



FAULT

A LAKE CONRAD NOVEL

EMILY NORTH

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To Sue, an “incurable romantic,” for her kind words.

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About Emily North

” *‘I am half sick of shadows,’ said The Lady of Shalott*”

Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *The Lady of Shalott*, Part II

1

MORGAN

TEN YEARS AGO

“You’re really leaning into that aesthetic, aren’t you?”

Morgan jumped at the voice, her eyes leaping off the pages of her book and up at the shadowy figure standing over her. She lifted her hand to block out the late June sunshine in an attempt to better see who had so obnoxiously interrupted her.

A tall, male figure loomed over where she lay back on a patio lounge chair on the Main House’s broad lawn. The sun was so bright behind him that she couldn’t see his face, but his voice was dripping with an odd mixture of disdain and humor.

“What do you mean?” she asked defensively, dropping her book on her bare stomach and straightening her posture.

“You don’t think this whole thing is a little heavy handed? The white bikini, the red nails, the heart glasses? That book? You know what Lolita is actually about, right?”

“Of course I know what it’s about,” she bit out dryly, her ire officially piqued. Who the hell was this clown to not only

lecture her about literature but fashion?

“All right, let’s hear it.”

She opened and closed her mouth a couple times like some sort of foolish fish, her analytical mind stalling at the weirdness of this situation. Finally, annoyance usurped her need to prove herself to this mystery guy.

“I don’t owe you a literary analysis, you creeper. Who are you anyway?”

“I’m Cole,” he answered, crouching down closer to her and releasing himself from the sun so she could finally see his face.

Morgan sucked in a deep breath at the sight of him. It’s that guy from school, she thought hurriedly, her eyes widening and a surge of exhilaration pumping through her body.

Her mother had dragged her back to her family’s massive homestead—unoriginally called the Main House—in the small town of Lake Conrad, California, a month ago, and she’d only spent two weeks in the tenth grade at Lake Conrad High School before the school year ended. She hadn’t really been interested in meeting anyone new. Who knew how long it would be before her mother announced they were moving once again?

At first, she hadn’t minded attaching herself to her cousin, Ian, much to his annoyance, but even that got boring after a while. All he wanted to do was exercise and play sports. Blah.

But one of the few people she had noticed at school was him. He was tall with a rangy build—maybe a little too skinny

—with longish light brown hair. Not the best-looking guy she'd ever seen, but something about him drew her in. You didn't have to be good looking to be beautiful, and he was beautiful.

She would always catch him out of the corner of her eye, prowling down the hallway, leaning dangerously back in a library chair while he read a book, or sitting outside on the bleachers and listening to headphones while he wrote something in a little notebook.

She didn't know anything about him. His grade, his name, or what his voice sounded like. Well, she supposed she knew most of that now. Elation filled her as she eyed him curiously. Who would have thought he'd just show up here at her family's house? It was a shame he was so judgy about literature and fashion, though.

"I've seen you," she said bluntly with narrowed eyes. "At school."

"I've seen you, too ... seeing me," he finished cryptically with a twinkle in his golden-green eyes. Morgan felt like the breath was getting sucked out of her.

"What grade are you in?" she asked.

"I'll be a senior next year."

Morgan nodded, filing away the information. "What are you doing at my house?"

"Working," he responded shortly, motioning to the riding lawn mower parked about fifty yards behind him. She'd

vaguely heard it in the background, but she'd been so focused on her book that she hadn't paid it much attention.

"Mmm," Morgan hummed, considering him. He was wearing a white sleeveless T-shirt and jeans, his tanned skin glistening with sweat and his overly long hair curling in front of his face. "I've never seen you around here before."

"My grandmother just got me the job," he responded.

"Who's your grandmother?" she pressed, taking her sunglasses off to get a better look at him.

He blew out a disbelieving breath, shaking his head. "You sure do ask a lot of questions. My grandmother is Lucy ... the housekeeper."

Morgan sat up with a start. Lucy was her grandmother. Well, not really, but she liked to pretend she was. Over the years, Morgan's mother had relocated them to and from the Main House, and Lucy had always been here with a hug and a cookie. Morgan would lay down her life for that woman.

Whenever Lucy had talked about her grandson, though, she'd always pictured a toddler or a ten-year-old. Not this gorgeous piece of man art in front of her now.

Morgan dropped Lolita to the side and considered him, nibbling on the end of her sunglasses. "Lucy told me about you," she said. "But I thought you'd be shorter."

Cole chuckled, turning his head slightly before giving her a final unreadable look and rising to his feet.

"Are you leaving?" she asked urgently.

“I better get back to work,” he called out as he walked away. “Next time I see you, I want you to tell me what that book is about. Think about it, Morgan.”

Another surge of irritation overwhelmed her as she swung her legs over the side of the chair. “I didn’t tell you my name, you weirdo, and I know what the book is about!” she called angrily to his departing back. “Despite my outfit choice!”

“We’ll see about that,” he said, turning his head toward her with a mocking smile.

“You know, I think you might be an asshole, Cole!” Morgan yelled. He’d already jumped on his lawn mower, though, revving it to life.

She wasn’t sure if he heard her, but she would definitely tell him the next time she saw him.



For much of the world, January might be considered the perfect time for solitude, conservation, and sobriety. In a mountain town like Lake Conrad, California, however, if there was snow on the ground, there was a party to be had.

Lake Conrad’s local bar, The Blue Sky, was packed to the gills with skiers and snowboarders in layers of baggy ski clothes, beanies, and awestruck, exuberant smiles. The hum of happy conversation floated around the warm humidity of the packed space, an occasional chant or loud yell rising above the fray.

Morgan Conrad couldn't help but think that all this mountain bar fun was much more enjoyable for the patrons than the waitstaff. She sighed deeply, her face resting in her hands, propped up by her elbows on top of the sticky bartop, as she looked wistfully at a group of four skiers taking a shotski of Jäger.

In perfect unison, they all tilted the ski back and poured the dark liquid down their throats, letting out loud whoops as they slammed the ski back down on the bar, causing the glasses to tumble and fall to the side.

Morgan let out another deep sigh as they all but howled at the ceiling in celebration of life, skis, and Jäger.

“Morgan, you've got table ten, right?” Ana, a fellow waitress, interrupted her envious thoughts as she slid behind the bar and looked up at her expectantly.

“Yep,” Morgan replied confidently, reluctantly moving her gaze from the shotski and toward the bartender, Fitzzy, as he dodged and danced behind the bar. “Just waiting for Fitzzy to pour these beers for table twelve.”

“Okay,” Ana responded doubtfully, reaching behind the bar to grab a couple of pint glasses. “They've just been sitting there a while. They're starting to look a little antsy.”

“I got 'em, I got 'em,” Morgan said under her breath as Ana moved to stand next to Fitzzy by the beer taps, and he mercifully started filling the three glasses with Black Butte Porter that she'd ordered who knew how long ago.

“It’s about time,” Morgan bit out as he walked over and placed the beers on the small tray she’d set out on the bar.

“Bite me, Morgan,” Fitzzy growled. “I’m slammed back here. It would make my life a hell of a lot easier if you could actually pour your own drinks like the rest of the waitstaff.”

“Talk to your boss about that,” Morgan yelled over her shoulder as she started weaving through the crowd on her way to table twelve.

When the owner of The Blue Sky, Craig, had hired Morgan as a waitress a couple months ago, it had been under the stipulation that Morgan was not allowed to go behind the bar and “interact with the alcohol,” as Craig put it in his thick Irish accent. She was only to cart it from the bar to the table, and nothing more. She hadn’t thought it was that big of a deal at the time, but once she’d gotten into the weeds, she’d realized it was a complete pain in the ass.

She’d been coming to The Blue Sky for years as a paying customer, and she didn’t exactly have the best track record as far as good behavior went. So, she could understand Craig’s resistance to hiring her. But she’d begged, pleaded, and even pulled the old my-last-name-is-Conrad card to get this job—the latter of which was something she would never admit for as long as she walked this tortured earth.

And now here she was, about two months into her job at the small mountain town bar, and while she wasn’t exactly failing, she definitely wasn’t succeeding.

Reaching table twelve, Morgan roughly set the three glasses down on the small table, beer soaking her hand as it sloshed over the side of the glasses.

“Here,” she said distractedly, looking over her shoulder at the increasingly angry faces sitting at table ten. “I’ll be back later.”

She barely glanced at table twelve—she wouldn’t even be able to pick them out of a lineup—as she left them behind and walked the couple feet over to table ten.

“What can I get you?” she asked absently, looking down and feeling around her apron pocket for her pen and pad of paper.

God, would it kill Craig to get one of those iPad ordering system thingies?

Finally finding her paper and pen, Morgan pulled them out and stood in position waiting for her customers to tell her what they wanted.

Why aren’t they talking?

Her head shot up, looking up at their blank faces expectantly. There were two men and a woman who all looked to be in their late twenties like her. She didn’t know any of them, so they couldn’t be from Lake Conrad. They were decked out in expensive-looking ski clothes, which made them most likely tourists.

Finally, one of the guys broke the silence as he narrowed his brown eyes at her. “Are you our waitress?”

“No, I’m your doctor,” Morgan deadpanned while shooting him a biting look, her hand still poised with the pen and pad of paper. “Who else would I be?”

They all three pulled their faces back, a little surprised by her impudence, Morgan guessed. *Rein it in*, she commanded herself before pulling her lips into a smile.

“Yes, I’m your waitress,” Morgan said in the friendliest voice she could muster like she was freaking Mary Poppins or something. “What would you like to drink?”

“We’ve been sitting here for thirty minutes,” the guy proclaimed, his voice coming out high and whiny. “That’s *not* acceptable.”

The woman looked at him cautiously. “It’s okay, Peter,” she said. “She’s here now.” She shifted a questioning look at Morgan. “Can I have—?”

“No, it’s *not* okay,” Peter interrupted angrily, his eyes piercing as the stared daggers into her. “I saw her standing at the bar for who knows how long. Why couldn’t she come take our order then? Is there something wrong with you?”

An awkward stillness descended on them before Morgan let out a deep, groaning breath, leveling a bored look at Peter’s little piggy face. He didn’t really look like a pig—he was actually kind of hot in a stockbroker bro kind of way. But he was definitely a pig of a man. She knew his type much better than she’d like to admit.

“Look, Peter,” she finally said, dropping her hands and her pen and paper to her side. “Do you want to *argue* with me? *Berate* me? A waitress in a tourist town bar? Is that going to help you sleep better tonight? I’m sure this lovely lady won’t give it up if you keep on acting like a spoiled baby.”

Peter was silent as his mouth dropped open in shock, but the other guy at the table barked out a loud, appreciative laugh. Morgan looked up to see his eyes dancing with humor. He was also the polished type but was blond. She gave him a small, grateful smile for not being a dick.

“This is my *sister*,” Peter bit out, his face turning beet red.

Morgan cringed. That was an unfortunate misstep on her part. “Well, in any case, please believe me when I tell you that this isn’t a good look for you ... it’s not a good look for *anyone*, really. Tell me what you want to drink, and I’ll go and get it—that’s how this works. I daresay we can skip the emotional abuse and both be the better off for it.”

“This girl’s a trip,” the light-haired bro said with a laugh, clapping his hands loudly in celebration of Morgan’s moxie. Morgan didn’t acknowledge him this time, though, just leveled a challenging gaze on Peter’s increasingly reddening face.

Peter opened his mouth to say something else, but the woman put her hand on his arm and shook her head. “We’ll each have a glass of Winter Solstice Ale and some spinach artichoke dip to share,” she announced, looking up at Morgan evenly.

Morgan quickly jotted down the order on her pad and smiled brightly at the sister. “Thank you so much! See, Peter, that wasn’t hard, huh?”

“You’re a terrible waitress,” he responded, looking at her from under angry, furrowed brows.

Morgan let out a deep, slow sigh and nodded her head thoughtfully while staring into space for a couple of beats. “Yeah, I know,” she agreed. “Maybe one day I’ll tell you how I ended up here. It’s a helluva story.”

Looking back down at them, they were all three looking at her with various looks of concern for her sanity—even Peter. *Rein it in, Morgan.*

“I’ll be back,” she said quickly before pivoting on her heels and diving back into the crowd to make her way to the computer on the edge of the bar.

Luckily neither Ana nor Hayley, the other waitress on duty, were using the screen so she could put table ten’s order in before she got distracted and forgot about it. She’d just finished tapping the screen to send the order to the bar and kitchen when she felt it—a hot prickle on the back of her neck.

She looked up at the wall over the computer, not turning around, but as soon as she heard that familiar twang rising above the gentle hum of the crowd, she knew her Spidey senses were on point.

The noise and heat from the bar’s crowd disappeared as she turned around and saw him standing in the corner of the bar

like he did every Friday night, handling his guitar delicately as he tuned its strings, the overhead lights casting shadows on his angular face and lithe form.

Cole.

His light brown hair was so long now, and he wore it pulled back from his face, but a few strands were always hanging loose in front of his face. Morgan liked to imagine that he stood in front of his bathroom mirror with a comb, carefully pulling the strands forward so they would frame his face just so.

She blurted out a laugh at the thought and went back to studying him. It was one of her favorite things to do: watch him when he was unaware.

His left arm was covered in dark tattoos. She'd always wondered what they were. She never got close enough to him anymore to see them.

He's so beautiful, she thought, not for the first time. Not that she would ever admit that to anyone, but she'd always thought he had the most interesting look about him. More so than anyone she'd ever met.

Too bad he's a lying, betraying sack of shit.

The dark thought caused her to suddenly become aware of the heat and noise of the crowd, as well as the many tasks that she should currently be completing. Just as she was about to pull her eyes away from him, someone knocked into her shoulder, causing her to stumble backward a bit, her eyes

instantly coming back to him as soon as she caught her balance.

Something in the motion caught his attention from across the room, and he looked up at her, his eyes immediately connecting with hers.

His eyes were a golden green, she knew that. Even though she couldn't make out their color from across the crowded bar, she saw them blaze with the same emotions that had always flashed at her over the past ten years. The anger she could understand, but the disgust was always a little hard to process.

Who does he think he is?

Angrily, she tore her gaze away from his and made her way to the bar, where Fitzzy may as well have been doing backflips as he poured and slung drinks down the bar.

She let out a frustrated sigh as she slapped a small tray on the bar and waited for Fitzzy to pour table ten's drinks.

What to do while I wait? What to do...? Check on table whatever? Nah, how about....

Her eyes landed on Cole again. He was facing to the side, talking to Duke, who looked to be accompanying him on bass tonight. That was weird. Usually it was just Cole and his guitar, but not only was Duke with him tonight, there was someone she didn't know dragging a drum kit through the crowd.

Interesting. Why is he trying so hard tonight?

“Morgan!”

She jumped about a foot in the air at the sound of her name, her hand coming up to her heart. “Jesus, Fitzy, you scared the hell out of me!”

“Well, you’re just standing there staring off into space. Take your beers and get out of here. And don’t yell at Cole—he’s got a lot going on tonight.”

Morgan leveled a vengeful gaze at him and picked up the tray of three Winter Solstice Ales a little too roughly, causing them to teeter a bit on the tray. Her heart jumped, fearing they would tumble over, but she was able to wrap her hands around the glasses and keep them from falling just in the nick of time. She looked nervously up at the cranky bartender, but his attention was already on the next customer.

Fitzy really wasn’t that bad. He was just a bartender, and unfortunately if you were going to survive with a bartender, sometimes you had to learn to give it as hard as they did.

Shooting him one last angry glare, she turned on her heels and started her well-charted path to tables ten and twelve. Unable to help herself, she kept shooting surreptitious glances toward Cole in the corner.

Had she yelled at Cole once while she’d been working here? No, she hadn’t. She’d been on her best behavior, but it seemed that some people were unable to let go of the past. Sure, the last time she and Cole had publicly argued had been only four months ago, but a lot had changed since then—at least for her.

What’s so important about tonight, though? Does he look different? It’s almost like he’s done something different with—

Morgan didn't get a chance to finish her thought as her foot caught on something—she wasn't sure what. A foot? A chair? *One of the great mysteries of our time*, she'd later decide.

Everything moved in slow motion, though, as she immediately lost her footing and went down, down, down. In an effort to catch herself with her hands, the tray of drinks went ... forward. Almost comically so, like the tray was transformed into a frisbee. It flailed through space and time, toward the shocked faces at table ten.

One of the last things that Morgan saw before she was lying flat on the sticky wooden floor of The Blue Sky was Peter's face twisted in shock and alarm right before he, and the rest of table ten, were soaked with the heavy splashes of Winter Solstice Ale.

There was a sharp intake of breath from someone standing nearby as Morgan lay on the ground for a couple of seconds, processing the pain on her knees and the palms of her hands where she had absorbed the impact.

Most of the raucous bar didn't notice the fall and continued on in their general merriment. The people surrounding her scattered a bit—the majority watching her with variations of shock and disgust—and one or two leaned down to ask her if she was okay.

Morgan couldn't answer them; she could only lie there on the ground, tears stinging her eyes. Not for the first time, she wished the ground would open and swallow her whole. Maybe

the universe would finally do her a favor and put her out of her misery.

It's funny how one minute you could be sailing through life, but all it takes is falling flat on your face in front of a huge crowd of people to remind you what truly sucks.

Faces flashed behind Morgan's eyelids: her mother dismissing her, her uncle screaming at her, her sister crying ... Cole begging her. All the people she was constantly disappointing and letting down.

Stop feeling sorry for yourself! You're lying on a disgusting bar floor. Get up.

Finally mustering enough physical and mental energy, Morgan peeled her body off the floor and pulled it upwards into a standing position.

She looked around her wearily, and the first person she saw was Peter, standing in front of her and wiping his beer covered face with a small square cocktail napkin, and boy oh boy was he mad.

Shaking her aching limbs, Morgan looked up at him with a cringe, bracing herself for his anger, and she was not disappointed.

"What *is* the matter with you?" he spat out the words, and Morgan winced at the vitriol.

"A lot, I'm afraid," Morgan said softly, rubbing the palms of her hands together gently. "Peter, I'm starting to think the

reason I'm a terrible waitress is because I'm so easily distracted."

Once again, Peter did *not* find her amusing. He took a couple of big steps forward until he was standing uncomfortably close. He was taller than her, but his face was inches away from hers as he looked down, his eyes flaring with true dislike.

She'd never seen that look from a stranger before. It took her breath away and filled her with a seedy, gross fear.

Morgan hated that she felt intimidated, that she wanted to run and hide. How could she feel any other way, though, with this guy looking at her like he wanted to snap her neck?

"I'm going to have you fired, you incompetent little bitch." he assured her nastily.

Morgan flinched, his words coating her face in specks of saliva. Still, she resisted the urge to take a step back. She opened her mouth wide to say something in return—she had no idea what, but she supposed she would find out along with Peter.

Before she could speak, though, a familiar smooth, crooning voice interrupted her and Peter's stare off.

"You need to step back, man."

Peter looked up at the voice, a shocked look on his face as his angry eyes traveled up and down the speaker's body.

But Morgan wouldn't let the thrill and excitement the voice ignited in her rise to the surface. Instead, she took a deep

breath and made sure her face was trained into the standard look of boredom that she always wore when directly faced with him.

Oh, look, Cole Sutton has decided to be the fucking hero for once.

2

MORGAN

Peter's eyes traveled up and down Cole's form slowly, as if assessing him for a potential fight. His nostrils flared as he breathed deeply, bringing the pig comparisons to the forefront of Morgan's mind again.

Cole didn't say anything else, just watched him, cool as a cucumber. He was always good under pressure. That was unless *she* was the one putting the pressure on him, of course.

Eventually, Peter took a small step back, as if the sight of Cole challenging him was too much for him to take on, which Morgan found a bit baffling. While she'd always appreciated Cole's long, lithe masculinity—despite her dismissal of his obnoxious personality—he wasn't one to inspire intimidation in others.

But you'd think he was a huge muscle man, cracking his neck and staring down his lesser-than opponent, by Peter's reaction. Peter blinked, his eyes shifting down to the floor, before he turned his head to look nervously at his light-haired

friend and sister, still sitting at table ten wearing silent, blank expressions.

Turning to face Cole again, Peter finally seemed to muster the wherewithal to speak. “What kind of asshole did you drag us to, man?” he growled accusingly.

Morgan blinked and looked between the two of them quickly. *Does Cole know these guys?* They weren’t his usual type.

Cole had always been friends with people like Duke, a behemoth of a man who seemed to be perpetually high.

As if on cue, Duke walked up behind Cole, his meaty arms crossed over his chest and his goatee-clad jaw pulled into a look of ready confrontation.

“You said you needed to hear me live,” Cole replied as quietly as one could in a bar full of people, most of whom were ignoring them despite the scent of physical altercation in the air. “*This* is where I play live. I didn’t think you’d start assaulting the waitstaff, though. It’s making me rethink this whole thing.”

“What ‘whole thing?’” Morgan couldn’t help but ask. They both ignored her, though, as they continued their testosterone-fueled dick measuring contest.

“She spilled beer all over us,” Peter insisted, looking only at Cole but gesturing angrily toward Morgan. “And she’s a terrible waitress!”

“Be that as it may,” Cole agreed, again provoking a surge of irritation within her. “This isn’t how you react, man. Be cool.”

Ugh. Morgan rolled her eyes. If Cole kept up this hippie-dippie act, she was going to join Peter’s side of this ridiculous fracas and demand her own immediate firing.

Peter pressed his lips together, his face turning red before his eyes landed on Morgan. “I wasn’t lying,” he told her firmly, jabbing his finger through the air. “I’m going to get you fired.”

“Oh, yeah?” Cole asked casually before Morgan could respond. “How do you think her uncle would react to that news?”

Morgan released a loud groan. *Oh no, he isn’t,* she thought urgently as Peter’s face scrunched up in confusion. “*Cole—*”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Peter asked hotly, interrupting her.

“This is Morgan Conrad,” Cole informed him with a quiet smugness. “Your boss’s niece.”

Peter’s eyes widened in shock as he looked Morgan up and down, everything in his form showing that he was retreating. Morgan snapped, though, and all but screamed as she released a primal sound of annoyance, causing more than a few concerned looks as she stomped toward Cole, dismissing Peter.

“What the hell, Cole?” she demanded angrily.

“Hey, Duke,” Cole called behind him, ignoring her once again. He hadn’t said a word to her since this ridiculousness started. “Would you mind asking Fitzzy for a couple of bar towels and new beers for these *fine, fine* people?”

“Sure thing, bro,” Duke said, slapping Cole on the back and turning toward the bar, also ignoring her.

Peter didn’t say anything else after that apparently life-altering revelation. He just swept Morgan with one last, distantly angry glare before returning to table ten and roughly falling into the chair next to his sister.

Both Peter’s sister and his light-haired friend were looking at Morgan with wide, awe-filled eyes. If they knew her uncle, they were surely wondering how the niece of the great and powerful Curtis Conrad ended up waiting tables in a “pisshole” like The Blue Sky.

Well, like she’d told them, it was a helluva story.

Morgan made quick eye contact with the light-haired friend, who was ogling her with a new appreciation.

Ugh, gross. She dismissed him, lifting her head haughtily and looking around to see where Cole had disappeared to.

“Cole,” she said sharply. Seeing him start to walk back toward his corner, she reached out and grabbed him by the arm. He felt warm and strong through his dark T-shirt, and she quickly pulled her hand away, shaking it in an attempt to rid herself of the feeling of him.

“Go outside, Morgan,” he said tightly as he turned around to glower at her. “Get some air. I think you’ve caused enough trouble tonight.”

Morgan felt her blood start to boil. That was always a sore point for her with him. He always thought she caused too much trouble when she was really just being herself. The person that he had once purported to....

“Me?” she proclaimed, her hand rising to her chest. “I’m just doing my job. I could have handled that guy.”

“I *saved* your ass,” Cole bit out angrily. “Maybe show a little gratitude.”

“Please, that had nothing to do with me,” Morgan argued. “That was all about protecting the stupid integrity of your set and your *music*.” She used exaggerated air quotes on the last bit, which Cole didn’t appreciate if his heavy frown meant anything.

“You’re unbelievable,” he muttered, turning to leave.

“And why do you think you of all people have the right to name drop me?” she pressed before he could get away. “Who are those people?”

“It was the only thing I knew would make that guy respect you,” he said casually. “You weren’t giving him much else to work with.”

Ouch. Morgan couldn’t help but flinch at that. Her mouth dropped open, and she felt as if she’d been punched in the gut as the oxygen slowly seeped out of her, her heart left deflated.

She didn't know why she still allowed him to hurt her, or why she still tried to hurt him. They'd said some terrible things to each other over the years, but somehow each time he said something like *that*, it felt like the first time. Like the person she still trusted most in the world had unexpectedly stomped on her heart.

He paused, leaning toward her a bit. *Was there a flash of regret in his eyes?* If there was, it was over before she could be certain.

He set his face in its usual solid, stony mask as he focused on her face purposefully. He was waiting for her to lose it, so he could feel superior. Well, he wouldn't get the satisfaction this time.

Slowly backing away, Morgan turned around toward the kitchen where she knew there was a door that led outside. To the cold winter night. To her escape.



Morgan turned Lucy's old Camry down Angora Road, a narrow street just off Lake Conrad Boulevard, the small town's main drag. Lucy's house sat in the middle of a block of small, one-story bungalows surrounded by a canopy of towering pine trees.

Even during the daylight, the street always seemed to exist in a perpetual state of shaded serenity. The tall trees blocked

out both the sunlight and noise from the Boulevard, so the houses lay within a well-padded cocoon.

On nights like the current one, as the world lay covered by layers and layers of snow, it seemed almost a little too eerily quiet. The sides of the street were piled high with towering snowbanks, and the trees were heavy with the weight of the snow against the black, starless sky.

Morgan loved the middle of the night. It was her favorite time to exist, to just *be*. Everything was so peaceful and quiet. One of the best parts of working at a bar was tasting that post-work freedom when everyone else was long past done with the day.

It felt like the machinations and drama of the daylight hours completely disappeared when the world was in the midst of such a pause. Nothing seemed to matter except what was directly in front of her, and that usually wasn't much.

As she pulled the car off to the side of the road and turned it off, she chose not to move from her seat for a few seconds. She stared out the windshield as if in a trance, admiring the dark, tranquil street.

It was hard to believe that she'd been living with Lucy for four months, since that last night in the Main House. Her cousin, Ian, had finally grown a pair and had stuck it to his father, inspiring Morgan to do the same and stand up to her mother. That last conversation with her mother had changed everything ... and yet nothing had really changed.

Morgan had always been very good at floating through life. Floating through her tumultuous childhood, floating through her mother's abandonment, floating through heartbreak. It had almost been like she was floating in a strong current, though. Breaking free seemed impossible.

But then she'd just done it. She'd taken the plunge and jumped ... into a new current, a new trap. Leaving her family had always seemed like the key to freedom before.

But she didn't know how to free herself from this situation—and that scared the hell out of her.

She was working in a bar, living off of Lucy, and driving a beat-up old car. A far cry from the Morgan Conrad who had a limitless credit card, a cushy bank account, and a responsibility-free job at her uncle's office.

Oh, how the mighty have fallen.

You'd think Cole would like seeing her like this, but if anything, it seemed to make him angrier with her.

Opening the car door, she stepped down onto the snow. It crunched and creaked under her feet as she delicately walked up Lucy's front path and stuck her key in the front door, silently pushing it open.

Lucy's house was dark, but there was a dim light and the low sound of the TV coming from the back of the small house. Morgan made her way through the living room, grabbing a peppermint off the top of the mahogany stand up piano, and

into the dining room where Lucy always kept her table fully set with her wedding china and crystal.

Entering the den at the very back of the house, Morgan saw her old friend lying asleep in a recliner by the light of a small table lamp and the glow of the TV. An episode of *Dateline* hummed in the background.

The den had been built onto the 1970s bungalow in the 80s. It was a constantly freezing, cold little room lined in wood paneling and populated with old tweed furniture. The walls were covered with pictures of Lucy and her husband, Steve, over the years, as well as Cole and his late mother, Amelia, in various stages of growing up.

Morgan looked down at Lucy's well-worn, comforting face, sleeping soundly on her reclined chair with a pink crocheted blanket pulled up to her chin. She was seventy and still worked like a dog as the head housekeeper for the Main House, the huge Conrad mansion. She refused to give up her job there, which was a constant source of contention between her and Morgan.

Morgan reached for the remote control on the small end table and turned off the TV, which, in turn, woke Lucy up.

"Morgan?" Lucy said with a start, her eyes relaxing when Morgan switched on the lamp on the table. "Oh, good, it's you."

"Luce," Morgan said in a scolding voice, sinking into the tweed couch and toeing off her shoes. "What are you still doing up?"

“Waiting for you, of course,” she replied in a scratchy, tired voice.

“You don’t have to wait for me,” Morgan said. “It’s one in the morning.”

“I don’t mind,” Lucy said dismissively. “I was really into my program, anyway.”

“Yeah, you were completely riveted when I got here,” Morgan said with a smirk.

“Oh, you.” Lucy smiled, sitting up in her chair, popping the recliner back into place. “Don’t be smart with an old woman.”

Morgan only smiled sweetly in return, and Lucy chuckled. Nobody thought she was as cute as Lucy did. She’d basically raised her, after all.

Morgan’s mother had been what some might call a “free spirit” when she was young. She’d left home when she was a teenager and moved around the country, following different bands, spending time at Burning Man and other small music festivals.

Lucy loved to tell the story of a nineteen-year-old Adele showing up at the Main House one Thursday evening with a small blond baby that she’d unceremoniously dropped in Lucy’s arms.

Lucy had bathed and dressed her, before putting her in a crib in her slightly older cousin Ian’s room. She’d stayed in his room for the next six months until Adele had decided they needed to leave again. That process would repeat itself over

and over as they continued to come and go every year or so. They'd stay a few months before Adele was inspired to move again, or until she got a new boyfriend. That was, until Morgan was sixteen, and she'd talked her mother into leaving her behind, which she'd been all too happy to do.

"You're not going to the Main House tomorrow, are you?" Morgan asked suddenly.

"I don't know," Lucy said quietly. "Your uncle doesn't expect me to, but I don't trust Claire with polishing the"— Lucy paused to release a loud yawn—"foyer flagstones. Last time your uncle almost fell to his death."

"Hmmm," hummed Morgan. *Maybe we'd all be better off if he did.* She couldn't stop the dark thought from floating across her mind. "How's Bella?" she asked suddenly. "Did you see her this week?"

Morgan hadn't been allowed to see her ten-year-old sister, Bella, in months. Not since she'd officially fallen out with her family and left the Main House in a blaze of glory. She'd known that leaving Bella behind would be a downside to escaping, but she'd had no idea how much it would hurt to be cut off from her little sister. They'd been attached at the hip all summer, and had grown closer than ever.

"Oh, yes, you would be proud of her," Lucy said, the smile coming through her voice. "She's making her way through the Roald Dahl books you got her for Christmas."

"That's my girl," Morgan said distractedly, sinking further into the couch.

“How was work?” Lucy asked. “Did you see Cole?”

“It was good, and I did,” responded Morgan. “He sang very well.” She never had it in her to tell Lucy that her grandson was a complete turd.

“He’s so talented,” Lucy said with a wide smile. “I wish you two had been better friends.”

“Hmmm,” Morgan hummed again, halfheartedly. “I think he had friends there tonight?” Morgan wondered if Lucy knew anything about Peter and his friends, and what connection they had to her uncle.

“Oh, I know Duke and Crumbly were going to accompany him tonight.”

Crumbly? That must have been the guy on the drums. Morgan had to admit that Cole’s performance had been on point with Duke and *Crumbly* backing him up. He played like she’d never heard him play before, and Peter and his friends had *not* looked unimpressed. Anxiety surged through her body at the thought. She hated not knowing what was going on.

“No,” Morgan said. “Not Duke and ... Crumbly. Someone named Peter?” She avoided saying it was someone who worked for her uncle—she didn’t want to bring him up again.

“I don’t know, dear,” Lucy said absently with another yawn.

Morgan’s eyes darted up and down Lucy’s slouched form. *She looks so old.* “Hey, I’m off tomorrow. Why don’t we go to The Golden Carafe in the morning? Get some coffee and go

shopping? You don't really need to go to the Main House, do you?"

"We'll see," Lucy responded halfheartedly.

Morgan knew she would go. She'd always choose that house over everything else.

"Why don't you help me up?" Lucy finally asked with another yawn. "I should get to bed."

Morgan helped pull Lucy from the recliner, laughing and making a joke about her creaky old lady bones before following her down the hall to her room.

Lucy rested her calloused hand on Morgan's cheek as she kissed the other one before wishing her goodnight.

After a much-needed shower—washing all of the bar grime off of her always felt glorious—Morgan flopped down on the bed in Lucy's spare room, the room that she'd been living in for the past four months.

She took a deep breath as she stared at the popcorn ceiling and pulled out her phone. She looked half-heartedly at her social media apps, ultimately deciding not to open them.

Her social media presence had floundered since she'd been out in the real world. Probably because she didn't have Bella around to inspire her. She'd been the brains behind Morgan's summertime online popularity, anyway.

Ultimately, Morgan did what always comforted her after a long night at The Blue Sky. She rose from the double bed and

walked to the oak bookshelf where her rows and rows of books were lined up and organized by color.

She closed her eyes and ran her finger across the spines. When her finger stopped on one, she opened her eyes and saw that it had landed on one of her favorite books—a dark fae romance. But she didn't feel excited about the possibility of a re-read of *that* particular story.

Her mind drifted to the events of the evening. *Who were those people at table ten?* They didn't look like her uncle's typical employees. They were young and had an air of coolness about them, not the degenerate old creepers her uncle seemed to keep on his payroll by the bucket full.

And how did they know Cole? Was Cole working with her uncle? If that were true then hell had truly frozen over. The last time he'd worked for Curtis Conrad was when he used to mow his lawn, and Morgan clearly remembered how *that* had ended.

Jumping out of bed, she shuffled over to the closet, opening the accordion doors. Pulling a pile of sweatshirts off the top shelf, she stood on the tips of her toes to slide a pink shoebox down. Securing it in her hands, she walked it over to the bed, plopping down next to it and pulling off the lid.

The box was overflowing with folded up pieces of lined notebook paper. She randomly pulled out one of them and started unfolding it slowly, almost reverently.

It didn't matter which one she read. They all made her feel the same, and they all started with the same words. Opening it

completely, she leaned back on her pillows and started reading her favorite story of all.

“My wild girl....”

3

COLE

TEN YEARS AGO

Was it because he was so high up on Echo Peak? Is that why it was so hot? True, it was late June, but Lake Conrad wasn't known as an unbearably hot place. And the Conrad house was 7,000 feet up Echo Peak, for God's sake.

He dropped a heavy stone next to the high pile he'd been building all morning, reaching his arm up to wipe the layer of sweat off his forehead.

"Hey, man, you wanna take a lunch break?" Nelson shouted from where he'd been stacking the stones around the perimeter of the expansive patio all morning.

Cole raised his hand in acknowledgement and staggered over to the far side of the house, where the shade was long and dark. He breathed a sigh in relief as he pulled a bottle of water and a sandwich out of his backpack. Collapsing against the cool stone of the house, he sank to the ground.

He'd been out in the sun all morning, lugging stones around the side of the Conrad house to be built into some sort of wall

around the existing patio. He wasn't really sure what it was supposed to look like ... Nelson was the brains behind the operation. Cole was just cheap labor.

He was grateful that his grandma had gotten him this job—she knew how important it was for him to save money—and he didn't mind a little hard work.

It would be nice to have the extra money when he graduated high school. He'd finally be able to leave Lake Conrad for good, just like he'd been dreaming about for as long as he could remember. He wasn't sure where he would end up yet—maybe New York or LA—but he knew that once he got there, his life would officially start.

If he had to break his back for the Conrads in order to get where he wanted to be, then so be it.

Finishing his sandwich and water, Cole reached into his bag and pulled out his used copy of Jitterbug Perfume. He had a good twenty minutes left to read before he had to get back to Nelson.

Just as he was about to delve into a dog-eared page, a melodic voice rang out above him.

“You know what that book's really about, right?”

Cole looked up with a start to see a pair of bare feet with red-painted toenails standing in the manicured grass in front of him. He immediately refocused on his book, resisting the urge to let his eyes trail up the tan, bare legs.

“Immortality, love, individuality,” he answered loftily, not looking up from the page in front of him. “What’s Lolita about?”

“A bad man and a scared little girl,” the voice answered firmly.

“Hmph.” He finally allowed his eyes to leave his book and dance up her bare legs. She was wearing frayed cut-offs and a pink tank top, her blond waves floating down her back. Her face was sun-kissed and lightly freckled, and her green eyes twinkled with mischief.

“Do you want to see something cool?” she asked, her voice filled with excitement.

“I’m working,” he said staunchly, fixing his eyes on the page of his book again.

“No, you’re not,” she said coaxingly. “You’re on lunch. I heard Nelson say so. C’mon ... it won’t take long.”

Cole knew he shouldn’t do it. This couldn’t end any way but badly. But something about her called to him. When he’d seen her watching him at school, he’d known immediately who she was. He’d heard her name every single day of his life, after all.

“I wish you could play with Morgan, Cole,” his grandmother would say. “She has a wonderful imagination.... Morgan’s already reading chapter books.... She wrote the most touching poem.... Morgan painted this beautiful picture of me. I’m going to frame it and hang it next to the one you made.”

He'd hated Morgan Conrad for stealing his grandmother and being better than him at everything. As an only grandchild, Cole was used to being the best at everything. He didn't like sharing the spotlight.

As he'd grown up, he'd let go of a lot of that jealousy, but he couldn't help the surge of pride when he'd first figured out who she was. He'd wanted to poke her and see if she was really as great as his grandmother always made her out to be.

Underneath all of that leftover jealousy, though, there was another feeling rising inside of him when he looked at her. Something he didn't want to put a voice to.

He looked up at her now, with her bare feet sinking into the grass, tank top hanging limply on her slender body, and sweat beading on her collarbone. He felt that same unidentifiable feeling simmer within him as he rose to his feet without thinking, looking down at her expectantly.

Silently, he motioned for her to lead the way, and she smiled brightly and wordlessly turned around, marching resolutely across the green lawn.

Neither of them said anything as he followed her over the yards of shorn, even grass. Cole looked back at the tall, shining windows of the Conrad house wondering if her uncle, mother, or cousin were watching him. Would he get in trouble?

Before long, they were in the clear, and the fear dissipated as they reached the safety of the forested areas surrounding the manicured landscape spread in front of the house.

The Conrad house was a monolith to the family's wealth and privilege. Built into the side of Echo Peak in a U shape, the back of the house was a part of the mountain's drop off, and its front led to the sprawling front lawn that Cole had become intimately familiar with over the past few weeks of his employment as lawn boy and stone lugger.

Although Cole had never hiked them, he knew there were paths and trails that looped all over the Conrad land on Echo Peak, all the way down to the town and the lake itself.

The path Morgan led him toward was in the opposite direction from the town and the lake, though, and he wondered where she was taking him if not to take in the view.

Cole watched her walk in front of him. No, she wasn't walking, she was swaying, her unruly, dirty-blond hair trailing down her back, moving in tune with her hips as they danced with her steps. Her shirt dipped down low on her back, and it was obvious she wasn't wearing a bra.

Cole felt like he was struggling to breathe a bit as the thought registered. He looked her up and down, searching for something else to focus on.

"Why aren't you wearing shoes?" he barked out, more angrily than he wanted to. He always prided himself on being cool, being in control. But that control was escaping him at this moment.

But she didn't seem to care that her small, soft-looking bare feet were pressing into the rocks, sticks, and leaves that lined the rough path.

Her narrow, tan shoulders moved up in a shrug in response to his question, but she didn't look back at him. "I don't need them. But don't worry, it's not too much farther," she assured him, as if he was the one walking barefoot through the woods.

Cole only grunted in response and watched her as she hopped on a couple of stones that formed a natural bridge over a brook of babbling, clear water.

Once they crossed the brook, there was a much shorter path that led to a copse of trees, mostly cypress and pines with a smattering of aspens. Huge, bulky boulders served as a wall, surrounding a cozy thicket of ferns that coated the forest floor like a plush carpet.

The shade from the trees blocked the strong rays of the sun that had been beating down on Cole all morning, and the boulders hid them from view of anyone that might be walking down the path. The small hideaway was quiet and dark—a perfect place to escape.

"It's beautiful," Cole admitted in a husky voice as he walked through two boulders and stood in the middle of the open area. It felt like he was on another planet. The light was dim, and the sounds of the forest and the brook were quiet and muted.

"I thought you'd like it." Morgan's voice tinkled from behind him, and he turned to see her leveling an unsmiling look at him—her features placid and emotionless.

"Why would you think that?" Cole asked curiously. "You don't even know me."

“I feel like I do,” she admitted bluntly, not exhibiting the least bit of shame at the confession.

Cole took a step closer to her as he studied her. Her eyes were a mossy green, like the lichen covering the boulders, and her bronzed skin still held a slight sheen of sweat. She looked like a wood nymph standing in this clearing, the sun streaming between the branches of the trees and catching the different shades of blond in her hair.

He felt a heat rise within him as he looked down at her, the strap of her tank top slipping off her shoulder. “I feel like I know you, too,” he murmured.

“Maybe we knew each other in another life,” she suggested with a small smile. “Does that sound crazy?”

“No, that doesn’t sound crazy,” Cole said softly, taking another step closer to her. He was just a few inches away from her now. He could see her pupils were huge, eating up the green of her eyes.

“My mother says I’m crazy,” she admitted with trepidation, her eyes shifting to the ground.

He’d only seen her mother from afar once or twice, and his grandmother was unusually tight-lipped about her opinion of her. All he knew was that she was blond like Morgan, and she always seemed to have a distant look about her.

“You’re not crazy,” Cole said, reaching his hand up to rub his thumb over the freckles on her soft cheek. “You’re just wild.”

She let out a deep breath, her eyes darting up and down his face as if she was trying to memorize him. “So, you’re not an asshole,” she admitted with more than a little wonder.



Cole Sutton was uncomfortable.

These were not his people. Wealth and excess always made him uncomfortable, and the people he was sitting with at this crowded table at The Golden Carafe, his hometown coffee shop, were the epitome of money and easy living.

Everything about them was perfect, almost to the point of overproduction.

“You’ve got a great sound, dude,” Tripp said, his voice smooth and slippery. “I like what I heard last night.” He marked the sincerity of this proclamation by lifting up a blond eyebrow and taking a delicate sip from his tiny espresso cup.

But the tone of his voice was such that Cole couldn’t tell if he *actually* liked what he’d heard or if he was bullshitting. It was something that Tripp and his business partner, Peter, had been doing left and right since Cole had met them in October.

Cole rubbed his hand up and down his face, not for the first time wondering what the hell he was doing. *I’d be stupid to pass this up, right?*

It was a question he’d asked himself a thousand times over the past few months. Ever since Morgan’s uncle had shown up at his house in September to tell him he’d bought a record

label and he had a proposition for him. A “thank you gift as it were,” he’d called it.

He hadn’t seen much of Curtis Conrad since that spring evening in his office ten years ago. He found that the passage of time hadn’t rid him of the desire to want to punch that son of a bitch in the face, though.

Cole had been on the verge of kicking him out, telling him to suck it, when he’d paused and considered the situation in which he found himself. The truth was this wasn’t ten years ago. Things had changed. And this was a music deal being dropped in his lap. *I’d be stupid to pass this up, right?*

Even though being a musician was a dream he’d given up on, it was still all he’d ever really wanted. To escape Lake Conrad. To live off his music.

So, he’d listened to Curtis’s proposition, during which Curtis stressed that he wanted nothing in return. Reluctantly, Cole had agreed to meet James Shelley, III—or Tripp, as he insisted on being called—his business partner, Peter Mancini, an asshole; and Peter’s sister, Callista, all of whom owned Rather Than Records.

Within five seconds of googling RTR, Cole knew he would indeed be stupid to pass this up. The label was representing some of the most successful indie musicians out there, ones that shared Cole’s look and sound, so if he was going to fit in anywhere in the music world, it was there.

“You sing and play just beautifully, Cole,” Callista said brightly, her face bright with makeup and her blindingly white

teeth flashing a sincere, sweet smile.

She shifted a little closer to him on the bench they shared at The Golden Carafe, and Cole cleared his throat uncomfortably. Callista had been making it obvious to him every time he saw her over the past few months that she was interested in something with him.

She *was* pretty, with her big brown eyes and shiny dark hair, and she was nice enough, but Cole was definitely *not* interested. He'd been a rich girl's distraction before, and he wasn't interested in a repeat of *that* situation.

"Thanks," he murmured, surreptitiously moving further down the bench.

"And this town is just so adorable," she said loudly, moving her large sunglasses to her head and taking in Lake Conrad Square spread before them. "I can't believe you grew up here."

"Yeah, it's great," Cole said blandly. He knew he sounded like an ass. The Golden Carafe was hopping on the late January Saturday afternoon, and the atmosphere could be described as nothing short of idyllic.

The coffee shop sat on the far end of Lake Conrad Square, Lake Conrad's town center that was lined with shops, boutiques, and restaurants. There were currently giant snowbanks pushed in all corners of the open space, but that didn't diminish the wide open, festive quality that permeated the atmosphere.

Today, the energy was especially cheerful as the town prepared for the upcoming winter festival that was put on each year by the Civic Association. Kyle Bear, the president of the Association, was standing a few yards away, directing someone who seemed to be building wooden booths—apparently incorrectly, if Kyle’s annoyed facial expression and angry arm movements were anything to go by.

Kyle had asked Cole a few weeks ago if he’d play the festival, and he’d been happy to accept. He didn’t know Kyle very well—their first conversation had been when he’d asked him to play Saturday night of the festival—but he found Kyle to be a pretty cool guy. He was blunt and sharp, which Cole appreciated in a person. Not all of these hidden innuendo and hints at things he didn’t understand like he got from the RTR people.

The Square backed up to the lake and was separated from the beach by a short stone wall. Although Cole’s back was to the lake, he’d enjoyed the sight of it surrounded by the towering mountains a million times. He was sure that on such a bright blue day as this, the waters of Lake Conrad were glistening under the sparkling sunlight, and the surrounding mountains were glowing around the lake like they were in 3D movie.

You’d think it would be freezing sitting so close to the lake in January, but the Carafe had heaters spread out around the long wooden tables. The resulting heat combined with warmth from the large crowd of skiers and snowboarders taking a

break from the hill made it a more than bearable place to sit down for a while.

“So, let’s talk next steps,” Peter chimed in roughly, dismissing his sister’s talk of the delights of Lake Conrad. “Mr. Conrad wants us to get your album out this year, so we should probably get to LA, like, yesterday and get you in the studio.”

“I haven’t decided if I want to do it,” Cole said slowly, shaking his head thoughtfully.

“You’d be stupid to pass this up, dude,” Peter said bluntly, reading his mind.

Cole shook his head again, looking down to study the heavy wooden grain of the table. He didn’t trust Morgan’s uncle—that wasn’t something he could just shake off even all these years later—and he didn’t trust these people and their shining smiles and fancy promises.

Tripp, who Cole guessed to be mildly more emotionally intelligent than Peter, seemed to sense Cole’s trepidation and silently shook his head when Peter opened his mouth again, presumably to pontificate on how stupid Cole would be to pass this up.

“How about this?” Tripp said, his voice soft and mollifying. He moved his Ray-Bans to the top of his head so he was looking Cole in the eyes. “We’re going up to my cabin on Golden Lake next weekend. How about you come and lay down some tracks with us? The cabin’s got a great studio. We can relax, record, and figure things out.”

Cole studied Tripp's clean-cut, mild face, his closely trimmed blond hair, and his blank blue eyes. He had never been anything but accommodating and benign toward Cole, but for some reason he trusted him even less than he trusted Peter's brash, hotheaded personality. While he could easily dismiss Peter as an asshole, Tripp kind of freaked him out.

"Oh, yes, please, please come," Callista begged in a sing-song voice. She reached her manicured hand over to this forearm, squeezing gently and looking at him pleadingly from under her long, dark lashes.

Cole glanced down at her hand and back up at her face, but her hand didn't move from his arm, her lips pulled down in a playful pout.

Why do they care so much? I know I can't be that amazing of a musician.

Nevertheless, he let out a deep breath and ran his hand over his face again. *I'm going to regret this.* "Alright, I guess...."

"Yay!" Callista let out a high-pitched cheer as she clapped her hands together lightly.

"Awesome," Tripp said with a wide, triumphant smile. "You won't regret this, man."

"It'll be *so* much fun," Callista chirped as Peter grunted a half-hearted agreement, looking deeply into his coffee cup.

This is just so fucking weird, Cole thought. But it was what he'd dreamed about his whole life, right? To get a music deal, to escape Lake Conrad. And now it was finally happening, and

it was just ... *strange*. He would have killed to be swept off his feet like this when he was eighteen, so why didn't he want it so much now?

"I get off of work at four on Friday," Cole told them, taking a sip of his coffee. "If you tell me where to go, I'll drive up and meet you guys."

"Why don't you just quit that job?" Peter asked bluntly. "We're going to help you make millions. You don't need to keep working at a *library*."

Cole sat back as if he was actually considering quitting the library. "Nah, don't think I will," he finally said dismissively. "I gotta be back by Saturday night to play the festival, too."

Cole had been happy to relax into the belief that the music thing would eventually happen as he floundered through his early twenties. He'd never strayed too far from Lake Conrad, but he'd traveled all over California, mostly to other mountain towns, playing and meeting other performers.

He loved the old musicians he'd met—the guys that had been around for years, singing scratchy versions of Bob Dylan songs in bars and growing long, gray beards. They were still convinced that their big break was just around the corner, that there was really a label out there looking for someone just like them.

One day, he'd given Steve, one of these types of musicians, a ride home from the bar they'd both played. When Steve had handed him ten dollars and a sweaty-looking joint as thanks for the ride to the small, run down house he lived in alone,

Cole had realized two things: he was never going to be discovered, and he didn't want to end up like Steve.

Steve's life was stuck in the same place it had been for the past thirty years. He was inert and motionless, waiting for things to happen, for opportunities to just happily introduce themselves to him. That wasn't how the world worked, Cole realized. He needed to forge his own path, and he hadn't been doing a very good job at it.

He signed up for classes at Lake Conrad Community College the next week, eventually taking enough online classes to get his BSA in Library Sciences. If he was never going to make a career with music, he'd move on to his next love, books.

"I'm telling you, this is going to be great, man," Tripp said smoothly. "Wait until you see the setup we have at the cabin...."

Cole stopped paying attention to Tripp's smarmy spiel, his eyes darting over the crowd of the Square: happy tourists walking and smiling in the frigid sunshine.

He'd always had a love-hate relationship with his hometown. It was a tourist town. A place where the rest of the world went to vacation, to escape reality. That left the people who actually lived there to feel a little trapped and stifled by it. Probably not everyone felt like that, but Cole always had.

Leaving had never felt possible, though. It always felt unfathomable to leave everything he'd ever known. A memory

gnawed away on his nerve endings, and he ignored it—or tried to, but of course, that's when he heard her.

He always heard her before he saw her. It would be impossible for it to be any other way. She was so loud.

Her voice rang above the hum of the crowd and burrowed into his brain, awakening memories and sensations inside of him.

Morgan didn't talk, she didn't converse ... she *sang*. Whether it was joyfully, shrilly, or angrily, her voice was that of a woman not to be reckoned with, not to be ignored.

When his eyes finally found her, she affected him like she always did, like he was looking into the sun. It was too painful to focus on her for long.

She was meandering slowly through the crowd with her friend, Lena, who was on crutches from the fall she'd recently taken at a birthday party for their mutual friend, Annie.

Seeing Morgan in the bright sun, away from the dim, smoky lights of The Blue Sky, she had the same wild, untamed look about her that she'd had when they were kids. Her unruly waves tumbled down her back, her cheeks were slightly reddened from the cold, and her green eyes glimmered in the sunlight.

Then her eyes landed on him. It didn't seem to ever be any other way. As long as they were in the vicinity of each other, they ended up making eye contact. That awkward, painful, and annoying connection.

And, as usual, as soon as she saw him, it was as if a light inside of her shut off. She stopped walking as her eyes connected with his, Lena stopping to look at something in the Explore Lake Conrad storefront—the recreation business owned by her boyfriend, Jake—but Morgan wasn't paying attention to what her friend was saying. She was only looking at him, her eyes narrowing in on him.

Cole didn't look away from her. He couldn't. That was the problem between the two of them, and why they would have never worked. They were both too stubborn, too unwilling to understand the other, they didn't share the same values.... The list was endless.

It was just that in the ten years since whatever had existed between them had ended in a fiery explosion apropos of their entire relationship, he'd never been with anyone like her. No one had even come close.

And as long as he stayed here, he'd never escape her.

"I'm looking forward to it," he said, his eyes settling on Tripp, leaving Morgan where she stood in the Square.

He didn't need to win with her anymore. He was going to leave Lake Conrad—and Morgan Conrad—behind.

He'd be stupid to pass this up.

4

COLE

There were only two salves for a broken and bruised heart as far as Cole was concerned: books and music.

Leaving behind The Golden Carafe and his meeting with Tripp, Peter, and Callista, his brain felt clouded, and his heart weighed heavy in his chest at the prospect of spending a weekend at Golden Lake with them.

Seeing Morgan looking the way she did sure as hell hadn't helped. The only time he'd really been around her in recent years was at The Blue Sky, when she was either a loud, drunken customer or a loud, incompetent waitress. It had been easy to harden his heart to that Morgan, to separate her from the girl he'd loved, the girl that had broken his heart.

But seeing her in the sunlight, a carefree smile on her familiar face, he could only see *her*. His wild girl.

He let out a loud groan, shaking his head at his own stupidity as he reached deep into the pockets of his green army coat, pulling out his AirPods and popping them into his ears.

He'd sometimes go weeks or even a couple months without dwelling too deeply on Morgan and their past. Then something would happen—he'd see her in a certain context or something would remind him of something they'd shared—and he'd obsess over it for weeks, remembering who she used to be and consuming himself over what had driven them apart.

You're fucking pathetic, he thought cynically, mentally kicking himself as he scrolled through his phone to find the song he was looking for. She hated him now, and he wasn't too crazy about her either.

Finding "California Stars" by Billy Bragg and Wilco, Cole started the song and picked up his pace, weaving through the tourists and burying his hands deep in his pockets as a strong, bitter wind blew against his face. Moving away from the heater of the Carafe, he should be cold, but his movements and the music warmed him as he reached the front of the Square.

It was a good distance away from The Golden Carafe, The Lake Conrad Resort, and all the tourist shops. There was a small park spread on the corner, and a couple of small businesses. Cole headed toward his favorite one—The Blue Bard, the town's independent bookstore.

Seeing the familiar blue wooden sign up ahead, which pictured an outline of a blue pirate with a book in front of his face, Cole felt his earlier worries disintegrate.

He pushed open the door with gusto, the glass door hitting the bells hanging above the door, the familiar musky, sweet scent of the store hitting his senses.

“Mr. Cole Sutton,” Bridget called out from the register.
“Long time, no see!”

“Hey, Bridge,” he responded, walking over to the long wooden counter where Bridget, who owned The Blue Bard with her husband Salvadore, was flipping through a stack of ancient looking books, which immediately piqued his interest.
“What do you have there?”

“Oh, I know you’ll appreciate this,” Bridget said excitedly, her wrinkled hand pulling up a red and gold volume depicting a castle and a starry night sky. Printed in spindly black letters on the cover was *The Lady of Shalott*. “A first edition,” Bridget said pointedly.

“Oh, shit,” Cole breathed out the words as he gingerly took the book from Bridget’s hands and delicately flipped through the yellowed pages. “Where’d you get this?”

“You know Sal goes out east a couple times a year,” Bridget said lightly, her hands and eyes moving on to the next old book in the pile. “He picked this up at some hidey-hole in New York. Go sit down and give it a look-through.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” Cole mumbled, turning and making his way over the old, trodden carpet and through the towering shelves of books.

Although it looked small from the outside, the bookstore was mammoth. Sometime in the past thirty years, Bridget and Sal had purchased the store next door, knocking out the wall to increase the size of the Bard.

While the front half housed current, popular authors and new releases, the back half was all used books. Whether they were books recycled from the community or treasures that Sal picked up on his book hunting excursions, this was Cole's favorite part of the store. He could sit in his favorite green velvet armchair for hours, flipping the dog-eared pages of ancient tomes.

As he read the familiar words of one of his favorite stories, everything melted away: his worries over his future, his suspicions of Rather Than Records, the anxiety of leaving behind his hometown. None of it mattered when he was lost in the words on the pages in front of him and the scenes and images they conjured in his head.

He barely looked up when he heard the shrill sound of the door's bells ringing, his focus on carefully turning the crispy pages of the book. But his head shot up with a start when he heard that loud, musical soprano ring through the aisles of the store.

"God damnit, Bridget, if you don't have that freaking book, I'm gonna lose my shit."

A warm feeling bloomed inside of Cole at the obnoxious sound. Leaving *The Lady of Shalott* behind on his chair, he slowly rose and walked to the edge of a shelf of secondhand biographies, peering at the front counter.

Morgan. Of course.

How he'd managed to go almost ten years with mostly seeing her only under the dull, yellow lights of a bar to seeing

her out in the wild twice in one day was beyond him.

She was wearing a puffy black coat over dark leggings, her hair wild and free down her back and her cheeks slightly reddened by the cold. Her eyes darted over Bridget urgently, which Bridget returned with a soft chuckle.

“I said I’d have your book, Morgan, so why wouldn’t I have your book?” Bridget asked with a teasing smile.

“Um, maybe because every time I’ve been in here over the past week, you *haven’t* had it,” Morgan said with wide, disbelieving eyes. “It was released a week ago. I’m dying here.” She dropped her head to the wooden counter in a dramatic sob, and Cole couldn’t help but chuckle at the sight.

Bridget reached under the desk and pulled out a shiny purple book. Cole couldn’t see the title, but he definitely heard Morgan’s sharp intake of breath as she lifted her head and took in the sight of the book, her hands coming up to grasp it.

“Oh, my sweet baby,” she said in a reverent voice, shifting her graceful gaze to Bridget as she held the book to her heart. “I’ve been waiting so long for this day,” she admitted.

Bridget smiled indulgently, shaking her head slightly. “You know, it wouldn’t hurt my feelings if you bought that online or read the e-book.”

“I would never,” said Morgan in a serious voice as she lifted the book up and opened it to smell the spine. “I love the feeling of a real book ... and you’re the only person I’ve ever bought books from. I’m not stopping now.”

“You’re a good girl, Morgan,” Bridget said with a warm chuckle.

The door rang again, and a new voice chimed in. “Morgan!” chimed in a new voice from the doorway. Cole peaked over to see Lena, struggling with the door while balancing her crutches under her arms. “Are you coming? I’m dying out here!”

“Coming, coming.” Her call echoed through the small store and another customer looked up with a look of mild irritation. Cole joined the man in shaking his head in annoyance even though he was the idiot who couldn’t look away.

“Okay, ring me up, Bridget,” Morgan said decisively, setting the book down on the counter.

Bridget picked up the book, her bespectacled face looking at it discerningly before she held it out flatly toward Morgan. “Zero dollars.”

“Bridget,” Morgan scolded, reluctantly taking the book from her. “I *can* give you twenty dollars or whatever this book costs.”

“It costs *zero dollars*,” Bridget insisted, picking up her stack of moldering texts in quiet dismissal of Morgan’s argument.

“But—” Morgan started, only to be interrupted by Lena crutching toward her awkwardly.

“I really need to go, Morg,” she said in a serious tone. “Maybe Jake was right and crutching around the Square in January isn’t a great idea.” She let out a long sigh and a

grimace as she lifted the purple cast wrapped around her ankle slightly.

Morgan shot a conflicted look between her friend and Bridget a few times before taking a deep breath. “I’m going to pay you, old lady,” she finally said, pointing her finger in Bridget’s face. “Whether you like it or not.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Bridget laughed. “Get your poor friend home now, and enjoy the book.”

Morgan narrowed her eyes at Bridget for a beat before quickly walking around the side of the wooden counter and wrapping her arms around her small frame in a tight hug.

Bridget burst out a surprised laugh before shooing Morgan out of the store. Moments later, Morgan and Lena were limping through the ringing doorway again.

A few seconds of silence passed as Cole stood and watched through the wide front window of the bookstore as they walked across the Square. Lena crutched slowly while Morgan talked to her exuberantly, her hands flinging wide.

“You can come out now,” Bridget’s voice called out from the front of the store.

Cole came out from behind the shelf, rubbing his face sheepishly.

“You don’t have to be afraid of Morgan, Cole,” she said sweetly, looking up from her stack of books. “She’s a nice girl, you know. You should ask her on a date if you like her.”

Cole shook his head at Bridget, looking back toward the window, at Morgan's departing form, until she was completely out of sight.

"Nah," he finally said, looking at Bridget with a tight smile. "She's not my type."

Lucy Sutton's house was a shrine to 1982 nostalgia. Whether she'd kept it the same for so many years to honor her late husband or their early life together with their daughter, Amelia, or both, Cole wasn't sure.

The large wood-finished TV sitting on the floor probably hadn't worked in ten years, but it was clean as a whistle, along with the floral couch he'd never been allowed to sit on, and the heavy drapes that blocked out whatever light managed to escape through the heavily shaded front yard.

Cole had never minded the dark, stagnant quality of the small house. If anything, he'd always found it strangely comforting to walk through the familiar maze of furniture and settle down in the same red vinyl kitchen chair where he used to partake in his daily dose of milk and Oreos. He'd commiserated with his grandmother's appreciation of the past and her longing for a simpler, easier time.

But now things felt different. It had started to percolate a couple years ago, and now that he'd embarked on the possibility of a record deal, of leaving Lake Conrad, he seemed to be constantly battling with himself over his past and present, and what they both meant for his future.

Was he any different than Steve if he stayed in Lake Conrad, playing music at The Blue Sky every weekend? Any different than his grandmother staying in her mausoleum of a house and the same thankless job?

She still lived here because it was comfortable and reminded her of happier times. Is that what he really wanted for his life? Merely existing just so he could be close to the place something great had once happened? On the off chance of what? That it happened again? *Not fucking likely*, he thought bitterly.

The dark thoughts crowded his brain as he walked through the dining room to find his grandmother bustling around her small kitchen humming The Judds' "Mama, He's Crazy," her feet tapping on the linoleum floor as she pulled open creaky drawers and rustled through ancient cooking utensils.

"Knock, knock," he called out, causing her to jump and hold her hand to her heart with a start. He felt guilty for scaring her until her eyes landed on him, softening as she took in his tall form standing next to the off-white refrigerator.

"Oh, my sweet boy," she said with a relieved smile as she wrapped her arms around him. "You scared the life out of me."

"You didn't hear me traipsing through the house? I also called out for you at the front door," he said, wrapping his arms around her short frame, leaning down to kiss her on the top of the head.

Has she gotten shorter? The thought jumped into his head as he looked down at her gray head, which landed well below

his face. Since Cole had hit six feet when he'd turned sixteen, his grandmother had reliably hit the top of his shoulder, but she seemed to be a couple inches below that now.

“Oh, I was in La-la Land,” she said lightly, pulling away to tend to the stove. “You know how I get when I cook.”

“Hmph.” Cole looked her up and down with concern. This woman led a staff of twenty-five at the gargantuan Conrad house. She could usually hear a pin drop and spot a speck of dust from a hundred yards away. “You look nice.”

She turned around, grabbing the side of her airy, floral print dress to more fully display the wide pleated skirt.

“How could I not dress up when my prodigal grandson is actually paying me a visit?” she asked in a sardonic voice as she returned to the stovetop. “Morgan was in the Square today with her girlfriend and bought this for me.”

Cole grunted in response as he opened the fridge and pulled out a bag of grapes. “She’s not here, right?”

“No,” she replied shortly. “She’s going out with friends tonight. What have you been up to? I haven’t seen you in so long,” his grandmother noted, her voice coming out quiet and coaxing.

“I’ve been busy with work and music,” Cole responded, popping a grape in his mouth and falling into his favorite kitchen chair. “Sorry.”

“Those are terrible excuses,” she said quietly, turning around to shoot him a scowl. “Tell me things, Cole. You’re

always so secretive. I never know what's going on in that opaque life of yours. Do you have a girlfriend to introduce to me yet?"

"Nope," he said shortly, popping another grape in his mouth. Cole couldn't imagine introducing any of the girls he'd been with over the past few years to his grandmother. Girls who frequented dive bars and liked the way he looked with a guitar in his hands. He might have shared an awkward breakfast with one of them, but that was as far as his non-bedroom socializing with the opposite sex had gone in many years.

Considering her, he took a deep breath and slowly exhaled, bracing himself. "Actually, I do have *something* to report," he said before he could change his mind. "I think I'm getting a music deal."

His grandmother paused and turned to look at him, her brow furrowed and her eyes flinty. "Oh?" she said tightly before turning back to the stovetop.

"That's all you have to say about it?" Cole pressed.

"Well, I just thought we'd put all that behind us," she said slowly, looking at him sadly. "You're doing so well at the library. Don't you like it there?"

"Yeah, of course I do," Cole said quickly. "It's just that.... Well, you know this is what I've always wanted."

"Certainly, dear," she said, turning around to look at him with a soft sense of understanding. "Well, tell me how it all

came about.”

Cole hesitated, his eyes dropping to the floor and tracing the lines of the linoleum made to look like bricks. “It’s a small indie label owned by some people that were in town skiing. They, uh, heard me at The Blue Sky, and ... *liked what they heard,*” Cole finished, repeating Tripp’s words from earlier.

A sick sense of dread filled him as he acknowledged he was lying to his sweet, elderly grandmother, but it was ... *complicated*. She couldn’t know that Morgan’s uncle was involved. It came too close to her finding out what had happened between him and Morgan, and he’d never been quite ready to divulge that shitshow to her.

As far his grandmother knew, he and Morgan just didn’t get along—she’d always chalked it up to jealousy that they had to share being the center of her universe with each other—and Cole had no desire to enlighten her of the reality of the situation.

“I’m going up to Golden Lake with them this weekend to record some tracks and figure out if this is really something I want to do,” he continued.

“Oh, well, that sounds lovely,” she replied with an obvious and concerted effort to appear perky. “Golden Lake is such a nice place. Keep me posted on how all this plays out.”

As Cole opened his mouth to respond, he was interrupted by the sound of the ancient front door opening and closing with loud creaks and bangs. *Really, how could she have missed me walking in with that racket?*

“Lucy!” A loud voice rang out from the front of the house.
Oh, shit.

“Morgan’s here?” he asked his grandmother around the grape he was chewing on.

“Mmm-hmm, just for a bit. I told you she was going out with friends tonight.” She nodded her head and looked back at him slyly with a faux look of surprise. “In the kitchen!” she called loudly toward the front of the house.

“The basil at Felix’s was crap, so I had to go all the way to —” Morgan’s voice cut off when she walked into the kitchen, her eyes scanning Cole’s form as he leaned back in his chair, throwing another grape in his mouth.

He couldn’t let her see how perturbed he was about seeing her in his grandmother’s kitchen, how just the sight of her seemed to cause heat to rise within his body. He quickly threw another grape in his mouth, methodically chewing as he looked her up and down.

“Oh.” She said the word tightly, her eyes darting quickly between them. “You didn’t tell me Cole would be here.”

“I didn’t? Ha!” Cole’s grandmother burst out congenially. “Well, he’s here.”

“Indeed,” said Morgan, shooting Lucy a side-eyed glare. “Um, well, I’m gonna go get ready.” With that, she unceremoniously dropped the bag of basil on the counter and bolted from the room.

Coward, Cole thought as he watched her flee.

Tapping his forefinger on the kitchen table in concentration, he watched his grandmother silently work at the stove for a few seconds, rising from his chair before he could change his mind.

“I’ll be right back, Grandma.”

“You be nice, Cole,” his grandmother said sternly as he crossed the room and walked into the narrow dark hallway that led to the bedrooms.

“Of course,” he called out distantly from the hallway as he looked at the closed doors of the three extra rooms before knocking softly on the one with a bright light shining under it.

He heard a scuffle inside the room before the door quickly flew open, revealing Morgan Conrad in a short blue dress, her bare feet sinking into the carpet. Her green eyes flashed up at him in surprise.

His heart jumped in his chest at the sight of her standing in front of him, so close he could touch her if he wanted to—which he *didn’t*.

He indulged himself for a few moments as he attempted to pull himself together. Apparently not needing the same moment to compose herself, though, Morgan sighed impatiently, narrowing eyes on him.

“What do you want?” The words flew out of her mouth like sparks off a sharpened slice of metal.

“Can I come in?” he responded coolly, looking down at her with a focused look of disdain.

She continued to eye him warily before taking a wide step back, casually pulling the door open wide before turning her back and sashaying into the room. She collapsed on the double bed in a single liquid motion, her smooth, bare legs held in front of her and her eyes looking up at him with a dark, questioning glare.

Despite all the composure-building he'd done earlier, Cole felt his body harden at the sight of her relaxed form on the bed. It used to be when he was in the vicinity of her bed, he'd waste no time in joining her there.

That's not happening this time, he reminded his body as he looked down at her bare legs, slightly spread out below her short skirt, and her blond waves falling over her exposed shoulders.

“Cole, what are you doing here?” she finally bit out shortly, looking up at him suspiciously. “Are you just going to stand there and stare at me like a fucking weirdo?”

Clearing his throat, Cole stood straighter in an attempt to harden himself to the sight of her. “Why are *you* here?” he asked bluntly, his voice coming out more harshly than he intended.

“You're the one who knocked on my door,” she accused him.

“No, I mean why are you *here*? In *my* grandmother's house,” he emphasized.

Her face immediately pulled back as if he'd slapped her with the simple question, her eyes widening and falling down to the floor in shock, which only built up Cole's annoyance. Why was it a shock to her that he didn't like this? She had to know he wouldn't like this.

"It's none of your business," she answered quietly, not looking up at him.

"It sure is," he said gruffly, his gaze searching for a place to land until his eyes fell on her tall bookshelf with the rows and rows of colorful books organized in perfect ROYGBIV coordination. "You don't get to mooch off my family, Morgan," he told her bookshelf. "Especially not when Uncle Daddy funds your life."

"You're an idiot, Cole," she said in a sharp voice, and he turned to see that she was looking at him now, and her eyes were overflowing with anger. "Do you think I'd be waiting tables at The Blue Sky if *Uncle Daddy* was funding my life? He cut me off." She cringed as if she immediately regretted divulging the information to him.

"He finally cut you off? Why?" he asked urgently, unable to disguise the shock he felt at the revelation. He knew how important it was for Morgan to have money, to not have to work for anything. He'd seriously thought her job at The Blue Sky was just because she thought it'd be fun to work at her favorite place.

A dark sigh escaped her lips at the questions, and she fell back flat on the bed, her short skirt riding even further up her

thighs. Now that she couldn't see him, Cole couldn't help openly staring at her like some sort of leering creep.

She was looking up at the ceiling blankly, her hair spread out on the quilt and her arms stretched over her head. She looked like a banquet laid out before him, and he felt something sputter inside of him at the sight. An image barged into his brain, completely uninvited, of *his* Morgan lying in the ferns, looking over at him with awe and love as she slowly ran her fingers through his hair.

“Once again, it’s none of your business,” she answered in a quiet, throaty voice. “Now go away and leave me alone.”

“No,” he said simply. Unable to stop himself, he walked over to the bed, falling down to the mattress on his knees. Her eyes shot toward him immediately, as if she’d just realized the delicate position she was in. She seemed to stop breathing as the mattress sank under his weight.

“What are you doing?” she asked nervously, her uneasy eyes looking up at his face.

Dropping down to his hands, he crawled over her prone form until he was positioned over her. Inches separated them as his face hovered above hers, and his eyes danced across her face, her collarbone, and down to her bare shoulders.

A rosy blush moved up her chest as she breathed in and out quickly in short, irritated breaths as she moved her head to face to the side. “Get off of me,” she said tightly, squirming to move up in an attempt to get away from him.

“You need to leave,” he finally said in a strained voice as, despite his efforts, heat pumped through his body as he looked down at her exposed neck. “Get away from my grandmother. Get away from me. You’re doing it again. Taking advantage of someone else just to save your ass.”

Her face whipped forward at his words. “For the last time, *it’s none of your business,*” she insisted.

“It’s my business when it’s *my* family you’re taking advantage of,” he said angrily, moving closer to her.

“I’m not taking advantage,” Morgan maintained, her hands coming up to press on his chest. “She *offered.*”

Cole felt himself harden at the feeling of her hand on his chest, his head gravitating toward her. Only a few more inches and he’d be home.

“Go home, Cole, I can take care of myself.”

The words echoed through his head, and he pulled back from her, quickly and desperately. *What am I doing?*

Slowly pulling away from her, he got up, looking down at her like she was a snake he’d stumbled upon. How had he ended up like this and with *her* again?

She rose from the bed slowly, pausing to straighten her skirt and flip her hair behind her shoulders before delicately wiping her eyes. Focusing her red-rimmed gaze on him, she set her jaw in a resolute scowl.

“You’re an asshole, Cole Sutton,” she said resolutely. “Now mind your own business.”

He almost didn't hear her; the last words came out so quietly. And she seemed unable to maintain her strong stance as she trembled slightly, a single tear falling down her cheek as she turned away from him, leaving him with nothing but her back.

He opened his mouth to say something but stopped himself before the words could get out. Anything he'd say at this point would just make it worse, and it wasn't worth the trouble. *What was there to salvage here?*

So he did the only thing he'd ever done when things got complicated with Morgan Conrad.

He left.

5

MORGAN

TEN YEARS AGO

*E*ver since Morgan was a little girl, she'd gotten a rise out of provoking people. Causing faces to pull back in shock and alarm always gave her a sick little thrill. She'd always done everything in her power to irritate her mother, scandalize her uncle, and tease her cousin.

She was smart enough to know by now that she did it all for attention. Even negative attention was attention, which was better than the alternative—no attention. She was not one to be ignored.

As her bare feet padded along the forest floor, she felt anticipation rise within her at the thought of seeing Cole. She probably should have worn shoes, but it seemed to really annoy him when she walked around the woods barefoot, so she'd kicked aside her flip flops on her way out the kitchen door. She loved the feeling of the cool ground pressing into the soles of her feet, anyway, so it was a win-win.

Seeing the bubbling creek ahead, she hopped across the scattered stone bridge and quietly walked through the tall

boulders and into the clearing where she'd been meeting Cole on his lunch break for the past three weeks.

He sat leaning against one of the boulders, the sun streaming through the treetops and catching the blond gleams in his honey-colored hair. He looked like a painting. Morgan thought that if she was an artist, she would paint him like this and hang the picture over her bed like an obsessed teeny bopper.

Unsurprisingly, he didn't notice her right away, as he was reading a book—probably a boring one. If she'd learned anything about Cole Sutton over the past few weeks it was that he read, almost exclusively, boring books.

She'd tried to read what he proclaimed to be his favorite book, Slaughterhouse Five. She'd known by the title that she'd hate it, and she hadn't been able to finish it. It just hadn't made any sense.

Her favorite book was Dreaming of You by Lisa Kleypas. Now there was a book that made sense. A good book required, at the very least, a dollop of romance—if not a complete dousing—she'd found. Without it, it was difficult for her to remain fully invested in a story.

As if he sensed her gaze, he looked up at her then, his green-gold eyes lighting up as they settled on her. Morgan couldn't help but revel in the warm glow she felt as his eyes trailed up and down her slight frame. She'd taken care with what she wore today, a loose pink sundress that showed off her

tan skin and sun-brightened hair. But when his eyes reached her feet, his face clouded with anger.

“You’re seriously going to hurt your feet,” he said sternly. “Why do you insist on walking around the woods barefoot?”

Adrenaline raced through her veins at his words. She wanted to challenge him and argue, but she found she didn’t actually have it in her as she shrugged and waded through the ferns toward him, peeking over at the book in his hands curiously. “What are you reading?” she asked.

“Cat’s Cradle,” he answered, holding up the cover. Looking at it, Morgan saw that the author was Kurt Vonnegut, who’d also written Slaughterhouse Five. Ugh.

Anxious to avoid another argument over books, Morgan released a nervous giggle before she abruptly dropped to the ground, onto the thick ferns. Spreading out on the cool ground, she stared up at the sky through the spaces between the tree branches, her breaths coming out quick and anxious, her fingers digging into the earth.

There was a strong breeze today, and it created a swishing sound as the leaves and branches moved over her, dancing against the sky as dark clouds drifted past. She didn’t hear him come over, but before long he was standing over her, his face pulled in a look of concern.

“What are you doing?” he asked warily.

Now that he was closer, she studied him. He was wearing baggy, worn jeans and a grimy white T-shirt, his arms and

face covered with smudges from his day building the patio wall with Nelson.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” she asked gently, pulling on the hem of his pants. “Lie down with me. It’s nice.”

He hesitated for a minute before letting out a disbelieving sigh and dropping to the ground, his broad shoulders hitting the ferns next to her.

She looked at him out of her periphery and noticed his white shirt was tighter over his chest. He’d gotten so much bigger since he’d started working with Nelson ... and tan. His eyes and hair glowed against the sun and dirt on his skin. Lying back like he was, his hair hung back from his face, and she could fully appreciate his profile, his skin. He was so beautiful.

Turning her attention back to the sky, she let her mind wander over the sights and sounds that surrounded her. The sound of the branches moving and his breath coming in and out of his nose; the birds and the trees moving against the sky.

He seemed perfectly content lying on the forest floor with her. That’s what she liked best about Cole. Although he was initially a little resistant, he never seemed to mind that she was a little weird.

“I don’t have much time,” he said to the sky. “You were late, and I have to get back to Nelson.”

She turned her head toward him. He had his eyes closed now, and it looked like he might be asleep. “I was arguing with my mother,” Morgan admitted.

“What about?” he asked in a deep voice, keeping his eyes closed.

“She’s got a new boyfriend,” Morgan said quietly. Whenever Adele had a new boyfriend, Morgan’s life was completely turned upside down. “She met him online. He lives in Texas.”

“Oh,” he said softly, understanding dawning on him as he opened his eyes to stare at the sky. “Does that mean you’re moving?”

“I hope not,” she said. “But that’s why I was late ... we were arguing about it.”

“I don’t want you to leave,” he said, rising up to prop his head up on his elbow, looking down at her seriously. His lips were drawn down in a frown as his eyes darted around her face.

He hadn’t kissed her yet. She wondered if he ever would.

“Me neither,” she said softly. “I’m going to ask my uncle if I can stay here with him and Ian.”

Cole perked up. “Do you think he and your mom would go for it?”

“I don’t know ... maybe? My uncle hates me, so it’s kind of hard to say,” she admitted darkly. She didn’t like admitting her family problems to outsiders, especially the boy she was into, but she seemed even less likely to control her impulses around Cole. “So, you’d be ... upset if I left?”

“Of course I would,” he said, looking her over askance. “You think I lie around on the ground like this with any other girls?”

“I don’t know what you get up to,” she lied. Morgan was actually well-versed on Cole’s activities, having thoroughly internet stalked him in addition to spending literal hours watching through the dining room window as he built a stupid wall.

“You’re the only thing I’m getting up to lately,” he admitted with a growl. She turned around and saw that he was staring at her, his sun-kissed cheeks burnished with a new red color as his eyes moved to her chest where the strap of her dress had slipped down.

“You don’t have to sound so upset about it,” she whispered as he rose above her, looking down at her. He didn’t say anything, but his eyes may as well have been spouting poetry and belting ballads as they took her in, lying there with her head in the mud.

Reaching over, he dragged his thumb over her cheek slowly and reverently. His finger felt rough on her skin, and she willed him to lower down a bit further, to connect his lips with hers.

But he didn’t move. He just stared down at her, rubbing her cheek and thinking his deep freaking unknown thoughts.

“What are you waiting—” she started to ask, but didn’t finish as his lips came down to connect with hers.

Oh, finally.

It was the only thought Morgan seemed able to have as his soft lips moved hers in a rough, uncoordinated fashion. She'd been dreaming about this moment since she first saw him rooting around his locker, and now it was finally happening.

He seemed so excited as his lips moved away from hers and traveled down her neck; they felt soft and cool against her hot skin. Cole was never that excited about anything, and it gave her a heady feeling of power to realize that she could bring this out in him.

He reached over to rest his hand lightly on the top of her dress, over her breast. She gasped at the contact as her nipples came to attention, a spark igniting inside of her as her back arched toward him.

She felt completely overwhelmed by the feelings as she reached up to touch his neck, her fingers resting lightly on his warm, damp skin.

He pulled back from her then, looking down at her with worry in his eyes, his hair hanging down over his face and his breath coming out fast.

"Was it okay that I did that?" he asked in a low, concerned voice.

"More than okay," she said with a hazy sort of smile. "It was about time."

His lips quirked up in a half smile as he looked down, considering her. "My wild girl," he said softly. "I don't want

you to leave ... even though you like terrible books and your feet are filthy.”

Morgan burst out a laugh. “Well, now I have to stay. Who else will inspire you to come up with beautiful words like that?”

“You’re my muse,” he said seriously, and something inside Morgan melted at the confession.

“Oh, yeah?” she asked lightly, reaching up to weave her fingers in his hair, pushing it away from his face to get a better look at him. “The Nancy to your Sid? The Courtney to your Kurt?”

It was his turn to laugh as he simultaneously rolled his eyes and shook his head. “You’re not leaving,” he said quietly, reaching up to rub her cheek with the pad of his thumb.

“I’m not leaving,” she repeated, her eyes worshipping him as she pulled him down, closer to her lips. “Not without you.”



“Huh? What did you say?” Morgan asked, jumping to attention and looking quizzically at Lena through the dim lights that hung over the large round table.

She was at Crunchie’s, her favorite mysteriously ocean-themed restaurant, with her crew. Her ride-or-dies. The people she could count on above all others. She should feel happy and relaxed, sitting here after such a heinous week, but instead she felt shitty and tense.

She hated to admit it, but she was shaken up about what had happened with Cole in her bedroom. How did he still manage to get to her after all this time?

“I asked you if you started that book that you just *had* to have,” Lena said with a laugh, looking at Morgan expectantly from where she sat across the table next to her boyfriend, Jake, her broken ankle propped up on a free chair. “You guys should have seen the speed at which Morgan dragged me to The Blue Bard this afternoon. She was on a mission from the book gods.”

“I don’t know which one of you to be more pissed at about that,” Jake said, looking disbelievingly between Lena and Morgan. “Helena for hobbling around the icy Square in the first place or Morgan for dragging her there.”

Happy for the diversion, Morgan gave Jake a long, bored look. “Puh-lease, Jake,” she scolded, playfully. “You can’t keep Lena home under lock and key for all eternity. She’s a big girl!”

“*Yeah*, and anyway,” inserted Lena with a finger raised in the air like she was at the Constitutional Convention or something. “Partial weight bearing means—”

“Does not mean hiking all over town,” intercepted Jake. “I’ve broken plenty of bones in my life, Helena. You need to sit on your ass and suck it up.”

Morgan opened her mouth to make a smart-mouthed quip—*now I can enjoy myself*—when Annie, ever the peacemaker, chimed in.

“I’ve gotta agree with Jake, Leeny,” she said slowly, reaching over a hand to rest on Lena’s arm. “You really need to take it easy.”

Knowing Annie, she probably felt a little guilty for the way things had gone down—quite literally—with Lena’s ankle.

Lena and Annie had both fallen while traipsing across the Square a couple weeks ago when Lena had been luring Annie to her surprise birthday party. They had slipped and fallen right outside the doorway of Explore Lake Conrad, the recreation business that Jake had recently opened with Ian, Morgan’s cousin and Annie’s fiancé. It was also at said party where Ian had proposed, pulling out the sparkling rock that now graced Annie’s small hand, which Ian hadn’t let go of since they’d sat down.

Ian chose that moment to smile at Annie supportively, giving her a gentle squeeze of the hand and causing Morgan to gag a little bit.

“Ugh,” Lena groaned, dramatically dropping her head in her hands. “I know, I know. I just didn’t realize how hard this would be. Who would have thought that *I* of all people would struggle with constantly sitting?”

“Oh my gosh, Lena,” Annie said with a start, drawing in a sharp breath as if she’d just realized something. “What about the winter festival?”

Ugh, the freaking winter festival. The winter festival was a Lake Conrad staple occurring every year in the Square. It was like a Christmas market a month after Christmas, which

Morgan had always found a little silly. But such was life in a tourist town that revolved around winter sports. There were stands holding crafts and trinkets sold by the community, tons of food, and usually live music and small performances by community groups.

Lena had started working a few months ago for the Lake Conrad Art House as a teaching artist, but she also did a lot of drama activities. She was supposed to be leading a group of middle schoolers in some kind of Shakespeare in the Park performance.

“I know,” Lena said with a frown. “I am supposed to be Hippolyta from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. I don’t think Shakespeare envisioned the Queen of the Amazons wearing a cast,” she grumbled, glaring at her cast angrily.

Ian nodded his head in distant understanding, causing Morgan to release a short chortle that she disguised with a drink of water. She knew that nod. That nod was from a man who didn’t give a damn about Lena’s ankle but would pretend to because *Annie* gave a damn.

As Annie launched into a supportive diatribe, Morgan considered her cousin—silent, bearded, and holding the hand of the woman he loved. He’d come so far since breaking away from their family. He was opening his own business and he was engaged to be married. All in all, he was well on his way to that white picket fence and 2.5 kids life.

She was proud of him but could admit to being a bit jealous. Why hadn’t she landed on her feet like he had? If anything,

she'd belly-flopped into her new life, and she hadn't quite figured out how to get up yet.

Maybe everyone had been right about her. Maybe she couldn't hack it. Her heart sank at the thought as she shifted her blank gaze to the words on the menu in front of her, her eyes blurring over as her thoughts became muddled and rambling.

“Ugh, you're *insufferable*.”

Morgan looked up as Lena let out another loud groan. Oh, great, the conversation had evolved into a Jake and Lena argument while she had been zoning out.

Lena's brows were fixed in a heavy glare, her blue eyes clashing with Jake's hazel ones as they went back and forth in some sort of silent argument, the tension between them growing thick ... and sexual? *Ugh, gross*.

“Where's Cara?” Morgan said suddenly, looking around the restaurant for their waitress. “You guys want me to go to the bar and get us some drinks while we wait?”

“Yes,” Annie chimed in, starting to rise from her chair. “I'll go with you!” Usually, Morgan and Annie had an unspoken agreement to escape and talk about Lena and Jake's bizarre love/hate tension behind their backs, but Morgan wasn't in the mood tonight—she needed a minute.

“No, no,” she said, waving her friend away. “You stay where you are, my Annie-kins. I got this.”

“Oh ... okay.” Morgan caught Annie’s concerned frown as she turned to weave through the tables toward the small restaurant’s narrow bar.

The bar area was empty of both customers and a bartender, but Morgan didn’t mind waiting. With her work at The Blue Sky, she was used to loitering around bars by now. Leaning against the shiny wood, she studied the shelves of bottles that lined the mirrored wall behind the bar.

What the hell was that with Cole earlier? The thought soaked into her consciousness as she finally let herself absorb the thoughts and feelings that had overwhelmed her since she’d left Lucy’s house in a rush an hour ago.

That had been *dark*, and *weird*, and ... *super hot*. She reached up to touch the back of her neck at the prickly sensation she felt, remembering the way he’d hovered over her. So close and yet still so far away.

God, that’s so messed up. How after all these years she was still getting turned on by that self-righteous douche, she’d never understand

Looking at her reflection between the bottles of vodka lined up against the mirror, there was a light blush coating her cheeks as she remembered his movements. The way his hair had hung down around his face, the scent of fresh air coming off his skin. It was just like the old days with him looking down at her like that, like she was all he could think about.

Some of the memories with him were so dim, she wasn’t sure if they had ever actually happened or if she’d just made

them up. Others may as well have happened yesterday; they were so bright and vivid in her mind.

She'd never been as happy or as sad as she'd been with that pompous prick.

"Looks like I'm always destined to be watching you stand around bars."

Morgan jumped at the mocking voice, reluctantly pulling her attention away from her reflection and her memories.

A vaguely familiar blond guy stood next to her. He had pale blue, taunting eyes and short, bright blond hair. As her eyes skimmed him distractedly, she couldn't place where she knew him from.

That's never a good sign, she thought with dread, eventually forcing a smile onto her frozen cheeks.

"Ha. Ha," she enunciated slowly, turning away to look for a bartender with a new urgency.

"You don't remember me, do you?" he asked, flashing a megawatt smile.

Morgan studied him a second time, and then dropped her head into her hands dramatically in an elaborate display of exasperation. "Ugh, no. I'm sorry. Can you refresh my memory?"

"Well, let's see," he said, leaning against the bar as his eyes grazed her figure in her tight blue dress. "You dumped a couple beers on me last night."

“Oh my god,” Morgan said with a sharp intake of breath, her hand coming up to her mouth. “Peter’s friend?” She’d been trying to block out that whole unfortunate experience over the past twenty-four hours.

He chuckled darkly, looking to the side. “That’s not usually how a guy likes to be remembered, but yeah sure ... *Peter’s* friend.”

“Shit,” Morgan said, a dread drifting through her body as she was hit with a realization. “Peter’s not here, is he?” She’d been looking forward to never seeing Peter again, but now her eyes darted over the crowd in the restaurant looking for his little piggy face.

“Yeah, he’s back there,” he said, motioning toward the back of the restaurant with his chin.

“Ohhhhh,” Morgan let out slowly with a cringe, her eyes zeroing to the back of the restaurant where Peter sat at a small table with his sister, openly glaring at Morgan. “I hope he already ate because I’m pretty sure the sight of me just ruined his appetite.”

He chuckled and looked up at her curiously. “I’m Tripp, by the way,” he said slowly. “In case you were interested in *my* name.”

“Oh,” Morgan said with surprise, mildly relieved to have a name for the blond guy’s face. “I’m Morgan.”

She smiled at him distantly before pulling away to look for the bartender. *Where is he? Fitzzy would never leave a*

customer waiting this long.

“Anyone ever told you that you’re a beautiful girl, Morgan?” Tripp asked, interrupting her bartender search.

She slowly turned her head toward him. He had the heavy-looking eyes of a man not to be trusted. He was leaning deep onto the bar, his gaze skimming her from top to bottom in a way-too-obvious way as his hand rubbed his chin slowly.

Eww. Morgan openly shivered at the sight of his open leering. *Nobody should have to deal with this shit.*

She’d much rather be dwelling on her recent sexy-weird interaction with her secret high school boyfriend than dealing with this creeper, but *c’est la vie*.

“Yes, of course,” she said blandly. “Naturally I’ve heard that many times throughout the course of my life.” She narrowed her eyes on his smarmy face as he pulled back a smile of pure, unsuspecting joy, leaning back while he clapped his hands in celebration.

He leaned forward and rested his face in his hand in a boyish way, looking at her from under hooded eyes. “You’re a trip,” he said lightly, his words coming out with an appreciative sigh.

“No, I think that’s your name,” she quipped just as the bartender finally noticed her. “Oh, hi! Can I have a rosé, three Black Buttes, and a Coke?”

Nodding, the bartender turned to work on her drinks, and Morgan turned around nervously to see that Tripp was still

standing next to her, staring at her with his face resting on his hand like she was a beautiful spring day or some shit.

She shot him a quick, distant smile before turning her back to him in an obvious effort to get him to leave. She stifled a fresh set of shivers that traveled up her spine when she saw him still standing next to her in the mirror. *God, this guy gives me the heebie-jeebies.*

“So, what are you doing this weekend, Morgan?” he asked lightly, drawing her attention to him again.

“Mmm?” she said, turning back to him with a surprised look.

“We’re going up to my cabin on Golden Lake,” he said simply. “Me, Peter, and his sister Callista ... they’re my business partners.”

“Cool,” she replied neutrally. “I hear Golden Lake is beautiful. I’m sure you guys will have a great time.”

“You want to come with us?” he blurted randomly.

“Huh?” She felt her face fall into a deer-in-headlights look.

“Yeah,” he said, his voice throaty and suggestive. “I’d love to get to know you better.”

“Ummm....” Morgan was, for once in her entire life, a bit lost for words. Go out to a cabin at secluded Golden Lake with *this* guy? And fucking *Peter*? He’d probably murder her in her sleep.

“Yeah,” he said smoothly through his hooded eyes, seemingly not noticing her resistance. “Your friend Cole will be there, too.”

“Cole Sutton?” she asked quietly, a spring of hope erupting inside of her.

“Yeah, your mighty rescuer from last night? We’re setting him up with a record deal.”

Oh, yeah, Tripp and his friends work for my uncle. It wasn’t surprising to her that her uncle was connected to a record label. Anything that would bring in more of those sweet dollar bills was a-okay with him. But if there was a thought that could make Tripp even more unsavory to her than he already was, it was a connection to her uncle.

So that’s how Cole knows them? He’s getting a record deal? she thought, her curiosity reignited.

From Uncle Curtis of all people?

She felt a surge of despair pump from her heart and into her veins as the realization settled inside of her, leaving her fingers and toes feeling numb and tingling.

She couldn’t breathe; something was pressing down on her chest. Lifting up her hand to her heart, she looked up at Tripp desperately, searching his face for answers. He viewed her nonchalantly, totally oblivious to her freak out, which Morgan felt was all but blaring through the restaurant like a siren.

“Yeah, maybe I will come,” she finally replied, not thinking about the words as they came out of her mouth

“Excellent,” Tripp replied triumphantly, a pleased expression on his face as his eyes took the familiar path up and down her body. “Give me your number....”

Morgan numbly recited her phone number so Tripp could program it into his phone and text her with his number.

She barely registered any of it was happening. Not as Tripp took his leave, and not when the bartender brought the drinks over and set them in front of her expectantly.

“That’ll be \$22.87,” he said deeply. But she just stood there, unable to move or speak.

“Here you go,” a voice behind her said, and Morgan turned around to see Ian handing the bartender a credit card over her head.

Her breath came out quick and deep as she turned away from her cousin in an effort to get a hold of herself.

Cole—*her Cole*—was leaving? He was breaking his promise. Neither of them was ever supposed to leave the other behind. It wasn’t allowed.

“You okay, Morg?” Ian asked as he took his card from the bartender and stuck it back in his wallet.

“Yep,” she said quickly, grabbing her Coke and Lena’s wine before she shifted her hips to slip past Ian.

Ever since that last night with him, she liked to think she’d maintained a neutral stance toward Cole Sutton—ignoring him except when he refused to be ignored.

She didn't care about anything that had happened over the past ten years, though. None of that mattered now, and she'd be damned if she was going to let him just walk away and leave her here.

6

MORGAN

The Monday afternoon lunch shift at The Blue Sky was a relief after the high drama of the weekend. Morgan hated to admit it—it didn't really jive with the adventure-loving mystique she'd built for herself—but damn did she love some peace and quiet.

It was hard to be sad or conflicted about Cole, her family, or the overall state of her life while she lazily served up bowls of potato soup and glasses of iced tea to sweet elderly locals and friendly business-type people.

It was just her and Jennifer in the restaurant this afternoon. They'd had a minor lunch rush at noon, but most of the weekday skiers didn't bother coming all the way down to The Blue Sky for lunch, instead choosing to eat at one of the overpriced places on the hill.

And good-natured and matronly Jennifer, who always worked the lunch shift, was as rowdy and raucous as Morgan, and always told the funniest stories about her school-aged kids.

Unfortunately, Morgan didn't get to work the lunch shift that often. Being young and hot, Craig claimed he liked to work with her during weekend night shifts where there would be a higher appreciation of her ... "*assets*," as he'd put it.

Craig's kind of a creep, Morgan thought distantly as she pulled out a chair across from Jennifer, settling in to roll silverware and engage in a gab session, which was something that always brought Morgan true joy.

She likened silverware rolling to knitting a scarf or painting a single wall. The methodical motions soothed her, giving her something to do with her hands and brain that wasn't moping around and bemoaning the slow deterioration of her life.

She'd just started on the first set when Jennifer's movements paused, her eyes widening as she looked over Morgan's shoulder.

"Isn't that your cousin, hon?" she asked, her brown eyes questioning as she gestured toward the front of the restaurant with her chin.

Morgan turned to glance behind her, and sure enough, there was Ian, brooding awkwardly in front of the bright mid-afternoon sun that streamed through the glass doors.

"Yeah, that's him," Morgan said dismissively, turning around to grab a new fork and knife.

"Aren't you going to go talk to him?" asked Jennifer, her eyes wide. Although she'd gotten used to Morgan, as a local, Jennifer was still a little starstruck by the Conrad name. *The*

Conrads are well known to be the most rich and powerful assholes of the entirety of this small hamlet, after all, Morgan thought cynically.

“Nope,” Morgan replied as she lined up the next knife and fork diagonally on a napkin. “He’ll come over here if he has something to say to me.”

“Well, then I think he has something to say to you,” Jennifer said with awe. “Because here he comes.”

Morgan silently groaned as she waited for Ian to make his way across the restaurant. There was only one reason why her cousin would seek her out like this at work in the middle of the day—he wanted to *check on her*.

“Morgan.”

She looked up to see Ian scowling down at her in a familiar look of disapproval. He looked as straitlaced as ever in a sleek North Face jacket and sand-colored khakis, his beard neatly trimmed, and his hair shorn almost painfully close to his scalp.

“Hey,” she said, glancing back down to her work as she placed another knife and fork on a napkin, meticulously folding the ends over before rolling it in a tight burrito shape and securing it with a napkin band.

“Are you going to seat me or what?” he asked impatiently.

“You want to eat?” Morgan asked, looking up at him with surprise as she set the silverware burrito aside.

“This is a restaurant, right? Why else would I be here?” he asked, irritation eclipsing his eyes.

“I don’t know your life, Ian,” Morgan said defensively, looking up at Jennifer with an *Amirite?* expression, which Jennifer returned with an owl-like look of confusion. She hadn’t rolled a single set of silverware since Ian had walked over, her head moving quickly between the two of them.

Ian didn’t respond, he just continued glaring down at her in annoyance.

Ugh, I might as well get this over with.

“This better be good. You’re interrupting my favorite part of the day,” she groaned, finally getting up from her chair and shooting Jennifer an apologetic look. “I’ll be right back.”

Jennifer nodded her head in wide-eyed understanding as Morgan looked resentfully at her cousin and rose from her chair. Stomping toward the front of the restaurant, she grabbed a laminated menu from the hostess stand and walked to table nine, where she slapped the menu down roughly.

“Here,” she said firmly. “What do you want?”

“This is pretty shitty service,” Ian grumbled, sliding the wooden chair out and sitting down with a distant scowl on his face.

“Well, that’s kind of what I’m known for,” Morgan said lightly, sliding into the chair across from him. “I’d hate to break precedent just because you’re my cousin.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Ian stated, picking up the menu before quickly tossing it aside and looking up at her with intensity. “I really came here to talk to you.”

“What a surprise,” Morgan replied blandly, looking at her fingernails as she waited for the lecture to commence.

“Are you okay, Morg?” The question was spoken in such a low, sincere tone that he caught her a bit off guard. She and Ian were rarely sincere with one another.

“What?”

“Are you okay?” Ian repeated with intensity. “You don’t *seem* okay.”

“Of course I’m not fucking okay, Ian,” she said, her voice rising as she gestured around the empty bar angrily.

“Well, you know that you don’t *have* to do this.”

“Do what?”

“Work here,” he responded, lowering his head toward her. “You obviously hate it.”

Morgan sighed deeply, debating about how much she should lie. She *did* hate working here. She’d originally thought it would be fun, and she had *other* reasons, of course, that had nothing to do with a certain moody, shaggy-haired singer slash guitar player who just so happened to spend every Friday night here. But it had turned into one of the most painful experiences of her life. She hated to think it was because she couldn’t handle a job. It was just *this* job she couldn’t handle, right?

“It’s really not that bad,” she said with a sigh and a grumble, dropping her face in her hands and looking at him between her fingers.

“Not that bad? You’re spending hours working here while Cole Sutton plays?”

Morgan’s heart jumped at Cole’s name. “He’s ... not that bad,” she repeated lamely.

“Not that bad? You hate that guy.”

“Not ... that ... bad,” she said under her breath. Ian had never found out about Cole. As far as he knew, Morgan just hated Cole’s music.

He didn’t seem to notice how much she was freaking out talking with him about Cole, though, and she giggled nervously.

“Why don’t you talk to Bridget and see if she still needs help at The Blue Bard?” he pressed. “You love it there, and you can force all your shitty books on people.”

“When was the last time *you* read a book, Ian?” she asked with a scowl.

“That’s not the point,” he insisted. “Look, I’m worried about you ... and so is Annie.”

“Well, you shouldn’t be,” Morgan answered. “This is where I need to be right now.”

“I don’t understand it,” Ian replied, shaking his head and pausing as he looked away from her distantly. “Well, you’ve got three years until your trust fund kicks in. There’s nothing my dad can do about that, you know? It’s your money.”

“I know....” Morgan’s voice was distant as she studied the table’s shiny surface. In truth, she didn’t care about the money. She didn’t seem to care about anything lately. Caring about something or someone meant losing it, and she didn’t know how much more loss she could possibly take. “Have you talked to Bella lately?”

Ian pressed his lips together and shook his head. “No, my father took her out of school. I think she’s being homeschooled by a tutor at the Main House.”

“Hmph,” Morgan grumbled in a low voice, her eyes widening. That was alarming. He was isolating her even more? Morgan didn’t understand why Ian wasn’t spending all this worry on Bella instead of her.

Her sister had been devastated when she’d left, not understanding the reasons that Morgan couldn’t live under the thumb of her family anymore. Morgan had promised her that she would get in touch after she left, but she just hadn’t been able to make it happen.

I’m just like her, Morgan thought darkly, her mother’s face flashing through her mind. *Abandoning Bella for my own selfishness.*

Although neither she nor Bella had seen their mother much in the past few years, there was still a heavy darkness involved in growing up in the shadow of Adele Conrad. Morgan hadn’t exactly come out of it unscathed, and she doubted that Bella would either.

And I just left her there....

“I just really want you to think hard about if this is really the place for you, Morgan,” Ian stated plainly, diverting attention back to the apparent reason for this very special visit.

“It’s fine, Ian,” Morgan said sharply. “Just leave me alone, okay?”

He leaned down close to the table, looking at her with heavy meaning in his eyes. “Do you really think this is the best place for you to be working with your drinking?” The question came out in a hushed, pointed voice.

And there it was. The crux of the issue. At least Ian had finally had the balls to say it. They’d all been hinting around it for months, and now it was finally out in the open.

“When was the last time you saw me have a drink, Ian?” she asked seriously.

“C’mon, Morg,” Ian started, shaking his head dismissively.

“No,” she said sternly, leaning over the table as she pressed him. “I want you to think hard and tell me when you last saw me drink an alcoholic beverage.”

He let out an annoyed groan as he leaned back in his chair, lowering his brows in concentration before rolling his eyes and looking at her quizzically. “I don’t know.”

“Exactly,” Morgan said clearly, as if she was relaying the obvious. “And if you would have been paying attention, you would have noticed that I quit drinking.”

“You did?” he asked, his mouth agape.

“Yep,” she responded succinctly. “When I left the Main House in October.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

She shrugged sullenly. “I didn’t feel like it ... and anyway, why didn’t you notice?”

“Morgan—”

“I wasn’t messing around when I told you that I didn’t want to be like *her*, and that I didn’t need you to protect me, Ian.”

She loved her cousin, but she didn’t want to repeat the fucked-up relationship with him that her mother had with Ian’s father, her brother. The last thing that she and Ian needed was to end up like those two weirdos: living in a giant house on a mountain and fucking up other people’s lives.

“I know you weren’t,” Ian said morosely. “But it’s not something I can just stop doing. I love you.”

A warm feeling descended through Morgan’s body. This old stick in the mud never failed to get to her. She reached over the table and grabbed his big warm hand. “I love you, too,” she said. “But I need to figure this out by myself. *I can do this.*”

“I’m proud of you,” he stated plainly. “For quitting alcohol, and I’m sorry I didn’t notice.”

“It’s okay,” she responded with a shrug. “You’ve got a lot going on ... what with marrying Annie and starting a new business. How’s everything going with Explore Lake Conrad?”

Ian and Jake had both worked at the Lake Conrad Resort for years until recently, when they'd decided to forge out on their own, opening up a recreation business in Lake Conrad Square.

"It's going," he said lightly. "But Jake and I are pretty busy. We got Seth Harper signed on to help promote the opening, though."

"Wow, fancy," Morgan said in exaggerated awe. While she wasn't entrenched too deeply in ski and snowboarding culture, despite where she was from, it was hard to avoid the name Seth Harper.

He was an internationally famous snowboarder who'd medaled in the X Games and was expected to participate in the winter Olympics next year. He was rumored to be a messy person, though. There were always stories popping up online about some bar brawl or drunken orgy he'd gotten himself into.

"Yeah," Ian responded. "I think he's doing it to clean up his image? Both Jake and Ramona can't stand him, though, so I feel like I'm the only one keeping this thing together."

Morgan frowned at her cousin. He did look tired. While she loved Jake, she knew he was judgy as hell, and Ian's assistant, Ramona, while lovely, was professional almost to a fault. Morgan felt a spark of irritation at both of them for making things so difficult for Ian. He always felt like he needed to take the weight of the world on his shoulders. Would it kill them to lighten the load?

“Does Annie like him?” she asked, knowing that talking about his fiancée was sure to cheer him up.

“You know Annie. She likes everyone.” He smiled distantly at the thought of her. “Why don’t you come and stay with us this weekend? We could go on a hike? Go to the winter festival? Kyle said Jake and I could set up a booth for Explore Lake Conrad.”

Morgan and Ian had known the Bear family—mainly Kyle and his sister Sasha—well for years. Their families were deeply acquainted, being the two oldest families in town. And Curtis Conrad, being an antiquated old snob, saw the Bears as the only acceptable family in Lake Conrad with whom to socialize.

They were almost as entrenched in the town as the Conrads were, rivaling their real estate ownership and running many of the town’s associations, including the Civic Association, which put on the winter festival every year.

“I can’t,” she said suddenly, cringing at the thought of the winter festival. “I’m going to Golden Lake for the weekend.”

“Oh?” he asked, raising his eyebrows and silently questioning her.

“Yeah, just with some new ... *friends* I’ve made,” she responded, and his eyebrows hitched up even farther. “What? I can have friends that aren’t you guys, right?”

She wasn’t exactly excited to go to Golden Lake this weekend with creepy-ass Tripp and murderous Peter. If there

was ever a time she wished she was still drinking, it was now.

But Cole would be there, and she needed to be in a place where she could look him in the eye and force him to listen to her. Somewhere from which he wouldn't be able to escape.

He was trying to leave Lake Conrad without her. Even with everything that had happened, she had been sure he'd never renege on that promise. If that was what he was really planning to do, he needed to explain himself.

Looking at the wrinkles of concern marking her cousin's face, Morgan wished she'd told him about Cole, and everything that had gone down with him and Ian's father. It had always seemed too painful, though, and then too uncomfortable after she'd held it inside for so long.

It was one of her biggest heartaches, and no one in her life knew anything about it.

Only him.

"What about work?" Ian asked urgently, interrupting her thoughts. "Isn't the weekend the prime time in this place?"

"Craig said I could have the weekend off," she replied nervously. In truth, she'd been almost positive that Craig was going to fire her when she'd asked him if she could switch shifts with some of the other waitresses in order to have the weekend off.

He hadn't been exactly pleased with her performance as a waitress so far. When she'd approached him while he was smoking behind the building earlier in the morning, he'd

looked at her for several long uncomfortable seconds before granting her request and telling her to use the time to think about what this job “really meant to her.”

Well, she could have told him that right then and there this job meant shit to her. But she’d kept her mouth closed, instead pasting a bright, grateful smile on her face before pivoting on her heels and sending some bargaining texts to her co-workers.

“Well, make sure you text me if you need anything,” Ian said stiffly before rising from his chair.

“Will do,” she promised, standing to walk with him toward the door.

She stopped at the hostess stand, and Ian turned around to stare at her awkwardly for a few beats. He didn’t move, though, or say anything as he looked at her for a few seconds, slowly inching his way forward, his arms coming out as if to wrap around her shoulders.

“Ian, I swear,” she said, holding out her hand as she realized what he meant to do. “If you hug me, it might just drive me back to the bottle.”

He pulled back suddenly, a loud laugh sputtering out his mouth as he shook his head. “Okay, okay. Well ... you take care of yourself, cuz.”

“You, too, P-Ian,” she said in a dulcet tone, an overly sweet smile spread over her cheeks. She let out a loud laugh when his face immediately scrunched into a scowl.

“I thought we agreed like *eight years ago* that you’d let that nickname die,” he said darkly, his hand coming up to point at her in accusation.

Morgan shrugged casually and looked down in concentration. “I just like it so much,” she said, reverting an innocent gaze up at him. “It’s what I always call you in my head.”

Ian rolled his eyes for the thousandth time since entering the bar and turned to walk toward the door, waving his hand in the air as he walked away.

“I’ll hit you up when I get home,” she called with an appreciative chuckle before turning back to Jennifer. A surge of excitement pumped through her.

My silverware awaits.

7

COLE

TEN YEARS AGO

The air on top of Echo Peak was getting crisp.

Cole pulled the flannel shirt he wore over his T-shirt closed, rubbing his arms in an attempt to warm them against the harsh wind rustling through the ferns and causing the tree branches to whoosh overhead.

He couldn't help but think how much more refreshing this breeze would have been when he was lugging rocks with Nelson all summer. The wall was long since complete, and the grass wouldn't need mowing until the spring. Cole had worked his last day at the Main House the previous week, which made it a bit harder to sneak onto the grounds and meet Morgan in the clearing.

Luckily, Morgan, as smart and wily as ever, already had it figured out. After his last day of work, she'd walked him a bit down the mountain to show him a space where he could park his car on the road that curved up the mountain and follow a short path that he could climb to get to the clearing.

When he'd asked her how he'd get through it when the snow came, she looked up at him, her eyes twinkling with conspiracy.

"Maybe we can start meeting in the house," she'd suggested. "In my room...."

"I don't think your uncle will be too happy about that," he'd responded darkly, his body hardening at the thought of her room, her bed. How would he even get in there?

Cole had never spoken to Curtis Conrad, but he'd seen him occasionally lurking around the grounds of the Main House, yelling into a cell phone or watching critically as Cole worked alongside Nelson.

Cole didn't like him, and something told him he wouldn't approve of his niece hanging around the lawn boy. But he was his grandmother's boss—she liked him just fine—and his grandfather had always spoken highly of him. He'd hired Cole simply because his grandmother had asked him to, after all.

And Cole didn't think he'd caught on to what was going on between him and Morgan yet. He had a feeling the shit would really hit the fan when he did. But maybe Cole was being too hard on him? Maybe he wouldn't care?

A strong gust of wind brought him back to the present, and to wondering where Morgan was. She was late—unsurprising—but this was even later than usual, and this visit felt especially portentous.

She'd texted him that she was asking her mother and uncle for permission to stay in Lake Conrad, to not travel to Texas with her mother, and she'd tell him how it went when she saw him this afternoon.

I don't know what I'll do if she leaves, he thought darkly, which was unsettling. He hadn't really known her that long, but now that he did ... how could he live without her?

Hearing a rustling sound behind him, he turned to see her there, standing between two wide boulders, watching him with a quiet, stricken look on her face. He hadn't heard her come up, and he always heard her. She was so loud stomping through the forest even though she never wore any fucking shoes.

"There you are," he said, quickly rushing over to her. "I was worried." She was wearing a thin dress patterned with small red flowers. Her legs and feet were bare, of course, and her hair tangled and wild.

It was on the tip of his tongue to scold her for her bare feet when he noticed the tears streaming down her face.

"Hey, what's the matter?" he asked urgently, setting his hands on her bare upper arms. Her skin was cold, goosebumps popping up at his touch. Quickly stripping himself of his flannel, he wrapped it around her frozen, unmoving body. "Did they say no?"

"No, they said yes," she said quietly, stepping closer to him and leaning deeply into his chest, arms curling up between

them. She was so cold, and he wrapped his arms around her, trying to transfer some of his warmth to her, to protect her.

“Why are you crying, then?” he asked, the elation he felt at the news quickly dampening with disappointment at her reaction.

“She’s having a baby with the Texas guy,” Morgan responded, her voice muffled in his chest. “She’s been flying out to see him, and just never told me.... I don’t see her that often when we’re here.”

Cole pulled back in surprise. He was aware she had a strained, kind of weird relationship with her mother. She always spoke of her in hushed tones, as if she was afraid she’d overhear anything negative said about her.

But Cole knew how it could be with complicated mothers—his mother had died a few years ago, and he still hadn’t forgiven her for it.

“Do you want to go with her?” he asked softly. “To be around the baby?”

“No.” Morgan shook her head against him, and he could see a fresh crop of tears spread down her face. “I want to stay here with you.”

She wrapped her arms around him, resting her head on his chest, and he pulled her small body against his as a strong gust of wind charged into the clearing.

They stood still, like beacons in the wind, for so long that he thought maybe they’d transform into one of these ancient

boulders and stand here forever.

She looked up eventually, though, her tears drying as she gazed at him intently, her lips coming down into a concerned frown.

“She said she didn’t want me to come anyway,” Morgan whispered softly. He almost didn’t hear her over the sound of the wind. “She has a new life now, and she doesn’t need me. She’ll have a new, better daughter and a rich husband. Everything will be perfect now.”

“What?” Cole pulled back to look down at her more fully, his face contorted. “That’s a fucked-up thing for her to say to you.”

Morgan just shrugged and leaned into him again. “It’s par for the course. She’s always saying mean things to me. I don’t know why.”

“Theirs not to reason why; Theirs but to do and die,” Cole quoted somberly.

“Ugh,” Morgan groaned, rolling her eyes, her sadness eclipsed by annoyance with him. She hated when he quoted poetry. “So pretentious.” She was silent for a few minutes, thinking with her face twisted into a look of disgust. “What does that mean, though?”

“Sometimes you’ve just got to suck it up and move on with life ... or death. But in your case, definitely life.”

Morgan breathed out a smirk, her face lightening with the smile. “I’m happy I’m not leaving you, you pompous ass,

despite how ugly it got with my mother.”

“Me, too,” he said softly, raising his thumb to rub softly against her freckled cheek. They were silent for a moment, staring into each other’s eyes.

“I’m scared, though,” she said, her voice turning shaky as her smile faded.

Cole tilted his head, looking down at her. “Of what?”

“She was all I had for so long. What if you leave me, too? I’ll be all alone.”

“I’m not going anywhere without you,” he mumbled, a burst of sincerity rushing through him.

“Promise me,” she said fervently. “Promise me that if you leave Lake Conrad, you’ll leave with me.”

“I promise you,” he said softly, tilting his face toward hers and letting her know how much he meant it.



Cole sat back in his truck, staring up at the “cabin” before him. He’d driven up about five minutes ago and hadn’t been able to make himself get up and go inside. If this thing was *a cabin*, then he was as good of a guitar player as Jimmy Page. Meaning it wasn’t and, all things considered, he was a pretty shitty guitar player.

When his grandfather was alive, he’d sometimes take Cole down to Golden Lake—usually when his mom was struggling and his grandmother needed to deal with her. Shit got messy

when someone was trying to detox again and again. No one needed a little kid underfoot for that.

His grandpa's friend, Al, owned a little shanty cabin that he would lend out to them. It had no heat or air conditioning, and the only bathroom was an outhouse about twenty yards from the back door.

Cole hadn't minded the rustic setting; if anything, it made it all the more fun while they'd grilled Lahontan trout that they caught from the lake and huddled around the campfire, his grandpa twisting up elaborate stories under a bright starry sky.

Cole would bet his grandpa's old Fender that this place didn't have an outhouse.

Finally mustering the will to get out of the car, he stood in the driveway a bit while the warm, tepid air settled around him. Golden Lake was located about an hour down-mountain from Lake Conrad, and the warmth provided by the lower elevation made even January feel a little balmy at about fifty or sixty degrees.

So, his long-sleeved thermal shirt proved more than adequate against the weather as he walked toward the house. His feet crunched the gravel that lined the driveway as he looked up worriedly at the mammoth, elevated structure.

It was raised about ten or fifteen feet off the ground, and he'd driven up to what he supposed was the back of the house. With a house like this, though, there didn't really seem to be a front or a back. It was wide and square, the wood siding coated with a walnut finish and topped by a shiny metal roof.

The wide wraparound porch was covered with rocking chairs and other patio furniture.

It was beautiful and charming. It looked like something from a movie. So why did it freak him out so much?

Looking through the pine trees and boulders that jutted out of the ground surrounding the cabin, Cole could see a path that led to the gentle slope of Golden Lake's beach. Wanting to avoid going into the house for a while longer, he turned from the steps that led to the front porch and chose the rocky path to the beach instead.

The lake water had an iridescent glow on its calm surface, reflecting the colorful lights of the sun setting behind the mountains, which loomed in the distance. A long, L-shaped dock stretched about twenty yards into the water.

All in all, it was a peaceful, serene setting, and Cole couldn't help but feel at ease by the tall green trees and placid water. It was nice to see after being trapped underneath all the snow that had covered Lake Conrad for the past few months.

It had taken him about an hour and a half to drive down the mountains and across the short expanse of flatter earth that led to Golden Lake. But he felt like he may as well be on the other side of the planet down here, with the level landscape and warm, mild temperatures.

There were all kinds of crazy legends about Golden Lake—stories about bodies of people who had drowned in Lake Conrad ending up in the waters of Golden Lake, sixty miles away. No one had ever been able to find a connection between

the two bodies of water, but there were rumors aplenty about hidden, underground tunnels.

It was strange to think about the two lakes, so far away from one another and so different, sharing a secret connection.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

Cole jumped at the sound and turned around to see Tripp walking toward him through the thick sand of the beach, a beer in each hand. He was wearing cotton pants and an airy button-up shirt, his hair still slicked back in the same greasy way he’d worn it in Lake Conrad.

“Yeah, it is,” Cole agreed, gratefully reaching out to take one of the beers and raising it in thanks. “I used to come here as a kid a lot, but it’s been a while.”

“Well, *mi casa es su casa* this weekend, man,” Tripp said, chuckling deeply as he motioned toward the house with his beer.

“Thanks,” Cole responded, taking a swig of his beer and looking toward the lake. “Looking forward to a productive weekend.”

“We party pretty hard. Hopefully you can keep up,” Tripp said, drawing Cole’s attention back to him. He was nodding knowingly as he looked Cole over, a glint in his blue eyes. “Although, I did just find out that the girl I invited doesn’t drink. So that’s going to make my life just a little more difficult.” He flinched at the thought, shaking his head.

Girl? Cole looked at him blankly. “I thought we were here to record?” he asked slowly.

“Oh, yeah, for sure,” Tripp replied. “I just thought we could have a little fun while doing it.” He winked knowingly, and Cole’s chest filled up with a sour dread.

Cole’s instincts had been tripping over the wrongness of this situation all week, but this really settled it for him. He didn’t want to get shitfaced with these people. He wanted to record his music, so he could feel reassured that working with anyone connected with Curtis Conrad wasn’t completely idiotic. This was a business arrangement of mutual benefit and nothing else. But it was starting to feel like some sort of effort to entrap him or trick him. He’d fallen for this kind of thing before, and he wouldn’t do it again.

Cole opened his mouth to respond, but all that came out was a pained, disappointed sigh.

“Peter has a special guest, too,” Tripp supplied, as if the information would appease him. “And luckily you’ve got Callista, who’s a fucking animal in the sack, let me tell you.”

“Look, man,” Cole said, holding a hand up to pause any discussion of Callista’s sexual prowess. “I was really hoping to just put some music down this weekend.”

“We will, we will,” Tripp said soothingly, his hand coming up to Cole’s shoulder. “We’re just going to have a little fun while doing it. You wanna be a rockstar? *This* is what rockstar life is all about.”

“I’m not interested in hooking up with Callista....”

“We can find you someone new,” Tripp insisted. “But let me tell you, man, she is a primo piece of ass.”

Cole took a deep breath, running his hand through his hair as he gazed at the darkening waters of the lake. The sun was going down, and the drive home would be long.

But he’d rather be stuck at a campsite with Duke and a pile of that hydroponic weed that always made him hallucinate spiders crawling over his body than hang out with these people.

“Look, man,” he said, looking over at Tripp. “I don’t think this is a great idea—”

“Hey!” A familiar, musical voice rang out, and Cole froze as a feeling of dread coated his nervous system. Of course, when he looked up at the house, he saw Morgan Conrad—the bane of his existence—carefully descending the high staircase that led up to the house.

She was wearing a pair of light-colored jeans and a long-sleeve black T-shirt, her long hair pulled back from her face. She moved her pink lips into a delicate half smile as she approached them, her eyes wary as her bare feet trod through the deep sand toward where he and Tripp stood.

Of course she isn’t wearing any shoes.

“Ah, my straight-edge lady,” Tripp burst out at the sight of her, walking over to relax his arm casually on her shoulders.

Morgan jumped a little at the contact, eyeing Tripp carefully before she settled a solemn, watchful gaze on Cole.

“You know Morgan, Cole,” Tripp stated in a silky voice. “You saved her from Peter’s hissy fit last weekend.”

Ignoring him, Cole stalked closer to Morgan, his eyes darting between her face and Tripp’s hand on her shoulder. She didn’t look up at him, though. She was watching her feet. Cole glanced down to see her wiggling her bright red toenails in the sand.

“You’re here with him?” he asked roughly, demanding her attention.

She had no choice but to look up at him then, her green eyes flashing with anger as they connected with his face.

“I’m *here*,” she responded firmly.

“Well, then, I guess so am I,” Cole said, taking a long swig of his beer and looking out at the placid, flat waters of Golden Lake.

What a fucking treat.



“Man, wait until you see this studio,” Tripp yelled behind him as Cole and Morgan followed him down the stairs to the basement. “You’re going to shit yourself.”

Hearing a groan behind him, Cole looked back to see Morgan rolling her eyes, her lips pulled into a look of disgust.

She'd always hated expressions that implied someone would be so excited they would defecate themselves.

Such a contradiction to someone who's constantly trying to get a rise out of people.

He breathed out a light laugh at the thought, shooting a wry look over his shoulder. He wasn't pleased with her right now—not that he ever really was pleased with her, necessarily—but no matter what had happened between them, he couldn't leave her here with these people.

Peter and Callista hadn't even arrived yet, but Tripp was being gross enough for all of them. Cole shook his head at some of the things that he'd said on the beach. One thing had stuck out to him, though.

Morgan had quit drinking?

For so many years, he'd watched from the stage of The Blue Sky as she'd deteriorated into someone he didn't recognize. She'd always been out of control ... *wild*. Hell, that's what had drawn him to her. But the new Morgan, the one with no self-respect and fewer inhibitions, worried him.

For the past few years, they had a steady routine going when they saw each other at The Blue Sky. She'd act out, he'd verbally lash out at her, she'd jump like a scalded cat and heckle him, and so on and so forth. He knew a lot of the locals found it funny, the way they argued so publicly.

But Cole had never known how to feel about it. It was the only contact he ever got with her, so there was that at least.

But after his mother, and all the things he'd gone through watching her slowly kill herself with alcohol, it had been more than disturbing—*devastating*—to see Morgan lose herself in drink after drink every weekend at that bar.

So, after a while, he'd found it easy to separate himself from her when she was like that; to dissociate the mean, loud drunk in the bar from the girl with whom he used to exchange love letters.

Out there on the beach, for a hot second, he thought he saw her again, his wild girl. He'd been catching short glimpses of her a lot lately, and he felt completely overwhelmed by her now. He could sense her walking down the stairs behind him, her heat, her essence ... *something*.

Coming to the end of the staircase, he looked around the huge, open room. It had a surprisingly tall ceiling for a basement, and much like the upstairs of the house, everything looked new, rich, and clean. Not in a stately, established kind of way like the furnishings of the Main House but in a modern, West Elm kind of way.

There were couches and chairs spread throughout the room, various area rugs that matched yet didn't match, a soundproof booth built into the corner, and many expensive-looking instruments scattered around the room.

Cole walked over to pick up the shiny Takamine acoustic guitar leaning on a stand in the corner. Holding it in his arms, he strummed a few notes, looking up at Tripp, who was staring over him with a smile of approval pasted on his face.

Blanching at the sight, he shifted his gaze to Morgan, who had her eyes glued to him, not moving them away as she sank down to one of the low couches. Their eyes stayed connected as he played the opening notes to Neutral Milk Hotel's "In the Aeroplane Over the Sea," warmth clouding him as Tripp all but disappeared.

"This is a nice set-up," Cole said hoarsely, forcing his attention to Tripp's slick smile. He did feel a bit better about what this weekend was supposed to be now that he could see there actually was a recording studio in the house.

"I told you that you'd like it," Tripp said excitedly. "After Peter gets here, we'll—"

"Hey-ho!" A loud voice came from upstairs, echoing through the high ceilings of the house's main floor.

"Speak of the devil," Tripp said with a chuckle as he walked toward the stairs. "There's Peter. You guys stay here. I'll bring him down."

As soon as he left, the silence was thick as Cole turned away from Morgan, gently setting the guitar back on the stand. He took a couple of bracing breaths before he turned to look at her again. She was sitting with her back straight and her eyes cast downward on her bare feet against the red-patterned area rug.

He studied her as he stepped closer to her, standing just above where she sat, but she still didn't look up at him. She looked so young with her mouth shut, not demanding attention

or hurling insults at him. It was disconcerting. He didn't like it.

“What are you doing here, Morgan?” he finally asked, his voice coming out rough as he looked down at the even part in her hair that separated her braids.

“I was invited,” she said shortly, not looking up at him.

“Uh-huh, so you're with that guy now?” His voice was thick with emotion and accusation, and a surge of irritation ran through him at the thought that he might actually give a shit who she was with.

“What does it matter to you who I'm with?” She looked up at him then, her eyes sparkling like emeralds as the familiar fire returned to them.

“It *doesn't*,” he insisted, relieved to see her anger. “But these people are huge sleazeballs.”

“Then why are you here?” she asked, leaning back on the couch and leveling her eyes on him in question, making it obvious she already knew the answer. “Who knew you'd eventually be in cahoots with *Uncle Daddy* after all this time?”

“I'm not in cahoots with anyone ... I'm just...” He trailed off. For some reason, he felt the need to explain himself to her. “You know this is what I've always wanted. To do something with my music. I'd be stupid to pass this up.” He cringed at the insecurity in his tone.

“So, it's true?” she asked, her face freezing at the thought. “You're leaving?”

“I don’t know yet, but maybe,” he responded, collapsing down next to her on the couch, his hands coming up to his face.

“You promised you wouldn’t, remember?” she asked, her voice coated with desperation. “You promised you’d never leave without....”

Her voice cracked as she let out a deep, exasperated breath, and Cole looked up to see her sitting straight again, looking ahead as if her thoughts were playing a sad song that only she could hear.

“You can’t hold me to that, Morg,” he said gently. He could feel the heat of her body radiating next to him, and the scents from the beach and the lake coming off her. The light freckles on her cheek called to him; he longed to rub this thumb on her cheek, to pull her close to him and comfort her.

“Why not?” she asked so quietly he almost didn’t hear her. “A promise is a promise.”

“You know why not,” he said deeply. For as terrible as that last night with her had been, it had also been pretty freaking fantastic. Images flashed in his mind as he leaned in close to her, bringing him inches from her face, from her lips and her freckles.

Her soft lips parted as she watched him coming closer before she shifted them down to look at his hands between them. “You asked me why I was here?”

“Yeah,” he replied distractedly, staring at her mouth as it moved. He felt like he was in a trance, a state in which there was no such thing as the past. No uncles. No mothers. No deals.

He was just sitting next to his wild girl again. It had been so long.

She looked up at him then, her eyes large and full of the same sad song as before. “I’m here because of you.”

8

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COLE

Cole's eyes filled with darkness at her confession, his breath coming out fast as he looked down at her. She fixed her gaze on his hands resting on his lap. They seemed to be convulsing under the effort to stay still. Dark lines and curves peeked out from under the long-sleeve gray thermal shirt he wore. She wished she could see the tattoos. It was rotten luck that he was wearing long sleeves as soon as she had the opportunity to finally get close to him.

“What do you mean?” he finally asked, his voice coming out like he was scraping the words from the back of his throat.

Her eyes moved up to meet his, and she suddenly felt transported backwards in time and space. They weren't in some douche's basement anymore; they were in the woods, surrounded by towering trees and a wide-open sky. He was looking at her like he'd never stopped loving her. It felt so good. It was almost as if she was alive again.

But he'd asked her a question, right?

She opened and closed her mouth a few times. She realized that now that she had to explain herself, well, the truth was she didn't *know* what she'd meant. She'd just known, down to her core, that if he was here this weekend, then she needed to be here, too.

Luckily, she didn't have to attempt to explain, as they were interrupted by voices and footsteps coming down the stairs. She looked toward the noise, relieved at the distraction, but she could still feel his eyes on her face.

First came Tripp, her knight on a bleached blond stallion, he of the perpetual smarm and slicked-back hair. He'd picked her up from Lucy's earlier in the afternoon and tried to cop more than a few feels in the car ... all while driving down a steep, twisty mountain. Admirable, but in the end pretty damn obnoxious. Morgan had successfully fended him off, but continuing to do so while in this house was going to take some major creativity.

She was reminded of this as he stepped into the basement, his eyes landing on her in cool and honest appraisal. He immediately walked over to her, and she couldn't help but shrink into Cole's warmth a bit. *I don't think so, dude.*

Then came Peter, his little piggy eyes widening in surprise before narrowing in disapproval as soon as he caught sight of Morgan on the couch. *Opsie*, Morgan thought as she was flooded with irrational glee at pissing this guy off. *I guess Tripp didn't tell him I was coming.*

Behind Peter was Callista, her hair and makeup flawless, and her eyes bright and wide as they settled on Cole with obvious meaning. Morgan felt her heart jump in her chest as she looked between the two of them, an involuntary *back off, bitch* rising to the forefront of her mind, itching to escape.

And bringing up the rear, taking delicate steps down the stairs was ... *Julia Keane?*

“Julia!” Morgan blurted out at the sight of her as she quickly stood up straight from the couch, almost knocking into Cole, who she’d forgotten was sitting so close to her.

Julia’s guileless blue eyes widened at the sight of Morgan, a sincere smile spreading across her face, revealing her straight, blindingly white teeth. “Why, Morgan Conrad!” she proclaimed like a shocked debutante. “What an unexpected but pleasant surprise.”

Despite herself, Morgan felt her heart melt a bit at Julia’s presence. She’d last seen Julia in the fall at the Main House. Morgan had been essentially trapped there for months after contracting her uncle’s ire with her “unsavory behavior” as he’d put it. But she had been permitted to attend a weekend house party, where she’d met Julia, as well as Julia’s parents, Ed and Astrid Keane.

Julia had actually been unceremoniously and unknowingly engaged to Ian for about twenty-four hours before he’d finally found his balls and proclaimed his love for Annie. It was the series of events that had led to both Morgan and Ian walking away from their family.

Poor Julia had gotten lost in the whole thing. Publicly rejected and humiliated by Ian, she and her parents had left the party early, abandoning a real estate deal and royally pissing off Morgan's uncle. Julia handled it all with grace and class, and although he claimed there was no way around it, Ian had done her pretty dirty.

Morgan would have thrown a huge fit if she'd been in Julia's position, so she had a soft spot for her. She found her poise admirable.

She frequently wondered how she was doing, and how she was coping with everything that had happened. Morgan knew how it was to be innocent, in love, and disappointed in no short order.

So with all that, she felt sincerely happy to see Julia standing in front of her as smiling and ladylike as ever with not a sleek, blond hair out of place. Although she couldn't help but wonder what the hell she was doing with the likes of Peter and Tripp.

"What are you doing here?" Morgan asked, ignoring the rest of them, including Peter's brutal glare as she passed him.

"I'm here ... for the weekend," Julia said, a heavy blush rising up her pale cheeks as she grabbed Morgan's hands in excitement. "I'm Mr. Mancini's guest."

Morgan pulled her lips back in a look of shocked disgust, looking back at Peter's grim face. "*Him?!*"

Julia nodded her head timidly in response, and Morgan released a loud groan. She turned to look back at him again, reconsidering him in this new light as someone acquainted with Julia Keane. His face was turning redder by the second—he looked like a boiled beet—as he shifted his weight nervously from one foot to the other.

“But he’s such a dick,” she said in a low voice, turning back to Julia pleadingly.

“I—uh—” Julia stumbled, her mouth opening wide. “He’s very—”

Before she could finish, Peter stomped over like a bull in a china shop.

“How do you two know each other?” he barked, his face as red as ever.

“Our families are acquainted,” Julia said with a serene smile. “And my parents and I spent a ... *lovely* ... weekend together last fall at Morgan’s family home in Lake Conrad.”

“Oh,” Peter grunted, reaching around Julia’s waist and possessively pulling her into his side as he openly glared at Morgan. A sprig of dark hair fell free of its shiny fortress and hung limply in front of his forehead. He looked like he was trying to be sinister and a bit threatening.

He must be taking hair tips from Tripp, though, Morgan thought distractedly.

“That’s so lit that you ladies know each other,” Tripp bellowed, cutting through the tension like a bombastic game

show host. He walked over to drape an arm around Morgan's waist, his fingers clinging tightly, causing her to let out a little shudder. "But I guess when two families are as rich as yours, you can't help but run into each other, huh?"

Morgan cringed at the mention of money as she moved to step away from him. She may be doing her damndest to break free from her bougie roots, but that didn't mean that she could stomach tacky-ass comments like that.

One just does not talk about those sorts of things, she thought with a sideways glance at Tripp.

Looking over at Julia, Morgan saw her downcast gaze jump up to meet hers, confirming she was having a similar thought.

Oh, if there was ever a time my uncle would be proud of me, Morgan thought cynically, *it would be now.*

Cole rose from the couch then, walking toward Julia, breaking up the awkward silence. "I don't think we know each other," he said politely, holding out his hand to her. "I'm Cole."

"You're the musician?" Julia asked excitedly, placing her hand in his gently. "I've heard so much about you. I can't wait to hear you perform this weekend."

Cole smiled at her courteously as he let go of her hand and stood quietly, close to Morgan. She felt the stirring of the warmth from earlier.

God, when was the last time I've been this close to him so many times in one day?

She didn't even think he realized he was doing it, but it gave her a drugged, high feeling. She glimpsed over at him briefly as she wobbled on her feet, and tried to avoid leaning into him.

“Why don't I take the ladies upstairs for a drink?” Callista asked brightly, interrupting the awkward silence and Morgan's Cole-daze. “We'll let you boys work, and then we can eat and ... have some *fun*.” She said the last bit with a look of heavy insinuation at Cole, causing him to quickly look down at the floor.

Back off, bitch.

“Sounds good!” Morgan said with exaggerated excitement, readjusting her scowl into a smile. “Come on, Jules.”

She linked her arm through Julia's, pulling her away a little roughly from Peter's side, who looked seconds away from slapping Morgan upside the head. But he eventually, and reluctantly, let go of Julia, allowing her to be dragged away.

Morgan smiled at him in a sickly-sweet way as Julia preceded her up the stairs. Giving Cole a quick farewell glimpse, she saw that his eyes were settled on her in dark determination. A shiver went up her spine as she looked up at Julia taking short, graceful steps up the stairs.

Watching her, she came to the grim realization that her goals for this weekend were now twofold.

Cole. Just Cole. Whether it was to talk to him, kiss him, or scream at him, she wasn't sure yet.

But also, she needed to protect Julia Keane.



“So, what do you girls want to drink?” Callista asked, leading Morgan and Julia into the bright white kitchen and pulling open the industrial stainless refrigerator. “We’ve got wine and liquor mostly, but I think there are some beers in here, too.”

Morgan vaguely heard Julia ask something about the wine, but she wasn’t really listening as she took in the kitchen.

Everything was very clean and shiny ... *not at all in my style*, she decided. It wasn’t that she liked things dirty and dull, but she appreciated a cozy, lived-in quality. Maybe that was why she was so comfortable in the small A-frame house she used to share with Annie, and at Lucy’s, of course.

She had no idea how big this place was, but she had her own room. A giant white room with a queen size bed. It felt like a hotel.

Would it be mean if I checked my phone to see if Tripp really owns this place or if it’s some sort of fancy Airbnb? she wondered idly as she took in the clean, open counters and the gleaming windows.

While she and her mother had lived in smaller apartments and houses on and off while she was growing up—especially when she was younger—her later years had been spent at suburban McMansions and the Main House.

As a result, behemoth houses tended to give her an icky, lonely feeling.

So, Morgan felt a little lost as she walked over to the tall, uncovered windows that wrapped around the kitchen and attempted to peer out at the lake and mountains through the pitch dark night.

She couldn't see much of anything other than her reflection, but she thought she could catch the sporadic glimmers of the water reflecting the hazy light of the low-hanging moon.

It had been so warm earlier, not at all like January. When she'd stood on the beach with Tripp and Cole, she'd itched to run past them and jump into the lake water. But she hadn't. She'd stood there like a good little Morgan.

Her family had never come down to Golden Lake when Morgan was growing up. She remembered driving by the signs a few times as she and her mother drove in and out of town, but that was about it. Neither her mother nor her uncle had seen the sense in visiting a smaller, darker lake when they essentially owned Lake Conrad, the golden jewel of the Sierra Nevada mountain range.

But Morgan liked it. It was cozy ... for all that a body of water could be cozy.

"Oh, that sounds lovely, don't you think, Morgan?" Morgan looked over to see Julia looking at her quizzically.

"I'm sorry, what?" She turned away from the window.

"Callista was just asking if we'd like a glass of chardonnay," Julia said, sliding onto a white leather barstool.

“Hm. I think Tripp said you guys had some lemonade?” Morgan asked, sitting down next to Julia. “I’ll take some of that.”

“Do you want some vodka in it?” Callista asked, turning away from the fridge.

“No, just the lemonade,” Morgan replied firmly. “Thanks.”

“Okay,” Callista responded distantly, like Morgan had just ordered up a pint of Julia’s virginal blood.

“So, whatcha been up to, Jules?” asked Morgan as Callista turned around to prepare the drinks. “I haven’t seen you since the whole Ian fiasco.”

Flinching a bit at the mention of Ian, Julia quickly straightened and nodded her head tightly. “I’ve been very good—*busy!* Cat shows and charity lunches, you know ... the usual.”

“I forgot you had a cat,” she said, nodding her head and accepting her glass of lemonade from Callista.

What had Ian called her? A crazy cat lady? That wasn’t very gallant of him. But as a reader of monster romance novels, Morgan would not begrudge anyone for where they found comfort and escapism. If it was cats for Julia, then more power to her.

An amazing thought occurred to Morgan, causing her to suck in a deep breath and set her hand down flat on the cold, white marble countertop. “Please tell me you met Peter at a cat show,” she said excitedly.

“No, no,” she said quickly, taking a sip of wine. “I, uh, met him online.”

“What?”

Setting her lemonade down firmly on the counter, Morgan stared at her for a long moment, doing her best to make sense of that strange factoid. Julia didn’t seem like the Tinder type.

“Yes, I have a cat account,” Julia stated proudly, raising her face to look at Morgan, a crimson blush staining her cheeks.

“What’s a cat account?” Morgan knew that cats were the darlings of social media, and there could be many different types of accounts deemed as “cat accounts,” but she was anxious to see how Julia defined this.

“An Instagram account in which I create hand drawn images of people’s pets ... for a very small monetary fee. But I don’t do it for the money,” she insisted quickly. “I just very much enjoy ... cats.”

“Well, that’s ... *super*,” Morgan replied through a toothy smile. “So, Peter has a cat, too?”

“No,” Julia answered with a shy smile. “He just very much enjoys cat art.”

“Hm,” said Morgan with a deep frown. “Did you know about this, Callista?” Callista had been suspiciously quiet during this discussion, just sipping a glass of what looked like bourbon and looking between the two of them, a worried frown marking her brow.

“Did I know about Peter’s love of cat art? No, I did not.” Callista quickly looked into her glass as if it held an escape portal from this conversation.

Julia, seeming to sense how uncool she was coming across to someone as chic and worldly as Callista, spoke up with additional details. “Yes, so I went out for drinks with my friend Eugenie from the cat circuit, and I met up with Mr. Man—*Peter*, and we’ve been dating ever since.”

“Well, he seems very ... *special*,” said Morgan neutrally, looking between Julia and Callista with a wide grin, more than a little proud of herself for her magnanimous neutrality. “Do your parents like him?”

Julia looked down at her neutral manicure, tapping her short, even nails against the white marble countertop. “They haven’t met him yet....”

“*Julia Keane*,” Morgan said in faux shock, kind of enjoying the brief flit of panic that danced across Julia’s delicate features. “I never!”

Ed and Astrid Keane were mega-rich real estate developers from LA. When Morgan had met them in the fall, she’d found them to be an odd couple. Astrid was Swedish, a former model from the 90s, and very much the Grace Kelly type; and Ed was a short, brash, cigar-smoking sort of old man.

They seemed very much in love, though, and were very protective over their daughter. When everything had gone down with Ian, they had quickly left the Main House with no

intention of continuing business with someone who treated the precious daughter so poorly.

“I know,” she moaned, looking askance at Callista. “I apologize, Callista. We’re leaving you out. It’s just that Morgan is familiar with my parents. We’re very close. I don’t want you to think that I’m taking advantage of your brother by not introducing him to them. It’s just a very delicate situation.”

Morgan shot a wry look at Callista, who still hadn’t recovered from the news that Morgan was a teetotaler. Morgan very much doubted her ability to comprehend the idea that this angel-woman, Julia Keane, was taking advantage of her slimy brother.

“Don’t worry about Peter,” Callista said, holding her hands up and rolling her eyes. “He’s— *Oh!*” Her voice was cut off but the loud chimes of a doorbell echoing through the house. “I think that’s the staff.”

“The staff?” Morgan asked, her eyes following Callista as she walked around the counter. She was a bit disappointed that she wouldn’t have the chance to weigh in on her brother.

“Yeah, you two of all people don’t expect *me* to cook and do the dishes,” she said with a caustic laugh, walking toward the front entryway. “I’ll be back in a bit.”

Morgan narrowed her eyes at Callista as she left the room. She wasn’t quite sure how she felt about her yet, but she was happy to be alone with Julia. There were things to discuss.

“Julia,” she said fervently, lowering her face close to Julia’s and grabbing hold of her wrist. “Did you run away from home?”

“Morgan,” Julia replied gently, carefully releasing her wrist from Morgan’s grasp. “How old do you think I am?”

“I don’t know,” Morgan said. She could feel confusion drawing her features in as she took in Julia’s clear blue eyes, smooth blond hair, and flawless complexion. “Fourteen? Twenty-six? Thirty-eight?” Morgan truly wouldn’t be shocked about any of those ages.

“I turned twenty-four in November,” Julia said quietly, rubbing her fingers on the stem of her wine glass. “Did you know Ian was the only boyfriend I ever had?”

Morgan shook her head quickly.

“And he wasn’t even a real boyfriend,” she said bitterly. “He was *using* me.”

Morgan blanched and sipped the overly sweet lemonade. “That was a shitty situation.” *Maybe I should have accepted a little vodka in this.*

“Yes, it was,” Julia admitted. “And I’m not bitter, really. I’m not blaming him. But it was a wakeup call of sorts. I’ve decided I need to put myself out there more.”

“I can understand that,” Morgan responded softly. While Morgan had never had any issues “putting herself out there” as it were, she felt like finally leaving her family behind had made her want to burrow and go into hiding more.

“Don’t get me wrong, I love my parents,” she insisted, draining her wine glass. “And Mr. Man—*Peter*—may not be the man I’m going to marry, but don’t I deserve to have some fun?”

“Of course,” Morgan said brightly, her heart softening a bit at Julia’s resolve. “You’re just ... so *innocent*. I’m sorry, but it’s true.”

“I can take care of myself,” she said firmly.

“I know you can,” Morgan agreed. “But if you ever feel like you can’t, let me know and I’ll be there.”

“You’re sweet,” Julia said, reaching over to grab Morgan’s hand this time. “And surely you know what it’s like to have overprotective parents. I know what your uncle’s capable of ... and I imagine your mother isn’t much different?”

Morgan’s heart hardened at the thought of those two. She’d never put her uncle in the same category as loving, watchful parents like Ed and Astrid, and as for her mother....

“Actually,” Morgan said, draining her lemonade, more than ever wishing it was dosed with a couple shots of vodka. “My mother never gave a damn about me.”

9

MORGAN

TEN YEARS AGO

When Morgan was very young, she was certain her mother was a princess. After all, what was a princess if not beautiful? And if her mother was one thing, it was beautiful, with her silky, wheat-colored hair, jade green eyes, and soft, clear skin.

It wasn't until Morgan was much older that she realized her mother much more fit the villain persona than the damsel in distress, but she didn't dare try to tell her that.

She would sit for hours on her mother's silky bedspread, watching as she tended to her daily ministrations, rubbing smelly lotions and oily liquids on her face and hands. Sometimes she'd get distracted by Morgan's hunched posture or her face resting heavily in her hands.

"You'll get wrinkles and a hunchback," she'd warn her sternly, her flinty eyes fixed on her daughter in disapproval.

Morgan was always quick to obey, moving to sit on her hands to avoid the temptation of touching her face and

keeping her back ramrod straight. Adele would narrow her eyes at her in long warning before finally turning back to her mirror.

Her mother hadn't always been like this. She'd been wild in her youth, moving her daughter around the world to stay with her various boyfriends in their different places—Morgan had lived in everything from an apartment in Budapest to a log cabin in Montana before she'd turned ten.

But, sometime after Adele Conrad turned thirty, something had switched inside of her, and her priorities had shifted. It no longer mattered that someone loved her or that she had a boyfriend, but it suddenly had to be the perfect someone—the perfect man. And if the perfect man was going to find her, then she had to be the perfect woman.

That was when all the lotions and liquids had appeared, and the long absences as she took trips to spas and underwent various surgeries. She told Morgan it was maintenance. One would never expect a Rolls Royce not to get a tune up just because it was a Rolls Royce, right?

Now that her mother was thirty-five, a new type of desperation had started to rise within her. Adele couldn't be alone anymore, flitting in and out of her family's house. She needed a life. A life of her own, and it could no longer include Morgan.

“It's for the best, Morgan,” she said, turning around from her vanity, her silk robe swishing gently and her soft hair spreading down her back like a fan. “I'm afraid Bernard's

rather possessive of me, and we'll be so preoccupied with the baby." She said the last words while laying her manicured hand on the gentle bump rising from her abdomen.

"But Mama," Morgan started quickly, shifting her eyes from her mother's baby bump. "I always go with you."

Adele raised her hands in exasperation. "Honestly, Morgan," she said shrilly. "You're the one who wanted to stay. I thought you'd be happy."

"I am happy," she responded quietly. "I do want to stay ... I'll just miss you."

"Oh, my dear girl," she said gently, grasping Morgan's chin in her soft hand. "I'll miss you, too. We've been a wonderful team this past few years, but I'm afraid it's time for us to go our separate ways."

"But Mama—"

"No," Adele responded firmly, slashing her hand through the air. "I'm not talking about this anymore. You're staying, and that's that."

Morgan was silent, looking down at the pink patterned rug under her mother's bed. She felt tears blurring her eyes, which was silly. Her mother was right. She wanted to stay. She didn't want to leave Cole, but she just thought her mother would put up more of a fight.

"Don't look so sad," Adele said lightly, slinking back down to her vanity, her earlier anger forgotten—she always said anger caused wrinkles. Her eyes twinkled, and her voice

turned conspiratorial as she leaned toward Morgan. “You’ve got the lawn boy to keep you company, after all.”

Morgan looked up at her mother, her eyes wide and surprised, which Adele returned with a cynical look.

“Don’t try to deny it, dear,” she said. “All girls need to go through a phase with those types of boys. I surely did. Just make sure that you upgrade later. You don’t want to end up married to a boy like that.”

“You know about Cole?” Her mother never noticed anything going on with Morgan. How had she managed to figure that out?

“Of course I know, dear,” her mother responded gently with her back to her daughter, her eyes sternly connected with Morgan’s through the mirror. “But don’t let your uncle find out. He doesn’t like you nearly as much as he likes me, and he’ll likely be displeased.”



Morgan felt like she could finally release her breath as she closed the French doors behind her and stepped out into the crisp night. The air was cool, but not freezing. Her senses were so used to the frigid mountain temperatures of Lake Conrad that fifty to sixty degrees may as well be Bermuda. She breathed in a deep breath and exhaled slowly as her bare feet padded down the wooden steps leading to the dark, empty beach.

She'd been itching to get out of that house all night, but finally getting the chance to sneak away had taken more than a little ingenuity.

After the guys had come upstairs, Peter and Tripp had been the same, as usual. Tripp handsy and overflowing with puppy-dog enthusiasm and smarm, and Peter constantly reverting his angry gaze between Morgan and Julia in an accusatory way.

But apparently, Cole hadn't enjoyed whatever happened in the basement nearly as much as they had. He'd silently stuck around for the grilled steaks and a beer or two. After dinner was over, however, as everyone got sloshed, he'd lurked around the living room with a gloomy look on his face for a few minutes before disappearing.

It probably hadn't helped that Tripp had started streaming some god-awful electro pop from his phone. Not a good sound when you're trying to woo an acoustic folk musician who had once asked her if she'd like to travel the country to follow Iron & Wine on tour.

Not only a connoisseur of bad music, Tripp had been like an octopus. As soon as she'd swatted away one hand, another seemed to appear out of nowhere, lurching and grabbing for some part of her body.

Morgan had stuck it out, though. She didn't relish leaving Julia alone with Peter. For every glass of vodka-less lemonade that Morgan threw back, Julia seemed to throw back two glasses of chardonnay. Julia was tall, but in a light, willowy way, so the alcohol seemed to hit her pretty heavily.

Morgan had eyed her warily as she laughed into Peter's chest from where she sat next to him on a wide, white couch, all giggling and sloppy. Morgan knew that look well, and she didn't like seeing it on someone like Julia.

The scariest part of the evening, though, had been when she'd ventured into the kitchen to refill her lemonade and Peter had followed her.

"I don't like you." She'd heard his deep, slurred voice behind her as she was pulling the pitcher out of the refrigerator.

"Yeah, I picked up on that," she quipped dismissively as she poured her drink, and didn't look up at him, which seemed to piss him off more.

"I don't care who your uncle is," he said roughly, coming around the counter to get closer to her. "And anyway, I hear he hates your guts."

Morgan sighed deeply as she finally looked up at Peter. His dark eyes were swimming around his face, and his hair hung limp and greasy in front over his forehead.

"He kind of does," Morgan admitted solemnly. "That doesn't change the fact that my last name is Conrad, though. So, if you murder me, he'll likely be upset."

"I'm not going to murder you," he said angrily, taking an uncomfortably close step toward her, his eyes moving down to her chest as his breaths came out heavily. "You're so weird."

“I *am* really, *really* weird,” she said quickly, backing away and darting around the large kitchen island. “So, remember that makes me pretty hard to miss ... you know, if I disappeared suddenly.”

“I’m not going to murder you, you stupid bitch,” he yelled loudly, and Morgan jumped and held perfectly still where she stood on the other side of the island, contemplating if she was fast enough to skirt around his hulking form.

Before she had a chance to run, though, a new voice echoed through the massive kitchen.

“Peter!” Morgan heard a loud whisper and looked up to see Callista walking into the room. She’d been suspiciously quiet all evening, her eyes darting nervously around the living room. Morgan had guessed she’d been on the lookout for Cole.

“What?” Peter slurred, not taking his eyes off Morgan.

“Go back out in the living room with the others,” Callista instructed, like Peter was a recalcitrant little boy.

There was a weighted pause before Peter, shooting her one last glare, turned and left the room, shuffling sloppily back to the living room.

Callista didn’t say anything, just leveled a serious look at Morgan. “Stay away from him,” she ordered firmly.

“Um, gladly,” Morgan replied caustically.

With one last eyeroll, Callista followed her brother’s footsteps and stormed from the room in a huff. Morgan had

looked around the room at imaginary compatriots, her arms raised in the air in question. *What the hell was that?*

So, needless to say, she was a bit shaken up after that.

She tried to stick close to Julia for the rest of the night, and did her best to avoid Tripp, Peter, *and* Callista—difficult to do when they made up three quarters of her present company. Eventually, she'd had enough and, as Tripp and Peter fell over themselves telling stories of past debauched experiences, she had pretended to go to the bathroom before sneaking out the side door.

She needed to get back in there and watch out for Julia, but she just had to take a short breather. Unlike some people—for example, the one person who was the point of this entire stupid weekend—she wouldn't just moodily disappear for large swathes of time.

She didn't know what Cole had to be upset about, anyway. Everyone here was kissing his ass and telling him how amazing he was. Meanwhile, if Morgan didn't watch herself, Peter would knock her on the back of the head with a candlestick or a lead pipe, and God forbid she find herself alone in a dark corner with Tripp.

Cole's always been such a moody bastard, she thought cynically as her bare feet sunk into the cool sand and she made her way to the dock.

When they were kids, he'd been so mad at her when she'd been sad to see her mother move to Texas without her. She got

to stay in Lake Conrad, after all, with him. What more could a girl want? It had been their first fight. He'd sulked for weeks.

Now that she was older and wiser, she knew that she *should* have been happy to see her mother leave. Morgan would be a lot better off now if she'd understood then that Adele Conrad was destined to disappoint her over and over again.

As her feet finally hit the wood of the dock, Morgan felt shrouded in a sense of peace at the sight of the bright sky and shining waters. All the errant thoughts of her mother and the past disappeared as she made her way down the dock. When she finally reached the end of the wooden pathway, it was as magnificent as she'd thought it would be.

The dock came out so far into the lake that it was like she was standing in the middle of it, surrounded by nothing but water and sky.

Carefully lowering herself down to the wooden planks, she lay down flat and looked up at the bright sky—it was on fire tonight. The moon was a huge, hazy orb hanging low in the sky. It almost seemed to be touching the mountains in the distance. The bright stars speckled the wide expanse, creating different shades of blue around them.

Just gorgeous, Morgan thought, feeling more at peace than she had in weeks. Something about a wide sky and clear night reminded her of how insignificant it all really was. She was just an ant from up there, small and meaningless. It was a comforting thought, and her mind went immediately blank as she gazed up, all her worries and fears disappearing.

She felt like she was lying under a heavy blanket—like the sky was her blanket, so soothing, warm, and comforting....

“What the hell are you doing?”

Morgan screamed and jumped at the deep voice coming from above her. She closed her eyes tight as she waited for the attack to come down on her.

It was Peter! On the dock! With a candlestick!

But nothing happened, and when she opened her eyes, it wasn't Peter standing over her with a candlestick, but rather Cole with a scowl.

She could see him clearly against the bright night sky, and he was not happy. Not unusual, she supposed, but why did he have to come ruin her meditation time?

“What does it look like I'm doing?” she asked angrily, not getting up. “I'm stargazing.”

“Do you really think that's a good idea?” he asked, dropping to the dock next to her and leaning back on his hands. “It's midnight ... and that Peter guy looks like he wants to either fuck you or claw your eyes out.”

Morgan looked up at him, sitting back in the moonlight. He'd pulled his long-ish hair back from his face and wore the same long sleeve thermal shirt and jeans. She could see the dark lines of his tattoos peeking out from under his sleeves, and she once again begrudged the lack of short sleeves and better lighting.

“*Obviously* he wants to murder me, but what’s up with that?” Morgan asked casually, turning to face the sky again. “All because I took too long to bring him a beer?”

“I don’t think it helped that when you finally showed up with his beer, you dumped it all over him,” he responded with a caustic chuckle.

“That was a shame. It was kind of funny, though,” she added distractedly.

“You went flying,” Cole said as he sputtered out a laugh. “It was like a cartoon.”

Morgan chortled at the thought. The fall had hurt like hell, but it *was* funny in retrospect. She breathed out deeply as a thought occurred to her, though.

“You were watching me?” Morgan asked casually, not looking over at him.

“Yeah,” he replied with no shame. “I was.”

“Do you watch me a lot?” She regretted it as soon as she asked the question.

“Of course I do,” he said softly. “You’re unavoidable.”

“Where have you been all night, anyway?” she asked, changing the subject as she propped her head up by her elbow. She wasn’t sure how she felt about that whole *unavoidable* comment, but she’d let it pass.

“You sure do ask a lot of questions,” he said quietly, his eyes glued to the sky.

“So I’ve heard,” Morgan replied caustically. “Where have you been all night? This is your party, after all.”

“I just needed a break,” he admitted in a deep, hushed voice. “I was keeping an eye on you, though. And that girl ... Julia? I don’t trust these people.”

“*These people?*” Morgan asked roughly, lying back down. “Aren’t *you* the one entering into deals with the great Curtis Conrad now?”

“I don’t know yet...” Cole said darkly.

“It’s what you’ve always wanted—to be a musician,” Morgan said quietly, studying the stars. “You’d be stupid to pass this up.” “Yeah, so I’ve heard,” he mumbled. She felt him turn toward her on his side so that his eyes were on her now. The thought made her feel like she was on the verge of bursting into flames. She itched to turn and look at him—to see if he was on fire, too. But she couldn’t. She wouldn’t.

“I can’t believe you’re leaving,” she said quietly, barely above a whisper.

“I don’t know if I am yet,” he admitted, his breath grazing her cheek.

That got her attention. Her head whipped to the side as she looked at him. He was inches away from her, so she could fully drink in his features. His face was sleepy, like he was in a daze. Even in the dark, she could see that his face looked boyish and soft. He looked like her Cole.

“So you’re not going to break your promise?” she asked quickly, her eyes narrowing on him.

“Jesus, Morgan,” he said roughly, his brows coming down in a scowl. “After everything that’s happened—all this time—why the hell would the promise matter anymore?”

“You said you’d never leave me!” She was almost yelling now, tears burgeoning behind her eyes.

“I’m not *with* you, Morgan,” he all but yelled back at her. “How can you leave someone you don’t even know anymore?”

“You’re an asshole,” she accused angrily.

“Well, what’s new?” he growled. “And you’re still a spoiled brat.”

She turned away from him then, moving to her side as tears flowed freely out of her eyes, soaking her cheeks. *What an asshole.*

She knew she was being unfair, bringing up all this ancient history, but she couldn’t help it. Somehow, when she’d found out he might be leaving, it was as if no time had passed at all and the boy she loved was betraying her.

It was stupid. That boy didn’t exist anymore.

She lay there silently crying for a few beats, sure that any second he’d get up and stalk away. But he didn’t leave. Instead, she heard him release a long sigh as he gently set his warm hand on her arm.

Asshole. Her thoughts were repetitious and venomous as his hand slowly forced her to turn to her back.

She could feel him above her, but she kept her eyes closed tight for as long as she could. Eventually, she couldn't anymore, and she looked up to see Cole's face inches above her.

"I'm sorry, Morgan," he whispered intently. "I know I'm being an asshole, but you can't hold me to that promise anymore. You just can't."

His eyes were searching as he looked down at her, and it took everything inside of her to not look away. She wasn't a coward. Not like him. Running away. Breaking promises.

"Why not?" she asked heatedly. "You're still you and I'm still ... me. Nothing has changed."

"Everything has changed," he insisted.

She growled at him then—actually growled—and pushed his shoulder. "Then go away," she said angrily. "Leave me alone." She pushed him again, doing her best to get him to leave, but he didn't move.

Eventually he got sick of being pushed around, though, and grabbed hold of her wrists, holding them over her head calmly. Morgan struggled against him, annoyed that he could so easily keep her down, and he rolled his eyes.

"Calm down," he ordered, but she didn't listen, and he moved his body to hover over hers.

Something about the change in position acted as a switch, and Morgan suddenly became aware of his stronger, heavier body on top of hers.

She stopped struggling, her body becoming slowly infused with heat as she shifted her hips and parted her legs softly, causing him to fall in closer against her.

He paused as he looked down at her, his gold-green eyes flashing with anger and something else.

“What are you doing?” he asked, but he didn’t move, instead sinking deeper into her as his eyes became a bit hooded and sleepy looking.

That same rebellious streak she’d always felt when someone pushed her bubbled inside of her as she bucked her hips into him. He hissed in a breath at the contact, releasing her hands. Her arms drifted to her sides, but he didn’t move away. He lay over her, their mouths separated by only a couple of inches, his eyes connected with hers.

Morgan lost track of what happened after that. All thoughts and expectations fled her mind as Cole’s face moved down to meet hers. She held her breath until she felt his soft, warm lips land on hers.

Ohhhh. She relaxed into him, just reveling in the feel of him. After all this time. This was what she’d been waiting for. He moved his lips gently against hers in soft, sweet motions. She just lay there, though, trying to make sense of what was happening.

Cole Sutton was kissing her? Yesterday, she would have laughed in your face if you'd told her this would happen.

So, it wasn't a surprise that it took her a minute to catch her bearings, but after the initial shock wore off, she caught on fast. Reaching her hand up to the back of his head, she weaved her fingers in the silky strands of his hair, pulling gently at the same time that she pressed her lips more firmly against his.

He pulled away for a beat at the pressure, looking down at her questioningly. She feared that he'd get up and run, accusing her of being a saucy, conniving minx or something.

But no, she silently breathed out his name in relief as he seemed unable to stop himself from taking her lips with his again.

And this time, he was more in control. He shifted his body so he was lying more on top of her, and Morgan couldn't help but let out a long groan at the contact.

Holy shit, holy shit. Is this really happening?

It was surreal being with Cole again. The same, but different. He was bigger and heavier than he'd been back then, and his body was smoother and more agile as he moved over her gently, her legs opening as his hips came to rest between them. He thrust gently as his hand traveled up and down her side and his lips continued to move against hers.

He'd always been so hesitant, like he wasn't sure what he was doing.

He sure knows what he's doing now, Morgan thought distractedly as she felt his tongue touch hers, sending jolts of energy through her body. She bucked a bit at the contact, and this sent him into overdrive, his mouth moving more quickly against hers, a grunt escaping his lips as he sank deeper between her legs.

If Morgan thought she was on fire before, she was engulfed now. It felt like her insides had melted down into a warm goo. He could do anything to her right now—*anything*—and she let him.

Unable to stop herself, she reached under his shirt to run her hands on his chest, gently grazing his stomach and reaching up for his torso, her fingers lightly tangling with the bulges of his muscles under his hot, smooth skin.

She wondered if she was touching any tattoos. She was so close to seeing them. If only she could....

But no, suddenly she was cold and alone, his warmth and pressure yanked away from her.

Cracking open her eyes, she immediately saw that Cole had moved to his knees, sitting over her as he breathed in deep, angry breaths, combing his fingers through his hair, which had come loose and hung in front of his face in long strands.

“I’m not doing this again, Morgan,” he said urgently, looking down at her accusingly.

“Doing what?” she asked, truly affronted. *Here we go again*. “You’re the one who kissed me.”

“Is this whole thing some bullshit with you and your uncle?” he asked. “Trying to trap me again?”

“Cole, what the hell are you talking about?” Morgan was angry now as she rose up from a sitting position to more eye level with him. “You’re the one who kissed me. You’re always the one who kisses me and then accuses me....”

She cut herself off with a sob. Nothing had changed. After all this time, she was still letting him get to her in the same ways she always had. *My uncle was right*, she thought, *I really am a delusional fool.*

He breathed out an angry sound before jumping to his feet, shooting her one last disappointed look before he stormed away down the dock, making his way back toward the beach and the house.

Running away. Like he always did.

“You’re an asshole, Cole Sutton,” she screamed on a broken sob for the millionth time in her pitiful life before she wrapped her arms around her knees and cried over the only boy that ever seemed to make her cry.

10

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COLE

TEN YEARS AGO

*M*y wild girl,

I've seen you so many times from afar today. I've gotta say that you look pretty miserable.

I can't say I blame you. This place kind of sucks. Despite its suckiness, I'd much rather you be here than at an identical sucky space in Texas with your mother.

I'm sorry I've been so moody the past couple weeks. I know I'm an asshole, so you don't have to tell me.

It's still weird to think of you here in this barren institutional space, though, and not out in the woods. You're wearing shoes and everything. How am I supposed to reconcile this clothed person with the girl from the forest?

Cole

P.S. I saw you walk into Ms. Schiffer's class. I had her last year. Be prepared to read almost exclusively non-romance novels this year.

My Cole,

I saw you, too. You were skulking around the cafeteria and moping through the hallways. Has anyone ever told you that you should smile more often?

You're not always an asshole, you know, and I'm happy that I'm here. I don't want to be in Texas. It's just that my mother was so fine—happy even—to leave me behind. I think that's what hurts the most if I'm being honest.

But I don't need her. I have you.

I want to meet at our spot after school today. You can play the guitar for me, and I can read. I wish I had the new Lisa Kleypas book, but my uncle hasn't let me go into town to get it from the bookstore. So I guess I'll have to wait for that one.

I may have already gotten into an argument with Ms. Schiffer about books. When I asked her if we would be reading any romances, she said we would. When I asked what romance, she said we would be reading ROMEO AND JULIET!!! She thinks Romeo and Juliet is a romance.

Not a good start, Ms. Schiffer, not a good start.

My wild girl,

I smile when it's appropriate. It's very rarely appropriate.

I'm sorry your mother hurt you. But you have me, and I will never leave you behind. I promise.

I think I agree with Ms. Schiffer. Why wouldn't Romeo and Juliet be considered a romance? They fall in love, don't they? Isn't that the basic requirement of a romance? What else do you need exactly?

I can't wait to see you laying back in the ferns this afternoon, shoeless and filthy.

Your Cole

My stupid, stupid Cole,

It's not a romance novel because—spoiler alert—they die at the end! A proper romance novel will NEVER end with anything other than a happily ever after. If Shakespeare really wanted it to be romance and not a TRAGEDY, it would have ended with them living in the suburbs of Verona with a gaggle of dark-haired, Italian-speaking babies.

Your annoyed girl

My wild, annoyed girl,

Is that our only option then? To end up in the suburbs of Lake Conrad with a gaggle of green-eyed babies who read a

mix of Tennyson and Julia Quinn?

Is any other possible outcome a tragedy?

Only your Cole

Maybe we can end up in San Francisco? You can go out all day and do music ...whatever that entails... while I lounge around and read.

That sounds perfect.

Cole jogged through the Square, dodging tourists and fighting the brisk fall wind on his way to The Blue Bard. He didn't have much time before he had to get all the way up Echo Peak to meet Morgan, and he didn't want to be late.

Cole knew he'd been sulking a lot lately, which had only exasperated Morgan's sadness over her mother leaving. He was determined to shake them both out of the funk, though. What better way to cheer her up than by surprising her with a new book?

Pushing open the glass door to the bookstore, he was grateful to be immediately enveloped in warmth as the bells

above the door announced his arrival.

*He breathed in the familiar sweet, musty smell of the bookstore, his eyes raking over the towering bookshelves. It always gave him a little bit of a high to enter any bookstore, but *The Blue Bard* especially gave him such an overwhelming feeling of ... something. Comfort? Happiness? He wasn't sure, but he wished it was something he could bottle up.*

He'd been coming here for as long as he could remember. Starting when he was a toddler, his grandmother and his mother, when she was on the wagon at least, would bring him here for story time and book shopping.

The only thing those two could ever agree about was books. He'd heard some knock down, drag out fights between the two of them, but they both wanted Cole to be a reader, and he was happy to oblige them.

His eyes landed on the front counter, where he saw Bridget talking to a customer who he hoped would clear out soon. He had places to be and needed to pay for this book and get out.

Swiftly making his way to the romance section, he scanned the shelves of colorful covers with elaborate fonts decorating the bindings.

Finally, he found the book he was looking for and cringed down at the bright white cover featuring a lady hanging off of a shirtless dude, her dress falling from her shoulders.

This is going to be awkward, he thought uncomfortably as he slipped the book under his arm and made his way back up

to the front counter.

Bridget was going to give him a hard time. He just knew it. He'd already decided he'd tell her the book was for his grandmother. Knowing Bridge, she'd ask her about it the next time she saw her, and Cole was going to have to tell his grandmother he'd started reading romance novels or something.

When he got back to the front of the store, he saw that she was still talking to the same customer, and Cole felt a surge of impatience. He really didn't have time to wait around, but Bridget seemed really into her conversation.

She'd usually give Cole a light wave or a smile even if she was talking with someone else at the counter, but she didn't even look at him, her eyes staying focused and serious on the tall man in a sleek black coat. She seemed stressed, and was standing alert and waiting as the man lectured her about something.

Not wanting to stress Bridget out further by waiting in line impatiently, Cole wandered over to a table of newly released fiction, picking up books that interested him and reading the descriptions on the back.

Not seeing anything he liked, he looked at Morgan's book again and started reading the back of it, his face twisting in confusion as he read the flowery description of the elaborate plot.

What does she see in these things, anyway?

“I’ve heard that’s not a very good book,” said a deep voice behind him, and Cole looked up with a start to see the man from the counter standing in front of him.

That’s when it hit him that this wasn’t just any man. This was Curtis Conrad—Morgan’s uncle.

The first thing that struck him was that he wasn’t very old. He’d never seen him this close before, but he’d always built him up in his head as the wizened old man. Kind of an Ebenezer Scrooge type. But Curtis Conrad was probably in his forties, tall, with dark hair and a close-trimmed beard.

Everything about him just screamed money, from his pitch black starched wool coat to his shiny black shoes. It all looked brand new, like he’d never worn it before.

Cole lowered his hand, dropping the book to his side before quickly straightening his posture. “Good afternoon, sir,” he said softly, embarrassment causing his voice to waver. “I’m getting this for ... my grandmother.”

“Huh.” Mr. Conrad’s eyes flicked from the book to Cole’s face, which was growing warmer by the second. “So you know who I am, then?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Nelson spoke very highly of your work this summer,” Mr. Conrad informed him, shifting his weight slightly. “I let your grandmother know that, too, and she was very pleased. I hope we can expect you back next summer?”

“I’d very much like that, sir,” Cole said quickly.

“Good,” Mr. Conrad clipped out, his body shifting as if he was planning to turn and walk away. He stopped, though, something causing him to turn back. His severe eyes swept over Cole’s scuffed Converse, old flannel coat, and too-shaggy hair.

“You’re eighteen? Graduating this year?”

“I turn eighteen in February.”

“Ah.”

He nodded his head slowly but still didn’t leave after, just stood there staring at him like he was some sort of foreign specimen.

“Do you know my son? Ian?” he finally asked. “He graduates this year, too.”

“Yes, sir,” responded Cole, nodding slowly. “I’ve seen him around.”

“And my niece, Morgan?” he asked, his lip twisting a bit at her name. “I believe you’ve seen her around?”

“Yes, sir.”

Mr. Conrad’s eyes darkened as he took a step closer, and Cole couldn’t help but hold his breath in anticipation of what he’d say next.

Does he know? Does he know about me and Morgan?

“Your grandmother is very dear to me, Cole,” he said quietly. “She’s been with us for many years, and your grandfather while he was still alive, too.”

“Yeah,” Cole breathed out, dropping the “yes, sir” as he became more mystified with this conversation. “You’re ... dear to her, too.”

“All that business with your mother a few years ago, and then your grandfather passing away,” Mr. Conrad noted firmly. “It didn’t do her any good, but everyone in the Conrad family and its businesses were there for her. We supported her.”

“Thanks for that,” Cole bit out shortly. This conversation was getting weirder and weirder.

“Morgan—she’s a bit like your mother,” he said, his voice quiet and flat. “She’s sloppy and difficult to control. Not the kind of person that makes anyone’s life easier... or better. In fact, quite the opposite.”

Cole was struck silent trying to process his words. What the fuck kind of thing was that to say? Was that an insult to his mother, Morgan, or both of them?

“I want you to remember that the next time you ... ‘see her around,’ understand?”

That’s when Cole realized that nothing got past this guy. He knew exactly what was going on.

“Yeah,” Cole responded, his heart pounding in his throat as a feeling of disgust swirled around his heart. “I understand completely.”

“Good,” Mr. Conrad replied, before shooting him a small smile and pivoting on his heels toward the door, his fancy

shoes clicking on The Blue Bard's ancient wood slabs.

Screw that noise, Cole thought bitterly as he rushed to the counter to checkout.

He had a book to deliver.



Cole knew he'd messed up.

Morgan was quiet this morning, and when Morgan was quiet, the entire world was off kilter.

He watched her through the kitchen window as she moved slowly back and forth in a rocking chair, sipping a cup of coffee and slowly turning the pages of a book on her lap.

It was a cloudy day—probably snowing up in Lake Conrad—and the early morning light was gray and dim, a fog drifting slowly off the lake. He was pretty sure they were the only two awake in the house.

Although he'd heard her drag Julia to bed after she'd come in from the dock, the others had partied all through the night.

He'd awoken more times than he could count to some loud banging noise, a sharp yell, and, at one point, someone trying to badly play an unconnected electric guitar.

He'd even gotten out of bed once at about three in the morning, walking to the stairway and peeking down to see that it was just Tripp and Peter making all the racket. Apparently, even Callista had abandoned them after a while.

Now the gloomy morning light was streaming through the windows and the place was trashed. There were bottles and cans everywhere, as well as some suspicious looking ash and powder on the glass top of the coffee table.

Cole poured himself a mug of coffee and looked back out the window. It was almost as if he was in a dream, watching her out there, so languid and quiet. She was always loud in his dreams, though, whooping up a storm, yelling, or laughing, so this had to be real.

She'd seemed so impenetrable and hard over the years, shouting insults to him over the sound of the crowd, telling anyone who'd listen he was a sucky musician and an uptight jack off. She was probably right about all of that, but his pride could only take so many hits before it forced him to lash out.

Those lashes had been minor and stupid compared to what had happened during the past week, though. He'd made her cry twice, and he'd never felt shittier. Maybe she was right. Maybe he really was an asshole.

He knew it was no excuse, but he'd been in such a weird headspace last night.

He'd already been off balance, finding her here when he'd shown up yesterday, not to mention her confession that she was here because of *him*. Then, to top it all off, when all the girls had gone upstairs and he was left with just Tripp, Peter, and a lot of expensive recording equipment, things had gotten pretty damn weird.

He'd stupidly thought they'd immediately dive right into the music, but no, those boys had other things on their minds.

“What’s going on between you and my lady, man?” Tripp had asked with a smooth smile, walking over to stand in front of Cole, puffing out his chest in an apparent effort to be intimidating.

Cole had a couple inches of height on both Tripp and Peter, but even if that wasn't the case, it was hard for him to imagine feeling physically intimidated by either doofus. *If* an attempt at intimidation was actually happening—the mocking smile that spread over Tripp's face contradicted his puffed-up stance.

“Your lady? You mean Morgan?”

“You two looked pretty cozy when we came down here earlier.”

“We were just talking,” Cole said with a shrug, unabashed. He was pretty damn sick of pretending like he didn't know Morgan Conrad. “We've known each other a long time.”

“Anything ever happen between you two?” Tripp asked snidely. “She's a sweet piece of ass. I wouldn't blame you if you took a bite.”

Cole hesitated. That pissed him off. He knew it shouldn't. He and Morgan were ancient history, after all. But something about denying that he knew her to her uncle's henchman didn't sit right with him.

Nevertheless, just as Curtis Conrad had instructed ten years ago, he kept his mouth shut. He hated to admit it, but he was

still afraid of what that bastard was capable of.

“Nope,” he responded shortly, the denial falling hard in his chest like a heavy weight, making him feel nauseated.

There was a long pause as Tripp watched him thoughtfully, but he wasn't the one who spoke first. It was Peter. He got up from where he sat on the couch, standing in position next to Tripp, his eyes scornful as they raked over Cole.

“She *is* a hot piece of ass, isn't she?” Peter asked seriously, his eyes probing Cole. “Too bad she's got that mouth attached to her.”

There was another weighted silence, during which Cole's eyes darted quizzically between the two of them, just before Tripp looked over at Peter and barked out a loud laugh.

“Hey, you've got your virgin princess, Pete,” he said, his voice now light and teasing. “You leave the mouthy one to me. I can handle her. I already got the go ahead from her uncle, but he did warn me that she needs a firm hand.”

Cole stood watching them, his mouth falling open in shock. Was this ... a joke?

Reading books, the truly terrible villains were always concealing some hidden depths. Under all the layers of mean words and callous actions, there was something truly human that explained how they became the way they were. But Cole didn't think that was what was going on here. He'd wager that even the whale in *Moby Dick* had more emotional depth than these two.

He didn't know what to do about it, but something told him he needed to play it cool. Kicking both their asses and rushing out of here with Morgan under one arm and Julia under the other seemed like a pretty good choice in the short term, but he needed to be smart. Be cool. In the end, this was Curtis Conrad he was dealing with, and Cole wouldn't give him the satisfaction that Curtis would glean from his sloppiness.

“Are we going to lay down some tracks?” he finally asked. “Or talk about girls all night?”

Then they'd spent an hour going through the motions, Cole strumming his guitar and singing a couple of his more popular songs. Things had relaxed a bit at that point. They obviously liked his sound, and had been enthusiastic and obviously adept behind the soundboard.

But Cole's heart wasn't in it. He knew now that this wasn't going to happen. He needed to get out of here, and he needed Morgan and her friend to come with him. Morgan should be easy. If she was only here because of him, then she'd leave if he left, right?

But when they were done recording and Peter had played everything they'd recorded back for him, he was struck dumb by the shittiness of this situation.

Cole had never heard himself sound so good. His voice was crisp and clear, and the accompanying instruments rich, creating the perfect harmony. He'd never heard anything like it, and it did something to him—it made him *angry*.

He was finally getting what he'd always wanted, and he couldn't take it. He had to turn it down. And it wasn't even a coincidence. It had been laid out in front of his face the entire time.

The Conrads were all over this thing, and he'd known it was bad news. He should have followed his instincts and stayed away, but Curtis Conrad knew the best ways to get to him: music and Morgan.

The question was, why? Why was he trying to get to him now, all these years later?

He'd been a good little soldier. He'd done what he was told and stayed away from Curtis's niece. Anything that had happened to her in the last ten years wasn't Cole's doing ... was it?

So, during the rest of the night, he'd been angry and terrible company to everyone else. He would have gladly chosen to swat imaginary spiders off of Duke's arm rather than hang out here a second longer. But no matter how much this entire thing was some sort of trap by the Conrad family, he wouldn't leave without Morgan and Julia.

There never seemed to be a ready opportunity to get Morgan alone, but he knew all he had to do was wait. If he knew one thing about her, it was that she would need to escape eventually. And true enough, around midnight, she'd slipped out the side door and into the night.

He'd followed her and proceeded to *not* tell her that they needed to leave and why; no, instead he'd physically and

verbally attacked her before accusing her of being in cahoots with her uncle.

Well, maybe “physically attacked her” was an overstatement. He remembered enough about Morgan to know that she was willing during that interaction.

She’d been so hot and pliant under him, her mouth opening to him and her legs wrapped around his waist. Heat rose within him at the thought, and he put his coffee down on the counter roughly. He watched her on the porch right now, so sweet and serene. She had no idea how much she was fucking with his head.

He and Morgan had only been together in that way once. Their time in the woods had mostly been kissing and light touching—innocent teenager stuff. They’d been so young and unsure of themselves, and he’d never wanted to push the envelope. It had all been very mature of him in retrospect, which wasn’t something that could be said for the rest of his behavior.

And unlike their interaction last night, it had been sweet and tentative back then. He hadn’t wanted to hurt her, something at which he had spectacularly failed in the time since.

Moving his eyes away from her with a great sigh, he refilled his coffee and walked to the kitchen door, slipping out into the warm morning air and shuffling toward where she rocked back and forth. He could see she had one foot curled under her and one on the ground, methodically pushing herself back and

forth by the ball of her foot. She didn't look up as he walked over and sat down in an adjacent rocking chair.

He watched the fog drift across the still lake and into the surrounding trees. There didn't seem to be any sound out here in this foggy dream world. It was completely quiet with the exception of the sound of their chairs rocking back and forth.

"I *am* an asshole," he said gruffly, breaking the brittle silence. "And I'm sorry about it."

The words hung heavy between them, but she didn't answer. Instead, she carefully inserted a bookmark between the pages of her book, setting it gently on her lap. It had a shiny purple cover and looked like the one she bought from The Blue Bard last weekend.

She stared straight ahead for a few long moments, and Cole began to worry that she wouldn't say anything. But when she finally looked over at him, her eyes were swimming with emotions. She looked serious, and Morgan was very rarely serious.

One of the things he'd liked the most about her was that she was entertaining as hell. He'd always been happy to sit back and watch the Morgan show. Even when he hated her.

And he hated her, right? Because of ... well, he couldn't remember why anymore.

"You know, it was really hard to leave my family behind," she said suddenly, her musical voice coming out like a quiet

song. “I think that you of all people know the tight hold they had on me.”

Cole didn't say anything right away, just nodded his head slowly. “So, you're completely cut off?” he finally asked. “Like for real?”

“Yeah, I am,” she replied firmly. “So whatever *trick* you think I am trying to play on you, or if you think I'm teaming up with my uncle to pull one over on you ... that's not what's happening.”

“I know,” Cole replied scornfully. “I'm an idiot. And a pompous blowhard. And a terrible musician.”

That got a laugh out of her, at least. Her lips came up into a half smile as she looked over at him cynically. “I've met worse,” she admitted softly.

He smiled back at her slightly until a thought made his face twist a bit. “What made you finally go through with it?” Cole could hear the edge in his voice, and he knew he sounded bitter. He *was* bitter. “Why did you finally walk away from them?”

She shrugged and looked down at her lap. “Let's just say there was no way I could deny reality anymore. I was *forced* to let go of my delusions.”

He looked up, met her eyes, and felt his insides catch on fire at the sight of her wrapped in a knit blanket, a book on her lap, her hair and eyes as wild as ever. She looked so serious. She looked like an adult. When had she grown up?

He cleared his throat in an effort to compose himself. “We need to get out of here,” he said gruffly. “These people are trash.”

“So you’re not breaking your promise?” she asked urgently, straightening in her chair as her eyes darted over him questioningly. “You’re staying in Lake Conrad?”

“I can’t keep talking about that promise,” he said angrily, his hand slashing through the air. “That’s over.”

Her brows lowered over her eyes, and he thought he could hear her blood boiling from where he sat. She let it go, though, exhaling a deep breath as her eyes finally rose to meet his gaze. Cole felt like he stopped breathing at the connection.

There she is again. My wild girl.

“What about your dream? What about being a musician?” she pressed in a quiet voice.

He shrugged, slipping down in his rocking chair, feeling a great sulk descend upon him. “That’s over, too.”

Morgan nodded silently, her eyes focused down on the porch. “We can’t leave without Julia,”

“She’ll come with us,” Cole responded dismissively. “Go wake her up and tell her we need to leave.”

Morgan nodded, apparently abandoning her fight. “I’ll go do that,” she said quietly, slipping out of the blanket as she rose from her chair and entered the house, not looking back at him once.

11

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MORGAN

Swinging Julia's bedroom door open without knocking, the first thing Morgan noticed with the benefit of daylight was that the room was absolutely identical to hers, from the white and gray knit rug under the bed down to the limp silk lilies propped up in a clear vase on the nightstand.

This place is one hundred percent an Airbnb, she thought cynically as her eyes settled on Julia's sleeping form.

Carefully walking across the room, she set a tall glass of orange juice and three aspirin next to the lilies and looked down on Julia worriedly. *This won't be easy.*

Julia lay essentially comatose in the giant bed, her long blond hair spread out on her pillow, her mouth open slightly as she breathed deeply in and out, a slight snore catching in the back of her throat.

"Julia, wake up," Morgan hissed softly, not wanting her voice to reverberate through the house's thin walls.

There was no response as Julia's chest continued to move up and down in even, deep breaths. She lay atop the bright white bedding in the same gray slacks and soft pink sweater that she'd been wearing the day before, mascara smeared under her eyes.

“*Wakey-wakey, eggs and bakey,*” Morgan said in a sing-song voice, kneeling down to be more at eye level with her. “*Juuuuuliiiaaaa.*” She poked her gently on the arm but didn't even get a flinch in return.

When Morgan had returned from the beach last night, she'd dragged Julia, somewhat against her will, up to her bedroom. She'd thought for sure she was going to get it from Peter—he was not happy to have Julia pried from his arms. But Callista and Tripp had distracted him long enough that they'd been able to slip away without too much drama from his direction.

Julia had fussed slightly as Morgan had led her up the stairs, questioning why they were the only ones who had to go to bed.

But for as resistant as she'd been about going to bed, upon entering her room she'd immediately fallen face down on the fluffy white bedding and passed out. Morgan had removed her shoes, covered her with a cream-colored throw blanket, and made sure she had some water readily available.

She'd thought about sleeping on her floor to make sure Peter didn't try anything, but in the end, she'd reluctantly gone to her own room to wait out the night. She'd barely slept a wink, though.

Between being pissed at Cole for kissing her—and subsequently having a giant hissy fit about it—and worrying about the weird atmosphere in this house, she felt restless and nervous. She'd fall asleep just to wake with a start at some loud noise or voice drifting from somewhere else in the house.

Looking down at Julia now, Morgan released a long, helpless sigh. She needed to get her to wake up. If Cole said it was time to go, Morgan wasn't going to fight him—she'd been ready to leave since she'd accepted Tripp's invitation—but she sure as hell wouldn't leave Julia here.

Anxiety piqued inside of her at the thought. Julia really needed to wake up. Morgan knew she wouldn't feel at ease until they were out of here.

“Julia,” she hissed again, grabbing her shoulder and giving her a little shake. “Wake up!”

Julia opened her mouth a little wider, letting out a soft grunt, and Morgan blanched at the gracelessness of the movement. Honestly, this was the most disheveled that she'd ever seen the pristine Julia Keane, which was kind of ... refreshing? Interesting? Definitely a different side to her.

Who knew she had it in her to reach such a low point? Kind of makes me like her more.

Shaking off the thought, Morgan looked down at her intently. Concentrating hard on what made Julia *Julia*, she decided to give something else a try.

Clearing her throat, she concentrated on Julia's face intently. "Meoooooww," she drew out in a long, high voice.

Letting the sound hang in the air a few seconds, she looked down expectantly.

Nope. Nothing. Not even a grunt of recognition.

Morgan groaned. *How much chardonnay did she put down?*

Seeing the glass of water she'd left on the nightstand the night before, Morgan reached over and dipped her fingers in the glass.

"Jules, wake up." She flicked water in her face, and Julia's face scrunched up at the contact. "Wake up." More water flicked in her face—*she was stirring now!* "Wake up now, Julia." She essentially threw a handful of water in her face this time.

That seemed to finally get something out of her. She didn't open her eyes, but she let out a loud groan as she tried to turn away, absently waving her hand in Morgan's direction.

"Oh, no you don't," Morgan said, gripping her shoulder firmly. "Wake up, Julia!"

Finally, she cracked her eyes open, looking at Morgan in confusion. "Morgan?" she said questioningly, rubbing her eyes and spreading the smeared mascara in the water that coated her face. "What are you doing here?"

"Waking you up," she said without explanation. "We gotta go." She motioned her head toward the bedroom door and reached down to pick up Julia's limp arm.

“What? Why?” She tried to sit up but immediately gave up. Her hand came up to her head as she fell back down the bed, closing her eyes as if she was in severe pain.

“It’s ... well, we just do,” Morgan said hesitantly before finishing firmly. “Trust me, please.”

“Well, okay,” she finally said absently, attempting to rise again. “Oh, my.” She set her hand gently on her forehead and fell back down. “I think I drank too much wine last night.”

“Yeah, I’d say so,” Morgan replied. “But don’t worry. If anyone is going to judge you for that, it’s not me. Here, I have something that will help.”

Reaching behind her, Morgan picked up the juice and aspirin off the nightstand.

“This will help,” she said. “Just pop those pills in your mouth and chug the juice.”

Julia looked down at the items warily before she nodded decisively, as if she’d figured out it was in her best interest to obey. She carefully picked up the small pills from Morgan’s palm, throwing them in her mouth before picking up the orange juice, which she inhaled in a few gulps, although she did stop a few times to gag.

“Ugh,” she groaned, handing the empty glass back to Morgan. “I’ve never been hungover before. This is terrible.”

“Don’t worry,” Morgan said sympathetically to Julia’s pallid face framed by her wayward hair. “I’ll take you to my friend

Lucy's house in Lake Conrad and you can crash there all day. No judgment. Now, c'mon. Let's go."

Rising to her feet, she reached down and grabbed Julia by the arm, attempting to pull her out of bed, but Julia resisted.

"Wait a minute," she said skeptically, pulling her arm away. "We're all going? But why?"

"No, not everyone," Morgan answered quickly. "Just you, me, and Cole."

"What about Mr. Mancini? Callista and Tripp?"

"They're ... not coming, but it's okay." Morgan tried again to pull Julia from the bed, but Julia balked, holding firm to the bed.

"Well, then no. I can't leave Mr. Mancini and Callista," she said firmly. "I'm here with them. That would be incredibly rude."

"Julia, it's fine," Morgan answered quickly. "Please just trust me. I'll explain everything when you feel better."

"No, Morgan," Julia said determinedly, lifting her body slightly to clumsily pull the covers up from under her. "I don't want to go ... I want to sleep." She slipped under the blankets, letting out a relieved sigh as her head sank into the pillow.

"Julia—"

"No," her muffled voice insisted stubbornly. "I don't understand, and I don't want to understand right now. Plus, it

would be extremely impolite of me to leave without speaking with Mr. Mancini, and I'm in no shape to do that right now."

"Julia, Mr. Mancini is a dick," Morgan insisted urgently. "You don't owe him anything."

"Morgan," Julia said sternly, lifting her head a couple inches off the pillow, her eyes becoming focused for a half second as she glared angrily at her. "Is the house burning down?"

Morgan shook her head and opened her mouth to speak, but Julia cut her off.

"Then give me a couple more hours of sleep, *please*." Reaching over, she pulled a pillow over from next to her and covered her head with it. Lying face down, a pillow over her head and her entire body under the blanket, it almost looked like she wasn't even in the bed.

Having succumbed to more than a couple awful hangovers in her life, Morgan knew exactly how Julia was feeling right now. She didn't begrudge her being kind of a jerk, but Jesus this was inconvenient.

Sighing deeply, she rose to her feet and walked toward the bedroom door. Cole hadn't really given her much urgency to work with, anyway. They were "trash people?" She could have told him that yesterday.

But for some reason, when he had come to her this morning, telling her they needed to leave ... *together* ... everything inside of her had told her to jump to attention immediately.

Apparently, even after all of these years, when Cole Sutton called, Morgan followed, which was ... disturbing. Especially after what had happened last night. She should have laughed in his face, told him to suck it, she was staying here with the trash people. But no, here she was, doing his bidding.

Shaking her head at her stupidity, she slipped out of the bedroom, closed the door tightly behind her, and turned to the right without looking where she was going.

He's always been so bossy, telling me it would be this way or that way with little to no consideration of what I—

“Oof,” Morgan let out a loud grunt as she ran into something big and hard. She looked down to see she was standing atop someone’s hairy toes.

What? Catching her bearings, her eyes traveled upwards to see it was Peter Mancini’s toes on which she stood.

“Oh, sor—” She tried to apologize and take a step back, but she was forcibly stopped as he reached down and silently grabbed both of her wrists in one hand. He yanked her at the same time he flung open the door of the room they were standing in front of.

Morgan went flying into the room but caught her footing before she fell on the large, unmade bed that was directly across from the door.

Immediately jumping up from the bed, she rubbed her sore wrists and looked up at him accusingly. “What the hell, Peter?”

He didn't say anything, just slammed the door closed behind him and silently stalked toward her like a charging bull. Morgan's heart dropped to her stomach as she took a few staggering steps backward, running into the bed again.

It's happening. He's murdering me. I knew it.

She attempted to skirt out of his way, but she wasn't fast enough. When he reached her, he grabbed her by the shoulder and dragged her back toward the door, pushing her forcibly into the door's sharp molding, his fingers digging painfully into her arms.

Morgan twisted, trying to break free, but she couldn't release herself from his firm hold. "You're *hurting* me."

"Now you listen to me, you fucking crazy bitch," he sneered from a few inches above her. His voice was high and nasally, and his dark eyes looked opaque. "I've got something going with that girl, and I'm not going to let *you* mess it up for me. Stay away from her."

Morgan tried to wiggle her arm out of his grip again, but he was too strong, his tight grasp biting into her skin. She was wearing a short, sleeveless crop top, so she didn't even have the benefit of sleeves between Peter's fingers and her skin. It felt like he was inserting talons into her.

She looked up into his face defiantly, though, not wanting him to see how scared she truly was ... and she was most definitely scared. As much as Morgan liked to treat life and all of its challenges flippantly, being forced against a door by a giant, angry man was no laughing matter.

“You can’t tell me what to do.” Not her most clever retort, but she’d been under a lot of pressure recently—now in particular.

He looked towering and threatening standing over her, wearing black sweatpants and no shirt, his chest exposed and his arms bare. He was dangerous ... and not in a good, sexy way. He had quite a bit of morning scruff on his face, and his dark hair was wild, going in a million directions.

Julia, in her rumbled, drunken slumber, had looked like a model of health and vitality compared to this guy. His eyes were red and surrounded by dark shadows, and every time he opened his mouth, a stale, sour scent emanated from it, covering her face.

He looked—and smelled—like a crazed animal.

“Now listen,” he said quietly, moving his face closer to hers so he was only an inch or two away. Morgan cringed at the sharp scent emanating from his mouth. “If you mess this up for me, I’m coming for you. You got it?”

“Fuck you, Peter,” Morgan hissed like an angry cat, continuing to fight against his hold. *Who does he think he is, trying to intimidate me?*

“No, fuck *you*, Morgan Conrad,” he sneered, his finger coming up to point in her face accusingly. “I know your deal.”

“You don’t know anything.” She made another fruitless attempt to pull her arm free from his grip, but it just seemed to make him angrier. “Let. Me. Go.”

He leaned into her, pushing his considerable weight into her body and putting his mouth directly next to her ear. His heavy chest pushed her body into the door, and Morgan felt her breath being driven out of her lungs.

Distantly, as she struggled to breathe and to move, she could feel him hard and ready as his hips leaned into her aggressively.

Oh, shit, this is turning him on. Fear and dread soaked her senses as she realized what was happening. *I've gotta get out of here.*

She stopped wiggling against him as it struck her that she could fight all she wanted to, but he was bigger and stronger than her. When it came down to it, he would win. Fighting wasn't going to be the way to win this particular battle.

She needed to be smart and figure out how to get away from him without him realizing it. He was like a snake, and the more she struggled, the tighter his hold got on her. Maybe if she relaxed, he would ease up and she could escape his grip.

Focusing intently, she willed her muscles to untense, which was hard because she was still struggling to breath under his weight.

“No one gives a shit about you,” he said softly, his breath coming out warm and wet into her ear. “You know how I know that? I spoke to your uncle, and he gave me and Tripp carte blanche to do whatever we want with you. He said it would be easier if you'd just *disappear.*”

Morgan flinched at his words. She wished she hadn't, but she couldn't help it. Mostly because she doubted he was lying. That sounded exactly like something her uncle would say. Peter noticed the flinch, too, and smirking a bit, he pulled back to look into her face.

Finally getting a little space, Morgan drew in a deep breath, but stayed slack under the pressure he was still putting on her. His grip loosened on her arm a bit as he swirled his hips a bit into hers.

Morgan did her best to ignore the rise of revulsion inside of her, nodding her head solemnly and attempting to widen her eyes like a cornered rabbit. "I understand, Peter," she said reverently. "I'll stay out of your way ... I promise."

He let go of her arm completely, and his hips moved away from her so that there was finally some space between them. But still his eyes narrowed menacingly like he didn't quite believe her.

"You better or else I'll—" he started, but he didn't get the rest of the words out because Morgan finally realized she had her chance, and she took it.

She felt some sort of unharvested strength rise within her, powered by nothing but fear and adrenaline, and her knee came up with a jolt before she even had a chance to think too deeply about what she was doing.

But her shot was true and steady, and her knee made contact right where it mattered the most, causing Peter to let go of her

completely, releasing a loud groan as his hands came up to gently cup his balls.

“You stupid bitch,” he choked out between attempts to catch his breath, taking a couple involuntary steps backward into the room.

Morgan didn't waste a second engaging with him, though. Turning away from him, she swung open the door and ran—she ran as fast as she could. Through the narrow hallway and down the stairs.

Once she got to the kitchen, she swung open the door and didn't pause to appreciate the sweet scent of freedom, instead choosing to get the hell out of Dodge. She vaguely noticed that she passed Cole on the porch, and that he called something out to her, but she didn't stop to explain.

She needed to get away. She needed to escape.

After she clumsily descended the stairs leading to the beach, her bare feet hit the sand, and it seemed like only seconds later she was in the shade of the tall trees surrounding the lake. The pine needles and rocks dug into her feet as they pounded into the ground, but she didn't feel them.

Her only thought was escape, and she didn't look back once. She didn't want to see Peter behind her, coming for her.

She felt like a deer running from a hunter through the trees, only the will to live propelling her forward. Nothing else mattered except getting as far as away as possible.

When she felt like there had to be enough distance, and maybe, just maybe, she was safe, she slowed down enough to attempt to catch her breath. It seemed like she'd been struggling to breathe for so long. Before she could even enjoy much of it, though, a strong arm came up from behind her, pulling her back harshly into a wide, strong chest.

Alarm clouded everything as she let out the loudest, most ear-piercing scream she could possibly muster.

12

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COLE

“**M**organ, I told you, it’s me.” Cole bit out the words as Morgan thrashed wildly in his arms. He tightened them around her in an effort to get her to relax. The more he tightened his hold, the more she seemed to fight him, but he was scared that if he let her go, she’d take off again.

She’d run from the house so quickly that she’d been nothing but a blur flying through the door and down the steps, her blond waves coming loose from the bun on the top of her head and trailing behind her. He’d called out to her, but she either hadn’t heard him or had chosen to ignore him.

She’d just run like she was being chased by a monster, disappearing into the trees. He’d called after her, yelling her name in an effort to get her to stop and tell him what had happened, but she hadn’t seemed to hear him.

It had taken a minute for his brain to catch up to his body, but he’d eventually run after her, continuing to call out for her. It hadn’t taken long to catch up to her, and just when she’d

slowed her pace a bit, he'd been able to stop her, wrapping her in his arms tightly around her.

That's when the thrashing started. She twisted and turned in his arms, trying to escape, but he wouldn't let her. She was going to hurt herself running aimlessly through the woods, and of course she wasn't wearing any shoes—just leggings and a tiny tank top.

“Morgan,” he said desperately, pulling her away from him a bit so she could see his face. “It's me—it's Cole. Calm down.”

Her eyes went wide as she took in his face, recognition settling over her features just before her face crumbled in relief, and she went limp in his arms. She let out a loud cry, burrowing into his chest, her wet face soaking his shirt as she took deep breaths between sobs.

“It's okay,” he crooned softly, dropping a kiss on the top of her head. “Just breathe ... I've got you.”

“Oh my God, Cole,” she said shakily, her arms wrapping around his torso and her head pressing into his chest. “I just—he—” Her voice broke on a sob, and Cole shushed her.

“Don't worry about explaining anything right now. Just relax. I've got you,” he repeated. “You're safe.” She seemed desperate to draw oxygen into her lungs, breathing deeply in and out as she leaned deeply into him.

Leading her to the trunk of a towering pine tree, he carefully slid down the sloped ground and positioned her carefully, so she remained cradled in his arms. The ground was covered

with a thick layer of pine needles, and the scent tinged the air around them.

The earlier fog had melted away at this point, but the forest still had an eerily still quality that only winter could bring. It seemed to Cole that he and Morgan were the only living things for miles around as he leaned against the thick tree trunk and massaged his fingers lightly onto the soft skin of her shoulder.

She curled against his chest, shaking slightly as she drew her body into a tight ball, burrowing deeply into him. She was calmer now, breathing in and out deeply as he made soft, soothing noises, and before long she sat perfectly still, her breath coming on in long, even strokes.

They sat like that for several minutes, and it almost felt like they molded into one being. It brought memories back to Cole of when they were kids, lying around that forest clearing, surrounded by its ancient boulders and trees.

He hadn't liked thinking too deeply about that time over the past few years, but it seemed like when he did, he remembered all the talking and arguing. Not so much the time they'd spent just being. It was something they had always been pretty good at.

He absently wondered if the clearing was still the same. He hadn't been there in so long. If they went back now, would it be like they'd never left? The ferns would all be dead in January, but the trees and the boulders wouldn't be able to go anywhere....

Cole looked down to see her eyes were open, staring blankly ahead of her into the trees. As if she sensed his gaze, though, she looked up at him. Her olive-colored eyes were red-rimmed and despondent. Cole thought she was probably the most pathetic thing he'd ever seen.

He started moving his hand slowly up and down her bare arm, enjoying the soft, silky texture of her skin when she flinched slightly, her shoulder recoiling inward a bit, as if it hurt her. He started to ask her what happened. Was she okay? Why had she run from the house like it was on fire? Had he hurt her when he'd grabbed her? But she spoke before he could question her.

"Can I see your tattoos?" she asked urgently as her eyes turned pleading.

"What?"

"I want to see the tattoos on your arm," she insisted, her face pursing together angrily like she couldn't believe he didn't immediately comply with her request.

"Don't you want to talk about what that was all about first?" he asked, motioning back toward the house.

"No," she said bluntly, her brows lowering in anger and impatience.

"Okay, okay," he said gruffly, raising his hands in acceptance. "Here, just let me...." He shifted a bit in an effort to pull his shirt up, since she was making no effort to get off of his lap.

Reaching down to grab the bottom of his long sleeve shirt, Cole shimmied it up between them and pulled it over his head. Throwing it aside, he looked down to see she had pulled away from him a bit and was taking him in, her eyes wide and her mouth hanging open.

Cole felt heat rise with him as he hardened at the sight of her small body so close to his. He resisted the urge to puff out his chest and preen for her like a peacock.

He'd been kind of a weird-looking kid, tall and gangly. He hadn't really started to fill out until he had the job at the Conrad house, mowing the lawn and lugging stones with Nelson. He never quite understood what Morgan had seen in him back then. Maybe that was why it was so easy to believe the worst of her when her uncle had presented it to him.

He looked different now. He knew it. He wasn't a kid anymore.

Without moving her eyes from him, she started to move, causing him to release an imperceptible groan as she twisted around his lap so she was facing him, straddling his hips. Her knees came down on either side of him, and her hands came up to his chest.

Her eyes watched her fingers as she trailed them up his stomach, causing his muscles to jump under his skin as she continued over his chest, slightly grazing the smattering of hair that spread the center of his chest. He leaned his back more fully against the tree as her hands finally traveled up to his left shoulder where his tattoos started.

Lake Conrad only had one place where someone could get a tattoo. It wasn't in the charming Square with the ice cream parlors and tourist shops but on the outskirts, where things were a little more run down and scraggly.

While Morgan's ilk shopped at Felix's, the small luxury grocery store near the Square, his family had always shopped at the Safeway that sat in an old, sprawling strip mall with a TJ Maxx, a frozen yogurt shop, and a tattoo parlor simply called Tattoos.

It had taken Cole a couple years to save the money and bank away the hours to get the ink etched into his skin, but the final effect was worth every penny saved and every hour spent in that chair.

It started on the ball of his left shoulder as light mist, similar to the fog that had been rising off Golden Lake earlier that morning. The mist seeped down his biceps to shadow the tops of trees rising up in a cascade of tall, towering points that trailed down his arm until they met the smooth ground drawn onto his forearm. The trees' roots splayed out on his wrist, forming words in twisty text that jumped in bursts onto the top of his hand.

"You have a forest on your arm," Morgan announced, her voice seeping with awe. Picking up his arm by the wrist, she held it up to look at the images that trailed toward the back to circle around to meet in the front. When her eyes landed on the words at his wrist, she narrowed them in an effort to read the elaborate, root-like text.

“I am half sick of shadows,” she read before looking up at him from under her lashes, still holding his wrist in her hand. “That’s Tennyson ... The Lady of Shalott.”

He released a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding throughout her exploration, meeting her eyes and reaching up to rub the thumb of his free hand over the freckles on her cheek. “I’m surprised you remember,” he murmured.

She scowled and rolled her eyes at the same time that she dropped his hand, bringing both of her hands up immediately to cup his jaw. She stared at him for a solid ten seconds, her eyes critical and annoyed as she took him in, and he waited in anticipation to see what she would do.

This was what he’d missed most about Morgan Conrad. He never knew what she’d do next.

Finally, she moved, shifting her face an inch from his so that their noses were basically touching.

“You’re such a pompous ass, Cole Sutton,” she whispered, her voice catching a bit on his name.

The low heat that had been settling inside Cole since he’d taken his shirt off boiled over, and he brought his lips forward to meet hers, rough and urgent, his hands roughly traveling down her sides to settle on her hips.

As they kissed, it seemed like they had never stopped from the night before. He couldn’t be close enough to her, and she met him kiss for kiss.

Her hands came off of his jaw and fell to lightly brace against his chest as he moved to weave his fingers into her hair, moving her closer to him. She was so soft and warm, and he still didn't feel like he was getting enough. Moving his hands down her neck and swooping them down her back, he crept his hand under the bottom of her short, baggy shirt.

When he realized she wasn't wearing a bra, he felt the heat and impatience swell within his chest. As he reveled in the feeling of his hands spanning her smooth, bare back, she arched slightly, bucking into him as his hands came back down to rest on her hips.

She let out a slight whimper as she hissed in a breath and pulled her face away from him for a beat, putting a few inches of distance between them. They were both breathing heavily, and he was about to protest when she reached for the edge of her shirt, pulling it over her head, throwing it aside.

Straddling his lap in nothing but a pair of black leggings and a challenging look, Cole wondered if this was some sort of cruel dream. He was going to wake back up in his house in Lake Conrad any minute now, alone in his cold bed.

Sitting in the woods with Morgan's glorious breasts in his face seemed like too much for him to process. If this really was a dream, he'd better get moving before he woke up.

With that thought in mind, he quickly moved his head forward and took one of her light pink nipples in his mouth, pulling on it deeply and scraping against her skin slightly with his teeth.

“Oh, god, Cole.” Morgan threw back her head with a low moan, and he moved his hands to her back to keep her from falling too far away from him.

He took his time, swirling his tongue slowly around one nipple before moving on to the other one, giving it its due. Once he felt like they’d had enough, he trailed his mouth up her neck, and she leaned her chest into his, her wet nipples rubbing against the light hairs of his chest as she made little noises in the back of her throat.

Her arms moved up to rest lightly on his shoulders as he kissed her neck before she pulled away from him again, leveling a look of understanding on him, and he nodded his head in immediate agreement.

Cole felt like he was seventeen again as he watched her rise from his lap and stand over him. She looked like a goddess in the soft hazy light. A fine mist had started coming down from the sky, coating her with sparkling droplets as she reached for her waist and pulled down her leggings, throwing them aside until she stood before him completely bare.

He felt like no time at all had passed as he rose and took her in, standing brave and still as she watched him pull the buckle of his pants open and threw them aside with her leggings.

Taking her into his arms, he groaned as he felt their bodies meld. It felt like nothing had ever torn them apart. They hadn’t spent ten years yelling at each other over the noise of a crowded bar. He’d never break his promise to this girl.

No, I’ll never leave her. We’ll stay like this forever.

Picking up the shirt he'd thrown aside, he laid it on the soft bed of pine needles before prowling over to her and hoisting her up in his arms.

After that, everything moved quickly as their hands moved over each other in a frenzy, as if they were trying to make up for lost time. He felt like her hands were burning his skin, marking him all over again as she touched his neck, chest, and legs before finally reaching where he most needed her to touch, running her hand up and down him firmly while he let out small grunts.

“Oh my god, Cole,” she said low in his ear. “You feel so good. I need you.” She sounded so desperate, so hot, and before Cole knew what was happening, he snapped.

He gathered her closer before he gently set her down on his shirt atop the pine needles, his hands moving over her soft skin, massaging her breasts, resting in the notch of her waist briefly before he made his way between her legs.

When she felt his touch, she widened them, and he dipped two fingers inside of her, finding her wet and ready for him.

“I missed this,” he said with a growl.

“You only had it—” She broke off as she hitched in a breath as he hit a spot inside of her. “Just that once.”

“And I never forgot it,” he murmured.

She groaned and pulled his hand away quickly. “Stop talking and just fuck me, Cole,” she said urgently.

Feeling like he could do nothing but comply at that point, Cole positioned himself and started easing into her slowly, stretching her. She arched her back into the pine needles as he moved closer, her hands coming down to run down his arms.

When he was finally firmly inside of her, they both let out a gasp. He started moving slowly at first, savoring the feeling of her around him like a warm, tight vise. After a while, though, he couldn't help but speed up as he moved deeply in and out of her. She bit her lip under him, pushing her hips into him.

Cole kept moving, almost in disbelief of what was happening, before he felt a tightening inside of him. It ended in an explosion that Morgan absorbed into her, arching under him as she let out a long, soulful moan.

He fell into her neck, breathing her in as they both inhaled deeply, recovering. Cole pulled back and looked at her, his eyes grazing her face. Her eyes were closed, and her hair was filled with pine needles. She'd never looked so beautiful.

His eyes kept skimming her face, her delicate shoulder blades, her breasts ... until they landed on her shoulders, something catching his eyes.

She was bruised. There was a bright red tint to her upper arm with the slight tinge of purple under her skin. It looked like a fresh bruise—like it was on its way to being angry and colorful, screaming out its presence on her skin.

Did I do that to her? The thought brought on an angry shower of regret. When she'd been thrashing, had he....

“What happened to your arm?” he asked absently, his breath coming out heavily as the heat inside of him came to a screeching halt, replaced with something else—suspicion and fear.

“Huh?” she asked distractedly, looking down at her arm, her eyes darkening as she released a long breath. “Oh,” she said shortly. “I don’t want to talk about that ... kiss me again.”

She reached her face forward to kiss him again, but Cole dodged her and pulled her arm out wide to get a closer look.

There were fresh, scattered bruises all over her light golden skin, trailing around her upper arms, and he also saw a few small welts scattered on her wrists with closer inspection. Although the bruises were somewhat smeared together, he could see that they were mostly in the shape of small ovals ... like fingerprints.

Someone had put their hands on her.

He knew he needed to keep his cool. Whatever had happened, he knew Morgan well enough to be quite certain that she would balk at any type of authoritative, questioning stance from him. If he questioned her too intently, she’d probably go running off into the woods again.

“Where did these come from?” he asked stiffly. He did his best to sound casual, but his voice came out forceful and angry despite his best efforts.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said dismissively, leaning her bare chest into him and resting her head on his shoulder. “I

don't want to talk about it. I just want to be with you. I—I missed you.”

She sounded vulnerable and desperate, which only made Cole more worried. Pulling her up in the same motion as he rose from the ground, he drew her close to him, circling his arms around her so they were in the same cradling position they'd been in earlier. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest, heavy and sure. He wondered if she could hear it or feel its vibrations against the side of her face. She wrapped her arms around him, and they did it again—sat there, just holding each other.

“I missed you, too,” he finally said softly, breaking the silence. “Now tell me where the bruises came from.”

She didn't say anything right away, and he didn't think she would answer him. He thought for sure he was going to have to press her for it and they'd fight, everything ruined again. But she surprised him.

“Peter came after me,” she admitted bluntly, her voice coming out flat and muffled against his chest. “I came out of Julia's room, and he grabbed me and threatened me. He said terrible things. I just ... I had to get away from him, so I kicked him in the balls and ran. I was so scared, Cole.”

Cole felt his heart sputter as he did his best to remain calm at the admission. Pursing his lips together, he lifted his arms from her waist and drew them around her back, pulling her close to him and breathing in the flowery scent of her hair.

I'm going to kill that fucker, he thought angrily. And then I'm going to kill Curtis Conrad.

Cole was starting to doubt that any of this was an accident. The fact that he was here. The fact that Morgan was here. Even Julia Keane. It was all part of some bigger plan, some wider manipulation that he hadn't quite figured out yet.

This was a game. And he, Morgan, Julia, and even the Rather Than Records fools—they were all the players. No, not even players, but pawns. There was only one player in this game, and Cole would be damned if he was going to let him win.

Cole felt his resolve settle within him heavily as both of their bodies and minds melded in silence. He rubbed his hands up her arms and up to her face. Pulling her away from his chest, he held her chin between his finger and thumb and tilted her face up to meet his eyes.

“Get your clothes on,” he said softly, his voice coming out of his chest with a rumble. “We’re leaving.”

“We can’t leave Julia—” Morgan started, but he cut her off, holding up his hand in assurance.

“We aren’t leaving Julia here,” he said with certainty, reaching for their shirts. Handing hers to her, he moved her gently off his lap and pulled his own shirt over his head before rising to his feet.

He ran his hands through his hair, pulling it back more tightly from his face, and looked down at her still sitting on the

ground. She was looking up at him worshipfully, and Cole wondered for a moment if they'd gone back in time. If this was all some sick joke the universe was playing on them.

But no, it was happening, and it was happening now. When Morgan stood up and pulled her shirt over her head, the eyes that looked up at him weren't the eyes of the girl from ten years ago. They were wearier and held a heaviness that he didn't quite understand.

"Alright, let's go," she said decidedly as she turned on her heels to walk in front of him. She didn't get far before she tripped slightly, though, her bare feet catching on something sharp. She let out a loud yelp as she lifted her foot to see what she stepped on.

Cole let out a deep breath and rolled his eyes. Coming up behind her, he wrapped one arm around her back and another under her knees, pulling her up against his chest in the same cradling position that he'd been holding her earlier.

She let out a loud shriek as she felt her body rise in the air, but Cole ignored her and started walking quickly and urgently through the trees.

"Cole!" She said angrily. "I can *walk*."

"You don't have any fucking shoes on, Morgan," he bit out, the anger he been trying to keep under wraps since her confession boiling to the surface. Seeming to sense his mood, she let out an annoyed sigh and relaxed into his arms.

No, he wouldn't take this out on her. There was someone much more deserving of his rage and he knew right where to find him.

COLE

TEN YEARS AGO

All Cole could think as he stood outside the kitchen door of the Conrad house at two in the morning was that if his grandmother knew where he was right now, she'd kill him.

He shifted his weight back and forth, picking up and setting down his guitar case as the icy snow seeped through his thin Converse, eliminating even the hint of heat in his body.

Where the hell is Morgan?

Although he was freezing his ass off, it was nothing compared to the fear that any minute Curtis Conrad would swing open the kitchen door and demand an explanation for Cole's presence outside his house in the middle of the night.

Cole wasn't one to take big risks or break rules. He'd had it drilled into him that too many risks would be sure to end badly.

Cole's grandparents had always been careful about either being too easy or too hard on him. After his mother had spent her teenage years and early twenties "carousing," as his

grandfather had always liked to put it, they'd been very careful with the amount of freedom they allowed Cole the last few years.

After all, her carousing had ended in the very worst way possible, and no one wanted to see that happen to Cole.

So, he wasn't particularly used to breaking the rules or stepping outside established boundaries. But standing outside his grandmother's place of work so he could sneak up to his secret girlfriend's bedroom definitely fell into some sort of category of carousing, he supposed.

Just when he thought he'd be overwhelmed by the disappointment he was sure to cause his grandmother and/or freeze to death, he heard the sound of the doorknob turning. Taking a heavy gulp of air, he held it deep inside his chest in anticipation as the door opened, revealing Morgan's small face in the dim light of the sconce hanging by the door.

"Hey," she whispered, wasting no time and reaching through the crack in the door to grab his sleeve and pull him into the kitchen. "C'mon."

She swung the door open and reached for his hand, her smaller fingers weaving with his as she yanked him into the kitchen. Cole appreciated that she wasn't bothering with formalities or extraneous greetings as he picked up his guitar and she led him by the hand through the dark kitchen.

She'd assured him repeatedly when they'd decided to meet up at her house that no one would find out. Her mother was

long gone, and her uncle and cousin were easy to avoid in such a huge house at such a late hour.

Nevertheless, neither of them made a sound as he followed her up the massive stairway and down the wide hallway to her room.

Cole tried to look around as much as he was able—he'd never really been inside the Conrad house, despite both of his grandparents working here—but he wasn't able to see much in the dark, and before long, they reached Morgan's room. He let out a relieved breath as soon as he closed the door behind him, setting his guitar case by the door.

While Morgan turned the lock in the door, Cole took a deeper step inside, his eyes darting over the spacious room and its ... decorative qualities.

Not only was it a huge room, it was pink. Completely pink from the rug to the bedspread to the wallpaper. It was illuminated by a roaring fire in the fireplace and scattered matching Tiffany lamps. The hazy light created a dreamlike atmosphere and accentuated the pink, causing everything to look like it was emitting a rosy hue.

"What do you think?" Morgan asked from behind him, her voice throaty and low.

She didn't sound like herself, but when Cole turned to look at her, his breath caught. She definitely looked like herself in a pair of pink pajama shorts and a tank top, her feet bare and her hair tumbling down her back.

He hesitated a moment before answering. "It looks like a giant bottle of Pepto Bismol spilled all over your room," he said quietly.

"Hmph," she said shortly, sticking her lower lip out and looking around the room discerningly before settling a scowl on her face. "It's always been like this, but I kinda like it."

"Well, then I like it, too," he stated simply.

"Liar," she stated, glaring at him as she walked past him and fell on her bed, crossing her legs casually.

Cole shrugged nonchalantly, trying to play it cool as he walked past her, further into her hideous room. The bed Morgan sat on was huge. Made from some sort of white wood, it had a pink canopy draping over a silky pastel duvet and about a thousand pillows of various sizes propped up at the head of the bed.

His eyes caught on the three floor-to-ceiling bookshelves on a wall past her giant bed, though. He walked over, standing in front of one of them, his eyes scanning the titles. All of her romance and fantasy books were organized not by author, title, or genre, but by color. Starting with red and going all the way to violet, he didn't see any he recognized until his eyes landed on Lolita.

Pulling the spine out with his finger, he looked at the green cover, not really seeing it as his eyes blurred and his heart beat heavily in his chest.

“You ever figure out what this book is about?” he asked, grateful that his voice came out smooth and even, not as cracked and bedraggled as he felt.

Morgan rose slowly from the bed and took a few steps toward him, her eyes narrowing on him and her lips setting into a firm, straight line. “Yeah, I know what it’s about,” she said dismissively. “We talked about that.”

“Not really,” he said defensively, ready to go on the attack. “You just said—”

She interrupted him by grabbing the book from his hands and throwing it across the room, toward the blazing fireplace, her gaze staying firm and settled on his face.

“What the fuck, Morgan?” he said angrily. “You don’t throw books—especially at a fire.”

“You know what I think, Cole?” she asked, ignoring him.

“What do you think, Morgan?” he returned sarcastically. She was standing a couple inches away from him now, and he felt his heart pick up to an even faster pace. It was like they were doing a dance that they both had never performed, yet they innately knew the steps.

“I think you act like an asshole to hide when you’re nervous.”

Cole scoffed. “I’m not nervous,” he lied.

“I am,” she said. Her green eyes looked absolutely luminous in their honesty, and Cole felt his breath trip. “I’m nervous, and you are, too.”

He reached out his hand to cup her cheek, his thumb moving over her smooth freckled skin. "I missed you," he said.

It had started snowing in November—three months ago—and hadn't stopped since. Cole had lived in Lake Conrad his whole life, and he'd never paid much attention to the snow. It was just something that he had to deal with, but it didn't bother him too much.

He was all too happy to stay inside on cold, snowy days, reading and playing music. He didn't need to go anywhere. He didn't have anyone to see.

But now he had someone to see, and he couldn't very well scale boulders on a mountainside to get to her when the mountain she lived on was covered in feet of snow. They hadn't been to the clearing in months. Cole doubted they'd recognize the boulders at this point, and Morgan sure as hell wouldn't be walking around barefoot.

So, they'd had no choice but to continue slipping notes to each other, exchanging hurried, secret kisses and frenzied touches at school.

Other than school, there was no other way for them to see each other. Morgan's uncle had her dropped off every morning and picked up every afternoon. She wasn't allowed to go out, she wasn't allowed to meet up at The Blue Bard or go for a walk on the beach. She was stuck on a mountain or stuck in school. There was nowhere they could meet up, as all their usual spots on Echo Peak were covered with ice.

This isn't what Cole had envisioned when they'd talked about her staying here. He'd thought they'd tell everyone—show everyone—that they were together. Her family, his family, the whole stupid town. Everyone would know. After that run-in he'd had with her uncle, he was pretty sure he already knew, so what was the point in hiding it?

But Morgan hadn't wanted to do that. She'd said she had her reasons. To trust her. But they had to keep it quiet. Keep it secret.

So, Cole had kept it quiet. Kept it a secret. But he didn't like it. He missed her.

He loved her.

So, being in the same room as her, touching her, it was no wonder he was nervous.

"Can you play me something on your guitar?" she asked suddenly, breaking the trance her face had on his senses.

Cole looked at his guitar sitting by her bedroom door. He'd forgotten he'd even brought it with him, but now it seemed to call to him. Something to do. Something to distract him from how awkward this was for him. Why not sing a song?

He stalked over the plush pink carpet, picked up his guitar case, and dragged it to the ivory-colored couch in front of the fireplace. Delicately opening the crumbling case, he looked at his grandpa's old Fender sitting in the frayed velvet interior.

When his grandpa had died a few years ago, his grandmother had unceremoniously and silently handed the

guitar over to Cole while they'd sat quietly and awkwardly in her house after the funeral.

Cole remembered how strange it had been not having his mother or grandfather around anymore—they'd been the loud ones in the family, the fighters, the big personalities, the storms. He and his grandmother were the peacekeepers, the calm and the quiet.

All things that were well and good, desired even. But it was going to take a while to get used to the house without that tumultuous energy, constantly in need of containment.

But as soon as Cole opened up that guitar case and started strumming out a few chords, it was like neither of them had ever left, and everything was right and balanced in the world.

His mother's laugh echoed through the twangs, and his grandfather's low voice reverberated through the bass. As long as there was music, then they were still here.

That was when Cole had leaned into creating music, playing music, making it his identity and his very being. As long as there were songs in his head, coming from his mind and eating away at the world around him, then everything would be fine.

He channeled that same feeling now as he balanced the guitar carefully on his knee and wrapped his right arm over it smoothly, twirling the pick between his fingers.

Morgan followed and sat down next to him, and he turned to watch her for a beat as the flames caused shadows and light to bounce and flare over her skin.

This feels so weird. Like a dream, *Cole thought distractedly. Nevertheless, pick in hand, he swooped his hands down over the strings and started playing.*

Playing here with Morgan in the dim, hazy light of her hideous room, it almost felt impossible to actually hear the music coming from him. He could only feel it thrumming through his veins and powering his heartbeat.

He played a simple Bob Dylan song, “Girl from the North Country,” his voice coming out more like a low murmur compared to Bob Dylan’s quivering twang, the guitar chords echoing loudly through the room.

When he finished, he looked up at Morgan sitting perfectly still, watching him with wide, worshiping eyes.

Gently, setting his guitar down next to him, he moved so that he was settled over her, and she leaned back easily, her hands coming up to rest on his neck. Suddenly, he didn’t feel nervous anymore as he moved down and did the one thing he’d been dreaming about for weeks.

Later, he thought it was a bit funny that they’d put so much effort into sneaking quietly into the house in the middle of the night, careful not to get caught ... but neither of them gave a second thought to the loud music.



Cole held Morgan tight against his chest and lifted his legs high to step over rocks, stumps, and sticks as he purposefully stomped through the woods. The sky still hung low and gray

above them, and the light mist had grown thicker in the air, causing his clothes to hang damply off his body, his jeans dragging in the mud underneath his heels.

It seemed the closer they got back to the house, the angrier Cole grew—he could feel it inside of him, snipping and biting with irritation. Shifting his eyes down to Morgan’s arm, his gaze caught on the bruises from Peter’s fingertips, growing darker by the second, and he felt a fresh, dark rage boil within him.

Cole of all people knew how ... *challenging* ... of a person Morgan could be. He’d done nothing but fight with her for ten years, after all.

But for that idiot to put his hands on her? Try to hurt her? Morgan? *His* Morgan?

She surprisingly hadn’t said much after her initial objections to being carried through the woods. Other than his screaming thoughts, the only sounds Cole could pick up were his footsteps, the splatters of the now-fat raindrops hitting the leaves and the ground, and her mild grunts and sharp intakes of breath as she was jostled in his arms.

Unlike this morning, when he’d been alarmed by her silence, he was grateful for it now—it gave him the opportunity he needed to stew and plan.

He wondered what she was thinking, though. Probably all the things *she* would do when they got back to the house: confront Peter, save Julia, and so on and so forth. Taking things in her own hands like she was likely to do.

The thought caused a surge of irritation to rise within him. Quickly glancing down at her face, he could see it plainly in her eyes as she stared distantly ahead at the passing trees—the scheming, the planning.

Well, she was going to be in for a surprise, because he'd be damned if that would be what happened *this* time.

“What the hell was that back there, Morgan?” The words came out of his mouth tight and strained. He felt like he might choke on his feelings right now. They settled low and thick around his throat like a tightening noose.

“What do you mean?” she asked distractedly, her distant gaze shifting to look up at him.

He rolled his eyes, trudging forward over the dirt and the rocks. “Wanting to see my tattoos? The ... sex? After what happened with Peter, why did you want to do that?”

She didn't answer right away, which only furthered Cole's aggravation. “I don't know,” she finally answered, her voice distant and hollow and her eyes darting back to the woods. “It just felt right.”

It felt right? That caused a sense of really shitty déjà vu to eclipse everything else he was currently feeling.

“That is so fucking typical,” he scowled. He knew he was being ridiculous, lashing out at her about this. He'd been a willing participant in what happened back there, and it hadn't bothered him in the immediate aftermath. But it seemed the further he got from what happened, the easier it was for him to

revert into the roles they'd lived for the past ten years. They were familiar and easy.

“How do you know what's typical of me?” Morgan demanded, never able to resist a fight. “We don't know each other, remember?” Cole felt a sour feeling rise in his gut as she repeated his accusation from the night before.

He didn't respond—he was done talking about this—but he picked up his pace toward the house with a renewed resolve. And as soon as he saw the short flashes of the lake between the trees, adrenaline pumped through his veins at the thought of getting back to the house and confronting Peter.

He charged through the treeline and onto the beach, but as soon as his feet hit the sand, Morgan started, lurching her body in an attempt to escape and jump to her feet.

“What are you doing?” he asked, tightening his hold. “Stop it.”

“No,” she said, continuing to squirm. “I can walk now. It's just sand. Let me go.”

He pulled her close to him, tightening his arms and restricting her ability to move. “Hold the fuck still, Morgan,” he ordered her in a low grumble.

She scoffed loudly, her face pinching in a pout, but she listened and stopped struggling as he stomped across the beach, toward the path he'd followed yesterday to get to the beach.

“Cole, listen,” Morgan said, looking up at him urgently as he climbed the path toward his truck. “I think we should talk about our strategy. We just need to get Julia and leave. So the first step is you put me down. The second step is we go inside—*both of us* walking—wake up Julia, and then—*Hey!*”

Morgan broke off as Cole unceremoniously opened the door of his truck and tossed her in the cab.

“What the hell, Cole?” She was slumped gracelessly on the seat, her hair disheveled and tossed over her head. She quickly moved her hand over her face, pushing back her hair to reveal an accusing look.

“I want you to shut up and listen to me for once in your life, Morgan,” he said, his voice quivering a bit as his anger threatened to fully take over. Cole didn’t know what was happening to him. He never lost control. He never got angry. He’d never been the storm. He was always the cool, the calm, the quiet.

But he didn’t feel like himself now. He felt ... *wild*.

Apparently, Morgan was just as shocked by his reaction as he was. Ultimately, she was always the one who called the shots between them. Even when they were yelling at each other in a crowded bar, she got the last word. Not this time, though. She sat back in the truck, her eyes wide and her mouth open as she waited for him to speak.

“You’re going to sit in this truck and you’re not getting out,” he bit out quietly. “I’m going in there—*alone*—to get Julia and your stuff, and to ... *deal* with Peter.”

She took a deep breath as she shook her head, ready to argue. “Well, wouldn’t it make more sense if I—”

“No. It wouldn’t,” he barked out, holding his hand up to point in the truck. “Stay here.”

He slammed the door at her shocked face, not waiting for her to say anything else, and turned resolutely on his heels. He didn’t look back as he stalked toward the house, his feet pounding on the stairs.

He didn’t dare dwell too much on what he was about to do. He knew if he thought too much about it, he would attempt to talk himself out of it. This wasn’t his style—fighting and confronting.

But as soon as his thoughts went back to Morgan running past him from the house, and the bruises on her arms as she sat on his lap, so pale and vulnerable, he knew what he needed to do. Nobody was going to mess with that girl again. Not as long as he was around to do something about it.

He stomped up the steps of the house and entered through the kitchen door. It was quiet inside, and the kitchen was just as he’d left it, with the spoon he used to stir his coffee still sitting on the counter. It was bizarre, really. Shouldn’t the atmosphere of the house be as frenzied as he felt?

Shaking off the creeped-out feelings, he stormed up the stairs and down the hall, stopping at the door he knew belonged to Julia and pounding on it loudly, with no care as to who else the noise woke up.

“Julia!” he bellowed. “Open up.”

No response. Not even an annoyed groan or the sound of feet shuffling inside.

“Julia, pack up,” he tried again. “We need to leave.”

Putting his ear to the door, he listened intently for sounds. He really didn’t want to go in there and wake her up. *That would be weird*, he thought with a cringe, but he didn’t hear any noise inside.

Before he could knock again, though, he heard the sound of a door opening behind him, and Cole felt his hackles rise. He’d known this was coming. Looking behind him toward the open doorway down the hall, he saw Peter’s dark head peer out of the door frame.

“Shut the fuck up,” he called out sharply. “I just got back to sleep.”

Cole dropped his hand from Julia’s door, his eyes and senses shrouded by darkness. He felt like an angry red haze was veiling his vision as he surveyed Peter hanging limply in the doorway. He looked like shit—his face scruffy, his eyes red-rimmed, his clothes hanging loosely off his body, and his eyes widening as if he knew what was coming as soon as Cole started moving toward him.

If he feels like he looks, then this should be pretty easy, he thought cynically as he prowled down the hallway.

As soon as Cole reached him, Peter attempted to back into his room and close the door, but Cole was too quick. Reaching

over, he immediately wrapped his hand around Peter's neck and pushed him backward into the room, where he fell with a loud thump on the floor near the end of his bed.

“What the fuck, dude?” Peter screeched, but Cole wasn't interested in conversation. He could barely form discernible thoughts other than the need to stomp Peter into the ground.

This guy had hurt Morgan. What other explanation did he require for what was about to happen to him?

Walking quickly into the room, Cole immediately fell on top of Peter where he still lay on the ground.

After that, everything was a blur as his fists continued to connect with Peter's face over and over again. Cole didn't take a moment to register his own surprise at his actions—this was nothing he'd ever done before—and Peter seemed to be just as caught off guard at first. He lay back, stunned, letting Cole pummel him before he caught on and started to fight back.

He lurched upward with a strong push in an attempt to push Cole off of him, but with no luck. Cole wasn't much bigger than Peter, but he had something else going for him. Anger. Retribution. Morgan's bruises.

He didn't know what was happening, but he seemed to be harnessing some unknown strength as he went after Peter again and again, banging his head against the hard floor with his hammering fists.

Distantly, he heard sounds and voices to the side by the bedroom door, and before long he felt a pair of arms come up

around him, pulling him off of a, bloody Peter.

Cole took a deep breath and distractedly wiped his face and eyes as he turned around to see it was Tripp holding him back. He had his arms in a lock, and when Cole tried to pull free, he tightened his hold.

“You okay, man?” Tripp called out to Peter, who was starting to pull himself off the ground, hanging on all fours as he took a few gulping breaths before rising.

“Let me go, man,” Cole sneered at Tripp.

Tripp looked up questioningly at Peter, who was rising slowly off the floor, wiping blood and saliva off his face with the back of his hand. Peter considered him for a beat, and Cole was momentarily concerned that Tripp would hold him while Peter attacked.

But Peter didn't seem interested in that, nodding his acquiescence at Tripp, who roughly flung Cole forward.

“You're lucky I'm so easy going, man,” Peter said, spitting blood at Cole's feet. He breathed out deeply like a bull before leveling a discerning look at Cole. “I don't think Mr. Conrad's going to like this, but I'm willing to put it behind me so we can do this record.”

What?! This guy is unbelievable.

“There's not going to be any record,” Cole told him. “You think I'd do business with someone who treats a woman the way you treated Morgan?”

“Morgan?” Tripp asked, his eyes shifting toward Peter in question. “What happened with her?”

Peter shrugged nonchalantly. “I just roughed her up a bit,” he said. “Her uncle said she wouldn’t be easy, right?”

Cole felt his eyes darken as he summoned his very best cool in order to continue this conversation without going after Peter again. This would probably be his only chance to find out what was going on and he couldn’t mess it up. “You guys need to stop with the bullshit,” he said caustically. “Why are you doing this?”

Tripp shrugged. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said coolly. “Mr. Conrad recommended you, and you’ve got a great sound—”

“Spare me,” Cole said, holding up his hand. “I’m leaving, and I’m taking Morgan and Julia with me, but not before you tell me what’s going on.”

Tripp let out a loud groan as he fell down in a nearby chair. “He said he wanted you out of town,” he said, rubbing his hands through his hair. “He’s the major investor in RTR ... we couldn’t turn him down. And when we told him what happened with his niece at The Blue Sky, he said I could have her.”

“He said you could *have* her?”

“Yeah, and her trust fund,” Tripp followed up immediately, like that excused everything. “She’s getting it in three years,

and I hear it's pretty hefty. Mr. Conrad said if I took her off his hands, he could make it so it was all mine."

Cole exhaled deeply and raked his hands through his hair. "If either of you get near her again, I'll fucking kill you, do you understand?"

Both of their eyes widened like they most definitely did *not* understand, but before they could answer him, they were interrupted by Julia and Callista.

"What's going on?" Callista asked, pulling the straps of her short, silky bathrobe. Her eyes widened as they settled on her brother. "Peter, are you okay?"

Julia stood completely still, looking at Peter with hollow eyes. She looked like she wasn't sure how she'd ended up in this mess.

"This is done," Cole said, walking toward the door as Callista rushed toward Peter. "That's what's going on. Julia, pack up. Morgan wants you to come with us."

Julia nodded distantly as she stared at Peter, who held on to his side painfully, not meeting her eyes. "What happened?" she asked him intensely, but he wouldn't answer or meet her eyes.

"He attacked Morgan," Cole informed her quietly. "Now can you get your stuff, please?"

She looked at Peter again, biting her lip as her eyes filled with tears. She nodded quickly before turning on her heels back to her own room.

Callista watched her go, a desperation in her eyes, before she slapped her brother on the shoulder. “You idiot,” she said tightly, pushing Peter down. “We needed that money.”

And there it is, Cole thought as he turned to leave them behind. What’s that saying? If it’s too good to be true, it probably is.

14

MORGAN

To say the ride back up to Lake Conrad was *strained* would be the understatement of the year.

No conversation. No music. No explanations. The only sounds were the snowflakes hitting the windshield and the hum from Cole's old truck as it made its way up the steep incline that led up into the mountains.

It was a sickening sort of quiet, and it made Morgan feel jittery, thoughts bouncing around her head like ping pong balls inside a lottery machine. She didn't know what was going to happen when they got back to town.

Things are different now, right? He isn't leaving now? she thought as she studied him. They'd had sex in the woods, after all. And *something* had happened between him and Peter in the house.

He was so quiet, though, and she found that she didn't know what to think. Cole had always been sulky, and she had always been able to break through it when they were young. But

things were different now. Although the connection they'd had when they were kids had made an appearance, it wasn't as strong as it was back then.

He must have been able to sense her looking at him, but he didn't say anything. He just carefully concentrated on the road ahead of him.

The thought of asking him where things stood with them was scary as hell. He hadn't exactly been approachable since he'd come storming out of the cabin earlier, looking like sex on a stick.

She didn't think she had ever seen him look so formidable—shoulders wide and stretching his gray shirt, his brows crouching over his golden-green eyes, strands of his long hair broken loose and hanging in front of his face.

He stormed down the steps and refused to meet her questioning gaze as he threw all of their bags in the bed of the truck, and continued his unapproachable stance as he forcibly opened the door and sullenly slid into the driver's seat of the truck.

Despite how scary and intimidating he seemed in his sulk, she'd been unable to resist poking at him a little. Things weren't *that* different between them.

“Are you okay?” she asked, her voice coming out as a whisper for some reason.

He hadn't responded, though, just grunted with a stiff nod toward Julia coming down the steps slowly in his wake.

She'd narrowed her eyes at him, willing herself to feel annoyed, but all she could think about was how great his hair looked.

God, I'm pathetic.

She *should* be mad at him after the way he'd acted when they got back to the house, yelling at her and throwing her around like a sack of potatoes. But, if anything, it had only made him seem all the more attractive to her.

I'm a disgrace, she thought with disgust. Maybe she still had sexy hormones pumping through her body and she would feel differently later.

Probably not, though, she admitted to herself as she admired his angry glare as he gazed out the windshield like he wanted to punch a fist through it.

"Are you mad?" she tried again.

"Of course I'm mad, Morgan," he bit out, looking askance at Julia on the other side of Morgan. "That guy put his hands on you."

Morgan felt reassurance settle over her. *So, he's not mad at me. He's mad at Peter. Well, that makes two of us.*

The thought of Peter getting his hands on Julia like he had on her made Morgan's skin crawl. She had never been more relieved than when she'd seen Cole stomping from the house earlier with Julia in tow.

While Julia was obviously unhappy to be awake and maybe a bit on the verge of some sort of nervous breakdown, she had

at least washed her face and was wearing a clean pair of yoga pants and a long sleeve T-shirt.

The others were nowhere to be seen, and Morgan couldn't say she was sorry about that. She very much hoped to avoid seeing any of their smarmy faces ever again. Especially Peter ... god, he scared the shit out of her. That wasn't something she usually readily admitted to, and she still didn't feel completely safe from him. She repressed a shiver as she reached up to gently touch her bare arm, where the bruises from Peter's fingers were growing darker.

But she was safe now, at least, sitting in Cole's truck between him and Julia, all warm and cozy—although completely filthy; she kept finding pine needles in her hair. True to her earlier form, Julia was slumped against the window, snoring quietly in the back of her throat as Cole drove the truck carefully up the twisty mountain road through fat snowflakes.

Apparently, while it had been wet and drizzly at Golden Lake, it had started snowing up in the mountains. The roads were covered with a soft, white blanket, and Cole drove slowly and methodically home, his eyes glued to the road.

She stole another look at his profile against the gray, snowy landscape passing by on the other side of the window. He looked tired and wary, concentrating on the road with excessive focus.

He must have sensed her staring at him again because he shot a swift glance to the side, meeting her eyes for half a

second before he swiftly re-focused them on the road.

Morgan felt a heat slowly crawl up the back of her neck as she scooted over a bit, shifting her thigh to be more flush with his. He jumped slightly at the contact, his hands gripping the steering wheel, and his lips pressing together tightly.

“Cole?” she said quietly, barely above a whisper, not wanting to wake Julia up, as she leaned into him a bit. Her hand slowly traveled to rest on the top of his thigh. His muscles felt hard and strained under her hand.

“Hmm?” he grunted. He’d barely said any non-grunted words since entering the truck, which Morgan decided not to take personally. She forged on, her fingers gently massaging his thigh over his jeans.

“Do you remember...” She paused meaningfully as she searched for the correct words. “Do you remember the last night that we were ... together?”

There was a pregnant pause, and he sucked in a deep breath, still not looking over at her as he slowly exhaled. She wasn’t sure if he’d actually answer her. But maybe he wouldn’t be able to help it? He looked pissy, like he didn’t want to remember. They’d never spoken about this, which Morgan found pretty stupid in retrospect.

It was an awful event in both of their lives. They’d been so young, so in love ... or whatever. And then it had just ended so suddenly. That had been the hardest part for Morgan, trying to pick up her life without him in it anymore more. He’d been her best friend, her only friend, for so long.

And then it had just stopped, and they'd never talked about it again. It was like it had never happened. They just yelled at each other in a bar like a couple of angry idiots for ten years.

"Of course I remember," he answered her question, his voice coming out as a grumble as if he *really* didn't want to talk about this.

"Do you ever think about it?" she pressed, turning so she more fully faced him. She'd often wondered if he thought about it as much as she did or if he'd just put it behind him, stuffed in a little box in a corner of his brain next to the plots of every stupid, pretentious book he'd ever read. That would be a pretty crowded corner, so maybe not a whole lot of room for memories of her.

"Sure," he said in the same low tone.

"The good part or the bad part?" she pressed, her fingers dancing up his thigh.

"Both," he bit out, his fingers gripping the steering wheel tightly.

"Hmm," she said, her head tilting in consideration as she leaned into him, relaxing into his body and into his heat. She could feel him under the thin layer of his shirt, and she thought of how wonderful it would be to pull it off and lean her head down on his lap. "I think about the good part more, personally, but I could see—"

"Morgan, what the hell are you doing?" he asked at a normal volume, causing Julia to jump slightly in her sleep.

Morgan didn't move, though. She took a deep breath, inhaling him as she leaned more into his body.

He lowered his voice slightly for the next question. "Do you really think now is the time to talk about this? Especially after what just happened."

She shrugged insolently. "I don't know," she said defensively. "But excuse me for wanting to be healthy and normal and communicate with you about all the things we haven't talked about in the last ten years. I just think it might be a smart idea, especially since a couple hours ago you were inside my—"

"Don't," he said sharply, shooting a look at Julia, who was now doing a bad job at pretending to sleep, her face scrunching up in discomfort. "We'll talk about it later."

As if on cue, before Morgan could question him further, Julia rose from leaning against her window and let out a delicate yawn, looking over at them with a lopsided smile on her face.

"I feel much better now," she said quietly, almost apologetically. "Thank you for letting me sleep for so long. I'm afraid I've been a terrible travel companion. Would you mind dropping me off at the Lake Conrad Resort? I think I'll settle in there for the night before heading back home."

"No way," Morgan burst out before Cole could answer. She pulled away from him and looked at Julia fervently. "You're coming with me."

“I couldn’t,” Julia said as she started to shake her head, her eyes filling up with dread. Morgan could tell she was battling within herself over what would be the least rude response to Morgan’s demand.

“Yes, you could,” Morgan countered, her words coming out rushed as she looked at Julia pleadingly. “Plus, I feel like I owe you an explanation. We kind of tore you away from that cabin ... and *everyone* ... after all.”

“It’s fine, Morgan,” Julia said quietly. “I feel kind of silly after all that. Apparently, I’m very bad at choosing men. Not that Ian was bad, but ... you know,” she finished lamely before reverting her gaze out the window.

“Listen, Julia,” Morgan said, demanding Julia’s attention. “I love my cousin, but he treated you badly, and yes, Peter was a dick. But we’ve all gotten involved with guys like that at one time or another.” She shot Cole a sideways look, which he returned with an annoyed grimace.

“You’re kind, Morgan,” Julia said, reaching over to grab her hand. “But I think I have some things I need to think through.”

“I understand,” Morgan replied. She considered Julia for a millisecond before the greatest of ideas occurred to her in a flash of brilliance. “You know,” she said in a casual tone, determined to play this cool. “We could all go to the festival tonight. *Everyone* in town is going, and Cole’s probably playing.”

Cole looked at her like she was crazy. “I don’t think that’s such a great idea. After everything that happened this morning,

maybe you should take it easy—”

“Come on, Cole,” Morgan cajoled, looking at him from under her lashes. “I want all three of us to go together. We’re supposed to be having fun this weekend, right? And so far, it has *not* been fun. And you’re probably performing, right?”

“Yeah, at eight,” he admitted. “But I wouldn’t think either of you’d be up to it. Julia could barely get out of bed this morning. You were *assaulted*, Morgan.”

“What kind of festival is it?” Julia asked curiously before Morgan could argue with Cole. “Is it something that a lot of the ... townspeople attend?”

“Yes,” Morgan answered enthusiastically. “It’s in the Square, and it’s put on by the Civic Association that Kyle Bear runs. You remember him, right? You met him in the fall at the Main House?”

Julia’s eyes brightened as she sat up straight in her seat, nodding her head up and down. “Yes, I remember him.”

“Well, every January, the Civic Association puts on this big winter festival in the Square. I think last night was the first night, but it goes on all weekend.”

“So, Mr. Bear—and his sister—will be there?” Julia pressed as she smoothed her hair, fiddling with the ends.

“I’d assume so,” Morgan answered distractedly. “It’s his party after all, and even a grumpus like him couldn’t very well avoid something like that.”

“I would very much like to attend,” Julia answered sincerely, a dark blush rising up her cheeks. “Can we go?”

“Yay! Yes, of course,” Morgan exclaimed loudly, tampering down a series of erratic thoughts that threatened to break the surface of her consciousness.

She felt a little like a helium balloon with a clumsily tied string. At any moment she would fly away into the sky forever. But for now, she had plans, something to do. She was tethered, grounded, close to Cole. She wouldn’t lose Cole again, right?

She looked up at him expectantly. “Cole, what time will you pick us up?”

He’d been zoning out a bit as Morgan and Julia discussed the festival, but he sat up with a start and looked at her disbelievingly at the question. “You want *me* to take you to the winter festival?”

“Yes,” Morgan responded assuredly. “Why not? Do you have something better to do tonight?”

“No, but you do,” he said fiercely. “You need to take it easy and rest after what happened with that guy.”

“The last thing I want to do is take it easy,” she insisted with an eyeroll. “I want to go to the festival with Julia, and I want *you* to take us.”

Morgan knew she was being unreasonable. He was right. That thing with Peter had been messed up, and she should probably hunker down. But she wanted—no, she *needed*—to

keep Cole close to her. To have plans to see him again. The next time she saw him couldn't be at The Blue Sky on Friday night while he strummed on his guitar and ignored her while she messed up drink orders.

“I just don't think it's a good idea,” he said softly, not taking his eyes off the road. “It's been a weird day, and you need to recover.”

He looked to the right as he turned on to Lake Conrad Boulevard. They were back in town now, on the outskirts with the strip malls and the gas stations, but Morgan could see the roof of the Lake Conrad Resort in the distance, the glimmering lake and the mountains settling comfortably in the background.

It was a relief to be home, which was a surprise. They had only been gone a day, but being back in Lake Conrad—being home—with Cole, it felt right and natural. Everything was as it should be again.

“Plus, what would people say if they saw us together?” he added absently, his eyes flashing with a brief moment of hurt as he seemingly forgot Julia was in the car.

“Who cares what they think?” Morgan asked stubbornly. “I sure don't.” She glanced over at Julia for support, but she didn't seem to be listening, plans swirling in her blue eyes as she stared out the window at the passing scenery. “Is it too much for me to ask you to take me out after what happened back there? The *sex*?”

Julia cleared her throat uncomfortably, gazing out the window steadily as if she'd jump out of it if Cole slowed down enough to allow for it.

"You want to be seen in a public place with me?" he asked incredulously, leaning forward as he maneuvered the truck. "At the freaking winter festival of all places, like it's nothing?"

He was turning on to Lucy's shaded street now. Morgan considered him in the dimmer light it cast over the inside of the truck.

"So, I guess I have my answer," she said in a soft voice. "It's the *bad things* you think about from that night." He looked over at her, his eyes softening before he shifted them back to focus on the road.

"No, it's not that," he whispered. "But I just can't let all of this go so easily—it still weighs on me."

"It's been ten years, Cole," she whispered back, her eyes glued to his face. "I'm letting it go and you should, too. I want to be with you."

They were both silent at her admission—him staring at the road and her staring at him. The only noise was Julia's small throat clears and sighs of discomfort. When Cole finally pulled over and stopped in front of Lucy's house, Julia jumped out of the truck like it was on fire.

"Such a charming neighborhood," she exclaimed loudly, looking up and down the street, but Morgan ignored her as she leveled a gaze at Cole.

He didn't say anything as he watched her warily; his eyes seemed to be peeling her apart, trying to figure out if they should trust her or not.

“What time will you pick us up?” Morgan whispered, staring intently at Cole. It seemed like hours passed before he answered, and when he did, he shook his head as if he couldn't believe what he was agreeing to.

“I'll pick you up at seven,” he grumbled quietly, shifting the truck into park. “And I want to be with you, too. It's just ... we *really* need to talk about everything.”

Morgan reached over, giving him a quick peck on the cheek, pausing for a beat with her cheek pressed to his, breathing him in swiftly, her eyes closing for an instant.

“So you're *not* an asshole,” she said quietly into his skin, and his breath caught as she pulled away to look at him fully.

Their eyes stayed connected for a beat before he moved closer to kiss her, as if he was compelled by something beyond his control. His hand came up to lightly cup her cheek as his lips moved softly but quickly over hers.

Morgan returned his kiss with a sigh of relief. He felt soft, yet firm and familiar. But she didn't let herself get lost in him for too long—there would be time for that later.

She pulled away with a smile before backing out of the car and gazing swiftly back at Julia, who was watching them with a mark of confusion or wonder.

“I’ll see you tonight,” she whispered, looking back at Cole before slamming the door and leading Julia to Lucy’s front door.

15

MORGAN

That night, walking through the Square, Morgan looked up with contentment at a sky full of stars. A vivid, full moon hung low behind the mountains. Other than the hint of a few long, translucent clouds, it was otherwise clear. The snow clouds from earlier in the day had long since moved on, leaving a glow that only a new snow and a bright sky could create.

The ground of the Square had been swept clean, but the roofs of the buildings surrounding it were draped in a blanket of clean white crystals. Strands of lights crisscrossed the area and wrapped around its perimeter, causing everything to sparkle. Even the snowbanks, which were essentially giant solid blocks of dirty ice at this point, looked prettier draped in the layer of fresh snow.

Morgan suppressed a shiver as she was hit with the bite in the air, wrapping her arms tightly around her midsection and looking up at Cole walking next to her, meeting his eyes. His lips pulled up a bit as he looked down at her silently before

looping an arm around her shoulder, pulling her snugly to his side.

She let out a disbelieving breath as she leaned into him, stealing his warmth and reveling in the feeling of him as they easily walked forward in tandem.

While Morgan felt warm and happy, she was very much aware of the stares and the whispers as they walked through the crowd.

There were a lot of tourists, and while they didn't care one bit that Morgan Conrad and Cole Sutton were walking arm-in-arm through the Square, the locals—especially the ones who frequented The Blue Sky on the regular—were a bit shocked.

Cole looked down at her questioningly, as if he was waiting for her to pull away, to put some space between them, but all she did was somehow manage to burrow closer to him. The worry dropped from his face as he smiled down at her.

Morgan didn't care what any of them thought. Let them stare. She hadn't been lying in the car earlier when she'd told him she was ready to put the past ten years behind them. As far as she was concerned, that started tonight. She'd already started planting the seeds.

Earlier that afternoon, after Cole had dropped Morgan and Julia off at Lucy's house, the girls had spent the afternoon being stuffed with food and drink by Lucy, who Julia had instantly remembered from her visit to the Main House last fall.

Lucy's eyes had brightened with surprise as Julia put forth one of her soft, perfectly manicured hands to shake with Lucy's calloused, wrinkled one.

She'd been so starstruck by Julia that she'd allowed them to sit in the main living room on the floral embroidered couch that Morgan didn't think she'd ever let anyone actually sit on before.

Morgan did feel a bit bad springing a guest on her, though, especially someone she associated with the Main House and work, but Lucy had done a good job not questioning too deeply about how this had actually happened—at least not in front of Julia.

“So, you two were at Golden Lake with ... *Cole*?” Lucy had asked delicately, as she put out a sterling silver tea set that Morgan had never seen before. “You didn't mention that, Morgan.”

“Yes, with some other mutual friends of all of ours,” Julia had replied judiciously, sipping her tea and looking to the side. It was obvious she was as disinterested in talking about this as Morgan was. “However, one of the gentlemen fell ill, so we were inclined to leave a bit early. Thank you so much for welcoming me into your lovely home, though. I just love that piano....”

Lucy had quickly been distracted explaining the origins of the mahogany piano in her living room that Morgan had never once seen her play.

So, although Lucy was obviously confused, she was also too in awe of Julia to dig too deeply in her presence. While Julia had been showering, however, Lucy had cornered Morgan in the kitchen while they were cleaning up the elaborate snacks that she had whipped up.

“Morgan Rose Conrad,” she’d scolded as she dumped a plateful of vegetables in a gallon sized plastic bag. “A little warning that you were bringing a guest would have been nice. Especially *Julia Keane*.”

Morgan rolled her eyes in response—you’d think she’d dropped in with the Queen of England. “I’m sorry, it was a crazy morning,” she said a bit defensively. She didn’t want to tell Lucy about what had happened with Peter. She was still feeling a bit raw from that whole thing, and Peter worked for her uncle, whom Lucy admired for some strange reason.

Lucy hummed doubtfully, seeming to sense that Morgan didn’t want to talk about it before she shot Morgan a look of warning. “You’re going to tell me what’s going on later,” she informed her sternly before looking at her sideways. “So, that was Cole who dropped you off?”

“Yes,” Morgan admitted slowly, shifting her eyes down as she dropped onto a kitchen chair. “And he’s coming back tonight. He’s taking me and Julia to the festival.”

“Ah. Well, that sounds lovely,” Lucy admitted with a small smile, pausing as she closed the refrigerator. “I’m sure Julia will enjoy that. I used to always love going to the winter festival with Steve.”

“Do you want to come with us?” Morgan asked.

“No,” Lucy instantly responded with a deep frown. “I’d much rather stay here and watch my program.”

“Hmm, okay.”

Morgan watched her putter around the kitchen, her body moving silently over the clean linoleum as she packed up food and scrubbed the counter with what seemed like a little extra ferocity.

“Hey Luce,” Morgan said suddenly, her heart pounding in her chest. “What would you say if I told you that Cole and I ... that we used to be friends?”

Lucy’s eyes twinkled as she looked up at Morgan. “I’d say neither of you is as sneaky as you think you are.”

Well, how about that?

“I disagree,” Morgan said with a faux frown, refusing to admit to anything. “I think I’m very sneaky.”

Lucy burst out a loud laugh. “You’re adorable, child.”

Morgan had tilted her head with a dulcet smile. “Well, *that* I can agree with.”

Before Cole arrived, Morgan showered—wherein she was mildly distressed to find that her hair was still full of pine needles—and dressed in her usual uniform as of late: leggings, sweater, snow boots, and her hair pulled back from her face.

But when Julia walked into the living room, both Morgan and Lucy were gobsmacked. She was all kinds of dressed up

in a teal sweater dress, narrow wool coat, and high heeled leather boots. She had her hair straightened within an inch of its life, and long icicle-like earrings hung down to her shoulders.

“Holy shit, Julia,” Morgan proclaimed. “You look hot! But you know this will be a lot of walking, right? And the food situation will be strictly sausage and warmed up nuts?”

Julia’s eyes widened at that description, and Morgan burst out a loud laugh as she realized what she’d said, kneeling over on the couch and eventually wiping tears from her eyes. “Oh, man,” she said with a sigh. “Actually, you look perfect for some sausage and nuts. Come on, let’s go.”

Lucy waved them off cheerfully as they swiftly walked down the cleared path to Cole’s truck, and Morgan felt the spark of anticipation in her as she approached Cole’s beat up old truck parked on the street, waiting for her. She almost felt like she was in high school again. This had been all she’d ever dreamed of back then—Cole picking her up and taking her out. And now it was happening.

The sun was in the process of setting. But on Lucy’s shaded street, it already looked like midnight as Morgan slid across the bench of the truck, looking at Cole expectantly. As his eyes landed on her, they darkened, and she happily leaned into his warmth as Julia got in and pulled the door closed.

He’d done little to nothing to prepare himself for the evening, but his hair had been a bit damp from a shower, and he’d smelled spicy and clean. A small fire had flickered within

Morgan at his scent. She'd itched to run her hands up the soft tendons of his neck and run her hands through his clean, damp hair.

He'd looked down at her with a heated gaze, not saying anything as his eyes darted over her face eagerly and silently before he'd put his car into drive and taken off in the direction of the Square.

And now, here they were, walking together down the icy paver stones, surrounded by dreamy lights, gawking locals, and indifferent tourists.

Julia, although surprisingly graceful in her high heels, looked completely out of place amid the casually dressed crowd. She didn't seem to notice, though, her eyes drifting over the faces surrounding them as if she was looking for someone.

Morgan hoped it wasn't Ian. Although she knew he was here somewhere—tonight was Lena's performance-slash-directorial debut in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and he had something going on with Explore Lake Conrad—she didn't look forward to navigating the questions from her cousin about why she was here with Julia and Cole.

Just as with Lucy, Morgan wasn't quite ready to explain herself to Ian. If she had to explain Cole, she'd have to explain *other things*, and that felt daunting as hell.

So far, so good, though. She hadn't run into anyone that meant anything to her, and maybe she'd continue down that path for the rest of the evening. She feared that may be a bit

naive, but whatever. She'd keep trying to convince herself it was possible as long as she could.

Walking to the very end of the Square near The Golden Carafe, Explore Lake Conrad, and the resort, Morgan searched the crowd nervously for Ian's and Jake's tall heads, but the only person she recognized was Kyle Bear as he looked down sternly at some lackey who was apparently schlepping warm nuts incorrectly.

Kyle was dramatically lifting the nut scoop in and out of the large glass container of nuts as if demonstrating the correct number of nuts to put in one of the small paper bags.

Other than his autocratic attitude toward nuts, the first thing Morgan noticed was that he'd gotten a haircut. For as long as she'd known him, he'd always worn his black hair long like Cole, but now it was cut close to his head, a slight scruff decorating his cheeks. The second thing she noticed was that he was wearing a gray three-piece suit to a festival like a complete weirdo.

"Alright, I see Duke and Crumbly," Cole said, interrupting her thoughts of Kyle and motioning toward a small, raised pavilion where Duke was plugging a bass guitar into an amplifier, the infamous Crumbly fiddling with a drum set. "You'll stay close?" he asked quietly, his hand lightly grabbing hold of hers.

"I'm not going anywhere," Morgan responded with a smile that Cole returned before looking around him quickly and dropping a quick kiss on her lips. "I promise."

“Good,” he said shortly with a mischievous smile as he reluctantly let go of her hand and jogged toward his friends.

Morgan watched him wistfully before turning to Julia expectantly. “Hey, Jules, are you ready for some hot nuts?”

But Julia wasn’t paying attention. She was staring off in the distance, and when Morgan turned, she saw that Julia was watching Kyle gesture widely at the fear-stricken nut boy who stood perfectly still with wide eyes and a slightly open mouth. Julia looked like a deer in headlights, completely dumbfounded.

That was when it hit Morgan. She’d been so wrapped up in worrying about Julia and Ian, and Julia and Peter, that she hadn’t given a single thought to Julia and Kyle. But why should she?

Kyle had behaved oddly toward Julia in the fall—like, odder than usual. He’d completely bitten Morgan’s head off when she, Lena, and Annie had tripped into Julia, causing her to fall into him.

Morgan had thought he was just being pissy about being knocked into, but maybe it was something more than that. She’d never seen him show any real interest in a girl anyway, so maybe all that weirdness was because he *liked* Julia.

Morgan couldn’t think of two more opposing types of people than serene, sheltered Julia and gruff, blunt Kyle. But as she looked at Julia’s face watching him, she realized that they kind of made sense in a way.

At the very least, they both enjoy over-dressing for outdoor festivals, Morgan thought cynically, looking between the two of them quickly.

“Hey, Julia,” Morgan sang slowly in a low voice, but Julia still wasn’t listening.

Her eyes were glued to Kyle as he apparently dismissed the nut boy, who looked absolutely bewildered, loosely holding a scoop of nuts in his hand.

“Julia,” Morgan repeated loudly, causing Julia to jump with a start, looking at Morgan with surprise that she quickly replaced with a serene smile.

“Yes?” she answered with a slight wobble in her voice, shifting her weight slightly on her high boots.

“You wanna go talk to Kyle?” Morgan asked innocently.

“No,” she answered immediately, her cheeks turning red, her eyes blinking rapidly. “He looks very busy, and I don’t want to disturb him.”

“It’s fine—don’t worry. C’mon,” Morgan insisted, grabbing Julia’s hand and pulling her in Kyle’s direction. Julia tried to pull her hand away, still sputtering her refusal, but Morgan held firm, and she had no choice but to follow.

By the time Morgan had planted them behind Kyle’s wide back, the nut boy had scampered off, and Kyle was scrolling through his phone with a severe look of concentration.

“Hi, Kyle,” Morgan said, looking up at the back of his dark, shorn head. Kyle was *very* tall. Even more so than Ian and

Jake, who were the tallest guys Morgan knew. She almost felt like she had to crane her neck to look up at him, and even Julia—at her greater height and in heels—seemed to be dwarfed by him.

“What?” Kyle responded gruffly, turning briefly to shoot her a distracted look before he looked back at his phone, quickly dismissing her.

Morgan pulled Julia forward by her wrist, and she tripped slightly. Julia had seemingly lost the will to fight, her mouth slack as she watched Kyle scowl at his phone.

“I have someone I want you to say hello to—” Morgan started, but Kyle cut her off, holding a large hand up.

“I don’t have time for your games, Morgan,” he said sternly as he finally turned around to face her. “Can’t you see I’m—” His voice died in his throat as his dark eyes caught on Julia, standing behind Morgan.

The anger and annoyance on his face was quickly replaced with something different, something softer. He dropped his phone to his side as his eyes darted over her body, taking her in. Julia still hadn’t moved. She didn’t even seem to be breathing as she watched Kyle with her mouth open wide.

“Julia.” He breathed out her name like an oath. “I mean—Ms. Keane,” he quickly corrected. “What are you doing here?”

“Mr. Bear,” Julia said, her voice coming out a tinkling sort of whisper, her hand floating between them for him to shake. “It’s lovely to see you again ... I’m here with Morgan.” She

motioned distractedly to her side. Morgan was surprised she even remembered she was there.

“It’s ... *lovely* ... to see you, as well,” he said in a low voice, swallowing as he reached over to gently hold her hand.

He didn’t let it go as they both stood there, staring at each other, and Morgan started shifting her weight uncomfortably. She should have known this would be weird. These two were the weirdest people she’d ever met in her entire life.

“The festival is great, Kyle,” Morgan said, attempting to break the tension. “I know this is your first year as Civic Association president, but you did a great—”

“Can I show you around?” Kyle asked quietly to Julia—and *only* Julia, Morgan couldn’t help but notice.

“I would love that,” Julia answered breathlessly.

Kyle held out an elbow to her, and she slipped her hand on his bicep. Without a word or glance to Morgan, Kyle led Julia away, disappearing into the crowd.

“I’ll just be here,” Morgan called out to them, waving her hand at their departing forms. “I’m going to go watch Cole.” They didn’t hear her, though, and before long, Morgan completely lost sight of them as they were enveloped by the crowd of people.

Well, thought Morgan cynically. *That sure was something coming from the person who wouldn’t leave Golden Lake this morning because she didn’t want to be rude.*

Turning back toward where she'd left Cole, Morgan saw him standing under the gleam of light from lanterns sporadically spread around the pavilion. He was looking down as he carefully tuned his guitar, and Morgan was struck by the sight of him commanding the crowd's attention from the stage.

She'd seen him stand on a stage hundreds of times, but this time was different. The light was catching the lighter hairs hanging in front of his face as his fingers twanged the chords of the instrument. He'd taken off his jacket and just wore his long sleeve shirt, the dark lines of his tattoos peeking out of one of the sleeves.

She knew what those tattoos were now, and it made her heart swell to picture them running up and down his arm, which brought back memories of the forest and what had happened this morning. It felt like a hundred years had passed in the course of this single day, and about a thousand since yesterday when she'd come upon him on the beach.

And now here they were. Back home. Together.

Morgan's breath caught in her throat at the thought. She felt like her eyes were glued to him standing with his guitar. She couldn't feel anything but warmth—the cold night air, the sounds of the crowd, everything disappeared, and she was transported back in time.

Sometimes when they were at The Blue Sky and she was either ignoring him or antagonizing him, she'd slip into a fantasy. It was usually when he was singing some soft song that spouted pretty words about love and adoration. She'd

pretend that none of the bad stuff had ever happened, and she was there with him. He was singing to her.

And now, as she watched him pick up his guitar and gently start strumming, that fantasy felt real, more real than it ever had before. She took a couple steps forward, and his eyes caught on her.

His lips were turned down in gentle concentration as he distractedly started playing a riff on his guitar, his eyes not leaving hers. Morgan vaguely felt the crowd pull in around her, anxious to hear the band play.

She was so entrenched in staring into his eyes that when she heard her name spoken closely behind her, she just about jumped out of her skin.

“Don’t even think about yelling at that guy tonight, Morgan.”

Morgan shrieked and jumped about a foot off the ground. For a brief moment, she thought it was Peter, and she turned around ready to fend him off, her hands coming up to guard her face.

But, no, it wasn’t Peter—*thank freaking God*—it was Ian.

“Jesus, Ian,” she scolded, swatting his shoulder lightly. “You scared the shit out of me.”

“How did I manage to do that?” Ian asked, scowling down at her. “You’re in a crowd of people.”

Before Morgan could answer, Annie, her long dark curls hanging down her back, came up beside Ian and wrapped her

arms around him. “Morgan!” she said with surprise. “I thought you were in Golden Lake.”

“I came back early,” Morgan said absently as she shifted her attention back up to Cole. He was deep in conversation with Duke and Crumbly. It looked like they were close to launching into their set. “Is Lena’s play over? Did I miss it?”

“Yeah, it ended a while ago. We’ve been hanging out at the Explore Lake Conrad booth, but I talked Ian into sneaking away to watch Cole perform,” Annie explained.

“Who’s holding down the Explore Lake Conrad fort?” Morgan asked, looking in the direction of the store. She saw Ian’s assistant, Ramona, as well as some snowboarder bro type who looked vaguely familiar, standing in front of one of the wooden booths near the store.

“Ramona,” answered Ian with a grumble. “Who’s ready to murder Seth Harper.”

“Oh, that’s who that is...” Morgan said distractedly. She remembered Ian saying that the snowboarder would be representing Explore Lake Conrad, and that everyone hated him. He and Ramona seemed to be having a heated discussion that he was winning, if Ramona’s reddened cheeks and wide eyes were anything to go by.

What the hell is she wearing? Morgan thought distractedly. Ramona was always a bit of a fashion disaster and tonight was no different. She was wearing some sort of puffy mauve coat that looked like it was right out of the 80s and a brown beanie

that she must have tucked her hair into. She looked like a bowling ball.

“You want to come over and meet him?” Annie asked. “He’s a little cocky, but not too bad.”

“Nah, I think I’m going to stay here and listen to the music,” answered Morgan, diverting her attention back up to Cole who was chatting with Duke. “Maybe later.”

“Oh no, Morgan,” Annie said suddenly, pulling her attention toward her. Annie’s brown eyes were frantic as they shifted between Cole on the stage and Morgan. “Please, leave him alone.”

“What?” Morgan asked, confusion marking her face.

“Don’t act like you don’t understand,” Ian said gruffly. “Don’t give that guy a hard time. I know you hate him, but just let him do his thing. If you don’t want to hear it, move on.”

“No, that’s not true,” Morgan insisted, opening her mouth, her mind racing with how she could possibly explain this without *actually* explaining it. But before she could attempt to do so, Cole’s voice came reverberating out of the microphone, commanding the attention of everyone around them.

“Hello, Lake Conrad!” he announced to loud cheers as the crowd moved in around them. “I’m Cole Sutton, and I’m excited to play for you tonight.”

The crowd cheered loudly as he positioned himself to start playing. Morgan’s eyes were glued to him. It was like she’d

never heard him play before, the anticipation built so high inside of her.

“I wrote this first song for the only girl I’ve ever loved,” he announced, holding his pick over the first chord. “It’s called ‘Morgan Outside.’”

16

MORGAN

TEN YEARS AGO

*M*organ had a song stuck in her head.

All day long, she couldn't shake it. No matter how much she tried, it stayed, echoing through the hallways of her brain.

Sitting in Ian's car on the way to school, she'd unconsciously hummed it until Ian had threatened to throw her out if she didn't immediately shut the hell up.

Listening to Ms. Schiffer rattle on about Catcher in the Rye, she'd hit the tune with her pencil on the side of her desk. She hadn't even noticed when Ms. Schiffer stood over her, glaring down angrily at her hand.

Running into Cole in the hallways, she thought the song would burst from her heart. He'd paused as he'd stuffed a note in her palm. He was coming tonight, she read. A full symphony played the song inside of her, and she all but skipped to her next class.

Showering that evening, she'd belted it out as she shampooed her hair, happy to finally have the freedom to really give in and embrace it.

The song of her heart, of her love.

And now she twirled around her darkened bedroom with wet hair and short pajamas, singing the words in a high, faint voice. She stopped in front of bookshelves, the words coming out as a hum as she ran the fingers slowly over the spines of her books, trying to find something to read. Something that would hold her attention until two. Until Cole.

Her finger paused on a book, and she looked up as she heard a knock at the door, her heart freezing. There weren't that many people that could be knocking on her bedroom door right now. Maybe Ian? But she thought he'd gone out tonight.

Pulling the book from the shelf and tossing it on the bed, she walked over to open the door. Her heart dropped when she saw who was on the other side.

"Uncle Curtis."

"Morgan," he said shortly. "May I come in?"

Morgan nodded, opening the door wide as she allowed her uncle entrance, her heart pounding in her chest. It wasn't that she was scared of him. She just knew he didn't like her. Whether it was because her mother had blatantly told her so, or just the fact that she could always tell in the way that he looked at her and treated her.

Like she was different. Like she didn't belong.

He walked over to the small couch in front of the roaring fireplace and sat smoothly in the corner, draping his arm on the back of the couch.

“Sit down,” he commanded her, motioning toward the corner of the couch with his hand.

Morgan walked over to the couch, sitting down as far away from him as she could get. He was wearing a suit even though it was nine o’clock. But somehow, she was the one who felt out of place and underdressed, wearing pajamas in her own room.

She looked at him warily, knowing that this would be his show, his conversation. If she knew what was good for her, if she was smart, she’d sit here and let it happen to her and not try to fight it. But Morgan had never been very good nor very smart.

“What do you want?” she asked, the words coming out tight and fierce. She hoped they hid how nervous she really was.

“Can’t I visit my niece?” he asked, putting unnecessary stress on the word niece. “And make sure she’s adjusting to her life here?”

Morgan just shrugged insolently, staring into the flames, trying hard not to look at him.

“Have you made many friends since you’ve been here?” he asked.

“Not really,” Morgan answered honestly.

“How are your studies?”

“Fine.”

He hummed in the back of his throat, and Morgan chanced a glance at him. The firelight was dancing on his face, and he looked older somehow, more wary than usual.

She really didn't know him very well, in truth. Whenever she and her mother had stayed at the Main House as Morgan had grown up, he'd always been busy and distracted. The two most prominent people she associated with life here were Lucy and Ian. Her mother and uncle always seemed to have their own things going on.

“You know, I'll never forget the day your mother showed up here with you,” he said suddenly, breaking into Morgan's thoughts. “‘My daughter,’ she said. You know, she never told me she was pregnant, so it was quite a shock. She and I were always so close, but she was never a happy person. When she'd disappeared for so long after high school, I thought that she was gone for good. I resigned myself to it, actually. But then she came back, and she had a random baby with her.”

Morgan flinched at the description. Random baby? She'd only ever heard the story from Lucy, and she tended to romanticize it with flowery descriptions of Adele walking in the house with a little golden child whom everyone had immediately adored, showering her with love and attention.

“And you have a lot of the same features as her—blond hair, green eyes,” he continued. “I suppose that's very lucky.”

Morgan's face pulled together in confusion as she finally looked at him fully. What was he saying?

“Why is that lucky? Why wouldn’t I look like her?” she asked, her voice trembling slightly.

He didn’t answer her right away, but when he did, he settled an unblinking look at her, his blue eyes burning into her. “I guess the better question would be ‘why would you?’”

Morgan was imploding. Like one of those buildings that you would see on the news. The explosion seemed to come from somewhere deep inside and slowly knocked out floors and beams until she didn’t exist anymore. What had been standing clear as day before had turned into a pile of dust and rubble, a blank spot on the skyline.

She pressed her lips together, waiting for him to elaborate, to explain. She didn’t want to ask, but she needed him to tell her. His eyes never left hers as he continued talking.

“Neither you nor I know where you really came from, Morgan,” he said firmly. “It wasn’t from the woman you’ve always believed is your mother, though. I know that for certain.”

“How can you know that?” she asked in a voice that was barely a whisper. “Did she tell you that?”

“Not in so many words,” he said vaguely before his eyes took on a look of warning. “But regardless of who you really are, your last name is Conrad. And you will conduct yourself in the ways befitting this family and its name. Do you understand?”

Morgan nodded numbly, shifting her gaze to the fireplace and finally releasing the deep breath she felt like she'd been holding since she sat down.

“Stop sneaking that boy in the house,” he said firmly. “Stop meeting him in the woods. You’re acting like a whore, and whether we like it or not, you are at the very least considered a Conrad by the general public. So act like one.”

She flinched for what felt like the millionth time since he'd arrived. How was she supposed to process all of this? “I—I don't know—”

“Spare me,” he cut her off with a sharp look. “If you don't end it, then both he and his family will be done in this town. His grandmother has been a faithful servant to this family, and she's been through a lot. But in order to protect this name, I will not hesitate to get rid of her if you continue down this path. Don't let your own selfishness destroy them, Morgan.”

With that, he rose from the couch and walked toward the door. Morgan didn't think he looked back at her, but she couldn't be sure since her eyes never left the fireplace. She heard the door click, though, and released a sigh of relief.

She didn't move for what felt like an hour after that, sitting on her little couch, staring at the flames that jumped in the gas fireplace.

When she finally felt like she could walk, she went to her desk and opened the drawer she'd filled with Cole's notes.

She raked her fingers through the pool of folded up pieces of notebook paper, and when she found the one he'd passed to her a couple days ago, she picked it up. Unfolding the paper, she read the words to the song he'd sung to her last week. He said he'd written it for her. About her.

She flattened it against her desk, her eyes absorbing the words on the paper as she tried as hard as she could to make the song stick to her brain and overshadow everything else going on inside of her.



Do you know

the trees stand at attention for you?

The stars shoot across the sky for just you?

When you're outside,

the cool air, it settles around you?

And I,

I'm waiting here for you?

It doesn't matter

if you're standing or running,

talking or reading,

singing or crying.

I'm outside

waiting here

for you.
Everything's fine
as long as
I'm outside,
waiting for you.
And the rain will dry,
the snow will melt,
the trees will fall,
and I'm still here
waiting for you.
Yes, I'm outside
just waiting
here for you.

Morgan felt her heart plummet to her feet as Cole belted out the words to her song. She hadn't heard it in ten years. It obviously wasn't something he'd whip out at The Blue Sky right after she heckled him about what a sucky musician he was.

That song has such varied connotations for her. Happy ones, sad ones ... disturbing ones. It reminded her of happy times with Cole, of course. But it also reminded her of Uncle Curtis, her mother, and all the shit that had gone down that last night.

Her initial instinct upon hearing those first chords was to run away. But she didn't. She couldn't leave him. She'd

promised him she'd stay close, after all.

She kept her eyes glued to his, and she felt like there was some sort of invisible current between them as he belted out the words. It was like he was singing just for her, like they were in her bedroom at the Main House or out in the woods, alone and happy. Just like before.

“Morgan, are you okay?”

She looked over to see Annie watching her with concern, her hand coming over to rest on Morgan's shoulder. Ian stood behind his fiancée, looking back and forth between Morgan and Cole with a puzzled look on his face.

“Do you want to go somewhere?” Annie asked, looking around them as the crowd closed in. “Should we leave?”

Morgan blinked and realized she was crying, a couple tears falling down her cheeks. She shook her head quickly, reaching up to rub her cheek. “I want to stay here,” she said quietly.

Annie considered her and nodded her head slowly. “Okay, how about I get us a couple of drinks and we sit over there and watch Cole?” Annie asked, pointing to The Golden Carafe where there was miraculously a free bench.

“Okay,” Morgan murmured, nodding her head absently and breathing heavily.

“Go grab that bench before someone else does,” Annie ordered. “I'll be there in a few ... and Ian will go away.”

Ian, still looking confused in a very male way, let Annie settle her hands on his wide chest and push him toward the

Explore Lake Conrad booth.

Morgan turned and stalked toward the bench, and when she looked up, she saw Cole's eyes had followed her over to where she sat. He looked concerned, and she attempted a half-hearted smile, lifting her hand in a limp wave to assure him she was okay.

He didn't look convinced, but he launched into his next song seamlessly, crooning the notes of another one of his original songs, this one more familiar to the locals if the loud cheers were anything to go by.

Morgan watched him in a daze, torn between feelings of adoration and the memories that were seeping to the surface of her consciousness.

She closed her eyes tight in an effort to stop them. *No, no, no, no.*

She'd done everything she could to block the memoires, keep them hidden. But when she'd left the Main House in October, she'd stopped to see her mother, who had all but forced her to contend with them. Since then, they'd been bubbling under the surface, waiting to burst free.

And that song. That song had given them the last push they needed to be out in the world. She felt like she could taste the regret on her tongue. Smell the sadness on her skin. It was surrounding her. Completely unavoidable. Everyone could see it. Everyone could see who she was.

“Here,” Annie’s voice interrupted her nervous breakdown, and Morgan looked up to see her thrusting a paper cup in her face.

“What’s this?” she asked, taking the cup.

“Hot chocolate,” Annie answered with a smile as she dropped next to her on the bench. “Ian told me you quit drinking alcohol, by the way. I’m sorry I didn’t notice.”

“It’s okay,” Morgan said, sipping the sweet hot chocolate and finding that it surprisingly hit the spot. “You’ve had a lot going on lately.”

“Yes, but it’s not an excuse,” Annie said, ruefully looking down at her own cup. “I know what it’s like to feel left behind by everyone. And I’m sorry if I made you feel that way.”

Morgan shrugged dismissively, taking a distracting sip of her drink. In truth, she’d been relieved to be left behind. She didn’t feel like she needed or deserved the direction that all her friends’ lives were going in.

“Is there something going on between you and Cole?” Annie asked suddenly.

Morgan’s head shot up, her eyes narrowing on her friend shrewdly. “Why would you think that?”

“Maybe because he just sang a song entitled ‘Morgan Outside,’ dedicated to the only girl he ever loved ... all while maintaining constant eye contact with you until the moment that you burst into tears.”

“Oh.” Morgan frowned into the distance. “I suppose that’s pretty damning evidence.”

“Yep,” agreed Annie. “Do you want to tell me what happened?”

“Not really,” Morgan admitted to Annie’s disappointed frown. “It’s just a really long story.”

“I don’t have anywhere to go,” Annie said with a small smile, moving her arm out to nudge Morgan’s shoulder.

So, she told Annie the whole story. Well, kind of the whole story; she vaguely glossed over the more painful bits, of course. But she gave her enough information to be aware that something had happened between her and Cole, it had ended badly, and it was now apparently starting up again.

While she talked, though, she stole continuous glances at Cole. He seemed to be as distracted by her as she was by him. The feelings, the glances, everything that passed between them felt electric and alive.

She didn’t know where things were going with him, but she knew they couldn’t go backwards. She’d been pretending for so long that he meant nothing to her. How had she even managed to do that? It seemed so impossible now.

“I’m definitely surprised,” Annie told her once she’d gotten the gist of things. “But I guess I can see how it works between you two.”

“We’re very different,” Morgan said darkly, taking another bracing sip of hot chocolate.

Annie shrugged dismissively. “That’s what makes it interesting, though. Think of how boring it would be if you were with a person exactly like you.”

Morgan took a deep breath and nodded her head thoughtfully. “A male Morgan would be pretty obnoxious.”

“But also very lovable,” Annie told her with a twinkle in her eye, her arm reaching around to wrap around Morgan’s shoulder, squeezing her gently.

Morgan smiled over at her just to see Annie’s face fall into a dramatic look of shock, her mouth opening widely and her eyes bulging out of her head as they caught on something through the crowd.

“Oh. My. God,” Annie breathed out in a dramatic whisper. “What is *she* doing here?”

Morgan’s head shot up just in time to see Julia walking with Kyle on the other side of the stage. He was saying something to her, and whatever it was caused Julia’s eyes to widen as if she was completely scandalized.

Morgan rolled her eyes as she looked back over at Annie. Knowing Julia, he was probably saying something completely out there like that he didn’t like cat art, or he greatly disagreed with the concept of salad forks.

“Are you talking about Julia and Kyle?” she finally asked, looking over at Annie’s stricken face.

“Yes,” Annie replied urgently, her breath coming out hurriedly. “What is she doing here? I’m not ready for this.”

Morgan looked at her friend sympathetically. While she was sure that Julia had no hard feelings toward Annie for what had gone down with Ian, Annie was used to being universally loved. It had been difficult for her to contend with being the bad guy when Ian had rejected Julia for her.

“I brought her,” Morgan admitted tentatively.

“Why would you do that?”

“She, Cole, and I ended up in the same shitty situation this weekend, so invited her to come to the festival. She’s staying at Lucy’s. And before you ask, no, I don’t want to talk about the shitty situation.”

“Alright, alright,” Annie said, slightly readjusting her concerned features with a smile and exhaling slowly. “You’re a woman of many mysteries, Morgan Conrad.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Morgan smiled wanly. “I should probably go check on her, though, and make sure she’s okay. Do you want to come with me?”

“No,” Annie said immediately, shaking her head and frowning in consideration. “I mean yes—unless that would be weird. Would that be weird?”

“Probably,” Morgan responded with a shrug. “But don’t let that stop you.”

“Hmm. I think I’m going to be a coward and go find Ian,” Annie finally decided, rising from the bench.

Morgan smiled at her friend, who gave her one last shoulder squeeze before she quickly disappeared in the direction of

Explore Lake Conrad to warn off Ian.

Cole was performing his encore and shot Morgan a concerned look as she wove her way through the crowd. Morgan waved at him reassuringly until she came up behind Kyle and Julia.

That was when Morgan noticed how closely they were standing to each other, and how pink Julia's cheeks looked under Kyle's intense gaze. They couldn't be talking about cats or salad forks—this was a *sexy* conversation.

So, it was no surprise that they paid little attention to Morgan standing behind them until she not-so-gracefully cleared her throat in their direction.

“Morgan!” Julia blurted as soon as she noticed her. “I was just looking for you.”

“Sure you were,” Morgan said with a wry smile, looking between the two of them.

Kyle was glaring at her angrily, which wasn't much of a surprise. He seemed to have a perpetual bee in his bonnet. She wished she was more in the mood to tease him about it, because this situation was gold.

“I think Cole's about done, and we're going to head out. It's been such a long day, and I'm exhausted.”

“Oh,” Julia murmured, shifting a regretful gaze at Kyle. “I suppose it *is* getting late.”

“Why don't you stay longer?” Kyle asked quickly. “I can give you a ride home. Where are you staying?”

“With Morgan’s....” She paused as if just realized where she was actually staying. “Housekeeper.”

“Stay,” he murmured gruffly. “I’ll take you there later.”

Julia seemed entranced by Kyle as she looked up at him, her eyes alight with an emotion Morgan felt like she hadn’t felt in a very long time ... or maybe it was just this morning. She had no sense of time anymore. Finally, Julia nodded her head slightly in acquiescence, and Morgan let out a sigh of relief.

“Alright, I’ll text Lucy and tell her not to wait up,” Morgan said with innuendo, her eyebrows raising as she looked knowingly at Julia.

“Morgan, I— It’s not—” Julia sputtered, her face dropping in alarm.

“No judgment, Jules,” she said, pulling her into a quick hug and whispering in her ear. “Be good ... or be bad. It’s your choice.”

Feeling minorly guilty for leaving Julia alone and somewhat vulnerable, Morgan pushed the errant feelings aside. Turning and walking away from Julia’s still very alarmed face and Kyle’s persistent scowl, Morgan realized she may not be in the best head space for a winter festival.

She wanted—no, *needed*—to get her guy and get the hell away from all these people.



Cole’s house was hideous.

Like, hideous in a way that only a guy's house could be. He didn't have a TV—because of course he didn't—and his living room was just an old leather couch sitting on grimy beige carpet, surrounded by bookshelves filled with books and records.

There was no art, no color, no personality.

“This domicile of yours is making me rethink this whole thing,” Morgan said with a grimace. “Is this really your house? Or some sort of Siberian prison?”

When they had driven up, it looked like any other Lake Conrad house. A small blue ranch house in one of the many streets surrounding the Square. The tiny yard was shaded by pine trees, so Morgan could tell that even in the spring and summer there wasn't much grass to speak of, but it was cozy and small. It reminded her of the A-frame house she'd lived in for so long with Annie.

She'd had high hopes for what awaited her as she'd walked through the honey-stained door, only to have them dashed against the rocks as soon as she'd seen the truly atrocious interior of the house.

It was ugly. There was no other word for it.

Cole gently closed his front door, setting aside his guitar case and throwing his jacket down on it, settling a solemn gaze on her.

“I don't think it's that bad,” he said with a scowl.

Morgan shrugged and walked over to one of his bookshelves, her face pulling back in horror as she realized there had been seemingly no effort put toward organization. Books of all shapes and sizes seemed to be crammed onto the shelves haphazardly, not by genre, size, or color.

What kind of psychopath—

Her thoughts came to an abrupt stop as she felt him come up behind her, his body and his warmth towering behind her. She almost felt like she had no choice but to close her eyes and lean back into him, so that was what she did.

It had been such a long day. Was it really just this morning that she'd ended up with a head full of pine needles? Right after Peter had....

She shivered and turned around, quickly burrowing into his chest, inhaling his scent. His arms came around her, and she inhaled deeply. He smelled like soap, laundry detergent, and the scents of the Square. The lake. The wind. The nuts.

She burst out a short laugh and looked up at him. He was gazing down at her, as serious as ever. His green-gold eyes seemed like they were trying to burrow into her skin.

He reached up then, grazing her cheek with his thumb. "My wild girl," he murmured. "Did you like that I sang your song tonight?"

Morgan felt a darkness fall over her as she nodded blankly, carefully schooling her eyes in a look of neutrality.

Leave it to Cole to not be fooled by her bullshit, though. “Don’t you like it?” he asked darkly. “Are you angry that it was so public?” His voice took on an edge, and Morgan knew exactly what he was thinking. He was worried she didn’t want anyone to know or that she was ashamed of him.

“It’s not that,” she assured him. “I love the song. It’s just— It reminds me of everything that happened. And that makes me ... *sad*.” Her voice cracked a bit, and she felt like her heart sank into her stomach at the admission.

His face fell, and his eyes darted over her face. “It’s been a long day,” he said quietly. “Let’s go to bed.”

Morgan nodded and let him lead her to his bedroom, which was just as hideous as the rest of the house. His double bed sat on an oak bed frame with a matching dresser across from it. Plain vinyl blinds covered the large window.

He kept the overhead light off but walked over to click on the small bedside lamp before turning to look at her with his usual quiet expectancy.

“This is the ugliest room I’ve ever seen in my entire life,” Morgan announced, turning around to survey it before settling her eyes on him. “I can’t believe you gave me so much shit about my pink bedroom.”

He didn’t answer her, instead coming closer to her—so close he was standing directly over her, looking down. Morgan didn’t have anything she wanted to say then. She waited impatiently as he slowly inched down to her, his lips millimeters from hers.

“Cole,” she breathed his name into him, her hands coming up to his chest and up to his neck. Her fingers grazed the tendons of his neck as she leaned to him, reveling in the feel of him. His height and his strength. “I missed you so much.”

“I missed you, too,” he responded.

“I’m sorry I’ve been such a bitch,” she started, but he put his hand over her mouth, cutting her off with a slight shake of his head.

“Go to bed,” he instructed her shortly.

She understood then, and she took a step away from him toward his ugly-ass bed. Her eyes didn’t leave his as she pulled her sweater over her head, tossing it to the side. The rest of her clothes followed, and once she was completely bare, she lowered herself down onto his bed and lay there, waiting for him.

He didn’t leave her long, swiftly pulling his shirt over his head to reveal his wide chest and dark tattoos by the dim lamplight. Morgan held her breath as she watched him unbuckle his pants before tossing them aside with his shirt.

She barely had a chance to admire him before he was on top of her, his skin against hers. She hissed in a breath and just enjoyed the feeling of him, the scent of him. He was perfect.

Propping himself up on his hands, he brought his face down to hers, capturing her lips with his. Her hands came up to press against his chest, and she could feel him settle between her legs, hot and ready.

She was ready, too, a slickness growing between her legs as she spread them wide for him. His lips traveled away from her mouth and down her neck. She groaned as she realized that he wasn't going to get to the point, he was getting into the foreplay.

I hate foreplay. I just need him to fu— Oh, god, I love foreplay.

She lost all train of thought as his mouth, warm and firm, connected with her core, and Morgan couldn't stop herself from releasing a loud groan at the feeling.

He'd never done this when they were teenagers. She doubted he'd even known how, but Jesus, he sure as hell knew how now.

Morgan felt like a thousand fires were emblazoned over her senses and he moved against her, his hand coming up to separate her folds to get a better angle and working over nerves to push her over the edge. And it seemed in no time at all, she burst into flames, letting out a loud moan at the sensation. It pulsed through her body for what felt like minutes upon minutes as she convulsed and whimpered in relief.

“Jesus Christ, Cole,” she said faintly as he came up to her, silently nudging her legs further apart and entering her quickly. He let out a small, choked sound at the contact, but Morgan groaned enough for the both of them, arching into him.

He moved once or twice very slowly, as if savoring the feel of her, and Morgan closed her eyes, running her hands up and

down his thick arms, enjoying him. When she opened her eyes, she saw him over her, staring down with almost devastatingly serious eyes. It was almost as if he was trying to question her, get to the bottom of her. She nodded her head and bucked up slightly.

That was all the encouragement he needed before he started moving quickly in and out, drawing her next orgasm out slowly as she made her way toward the precipice. She came before him, yelling out loudly as he followed close behind, groaning helplessly in her ear as he wrung himself out inside of her.

They lay there for minutes, not saying anything, just breathing and existing. Morgan wanted to reach her hand up and touch him, maybe move his hair from his face, but she found she couldn't move. She was too tired.

What an insane day, she thought to herself. Am I going to wake up tomorrow and find it was all a dream?

Cole, seeming to sense how tired she was, rose off of her slowly and looked down at her gently, moving his thumb over her cheek. She tried to smile up at him but found she didn't even have the energy for that.

So, he positioned her on the bed before reaching over to click off the small lamp and coming up behind her to spoon her. He reached down to kiss her on the side of the head, and Morgan sighed in contentment, already on her way to sleep.

Before she was asleep completely, though, she heard him murmur in her ear, "I'll always love you, Morgan Conrad."

COLE

TEN YEARS AGO

The first thing Cole noticed when Morgan opened the kitchen door was her eyes. It was like a light inside of them had been shut off.

She didn't say anything, but she was trembling slightly as she grabbed his hand and led him through the darkened echoing house. Following her cues, he silently followed her up the grand staircase and into her pink monstrosity of a bedroom.

As soon as they entered her room, she dropped his hand and walked ahead of him, while Cole closed the door, setting his guitar case on the floor. Looking up, he saw she was sitting in the middle of her giant canopied bed, a blank look on her face as she stared off into the distance.

"What's the matter?" he asked, concern seeping into his voice as he walked toward the bed. He fell down next to her and started rubbing her back gently through her thin pajama shirt.

“My uncle was here earlier,” she whispered, her face turning to look up at him. That’s when he saw that her eyes were overflowing with tears. But under the swell of tears, her eyes were a kaleidoscope of feelings, bursting in all directions. Sadness, fear, maybe a bit of recklessness. “He knows about us,” she finally murmured softly.

Dread washed over him as he released on a long exhale and fell down on the bed. Of course he knew. He’d probably known for weeks. But Cole knew that this was what Morgan was most afraid of—people knowing about them.

“Shit,” he breathed out. “What’s he going to do about it?”

Morgan shrugged, her eyes widening. “He said some terrible things to me,” she acknowledged quietly, backing up onto the bed and sinking into the pile of pillows at the head. “And now, I don’t—I just—I don’t think I feel very well.” Her voice had a frantic quality, which sent an alarm signal through Cole’s body.

“Hey, what’s the matter?” he asked, moving up the bed to be closer to her. “What did he say to you?”

She was quiet for a moment before looking up at him decidedly. “I don’t want to talk about it. I don’t want you to know,” she admitted.

That was weird. If Morgan was anything, it was shameless. She liked what she liked. She said what she said. And she felt no qualms about it. Ever.

“We don’t have to talk about it,” he said quietly, moving to sit next to her, reaching over to rub his thumb over her cheek. Her eyes darted past him, over the giant canopy that covered her bed, her thoughts seeming to move a mile a minute.

“I miss my mother,” she said suddenly, her voice taking a hysterical edge as her hand came up to her face to wipe away the tears that were now streaming down her cheeks. “I want to go see her soon. I’m so mad at her for leaving me.”

They were silent for a minute as Cole lay on his back atop of the pillows, and they both stared up at the canopy together in silence.

“You know what happened with my mother, right?” he finally asked. She’d only know this story if his grandmother had told her. He’d always been careful not to reference his mother with Morgan too much.

“No,” she whispered absently.

“She overdosed.”

“Really?” This got her attention, and out of his periphery, he saw her turn to look at him.

“Yeah, three years ago.” He kept his voice steady and emotionless, like he’d trained himself to do when talking about her. “It was a long time coming.”

“What happened?”

“When I was growing up, she tried to stop a lot, but she could never quite get there. I always kind of blamed myself,” he admitted. “I was bad or stupid or unwanted, so she had no

choice but to soothe herself with drugs. I have no idea who my father is....”

“I don’t know who my father is, either,” Morgan admitted honestly. There was a darkness to her earnestness, though. She still had that slight hysterical edge to her voice.

Cole reached down and lightly grasped her hand, but otherwise, they lay there next to each other, not moving. “She’d always try to get better. Pick herself up, dust herself off ... just to fall down over and over again. It always got worse, not better. You know, she left me in a gas station once when I was six.”

“What?” she asked, her voice tinged with shock.

“Yeah, she was picking up drug, and forgot I was with her. I was in the candy aisle.”

“That’s terrible, Cole,” Morgan said softly.

“That’s when I went to live with my grandparents full time,” he said. “She was in and out of our lives after that. She’d always show up to fight with my grandparents—about money and me, mostly. When she died, we hadn’t seen her for six months, though.”

Morgan sat up and looked down on him. “Lucy never talks about her ... she never has, really. It was always just you.”

“It’s painful for her,” Cole said steadily, like this conversation wasn’t making him want to throw something at the wall.

Morgan nodded solemnly and lay back, her eyes glued to him.

“But she doesn’t matter. And neither does your uncle,” he told her assuredly, moving over to his side to face her. “All that matters is you and me.”

Her large green eyes were wide, the tears having long since dried up. “I love you, Cole,” she said softly, in a matter-of-fact voice like she’d said it a million times before.

“I love you, too,” he responded quietly.

“Tell me about how things will be for us,” she ordered him quietly, turning to burrow into him. “When we leave.”

“Well, we’re going to move to San Francisco,” he said as she settled in the crook of his arm, snuggling against his side. “I’m going to be a musician and you’re going to be ... what again?” There was a teasing edge in his voice as she released a long sigh.

“A reader of books,” she replied dreamily.

“Ah, yes,” he said lightly. “Sounds like a recipe for success.”

She smirked slightly against him before letting out a deep breath, settling quietly next to him.

After that, they lay there quietly for a few minutes. He stared at the canopy, trying to keep his thoughts as blank as possible. He hated talking about his mother. He thought Morgan had fallen asleep for a moment until he felt her move slightly against him.

When she rose, all hints of their joking had disappeared. She locked her gaze with his as she came up to her knees. That recklessness he had noticed in her eyes earlier had grown into something more, something wilder.

Staring down at him, her legs spread apart slightly, she grabbed her shirt by the edge and pulled it over her head slowly. She tossed it, and it landed on the other end of her giant silk bedspread.

Cole felt a darkness descend inside of him as he looked up at her. Her long blond waves falling over her shoulders; her small, rosy tipped breasts; and her golden skin glimmering in the dim lights. Her eyes held a desperate challenge in them.

“What are you doing, Morgan?” he asked quietly, rising to get closer to her. He couldn’t take his eyes off of her.

She didn’t respond, though, just reached down and grabbed his hand, settling it on her right breast gently. Cole sucked in a deep breath at the feel of her, silky and warm under his palm. He moved his hand slightly, feeling her erect nipple.

His heart felt like it was beating through his chest.

He couldn’t breathe.

He would explode trying to contain all of this feeling.

Nevertheless, he managed to slowly move toward her, gently forcing her back until she fell down on the pile of pillows at the head of her bed.

Crawling over her, he planted a hand on each side of her head and leaned down, taking her lips softly with his. She

reached her hands up, settling them gently on his neck at the same time she let her legs fall apart for him.

Moving one hand down her waist, he caught his fingers on the waistband of her shorts and pulled them down. She lifted her hips to allow him to move them off of her, and Cole let out a groan as his body came down flush with hers. His body was drowning with liquid heat. Different and more intense than anything he'd ever felt on his own.

While she was naked, he was still completely dressed, but he didn't think he could make it long enough to take off his clothes. He was completely overcome by the urgency—the need—to get inside of her before he lost his chance.

Fumbling with the buttons and the zipper of his pants, he pulled them down quickly until he was settled between her legs. He let out a long hiss at the warm, wet feeling of her as he moved his hand down to touch her.

It was unlike anything he'd ever known before as he dipped his fingers inside of her. She let out a small little moan at his touch, and Cole knew he was done for. There was no going back.

Everything they'd ever done before had been over the clothes, almost innocent, kissing and minor fondling. But this, this was something he'd only dreamed about.

Morgan started breathing heavily and arching into him. She let out a low groan that reverberated through his entire body as she pulled him closer to her. "Make me feel better, Cole," she said distantly.

After that, Cole didn't realize what was happening. It was just a series of frenzied movements as he pulled down his pants and pushed inside of her in one, then two thrusts.

He let out a choked groan and she sucked in a breath. He distantly wondered if she was okay or if he'd hurt her, but he didn't have time to think too deeply about it. Moving inside of her gracelessly, he scattered hurried kisses on her face when he could be bothered to, but otherwise just moved in and out of her as fast as possible, reveling in the friction and the feel of her.

After not much time at all, he let out one last quick, choked noise as he thoughtlessly released inside of her. It was a mess, and not at all how he'd imagined it in his head. But it was also the most spectacular moment of his life.

He pulled back to look down at her before falling roughly to her side. He'd never felt so spent, so replete in his entire life. She looked a little less sad as she looked over at him, her eyes reverent and serious, but a soft smile played on her lips.

"Are you okay?" he asked quietly, rubbing his thumb softly over her freckles.

She nodded her head slowly, pressing her lips together. She was still so quiet. She wasn't okay.

He opened his mouth to question her further, but before he could get the words out, he was interrupted by a loud banging on the door. He looked up with a start between her and the door.

“Shit,” he said, rushing to stand up. “Who’s that?”

There was another knock as Morgan rose slightly, her hair disheveled, her face red from where he kissed her roughly, her eyes bright. Her movements were slow and liquid as she reached to the floor and picked up a terry cloth robe.

“Don’t be mad,” she said as she put on the robe and positioned herself on the bed. “And remember that I love you, okay?”

Cole was again interrupted before he could answer when a key turned a lock on the door, and it was pushed open.



Cole was up with the sun.

He supposed he had a lot on his mind, and he was naturally a morning person, anyway. He found he was too restless to lounge around for long. Especially now, with all the memories and thoughts bombarding his brain.

So, with a final look at Morgan lying in his bed, wrapped in his old plaid comforter and sleeping peacefully, he got up and sat with a cup of coffee in the living room, fiddling with his guitar by the gray morning light.

As he strummed and sipped his coffee, he kept seeing flashes of Morgan’s face from the night before, when he’d played her song. He’d known it was a risk to play that song. It was an announcement to the entire town and her family—her cousin had been standing right next to her—that something

had happened and was still happening between the two of them.

At first, he'd been worried that he was horribly mistaken, publicly declaring himself to her. But he'd kept singing, and as he'd done so, he saw that something was happening, something playing over her features. He hadn't understood it when they were teenagers, and he still didn't think he really grasped what was going on inside of her.

Morgan had secrets. They'd torn them apart in the past. But they couldn't be as simple as he'd always made them out to be. It had been easy to stay angry with her for so long when the reasons for everything were solely her own faults and failures. Her selfishness. Her sense of self-preservation. Her entitlement.

Her secrets and his reckless confidence were what had torn them apart in the past, but he wouldn't let them do so now.

He slowly strummed out the chords to her song on his guitar, watching the strings bend and pull back to form the sounds. He tried to play quietly, but he kind of wanted her to wake up. He was in the mood to talk, to rehash all that old shit.

Seconds later, he got his wish as she came shuffling out of his bedroom, his plaid comforter wrapped around her naked body.

Cole eyed her skeptically. "You don't have to cover up," he said with an ironic lift of his brow. "I think at this point I've seen all there is to see."

She twisted her face into a cute scowl. “I do. Because not only is your house hideous, it’s freezing,” she said, her voice hoarse from sleep as she walked over to the couch, settling down in the corner with the blanket wrapped tightly around her.

Cole shrugged. He never felt like splurging on a high gas bill when he could just put on a hoodie. He was wearing a thick hoodie now over his thermal shirt and didn’t feel too affected by the cold. He was used to it, though.

But he knew his grandma didn’t mind splurging on heat, and god knew how much the Main House went through.

He looked up to see her watching him, her eyes tentative as they danced over his arms wrapped around the guitar. “Are you disappointed?” she asked. “About the music deal?”

Cole shrugged again as he looked down at his guitar. “Not really,” he said, not realizing how true it was until he said it. “I didn’t really want it. I just felt like I should, I guess.”

She tilted her head at him thoughtfully. “It’s all you ever used to talk about. Remember we were going to run off to San Fran?”

“Yeah, but I haven’t really thought about it for a long time,” he said with a distant laugh. “I’ve kind of resigned myself to being a small-town librarian.”

“Hmm,” Morgan hummed. “I guess people change when you don’t talk to them for ten years,” she said wryly. “Except

for me ... I still basically grew up to be nothing but a reader of books.”

Cole chuckled at the memory, his smile falling as he considered her. “You talked to me plenty,” he said, setting aside his guitar. “Every Friday night at The Blue Sky, I got to hear your beautiful voice hooting at me from across the bar.”

She pressed her lips together, looking down thoughtfully. “I’ve been such a bitch. So angry. And sad,” she admitted. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have anything to be sorry for,” Cole answered, and neither of them said anything else about it as he picked up his guitar again and started strumming. Just for something to do, really. He had a feeling he was going to get his wish, and they were going to have their talk. He found he wasn’t looking forward to it as much as he had been a few minutes ago.

But apparently Morgan was as disinterested in talking as he was. She watched his hands as they moved over the guitar strings, louder now as he played haphazardly and randomly.

When he’d had enough, though, he leaned back and let out a loud sigh, turning to smile at her easily. She wasn’t smiling, though; she was staring down at the floor, an intense look on her face.

“I’m not a Conrad.” She breathed out the confession in a single breath, not looking up at him.

“Huh?” He looked up at her with a start. “What do you mean?”

“My mother’s not my mother,” she said timidly, her eyes staying fixed on the floor. “And I’ve never known who my father is.”

“What? I don’t understand. Then who are your parents?”

“I don’t know. That last night that you and I were ... together, my uncle basically told me that Adele wasn’t actually my mother. That he didn’t know where I came from.” Her voice was trembling as she moved her feet up to the couch, wrapping her arms around her legs under the comforter.

“You look just like her, though,” he said defensively. “And your sister, too.” He’d only seen Bella a couple times from afar, and he remembered finding it a bit painful how much she resembled younger Morgan.

“Not really. We’re all blond ... which is *lucky*, I guess.” She shrugged distractedly, tears running down her face.

He moved to her, wrapping his arms tightly around her shoulders as she settled against him, sniffing quietly. He positioned her so she was sitting on his lap and gently rubbed her hair back from her face as he looked down at her.

She released a deep breath and leaned against him quietly. So much silence from her lately. She wasn’t supposed to be sad and silent. She should be dancing and laughing.

“It’s been so hard,” she admitted. “I don’t know who I am in this town without this name.”

“What did your mother say about all of this?” he asked gently, the word leaving a sour taste on his tongue.

“I didn’t ever talk to her about it until a couple months ago,” she said nervously. “When I got cut off, I went to talk to her before I left the Main House.”

“What did she say?”

“She said it was true,” Morgan confessed sadly. “She said she met my real parents at a music festival when I was a baby. They were high, and she didn’t think they deserved me. So ... she took me, brought me to the Main House, and told everyone my name was Morgan. It was her mother’s maiden name.”

“Holy shit.” Cole bit out the words angrily. *That crazy bitch.* “That’s insane. She kidnapped you? Did you know that’s what happened?”

“Not exactly, but I thought it might be something like that. I’ve just been pushing it down for all these years. Pretending like that night never happened, and I never actually had that conversation with her. I don’t even know what my real name is,” she admitted, her voice shaking.

He leaned forward to wrap his arms around her. “Your name is Morgan Conrad. That’s who you are. I know who you are, and so does everyone else in this stupid town.”

“I was so mad at them,” she confessed. “That last night we were together, I knew my uncle would find us—he was well aware I was sneaking you into the house—but I didn’t care. I wanted to piss him off because he hurt me. Do you hate me again?” She pulled back and looked at him urgently, grabbing hold of the sides of his hoodie.

“Of course not,” he murmured, pulling her into his chest. “I’ll always love you ... no matter what.”

She let it all out then. Her sobs came strong and loud from her throat like she was releasing years and years of sadness and anger onto his shoulder, and he had no desire to do anything but absorb it.

He just couldn’t believe it. The Conrads were an institution in Lake Conrad. A legacy. And while Adele Conrad had been a bit of a free spirit, she was an accepted member of the community. Nobody had ever doubted Morgan’s parentage or Adele’s choices.

The Conrads, it had always seemed, were above the actions of all the mere mortals in town. If Adele wanted to disappear for years and show up with a daughter, no one would question it. What else would you expect from an eccentric rich person?

But not for the first time, Cole found himself resenting it all. Their privilege, their holier than thou attitudes. Who was Adele to decide who did or didn’t deserve a baby? A Conrad, that’s who.

Eventually, Morgan stopped crying and Cole stopped stewing, and she rested quietly on his shoulder. Looking down, he saw that she’d fallen asleep, so he carried her back to his bed, and she slept. For hours, it seemed.

In the meantime, he wandered around his house. It was a cloudy, gray Sunday, so the perfect day not to go anywhere or do anything.

He put on a record and played the music low while he attempted to clean so that when she woke up, everything would be neat and maybe she'd consider it a little less hideous.

He even pulled out the painting his grandmother had given him of Sapphire Fall and propped it up on the mantle in an effort to add some color to his living room. Seeing his fireplace reminded him of the stack of wood he had under the eaves of his house, so he built a small fire and enjoyed the way the blaze heated up the house. Maybe there was something to be said for heat.

It was about nine thirty when he started scavenging the fridge, looking for something to cook her—something fragrant that would wake her up and make her happy to be here—when he heard a knock at the door.

He quickly went to open it, thinking it was Duke or Crumbly bringing his amps from last night, but when he opened the door, there wasn't anyone there he had any real desire to see or talk to again.

It was Curtis Conrad.

COLE

TEN YEARS AGO

*C*ole sat in Mr. Conrad's office, staring at the patterned carpet. The swirls and shapes. The red and gold colors. Everything seemed to mesh together as his eyes blurred.

It was late—probably about four in the morning—and he was tired and scared.

He didn't know where Morgan was right now. She'd been calm, almost complacent, as her uncle had entered her bedroom. She'd simply leveled a challenging look at him, crossing her arms over her chest and glaring up at him with a look that could only be described as "What are you gonna do about it?"

But her uncle had completely ignored her, walking past her dismissively and instead leveling a cool gaze at Cole before asking him to follow him to his office—he'd like to have a chat with him before he sent him home.

Cole had opened his mouth to apologize or make an excuse for being in his niece's room at three in the morning, but when

he had looked at Morgan, she had given him a tight shake of her head.

Did that mean she had this under control? Maybe so. This was her family, after all.

In the end, he'd followed the man to his office, where he had been left for the past thirty minutes. Cole had thought about leaving multiple times. The door wasn't locked, right? He could just leave, go home, and talk to Morgan at school on Monday.

But no, he needed to wait it out. He wouldn't leave her here. They were in this thing together. Not to mention this was his grandmother's boss.

Yeah, there was that.

So, he should probably do whatever he could to not only protect the girl he loved, but also maintain his family's livelihood.

That was the right thing to do, so that was what he would do. Even if every instinct he had screamed at him to get out as soon as humanly possible.

After what seemed like an eternity, Cole turned around to the sound of the office door opening behind him. Mr. Conrad carefully and quietly walked through the door, closing it softly behind him.

He was wearing silk pajamas and a heavy velour robe, which Cole found as disconcerting now as he had in Morgan's

bedroom earlier. He seemed like the kind of guy who slept in business wear.

He didn't look at Cole as he walked to the other side of his massive wood desk, sitting in the large leather chair on the other side.

He continued not looking at Cole, a serious, almost overly focused expression fixed on his face as he opened up a small rectangular box on his desk and stared down into it for several seconds.

"Cigar?" he asked, finally looking up at Cole with a questioning look. His dark hair fell over his eyes, giving him a disheveled look, making him seem younger.

Cole simply shook his head in response, looking up at him from under his brows.

"Hmph," Mr. Conrad hummed softly as he took out a cigar and chopped off the end. "I would have thought a man like you would like a smoke after fucking my niece," he proclaimed, enunciating the words carefully.

Cole drew in his features in disgust at his crassness. Mr. Conrad paid him no attention, though, lighting the end of the cigar and blowing out a couple puffs of sour, acrid smoke and glaring over his desk.

"You are a man, aren't you, Cole?" he pressed, leaning back in his chair and focusing a probing gaze at him. "I am not sure what other manner of person would disrespect my home and my name like you have."

Cole looked up at him, confused and unsure how to respond. This wasn't how he thought this would go. Was Mr. Conrad drunk? He seemed like it, the way his eyes were having trouble focusing and his voice was coming out quickly, like water from a faucet.

"I don't understand, sir," he said softly.

"That's rich," Mr. Conrad grumbled. He was definitely drunk, Cole decided ... or something. He was getting more confused by the second. He'd known he'd be mad, but this was not what he was expecting.

"I'm really sorry this happened," Cole said, finally getting the nerve to appeal to his sense of understanding. "I shouldn't have been here without your permission, but Morgan didn't think you'd approve. We didn't think we had any other choice."

"Well, she was damned right about that, if absolutely nothing else," he said sternly, his hair coming down further in front of his face as he glared at Cole, a look of disapproval on his face. "Shameful. But blood will tell, I suppose. Who the hell knows what kind of blood we're dealing with as far as that one goes, huh?"

He's definitely drunk, Cole decided, and not making any sense. His eyes narrowed as he tried to decipher the older man's rant. Maybe he should leave and come back tomorrow? Talk to him when he was more himself?

He opened his mouth to suggest as much when Mr. Conrad cut him off.

“You’ll never talk to her again after tonight,” he ordered roughly, leaning over his desk and setting his cigar on the edge of an ashtray. “You’ll never be alone with her again, either.”

“What?” Cole started. “But you don’t understand—”

“I understand completely,” Mr. Conrad sneered. “You think you can associate with my sister’s child?” He sneered at the last word as if it disgusted him. “She’s not for you. Her last name is Conrad, for fuck’s sake. You’re the goddamn gardener.”

“Mr. Conrad, I love Morgan,” Cole said firmly, rising from his chair.

“Then you really are a fool,” he scoffed, rising from his chair and walking to a sideboard, where he filled a glass with brown liquid, all the way to the top. “That silly girl may think that her life is a romance novel, but I expected better of you, Cole. You come from a practical people. A hardy stock. But maybe you’re more like your mother than I thought.”

Cole took a few steps closer, holding a challenging stance, but Mr. Conrad wasn’t looking at him. His eyes took on a distant glare as he sipped the giant glass of liquor. After a few moments, he made his way back to where Cole stood, looking him up and down and shaking his head.

“I’ll take her away from here,” Cole said, steadily. “I’ll leave with her. You’ll never see her again.”

“God, if only you’d do me that favor.” Mr. Conrad leaned back as he laughed, liquid sloshing over the side of his glass. “But no, you can’t. I’m cursed to deal with my sister and her mistakes forever.” He paused, his eyes taking on that distant quality again. “You’ll never speak to her again. You’ll never be alone with her,” he repeated. “I’d like to say you’d never see her again, but that would be impossible in this town, I suppose.”

“You can’t keep us apart,” Cole said, knowing he didn’t feel as brave as he sounded. “Morgan will never agree to this, and she only has a year before she graduates. We’ll be out of here together as soon as we can.”

“I don’t think so,” Mr. Conrad sneered. “This was her idea after all.”

Cole looked at him quizzically, and Mr. Conrad barked out a sharp laugh, falling back down in his leather desk chair, the liquid spilling out his glass again.

“She and I made a deal,” he proclaimed shortly. “If I let her stay and allowed her to remain a member of this family, then she’d give you up. It was the easiest deal I ever struck.”

Dread shrouded Cole. There was no way that was true. It had been just an hour or so ago that they’d said I love you, right after they....

“I don’t believe you,” he told Mr. Conrad softly, right before a light knock at the door echoed through the room.

“Ah, well, here’s the validation you require,” Mr. Conrad said jovially. “Come in,” he bellowed loudly.

Turning around, Cole saw Morgan timidly walk into the room, wearing her terry cloth robe, her hair pulled back from her face in a tight bun and her eyes drooping heavily over her pale face.

“Uncle Curtis,” she said, ignoring Cole and looking at her uncle pleadingly. “Can we have a minute alone?”

“Absolutely,” responded Mr. Conrad grandly with an eerie chuckle. “But remember what we talked about.”

Morgan nodded tightly in response as her uncle rose from his desk chair, abandoning his cigar and drink. Smiling at Cole in a gracious manner, he left them in a room clouded with cigar smoke, scotch fumes, and tension.

“What’s going on, Morgan?” Cole asked, turning to look at her as soon as the door closed.

“Cole, he made me choose,” Morgan said quickly as she rushed toward him, her eyes imploring him to understand.

“Choose between what?”

“Between you...” she responded, trailing off as her eyes darted around the room, “and everything else.”

“What else?”

“My home. Ian. My mother. My things.” Her eyes filled up with tears as she listed them off. “Everything that I am.”

“Morgan, it’s okay,” Cole started. He just had to reassure her. None of those things mattered. All that mattered was they had each other. “You’re his niece. He wouldn’t really do that. That’s the stupidest thing—”

“Well, it’s true, Cole,” Morgan argued, her voice taking on an edge. “He’s right. I’m nobody without my family.”

“You have me,” Cole responded, urgency rising within him. He was losing her. He could feel it. “You don’t need them....”

“And what are you going to give me, huh?” she asked wildly, her tired eyes growing alarmed. “A home? Books? A family? You can’t give me any of that. You barely know me.”

Cole felt a coldness settle over him. He felt like his heart had stopped beating. His breath had stopped pumping through his lungs. “I know you,” he said half-heartedly, his eyes scanning her up and down. “Don’t I?”

Morgan shrugged. “Apparently not,” she said coldly. “Because I’m not leaving all this behind”—she motioned around at the opulence surrounding them—“for you.”

“Morgan, you need me like I need you. I know it—”

“Go home, Cole, I can take care of myself.”

That was when he had to stop trying to keep her. She didn’t want him. She wanted her fancy house. Her family. Even if all they did was make her miserable. And did he really want to be with someone that shallow?

He pushed away the urgency, the sadness he had been feeling deep inside of him, then, and replaced it with

something else. It was bitter anger that would protect him for a long time.

And so, with one last disappointed look, Cole walked out the door and tried very hard over the next ten years to never look back.



Cole didn't bother to hide his groan of disappointment at the sight of Morgan's uncle.

Curtis, however, didn't seem to notice the rude greeting. He stood calmly on the icy doorstep, his mouth set in a firm, expressionless line.

He was dressed in a sleek wool coat and shiny black shoes. He didn't look much different than he had the day that Cole had run into him at The Blue Bard all those years ago, with the exception of the spreading gray hair at his temple and the deeper lines around his eyes.

Cole didn't give him the chance at a greeting or an explanation for his presence. He just waved his hand in front of his face and shook his head, holding tight to the open door.

"Absolutely not," he said sharply to Curtis's questioning face. "Not interested. Don't want any. Go away."

Cole started to close the door, but Curtis's hand came out quickly and firmly, stopping it from closing.

"Be reasonable, Cole," he said calmly, his grip tightening on the doorframe. "We had a business arrangement that has

seemingly deteriorated. It's only courteous that we have a discussion about it."

That's when it struck Cole that Curtis probably had no idea that Morgan was here, but even if he did, there was nothing he could do about it. He didn't control either of them anymore, and that must drive him crazy.

"Alright, but you're not coming in," Cole said, looking behind him at the dark hallway that led to the bedroom. Hopefully, Morgan hadn't woken up yet and wouldn't have to deal with this.

Curtis let out an annoyed sigh, but ultimately nodded his head in acceptance. "Fine," he said shortly.

"I'll be right back," Cole told him, closing the door. Turning, he exhaled slowly as he looked around for his coat and boots.

The truth was, he *did* want to hear what Curtis had to say, and he had a lot of questions. It seemed like the most effective way for him and Morgan to put the past ten years behind them was to *talk*.

Not just with each other, either, but with people like Curtis, who played a direct role in all the shit they'd been through.

After he'd donned his coat, boots, and hat, Cole took one last fortifying breath before he went back outside.

Curtis stood on the icy stoop, overlooking the small, snow-covered yard, his eyebrows drawn down in disapproval as he surveyed the area. He didn't look up at Cole as he walked over

to stand next to him, but his eyes seemed to narrow even further into the distance, and his lips pressed together to produce a sour expression.

Cole didn't say anything. Curtis had come to him, after all, and knowing the man, he probably had this conversation all mapped out. Eventually, he'd launch into some self-serving diatribe about how he was disappointed and/or disgusted with Cole and Morgan, followed by some grand punishment meant to destroy their lives forever.

But that wasn't what he did. Instead, he asked him the most unexpected of questions.

“Did your grandmother ever tell you about your mother's death?”

Cole pulled back in surprise, followed by a low feeling of annoyance settling over him. Why would Curtis think he'd want to stand in his freezing cold front yard and discuss his dead mother?

But the last thing he wanted to do was show Curtis how much the question affected him.

Be cool.

“Not really,” Cole said quietly. “I was only thirteen and hadn't seen much of her in a while.”

His grandmother didn't like to talk about his mother at all, and she had never told Cole about the circumstances of her death. Cole suspected that she thought she was protecting him

to a certain degree, and in truth, he'd been happy to be in the dark about it. He'd known it was probably an ugly story.

“She was discovered in a small motel on the edge of town—the Sugar Pine Lodge, you know it?”

“Yeah, I know the place,” Cole said, nodding thoughtfully. The Sugar Pine Lodge was a seedy place even further out of town than the strip malls and gas stations. Duke had talked him into going to a couple parties there over the years, but it had always creeped him out.

“Your grandmother called me very early one Sunday morning,” Curtis explained. “She’s one of the few people that can get a hold of me during that time of day. She asked me to help her. Amelia—the daughter that had caused her so much trouble, so much grief—was as close to death as one could possibly be while still breathing.”

Cole didn't say anything and didn't look up at Mr. Conrad to acknowledge this description. Instead, he focused his eyes on a pine tree a few feet away from him. A clump of snow weighed down one of its branches, and water slowly dripped into the snow below it, creating a little hollow, the snow on the edges melting away so that it slowly became bigger and bigger.

“So, I had Amelia pulled out of that grimy hotel room and flown down to Reno, where the doctors did everything they could to save her,” Curtis continued, not noticing the dead, shocked feeling that Cole felt like he radiated. “It was useless,

though. She was gone. She'd probably been gone long before that night, honestly."

"Why are you telling me this?" Cole asked angrily, finally looking up at him.

"Because there is very little separating your mother and the girl sleeping in your bedroom right now. They're the same person. And I've known your grandmother, and your grandfather before he died, for my entire life. I won't have them lose another child."

"You don't know what the hell you're talking about," Cole insisted, taking a step closer to him. His cool had officially evaporated. "If you really ever cared to know Morgan at all, you'd know she's nothing like my mother."

"She's exactly like her," Curtis insisted fiercely. "I grew up with Amelia—I *knew* her. Better than you. She was a lush. She was out of control. She was an embarrassment. And she caused your grandparents so much pain."

Cole couldn't take it anymore. He turned around and pushed Curtis slightly on the shoulders, causing him to stumble backwards on the icy cement and shoot an alarmed look at Cole.

"Cole, calm down—" Curtis started, holding up his hands.

"Did you think I wanted to hear this from you? Get the fuck away from my house," he said angrily. "You think you can just show up here and insult two out of the three women I've loved most in my life and I'd, what? Agree with you? You're a fool."

Cole felt a surge of satisfaction to repeat Curtis's words to him from all those years ago, and to see the fear in his eyes as he again stumbled backward on the icy step.

"Cole," he said seriously. "This record deal was for you and your family. A way to free you from *that girl*." He pointed angrily in the direction of the house. "Since she'd walked away from the family, I knew it was only a matter of time before she sought you out. She's a leech."

"And what were you going to do with her?" Cole pressed. "Pawn her off on the assholes from RTR?"

"They can have her, and her trust fund," Curtis snarled loudly. "I'll be forced to pay her out when she turns thirty. I can't imagine turning my family's money over *to her*. You know she's not even—" He cut himself off and shook his head. "At least if she ended up with one of them, then I could ensure it would be absorbed into one of my business ventures."

"I don't want your money."

Both Cole and Curtis looked up to see Morgan standing in the doorway. She'd gotten dressed in her leggings and sweater from last night, but her feet were bare and her hair was wild, tumbling down her shoulders. She had light circles under her eyes, but they were focused and fierce as they narrowed on Curtis.

"Keep your money," she continued coldly. "I don't want it."

“As if I’d believe that,” Curtis sneered. “You’ve done nothing but take, take, take from the moment you entered this family.”

“Did you think I asked for any of this?” Morgan asked, her eyes widening in shock and her hand coming up to her chest, her eyes filling with tears.

She closed her eyes, taking a deep breath as the tears fell down her cheeks. Bracing herself, she opened her eyes again and looked at Curtis resolutely.

“I don’t want your money,” she repeated. “And I don’t want your name. I’m done being a Conrad, and I want everyone to know it.”

Curtis’s face fell at the announcement. He seemed to age about twenty years in a matter of seconds, his mouth opening slightly as he took in Morgan staring at him defiantly, his eyes shifting nervously toward Cole. “You wouldn’t dare tell anyone.”

“Why wouldn’t I? What do I have to lose? Cole knows,” she announced proudly.

Curtis’s eyes filled with shock as his gaze reverted to Cole, who shrugged insolently.

“You’d lose any standing you have in this town,” Curtis said, returning his gaze to Morgan and motioning around him. “You’d ruin yourself.”

“Well, that’s the thing,” Morgan said with a roll of her eyes, crossing her arms over her chest. “There’s a whole wide world

out there that doesn't care about the Conrad name, so I don't think I'd be ruining myself at all. And I'm pretty sure the town wouldn't tar and feather *me* if they found out Adele committed a crime that *you* covered up."

"You listen to me—"

"No, you listen to *me*," she said insistently, coming down to stand in front of him, her bare feet hitting the icy doorstep. She immediately started jumping a bit as her feet hit the cold concrete. "You've done nothing but make me feel like shit for my entire life—you and *her*."

"Well, what was I supposed to—"

"No," Morgan said angrily, slashing her hand through the air and hopping quicker. "Stay away from me, and stay away from him. I never want to see you or her again." She breathed out a disgusted sigh as she gave him one last look. "I'm going inside because I probably have frostbite on my feet now, and it's all your fault. *Asshole*."

With one more dismissive look, Morgan turned on her apparently frozen feet and stomped into the house, slamming the door behind her.

Cole and Curtis stood there in silence for a few moments, and when Cole looked over at him, he saw that he was staring down at the ground blankly. When he finally looked up at Cole, his eyes were bright and hopeful.

"Cole, you have to understand...."

But Cole just shook his head at him slowly before turning to walk into the house after Morgan. “You need to leave.”

As he closed the door, he took one more look at Mr. Conrad standing on the small, icy stoop in his fancy clothes. His face fell in shock as Cole noiselessly closed the door behind him.

He was sure that he’d be forced to reckon with Curtis Conrad again one day.

But not today.

MORGAN

Morgan fell onto Cole's bed with a loud groan, burrowing her freezing cold feet into the blankets as she curled up onto her side and stared through the window at the gray sky.

There'd been a small fire blazing in the fireplace as she'd stomped through the living room on her way back to the bedroom. Probably something Cole had attempted while she'd slept, but she couldn't feel it in his bedroom.

She heard him come into the house and close the door behind him. He didn't come into the room right away—he must sense she needed some time alone—but she heard him fiddling around in the kitchen.

The world suddenly felt like it was draped in a heavy gray blanket, like the sun would never shine again, like she would never smile again.

God, stop being so melodramatic, Morgan scolded herself. But how could I have been so stupid for so long?

Curtis hated her guts. Adele was indifferent to her.

They'd both hurt her so much, and yet continuously blamed her for the shitty situation at no fault of her own. And the worst part was that she had agreed with them for so long, punishing herself for her perceived faults and shortcomings.

She remembered once when she'd been about seven, she and Adele had been back at the Main House for a short stint, and her mother had taken her shopping in the Square. She'd bought her new clothes, toys, and books—anything she wanted, really.

Everyone stopped to comment on how beautiful they were. A matching pair. The perfect mother and daughter.

Blond hair. Green eyes. Clear skin.

Morgan had never felt happier than when her mother had looked down at her with so much pride and love that day while chatting with the other adults they met along the way.

She remembered focusing intently on standing perfectly still while her mother talked, careful to never take one step out of line or say one word that would not be perceived as adorable or polite—the perfect little doll whom Adele could dress up and drag around town.

But as Morgan had grown older, her hair had grown darker. While her mother's hair was an even, silky blond tone, Morgan's was different burnished shades of gold. It had also started growing in wild curls and waves—not like her mother's perfect sheen.

Her mother always complained about her messy hair and her skin, which had turned golden and freckled from so much time in the sun. She'd slather her with sunblock every day, but the freckles came anyway, so she'd given up eventually.

That was about when she stopped caring, Morgan guessed. That was also when Morgan's uncle had developed his mean streak. Maybe that was when he'd noticed something wasn't right—that *she* wasn't right.

So, she had acted out. She'd been loud and obnoxious. Gone was the perfect little clone from the mother-daughter shopping trips. And obviously it was her fault that everyone had stopped loving her. She was wild, right? And sloppy—that was the word her uncle liked to use the most.

She needed to be better, she'd known it, but she could never quite get there. She always failed. So, she may as well embrace the bad, the sloppy, the wildness that seemed so innate.

It was stupid, really. If anyone else she loved was in this position—Ian, Annie, Lena—she would have told them they were crazy to believe any of this was their own fault. Obviously being kidnapped by a narcissistic sociopath and raised to believe everything was her fault by a controlling autocrat was *not* her fault.

She'd had no trouble blaming herself for everything, though. For so long.

And she'd never stopped loving her mother. Even now, she still kind of loved her, which was so fucked up—especially

after all the things she'd said to her the night Morgan had left the Main House. When she'd finally confirmed everything that had happened. Everything that Morgan had suspected.

Morgan had barged into her room, not even knocking. For months, she'd been staying at the mansion with her mother, and yet, she hadn't even seen her. Adele must know she was there, but she never sought Morgan out. And whenever Morgan had mentioned going to see her, Lucy had gently discouraged her.

It was for good reason, Morgan discovered.

The first thing Morgan noticed about her mother was that she didn't look any different. If someone was locked away for so long, you'd think she would be wasting away, right? Sick or just *off* somehow? But no, she looked healthy and happy, sitting in front of a TV, scrolling through her phone distractedly, her legs tucked under her.

Her smooth face was washed, her hair freshly brushed, and her eyes bright as she looked up at Morgan with alarm.

"Goodness, Morgan," she'd scolded, her hand delicately rising to her chest. "You frightened me."

"You're okay?" Morgan asked, dazed and disbelieving.

"Yes." Adele looked perplexed. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Because neither Bella or I have seen you in months," Morgan said, her voice rising and heated. "Where have you been?"

“Mostly here,” she said casually, looking back down at her phone. “But I spent a couple months in Mallorca.”

The apathy was soul crushing, but Morgan forged on. “I want to talk to you,” she said blankly, standing over her and turning off the TV.

Her mother shot her an annoyed glance. “What about?”

Morgan took a deep breath and swallowed. “I’m leaving,” she said. “I’m leaving the Main House, and it sounds like Uncle Curtis is cutting me off.”

Adele sighed and set aside her phone gently on the arm of the couch. “Are you sure that’s wise, dear?”

“Probably not,” Morgan answered. “But I’m doing it anyway.”

“It’s your choice, of course,” Adele said distractedly with a sigh, gracefully moving her legs out from under her. “But you’re better off just doing what he says. I never had the disposition for life outside of this family, and neither do you.”

“But that’s the thing,” Morgan responded softly. “I’m not really a part of this family, am I?”

Adele looked over at her curiously, her eyes narrowing as she looked her up and down shrewdly. “No, you’re not,” she finally admitted in a flat voice.

Morgan stared ahead blankly, her vision not focusing on any of the furniture or space in front of her. She’d known it was true, of course. But she’d always kind of held out hope that her uncle was just messing with her, and as soon as she mentioned

it to her mother, she would swiftly deny it, pulling out undeniable proof that Morgan was her daughter.

But now there was no more denying it. It was time to embrace reality.

“So you kidnapped me?” she asked weakly, her knees giving out as she fell down next to her on the couch.

Adele’s mouth pulled into a delicate frown. “That’s an ugly word. I always preferred to think of it as giving you a better life.”

“What were they like?” Morgan asked quietly. “The people you took me from.”

Adele sighed, letting her head fall back as if remembering this was a great effort, some major inconvenience.

“Well, I wasn’t in a very suitable state at the time,” Adele admitted with a frown. “But they were young; children, really. They called you something else ... Tulip, Posy, some silly flower name. I wasn’t much older than them, but I knew I could give you a better life. And I have, haven’t I?”

“What? No,” Morgan said angrily as her head shot up. “It’s been full of unhappiness and benign neglect.”

“Honestly, Morgan.” Adele’s voice was rising now, her arms flailing as she motioned around the room. “Look where you live. If it wasn’t for me, you’d probably have grown up in a trailer park in some god forsaken state. Instead, you got to travel the world and come from one of the most powerful

families in the country. I wouldn't be so quick to give that up if I were you."

"Well, I don't want any of that," Morgan said in a teary voice as she rose from the couch on wobbly knees. "I want a normal life. A life where my mother is actually my mother, a life where I'm not constantly being warned and threatened into submission. A life where I can go out with the boys I want to go out with...."

She looked over at Adele, wondering if she'd gotten through to her at all, but she was looking right through her. Like she didn't even see her.

"You're a silly girl," she finally said in a bored voice.

"Yeah, I think that's been drilled into my head enough. So, I'm leaving. Goodbye." There was more emotion in her voice than she would have liked. It would have been better to be stoic and uncaring, but Morgan supposed she just didn't have it in her.

Adele shook her head shamefully as she picked up her phone again. "Bad choice," she said on an exhaled breath. "Just don't go back to that gardener boy. Otherwise, you're no better off than your parents."

Morgan had paused at that warning, looking back morosely at her.

"I don't think he'd even want me at this point," she'd said sadly, but Adele hadn't been listening. She'd been looking at her phone again.

Now, back in Cole's bedroom, Morgan let out a disbelieving laugh as she realized how much she had failed to heed Adele's advice. She was still smiling in disbelief when Cole came into the room, holding a cup of something steaming.

He set the cup down on the nightstand and crawled into bed next to her, pulling her close against his chest. She couldn't help the sigh of relief that escaped as she relaxed into him, enjoying his warmth and his spicy scent.

"Is he gone?" she finally asked, her voice muffled against his chest as she reached to hold on to his large, rough hand.

"He better be," Cole growled into her hair. "I told him to leave."

Morgan rolled over to face him, and he propped himself up over her, his familiar eyes creased in concern, his mouth pulled down in a frown.

"I'm so sorry, Cole," she said, her eyes welling up with tears again. "I'm sorry I chose ... *everything else* ... over you back then. I was so stupid."

Saying the words left her unable to hold back the tears any longer, and they quickly streamed down her face, one after the other.

God, I'm so sick of crying, she thought miserably as she reached up to wipe them away.

"It's not your fault, Morgan," Cole said, shaking his head and smoothing her tears away with his thumb. "You were just

a kid—we both were—and you had some pretty shitty adults in your life.”

Morgan didn't say anything, just stared ahead blankly. They lay like that for a few minutes, doing what they did best, when Cole finally spoke.

“Do you want to try to press charges?” he asked. “She committed a crime.”

“I don't know. I haven't thought too much about it. I've been trying to block it out for so long. It wasn't until the last few months that I really came to terms with it. They've got a lot of money and power.... I can't live here anymore, Cole,” she admitted in a choked voice. “There's so much I love about this town, but I think I need some time away from it—from *them*.”

“That makes sense,” Cole said softly, rubbing his thumb across her cheek again. “Should we finally move to San Francisco, then?”

“Are you sure you want to?” she asked shakily. “I'm a mess, and I don't even have a last name anymore.”

“You can have mine,” he suggested, like it was the simplest thing in the world.

Morgan narrowed a disbelieving gaze on him. “Really? After barely talking for so long, you want to move across the state and marry me?”

“I've wanted to marry you since I first laid eyes on you,” he claimed seriously.

“Well, then you were an even weirder teenager than I thought,” Morgan said distantly, and Cole cracked a smile at that, which she returned with a delirious laugh.

Eventually, it petered off as a serious thought occurred to her.

“I think I want to find my real family,” she admitted. “But I’m scared. What if they hate me like the other ones did?”

“Whatever you want to do,” Cole said. “I’m here for you. I want to make up for pushing you away for so long. For treating you like I did.”

“Please,” she said caustically. “As if you had any choice. I know it was wrong of me to yell at you like I did. I just wanted your attention.”

“Well, you got it,” he said, falling back down on the bed. “I’ve gotta wonder how everyone is going to react to us being together. Does Ian have any idea?”

“Oh, god, Ian,” she said, her eyes widening in fear, her hand coming up to her forehead. “I said I’d tell everyone, but Ian’s the only one I’m worried about ... and *Bella*. Jesus, I’ll never see her again.”

Morgan felt panic rise within her at the thought of losing Ian and Bella. This was why she’d hung on to being a Conrad for so long—she didn’t want to lose *everyone* she loved.

“Hey,” Cole interrupted her, coming up to look at her again. “You don’t have to think about all this stuff right now. Take it one step—one *day*—at a time.”

“Okay,” Morgan responded distractedly as thoughts continued to float through her mind. “I guess that’s probably smart.”

“Let’s start with today,” Cole said decidedly. “We’ll make a plan.”

“Yes,” Morgan responded firmly, his certainty becoming contagious as her fears evaporated. “What should we do today?”

“First,” he noted in a determined voice. “I’ll make *sweet love* to you in this hideous house of mine.”

Morgan spit out a choked laugh. “‘*Sweet love*?’ Are you trying to make a joke, Cole? Have you ever really made a joke before?” she asked incredulously as his eyebrows came down in a quizzical look. “No? Okay, sure, sweet love sounds great.”

“Glad you’re on board,” he said with a firm nod. “After the lovemaking, we’ll get dressed and go to The Golden Carafe for coffee and food. While you were sleeping, I figured out I don’t have anything to eat here.”

“Oh, yes, I like that idea,” Morgan said enthusiastically. “I *am* hungry—I never got any nuts and sausage at the festival last night ... or maybe I did?” she asked with a suggestive raise to her eyebrow, looking him up and down.

Cole blanched at the description, causing Morgan to burst out a loud laugh.

“What? ‘*Sweet love*’ is okay, but a veiled reference to your dick isn’t? You’re such a prima donna,” she continued. “Even

worse than Julia—” Morgan stopped talking as a terrible thought occurred to her. “*Oh, shit, Julia.* I forgot all about her with all the Uncle Asshole drama.”

“Yes, we should probably track down Julia,” Cole said, nodding calmly in the face of Morgan’s freak out. “She is *kind of* our responsibility.”

“I left her with Kyle Bear last night,” she realized with horror. “What was I thinking? Did he even get her back to your grandmother’s? She’s probably sitting around all alone and uncomfortable, waiting for me to show my face.” Morgan groaned as the image of Julia sitting on Lucy’s fancy couch being force-fed finger foods by her well-meaning friend overwhelmed her with regret. “Dammit, where’s my phone.”

She attempted to get up out from under Cole and start looking for her phone, but he held her down, pushing her gently by the shoulder.

“Stay where you are,” he said softly. “First comes the sweet love.”

“That’s a little selfish of me, isn’t it? I hope she’s okay.” Morgan felt worry gnaw at her, but it quickly became eclipsed by something else as she looked up at Cole’s face.

She couldn’t believe she was here, lying under him in his bed—so similar to last week when he’d cornered her in her bedroom at Lucy’s house.

But it couldn’t be more different. The way he was looking at her. The way he made her feel. Safe and happy. It felt like a

dream.

“I can make this quick,” he assured with a smile, his eyes darkening as they landed on the bruises on her arm. He gently swept his fingers over the bruises and looked up at her worriedly. “Besides, I think you could use a little selfishness. It’s been a hell of a few days ... a hell of a twenty-four hours.”

“It’s been a hell of a ten years,” she said quietly, unable to move her eyes from his face. “I love you, Cole, and I’m sorry —”

She didn’t get to finish. He cut her off with his lips as he pulled her close, into a soft kiss. Morgan felt like she could lie here and be kissed by him forever, under his warmth, in his bed.

“I love you, too,” he said throatily as she pulled back from him. Weaving her hands through his long hair, pulling him closer to her. It didn’t feel like she could get close enough to him.

He was still propped over her as she lay back, but he brought his free hand up to her side, slipping it under her shirt as he moved up a short distance and started kneading her breasts slowly and reverently. Both of their kisses became more urgent as he touched her with his strong, rough hands.

When Morgan didn’t feel like she could take it anymore, she pushed him up off of her. Easily reading her cues, he flipped over on his back and started unbuckling his jeans while Morgan pulled her tight leggings and shirt off. She stood on her knees over him.

She looked down at him lying in wait for her, and her eyes grazed the forest tattooed on his left arm as her fingers came down to graze his inked skin.

“I want to go back to the clearing with you soon,” she told him randomly. He nodded his head slightly as he looked up at her, his eyes focusing on her bare body as he reached up and grabbed her hand, pulling her gently toward him.

She let him pull her down until she hovered over him. She pulled his unbuttoned pants down further and grabbed hold of him firmly. He was hard, and his skin felt silky as she pumped her hand up and down a few times.

He broke eye contact with her then as he leaned back against the pillows, hissing out a deep breath and a moan. She felt so powerful, so in control touching him like this, causing his body to arch and his eyes to close. A warmth settled over her and seeped out as she watched him from under hooded eyes.

“Fuck, Morgan,” he breathed out as she pumped faster and faster. “You need to stop.” But she didn’t listen, just kept going at him over and over again, until he let out an angry growl and reached up to grab hold of her by the waist.

He lifted her easily and positioned her until she was positioned over him. Looking down at him, she placed her hands on his shoulders and wordlessly sank down on him. She let out a small whimper at the feeling of him at this angle.

He filled her so deeply, so perfectly. She couldn’t help letting out a few short gasps as she lowered herself further and

further until he filled her completely.

She moved once and then twice without looking down at him. But when she opened her eyes, she saw him below her, staring up at her like she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. She couldn't stop herself from leaning over him and moving up and down slowly, then a bit more quickly.

She only moved a couple of times before she came, collapsing down on top of him as the long waves of pleasure hit her over and over again. Had she really thought everything was gray just twenty minutes earlier? It wasn't gray. It was as colorful as her bookshelves. She threw back her head as all that color and all the warmth exploded inside of her.

He pounded into her a couple more times before releasing a short grunt just before he pulsed and moved against her in short bursts and movements.

Gently moving her to the side, they lay facing each other on opposite sides of the bed from where they started, breathing heavily. Morgan had her eyes closed, but she wasn't sure about Cole. She felt like she could fall asleep again, but she knew she shouldn't. She had a day to get through.

Finally cracking her eyes open, she saw Cole staring at her, his green eyes hooded and gentle. He reached over and spread his thumb gently over her cheek, and she breathed out a short laugh.

"You were right," she said in a cracked, used voice. "That *was* quick."

“And don’t forget sweet,” he countered with a small smile, his eyes glistening.

“And sweet,” she agreed.

“I love you, my wild girl,” he said quietly, reverently. “I always have. I never stopped.”

“And I never stopped loving you, my Cole,” Morgan replied. “Now let’s go track down Julia before I irrevocably break the girl code.”

20

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MORGAN

Julia was being weird.

Well, weirder than usual, and truth be told, Morgan didn't know her well enough to make grand pronouncements on her general state of being.

But this was definitely weird.

"Are you sure you're not mad at me?" Morgan probed her from where she sat across the table at The Golden Carafe. "That was a shitty thing for me to do. I abandoned you."

They were sitting inside the coffee shop, at a long table flagged by two heavy benches. Even with the outdoor heaters, it had been too cold and gray to consider the outdoor seating.

She and Cole had surreptitiously swung by Lucy's house about half an hour ago to pick Julia up. They had done their best to avoid Lucy and her questioning, curious eyes. There would be time for *that* conversation later.

Morgan had been grateful to slip into some fresh clothes, and she now sat hunched over the table in a fluffy pink sweater

and a black beanie. She also had a nice warm glow brewing inside of her, which was a pleasant change. It was proving to be quite a nice distraction from ... well, from everything, actually.

She didn't know if her current serotonin rush came from the cozy atmosphere in the coffee shop, from the confirmation that Julia hadn't been murdered by drifters last night, or from the sweet love she'd had with Cole this morning.

And as far as things to be thankful for, that was a pretty great list.

Although Julia was in one piece, Morgan was having a very difficult time trying to get out of her what actually *had* happened last night.

"You did not abandon me. I gave you full permission to leave," Julia reassured her. "Don't give it a second thought." She flashed a brittle smile as she nervously twisted her fingers in her hand. "Just as he promised, Mr. Bear ... took care of me."

"*Took care of you,*' huh? You just don't seem like yourself this morning." Morgan eyed her warily, her eyes darting from Julia's twisted-up hands to the frantic eyes that refused to meet hers. "You made it back to Lucy's, then?"

"Eventually."

"Did Kyle try something with you, Julia?" Morgan asked bluntly, leaning further over the table and narrowing her eyes on Julia in concentration as if trying to see through her.

Julia didn't answer and shifted her gaze all over the room in an attempt to avoid eye contact—the overhead lighting, the colorful wall art, the long line leading up to the front counter. When she finally made eye contact with Morgan, her eyelashes fluttered before she pulled back in a frozen, wide-eyed look of alarm.

“I have to go to the bathroom!” she proclaimed suddenly, jumping off the bench and running to the back of the coffee shop.

Very weird.

As Morgan watched her flee in the direction of the bathrooms, Cole reappeared, shooting Julia a questioning glance as he placed the three cups of coffee he'd been charged with buying on the table.

“What's the matter with her?” he asked, sliding onto the bench next to Morgan.

“I think she hooked up with Kyle Bear,” Morgan pronounced sagely in a dramatic whisper, taking a long sip of her sweet coffee, her eyes not leaving the long hallway into which Julia had fled.

“What?” Cole asked, joining Morgan in looking in the direction she'd just taken off. “Her?” He looked back at Morgan in disbelief.

“Yes,” Morgan responded slowly, meeting his gaze. “Why not her?”

“I don’t know,” Cole said with a shrug. “She seems a little ... innocent for him. I don’t know him well, but I hear he gets around.”

Morgan shrugged and looked absently toward the restrooms. “The heart wants what the heart wants, I guess.”

Cole smirked and raised his brows. “I guess so,” he agreed in a reluctant tone. “I ordered food, too, by the way.”

“Oh, good. I’m starving.” She still had not eaten, and after the emotional drama of the day and the night before, she needed a good meal. Something heavy that would slow down her thoughts. “What did you get me?”

“Macaroni and cheese.”

“Oh my god.” Morgan sucked in a breath and grabbed hold of his arm, looking at him with intensity. “That’s perfect. *You’re* perfect.”

“Thanks,” he said with a chuckle and a wry look as he took a sip of his dark coffee. “Do you think it’ll be weird when your cousin—when *Ian* gets here?” he asked, correcting himself. “After everything that you said happened between him and Julia? It might be uncomfortable for both of them.”

Morgan sighed and shook her head with a shrug, gazing down into her mug of coffee. “I really don’t know.”

After they’d detangled themselves from Cole’s heinous beige sheets earlier that morning, Morgan had seen text messages from both Julia and Ian on her phone.

Julia's were from earlier in the morning—almost when the sun was coming up—informing Morgan that she'd rented a car to leave town, but she'd love to meet her for coffee before she left to thank her for her hospitality and kindness.

Ian's text had been more recent. He was ironically also asking her to meet him at The Golden Carafe—he said he wanted to talk to her about something important.

So, Morgan had decided to kill two birds and meet both of them, rather than trying to stagger them and further exhausting herself.

Despite her current glow, she still had a bit of that numb feeling coloring the edge of her thoughts. All in all, she was fine, though. She was canoodling with *Cole Sutton* at The Golden Carafe. And who would have thought that would ever happen?

But she wondered how much longer she would have to carry around this big *thing*, eclipsing the rest of life. For months, it had gnawed away at every conversation she had and every smile she attempted.

Cole hadn't mentioned it again, but she knew he wanted her to do something about it. Something tangible. Press charges against Adele. Find her real family. *Both of those things?*

But she hadn't been lying to him when she told him she hadn't given it much thought. Cognitive dissonance was a hell of a state of mind, and Morgan had been soaking in it for so long.

Before she tried to do anything about it, she felt like she had to convince herself that it had actually happened. It was her reality. Not for the first time, she wondered if she should find a therapist.

And it felt much easier to accept that now, especially with Cole's reassuring presence.

Looking gratefully at his familiar face, she reached over and grasped his hand. He enveloped his hands over hers silently. Neither of them had to say anything. Just *being* was so much simpler with him than it had ever been with anyone else in her life.

“God, we're so obnoxious,” she said, looking down as a blush warmed her cheeks, causing him to release a quick chuckle and reach over to graze her cheek with his thumb.

“Speak for yourself,” he responded.

Oh, if only we could hightail it out of here and return to his hideous house and make sweet—but maybe not as quick—love for the rest of the day.

But she supposed one had to eat and make an attempt to not neglect one's friends and loved ones, even when one was on the verge of severe emotional distress.

Her eye catching on the back of the coffee shop, she spotted Julia walking back from the bathroom, her face fixed into her usual serene smile.

She wasn't wearing the same clothes from last night, so she had that going for her as far as walks of shame went. She was

wearing a long black skirt and an eggplant-colored turtleneck, her hair pulled back in a tight, perfect ponytail.

As she slid in across from Cole and Morgan, she gratefully picked up her cup of coffee. “Thank you so much for the coffee, Cole,” she said as she took a sip from the cup. “Mmm, heaven,” she proclaimed as her eyes settled on Morgan. They were perfectly blank and at ease like she was bracing herself ... or hiding something.

“So, Julia,” Morgan started as she leaned over the table. “Why don’t you tell me more about what you got up to when we left last night?”

Julia’s easy look fell off her face as her eyes filled with alarm. She opened her mouth wide, seemingly fishing for a response, but was saved by a loud bellow from the front of the coffee shop.

“Morgan Conrad!”

Oh, god. Morgan’s head shot up, and she thought for sure it was Curtis, coming to drive her out of town with a team full of pitchforks and scarlet letters.

But no, it wasn’t him. It was Ian, standing tall in the doorway, drawing questioning glances and annoyed looks as he made his way through the heavily populated coffee shop.

He looked as stuck up as ever in khaki pants and a perfectly ironed pinstripe button down shirt.

Honestly, doesn’t he know that Sundays are for sweatpants? Morgan wondered cynically as he stormed toward her like a

man on a mission.

When he stood right in front of her, he looked down at her with a very Ian look of suppressed emotional intensity. Morgan thought for sure he'd freak out at the sight of her with Cole and Julia, but he didn't look at either of them. He just looked at her, his eyes swimming with a feeling that she couldn't identify.

"Ian, that was quite an entrance," she said in a lightly accusatory tone. "You remember..." She trailed off motioning toward Julia, but Ian wasn't paying any attention to Julia.

"Stand up," he ordered her gruffly, his eyes glistening amid his bearded face.

"Huh?"

"Stand up," he said louder. "I want to hug you."

"Um, no thanks," she said looking up at him with her nose scrunched up.

What a weirdo. Is there something in the water today?

Besides, she and Ian had only hugged once throughout her entire childhood. It was one time too many as far as she was concerned. His was the last body she wanted to be pressed against for any prolonged period of time.

But everything about this odd situation changed when he kneeled down to look her in the eyes. "Morgan ... *cousin* ... stand up and hug me."

Morgan's face fell at his words, and her heart stopped beating. Against her will, her face twisted up as her eyes filled up with tears.

Did Curtis tell him? Did Adele?

It didn't matter, because she was crying again. She was so damn sick of crying.

But she didn't fight it after that. She rose from the bench and collapsed into Ian's arms, and immediately started sobbing into his starched shirt. She cried about nothing and everything all at once.

Her real family, out there somewhere.

Adele for taking her and screwing her up.

Curtis, for treating her like dirt.

Peter, for manhandling her. *Fuck you, Peter.*

Ian, her rock, whom she loved.

Bella, her baby sister, whom she missed.

And Cole, the love of her life.

Ian just held her in his big arms until it had all been wrung out of her, and she was spent and finished. He didn't let go of her, though. His arms tightened around her as his mouth came down to her ear.

"I love you, Morgan Conrad," he said firmly. "You'll always be my cousin. My *family*."

Morgan nodded and pulled away from him, looking up at him with tear-filled eyes.

“I love you, too, P-Ian,” she said seriously, wiping her cheeks and nodding her head with certainty.

Ian looked at her seriously before he cracked, spitting out the most inelegant laugh she’d ever seen her cousin release in all her life.

He pulled her into another short, firm hug before pulling away again. “Look at the door,” he said, motioning through the crowd. “I have a surprise for you.”

Looking over the heads of the other seated patrons, Morgan felt her knees buckle a bit at who she saw standing near the door of The Golden Carafe behind Annie.

It was Bella. Her baby sister.

“Arabella!” she shrieked as loudly as she could and held her arms wide as she ran toward her and into her arms.

If the other coffee shop patrons had been irritated by Ian’s noisy stomping, they were *extremely* annoyed by Morgan deliriously tripping through the tables and chairs to wrap her arms around Bella.

All she saw was Bella’s stoic eyes turn wide and alarmed as Morgan swam through the crowd, but Morgan could barely see her as she pulled Bella’s small form tight against her.

Bella laughed awkwardly and stiffly patted Morgan on the back a few times.

“Jeeze, Morg,” she said, pulling back as her jade green eyes, so much like Adele’s, looked around nervously. “People are staring at us.”

“I just really, *really* missed you,” Morgan proclaimed, wiping away tears from her cheeks.

Thank god I didn't bother with makeup this morning.

“I missed you, too,” Bella said distractedly, looking past her toward the giant menu posted behind the counter. “Can I get hot chocolate?”

“Ugh, you're such a brat,” Morgan said, rolling her eyes and wrapping her arm around her sister's shoulder. “Yes, come on. Ian's buying.”

Before she could walk away, Annie grabbed hold of Morgan's hand as Bella skipped off toward Ian for cash.

“I want to talk to you really quick,” Annie informed her, pulling her into a small, quietish corner.

“Okay,” Morgan said reluctantly, looking over at Bella as she interrupted Ian from whatever awkward conversation he was trying to make with Cole and Julia.

Once they were secluded, Annie looked over at Morgan, her dark brown eyes imploring and glistening. She looked like she was containing some great emotion just like Ian but having a more difficult time hiding it.

“I know you're anxious to see Bella,” Annie said. “But I thought you should know that Ian's dad paid us a visit this morning.”

Morgan's heart stopped at the news. “What did he say?” she asked nervously. *Stupid question. You know what he said.*

Annie didn't respond directly, her eyes filled up with tears. "Morgan, this is just terrible. How long have you known about this?"

"Since I was a teenager," Morgan said blankly.

"And you've kept it to yourself all these years?"

She shrugged distantly, looking back at the table. Cole. Her sister. Ian. Everyone she loved the most in one place.

"I was ashamed," she finally admitted, looking back at Annie.

"Well, you have no reason to be. You should be pissed—" Annie cut herself off, releasing a deep breath and setting her lips in a firm line. "But no, that's not why I wanted to talk to you. I'm just so angry at them."

Morgan smiled at her in return but kept quiet. What else was there to say at this point?

"Anyway, apparently Ian's father is worried about you telling everyone in town, and he wants Ian's help controlling it."

Morgan felt that numb feeling grow wider and start to nip away at the edge of her senses. "I'm not going to tell anyone." Although, she had kind of insinuated that she would this morning....

"No one would blame you if you did, Morgan," Annie told her seriously. "Anyway, Ian was pissed—like, I've never seen him that upset, and he obviously has no desire to help Curtis."

“Hmm,” Morgan hummed absently. “How did he get Bella here? I thought Curtis was keeping her under lock and key at the Main House?”

“Well, that’s kind of what I wanted to talk to you about,” Annie admitted. “While he was ranting about you and everything else, Ian cut him off and got him to agree to allow Bella to see you, and basically leave you alone.”

“How did he get him to do that?” Morgan asked in a shocked voice.

“He told him that he would never meet his grandchild, and we would leave Lake Conrad behind, and leave the family’s presence here to die out with Curtis.”

Morgan nodded her head absently until what Annie was saying dawned on her. “Oh my god. You’re pregnant, Annie-kins?” she asked loudly, getting curious looks from other patrons.

Annie looked around nervously. “Yes, but keep it down. It’s early. I was annoyed at Ian for telling his dad until I realized he did it in order to threaten and blackmail him, which was completely acceptable, of course.”

“Wow,” Morgan sighed, pulling her friend into a hug. “You guys aren’t wasting any time though, are you?” She murmured the words into Annie’s curls, and Annie burst out a short laugh as she pulled away. “It’s not going to be a white wedding, I suppose.”

“It was an accident,” Annie confessed, sputtering out a laugh. “I was a little freaked out at first, but I’m getting used to the idea, I think.”

“Well, if you’re happy, I’m happy,” Morgan said sincerely. “And I’m not sure how you talked Ian into this public declaration of his, but it was pretty hilarious.”

“Oh, that was all him,” Annie told her with a laugh. “And speaking of him, I see him glaring at me for hogging you. Come on, let’s go— *Oh my god.*” Annie stopped in her tracks. “It’s Julia Keane *again.*”

Julia turned her head slightly, revealing her face, and Morgan guessed Annie hadn’t been able to recognize her from the back of her head.

“Are you going to be okay with that?” Morgan asked worriedly.

“Yes, I am,” Annie said firmly with an unconvincing smile. “Today is about being here for *you*, not focusing on my own issues.”

“Okay. Be strong, Annie-kins,” Morgan said with a smile before leading her friend through the packed coffee shop.

Arriving at the table, Morgan saw that Bella was now happily sipping her hot chocolate and eating the largest chocolate chip cookie that Morgan had ever seen. She felt all her numbness flush away as she sat down on the bench between her sister and Cole.

The rest of the morning quickly passed into the afternoon—much too quickly for Morgan’s taste. She could have sat at that table all day, eating comfort food and talking and laughing with her favorite group of weirdos.

Julia didn’t stick around for too long, just long enough to politely make conversation with everyone, especially Bella, with whom she had an instant rapport. Morgan remembered Julia mentioning she worked with a lot of children’s music charities in LA, so she must have a lot of experience talking with children.

She also graciously offered up congratulations to Ian and Annie on their engagement, which they each accepted with more than a little awkwardness.

As she was leaving, Julia walked over to envelope Morgan in a hug, her thin, graceful arms coming around her firmly, the scent of her fancy perfume wafting in the air around her.

“I very much enjoyed your company this weekend, Morgan,” she said in her too-formal but sweet way, releasing her from the hug and looking her up and down. “And I’d very much like for us to keep in touch.”

“I’d like that, too, Jules,” Morgan replied honestly. “Mostly so I can get out of you what you did last night.”

“I’ll never tell,” whispered Julia with a half-smile and a surprising sparkle in her blue eyes.

And with that, Julia Keane took her leave, exiting the building in a cloud of expensive smells and fine fabrics. As

Morgan watched her go, she realized how much she'd actually miss prissy Julia Keane.

The rest of the afternoon passed in happy conversation. She and Ian didn't discuss anything important, which was fine by her. When she informed him that she and Cole were together, he'd slowly nodded his head in acceptance after Annie shot him an imploring look.

As they all finally rose to leave, Morgan felt a sense of dread settle in her. She didn't know when she'd see her sister again. But then Ian had surprised her—*again*.

“So, Morg ... and *Cole*,” he said, shooting Cole a doubtful look. “Annie, Bella, and I will see you here next Sunday at the same time?”

“What?” Morgan asked, perking up as she rose from her bench.

“Yeah, my dad and I came to an agreement—Bella gets to hang out with us every Sunday.”

And so, she was bawling again. After Morgan had thoroughly embarrassed both Bella and Ian with her histrionics, Ian pulled her into a final hug. “You and I are going to talk later,” he said firmly.

“Yes,” she agreed on a deep breath. “We are.”

And then they were all gone, and Morgan and Cole stood outside The Golden Carafe together, alone, staring at each other with wonder.

Something in Morgan's heart melted a bit as he tore his gaze away from hers and stared off into the distance, distracted by something happening in the Square. Who knew she'd ever do something as normal as have a prolonged brunch with Cole Sutton of all people?

His gaze shifted back toward her, and his eyes lit up as he took her in. Walking toward her, he grabbed her left hand with his right and lifted it up to his mouth "Back to my house for more sweet lovin'?" he asked with a smile.

Morgan laughed and stepped toward him. Not letting go of her hand, he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her closely toward him. "You are a joke *machine* lately, Cole Sutton. Who knew?"

"Everyone agrees I'm a very funny person," he said seriously.

"Mmm-hmm," Morgan agreed. "Anyway, before we get on with all that, what do you say we make a pit stop at The Blue Bard? Between getting manhandled by Peter and receiving all that sweet love, I managed to finish my book. There's another one I'm on the lookout for."

"You know I can't say no to a trip to the bookstore," he responded seriously.

"And that's why I love you," Morgan responded as they started walking hand in hand through the Square.

And although Morgan still had a little leftover numbness, she realized just how happy she really was when she and Cole

happily visited their separate sections of The Blue Bard.
Mostly because, when they left, it was together, hand in hand.

EPILOGUE

THREE MONTHS LATER

The clearing hadn't changed at all.

True, the ferns were babies this early in the spring—not the lush growth that had existed when they were teenagers during that long-ago summer—but Cole was having a hard time seeing many differences as he watched Morgan walk around, weaving her way through the boulders and the trees, her arms wrapped tightly around her midsection.

There was a sadness in her eyes as she took it all in, which he completely understood. It was difficult to see this place after the amount of time that had passed and all that happened.

Looking up to meet his eyes, her expression brightened considerably, though. “It’s crazy how so much about our lives changes and evolves, but nature stays the same,” she noted, walking up and wrapping her arms around his waist.

“It’s kind of comforting,” he admitted, looking down at her green eyes glowing amid the early spring growth surrounding them.

They were on their way out of town. For the past three months, ever since the shit had hit the fan—an expression he'd used once with Morgan before she'd drawn her face up in horror and demanded he never speak another excrement related metaphor in her presence again—he and Morgan had hunkered down and worked diligently.

She'd kept up her job at The Blue Sky, mostly to bank away all her tips, and he'd kept going at the library. They saved every penny. Even if it meant not buying anything extra to jazz up Cole's "hideous house."

Since moving into Cole's apartment, Morgan had bemoaned the drabness of the house every day, but she had sucked it up for "Cole and Morgan 2.0," as they'd begun to refer to their new life in San Francisco.

They had made a couple trips out there already, both to interview for jobs and sign a lease on a new place—a walk up in a vintage Victorian house. Morgan had dubbed the vintage wood floors and molding "so freaking gorgeous," to his relief. The best part were the rows and rows of built in bookshelves, which he knew they'd have no problems filling.

All in all, they were both ecstatic for their new life, but there were still some sad parts associated with leaving the place they called home.

First was leaving behind Bella, who Morgan had been able to see every Sunday for the past three months. He knew Morgan was worried about leaving her sister behind when she was on the verge of tweenhood. But they both knew they

needed some time away from Lake Conrad. Maybe a life here was waiting for them in the future, but now was not the time.

The move to San Francisco promised a release from the shock that still pulsed through the community whenever they went to a restaurant or grocery store together. A life that had nothing to do with the new rumors that Morgan may not actually be Adele Conrad's daughter.

He'd been gently nudging Morgan toward doing something to rectify what had happened to her. If he had his way, she'd be lawyered up and seeking justice against Adele Conrad by now, but she didn't seem too interested in that as of yet.

She had made murmurs of finding her parents and where she came from, though. It seemed like a good place to start was to talk to Adele, though. Something that both Morgan and her therapist agreed she wasn't quite ready for.

They'd been too excited for their new life to do much dwelling on the past, though. It was going to be a great life. A simple life. A life where they could introduce themselves to people as Cole and Morgan, a happy odd couple whose only drama involved who had to take the trash out and what constituted a good book.

Cole couldn't wait, although it wouldn't be the life they'd pictured when they were teenagers. He'd recently accepted a position at one of the branches of the San Francisco Public Library, which was not exactly the rockstar life he'd dreamed up in his youth.

“Hell, Morgan,” a voice from behind them proclaimed caustically. “You know Annie is pregnant? And *this* is where you want to meet up to say goodbye?”

Cole turned around to see Ian guiding Annie through the boulders, followed by Jake and Lena. Morgan smiled at them brightly, and he knew she found this hilarious.

She’d asked her friends to meet them here on their way out of town. For obvious reasons, they weren’t able to get here via the path from the Main House, so they’d taken the hard way. Or the way that Cole used to climb over and over again to meet up with Morgan when they were kids.

Annie was only a couple months pregnant, and wasn’t showing yet, but the way Ian guided her through the jutting boulders, you’d think she was about to burst. Annie waved off her fiancé’s concerns, though.

“This is gorgeous,” she said brightly. “And I needed the workout.”

“So this was your teenage secret sexy meet up spot?” Lena asked, coming from behind with Jake at her heels. He looked annoyed to be walking so slowly with his girlfriend, but gave her a patient smile as he wrapped his arms around her shoulders.

“This is it,” Morgan said proudly with a mischievous grin, surveying the area with her hands on her hips. “We’d either hook up here or I’d sneak Cole into my bedroom.”

“Okay, okay,” Ian said loudly, standing in front of Morgan to cut her off. “No one needs to hear all of that.”

“I was just answering a question, Ian,” Morgan replied with a severe scowl.

Ian dismissed her with a sigh, looking around the clearing wistfully. “I haven’t been up here in so long,” he noted. “It’s hard when everything is so shitty with my dad ... and Aunt Adele.”

Cole knew that Ian had kept in minimal contact with his father. He had his own issues with the man but was keeping him at arm’s distance mostly to keep him from messing things up for Morgan too much.

Cole couldn’t help but think that Ian would be the perfect buffer to get information from his father and aunt about what had happened when Adele had taken Morgan, but again ... he wasn’t pushing.

He could tell that, despite everything, Ian loved Morgan, and Cole was happy that she had him. He used to think the Conrads were all bad—users and manipulators—but he could see now that it was only a select few.

“So you guys are all packed up?” asked Annie, approaching Morgan with a sniffle. Lena stepped up and wrapped her arms around Annie’s shoulders as they all looked at each other with wobbly, tear-filled eyes.

“Yes, Annie-kins,” Morgan proclaimed strongly. “But no crying! We’re only a few hours away, and we’ll be back in

May for your shotgun wedding.”

Ian and Annie had been obliged to move up their wedding from July to May to accommodate the circumstances of her pregnancy.

“Ugh, don’t remind me,” Annie said darkly, her face falling. Cole knew she was stressed out about the wedding that was getting bigger by the day. “I just hope I can fit into my dress.”

“You’ll be beautiful, Annie,” Lena said, putting her arms around both her friends’ shoulders.

“We should get back down the mountain,” Cole said. If he left it up to Morgan, she’d stand here all day talking to her friends. When he’d stopped by Duke’s house this morning to hand off his extra amp that he’d been holding onto, his friend had glumly smacked him on the back and told him to look for him when he got back in town.

There’d been none of the constant reassurance, hugs, and teary glances that Morgan had been exchanging with her friends for the past couple weeks.

Morgan sighed and held on tightly to Cole’s hand. “You’re right,” she said resolutely. “Come on, guys, let’s go before crazy old man Conrad kicks us off the property.”

They walked very slowly down Echo Peak’s steep incline, a little on purpose Cole guessed, as they talked the whole way down. And when they reached the road, there was yet more time spent on crying, hugging, and promising things.

Eventually, Cole climbed into the driver's seat of his truck, and sat back waiting patiently for Morgan to join him. He, Jake, and Ian had already said their quick and awkward goodbyes.

Ian's goodbye had been especially uncomfortable, and Cole strongly suspected that Ian wasn't his biggest fan. He guessed that wasn't a surprise, considering how he and Morgan had interacted over the past ten years.

Before long, though, Morgan reluctantly joined him in the car, and as he drove away, she watched her friends in the rearview mirror until they disappeared completely.

"Hey, you okay?" he asked seriously, looking over at her as she continued to fight back tears.

"Oh, yeah, I'm just peachy," she said seriously.

"I really don't think that's true," he said wryly.

"No, really, I'm fine, Cole," she said. "It's hard to leave everyone behind, but I'll see them again soon. And look at us, we're moving to San Francisco—*finally*."

"What do you think Cole and Morgan 1.0 would have said about this?" he asked, referring to the names they'd given to the teenage versions of themselves.

"I think they would have asked what took us so long," she said with a sideways look at him.

"Well, I gotta agree with them there," he said with a firm nod. "But we're doing it now, right? That's got to count for something?"

“It’s everything,” Morgan said, her eyes filling with tears again as she reached across the truck bench for his hand.

Meeting her halfway, he grabbed hold of her hand and squeezed tight.

He couldn’t agree more.

THE END

Thank you for reading! Find out how Cole and Morgan are doing down the road, and Morgan’s eventual efforts to learn more about her past by downloading the Fault bonus epilogue from my website:

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Also, turn the page to learn more about other books in the Lake Conrad series!

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ABOUT EMILY NORTH

Emily North is a lifelong reader and lover of romance novels.

She met her husband living in Lake Tahoe, California a million years ago, which serves as inspiration for Lake Conrad.

She loves the outdoors, a book she can't put down, and her family. She currently lives in Virginia with her husband, two daughters, and way too many pets.

Connect with her in any or all of the following ways!

Website (www.emilynorthauthor.com)

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