to finish the sentence. What was this turning into? Was that a flirtation attempt? She felt her cheeks getting even hotter. She startled and flinched when she realized what she had just blurted out — or rather, hadn't blurted out completely.

"Oh my God, what did I just say? With Maria, I could talk about hot guys, but that was just between us. And now I'm standing here not able to get out a single coherent word," she thought.

Nathan didn't seem bothered by the question and was surprisingly relaxed.

He even grinned at her.

"I have two good buddies I hang out with a lot, but I don't have a girlfriend yet!"

He winked at her. Her face was glowing with embarrassment, and she quickly turned away.

She didn't know what to say to that, but then she looked at him again, and the kindness in his eyes suddenly gave her a feeling of security. She gave him a small smile, which looked more like a grimace.

"Um... yeah... it'll probably happen soon... I mean... if you want... or maybe not..." she stammered, hoping she hadn't completely scared him off.

Nathan grinned and replied:

"Maybe I already found her."

Haylie felt her cheeks burning again, and she had to giggle. Was he serious or was he just teasing her? Either way, her heart was going crazy. She turned away, very embarrassed and at the same time somehow excited.

"That's really too bad that you don't have a girlfriend yet, but I'm wondering, with flirting skills like that, you've definitely already got a lot of g..."

"Ladies and gentlemen, in a few minutes we will reach a rest area. There you can stretch your legs and take a break. I hope you've had a pleasant journey so far," blared from the speakers, and Haylie cursed internally.

Of all times, this stupid announcement had to interrupt the exciting conversation with Nathan. She had felt so comfortable and finally wanted to show him how she felt.

"Finally. About time. I can't stand sitting anymore," Nathan said and stretched.

In that moment, her good mood shattered into a thousand pieces, and she felt terrible. She wanted to tell him how she felt, but she couldn't find the right words. Instead, she just stared out the window and watched the rest area get closer.

Haylie felt her cheeks burning as she thought back to the conversation with Nathan. Was it all just a nice distraction and Nathan hadn't meant any of it seriously? The kind words, the feeling of being liked — was it all just talk? She would have liked nothing more than to sink into the ground and never come back up.

Until the bus came to a stop at the rest area, she had refused to look at Nathan and instead stared out the window. Everything was way too embarrassing. Nathan made no move to continue the conversation or even say anything.

The doors opened and the passengers rushed to the restrooms. Nathan stood up, walked a few steps forward, turned to her, and said:

"To answer your question from before: I've never gone this far with a girl. You're the first one I've ever actually flirted with." With that, he left the bus and left her speechless.

"Should I have just asked him again? Is he mad at me now?" she wondered.

Haylie followed the other passengers and went to the restroom. She was still trying to process what had just happened.

"He's definitely pissed off now, the way he said that!"

Haylie tried to distract herself, but then she remembered that rest area bathrooms are usually a nightmare. The thought of lifting the lid and being greeted by what felt like the leftovers of a thousand other people was just gross. But when she entered the restroom, she was surprised: Everything was spotless, and it even smelled like lemon.

She did her business and washed her hands. She had been alone the whole time until suddenly Stacy came in.

"Well, well. You're really glowing. But listen here, Haylie, I want to tell you something, even if it hurts: Don't let that guy mess with you," she said with a saccharine grin, went to the sink, and dropped her handbag into the other sink.

"What's that supposed to mean? Were you watching us or something!" Haylie asked irritably.

Stacy took a theatrical breath. You would have thought she was preparing for a speech in front of the UN Security Council.

"I just wanted to admire my charming reflection for a moment when I saw you throw yourself at this attractive guy. I immediately flipped the mirror away — I certainly didn't want to watch such a pathetic spectacle

any longer. But what does one even talk about with you? Probably about your stamp collection or the latest deals at the craft store, right? I bet the guy already regretted smiling at you after five minutes!"

Stacy threw her a disgusted look, rummaged through her handbag, and pulled out a lipstick. She threw Haylie a brief, contemptuous glance and snorted before she continued:

"Perfect! Where were we? Oh yeah, at your obvious disconnect from reality. Listen here, kiddo, this guy plays in a league you shouldn't even dream about. You're more the type for the math teacher with the greasy hairline and the shirts that even your grandma thinks are ugly. So do us all a favor and spare yourself the embarrassment. You're going to get rejected anyway, and honestly, I don't want to hear the screaming. Just trust me, okay? Find someone who appreciates your... let's say... 'unique' qualities. Someone who also thinks socks with sandals are a fashion statement. That's the best advice you'll ever get. Think about it before you make a complete fool of yourself."

Haylie couldn't believe what Stacy had said. She couldn't just let that slide, so she went on the offensive:

"Who do you think you are to say something like that! Listen up, you dumb bitch! It's none of your damn business, but he started flirting. I just played along. You've got your David, so mind your own damn business!"

After that comeback, she just wanted to get away and stormed toward the door.

Stacy called after her, and her laughter sounded like the cawing of a crow over a freshly plundered grave.

"Oh, he definitely just felt sorry for you because you're such a sad case. But don't worry, once he realizes you're more of a burden than an asset, you'll be forgotten faster than you can say 'Oh God, why me?'"

Haylie slammed the restroom door shut and marched back to the bus. Nathan saw that she was furious and came toward her.

"Hey, what happened?"

"What happened!? Stacy Stone, that's what happened!"

"Okay, whoever that is. What did she do?"

"That stupid bitch was watching us!"

"So what? That's not such a big deal, is it?"

"Yes, it is! First of all, that stupid cow had the nerve to talk to me! Second of all, she's an arrogant bitch!! Third of all, she's getting to me because she was watching me talk to you! You have no idea how much I hate that chick! Dude, she's really getting on my nerves right now! She should just shut her stupid mouth and leave me alone!"

Haylie sighed and wiped away a tear. Nathan put an arm around her to calm her down.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Take it easy, Haylie. But okay... I get it, you two aren't friends. You know, that's just jealousy on her part. I think you're really cool."

Haylie smiled slightly and hugged him briefly.

"Okay. Listen. In a moment she's going to come out of the restroom and walk past us. Let me handle this," Nathan said with a determined look.

It didn't take a minute before Stacy came out of the restroom. Slowly and with an arrogance that was almost painful to watch, she headed toward them. Nathan pulled Haylie closer to him. He smelled damn good, and Haylie's knees went weak. His arms were strong, she could feel his muscles, and she liked it.

"Oh, how touching. Haylie and her fairy tale prince. Disgusting."

"Hey Stacy, what's your problem anyway?"

"I don't have a problem. I'm just wondering what you see in her?"

"Listen here, you walking barrel full of cheap hardware store paint. What I see in Haylie is none of your damn business. And why the hell should that even interest you? Do you think I'd chase after some dolled-up nothing like you? The only thing you have in your head is your damn makeup! And even tons of makeup can't cover up the fact that you're so ugly on the inside that it's scary!"

Haylie couldn't believe her ears at how Nathan was standing up for her. A warmth flowed through her like she had never felt before. Stacy was

caught off guard and stared at the two of them before taking a deep breath and saying:

"Oh, come on, Sunnyboy. You think you're the next Brad Pitt, but in reality you're just a cheap knockoff. And as for Haylie, she can barely string a sentence together. But hey, maybe you're into the silent type. Or pity. I don't care either way. David Thomsen at least stands by me without being ashamed of me. Have fun babysitting, kid."

With that, Stacy wanted to leave, and Haylie thought they finally had peace when Nathan called after her:

"David Thomsen from Littleton High? The one who's so dumb he has to think even when taking a shit?"

Stacy froze. She spun around and asked:

"What are you implying?"

"Oh Stacy, where do I even start? David Thomsen... Let me tell you some secrets about your dream prince. First: basketball. Yeah, we play together. But what you don't know: After every practice, he hangs around with all kinds of groupies who he tells how unhappy he is with you. Apparently because you're always forcing him to talk about your problems for hours and bending his ear. He even made a chart of how often you cry in a month! Second: Colorado Springs. That's right, he's got a girlfriend there too. Lisa. Sweet girl, but unfortunately she didn't realize she's just one of many. He picked her up at my birthday party while you were sending him love texts. Apparently because he doesn't get anywhere with you — and even if he did, he'd probably need a therapist afterward. He complains that you two haven't been 'active' in bed yet. That's why he's constantly screwing around with other girls, he says he has to... how does he always put it... let off some steam. And then he constantly shows us naked pictures of the girls he's slept with and brags about it. But here's the best part: He bets with us other guys how long he can stand you before he trades you in for someone better. Last estimate was two weeks. So before you come here opening your big mouth and insulting other people, maybe you should check what's going on in your own relationship.

But I guess the truth is sometimes hard to swallow, especially when you've got so much makeup on that you can't recognize your own face anymore."

Stacy's face was simply epic. The two of them turned around and marched away grinning. When they reached the bus, they burst into uproarious laughter.

Stacy rummaged through her handbag like she'd been stung by a tarantula, looking for her phone. After what felt like an eternity, she finally found it, only to drop it. She picked it up and started hammering on the screen like a madwoman. It didn't take a minute before she started screaming into the phone so loud it screeched.

Nathan and Haylie watched the spectacle from a safe distance and could barely hold themselves together from laughing. They watched as Stacy flailed her arms wildly, as if she wanted to hit someone. Haylie and Nathan stood off to the side of the bus, while the other passengers slowly got back on.

"Is that really true, what you told Stacy?" Haylie asked after a while.

"Yeah, unfortunately. I've been playing on a team with David for three years. And believe me, the list of his conquests is longer than the McDonald's menu. But that's not even all of it. This guy is so broke he can't even afford a burger, but as long as his hair looks perfect and he's wearing the most expensive sneakers, he's good. But here's the worst part: He treats women like disposable goods. For him, they're all just trophies he can show off to his buddies. Oh, and to be honest, I forgot to tell you something else: He's constantly stealing money from the team fund and then blowing it on some pointless crap.

But honestly, I don't even care anymore."

Haylie frowned.

"That's horrible! How can someone be like that? Why does he do all that?"

She was shocked by what Nathan had told her about David. She didn't like Stacy, but nobody deserved something like that.

"I have no idea. Maybe he has some kind of inferiority complex and is trying to compensate. One thing's for sure, he's just an asshole. Honestly, I don't even care. The main thing is that Stacy finally gets the truth thrown in her face."

"Don't you think David is going to be pissed off at you when he finds out you told her all that?"

"Maybe, but I don't care about that either. David and I were never best friends anyway. But maybe it's better if Stacy figures out the truth herself. I think I've said enough."

Nathan leaned back. They talked about it for a while longer until the bus driver signaled them to get on.

Nathan and Haylie made their way to the bus, and Haylie noticed that the bus driver looked completely exhausted. But she didn't care. They got on and found their seats. When they looked out the window, Stacy was still standing in front of the bus screaming into her phone. The bus driver honked briefly, and Stacy was the last one to get on. She looked like she had just buried her dog.

Haylie tried not to dwell on it too much, rummaged through her lunch box for her sandwich, and took a hearty bite. Nathan did the same and unpacked his sandwich. They wished each other bon appétit, and it felt good to finally have something in their stomachs.

The bus set itself in motion again, and Haylie leaned back and looked out the window.

As she slowly chewed on her sandwich, she let her gaze wander over the passing landscape. Nature was simply overwhelming — the rich colors, the diversity of plants and animals. It was as if she was getting a tiny glimpse into the incredible creativity of the universe. And suddenly she became aware of how small and insignificant she really was. So far, she had only seen a tiny fraction of the earth, a speck of dust compared to the infinite beauty and magnitude of Mother Nature. And probably she would never have the chance to experience all the wonders this world had to offer.

Somehow, this made her both sad and grateful at the same time. Sad because she knew that most people didn't appreciate the incredible world they lived in, but instead destroyed it out of greed and stupidity. No matter what politicians promised, this destruction would continue. The cycle of annihilation that humanity itself had set in motion could not be stopped. Because human ignorance and selfishness were simply stronger than the empty words of politicians. But we were all just visitors on this earth, only for a brief moment. Shouldn't we be much more grateful and enjoy every moment?

They had been on the road for another hour when a sudden, violent jerk pulled her from her thoughts. The bus swerved slightly off the road for a split second. The driver must have noticed and had overcorrected.

"Did he sneak a drink while we were on break?" flashed through Haylie's mind. She remembered that the bus driver already looked completely exhausted when they got on. What if he fell asleep while driving? This thought sent a huge wave of fear through her.

"The driver is acting kind of weird, don't you think? Did you notice that too?"

"Yeah, totally. He looked really tired earlier. I noticed when we got on. I was actually going to say something, but decided against it," Haylie said and bit her lip.

Suddenly, the bus swerved to the right again and lurched toward the guardrail.

"What's wrong with the driver?" asked an elderly woman sitting a few rows ahead of them, her eyes wide open. Now more and more voices were getting loud on the bus.

"Doesn't he realize what's happening?!" yelled a guy from the back. A boy jumped up and tried to run forward, but his buddy pulled him back into his seat. The bus accelerated with a jerk and headed straight for the guardrail. A woman screamed hysterically that someone had to do something finally.

"Wake up, man! For God's sake!" shouted another guy at the bus driver. Haylie suspected he must have rushed forward, but in all the chaos, she couldn't make sense of anything anymore.

Haylie was frozen with fear. The driver must have been overwhelmed and yanked the steering wheel to the right in a panic. That was the death blow. The bus began to tip to the side. He tried desperately to regain control, but no matter how hard he countersteered, the bus kept skidding. Haylie's screams were drowned out by the others, panic took over, and she gripped her seat for dear life.

Then it happened.

The bus tipped over to the side, at first very slowly, as if it were being pulled up the first hill of a roller coaster. And then everything went incredibly fast. In the next moment, she felt Nathan pull her tightly into his arms.

Then they flipped.

A deafening noise, shattering glass everywhere. A shard hit Haylie on the left thigh and buried itself deep into her flesh. The pain was unbearable.

Suddenly, she felt a hard blow to her head, as if someone had smashed a brick against her skull. As her vision slowly faded to black, her entire life flashed before her eyes. Her mother, Maria, Sir Jo - Jo, the hamsters. She might never see them again, and there was so much more she wanted to experience. She wanted to travel the world, laugh, love, be loved, have adventures, make memories, and live life to the fullest. But fate seemed to have other plans.

The darkness closed around her like a cold embrace, and slowly the screams and calls faded until there was only silence. She felt a strange lightness, almost as if she were weightless and floating through space. Her body seemed to dissolve, without support, without weight, without pain. A deep peace settled over her, a tranquility she had never known in her life. She was free from all the worries and all the horror of this world,

free to simply exist, one with the void. She closed her eyes and let the darkness consume her, surrendering to the feeling of weightlessness.

THEN IT CONTINUES...

In Chapter 4, Haylie arrives in Fautunia!

The complete book will be released soon — SURPRISE! 📖

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Chris André Bernhard