Squirrels generally do not make great models. They move a lot. They’re nervous little balls of anxiety, always hyper-aware and paranoid. But, as I was sitting against the tree by the creek, my sketchpad laid against my knees, wondering what I should sketch, a squirrel sauntered up lazily and threw himself down on the large, flat rock at the creek’s edge. He looked like he had fallen in the creek and had struggled to extricate himself. He was tuckered out. He just wanted to sun himself. His head had lolled to the side when he first laid down, and he eyed me for a moment. After a few moments, he decided that I was not going to bother him, so he went to sleep. I started to sketch.

Trees were usually my favorite subject because they’re not known for moving around much, are they? Other plants, flowers, landscapes, they were pretty good for sketching for the same reason. Sometimes, I’d get lucky, and one of the kids at the creek would sit still long enough that I could sketch them quickly. But those sketches were never that great because the kids never stayed still long enough for a real sketch to be done. Except for the kid with the sandy blonde hair and mossy green eyes and the beginnings of freckles along his nose. Michael Steedman.

That was his name.

I had asked Kevin when I ran into him at the creek once.

Kevin knew everyone and everyone knew Kevin, though he didn’t really have many friends. He wanted to be my friend, but...but, that just wasn’t a great idea. If Kevin was going to make one friend, it was best if it wasn’t me. Too much baggage there. No reason to put another target on Kevin’s back. He got heckled for his stutter and being scrawny enough. He didn’t need his friendship with a bad kid to be another reason that he got bullied. Of course, no one bullied Kevin much anymore. And I doubted that his most persistent bully, Carson, was going to bother him much anymore, either. At least not as frequently. Carson had probably learned his lesson when I had hit him.

I felt my eyes start to water at the memory.

I clenched my hand, flexing my fingers as I looked down at the bruises that littered my knuckles.

I hated my hands.

I hated violence.

I hated that my hands could be used for both the kindest and cruelest of touches.

I hated that people were capable of such cruelty.

I hated being...alone.

Clearing my throat, I moved my shaking hand back to the sketchpad, took a deep breath, steadied my hand, and continued sketching the squirrel. I forced myself to smile over at the squirrel, thankful for such an unexpected and wonderful subject. Living things usually don’t give me the opportunity to sketch them. Sure, it was just a squirrel...no, not just a squirrel...it was a living creature that had honored me with its fearless presence. This squirrel had sensed that I was harmless. It knew that I would do nothing to harm it as long as it didn’t harm me. For that, I was incredibly grateful. I felt exalted. That made me blush and feel embarrassed at my unearned pride.
I didn’t feel so alone with the squirrel sleeping on the warm rock, sunning itself dry. Something had chosen to spend time with me, even if it was at a short distance. He didn’t mind me, and I didn’t mind him. We were able to sit there in silence together, both of us doing what was second nature to us. And we allowed each other to do that without interference or judgment.

When Michael Steedman approached, I heard and sensed him rather than saw him. I knew, after a week of being stalked by him, that Michael would eventually approach me. For a solid week, every time I looked up, there he was, watching me, examining me, trying to figure me out. At the creek. In the store. Walking along the streets. Sitting by my favorite tree along the wooded path where I loved to sketch and watch animals. He always seemed to find me...and his eyes did a number on me each time. I didn’t mind so much. I did mind that he never said anything. Then again, he had witnessed me hitting Carson, so he was probably keeping a safe distance.

I couldn’t blame him.

For the first few days, anyway.

After a week, it was making me sad to see him watching me yet saying nothing. Of course, I didn’t really want him to say anything. Or did I? He was a popular kid at school. He didn’t need me bringing down his social stock. Of course, a kid like Michael Steedman probably wouldn’t get bullied much, if at all, if he was friends with me. He was one of those kids who could do whatever he wanted, and people still thought the sun shined out of his ass. I usually hated people like that. But not Michael Steedman. He always said “hello” to Kevin in the hallways and smiled at him, even though they weren’t friends. He never picked on other kids or was cruel. He never jumped out of my way like other kids did. Of course, he didn’t seem too aware that I existed, either. Not until he saw me sketching by the creek. He was blissfully unaware of most things that went on around him, consumed by his own life.

And his life probably wasn’t all that fantastic.

Just average.

When Michael Steedman approached me at the edge of the creek, as I sat there sketching the squirrel, he stopped before he got too close. I continued to sketch for a moment, waiting for him to say something. To give him the option of whether or not he wanted to pursue...whatever it was he was pursuing. After a few moments, it became apparent that even today, with no other kids around, he was doubting whether or not he should talk to me. Whether or not he should be afraid of me. So...I went against my nature. I gave a kid a break.

I looked up at him but didn’t stop sketching.

He looked...shocked?

“You still stalking me?” I asked before turning my attention back to my squirrel sketch. “I thought you’d have given up by now.”

I somehow kept myself from smiling as he walked in a wide arc around me, afraid to get too close. Afraid to enter my atmosphere, as though the gravity of who I was would pull him in and never let him leave.

“What are you always drawing?” He asked.
Then he sat down a few feet away in front of me, his back to the rock and the squirrel, not noticing it at all. Blissfully unaware. The squirrel hadn’t spooked at Michael Steedman’s approach. That was... *interesting*.

“*Usually trees,*” I answered, looking back up at him. His eyes were so green. Mossy. Kind. “*Sometimes other kids. Birds. That squirrel there.*”

I flicked my head in the direction of the squirrel, my bangs landing in my eyes. As Michael Steedman turned his head slowly to look at the squirrel, I reached up and pushed my dark hair out of my eyes again. Suddenly, Michael Steedman’s eyes grew wide, and he looked devastated.

“*Is he dead?*”

I don’t know how to explain what happened to me then. But my heart felt like it swelled until it was pushing against my ribcage. My chest felt full. It was hard to breathe for a moment. Did he really care if this squirrel was dead? God, I hoped that he did. I took pity on Michael Steedman and swallowed hard, then squealed loudly, even though I knew I’d lose my sketch subject. The squirrel popped up on his hindquarters, its head whipping back and forth frantically. Its eyes went to both of the boys sitting by it, then it dashed off quickly in a blur of fur.

“*He was just sunning himself,*” I said. Michael Steedman gave a relieved chuckle. There went my heart again.

“What have you got there?” I asked, nodding at the bag he had set down beside himself.

“I, uh, brought us some sodas and chips.” He was blushing. “*If you want some anyway.*”

Michael Steedman had ventured out to the creek to find me. He assumed that he would bring snacks and he would talk to me, and we’d become best friends. He would open up to this strange, violent, bad kid who sketched things, and we would suddenly be tied at the hip. He was right.

“I don’t eat,” I said. He was frowning at me.

“Or drink,” I added. “*I consume the blood of virgins and smoke the reefer, and I joined a gang right before school last year. Sometimes you can see me swimming at the creek at night, worshipping Satan.*”

Okay. Maybe that made me an asshole. But I knew that Michael Steedman had heard the rumors about me. I knew that other kids had told him that I was a *bad kid* who did horrible things. It didn’t matter that none of it was true. I wanted to test his mettle.

“*Is any of that true?*” He asked after staring at me for several breathless moments.

I stared back at him, wondering if this kid, Michael Steedman, believed these things when he had heard them from others. Or had he thought it was all bullshit until he heard me say them? Would he be my friend either way? Internally, I knew it didn’t matter if he’d be my friend if they were true—because they weren’t. But I would rather be alone than have a friend who would judge me. However, I realized that Michael Steedman had come to the creek with sodas and chips, determined to be my friend no matter what. So...I was going to be nice.
“I like swimming at night.” I nodded. “But I don’t believe in Satan. And it’s kind of hard to find a virgin nowadays.”

“Why does everyone say those things about you?” He laughed nervously. It was adorable. Michael Steedman was nervous and shy. I didn’t really have that effect on a lot of people. Mostly they were scared of me—either because they’d heard stories or just assumed things about me. Michael Steedman, though, he seemed self-conscious.

“Carson, the guy you saw me with the other day?”

He nodded, not bothering to lie and say that he hadn’t been spying on me a week prior. I liked that he didn’t try to deny it.

“That’s not the first time I’ve had to punch him. After the first time, he started making up stories about me. He didn’t realize that it made no difference to me.”


I kept saying his name in my head. Michael Steedman was an All-American boy. Blonde, built, gorgeous. Easy smile. Affable. Kind. An “aw-shucks” type of guy. The type of guy you’d pay a compliment to and he’d reach up and rub the back of his neck while looking down at his feet while he blushed and smiled. He was absolutely adorable, and my stomach felt like butterflies. I knew exactly what that meant. And it scared the shit out of me.

“I don’t like hurting people. No matter what you might have heard.” I was mentally pleading with him. Don’t. Judge. Me.

Michael Steedman’s eyes flicked down to my hands. They were covered in bruises, but I did nothing to hide that fact.

“I believe you.” It was an exhalation.

I found myself staring at this All-American Boy, the body of a god, looks that most guys would kill for... and I believed that he believed me. After several moments, I realized that staring much longer would probably scare him away, and I didn’t want that. I stretched my legs out and let my sketchpad lay upon them as I smiled at Michael Steedman.

“So, what kinds of chips and soda did you bring?”

“I, uh, didn’t know what you’d like, so I just got Cokes and a couple of bags of Cheetos.” He replied nervously, removing the items from the bag.

I hated Cokes and Cheetos. But I was touched by the thought.

“Perfect.” It was a harmless lie. “But I don’t have any money.”

“It’s cool.” He feigned insouciance. “I had some allowance saved up.”

I doubted he had to save up allowance. His parents probably gave him money anytime he wanted or needed it. I didn’t hold that against him. That was nice. But, I thought about that for a moment. One should never go into a relationship without being on an even keel. I didn’t want to owe Michael Steedman anything, even if he probably wouldn’t hold that over my head. I flipped through my sketchpad, found the sketch I was looking for, ripped it out, and held it out to him.

“We’re even.”
Michael Steedman took the sketch from me gently, his eyes staying on mine as he pulled the sketch close to himself. His mossy green eyes stayed on mine, his affable and gentle and kind nature shining through, until the sketch was right under his face. He looked down at the sketch, and his eyes immediately widened and lit up, the smallest, self-conscious smile appearing on his lips.

“Wow.” He said simply as he looked down at the sketch I had done of him the first time I had laid eyes on him, sitting across the creek from me a week prior.

“It’s not my best,” I admitted as I moved to grab the Coke and Cheetos that he had bought for me. “But it’s not my worst.”

“It’s...amazing.” Michael Steedman looked up at me, his smile no longer self-conscious.

“Thank you.” I twisted the cap off of my Coke. “I like your hair. You should let it grow out even more.”

Michael Steedman’s hair begged to have fingers run through it. It was like the sun as it just started to peek over the horizon at dawn. Warm and golden and beautiful.

“So...what’s your name?” He asked.

I couldn’t help myself. My eyebrow rose as I sized him up. Did he think that I’d believe that he hadn’t heard about me?

“Okay.” He was blushing, aware that that had been a poor attempt at subterfuge.

“And you’re Michael Steedman.”

Saying the name out loud made my stomach flip-flop.

“Mike.” He interjected, still blushing. “I go by ‘Mike’ to everyone but my mom.”

“What does your mom call you, Mike?” I smiled, curious to know what nickname he’d been saddled with as I brought my soda to my lips.

“Sugar Man, mostly.” He blushed so deeply that I wanted to pull him into me and laugh and hug him and make him feel less self-conscious.

Mostly, I wanted to thank him for being so unabashedly honest. Instead, I just grinned.

“You look like a ‘baby boy’ or ‘junior’ to me, personally,” I said, honestly having thought that one of those would have been the nickname. “Sugar Man doesn’t really fit you.”

That was the truth. He didn’t look like a “Sugar Man.” He was too...Michael Steedman for such a “squee” name.

He laughed gently, the blush slowly fading from his face.

“But, there’re worse things than ‘Sugar Man,’ I guess.” I shrugged.

“Do you want to be my friend?” Mike spat suddenly, then blushed again, his eyes dropping to look at his lap.

I held my breath, the weight of this moment in my chest. The absolute joy at having Mike Steedman find me by the creek, doing something so thoughtful as bringing me food and drink. Talking to me like I was a normal person. Not being scared of me. Not treating me like a bad kid. Wanting to be my friend.

“All right.” I nodded.
“Good.” He smiled and reached for his Cheetos excitedly.
I breathed out, trying to not show how excited I was that Mike had sought me out and asked to be my friend. And I was so grateful. I would drink Coke and eat Cheetos and sit there and talk to Mike about anything he wanted to talk about. I wasn’t alone anymore. Silently, I thanked God for two things as Mike began talking ninety-to-nothing. The squirrel. And Michael Steedman.