

## Christian Hartselle

### Byron



He picks me up and my first thought is that I hate his teeth.

They're more dilapidated than the passenger door I shut behind me, and the amount of space between them is appalling. When he puts a cigarette in his mouth, I want to show him the mirror and tell him he doesn't need it. But I'm being paid, so I ask for one instead.

"What are you looking to do?"

"Just normal stuff, I guess. Can you get me a quote for that?"

"The going rate."

"That's fair."

His speech patterns are interrupted to an extent that the interruptions become a part of the pattern. First of all, he's always coughing. I audaciously point this out, but he insists it's a habit more than it's the tobacco.

I won't see them until we're into the night, but he has a lot of tattoos. It's not something he likes talking about, though. They're not any good. They're trash.

A deer below his shoulder blade: he assures me it's dead. He hunts

and keeps all the meat. An ankle tattoo — I'd think a little geeky for this guy. It's a flower, I think. He got that one when he was fifteen. The rest I can't view by him peeling down the cloth, but he said there's not one he's proud of anyway. He knows that removal is possible. He doesn't want to.

Every two minutes, his phone rings —

*Errybody's addicted to something*

*Errybody gotta grip onto something...*

He keeps cancelling the calls and talking to me, but he won't just silence the damn thing.

He's friendly, for sure. And not in the creepy way I thought I would come to expect in this industry. I guess you'd say he's professional. Loves talking to me like anyone else, as if we're going bowling.

I learn a lot about his nephew Sam. He's ten. Doing okay in school but hates it. Won't stop playing video games.

Sam only calls his uncle Brian even though everyone else calls him Byron. Sam doesn't live with his mom anymore. That's Byron's sister. She got cancer in her bones and it hurts so much she doesn't want to be around people anymore. In fact, it's been that way for several years, and Byron worries about his nephew the way his mother should be able to worry about her son. Anyway, his point is, I'm a girlfriend as far as Sam is concerned. Uncle Byron needs to set a good example.

Cough. Cough, cough, cough.

He asks me what kind of pizza I like and orders it for all three of us. I discover another pattern to his speech: he's constantly mentioning that he's tired. He does it in a surprised way, as if every three minutes he is surprised by how tired he is.

After he parks, he runs around the car to open my door before I can lift the handle. Sam's shooting veterans when we walk into the darkness with him. He's intensely focused on this task. It doesn't stop him from asking questions, though.

"Who are you?"

Byron answers for me. "This is Haddie."

"How old are you?"

I answer the question as a reflex like a dumbass, "Nineteen."

Sam looks at his uncle. "Woah, Brian."

"She's legal, Sam. Don't worry about it. Play your game."

"You're thirty-one!"

"Play your game."

He reclines on the couch with me. He grins at me with those teeth but doesn't so much as lean on me with Sam present.

He says he should get some laundry done if the pizza is going to take this long. He dumps the basket into the machine. The washer is in a little room next to the kitchen. Pretty close to the television, too. That must be annoying.

He removes his own shirt and adds it to the load. He honestly fit an absurd amount of tattoos on his skinny frame. No colors, just that shade of green that men consider acceptable. Those typical vine tattoos on his side. I think that kind is supposed to hurt, especially there. That's a star with someone's name in it. I assume it's a woman, but it says *Nicholas*. I ask, it's his father. Doesn't actually know his name, but he always imagined him as a Nicholas. Is that the grim reaper? Ah, yes: *Only God will judge me*. I'm thinking he had to be fifteen to get that one too.

The calls don't stop. *Errybody's addicted to somethin*.

It isn't my job to understand B.O.B.'s interruptions, but I still ask. He starts with a laugh, telling me he has an untaxed income. I don't say I want more than that, but he tells me that people are calling him, begging for Oxy.

It's a Friday evening and according to Byron's phone, eleven different numbers have called asking for more. Most of them, more than three times. Byron won't go back; it was calming and euphoric, but he kept itching for half a tablet more. He would stop using for months and come back with the pills no weaker. He would crush them to make the effects come faster. It's too lucrative to turn others away. He makes six figures. Not taxed, either.

It started with a procedure he had with Sam's mother's doctor that has sustained for the last half-year. Byron's sister already has the prescription, and by simply embellishing her stage, he is able to obtain 80g for a regular dosage, and by simply continuing the prescription, an excellent base for his business is set. His new contacts coupled with whatever bone cancer friends his sister made at the care center, he has an excellent influx of product, and he hasn't yet come across a client who wants to stop.

I'm playing one of the shooting games with his nephew now, because I'm nervous that he can understand everything his uncle is saying. It's a distraction.

"What do you like to learn about in school?"

Sam looks at me.

"I guess I like science," he says. He looks back at the game.

Byron doesn't send Sam away, but waits for him to get tired and

retreat upstairs to bed. It's exhausting for me too; I didn't think the kid would ever stop.

This is where my job starts. I climb over him first and listen to his heart palpitations. I already feel strange about it.

His breathing is slow. He tells me I'm beautiful. And then it stops.