

*Excerpt from*

Badlands

Chapter 1

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*Badlands* - Chapter 1

“Freeze!” shouted the cop. The snake just laughed, and laughed, and laughed, squeezing the hostage tighter. “You think it’ssss going to be that easy? I’ll just give up now, iss that it?” The cop drew his gun, hands shaking. “Don’t make me use this. You’ll get a fair trial.” A sick, reptilian grin crept across the snake’s face. “*Fair?* You musst think I’m inssane!” Its tail, which had been inching towards the ground, suddenly swept across the floor. A spray of sand scattered into the air, and the cop barely covered his eyes in time to avoid being blinded. As the dust began to settle, the cop aimed and fired twice at the shimmering green scales disappearing around the corner. The shots went wide. He silently cursed his lot in life, but his paws hit the ground running.

As he rounded the corner, he could see the snake slithering down the deserted main thoroughfare with the golden idol strapped to its back. The midday sun squarely in his eyes, he aimed and fired three more times. One after the other, patches of dirt exploded upwards like tiny geysers, as the snake swerved back and forth in the serpentine manner for which the evasive maneuver was named. He let out a frustrated growl. Throwing his revolver in the dirt, he took off again, praying to the elements that the past year on desk duty hadn’t hurt him where it was about to count. He hurtled over carts and rocks, through sand and mud, steadily closing in on the snake who seemed always just out of reach. They flew through the districts and neighbourhoods one after the other, his chest heaving, his feet aching, down alleys and up rooftops, always gaining ground, ears ringing, spurring himself faster and faster, getting closer and closer. Muscles screaming in chorus, he followed past the railway yard to the outskirts of town, straining and pushing past the limits of his endurance, vaulting and ducking under barrels and iron bars, until finally, there they both were, no more than inches apart, and just as his paws reached out, grasping at his quarry, Will’s head began to swim.

“I’m going to throw up.”

*Mas Que Nada* blared over the car radio. Neither his mother or his father seemed to have heard him, so he said it again, only louder. "I AM GOING TO THROW UP." Both heads turned away from their conversation about the differences between a cougar and a mountain lion, now focused on him. "Can you hold it?" asked his father. "Blhrghmph," replied Will. "Oh Jesus," said his mother. His father rolled down the window closest to Will, who stuck his head out and let loose a stream of puke. "I just—" Darren Holm put a hand to his head and reluctantly shifted his eyes back to the road. "I washed the car not even a week ago. Really, buddy?" His reproachful expression was very much visible in the rearview mirror. "It was two weeks ago, dear. But I agree with your father." Cecilia Holm took the opportunity to peer back at Will through her half-spectacles, the *I told you so* expression visible long before she said "What have we said about reading in the car? You know you get motion sick." Will grunted and brushed the flecks of vomit off the corner of his sketchpad. He *did* know that, but he'd secretly hoped he'd be over it by now. He also made a mental note to redraw the panels on that half of the page. "Mom," he said, "There's nothing to do in here. What I am I supposed to do for three and a half hours in a boring car surrounded by boring desert, when all you two want to do is talk about indigenous American wildlife?" "Whatever you want," said his dad. "Just keep a lid on it. Don't you have... I don't know, an I-Device to watch TV on?" Will shrugged. "What am I, made of money?" "That's my boy," said Darren. "Frugal." With that, he turned his full attention to the road.

Darren Holm was by all accounts a practical man. This, along with luchador biceps and an eye for detail, made for a good detective. He'd spent the better part of his career fighting for the right to wear short-sleeved shirts in the workplace, and hadn't looked back a day since. Behind the wheel now, he was as free a man as any, dressed in a bright blue polo which put the family's rusty red station wagon to shame. Even off duty, he was a cop. It was who he was. The chin stubble, the probing expression, the perpetually tucked-in shirt—they practically spoke for themselves.

"Honey, you're welcome to join in," said Cecilia. "Your comics will be there tomorrow. This is a Holm family vacation."

"You just want to talk about animals," said Will.

Cecilia frowned. "You love animals."

"Yes, mom, I do. Let me rephrase that. You only want to talk about what you want to talk about. When was the last time you asked me what I felt like talking about?"

"Fine. What would you like to talk about, Will?"

His eye twitched imperceptibly. "Nothing."

"Alright then. Cougars it is."

"Mom, it is literally your job to talk about animals all day."

"Reptiles," said Cecilia. "The warm-blooded ones are a nice break, actually. Don't you think so, dear?"

"Absolutely," said Darren. "And hey, did I ever tell you about the time—"

"—Sergeant Adams had to shoot a cougar on duty?" replied Will and Cecilia in unison.

"Apparently I have, huh?"

"Once or twice, dear."

He chuckled. "Well, I thought it was interesting. You know, you'd be surprised how misrepresentative of police work movies and TV really are. You think it'd be 'hop-to,' action all the time, but it's mostly been a lot more paperwork than I'd have liked."

Will took a moment to think. "When was the last time you killed a guy?"

"*Will*," chided his mother.

"Yeah. Come on, son. We didn't raise you to be so excited in asking that kind of a question. And for the millionth time, I've never 'killed' anybody."

"That's not what *I* heard," said Will.

"From who?"

"Yes, Will, *who* told you that?"

Will went silent. He looked down at his sketchbook. "Okay, fine, nobody. But wouldn't that be *kind of cool*?"

Darren sighed. "Buddy, you've got to ease up on living in fantasy land there. Shooting somebody doesn't make you an action hero. You need years of therapy."

His parents shot each other a look. Will sighed. "Yeah, ok," he said, not entirely convinced.

The car sped down highway 68, the tires kicking up clouds of dust. Sunbaked flats and crags, sparse and scruffy vegetation, buttes and rocky outcroppings, flew right

on by. As Darren eventually slowed the car to pull off onto a nameless dirt road, Cecilia threw up her hands. “We’re almost here!” The radio faded into silence, then on came *Anyway The Wind Blows*. As they passed a particularly flat rock, Cecilia practically stuck her whole head out the window to get a closer look at the hoard of lizards bathing in the afternoon sun. “Gila Monsters,” she said, the excitement plain to see. “Neat,” said Will. He rolled his auburn eyes ever so slightly.

“It is neat. They’re the largest lizard native to both North America and the Mexican border, *and* they’re one of two known venomous species of lizard on the continent. Very much harmless to humans, though. They spend most of their time tanning, as we can see right here.”

Darren grinned. “Honey,” he said, “aren’t we out here to take a break from your work? I mean, I’m all for it, but, y’know...”

“Oh, I can’t help it. It’s--”

--A passion first and a job second,” replied Will and Darren in tandem.

Cecilia positively beamed.

The first thing anyone would notice about Cecilia Holm was her warm and forthcoming smile, always from ear to ear. No half measures in that department. Next, one might register her frizzy blonde hair, her aquiline nose, her ever-present hand gestures during moments of enthusiasm (of which her life offered many). One could very much picture her in a lab coat and rubber gloves, regardless of circumstance. This not at all in a clinical, detached sense, but entirely the opposite. A child who, on career day, had said “I wanna be a scientiss,” and who’d both meant it at the time and stuck with it since.

“Are we there yet?” asked Will.

“Not yet,” said Darren.

Five minutes went by. “What about now?”

“Not quite,” said Cecilia.

Several more minutes passed. “How about--”

--WILL.”

“What?”

“We’re here. But calm it down.”

The hatchback pulled off the dirt track and onto a flat stretch of sand, sheltered on three sides by large rocky outcroppings. His mother had once taught Will the difference between a Butte, a Crag, a Mesa, and a regular pile of rocks, but to him they all looked gnarly and orange-ish, so *what was the difference?* The Holm family unlatched their respective doors--Will taking care to use the *other* door, the *clean* one--and they all got out and stretched their legs. Looking around, the only thing about the area that stood out was the tiny triangular sign decorated with a tree, cactus, and waves, which marked the spot as an official Arizona State National Park campground. The "You Will be Fined for Camping Without a Permit" notice was prominently displayed. Other than that, the only indication Will could find of any other people ever having been here was the 30-foot ring of slightly-more-trodden-than-usual ground around a miniscule pile of logs. *Barren, really.* But that would be good for his story. He pulled a pencil from behind his ear and began sketching things out as his parents unpacked the car. "Will," said Darren, "would you mind helping your mother and I with the setup here? Plenty of time for drawing comics after that." Will knew that no, there wouldn't be, because the sun was already waning and it would be dark out soon. He reluctantly stowed his sketchbook in his bag and helped set up their campsite.

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The crackling fire kept the cool air at bay, and more importantly, ensured the Holms were well-fed on pre-packaged burgers and hot dogs. Overhead, a wash of eager stars began to shine.

"This is fun, isn't it?" Darren wiped some mustard off his face.

"Sure," said Will.

"Roughin' it, taking some time off from the hustle and bustle of Tucson proper? Finally being able to commune with nature for a little bit?"

"Exactly," said Cecilia. "When was the last time relaxation's done anyone any harm?"

Will chewed on the end of his hotdog. "It's nice to see you guys for a change."

Another glance between the two of them.

"Listen, Will... You know we'd both *like* to be home a little more often than we are, but--"

"--Herpetology is busy work, and your father pulls overtime at the precinct as-is."

“But now that we’re all here, why don’t you tell us. What’s new with you? What’s the news in Willsville these days?”

“Dad, I’m not a town.” Will flicked his eyes downwards and back up again. “But... I’ve been working on this book, and I think I might be able to finish it soon. I don’t know. I’m trying to find an ending. I’m not sure what to do. It’s kind of frustrating, actually.”

“Maybe getting out of the house might clear your head, find you some solutions. You know, you could always ask your friends. I’m sure they’d have something for you.”

“Yeah,” said Will. “Those.”

“You could always ask at school. I’m sure the library has *something* you could use.”

“Mom, we’ve got plenty of interesting books at home. And the kids at school are dicks. Last week that Garcia guy tried to light my hair on fire.”

“Well, that’s awful! Didn’t you say something to someone?”

“What is the principal even *for* if they’re not going to intervene when that kind of thing--”

--It’s not--” Will sighed. “I mostly just use the time to draw. What good is snitching going to do me? He didn’t actually do it. I’d rather be alone anyways. It’s not a big deal.”

Yet another knowing glance.

“I hate it when you guys do that.”

“Okay, so... listen, bud. We’ve been talking--”

--Yes, we have, and we’re worried about you. Your last report card--”

--It wasn’t great. In fact, it was very much not great.”

“Which is fine, but the one before that--”

--Also not great. And look, we’re sorry that we can’t always be there to support you, but--”

--Honey, we can’t just do *nothing* here. We care about you. You’re our son.”

“Which is why, well--”

--Your father and I have been talking, and we feel that the best thing for you going forward is...”

“Boarding school.”

Will’s eyes went wide.

Darren continued. “We think maybe some more structure might be a good thing for you.”

“It could refocus you on your schoolwork. You’ve only got two more years, and you’ll need those good grades to get into a good university. Otherwise--”

“It’ll get you out of the house. You’ll be in a new environment. Maybe you meet some people--friends.”

“Absolutely. We think the change will do you good.”

“So... So we’ve enrolled you for next year. Eastwood Prep, downtown. It’s going to cost us some money, but we’ve already set it away, and...”

Will clenched his fists. “Why.” he said. “Why would you not ask me. Why would you not ask me?”

“We’re your parents,” said Darren. “We thought long and hard about this and it’s what we think is best.”

“Where’s my fucking say?”

“William!”

“No, no. Where the *fuck* was ‘How’s it going in Willsville’ for however long you spent making this decision without me?”

“Son. Watch it.”

“You watch it. This is my life, and you just get to go ‘here’s where it’s going’ without so much as asking me? You know what? Fuck that. Fuck you. Fuck both of you.”

Darren stood up, filling out his powerful frame.

“Will, you watch that goddamned language around your mother.”

“Where is this coming from?” asked Cecilia. “I do not deserve to be spoken to like this.”

“Yes, you fucking do. The both of you.”

For a moment, the evening air was entirely still.

“Will. Get in the tent. Now.” His father was seething, his mother starting to lose her temper.

“*Now*, Will. Your mother and I are going to talk.”

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Will sat inside the tent, waiting until his parents’ voices fell to a murmur. He waited some more, until at last he heard a *click* and *thunk* followed by another. They’d moved the discussion to the hatchback.

*Fine*, he thought. *Unbelievable. I'm not a human being? I don't have opinions? You know what? No, fine. Fine. If they think I'll be better off elsewhere, that's where I'm going. I'm out of here.* He gathered his pencils, his pad of sketch paper, his three unread issues of *Guardians of the Galaxy*, his toiletries bag, a flashlight, an extra pair of socks, and the eco-conscious stainless steel water bottle his aunt Frieda had given him for Christmas. He sloshed it around. Half-full. Into the backpack they all went, and without so much as another glance around, Will quietly unzipped the tent flap and began tiptoeing towards the fire. There was a single hotdog left from dinner, which he wrapped in a napkin and shoved inside his sweatshirt pocket. Just before turning away, he paused to look into the car. His father gestured as he spoke, while his mother listened long enough to reply in an equally heated manner. With that, Will spun back around. He took a deep breath, then another, and began to quietly make his way farther and farther away from their camp. The setting sun cast an ethereal glow over the rocks and sand as Will made off into the badlands.

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The beam of the flashlight cut through the restless night. It seemed to Will that though he was alone, something or somethings were watching him. He'd been wandering for at least an hour. Every so often he'd hear rustling off somewhere behind him. Shadows flitted from view at the edges of his vision. *Just for the night*, he'd thought, and already it was starting to seem like a bad idea. *Just to scare them. It'd serve them right.* It would, and that thought had kept him going until now. Now, when the cacti and boulders and dunes might all conceal something about to jump out and prey on him. Now, when he was well and truly lost. Lost and shivering. He checked his phone; it was after midnight, and he'd long since lost sight of his family's camp. Kicking himself for not having brought a jacket, he cast the beam of the flashlight around once more. Off some ways, he saw two squat boulders leaning against one another. As he made his way towards the formation--a landmark, maybe--he saw instead that the two boulders receded back into the dirt. A cave. Out of time and most definitely options, Will crept over and poked his head in.

Though not of a height which let him fully stand up, the interior, as revealed by the probing beam of the flashlight, was empty. The floor was littered with dried vegetation and dead insects, but other than that, Will appeared to be alone. He pulled his hoodie up over his shoulders and shuffled on his knees to the back end of the cave. He was surprised to find that it kept most of the wind out. With that, he slung his backpack onto the floor to use as a pillow. Still shaking, but much less so than before, Will laid down his head and settled into a fitful sleep.

He awoke to the blinding yellow rays of the dawn tickling his eyelids and his feet. In this light, things were already beginning to look better. He yawned, watching the languid motes of dust catch the sunlight. Suddenly hungry, he took the hotdog out of his pocket and took a bite. *Not bad*, he thought. The sun continued to tickle his feet, and then his ankle. Then it began to pinch a little. *Wait*, he thought, fully coming-to. He yanked his foot away, too late. His ankle began to tingle and then burn. The burning sensation began to spread through his whole body. He could feel it throbbing behind his eyes, and everything started to go blurry. Will tried to stand, to steady himself against the wall of the cave. It was fine. Now, everything was fine.

Will breathed in, and out. In, and out. In, and suddenly bile was rushing up his throat. He put his hands over his mouth and stumbled towards the cave entrance, barely keeping it down. Three steps and a *crack* echoed around the cave as his head hit the stone. His vision undulated and shifted, his eyes unable to focus, his ears filled with his own pulsing heartbeat. The tan, multi-legged insectoid skittered into view as darkness came in waves, threatening to drown him. There was pain, and then warmth, and pain again. As consciousness finally fled, Will could just make out two black, beady eyes staring back at him.

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“Psst!”

“Hey!”

“Hey, buddy. This is gonna look bad on both of us.”

Will awoke to a hollow thud and a sharp pain in his ribs. “Ow,” said the possum standing next to him, cradling his elbow. “What I wouldn’t have given for a shell like that during physical training. By the way, you’re welcome.” The beady-eyed creature was covered with ruddy, matted fur, and was dressed in a navy blue button-up and policeman’s cap. Its pink tail poked comically out the backside. Will couldn’t help but stare. “Oh. Jack Irving,” whispered the possum, gesturing to himself. “Now, hey, I don’t care what you spent all of last night doing, but this is *not* the time to be dozing off.” He gestured forwards with his head. Will turned and gulped. The cliffside couldn’t have been more than ten feet in front of him. He looked out over the edge of the Great Mesa, as it gave way to shimmering desert stretching outward for miles and miles. Only partially recovered from the shock, he began to notice drops of water sparkling in the midday sun, evaporating before they hit the ground. A glance upward revealed the source: A massive thundercloud... with a face. And a mustache? It wore a stern expression, eyes crackling with electricity, only just outshining the gleaming badge somehow pinned to its chest. *Did it have a chest?* As best Will could tell, the badge read ‘Chef.’ The cloud spoke in a booming voice to the crowd of blue-clad people Will now saw all around him, showering the front rows with condensation as it did so. Except these cadets, they weren’t people. Will swivelled his head around. Glancing from side to side, he saw lizards, snakes, rats, ocelots, prairie dogs, peccary, sheep, jackrabbits, roadrunners, rotund little cacti, person-shaped boulder piles, hummingbirds, tumbleweeds and a whole host of others, all arranged in uniform rows, eyes facing forwards, backs straight as could be. Some of them looked to be having an easier time of it than others. Their attention was fixed on the gargantuan apparition, currently furrowing the cloud equivalent of bushy eyebrows. *Oh, ‘Chief,’* thought will. This must be the chief.

“Don’t tell me you blew off last night,” said Irving. “Oh,” said Will. “I don’t think so.” He looked past his snout, down at his claws, and--*wait*. “Well, whatever you did or ‘didn’t do,” (Irving winked as he said this), “we should pay attention here. St. Rains isn’t famous for his patience.” Will scratched his armoured head. “St... Rains?” Irving cocked his head to the side. “Thaddeus St. Rains? Local Legend? Hero cop? The Big Cheese?” He gestured upwards. Will’s blank expression said quite enough. “I mean,” said Irving, “some of us literally live under rocks, but you must have *really* been living under a rock.”

Will laughed nervously. “But seriously,” said Irving. “Shut up and look up. No offense. It’s both our asses.” With that, Irving trained his gaze squarely on the giant cloud. Will followed suit.

They both tuned into what seemed to be some kind of graduation or commencement speech. “...I sincerely hope,” said the giant mustachioed thundercloud, “that you will find it in yourselves to produce some goddamned results.” As he finished speaking, the ground shook, and the front row of cadets turned their heads to avoid the spatter of raindrops. Will caught one on his nose. “Now, you’re a promising bunch,” said the chief, “and that’s a promise you’re making to yourselves, to me--hell, to your mothers, your grandmas, to the good citizens of Salt Flats, and to the equally-as-good citizens of the Badlands at large. That promise is simple: ‘I will protect those who cannot protect themselves, and I *will* serve the greater good.’”

“But with that said, well, ‘promising’ isn’t good enough. Not even close. Promising,” continued the Chief, “describes the first two years of my marriage. And now what? The *results* are an empty home, an unfulfilled mortgage, and monthly alimony payments on two beautiful cirrus children with five years until they graduate high school. Now, my succubus sandstorm of an ex-wife aside, I am here today to impress upon you a singular point. Shit is gone all wrong across the Dust Bowl and the New New Mexico desert, and as of today, it’s your job to get to shovelling with a smile. Now, I see the looks on some of your faces. You’re thinking ‘I did great in training. I’m not shovelling anything.’” He scanned the crowd. “WRONG!” The ground shook. “As of this moment, you are better than nobody and equal to everybody. Look around, new recruits. This is your family now. You are all in this together, and take it from me: THIS IS NOT GOING TO BE A SKIP ALONG WITH THE F\*CKING BREEZE.” A ferocious gust of wind blew the hats off of most of the nearby cadets; Will barely managed to hold onto his. “Things will get hairy. Some of you may get wounded. Some of you may die. And as for the rest of you, there’s ample paperwork out there for the yellow-bellies.” Some of the snakes and lizards hung their heads. “No offense if that is the natural colouration of your undercarriage. But know this, recruits. I believe in you. And beyond that, a hell of a lot regular folk out there need you to be the best you can damn well be. You are now officers of the law, and it is TIME to UPHOLD some JUSTICE!”

Cheers erupted from the crowd. Those cadets still in possession of their hats threw them up in the air. Shoulders were clasped, hugs came by the dozen, and Will even saw a few tears on the cheeks of some of the recruits, though they might've just been raindrops. Being honest, he felt a little emotional himself. Inspired, even. "Dismissed," said the Chief.

"Except you." Will looked around. Everyone else was already clearing out, but the Chief now towered over him. "Me?" "Yes, damn it. Madillo, is it? Step into my office." Before Will's eyes, the Chief shrunk himself down to the size of a floating bush. He led Will behind a rocky outcropping over to the easternmost edge of the Mesa, where a rectangular stone sat, planted on the cliffside. His desk, Will supposed. "Son," said the Chief, "I'll level with you. Your test scores are exemplary. Your physical training scores, well, they're pretty damn good for an armadillo. How do I put this? You are a bright, rising star amidst a warehouse full of 40 watts." The Chief looked around.

"What about that inspirational speech?" Asked Will.

"I give that speech every year," said the Chief.

"Word for word?"

"Pretty much."

"But--"

"Things are always messed up. Not that I'm thankful, but it makes it easy on the rewrites."

Will narrowed his eyes. "Even the bit about your ex-wife?"

"Obviously. Sometimes two people grow apart, and it's healthier for everyone to go their separate ways. Bygones are bygones, alright? We get lunch every other week."

"That's good," said Will.

"Mm," said the Chief, looking around. "Now, where is that bast--NEEDLEMEYER!"

A dejected cactus peeled itself off a nearby rock formation and hopped over to where Will was standing. As it did so, its aviator shades fell down past its non-existent nose, and before it pushed them back up, Will caught two half-open, bloodshot eyes sizing him up. "Hola," said the cactus, extending a barbed limb. Will hesitated, but

didn't want to be rude. He shook its hand. "Ow," said Will. The cactus laughed--a 'twenty-year smoker' sort of laugh. "Y'know, you didn't have to shake," it said. "That's just a social convention I like to take advantage of for fun." *Oh great*, thought Will. *A dick*. "Sid Needlemeyer," said the cactus, extending his arm again. This time, Will declined to meet it. "Well, Will Madillo, you've just learned the first two rules of being a detective. One, never trust an alcoholic. They'll burn you at a moment's notice, sometimes just for personal amusement." He swayed a little. "Two: You get to make mistakes once in this line of work, and that's if you're lucky. Any more than that and you're just making it easy on the criminals and the scum." He tapped his head. "You've always got to be *learning*, that's the key. I hope you're quick on your feet."

The Chief glowered at Sid. "Damn it Needlemeyer, quit razzing the rookie! This job is important, and I need him naïve and optimistic for the first few weeks at least." Will's eyebrows shot up. "Wait. Excuse--" "--Now, both of you, listen up." The Chief went right into it. "First things first, and I'll skip the song and dance. You're partners. Loving each other is *not* a requirement, but trusting each other is the bottom line. Anything less and you *will* incur the wrath of God. As far as you know, that's my wrath. Feel free to hug." Will took a step back. "Now, here's the skinny." The Chief produced a thick manila dossier from a drawer-shaped hole in the desk and slapped it on top. "Something very, very bad has been circulating the Badlands. Some of my best men, women, plants, animate topographical features, et cetera, have failed to make any measurable headway on this case. So I'm trying something different. Now... now it's your problem." Sid belched loudly. Will gulped.