Where You Belong

by AlexRuby

Summary

In an impulsive decision after her grandfather's sudden passing, Morgan decides to move out to the country and take over his farm. With hardly any farming experience, she has to learn quickly and tough farming life out. She hoped this would be the start of new beginnings, but it was also the start of new friendships, a new romance, and new experiences. Can Pelican Town become her home as it once was for her grandfather? (Rated M to be safe. Rating and tags will fluctuate in each chapter.)

Notes

Since the in-game calendar works on a typical Harvest Moon-esque 4 season and 28 day cycle, I've broken down where my time scale falls within those seasons so I can take this story at a slower pace.

March - May (Spring)
June - August (Summer)
September - November (Fall)
December - February (Winter)

Feedback is appreciated!
Chapter 1: Quarter Life Crisis (Rated G)

March 1st (Spring)

I carried my bags off the bus and stepped into the damp and slushy melted snow. Dirt and ice splashed with each tentative step, and I took care to not let my luggage become sullied by the spring melt.

My grandfather’s letter was tucked away safely in my breast pocket. I felt the paper's stiffness against my pounding heartbeat. I had read and re-read the letter plenty of times on the bus ride to Pelican Town that I could recite his words from memory.

It read:

If you are reading this, you must be in dire need of a change. The same thing happened to me, long ago. I’d lost sight of what mattered most in life … real connections with other people and nature. So I dropped everything and moved to the place I truly belonged.

Attached to the letter was a copy of his will. The notary and the signatures on the document were dated for July of the previous year, and the will had a portion highlighted which pertained to me.

And to my only granddaughter, I leave my entire farm including its land, tools, and existing structures to live on. I hope you come to call Pelican Town your home as I did when I met your grandmother there.

According to the stories, my grandfather bought the land from a family who was looking to move to Zuzu City. Many families left their quaint hamlets and small towns in search for better job prospects or more excitement in their life. But my grandfather, after returning home from war, wanted a break from the chaos and regimented military life and settled down in Pelican Town. There he met my grandmother and it was love at first sight, or at least that’s how he tells it. Sadly, I never got to meet her. She died of cancer before I was born.

When he passed away, my mother called me at work to tell me the news. Although the news wasn’t unexpected, I still felt like someone had sucked the breath from my lungs. And to add insult to injury, my manager called me into his office soon afterwards to issue me a formal disciplinary citation for taking personal calls at work.

Prior to hearing about my grandfather’s passing, my life hadn’t exactly gone as I had planned. I worked at a menial, minimum wage job that barely paid the bills. My manager was a tool. The company that I worked for, Joja Enterprises, was a soul-sucking cooperate conglomerate and soon after the disciplinary citation incident, I quit. I wish I could say that I quit in a spectacular fashion where I told the entire cubical city to ‘suck it’, but I hate confrontation and I simply called my manager that next morning and quit over the phone.

My personal life wasn’t all that stellar either. I had recently broken up with my boyfriend. I didn’t end it over anything sensational; he never hurt me or abused me, nor did he cheat on me, but he wasn't motivated -- in life or in our relationship. While I was out busting my ass for a handful of gold, he sat at home, smoked cigarettes, played video games, and pretend that he was job searching. He had every excuse under the sun to explain why he had yet to find a job since we moved in together. So while he was out blowing my hard earned gold on more cigarettes, frozen
pizzas, and cheap beer, I packed my things and left.

So here I was. With three suitcases packed full of my clothes and personal belongings and with nothing more than my grandfather’s final wishes, I set out into my new life.

“Welcome back, Morgan.” An older man said as I walked towards the dirt road where a green truck was idling. It took me a moment to recognize him as the town’s Mayor and my grandfather’s best friend. Mayor Lewis was dressed in the same blue coveralls and orange floppy newsboy cap that he always wore. His once brown hair was now sterling grey, and although his mustache was just as thick as it had been last time, it was now neatly trimmed. “My you’ve grown up. I think the last time I saw you was …”

“… eight years ago.” I finished for him with a guilty smile.

Truthfully, my absence was mostly the product of teenage rebellion and angst. As soon as I got my driver’s license, I stopped taking summer trips to Pelican Town with my Mom and started caring more about going out to the movies, getting a summer job, or going to the mall with my friends.

“Ah yes, that’s right.” He replied. “It’s a shame that something like your grandfather’s passing had to get you to come all the way back to our town. I hoped you’d come back under better circumstances.”

Lewis took my bags and lifted them into the back of his pickup truck. For a man in his mid sixties, he was still as strong as ever.

“Did my grandpa do much on the farm in the last couple of years? I know that he had some cows, pigs, and chickens that he kept.” I asked.

Lewis frowned as he slid into the warm truck cab. I followed suit and put my backpack and the tackle box that my grandfather had gifted me on my thirteenth birthday between my legs.

“Truthfully, your grandpa was in poor health in his last couple years. He sold all of the animals to slaughterhouses to pay for his medical care in Zuzu City. I know that he has a coup still standing, but his pastures are pretty overgrown. Any fences that were there have long rotted away.”

Lewis started up his truck and drove two miles down the rutted and slushy road that led to the old farmhouse. As we pulled in, I saw a red-haired woman who looked to be in her early forties inspecting the side of the house.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“That’s Robin. She moved here with her family a few years ago. She has a daughter who is graduating high school and has a son who’s around your age. She’s our town carpenter and I asked her here to do an inspection on the house before you move in.

“Morning Robin.” He called out as he hopped out of the truck.

I followed suit and grabbed my backpack and tackle box from the truck cab while Lewis grabbed my bags and set them on the wooden stoop.

“Morning!” She called out brightly and then turned to me. “Ah, you must be Morgan. It’s nice to finally meet you. I’m sorry to hear about your grandpa. I didn’t know him well. We moved here just before he passed and I didn’t get a chance to talk with him that much.”

“Thanks for meeting us here Robin.” Mayor Lewis replied. “I know the backroads to your place
are probably a puddle of snow soup right now.”

She grinned. The woman’s face was youthful which contrasted with the callouses, wrinkles, and scars that marred her hands.

“It’s not a problem.” She replied and then turned to me. "I’ve inspected the cabin for you to make sure that everything’s up to code. The place is a little out-dated, but it’s habitable.”

I nodded mutely. The woman barely took a breath between sentences. She was like an excitable dog who, upon meeting someone new, would jump around their shins in excitement. Interactions like this never happened in the city. Despite being more populated, people tended to keep to themselves. This change of pace was endearing but also overwhelming.

Robin opened the door to the cabin and ushered us all inside. “You have a fireplace and a small kitchenette in the main room. The bathroom is through that far door, and your bedroom is through the nearest doorway to your right. You grandpa paid me to redo the kitchen floor as termites were beginning to make a meal out of it, but the rest has remained exactly as he had it. It’s a bit small, but it will work for a bachelorette such as yourself. By the way, I’m available for hire if you need any upgrades, wood-working projects, or buildings constructed.”

“Um thanks.” I replied. I only half-listened to what she was saying. Instead, I was distracted by the warm, spicy odor of pipe tobacco. It was grandpa’s brand and it was a smell that brought back so many memories.

Lewis chuckled, “Thanks Robin. I think we should let Morgan get unpacked and settled in. I left my telephone number on the spindle next to the microwave if you need to get ahold of me, Morgan.

“Of course,” Robin replied and shook my hand. “It was nice to meet you.”

Lewis put my bags next to the small, wooden kitchen table and tipped his hat to me. Robin followed behind him and shut the door.

Without them, the quietness in the cabin was deafening. I strained my ears for the ambient noises that I was used to but heard nothing except for the hum of the toilet cycling water through the reservoir and the steady dripping of the ice and snow as it melted off the roof.

I kicked off my shoes and walked around the cabin in my socks. An unseen force was pulling me towards the bedroom first. Grandpa’s bedroom didn’t have a door to it. He told me that it was easier to keep the entire place warm if the heat from the fireplace didn’t have to pass through a closed door.

His bedroom use to have taxidermied fish hanging from the walls. He even had an old beer sign that lit up. A thick quilt use to lay across his bed and he’d wrap me up in it when the nights became cold as summer ended. Now the room was bare, and aside for the smell of pipe tobacco, there was no sign that my grandfather ever lived here.

The bathroom was at the other end of the cabin. I never understood why since it forced you to walk through the living room to take care of business. Grandpa told me that the cabin use to have a second bedroom attached to the other side, adjacent to the bathroom, but a meteorite struck the place when he was a young man and destroyed it. Apparently, this was before he married grandma and they had my mother, so I always assumed he was pulling my leg. But it still made for a nice story, I suppose.
The bathroom was tiny. A large glass door shower took up the majority of the right side of the room while the toilet and the sink were across from each other on the left. I chuckled to myself as I remembered six year old me trying to stretch my hands out to reach the faucets so I could wash my hands while I went to the bathroom. I insisted that it saved time, but my mother scolded me for my unsanitary habits. Although now, as a grown adult, I could comfortably reach the faucets if I wanted to.

There were no decorations on any of the walls. The bathroom had a sun-bleached yellow wallpaper that had sunflowers growing up along the walls, but the kitchen and grandpa’s … no, my bedroom had nothing but bare wooden slats. My mother would’ve loved this place with its utilitarian and no-frills decor, but the emptiness reminded me too much of what was missing: the taxidermied fish, the outdoorsman nature watercolors, the smell of bacon grease and beer batter from our Friday night fish dinners, and of course, it was missing grandpa.

Just then, my cell phone rang. The peppy ringtone sounded alien to me amid my nostalgia and melancholy, but I fished it out of my pocket and answered it.

“Hello?”

“Hey hon. Did you make it to the farm alright?” My mother asked.

“Yeah.” I cleared my throat hoping to mask the whirlwind of emotions that swirled in my mind. “Lewis met me at the bus stop and brought me here in his truck. The roads are still sloppy from the winter thaw, but the cabin is in good shape.”

“That’s good.” My mother replied, but she sounded uncertain. I already knew where this was going.

“You don’t have to do this, you know.” She said. “Just because grandpa left you this place in his will doesn’t mean you have to stay there. You could sell it. You could use it for a summer cabin for when you eventually have kids. You could —”

“Mom! Mom, stop. Okay?” I sighed and sat down at the kitchen table. “This is what I want.”

“Are you sure?” She asked. “You don’t need to do this for him, Morgan. Your grandpa would understand. You have a life and a home here. Don’t treat this as a quarter-life crisis.”

My mom chuckled at her own lame joke but I rolled my eyes. “Mom. What kind of life do I have in the city? Working at Joja? Living with Brandon in that one bedroom apartment above that dive bar? No, I can’t do that anymore. I did this for me, not for anyone else.”

My mother sighed. “Your grandpa was always stubborn too. I swear, you take after him more than you do me. I just want you to know that you can come home if you get into trouble. I can send you money if you need it. I don’t want you to starve out there. Hell, it’s not even fishing opener! What are you going to eat?”

“Mom. Would you stop worrying? I’m going to be fine.”

She sighed again. “Fine. Just promise to call me later on this week to let me know how you are doing. Chuck is working doubles at the plant right now, but he has Friday off so we can come down there if you need us to.”

I wrinkled my nose at the mention of my stepfather. The man did the best he could. He married my mom when I was fifteen and dealt with my teenage angst and mood swings with grace and patience, but he and I never did have a close relationship. I didn’t need a dad — or want one — and he was perfectly happy with keeping an arm’s distance. Still, he made my mom happy, so I
couldn’t complain too much.

“It’s fine Mom. I’ll call you on Friday to check in, but I’ll probably be busy cleaning up grandpa’s farm, so how ‘bout you wait a few weeks before visiting.” I replied quickly.

“Or how about you come home?” My mother tried again.

“I am home Mom.” I replied with a conviction that startled even me. “Grandpa’s watching out for me. I can feel it. So don’t worry about me, okay? I love you both and I’ll call you Friday, okay?”


When I hung up my phone, I had half the mind to power the thing off. Aside for spotty cell coverage, my grandfather never had an internet connection and the thick forest that surrounded the farm blocked any and all high speed data. Maybe shutting it off would be the last step I needed to fully embrace this new lifestyle.

“I am home.” I said to myself as I surveyed the empty cabin.

“I am home.”
April 6th (Spring)

The frozen mist from my breath floated out into the sea air. Screaming seagulls flew overhead and the steel grey waves crashed against the sodden dock making the wood slick and treacherous. Although it was early April, Pelican Valley was experiencing a late cold snap as winter’s icy grip stubbornly refused to let the valley warm up enough to bloom with spring flowers.

I knew I shouldn’t be out here. Not this early in the season and not this early in the day, but my dwindling food stores and my even thinner wallet made fishing my only main food supply until the ground thawed enough to plant the spring seeds that Pierre was advertising in the weekly sales pamphlets that he mailed out.

Since I arrived, I had spent the majority of my money on the essentials. Marnie, my neighbor south of the farm, was generous enough to sell me her surplus eggs at a discounted price. She even sent me home with a welcome-to-the-neighborhood casserole that helped get me through my first week on the farm.

Still, the rest of my time was spent clearing a small area of land so I could start a garden. I didn’t need much land, but the area that I did clear took me the better half of a month and drove me in to Gus’s saloon in the evenings to eat something more substantial than the small provisions that I had brought from my old apartment.

I had a sneaking suspicion that Gus was giving me a discount on the food — no plate of spaghetti should be only twenty-five gold — and I also knew that the newly built Joja Mart would have anything that I could ever want at a discounted rate, but my pride forbade me from setting foot in there. Instead, I patronized Pierre’s shop once a week to buy things like flour, sugar, cooking oil, and toiletries. But Pierre was charging at least thirty percent more than what Joja was charging and that cut into my wallet a lot quicker than I expected.

Thus, I was driven out to the sea out of necessity. I was much too prideful to write home and ask my mother for money. I knew that she’d send it, of course, but I couldn’t bare the smug ‘I told you so’ look that she’d have as she licked the envelope closed.

My mother was far more utilitarian than I. Cleaning out my savings account, quitting my job, and moving out to grandpa’s old farm was a foolish pipe dream to her. She always figured that I’d fail and come home, and I wasn’t going to prove her right, so I packed up my tacklebox, my fishing pole, and a cooler full of bait fish that I managed to catch in the pond on the farm and hiked out to the sea.

Since it was just my mother and I for most of my life, we spent a lot of family vacations with my grandfather in Pelican Town. Like father like daughter, grandpa taught my mom everythine he knew about fishing. Now thanks to both of them, I was taking after that legacy.

Grandpa taught me everything I know about fishing. I still remember how my grandfather patiently guided my hands as he showed me how to carefully clean a northern pike that he had caught from the river.

“To most people, this fish is just a junk fish.” He had told me as he slid the thin, flexible fillet knife
down one lateral line, starting behind the fish’s head and running to it’s tail. “But the northern pike
is often called the poor man’s lobster. The meat is really tender but it’s full of dangerous Y-bones
which make eating it a chore.”

I remember my Grandfather cutting the northern pike fillets up into several smaller strips and told
me to run my finger along the fish’s backbone. Each Y-bone branched out like spines on a puffer
fish. I then ran my fingers along the pieces of fillet pleased at how soft and squishy they were.

“There’s no bones in the fillets Grandpa.” I told him proudly. “You cut around them, didn’t you?”

“Sure did!” He grinned and threw the northern pike’s remains into a pickle bucket.

I wrinkled my nose at the smell but I silently thanked the fish for providing us with the meat we
needed. My grandfather took all organic matter and threw it into the compost pile that sat out
behind the cabin.

Thinking about memories like those reopened an ache in my chest, but I pushed them back down
and straightened myself against the bracing wind. I had a job to do out here.

I baited my hook and casted the small minnow out into the sea. I waited until my line went slack to
indicate that my bait had settled onto the bottom of the sea and then I slowly reeled it in.
Occasionally, I’d give the rod tip a short jerk downward. Abrupt movement would often trigger a
wary fish to strike, and I needed every fishing tactic at my disposal.

I reeled the minnow in and then casted it back out and repeated the process. My left hand held the
bamboo pole like I was a spider feeling for the delicate touches of an insect landing on my web.
My right hand steadily turned the reel; every click, click, click, of the spool being retrieved felt like
the ticking of a bomb.

I exhaled another long gush of mist; this one was less visible than the others which gave me hope
that the weather would warm up.

The minnow surfaced through the grey salty froth. The small fish’s dull eye seemed to mock me
and my rotten luck. I sighed and casted the fish out once more with a dour frown. That’s why they
call it fishing and not catching. grandpa’s voice chuckled in my mind.

On the third small jerk that I made with my bait, I felt a hard tap but continued to reel. Instinct and
years of practice had taught me to never stop reeling when a fish hits. Maintain your speed and see
if you can entice the fish to strike again, so I began jerking my bait slightly to my right. On the
second jerk, the fish hit hard and I set the hook.

I could already feel that the fish on the other end was nothing to write home about. It fought
weakly, almost lazily, and I barely had to move from my spot on the dock to get the fish in. I
scooped up the grey blur with my net and brought in my quarry. It was a herring and it was barely
ten inches in length. If I wasn’t hurting for food, I would’ve thrown it back, but I figured that if I
could catch a few more then I could at least have a couple dinners of baked herring. What I really
wanted was a nice sized ocean fish like a halibut or a red snapper. They would provide a weeks
worth of meals from just one catch.

I dropped the herring in a fine mesh bag that I tied to the dock and dropped the bag back into the
water to keep the fish alive and fresh until I was ready to go back. I baited my hook with a fresh
minnow and casted it out again to try my luck for something bigger.

In two hours of time, I pulled in three more small herrings and I lost a nice sized halibut that
snapped my line right next to the dock.

My stomach was growling and I had other things that had to get done that day so I promised myself that I’d do one more cast and then pack up my things to head back.

On this cast, the bait didn’t have time to sink to the ocean floor before something grabbed it and tugged sharply. When I set the hook, it felt like I had snagged a log or a rock as it wouldn’t budge…until it finally moved.

I looked at my net and realized that it would be too small for whatever was at the end of it, but the hunger that drove me told me that I should try and beach the fish instead. Unfortunately, I was on the far end of the dock in front of Willy’s fish shop and there would be no way that I’d be able to get back to shore without snapping my line, unless…

Along the right side of Willy’s shop, the wood planks extended about a foot outward. There was just enough dock space for me to carefully side-shuffle along Willy’s shack and then make it to the other end of the dock.

I figured that I had to at least try. I was a competent enough swimmer so I’d be able to make it to shore if I accidentally slipped.

I kept my line tight as the monster at the other end became more agitated. For every three cranks that I made with my reel, the fish pulled out twice as much line to escape.

Tentatively, I stepped out onto the dock edge while keeping my back plastered against the damp, salty shack wall and slowly side-stepped to the left. I made it half way there when the monster decided to run. I reeled frantically, my rod bending nearly in half from the fish’s power, but the beast was too strong and I was too careless.

As I leaned forward to get some torque to turn the fish around so I could guide him towards the beach, the fish shook its head underwater with a ferocious thrash. I heard a tink sound as the line broke, and the sudden lack of resistance threw me off balance. My body was pitched too far forward and my gut dropped from my stomach when I felt nothing but empty air between me and the ocean.

The initial shock from the icy water stole the breath from my lungs. My fishing pole was knocked out of my hands and I saw it disappear into the grey depths. I swam frantically to the surface and took in greedy gulps of air right before a wave slammed me underneath the dock.

I tried to open my eyes underwater but the saltwater stung and so I had to feel my way blindly. I felt the slimy wooden supports and grabbed onto the heavy, thick planks above me and tried to pull myself out from underneath the dock. Just as I poked my head out of the water and felt the cool, wet spray from the ocean hit my face, another wave knocked me back down and I went tumbling back into the dark abyss.

When I broke the surface again, my head bumped the underside of the dock. I had to press my face against the algae covered wood to get enough of my face above the water to take a breath. I coughed and sputtered but I couldn’t touch the bottom; my cold limbs refused to obey my orders. I tried to stifle the sickening bubbles of panic that rose up in my stomach and failed.

“HELP!” I screamed and then accidentally swallowed a mouthful of seawater.

I flailed and kicked my legs and reached up from underneath the dock to grab something, anything to hold on to so the waves wouldn’t crash me into the sodden wood some more. I couldn’t see
anything in the darkness and I couldn’t hear anything except the my own frantic gasping and the
dull pounding of my racing heartbeat in my ears.

I had to do something. Bobbing underneath the dock as the waves pummeled mercilessly against
me would surely end in me drowning, but every time I tried to swim out, I was pulled back by the
strong undercurrent.

My arms and legs tingled unpleasantly as my body was beginning to go limp. I had maybe ten or
fifteen seconds left of breath before I would be forced to inhale. The clear realization that I might
die flushed my system with a far bitter chill than the ocean’s.

I tried once more and furiously kicked my legs and clawed at the wooden slats on the dock’s edge.
But before my hands could grasp the slippery water logged wood, a pair of warm hands grabbed
my forearms and pulled me out from beneath the dock.

I coughed and sputtered when my head broke the surface of the water and I was half dragged, half
carried to the shore. The daylight seemed brighter than I remembered it and the salty air smelled
sweet and refreshing. When I opened my eyes again, a pale face adorned with long, brilliant rusty
red hair was looking back at me. Full lips moved frantically but I couldn’t hear what was being
said. Warm brown eyes framed by thick eyebrows furrowed with consternation and concern.

“Are you okay?” I heard a voice ask, but the voice sounded unnaturally slow and warped. “Do you
need a doctor?”

I groaned and then turned over onto my side and coughed up the salt water that was in my lungs.
Each cough rattled my chest painfully and it brought tears to my eyes. Once my body was done
expelling the water, I rolled onto my back and sighed.

“I’m fine.” I replied hoarsely. “I’m just a little waterlogged I think.”

The figure looked down at my soaked clothes and sandy, wet hair. “We need to get you into a
shower before you catch your death out here. C’mon, are you able to stand up or should I carry
you?”

As my eyes became clearer, I saw that the person who saved me was a man. A handsome man, in
fact. He had delicate facial features and lithe but strong body. His red jacket was covering a green
woolen sweater.

“I’m fine.” I insisted, but when I moved to stand up my legs wouldn’t obey and I flopped uselessly
into the sand.

“No, you’re actually freezing.” He replied calmly, as though convincing me that I was succumbing
to hypothermia was as easy as showing me basic math.

“No, I’m not.” I insisted and tried to stand onto my feet again. This time I sort of succeeded, but I
stumbled a little and fell to my knees.

He threw my arm around his shoulders and lifted me to my feet. He guided me towards a small
cabin that I had always assumed was just a boat house and opened the door.

The inside of the cabin was well lit with a couple of reading lamps and a handful of candles that
flickered pleasantly on the wooden cross slats. The room was cozy and well put together
considering the small space he was working with.

A neatly made bed was tucked into the far left corner. A worn piano was the focal point of the
room and still had sheet music sitting on the mantle. To the right was a wooden writing desk that seemed overflowing with papers. A couple of old fashioned quills made out of white turkey feathers sat in a bottle of ink.

“Here,” He said and led me towards a dresser that was adjacent to the foot of the bed. “You can borrow some of my clothes while we wash yours. And I don’t mean to sound like a cad, but you’ll need to completely strip so your body temperature can warm up. I’ll turn my back so you have some privacy, and then you’re going to take a shower. There are clean towels already in there.

I blinked a couple times. He wanted me to do what? My mind was still floundering as I processed his requests.

“Or I can bring you to Dr. Harvey.” He suggested when he saw my puzzled and vacant expression.

“No. No!” I croaked and motioned for him to turn around. I knew that if I went to the doctor, then my mom would get a call letting her know what happened. I didn’t want to give her another reason as to why I should come back home.

So I did as he ordered and peeled off my wet clothes and left them in a pile on his floor. When it came to removing my bra and underwear, I turned my back to him as well just to be doubly sure he wasn’t going to peek. But true to his word, his back was turned and he even had his hands over his face.

Once I closed the door to his bathroom and turned on the shower, I could hear the dryer’s buzzer and then saw the bathroom light dim a little as the dryer started.

I didn’t take a very long shower; it was just long enough to wash the sand and seaweed from my body and rinse out my hair. Although the tap was running as hot as it could go, my skin still felt like ice.

I stepped out onto a navy blue bath mat and quickly dried off. I pulled on the grey t-shirt and the black athletic sweatpants that he had given me. I needed to roll the pants up several times just so I could walk, but at least the clothes were dry. Plus they smelled good. Unlike the stench of teenage brand body spray that Brandon always used, this man’s clothes smelled like salt and pine. It made my heart race a little.

“Whenever you’re dressed, I have some tea out here to help you warm up.” The man’s voice had startled me from my thoughts.

C’mon, get a grip on yourself. I thought.

When I stepped out of the bathroom, the man placed two mugs full of steaming tea onto the table.

“I wasn’t sure how you take your tea,” He replied with a sheepish smile.

“That’s alright. This is far more than I deserve.” I replied a little hoarsely. My throat was still raw from the saltwater I had inhaled. “You saved my life, you let me clean up in your shower, you’re drying my clothes, and you fixed me tea? You must be an angel.”

“I’m not, I assure you.” He chuckled as I sat across from him. “My name is Elliott. What’s yours?”

“Morgan.” I replied and I extended my hand across the table. He shook mine and I felt that his hand was smooth and warm.

“Ah, so you must be the farmer that everyone’s been talking about. You moved here recently, did
“Yeah.” My grandpa left me his cabin north of the Cindersnap forest. “I’ve been trying to clean the place up so I can get a garden started. That’s why I was down here actually. I was trying to catch some fish for dinner.”

“It looked like you had some success before your unfortunate spill.” Elliott replied. “I don’t see very many fishermen down here during the spring.”

“Yeah. They’re all small, but it’s enough for one or two meals I suppose. Unfortunately, I lost my rod. It got knocked out of my hands when I fell in and it sank to the bottom of the ocean.”

“Well, if it happens to wash up on shore I’ll be sure it gets back to you.” He replied with a gentle smile.

I returned his smile with my own and we sat in comfortable silence and drank our tea. I looked around his cabin once more and noticed that books seemed to sit on every available countertop, shelf, or open space. The only place that didn’t have books lying about was the large oak writing desk tucked into the corner, but that was overflowing with papers weighed down with rocks and dried sea shells.

He must’ve noticed my scrutinizing observations and interjected, “Please excuse the mess. I wasn’t expecting company, obviously, and I get tunnel vision while I’m writing. If I’m feeling inspired, the entire cabin could be burning up around me and I probably wouldn’t notice.”

I nodded sympathetically. “I get that way too. When I’m fishing, I kind of tune out the world.”

Another bout of silence fell over us. I was never good at making small talk, but to save myself more awkward waiting, I delved further into my rarely used social side.

“So, have you lived here long?” I asked.

“No. I moved here last autumn actually. I’m taking a sabbatical of sorts to get away from the city to work on my novel. What about you?”

I paused. I considered how much I should reveal and then decided to be intentionally vague. “I’m taking a sabbatical to get away from life, I guess.”

He nodded emphatically. “Escapism is something I understand all too well.”

“I noticed.” I replied. “You could run a library out of your cabin.”

“Yes, I suppose I could.” He grinned. “But I’d hate to step on Gunther’s toes. Most of these books are my personal copies, although I do need to make a trip back to Gunther to return a handful of things. That stack over there — he indicated to the large pile sitting on his nightstand — is recreational reading, and that stack near my writing desk is mostly used for research. The rest are just random books that I’ve collected along the way.”

“Well, it’s incredible.” I replied. “I don’t have a lot of time to read right now, but I’m hoping that after I get the farm up and going that I’ll be able to sit down and get back in to a good book.”

That made Elliott smile wide. His eyes lit up and his entire being seemed to glow. “I knew it was fated that we met, Morgan. An author and a book lover commiserating over tea. It’s almost cliche.”

“I guess it is.” I chuckled.
Just then, the buzzer on the dryer rang out and I rose from my seat to grab my clothes out of the machine.

My sweater and my jeans were comfortably warm. I wanted to bring them up to my face and let their warmth wash over my skin, but I stopped myself.

“I’ll just be a minute.” I said to Elliott and stepped back into this bathroom. I couldn’t help but grin stupidly as I shirked off his clothes and dressed in mine again. The almost too-hot fabric took whatever chill remained from my body.

I cleared my throat when I emerged from the bathroom; I folded his shirt and sweatpants into a neat pile and set them on top of his dresser and then slipped on my cold, damp shoes.

Elliott met me by the door. The sun was sinking low in the sky. I’d need to hurry if I wanted to make it back to the farm before it became too dark to see.

“Thanks again for everything.” I replied with a shy smile. “I honestly hate to think what would’ve happened if you weren’t here.”

“I dread the thought as well.” He replied. “But at least one misfortune led to an afternoon of tea and pleasant conversation. It was marvelous to meet you Morgan.”

I nodded and stepped out onto the cool sand. My tackle box was sitting on a wooden stump next to his cabin, but my live bag of fish was still tied to the end of the dock. I stepped back onto the dock gingerly, determined not to make the same mistake twice, and collected my fish from the water.

When I passed by his cabin again, I almost expected to see Elliott’s face peeking out from the window, but I saw nothing except the soft, warm glow of the candles from his cabin. The smell of the pine and the sea hit my nose and I lingered there breathing it in.

A handful of geese honked overhead and as I crossed the old stone footbridge I saw the first splash of color near the riverbank. A small yellow wildflower had bloomed and it was closing its petals to prepare for the evening cold.

A week later, Elliott opened his door and found a wrapped parcel on his stoop with a note attached to the top. The package felt incredibly light, almost weightless, when he picked it up and brought it inside.

He opened the note first and read it.

Dear Elliott,

Pierre was out of greeting cards which said “thanks for saving my life” so I’ll have to make do with a homemade one, but I’m a terrible artist so I hope you can use your imagination for the cover.

But seriously, I owe my life to you. Thank you for saving me, giving me a change of clothes, and being a gentleman about the whole thing.

I found these in the Cindersnap Forrest while fishing along the river. Ones this nice are rare to find in the wild, but I’m hoping that you can add them to your collection. (I noticed that you prefer to use a quill to write, so hopefully you can make use of these).

Sincerely,
Elliott unwrapped the box and gingerly lifted the lid. Inside were two green duck feathers. He held them up to the candlelight and admired how they seemed to gleam deep hues of purple and blue beneath the startling emerald. The feather’s shaft was surprisingly thick for belonging to a duck, but he noticed that the end had been cut into a fine point.

He removed the feathers from the box and brought them to his writing desk. The white turkey feathers that he had been using were long frayed — one had even lost its plumage and was simply a thin piece of quill. He removed the turkey feathers from the empty ink well that held them and put the duck feathers in their place. Their colors seemed to shimmer and dance in the low lamplight.

Elliott propped up the card on a pile of books that sat above him on a shelf and looked down at his unfinished manuscript.

He had a sudden urge to write. He dipped his new duck feather quill into the ink and put pen to paper.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 3 -- To Us (Rated G)

April 30th (Spring)

My back and shoulders ached as I rested the heavy steel hoe against the cabin wall. The plastic watering can sat nearly empty on the stoop. I wiped the sweat off my forehead and rolled my head around on my neck relishing in the bendy straw-like popping sound that I heard. I sat back and observed my hard work, amazed that tomorrow would mark two months since I walked off that bus and into my new life.

I spent the first month on the farm chopping down old trees with grandpa’s hatchet. Granted, the trees weren’t very big, but felling them was a daunting job nonetheless. Most of the trees and bushes near grandpa’s house were juvenile oaks and maples and their trunks were no bigger than my forearm. The larger trees — the mature maples, oaks, and pine trees — would have to wait until I could afford to hire Robin to come with her chainsaw and cut them down.

I used all parts of the tree the best that I could; I used the thicker wood and the branches as kindling and dried the wood out in the cabin. Although the weather was beginning to warm up, I knew that having dried out wood ready in the cabin would be a boon come the winter. I also dried the leaves out and then dumped the leaves into the three foot by three foot plot behind the cabin which would become my compost pit.

In April, after my unfortunate spill into the sea, I made it my priority to get a garden started so I wouldn’t have to rely on fishing as much to feed myself. I planted some turnips to start (Lewis left the seeds free of charge as a ‘welcome to the neighborhood’ present). Then I put down a couple rows of potatoes, and lastly I stuck thin sticks into the ground and planted green beans so they could climb the trellis to reach the sun.

When I was finished seeding my small garden, I began fashioning a scarecrow out of dried grasses that I cut with the old sickle in the shed. I sewed together burlap for its body and I dressed it in one of my old plaid shirts, drew an angry face on it with black permanent marker, and erected it in the back of the garden. I had worked too hard on this patch of land for my crop to become an easy meal for the crows.

The last project was to get grandpa’s old chicken coup cleaned up so I could start saving money to buy some chickens. The structure itself was surprisingly sound, but the interior was filthy. Mud, dirt, and chicken poo crusted the interior like cement. It took me nearly a week of chipping away at gunk, hosing the entire inside down, cleaning it with white vinegar, and hosing the entire thing down again. By the time I was done, I was covered in a disgusting sheen of sweat, chicken feces residue, and vinegar.

I dropped my thick yellow cleaning gloves into a bucket of vinegar and water. My stomach rumbled and I looked at my watch. It was half passed five in the evening, and it was time for dinner.

I managed to earn some money from selling the extra fish that I caught, but the proceeds were only enough for a dinner at the saloon once or twice a week. I had some leftover salad greens in the
refrigerator, in addition to fish fillets and bagged frozen vegetables sitting in my freezer, but I felt the need to go out and get off the farm for a while. So, I put away my gardening tools in the small shed behind the cabin and kicked the mud and dirt off my boots before I went inside.

In two months, the interior of the cabin was beginning to become more cozy. A thick patchwork quilt that my mother had given me when I was a child was draped across my bed. The sheets that I brought came from my old apartment, and after a couple of good washes through the old top loader, the stench of cigarette smoke from Brandon’s preferred brand was finally gone.

The kitchen and living room was still sparse. I had an old camping chair propped up next to the small black and white television that sat on a small wooden table. The television only had three channels (two when there was a storm or if it was raining) but the only one I ever cared about was the weather channel.

The bathroom was too small to contain my towels, toiletries, and other feminine necessities, so I broke down and purchased a cheap bookshelf from Robin during my first month. The price was more than reasonable and Robin offered to deliver it personally. She assembled the bookshelf which reached my bellybutton and then left me with a parcel of chorded wood that she had chopped for a woodworking project but ended up not using.

I took a quick shower and dressed in an old school sweater from my high school days. The black hoodie had a maroon silhouette of a snarling grizzly bear. The back said West Zuzu High School in maroon, gold, and white block lettering. I didn’t particularly like this sweatshirt, but I was running low on clean clothes and this was the warmest thing that I had that was clean.

My stomach let out an irritated rumble as I laced up my waterproof boots. Most of the snow had finally melted but there were still patches of mud and puddles from the recent rain that were treacherous.

I grabbed my wallet and my headlamp. I thought about locking the door, but nobody in Pelican Town ever locked their doors; that was just one of the unspoken rules of the town. Everyone trusted each other and so it never became an issue. It was a habit that I was enjoying.

The sun dipped below the thick clusters of pine trees on the west part of my grandfather’s property as I set out on the two mile walk into town. After all of the work I’ve done on the farm plus walking around to visit Pierre’s and the river that snakes through the town, I was getting into the best shape of my life.

Two months ago, the walk left me sweated through my clothes but now I could easily make it to Pierre’s in about twenty minutes without being winded. Living with Brandon’s second hand cigarette smoke, the constant drinking, and the frozen pizzas five days a week left me feeling sluggish and worn out. I wasn’t above an occasional night out but living on grandpa’s farm had restored my vitality as well as my soul.

The town was still quite busy as I walked past the the medical clinic and Pierre’s shop. Caroline and Jodi were gossiping as they weeded one of the town’s many flowerbeds. While Sam and Sebastian were fooling around with Sam’s skateboard as Mayor Lewis watched disapprovingly from his yard.

“You boys don’t go ruining the tulip beds again.” He shouted across the courtyard.

Sam grinned mischievously while Sebastian waved. I thought they’d trample through the garden just to spite him, but the boys moved on down towards the Cindersnap Forest and away from the precious tulip beds.
When I opened the door to Gus’s saloon, the warm air and the delightful smell of home cooking hit my face. The bar was half full with patrons. The ushals, Pam and Shane, sat in their respective corners, and the town doctor Harvey was reading the paper at the bar. A salad and a glass of red wine sat in front of him.

“Good afternoon Morgan.” Gus greeted me warmly. “How’s the farm comin’?”

“It’s getting there.” I replied and took a seat on the barstool. “The weather stopped me from planting anything in March so I’m hoping to grow enough this spring so I can get a jumpstart on the summer plants next month.”

Gus chuckled, “I wouldn’t worry too much. Your granddad took his sweet time startin’ the farm up. I use to help him, you know. When I was a youngster, he paid me to pick rocks out of his lower pasture. But don’t go askin’ me to do that now, I ain’t in shape for it anymore.” He patted his bulging belly affectionately. “So what can I get ya?”

Before I opened my mouth, I heard the door swing open again and I smelled the faint odor of pine and salt. Gus looked over my shoulder and nodded politely. “Ah Elliott, welcome!”

I looked over my shoulder and met Elliott’s eyes.

“Fancy seeing you here Morgan.” Elliott said warmly. “Are you dining alone?”

I nodded. I didn’t know where this sudden shyness came from but all of the words that came to my lips sounded infantile and alien.

“Do you mind if I join you?” He asked.

I shook my head and then cleared my throat. “No, that’s fine.”

“Marvelous!” Elliott gave me a friendly smile and took a seat on the bar stool next to me.

“So, what’ll it be to drink you two?”

“I’ll have a pale ale.” Elliot replied.

“I’ll have a hard cider.” I replied.

Elliott pulled out a modest coin purse and dumped several handfuls of gold coins onto the wooden countertop. I realized that he was going to pay for my drink as well.

“Elliott, that’s not necessary. You don’t need to pay for mine.” I protested quickly. I felt blood flush to my cheeks. “Honestly, I should be buying you the drink considering that you saved my life.”

“You repaid me twice over with those beautiful duck feathers.” Elliott replied. “Surely you’ll indulge me. If you must, consider this as my “welcome to the neighborhood” present.”

Gus grinned at us. “That’s a nice gesture Elliott.”

I sighed and nodded. “Yes, thank you.”

Elliott’s smile became wider and he ran his long fingers through his hair. Gus swept the money into his hands and then deposited it into an ancient-looking cash register. The bartender was only gone momentarily and then he came back with a pint for Elliot and a bottle for me.
“Would you like any food with your drinks?” He asked.

“Is there a special tonight, Gus?” I asked.

“Yes. Our Wednesday night special is a baked largemouth bass fillet with garlic mashed potatoes for 100 gold.” He replied.

My stomach rumbled loudly. He could’ve said that the special was deep fried earthworms and I might’ve considered it. “I’ll take it Gus.”

“And for you Elliott?” He asked.

“Just the drink is fine, thank you.”

As Gus left to prepare my meal, I turned to Elliott. “Well, thanks for the drink.”

He held up his glass. “I propose a toast.”

I mimicked his gesture and raised my own glass. “A toast to what?”

“What about to us?” He suggested. “To new friendships!”

I smiled, pleased that he thought of me as a friend.”To new friendships indeed.”

Our glasses clinked together and we both drank headily. The cider was sweet on my tongue and I had to use a lot of self-restraint to not down half the bottle in one sitting. Elliot sighed contently and set his heavy mug down onto the wooden countertop.

“So Morgan, tell me something about yourself.” Elliott said.

I racked my brain but the first things that came to mind were self-depreciating and depressing. I just broke up with my boyfriend. I quit my job at JoJaMart Headquarters because the boss was a tool and I secretly think he had a crush on me. I hate the color orange…

“Uh … what do you want to know?”

“Tell me about your family. I never had the pleasure to meet your grandfather like everyone else in this town, but he must’ve been a great role model to you since you moved out here from the city.”

“How did you know I moved from the city?”

He shrugged, “It was process of elimination. When I first saw you around town, you had this aura about you. You seemed — and forgive my frankness — you seemed tense and wound up. I knew you came here by bus because you didn’t have a car and I noticed that you aren’t terribly tan which means your time before coming here was probably spent indoors.”

I was amazed by his assessment, but knowing that he had been paying this much attention to me made my heart race.

“My, you’re a regular Sherlock Holmes.”

“At your service, ma’am.” He said with a surprisingly well done posh accent.

He cleared his throat and looked sheepish, “No, but seriously, I didn’t notice any of that until that day on the beach. Truthfully, the town likes to gossip and I heard about your move out of Zuzu City from Willy, Mayor Lewis, and Pierre.”
Normally I would’ve felt a little irritated with the town’s tendency of minding other people’s business (it seemed to be a tradition as old as Pelican Town itself), but Elliott’s earnestness in wanting to get to know me was charming and welcome.

“Well, the mystery’s been solved for you I guess, but the story isn’t that interesting.” I replied.

“Still, all stories are worth being told.” Elliott replied.

I couldn’t argue with that.

I sighed and I warily recounted my past. “Well, my mom was a single parent. She was a teenage mom and got pregnant with me in high school. Unsurprisingly, my father didn’t want to stick around to care for a child when he had a full ride scholarship to some fancy state college waiting for him so he split. So, as soon as I was old enough to walk, my mom would drop me off at my grandpa’s during the summers so she could work. Actually, I blame the farm life for her workaholic tendencies, but in the summers she worked long enough hours so she’d be able to keep on top of the bills. But as I got older, my mom started coming back out to the farm with me and we made it an extended family vacation I guess.”

“So, you must know a lot of the townsfolk here from your summers spent with your grandpa.” Elliott surmised.

“Not really. Alex, Shane, and Sebastian all came here after I stopped spending time with my grandpa. Abigail was just a toddler when I was here and much too young to involve in our games.” I replied. “I know Sam the best. He’s about five or so years younger than me, but I remember him and his dad fishing on the beach all the time. My grandpa would share our worms with them because Sam liked to play with them in little sandcastles he built. But little did he know that when he turned his back, the seagulls would snatch them up. He must’ve been around six or seven at the time.”

I took another drink from my cider. The tartness coated my tongue pleasantly but the alcohol was beginning to make me feel light headed. Thankfully Gus came with my plate of food. The aroma that wafted up from the plate awakened my insatiable hunger.

“Another round you guys?” Gus asked.

“I’ll do one more.” Elliott replied and put down another handful of coins onto the countertop.

“No more for me, Gus.” I replied. “But I’ll have some water when you get a chance.”

“Of course,” Gus replied as he handed Elliott a full mug of foamy amber ale. “The water is from the tap, I hope that’s okay.”

“Yes, of course.” I replied. “The water here tastes amazing anyway. I’m surprised someone hasn’t thought to bottle it and sell it in the city. They’d make a fortune.”

I was joking, of course, but I saw that my jest struck a bit too true. “I’d keep your voice down, hon.”

Gus eyed up a man in a suit who was sitting in the corner near the door. I feigned a stretch and caught a glimpse of the man in question but I didn’t recognize him.

“Who’s that?” I asked

Gus frowned, “The man’s name is Morris and he’s the public relations manager for the new
Jojamart. He’s been sniffing around here in the evenings. I caught him passing out coupons to Pam for discounted beer. Now, I’m not against competition but I have a strict no soliciting policy.”

I nodded sympathetically, “Jojamart is ruthless and I was only a glorified cubical jockey who made cold calls to administer surveys on customer satisfaction.”

Elliott’s eyes widened, “You worked for Joja?”

I changed my voice into it’s sickeningly cheery Joja alter-ego, “Would you say that your last shopping experience at JojaMart has been extremely satisfactory, satisfactory, mildly satisfactory, mildly dissatisfactory, or …”

I erupted into a fit of giggles while Elliott looked equal parts amazed and chagrined. Gus simply rolled his eyes at us and murmured a cursory “enjoy your meal” as he went to attend to Pam’s empty beer. Apparently even standing within a ten foot radius of the Joja employee was enough to turn Gus’s normal cheery countenance dour.

“No wonder you were so tense.” Elliott replied but the mirth didn’t leave his eyes. “I heard they flog their employees when they don’t meet sales quotas.”

I put on a mask of stoic grimness, “Yes, and the top sales people got to hold the floggers.”

Elliott snickered, “That’s twisted.”

I grinned and cut into my fish. The meat was flaky and seasoned to perfection. A healthy scoop of Gus’s renown homemade mashed potatoes sat in a small ceramic ramekin and piece of crusty bread with garlic butter sat next to the fish. Everything on Gus’s meal seamed to come with a side of bread. Hell, even the salad came with a side of bread in addition to the croutons. Not that it mattered, I was hungry enough to eat it all, but I had a sneaking suspicion that Gus was trying to fatten me up a little so I wouldn’t starve out on the farm.

“So what about you, Elliott?” I asked as I dabbed at my face with a paper napkin. “Now you know my terrible secret. What did you do before you came to Pelican Town?”

His fingers ruffled through his hair again. I wondered if this was more of a nervous tick than a cursory comb through to untangle any knots or snarls because his hair always seemed to be perfect. I was kind of jealous, actually.

“Well after I graduated from high school, I went to college for a couple of years” —

“Let me guess, you were a Theater major.” I interjected.

Elliott sighed, “No but I get that a lot. I majored in Philosophy. And you can go ahead and skip asking about what types of jobs I plan on getting with a Philosophy degree.”

I winced. The bitterness in his voice was obvious, but he seemed more bitter at the situation than at his choice in choosing an impractical major.

“So after two years in college, I realized that while studying Philosophy was a moral and intellectual education, I still needed to … you know … eat. So I didn’t go back for a third year and I got a job in the service industry.”

“Like as a waiter?” I asked.

He shrugged, “Waiter, bartender, maître d, barista… you name it and I did it.”
“Well, you seem well suited for that job. You’re easy to talk to and you’re friendly.” I replied.

Elliott smiled at the compliment, “You’re too kind, but I actually hated the jobs. All of the interactions seem so shallow and superficial. When I greeted the guests or took people’s orders, I would often want to stay with them as they discussed their lives, but the nature of the job meant I had to make them feel special and attended to but also remove myself from the equation. I was just an accessory in the background, but I wanted to hear about their lives, their hopes, their fears, and their dreams.”

I marveled at what he said. Unlike me, he was a person who craved social intimacy and needed to feel invested in the conversation whereas I thrived under the trite social traditions that we often played with one another. The greeting of “hi” or “how’s it going” as I passed by people in town was comfortable because that meant I wouldn’t have to invest in their lives.

“So, how did you get into writing?” I asked.

Elliott looked almost gloomy as he took a drink. “It was a social experiment for myself at first. I was so dissatisfied with my life and my direction that I thought a change in scenery might help reset my mind, so to speak. I thought that if I couldn’t get fulfillment from my jobs, then I needed to move to a place where one-on-one conversations with others wasn’t discouraged. I guess I was looking for a small town community where personal interactions mean more, so I bought a map of the area at a bus stop, I closed my eyes, and I picked here.”

“So, you came here just by chance?” I asked. There was another difference between us. I thought my planned, although quickly executed, move to Pelican Town was the craziest thing I could’ve done, but I couldn’t imagine just picking a place at random and moving there.

“Chance. Fate. Destiny. Luck. Sure, all of those things work if you want.” Elliott replied. “But I look at it like an experiment. A lot of authors take sojourns in other places to relax or to write. The change in scenery can be inspiring. Although I’m not a true author yet, I like to think that adopting a credo of sorts will help me become disciplined enough to produce some sort of finished product.

“Well, what kind of story are you writing?”

Elliott sighed and at first I thought he was annoyed by my question. “That’s the rub. I have so many stories that I want to tell that I can’t pinpoint down a consistent plot. I must’ve started five different stories since coming here; one was a swashbuckling action-adventure on the high seas, another was a sordid romance between a poor scullery maid, the town’s mayor, and a long lost love who has come home from war, and then a third one was a science fiction psychological thriller that explored the morality of sentient artificial intelligence, and the other two were too jumbled to fit comfortably into any genre.”

He spoke quickly, obviously flustered, and I saw the unbridled passion that hid beneath his well crafted and controlled persona.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m partial to drama and romance stories. The one with the love triangle between the maid, the mayor, and her long lost love sounds interesting to me.” I replied. “But have you asked around to see what people want to read about? Maybe that would help you focus your attention onto one subject.”

Elliot’s eyes widened and then he jolted out of his seat like someone had shocked him.

“I’m sorry. This is terribly rude of me. I must go. Inspiration has struck thanks to you, Morgan.”
He moved towards the door but abruptly turned back to me. “Can I call on you sometime?”

“Call on me?” I repeated. This man must be living in his own Jane Austen novel, I thought.

“You know, come visit sometime. If something comes from this moment of inspiration, I’d like you to take a look and give me your thoughts. That is if you aren’t too busy.”

“That sounds fine.” I replied. “Come on over whenever you’re free. If I’m not at home, I’m probably out fishing somewhere.”

“Marvelous.” He beamed. “Like I said, I’m sorry that my exit is so rude. I very much enjoyed our chat. I can’t wait to see you again.”

I grinned and waved good-bye as he bounded out the door. The heavy bar door closed behind him and I turned back to the rest of my fish dinner.

Chapter End Notes

I mean no offense to anyone who has majored in Philosophy. I graduated from college with a degree in English. The amount of times I’ve heard people ask, “So what are you going to do for a job?” was disheartening. Of course, Avenue Q's song "What Do You Do with a BA in English" is another self-deprecating favorite of mine.

This chapter is dedicated to everyone who pursues questionably practical hobbies, interests, or jobs. Live your dreams!
Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who has left reviews, kudos, and bookmarks. I apologize about the delay. I had to finish out my larger fic before I could get to these shorter snippet chapters.

Cheese, meta discussions about writing, and fluff ahead!

Chapter 4 -- Literary Pursuits

June 5th (Summer)

The salt air misted my face as walked along the dock and shoreline hauling in my crab baskets one by one. The first couple baskets were empty save for the occasional soggy newspaper or chunks of driftwood that got swept into the basket by the ocean’s current.

Crabbing was a hard task. Much harder than fishing, but preparing seafood was far less labor intensive than cleaning a fish and the arrival of summer meant that the lobsters would be legal to harvest.

I pulled each basket up by hand. My grandfather’s old gloves were damp with sweat and saltwater and my shoulders ached from pulling the heavy chain up. Each basket felt like it weighed thirty pounds. There was a reason why commercial fishing boats used pulley systems, I thought.

The next two baskets held a handful of shrimp and a nice assortment of muscles. I swept the critters up and threw them into a live bag that was sitting on the beach. Although delicious, I had my sights set on something more gourmet.

The next two crab baskets were filled with trash and it took me almost twenty minutes to dislodge the soda can plastics and the water logged grocery bags from the fine mesh netting. Cursing my rotten luck, I re-set the bait in the baskets and lowered them back into the water.

My last basket was sitting on the far end of the dock, off to the left of Willy’s fish shack. I groaned and winced as I hauled it up slowly from the ocean floor. The basket felt heavy and I prayed that it wasn’t full of more trash. On the third and final heave, I dragged the large metal contraption up onto the waterlogged dock and squealed in delight.

There were not one but two large lobsters sitting in the trap clicking their pincers angrily. One was a handsome rusty brown and the other and was much larger and had a lovely blue sheen to its shell. My stomach growled at the thought of the seafood feast I would get tonight, and I fished the electrical tape from my pocket.

I grabbed the first lobster and held it’s pincer right below the joint that connected to its arm and wrapped black electrical tape around its large claw. After the first one was immobilized, I did the same to the other one. I repeated the process with the smaller lobster and cursed as it pinched my wrist in defense.

The bait was all gone and I was out of fresh bait, so I left the crab pot on the dock as a reminder for
me to pick it up later that evening after I cleaned my catch.

As I walked back to the beach with my two lobsters, I couldn’t help but grin with pride. Not only was I having the time of my life fishing for panfish and bass in the rivers, tuna and red snapper in the ocean, and catching all manner of seafood in my new crab pots, but also the farm was starting to come together. I managed to save enough money to buy two chickens and my fruit and vegetable garden was growing larger each week.

After a lean Spring, I was beginning to feel more confident in my abilities and in my place here in the town.

“Good morning, Morgan.” A voice called out.

I looked up and saw Elliott stepping out of his small cabin. He was wearing a cotton blue t-shirt beneath his typical red overcoat. Although the weather was mild for the summer, I wondered if he always wore a jacket around and I tried to imagine what he’d look like in just his t-shirt. The thought of his lithe body made my heart stutter.

“Good morning, Elliott.” I replied.

“I see the fisherwoman has returned with her bounty.” He said with an easy-going grin. He had a pile of papers bundled in a moleskin wrapping stashed in the crook of his arm. The duck feather quill and a couple of his own worn quills sat in the middle of his work like a bookmark.

“I had some luck.” I replied as I stashed the lobsters into the live bag with the rest of my catch. “But I’m amazed and kind of disgusted at the amount of trash I pulled up. I never knew Pelican Town was this polluted.”

Elliott nodded sympathetically. “Yes, it’s quite a shame. Sometimes I see Joja cans wash up onto shore; I even found a tire during low tide. It seems like people don’t have the same care for the environment as they use to.”

I nodded and adjusted my mesh live bag so it sat over my shoulder. An awkward silence was threatening to close between us so I tried to reignite our conversation.

“So, I see you’re doing some writing.” I said. “Did you finally settle on a story?”

Elliott wrinkled his nose in distaste and I thought that I had offended him, but then his expression turned from distaste to uncertainty. “I’m trying out a few ideas, as you suggested, but I’m afraid they’re not very good.”

“Do you mind if I read some of it? I’m not editor but I could give you a first impression as a potential reader.”

Elliott bit on his lower lip. Anxiety crackled through his entire body and his soft brown eyes had hardened into look of skepticism and fear. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea...”

“Oh. That’s alright! I’m sorry.” I said almost too quickly. “I didn’t mean to pry. I just --”

“-- No,” Elliott sighed, “Morgan, I’m sorry. You were kind to offer. It’s just that I don’t know if it’s any good and I’m afraid that...” He trailed off and pulled out his collection of papers. “Here’s the first few of pages. It doesn’t have a title; it’s more of a rough concept, but maybe there’s something there that I can work with.”

Elliot handed me two yellow sheets of paper. His neat, looping cursive scrawled across the page.
“You cannot do this!” Elizabeth exclaimed. “He has served his time. You must let him go.”

Everything about Charles was hard and cold for he was born in a time when men needed to be so to survive the insurmountable deluge of life’s sins on man.

He eyed the young man in the stockades with the same distain one would have for loathsome vermin. The young man wore the florid bruise that he received from the constable's baton like a badge of honor. Henry met the governor's eyes with defiant spirit seen in only the most wild beasts. Like a wily colt that refused to take the bit, so too did Henry refuse to bow to Charles's authority.

“He will be released when he has confessed to his crimes and has accepted his punishment.---”

“-- But he has done nothing -- “

“-- Enough, Elizabeth! You are my betrothed and you will obey my word as your husband. Forget this urchin. I forbid you to see him.”

Elizabeth swallowed her cries and rose up to full height. Although a proper woman, she called upon the fury that was building within her to give her strength.

“You are not my husband yet and I will not cow to your domination. Either set him free or I will.”

Charles's tan and broad hands rose and Elizabeth thought he was going to strike her, but he grabbed at the keys that were hanging on the hook.

“I will tolerate this impudent behavior for only so long. That boy out there has no business with you. He cannot provide you with anything He will give you sweet words just so he can win your virtue. When he has used you, or when he has gotten you with child, do you really expect him to do the honorable thing? He will leave you to corrupt some other girl with his sweet words and his ...”

Elliott cleared his throat. “So, what do you think?”

I glanced up. He was staring intensely at the pages and I suddenly felt more nervous than he did.

“The writing is beautiful.” I commented.

His eyes met mine and I racked my brain for the right words to soften my next comments. But I didn’t need to. Apparently, my facial expressions betrayed my true thoughts.

“You didn’t like it.” He noted.

“Well, I like the idea.” I insisted. “I like stories about drama and romance, but...” I winced “...does the writing have to be so ...”


“... So old fashioned.” I interjected. “Who are you writing for?”

His eyebrows furrowed, deep in thought, but he didn’t answer my question.

“What if I changed the language to something more accessible, do you think there’s something there then?” He asked.

“I dunno. Where is this story set?”
“In a coastal town where the world around them is on the brink of war.” He replied.

I looked around at the beach and the dirt path that led back to town and I suddenly had an idea.

“Why not make the setting here?”

“What?”

“Yeah! I mean, it doesn’t have to be this town per se but what if you used the town as inspiration. I mean, what you have is a love triangle. What if Charles was the Mayor of the town and Elizabeth was the woman he had planned to marry, but then a mysterious stranger comes to town and steals Elizabeth’s affection?”

“In Pelican Town?” Elliott looked doubtful. “Nothing like that ever happens here. This town is too sleepy for a scandal like that.”

“Exactly!” I cried, “That’s what makes it perfect! Right now the story isn’t believable. I don’t care about these characters. But if I saw aspects of other people in them, then I think I’d be more invested in their lives.”

Elliott looked at the paper and back at me. His warm brown eyes had lost their self-conscious edge and now he seemed tentative but hopeful.

“I’ll give it a try.” He replied. “I’ll let you know how it goes.”

“Yes, please do.”

I gave him the papers and went to slip my sandals on.

“Are you heading back to the farm?” He asked.

“Yeah. I need to get these critters into a live well.” I gestured at the mesh bag that was slung over my back. “You know, you’re always welcome to come over for dinner if you’d like. I have plenty of food now that my garden is flourishing. My chickens are laying more eggs than I can handle at this point, so I even have a modest income coming in.”

“Morgan. Are you asking me on a date?” Elliott asked with a smirk.

“What — uh, no. I…” I stammered over my words. “I mean like a friend date. Like a kind of date where we’re just two friends hanging out and talking about books and the farm. Something more like that.”

My face flushed red and I heard Elliott’s low chuckle, “I’m flattered by the offer. I will have to take a raincheck though. Thanks to you, I think I’ll be working on revising this draft over the next few days, but how about I stop by next Sunday?”

I tried to not sound too eager. “Next Sunday works.”

“Wonderful.” Elliott beamed and we trudged down the dirt trail that led back to the town square.

At the juncture, Elliot waved good-bye and took a right towards the town library while I took a left and made my way towards the Cindersnap Forest. My heart was beating out of my chest and I had to stop by the riverside to catch my breath.

This is stupid, I thought. You just got out of a relationship. You’re trying to start the farm. You don’t need any other distractions right now. Besides, he was just being nice. Do you really want to
muck up this friendship by getting all doe eyed now?

I frowned at my reflection and tucked back the stray hairs that had escaped my braid. What if Elliott was just being nice? After all, I didn’t come to Pelican Town looking for love. I was tired of the big city life. I was tired of the fruitless toil, the pollution, the rude and snobbish people, and I was tired of sacrificing my happiness for the good of others.

Maybe Elliott would never think of me in that way. That’s okay. Besides Pierre, Marnie, and Robin, he was the first real friend I had made here and I didn’t want to mess that up. But then again, maybe asking him out wouldn’t mess anything up at all.

I groaned inwardly as I walked back to the farm. My relationship with Brandon was a relationship of convienence. We were both low-key people who seemed to partner up because we had no better options.

Elliott was different. His eloquence, his style, even his decorum, they all were traits that not many other people had. If he didn’t want to consider me in a romantic fashion then that’s fine.

But dammit, I had to at least try.
June 15th (Summer)

I languidly basked on the deck in my red camping chair. An orange tabby cat did the same. She was draped over a small woodpile that was covered in a blue tarp. Her white paws stretched out towards me and she’d occasionally flex her digits to reveal sharp, needle-like claws.

The cat had found her way to my farm a couple of weeks ago. The poor wretch was stuck in the middle of a summer rain storm and was yowling pitifully next to the kitchen window. I opened the door expecting that the animal would run off in fright, but instead the cat raced between my legs and ran into the cabin; her wet, tiny muddy paw prints got all over the cabin’s wood floor.

I coaxed the cat out from beneath my bed with a smorgasbord of prime cuts of ocean fish, chopped seafood, and minced tuna, and the tabby ate her fill and fell asleep — muddy paws and all — in my basket of freshly laundered towels. The next day, I left a post on the town’s bulletin board that I had found a missing cat, but two weeks had gone by and nobody had claimed her.

“Well, cat, it looks like it’s just you and me.” I told her after Pierre handed me back my flyer with an apologetic expression. The bulletin board had a fourteen day limit for any non-job related postings.

The tabby meowed and its orange and white tuffed tail rose high like a flag. I scratched the cat behind its ears and went inside to make myself a glass of lemonade.

Two hours later, the lemonade had turned into a watery residue of pulp and sugar and the cat, whom I had named ‘Golden’ was in a deep sleep.

The afternoon sun was directly overhead which baked the land like an oven. I had to start watering my plants twice a day in order to keep up with their demands for water. Green tomatoes were beginning to show the barest hints of crimson as they ripened. The mellon I had planted were just beginning to flower and bloom. Pierre had warned me that they were an investment — both in terms of time and gold -- but the sweet, juicy fruit that the mellon promised once ripe made the wait worth it. Although the melons were slow to grow, the pepper patch made up for it. They had given me so much over the summer that I was trying to can the excess in brine to sell or give away as gifts.

Speaking of which…I looked at my watch and saw that the library was due to close in a couple of hours and I had to renew the books that I had checked out. One, which was entitled *Fruit and Vegetable Canning for Beginners*, was invaluable. Thanks to their clear, step-by-step tutorial I had successfully canned pickled beans and strawberry jam. Several cans were sitting in my pantry ready for the lean winter months.

The other books I had were more for light reading. After my conversation with Elliott, I realized that waiting until winter to read for fun wasn’t actually necessary. I usually spent the evenings
either watching the one television channel that I got off the old bunny-ear antenna model, and most of the time, the picture either rolled or came in with a white fuzz over it. Surely my evenings could be better spent reading, right?

Alright, so my motives weren’t entirely pure, but Elliott hadn’t stopped by like he had promised. When that Sunday came and went, I took to fishing at the ocean in hopes that I’d see him walking into our out of his cabin. I spent the entire weekend down there from nine in the morning until five in the afternoon and I hadn’t seen hide nor hair of him.

If he was in the library, I wanted to have a legitimate excuse to go there. The townsfolk loved to gossip, so I knew I’d be the subject of their idle chatter if I started hanging around the library too much. Hell, the one time I asked Gunther if he had seen Elliott around and the man gave me a coy, knowing smile before answering that he had already left for the day.

With that one inquiry, suddenly the rest of the town — mostly Pierre, Marnie, and Mayor Lewis — all made passing comments about us as I ran errands in town. Their comments, plus their smug and expectant smiles, got under my skin more than it probably should have.

Even if I ended up missing Elliott once again, I was in a desperate need to be in an air conditioned building for a couple of hours so the time spent there wasn’t a waste. But there was still the slight promise of seeing him “coincidentally” and that was enough for me, so I packed up my backpack, laced up my tennis shoes, and walked back out into the baking sunlight.

The library’s interior was pleasant and cool. The far wall near the bookshelves were lined with opaque windows that let in the natural sunlight. Gunther sat next to an old computer and a rather impressive manual card catalog that was neatly arranged and whose titles and author’s last names were clearly penned in block lettering. He smiled at me when I came in. Although he dressed rather eccentrically for a Pelican Town citizen, he was one of the nicest people in town.

“Good afternoon, Morgan! It’s a hot one out there ‘eh?’”

“Yeah, the weatherman says that it’s going to be hot all week. I’ve spent more time watering my crops than any other chore. If I didn’t need those plants to live off of, I’d start considering if they were worth watering.” I lightly joked.

I put my pile of books on his countertop and he dutifully began recording the title and today’s date into his large record book of library checkouts. I wondered what he used the computer for if he did all of his bookkeeping by hand, then I wondered if the computer even worked at all.

Gunther said, “I do have a couple old books about how to create a sprinkler system for agricultural use. They’re listed under the 620 or 630 section — my old brain can’t remember anymore I guess. But I know they’re in one of those two sections. Let me write down the titles for you.”

He penned the titles on an index card and slid it back to me. “There’s also complimentary water for guests over in the cooler near the door. Help yourself, but please don’t take the water near the shelved books.”

“Thank you, Gunther.” I replied.

“Oh and …” he leaned in closer and dropped his voice to a hushed whisper, “Elliott’s in here working. I’ve been reminding him to take brakes every so often so he doesn’t overwork himself. He’s due for another break here in a few minutes.”

Gunther winked at me and placed my books on a rolling cart. I tried to school my face into a
confused but vaguely concerned expression, but I only managed to blush scarlet all the way to my ears. I prayed that the sunburn on my face hid some of my embarrassment.

Because it was a Sunday afternoon, the library was deserted. Penny and her two charges never conducted classes on the weekends, and the rest of the town was preparing for the summer luau that was taking place down at the beach. No, everything was blissfully quiet and I liked it that way.

I knew where to find the books that Gunther was suggesting because I had seen them in the Agriculture and Technology section during my last visit, and sure enough, they were both there. The first book was a heavy old tome that had a preface in a runic language that I didn’t understand and I couldn’t read. Thankfully the rest of the book was in English.

The other book was short, more like an informational pamphlet really, and it showed diagrams of how to connect PVC pipe, metal, and rubber tubing into an underground sprinkler system. The sheer complexity of this new project threw my mind for a loop; but I tried to break it down into smaller steps.

I flipped through the pamphlet and read the clear and articulate preface about how building your own sprinkler system is a time consuming project that will save you time in the long run. I continued reading the pamphlet as I made my way towards the Fiction section. Unlike the Nonfiction section which was organized numerically and by category, the Fiction section was organized by author’s last name. Since I wasn’t particularly picky about the genre, I figured I would walk into the middle of the stack and start scanning the spines for titles that caught my eye.

I made it all the way to the third row before I ran into something…well actually, someone. I bounced off his chest and staggered backwards like a stunned insect. Automatically, his warm and soft hands shot out and grabbed me by my shoulders.

“I beg your pardon, I didn’t see you — Morgan?” Elliott said in alarm.

“Oh, hey!” I replied with a guilty smile. “Gunther mentioned that you were here working. I hope I’m not interrupting you.”

Elliott’s long hair looked mussed and tousled. It looked like he had spent some of his down time trying to finger comb his locks into some semblance of order. He had dark circles under his eyes which made him look a little morose. Nevertheless he gave me a small smile and drew his hands back into his pants pockets.

“I’m surprised to see you here.” His voice was even. “I thought you’d be out enjoying this marvelous day.”

“I’ve spent most of this week enjoying the warm weather.” I replied idly, “I’m afraid I’ve enjoyed it too much though because the sun doesn’t seem to agree with me. If I stay out there any more than I need to, I’m going to start looking like a lobster.”

“You should wear a hat,” He remarked “or some sunblock.”

I chuckled but my voice sounded fake and robotic. “Yeah. I guess I should.”

An uncomfortable silence fell between us and I bit my lip. “So…”

Elliott cleared his throat, “I’m sorry. Uh…if I’m in your way, just let me get past you. I’m going to grab a drink of water before getting back to work.”

“No.” I said automatically. “I mean … I … uh. Is everything okay? I hope I didn’t … I don’t know
… act weird when we were on the beach. I know you’re really focused on your novel, but I can’t help but think you’re avoiding me.”

I winced at how I sounded, but when his face fell into an unmistakeable look of guilt I felt the air grow a little colder around us.

“No, it’s …” He faltered and then sighed in resignation. “Morgan, I’m sorry. I’m not trying to intentionally avoid you. I’ve been devoting a lot of time to this novel, and I’m afraid it’s made me become rather hermit-like in my behavior.”

“It’s alright.” I urged in a tone that sounded like I was trying to convince myself as well as him. “When I offered for you to come over, I knew you were busy. It’s not like we had a date, right? It was more like a friendly invitation to come over at your leisure.”

Elliott combed thin, dexterous fingers through his long rusty hair. He looked heartbreakingly guilty.

“Morgan…”

I waved off his response with my hand. He didn’t need to justify himself to me. We were friends. Just friends. I was probably blowing this all out of proportion. Still, the look on his face also churned my stomach into uncomfortable knots.

“So how’s the book coming, by the way?” I asked, changing the subject.

“It’s coming a lot better, thanks to your idea. I’m about a third of the way done with it. Setting the story in a place like Pelican Town has opened up a lot more interesting backstories to work with. I just want to be mindful and cautious that the stories I create are similar enough to resonate with my audience without making the people here feel like I have crossed into their lives inappropriately. You know, most people don’t take well to having their dirty laundry aired publicly, especially not in a book.”

I nodded sagely. “Yes, I imagine that people wouldn’t like that.”

Silence fell over us again and I looked around. The bookshelves were a full foot taller than Elliott and a foot and a half taller than me. Nobody could see us from the lounge area and the town had far too much trust in their citizens to have security cameras hidden anywhere. No, we were alone. All of this privacy made me feel more vulnerable.

“Look Morgan, I’m sorry that I didn’t come over when you invited me. Not showing up after being invited somewhere is impolite.” Elliott said.

I couldn’t help but feel that his apology was forced, almost canned, and came more from social decorum than actual regret.

“It’s fine.” I replied with an easy-going smile. “I’m sure there will be other times we can get together.”

Elliott nodded. More awkward silence slipped between us again. I forced myself to look, really look, at his face and his expression seemed out of place. He was looking just above my eye line. It was as though he was purposely avoiding looking me in the eyes but didn’t want to be obvious or rude about it. His teeth worried at his lip and his breathing was shallow and breathy.

“Is Maru helping you with the sprinklers?” He asked.
“I’m sorry?” His question had caught me off guard and broke my intense observation of him.

Elliott indicated the books in my hand. “It looks like you’re planning on constructing a sprinkler system on your farm. I was wondering if Maru was helping you with the technical plans. From what I hear, she’s kind of a scientific genius.”

“Oh.” I replied dumbly. “I haven’t asked her yet. I wasn’t really considering asking for help, but maybe I’ll look into it if setting all this up turns out to be too challenging for me to work through on my own. It’s just so hot out that watering the crops twice a day gets a little draining.”

I was babbling now and I couldn’t stop. I continued talking about the crops I was growing, the chicken coup that was steadily expanding; now with four hens and a rooster, I had more fresh eggs than I could ever eat on my own. I thought Elliot was just being polite at first by listening to my countless stories, but then I realized that he wasn’t listening at all. His gaze was focused, unblinkingly, at me.

“Uh … are you okay Elliott?” I asked.

His gaze snapped to mine and I felt my blood flush scalding heat through my chest and stomach. Elliott took a step closer to me. His cologne was intoxicating. My throat was parched and no amount of swallowing or throat clearing would loosen the frog that had jumped into my throat. Our eyes met and I watched his eyebrows rise imperceptibly. His nostrils flared; I could see the small flyaway in his hair which only made him look more wild and desirable.

There were several things I wanted to say, but the words failed to materialize on my lips. My thoughts raced and my palms tingled unpleasantly. I had felt lust before. Hell, any red-blooded girl has lusted after a famous actor, musician, or athlete of some kind, but this connection I felt went beyond a crush. My desires were far more powerful, and the sheer magnetism that crackled between us intimidated and excited me.

“Elliott —” I whispered.

“I would like to kiss you Morgan.” His own voice came out as a low, husky rasp. I could barely hear it over the pounding of my own heartbeat. In that short amount of time, he had closed the distance between us, and although he was a full head taller than me, he bent down towards my face. His lips were inches away from mine and I knew he could easily close the distance without any issue, but he was waiting for me to respond.

“I want to kiss you too.” I whispered. My knees felt weak and my heart thundered in my throat.

He smiled faintly but then guilt etched into his features. I wanted to ask him what was wrong, but I also didn’t want to ruin the moment. We’d deal with it afterwards, I figured.

His lips brushed the left corner of my mouth as though he was trying to kiss me but had missed, but then he withdrew slightly and turned his head. His lips felt like butterfly wings, soft and delicate, and I was worried that mine were too dry. My tongue snuck out to moisten my blistering skin and I tasted cinnamon and cloves as his own tongue shyly met mine.

I heard a groan but I don’t know if it was from him or me. My left hand trailed through his thick hair and cupped the back of his head as I met his kiss with more confidence.

I inhaled more of his pine and salt scent and his hand skimmed across my lust-burned cheek to cup my face. I wanted to get lost in our connection. I wanted time to stop so we could be in this moment forever; like a statue or relic of a bygone era, we could be just another fixture in Gunther’s
museum.

I felt like I was simultaneously drowning and flying. All of my racing thoughts, hangups, insecurities, and fears were temporarily muffled. I felt and heard nothing except him. His blistering touch and the tickle of his breath on my nose.

But then Elliott pulled away from me suddenly and the connection was broken. I thought he had been shocked, or that someone had come out from the bookshelves and had caught us making out like teenagers, but the sheer guilt and panic on his face doused the simmering heat in my gut.

“Elliott? What’s wrong —“

“I’m sorry, Morgan.” His own voice was hoarse and shaky. He cleared his throat and stood up straight. His manuscript was clutched tightly in his right arm and his left hand was stuffed in his pocket.

“Why are you sorry?” I asked with a harsher edge to my voice than I meant. “I wanted it.” I blushed at how needy I sounded. “Hell, you kissed me.”

“I know.” Elliott replied. “And that’s why I’m sorry. I have to go.”

In three strides, Elliott was on the other end of the bookshelf. In three more strides, he had passed Gunther who bid farewell to him in his friendly but off-handed way. I couldn’t see Elliott after that, but I heard the door open and close abruptly and silence settled over the library once more.
Chapter 6 -- Villain

July 2nd (Summer)

Sheets of rain battered the sun-baked ground and rolls of thunder echoed off in the distance. Despite the rain, I had opened the window above the kitchen sink and stood there deep in thought. My cast iron frying pan, chipped ceramic plate, and coffee mug sat unwashed in hot soapy water; the rain from outside gently misted through the window and splashed onto my face.

Golden, my adopted cat, let out an impatient meow and reached out towards my bare arm. One needle sharp claw pieced my skin as a warning and the sharp pain jolted me out of my melancholy musings.

“Ouch! Alright, damn you.” I cursed and swatted at the cat, but my strike was half hearted and lacked any malice.

Golden circled the bowl that I set out next to the entrance door and meowed again. I dropped about a half cup of minced tuna into her bowl.

“That’s all you get. You’ve eaten me out of my fish supply.” I chastised and dropped the spoon into the soapy water.

I hadn’t gone fishing in almost ten days (a new personal record and new personal low) because I was avoiding everyone, especially Elliott. The townspeople’s nosy questions had gotten worse since our disastrous encounter in the library and it was starting to get on my nerves.

Pierre was the worst culprit. He had sent a letter the day after our meeting in the library that announced he was selling flower bouquets in his shop. I had heard plenty of stories from my grandfather about Pelican Town’s tradition with handing out bouquets to a person you liked. According to him, he and my grandmother fell in love at first sight. He immediately knew that grandma was the woman of his dreams, so he bought a bouquet and gave it to her in front of the entire town. The story was cute. It was a story that knew by heart, but for such a time-honored tradition, I felt like the universe was thumbing its nose at me.

To be fair, I wasn’t angry at Pierre’s advertisement (even if it was poorly timed), I was more angry that Elliott hadn’t even given me a chance to tell him how I felt. He asks to kiss me and then runs away. How’s that for confusing?

Truthfully, my feelings, or at least carnal attraction, for Elliott had begun as soon as we met. As soon as the salt water cleared from my eyes when he literally fished me from the ocean and saved me from certain death, I felt a spark between us. I just thought it was something that could build over time. In fact, I was trying to nurse the spark into a flame, but his reaction to our kiss had extinguished that spark and left me confused, cold and wanting. He never gave our relationship a chance to become just that — a relationship.

I groaned aloud and plunged my hands into the scalding soapy water. The more I brooded about this, the more dissatisfied and bothered I became, so I washed each dish, rinsed it in the other sink, and placed them into the dish drainer that was near the microwave.

When Golden had finished her meal and was diligently licking her paws for the last morsels of food, I grabbed her bowl and dropped it into the suds as well and washed it before pulling the plug.
and letting the water drain.

Just then, my cell phone rang on the countertop next to me and I dried my hands on a dishtowel before answering.

“Hello?”

“Morgan? Hello. This is Mayor Lewis.”

His voice sounded far away. Aside for the occasional text from my old friends back in Zuzu City, or a call from my Mom, nobody ever contacted me by my cell phone.

“Is everything alright? Where are you calling from?”

“I’m at the Saloon.” Lewis replied. “Most of the town is in here with me. The weather station has reported some pretty serious stuff headed our way, and Gus’s cellar is our designated storm shelter. Do you think you can make it over here?”

I glanced out the window that overlooked the south pasture. The sky was pitch black and the trees whipped violently amid flashes of lightning. I was shocked by how quickly the storm had come upon us. When I woke up, the summer rain was nothing more than a soft and peaceful shower; now the rain had picked up speed and the clouds looked foreboding.

“I don’t think I can.” I admitted. “I don’t have a car and I’d rather not run the two miles into town while its lightning out.”

“Okay.” Lewis replied. “Just keep your eye on the weather channel. If the storm turns into a tornado, the safest place to be is probably the bathroom since that doesn’t have any windows.”

“Gotcha.” I replied.

“And...” He paused and I could tell he was debating about divulging this next bit of information. “Everyone from the town is accounted for except Elliott. Willy said that he wasn’t in his cabin and Gunther’s library was closed today on account of the incoming storm. Leah said that she saw him walking past her cabin early this morning, but the Cindersnap Forest is too wild for my truck to navigate through. If there’s a break in the storm, could you run down there and see if he might’ve gotten lost?”

“Doesn’t Marnie live down there? She’s closer than I am.” I replied.

There was another pause, and the Mayor's voice was tinged with embarrassment. “Marnie wasn’t home last night and now she’s in the Saloon with the rest of the town.”

“Well, I’ll see what I can do.” I replied. My promise was hollow. There wasn’t much I could do with a storm bearing down this quickly.

Lewis hung up just as a large rumble of thunder rolled across the pasture. The wind whipped up and the rain now looked like it was falling diagonal to earth.

I turned the television on and scrutinized the radar as red, yellow, and orange blobs floated across a map of Zuzu City and its outlying areas. Pelican Town was too small to even warrant a name on their radar map, but the timestamp showed that the worst parts of the storm would hit us in fifteen to twenty minutes. If Elliott was indeed out there, he’d be unprotected and in danger.

“Dammit.” I cursed. I threw my hair into a ponytail and pulled on my rain gear. Grabbing an
umbrella in this sort of deluge would be as useless as a screen door on a submarine so I decided to go without and instead I grabbed a flashlight and braced myself for the onslaught of rain and wind when I opened the door.

Rain slapped my face and stung my eyes as I ran towards the south end of the pasture and towards the menacing wall of black clouds that came my way. Thunder boomed off to my right and I nearly jumped out of my rain boots.

Navigating through the thick trees that bordered the southern part of my property was daunting. Leaves were being ripped off the trees by the rain and wind. Green acorns and pinecones pelted my face and I had to plow through a couple thickets of thorny brambles to get to the overgrown path that led to the Cindersnap Forest.

Lighting crackled like a spider’s web as it shot across the sky.

“Elliott! Elliott?” I cried.

Dammit. The Cindersnap Forest was at least seventy acres, if not more, and finding him amid the darkness, the thick trees, and the howling wind would be impossible. I didn’t consider myself a religious person, but I offered a silent prayer to Yoba hoping that divine intervention might take over if my luck ran out.

“Elliott? Are you out here?” I cried again.

There was no sound, so I continued down the trail at a slow jog. I could see the dock that led to the small pond, but the cliffs beyond were obscured by a line of thick bushes and large boulders.

“Elliott!” I yelled at the top of my lungs. “Elliott?”

“Hello?” A voice called back. It was Elliott’s voice, but unlike his usual cool eloquence, he sounded truly frightened. “Hello? Who’s there?”

“Elliott, where are you?” I yelled.

I walked towards a clump of pine trees and listened carefully for his voice. “Keep yelling so I can find you?”

“Help! I’m over here.” His voice was louder and it came from the other side of thick brambles that were nestled among a swath of pine trees.

The thick briar patch I was forced to clamber through cut through my plastic rain pants and sliced painful gashes into my tender skin.

“Elliott?”

I saw him sitting beneath a large pine tree whose bows had been recently cut to create just enough of a shelter for a fairly tall adult. An ax was next to him and the extra hewn bows were laying in a pile at his feet. I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw his worried and pale face.


He turned to me and I expected more shame, guilt, or even taciturn coolness like I saw back in the library, but he looked relieved.

“Morgan! How -- why, um -- How did you know I was here?” He asked.
“I’ll explain everything once we make it back to my place.” I stumbled over my words as I realized that coming back to my cabin might sound too presumptuous after our last encounter, so I added, “Unless you think you can make it to the Saloon. That’s where the rest of the town is at.”

He grimaced and I saw that he was favoring his right ankle. His green linen pants were torn by the brambles and were stained with mud.

“I don’t think I can make it that far, I’m afraid.” He replied. “I took a nasty fall and rolled my ankle. I was planning to create some sort of rudimentary shelter, as you can see.” he gestured at the cut pine boughs, “but if it’s not an imposition, I’d rather be indoors during a storm like this.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. It’s fine, Elliott. Throw your arm around my shoulder and we’ll head to my place.”

To his credit, he didn’t complain. Hell, he barely made any noise as we hobbled back through the brambles and the thick forest. But as we made our way back, the dirt covered trail had turned treacherous from the heavy rain. The cool, rushing water flowed downhill turning the trail into a hazardous river. Water came in over the top of my rain boots, and the rain began falling with more ferocity. The wind had picked up and it was blowing Elliott’s soaked hair into our face. Each smack of his waterlogged locks stung like someone had whipped my face.

“We have just a bit farther.” I yelled over the roaring wind and looked up into his eyes.

He nodded and bit his lip. His jaw was clenched in determination, but I also noticed that he had some twigs, foliage, and large burs that were tangled in his hair. The twigs would be easy to get out, but I’ve only had experience removing burs by cutting them out of hair, and I didn’t want to break that particular news to him yet.

As we came within the last forty feet of the cabin, a bolt of lightning flashed and struck my tomato plant, and we both jumped. I never thought lightning made a sound, but this one made an audible crack like a gunshot and the ground trembled beneath our feet.

“We need to go fast!” I roared over the wind. My own fear was mirrored in Elliott’s eyes and rolled ankle be damned, I grabbed his hand and ran towards the house in a dead sprint.

We both clambered up the three steps that led to the small porch, threw the door open, and stumbled into the warm and dry cabin just as the wind slammed the door shut for us.

My phone was buzzing on the table, but when I picked it up an automated message crooned out over the speaker. THE NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE HAS ISSUED A TORNADO WARNING FOR …

“Shit!” I cursed as I hung up the phone and then grabbed Elliott by the forearm and pulled him towards the bathroom.

“Wha--ouch--Morgan?!”

“Mayor Lewis said that if the storm get too bad, we need to take shelter in the bathroom. That’s the only room without windows.” I urged.

I pulled him down the hallway and we both squeezed into the small bathroom, and I shut the door. Golden’s yellow eyes peered out at me from beneath the sink cupboard. The smart cat had found her own hiding place, but when I went to give her a pat on the head in praise, I saw that she had scratched up all of the toilet paper rolls in her anxiety.
I groaned, “Why did I ever adopt you?”

“I beg your pardon?” Elliott replied. He winced as he slid down the wall and sat on the tiled floor in between the toilet and the sink. I took the only other available floor space, in between the small radiator and the upright shower.

I reached beneath the sink and pulled the cat out. The blasted creature purred and nuzzled her head against my waterlogged hands.

“Nah...don’t try to apologize to me. I’ll be wiping myself with toilet confetti instead of toilet paper thanks to you.” I groused.

“Ah, I’ve seen her around here before.” Elliott replied. “There’s a feral cat up by Robin’s that had kittens last October. Robin set up a nice winter shelter for them in her garage. This one must be one of her kittens.”

I turned Golden to face me and scrutinized her sleek figure. I just assumed that she was underweight, but I now saw that part of her lithe grace came from being young and barely out of kittenhood.

“She’s a smart one.” Elliott complimented. “It’s good that she was hiding in here. I find that animals often have a preternatural sense for bad weather.”

“If only we were that lucky.” I replied and put Golden down. There wasn’t much room for her to explore, so she made her way back beneath the sink and I heard the telltale ripping sound as she shredded more toilet paper.

“Speaking of which,” I continued without hiding the irritation in my voice, “why in the hell were you in the middle of the forest during a storm? Couldn’t you see the storm approaching?”

Elliott frowned and ran his fingers through his wet hair only to find that he had half of the forest tangled up in his locks. His expression of shock, distaste, and horror tempered my ire.

He sighed, “The truth is rather embarrassing. I went out for an early morning walk to clear my head and I … got lost.”

“You got lost.” I repeated in disbelief.

He nodded. “I guess I wandered too far off the main trail and I couldn’t find my way back to it. The storm came upon me so suddenly and I guess I panicked. I took off in the direction that I thought I came from, but it began to rain rather hard by then. That’s when I slipped down a bank and twisted my ankle. By sheer good fortune, I found an ax lodged in the mud nearby. Most conventional wisdom tells you to stay where you are if you are lost, so I decided to do the next best thing and build some sort of shelter to protect myself the best I could.”

“A bolt of lightning isn’t going to be stopped by a few pine branches.” I replied. There was anger in my voice and Elliott heard it.

“Well that’s the best I could think of in the heat of the moment.” He huffed.

I took a deep breath and tried to compose my thoughts. We wouldn’t get anywhere in this discussion if I lashed out at him in anger.

“I’m sorry.” I replied. “I was just worried about you, that’s all.”
His eyebrow cocked at that. “You were worried about me?”

“Yes, of course I was worried about you!” I snapped, anger flaring again. “You’re my friend. When Mayor Lewis called to tell me that nobody had seen you in town and asked that I look for you, I was worried that I’d never find you out out there.”

“You came looking for me even after what happened in the library?” He let his voice trail off and his face looked regained the guilt and uncomfortableness that haunted him back at the library.

“Of course.” I replied somewhat exasperatedly.

“I would’ve assumed that you’d never want to talk to me again. I did act rather boorish.”

"I wouldn't say boorish," I countered, “but I've been meaning to talk to you about that sooner or later, so I guess there’s no better time like the present.”

“Indeed.” Elliott gave me a small smile, but the sadness hadn’t left his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“Your sorry for what? The fact that you kissed me, or the fact that you ran out without giving me an explanation.” I bit out.

“Both.” He replied in a quiet voice.

My heart sank a little. “So you are sorry that you kissed me?”

“Yes.” He replied. “You deserve someone far better. You deserve someone who…” he paused and his voice took on a more anguished tone, “… who isn’t a villain.”

I blinked dumbly at him. “A villain?”

Elliott nodded. “As cliche as this sounds, you’re too good for me. After what I’ve done, it’ll be a long time before I deserve someone like you.”

“That’s bullshit.” I replied. “Why in the world would you think that?”

“Because I’ve spent the last five years of my life regretting the mistakes I made with my past relationships.” Elliott replied.

“Elliott, everyone makes mistakes in relationships. I think you’re being too hard on yourself.”

He shook his head. “Morgan, before I came here I …” he paused and cleared his throat. His voice was rough and low. “I had just left a pretty toxic relationship.”

I nodded in sympathy, ”That’s part of why I came here too.”

"No. I was the toxic part of that relationship.” He clarified.

“What do you mean?”

He paused, but then the confession spilled from his lips. “The woman who I was seeing was dating someone else.”

“She was cheating on you?”

Elliot shook his head, “She was cheating on her boyfriend with me.”
“Well if you didn’t know —“

“I did know.” He said with a guilty conviction. “I was the one who seduced her.”

Silence fell over us and I shifted uncomfortably on the linoleum floor. I thought about his confession and let it sit there in my mind. I was shocked, but there was a whirlpool of pity, frustration, and empathy that swirled in my stomach so violently that it hurt. His confession didn’t change how I felt about him, but it certainly was like a splash of cold water to the face.

“So, how long were you in that relationship?” I asked carefully.

“About ten months.” Elliott murmured. “We didn’t spend a lot of time together during the first couple of months because it was new and we were both nervous about being caught, but we eventually started seeing more and more of each other. Eventually her boyfriend caught on. I mean we weren’t exactly discrete towards the end.”

“What happened when found out?”

“She denied it at first but the evidence was all there: the text messages, the pictures, the unexplained gifts … then he tracked me down. He found out where I worked and waited for me. As I was walking to the bus stop, he and his friend jumped me.”

“What?!”

Elliott shrugged. I could see that he thought he deserved it. “I didn’t bother to fight back. They got a few good punches and kicks in and that seemed to satisfy him. He told me that if I ever touched her again, he’d kill me. His anger was warranted of course, but he was a violent man and I worried that he’d take it out on her.”

Now I saw the truth behind his pain.

His voice took on a haunting quality as he spoke, "I tried to save her. Even if she didn't want to be with me, I tried to get her out of that relationship, but she wouldn’t return my calls. That night I went back to my apartment still bloody and cut up and I packed my belongings and moved here.”

“So this happened recently?” I surmised.

“Why else would I move to a sleepy village two months before Winter set in?” He asked wryly. “People in the town, especially Willy, caught on quickly that I moved to Pelican Town to escape something, but for once people didn't pry. The winter was rough, but people are really generous here and despite their habit of being busybodies and gossips, they all accepted that my life in the city was a chapter that I wanted to remain closed.”

He bit at his lip again and braced one hand on the sink and another on the toilet lid and hauled himself up to a stand. He winced as his injured ankle bore some of his weight and he leaned against the sink with a sigh.

Elliott fixed his eyes on me. "Morgan, when I first met you, I didn't expect that we'd have a connection like this. I admire you. I value your friendship, but I was reminded of my past after we talked on the beach about my book. Remember when we walked back to town together? Well, I picked up the latest Zuzu Gazette from the newsrack outside Pierre's shop to look for publishing companies in Zuzu City. On the front page I saw a story with the headline: MURDER OF PASSION COMMITTED BY BOYFRIEND — TWO DEAD IN DOMESTIC HOMICIDE.”

I was too stunned to speak.
“Apparently, her boyfriend caught her together with another man and murdered them both.” His voice was hollow and it broke my heart.

“What happened to him?”

“Her boyfriend? I don’t know. I couldn’t bare to read on.” He sounded tired and miserable. But it was more than that, he sounded like he was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders.

"Elliott you can't think that it was your fault." I replied. "You couldn't have known what her boyfriend would do."

"But I did know. Just like your cat knew that a storm was coming and had the foreknowledge to hide in your bathroom, I had a sense that a storm was coming too. But instead of doing what I could to help mitigate the storm, I fled like a coward."

"Oh Elliott..." I sighed.

He shook his head dismissing my sympathy. "So now you know the truth.” He said. “Nobody else knows the real reason as to why I moved here, so I’d appreciate it if word didn’t get around.”

I rose to my feet and shook out the stiffness in my legs. “I’m not one to spread rumors Elliott.”

"Thank you.” He said and then caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. “Oh… I look dreadful.”

I opened the bathroom door and stepped out into the hallway. There was a noticeable temperature difference and the cool, fresh air felt wonderful. I walked out into the kitchen and living room and saw that the rain had stopped. A blue sky peeked through the sleet grey clouds that remained, and birds were chirping outside once again.

Elliott limped down the hallway towards me. He had managed to untangle the leaves and twigs, but the burs still remained knotted in his hair.

“Do you want me to help you cut out those burs.” I asked. “They’re just going to get more and more tangled if you leave them in there.”

His eyes widened in abject horror at the mention of cutting hair. “Yoba, No! I’ll manage to get them out on my own.”

I chuckled and looked at my phone. The small LED screen on the front said that I had four missed calls and all of them were from the same number that Mayor Lewis had called from.

“I’m going to call Mayor Lewis back to let him know you’re alright.” I replied. “Do you want me to help you to Harvey’s? The road will probably be sloppy from the rain.”

“That’s kind of you, but I think I can manage.” He smiled politely.

So that’s where we were. Back to the propriety and the politeness, I thought.

“You know Elliott, I know telling me about your past wasn’t easy, but you are being way too hard on yourself. We’ve all done things we aren’t proud of, me included, but none of that changes how I feel about you.”

An unfamiliar expression crossed his face and I was worried that I had upset him. His eyebrows furrowed but then his brown eyes — once dark and hollow in his sadness — gained light again.

“I’m sorry that the tender moment we shared in the library has to be overshadowed by my baggage.
I’m just going to need a little time before I make any decisions about us and about pursuing a relationship again.”

I nodded. “I can respect that, and I can wait. Just promise me one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Consider looking at yourself as a person in search of redemption and not as a villain.” I suggested. “We both moved here in search of a change. We can’t change if we are stuck in the past, can we?”

Elliott didn’t answer as I opened the cabin door, but I could see that he was considering my advice. He limped out onto the porch and looked back at me.

“Are you free to have lunch with me on Thursday?”

“Is this like a date?”

He smiled wryly, “It’s more like a gathering of two friends. I can show you a draft of my book if you’d like, or maybe you could teach me how to fish. No matter what we do, I promise to keep my lips to myself.”

I grinned, "It’s a friend-date then. I promise I won’t stand you up.”

“Splendid.” He replied. “Thanks for coming to my rescue, and ... thanks for listening to me.”

“That’s what friends do.” I replied with a smile. I waved good-bye as he limped down the road. He didn’t seem to be in as much pain now, and I hoped that all he’d need would be a nice ice pack and some rest.

Golden meowed in greeting and weaved in between my legs. A shred of toilet paper was stuck to her back paw and was turning translucent from the moisture on the wooden cabin floor.

Broken branches and leaves littered my front yard and my poor tomato plant had been burned to a crisp by the lightning, but none of that mattered now. All I could think about as the sun rose above the tree line was Elliott’s confession. He might’ve thought of himself as a villain in his own life, but I saw him differently.

My mom once told me that we are the sum total of our experiences, and those experiences influence and reshape the person we are, and the person we become. Elliott wasn’t a villain. He was a man who made poor choices in his life and was dealing with the consequences. We all are in a way, I guess.

Learning from your mistakes and feeling regret over them isn’t villainy. It’s human.
Chapter Notes

This is mostly an exposition dump for the Female Farmer's backstory. This chapter sets the future chapters up so it's a little slower.

Thank you to everyone who has taken the time to leave kudos, bookmark, and/or leave a review. I appreciate the support.

Chapter 7 — Picking Up the Pieces (Rated G)

July 8th (Summer)

After the storm, it took me a good two days of work to clean up the trees and the large branches that the high winds had knocked down. Robin was nice enough to offer her help for free, and together we cleaned up, cut, and piled over a chord of wood for the winter. The only downside to all of this work was that we were both sweating buckets by the end of the day, and I was too exhausted to venture down to the beach to go fishing. However, my fatigue and the intense summer heat didn’t stop me from thinking about Elliott’s predicament and his sense of misplaced guilt.

Although I couldn’t relate with Elliott’s past relationship troubles, I could understand not feeling worthy of love. It took me a long time to realize that Brandon’s and my relationship was built more on comfort and familiarity rather than love. We stayed together as long as we did because we didn’t — or at least I didn’t — know any better, and when I finally left him, I remember the gnawing guilt that ate at me.

Brandon and I started dating in high school. He was a nice boy (as my mom would say) and I was too shy to talk with other guys all that much. Brandon was the first boy who was nice to me or showed any interest whatsoever, so I took that and ran with it. We started dating as sophomores in High School. After we both graduated, we moved in together. Brandon had dreams of becoming a professional gridball player or a video game tester, whereas I’ve always wanted to own my own business, so I signed up with the Joja Youth Internship program as a way to get my foot in the door and to make some money.

We ended up renting a one bedroom studio apartment that was above an antique shop. Our landlord was a nice, deaf old lady who owned the antique shop. On the weekends, I’d help her sort, organize, and price tag all of the donations that people left for her. And for a while, Brandon and my relationship was great. Until it wasn’t.

After six years of living together, we began to argue a lot. Our arguments always centered around money and not having enough of it, or over the fact that Brandon thought I was pushing him too hard into a future that he didn’t want. What can I say? I wanted to move out of the city and maybe get a small house in the suburbs so we could finally start our lives like every other young couple in the world. I wanted kids but Brandon didn’t. I wanted to eventually get married, but Brandon said that marriage was a waste of money. We fought so much and my temper got the best of me far more often than I care to admit, but I loved Brandon, or at least I did once upon a time. But I also didn’t want to see myself turn into my mother who had her life pulled from beneath her when my father unexpectedly left us — so I left Brandon instead.
I took the coward’s way out. I know that. When he was down at the bar drinking away my hard earned money, I packed my things and had my friend pick me up and drive me to my mom’s house. Since I was the sole provider and had my name on our lease and utilities, I called the landlord up and terminated the lease without telling him. He called me up drunk and upset. I was halfway into a bottle of wine myself and I said things that I shouldn’t have said. We ended our relationship then and that following month, I quit my job at Joja and I left Zuzu City a person embittered by love looking for a change.

“Whoo, it’s another hot one today!” Robin exclaimed.

Her voice broke me out of my brooding and I pushed those memories pack into the recesses of my mind. It was a beautiful day, despite the heat, and I wanted to focus on my life as it was right now, not live in the past.

I went to help Robin collect her tools and supplies. The woman came prepared, I’d give her that. She brought down enough equipment for at least five people and used all of it with the skill and dexterity of a woman who had done this for her entire life. We set her axes and chainsaw in the flatbed of her utility vehicle, and I helped Robin hook up the automatic log splitter to the vehicle’s trailer hitch. Robin leaned against it and pulled off her thick, heavy work gloves.

“So when did ya want Maru to stop by to check out your farm?” Robin asked idly.

During our work, I asked Robin if I could pick Maru’s brain about setting up a sprinkler system at the farm. Robin told me that she’d do me one better and send her daughter down the hill whenever I needed her.

“Would this Tuesday work?” I asked.

“Nah, Tuesdays are usually no good. I step out for a couple of hours to teach an aerobics class in Caroline’s house, and Maru has to step in and watch the shop while I’m gone.” Robin replied.

“What about Friday?”

“Yeah, that should work.” Robin agreed. “I’ll send Maru down in the mid-afternoon after she is done with her online classes. That child of mine has her sights set on Zuzu State and I couldn’t be more proud of her.”

I smiled. It was nice to see the extent of Robin’s pride over her daughter’s accomplishments.

“I’ve heard wonderful things about both of your children.” I replied. It was half-true. I knew that she had an older son named Sebastian and although I had rarely seen him around the town his reputation for being technically savvy and a good friend to the local boys, especially Sam, meant that he was good in my book too.

“Well, I just wish Seb got out more. Yes, he has his computer thing and some of the money that he makes from that is paid to us for his rent, but …” Robin hesitated and looked like she was going to regret this next comment, “but he’s so quiet and shy. Sometimes I wonder if he’s even mine! I mean, you couldn’t pay me to stay quiet. We are like oil and water most of the time. But I suppose that’s the way with most mothers and their sons.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much.” I consoled. “Sebastian seems dedicated to his passions. I’m sure he’ll find a place to pursue them.”

Robin looked at me sagely and then shook her head, “If I had no shame and had no sense, I’d try to set you up with my son. He needs a good woman like you to give him a good kick in the pants.”
I shook my head, good-naturedly but serious, “I appreciate that sentiment, but I’m perfectly fine being single.” I almost added, and I’ve already tried the whole pants-kicking routine with my previous boyfriend and that’s why I’m single.

Robin slid into the drivers side of the utility vehicle, flicked a switch, and rested her tanned forearm on the passenger seat’s head rest. “Well if you change your mind, there’s plenty of men for the picking here — my son included!”

The red-haired woman drove away up the bumpy two-wheeled, rutted trail that went north of my cabin. Unlike Mayor Lewis’s diesel truck, Robin’s utility vehicle barely made a noise as it powered up the first hill with ease dragging the wood splitter behind it.

With the sun directly overhead, I felt the sweat that was beading at my neck now drip disgustingly down my back and soak into my shirt. I went back inside the house to gather the supplies I’d need for a relaxing and well-deserved break and within fifteen minutes I trudged back down through the now-cleared pastures with my fishing rod, a picnic lunch, and a large milk jug full of water. Now that today’s work was out of the way, the large pond in the Cindersnap Forest was calling my name.

I flopped down onto the grass and let the sun warm my chilled skin and dry the water that dripped down my bare arms and legs.

After an hour of fishing and not catching anything, I decided that my time would be better spent cooling off with a quick dip in the pond. A dirt walking trail weaved through the large pine trees that encircled the pond, but I figured that nobody would be out hiking in this type of hot, humid weather.

I hadn’t owned a bathing suit since I was in high school and I hadn’t had a reason to buy a new one until now, so I decided to strip down to my underwear and swim in that. My underwear wasn’t particularly scandalous; I was wearing a multicolored sports bra and sky blue bikini cut panties, so I figured that I was wearing the clothing approximation of a bikini.

I made a running leap off the dock and cannonballed into the dark water. The pond was spring-fed which meant that the water was deliciously cold, so cold that it took my breath away. I didn’t swim for very long, and soon after jumping in, I hauled myself up onto the dock, spread out my towel, and basked in the sun.

Within minutes, I was fast asleep.

“Yeah, yeah! Get it. Pass it to Sykes. Go! Let’s GO! SCORE!” A voice yelled out as I unlocked the apartment door and stepped into the small kitchen. I flicked on the light and hung my keys up on the hook next to the door.

I groaned inwardly when I saw the state of the kitchen. Pots and pans cluttered the stovetop; leftover spaghetti sat in a pot and had congealed into a pile of slimy, worm-like monsters while the canned tomato sauce still simmered on low which splashed sauce all over the stove and the microwave.

I walked through the kitchen and into the living room to drop my backpack off on the table and noticed that empty Joja Cola and beer cans that had collected on every available surface.

“Hey,” Brandon said off-handedly. “His eyes were glued to the television and he was absent-mindedly munching on chips and salsa.”
“Hey. How was your day?” I replied back, trying to keep the frustration out of my voice. I had just got done working a double shift at JoJa and I was tired of fielding people’s questions and complaints. Sometimes it felt like I was chained to that infernal desk in that call center.

He shrugged, ate more chips, and watched the gridball game. “It was fine.”

“Did you turn in any more job applications? My mom’s work is hiring someone to work graveyard shift as a security guard. All you really do is sit outside the parking lot and monitor the area for any illicit activities.”

Brandon sighed. “Yeah, okay. I’ll look into it.”

He still didn’t answer my earlier question. “So, did you send out any applications?”

“I’m working on it, okay?” He gritted out between clenched teeth. “I said that I’ll get to it, so I’ll get to it.”

I rolled my eyes and went back into the kitchen. I turned off the stovetop and began putting away the leftover spaghetti that Brandon had made while I was at work. As I cleaned the stovetop with some paper towel and some kitchen cleaner, I could hear the gridball game go to commercial.

“Oh, by the way,” Brandon’s voice called out from the living room, “we’re out of milk.”

“You didn’t buy any?” I called back. This time I didn’t temper the frustration in my voice. I was dead tired and my feet ached. The last thing I wanted to do was run out and buy more milk for our breakfasts.”

“I’m broke until Friday. I told you that. Remember?” He replied.

“But I thought your unemployment check came in on Monday.” I almost added, ‘surely you can’t be that broke since you never pay for anything.’

“It did and I bought some groceries, but I forgot the milk.”

He never took his eyes off the gridball game. This was our routine: I would come home from work, clean up after him, try to take care of our mounting bills, and maybe … just maybe read a little before I went to bed. At first, the routine was normal, or so I thought, but then I felt like my apartment was closing in on me. No matter where I looked, living in this apartment was starting to become my Hell.

“Fine. I’ll go out and pick up some milk.” I hoped the resignation in my voice would’ve triggered an empathetic reaction from him, but he continued to eat chips and watch the game.

“That’s great, hon. Thanks.” He replied. “Oh and when you’re out, can you pick up a six pack of beer, and get something for yourself too. You look like you’ve had a hard day at work.”

I almost shot back that I was surprised he even noticed since he hadn’t taken his eyes off his damn gridball game since I had arrived, but I swallowed my vitriol, grabbed my purse, and walked out into the humid summer night.

“Morgan?” A disembodied voice said.

“Morgan.” The voice became louder.

“Morgan!”
I woke with an abrupt jolt. All of my senses returned at once and the sound of cicadas chirping was almost deafening.

“Good Yoba, what the —?” I looked up and peered through the harsh sunlight to see Elliott standing with his hands in his pockets looking both concerned and a little sheepish.

“Sorry to startle you Morgan.” Elliott said. “I saw you sunbathing here and I saw that you hadn’t moved in a while. I figured that you were asleep, but I also noticed that you’re starting to turn a little pink. Getting sunburned with your fair skin is a sure way to develop skin cancer when you’re older.”

“Man you sound like Dr. Harvey.” I lightly joked. My head felt like it was full of cotton and my tongue was dry like sandpaper.

My ribs ached a little from lying face down on the wooden dock so I crawled onto my hands and knees so I could stand. Elliott was right, I could already feel a sunburn coming on and I knew that in a few hours, my back and shoulders would be in a world of hurt.

“Thanks for checking in on me.” I replied. My brain was still trying to process my dream, but even as I tried to reach back into my thoughts and remember what I had dreamt about, I felt the memories slipping from my mind like water.

When I got to my feet, my knees buckled a little and I stumbled forward. Elliott moved to catch me but I caught myself before that was necessary.

“Sorry.” I murmured shyly. “Robin and I were clearing out the fallen trees on the property and I guess my muscles are still getting use to heavy labor.”

Then I realized that I was standing in front of Elliot in my underwear and I quickly snatched up the towel that I was lying on and wrapped it around myself. “Sorry about that…”

Elliot’s expression was hard to read. He wasn’t obviously leering at my partially exposed body, but he was fixated on something at my hip.

“You have a tattoo?” He asked.

“Um, yeah.” I said. Apparently today was the height of my eloquence so I added, “I got it when I was twenty-one.”

The tattoo in question was on my hipbone, but it was partially hidden by my underwear. I was surprised that Elliott could even see it.

“What is it of?” He asked, “If you don’t mind me asking that is.”

I shrugged. My mom didn’t know about the tattoo and Brandon assumed that the tattoo design was a cliche design, so I guess I needed to set the record straight. “My tattoo is of three stars clustered together. There’s a big one, a medium one, and a small one arranged in a triangle formation. It’s meant to remind me of my family — my grandpa and my mom. It had always been us three until he passed away.”

“Why stars?”

“Grandpa and I would always stargaze in his lower pasture. Mom would sometimes join us and we’d make wishes on the shooting stars. My mom would always wish for a man to love her, and my Grandpa would always wish that he could catch Old Mossback — the 40+ inch northern pike
that lurked in the river — and I …” I faltered a moment as I thought back to those warm summer nights. “… and I always wished to be just like my Grandpa.”

“Well it looks like you got your wish.” Elliott replied. “I took a detour through your farm while on my way back from the library. Your Grandpa would be proud of the work you’ve done with the place.”

I blushed at his praise, “Thanks. I still have a lot more to go with it. I want to build a barn and start a fruit orchard but those are definitely long-term plans. Although it’s only been four months since I got here, I feel like I’ve been working that land forever.”

A comfortable silence fell between us and although it didn’t last long, it gave me time to sweep the nostalgia and poignant memories from my mind.

When I glanced at Elliott, I noticed that he was dressed down, or at least as dressed down as I had seen him yet. He wore a pair of khaki shorts that showed his wiry long legs. He had forgone his usual suit jacket and shirt for a simple navy blue graphic t-shirt with an embossment of an old man in a tiny row boat fighting a giant blue marlin at the end of his fishing line.

“That’s a neat shirt, by the way.” I commented.

“Thank you.” He replied. “My sister bought it for me for my birthday last year. It’s called a lithograph, so the design you see is actually the whitespace. The rest of the shirt is the entire written novel of Hemingway’s The Old Man and the Sea. I probably wore this shirt for three weeks straight when I first moved here. Something about living in a seaside cabin sounded delightfully romantic, and this shirt is a romantic story in sense.”

“Romantic? Does the fisherman fall in love with the fish?” I asked slightly aghast at that idea.

Elliott chuckled kindheartedly at my ignorance, “Of course not. I mean romantic as in the literary sense. It’s a story about adventure, triumph, and surpassing insurmountable odds to come out on top.”

I nodded but then something he said struck me in the same way that my tattoo had struck him, “Wait, I didn’t know you had a sister.”

“I was what you would call a ‘late season’ baby which means that I was an accident; my mom had me much later in her life and my sister was already a teenager by that time. Because of our vast age difference, my sister and I aren’t really that close but she does her best to remember me and she sends me the occasional letter or care package when she can.”

“That’s nice of her.” I replied. “When is your birthday anyways?”

“September 15th. And yours?” He asked.

“September 27th”

Elliot’s smile grew brighter. “We should endeavor to celebrate together then.”

“Okay!” I agreed.

I tucked the hem of the towel into itself and gathered up my picnic basket and slipped on my sandals. Elliott reached down to grab my half full jug of water and walked with me as I made the long walk back to the main dirt road.
Aside for the occasional fallen acorns and pinecones, the storm didn’t wreck as much havoc on the trees in the Cindersnap Forest as I would’ve thought. Perhaps Elliott’s makeshift tree bough shelter would’ve protected him if I would’ve never found him. Or maybe it wouldn’t…the idea of him weathering the storm alone didn’t sit well with me.

“How’s your ankle doing?” I asked. Elliott seemed to be walking uninhibited.

“It’s doing well.” He said. “Harvey looked at it and said that it was probably sprained. I took a couple days off of writing to ice it and rest and it was as good as new.”

More silence fell between us and my brain raced to think of some topic of conversation that we could have that didn’t center around the fact that I wanted to kiss him again. I couldn’t think of anything worthwhile to talk about and we reached the edge of my property far quicker than I would’ve liked.

I could hear the chickens clucking in their coup. The storm had upset them and they had refused to lay eggs for a couple of days. I was hoping that with enough fresh air and some TLC from me that they’d get back to their normal routine soon.

We stopped outside of my cabin door and I took the water jug from Elliott’s hand. I tried to not look at his face. Whether it was my sunburn or the fact that I was feeling bashful, I knew that my face was uncomfortably red.

“Well, thank you for walking with me.” I replied.

“Morgan, I’m sorry.” He said suddenly.

“Sorry for what?”

“For worrying you during the storm.” He said.

“Don’t worry about it.” I brushed off his apology with a towel-covered wave of my hand, but Elliott still looked guilty.

“But still. It was valiant of you to come and get me and shelter me while the storm passed, and I’d like to make it up to you.” He replied.

“Elliott, this isn’t the medieval times. I’m not some knight of yore rescuing some helpless damsel to win her favor. You don’t need to pay me back for that. I did it because it was the right thing to do,” I said.

“I’m not just talking about the timely rescue.” He replied. “I’m talking about being there for me and listening to my problems. I had a lot to mull over after I left, and although I still feel … unsure and uncomfortable about what happened with Laura, I think acknowledging my part in things helped me move on.”

So her name was Laura, I thought. Then I said, “Well I’m not going to say ‘no’ to spending more time with you. I stand by what I said, I value your friendship.”

Elliott smiled again. It was a gracious smile but he also looked different somehow, almost self-assured and more confident than I had seen him last time.

“So instead of meeting for lunch, I’d like to invite you over for dinner tomorrow. Willy has given me plenty of fish that he’s caught and I can run to Pierre’s to buy some seasonal produce so we can whip of some sort of side dish.” He said.
“There’s no need to buy anything.” I said. “I have potatoes, beans, and parsnips that I need to use up from the Spring harvest. I’ll bring over the side dishes if you focus on the main course.”

“So does that mean you’ll come?” Elliott asked.

“Of course!” I exclaimed. “This will be a good first friend-date.”

Elliot nodded, “Marvelous! I will see you tomorrow then?”

“See you then.” I replied.

I went back into the house and kicked my sandals off by the door. I could see that Golden was stretched out on my bed enjoying a luxurious nap of her own. I was about to take a quick shower when I saw that my cell phone was blinking; I had a message.

I flipped open the cell phone and recognized the number immediately. It was Brandon’s number. I navigated to the inbox and clicked on the unread message.

Hey. I need to talk to you. Please call me or text me back.

I typed back my response. What’s up?

His response came as soon as I turned the shower on. Can we talk in person? Meet me at the Delta Diner off Exit 2 for dinner? I’m buying!

I glared suspiciously at the text from the shower as the cool water soothed the sunburn on my back. The small town of Delta wasn’t that far from Pelican Town. The idea that Brandon might’ve turned up on my doorstep unexpectedly made me bristle.

After I washed up and got dressed, I texted back that I’d meet him there in an hour and then I grabbed my purse and my sunglasses. The next bus to Delta left in ten minutes.

I left a note outside my door detailing where I went in case someone decided to drop by. I wasn’t expecting anyone, but I thought it would be prudent just in case.

My stomach clenched into knots as I tried to predict what I could expect from this encounter. I hadn’t heard from him since I walked out with my things and never went back. I knew he’d be angry, and I probably deserved some of that anger, but a small part of me — the selfish part — was angry with him for barging back into my life.

No, I said to myself. Everyone deserved closure. I broke this relationship and it was only right that I now picked up the pieces.
Chapter 8 — Public Embarrassment (Rated T)

July 8th (Summer, Mid-Evening)

The Delta Diner was a greasy hole-in-the-wall type of establishment that everyone somehow knew about. The parking lot was full of cars full of families looking to enjoy a nice diner out and full of working men and women looking to get a quick bite before going home. Thankfully, I had gotten there early. The waitress showed me to the last available booth. Behind the linoleum belly-up countertop, I could see a line of cooks working diligently behind a curtain of smoke and steam to keep up with the steady order of greasy, delicious and satisfying dishes.

“Would you like some coffee ma’am?” The young waitress asked me. She couldn’t have been more than sixteen. Her thick auburn hair was pulled up into a high ponytail and her thin lips were slicked with vibrant red lipstick.

“Uh yeah, sure.” I replied.

“So are we waiting for one more?” She asked as she poured the coffee. Her tone was blasé and I realized that I had that same tone when I was administering customer service satisfactory surveys to people over the phone.

“Yes, I’m waiting for one more.” I replied. I checked my cell phone to see the time, but as I did so, I saw Brandon leave from a beat up clunker of a car. He was early as well. He closed the car’s heavy door and fixed his hair in the side mirror. That struck me as odd. Brandon had never willingly combed his hair unless I specifically asked him to.

He was dressed in a pair of black pants and a blue polo shirt that said “Michelson’s Auto Repair” on the front. He scanned the window seating as he walked towards the front door. When his eyes met mine, he grinned and gave me a small wave.

The waitress saw my face watching Brandon and tactfully said, “I’ll let you two get settled in and then I’ll check back with you in a couple of minutes, okay? By the way, the dinner special tonight is a homemade turkey dinner which comes complete with mashed potatoes, your choice of a vegetable side, and our house special gravy.”

Brandon walked past the windows and jogged up the small stoop which led to the diner’s interior. He looked like he was doing better since I had last seen him. Granted, our last conversation ended with me slamming the door to my mom’s house in his face, but he looked more confident and healthier. The pervasive five o’clock stubble that he use to sport with pride was gone, and he had lost some weight. His light blond hair was combed but driving with the window rolled down made it windswept despite his quick attempt and finger-combing his way through it.

All in all though, he looked good.

“Hey.” Brandon said as he sat down in the booth. “Did you find the place alright?”

“Yeah, it wasn’t too hard to find. It’s right next to the bus stop.” I pointed out.

“Oh yeah.” He agreed and settled into the booth. “So…”

“So…” I echoed. My stomach was a flutter of nerves.
“How are you doing?” He asked.

“I’m doing fine.” I replied.

Yoba, if this was going to be the peak of my eloquence tonight, I’d be better off communicating in sign language. So I tried to give a little more effort into the conversation. “I see you have a new job?”

He looked down at his shirt and beamed. “Oh yeah! I’ve been working at Michealson’s for the past month or so fixing cars. I finally finished my training with them and now I’m getting paid a full wage. In six more months, I’ll get health benefits!”

“Brandon, that’s great!” I replied.

“Yeah!” He exclaimed, “And did you see my car?”

He was beaming from ear to ear as he gestured to the beat up Oldsmobile sitting in-between two SUVs. It didn’t matter to him if his car looked like he had driven it out of a junkyard. It was his and he was proud. And for that I couldn’t fault him.

“That’s really great Brandon. I’m happy for you.” I said.

During our entire relationship, Brandon had owned only one car but he totaled it the summer after we graduated and never had the money to buy another one. He had to rely on friends, public transportation, or my mom to bring him anywhere.

“Yeah the car is my pride and joy right now. I bought it from an elderly man off the internet. He had a lot of maintenance and improvements done to it so it runs well, but it’s not the prettiest thing out there.” He replied with a fondness that only a man could have over a vehicle.

“So. You have a new car and a new job. You’ve been doing pretty well then, huh?”

He nodded. “You know. I think our time apart has really forced me to grow and mature. I feel like I really had to … find myself, you know? Like I had to mature and all that.”

“Maturing. Yep you mentioned that.” I replied, not disguising the incredulity in my voice. After all, I had no reason to distrust him, but my inner voice was telling me that something here was fishy. “Well, I’m happy that you have grown so much. You do look great. Being employed and being happy suits you.”

“Thanks.” he replied and reached across the table to take my hand. I discretely pulled my hand from his grasp and settled both of my hands safely in my lap. But before that exchange could become too awkward, the waitress came by with a notepad and a pen.

“Are you two folks ready to order?” She asked with just the right amount of friendliness and cool detachment.

Brandon nodded, “Yeah. I’ll have the spicy pepper poppers with an extra helping of dipping sauce, and I’ll have a Joja Cola too.”

The waitress dictated his order and then turned her attention to me. “I’ll just have coffee, thanks.”

Truthfully, I was starving after working all morning with Robin. Even my modest picnic lunch hadn’t quelled the rumbling in my stomach, but I also knew how this usually went. On the rare
chance that Brandon and I did go out on a date night, I'd always be stuck paying. He was the king of excuses. Sometimes his debit card mysteriously wouldn’t work, or he'd leave his wallet at home. One time, he tried to pay for our date night at a fast food restaurant with an expired gift card. So, fool me once shame on you, but fool me twice …

“You’re not eating?” Brandon said as soon as the waitress left to fill our orders. “You’re not going anorexic on me, are you? I always thought you looked better with some weight on you.”

“Really? No. I’m not going anorexic, I have a freezer full of home grown and homemade foods at home, and I’d rather eat them before they go bad.”

Okay, so that was the partial truth but coming outright to tell him that I was worried he wouldn’t be able to pay for my meal sounded rather insulting considering all of his pride and recent hard work.

He shrugged. “I guess that means you’re a cheap date then.”

“Is that what this is? A date?” I asked carefully.

“Well I did ask you out.” He grinned.

“I thought you just wanted to talk.” I said firmly. “I didn’t think this was a date.”

“Hmm… I guess that explains why you’re dressed down.” He said, mostly to himself. “What happened to those cute skirts you use to wear?”

I rolled my eyes, “Skirts aren’t that practical when you’re working outside every day.”

“Oh that’s right.” He said dismissively. ”So the farming life is going that well?” I noted the disbelief in his voice and frowned. He continued, ”I … I don’t know, I honestly thought that you’d be back after starving out there or becoming bored to death. I mean, how many channels does your Grandpa’s television even have anyway?”

There was the Brandon I knew and loved for longer than necessary.

I bristled at his judgements, “I’m doing fine out there. More than fine, actually. I have a coup full of chickens that I’ve raised to adulthood. I have a garden full of fruits and vegetables that seems to get bigger every week, and I’m saving up money to build a barn so I can start owning some milk cows and maybe a horse.”

“And you apparently have a boyfriend.” He added. His eyebrow was cocked in a sardonic expression.

“What?! No I don’t.”

He took a drink of his soda but his smug grin was still evident on his face, “Well according to your mom, you’ve been getting pretty friendly with a guy from the town.”

“I’m friends with a lot of people in the town.” I replied coolly.

“Well, Caroline told your mom that you were making out with some dude in the library. Who is it? Sam? Oh Yoba, don’t tell me it’s a woman. You’re not switching teams are you?”

Now, I’m not normally a violent person but I wanted to hit Brandon upside the head at that moment. But I reached into the depths of my self control and forced my response out through gritted teeth, “What in Yoba’s name is your problem? Is this why you invited me here? Just so you
could badger me about my personal life. And to top it off, my mom has no business telling you anything. Especially when she has no idea what she's talking about!"

“Well your mom said that he -- or she. -- had long hair.” he grumbled and took another drink of his soda. His cool demeanor was replaced with indignant vindication.

I slammed my fist down on the table so hard that our silverware jumped. “My mom shouldn’t be talking to you! None of this is any of your business!”

I got a few glares and annoyed looks from other patrons at my outburst, and I sank into the booth wishing I could just disappear into the wood like a chameleon. I should just leave, I thought. But the next bus back to Pelican Town wasn’t scheduled to leave for another half hour.

I took a couple deep breaths and tried to regain control. “Look Brandon. We broke up. I’m trying to move on and do better for myself. I mean, you look great and you have a job and a car. You seem to be doing well and I’m happy for you, but I don’t know what you thought you’d accomplish by meeting with me here. Especially not if you’re going to bring up rumors and things that you don’t know anything about.”

Brandon’s reeled back as though I had slapped him anyway. And his voice lowered into an angry, rushed whisper. “I wanted to meet you here to show you that I’ve got my life together now and that you can come back to me. Hell, I even have an apartment of my own. We had a break and it helped both of us grow, but now it’s time to get back together.”

“We’re not getting back together.” I snapped. “This is going to sound harsh, but I’ve moved on. I’m sorry.”

“You’ve moved on? Please. As if I’d believe that.” He said, his own voice raising now. “I mean, you had your fun messing around with what’s his — or her — face in that podunk town, but I’ve worked really hard for you here. A little appreciation would be nice.”

I sighed. “Look, I’m happy that you did all of this for yourself. You look healthier and happier now than the entire time that we were together—”

“— I didn’t do this for me.” He interrupted. “I did this for you. For us. I want us to make it. I wanted to show you that I am responsible and that I do give a shit about things. But that doesn’t seem to count to you I guess.”

I rubbed my temples and I felt the pinprick of tears sting my eyes. Just then, the waitress came with the pepper poppers and asked if we needed anything else.

“We’re fine.” I replied dryly. My own coffee was empty but I knew that having another cup would keep me wired and awake for the rest of the night, so I just sipped on my water instead.

“You should at least eat some of my poppers.” he said and pushed the basket towards me. “You look like you’re wasting away.”

“I’m not hungry, and I didn't ask for your opinions.” I said firmly, pushing the basket back to him.

We … or at least Brandon … ate in silence and it was an awkward silence that threatened to suffocate me and drive me out of the restaurant. I thought about Elliott and our kiss in the library. I thought about how easily I caved to his magnetism and how the passion that crackled between us nearly swept me away. I craved that. I hungered for more. I had never felt something like that for another person, including Brandon, and catching a glimpse of that world where passion and desire was just as much a part of the relationship as trust, friendship, and teamwork, was like glimpsing
paradise through a jail cell.

“So have you slept with him yet?” Brandon’s voice interrupted my thoughts.

“Excuse me?!”

Apparently while I was lost in a daydream, Brandon was silently seething as he ate.

“Have you slept with him yet?” He repeated. “I mean, it took you a year and a half of us being together before you were willing to give it up, so…”

“Dammit Brandon, I was eighteen! You were my first! Give me a break!” I yelled not caring who heard. But by the sound of the entire restaurant quieting to a dull murmur, I knew that everybody had heard.

Shame burned my face and in a hushed whisper I said, “I don’t know what you expected to happen by meeting me here, but I hope you’ve had your cruel fun because this has been the worst night of my life. Sometimes I wonder how I became so brain dead as to actually tolerate this for seven damn years.”

I rifled through my coin pouch and slammed gold coins down on the table to pay for my coffee. Tears dribbled down the sides of my face and I needed to escape that blasted restaurant. I hated crying, but crying in public was one of my worst nightmares.

“Morgan, don’t be—” Brandon started but I cut him off. I knew he was going to say ‘don’t be ridiculous’ and I may have hit him then and there if he finished that sentence.

“Goodbye Brandon. Don’t ever contact me again, and don’t ever contact my mom again…for anything. It’s my life, and what I do with it is none of your business.” I rose from the booth as our waitress was coming over with the bill.

“Your money is on the table.” I snarled and I stormed past her and past couples and families who were enjoying nice dinners out. I could feel their eyes on my back like laser pointers and I ducked my head as though I could hide from their judgment.

The evening weather was hot and sticky, but the sun setting over the large corporate farms that surrounded the main expressway casted a golden hue to everything. I wish I could’ve appreciated it more, but my mind was elsewhere.

As I walked back to the bus stop to wait another forty-five minutes for the bus to arrive, I pulled out my cell phone and called my mom. She picked up on the first ring.

“Hello?”

I jumped into my tirade as the anger built into a bubbling torrent, “Mom! Why the Hell did you tell Brandon that I had a boyfriend? In fact, why are you telling him anything about me? I’m not dating him anymore!”

I heard her sigh on the other end, “Morgan, he called me last week to show me the car he had bought. He was really proud of it, honey. It’s an accomplishment for him, and I mean I look at him like he’s my son-in-law. Then he asked about you and I told him the truth.” She replied in that annoying maternal voice that was meant to placate my concerns instead of address them head-on.

“Caroline’s rumors are NOT the truth!” I shouted.
“Morgan Grace you need to calm down otherwise I will hang this phone up until you can get ahold of yourself and stop shouting at me.” She scolded. “And I know for the fact they're the truth. Her daughter Abigail Facechatted or Snapbooked or whatever you call it and put it online. That’s how Brandon heard about it, I guess. He called to confirm it with me and sent me a link to the picture.”

I fell silent. Abigail was there? I was almost completely sure we were alone. Then I felt uncomfortable. Were there other times that she was spying on us? Paranoia crept in under my skin and I wondered if she could somehow be watching this conversation now.

“So you saw the picture?” I asked. Now embarrassment added a deeper burn to the shame that coursed through my body.

“Yes. I mean. It’s not a clear picture. It looks like it was taken in between some bookshelves.”

There was a pregnant pause on the other end and I already knew the follow up question she was going to ask. “T—that’s not a girl, is it? Not that there’s anything wrong with that! I just didn’t know you liked girls.”

I groaned and hit my head against the back of the bus stop awning. “He’s not a girl.” I mumbled guiltily, "He just has long hair. And I don’t like girls. I’ve liked boys my entire life, but thanks for the support if I ever decide to broaden my horizons.”

My mother sighed at my sarcasm, “Look Morgan, you can do whatever you want with the men you date but don’t forget that you and Brandon had been together for nearly six years and then you left him without a word. He deserved an explanation.”

“I gave him an explanation when I broke up with him.” I groused.

My mother always did this. Ever since I left Brandon, my mother has treated me with the same suspicion and guilt that you’d give a criminal who needed to turn himself into the police. Before I moved to Grandpa’s farm, I constantly heard about how I wasn’t being fair to him, that leaving him high and dry without a place to live was just cruel, and that she never thought that I’d do the same thing my father did and walk out on a person I loved.

Yeah…that last one really cut me.

I was eight months old when my father left my mother and never came back, but she still talked about him with the same reverence and expectations that you’d reserve for some deity. That is until she met Chuck.

Although I did leave Brandon, I didn’t get a chance to formally end it until he came to my mother’s house drunk and emotional. He begged me to take him back. He did everything under the sun to apologize and promise that he’d do better, but I wouldn’t be swayed. To be honest, I think I had checked out of that relationship a year before and only finally had the guts to do something about it.

My mother sighed again, “Well I don’t know what you want me to say Morgan. He called me up. We started chatting. Then he asked me about you, and then asked about your new boyfriend. I didn’t believe it until he sent me the picture. I never knew you liked guys with long hair.”

I smacked myself in the forehead. “Mom. For the last time, Elliott is not my boyfriend.”

“Morgan, it’s fine. I know it’s all the rage now to just hook up willy nilly and stuff, but I never thought that my daughter would date around like that. It’s just something I’ll need to get use to.” She huffed.
“I’m not dating around, Moomom.” I whined petulantly like I did when I was a teenager. “Stop! Just stop, okay?”

“Stop what?”

“Just — just stop.” I floundered, “Stop talking to Brandon. Stop listening to Caroline’s rumors. Stop looking at creeper stalker pictures that are taken by a seventeen year old girl who obviously has too much damn time on her hands. Just stop, okay?”

“Fine Morgan. Look, I know you’re happy at your Grandpa’s farm and everything, but don’t let this dream of yours interfere with your life. There are people in Zuzu City who are asking about you. Brandon is trying to better himself for you, and you’re out there like some damn hermit avoiding everyone. I’m just worried about you darling.” She said this in the same tone that she had when she called my moving out to the farm my ‘quarter life crisis.’

“Goodbye Mom.” I said through gritted teeth and I hung up before she could respond back.

My hands trembled as I slid the phone back into my purse. From the bus stop, I could see Brandon get into his car and start the loud engine. I thought about hiding behind the bus stop just in case he drove past to harass me some more, but he pulled out of the driveway and turned in the opposite direction to head back to the express way and back to Zuzu City.

As I waited a half an hour for the bus to arrive, I became consumed by my thoughts. They started off as muddled fragments of memory and feeling and then they exploded into full memories of Brandon and I. When the bus did arrive, I grabbed a seat in the back corner and rested my head against the window.

The first thoughts were about Brandon and I in high school. My teenage years were rough for me — as they are with almost everyone — but in high school, I found myself playing an act like I was on stage.

Most of my friends didn’t think that fishing, farming, or doing outdoor work was cool. That’s what all the hicks did over at Zuzu South Central High, and I wasn’t a hick. To prove that, I stopped visiting my Grandpa in the summer, and I know my absence hurt his feelings. I stopped dressing in my casual jeans and t-shirts, and started wearing more skirts, cut-off shorts, and cute halter tops. In fact, I hid the t-shirt that my Grandpa had sent me from the Stardew Valley Fair because I was embarrassed that he’d have the audacity to think I’d like something that came from a county fair instead of a mall.

I sighed and more tears fell down my cheeks. I was kind of a brat, I guess.

In addition to hanging at the mall’s arcade or food court, my mom’s marriage to Chuck certainly didn’t help things. I thought he was trying to be my dad. And in those times, what I wanted and needed the most was a dad. I often wonder that if my dad hadn’t left me when I was a baby, whether I would’ve even dated Brandon in the first place.

As high school breezed by, I wrapped myself up in his world. I lived and breathed Brandon’s life. We went to prom together. We got drunk at the abandoned municipal lot with our friends. We both graduated with unremarkable grades and we went on to live unremarkable lives. About three years into our relationship, I began to realize that I screwed up somewhere and it took me two more years to realize that the somewhere was more of a someone.

The worst part was that Brandon was the first boy that paid attention to me. Everything that I did was ‘awesome’ or ‘cool.’ My friends warned me that he was just saying that to get into my pants,
but I didn’t believe it. And to prove it, I made him wait — not for lack of his trying, however. When we finally did have sex, it was underwhelming to say the least. And the more we tried, the more mediocre it became. Even years into our relationship, our sex life wasn’t that remarkable, and I thought that was my fault. We’d go for months without having sex and I thought that was normal. Sex was just a chore. It was like vacuuming or taking out the trash. But that didn’t stop me from having hormones and desires like any other woman.

The night after Elliott fished me from the ocean on that cold April morning, I had a strange feeling in my gut that I couldn’t shake. As I fell asleep, I could barely breathe. I was restless and needy so I touched myself and thought about his hands over mine. I thought about how his warm, dry clothes smelled while mine were washing, and I thought about how his lips would feel on mine.

That night I climaxed with another man’s name on my lips and was smitten ever since then. I tried to maintain my distance, of course. I’m not a clingy person and raw lust was one thing but starting a relationship was something completely different. After Elliott’s kiss in the library and his heart-to-heart with me during the recent summer storm, I thought that I was beginning to make some headway in getting closer to the enigmatic author.

Hell, I wanted to get closer to him, but now I felt that Brandon would somehow mess everything up.

By the time I pulled myself out of my thoughts, the bus was approaching the Pelican Town bus stop. I wiped the tears from my eyes and grabbed my purse. The coffee I had at the diner was still buzzing through my mind, and I knew that if I went home, I’d sit alone and stew on these unpleasant thoughts some more.

When I got off the bus, lightning bugs danced around the path that led to the main gravel road. I could’ve easily turned right and walked back home but I decided to head towards the Saloon.

By the time I got there, almost everyone had left for the night. Shane and Pam sat in their respective corners while Emily, the bartender, was scrolling through her phone. She looked up at me when I came in and she smiled politely.

“Hey Morgan. Fancy seeing you out this late. You here for a drink?”

I slid onto a barstool and fished out some gold from my purse. “Yeah, I need something strong.” I said, “I’ve had a rough evening.”

“Well, we do have a variety of wine. Our summer blend wine is fresh for the season. We also have a nice shandy beer on tap.” She replied.

I scanned the liquor bottles behind her. I knew I’d regret this in the morning, but at that point I didn’t care.

“Whisky and cola, please.”

Shane’s usually stoney face perked up at the mention of whisky. He chuckled, “You’re a girl after my own heart.”

I nodded politely. Shane’s lopsided, beer-inspired grin took years off his prematurely aged face. I didn’t know what to say in response back since our previous encounters never went past him grunting like an annoyed animal when I said “Hi.” Prior to this interaction, I didn’t realize that he was capable of human speech.

Emily set a lowball full of ice onto the bar and fixed my drink. She poured a healthy amount of
amber whisky into the glass, filled the rest with Joja Cola, then passed it to me.

I sipped it tentatively and felt the small hairs on my arms tingle from the potent booze. I stirred the drink with the straw and sipped again. This time the taste was more even with the cola.

“Thanks.” I replied.

“So, how’s the farm going?” Emily asked. “Robin told me that the storm knocked down a lot of your trees.”

I nodded and recounted the work that Robin and I did on the farm. As I drank, I felt the warmth that burned my face turn from shame to merriment. My head was spinning with the booze and suddenly another drink appeared on the tails of the first one. I gave Emily a questioning look and she motioned to Shane.

“That one was on him.” She said.

He toasted me with his mug of beer and I toasted back. I liked drunk Shane.

At about nine-thirty, Penny, the school teacher came in to walk her mother back home. Her dark red hair was wrapped up into a bun and was held up with what looked to be metal chopsticks. She didn’t say anything to us. In fact, I think she pretended like none of us were even there, so we did the same, and kept our faces forward as she helped her mother, stumbling and slurring, out of the bar.

Shane showed me how to play a shaking dice game that Emily had behind the counter. We put a gold coin down as his bet and he shook first. I didn’t really understand the rules of the game, but after taking the allowed three shakes, I lifted the cup to find they were all sixes.

“No way!” Shane exclaimed. “That’s like never happened. In all of the time of Shake-A-Day here, has that happened Emily?”

Emily saw my five sixes and shook her head with a smile. “That is a pretty lucky roll.”

“You are like a walking horseshoe my friend.” Shane exclaimed and patted me on the back. “Get this girl another drink!”

By ten, I was on my third drink and my mind was feeling fuzzy. It was a feeling that I simultaneously loved and hated. Meanwhile, Shane was playing songs off the jukebox in the game room while trying to drag me to dance with him.

“I don’t dance!” I exclaimed mid-laugh. “No really. I have two left feet.”

Shane shrugged and turned back to the jukebox while I turned to Emily. “Is Shane usually this friendly?”

“Only when he’s drinking.” She replied seriously. “And you, missy? ‘I think maybe you should slow down, huh? I mean, no judgement here, but you must’ve really had a tough day if you’re slamming these like they are water.”

I shrugged and drank headily from the full glass, not tasting the whisky anymore. “If you call getting h-har-harrassed by your ex at some shitty diner tough, then yes. I’ve had a tough day.”

My voice sounded strange to me and I frowned. Articulating my words took more mental power than I was use to. “And I didn’ get to eat because I knew Brandon woulda made me pay. And
that’s jus’ stupid.”

“Who’s Brandon?” Emily asked.

“My ex” I said.

“Well, I wish the kitchen was open because I’d make you something to eat, but Gus is out of town tonight. Sorry.” Emily replied with a frown.

I waved off her apology, “S’not your fault.”

Then my bladder reminded me that although I hadn’t had much to eat today, I certainly had more than enough fluids.

“D’you got a bathroom? I asked Emily.

She pointed off to the left where the small dining area was and I slid off the stool. My legs felt like rubber and I grabbed onto the stool next to me to maintain my balance. I fixed my eyes on the door that said “Ladies” and focused all my attention on walking straight. I think I did a pretty good job until I got into the bathroom and stumbled into the stall.

As I took care of business, I tried to read the advertisements that were framed and were on the inside of the stall door but the words blurred together. When I rose to my feet and pulled up my shorts, I felt a painful lurch in my stomach.

Uh oh.

I dropped to the ground and heaved into the toilet bowel. All the blood vessels in my face seemed to contract as though they were helping my body expel the alcohol from my body. Tears and snot ran down my face uncontrollably. When the tempest in my stomach quieted to a small rumble, I grabbed toilet paper and tried to wipe my face.

I rested my head against the closed bathroom stall and closed my eyes hoping my brain would stop spinning in my skull.

Then a knock came at the door. “Morgan, are you alright?”

It was Emily.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine.” I said. My voice was hollow and breathy. “I’ll … uh … be right out.”

“Okay.” She replied, “Elliott’s here to take you home. I didn’t know who else to call. The bar’s closing soon.”

I blinked dumbly. Closing? It was nine-thirty or ten at the latest. But when I checked my cell phone, I saw that it was five to midnight

“Damn! Sorry! Okay, I’ll be right out.” I said.

I flushed the toilet and went to wash my hands. I looked at my face in the mirror and groaned. Blood vessels had broke beneath my skin giving me a chicken-pocked look. My mascara had smeared off and my dirty blond hair was wild and wispy from the humidity. My blue eyes looked dull from the alcohol. If I was sober, I would’ve said that I looked like a zombie.

I stepped out into the bar trying my damnedest to walk straight but it still wasn’t happening. Emily
was turning the lights off and locking the cash register. Shane was gone, but Elliott was leaning with his back up against the bar. He had my brown purse slung over his shoulder as though he walked around with a purse everyday. He was wearing his typical red suit jacket over his lithograph Old Man and the Sea t-shirt. His rusty red hair cascaded over his shoulder like a waterfall and he chatted with Emily as she closed up.

Dammit, I thought, This wasn’t fair. Elliott looked like some magazine model for men’s sport coats, while I looked like, and probably smelled like, I slept in a whisky barrel.

As I walked towards them, Elliott turned to me and smiled. “Hey Morgan, are you ready to go?”

“I — um, you don’ have to walk with me home.” I said. “I’m okay.”

Emily shook her head. “Elliott has given me his solemn promise to get you home safely. As your bartender, that’s my job. Neither of us will take ‘no’ for an answer.”

I looked balefully at her and then looked at my feet. The pleasant glow from the whisky was replaced once again with more shame. It had been a long time since a man babysat me while I was drunk. Usually it was the other way around. “Well, I’m ready to go I guess.”

“Have a goodnight, Emily.” Elliott said genially.

I waved goodbye and marched out of the bar like a convict being marched down a prison ward. The midnight air as only slightly cooler than the evening and I could feel myself already sweating.

“You know, you really don’t have to do this.” I grumbled trying to mask my stumble as a purposeful misstep.

“Yes I do.” He replied. “You saved me from that storm and let me take refuge in your house while it passed. It’s the least I can do to repay the favor.”

“It’s not storming.” I pointed out.

“Not all storms are literal.” he replied wryly. Unfortunatly, the double meaning of his comment was lost on my drunk mind.

I huffed and stumbled over my feet when the cobblestone street transitioned to a gravel road. Elliott grabbed my arm to keep me from face planting in the dirt and steadied me.

“There was a root.” I grumbled.

“How about we just take it slow, hm?” He suggested.

“I don’t want to take it slow.” I complained.

“But you might trip and fall.”

“I don’t care.”

I had a sinking feeling that we weren’t just talking about my inability to walk straight.

“Well, I do.” he replied. “Take it from a guy who rolled his ankle. My job doesn’t require much from me physically, but I know you’d be beating yourself up in the morning if you were laid up because of a nasty fall.”

“Ohay, I guess. We’ll gooo sloooow.” I loosely drawled. My skin felt too hot and I was unbearably
thirsty. I should’ve asked Emily for a bottle of water before she closed up.

“Are you doing okay?” Elliott asked. His dry, warm hand held my bicep gently but firmly to keep me from toppling over disobedient feet.

“No. I’m drunk.” I replied.

He chuckled, “I can see that. But I meant, are you doing okay … personally. You look like you’ve been crying.”

I bristled and almost shot back that it was none of his business, but all I said was, “Yep.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

I sighed, “I don’t know.”

Then the tears came again. Sober tears were one thing; I could easily let them drip down my face in silence to maintain some of my dignity, but drunk tears were something else completely. I stopped and clutched myself again. A sob tore from my chest and I pulled out of Elliott’s grasp.

“Morgan?” He asked in concern.

“No. Just…just I just…just I just hate this.”

He gently held on to my arm, but this time he turned me to face him. His salt and pine scent hit me again and I almost wanted to slap him for having the audacity to smell so damn good.

“I don’t understan—“

“I don’t either!” I interrupted. My voice echoed down the road. “I — I’m not sure what’s happening. I don’t know who I am anymore. Like, I came here expecting that I could just leave my problems back in Zuzu City and they seem to find a way to haunt me anyways. I don’t know! I love the farm. I love being here. I have goals and a life that I want. But Brandon can’t see that.”

“Who’s Brandon?” Elliott asked. He didn’t seem jealous or concerned, just confused. Apparently Emily didn’t tell him that particular detail.

I sighed, suddenly sober as I remembered our fight at the diner, “He’s my ex.”

“Oh.” Elliot said lightly. “And he’s the one who drove you to drink?”

Damn him, he was astute.

“Kin’ of…” I slurred, “Brandon was trying to get back together with me. It’s a long story though, and I don’t know if I can tell it right now while I’m … in this state. Besides, it’s dumb. It’s all dumb. I’m dumb for dating him. I’m dumb for believing that he’s changed for the better. I’m —“

“Morgan, stop.” Elliott said.

“No!” I replied petulantly. “I mean, I try to move on and have a happy life but then Abigail posts one picture of us together and suddenly I’m a whore.”

“Wait, what? What picture? What are you talking about?” Elliott’s face swam in front of my eyes and I stumbled backwards against the trunk of a large oak tree. He grabbed my shoulders and tried to keep me balanced. “Morgan, I don’t understand what you’re talking about.”
I groaned and tried to walk out of his grasp but he held fast and I quickly gave up. I blinked my eyes furiously as though if I kept blinking then the world would stop spinning around me.

“Can I sit down and talk? I can’t stand anymore.” I whimpered.

“Sure.” He replied and helped me plop ungracefully into the grass beneath the tree and sat next to me. “Now what’s this about a picture?”

I huffed and blew strands of hair out of my face. I spoke slowly but at least all of my words were clear and articulate. “Apparently Abigail took our picture when we kissed in the library. My ex knew about it because my mom told him. My mom knew about it because Caroline told her…”

“Morgan, I’m so sorry that my lapse in judgement caused you so much pain.” Elliott said genuinely remorseful. “I — I had no idea that Abigail was even there.”

I groaned and swatted at him. I hit his arm lightly but I was too drunk to put any force behind my hit. “Don’t apologize for that! Dammit, if Abigail wants to be some teenage stalker and post pictures of PDA online then that’s her business. But never apologize for kissing me. I already told you that I kissed you back. Apologizing for it just makes me feel more like a jackass.”

Elliott took my hand. This time his touch wasn’t controlling and firm, it was gentle and consoling. “Then I’m sorry you’re going through a rough time.”

“Thanks.” I mumbled feeling only slightly better. “Who would’ve thought that drinking whisky on an empty stomach wasn’t the solution to all of my problems.”

Elliott chuckled, “If the solutions to our problems was that easy, then Gus would be a millionaire.”

I blinked a few times and looked at him. If I was sober, I would’ve know that I was looking at him far longer than what was usually socially acceptable and he was starting to get a little nervous.

“You doing oka—“

“—Why are you so nice?” I blurted out.

He looked taken aback. “I--I don’t know. I guess because being a nice person is a good thing to do?”

“No.” I wined. “You have a … a conscious. Like you do nice things for people because it’s nice to do. I saw you helping Willy put in his rowboats the other day. And you get along well with everyone in the town. I — you’re a nice person. I don’t know that many nice people.”

“Well thank you for that compliment.” He said and rose to his feet. He helped me up but my legs felt like jello and I was having trouble balancing so he ended up half-picking me up and setting me on my feet.

“You’re strong too.” I mumbled and nuzzled into his shoulder as he set me on my feet.

“Okay, let’s get you home before I get an overinflated ego.” He said with a chuckle.

As we walked along the dirt road, he held my hand in his and guided me around potholes and large rocks. Thankfully the nearly full moon made it plenty bright for us to see. We walked in silence, or at least in mostly silence on account of my labored panting from walking almost two miles while drunk, and we finally reached the farm at around one in the morning.
Golden jumped up in the window. Her little mouth opened into what I could only imagine as an outraged meow. The tip of her tail flicked to and fro as she prepared to berate me for my lateness.

“It looks like she’s missed you.” Elliott replied as he helped me up the three wooden stairs to the porch.

I opened the door and the cat raced out, weaved in between my legs, and scratched at my bare legs. I followed the cat inside and Elliott followed the both of us. I turned on the lamp beside the door and grabbed Golden’s food bowel from the table.

“Um. So. Here’s my house.” I replied. “I’d give you a tour but —“

“I’ve been in your house before.” He grinned. “If my memory serves, we spent a lot of time in the bathroom.”

“Yeah…” I replied. “Oh yeah, I remember.”

“So do you need help getting to your bed?” Elliott said.

I kicked off my sandals and Elliott dropped my purse by the door. I looked at what I was wearing, shorts and a t-shirt, and figured that was decent enough to sleep in. I wasn’t dexterous enough to change into pajamas and I didn’t have the courage to ask Elliott to help me out of my clothes. Okay, well I did want that but I figured that it would be too forward considering this evenings events.

“No. I’m just gonna sleep in my clothes.” I murmured.

“You may want to drink some water before bed.” He suggested. “Do you have any aspirin or pain reliever for the morning?”

I nodded mutely and picked up the bottle that was perched on the kitchen window, grabbed a glass, and filled it with water. I brought both into the bedroom and Elliott drew open the covers for me. As I drank the water, I could feel the blackness pulling me down into sleep.

“Careful.” He murmured and removed the cup from my hand. He set the cup and the aspirin on the end table and helped me into bed.

“I’m sorry.” I murmured.

“No. No more apologies tonight. I think we both apologized enough to each other for today.” He sighed. I felt his weight on the bed. His dry hand stroked across my brow and pushed back my long bangs that fell into my face.

I don’t remember when he left. I don’t remember anything else except complete and total darkness.
The Aftermath (Rated T)

Chapter Notes

Thank you for your patience with me getting this chapter out. I've appreciated all of the kudos and comments from you fine readers. Your support means everything to me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 9 -- The Aftermath

July 9th (Summer)

I woke up feeling like my head was being squished by a truck tire. The persistent headache that ran across my entire forehead throbbed with every beat of my pulse. My throat felt like I had swallowed cotton, and I was simultaneously too hot and too cold to get comfortable enough to fall back asleep.

Golden was lying on the cat bed that I had bought for her. She rarely used it; she preferred to sleep in bed with me, but perhaps my alcohol-soaked stench or my unresponsiveness scared her away. Whatever the case was, she looked at me with reproachful eyes and flicked her tail over her nose and went back to sleep.

I groaned as I rolled onto my side. I didn’t drink enough to fully black out but piecing together the memories of last night was a bit difficult. I remembered Elliott walking me home, and I remember telling him about Brandon and the picture that Abigail took, and ...”

Oh Yoba.

All of the apologies that I issued to him echoed in my mind like a broken record. I couldn’t believe how pathetic I sounded. He didn’t need to know about my baggage and my issues with Brandon, and yet I spilled my heart out like some mopey teenage girl.

I tried to sit up, which was a feat in and of itself, and then I saw the glass of water and the bottle of aspirin on my nightstand.

There was a note next to it written in neat cursive that said: I’m sorry that you had such a bad time last night. I hope you’re feeling better, but knowing how whisky works you’ll probably be hurting for a while. If you need to blow off more steam, you know where to find me. See you for dinner tonight (if you feel up to it...there’s no pressure). I’m thinking around 7 pm? Yours truly, Elliott.

I blinked my eyes and ran my tongue along the roof of my mouth. The sticky aftertaste of soda and the raw alcohol taste from the whisky remained which made my head throb once more. I pulled the pillow over my head and tried to lay still in the darkness but I couldn’t go back to sleep.

“Dammit.” I grumbled and I propped myself up onto my elbows and then onto my hands.

The room spun and I closed one eye hoping that would do something to make it stop. It didn’t. My body felt uncomfortably hot and my stomach roared at me to feed it something substantial. Aside for my modest breakfast yesterday morning, the coffee at the diner, and the cocktails, I hadn’t had much to eat. Now I was afraid that I wouldn’t be able to keep anything down.
I tried to keep my movements slow and I reminded myself to breathe. Drinking some of the water helped wash away the terrible aftertaste, and taking the aspirin gave me hope that I wouldn’t always feel like death warmed over. With herculean effort, I finished the entire glass of water, burped rather undignifiedly, and trudged through the cabin to the shower.

My entire morning routine took twice as long as it normally did, partly because I was moving at half speed out of necessity to not puke again and partly because my mind was elsewhere.

I knew I had to confront Abigail about the picture, but Abigail and I didn’t have a strong history. She was a young toddler when I came to visit my Grandpa as a pre-teen. Even during the last summer that I was here, Abigail couldn’t have been six or seven years old. Even though she was seventeen now, I couldn’t see her as anything other than a kid.

I tried to think of how my Grandpa would’ve handled the situation. He didn’t become loved by the community without some effort. But then again, he probably wouldn’t have been making out with my Grandma in-between the library’s book stacks. By the time I got dressed, drank some more water, and began the two mile walk to town, I hadn’t gotten any closer to figuring out what I was going to say.

I got to Pierre’s shop a half an hour after it had opened. The bell over the door chimed when I went in and I could feel my heartbeat fluttering as I tried to figure out what I was going to say to his daughter.

Pierre was marking down yesterday’s receipts into a large ledger book. His blue eyes peered over glasses that were slipping towards the middle of his nose. I could hear the faint scratching of his pencil as he wrote. I waited patiently for him to be done and my eyes scanned over the fresh produce bins that sat off to the left of his register.

Most of the vegetables came from Marnie’s farm and the town’s small garden. Occasionally, Pierre would get a shipment of produce from farms outside of Pelican Town but the produce was often more expensive and quicker to spoil as it had to endure a longer travel. Joja always boasted that their produce was the ‘freshest guaranteed’ but then again Joja did own several large cooperate farms in the area. Sure the produce was cheap, but it didn’t taste the same as the food that came out of Pierre’s shop.

Pierre cleared his throat to get my attention and flashed me a warm, friendly smile.

“Good morning Morgan. What can I do for you today?”

“I ... Uh.” I stammered. “I was actually wondering if Abigail was here. I need to talk to her.”

“She’s probably in her room. I can go get her if you’d like. What is this about?”

I bit my lip. If I told the truth, I knew that I might get Abigail into trouble. I wanted to give her the benefit of the doubt. What if she never intended to post the picture? What if this was all a huge misunderstanding? I had to at least give her a chance.

“I was looking for advice on buying a new cell phone. I have the old flip phone that you could run over with a truck and I think its time for an upgrade. I’m useless with new technology and figured that if anyone would know, it would be Abigail.” I lied.

Pierre pursed his thin lips in thought. “To be honest, you’d be better off asking Sebastian. He’s our computer expert around here. He’s working on coding a website for us so we can eventually fill orders online.”
I smiled politely hoping my impatience didn’t sour my ruse, “Yeah I would’ve asked Sebastian, but I can never find him when he’s free. Besides, I don’t think this is something to bother him with when he’s on the clock, so to speak.”

That was at least partially the truth. I had only seen Sebastian twice since moving to Pelican Town and he was quiet as he was elusive.

“Well let me just check back in the house and see if Abigail’s available to talk. Would you wait here a moment?”

I nodded and browsed through some of the shelves while I waited. I saw a small display of CDs near the upright cooler that was tucked in the corner of the store. The CD cases had a crazy tie-dye swirl background and a photoshopped image of Sam, Abigail, and Sebastian rocking out. The album title *Memories of Yesteryear* stood out in large, white block lettering.

I snickered at the title. It was a little too New Age for my taste, but I couldn’t fault them for starting a band. I have no musical talent so people who do automatically gained some respect in my book.

Together, the three looked like legitimate musicians; Sam’s normally happy face was scrunched up in a thoughtful, brooding look that only teenagers could really perfect. The eldest of the group, Sebastian, looked naturally cool. A cigarette hung from his lips and his purple-black hair was slicked back and spiked. But Abigail was probably the edgiest of them all with her black knee-high boots, torn fishnet stockings, tight purple skirt, and skull and bones white tank top. Gold hoop earrings hung from her ears and several of her fingers had rings of different designs and colors. One ring was just a ball full of spikes.

As I was about to turn around, a breathy soprano voice said “Were you looking for a signed copy?”

Abigail stood before me with a pale hand on her hip. Her thick and long purple hair was brushed up into a messy ponytail, and she was wearing the same tight purple skirt from the album. However this top was just a simple black graphic t-shirt.

“Hey Abigail.” I said, trying to sound nonchalant. “I was hoping I could talk to you. Do you got a sec?”

She shrugged. I have to run up to Sebastian's to give him our latest song to mix. You can walk with me if you want.

I nodded mutely. My assessment of Abigail still being a child was completely blown out of the water. The woman before me exuded a badass rocker attitude that I was sort of jealous of. She was so sure of herself that confronting her about the picture seemed impossible. At first, I was afraid that I’d hurt her feelings by being blunt, but now I was more afraid that she’d hurt *me*.

I followed Abigail out of her father’s shop, waving good-bye to Pierre before we left, and I kept pace with her as we walked up the road which lead to the mountains.

“So Dad says you wanted to ask me about phones?” She asked with an impatient edge in her tone. As she said that, she took out her own cell phone and began texting someone in earnest.

“It was now or never I guess.

“Actually, I was hoping to talk to you about a picture you took with your phone.” I said. I was treading on dangerous ice here and I needed to handle this more delicately than I did my conversation with Brandon. I couldn't let my temper get in the way, I reminded myself.
“You’ll have to be more specific. I take tons of pictures with my phone.” Abigail replied. “And I don’t remember you following me on my social media accounts. I normally try to put pictures of my friends into albums otherwise it just gets too crazy to look at.”

“I didn’t follow you on anything social-media related.” I replied quickly. “But ... my ex-boyfriend did. And he saw the picture you took of Elliott and I at the library.”

Abigail thought for a moment and then grinned. “Oh yeah! You two had no idea I was even there, you were so into each other.”

I sighed, “Yeah that’s the problem Abigail. If we knew you were there, we wouldn’t have kissed. You took that picture of us and put it on social media where my ex saw it. He didn’t handle it well, and I just want you to take it down.”

Now she grew serious. “Yikes. I’m sorry. I -- I didn’t mean to have your ex give you grief over it. I thought it was a nice picture of you two, actually. That’s why I posted it. See?”

Abigail navigated to the picture in question and I saw that we were part of a group entitled “Caught in the Act.”

“What is that?” I asked.

“The group? Oh it’s something I joined a couple months ago. They post pictures of people engaged in PDA. Some of the pictures are really explicit -- like they’re almost naked and stuff. Someone once posted a picture of a girl giving a guy a blowjob on the street, but the majority of the pictures are really sweet, like yours.”

When she clicked on the picture to go full screen, I was caught off guard by how Elliott and I looked. The kiss I felt -- the reluctance, the regret, and the fearful passion -- was not what it looked like on camera.

Elliott’s eyes were closed but his eyebrows were frowning in concentration. His large hands were tenderly holding my face and the nape of my neck as his hard body pushed into mine. Likewise, my hands clutched at the back of his t-shirt and my slightly sunburned face was blushing red. I accepted Elliott’s body and my back was bent slightly to allow him to fully hold onto me. The satisfaction on my face was palatable.

“Oh...” I murmured.

“Yeah.” Abigail agreed. “I didn’t mean to snoop or anything, but I heard you guys talking and when I parted the books to look to see who it was, I saw you two like this. Morgan! Love like this has to be shared! There’s so much bullshit in the world. This group tries to spread pictures like this to offset all the shit we hear in the news about the Grotto Empire. You know? Make love, not war. Right?”

I was caught off guard by her passion. “The idea is really sweet Abigail, but you ... kind of invaded our privacy.”

Now she frowned. “I’m sorry, honestly I didn’t mean to hurt either of you. I just saw you two together and thought it was really sweet. I figured taking a picture of you two together was more appropriate than catching Marnie and Mayor Lewis together. I guess, in a way, I’m grateful it was you. They would’ve killed me if I would’ve taken a picture of them and put it online.”

“Wait, what? Marnie and Mayor Lewis are together?”
“Yeah. They’ve been secretly dating for almost a year and a half. They think nobody notices because we don’t say anything, but it’s super obvious.” She said, once again distracted by her phone.

I couldn’t wrap my head around that right now so I tried to focus on the task at hand. “Abigail, can you promise to not sneak around and take anymore pictures of Elliott and I. We’re friends. That’s all.”

“Uh huh. Sure.” She replied skeptically.

“What d’you mean?” I snapped.

She gestured vaguely at me with her cell phone. “C’mon, can you really not see how Elliott looks at you? I once saw him almost trip into the fountain in the center of town because he saw you leaving Gus’s Saloon after dinner. Yoba, I wish someone looked at me in the same way he looks at you.”

I rubbed my hands over my face feeling the sweat that accumulated there and wiped my damp hands on my shorts. “Well ... I just ... I ... Can you just delete the picture please?”

Blush colored my cheeks and I knew Abigail could tell. Still, she navigated to the image in question and clicked on the trashcan icon. “There. It’s done.”

“Thank you.” I replied.

Abigail looked at me in the eyes and the child that I thought would be there peaked through. “Hey. Are you going to tell my dad? If he knows that I’m part of this group, he’ll literally freak. He gets so over protective of me, it’s insane.”

“No I wont tell him.” I replied. “But you have to promise me that you’re done with snooping around. I don’t want to see other Pelican Town residents on that silly group even if it is meant to spread love.”

“Deal.” She replied and extended her hand to me.

I shook it. "Thank you."

“Hey, you should stop by Gus’s next weekend. Our band is playing at the saloon. It could be like a date night for you and Elliott.” Abigail suggested. “He and Leah went together when we played there over Christmas.”

“Leah?” I asked. I couldn’t keep the jealousy from my voice. I conjured a vague image of her in my mind but I didn’t really recognize her amid the other faces of new and old memories. “Is she the woman who lives just south of Marnie’s farm?”

“Yep.” Abigail replied. “She’s an artist. A sculptor actually and she helped Elliott get set up in his place when he moved here last fall.”

“Oh.”

Suddenly my jealous mind whispered into my ear a dark suspicion. Maybe Elliott’s previous relationship debacle wasn’t the true reason why he didn’t want to get involved with me. Maybe he was trying to let me down easy because he was in love with someone else. After all, an artist and a writer seemed like a natural match.

“Morgan don’t worry.” Abigail said, interrupting my jealousy spiral. “Elliott and Leah are just
friends.

“Cool.” My voice sounded hollow but I forced a smile. “You can’t have too many friends these days, I guess.”

“You should meet her. I think you’d like her.” Abigail replied. “You definitely seem her type if the whole Elliott thing doesn’t work out.”

I puzzled over what she meant by that as she made her way up the hill. Her purple ponytail swayed with each step and I watched her until she crested the hill and went out of sight.

That evening, I knocked on Elliott’s door at a quarter to seven with a casserole dish.

Elliott opened the door. He was wearing an apron over a plain navy blue t-shirt that hugged his broad chest in all the right ways. He was wearing green cargo shorts and was walking around the cabin barefoot. His long hair, which he normally wore tucked back behind his shoulders, was bound at the base of his neck by a thin hairband.

“Morgan! I’m glad to see you.” He said and welcomed me inside. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay.” I replied a bit sheepishly. “My headache finally went away at around three this afternoon, and I’ve been feeling progressively better but I still feel ... off.”

Elliott nodded sympathetically and took the casserole dish from me and placed it on the countertop.

“By the way, thank you for taking such good care of me last night and for walking me home. I’m just sorry that you had to see ... all of that.”

Elliott shook his head. “Not at all. Honestly, it’s alright. We all overindulge from time to time. Remember, I did bartend for a bit back in Zuzu City, and I’ve seen my share of drunk people. It sounded like you needed to vent.”

“Yeah.” I replied. I didn’t really want to drudge memories of our conversation from last night so I tried to change the subject.

I nodded and gestured at the dish, “I wasn’t sure what we were having so I made us some baked green beans, potatoes, and mushrooms. It was my Grandpa’s recipe.”

“Splendid, that dish will go well with the halibut that Willy gave me.” He replied. “While the fish bakes, would you care to sit outside? The cabin gets awfully stifling during the summer afternoons. I’ve opened all the windows, but it wont cool down until evening.”

“Sure. The ocean breeze will feel pretty nice.” I replied hoping my voice didn’t betray the heat pooling in my stomach “I’m pretty sweated too.”

“I just put the fish in and it will need to bake for about twenty minutes, so would you like something to drink while we wait? I have iced tea, water, coffee, and wine.”

My stomach churned at the thought of more alcohol and Elliott chuckled at my grimace, “I’m guessing the wine is a no.”

I nodded. “Iced tea sounds wonderful though.”

Elliott filled two tall glasses full of ice and poured the amber liquid into the plain glasses. The ice
clinked deliciously and he garnished each glass with a finely cut lemon wedge.

When Elliott removed the apron and draped it over the chair, I noticed thin lines of sweat running down his neck and forearms. His face looked flushed and tiny hairs near his forehead curled up in the humidity. *Yoba have mercy*, I thought.

“I helped Willy build some wooden chairs and a couple picnic tables for the luau. There’s a couple chairs that he left behind that we can sit in.” He said as he handed me a glass.

He held the door open for me and we walked out onto the grassy area that met the edge of the beech. He let the door swing shut just enough so he could still hear the oven’s timer. There were two heavy wooden chairs sitting to the left of his cabin. Elliot took one and I carefully lowered myself into the other so I wouldn’t spill my drink.

I sighed contentedly once I settled in. The cool ocean breeze ran through my hair and over my body drying the sweat that glistened on my skin. I closed my eyes and listened to the ocean waves beating against the shore.

“It’s beautiful out here.” I murmured. “The sound of the waves alone could put me to sleep.”

“Yes it is.” Elliott agreed. “The winter was pretty brutal, but its moments like this remind me that moving out of the city was the right choice.”

“Do you ever regret it?” I asked and then immediately felt stupid for asking the question. Apparently choosing innocuous dinner party conversations wasn’t my strong suit, so I leaned into it. “I -- I mean, do you ever miss the city?”

“I miss the passion I guess.” He replied thoughtfully. “But living in the city always brought out a rather manic side in myself. Everything was faster, bigger, and more intense, which was fun, but I didn’t like the person I was. Living out here and with these people seems more genuine. I feel more authentic to who I really am. Sometimes I miss the lights and the excitement of the city, but then I look out my window and I see this --” he gestured at the sea -- “and I know that I would do everything I could to not go back.”

I nodded. “My Grandpa once said that city people were just country people who hadn’t found their way home yet. When I think back to where I was only four months ago, I think he might’ve been right.”

Elliott’s warm hand gently clasped over my forearm. I’m sure he meant for the touch to be innocent, but my heart still jumped up into my throat. I opened my eyes and saw the complete sincerity reflected in his.

“You were made for this town Morgan. The work you’re doing on your farm, the way the town talks about you, it just shows that there’s nothing in this world that you should be doing differently.”

I rolled my eyes, “You make it sound like this was my destiny or something. Like the prodigal granddaughter has returned and now the entire town can finally be whole.”

He shrugged and removed his hand from my arm. I felt the loss immediately.

“The work you’ve done on your farm is impressive Morgan, don’t discount yourself. I can barely keep a flower alive in a vase let alone produce food from the ground. I’m sure your Grandfather would be proud.”
I blushed at the compliment and took a long drink from my iced tea so I had an excuse to do something with my hands and lips other than pull him in to kiss him.

Seagulls floated on the breeze and lazily swooped above the ocean’s surface to catch small baitfish. The odd crustacean milled through the sand and around the sea shells that littered the damp beach leaving small footprints behind. I thought I saw a fin of a dolphin or a shark emerge from the ocean out in the distance, but a large breaking wave curled around the creature and it disappeared out of sight.

I glanced over at Elliott; he seemed mesmerized by the sea like I was but his lips moved silently like he was whispering a prayer. The pure serenity on his face made him look more like a young boy rather than the man that he was and I felt like I was intruding on a private moment. When he saw me watching him, I saw a faint flush of embarrassment rise to his cheeks. He ran his left hand through his hair and looked down at his knees.

He chuckled, “I’m sorry. The ocean’s muse pulled me out to sea for a moment there. Normally I’m a better conversationalist.”

“I’m sorry for intruding.” I replied. “Were you praying or something?”

“Praying? Oh, no. I was reciting a sonnet that came into my head.” He said. “Living out here tends to excite the muses in me. What?!“

He noticed my grin and gave me a reproachful look. "I'm being serious Morgan."

“No! I just -- I --” I sputtered trying to find the right words. “Yoba, if my destiny is to run my Grandpa’s farm, then your destiny is definitely to become a poet laureate or something. You may not have a green thumb, but then again I’m about as creative as a burlap sack.”

I paused and angled my body in the chair so I faced him. “I’ve never met anyone like you.”

The intensity held in our gaze seemed to buzz with an ancient energy.

Elliott’s voice seemed to drop an octave and take on a husky quality, “I guess that’s what makes us such natural friends. We compliment one another.”

“Yes.” I replied failing to keep the sadness out of my voice. “I guess thats it.”

A beeping from inside the cabin broke through the tension and Elliott rose gracefully out of his chair.

“Come. Our feast awaits.” Elliott said and offered me his hand to help me out of the low wooden beach chair.

We walked back into his cabin as the sun was dipping below Willy’s ocean shack. The smell of baked fish, lemon, and my roasted vegetables made my stomach rumble in anticipation.

Our conversations meandered lazily from topic to topic as we ate. I talked about the work I was doing on the farm and recounted a story of losing a nice two pound largemouth bass up by Robin’s house. He pulled out a draft of his novel and read parts of it aloud to me. The writing was still flowery but the characters seemed more alive and relatable in this second version, and less like the caricatures of a Jane Austen era novel.

Elliott beamed when I told him that.
By the end of the night, my jaw was sore from laughing and smiling at Elliott’s witty and exuberant nature. I had talked more to Elliott about my Grandfather, my mother, and my past visits of Pelican Town, than I had ever talked to Brandon in our entire relationship. It was refreshing, almost revitalizing, after the disaster yesterday.

As dusk finally settled and the cabin became shrouded in darkness, Elliott walked me to the door and handed me my empty but now washed casserole dish.

“Thank you for coming over Morgan. It’s nice to be around a kindred spirit.” He replied.

I nodded and I went to hug him. His pine and salt scent enveloped me like a pleasant memory and I lingered in his arms long enough to feel his warm lips press against my hairline.

“Goodnight.” He murmured.

“Goodnight.” I replied and I broke away from him.

As I walked back to my farm, I clutched my casserole dish to my chest like a swooning school girl. Maybe my jealous mind was wrong. Maybe a writer and a farmer could be a good match after all.

Chapter End Notes

The sonnet in question is from Samuel Daniel (1562-1619)

Reading Delia: Sonnet 1

Unto the boundless Ocean of thy beauty
Runs this poor river, charged with streams of zeal:
Returning thee the tribute of my duty,
Which here my love, my youth, my plaints reveal.
Here I unclasp the book of my charged soul,
Where I have cast th'accounts of all my care:
Here have I summed my sighs, here I enroll
How they were spent for thee; look what they are.
Look on the dear expenses of my youth,
And see how just I reckon with thine eyes:
Examine well thy beauty with my truth,
And cross my cares ere greater sum arise.
Read it sweet maid, though it be done but slightly;
Who can show all his love, doth love but light
The latter scene is based loosely off of Elliot’s six heart event. I added a little more angst and higher stakes but it’s essentially the same scene.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 10 — Imposter Syndrome (Rated G)

July 29th and July 30th (Summer)

“She is so cute!” squealed Jas.

The young girl was standing on the first rung of a wooden fence looking out into the cow pasture as Marnie put a halter around a large cow and led the animal out of the large pasture. The giant animal looked dolefully at Jas and myself and moved with Marnie without any hesitation.

“You should lead her up to your farm so she gets to know your scent.” Marnie suggested, and as though she felt my nervousness she added, “Don’t worry, I’ll be right next to ya.”

I had been around my grandpa’s three milk cows a lot when I was a child. Most of the time, they didn’t pay any attention to me, but when I got older, I helped grandpa with the milking in the mornings and suddenly my presence was welcome because I often brought them treats. But that small amount of experience with the animals back then seemed lightyears away when I was staring straight into the dark eyes of my very own cow.

“So do I just walk with it like a horse?” I asked cautiously.

“Sure. Stella’s good-natured enough that she should follow you. If she gets stubborn, you may need to grab her by the halter and pull her along a little or give her a stern slap on the rump. Don’t jerk on her head too much though; no animal likes their head being messed with.” Marnie replied.

“Haven’t you ever been around animals before?” Jas skipped up next to me. Her purple dress fluttered in the summer breeze.

“Jas don’t be rude.” Marnie scolded. “Morgan’s been around plenty of animals; she bought chickens from us, remember? Besides, I wouldn’t have sold Stella to her if I didn’t think Morgan could handle it.”

“Hey Jas, What do you know about cows?” I asked hoping to distract myself from my nerves as I led this one thousand pound animal back to the farm.

Jas considered my question for a moment. “Well I know that the mommas give milk and we drink the milk. Cows eat oats, or hay, or grass, or sometimes hair ribbons--” she shot an accusatory glance back at my cow, “-- and they have babies called calves.”

“Wow, you’re an expert!” I praised. The cow let out a low moo as though to say that she agreed.

“So Morgan,” Marnie interjected, “when I took a look at your barn yesterday, I left all of the supplies that you’ll need to take care of Stella in the small hutch off in the utility room. Stella’s had
her baby already and she’s been producing a decent quantity of milk for us -- nothing crazy mind you -- but enough for a woman like yourself to live off of and possibly sell if you choose. If you have a couple of pots or a double boiler you can pasteurize the milk at home. I’d suggest doing that anyways since Pierre won’t buy unpasteurized milk and you don’t want to run the risk of getting laid up by a bad stomach bug by drinking raw milk.”

I nodded. “I found my grandpa’s old pasteurizing setup when I was cleaning out the pantry closet. I think I’ll be good to go.”

As we approached the farm, Jazz ran ahead through the path that I had cut in the trees and the thick grass to jump on the small wooden fence around the barn. The fenced area wasn’t too large (I planned to expand it later) but it was the right size for a single cow to run around in.

“That’s a nice fence.” Marnie commented with an appreciative grunt. “Did you build that?”

“Not really. Robin’s been a life saver with helping me with projects on the farm. I bought the lumber, paid her for her labor, and helped her dig the holes to put in the fence posts. She did all of the hard work; I really just held the shovel.”

The other woman grinned, “Robin’s been a right blessing for this valley. She helped me re-shingle my barn after that storm last month tore some pieces off the roof. It scared Shane’s chickens half to death though. The poor things refused to lay eggs for a week.”

“Mine too.” I agreed as I undid the latch on the wooden gate and let Stella into her new home.

I undid the rope halter and pulled the nylon chord over her ears and off her muzzle and then stood back. She looked back at me questioningly and swished her tail.

“Go on.” I urged her. “This is your new home!”

Stella plodded around the perimeter of the small fenced off pasture and then broke into a choppy and heavy-footed trot. For an animal that massive, I was astounded by how quickly it could move when it wanted to.

After one more lap, Stella settled down twenty feet away and began munching on the tall grass. She’d flick her tail or twitch her ears at the black flies that began to gather, but otherwise seemed — pardon the pun — content as a cow.

I let myself out of the pasture and smiled at Marnie who nodded encouragingly back at me.

“Whooh wee. Now that’s a sight to behold, hun?” She said to no one in particular. “I never thought I’d see this farm back up and running again. A part of me died a little when your grandpa was forced to sell his animals. I couldn’t take them, but now it’s good to see a farm back in working order again. You should be proud of yourself Morgan.”

I blushed and looked away bashfully. “Uh thanks Marnie.”

The older woman looked at me seriously. Her sun-tanned skin and laugh lines weathered her face just enough to give her a look of wild, confident beauty.

“I’m serious. Seeing something like this passed down through the generations is important. None of us would be here today without our ancestor’s help and guidance. You’re young, so you may not understand it yet, but legacy is important.”

I nodded and we both watched Stella graze peacefully. Then something broke from my throat
unexpectedly. I didn’t even register that I said it until I heard my voice, low and soft, on the breeze.

“Sometimes I don’t think I’m doing enough, ya know? If it wasn’t for these past two seasons of great harvests, I wouldn’t be doing as well as I am now. Maybe this is just a good farming year. I dunno.”

Marnie shook her head. “Morgan, you ever heard of ‘Imposter Syndrome’?”

“No.”

“Well that’s what you got goin’ on now.” She remarked. “It’s when people — usually successful people — attribute their success to luck or mistake or whatever. You tell yourself that you’ve only gotten this far because you’ve been lucky, but that’s crap. I see how hard you work. How long did it take you to save up to buy Stella?”

I did the mental calculation in my head. I knew that I wanted my own cow as soon as I had arrived in Pelican Town, but I didn’t have enough income until I started raising chickens, but even then, selling chicken eggs for 150 gold a dozen didn’t exactly catapult me into the lap of luxury. “I suppose for around three months, why?”

“Was it luck that you did that?”

“No.”

Marnie nodded. “So whenever you look out at this piece of Yoba’s paradise and you think, ‘I was just lucky’ I want you to give yourself a stern hit upside the head because this was the product of your hard work. You understand?”

“Yes ma’am.” I replied with a polite grin.

She nodded and smiled back. “Jas, let’s go!”

The young girl was twirling in a circle beneath the shade of some large pine trees. She giggled in high-pitched trills and her ringlet curls bounced as she moved. Butterflies swarmed around her and her purple dress fluttered out just far enough to reveal white cotton underwear with chickens printed all over it and frilly white socks.

“Jas Nelson you stop showin’ off your undies to Yoba and everyone. Ain’t nobody need to see that.” Marnie scolded.

The young girl giggled and ran towards Marnie but the twirling caused her to run diagonally. Her sparkling blue eyes and red face made her look like young shepherdess in a pastoral painting.

“The wind caught my dress Auntie. I couldn’t help it. At least there’s no boys around here.” She giggled.

Marnie shook her head and muttered, “She’ll be a hell-raiser when she’s older.” and then said “You go and tell Ms. Morgan good bye.”

Jas panted breathlessly and collapsed into my arms dramatically. “Go-ood bye!” She said in a sing song voice.

“By Jas.” I chuckled and pulled down the back of her dress that somehow got flipped up and tangled in the tule ruffles. I never understood why Jas insisted on wearing dresses when she lived on a farm of her own, but then again, I was never the girly girl type even when I was younger.
“Promise you’ll take good care of Stella.” Jas said, and then she added in a serious whisper. “She likes to eat hair ribbons but Auntie says they’re bad for her. Don’t let her, okay? You promise?”

The childish sincerity was both touching and absurd, “I promise.”

Jas smiled and ran up to Marnie who took her by the hand. I knew the older woman wasn’t Jas’s mom or even her biological aunt, but the maternal care she had for the little girl was evident to anyone. I waved good bye to them as they strode away.

A large solid mass gently bumped into my back and I stumbled forward. I turned to see Stella’s doleful and content face looking at me while bits of grass hung from her lips as it chewed.

“It looks like it’s just you and me.” I said to her and scratched the bovine beneath her chin.

Several notices hung from the bulletin board next to Pierre’s shop when I went into town the next day.

Some were help wanted ads and requests for odd items, but the flyer that caught my attention depicted a highly stylized picture of the ocean at dusk. Blips of luminescent blue and purple objects floated in the water and the flyer’s headline said ANNUAL JELLYFISH MIGRATION PREDICTED FOR AUGUST 15TH AT DUSK. COME AND SEE THIS RARE NATURAL PHENOMENA.

I remembered seeing this migration with my grandpa when I was a child. It was our yearly tradition, like a last hurrah before school resumed at the end of August and my summer visits at the farm had to come to an end.

“Hey Morgan, you gonna go to the migration?” A deep voice asked.

I turned to see Alex walking towards me with a young blond woman that I vaguely recognized but I couldn’t remember her name.

“I’m thinking about it.” I replied. “This was one of Grandpa’s favorite celebrations. Although, I use to remember it happening towards the end of August. Why is it so early this year?”

Alex shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe the jellyfish just decided to migrate early.”

I nodded and tried to suppress an eye roll at his ignorance. Alex was a nice young man but a scholar he was not.

The woman next to him stared at me with unblinking blue eyes. Her blond hair was perfectly styled into beachy curls that hung down her shoulders in a sexy, natural way that said ‘I woke up like this.’

“Sorry.” I said and I held out my hand. “I’m Morgan. I’ve seen you around town but I forgot your name.”

She clucked her tongue against her teeth and sighed without taking my hand, “My name is Haley.”

I heard the implied obviously in her snotty tone and retracted my hand. Embarrassment from my social snafu flushed across my face and I quickly looked for a way to escape this painful moment.

“Well — um. It’s nice to meet you Haley. You haven’t seen Elliott around, have you?”

Dammit. Why did I automatically jump to Elliott’s name? I didn’t actually need to see him but
when I looking for an out, his name was the only one that popped into my mind.

To make matters worse, Haley’s snooty, pinched face grew into one that relished in the potential intrigue.

“I haven’t seen him today. Did you try his house?” Alex asked.

Haley smirked, “So, I heard some rumors that you’re dating him. Is that true?”

“No.” I replied flatly.

Haley still smiled, “Well that’s not what Caroline, Jodi, Robin, and Granny Evelyn say. They say you follow him around town like a puppy.”

“Knock it off Haley.” Alex replied, “They’re just friends. Like us.”

The speed in which Haley’s smile vanished at the mention of their friendship would’ve set land speed records.

“Right. We’re just friends.” She replied hollowly. “I gotta go. Emily is on her way to work and I have some pictures to develop in my dark room.”

Haley left without saying good bye to us and walked away in a huff while muttering under her breath. Alex seemed unfazed but I saw what was happening here. I would’ve felt badly for Haley, especially because I knew how it felt to be friend-zoned by a man who you liked, but also my empathy could only extend so far before it fizzled in spite and annoyance at her ‘holier-than-thou’ attitude.

“If he’s not at the beach, did you check the library? People say that he’s in there kinda often.” Alex replied.

Everyone in Pelican Town knew that Alex had never willingly stepped foot in a library; the only time Gunther ever saw Alex in there was when he was either returning or picking up box set DVDs of old television shows for his grandpa.

“Yeah I’ll check there if he’s not home.” I replied in a pinched voice. “Well, it was nice to see you.”

“You too.” He replied brightly. “If you ever want to watch me throw my football around with Sam, just let me know.”

I half scoffed and half laughed at unintentional priggishness, “I’ll keep that in mind.”

I began walking towards the beach with my head held low as though I was walking through a hallway of jeering peers.

I mean, I hadn’t seen Elliott since our dinner together a couple weeks ago so it would make sense that I wanted to check in on him. In fact, I hadn’t really left the farm at all; I was busy harvesting, canning, and preparing all of the summer crops for storage and for gifts to sell or give away, so getting out to stretch my legs was a good thing to do, right?

By the time I knocked on the wind-beaten door, I was almost giddy in anticipation and excitement. I could hear the quiet melody of a piano and saw that the curtains were drawn shut.

I knocked tentatively at first. The sound of the waves crashing on the beach lulled me into a
peaceful serenity so I didn’t hear whether Elliott responded or not.

I put my ear against the door and heard the faint plinking of piano keys and knocked again.

There was no answer.

“Elliott? It’s Morgan. Are you free for some company?” I said loudly as I pounded on the door until my fist ached.

Again, there was no answer. I was about to turn back when a thought hit me. What if he was ignoring me? What if I had done something wrong when we had dinner and he was purposely avoiding me?

I kicked the door jam with my work boot a few times. “Elliott. I know you’re in there. I can hear your piano. Please talk to me.”

“Go away.” I heard him say.

He didn’t sound angry but his rejection hurt like a slap to the face.

“Elliott, what’s wrong? What did I do? I’m sorry if —”

The piano stopped and I heard the door unlatch, but the door didn’t open.

When I pushed the door open, I realized just how dark the small cabin was compared to the bright afternoon sun. It took my eyes a moment to adjust and I felt blindly out for anything that might be in my way and then I closed the door.

A single kerosene lamp sat on his writing desk which was now bare. His bed, which was usually imbecilely made, was ruffled with navy blue sheets indicating a restless night of sleeping. The small kitchenette was still spotless but the countertop and the cupboards were bare.

In a darkened alcove next to the door, four large cardboard boxes sat stacked on top of each other. Each box was labeled neatly with clear black marker with ‘kitchen,’ ‘bathroom,’ ‘bedroom,’ and ‘miscellaneous.’ A large rucksack sat open and was full of neatly folded clothes. I felt a strange emptiness once my eyes adjusted to the dim light and I saw that everything that had made Elliott’s small cabin home was now gone.

“I’m sorry Morgan. I’m not up for entertaining guests today.” Elliott said in a hollow voice. His back was to me and his shoulders were sagging like a man who carried the weight of the entire world on his back.

“Oh. Are you moving?” I asked. I walked across the wooden floor hearing my footsteps echo dully in the cabin’s lonely silence.

Elliott shook his head. His back and shoulders heaved once in a deep sigh and when he spoke, his voice was low and rough. “I can’t do this anymore.”

“I don’t understand.” I began but then I saw the pile of mail and an even larger pile of binder clipped manuscripts sitting on top of the upright piano in orange envelopes. The letterhead of the top piece of mail read ‘Thompson & Garrett Publishing.’

“Elliott. Did you finish your book?”

He snorted contemptuously. “I finished something. I don’t know if you would call it a book. A
farce would be more appropriate.”

He sat at his piano and began playing the same morose tune that I had heard outside. I didn’t know music that well so the song was unfamiliar to me but I could feel the frustration and pity leak off each note he played.

I bit the top of my lip. Someone had replaced Elliott’s normal jovial optimism with sour embittered defeat. He was a shell of himself and it scared me.

“What happened?” I asked as I straddled the long piano bench and faced him. He didn’t move to make room for me but he also didn’t berate me for moving closer to him. I thought I saw him sigh momentarily but I couldn’t be sure.

“I’m a fraud Morgan. That’s all that’s happened.”

“How are you a fraud?”

He didn’t answer so I grabbed his hands to stop him from playing. The force of my hands on his created a clash of notes that gnawed through the air. I pulled his cool hands off the keys and pulled him to face me, but like a defiant child who didn’t want to be scolded, he only turned halfway.

“Elliott talk to me, dammit. What’s going on!”?

“I’m moving.” He said again, this time a lot quieter.

“I can see that, but why?”

“Mayor Lewis can’t afford to let me stay here anymore. Our original agreement was that I could have this cabin until the end of Fall, but he sent me a letter yesterday saying that they’re predicting an early winter this year and Willy will need the cabin sooner so he can store his boats in here before the snow flies.”

“That’s ridiculous!” I exclaimed. “How can they predict something like that in advanced? I can talk to Mayor Lewis for you, let’s —”

“No Morgan.” Elliot cut in. “No. Please don’t. I’ve stayed here for nearly a full year rent free. Mayor Lewis has been incredibly kind to me, but asking for this reprieve would be taking advantage of his generosity, and I can’t do that.”

My heart sank. “And you — you can’t pay him?”

Elliott’s jaw clenched and I was afraid that my question had angered him.

“No.” He said tersely. “So far, no publishers are interested in my book.” He gestured at the pile of opened letters, “I sent out ten copies to publishers and I’ve received nine responses back. They all said ‘no.’”

“Did they give you a reason why?”

He shrugged, “Some said that it didn’t fit nicely into a marketable genre. Others said that it just wasn’t their type of story they often published. One said that they want their authors to already have other published titles that can guarantee the quality of their work, and one just said no and didn’t provide a reason.”

“But you still have one response that you’re waiting on.” I said. “Maybe that will be a yes.”
He snorted, “It’s doubtful. I don’t know why I thought I could do this.”

Elliott shook his head so his rusty locks flipped over his shoulder. Like this, in the dark, his pale face and hollow eyes made him look like a wraith or a ghost.

“Can I read it?” I asked suddenly.

“Can you read what?”


“Why? It’s not published. It’s just —“

“I don’t care if it’s not published. I don’t need stuffy old people who sit all day in an office to tell me whether a book is good or not. I’d like to decide that for myself, thank you.”

He shook his head but said nothing. Then I had an idea.

“Or…can I buy a copy right now?” I asked

“Morgan, you don’t need to buy a copy. Don’t waste your money.” He said bitterly.

“I don’t consider it a waste. I consider it an investment.” I said and I sat up straight imitating a suit-and-tie business woman who was discussing a deal at a board meeting. “Just think. If I buy the book now and if you do get published, I will have a rare original manuscript whereas others will just have the hardcover or paperback copies. If I sell the manuscript down the line, my investment will pay dividends at an auction.”

He snorted incredulously. I could see he wanted to fight me but I could also see the small spark in his eyes of hope that someone was interested in his work.

“I don’t have a price set for it. That’s usually the publisher’s job.” He murmured.

“I dug in my purse for every coin I could possibly find and I plopped the modest pile of gold on the piano’s lid. There. That’s 157 gold, a cough drop, and two breath mints. The breath mints are the promise of this contract and the cough drop is a tip — you sound like your throat’s bothering you. If, down the line, you think that I gypped you, then I will pay the rest later.” I said.

He shook his head. “This is ridiculous.”

“But it’s my purchase.” I said with an encouraging grin. “Besides, I just bought a cow. Soon I’ll be a farm mogul and I’ll be able to buy out all of the other publishing companies who turned you down.”

Elliott pulled the top manuscript from the monstrous pile. His grimace made it seem like he was picking up a box full of spiders.

“You don’t need to do this.” He said once again.

“I know but I am. And I’ll even read it in the privacy of my home so nobody will know your secret shame if it actually turns out to be crap.”

He half-coughed and half-laughed at my response. “My that’s … blunt.”

I smiled and held my hands outstretched and flexed my fingers in a ‘gimmie’ gesture. He settled the manuscript in my hands. The cover page was bare save for the book’s title, Across the Blue
Mountains, and the by-line 'by Elliott Michaels'.

Elliott exhaled a long, drawn out breath that I’m sure he had been holding since I arrived. I tucked the bound papers under my arm and smiled but then I considered the future — his future.

“So…if you can’t find a place to live before Fall, are you moving back to Zuzu City?”

“I’ll have to. Or I’ll have to move back home and live with my parents and listen to their smug lectures of how they knew I couldn’t meet my lofty expectations. Then I suppose it’s back to the service jobs.” Elliott’s face made it seem like the service industry was akin to getting sent back to Hell.

“You could live with me if you want.” I offered and then immediately blushed. “I — I mean, like as roommates and stuff. Emily and Haley are roommates and they make it work. Then again...I think they’re sisters. Besides it’s the 21st Century, co-ed roomies are becoming more and more acceptable. You’d have to sleep on the futon until we can get you a bed of your own, but it’s a comfortable futon.”

“I appreciate the offer.” He said quietly. “But I’ll have to pass.”

He stood up from the piano bench and I followed him. His eyes still looked hollow but he gave me a small, half-hearted smile.

“I’ll let you know when I’m leaving. I’m helping Willy launch the row boats in preparation for the jellyfish migration, so they can’t kick me out until then.”

He chuckled sadly and opened the door wincing as the natural light cut through the cabin’s darkness

I grabbed a pen and a piece of paper from a legal pad and wrote down my phone number.

“Elliott, if you ever want to talk or vent just give me a call. You worked really hard on your book, no matter what publisher say, and I’d be frustrated too if my hard work wasn’t being acknowledged.”

I blushed. Although my motivation was platonic, I had never given another guy my phone number.

I met Elliott’s eyes before I stepped onto the sand. His brown eyes looked golden in the sun. His mouth was set in a hard line and his thick eye brows furrowed in a look of concentration, confusion, and … something else.

Before I could react, he pulled me into a tight hug and buried his face into the crook of my neck. I felt his hot breath on my skin, his firm body against my breasts, and his hand gently tangled in my hair. I closed my eyes and relished in his touch and hugged him back.

I wanted to run my fingers through his long hair and hold him until his brooding fell away to reveal the thoughtful and happy man underneath. But I was also content on holding him in my arms as long as he needed.

When he finally pulled away he retreated back into his cabin and shut the door quietly behind him. I waited outside his door for a long moment and then I heard the sound of his piano once again.
Across the Blue Mountains (Rated G)

Chapter Notes

We’re about to get all meta up in here. Enjoy snippets of Elliott’s novel within MY story. So…it’s a story within a story.

Some of Elliott’s novel, Across the Blue Mountains, is based not-so-loosely off of vignettes from the stage play Almost, Maine by John Cariani. This vignette in particular is taken from the scene “Sad and Glad” from the stage play. I own no rights to Almost, Maine and I am merely using the scene as a parallel between the Morgan/Elliott/Brandon relationship.

Go check out the play on Youtube if you are interested. It’s a fantastic production.

I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 11 — Across the Blue Mountains (Rated G)

August 2nd (Summer)

The digital timer on the refrigerator counted down from thirty minutes. I wiped the sweat from my forehead with the back of my arm. I was canning my last batch of blueberry jam for the night and my back cried out for mercy.

I had spent the last couple days scouring all of the blueberry plants for every last blueberry on the bush. The blueberry patch was tucked up in the north west corner of the farm away from the rest of my fruits and vegetables. Like other fruit bearing plants, blueberry bushes produced fruit annually, so I needed them farther away from everything so they wouldn’t get in my way during Spring or Fall. However, that meant that clambering through the thick undergrowth and dense tree line to get every last berry was a daunting and seemingly impossible task, but the scratches on my arms and legs told that I gave it my best shot anyway.

By early evening, I had canned almost two dozen half-pint jars full of jam, and I still had the rest of the peppers and tomatoes to get through. I also had a sink load of dishes that needed to be washed, and I desperately needed a shower (somehow blueberry jam ended up dripping from the ladle as I was canning and landed down my cleavage).

While the last six jars were pressurizing in my canning machine, I grabbed Elliott’s manuscript from the kitchen table, sat heavily in my canvas camping chair, and I flipped to the Table of Contents.

As far as standard chapter titles went, it was interesting that each chapter had people’s names next to them. Among the variety there, one name popped out to me. It was mine. Chapter 2 was entitled “Morgan and Eric” so naturally, I flipped ahead to Chapter 2, ignoring all conventional tradition of starting a book at page one, and began to read.

The Crystal Tavern hummed with indistinct voices. A group of young women were clustered
around a high top table; fruity alcoholic drinks of all sorts were being handed off by a pretty blond-haired waitress.

Eric Young, the town’s blacksmith, sat at a table that was tucked away from the action. He preferred it that way. He wasn’t a man who drew attention to himself, and on that particular night, he wanted no attention whatsoever.

He peeled the label off his beer bottle and stared at the half-empty amber liquid pretending it was poison that was slowly killing him from the inside out. As he brooded, a tall brunette woman passed his table while on the way to the bathroom and stopped in her tracks.

“Eric?”

His eyes glanced up lazily but then widened in hope and dread as he saw who the woman.

“Morgan?”

“Hey!” She said. Her face looked like a deer caught in the headlights.

“Heeey.” He drew out awkwardly. He thought to himself: what was she doing here?

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

They stood their ground like two rival animals. Morgan spoke first.

“So how are you Eric? I — I haven’t seen you in a couple of years.”

“I’m good. How are you?”

“Good. Good.” She replied with a nervous chuckle. Eric caught the glance that she made back to the group of women in the bar. He indicated them with his chin, “Are you with them?”

“Yeah!” She replied brightly but then her voice fell. “Yeah. I — uh — was just on my way to the bathroom. So I better get —“

“--Whew, I’m glad I finally got to you two.” The blond waitress said with an ecstatic smile. “It’s super busy in there. There’s a bachelorette party in there and those girls can drink. So what can you two lovebirds this evening?”

“Oh no—“ Morgan started.

“We’re not——“ Eric broke out embarrassed.

They looked at each other and then looked away. The waitress seemed oblivious to their sudden recalcitrance and took their silence to mean they were still thinking about what they wanted to order. After all, she had other patrons to attend to.

“Well you two just give me a holler when you’re ready to order, okay?” She replied sweetly and skipped spritely through the double doors which led to the kitchen.

Morgan looked at Eric and gave him a regretful smile. “Well it was nice to see you but I gotta—‘

“No! I mean why don’t you take a seat.” He exclaimed and gestured towards the other empty chair. “I mean, I haven’t seen you in months. Like … months AND months. How does that even
happen? I mean, you live in the same town but you never see each other?"

Not wanting to be rude, Morgan sat down in the open seat as though she was sitting on a pin cushion. The smile Eric had on his face when she sat down was worse than the pained look on his face when she had broken up with him on that cold winter’s night.

“I — I really can’t stay long. My friends are — “

He brushed off her warning with a large hand, “They’ll be fine without you for a moment. So what’s been going on? Whatcha been up to?"

“Well, I’m — “

“— Did you know I took over the family business? Yep, I’m running the shop now.” He beamed with pride and puffed out his chest.


“—Yep, I make tools and smelt ore. I deliver coal to the houses for their heaters. That’s a pretty important job, ya know? Especially on a night like this. If people don’t have coal for their heaters, they could die!”

“That does sound serious.” Morgan commented idly.

Eric continued, “And I have to work on weekends and through holidays, but that’s alright because that means everyone else has heat and supplies to be with their family. But that’s alright because ever since Pop died, I’ve got no one.”

Morgan’s pained expression was one of pure guilt. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Oh don’t worry about it.” He replied and waved another large hand at her concern. “It’s not that bad. I mean, my brother went off to the war and my mother moved back to the city because the Winter is easier there. My dog died last year — “

“— I’m sorry, I didn’t know! — “

“— It’s fine. It was his time.” He said dismissively. “But since I’m all alone right now, and since I happened to connect up with you again, I just thought that … you could come over and keep me company.”

Morgan bit her lip and took a shuddering breath. This was exactly what she was afraid of. “Eric I — I would love to but I’m actually …” She paused and fixed her gaze on his, “Eric, I’m getting married.”

His thick eyebrows rose and his lips pursed. “M-married?!”

“Yeah. That’s why I’m here. It’s my bachelorette party.” She said sheepishly.

“Wow.”

“Yeah.” She replied meekly.

“Wow…” He blinked and the realization of what she had said just dawned on him. “I thought you weren’t going to do that. Getting married that is. You said that you weren’t the marrying type. I guess I just wasn’t your type.”
“I’m sorry Eric.” She said and gently grabbed his thick forearm.

“So who’s the lucky guy?” He pronounced the word ‘lucky’ like it was pure poison in his mouth.

“Uh…his name is Brian. Brian LaFollete. He’s in the Brown County Coast Guard.”

“Oh I know Brian!” Eric said, perking up a bit. “He’s amazing. He once saved my friend after his fishing boat capsized in a storm —“

“— Yeah I heard about that —“

“—And he can find anyone at anytime, so if you’re ever lost at sea Brian LeFollete is the man you’d want to find you —“

“—Yeah” Morgan chuckled uncomfortably.

Eric’s hard eyes turned on her and the excitement in his voice was gone. “And he found you.”


“How would I have known?”

“You know. From other people. I thought Esme, Samantha, or Hayley would’ve said something. You know how people here talk.” Morgan replied.

Eric inhaled a long, sharp breath. His voice was tight with emotion. “People don’t talk about things when they know you don’t want to hear them.”

“I’m sorry.” Morgan said. And she really was sorry.

He shrugged, “So when’s the big event?”

“Um…tomorrow.”

His eyes snapped to hers again. “Really.”

“Really.” She confirmed.

“Well then we have to celebrate!” He exclaimed and raised his right hand as though he was hailing a taxi. “HEY! HEY WAITRESS!”

“What are you doing?!” Morgan exclaimed in a hushed voice.

“Calling the waitress over. We gotta celebrate. You’ve been found! You’re getting married, and that’s a thing to celebrate.”

Just then, Morgan caught the sight of a large black mark that went across Eric’s entire right forearm. In the dim light, she couldn’t make up the words but she could tell it was a tattoo of some sort.

“What’s that on your arm?” She asked.

“This? Oh it’s nothing. It’s just a tattoo HEY! WAITRESS!”

“What does it say?”
“It doesn’t matter—“

“—Wait, does that say —“

“— Don’t worry about it.”

As Eric went to pull down his sleeve, Morgan caught is forearm and held it beneath the candlelight.

“That says ‘villain.’” She said. “Why does your tattoo say ‘villain’?”

Her voice was cautious and she rubbed his forearm over his heavy woolen shirt as though she could erase the mark altogether.

Eric wouldn’t meet her eyes. His jaw clenched as a storm of frustration, pain, guilt, and anger tore through him.

“Eric, why is your tattoo suppose to say ‘villain?’” She asked once more.

“Because that’s what I am.” He snarled.

“You’re not a villain!” Morgan urged as Eric pulled his arm from her grasp.

“Am I not?” He asked and stood up. “Because I sure as hell think I am! Because when a guy drives a girl — a beautiful, wonderful, sweet girl like you away, how can he be anything but a villain?”

“Eric you didn’t drive me away.—“

“—It’s criminal, that’s what it is!” He continued over her. “It’s criminal, it’s villainy and it has to be punished, so I punished myself. I tattooed this on my arm to warn other girls — so other girls would know the type of guy I am and they’d stay away. That way I wouldn’t have to go through what I went through with you.”

Morgan saw the tears that shimmered in his eyes and Eric turned away from her, his back heaving. When he faced her once more, the tears were gone and nothing except a cold, stony countenance remained.

“I wish you and Brian all the best.” He said in a tight voice. “I’m sorry that I kept you from your friends.”

Morgan watched as pulled on his heavy winter jacket and pulled the fur-rimmed hat over his head. He saluted her by touching his forefinger and index finger to his forehead and walked towards the main room and out into the winter storm.

The timer beeped which jolted me out of me dream-like haze. Large wet blotches dripped onto the white paper and I wiped my nose with the back of my hand.

I rose shakily from the camping chair and extracted the piping hot pint jars from the canning machine and placed them on a wire rack to cool. I brushed the flyaways that had escaped from my braid out of my face and noticed my hands were trembling.

Elliott had captured Brandon’s overbearing essence while interjecting his own insecurities about his past relationship into one character. Yet I couldn’t decide if this was a mark of genius or insanity; I was amazed and disturbed as I tried to tease out the blurred facts from the fiction.
Thoughts raced through my head: Was the character of my namesake suppose to be me? Was Eric suppose to be Elliot or Brandon or both? And what about Brian LaFollette, the amazing Coast Guard member who had ‘found’ and married Morgan? Was Elliot trying to be prophetic or was it a plot point that just made sense in the rest of the story?

As I mulled through all of these questions, I almost considered giving the manuscript back to him, but I had to remind myself that one chapter did not define the rest of his novel. I would need to start at the beginning and read the book from start to finish before I could formulate my opinion.

Golden swished her tail at me from her perch on the kitchen table. Her yellow eyes seemed to say: you know what you have to do.

I took a damp washcloth and wiped the spilled jelly from my chest, then I grabbed the manuscript and brought it into my room.

I promised myself that I’d do the dishes later. Now I needed to read.

Chapter End Notes

The ending of “Sad and Glad” is absurd in the best way but I left it out because it didn’t fit in the story’s tone. I hope you enjoyed.
Chapter Notes

Loyal readers, I apologize about the absence. I had the bulk of this chapter written back in July but then I couldn't get the tone to sit right with me. So I stepped away from it to work on other projects and now I'm back. Thank you to everyone who has left reviews, kudos, bookmarks, etc. I appreciate the support.

Now the ratings will crank up a notch over these next few chapters. If that's not your cup of tea, I understand. Unless people request it, the upcoming intimate scenes wont go beyond an M rating. I have nothing against PWP but that's not my goal with this fic.

Let me know your thoughts!

Chapter 12 -- Unexpected Surprises (Rated T+)

August 6th (Summer)

I devoured Elliott’s novel in three days. That was a record for me; I had never read a book that quickly before in my life.

I closed the manuscript and let a contented smile settle on my face. Golden purred next to me as she nudged my hand with her head.

“Hey now,” I murmured to the feline before picking her up and cuddling her to my chest, “I wont be gone long. You just behave and enjoy the lazy afternoon, okay?”

Her long golden stripped tail swished; the white tuff at the end twitching like a worm dangling off a hook.

Suddenly a knock came at the door. Golden wriggled out of my hands and jumped up onto the wooden table near the window and peered out at the visitor.

“Morgan? Are you home?” Elliott’s muffled voice asked.

I smiled and set his manuscript on the coffee table and went to unlock the door.

“Good morning!” I greeted warmly.

Elliott’s warm brown eyes settled on mine for a moment and something passed across his face. I could’ve sworn that he looked afraid but then he had schooled his face into a warm smile that matched mine.

“I’m sorry to disturb you this early in the morning.” He said, “I’m on my way to Zuzu City to meet with the last publishing agency. They called me last night and asked if they could talk to me about my novel in person so since I was on my way out I wanted to stop by to just say thank you.”

“Elliott, that’s not necessary.” I urged but he waved my politeness away.
“It is Morgan. I — I was feeling trapped earlier. It just seemed like everything in my life was crumbling around me, and I’m thankful that you were there to offer a different perspective. I don’t think anyone else here could’ve empathized with what I was feeling, except perhaps Leah but that’s besides the point.”

I felt myself bristle when he mentioned Leah. I knew I was being unreasonable. I had no reason to dislike Leah; aside for seeing her a couple of times at the Saloon during dinner I hadn’t actually talked to her, but the jealous feelings were still there nonetheless.

“Don’t mention it. Like I said before, I’m here if you ever need to talk or vent. That’s what friends do, right?” I cleared the hollowness from my throat and grabbed my purse and the small picnic basket from the kitchen table.

“Are you on your way out too?”

“Yeah, I have to catch the bus to Burnsville. It’s my mom’s birthday today.” I replied.

“Then I believe we’re catching the same bus.” Elliot remarked. “How serendipitous is that?”

“Well then I suppose you’ve got yourself a traveling companion.” I remarked with a smile. As I made my way outside, I passed Golden and tickled her beneath her chin.

“Don’t get into the bathroom again missy.” I scolded. “That door is closed for a reason you know.”

Golden meowed and cocked her head innocently. I knew that as soon as I was off the front porch, the damn cat would be throwing her body weight against the door to force it open. The door lacked a lock so it didn’t take much effort for an eight pound animal to breach it.

I closed the door and slung my purse off my shoulder and put the picnic basket in my left hand. “Well, shall we?”

“We shall.” Elliott agreed and we both walked down the dirt road that led to town and to the bus stop.

My heart pounded out of my chest, partly because I’d be sharing a bus with a man that I’ve been pining after since I first met him and partly because this was the most opportune time to ask him about using my name and my life as subject matter in his book. After all, I wasn’t sure how he’d react. Hell, I wasn’t sure how I would react either. The walk to the bus stop took about ten minutes and I was deep in thought the entire way there.

Elliott cleared his throat and glanced at me, “A penny for your thoughts Morgan? You’re awfully quiet.”

“Uh. I’m sorry. I was just thinking about some things.” I murmured shyly.

Elliott nodded, “Do you want to talk about them?”

It was now or never, I thought. “I — I — um. I finished your book.”

Elliott had a schooled, neutral expression that seemed practiced but his left fist was clenched so tightly that his knuckles were white.

“And…?” His voice was thin and wispy like the morning breeze.

“I loved it!” I responded earnestly. “Really I did. I just —“
“— You read Chapter 2 right?” Elliott finished for me, “The chapter I named after you.”

“Yeah. I — uh — was that suppose to be me? I mean, the rest of the novel had characteristics of Pelican Town but there wasn’t one other character that was so authentic to real life besides that one.”

“Are you offended that I wrote you into my book?” He asked. There was no pretense or minimizing in his tone; he was sincerely concerned that he had offended me.

“No! No, I’m not offended. I’m flattered of course. I’m a little confused too. But I just … I just wasn’t expecting it I guess.”

Elliott took a seat on the wooden bus stop bench near the asphalt road and I sat next to him.

“You know, that was the last chapter I wrote and it was the hardest one to write. In fact, I wasn’t even sure if I was going to include it in the novel. The rest of the novel came quite easily thanks to your suggestions to make it grounded in reality, but I was still missing something that people could relate to on a visceral level. A relationship that wasn’t sensationalized or overly sentimental, you know?”

“And you thought about me and my ex?” I asked with more snap in my voice than I meant. As I thought about my drunken confessions to him, I felt foolish and slightly embarrassed that I even confided in him in the first place.

“No! No. Of course not!” Elliott eyes widened in shock. He turned to me and gently took my hand. “Morgan, that scene wasn’t meant to represent your ex. It was more about … us … actually. I thought about that morning of the terrible storm where I told you about Laura and about my past indiscretions. And when you told me how you felt about me and how it hurt you when I rebuffed your affection.”

“So you were suppose to be Eric in that scene?” I asked perplexed. “But he sounded a lot more like Brandon.”

He shrugged but I watched Elliott’s adam’s apple bob nervously in his throat. “I suppose I did base a couple personality traits off your ex, but Eric’s situation represents my biggest fear. Eric branded a warning onto his skin for other women to heed, but I …” Elliott sighed, “I pushed you away and I never did anything about it.”

“You didn’t push me away,” I countered but Elliott shook his head.

“Of course I did. I pushed you away because I didn’t think I was allowed to have another relationship after what happened to Laura. I messed up on that one so badly that I might as well have branded my own skin with a warning. I told you more than enough times that I just wanted to be friends.”

“Which is fine!” —

“Which was a lie!” He exclaimed.

My racing heart stopped and the breath rushed from my lungs.

“What?!”

Elliott’s eyes were wide and the summer humidity was already curling his hair into a wild tangle. “What I told you was a lie, Morgan. Not a purposeful one, mind you. It was more like I was trying
to create a self-fulfilling prophecy. If I treated you like you were just a friend, I figured the feelings that I have for you would eventually subside into platonic affection. I was wrong. And I want to clear the air now before someone else like Sebastian, or Sam, or Alex, or Harvey, or even Shane comes along and finds you.”

“But what about Leah?” I asked.

“Leah?” Elliott frowned. “What about Leah?”

“Y-you’re not dating her? Or seeing her? Or whatever you want to call it … with her? I mean it would make sense. The struggling artist and the starving writer overcoming society’s harsh expectations to create love in a meaningless place.”

Elliott chuckled, “Leah and I are friends but we’re not dating. Our relationship is truly platonic I can assure you. She’s a lovely dancer but you’d be more her type than I would.”

My head spun as I tried to digest all of this information. Elliott opened his mouth, clearly about to say something, but thought better of it. Instead, he ran his thumb across my knuckles and my heart felt like it was simultaneously plummeting out the bottoms of my feet and exploding out of my chest.

Just then, the large metallic grey bus pulled up. The interior was completely empty save for one man who was asleep in the front with headphones in his ears. The advertisement on the side of the bus was for the latest kick-butt action movie that was being shown in theaters.

An overweight middle-aged man was driving the bus and he opened the doors once the bus’s hydraulics lowered the platform step closer to the ground.

“Good morning!” He said jovially. “All aboard.”

We both got up and clambered up the steep metal steps. We dropped a couple of gold coins into the box up front and then we walked towards the back to sit down. I wished that the bus was actually full. Aside for the sound of the whooshing and vibrating from the bus’s acceleration, the privacy we had made me feel more exposed.

I set the small picnic basket full of my mom’s presents on the floor by my feet and then I propped my knees on the back of the seat in front of me like I was back on the bus to school.

Our ride into the city was quiet. Elliott’s fingers kept plucking stray pieces of string from his dress shirt sleeve and his right knee bounced nervously.

I cleared my throat and swallowed thickly, “You know, when you’re done with your meeting, you’re welcome to come to my mom’s house. Her birthdays are pretty low-key now that she’s in her forties. And I’m sure she’d like to meet you. I can write down her address if you’d like.”

“I appreciate the offer” Elliott replied. “But I think meeting your parents is still a bit early don’t you think? I’m actually more curious about what you’re thinking. Your expression tells me that you look slightly overwhelmed but you also have this look in your eyes like you’re angry.”

“I’m not angry.” I said in a rush. “Overwhelmed, yes of course. But I’m not angry. I just …” I turned to him and grabbed ahold of his hand, “… I’ve never felt this way about anyone in my life. The feelings I had for Brandon pale in comparison to what I feel when I’m with you. I’m sorry if that makes you uncomfortable or makes you feel weird. I feel kind of weird just saying this aloud…but can we table this discussion until after your meeting? I—I’m afraid that this is too good to be true.”
Elliott nodded and then looked around as though he was checking for eavesdroppers, but the bus was still empty save for the sleeping man up front.

“Then in case this meeting is just a cruel joke and I’m still forced to move back to the city, can I do one thing first?”

“Sure.” I replied.

Elliott leaned down and cupped my cheek with his right hand. His mouth covered mine I felt the breath leave my lungs. My head spun and I grabbed onto him for both stability and out of raw desire as kiss and the heat of his body enveloped my senses.

When he broke away from me I blinked dumbly as though I had been hit upside the head.

“Elliott even if they don’t publish your book, you know that you don’t have to leave Pelican Town. I was serious about my offer. You could live with me.”

“As your roommate?” Elliott asked with a sly grin.

“No, as my boyfriend.” I said. The words spilled out of my mouth before I could stop them. After months of stalling and indecision, everything was happening so fast that I was beginning to feel claustrophobic.

“Let’s table the discussion for now. We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it, okay?”

I nodded and I squeezed Elliott’s hand affectionately. This time he didn’t pull away.

I knocked twice on a white door that had a sign hanging next to it which read “Welcome to the Raymond residence.” I adjusted the picnic basket and my purse and readjusted the floral print cotton blouse that my mom had bought me for Christmas last year.

The blue siding on the house was new since I last visited, and it looked like someone had finally leveled out the uneven stairs that led to the small wooden front porch. I knocked on the door and my mom’s face appeared distorted through the half circle of bubbled decorative glass.

“Just a minute.” She called out as she unlocked the door.

When she opened it, my mom stood beaming at me. My mom had lighter blond hair than mine that she routinely went to have someone style it or add highlights to it. She once had long hair that reached her mid-back, but in all of her adulthood and throughout all of my memories, she kept her hair cut short.

“Happy Birthday!” I smiled.

“Thank you, daughter!” She cried and ushered me inside. The smell of her faint lilac perfume hit me and a wave of comfort and nostalgia swept through my mind. Although she and I were often oil and water when it came to our personalities, right now she smelled like home.

“You look great.” I remarked and gestured at her attire.

She wore a floral blouse similar to mine and wore faded jeans (she had a habit of shopping at younger persons’ stores because she, and I quote, refuse to buy Ann Taylor brand anything until she reached sixty). Her toenails were painted a vibrant pink and she wore a braided ankle bracelet with glittery beads tied on the ends.
“Thanks! My co-worker bought me a gift certificate for a pedicure for my birthday and I had a coupon for this blouse. It was only half-off, can you believe it?”

As mom closed the door behind me, I got a good look at my old childhood home.

Her house was more aptly described as a trailer home but I never associated the negative stereotypes of trailer park living with this place. Ever since I was born, this three bedroom and two bathroom trailer had been my home. Since I was an only child, one of the bedrooms had turned into an office so my Mom to work from home, and my old bedroom became the de-facto storage room until my Mom saved up enough money to turn it into a guest bedroom. (Or a bedroom for her future grandkids, as she often hinted to me).

“Hey Morgan.” My step-father Chuck said warmly. “It’s nice to see you.”

“Thanks!” I replied with a warm smile. I passed him the basket I was carrying so I could hug my mother.

“Well I guess I’ll be the first one to admit that I was wrong.” She announced when she released me from the hug. “You didn’t starve out at your grandpa’s cabin after all.”

“Are you calling me fat?” I mock scolded.

“No. No!” She replied. “But maybe I should send Chuck out to help you on the farm. He could use a little exercise to get him into shape.”

Chuck stuck a finger into his mouth and gagged. For a man in his mid-forties, he was the type of man of whom health problems were only one bad decision or accident away. He was a hard worker, but his fondness for single malt scotch and the occasional cigar meant that doctors were constantly on his case to shape up before things got worse.

But aside for his vices, he was still a handsome man underneath it all. He had windswept sandy hair that was showing more and more grey each time I visited and a wide smile with remarkably clean teeth. The slight pudge in his belly that betrayed his vice but it was usually hidden by his work button-downs and dress slacks. Today though, he was dressed down in khaki shorts and a Zuzu Vultures Gridball Jersey.

“I could always use more help on the farm.” I said with a sly grin. “I’m actually looking at clearing some of the larger trees and rocks south of my chicken coup so I can plant some fruit trees. What d’you think Chuck? Can ya lend a hand?”

His face paled but he smiled, “Just tell me the time and the place and I’ll be there.”

“So you have chickens now?” Mom asked casually.

“And a cow.” I interjected. “Oh and if you guys want any farm fresh eggs, cow’s milk, or produce, I’ll be happy to sell it to you. I’ll even give you the family discount.”

“I’ll have to pass on the offer for now.” Mom replied briskly. “Unless the eggs are pasteurized that is.”

“Oh.” I replied. “They’re not but I can guarantee that all the chickens are healthy. Unless you eat them raw, you shouldn’t worry about salmonella or anything.”

She gave me a patient and gentle smile. “We’ll see. You know how I get Morgan. I’m one of the pickiest eaters ever. I’m always trying to watch my figure.”
I snorted at that and nodded.

Ever since I could remember, my Mom was always on some sort of diet to try and lose that stubborn belly fat that she gained from being pregnant with me. Half of the books on our bookshelves were diet or nutrition-related books, yet my Mom could never be satisfied with one particular program. The kicker and perhaps the tragedy was that, at 5-foot 6-inches my mom couldn’t be pushing 140 pounds.

“I convinced your Mom to give up on that for a while.” Chuck murmured to me Then he said a little louder so she could hear, “Your mom knows that we love her no matter what she looks like. Besides, a little fat is healthy on a woman.”

He said that last bit with an edge of innuendo. I caught him winking at her and I grimaced.


“Nope. Chuck’s in charge of dinner tonight. It was his birthday present to me.” My mom said and patted his shoulder adoringly.

“I’ve been taking some of the cooking classes were are offered through your old high school’s Community Education program. I think I’m really getting the hang of it.”

Based on the smells wafting from the kitchen, it seemed like he was indeed getting the hang of cooking. My stomach rumbled expectantly at what smelled like chicken alfredo.

“Dinner will be done in about ten minutes or so. Why don’t we all celebrate Diane’s birthday with a toast.” Chuck announced.

I followed my Mom into the kitchen. Our small four-person dining table was set with our finest plates, faux gold cutlery, and champagne flutes next to water glasses. Chuck handed me a wine glass half full with white wine. He grabbed one for himself and handed my mom an off-colored version of what we were drinking.

“Mom I think your wine is bad.” I told her. I held up my glass to hers to compare the differences in the hues.

“No it’s fine Morgan.” She said quickly. “You and Chuck finished off the riesling and this is from a local vineyard that Chuck and I visited for our anniversary last month.”

“You know how your Mom gets.” Chuck commented lightly. “She’s such a wine snob that if the bottle is less than 400 gold then she isn’t interested.”

“Oh stop.” She mock scolded. “No teasing on my birthday.”

“Alright honey.” He replied.

My mom held up her glass and Chuck and I did the same.

“I want to propose this toast to my wonderful husband who has gone above and beyond over these last few weeks to make my life easier. And to my motivated and hard-headed daughter, I’m glad you didn’t listen to your old Mom when I told you to come home. You seem really happy out at Grandpa’s old place. And I’d like to toast to Grandpa himself. Without him, the next generation of Raymonds wouldn’t exist; it’s his legacy that we live up to” Then she looked up as though she was addressing Grandpa directly, “And I’ll always be thankful for that Dad.”
We clinked glasses and drank. The wine was fruity and light; I relished in its sweetness.

Chuck muttered to my mom, “That was beautiful honey” and then kissed her. Meanwhile I took a seat at the kitchen table with my wine glass and watched them idly.

Something was different about them, but I couldn’t put my finger on what it was. I had never seen Chuck this affectionate with my Mom before. Even when he started dating my mom when I was thirteen, they kept their amorous affections PG-rated. Hell, I hadn’t even seen them kiss until their wedding day. Now they seemed so domestic. It was like they were newlyweds instead of middle aged adults who had been married for ten years.

“I hope you brought your appetite Morgan.” Chuck announced as he brought the pot full of chicken alfredo over to the hot pad that was on the table. A bowl full of salad and assorted vegetables sat next to the main course. I loaded up my plate with veggies and let Chuck serve me up the pasta.

“Oh! Morgan, this is lovely.” She exclaimed as she pulled out the framed picture of Grandpa, her, and me during Pelican Town’s ice fishing competition.

“I got the picture from Mayor Lewis. He has a ton of old pictures of Grandpa and I’m trying to make copies of them so I can put them in a photo album.” I said. “You don’t have any of Grandpa here do you?”

“I might.” She replied. “But they’re probably all packed away in your bedroom right now. I’ll check through them sometime next week, okay?”

Then Mom opened up her second, much larger gift, and she sighed in pure bliss. “Morgan, oh you really shouldn’t have.”

She withdrew her present from the box and set it on the table. Her present was an old, green tackle box that use to be hers from when she was a child. Carved into the aluminum was the inscription “Property of Diane Weiss” and a crudely drawn fish was etched in the side.

“I found the tackle box in Grandpa’s shed back in March. It took me a while to clean up, sanitize, and remove the rust, but I thought that Grandpa would want you to have it. Oh, and there’s a smaller present inside it.”

Mom flipped the metal latch on the box and opened the accordion drawer lid so three empty trays awaited. In the very bottom of the tackle box were four small mason jars full of pickled beans, peppers, blueberry jam, and salmonberry jam.

“This is all very thoughtful, thank you.” My mom said, genuinely touched. She rose from the chair and kissed me on the cheek. I wiped off the moist spot with the back of my hand and made a faux grimace like I use to do when I was a kid.
“And thank you for dinner, dear.” Mom said and she went to kiss Chuck on the lips. Instead of their usual quick marital peck they often shared, this kiss was tender and languid. Seeing their kiss made me pine for Elliott’s touch.

I cleared my throat, “Uh ... I can leave you guys alone if you want.”

Mom smiled and looked back at me. She looked positively radiant, glowing even and I had never seen her this happy before. It was a kind of happiness that superseded just today’s festivities; it was almost ethereal.

“Don’t run off just yet. Chuck and I have some exciting news that we want to share with you.” My mom said.

Mom held Chuck’s hand and looked at me expectantly with a perverse and enigmatic smile that told me that I should know what they were thinking.

My heart thudded in my chest as my mind jumped to the worst possible conclusions. Had someone died? No, Mom seemed too happy. Did she get a promotion? Maybe, but that hardly seemed like news of this caliber.

Chuck cleared his throat first. His salt and pepper mustache twitched and he looked sideways at my mother who blushed. “You know Morgan, we’ve been a family -- just the three of us -- since you were fifteen and now --” he paused and bit his lip tentatively, “-- and now our family is getting bigger.”

There was a beat of silence.

“Oh.” I replied dumbly, “You’re getting a pet?”

That didn’t make sense to me. My mom hated animals, or ‘critters’ as she called them when she was at grandpa’s farm. I’d always be the one to help grandpa feed the cows and pigs while Mom tended the garden, happy to be far from anything that barked, meowed, whinnied, oinked, or mooed.

“No Morgan.” My mom said patiently. “I’m — I’m pregnant.”

“With what?” My brain still hadn’t processed the news.

“A baby.” She replied stiffly.

I blinked dumbly. “What?”

Chuck’s proud grin conveyed a strange masculine pride. He chuckled, “Believe me. That was my reaction when your mother told me too.”

My mother nodded and held her still flat stomach, “I had my first prenatal doctor’s appointment yesterday and the doctor says the baby is doing fine. I’m about eight weeks along but so far it’s been smooth sailing.” She chuckled to herself and sipped a can of carbonated water. “People say the second pregnancy is always easier but I don’t think they often count a twenty-five year gap in their studies.”

I could hear the blood pulsing in my head in time with my frantic heartbeat. My immediate reaction wasn’t good. I was shocked, of course, but a darker and more selfish part of myself was kind of pissed, but I used all of my self-control to stuff my feelings down until I could rant about them later in the privacy of my own home. However, my body seemed to have other plans.
“Oh hon, don’t cry!” Chuck said and he moved around the table to pull me into a gruff, masculine side-hug. I wiped my fingers underneath my eyes hoping to catch the tears without smearing my mascara. My mom came on the other side of my chair and sandwiched me in-between her and Chuck and we shared a tortured and claustrophobic group hug until I wriggled free.

“Mom.” I croaked. “W-were you trying to get pregnant?”

Again her sheepishness returned and she shared a conspiratory side glance with Chuck who waggled his bushy eyebrows like he was a twenty-one year old kid boasting over his masculine conquest rather than a forty-five year old man who received AARP junk mail and would be pushing retirement age once his kid graduated from high school.

“I mean we weren’t trying for anything.” My mom said. “Chuck and I haven’t used protection since we got married when you were fifteen. I thought it would’ve happened back then and I was ready for it, but when it didn’t I just assumed that you’d be my only child.”

“Believe me, I wasn’t expecting to be a first-time dad at forty-five but here we are.” He grinned and kissed my mother’s cheek.

They both looked so sickeningly happy in their parental bliss that I felt like I was a voyeur watching my Mom’s real family finally take root.

“So what? I was like your practice kid or something?” I mumbled despite my best efforts to keep my hurt inside.

My mom frowned, “No Morgan! You will always be my baby but I had you when I was sixteen. This is different. I’m different. I’m ready to take care of a child now.”

“And you weren’t back then?” I asked in a tortured voice.

“No. I wasn’t.” She replied. “Morgan, I was sixteen! Why do you think you spent so much time with your Grandpa? He took you for entire summers as soon as you were potty trained so I could work doubles to make ends meet.”

Logically, I knew all of this. My Mom had sacrificed a lot for me. She had never hid that fact from me. When you grew up poor, you were well aware when money was tight or why Mom was working a double shift after having worked for fourteen days straight without a day off. But her response did nothing to quell the confusing torrent of hurt, betrayal, anger, and jealousy that rose up in me.

“Oh I’m glad that you’re ready for motherhood now.” I couldn’t keep the sarcasm from my voice.

My mother stiffened and leveled a look at me that showed me exactly where my stubbornness and temper came from. “Morgan Grace. You may be a grown adult, but I will not tolerate lip from you, especially not on my birthday.”

“I’m sorry.” I mumbled, properly rebuked.

“Uh…why don’t you ladies go have private girl talk on the porch. I’ll clean up here.” Chuck suggested.

I sighed and let my Mother guide me out onto our small back porch. There was a round patio table with an attached umbrella for shade, and two heavy wrought iron chairs with floral seat cushions that had been bleached nearly white by the sun.
We both took a seat and I stared stubbornly at my hands. It was probably petulant, but I wasn’t going to talk first.

My mom sighed, “Morgan why are you so upset?”

“I’m not.” I lied.

“Morgan…” Her own impatience crept into her voice. “Look. This baby will not change how I feel about you. I’m still your Mom and I still love you.”

I tried to articulate the emotional tempest inside of me so I picked and grabbed at the ideas hoping they’d make some semblance of sense when I said them aloud.

“I — I know that. But —” I sighed, “Mom. It’s been you and me for my entire life. When you started dating Chuck, I was already at that age where I was trying to go off on my own and didn’t really want you around. But now…” I paused, searching for the right words.

“But now you need your old Mom?” She finished for me with a smirk.

“I guess. Sometimes.” I admitted. “Like what happens when I have questions about boys? Or when I get married? Will you have time for me when you have a little kid tugging at your clothes? Or when I eventually have kids, how will they feel that their aunt or uncle is only a few years older than them?”

“Morgan I’m your mother. I will always make time for you. And unless you plan to get married on the exact day that I go into labor, I promise that I will be with you through that whole process. And I’m sure your future kids and my future child will be able to bond over this unique relationship that they have. It shouldn’t make any difference.”

“I’m sorry.” I felt properly ashamed and I shook my head at my own silliness. “I guess I’m already fulfilling the jealous older sibling stereotype, huh?”

“Well the one good thing about the big age difference is that I wont have to hear you both fighting over toys or clothes.” Mom remarked.

I chuckled and sipped more of my wine.

“And do you have questions about boys?” My mom inquired with a knowing smile.

I groaned as I thought of Elliott and about whether his meeting with the publishing agency had gone well. I knew that he wouldn’t take me up on my invitation to come to my mom’s birthday party. He was right, it was too soon, but I really wish that he could’ve been here to offer his perspective as a “late season” baby, as he once put it.

Chuck poked his head out the patio door like an animal checking to see if the storm had passed; a dishtowel was slung over his shoulder and he wiped his damp hands on the cloth. “You ladies alright out here?”

“We’re doing fine.” Mom replied. “But I think we can both use another drink now that the elephant in the room has been announced.”

Dutifully, Chuck went back inside and grabbed a fresh bottle of white wine and the sparkling grape juice for my Mom.

“So speaking of weddings and children and future plans…” Mom said with a sly grin. “Are you
“How do you know he’s a writer?” I asked in surprise.

“How do you know he’s a writer?” Mom replied matter-of-factly. “She keeps me up-to-date on all of the latest news regarding you and that young man. Unless you want to give me grand babies, you should probably get back on birth control. And I’d like to meet him before things get too serious between you too.”

My head thunked against the glass table as I hid my face from my mom and step father. I knew my face was probably cherry red, but what was worse was thinking about Elliott and I engaged in any activity that could lead to children. The fantasies and thoughts my mind conjured cracked through my brain like an unwanted prophetic vision.

“Oh I know that look.” Chuck commented with a chuckle.

“Don’t say it!” I nearly yelled as Mom’s grin got wider.

“Don’t tease her Chuck, the poor girl hasn’t gotten any in a year. She’s about to combust. Just look at her!”

Kill me now, Yoba. I thought as I drained the rest of my wine and grabbed my purse from the kitchen.

“Goodbye Mom. Happy Birthday. I’m leaving now!” I yelled out from the kitchen.

“Love you!” They both crowed in glee from my obvious embarrassment.

My head cleared a little and the blush from my face finally faded as I walked to the bus stop.

The bus stop was three blocks from my mom’s house and it was rather busy for it being so late. A couple of women were sitting on the bench complaining about their jobs in animated at loud voices while a couple of surly teenagers were standing slightly off to the right of the awning; their hoods obscured their faces but the skunky smoke that wafted up into the air made my eyes water a bit. The other three people were talking in a group but their accents gave them away as being from the Grotto Empire.

I stood off to the left and shoved my hands into my pockets. Living in Zuzu City gave me the wherewithal to be on the lookout for unsavory people. The three foreigners didn’t pay attention to me or even look in my direction so I paid them no mind. The pot heads didn’t seem violent or dangerous, their smell was just off-putting, but the figure quickly advancing upon me out of the alley’s darkness was a red flag.

I inched closer to the two rubenesque women without taking my eyes off the stranger. The man’s head was stooped and he looked to be holding a paper of some sort. He could’ve been a lost tourist I suppose, but this part of the city wasn’t a common tourist destination.

“Hello?” I called out. “You better look up or you’ll trip over something.”

According to my mom, rule number one of running a good defense when in the city at night was letting others know that you see them. If a criminal or unsavory character knows you’re aware that they’re there, they are less likely to try anything untoward. Or so my mom says.

The man’s head jerked up and a familiar voice called out from the darkness. “Morgan?”
“For Yoba’s sake…Elliott?”

He jogged towards me with the paper he was reading crumpled slightly in his tight grip.

“What are you doing here?”

“I got lost.” He said in a breathless pant. “I got off on the wrong stop and that bus was done running for the night. I had walk nearly two miles across town to this one.”

“It’s a good thing you did, hon.” One of the women on the bench said, “This is the last bus for the night.”

“D-Did your meeting just end?” I asked. “It’s almost ten o’clock!”

“No, it’s … I just …”

Elliott’s mind seemed addled and he looked paler and more sallow than he did when I first saw him this morning.

“Morgan…” He said in a hushed whisper, “T-they offered me a contract.”

“They want to publish you?!” I asked.

My heart soared and he pushed the papers he was reading into my hands.

His eyebrows rose minutely and a small smile played at his lips. “Read it.”

I looked down and read: "Dear Elliott Michaels. I am delighted to inform you that your book, tentatively entitled Across the Blue Mountains, has been accepted for publication by the Editorial Board, subject to approval of the final manuscript. As we discussed in our meeting his afternoon, our editor will work with you to get your manuscript ready to meet our quality standards. Please read through the formal offer to publish your book and carefully review the terms outlined below … Enclosed is a cheque for your advance after which you can expect …”

I stopped reading and full-out squealed. “Elliott! That’s amazing! I knew you could do it!”

I pulled him into a hug and he nearly stumbled from my ferocity and passion. My heart was beating wildly; I think I was more happy for him than he was for himself. Of course, this promise of steady income — however modest — meant that Elliott wouldn’t have to leave Pelican Town after all.

“Morgan they offered me a 4,500 gold advance and a publishing run of 50,000 books with the option to renew for 100,000 more if they sell out. They told me that this is the most lucrative contract that they’ve ever offered a novice author before!”

“Published author.” I corrected for him and he beamed at me.

“I couldn’t have done it without you Morgan. I mean that, truly.” The small hairs around his face curled in the humidity creating a wild man look that made my heart ache in the best and worst way.

I tucked a loose hair behind his ear and cupped the base of his neck. My heart thundered in my chest and blood rushed to my head. I desperately wished that we were back at the farmhouse together and that this next moment didn’t have to be shared by seven strangers as we waited for the bus.

I kissed him with all of the passion and urgency that I had been bottling up over the past several months. I heard one of the teenagers let out a wolf whistle and one of the foreigners tutted
disapprovingly but I didn’t care. Let the entire damn world see this, I thought wildly.

Elliott stuffed the letter into his pocket and pulled me up against the side of the awning and kissed me back. His teeth nipped at my lower lip which sent shivers and jolts down to my core. My entire body begged for him to touch me that I thought I’d go mad with desire.

When I finally pulled away, we were both breathing heavily and the loud whooshing of the bus’s hydraulics interrupted our amorous embrace.

I pulled him towards the bus as the line of people climbed the steps into the metal beast with agonizing slowness.

“Elliott, I want to be with you.” I said. My voice was unsteady and my words came out punctuated with small breathy gasps. “I want to be your girlfriend. I want to love you. I never want to let you go…”

He kissed me once more, and although his kiss was brief my head swam with the same passion and desire. “I want the same thing Morgan. You are my muse and you’ve been in my corner since the start. I’m sorry it took me so long to sort everything out.”

“Don’t apologize.” I replied. “I’m just glad you found me.”

He chuckled and I saw that his eyes were glistening with tears. I wiped them away with the pad of my thumb and gave him a peck on the lips once more.

As we boarded the bus together, I noticed that Elliott was discretely pulling down his sweater so that it covered his crotch. I’m sure he was regretting that he left his suit jacket at home.

We walked towards the back and took the last seats on the left. Once the overhead lights switched off and we were bathed in darkness, I heard Elliott whisper to me. “How long of a ride is it back to Pelican Town?”

“How long of a ride is it back to Pelican Town?”

“About forty minutes, why?”

He audibly whimpered, “This is going to be the longest forty minutes of my life.”
**Worthy of Love (Rated M)**

Chapter Notes

Warning! There is sex ahead. Please heed the ratings and the tags. This fic is firmly an M rating.

Chapter 13 — Worthy of Love

August 6th - (Summer, late evening)

We were both completely silent on the bus ride back to Pelican Town. As people trickled off the bus at the various stops before ours, I began to feel even more anxious about the possibilities and the expectations that awaited us back home.

I stared out the window hoping that the flashing scenery outside could distract me, but without the moon it was too dark to see anything except dark, blurred shapes. Next to me, Elliott’s right leg jiggled as nervously as ever which made me even more anxious.

But why was Elliott nervous? He was suave and worldly. He’s surely been around the block a couple of times, and I’m sure I wasn’t the only woman to fall for his charm. Between the two of us, he was the one who was clearly more experienced in all things romance and relationships. But my own dark insecurities whispered in my ear. What if I was an inadequate lover?

Brandon’s sexual proclivities centered around two traits: quick and basic. Having sex with him was infrequent and unsatisfying. I had to just lie there and take it; I was just a passive observer to Brandon’s carnal desires.

“Morgan, are you alright?” Elliott asked, breaking me out of my thoughts.

“Huh? Oh yeah … I … I was just lost in thought I guess.”

“Well we just passed the exit for Butternut Grove. Pelican Town is the next stop.” He said and his right leg resumed its jiggling.

I looked out the window once more. The large industrial farms that surrounded Zuzu City had given way to more wild hillside. Although the ocean wasn’t visible from the road, I could still smell the salt tang on the air.

No, intimacy with Elliott would be different. The passion I felt from just kissing Elliott was incomparable to what I had or thought I had with Brandon.

When the bus entered the pitch black tunnel, I turned towards Elliott and brought his hand to my lips. I kissed the top of his knuckles and then ran my fingers up his sinewy forearms. He hummed in appreciation and then leaned in towards me.

“Your touch dances like fire on my skin.” He purred in my ear.

His voice made me shiver. I swallowed my nerves and found my courage. I kissed his smooth jawline, tasting the slight saltiness of his skin, and kissed up his jawline to nip an his earlobe.
before placing feather light kisses at the corners of his lips.

“Teasing me are you?” He murmured low.

“More like exploring you.” I whispered back.

“Would you like a guide to help you? I can point out all of the intriguing points of interest. The nape of my neck is usually quite sensitive.” Elliott’s voice was raw and husky.

“Thanks for the tip. I’ll keep that in mind” I replied.

As I pulled away, two large hands cupped the sides of my face and pulled me back to him. Elliott’s kiss was hungry and full of longing for something more. This kiss lacked propriety. It was all consuming, engulfing, and my head swam with the thought that there was still so much more to come.

When we heard the bus slowing down, we both reluctantly broke away from each other and we glanced around with cat-that-ate-the-canary expressions. Thankfully nobody seemed to be paying attention to us.

As soon as the interior lights came on, Elliott turned his body into the aisle to let me out.

“Ladies first.” He remarked.

I walked down the aisle and past two riders, one who was watching some video off his cell phone and another who was sleeping so soundly that she was snoring. As the bus came to a shuddering and abrupt halt, I heard Elliott stumble forward and then felt his body lightly knock into mine.

I audibly yelped when I felt Elliott’s obvious arousal against my backside. The driver, this time he was a stocky, salt-and-pepper-haired black man, looked up at me and smiled.

“Have a good night you two.” He replied.

Maybe it was where my mind was at but his salutation seemed to hold a knowing tone.

“Um, thanks. You too.” I replied as I carefully descended the steep metal stairs and stepped out into the cool summer evening.

The gravel crunched behind me and then I felt Elliott’s hand snake down my arm to join with my hand. “I’d offer to take you out for a nightcap in celebration of this good news but it’s nearly 11:30 and the Saloon will be closing soon, and most of my belongings are still packed up in boxes anticipating a move that may never come.”

“We could celebrate at my place.” I murmured. I wanted my voice to sound seductive but it came out sounding all wrong. “I — I mean, I don’t have wine but I have some iced tea left.”

“Iced tea sounds lovely.” He replied and he held out his hand.

I laced my fingers in-between his and gave his hand a gentle squeeze.

We walked slowly through the darkness. I used the pitch black tree line to keep us on the road but even then we’d occasionally stumble into the tall grass on the side of the road and need to correct ourselves.

“Hey Elliott.” I said.
“Hmm?”

“You know, this can be just a celebration. We don’t have to jump into anything … more… right now.” I said, hoping my voice didn’t betray how much I wanted to do the exact opposite. “It’s just been a while since I’ve …” My voice trailed off and I felt myself blush again.

Elliott stopped and turned towards me. Now that my eyes had adjusted to the darkness, I could faintly see the concern that was written on his face.

“Morgan we can take this as slow as you’d like. I’d never do anything —“

“— My Yoba that’s like the opposite of what I’m talking about.” I interrupted, “It’s just been a long time for me. I’m not a virgin or anything but I want to be good for you. I’m not all of that experienced but —“

“— Morgan, hey. Shhh. It’s okay.” He interrupted my babbling and rubbed my forearms. “None of that matters to me.”

I sighed in exasperation. Of course he’d say that. He was just trying to not make me feel bad.

“Elliott, I’ve only been with Brandon. He was my first and I … look I — I don’t know how many sexual partners that you’ve had but —“

“— Two —“

“— I beg your pardon? — “

“— I’ve had two lovers.” Elliott repeated.

“Oh. Really? Only two?” I blurted out before I could stop myself. “Damn it, I didn’t mean it to sound judgy, I just…"

Elliott waved his hand dismissively. “Does that number worry you or disappoint you?”

“No! Neither! It’s not that. Yoba… I just thought that since you went to college and since you’re, you know, attractive that you’d be …“

I felt foolish and I sighed, “I just didn’t want you thinking that tonight was just me looking for a booty call.” I countered. “Coming over to my place, even though its late, does not mean you’re obligated to do anything.”

“That same agreement applies to you Morgan.” He said. “But I stand behind what I said this morning. I care about you, and I want to be with you. What makes you think that your so-called inexperience would change that?”

I chuckled in relief, “I — I don’t know. I’m being a little foolish I guess.”

“Besides, part of the fun of a new relationship is learning what the other person likes.” His voice dropped and his hands gently caressed my waist over my shirt. “I want to learn what you like.”

“Wh-what if I don’t know what I like?” I replied airily.

“All the better to learn and experiment and try new things.” He nipped at my neck and I shuddered.

I swallowed and bared my neck to his ministrations. I held tightly to his hard, lean body and I imagined how he’d feel beneath me, on top of me, or behind me. But then I jolted as I remembered
the other thing we needed to talk about.

My hands brushed through his thick hair and I pulled back to look at him. “There’s one more thing
I need to tell you.”

He hummed, or maybe purred, and his hands wandered down to my hips. I felt my body respond in
anticipation of where his hands might go. The sheer arousal I felt from his touch and my overactive
imagination made it hard to collect my thoughts.

“Elliott, I—I’m not on birth control. So unless you have a condom, I’m afraid all we’re doing is
 teas ing each other.”

Truthfully I had let my prescription run out as soon as I broke up with Brandon. I assumed that my
body didn’t need them anymore if I was too busy dating myself. Well, I thought wrong.

I also thought Elliott would’ve looked disappointed — or worse — angry that I had yet another
reservation about us having sex, but instead he smiled.

“Morgan, please don’t think that I’m a cad but in light of recent events and our discussion this
morning, I did harbor some hope this would happen.” He replied. “So it was serendipitous that I
stopped at a drug store before getting lost on the bus and stumbling into you.”

Elliott fished a small cardboard package containing three condoms out of his side pocket. The
conflicting emotions racing through my mind transformed into a buzz of relief, jubilation, hilarity,
and amazement at Elliott’s foresight.

“Is this okay?” He asked seriously.

My breath hitched in my chest. This was it. We were going to do it. “Absolutely.”

His hands were warm but I still shivered under his touch. My fingers trembled a little when I ran
them down his button up shirt. His heart thumped beneath my palm and I took his hand and placed
it on my own chest.

He didn’t squeeze or grope at my breasts; he just kept is his palm still and we felt each other’s
hearts beating.

“Elliott, what I feel now…what I feel between us…I’ve never felt this way before. I’m a little
scared.” I said.

“Me too.” He said.

I let out a long sigh that took most of my anxiety and nerves with it. No, this felt right. “Alright.
Let’s get going.”

He took my hands into his and we resumed the walk towards my house. We said nothing else the
entire way home.

When we entered the farm, the sound of cicadas, crickets, and bullfrogs were deafening. A soft
glow came from the cabin from the electric lamp that I purposely left on to help guide me back in
the dark. Golden’s luminous eyes peered out from my bedroom window and then they disappeared
once she spotted us.

I fished out my house key from my purse and I tore the note off the door. When we entered the
warm cabin, an envelope was lying on the welcome mat and I picked it up and put it on the table.
The letter was from Mayor Lewis and enclosed was a check for my second batch of summer crops.

As I closed the door behind Elliott and flicked on the lights to the living room, I felt my heart thump heavily in my chest. Yes Elliott had been inside my house twice before but this time was different.

“So … feel free to make yourself at home while I fix the iced tea.” I said.

I turned my back to him and made my way into the kitchen. The freezing air that wafted from the ice box that I opened did nothing to cool me down. As I cracked the ice trays and dumped the ice cubes into two tall tumblers, I thought about how it would feel if Elliott took an ice cube and slowly ran it along my body.

I shook my head at the thought and then I reached into the fridge for the pitcher of iced tea. As I poured the tea into the tumblers, I heard Golden frantically chasing after something. Elliott quietly chuckled, and when I glanced at the still unfinished living room, I saw that he had found the laser pointer that I had left on the coffee table.

I took a seat next to Elliott on the old futon. It was a two person love seat which forced us to sit close. He smirked mischievously as he coaxed Golden to run after the light at full speed, her claws clicking against the hardwood floor.

“I’m glad you’re tiring her out.” I remarked and I put his glass of iced tea on the coffee table in front of him. “Sometimes I feel bad that I’m too busy outside to properly tire her out before its time for bed.”

“Do you ever let her roam free outside?” He asked me off-handedly. Now the game was to see how high Golden could jump. Her white-tuffed tail flicked in irritation at the red light that was just out of reach.

“I don’t let her go outside all that often. I guess I’m afraid that she’ll get hurt or that she’ll run off and never come back.” I said. “I’ve gotten use to having her around, ya know?”

After a few minutes of Elliott’s teasing, Golden walked away from the red laser light and wandered off towards the bathroom. Her luminescent eyes peered at us from the darkened hallway.

“I fear that I’ve annoyed her.” He remarked.

“She’s fine. I think she’s in her moody teenage years right now.”

A quietness settled between us as we both drank from our glasses. Condensation slid off the glass and leaked onto my dress shirt and slid down my cleavage.

“I should get changed out of my dress clothes.” I said idly, hoping the breathiness in my voice wasn’t noticed.

“You look very nice though.” His brown eyes appraised me like an art critic studying the Mona Lisa. “You’re a vision, my dear. Simply a vision.”

I scoffed, “A vision of what?”

Elliott put his glass down on the coffee table and took my hands in his. “You’re a vision of wild, rustic beauty.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh stop. You probably got that from a book or something.”
Elliott scowled a bit. He looked almost hurt at my accusation.

“`I didn’t and I don’t make it a habit to woo women with plagiarized compliments from literature.´” He replied. Although his voice held no malice or anger, I still felt properly rebuked.

“Alright. Alright,” I conceded. “I’m just not use to someone calling me beautiful.”

“Now that’s an unforgivable tragedy and I plan to remedy that.” He pulled me close and kissed me gently. The futon creaked beneath our weight as I leaned back against the arm rest. We explored each other languidly and slowly. The sounds of our heavy, slow breathing and the occasional sigh as our kisses began drifting into more adventurous territory stoked my arousal.


Elliott obeyed and tossed the garment onto the floor. He resumed his kisses and ministrations while cupping my breasts over my bra.

As he kissed caressed my body, my trembling fingers undid the buttons on Elliott’s shirt and skinned over his lightly haired chest like I was trying to read braille off of him.

I dropped his shirt onto the floor and nipped lightly at the chorded muscles in his neck. He let out a contented groan and pulled my body into him. My hands kneaded the muscles in his back and then tickled over his sides until I ran my fingers through the light line of hair that ran from his naval down past his pants.

The summer air felt cold as it tickled across my own stomach. I reached back behind myself to undo my bra. Elliott stood back to let me but he never took his eyes away from mine. When I slipped the straps from my shoulders, I held the cups against my chest as one final moment of modesty before I bared myself before this man.

Elliott’s chest rose and fell steadily but when I dropped my arms and my bra to the floor, I saw his chest stop moving altogether. His brown eyes flickered down at my half-naked body once and then went back up to my face. In that minuscule passage of time, I thought I saw several emotions flash
across Elliott’s face until he finally settled on one: complete and utter adoration.

“You’re so beautiful.” He spoke that phrase like he was murmuring a prayer. “Lie back on the bed.”

I did so and looked up into his face. He was panting in desire and the tented fabric of his dress slacks did very little to hide his obvious arousal.

He swallowed thickly and climbed over me to kiss my cheek. Each kiss he planted traveled down my jaw, past the crook of my neck and collar bone, and ended at the top of my chest. His warm hand cupped my breast and I shivered in delight.

Then his mouth descended to my breasts and he tongued and laved over my erect nipple while his fingers gently rubbed the other one with agonizing slowness.

“Elliott, oh please.” I moaned out. “Please keep doing that. I like it”

“I will…” He panted. “I just … I need to get these pants off.”

I heard him fumble with the buckle and then hiss in satisfaction once he managed to slip the pants over his slim hips.

I scooted back towards the middle of the bed and went to remove my skirt but he shook his head. “No. I want to do it.”

His voice had taken on a different tone. He was needy just like I was but he was also a man who knew what he wanted, and that made me want him even more.

Elliott stood up to full height, and try as I might, I couldn’t take my eyes off his erection. He seemed to have no shame in his nakedness. He was gorgeous and his nakedness made him even more so. Hell. If I had known that he was hiding something like that beneath his long overcoat and linen pants, I might’ve been more persistent in our relationship.

“My eyes are up here, love.” He replied with a smug smirk and then climbed onto the mattress and settled between my legs. He tossed a wrapped condom onto the blankets near us and then captured my lips in his.

I rose up to meet his kiss and I returned his affection with a little more assertiveness than before. I nipped at his lower lip until it became swollen and a little red. Each time I did, Elliott rewarded me with a breathy sigh or a throaty groan.

“Kiss my breasts again.” I whispered.

His mouth descended over my skin. He gently tweaked and nipped over my sensitive flesh before drawing one nipple into his mouth and sucking gently.

“Yes.” I breathed. He caressed and molded my body like it was made out of clay, and I needed him more than I needed anything else before in my life.

My hips canted up off the bed to rub against his erection, and the friction of our two bodies together had us both hissing and growling in need.

Elliott sat back on his knees. His fingers dipped below the waistband of my skirt and he shucked my skirt and my panties off in one fluid movement. Immediately the cool summer air licked and tickled at the wetness that had collected between my legs which only heightened my arousal.
“Morgan…” He murmured and returned back to my breasts and kissed a path down across my stomach to the small tattoo on my hip. His tongue laved over that spot and then he gently nipped at me. As he made more progress further down my body, I felt completely at his mercy. I never knew I wanted to feel so helpless.

Elliott ran his palm down across my pelvis and over my trimmed pubic hair. His thumb dipped through my wetness and gently stroked across my clit.

“Oh Yoba.” I squeaked. My hips jolted at the sudden intensity and Elliott chuckled.

“What would you like me to do to you?” He asked and started kissing my neck and collar bone. His fingers never left my wetness. He seemed to be lingering there awaiting my next command.

“Tell me how to please you Morgan.” He murmured in my ear.

“Fingers…please!” I gasped and wiggled my hips to get him to touch me more.

Elliott captured my lips in a kiss and he slid two slim fingers into my body while his thumb gently but quickly teased and vibrated against my clit. I moaned and whimpered into his kiss.

The sounds my body was making as he touched me were sounds I had never heard before. I felt unbearably wet … almost embarrassingly so … but Elliott didn’t seem to mind. My body was experiencing so many different and unfamiliar sensations. There was a pressure building up in my stomach and I couldn’t articulate what was happening.

“Oh Yoba!” I cried as Elliott’s fingers moved faster inside me. “Oh … oh … wh—“

I moaned. My entire body seemed to seize up and I felt the breath leave my lungs. Unimaginable pleasure crackled through my body and my hands shot down to grab Elliott’s wrist.

His lips crushed against mine as I writhed against his body, whimpering and moaning, through my orgasm.

My heart pounded in my chest and I clutched against Elliot’s bare skin as though I could transfer some of the pleasure he had given me through skin-to-skin contact.

“That — that was amazing.” I croaked out.

Elliott chuckled and kissed my forehead. “You are amazing.”

I felt his manhood poking against my thigh and I grabbed the foil wrapped condom, opened it, and reached between us to touch him. My fingers gently encircled his velvet member and he slowly thrust against me.

“Morgan, please hurry. I — I can’t wait. I need to be inside you.” He groaned.

I did as he asked and slid the rubber down his member and guided him in to me. He paused for a moment and I gasped when I felt him push into me.

“Just go slowly. Please.” I murmured. “It's been a while.”

Elliott nodded but his face was fixed in a determined stare. His chest rose and fell at a feverish rate as he slid deeper into me.

“Morgan…” He groaned. “Oh Yoba…”
I felt a similar reaction but as he pushed deeper into me, all of the air escaped from my lungs. I ached slightly but it was a good ache.

Elliott grunted, deep and animalistic and oh-so arousing, as he slid the rest of the way into me. I sighed at the sensation of complete and total fullness and rose up to kiss the nape of his neck. His skin was sweated and hot to the touch but I didn’t care.

“Morgan, I’m not going to last very long.” He croaked.

I nibbled on his ear lobe and smirked, “Then don’t.”

I canted my hips upward and pulled him into me. He growled and then began moving against me, pumping his hips slowly but steadily.

We whispered adorations and praise to each other with every breathy sigh or ardent moan. Elliott’s long hair looked like a curtain that fell off his shoulder and I wrapped my fingers up in his luscious locks.

He groaned at my touch. The muscles in his forearms bulged as he propped his hands on either side of me and angled his thrusts deeper and faster. I met each thrust with one of my own.

“Play with yourself.” He growled. “I want you to cum with me.”

He rose up slightly and I did as he asked. My eyes locked with his and I felt my slick sex with my fingers. I felt him moving within me but when I touched my clit, my body clenched up in delicious anticipation.

Elliott whimpered and his thrusts became more insistent and aggressive. “Yes Morgan. I can feel you respond when you do that. Do that. Please.”

My fingers slicked across my clit like I was a woman possessed. I couldn’t get enough and soon my body seemed to hum with anticipation.

“Oh … that’s it.” Elliott groaned. “Yes. Cum with me, love. Please. I want to hear you.”

My entire core clenched down on and around Elliott’s member as I fell backwards into the chaotic bliss. I vaguely remember crying out and cursing, but I lost all notion of myself. My whole body felt raw and overstimulated.

Elliott finished on the heels of my orgasm and he gripped the headboard to stop himself from collapsing on top of me.

“Morgan — that was …” He gulped and brushed the sweaty hair off my forehead. “that was … amazing.”

I nodded mutely. Tears leaked down my face and I didn’t understand why I was crying. I felt amazing. This moment was beyond anything I could’ve ever imagined, but there was something gnawing at my mind.


I coughed and then laughed. More fat tears leaked down my face as I tried to sift through all of my feelings. I wasn’t even sure how coherent I was going to be.
“Talk to me.” Elliott pleaded and kissed my forehead. “Are you in pain?”

“N-No.” I hiccuped. I felt like I was going a little insane. “I’m okay. You didn’t do anything wrong. You were wonderful. Amazing.”

Elliott sighed and grabbed the ring of the spent condom and pulled out. “I’m going to go and take care of this. When I get back, please tell me everything.”

I nodded and swallowed. I grabbed his wrist and pulled him back to me. “It’s not you. I swear. You were amazing. I’m okay.”

“Okay…” He said but his voice conveyed his disbelief. “I’ll be right back.”

I climbed beneath the sheet and turned to face the bedroom window. The stars painted the sky like spilled marbles and I watched a couple fall through the sky in brilliant flashes of light. In that moment, I realized just how much had changed in my life. A year ago, I was in a tired, loveless relationship and stuck in a job that I hated. Five months ago, I made a radical change and had no idea how it would turn out. And now…well, I felt so grateful that I had made those changes.

Elliott came back and slid into the bed behind me. He pulled me so my back rested against his chest and he held me tightly.

“Are you okay?” He asked again. His hands held onto mine and I brought his knuckles to my lips.

I turned to face him and smiled, “I’m sorry. I wasn’t expecting that sort of reaction. I think I was just overwhelmed by everything. What we just did … that type of passionate connection … I had never felt that way before. Sex has always been a chore for me. You know? I didn’t know it could be like … that.”

Elliott looked touched at the compliment but also a little sad. “Morgan. Sex should never be a chore. It’s an expression of love between two people. You are worthy of being loved. You know that, right?”

More tears sprang to my eyes and I nodded. “I just never knew that it would feel like this.”

Elliott brushed the hair from my face and drew me into his arms. I listened to the steady thump of his heart beat until I fell asleep.
Chapter 14 — The Dance of the Moonlight Jellies (Rated T+)

August 15th (Summer)

“It’s going to be alright Morgan.” Elliott said as he gently brushed my hair away from my neck and kissed my pulse point. “The town was going to find out about us sooner or later.”

“This is one of the few things that I hate about small towns. Nobody would bat an eye at us if we showed up together at a party in the city, but I wouldn’t be surprised if we’re all they talk about for the next month.” I groused.

“Morgan, why does that bother you?” Elliott asked idly. I could tell he was trying to tip toe through this discussion without stepping on a proverbial land mine.

I sighed as I finished my side braid and tied the end with a small hair tie. “I just hate the idea that people are going to talk. I’ve never liked being the center of gossip or attention.”

The truth was actually more than that. Being the granddaughter of the town’s most loved and respected man meant that I was raised knowing that there were certain expectations of me, and settling down and marrying someone was one of them. I didn’t want Elliott to feel like I was moving too fast or trying to trap him in a life that he might not want. Least of all, I didn’t want the entire town doing that same thing to him either.

“You know, we don’t have to go to this together.” He murmured from behind me.

I winced at the hurt and disappointment in his voice. “No!” I urged, “Look … I’m sorry, okay? I know I’m probably making this a bigger deal than it is.”

I took Elliott’s hands into mine. Ever since that first night together, we had been inseparable. If he wasn’t over at my farm, I was at his cabin. We had fallen into this relationship easily, so what was I afraid of?

I turned to face Elliott. His warm brown eyes were soulful and troubled. I had to come out with it and tell him the truth.

“Elliott, look —“

“— Is it because of your ex? Are you worried about him finding out?” Elliott interrupted.

“Yoba, No!” I urged. “This has nothing to do with Brandon. I just …” I faltered again. “… Elliott, now that I’ve moved back here…the town expects things of me. My grandfather was the cornerstone of this town and with my recent success I just feel like the town elders are expecting things from me that I don’t want to put onto you.”

He frowned, “I still don’t follow you.”

I sighed, “Are you familiar with the religious story of the prodigal child? It was rare for Grandpa to go to worship, but when he did, he liked the story of the prodigal child the best.”

Elliott nodded, “I don’t know the story first-hand but I’ve seen it referenced in other kinds of literature.”
“Well, in the story, the child leaves home and succumbs to all kinds of vices and returns to the farm destitute and broken. The father could’ve spurned the child for abandoning the family, but instead, he welcomes the child back with love and grace.”

“And you think you’re that prodigal child?” He surmised.

“No. But I think that the town — especially the elders — see me as that.” I replied. “My mom got pregnant with me while she was still in school. I know that Grandpa hoped that she’d take over the farm someday, but when she turned that down and moved to the city, he — and now the whole town — is expecting that I take up that mantle. And now that I’m dating you, I just worry that the town is expecting more out of us than what we’re ready for.”

“More?”

I hesitated again and then confessed my fear in one quick jumble. “Elliott, they are waiting for us to get married, settle down, and raise a family. I mean, we’ve only been together for a couple of weeks but I know they’re eagerly waiting for us to get a lot more serious. I’ve got the farm and you’ve got your book, and we’re both busy and ambitious, but courtships in Pelican Town don’t last very long and I don’t want you to feel pressured into something like that. Not that I don’t want to get married eventually but this isn’t something couples usually talk about after dating for two weeks. I … I … I’m sorry, I know I’m being ridicul—“

Elliott chuckled and pulled me into a hug. “Morgan, that’s a monumental kind of weight to carry on your shoulders.”

“I just didn’t want you to think I was trying to trap you or force you into something that you didn’t want. I didn’t want to hold you back from your dreams.” I mumbled into his chest.

“Trap me?” He pulled away and cupped my face in his large hands, “Darling, you’ve completely trapped me. You’ve ensnared me. I’m at your mercy. But I walked into this trap knowingly and fully consenting to this relationship. But nothing you’ve done, nothing you could do, would interfere with my dreams. I owe the success of my book to you. You were the one that gave me the idea to focus on the day-to-day drama of life. Remember? If it wasn’t for your support, I wouldn’t even be here.”

I nodded and swallowed the lump rising to my throat.

“Besides,” he continued, “I’m a traditional man when it comes to relationships. I always thought marriage was in the cards for me at some point, but right now, I’m just enjoying us. I’m enjoying the newness of everything, and I’m looking forward to tonight and all of the other nights that we get to be together.”

He gently kissed me and I recieved it with tender and languid affection. He tasted like coffee and strawberries and smelled like pine. I shuddered beneath his gentle touch. My newly awakened libido gnawed at me to grab him and take him back to my bedroom.

“You know, we could always stay in.” I said huskily. “The jellyfish migrate yearly. We will see them again, and I’m sure we can find something else to get up to in the meantime.”

“Ms. Raymond, are you trying to seduce me?” He purred.

I gave him a winning smile, “Is it working?”

“Tremendously. But I’ve had my heart set on seeing this phenomena ever since I came to Pelican Town, so our ardor will have to wait.”
I pouted and then smiled, “I admire your restraint.”

“Oh, this isn’t restraint.” He murmured. “Consider it foreplay, for I plan to taste every inch of you once the festivities are over.”

My breath hitched in my chest and I felt a light blush color my neck. I slid past him in the small bathroom and went to the coatrack that was next to the door.

Elliott emerged soon after and pulled on his red overcoat. He wore dark wash jeans and a blue cotton t-shirt, and pulled his hair back into a loose ponytail with one of my hairbands. He looked like he could’ve walked off a modern romance novel.

He kissed my knuckles on my right hand. “Shall we?”

The living room was awash in golden light as the evening sun finally made its way to the edge of the tree line as it set. I grabbed my own cotton zip up and ruffled Golden’s fur. She gave a plaintive squeak in annoyance but remained perched dutifully near the window.

“Don’t wait up for us.” I told the cat to which she meow-squeaked again and flicked the white tuff of fur on her tail acknowledgement.

“So you guys finally made it official?” Alex asked and clapped Elliott on the shoulder so hard that he knocked into me.

I smiled politely, “Yeah I guess it is official.”

Haley appraised Elliott like he was an odd museum artifact and then shrugged. “It’s about damn time.”

Alex nudged her with his elbow and then she added reluctantly, “Congrats I mean. I guess.”

I bristled at her tone but plastered a fake smile onto my face that mirrored hers, “Thanks. I appreciate that.”

“Elliott and Morgan sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G …” Vincent sang as he skipped past the four of us. Sam glanced at me apologetically and shook his head at this brother’s antics. My ears grew hot from embarrassment and I gently pulled Elliott towards the beach.

“Excuse us, we should probably head down there if we want to snag a rowboat before they’re gone.” I replied.

“Have a lovely evening.” Elliott replied primly to Alex and Haley.

The cobblestone turned to hard packed dirt and the ground gradually sloped. I could hear seagulls crying and I smelled the salt on the air. The breeze coming off the ocean was comfortable and it cut through the summer humidity.

“Hey Elliott, can I get yer help with these last couple of rowboats?” Willy called out to us. “Lewis’s done throw’d his back out tryin’ to lift them by himself.”

Sure enough, I saw Mayor Lewis sitting in a lounge chair next to Elliott’s cabin with a bag of frozen vegetables resting on his back.

“Of course.” He replied and then turned to me. “I’ll be right back.”
“I’ll be fine. Go and help Willy. I’ll be waiting right here.”

Elliott gave my hand a gentle squeeze and then crossed to where the rowboats were sitting on the beach. The last two in the line were still upside down.

“Hey Morgan!”

When I turned my head, I saw Sam jogging towards me. His hands were stuffed in the pockets of his denim jacket.

“How’s it going?” He asked with a shy smile. “It’s been ages since you’ve been to a Moonlight Jellies celebration.”

“I know.” I agreed. “I think last time I was here, you were just a bit older than Vincent. I think you were going through a punk phase at the time because I remember that you had red and blue dyed tips that year.”

He chuckled at the memory, “Oh yeah. Mom was super pissed about it too.”

“So …” Sam began, “You and Elliott, huh?”

“Yep.” I replied in a tone that indicated I didn’t want to elaborate any further.

“Sorry, I’m not the one to be nosy.” He replied. “I … I’m just happy for you. I always looked up to you in away. When I was a kid, and you and your Grandpa were down here fishing, I would come down here to find seashells just so I could see you.”

I chuckled, “You were ten! Why did you want to see me?”

Now Sam blushed and kicked at the sand so it covered his other shoe. “C’mon Morgan. You were the 14-year old city girl. You were cute. I guess I had a crush on you.”

Then as though he just realized what he had said, Sam’s blue eyes shot up and got real wide. “I — I’m not trying to hit on you! I … I just was reminiscing and …”

“It’s okay.” I replied. “Thank you for the compliment. I have a lot of fond memories from those times. Even though Grandpa’s passed, sometimes it feels like he’s still here with us.”

Sam smiled shyly, “Take care Morgan. You and Elliott should come to the Saloon sometime. We’re playing there next Friday night before we go to the Zuzu Autumn Music Festival to compete.”

I nodded, “I’ll try and stop by. What time do you start?”

Sam’s nervous expression brightened, “We start at seven!”

“Alright, maybe I’ll see you there.”

Sam walked back to where his brother, Vincent, was digging a hole in the sand like a dog and picked the young boy up and set him on his shoulders. Vincent’s sandy hands ruffled Sam’s gelled and spiky hair, but if the teenager was annoyed, he didn’t let on.

Elliott walked back to me. He was carrying his shoes in one hand and his jacket over his other arm. His shirt was slightly damp from the spray from the sea and it clung to his lithe frame like a second skin.
“It's probably prudent if you give me your shoes. I’m going to set our belongings in the cabin before we set sail.” He replied.

As I toed off my own work boots and socks, a streak of black and purple broadsided me and slammed into my hip.

“Morgan!” Jas cried. She hit my body so hard that I stumbled back a bit.

“Ooof. Jas, be careful. You’re stronger than you look ya know.”

“So-rry.” She sang in a girly sing song voice.

Elliott picked up my shoes from the sand and gave Jas a warm smile.

How’s it going?” He asked.

She gasped and glanced from me to Elliott and back again. Her eyes bounced between us like a ping pong ball. “Morgan is Elliott your husband now?” Her hushed voice was filled with so much wonder and delight that I felt bad laughing.

“No Jas.” I replied and I shot Elliott a smile that said ‘see I told you.’

The young girl frowned and looked up at me with dark, expressive eyes. “But Auntie Marnie said that when a boy and a girl are together, they will get married.”

“What about you and Vincent. You both are together at school. Are you going to marry him?” I was trying to get the young girl to recognize the intricacies of marriage, but my strategy backfired.

“Yes! I’m gonna marry Vincent once I’m old enough.” Then she lowered her voice in a conspiratory whisper, “He just doesn’t know it yet.”

“Okay…” I faltered. I looked over at Elliott’s cabin and saw Marnie sitting in the other wooden chair. She was waggling her finger at Mayor Lewis who looked properly rebuked for whenever he moved in the chair, he winced and readjusted the bag of frozen vegetables that he was using to ice his strained back.

“What about Marnie and Mayor Lewis?” I asked. “They’re together right now. Does that mean they’ll get married.”

Jas had the most peculiar expression. “They’re too old to get married. At least that’s what Mayor Lewis tells Auntie when he comes over for a sleepover.”

I looked at Elliott who looked just as bewildered. “Um…well…”

Elliott knelt down and put a reassuring hand on her shoulder, “Jas. Morgan and I aren’t getting married anytime soon, but I do like her a lot. You clearly like Morgan too.”

The little girl nodded, “She lets me pet Stella whenever I want. And Uncle Shane isn’t as grumpy when she brings over some of her extra food and preserves.”

“Well, I might not be ready to get married but I do want to be her boyfriend. Is that alright with you? Would you give us your blessing?” He asked.

“What’s a blessing?”

“It means permission.” Elliott clarified, “Do I have your permission to be Morgan’s boyfriend?”
Jas frowned and tapped her chin as though she was in deep contemplation.

“Okay!” She said brightly.

“Jas!” Shane called out. “Jas, stop bothering the love birds. The migration is about to start.”

Shane was standing at the surf’s edge, barefoot and with his jeans cuffed up around his hairy calves. He took a pull from a silver flask. Even in the twilight, his five-o-clock shadow was prevalent.

Jas didn’t seem to notice Shane’s appearance, nor did she comment about the flask. Instead she waved good-bye and skipped through the sand. She held her purple dress up so she wouldn't get sand on it. Her dark curls were tied back into pigtails with purple ribbon.

“C’mon, I murmured. Drop our stuff off in the cabin and let’s set sail before any other people decide to offer us congratulations.” I replied.

Elliott nodded and once our stuff was safely stashed in his cabin, he pushed a rowboat out into the shallow water and then gracefully hopped aboard. I envied him. He seemed at home on the sea. He gallantly helped me clamber into the rowboat, none-too-gracefully. He climbed over the first bench seats and sat in the middle of the boat. We were so close that our knees touched.

His large hands grabbed ahold of the oars and began rowing us out into the ocean. Thankfully the night was calm and the tide was low; the waves were manageable, almost soothing, and we soon made it out past the docks and into the open sea.

Demetrius and Robin stood on the far end of the dock holding hands while Alex’s grandparents sat on a bench that someone had carried and placed on the other dock. Several boats started rowing out to sea and soon the entire town was either on the docks or in boats of their own.

Shane and Jas were wading in the shallow waves. The young girl’s bright pink lifejacket stood out like a beacon amid the blue, navy, and purple hues of the descending night.

Sam was following Vincent as the kid ran out into the sea to pick the shells that were momentarily uncovered by the retreating surf.

The closest boat to us was Leah who was manning a boat by herself. She gave us a shy smile as she rowed past us. I spotted a sketchpad and a set of oil pastels sitting on the vacant wooden seat. The artists fingers were already smudged purple and blue, there was even a smudge of blue across her brow, but the woman didn’t seem to notice or care.

Alex was rowing a boat while Haley took pictures of him with her camera. The flashbulb sparked occasionally and I could hear Alex’s indistinct complaints although I couldn’t deduce what he was saying.

“Is this alright or do you want to go out farther?” Elliott asked.

“This is perfect.” I replied. “I’ve actually never experienced this from a boat before. I don’t want to chance fate by traveling too far from the beach.”

“I’ve never experienced this phenomena before.” Elliott replied as he rested the oars on the inside of the boat. “I once watched a documentary about the jellyfish migration on television, but seeing it in person must be spectacular.”

“It is.” I agreed.
A comfortable silence settled between us and I dangled my fingers lazily in the water enjoying how the cool sea caressed my skin. I remembered my grandfather’s gently chiding voice to be careful because fish might mistake my finger for a worm and bite it off. We always watched the migration from the docks, mostly because my grandfather didn’t know how to swim and didn’t want to chance capsizing in a boat, but being this close to the sea and this far way from people made it feel like Elliott and I were floating away in our own little world.

“A penny for your thoughts?” Elliott asked. His warm hands caressed my bare legs. His touch got my attention but it also ignited a needy flame within me.

“I — I was just thinking about grandpa actually.” I confessed. “This was kind of our tradition before he passed away. I didn’t attend a lot of the festivals — I still don’t come to think of it — but this …” My voice caught in my throat and my words failed me.

“Thank you for making me come to this.” I whispered.

Elliott kissed my hands and rubbed my exposed forearms. “Thank you for coming to this and for putting us out there in the open despite the overbearing well-wishes.”

We sat in silence once more, leaning against each other and relishing in how simple physical contact set my anxiety at ease. Soon it was too dark to see the people on shore. As we watched and waited for any sign that the jellyfish were on their way, I turned my eyes skyward and marveled at how the stars glowed and twinkled like ornaments. I squinted and tried to peer past the first layer of stars only to discover a whole new layer of dim, tiny stars hiding deeper in the inky blackness.

“Morgan, look!”

I pulled my eyes from the heavens and glanced into the dark water. At first I didn’t see anything but then, near the bow of the ship, I saw an iridescent purple and blue glow rise up from the deep.

The entire town cried in amazement and Jas’s squeals of delight carried across the water to us. Like scattered jewels, the iridescent color seemed to glow like the inverse of the night sky. I peered deeper into the water past the first blip of color and saw three more begin to rise up. Then seven more, then twelve, and then the entire sea seemed to glow with color and light.

We started to see the faint shapes of the jellyfish as they rose closer to the surface. Tiny ones clustered in groups; their tentacles were barely visible while large jellyfish floated lazily beneath us as they rode the ocean’s current.

I shuddered at the thought that while these animals were majestic and beautiful, one sting from their tentacle could cause immeasurable pain.

I noticed that a jellyfish wiggled nearby and shook as though it was dancing. Its tentacles swayed beneath it like seaweed. The jellyfish’s translucent skin glowed a gorgeous violet and then gradually faded into a hunter green and then into a vibrant magenta.

After a two or three minute spectacle, the colors and light faded from the ocean as the jellyfish sank back into the ocean’s depths to catch the colder water current and migrate to their winter home.

“So what did you think?” I asked Elliott, but his partially open mouth and wild, wide eyes told me everything that I needed to know.

“Morgan that was … I mean …”
“Pretty cool, right?”

“Cool. Morgan it was marvelous, breathtaking, wondrous, sensational, it was …”

His eyes held a fire in them that I hadn’t seen before. He looked like he had just witnessed a miraculous event.

“And this happens every year?” Elliott asked.

“Yes.” I picked up the oars and began to row us back to shore. “The migration is never very long but the entire town always comes out to see it.”

“This is the type of natural miracle that inspires poetry!” He exclaimed. “Wordsworth, Keats, Blake… the great Romantic authors would’ve been hard pressed to find another natural wonder as gorgeous and dazzling as this.”

I smiled at Elliott’s exuberance. “Then let’s get you back so you can write a poem that will put them all to shame.”

We made it back to shore quickly and Elliott hopped out of the rowboat and helped Willy and Alex drag the boats back onto the sand.

“Will you be okay if I left you alone for an hour?” Elliott said, “I know this is supposed to be our time together but inspiration has struck. The muse calls me.”

“Go ahead.” I chuckled. “I’ll be right outside the cabin. I’ve been meaning to do a little stargazing before I turn in.”

Elliott gave me a quick peck on the lips. “Give me an hour then I can make good on that promise that I made earlier.”

My entire body warmed a few degrees at the thought of his promise and I bit my lip. “Alright, but when the hour is up, I’m interrupting your work whether you’re finished or not.”

“Deal.” He murmured.

I settled into the lounge chair outside of his cabin and listened to the steady chirping of the summer cicadas and bullfrogs.

Within ten minutes, most of the townspeople clambered up the sandy hill and returned back to their houses. Demetrius and Robin were still on the dock, and they held hands as they sat on the edge and stargazed.

Marnie showed up ten minutes later with Lewis’s truck and helped him into the passenger seat. The poor man was walking hunched over and holding his lower back. Harvey was nearby and helped him into the truck and then issued some instructions to Marnie about his care.

I leaned back in the chair and pulled my legs up to my chest. The chair was large enough that I could curl into a fetal position and still fit with room to spare. So I sat in silence and tried to pick out the constellations that my Grandpa had named. They were not scientifically accurate mind you. He called the Big Dipper the Spankin’ Spoon because his own mom use to spank him with the back of a wooden ladle. But each constellation that he named had its own story. As I searched the sky to find Mossback the 40 inch Northern Pike, I felt my eye lids get heavy as the ocean’s waves lulled me to sleep.
Parting Is Such Sweet Release (Rated M+)

Chapter Notes

This fic goes from zero to sex in a matter of seconds. This fic is rated M for a reason. If sexual content is not your style, feel free to skip to the next chapter.

Thank you to everyone who has taken time to review, read, leave kudos, and bookmark this fic. I love writing this story and I appreciate all of the support.

Chapter 15 — Parting Is Such Sweet Release (Rated M)

September 1st (Fall)

After the Dance of the Moonlight Jellies festival, the rest of that summer flew by.

My daily routine, which included weeding, feeding the animals, milking, collecting eggs, harvesting ripe produce, and canning and cooking the produce, now included yard work such as raking, maintaining the fence in the pasture, and chopping wood to prepare for winter.

Life on the farm forced me to become a jack-of-all-trades type of person, and when I couldn’t figure something out, I’d give Marnie or Robin a call and ask their advice. The work was hard, and once Fall hit, I was beginning to feel a bit run down. At night, I’d play through an exhaustive list of things that I had to get done before winter arrived, and during the day, I’d often work from sun up until sun down.

Meanwhile, Elliott spent his days in Zuzu City with his editor and the publishing company as they finalized his book and prepared for the press circuit. Although it was exciting, I knew that he was feeling overwhelmed by the sudden attention. Sometimes I’d catch him muttering to himself and hastily scratching down a reminder on a pocket notebook that he had taken to keeping in his jacket, and on the nights that we spent together, he slept fitfully or very little at all.

It was a cool autumn evening when our respective anxieties and mounting stress robbed us both of sleep.

My alarm clock read 1:32 a.m. and no matter what I did, I couldn’t get back to sleep. Elliott’s side of the bed was still intact which meant he hadn’t come to bed at all.

My bare feet kissed the cold wooden floor and I put my hair up into a hasty ponytail. The kerosene lamp on the small table by the door burned low which made the room seem even more ominous.

“Elliott?” I called out.

“I’m here, love.” His soft reply answered.

As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I saw that Golden was curled up on his chest and he absent-mindedly stroked her fur.

I took a seat next to him on the metal futon and leaned against his arm.
“Hey.”

“Hey.” He murmured.

Golden hopped off his chest and flicked her tail at us before settling on my canvas camping chair.

“Whatcha doing?” I asked while trying my best to sound light-hearted and cheery.

He sighed, “I’m just thinking about this coming weekend. My editor wants me to do five different book signings throughout Zuzu City. I think they scheduled three this Saturday and two this Sunday.”

“That’s good, isn’t it?” I asked.

“Of course! But it also means that if this weekend goes well, they’ll want me to do readings and go on a wider tour. I’d be gone until early October.”

He glanced at me and I saw the concern etched in his face. Was he concerned about leaving me behind?

“Is that what’s bothering you? Being gone, I mean?”

Elliott’s fingers interlaced with mine. I couldn’t read his facial expression in the darkness but I knew he was choosing his words carefully.

“I don’t know what’s bothering me. I guess I’ve been feeling this low-level of anxiety ever since I got the news from the publisher. I mean, of course I’m excited to meet new people and share my thoughts with the world, but I didn’t realize how much this place has sucked me in. I would’ve never considered myself as a homebody in the past, but I …”

I brought his hand up to my lips and kissed his knuckles. “I get it. But also, think of all of the people you will get to talk to and the places you’ll get to visit. Elliott, this has been your dream since you got to Pelican Town.”

“It has.” He agreed. “But I never expected that I’d have someone waiting for me to get back. I wish I could have you come with me.”

I smiled sadly. We both knew that was impossible. I couldn’t be away from the farm for a week, let alone a month.

“We still can call each other.” I remarked.

He kissed my hairline and pulled me in between his long legs so I could lean against his chest. “I vow to call you every night just so I can hear your voice.”

“And if you are doing a book signing near Zuzu City, I can take a bus out during the day to come and see you.” I offered.

“That would be lovely.” He mused as his long fingers absentmindedly stroked the exposed skin along my collar bone. His feather light touches made my heart race and I desperately wanted his hands to move someplace more interesting than my shoulder.

“We will be missing each other’s birthdays, you know.” Elliott remarked, “And I had something fantastic planned for yours.”
“Oh really?” I replied and I stroked his forearm with the tips of my fingers. “What is it?”

He tutted at my curiosity, “It’s a surprise, even if it will be late. The best kinds of surprises are the ones you don’t expect.”

I groaned, “I don’t like surprises. Besides what about your birthday? Even if I can’t celebrate with you, I still want to get you a gift, and I’m sure you already have plenty of books. What else would you want as a birthday present?”

Elliott hummed thoughtfully but then entrapped me with his arms and nibbled at my exposed collar bone. Jolts of electricity shot across my neck and I shuddered.

“I’m a pretty simple man.” He murmured into the crook of my neck. “Besides books, I enjoy a good home-cooked meal. I’m partial to seafood and …” His hands relaxed their hold of me enough to sneak beneath my loose-fitting sleep shirt.

“And I like when you’re completely at my mercy.” He whispered into my ear.

“Oh …” I moaned when his left hand snuck beneath my pajama bottoms to graze against my vulva while his right hand expertly teased at my nipples. “Oh … Elliott.”

I melted into his body as his dexterous fingers stoked the flames within me. My hips pushed back against his pelvis and all of my concerns and anxieties about the ever-mounting farm work and about Elliott’s book tour slipped from my mind.

Elliott nibbled and sucked at my pulse point as his long fingers dipped into my core. The futon frame squeaked in protest but I’d let the damn thing break before I asked Elliott to stop touching me.

I reached up behind me with my left hand to run my fingers through Elliott’s hair while my right hand slipped beneath his drawstring lounge pants to cup his hardening member.

“Morgan…” He sighed into my shoulder. His hips rolled against my hand and I felt his own wetness leak from the tip of his arousal.

“Bedroom?” I asked huskily. My mind swam with incoherent thoughts as I tried to navigate through the waves of pleasure radiating from my core.

“No… I need you now.” He growled. He removed his fingers and trailed his hand along my left hip. My own wetness stained my skin but I didn’t care. I felt him pull my pajama bottoms off me, but he left them around my knees.

“Oh your knees, love.”

An electric thrill shot through me as I crawled forward. My face flushed from excitement and embarrassment as I presented my bare sex to him.

I heard the crinkling of foil and I was glad that we had the foresight to stash condoms in almost every room in my cabin. I had just started my birth control pack and it would be a couple more weeks before I was fully protected.

I felt Elliott’s fingers lightly tease across my vulva before dipping into my core once more. From this angle and in this position, his fingers hit something inside me that made me feel like I was being punched in the gut with pleasure.
“Oh Elliott.” I moaned as I met his thrusting fingers with light thrusts of my own. “Yes … more. Please.”

I felt his body hover over mine and he gently nipped at my ear lobe while planting kisses along my neck and exposed shoulder.

“I love seeing you like this.” His voice was soft and full of lust. “Tell me exactly what you want.”

I gasped as his thumb joined his ministrations and slowly circled my clitoris. His movements weren’t enough to get me to the edge, and I realized that he was purposely teasing me and holding me in suspense.

“Ah, please!” I wined. “Please!”

“Please, what?” He murmured in my ear.

My face flushed red as I said words that I had never said to another man before, “Dammit! Please just fuck me.”

Elliott chuckled and guided himself into me with very little resistance. The sensation of him entering me soothed the raw ache that was building inside of me.

“Oh Yoba,” He sighed.

Our previous times of love making always held some semblance of romance, but tonight, we both needed something different.

“Go fast.” I commanded. “I need you to fuck me.”

I didn’t have the courage to look back at his expression but the animalistic growl that came from him sent shivers down my spine.

Elliott’s hands slipped underneath me to grip the flesh where my hips and thighs met. His grip was firm, almost slightly uncomfortable, but I leaned into the sensation.

The pace was quick and our movements were clumsy until we found a rhythm that we both enjoyed. I lost myself in the pleasure. I heard myself moan but I didn’t realize that the sound was coming from me.

The sensations and pleasure building inside me felt more raw and intense than my previous orgasms. I wanted more … so much more.

“Yes. Please!” I begged as I thrusted back against his movements.

“Morgan, oh Yoba…” He choked out. “You’re so tight, love.”

I braced myself against the futon’s metal armrest despite the squeaks and creaks it made in protest. I wanted Elliott deeper. I wanted him to go harder. I wanted him so badly that I wanted it to hurt just a bit.

In my zealiousness, I didn’t notice that the armrest was beginning to wiggle until it was too late, then the sound of metal bending and wood snapping caught our attention.

“Shit!” I cursed as the futon collapsed beneath our weight.

Golden shot past us in a blur of fur as she ran into the bedroom for safety. But Elliott and I
collapsed into the mattress pad in a tangle of limbs.

“What the —” Elliott groaned as he rolled off of me.

I already missed the fullness and desperately craved more. I didn’t want to stop now, broken futon be damned.

“Here.” I murmured as I pulled the mattress pad off the tangled wreckage and out into the open area near the doorway to the bedroom. “We’ll worry about that later. I need you.”

Elliott gave me a mischievous smirk as he guided me back to my hands and knees. “I’ve never done this on the floor.”

“Me neither.” I whispered hoarsely. “But then again, I’ve never done this from behind before either.”

I heard Elliott hum in approval as he planted kisses along my back. He pushed my loose nightshirt up and over my head and pulled me up so my back was against his chest.

“Do you like this?” He murmured in my ear.

I nodded and craned my neck so I could kiss him. Due to the angle, our kiss was sloppy but it was no less enjoyable. My heart thundered in anticipation of going another round.

Elliott’s hand reached down to dip into my wet core while his other arm wrapped across my body and held me firmly against him.

His hard member was trapped between us as an ever present reminder of what I needed.

“Please Elliott, I need you inside me.” I whimpered.

“Patience my love.”

His fingers rubbed at the sensitive spot inside me which elicited sounds that I had never heard my body make before. Elliott sucked and nibbled at my pulse point and I was sure that there would be a mark there tomorrow.

His fingers seemed to be everywhere at once and I felt myself fall backwards into the pleasure once again. My legs felt like jello and I was glad that he had a firm hold of me because I would’ve collapsed onto the mattress otherwise.

I felt the pressure build in my abdomen and I tried to vocalize a warning or at least announce that I was climaxing but my lungs were devoid of air. My hand shot out to grab his own hand and I held his had against my sex as my body shuddered from the orgasm.

“So beautiful.” He murmured into my ear and he kissed away the sweat that ran down the nape of my neck.

I groaned unintelligibly in response as I fell limp against his body.

Elliott chuckled and helped me lay on the mattress and then scooted up behind me. His erection nudged my opening and a jolt of electricity shot through me. My body was walking the fine line between being painfully overstimulation and ready for round two.

“D’you still want me to fuck you?” He whispered in my ear. I could hear the smile play on his voice and I knew he was teasing me for my coarse language.
“I think you already did that.” I remarked. I felt drunk and I’m sure my response came out slurred.

“Then what about making love?” He suggested.

I nodded, “That sounds good.”

I rolled onto my back as Elliott peeled his shirt off. His skin glimmered in the low candlelight from our sweat.

He gently peeled my pajama pants off the rest of my legs and kissed the exposed skin on my calf as he did so.

Elliott settled in between my legs and crawled over my body like a big cat stalking its prey. He slid back into me easily and we both sighed at the contact.

We rocked against each other, gently and steadily, like boats rocking in the surf. My hands ran across his shoulder blades and down to his narrow waist to cup his backside. I was like a blind woman reading braille; no part of his body went untouched.

“Morgan…” He groaned quietly.

I could tell he was close. His thrusting slowed down like he could prolong the inevitable.

“Go on.” I murmured. “Come for me.”

He hissed and snuck his hands beneath my neck and shoulders as he thrusted into me with full, deep strokes. He pressed his face into my shoulder and I felt his teeth lightly nip at my tender skin which sent a shock of pleasure though my already overstimulated nerves.

“Oh…Oh …” He panted.

His hips thrusted once and then twice and I felt him swell slightly within me which set off my own pleasure.

“Yes!” I hissed, partially in triumph and partially from the sensation of him climaxing inside of me.

Elliott clutched me and shivered in the cool evening air and from his own climax. In my own pleasure-addled brain, I wanted nothing more than to pull him back into the bedroom and cuddle up against him until the shivering and trembling went away.

But as soon as the fog from my orgasm cleared, I noticed the true destruction our frantic, animalistic coupling had caused.

The metal armrest that I was bracing against had snapped off the joint which connected it to the frame. Being a cheap futon, the lack of an armrest meant that the back half of the futon also broke away and fell against the wooden wall at an odd angle.

“We certainly did a number on that futon.” I chuckled hoarsely.

Elliott glanced over his shoulder and looked chagrined. “Morgan, I’m sorry. I’ll pay you back for that.”

I shook my head, “Hush. Don’t worry about it. This gives me an excuse to buy a proper piece of furniture from Pierre’s catalogue.”

Still Elliott looked guilty. “We should’ve gone to the bedroom like you suggested.”
I kissed him and rolled my hips in response which made him whimper from his own overstimulation. “Don’t worry about it. Okay? I never really liked that futon anyway. So the fact that we broke it having amazing sex makes it worth every piece of gold that I spent on it.”

Elliott shook his head and gently withdrew from me. He helped me up to my feet and we both picked up our clothes that were scattered around the living room.

“We should really get to bed.” I remarked.

He nodded, “Let me go clean up and I’ll be right in.”

I grinned despite myself as I pulled the futon mattress and propped it up against the wall. Even if the frame was broken, the mattress could still be used for something — after a thorough cleaning of course.

The cold autumn air chilled my feverish skin as I went back into the bedroom with our discarded clothes. Eventually I’d have to start lighting fires in the hearth in the morning to keep the cabin warm.

I pulled on a my pajama pants and sleep shirt and slid into the cold bed. The full moon outside threw a beam of light into the bedroom which bathed the room in a dim, silvery glow. The alarm clock read 2:42 a.m. and I groaned inwardly at the thought of waking up again in a mere four hours to get a head start on my list of chores and projects around the farm.

I felt myself dozing off when Elliott slid into bed beside me. His lips gently kissed my forehead and I reached out without opening my eyes and laced my fingers with his.
The Stardrop Saloon (Rated T)

Chapter 16 — The Stardrop Saloon (Rated T)

September 12th (Fall)

The Stardrop Saloon was packed with people. Even some non-locals drove in from Butternut Cove to come and see Sam, Sebastian, and Abigail’s band perform. Gus had converted the bar into a makeshift auditorium. Mismatched bar stools, wooden chairs, wooden benches, and even an outside park bench were arranged into chaotic audience seating. Emily flitted among the patrons like a forest sprite carrying a tray full of bottles, mugs, and glass tumblers.

We made eye contact and I smiled shyly at her. I hadn’t had the chance to talk with her since the ill-fated incident at the bar after the whole Brandon fiasco. Truth be told, I was still mortified at my behavior that night. So I found a seat nestled in the back and waited for Emily to make her way towards me to take my drink order.

Marnie and Mayor Lewis sat together at the other side of the bar clearly in deep conversation about a serious matter. Pierre and Caroline were sitting in front of them. I didn’t know Caroline that well, but I noticed that she watched the movement on stage as the band was setting up with the same cool and disgusted detachment of watching an animal carcass decompose.

Haley and Alex were in the corner closest to the stage giggling with each other. Haley was wearing a lavender tea length dress with cream wedge pumps. She looked like a supermodel and as much as I found her holier-than-thou personality grating, I had to admit that she was far more comfortable in her skin than I ever could be in mine. She seemed to radiate beauty.

The Stardrop Saloon was as low tech as bars came but Emily managed to work her interior decorating magic. Gus had moved the pool table and arcade games out of the way. Robin donated her time and extra material to create a makeshift stage just large enough to hold a three person band and their equipment.

Across the stage was a cloth banner that read Iron Stream Engines printed in a bold font. For such a bleak sounding name, the lighting and decor was completely the opposite. A singular electronic laser light was mounted to the ceiling which casted minuscule dots in crazy geometric patterns onto the stage, while two more lights were hanging on the wall facing the audience. Colored cellophane, one red and one blue, covered the lights.

Sam came on stage first and plugged his red electric guitar into an amp. His blond hair was spiked per usual, but someone had dyed the tips of his hair a vibrant red to match his instrument. He wore a neon blue glow necklace around his neck and his sleeveless tank top was haphazardly dyed a blotchy red, yellow, and blue.

Sebastian was running a long cable across the stage to a contraption that held drums, an electric keyboard, and something that looked like a keyboard and a guitar combined. He wore a plain white t-shirt with a scanned image of their album art “Memories of Yesteryear” on it. I saw the same types of t-shirts folded neatly on a table near the stage with a trifold sign that read T-Shirts - 150 gold.

“Hey Morgan! Glad you could make it!” Emily said. She tucked her serving tray underneath one arm and pulled out a small memo pad and a pen.
“Yeah.” I agreed. “I kind of promised Sam I’d come to this. He even sent me a formal invitation in the mail after their first show was postponed due to Sebastian getting sick with the stomach flu.”

“Believe it or not but they’re kind of a big draw. This will be the busiest night here by far aside for the Stardew Fair.” She replied.

I glanced around to ensure that my next question wasn’t overheard. I didn’t have a delicate way of phrasing what I was about to ask. “So…what sort of music do they play?”

Emily’s face held a perplexed expression, “They don’t like to define their music. I once asked Abigail the very same question and she went on and on about how mainstream society expects people to conform into easy-to-define boxes because conformity is comfort. I kind of went with it after that. Just listen with an open mind, okay?”

I stifled an incredulous snort, “I’ll do my best.”

“So what’ll it be to drink?”

“What sorts of beer do you have on tap?”

Emily shot me a wink, “Staying far from the whisky, huh?”

I grimaced, “Yeah, that wasn’t my most glorious moment.”

She waved her hand at me as though she was batting away my shame. “This is a bar not a church. I don’t judge. I was just making an observation. Anyways … we have a nice pilsner called Blue Bayou or a dark lager called Moose Drool in preparation for the Stardew Fair.”

I blanched at the thought of someone ordering a beer called ‘Moose Drool.’

“I’ll try the Blue Bayou, thanks.”

Emily nodded, stuck the pen behind her ear, and slipped back into the thickening crowd.

The lights dimmed in the bar and the band assembled on stage. Sam and Sebastian plucked at their respective guitars while Abigail tested out the drums and keyboard. The sound was haphazard and random as the band warmed up and checked their audio levels.

More locals filed into the bar. Doctor Harvey adjusted his glasses and scanned through the crowd for an open seat. Tiny orange ear plugs stuck out of his ears and I snorted in amusement. Only a doctor would bring ear plugs to a concert, I thought.

Willy took off his hat to reveal a bald patch amid wind swept salt and pepper hair. Gunther, with his ostentatious blue cowboy hat and matching leisure suit, slipped through the crowd and found a seat off to the side.

Morris, the JoJa Mart manager, smiled widely at everyone and shared trite pleasantries with a couple of out-of-owners until a gruff voice, sounding suspiciously like Gus’s, yelled “Sit down or move on. There’s people that wanna get to the bar.”

“Hey, can I sit here?” A voice asked from behind me.

I turned and saw Leah’s face in the dim light. Her long hair was braided and hung off her shoulder. Dried leaves stuck out of her hair at odd angles and her pale skin was flushed.

“Sure, go ahead.” I replied automatically.
“Thank you.”

Leah slid in between my chair and the metal park bench that was next to me and took a seat.

“Oh dear.” She murmured as she felt the debris that was stuck in her hair. “I am such a mess.”

She said this with amusement rather than criticism and she began plucking the leaves from her hair.

“You must think I’m some cave woman.”

“I … I …” Truthfully I didn’t know what to think. “Well, it does look like you lost a fight with several maple trees.”

She chuckled. “I’m actually working on an foliage-based art project. Now that the leaves are starting to change color, I am collecting the ones that are beginning their change, then I press them in books to preserve them, and later I plan to paint them with a small amount of resin and create art with their colors.”

“That sounds pretty cool, actually.” I remarked. “There’s an elm tree on the farm that turns a brilliant red in the fall. My grandpa use to use that tree to determine when autumn had really arrived. As soon as it starts turning, you are welcome to pick whatever leaves you need. I’ll just end up raking them up before the snow falls.”

Leah nodded, “Thanks. I’ll take you up on that offer. By the way, is Elliott here? I was going to ask him if I could borrow some books to press the leaves with. All of my books are full of leaves at the moment, and I know Gunther would never let me within the library if he found out that I was using library books for this type of project.”

“He’s out of town actually. He is on a book tour in Zuzu City at the moment. I can call him tomorrow night and ask for you if you’d like.”

“No, don’t bother him with something like this. Elliott should enjoy this moment. I remember how nervous and excited I was when I had my first art exhibition. He’s worked hard for this moment. He deserves the praise, not the distractions.”

“It sounds like you’ve read his book.” I remarked idly.

“I haven’t read all of it, but he did show me a chapter early on in the writing process. He was writing about two gay characters and wanted to ask my perspective about how to do that as a heterosexual man.”

“Oh?”

“I think he didn’t want it to sound cliche or stereotypical. I mean, I get it. He’s a man trying to write about two women who are … or were … in a relationship together. He was really concerned about making the relationship realistic and natural and not a stereotypical piece of erotica that was ripped out of a porn magazine.”

Was that the chapter entitled “Chloe and Claire?” I asked.

“Yep. That’s the one. My middle name is Claire and that chapter is loosely based off of my previous relationship.” She replied.

“If I remember correctly, Chloe was really controlling and verbally abusive.” I replied as delicately as I could.
I saw Leah grimace and I wanted to kick myself for even bringing up the connection in the first place.

“Shit, I’m sorry. I —“

Leah shook her head, “No, No. Don’t worry about it. I wanted my story to get told. It’s no secret that I came to Pelican Town to get out of a pretty abusive relationship. I’m still trying to cut the chord, actually.”

I didn’t get a chance to ask her what she meant by that because Emily made her way over and handed me a tall mug of golden beer and passed Leah a glass of red wine.

“Oh…I uh. I didn’t order this.” Leah replied.

Emily smiled shyly. “I ordered it for you. That’s the last of our strawberry wine. Gus has switched over to the cranberry and blueberry wine in preparation for the fair.”

Leah accepted the glass and both women flushed red. I bit my lip to stifle my grin.

“Well…thank you Emily.” Leah smiled. “I owe you one.”

“Enjoy the show ladies.” Emily replied. Her wide smile seemed to glow brighter than the stage lights as she sank back into the crowd to tend to more patrons.

Just then, the rhythmic strumming from Sam’s guitar picked up speed and changed pitch. Abigail stepped up to the microphone while Sebastian hit his drum sticks together in the telltale beat of one-two-three-four.

Abigail yelled out “Hey!” and the die-hard fans echoed her back “Ho”. She did it again and encouraged the audience to repeat after her until everyone, including me, was following her lead.

The alternating chant of “Hey - Ho - Hey - Ho” echoed the tavern. Then Sam struck a chord on his guitar and I sat back to listen to the strangest arrangement of music that I had ever heard.

“Thank you Stardew Valley!” Abigail cried into the microphone.

The laser lights casted green and red dots across her pale skin. The red and blue lights behind them strobed and then turned off as the audience applauded politely. A couple of unfamiliar faces whistled and hooted. They wore their own Memories of Yesteryear band t-shirts proudly.

“We’ll be back in about fifteen or twenty minutes so help yourself to some drinks at the bar.” She was about to walk away but then came back to the microphone and announced, “And remember, Gus checks ID’s so it doesn’t matter if you’re the lead guitarist or singer in a band. You can’t consume alcohol unless you are of legal age.” Abigail shot her mother a dirty look and then hopped off the stage to mingle with a group of people near the merchandise table.

Leah took the opportunity to make her way back to the bar which left me alone with my thoughts.

“They’re pretty terrible huh…” A deep voice said into my ear which made me jump.

Shane shot me an apologetic expression and held up his free hand in surrender — his right hand was holding a full drink — and sat next to me. “Sorry. Didn’ mean to scare ya.”

Truth be told, the music wasn’t half bad. Abigail was a talented singer and had a wide range that added a sultry but defiant tone that most teenage bands were still developing. Even Sam’s and
Sebastian’s voices were good when they contributed their own little backup vocals.

“They’re not bad.” I replied. “I’m actually enjoying them.”

Okay … that was stretching the truth a bit.

Shane glanced at me with a discerning expression. “Really….One of their songs is called “Give Me Tacos.””

“What? Who doesn’t love tacos? The song speaks to me on a soulful level.” I replied with a grin.

Shane chuckled and shook his head. He took a long drink from his glass tumbler full of amber liquid. My stomach gurgled at the memory drinking with him and I looked down at my hands.

The ice clinked around in the glass and Shane sat his drink onto the seat next to him. “So where’s the author at? Seems like I never see you two apart nowadays.”

“He’s currently on a press tour promoting his book.” I replied.

“Well good for him.” Shane replied but I sensed a hint of sarcasm which annoyed me.

“Yes it is. He worked really hard on his novel.” I replied coolly.

Shane grunted noncommittally at my response and signaled to Emily to refill our drinks. If I was forced to be stuck here, I figured that I might as well have another.

“Emily I’ll have another beer and can I have some water as well?” I asked as I passed her a handful of coins. “I don’t want to overindulge like I did last time.”

“Sure.” She replied with a smile.

Shane rolled his eyes at my remark and handed her the tumbler that was now empty save for the melting ice. “I’ll have another, thanks.”

Emily frowned but nodded and took our gold and our empty glasses back behind the counter.

“C’mon.” Shane said once he noticed my disapproving expression. “Loosen up a little, would ya?”

“What d’you mean?”

He rolled his eyes again, “I can just feel the judgement coming off of you.”

“What are you talking about?” I countered, now a little irritated.

Shane’s dark eyes narrowed suspiciously. “I’m a drunk Morgan, not a damn idiot. Is this when you’re gonna give me a lecture about how drinking too much is bad for me? Are you gonna scold me for buying you those drinks this summer when you oh-so-clearly needed them?”

I reeled back at his accusations. How did this conversation go from zero to one hundred so quickly?

“Look, I’m not judging you at all.” I replied. “I don’t care that you drink a lot. That’s all your business, not mine.”

“Sure. Whatever.” He grumbled. “You know what, I’m outta here. You can have my drink. I know you’re a whisky girl deep down.”
Shane got up and pushed through the crowd and left out the saloon’s back door.

“What the hell?” I muttered to myself.

It took Emily a while to bring me my second beer. It was partially because she was swamped but I also noticed how she looked at Leah. Both women were smitten with each other, and their clear affection made me miss Elliott even more.

I checked my cellphone but didn’t see any text messages or missed calls. The band had started late so it was already pushing close to eleven o’clock. I had a full day of work ahead of me and I was at my limit of social interaction after Shane’s weird blowup.

I made my way to the bar as Sam struck up a riff on his guitar. Patrons clamored to the stage and back to their seats in preparation for the second set which left an opening at the bar for me to slip into.

“I’m sorry Morgan. I’ll get you your beer right away.” Emily cried out as she unloaded a tray full of empties into a large sink.

“Hey, don’t worry about it. Why don’t you send it over to Leah. Tell her that I bought it so she’ll have an excuse to sit at the bar and talk with you some more.”

Emily blushed, “Is it that obvious?”

“It’s super obvious.” I chuckled. “But it’s cute. Why haven’t you asked her out yet?”

She sighed, “I did but she turned me down. She said her girlfriend wouldn’t like it.”

I glanced at Leah who was sitting next to her empty wine glass and saw that she was checking her phone. If Elliott’s chapter was as accurate to her life as it was to mine, then I figured Leah needed someone far more caring than a woman who controlled every single aspect of her life.

“Well. It couldn’t hurt to try again.” I suggested. “Or maybe strike up a friendship first?”

“Is that what happened to you and Elliott?” She replied with a knowing smile.

I chuckled, “Yeah, it was something like that.”

Emily smiled. “Thanks Morgan.”

I nodded and set a pile of gold down for a tip and pushed through the crowd of people and left out the back door that Shane had gone through.

Maybe it was the beer that warmed my belly or it was my sheer irritation at how our conversation went, but I was determined to figure out what Shane’s problem was.

I found Shane sitting on the dock by the pond in Cindersnap Forest. I would’ve missed him if it hadn’t been for my headlamp catching the glint from the empty beer bottles that were scattered around him.

“Shane?” I called out.

“Don't tell me you come by just to lecture me again?” He snarled.

“I wasn’t lecturing you the first time.” I replied.
He grunted out something which sounded like “whatever.”

“Look…” I began, “I’m sorry if I said something to offend you back at the Saloon. I just wanted to come by and see if you’re okay.”

“It’s late. You should just go home.” He replied softly.

“Hey. I’m sorry. I — I didn’t mean to seem like I was judging you back there. I did appreciate the fact that you were there for me after that whole fiasco with my ex. I had fun. Really.”

Shane turned to look at me. His dark eyes were glassy and dull from the alcohol but he managed a smile.

“Sit down and have a drink with me.” He said.

I glanced at my phone. The display read 11:32p.m. so I still had a bit of time before I’d regret it in the morning, so I sat on the dock next to him and dangled me feet off the edge.

Shane passed me a beer and pulled out a bottle opener and popped the cap off it. I was happy to see that he stuffed the cap back into this pocket instead of throwing it into the pond.

The beer was the same kind that Brandon drank and I thought back to the times that we’d sit on the couch, drink beer, and watch television. The nostalgia and the guilt pained me.

“You ever feel like no matter what you do, you’re gonna fail? Like you’re stuck in some miserable abyss and you’re so deep that you can’t even see the light of day?” Shane said out of the blue.

“I … um.” I racked my brain to figure out how to answer him. But he continued his tirade as though I hadn’t said anything.

“I just feel like no matter how hard I try, I’m not strong enough to climb out of that hole. So why bother, you know?”

I drank the beer. It went down easily … almost too easily and I fiddled with the bottle in my hands, “I use to feel like that.”

He shot a sideways look at me. “I’m sure you have.” His voice was thick with sarcasm.

“Really.” I insisted. “Before I came to Pelican Town, I just felt … stuck. I wasn’t where I wanted to be in my life, and I didn’t know how to get there.”

“So what did you do?” He asked.

I thought back to the day I quit my job. I was living with my Mom and Chuck and they both tried to talk me out of it. ‘Just give it some time.’ My mom told me. ‘If you act impulsively now, you’ll regret it later on.’ But when I made that call to my boss, it felt like a large weight was lifted off my shoulders.

“I came here.” I remarked. “When I was at my lowest point, I came here.”

Shane snorted, “Well I’ve been at my lowest point for a while and I’m already here. So …” He tilted his beer back and drained half the bottle in one sitting. He belched and then set the empty bottle next to the rest of the dead soldiers, “… so I guess I’m fucked.”

I drained my beer right after him and placed the empty bottle in the same pile. I stifled a burp and
felt the carbonation burn through my nose as I did so.

“I don’t think you’re fucked.” I replied.

Shane shook his head, “You’re right to judge me. You have your whole life ahead of you. You have the farm, you have a boyfriend, and you have a bright, shining future to achieve whatever you want. But I … well.” He coughed roughly, “I never imagined that I’d be working at a fucking store as a stock boy at the age of twenty-four.”

I shook my head at his assessment. That feeling of hopelessness. That you’re stuck with whatever hand Yoba dealt you. These were things that I could empathize with all too well.

“I quit working at the Joja Headquarters when I was twenty-five.” I remarked dryly. “And then I came here with 100 gold to my name, three suitcases, and a letter that my grandfather had written to me. My family expected me to fail. I nearly drowned in the ocean a month in and there were a few nights where I wondered if I was really cut out for all of this.”

“And…” Shane asked. His voice was husky with emotion.

“And now I’m facing my first winter in the middle of nowhere and I’m scared once again.” I replied. “But I also know that no matter how lean things get, that no matter how shitty life gets, there will always be people around who are willing to pull me back from the edge.”

Shane grunted at my comment. We sat in silence for a long moment as I mulled over Shane’s comments. I had no romantic feelings for the man — he was too much like Brandon — but something about him invoked a sense of camaraderie, pity, and guilt within me.

Shane hiccuped and then pulled out a plastic garbage bag from his pocket and put the empty beer bottles into the bag.

“Thanks fer the words of wisdom.” He slurred and moved to stand up. “I’m happy the author makes you so happy.”

I opened my mouth to respond but thought better of it. The blatant jealousy in his voice surprised me, but I knew that Shane was in a delicate mental place so I didn't push the issue.

“Shane. If you ever need to talk or vent, know that my door is always open. If anything, I can share with you some crazy stories about working at JoJa Headquarters. Sometimes misery loves company, as they say.”

Shane waved off my offer but stumbled and then caught himself.

“Don’t worry about me.” He hiccuped, “I’m a big boy. I can handle my own problems.”

The wall was back up, I noted. Shane stumbled up the trail and I switched my headlamp on to guide the way. The plastic bag full of empty beer bounced against his leg. I almost wanted to take the bag from him just so the grating noise of glass-on-glass would stop, but I let him walk ahead of me until we made it back to Marnie’s farm.

Shane tossed the bag into a silver trash can by the door and slipped inside the dark house like a wraith while I followed the path back to my farm feeling unsettled and unsure.
Chapter Notes

I am a sucker for hurt/comfort fics. I see a lot of fics where the hurt/comfort element is serious (e.g. rape, abuse, suicidal attempt aftermath) but I don't see very many fluffy 'comfort me when I'm sick with a cold' fic, so I’ve endeavored to create my own in this chapter. Enjoy the drama and fluff as flu season hits Stardew Valley.

Chapter 16 — Flu Season (Rated G)

September 14th (Fall)


The sound of my alarm clock ricochet around in my skull. My eyes throbbed as I pulled the heavy quilt over my head to block out the alarm clock’s noise.

My face was flushed with sweat, and I winced as the saliva that I swallowed burned like lava.

I felt Golden’s weight on my belly before I heard her squeaky, impatient meow. My stomach rolled and churned which was another clue that something was wrong.

My hand snuck out from under the covers and I turned off the alarm clock.

When I went to sit up, the entire room spun as though I was on an amusement park ride. My stomach lurched, I gagged, and then I rolled off the bed and onto my knees and puked into the wastepaper basket next to the nightstand.

My hair, matted and greasy from a fitful sleep, hung around my face. I hugged my stomach, willing it to settle down, as fat tears slid down my face.

Oh Yoba. I thought. No. No. I couldn’t get sick now. I had too much to do.

Through sheer force of will, I pulled myself to my feet and trembled like a newborn deer.

I took a mental inventory of my faculties as I sat on my bed. I was dizzy and weak. My pajamas were soaked in sweat but I was chilled to the bone. I mean … the morning after talking with Shane, I woke up with an upset stomach. I just thought it was from the cheap beer and I ate a couple antacids and shrugged it off. But the stomach ache hadn’t gone away.

I felt my forehead with the back of my hand and found that my forehead was blistering hot while the rest of my body felt chilled to the bone.

“I’m sick, that’s all.” I said aloud to myself. “Just pull yourself together. Grandpa had to work even when he broke his arm. Suck it up, okay?”

Golden head butted my arm and meowed again before running to her empty food dish in the living room. I groaned and heaved myself up to a stand. My legs trembled a bit but I managed to walk into the kitchen and get the kettle on the stove to get some tea started.
After a slow start to the morning, I managed to take a shower and get dressed while Golden ate. I hadn’t had time to go fishing, so Golden was forced to eat dried cat food instead of her usual fare of fresh seafood. She didn’t seem to mind, however.

As I poured the tea into a thermos, another dizzy spell hit me and I reached for the trash can and dry heaved into it.

Just then my cell phone buzzed on the kitchen table. I carried the garbage can with me just in case I got sick again and sat heavily in my canvas camping chair and answered the phone.

“Hello?”

There was a slight pause on the other end. “M-Morgan?”

Elliott sounded taken aback.

“Hey.” I whispered hoarsely. “How are you?”

“I should ask you the same question. My dear, you sound sick.”

I coughed into my sleeve and sipped some tea. “I think I am sick. I woke up feeling like this.”

“Then you should go back to bed.” Elliott replied with gentle admonishment.

“I can’t.” I protested. “There’s too much work to do.”

“Well at least take your temperature first. Or call Dr. Harvey and see if he can make a house call.”

I sighed in exasperation, “Stop fussing over me. I’ll be fine. It’s just a cold or something. I’ll shake it off in a day or two.”

I could hear Elliott’s own frustrated sigh through the phone.

“Sorry.” I murmured. “I know you’re just trying to help.”

“I wish I was there with you. Morgan, you’ve been working so hard. I may not have a gardener’s soul but I can chop wood with the rest of them.”

“I’m doing okay with wood.” I remarked and sipped more of my tea. “I still have a good month to stockpile what I need for winter. The summer storms knocked down enough trees as it were so I have quite a bit piled up already. But enough about me. How’s the book tour going?”

“It is … interesting.” He replied.

I frowned at his vague response but waited for him to elaborate.

“I — I think I like the process of writing a book more than receiving feedback on my book.” He replied. “After working non-stop for several months on a creative endeavor such as this, I don’t know what else I have to say about my book. The story is right there for people to read.”

“But have people been receptive? Do you have a good showing of people at the book signings?”

“Yes. Of course. I’ve been blown away by the amount of people who are interested in my work, but I never want to feel like I’m writing a story just for the praise. I want to write stories because they should be told, not because I want to feed my own ego.”
I coughed into my sleeve again, but as I did so, the room spun around me and I rested my head on
the wooden table praying it would stop.


I put the cell phone to my ear again and swallowed painfully, “Yeah I’m fine.”

“Please see Dr. Harvey. You know, just in case this is something more than the common cold.”

“Okay. I’ll give him a call once I finish my chores.” I replied.

He sighed, “Take care of yourself, love. And call me later tonight and let me know how you’re
feeling.”

“Okay.” I croaked. “Happy early birthday by the way.”

“Thank you. If you didn’t get me anything yet, I do have one idea for you.”

“What’s that?”

“Go see Dr. Harvey now. The chores can wait. Your health can’t.” He remarked.

I smiled despite myself and shook my head at his insistence, “Then I guess it’s too bad that I
already got you a birthday present.”

“Morgan…” He sighed.

“I’ll go, okay!” I exclaimed. “Just let me take care of some things around here. I’ll get better sleep
knowing that things are taken care of and done properly. My chores will take me an hour, maybe
two at the most, and then I promise that I’ll call Dr. Harvey and go straight to bed.”

My phone’s audio crackled slightly as Elliott exhaled at my response, “Fine. I’ll let you go then.
Goodbye, my dear.”

“Goodbye.”

I ended the call and sipped some more peppermint tea. I considered making scrambled eggs for
breakfast, but my stomach lurched painfully at the thought of eating food so I skipped breakfast.

I shrugged on my jacket and slipped my feet into my work boots, but when I bent over to lace them
up, the entire world spun around me and I grabbed onto the coat rack to stop myself from falling
over.

I sat down on the chair near the door and pulled the laces tight and then tied them. I made each
movement slow and methodical. If I could focus on each step in the process, then the splitting
headache and the tempest in my stomach would be manageable enough to ignore.

Golden cocked her head at me once more and meowed.

“I’ve got to get to work,” I snapped. “The farm won’t take care of itself.”

Once I made it to my feet, I opened the door and felt the cold wind slap at my face. Just to be safe,
I grabbed a winter scarf and wrapped it around my face and pulled on my hat.

“Just feed the chickens and milk the cow. Collect the eggs, milk, and ripe produce, and go back to
bed.” I said aloud. “And call Dr. Harvey. Don’t forget that.”
Although my mental to-do-list didn’t seem like a lot to me, my body balked at the idea of simply walking to the chicken coop.

“C’mon.” I growled to myself. To ensure that I made it to the chicken coop, I grabbed the pitchfork that was leaning against the porch and used it as a makeshift walking stick.

As I plodded over to the small wooden structure, birds chirped and twittered their morning songs and the gentle cool wind kicked up some fallen leaves and blew them into a whirl of orange, yellow, and red tornado.

I wish I could’ve appreciated the beauty but my one track brain was only focused on not collapsing into a useless heap.

When I entered the chicken coop, the warm interior perked me up a bit and I felt marginally better. I scattered the chicken feed and collected the eggs while the chickens were distracted by the food. I collected fourteen in total and left the coop with the hens none the wiser.

The walk back to the farmhouse went better. I felt a little stronger from the fresh air, and I was hopeful that I’d kick this bug before the day was over. I put the chicken eggs in the refrigerator, grabbed the milking apparatus from the shed, and made my way to the pasture to milk Stella.

Golden followed behind me. Her white-tuffed tail was hoisted high in the air as she pranced through the tall grass to sit on the fence post. Ever since I got Stella, Golden made it a point to keep watch as I milked her. The cat was afraid of the large bovine, but she was also dutiful in watching over me. But if Stella wandered too close to her, Golden would hiss and spit and run off into the tall grass.

“C’mon, she wont hurt you.” I told the cat as I let myself into the pen.

Golden’s yellow eyes looked at me with a reproachful and distrustful look. Instead she settled on her usual fence post as I walked to the small barn and opened the whitewashed double doors.

Stella mooed in greeting and trotted a lap in the pasture before settling in her typical spot near the barn doors. I set the milking stool on the ground and hooked her up to the automated milker while she chewed her cud.

When I went over to the milking machine and turned it on another wave of dizziness and nausea swept through me and I collapsed to my knees in the mud.

Bile rose to my throat and I puked up the tea that was suppose to be my meager breakfast.

“No. No. NO.” I sobbed. My head throbbed and my hands trembled. I had never felt so weak and so useless in my entire life.

Stella looked over at me and swished her tail. She lowed softly as though she could sense my unease and pain.

“I’m fine, girl.” I groaned.

I pulled myself back up to my feet and held onto the fence post as I pulled out my cell phone to call Dr. Harvey.

The phone rang once and Maru’s friendly voice answered, “Dr. Harvey’s office, how may I help you?”
“Maru. It’s Morgan. Is Dr. Harvey available for a house call? I — I think I have a bad cold or — or the flu or something.”

“Yes, Dr. Harvey’s schedule isn’t too tight today. He’s doing paperwork right now and he may want to ask you about your symptoms. Let me go and get him.”

I heard the melodic but nondescript ‘on hold’ music and closed my eyes. Another wave of nausea was beginning to churn in my gut.

In an attempt to keep the bile down, I must’ve let my mind wander because I heard a male’s voice on the other end sounding confused.

“Morgan? Hello? Are you there? Hello?”

“Oh sorry.” I replied. “Hey, I’m here.”

“Ah yes, Morgan. Maru tells me that you’re feeling a bit under the weather. When did you notice your symptoms?”

As I recounted my rough morning to Dr. Harvey, the light on the automated milker flashed which indicated that the container was at its maximum capacity. I turned the machine off, unhooked Stella and removed the attachments from her udders, and flipped the switch on the machine to start pasteurizing the raw milk.

“Well based on your symptoms, you probably have the flu rather than the common cold.” Dr. Harvey replied. “I have some antiviral medication at the clinic here, but I won’t be able to make it down your way until around 2 o’clock this afternoon. Is that okay?”

“Yeah. I should be fine.” I replied but the pounding pain in my head didn’t make me feel all that confident.

“Have you taken your temperature recently?”

“No.” I replied. “This is going to sound stupid but I don’t have a thermometer. It’s just one of those things that I forgot that I didn’t have until I had a need for it.”

Dr. Harvey sighed and I heard indistinct talking over the phone. The other voice was Maru’s but I couldn’t make out what they were saying.

“In that case, I’ll swing on by in about twenty minutes. I’ll take your temperature and check your vitals and we will go from there, okay?” He replied. “In the meantime, don’t overexert yourself. Go back to your cabin and relax. Drink some water if you can and try to nibble on something bland. Saltine crackers will usually do the trick.”

I nodded but I was only partially listening. I dropped the milking attachment into a bucket full of warm soapy water and placed empty glass bottles off to the side so I could begin filling them so they were ready for storage in the upright refrigerator that was tucked in the corner of the attached utility shed.

“Yep, yep. See you in twenty minutes Dr. Harvey.” I said absent-mindedly. “Goodbye.”

While the machine pasteurized the milk, I hobbled out to the garden and grabbed the wicker produce basket off the cabin’s front porch. My garden was nearly three times the size than it was in the Spring. I was both proud and a bit intimidated, but the cornucopia of food that my garden was producing made the effort worthwhile.
I set the wicker basket on the ground and made my way to the first corn stalk and gently peeled the husk back to check the kernels to see which corn was ripe. I picked five off the first stalk and placed them into the basket.

Sweat beaded across my forehead and the act of raising my arms seemed like monumental feats. But still, I persisted and pushed through the fatigue.

I wasn’t pushing myself. This was necessary work.

When I got to the second row of corn, the world started spinning again and my stomach fell to my feet. I stumbled out of the garden and dry heaved on the grass while bracing myself with the pitchfork. Nothing came up this time which worried me.

I knew that I was probably dehydrated but I also couldn’t remember where I put my thermos full of tea. I checked the cabin but didn’t see it anywhere so I grabbed a glass and filled it with water from the tap.

Each sip felt like I was swallowing bowling balls with how it weighed in my stomach. I barely managed to choke half of the glass down before the cabin’s sweltering heat drove me back outside.

Nothing made sense anymore.

Blood rushed to my head and I could feel my pulse beating in my ear drums. The sound of my frantic pulse was deafening and it drowned out all other sound.

I saw Golden’s mouth open in a fearful meow but I never heard the noise. Birds took flight from a nearby tree and I heard nothing. I looked down at my cell phone to check the time, but the small pixellated text swam off the screen.

I was too hot. Much too hot. Then in the next second, I was too cold.

The last thing I remembered was seeing the ground rush up to smack me in the face.

“Morgan…”

“Ms. Raymond…”

“C’mom, love…”

“Morgan!”

Voices of all sorts rushed into my consciousness like a waterfall and I jolted awake. The aged wooden slats from the cabin ceiling swam into focus first.

I was back in my bed but the sky was glowing a golden amber color as the sun set below the tree line. A kerosene lamp sat on my nightstand which threw ghastly shadows across the walls.

I could tell there were other people in my room but they all looked like blobs of color, undefined like abstract art.

A soft, warm hand felt my forehead while something else was jabbed firmly into my ear. People talked around me with hushed voices but then I made out a breathy baritone amid the hum.

“103.1. Her fever still hasn’t gone down. She needs to be admitted to the hospital. The nearest one to us is the Crimson Heart Hospital in Hay Creek.”
I wanted to cry out in protest at going to the hospital but my voice wouldn’t work. My lips felt glued together and the only sound I could make was a pathetic whimper.

“I know you don’t wanna go there. So you gotta try and drink something.” A soft voice said in my ear. It was Elliott and I felt my weak heart skip a beat. “Can you try?”

I squinted at him, and his face swam in front of my eyes like a wet watercolor painting until the shapes and colors finally settled. But was he really here? How could he be here? I just talked to him on the phone no more than an hour ago.

“How?” I croaked.

Elliott smiled and shook his head. “Don’t worry about that now. You need to drink something.

He scooted into bed behind me and sat me up against his chest. The scent of salt and pine enveloped me and I could feel sleep pulling me down like a weight.

“She can’t sleep yet. She’s dehydrated and needs fluids, and plenty of them.” Dr. Harvey barked.

“Here. You’ll feel better if you drink this.” Elliott murmured and he gently pressed a mug of something to my lips.

The liquid inside was salty, savory, and warm. The taste of it exploded on my tongue and I feebly grabbed the mug from Elliott’s hands and drank half of it.

“Told ya she’d take to it.” A deep female voice said. “My ma made this for all of us kids when we were struck with the flu. With some of this and some bed rest, I’m sure Morgan’ll feel as right as rain in a couple of days. The flu’s taken out Sam, Emily, and Abigail as well.”

“With all do respect Marnie, home remedies may work temporarily but I do think I should admit her to the hospital, at least overnight so she can get proper fluids and an IV.” Dr. Harvey’s voice replied briskly. “If she would’ve called me earlier, she could’ve spent the night at the clinic but her fever is much too high now. If it gets any higher, she could suffer some serious health effects.”

“No.” I whispered.

I heard Dr. Harvey sigh in disappointment. “C’mon Morgan, be reasonable. This is your health we’re talking about. You have one of the worst cases of the flu that I’ve ever seen.”

I squinted so I could focus on the mustachioed man at my bedside.

“I am being reasonable.” I argued weakly. “I have a farm to take care of here. I have a lot to do. I …

Marnie’s large hand cupped my cheek with motherly affection, “None of that now. Shane and I will help you with the farm. You best do what the doctor says. It don’t make sense to fight reason with stubbornness, ya hear?”

“I don’t want to go to the hospital.” I murmured pathetically.

“Morgan, I’ll be with you the entire time.” Elliott reasoned. “Please just go to the hospital.”

I looked around the room. I felt like a helpless child in a room full of adults. My entire body trembled and shivered beneath the blankets and my stomach churned and rolled.

Dr. Harvey looked relieved. “That’s a wise decision Morgan.”

“Elliott help me put Morgan into my truck and I’ll drive her there.” Marnie ordered.

He nodded and I felt him remove the covers and gently slide me to the edge of the bed.

“Do you think you can stand on your own?” He asked.

I nodded although I wasn’t too sure, but I still needed to try.

I stood on trembling legs and half walked/half shuffled into the living room. I was still in my farm clothes which were stained with dirt and Yoba knows whatever else.

Elliott helped me get my coat on while Dr. Harvey called ahead to the hospital and let them know that I would be arriving soon.

I was half-carried, half-helped into the truck cab’s middle passenger seat. Marnie climbed into the driver’s seat while Elliott slid in next to me.

The drive to Hay Creek was about twenty minutes, but compared to Zuzu City’s nearly 1 hour commute by car, we fortunate nonetheless.

“I’m sorry for all the trouble.” I remarked.

Marnie shook her head. “Hell no. This is no trouble. And don’t you go apologizing for getting sick. It’s not your fault. Flu season is here. That’s all.”

The truck cab was uncomfortably cold but the dials indicated that Marnie had the heat blasting. I pulled myself deeper into my jacket and shivered. Elliott pulled me in close and felt my forehead with the back of his hand and then shook his head.

I still couldn’t wrap my brain around how Elliott was even here. He was at a book signing in a city about three hours from here. How did he get back so quickly?

“I hope I didn’t ruin your book signing event today.” I whispered.

Elliott gave me a gentle smile. “You did nothing of the sort, my dear. I had already planned a day off so I could come back and surprise you for my birthday.”

I blinked dumbly at him. “But your birthday is tomorrow.”

“It’s been my birthday for a while now.” He replied. “You’ve been out for nearly thirty-two hours.”

Then his face took on a somber look, "When Dr. Harvey found you unconscious in the field, he rushed you inside and called Marnie because of her previous experience as a volunteer EMT. Marnie called me and well...here we are."

“Elliott, I’m so sorry.” I choked out. "You were right. I should've listened to you when we spoke on the phone."

"Believe me, I am doing my best to not gloat over being right. But aside for scaring the daylights out of me, you have nothing to be sorry for. People get sick. You just happened to get a bit sicker than most people."

“But your birthday shouldn’t be spent dealing with me!” I countered. "Especially not when my
stubbornness got me into this mess in the first place."

He kissed my hairline and I knew he was being tactful about avoiding my clammy and sweaty forehead. “Morgan, there’s nothing else I’d rather do for my birthday but spend it with you. This little detour to the hospital is just a road bump in the plans, nothing more.”

I shook my head. I couldn’t believe how wonderful he was being about all of this. “This isn’t how I wanted this all to go, but …” I reached into my jacket pocket and pulled out a small wrapped parcel. “… and it’s nothing too crazy or anything. I spend most of my money buying fall crops and milking equipment, but it’s something.”

Elliott unwrapped the box and removed the lid. Inside the box was a slim black and gold-tipped fountain pen sitting in a faux suede holder.

“Morgan, this is —“

“— I know you prefer to write with a quill but I figured that you could use this to sign copies and to write personalizations to people when they buy your book. Leah gave me the idea.”

“Thank you.” He murmured and squeezed my hand. “It’s a lovely gift.”

Twilight was fully upon us when we pulled in to the Crimson Heart hospital parking lot. I saw a familiar black sedan car parked in the first row. My mother and Chuck were talking to a nearby nurse who had a wheelchair ready and waiting.

I groaned aloud.

“What’s wrong?”

“Get ready.” I replied as another wave of nausea struck me. “You’re about to meet my mother and my stepfather.”

“Is that bad?” He asked.

I didn’t answer him, partially because I didn’t know how to answer his question. Was it bad that my new boyfriend was about to meet my pregnant and hormonal mother while we were at the hospital? I hoped not, but I also was a realist.

My stepfather would probably stand his ground and observe Elliott from a distance, but my mother … no, my mother in all of her practical and utilitarian sensibilities thought that men, especially by Elliott’s age, should be working full time at a traditional factory or office job — a job that offered health benefits and dental and two weeks of unpaid vacation a year.

No, Elliott’s carte blanche attitude towards life clashed substantially with my mother’s worldview. I just hoped that she’d be open minded enough to not compare him to Brandon.

Elliott was everything that Brandon was not. And I just hope that she’d be okay with that.
Chapter 18 — Hospitals and Bedtime Stories (Rated G)

September 16th — 22nd (Fall)

I slept for what felt like days. I felt myself float through a swirl of touches, light kisses, indistinct murmurs, and ambient noise. My body felt weightless but my head felt like it weighed a thousand pounds. As the time passed, I’d occasionally hear an unfamiliar woman’s voice over me spouting medical jargon that I neither understood nor had the attention span to try and puzzle out what was being said.

Everyone’s fragmented sentences reached my ears as though they floated through the air in a children’s show-esque fashion. At some point I dreamt my name was being said by a furry puppet and each syllable would be said individually before the word came together. Mor — Gan. Mor — Gan. Morgan! I didn’t know how much time had passed as I went in and out of sleep, but I eventually caught on to a thread of conversation.

“Her fever is still quite high.” I heard a woman say.

A cold compress was placed on my forehead and I felt my mother’s acrylic fingernails gently brush against my cheek. My senses pricked up at her touch and I felt myself being pulled out of my drug induced dream.

“Morgan, you gotta drink some water.” She murmured.

I didn’t want to open my eyes but I did so anyway and fought against the dizziness and nausea. Mom’s tired, red-rimmed eyes clashed with her perfectly styled hair. She held a plastic cup with a straw. A blue hospital mask covered her nose and mouth and the fabric moved as she talked.

“C’mon hon, have some water.” She held the cup up to me and carefully put the straw in my mouth.

I sipped. The water was blissfully cold and I drank until I felt the fatigue pull me down again. The longer I stayed awake, the more noticeable the pounding in my head became. When Mom pulled the cup away and placed it on the end table near me, I shivered as the ice water chilled my feverish body.

“Is Elliott here?” I asked hoarsely.

The last thing I remembered was Elliott helping me out of Marnie’s truck. I felt a little stronger on the drive to the hospital but once my feet hit the asphalt, my knees buckled and I collapsed against him. The rest of the night was a haze of nurses, commotion, and indistinct voices yelling around me.

Mom looked over her shoulder and made a sharp gesture with her head. Elliott approached my bedside also wearing a hospital mask over his nose and mouth. His hair hung lose and the small hairs at his temple and brow were slightly frazzled. His thick eyebrows were drawn down in unmistakeable concern.

“Hey.” He said in relief. His hand caressed my cheek and I leaned into his touch.

“Hey.” I sighed.
He his mask crinkled into what I presumed was a smile, and he ran his fingers through my hair. “How are you feeling?”

“I’ve been better.” I replied. “I hope I’m not interfering with your next scheduled book signing.”

“You’re not, my dear. Please don’t worry about that. I have a taxi arranged to pick me up from here and bring me to my next destination. I might be a little low on sleep, but its worth it to see you awake.”

I wanted to kiss Elliott then, or at least amorously squeeze his hand, but I lacked the strength to do either so I just mustered up a weak smile.

“Hon, Chuck wanted to stay and visit but he had to get to work.” Mom interjected.

I nodded. In fact, I completely understood. Chuck and Mom both worked at the same small manufacturing company. That was how they met, but with Mom being part of the upper management, she had more leeway to take an unexpected emergency sick day. Chuck would’ve had to use his paid-time-off which I knew they were saving for when Mom had the baby.

I turned my head away from them and coughed. Mom passed me the cup of water and I sipped some more. The straw gurgled as the cup ran empty and Elliott took it from me with a smile. “I’ll go get you some more.”

He ducked out from behind the blue privacy curtain that surrounded my bed leaving my Mom and I alone.

“So…that’s my boyfriend.” I told my Mom. As for introductions went, that would have to do.

“Yes. He introduced himself to me as we brought you into the hospital.”

Mom didn’t sound angry or disappointed but she didn’t exactly sound thrilled either.

“Oh. Well, what do you think of him?”

“I haven’t had a chance to really talk with him. We both have been too busy checking in on you.”

I frowned at her evasive response and she noticed.

“Morgan, does he make you happy?”

I nodded emphatically.

“Then that’s all there is to it.” Mom replied.

“He’s an author, you know.”

“Yes, he told me.”

“Does that bother you?” I asked.

Mom sighed and fiddled with her gold earrings. It was something she always did when she was stressed or exasperated about something.

“Let’s talk about this later, okay? I just want you to focus on getting better.”

Fine. So we’d table this discussion for another time. There wasn’t any evidence that Elliott hadn’t
made a good first impression with my mother, but I still felt like something was off.

“Man, I can’t wait to go home.” I announced. “This flu medicine is giving me crazy dreams. I’ve had the flu before, but I’ve never had it this bad.”

Mom smoothed the already crisp and neat hospital blanket across my lap. “Darling, you don’t have the flu.”

Of course I have the flu, I thought. I had all of the symptoms. Fever, body aches, a killer headache, and a sore throat.

“Then what do I have?” I croaked.

Elliott emerged from behind the curtain and offered me the full cup of water. The ice inside the plastic cup clicked together as cold condensation leaked down onto my feverish hands.

Mom looked serious and glanced at Elliott. “Darling, you have bacterial meningitis. Thankfully the doctors caught it early before it did lasting damage to your brain.”

“Is that like Mono?”

In the winter of my junior year in high school, an epidemic of mono swept through our school. The teachers snidely referred to it as “the kissing disease” while our school nurse kept reminding students to not share drinks with friends. I didn’t get the disease, being both a germaphobe and a shy virgin who hadn’t yet kissed a boy, but my good friend Samantha was out of school for nearly a month with the disease.

Mom sighed, “The doctor said that it is similar but meningitis causes the lining around your brain to become swollen and inflamed. If gone untreated for too long, that swelling can start affecting your brain. The doctor has started you on some antibiotics, but until we can get your fever down, you’ll have to stay in the hospital.”

“Am I contagious? You’re pregnant. Should you even be here?”

“It’s alright Morgan. The baby is fine and the doctor has assured me that you are not contagious now. The doctors want to keep you here until the 22nd just to ensure that the meningitis hasn’t caused any lasting damage.”

“The 22nd? No. I can’t stay here that long.” I protested. “What about the farm?”

“I’ve already called Marnie and told her the situation.” Elliott replied, “She said that Shane will be more than happy to tend for the farm while you’re recovering. And I’ll be able to swing by and check on things in between my engagements.”

Although I had was grateful for their help, an irrational fear still sat in my heart. I desperately missed the farm. I missed the familiar environment and the calm, small-town charm of Pelican Town. Staying here, even for the week, felt like a prison sentence.

“I know you don’t like it darling, but you need to focus on getting better first.” Mom said.

I reached out and took Elliott’s hand into mine. I needed to feel his touch. I needed something familiar to anchor me down from the flood of uncertainty and apprehension that was threatening to sweep me away.

Mom noticed and she cleared her throat, “The doctor wants you to try and eat something before
you go back to sleep. I’m gonna track down the nurse and see if we can get you some soup or something.”

She left the room quickly and Elliott took a seat in the chair she just left.

“Well, now you’ve met my mom.”

Elliott nodded, “I have.”

“How did it go?” I pressed. “I hope she didn’t give you a hard time.”

Elliott took a breath and I noticed that he glanced up towards the ceiling before answering. “Your mother is a passionate and self-driven woman. You take after her in a few ways.”

He was dodging the question. “Elliott, what happened?”

“Nothing specifically happened. She just has legitimate concerns about me making consistent money as an author, but I know she is happy to see you happy, so she hasn’t kicked me out yet.”

“And she won’t.” I replied firmly. “I will fight her tooth and nail if she tries to get you removed from my side.”

Elliott chuckled and stroked my cheek, “I don’t doubt that. You have the ferocity of a lioness, my dear.”

I squeezed his hand and smiled. “Thank you for being here with me.”

“You’re welcome.” He kissed my knuckles. The paper mask he wore over his mouth crinkled and I smirked at how absurdly cute he looked.

I rested my head against the crinkly hospital pillow and watched him through half-lidded eyes. His thumb caressed over my knuckles and his slow breathing blew strands of his hair that had fallen into his face. My heart swelled as I looked at him. I felt both proud and grateful that I had found someone as kind and thoughtful as Elliott.

“Hey — uh — can I tell you something?” I whispered. A sudden boldness came over me and my heart told me that there was no better time than like the present to tell him what was in my heart.

“Of course my dear. You can tell me anything.”

“Um I — I don’t want you to think this is too fast but —”

“— They were out of chicken noodle, but I got you some tomato soup instead.” Mom said as she slid open the curtain. “By the way Elliott, your taxi is here. I saw it pull into the parking lot just now.”

He checked his wristwatch and jolted upright. “Yes, you’re right. Thank you.” Elliott bent over me and kissed my forehead, “I’m sorry Morgan. Time has run away from me, but I’ll be back in a couple of days. Can you hold onto what you were going to tell me until I return?”

“Sure.” I croaked. “Good luck.”

“Thank you.” He smiled. He pulled his hand from my grasp and I immediately missed his warmth.

“It was nice to meet you Mrs. Raymond.” He offered her his hand which she shook curtly.
“Safe travels Elliott.” Mom replied. She set the steaming styrofoam bowl of tomato soup on a moveable dining tray which was attached to the hospital bed.

I watched Elliott leave feeling more miserable each passing second. Mom stuck a couple more lumpy pillows behind my back so I was sitting up and then pushed the soup and the full cup of ice water towards me.

“Eat up hon’ and then get some rest.” Mom kissed my hairline through her own paper mask.

I sighed and dipped my plastic spoon into the steaming liquid. I wasn’t hungry but I ate automatically and tried to imagine that I was back home in the cabin with Elliott and Golden. My own tomato basil soup would be simmering on the stove as we shared a bottle of wine and teased Golden with the laser pointer.

I had never felt more cared for by another man. After Brandon, I had to learn to care for myself in addition to him. Our relationship was always take, take, take, so it felt nice to receive some care and concern for once. I had gone five years feeling progressively more empty and Elliott was beginning to restore some of what I had lost.

“Oh…hon. What’s wrong?” Mom’s voice broke me out of my thoughts.

Tears stained my face, but I hadn’t realized that I was crying Mom had said something. I dried my eyes with a paper napkin and pushed the food tray away from me.

“The soup is hot.” I mumbled pathetically but my Mother saw through that right away.

“You like Elliott, huh?” She took my hand in hers.

I wanted to pull away because the way she said it made it seem so anticlimactic and so simple when it was anything but that. I didn’t just like him. I loved him and I wanted him to know.

“He’ll be back.” She assured me. “He wont be away from you for long. He’s smitten with you.”

Mom squeezed my hand once again and pushed the food tray towards me again. “Now try to eat a little more. I’m going to step out and give Chuck a call. Be right back.”

“Mom?” I called out.

She turned back to me before she opened the curtain.

“Thanks.” I told her. “Thanks for taking care of me.”

She looked touched. “Love you, hon.”

“Love you too mom.”

The next couple days passed by with agonizing slowness. The hospital room that I was in had three other beds surrounded by their own privacy screens. One patient, who kept hacking and coughing in the corner, had a circus of people parading past my bed until the visiting hours ended.

Now that I was deemed not contagious, I was encouraged to go out and walk for a little bit every couple hours or so up and down the corridors, but I felt indecent and exposed in the paper thin hospital gown they had me wear. Instead, I paced in my small space like a caged animal until it was time for a nurse to bring me food.

Chuck brought me a crossword books and a word find book which helped pass the time, but he and
I had nothing much to say to each other aside for trite pleasantries so he never stayed very long.

Mom texted me and said that her job was asking her to pull a double shift because they were short staffed. She felt awful, of course, but I told her that it was okay. I was use to my mother getting called into work, so this was just par for the course. I was twenty-five years old. I could face another night in the hospital alone.

After a dinner of suspiciously soggy ravioli, salty green beans, skim milk, and lemon jello, I made a list on the inside cover of the crossword book of all of the things I needed to do before the end of the season. I was beginning to realize that planting some fruit bearing trees before the frost came was unrealistic, but I could at least clear the area of land where I wanted to start my fruit orchard.

With Maru’s help, I could expand my sprinkler system and expand the garden for the next year. I could even begin using some of the milk that Stella gave and process it into butter or cheese. Of course, I’d need to talk to Marnie about stud fees as Stella’s milk production would run dry around Spring. Eventually, my to-do list became so massive that I had to write in the margins of the first puzzle after which I decided to just set aside farm business until I could get back to the farm.

I opened the crossword book to the first puzzle and began solving it out. This puzzle’s theme was ‘In Nature’ and I managed to finish half of it before the questions stumped me, so I set the book off to the side and tried to meditate myself to sleep.

The sounds in the hospital were alien and disconcerting. While my eyes were closed, I heard the beeping and trilling of my heart rate monitor machine, but I also heard the muffled robotic voice of the PA in the hallway notifying people that visiting hours were ending in thirty minutes. The family who was visiting the patient across from me was involved in a serious discussion. I couldn’t tell what it was about as they spoke in a different language, but I could tell from their voices that all was not well among their family.

Just as I was about to give myself over to sleep, I heard metal curtain rings scrape against the bar as someone entered my room. I opened one eye and saw that it was Elliott. His leather satchel hung stylishly off his hip and his jacket was draped over his arm.

“Hey!” I perked up immediately.

“Hey.” He smiled in return. “I hope I didn’t wake you.”

“It’s okay.” I urged. “It feels like I’ve slept enough for an entire lifetime.”

“How are you feeling?” He set his bag down on an empty chair and laced his fingers in mine. I never wanted to let his hand go.

“I’m feeling a lot better.” I replied. “I’m just bored out of my mind. There’s not much for me to do here, but the doctor won’t let me discharge myself until they run one more test tomorrow. How was your book reading by the way?”

“It went well, in fact, better than the previous one. There were over fifty people there and at least half of them purchased copies of my book.”

“That’s wonderful!” I exclaimed. “One day, I’ll come to one of your book readings.”

Elliott sat in the other vacant chair at my bedside. He pulled out a yellow legal pad from his leather satchel and I saw pages and pages of scrawled writing.

“Actually, I’m working on something new.” He seemed slightly sheepish. “Across the Blue
Mountains was good and was generally well-received, but I know the buzz will die down eventually. I don’t want to be a one-title-wonder.”

I rolled onto my side and faced him. The moonlight from the window shone through the open blinds and painted us with lines of silver gossamer.

“Can I hear what you’ve written?”

Elliott’s tentative smile grew into cautious happiness, “It’s a bit rough.”

“I don’t mind rough.” I replied with an impish smile.

He visibly shuddered and his brown eyes took on a hungry quality. “Are you sure, my dear? This is a bit of turn in tone from the last one.”

“Oh? How so?”

“Well it’s less small town drama and more big city corruption, crime, dirty cops and their femme fatale vixens in an amoral lose-lose world.”

I chuckled. The memory of watching old black and white movies with Grandpa at the farm on a rainy Saturday afternoon came back to me.

“Lay it on me, doll.” I replied in my best old-timey gumshoe impression.

Elliott’s smile seemed to outshine the moonlight at my reaction. He eagerly flipped open his notepad to the part he wanted and bent over to read it aloud.

I closed my eyes and listened to his soothing voice.

It was cold and dark. My partner and I were on the beat on 42nd street and Lynell Avenue. This was the place, with its dope fiends, cut purses, and hookers, was both a punishment and an initiation. A punishment for shmucks like me who had to choose between a bad and a worse scenario and an initiation for the poor flatfoot rookie straight outta the academy.

My partner was the sort of starry-eyed virgin who thought the world could be differentiated into the good guys and the bad guys. The vic and the perp, the right and the wrong. Never mind the fact that half of the criminals I spent my career putting away were no worse then the men pounding the gavels and declaring them guilty...

“Guests. Visiting hours are now ending. Non-family members must please leave the hospital. Thank you for visiting.” A cool, female voice announced over the radio.

“To be continued.” Elliott said with a sad smile.

When he moved to get up, my hand grabbed his forearm. “Wait! Don’t.”

“I’m sorry Morgan. Visiting hours are over. I wasn’t even sure if I’d make it here at all. Thankfully the bus I caught didn’t have too many other stops to make.”

“Stay.” I pleaded. “Please. Everyone else gets to have their immediate families here. My family is busy working. I’m subbing you in.”

“Morgan.” He sighed. “I don’t wanna get you in trouble.”

“I’m not gonna get in trouble. Please!”
He sighed and looked around the small area like he was about to commit a capital offense before he toed off his shoes. “Scoot over. I’m going to lay down next to you. It’s been far too long since I’ve held you in my arms.”

I grinned and moved over until my back was against the plastic bed railing. The mattress shifted as Elliott climbed up. He wrapped me up in the scratchy hospital blanket and held me against his chest.

I breathed in his scent and noted that it had changed slightly. “You smell different.”

“Oh?”

I blushed. “Um. Normally you smell like the sea and the forest, on account of where you’ve been living I’m sure, but now you smell different, almost spicy.”

He hummed thoughtfully. “That’s interesting. I was afraid that I’d smell like the city with its smog and gasoline. I guess I worried for nothing.”

He ran his fingers through my matted hair and carefully untangled the knots and snarls. My scalp tingled from his touch and I felt myself falling back asleep.

“Hey, can I tell you what I was going to say before my Mom interrupted us?”

“I’m all ears.” Elliott rumbled.

My cheeks flushed.

“I just wanted to say thank you for being here for me. I know it hasn’t been easy going back and forth from the city to the hospital and Pelican Town. I just appreciate it. I’ve spent a lot of my adult life putting up this wall of self-sufficiency that it feels weird to have another person who isn’t my Mom taking care of me.”

“Morgan, you don’t have to thank me for that. You are the hardest working person I know. You deserve to be taken care of when the unforeseeable strikes.”

“Elliott, I love you.” I interjected.

His eyes crinkled in the corners as he took in what I had said but then he smiled and caressed my face. His lips lightly met mine, and although both of our lips were dry, I sighed at the contact. I had gone far too long without kissing him.

He pulled me into his chest and rested his chin on the top of my head. I heard his strong heartbeat and I felt his chest rise and fall with each quiet breath.

“Love comes quietly, finally, drops about me, on me, in the old ways. What did I know thinking myself able to go alone all the way.” He murmured.

“Did you write that?”

“Sadly, no.” He replied and released me just enough so I could look into his face. “It’s just that poetry is the only way I can express my feelings for you. You would think a writer would be better at vocalizing all of the thoughts that are flying through my head right now.”

I tucked his hair behind his ear. His slender neck glowed with the moonlight revealing his jaw with a faint line of stubble starting to grow.
“You could give it a shot.” I suggested with a grin.

Elliott shook his head. “I could pull every word from the dictionary and it still wouldn’t be enough to fully articulate my thoughts, so I think I’ll just stick with the simplest answer.”

“I love you too Morgan.”
I apologize about the delay. I try to not let more than a month sit between chapters but I’ve been crazy busy with work. Also, the first draft of this chapter wasn’t panning out to where I wanted it to go so I scrapped it and started over. Apparently my mind jumps to sex when I need to move the plot along so this chapter is rated M+ but it’s only explicit for the first section. After that, it’s back to a general T rating.

Thank you to everyone who has taken the time to leave a kudos, bookmark, and most of all, leave a comment or two. I love talking with you all and your feedback drives me and inspires me.

Chapter 19: Birthday Surprises Pt. 1

September 27th (Fall)

Rain fell softly against the tin roof lulling me back to sleep. I fought against it half-heartedly and rolled over and pressed myself against Elliott’s bare back. My arm curled around his body and I pulled him into me. His back was warm and firm, and I placed a gentle kiss on his shoulder.

He sighed sleepily, “Hi.”

“Hi.” I whispered my greeting into his skin.

“Is it time to get up already?” He asked sounding a bit more awake. He rolled to face me. His hair was tousled into an unruly mess and I couldn’t help but grin.

“You’ve got serious case of bed head.” I chuckled.

“That’s what I get for taking a shower before bed.” He murmured and closed his eyes. “The hotel I was staying in had showers that I wouldn’t wash a dog in, let alone myself, and I wanted to freshen up a bit before I came over.”

“You could’ve used my shower you know.” I brushed back some flyaway hairs that were sticking out from his scalp.

“I know.” He murmured, sleep tinged his voice once again. “But I didn’t want to wake you. I know you tend to go to bed early.”

“You could’ve woke me. I wouldn’t have minded.” I didn’t conceal the innuendo in my voice.

In fact, between my bout of illness, Elliott’s book tour, and the uptick in chores around the farm to prepare for winter, I hadn’t had the time or the inspiration for sex. But now that the inspiration was lying right next to me, my libido was trying to make up for lost time.

Elliott opened one eye and cocked his eyebrow mischievously. “I’ll keep that in mind, my dear.”

My hand ran from his shoulder down the length of his side until I reached his pajama pants. My
pulse seemed to flutter a bit as I sat on the precipice of a decision. I still wasn’t use to taking the initiative when it came to sex in our relationship, but I wanted to get better at it. I wanted him.

I slipped my hand beneath his pajamas and his underwear and let my hand rest on his hip bone. Now both of his eyes were open staring at me with naked lust and hunger.

“Roll onto your back.” I said softly.

He did as I asked and as he turned my hand trailed from his hipbone to the blistering hot skin just below his naval.

I pulled his pants down just enough to access my quarry and I rose up onto my knees and tossed my own sleep tousled hair over my right shoulder as though my hair could be a sort of privacy curtain for what was about to happen.

“Morgan?” I heard Elliott ask, but I ignored him.

I took him into my mouth and he groaned in a breathy, almost needy way. He was half-hard from the morning and tasted slightly salty, but not unpleasantly so.

I ran my tongue along his length. With each pass, he grew harder and fuller in my mouth, and I lost myself in the act. It was an act that felt so taboo to me that simply performing it was arousing in and of itself.

“Morgan…” He groaned. “Love, please…”

I took him in my hand and brushed my hair over my other shoulder so I could look at him. “Instruct me. Tell me what you like. Please.”

Elliott’s chest heaved and he propped himself up onto his elbows so he could lean in and kiss me.

“I want to see you, love. Don’t hide from me. Never hide from me. You’re doing fine.” Each sentence came out as a pant and I grinned at his praise and at the fact that he was completely at my mercy.

As I went down on him again, I glanced up to watch his reactions as I took him into my mouth once more. I took my right hand and slowly stroked along his base as my mouth worked the tip.

Elliott would occasionally groan out a command of ‘faster’ or a praise like ‘Yoba, yes’ but for the most part, his feedback was nonverbal.

He exhaled a long breath and threw his head back. His jaw fell slack and I could see the tension running from his slender neck down through his lean forearms.

Feeling bolder, I took him entirely into my mouth and gently ran my nails along the outside of his thigh. His hips thrusted up in response and I felt my eyes water from the strain.

“Oh. Do that again.” He begged.

I continued to stroke him and sat back on my knees with a smirk. “Do what? This?”

I repeated the motion again, but this time, I angled my path so it started at his hip but then ran over the top of his thigh and towards the sensitive skin where his inner thigh met his pelvis.

He whimpered and I felt his erection pulse in my hand. I repeated the motion once more and swiped my tongue around his leaking tip.
“Oh Yoba, Morgan, I’m — I’m close love. You — you don’t have to …” But his voice died in his throat as I took him fully in my mouth again.

He was right. I didn’t have to but I wanted to. I wanted everything that Elliott had to give me, so I redoubled my efforts. I heard him shout and then entwine his fingers in my hair as he felt pulsed in my mouth. I tasted salt and his musk; it wasn’t necessarily unpleasant, just odd. Elliott jostled violently against the headboard as his climax wracked through his body. In fact, he moved so abruptly that he slipped out of my mouth and spilled a little of himself over my hand.

Elliott panted and whimpered when I finally released him. His softening member sat against his thigh slick with the evidence of our deed. As he recovered, I pulled a few tissues from the box sitting on the nightstand and cleaned us up as best as I could, but I couldn’t wipe the proud grin off my face.

When I leaned over him to throw the tissues away in the wastebasket, his hand ran through my own bedraggled hair and pulled me in for a languid and slow kiss. He didn’t pull away in disgust at tasting himself on my lips, so I kissed him harder and brushed my knuckles along the fine stubble that was starting to grow on his chin.

“I love you.” I murmured when we broke away.

“After that. I should say that I worship you.” He replied hoarsely. When he opened his eyes, the love and adoration that met my gaze was incomparable. “But still. I feel a bit selfish here. This is your birthday, love. I should be the one pleasuring you.”

I shook my head and tossed the soiled tissues into the wastebasket near the bed. “I do remember that you said we should endeavor to celebrate our birthdays together. You had to drive me to the hospital on your birthday, so I thought we should make up for lost time.”

The mattress moved and I felt Elliott’s strong, wiry arms wrap around my waist and gently toss me onto my back.

I squeaked in surprise but parted my legs so Elliott could settle in between them.

His bare chest was flushed from his orgasm and his hair was still a wild mess, but I don’t think I could’ve loved him any more in that moment than I had already.

“If we’re celebrating together, then turnabouts fair play my dear.”

“I should be on my knees then if you want to turn me about.” I quipped.

He growled low in his throat and captured my lips in a searing kiss. His pupils were so dilated that his brown eyes looked nearly black in the low light.

“I’ll have you on your knees eventually, but let’s not rush things. We’ve got all morning.”

I lifted my hips so he could pull off my own flannel pajama pants which he did with such gusto that he threw them clear across the room. I leaned towards him and removed my sleeping shirt and kissed him again.

His eyes watched my reaction as he kissed down the length of my body until he settled at the apex of my thighs.

After that, I couldn’t remember my own damn name let alone anything else of consequence.
By mid morning, the rain had finally let up and the cool autumn sun broke through the grey clouds.

The trees on the farm were halfway through their color change and by the Stardew Valley Fair in a couple of weeks, they’d be at their peak color. The sodden leaves made very little sound beneath my muck boots as I trudged through the puddles on my way to Stella’s pen.

After our lovely, amorous morning, Elliott made me breakfast and then gathered up his things to get ready at his own place. He claimed that he was preparing a special surprise for me, and while that might’ve been true, I also knew that he was being tactful in his own way. We both knew that if he had stayed here, neither of us would’ve gotten anything done. In fact, we probably would’ve never left the bedroom, not that I had a problem with that, but my mom might.

My Mom was expected to arrive at the farm by noon. I planned to take her to the Stardrop Saloon for lunch so she could reunite with some of the townspeople. The selfish part of me debated whether I could slip out quietly after lunch while Mom gossiped with Jodi and Caroline so I could fish in the lake in Cindersnap Forest before it got dark. Fishing season was closing in a month, so if I didn’t capitalize on the time I had left then I’d have to wait until next April when the season opened again.

Stella’s low moo broke me from my thoughts and I patted her head with a gloved hand.

“Don’t worry about me girl. I’m just gonna clean up the barn so it’s nice and comfy for you come bedtime.”

The bovine swished her tail and pulled another bunch of hay from the netting hanging near the open stall.

Now that the weather was getting colder, especially in the evenings, I brought Stella into the barn every night. I bought a heater from Marnie to keep the barn warm during the winter so Stella would be comfortable and would continue to produce milk. When her milk production eventually runs out, Marnie suggested that I let her rest for a while before finding a stud for her.

“Milkin’s hard on the body — for animals as well as humans — so givin’ the girl a rest before the next round is only right.” Marnie told me.

This whole process of animal husbandry was new to me, and sometimes, I still felt like the sheltered city girl that I once was.

As Stella ate, I took the pitchfork from the corner of the barn and began scooping the soiled hay and manure into a wheelbarrow. The cooler weather tempered the smell a bit, for which I was grateful, but the manure would add important nutrients to my growing compost pile behind the cabin. I didn’t bother too much with the fertilizer that Pierre sold (partially because it was too expensive), so I couldn’t wait for next year’s growing season to try out some of my own fertilizer.

After I cleaned out the barn, I swept the soiled straw into a pile and shoveled it up, I then began tearing straw off the giant round bale that was sitting outside near the back door and spreading the clean straw on the concrete floor and in Stella’s stall.

Stella watched me with unblinking eyes as she chewed on hay. By the time I was done, my back was covered in a layer of sweat and my hair was frizzing up from the damp weather.

“Is everything to your liking ma’am?” I asked Stella and tickled her under her chin.

She shook her head and bits of hay and cow slobber flew everywhere.
“Tough critic.” I remarked and gave her a farewell pat on her hindquarters. “It’ll have to do for now though.”

I peeled off the work gloves, put the tools away, and checked Stella’s water before I trudged back to the cabin to take a shower.

The hot water felt amazing on my sore shoulders and I luxuriated beneath the spray until the water ran cold. I heard Elliott’s voice call out from the kitchen and I yelled back that I’d be out in a few minutes. I heard the small tabletop television turn on and I heard the weatherman’s unintelligible voice warble out from the old speakers.

After I dried off, I dressed quickly and blowdried my hair. I pulled my hair back and pinned it up with a barrette that my grandpa had given me when I turned thirteen. It was grandma’s, he told me, and it was a gift that her mom gave to her when she became a young lady.

The gold barrette gleamed and the rose embellishments at the end gave the hairpiece a vintage, classical look. I rarely did anything fancy with my hair other than a braid, a ponytail, or a bun, but I made it a point to wear grandma’s barrette on my birthdays.

Then I slipped into a knee length skirt with a subtle dark blue floral pattern and pulled on a simple cream blouse. I put on the gold and diamond earrings that my mom gave me last Christmas and a little mascara and lipstick.

When I opened the bathroom door, the cool air rushed out to greet me and I walked into the kitchen where Elliott was waiting.

He was leaning against the small wooden table in the kitchen looking as handsome as ever in his typical green woolen sweater and red jacket, and I smiled shyly at him.

“How do I look?”

Elliott’s eyes never left mine. “You look perfect.”

I kissed him. He smelled of pine and the sea once again. The foreign scents of travel, hotels, and the city were finally washed away. Elliott was home.

Just then, a horn honked twice and the dirt road crunched beneath car tires.

He cupped his hands and held either side of my face before kissing me once more. “Your chariot awaits my dear.”

Lunch at the Saloon turned out to be a surprise party co-organized by my Mom and Gus.

As soon as we walked in, nearly half the town waited for us and wished me Happy Birthday. Sam threw handfuls of confetti over my head while Abigail and Sebastian played pool in the game room and watched Sam’s antics with detached bemusement.

“Morgan!” a squeal in the sound of my name interrupted the moment.

Just then, a purple and black blur ran into me with the weight of a seventy pound kid and nearly knocked me into a high top table.

“Jas. Woah. Be careful, hun. You don’t know your own strength.”
“Sorry!” She cried breathlessly. “Happy Birthday to you! You live in a zoo. You look like a monkey and you smell like one too.”

She sang and giggled with childish glee and I couldn’t help but chuckle with her.

“Hey! You just said I smelled. That’s not true! I just took a shower!” I cried in mock outrage.

“That’s just how the song goes.” She pointed out. “I know you don’t smell.”

“Well that’s a relief.” I chuckled.

“So how old are you anyway? Like 40?” Jas asked with all the seriousness that a child like her could muster.

Before I could respond, Shane sharply said her name and made a gesture with his head in Marnie’s direction. He was nursing a beer in his usual corner and a sullen expression clouded his face.

“Sorry. Gotta go.” Jas said flatly.

Elliott hung our jackets on the coat rack near the door and then took my hand. “There’s nothing like a child’s bluntness to keep life in perspective.”

“Right.” I agreed. But I couldn’t take my eye off of Shane. More specifically, I couldn’t take my eye off the sallowness of his skin or the white bandages that peaked out from beneath his denim jacket sleeves.

As Elliott and I made our rounds to talk to people (Elliott did most of the talking while I just nodded and listened), I kept stealing glances back at Shane.

Occasionally Emily would check on him and refill his beer, but other than that, the rest of the town seemed to ignore him. They treated him like he was just another fixture in the bar, like a lamp or a stool. Hell, the people talked with Pam way more and she was the more obnoxious drunk.

“Hey, I’ll be right back.” I told Elliott.

He nodded absentmindedly as Willy regaled him with another mostly embellished fishing story.

I crossed through the small bar quickly and then slid onto the stool to Shane’s left. He didn’t acknowledge me, nor did he make any indication that I was there. He just took another swig from the dark beer bottle and stared off into space.

“Hey Birthday girl!” Emily cried. “What can I get you.”

“Can I get a glass of white wine and your pumpkin ale?” I asked. I went to pull out my small coin purse but Emily waved my hand away.

“Your money is no good here. Not on your birthday anyway.” She smiled.

“I’ll get another when you get a chance.” Shane said softly and he put his empty bottle towards the edge nearest to Emily.

“I got his Emily.” I replied and I placed a handful of coins down on the bar. “I understand giving me a drink for free, but I insist on paying for Shane’s.”

She shrugged and swept them into her hand and dropped them into the cash register. She handed Shane his beer and handed me a healthy pour of Gus’s delicious peach wine, and then went to the
back to fetch the ale.

“I don’t need your charity.” Shane snapped at me. Nevertheless, he took a long drink from his beer and set the bottle down with such force that the beer fizzed up and spilled over the top.

“That wasn’t charity.” I replied in a steely tone. “It was repayment for taking such good care of my chickens while I was in the hospital. I owed you one.”

Some light flickered behind the ever-present cloud that lingered in Shane’s countenance and the carefully constructed wall he created crumbled away.

“Oh…Well, you’ve taken good care of them. They’re healthy chickens.”

I pursed my lips in surprise, “I think that’s the first compliment you’ve ever paid me.”

He grunted noncommittally, “I kinda thought that with you being from the city that your chickens or your cow would be sick or malnourished. Your grandpa taught you well.”

“Yes, he did.” I agreed coldly. “Although, he did tell me once that a back-handed compliment was worse than an insult.”

He sighed and looked genuinely remorseful, “You’re right. Look. I’m sorry I’m such an ass sometimes. You’re doing good work on the farm.”

“Thanks Shane. I appreciate it.”

“So are you going to the Stardew Fair in a couple of weeks?”

“I hadn’t actually thought about it.” I replied, “Although, I’m not a big fan of crowds. Grandpa took me to the fair as a kid but I think it would be weird to be there without him.”

His half-lidded brown eyes held my gaze and there was something in his expression that I couldn’t quite place. “Well if you do go, feel free to stop by my booth. I’m selling some of my special chickens. They’re expensive but I’ve put a lot of work into raising them.”

“What makes them special?” I asked and took a sip of the sweet summer wine.

“Well, they’re blue for one thing.” He remarked. “And they’re harder than other breeds which means they are less prone to disease and have a longer life expectancy.”

“I beg your pardon. Did you say blue?”

“Yeah!” He perked up and turned his body to face me. “I’ve been trying to breed a couple of my roosters with my hen to produce more blue chickens, but it’s been a bit dicy. Benny won’t accept just any rooster I try to put her with. She pecks them and scratches them before they can —” He paused and looked sheepish. “— well you know. She only likes King. But the rate of laying an egg that will hatch a blue chick is quite low. When she does lay eggs, one out of every five or so hatches a chick with blue plumage. I’ve got three of her chicks in the incubators right now.

“Here’s the ale Morgan.” Emily interjected. “Let Elliott know that this is the first keg that Gus has tapped for this year. This stuff usually sells out by the time the Stardew Fair has come and gone. So he should enjoy it while it lasts. I know it’s his favorite.”

“Thanks Emily.” I replied.

Shane shifted in his seat and then took another long swig of beer. Even through the brown tinted
glass, I could tell that he was halfway done with the bottle.

“So the author is back” He remarked bitterly. All of his previous enthusiasm had vanished into thin air.

“Yes. He just got back yesterday.”

“Then why aren’t you with him?” I heard the clear dismissal in his voice. Shane turned back to his beer and took another long drink. He belched and then took out his cell phone, clearly indicating to me that this conversation was over.

I turned my back to Shane. I tried to not let his dismissal sting but it did, and I walked towards Elliott and my Mom with our drinks in hand.

I passed Elliott his drink. He met my eyes and seemed to know instinctually that something was wrong.

“Are you okay?” He murmured in my ear.

I nodded and smiled but it was half-hollow. I wrapped my left arm around his back and leaned into his side and he kissed the top of my head.

“Your mother has been regaling the crowd with stories of your childhood.” Elliott remarked. “I’ve only caught snippets of the conversation, but apparently you were the little exhibitionist.”

My eyes grew wide and Elliott’s smirk mirrored my astonishment. “She didn’t!”

Mom butted in, “Oh but you were so cute! Your poor Grandpa couldn’t keep you in clothes for the life of him.”

“I was three!” I exclaimed defensively.

Caroline chuckled as she nibbled on some hors d’oeuvres that Gus had set out. “I swear that every kid goes through that phase.”

Jodi agreed, “Try living with two boys. If they aren’t dirtying their clothes in the mud or sand, they’re running around the town half naked as it is, and I can’t get them to stop!”

I pulled Elliott away as my Mom jumped in with another undoubtably embarrassing story about me, and sat with him at a high top table in the corner.

“She’s only teasing.” Elliott replied as though he could read into my mind. His warm hand enveloped over the top of mine.

“I know.” I grumbled and took another sip of wine. The wine was delightfully tart and I tasted a slight hint of honey along with the notes of peach and something floral.

I sighed and shot one more glance at Shane. His was hunched over his beer staring lifelessly ahead at nothing.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Elliott urged.

I turned back to him. “I just don’t get Shane. I mean. I don’t need to be best friends with everyone in town, but he seems to actively hate me.”
“From my observations, he seems to be that way with almost everyone.” Elliott remarked.

“I guess.”

A troubled look passed over Elliott’s face. “Or it could be that he’s in love with you.”


Elliott cocked an eyebrow at me and said nothing. He and I both knew that he was right. It would make sense, actually. Shane had an interest in farming, well more specifically, raising chickens. Marnie was the only other farmer I knew in town and he lived with her. In terms of livelihoods, we were well matched. But there were two huge glaring flaws. One, I was madly in love with the well-spoken, sophisticated author in front of me, and two, Shane reminded me too much of Brandon.

“Okay. You’re right.” I admitted. “But I’m 100% in love with someone else.”

“It’s Willy isn’t it.” Elliott deadpanned.

“You got me.” I replied. “I guess I have a thing for balding, sixty-five year old men.”

Elliott laughed and kissed my fingertips. I trailed my fingers from his lips to cup his clean shaven jaw. I imagined how his face would feel against my thighs and my body temperature rose a few degrees.

“So what do you have planned after this?” I asked breathier than usual.

Elliott’s smile took on an enigmatic quality, “It’s a surprise.”

I rolled my eyes in mock annoyance, “But I hate surprises.”

“I think you’ll like this one.” He remarked. “Just be patient. Okay?”

Elliott and I finished our drinks and he went back to the bar to order us another round. As soon as Elliott approached the bar, Shane threw his hood up and walked past Elliott without making eye contact with anyone.

Emily gave him a pitying look as he left. The heavy bar door opened and the crisp autumn wind blew a few multicolored leaves in and then slammed again with a sharp thud.

The rest of the afternoon went about as well as I could expect. I helped myself to a plate of Gus’s famous lasagna and afterwards Gus dimmed the lights while Emily brought out a sheet cake and set it on the bar.

The sheet cake was frosted white and Emily had decorated the top with a picture of fish jumping out of the water.

“That looks amazing Emily!” I exclaimed.

“Thanks. But I can’t take all of the credit. Leah was the one who decorated the cake. She’s got a far steadier hand than I do.”

Leah was sitting in the other corner with a half full glass of Gus’s summer red blend and gave us a small wave.

“Thank you.” I said but my words were consumed by the idle chatter in the bar. Nevertheless, she got the message and nodded.
Mom slid up behind me and but her warm hand on my back. Elliott sat at my right side and held my hand in his own. As Gus lit the candles, the town seemed to gather around me and I swear that I could smell my Grandpa’s pipe tobacco once again.

“Someone get the fire extinguisher ready.” Sam called out.

“Ha ha.” I shot back.

The warm amber glow from the candles radiated across my face. The town sang with Gus’s enthusiastic but off-key voice taking the lead, and I felt my eyes mist up. I thought back to all of the cards that Grandpa would send to me on my birthday; each one left a short note and a series of x’s and o’s following his name in his neat, cursive handwriting. For as many summers as I had spent with Grandpa, I never got to celebrate my birthday with him. This year was the start of a new tradition.

As the singing stopped, I took a deep breath and blew out the candles in one fell swoop. Once they extinguished, I half expected them to spark back to life as would sometimes happen when Chuck switched out my birthday candles with trick, re-lightable ones.

But no. There were no surprises this time. Just a pure and timeless tradition.

“Happy Birthday love.” Elliott murmured and kissed me lightly on the cheek.

I squeezed his hand appreciatively as Gus began cutting up and dishing out pieces of cake.
Chapter 20 — Birthday Surprises Pt. 2 (Rated T)

September 27th (Fall)

“Trust me.” Elliott said.

Although he had blindfolded me, I could still hear the amusement in his voice. I held tightly onto his hand as he led me towards the unknown.

“Alright, this is a tricky spot up ahead. I’m going to go first and then help you over.” He let go of me and anxiety immediately flooded through my body.

“Take one step forward Morgan.” He commanded.

I did and I felt my knees bump up against something solid. Branches pulled at my sleeves and I smelled the sweet and earthy aroma of decaying leaves. The wind tickled the nape of my neck which sent a slight chill down my spine. I was happy that I changed into more suitable clothes before Elliott literally took me off the beaten trail.

After my birthday party at the Saloon, Mom drove us back to the farm. She gave me a card and then kissed me on the cheek.

“You might be too old for presents but I know you’re never too old for money. So either put this to the farm or to yourself.” She said and she handed me a small purse full of gold.

“Thanks Mom.” I replied.

She gave Elliott a hug and said something into his ear which I didn’t catch, but Elliott nodded and said “Of course.”

Soon after, I had changed into boots, blue jeans, and a flannel shirt, and we were off on this weird adventure.

“Take my hands.” Elliott said.

I reached out blindly until his hands grasped mine.

“Take your left leg and swing it over like you’re mounting a horse.” He said.

I tried but only managed to get my leg caught in brambles and branches. I toppled over ungracefully and ended up laying on the log that I was trying to climb over.


“Shut up.” I laughed. “If you didn’t insist on blindfolding me, I’d be a lot better at this.”

Elliott’s arms slipped underneath my armpits and he half helped and half lifted me back to my feet.

“That was the worst of it. I promise. The rest is smooth sailing now.”

True to his word, he led me onward and I sensed that the sun had dimmed a bit. The leaves beneath our feet crunched with each step which meant the overgrowth and sheltered this area from much of
the morning’s rain. Squirrels chittered and ran along the branches near us and a game bird, a quail or a partridge maybe, took flight from the underbrush.

The ground was remarkably flat for being in the middle of the forest, but I still picked my feet up so I didn’t accidentally catch a root and end up flat on my face.

“Alright. We’re here.” Elliott said.

We stopped and I felt his warm hands slide the bandana off my face. I blinked a few times as my eyes adjusted to the dim light and I looked around at the paradise before me.

Ancient trees, far larger than I had ever seen, stood like giants against the sky. Their powerful limbs, blown and bent from the years of wind, rain, and snow created a natural cave of sorts. Light streamed through the red, orange, and yellow leaves which painted the ground with splotches of pale color.

About twenty yards ahead, a pond about the size of a swimming pool sat with water as still as glass. Leaves occasionally fell from the cavernous canopy overhead and landed like feathers on the water creating ripples that cascaded outward. Sitting by the pond’s shore were two canvas camping chairs; my red one and an unfamiliar blue one sat open and ready for us. A bottle of wine was nestled between them in a pile of leaves.

I looked at Elliott. His warm brown eyes were hesitant but hopeful. “What do you think?”

“I — It’s — How did you find this place?” I said. “I thought I knew of every place in Pelican Town. I’ve never been here before. Where even are we?”

“What? People would have an easier time getting here if we just removed the log.” I pointed out.

“I think it would take a little something away from this place. The places worth visiting should be hard to get to, I think.”

I suppose Elliott did have a point. He guided me towards the two chairs that were set up near the pond and grabbed the canvas storage bag that was stuffed beneath the chair. Inside were two ceramic coffee mugs, a corkscrew, and a wrapped parcel the size of a book.

“Here’s a present from Willy and Mayor Lewis.” He said and handed the package to me. I knew it wasn’t a book when I touched it. The container felt like plastic and I heard small items inside moving around. “They wanted me to pass it on to you since they knew we were headed out here after the party.”

I tore the parchment paper off the box and saw that it was a small plastic tackle box, the kind with plastic compartments built right in, and I saw that each compartment was filled with a different bait or lure.

“Mayor Lewis told me that some of these baits were your grandfather’s. He found them in his shed when he was cleaning it out and wanted you to have them.”

I opened the lid and inspected the lures. Sure enough, over half of them had paint chipped off them and some even had teeth marks from a northern pike or muskie. I picked one bait in particular and inspected it like it was a gemstone.
The bait in question was four inches long, oblong shaped and resembled the body of a small waterfowl like a loon or a duck. The bait was segmented into two pieces and a small aluminum blade sat behind the bait’s head.

“What is that?” Elliott asked.

I smiled and spun the bait’s head so the head and the blade made a loud chittering sound. “This was one of my grandpa’s favorite baits. It’s called a chopper and it cuts through the water like a propeller and creates vibrations below the surface that the fish can feel. When they come to investigate it, the noise and the splashing activates their feeding or their territorial instincts and they’ll strike.”

I held the bait reverently in the palm of my hand. Two brass treble hooks protruded from the bottom of the bait. The hooks were dull, but that was no matter, for also in the tackle box was a metal file to sharpen hooks.

“May I?” Elliott asked.

I nodded and he carefully picked up the bait and studied it for himself. As he did so, I looked through the box and saw more familiar baits which brought back old memories.

“Oh man. This one is mine. I can’t believe grandpa kept it.” I mused. I plucked a small orange crank bait from the box. It’s body was painted a bright neon orange while the top was painted with black accents to mark out the outline of a fish. It was the ugliest bait I had ever seen, but it was my most loved bait. By all rights, the color alone should’ve spooked the fish but it darted through the water like a dream and bagged me a 31” northern pike when I was nine years old.

“This is amazing Elliott. Thank you.”

“There’s one last thing.” He said.

He handed the bait back to me and then walked a few yards towards a large pine tree. He peeked around it and pulled out a fishing rod. But it wasn’t just any old rod, it was the rod I lost in the ocean when I got pulled off the dock.

He handed me the rod and I inspected it, appraised it, in the same way a knight would inspect his weapon before a battle.

“I promised you that if your rod ever washed up on the beach that I’d get it back to you.” He said. “Well…about mid July during low tide I was taking a walk along the beach because I couldn’t sleep and I saw it sticking out of the sand in about five feet of water. I dove in and retrieved it but it was in pretty bad shape. The line was rotted away, the internal gears were corroded by the salt water, and the tip broke off. I brought it to Willy and he’s been fixing it in secret since then. He put the final touches on it last week when you were in the hospital.”

I gaped at him. My eyes flitted from the tackle box full of memories, my oldest and most cherished possession, and my amazingly thoughtful boyfriend who made all of this possible.

“What do you think?” He asked.

I put the tacklebox on the camping chair and carefully laid the fishing pole on the ground before pulling Elliott into a tight embrace.

“I’m speechless. I can’t believe you did all of this for me.” I murmured into his neck. “And all I got you was a stupid pen!”
He pulled me away to look at me, “Hey. I like that stupid pen. It writes well, it makes me look professional at book signings, and now I have far less ink stains on my fingers.”

“You are amazing.” I said.

“I know.” He agreed smugly which made me laugh.

We kissed long and tenderly as the breeze kicked up fallen leaves and blew them around us in a vortex of color. An yellow maple leaf got stuck in Elliott’s hair and I plucked it out.

“Now my dear, we have wine and you have a pond — which according to Willy — is stocked with carp and catfish. What else do you desire.”

“Nothing.” I said reverently. “I have everything I could ever want right here.”

Later that night, Elliott and I were curled up in each other flushed and content with the afterglow of sex. I ran my fingers through his luxurious hair and he shivered in delight. As I was about to do another pass with my fingers, his hand caught mine and he brought my palm in for a kiss.

“If you continue doing that, I fear we will never get to sleep.” He said.

“Sleep is for the weak.” I grinned. “It’s still my birthday for another —” I rolled over to look at the alarm clock on the night stand — “for another twelve more minutes.”

“Well then I’ll owe you twelve minutes of birthday sex later.” He said. “I actually have something that I’ve been meaning to ask you.”

He sat up and pulled me up with him. The quilt had slipped from our shoulders revealing our nude chests.

Elliott’s eyes wandered over my breasts and he sighed. “Now that’s not fair.”

I crossed my arms knowing full well how it accentuated my modest bosom and pushed my breasts out even more.

“Hey. If you can’t say what you need to say to me while I’m naked then I think the conversation can wait until tomorrow.” I said.

Elliott sighed but soldiered on which told me it must’ve been important. “I hope you don’t feel like this is too fast or inappropriate but my parents are celebrating their fortieth wedding anniversary on the thirteenth of October and I’d like to bring you to the party as my date.”

“Oh.”

I snatched up my sleep shirt from the floor and slipped it on. It didn't make sense but I felt like I should look somewhat presentable when we were discussing his parents. I mean, they couldn't see us...but it was the principle of the matter more than anything.

“So you want me to meet your parents?” I clarified.

He nodded. “The anniversary party shouldn’t be a huge affair; some of my father’s colleagues will undoubtedly come, and my sister and her kids might be there, and maybe a couple long-time family friends. We’re hosting the party at our house.”

“I would be honored to come.” I said. “You’ve met my parents. Maybe it’s time that I met yours.”
Elliott squeezed my hands and smiled. “We’d be staying with them that entire weekend since they live five hours away by train in Alexandria.”

“Alexandria as in the state capitol?” I asked.

“Yes. My father is an Anthropology Professor at West Alexandria State. He wanted me to go there but I …” He paused, “I needed my space.”

I sensed there was something more to that story, but I let it go. I figured that Elliott would share the details when he was ready.

“So what does your mother do?” I asked. I was kicking myself for not asking more details about his family sooner but now my curiosity (and, to be honest, my anxiety) were piqued.

“Well, when I was younger, she was a stay-at-home Mom. She homeschooled me through the fifth grade and taught piano lessons on the side. Before I came along, my mother was a concert pianist, and once I started attending school, she opened her own event planning business. She’s been running that business out of our house for as long as I can remember.”

“What types of events does she plan?”

“All kinds: weddings, showers, reunions, graduations, and birthday parties. She is quite the artist in her own way. She is an adept florist and craftswoman. All of the halloween costumes I’ve ever worn look like they were made by a professional tailor. She’s a woman of all trades.”

“She sounds remarkable.” I commented, “And what about your sister? You told me that you and her were twenty years apart.”

Elliott nodded, “Yes, she’ll be forty-six in February. She’s the superintendent for the Alexandria Technical Magnet School in the city. Since my father is a professor and my mom homeschooled us both as small children, it was almost predetermined that a job in education would be her calling.”

“So what happened with you?” I asked with a wry smile. “Why didn’t you become a teacher or a professor. You’re certainly smart enough.”

Elliott dropped my hands and drew me into him again. He swept my lose hair back to expose the nape of my neck and kissed me underneath my jaw. “Thank you for the compliment, love. But you are dating the black sheep of the Michaels family.”

“I find that highly unlikely that you’re the black sheep.” I said in a breathy voice.

“Mmm.” He murmured and nibbled lightly at my skin. “I assure you that I am. My father never wanted me to become an author. He finds writing fiction a waste of time. Unless I’m writing for an established scholarly journal on academic studies, he says I should hone more practical talents rather than storytelling.”

“He and my mom would get along.” I mused. "How did he feel about you majoring in Philosophy?"

"Oh he hated it." The smirk in Elliott's voice held an echo of teenage rebellion. "But I made that decision for myself and for nobody else. I don't regret my choice of study. I only regret believing my father's lie that writing was a waste of time."

I rolled to face him, “Well I’m glad you came to your senses.”
“Me too.” He agreed. “But I’m sure my tenuous employment will be a conversation topic.”

“It can’t be that bad.” I reasoned. “You did get to hear all about my childhood exhibitionist tendencies courtesy of my mother. I’m proud of you Elliott. Nothing your father says could ever convince me otherwise.”

He nodded in thanks but he still looked uncertain. “I just don’t want you to get the wrong impression of them. They’re nice people, and I love them, but they can come off as snobs.”

“Well whatever my impression is of them, I can guarantee it won’t change my opinion of you.” I said.

“And what’s your current opinion of me?” He grinned.

I rolled on top of him and pulled off my sleep shirt. “My current opinion is that it’s after midnight and you owe me those twelve minutes of birthday sex.”

“Surely you wouldn’t want to wait and —” But I silenced him with a blistering kiss.
October 12th (Fall)

“We’re here love.” Elliott murmured and gently brushed back my hair.

I cracked an eye open and peered out the small train window. The rolling hills and expansive farmland that surrounded Pelican Town had given way to masses of steel, concrete, cars, and people. The capitol building sat on the horizon shining in its white marble splendor and flashing billboards for all sorts of things casted a garish, neon glow against the night sky.

The train slowed as it pulled into the Alexandria Station and then it puffed to a stop. Elliott slung his canvas traveling bag over his shoulder while I grabbed my purse and my small rolling suitcase and navigated through the tight corridors of the train and onto the train platform.

“This way.” He called to me.

I followed behind him as he led me through throngs of people, up a set of stairs, and then out to the main concourse where two dozen bored ticket clerks sat in plexiglass boxes. Almost every counter was busy and several had lines that were four or five people deep. Everyone was in a hurry and the place pulsed with a frantic energy tinged with manic desperation.

After we zigzagged our way through the throngs of people in the main concourse, we turned a corner and followed the directions on a large sign which read “Pick Up and Parking.”

I followed Elliott outside. He scanned the line of cars that sat idle in the pickup zone and then pointed to a navy blue SUV parked seven cars down.

“There’s my father.” Elliott said.

I followed Elliott down the sidewalk at a brisk walk. My heart thudded in anticipation and in anxiety as I approached the unknown. I didn’t know what to expect. Would his father approve of me? Was he a nice guy? He had to be decent for raising a son as kind and as wonderful as Elliott.

But then again, Elliott’s comment about being the black sheep in the family made me wonder.

As soon as we approached, the driver got out of his car and came around the front to meet us

“Hey son.” He said and gave Elliott a lethargic side hug.

Elliott cleared his throat and gestured to me, “Dad I’d like you to meet my girlfriend Morgan.”

Hearing him call me his girlfriend sent an exhilarating shiver down my spine. I stepped forward towards the man who was stout, about my height, and broad shouldered. He looked to be in his sixties and his tanned, sun-wrinkled face, told me that he spent a lot of time outside.

“Nice to meet you, sir.” I said and shook his hand.

Elliott’s father had intelligent, shrewd eyes that looked out from behind horn rimmed glasses. Bushy eyebrows which looked like twin silver caterpillars rose up in slight surprise when he saw me. When he took my hand, he gave it a slight squeeze before shaking it and nodded at me.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you.” He said. “I’m Dr. Carl Michaels. I’m sorry to say that my son has
“told me very little about you.”

I suddenly felt as though I was in the hot seat. It was like I was back in high school and the teacher had called on me to make it a point to show the class that I wasn’t paying attention. I didn’t know what to say in response so I blinked and stuttered out a quiet “Oh — well I — er — I’m kind of a quiet person myself.”

“Indeed.” He stated and then gestured to the SUV’s trunk. “Let’s get your luggage settled back here. I’d like to try and get on I-65 before the traffic gets too bad.”

Elliott took both of our bags and I slid into the back seat. The car was the fanciest thing I had ever sat in and I felt self conscious about my casual traveling clothes accidentally scuffing the leather seats. A map of the city sat in the seat pocket in front of me, but aside for that, there was nothing else in the car. No empty soda bottles stashed under the seat. No fast food wrappers stuffed in the cup holder or discarded on the floor. No dirt, no sand, and no stains, and the car’s interior smelled like it was fresh off the dealership lot. It was both refreshing and intimidating.

Elliott was about to open the other back door but his dad said something unintelligible and then Elliott came back around to sit in the front passenger seat. He gave me an apologetic look in the sideview mirror and slid into the seat in front of me. His father then got in the car and I smelled the faint spiciness of pipe tobacco which made me pine for my grandfather.

“So son, tell me about this book of yours. I’ve yet to see a review of it in the Alexandria Chronicle.”

As Elliott talked about his novel, we pulled away from the train station and wove through the twisting and turning exit ramps until we sped onto the turnpike. I half listened to their conversation but I detected an edge to Elliott’s voice that I had never heard before. With every question his father asked him, Elliott responded as though he was on the defense in an argument.

“And living in a shack is the lifestyle you want for yourself?” His father asked.

“It’s a cabin.” He said tersely. “And yes. I enjoy Pelican Town. Life there is simpler.”

His father glanced back at me in the rear view mirror and I felt caught in the crosshairs.

“So Morgan. Have you lived in Pelican Town your entire life?”

I cleared my throat, “I spent my summers there with my Grandfather before he passed away. I only recently moved back.”

“And what is it that you do there?”

“I’m a farmer.” I responded and then I realized how lame I sounded. “Well, I inherited the farm actually. I moved to Pelican Town in March and I’ve been trying to build up my Grandfather’s farm back to its former glory.”

“Where did you go to school?”

“West Zuzu High School.”

He scowled, “No I mean what is your Alma Mater?”

“Morgan started working right after high school. She didn’t go to college.”

“Hmph.” Carl grunted and then turned his eyes back to the road.

I bit my lip. This conversation wasn’t going where I thought it would go and I felt the silent judgement in that grunt so I added, “I didn’t really have an interest in college but I’ve always wanted to own my own business. I started working for the Joja Corporation as part of an internship program and then I was hired full-time to be part of their customer service division.”

Elliott’s father grunted again in acknowledgement that he heard me but his eyes never looked back in the rearview mirror again. The sapphire on the thick class ring that he wore glinted off the streetlights as we sped through the city.

I looked out the window feeling lost and a bit perturbed. So what if I didn’t go to college? Being college educated didn’t make you better than anyone else. My annoyance simmered as Elliott and his father jumped back into their conversation and left me to ponder my thoughts. Although we were leaving the city and closing in on suburbia, I didn’t feel less anxious or any less claustrophobic.

After fifteen minutes of driving, we turned off the interstate, passed through a large town full of strip malls, fast food restaurants, and picturesque parks and walking paths. A footpath crossed over the road on metal railroad tresses and nighttime joggers ran up and over the road with their headlamps bouncing with each step.

We passed a large lake where boats floated peacefully in the bay and then turned onto a two lane road which snaked through the foot of large blue-green hills. Despite the wilderness that surrounded us, the lawns surrounding the houses were perfectly manicured and fertilized to reveal a rich forest green. Flower boxes near windows and gardens by the living room windows were well tended with their blossoms still hanging on despite the October chill. I imagined that this area turned into a bouquet of aromas and color every Spring.

“We’re here.” Carl said as he turned left onto a crushed gravel road.

The driveway leading to Elliott’s parent’s house was nearly the length of a gridball field. Large aspens, elms, and maple trees hugged close to the road which blocked out the moon and the stars that were just peaking through the rapidly darkening sky.

I looked out the front windshield as we approached. Their house looked like it was ripped right out of a Better Home and Gardens magazine. The red brick split-level style house sported tan shutters and a charcoal high-slanted roof. One large window on the second floor revealed a well decorated dining area where a tall and slender woman with chin length grey hair was setting the table for dinner.

Two other cars sat in the driveway. One was a modest red sedan car and the other was a large grey suburban with bumpers sticker that said “I love my Honor Student” and “AHS Parent Pride.”

“When did Eva get in?” Elliott asked.

“Right around five. She had a meeting with one of the school board members which kept her a bit late.” Carl replied. “And I think she said something about Rebecca needing to clean up after the science fair today.”

We pulled into the two car garage and I jumped out of the car first. My palms felt clammy and my heart wouldn’t stop racing as I wondered how much worse the rest of these introductions would go.
Everything felt out of place here. I felt like I was intruding on something special. Like I was the alien on this new planet of suburban perfection.

I felt Elliott looking at me as I opened the trunk and grabbed our luggage. I didn’t make eye contact as I passed him his bag and then grabbed my suitcase.

“I got it, love.” He said softly and he took my suitcase from me. His eyes seemed to plead with me. He seemed to say “just give them a chance” and I let out a slow, even breath and grabbed my purse.

“Mom?” Elliott called into the house as he walked up the stairs in the garage and entered through the door.

Carl shut the car door and followed me into the house.

“Please take your shoes off.” He said to me. Then he called out to Elliott “Take your shoes off.”

I removed my flats, placed them on the pristine black carpeted mat near the door, and I made my way towards the living room.

The interior of the Michaels’ house was as immaculate as their front lawn. The entrance from the garage led to a long hallway which banked slightly to the left to reveal a spacious living room area complete with a large fireplace with an actual rock and concrete facade, a couple of faux leather recliners and a large sectional, a couple of bookshelves tucked away in the corner all immaculately organized, and several plush throw pillows perched on the couch at just the right angle to make the living room seem like the display model at a store.

There were four doors in the hallway, two on either side, but they all were closed. I followed Elliott around to the left and we went up some carpeted stairs to another sitting area, this one was smaller but no less immaculate and well put together, and a stern-looking woman was sitting on the couch typing on a laptop.

“Hey Eva.” Elliott remarked.

The woman looked up, set her laptop on a glass and wood coffee table, and rose to greet us.

“It’s good to see you Elliott.” She said and gave him a hug which, like Carl’s hug, lacked any warmth.

She looked over Elliott’s shoulder at me to which I figured I should just bite the bullet and get another awkward introduction out of the way.

I stepped forward and extended my hand. “Hi, I’m Morgan.”

She shook it in a business like fashion and appraised me with a fierce gaze that only a teacher could perfect.

“Morgan.” She repeated my name like she was repeating a foreign word. “So you’re the young woman my brother’s been seeing. How long has this been going on?” She addressed her question at Elliott.

“Be nice Eva. Dad already put Morgan through the ringer on the drive over here. Let’s save the interrogation until after dinner, okay? Where’s Stephan and Becka?”

“Stephan is studying for his upcoming SAT in the guest bedroom and Eva is taking a shower.” Eva straightened her shoulders. Her paisley blouse was tucked into her black pencil skirt. She was still
in her work clothes despite the fact that it was almost seven o’clock.

“I remember studying for my SAT.” I said in an attempt to commiserate and breach the gap forming between us. “That whole process was the most stressful thing that I did in high school.”

Eva smiled politely but her smile never reached her eyes. “Yes well Stephan is a Webber Scholar so he is use to meeting high expectations and working hard. He took the SAT in the Spring but he wasn’t happy with his score. He received a 1350 but he wants to get as close to a 1600 as he can. He needs the best score possible if he plans to attend Alexandra State next Fall.

“A 1350 is impressive.” I commented.

Truth be told, I only took the SAT test because it was a graduation requirement so my score of 910 meant very little to me. I never had an ambition to go into college. Mom just couldn’t afford it and I didn’t want to be saddled with debt to do so.

“Alright alright, enough talk about work.” They grey-haired woman scolded from the kitchen. “Eva could you run downstairs and bring up the wine?”

The kitchen and dining room were conjoined, but the kitchen was blocked off by one wall above the staircase. The design made the house look far larger than it already was but it also provided a semblance of privacy.

Elliott nodded towards the kitchen and took my hand. His own skin felt slightly clammy and I wondered if he was just as nervous as I was feeling.

We went up two more carpeted steps which led to a small landing and walked into the kitchen. There was an island in the center of the kitchen that was full of appetizers, cheese wheels with a small silver knife sticking out of a soft white cheese block, exotic fruits, and assorted nuts, crackers, and olives, and julienned vegetables.

“Hey Mom.”

The woman turned around at the sound of Elliott’s voice. Her shoulder-length grey hair was pulled back with blue hair clips which matched her eyes. Elliott’s mother was his exact physical copy. She was just as slender and lithe and her hair betrayed the barest hints of red hiding amid the swath of grey and white. Her thin face and slender neck reminded me of the cranes that would hang around the river.

“Hi I’m Morgan.” I announced and offered my hand politely.

“It’s lovely to meet you.” She smiled and took my hand gently, her skin was soft and delicate. This smile was warm, maternal, and genuine. “My name is Kathryn but please call me Kaye. I’ve only heard Kathryn from teachers and my own late mother.”

Then she went to Elliott and pulled him into a full hug.

“How are you doing Mom?” He murmured.

“She’s still raising Hell and taking names.” She smirked.

“I mean, how are you feeling?”

“I’m fine.”
Elliott half scowled and looked at his mother in disbelief, but Kaye just had the same enigmatic smile toying at her lips. “Honestly hon, I’m fine. Now go put your things into your room. I’ve made the bed up for you. I put Morgan in the upstairs guest room so Eva and the kids can have the downstairs as their own space.”

“I don’t mind if I share a room with Elliott.” I interjected. “That way you won’t have to do laundry for two beds.”

Kaye smiled warmly, “Oh no dear. It’s only proper that you have your own room.” Then she lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, “to keep up with appearances at least. Your father would have a fit otherwise.”

She winked at me and I looked sideways at Elliott who was both chagrined at the implication but also slightly proud.

“I’ll go get our bags.” Elliott murmured to me and he kissed me on the cheek.

Kaye beamed at the both of us and my pulse seemed to slow as I felt her silent approval wash over me.

“Do you need help with anything?” I offered.

The food simmering on the stove smelled amazing. In fact, the entire kitchen was warm and homey and welcoming.

“All I need to do is put the salmon on.” She said. “Would you mind helping me prepare it?”

“Not at all!” I said, relieved that I could help with a task that I was actually good at.

I unwrapped the white parchment paper and the plastic to reveal large slabs of beautiful pink salmon fillets with their skin still attached. I placed the fillets on a cutting board, patted them with a paper towel to remove any excess moisture, and went to wash my hands.

“Rub them with some olive oil, add some light salt and pepper, and we’ll put them in the skillet to cook.” Kaye said. She was roughly chopping vegetables to throw into a large green salad bowl.

I did exactly as she said and smiled as the outside of the fillets crackled when I put them in the large cast iron skillet.

“You must do a lot of cooking.” I commented. “I’ve never seen a kitchen so well-stocked as this.”

“I love cooking.” Kaye replied. “It’s kind of like art. Some people paint, some sing, some write, but I cook.”

She had an impish smile. “I use to teach piano lessons when Elliott was a boy but the arthritis in my hands makes it hard for me to play for that long without being in pain. Now I cook.”

“I’ve just started canning the produce I grow. I’ve made jams and I’ve pickled vegetables. Next season I want to plant some wheat and make my own homemade bread.”

“That sounds wonderful.” She replied. “I have a wonderful recipe for sourdough bread I can give you. I picked it up from a farmer’s market. It was some of the best bread I’ve ever had.”

“I’d like that.” I replied.
Once the salmon was done, Kaye brought over a platter and helped me transfer the cooked salmon without breaking the fillets apart. She sprinkled chopped parsley over the top of them and then cut up a lemon into wedges.

“Dinner is ready!” She called out and then she turned to me. “Morgan, feel free to choose where you and Elliott would like to sit.”

I turned off the flame on the gas stove, washed the oil and salmon off my hands, and walked around the island and into the adjacent dining room.

The table looked like it was set for a thanksgiving feast. The centerpiece was a mix of autumnal leaves, acorns, and pinecones in a brown wicker basket. Two long orange candles sat on either side of the centerpiece. Salt and pepper shakers in the shape of ceramic pumpkins sat next to a ramekin full of round butter balls. The table cloth over the heavy oak dining table was a deep burgundy red like the color of grandpa’s favorite tree on the farm and a lacy table runner crossed the length of it.

Elliott came up behind me. His touch was light on my shoulder and I glanced back into his brown eyes.

“How are you doing, love?” He whispered.

I took a deep breath unsure how I should answer him. “Your mother is lovely.”

“She’s a saint.” He agreed. “But what about you? I hope you didn’t take too much offense to my father. He…is like that sometimes.”

“You mean he’s a …” But the rude identifier I was about to whisper died on my lips when Carl, Eva, and two more people came up the stairs to dinner.

Elliott and I sat on the side of the table facing the living room. Out of respect, we left both head seats at the table empty which was apt as Carl sat on Elliott’s right while Kaye set her half full wine glass down on my left. Eva and a young girl of about fourteen with damp brown hair that I figured would dry to be a light brown or dirty blond color was sitting across from us. A young man, who was obviously Eva’s eldest son and the prodigal SAT genius, took a seat in-between Elliott and Carl.

Eva’s son had dashing dark hair and piercing blue eyes. He looked very unlike the rest of his family who both had brown hair and the Michael’s family shade of warm brown eyes. He caught me staring at him and a faint blush colored his cheeks.

“This is my nephew Stephen and my niece Becka.” Elliott said as he made introductions. “Guys, this is my girlfriend Morgan.”

Stephen smiled sheepishly at me and sipped tentatively from his water glass. The girl named Becka smiled as well but hers mirrored her mother’s lethargic smile of politeness.

“Well let’s not stand on ceremony here.” Kaye said, “Let’s eat!”

Dishes were passed around and we served ourselves. Salmon, wild rice, mixed salad, and assorted hors d’oeurves filled my plate. My appetite awakened as soon as I started eating and it took a lot of self control to not scarf down all of the delicious food like the backwoods yokel they probably thought I was.

I spread some soft cheese on a multigrain cracker and I listened to the two conversations that were happening at once. Eva, Becka, and Kaye were chatting about Becka’s upcoming volleyball
tournament and about the teams that would be there while Carl and Stephan were discussing the current news about the Gotoro Empire’s recent military campaigns against our deployed forces.

“All I’m saying is we shouldn’t even be involved in this conflict.” Stephan protested as he speared a potato. “Our Republic has better things to do than get involved in yet another military insurgence. We have issues to take care of here.”

For a young man of seventeen, Stephan held himself like he was a decade older. No wonder his mother acted like he was a genius. He certainly acted far older than his age. I then looked to Carl, whose mustache twitched in wry amusement and his eyes took on a sheen of intellectual pursuit.

“You are looking at this issue naively Stephen.” He said. “The Gotoro Empire has opposed the Republic since before you were born. There are men and women your mother’s age who have seen what can happen if the rebels are left unchecked. We could have another uprising if we don’t keep the Empire in their place. Don’t you agree Elliott?”

Elliott held up his hands judiciously, “I am staying out of this one Father. I don’t follow politics as closely as I did since I’ve moved to Pelican Town. I’m afraid my opinion would be woefully uninformed.”

Carl snorted once more. It was the same pretentious sound he gave me in the car. “I suppose living in a fantasy world is more palatable than facing the truth in our world. Opium of the masses and all that…”

Elliott scowled at that comment but I was starting to get annoyed.

“Wasn’t that quote about organized religion, not fiction writing?” I said before I could stop myself.

Carl’s head jerked slightly as though he was moving away from a gnat that got into the house. The entire table quieted and Elliott glanced sideways at me. I couldn’t read his expression and I was too far into this now to back out gracefully.

“I beg your pardon?” He said, his voice steely.

I took a sip of water as I composed my thoughts.

“That quote,” I said. “It’s by a guy named Karl Marx, right?”

“Yes.” The steel in his voice didn’t waver.

“Well the full quote says, ‘Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creatures, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of souls conditions. It is the opium of the people. I don’t think an outlet of creative expression like fiction writing or painting or even cooking for that matter —’ I glanced at Kaye who was suppressing a small smile — “falls under the umbrella of being a drug that brainwashes you.”

Carl’s eyes narrowed, “I see Elliott must be tutoring you with what he learned in his Community College Philosophy classes.”

I met the man’s gaze and tried to suppress the tremble of anger and frustration I felt at his holier-than-thou attitude. Now I knew why Elliott said he was the black sheep of the family. Elliott didn’t fit in this cookie cutter suburbia lifestyle, in fact, he actively rejected it.

Elliott’s hand found mine under the table and he squeezed my hand firmly as if to say, “back down” and I looked away.
The palatable tension that boiled up simmered again and the conversations resumed with more of a careful and stilted air.

When dinner was finished, Kaye cleared our plates and then she brought out fruit parfaits as a light desert. The assortment of raspberries and blackberries were still tart and fresh as though the had been picked off a bush this morning and the whip cream was decadent and airy and obviously homemade instead of from a tub. After our feast tonight, I knew that Kaye could give Gus a run for his money in terms of better cook.

After dessert, Stephan challenged Elliott to a game of chess. They were apparently tied 49 to 49 of total games won between them. Elliott glanced at me questioningly and I nodded at him. I’d be fine alone for a bit so long as I could keep my mouth shut.

I rose from my seat and went into the kitchen. Carl was checking his e-mail on his smart phone and then made an off-hand comment about going to his study to work. He nor I made eye contact.

Kaye was by the sink rinsing plates off and putting them into the dishwasher. A white cloth dishtowel was draped over her shoulder.

“Do you need any help Kaye?” I asked.

She turned to me. “My you are helpful Morgan.”

“Yeah. It was something my Mom taught me and my Grandpa often had to re-teach me.” I smiled wryly. “But my Mom always made me ask the host of a party or my friend’s parents if they needed help when I came over. Eventually she had to stop making me ask I guess.”

Kaye handed me the dishtowel. “I’d appreciate it if you’d help me dry the large pots and pans that can’t fit into the dishwasher.”

“Sure.” I said.

As I dried, I cleared my throat. “I—I’m sorry if I made dinner uncomfortable. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

Kaye looked at me and frowned. “Uncomfortable? Yoba, no! You have a quick mind my dear. I can see what drew Elliott to you. My husband, bless his heart, tends to forget that there is a difference in being intelligent and in being an insufferable know-it-all. He needs to be put in his place now and then. Eva won’t do it — she’s always been Daddy’s girl — and I know Elliott is trying to restrain himself since the last blowout. So I’m glad you spoke up.”

“What happened with Elliott?” I asked then I added, “If you don’t mind me asking that is.”

Kaye passed me a large saucepan which once held the wild rice and I set to work drying it.

“It’s not my place to tell so all I’ll say is this. When Elliot went off to a college that wasn’t Alexandra State to pursue a degree in something other than anthropology and archeology like his father did, Carl felt betrayed I guess. He made Elliot an ultimatum. He could attend a non-Elite college if he wanted to but his father wouldn’t pay for him to attend it; he’d have to pay for school on his own.”

I frowned. So that explained why Elliott had to work all of those service jobs. It wasn’t just to pay for things while he attended college, it was to pay for the entire bill. I suppose a small, jealous part of me assumed that Elliott’s family had footed the bill.
“Is it really that big of a deal which college he goes to?” I asked.

“It is to Carl.” Kaye replied. “Elliott will be the only Michaels in four generations who hasn’t attended Alexandra State or hasn’t graduated from college. Education is a mark of pride in this family. Eva is a school superintendent and Carl is an archeology professor so I think they both feel like Elliott is squandering his life away.”

“But he’s not.” I countered. “He’s a published author. It’s made some buzz in Zuzu City and I’m sure it will take off once more people read it. Have you read it?”

Kaye shook her head. “I haven’t had the pleasure. Until a week ago, I didn’t know that Elliott had written a novel. He’s always been a private person.”

“Well its good.” I said stiffly. I grabbed the last pan from the countertop and dried it as Kaye pulled the stopper from the sink and the sudsy water drained away.

“I’m happy Elliott has you.” Kaye said and she pulled me into a hug. As I was still holding onto the pan, the hug was a bit awkward but no less warm or enjoyable.

I shrugged, “I probably wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for him. He saved my life you know.”

“I didn’t.” She beamed. “Would you enthrall me with the tale?”

I heard Elliott’s triumphant laughter call out from the living room and Stephan’s defeated groan followed by his urgent voice, “I demand a rematch!”

I smiled at Kaye and suddenly this alien house from planet suburbia was starting to turn into a home in my mind — a beautiful, warm, but nonetheless slightly dysfunctional home.

Kaye passed me my half full wine glass and we both leaned against the granite countertops looking at the pristine and clean kitchen.

“So…it started a month after I first moved to Pelican Town. I was broke, low on food, and I was going to catch some fish for dinner…”

By the time midnight approached, sleep was pulling me into the ether and I forced myself up off the over-plush and comfortable couch. After I told Kaye the tale of Elliott’s daring rescue of me, we all lounged around in the living room sipping wine, making conversation, and watching the epic chess tournament that was unfolding. Eva got in on the action and she and Elliott were currently facing off in a tense stalemate.

“Face it little brother, you are not going to win.” She said.

At some point in the evening, she had changed out of her skirt and blouse and put on black yoga pants and a lithograph t-shirt like the one she gifted to Elliott. This one had an emblem of a couple dressed in elegant evening wear walking down a grand staircase holding martini glasses. I wasn’t familiar with the story but the shirt looked cool nonetheless.

All eyes were focused on them. Elliott made a move that I couldn’t see from where I was sitting and then Eva slapped her piece down with a furious motion only to be countered with another move from Elliott. Eva moved her bishop to take Elliott’s rook which put him in check. Elliott then moved his king to what he thought was a safe spot only to have Eva move her queen adjacent to the king.
“Check mate.” She said.

Elliot bowed his head in defeat. “Alright. Fine. Congratulations”

There was a slight bitterness in his tone but he still shook his sister’s hand.

“C’mon kiddos, it’s time for bed.” Eva said.

Becka kissed her grandmother on the cheek and politely waved goodbye at us before she descended the stairs. Stephan groaned but rose to his feet anyway and went downstairs with a sullen, “Goodnight.”

“I think that’s a good idea.” I said. “It is getting late.”

Elliott nodded. He put the wooden chessboard back underneath a wood and glass end table which held a potted vine that tumbled down towards the carpet. “I’ll show you to your room Morgan.”

I wished everyone goodnight as well and we all dispersed towards our own bedrooms as Kaye sat next to her husband reading. Carl said nothing as he was already snoring next to her. His glasses slipped down to the tip of his nose and a large leather book open and resting over his chest. That was the most amiable I had seen him all day.

We walked through the living room, up the two carpeted steps that led to the landing by the kitchen, and made our way down the dark hallway. Elliott’s hands guided me gently by the shoulders and in the dim light I faintly saw three doors; one was to my right, one straight ahead, and one to my left. Elliott took me into the one straight ahead of me.

The guest bedroom was the least decorated room in the house. A large queen bed was in the middle of the room with a ceiling fan overhead and an empty closet and tan dresser. The room was clean but spartan. My small suitcase sat at the foot of the bed awaiting me.

Elliott closed the door softly behind us. But before I could go for my luggage and change into my pajamas, his large warm hand grabbed my wrist and he pulled me into him.

We stood in the darkness and I felt his heartbeat through his clothes. “Elliott, what’s —“

He kissed me hungrily. All teeth and tongue and I shivered in pleasure. Suddenly I wasn’t all that tired anymore and I kissed him back.

We broke apart gasping for breath. “What was that about?” I asked.

“Since when do you quote philosophers at dinner?” He asked wryly. I couldn’t see his eyes in the darkness but his tone had a seductive tone. Oh Yoba.

I blushed and stuttered, “No — its just. Look, so I had this coworker at Joja who had his cubicle across from mine. He was annoying and insufferable and he was always late to work but he had that quote on a poster right outside his cubicle. I think he fancied himself a freedom fighter of sorts. I had to look at that poster every time I lifted my head for air and for three months the bushy bearded silhouette of Karl Marx and that damn quote stared back at me.”

Elliott smiled and I only knew that because his white teeth glinted slightly off the moon that peaked through the window.

He kissed me again, softer and more languidly, and he breathed, “You are unbelievably desirable to me.”
I snorted in a very incredulous and undignified way, “Because I can remember a quote?”

“Because you’re intelligent.” He rumbled against my neck as his kisses drifted away from my mouth. “Because you’re fierce.” He kissed my jaw. “Because you try to protect others besides yourself.” He nibbled at my neck and I shivered. “And because no one has ever gone toe-to-toe with my father and escaped unscathed except you.” He captured my lips with his again and I felt his clear interest pressing into me.

“Elliott, wait.” I chuckled and gently pushed against him.

His large hand cupped my cheek and his dark eyes sparkled off the moon. He whispered, “What’s wrong, love?”

“We’re at your parents’ house.” I whispered back. “They put us in two separate rooms for a reason, and I’m sure that reasoning was to not have sex in their house. I don’t want your dad mad at me for … I don’t know … disrespecting his rules or whatever.”

Elliott exhaled softly. His breath warmed my neck and tickled over my collarbone. He took one clearly deliberate step backwards and held my hands in his.

“Your right.” He murmured. “Dammit.”

I cocked my eyebrow at him. Elliott rarely cursed. When I asked him about it, he told me that there were one million other words in the English language to convey displeasure and resorting to crude swearing was lazy and uninspiring. I didn’t think now was an appropriate time to remind him of that maxim.

He stood up tall and kissed my knuckles like a proper gentleman. “Do you need anything before I turn in?”

“Where’s the bathroom?” I smirked. In all of the awkwardness and judgement, I forgot to ask earlier.

“It’s the second door on the left as you walk back towards the living room.” He replied. “My parents’ room is the first door on the left and my room is the only door on the right.”

“Can I see your room?” I asked.

“Maybe tomorrow.” He replied with obvious effort. “I’m not allowed to have girls in my room after eight. House rules and all that.”

“That was a test.” I said. “You passed. Your dad would be proud.”

Elliott made a disgusted sound in the back of his throat. “Yeah” He said flatly. “Goodnight. Sleep well, love.”

“You too.” I murmured.

Elliott opened the door and stepped into the dim hallway. Another rousing conversation started back up in the living room but I couldn’t tell what they were talking about, and frankly, I didn’t really care. He opened the door directly to my right, flicked on the light to his bedroom, and faced me with a pained expression as he shut the door.
I apologize about the delay (I feel like I'm saying that a lot lately, but it is no less sincere).

This chapter was a doozy because it is sooo full of drama and complicated family dynamics.

Nevertheless, I hope you enjoy!

October 13th (Fall) — Happy Anniversary (Rated M)

I tossed and turned throughout the night. The bed felt too big, too different, too alien. I had been away from the farm for a little more than 24 hours and I already missed it. I missed Golden’s feline haughtiness and manic energy. I missed hearing the crickets and the bullfrogs chirping outside my window as they sang one final song before winter set in. I missed how the dry autumn leaves blew across my small wooden porch and created tornados of color. I missed the chickens and their morning greetings at sunrise, but most of all, I missed feeling Elliott’s warm body pressed against me.

We hadn’t spent a night apart since my birthday celebration. He rarely stayed in his cabin anymore as it didn’t have heat. The blending of our two lives felt natural and we were living together in all but name. I planned to talk to Elliott about making the arrangement official as he still needed to be out of the cabin before November, but this impromptu trip got in the way.

The wooden ceiling fan above the bed whirled slowly casting the fine wisps of my sleep-curled hair across my face. I rolled onto my other side and checked the time. The black alarm clock on the night stand read 6:11am. I groaned inwardly. I usually woke around 7:00am as it gave me plenty of time to do the chores and eat breakfast before I tackled my ever growing to-do list. My body didn’t care that I was on a pseudo-vacation. Like it or not, I was up and ready to start my day. I groaned, threw off the covers, and crept out of the room.

I gingerly turned the knob on Elliott’s bedroom door and pushed it open just enough so I could slip through the doorway. His door opened silently and I shut it behind me with a soft click. My heart thudded in excitement and mischievous glee. It had been a few years since I snuck into another boy’s room while his parents were still asleep.

Elliott’s room was dark and the blinds were drawn, but I could make out the dark shape of his full size bed and I heard his even, heavy breathing. Although the room was bare of decorations like the guest bedroom, it still had a sense homeliness. The room smelled of clean linen and crisp autumn air, and the blinds fluttered ever-so-slightly as the refreshing and brisk autumn breeze swept into the room.

I went to Elliott’s bedside and gently stroked his cheek before kissing him lightly on the forehead. He didn’t stir but his breathing deepened a bit which made me smile. His hair hung loose around his shoulders looking sleep tousled but somehow free of knots or tangles. His bed was pushed against the wall and I couldn’t slip in on the other side, so I gently peeled back the covers on the
far side of the bed, climbed over him, and snuggled against his back. He breathed in sharply, now
awake, as he felt my weight over him.

“You’re breaking the house rules my dear.” He murmured sleepily. Despite the sleep in his voice, I
heard the twinge of heat and desire there.

“I’m doing no such thing.” I countered and pulled the blankets up around us both. “We both have
our clothes on.”

My arm slipped beneath his pillow while my other arm curled across his chest. I pressed against
his warm back and yawned, “Besides, I’ll be out of here in an hour or so. I just … needed this.”

I pressed my face against his wiry back. His pajamas were flannel and I nuzzled against the soft,
thick fabric inhaling his scent. Elliott took my hand into his and pushed back against me with a
sound that was more like a purr than a sigh.

“I’m at your mercy my dear.” He murmured.

“I like the sound of that.” I whispered against his shirt. I kissed up his spine and added little nips
when I met his skin. When I kissed below his ear, Elliott shuddered and a low growl rumbled in his
chest.

My hand snuck underneath his shirt and I gently traced a fingernail along his chest. I nibbled at his
earlobe and took it lightly in my mouth and sucked. Elliott’s breathing sped up and he pushed his
hips against mine.

He rolled over into me and pinned me against the wall. His eyes were no longer half-lidded from
sleep. They were now alert and hungry.

His kiss held the same heat and desire as the one we shared last night but now there was a
panicked urgency and a raw need that flowed between us. My fingers unbuttoned his pajama shirt
as I laved my tongue across his. His teeth nipped at my lower lip and my breath caught in my throat
when his hands cupped my breasts over the tank top that I slept in.

“We really shouldn’t do this.” He murmured against my lips. “You were right about it last night.
My father separated us for a reason. We can wait until tomorrow when — when … oh…” He
gasped when my thumbs brushed against his nipples and stroked down his abdomen.

“I was wrong.” I murmured against his ear. “I can’t wait anymore. I don’t like sleeping alone
anymore. I need you and I can’t wait.”

“What if we get caught, love?” He said.

I snorted and stifled a laugh by burring my face into his shoulder, “If we get caught then who
cares? We’re adults and I’m sure they’ll figure out what we’ve been up to when your bed begins to
squeak more than usual.”

Elliott looked scandalized actually blushed. The color spread from his cheeks down to his collar
bone and he sat up a bit.

“Oh come on.” I said, noticing his hesitation, “Are you telling me that you’ve never fooled around
under your parents’ noses?”

Elliott cleared his throat and swallowed before speaking, “Actually no…I — I usually kept my
dalliances out of my parents’ house.”
I hooked my leg over his hip and shivered delightfully as his arousal pressed against me. I rolled my hips against him and then slapped my hand over his mouth as he groaned a bit too loudly.

“Do you want this?” I asked sincerely. “If you say ‘no’ I’m just as content to sleep next to you, clothes on and everything.”

His eyes narrowed as he considered my proposition. The hesitation was clear but I also saw the need in his eyes. He needed me as much as I needed him.

My hand was still over his mouth so all Elliott could do was nod ‘yes.’

I replaced my hand with my lips and gave him a quick peck. “Then you need to be quiet. The trick to this is to keep most of our clothes on so we can feign ignorance if someone does walk in.”

Elliott’s pupils dilated slightly and his nostrils flared like an animal’s.

“You’re a temptress my dear.” He breathed and captured my lips with his and gave me a searing kiss.

“You’re just as tempting.” I murmured when the kiss broke.

We had no need for foreplay. Our mutual raw, unabashed pure arousal was enough to get us to the most important part. Elliott pulled himself out of the front seam in his boxers while I slipped my pajama pants past my knees, pulled my panties aside, and sheathed him inside of me.

I clapped my own hand to my mouth as I gripped him tightly with my core. He felt so hard within me that electric shocks danced across my skin and made my mind swoon.

Elliott sat up and held me in his arms. He pulled my pajama pants off me and hid them beneath the covers and then grabbed my calves and pulled my legs forward so I was sitting in his lap.

“Oh…” I breathed out as this new position came with all new sensations and then I kissed Elliott again. This kiss was long and passionate. The chill from the open window only added to the desire and the pleasure. The blankets pooled around our lap and my nipples rubbed against my thin tank top adding another aching sensation to the pot. I rocked my hips against him and Elliott peeled down my tank top straps from my shoulders and tugged the top down to sit beneath my breasts.

He nuzzled between them and then took one hardened nub into his mouth and sucked while his other hand tweaked and lightly pinched the other nipple. I bit my lip to stifle the squeak that rose to my throat.

“You’re so beautiful.” He murmured against my left breast before sucking a bit of my pale skin into his mouth giving me a light red hickey.

“So you’re marking me?” I grinned. “My dress for tonight has a v-cut neckline. What if someone sees?”

He looked up at me. The passion behind his gaze made me shudder in anticipation. “If anyone but you or I see these marks, they’ll have to deal with me.”

“Possessive much?” I smiled and kissed him.

“A little.” He admitted. I didn’t mind that.

“I love you.” I murmured reverently.
“I love you too.”

I rocked my hips against his. My movements were slow and fluid despite the burning need in my stomach. As much as I wanted it hard and fast and primal, I also found that I enjoyed slow and tender just as much.

We moved against each other, kissing and languishing in the new and also the familiar. I ran my fingers through Elliott’s hair and he jolted against me like I had stuck him with a cattle prod.

“Oh do that again.” He groaned.

I did and let my fingernails scrape lightly along his scalp as I combed through his long hair. I felt his enjoyment physically. I felt him swell slightly inside of me and I shuddered in anticipation. I was about to do it again but his hand caught my wrist and pinned my hands to my chest.

“No…” He panted. “I—I’m too close. I don’t want to finish yet.”

“It’s okay.” I murmured and kissed his forehead. “You can finish. I don’t mind.”

He shook his head. “I mind, love. Tell me what you need.”

“I don’t know.” I murmured. “This feels good but its not getting me there, you know?”

He nodded and was about to lift me up off his lap when a sharp knock came at the door.

I stifled a scream and my heart plummeted to my stomach. I reacted on instinct and didn’t think about what I was doing. I jumped off Elliott and dropped to the floor. I pressed my bare breasts to the carpet and army crawled beneath the bed. I heard rustling above me as Elliott rearranged his covers and tossed my pajama pants underneath the bed, and as soon as he did, the door opened.

“Son?” Carl said.

“What?!” He choked out hoarsely.

“Is Morgan in here with you?”

There was a pregnant pause that seemed to last years and then Elliott spoke, “No.”

“So you sleep with your shirt unbuttoned now?” Carl retorted.

“I was too warm in here. Hence the open window. I didn’t know it was a crime to sleep with an unbuttoned shirt.”

Carl sighed, “Elliott, do you know why I asked that your mother set two separate rooms up for you both?”

“Because premarital sex is a sin in the eyes of Yoba.” Elliott deadpanned.

“Don’t be pedantic. We’re agnostic.” Carl snapped. “I did it because there’s a sense of mutual respect and courtesy that is expected…required between a man and a woman. Relationships may start from sex but relationships stay together when they are allowed space to breathe, when they can develop an identity away from and separate from the other person. Your mother and I think that bringing Morgan to meet us is significant, and I like to think the best of my son and that he’d bring a girl over to his parents’ house for more than just sex.”

I winced inwardly and felt properly rebuked.
“I didn’t bring Morgan here for just sex.” Elliott punctuated every word with a little irritation.

Carl grunted, “That’s good to hear. Anyways…your Mom is making breakfast. We have an early start today. You and Morgan are going to help Eva and the kids set up the banquet room for the party tonight.

“Okay.” Elliott replied. “Would you please leave now?”

Carl sighed, “Just get dressed. And try and have some restraint. The last thing we need is another accidental pregnancy in this family.”

I heard the door shut firmly and I let out a slow breath. Dust bunnies kicked up like a cloud of grey smoke and I sputtered. When I crawled back out with my pants, I brushed the lint and and dust off my bare breasts, pulled up my tank top straps, and put on my pants.

Elliott looked about as unhappy as anyone could be after being interrupted in the middle of sex. I kissed him chastely.

“You can go ahead and say I told you so.” I said.

Elliott shook his head and then he shuddered. “I’ll gloat once the blood returns to my brain.”

After a moment of anger, Elliott’s lips twitched into a mischievous grin. I mirrored it and gestured to the closed door.

“You know that my birth control is effective now. Your dad’s fears are kind of ridiculous.”

He sighed, “It’s not really about that.”

“Then what’s it about?”

Elliott shook his head, “It’s a long story and I need to get you back into your room before my father comes back to lecture me again.

“Just hold on.” He said and grabbed the flannel robe that was hanging on the back of his door and pulled it on. He cinched the cloth rope and it did a suitable job at hiding that anything untoward had happened, namely, the damp spot on his boxers from our … well my … excitement.

He opened the door first, looked around the hallway, and then gestured at me that the coast was clear. I went no more than five steps behind him and slipped back to my room and shut the door. I pressed my back against the door and exhaled the breath I had been holding in a long, slow woosh.

Yoba, I really missed home.

After breakfast it was determined that Eva only needed Elliott’s height and Beckah’s apparent skill at calligraphic handwriting so Stephen and I were left behind at the house with Carl and Kaye.

I tried to see if Kaye needed help with anything but she kindly suggested that I occupy my time in the downstairs family room while she made phone calls to confirm RSVPs. I was about to see if Stephen wanted to teach me how to play chess but he was watching some crazy Sci-Fi movie off his smart phone with his earbuds in. So that left me feeling unbearably bored.

I eventually decided to go for a walk but thought it prudent to tell someone my whereabouts just in case. Big cities, you know? I heard Kaye’s friendly voice upstairs as she spoke to someone over the phone and I didn’t want to bother her, so I went to the one room that I absolutely didn’t want to
I knocked on Carl’s closed study door and waited.

“Come in.”

When I opened the door, the carpet ended at the threshold and handsome dark wood flooring extended out into the room. Two thick fringe rugs were thrown across the hardwood floors and two leather armchairs sat side-by-side with a sturdy wooden end table sitting between them. A long rectangle window let in natural light, but as we were in a half-basement, the light was partially blocked by accumulated leaves and grass.

The walls were covered in mahogany bookshelves and tomes, textbooks, a couple dictionaries, and many many non-fiction books about far off civilizations sat on the shelves. Artifacts, art, and collegiate degrees decorated the office either hanging from the walls, sitting in display easels on countertops or around the room, and one undyingly familiar piece was enclosed in a glass display case — it was a prismatic shard.

Carl was sitting in the center of the room at a white desktop computer typing away. A blurry black and white photograph of strange looking creatures caught my eye. There were over twenty little creatures in the photo but they all looked like they were apples with spider legs. Weird.

“What do you need Morgan?” He asked.

I startled and then looked away from the computer. Yoba, he was probably thinking that I was trying to snoop on his private project. I blushed and stammered out what I needed to say.

“I—um— I wanted to let you know that I’m going for a walk. I’m not familiar with the city but I saw a nice walking path while we were driving last night. I just wanted to let you know so you know where I am.”

He grunted in acknowledgement, “Thank you for telling me. I’ll let Elliott know if he gets back before you.”

The dismissal in his voice was clear and I was about to walk back out when I blurted out, “That’s the first prismatic shard I’ve seen. Where did you get it?”

Carl stopped typing and he turned around in his office chair. “You know about prismatic shards?”

“No not exactly.” I replied. “But there’s a librarian in Pelican Town who collects odd artifacts. I’ve given him some fossils and other weird things that I’ve found or that I’ve drug up from the river when fishing. All I know about it is that it’s a very rare mineral.”

Carl rose from his seat and walked over to the display case. “Yes it’s a mineral but many civilizations believe that it has cosmic or supernatural power. There are old texts depicting its use in ancient sacrificial rituals while other texts tell stories about how this shard was given to them by their chosen deity.”

“By Yoba?”

He shook his head, “Not everyone believes in Yoba or worships the Sign of the Vessel.”

I felt a little stupid. Of course there would be other religions out there. I was just use to living in a world where people either believed in Yoba or believed in nothing at all. Grandpa use to take me to church on Sundays for service but Mom rarely made me go. She fair-weather Yobites as we only
went to church once or twice a year and it was usually to observe holiday celebrations.

“Where did you get it from?”

Carl frowned as he tried to remember. “I did some excavating in the Calico Desert about a decade ago. We found it while we were exploring a nearby cave. The cave system was massive and it took us nearly two whole days to make any headway against the ferocious cave flies that kept attacking us. I wasn’t watching where I stepped and the ground gave way beneath me. I fell onto my back, hit my head against ground, and I blacked out. When I came to, my friends and associates were gone but a shaft of light from the hole I had made illuminated this for me.

My eyes looked back at the prismatic shard. The multicolored rock was the size of a small dinner plate and seemed to shimmer as though there were tiny diamonds embedded in it. An uneasy feeling sat in the pit of my stomach but I couldn’t put a finger on what caused it. Boy, I really needed fresh air.

I looked back at Carl and gave him a friendly smile. “Well I’ll let you get back to work. I should be back in an hour or so.”

He nodded and walked back to his desk without saying another word while I closed the door to his office, put on my shoes, and went on my walk.

Later that night, Eva’s SUV pulled into one of the last remaining spots in the parking garage of the Joja Embassy Hotel. I fiddled with the thin gold necklace that my mother had given me for my sixteenth birthday feeling more anxious than usual. Elliott’s warm hand brushed my arm and he gave me an encouraging smile.

“Alright let’s get going.” She announced. “Mom and Dad are arriving in a half an hour and I need to meet with the event planner to see if everything is ready.”

We all filtered out of the SUV in anxious silence, or at least I did, and we passed through two sets of automatic doors before entering into a hotel lobby. There were two large, white double doors propped open just before the front desk area. Right outside the door, a chalkboard sign read “Mr. and Mrs. Michaels Anniversary Party” in pretty calligraphy handwriting, clearly Beckah’s doing. Silk flowers in pale lavender, pink, and white on vibrant green vines adorned the sign like a halo.

Eva led us into the banquet hall and I stopped in my tracks. The banquet hall was actually a grand ballroom. The room was larger than my entire back pasture; the large floor-to-ceiling windows in the west side of the room let in the city lights while keeping the noise and smog out. I counted at least fifteen round tables set for eight people. Each table had a pure white table cloth and a centerpiece that kept with the same flour type and color scheme as what was decorating the sign in the hallway. A string quartet was setting up in the corner. One man played a few practice notes with sharp flourishes with his bow while the others set out heavy music books full of classical pieces. Lastly I noticed two tables in the opposite corner. One had a white sheet cake that was decorated with lavender and pink frosting flowers with small plates neatly stacked nearby while the other table had at least five dozen bottles of champaign ready to be uncorked and poured into champaign flutes.

“Wow.” I breathed.

Elliott held out his arm for me and smiled grimly. He looked more like a man who was going to his death rather than a son attending his parents’ anniversary party.
I took his arm and we walked through the throngs of guests and went towards a table with a #1 in the middle. Emily had loaned me one of her dresses when she heard that the party was a black tie affair. It was a deep navy blue tea length dress. The straps were thin but the bodice was lightly beaded and a thick black ribbon encircled my waist. Aside for being a bit tight in the shoulders, it fit well enough for a last minute option.

Elliott, on the other hand, looked like he had walked off a men’s magazine. His black suit hugged every angle of his body. His tie and pocket square matched my dress and his long hair was tied back at the nape of his neck by a clear hairband. He looked aristocratic and even more sophisticated than he usually did. It made me lament our ruined morning even more.

We took our seats at the table. Stephen and Beckah soon joined us as waiters filled our glasses with champaign. They must’ve known that Stephen and Beckah were underage because they filled their glasses with sparkling grape juice instead.

As soon as the other guests were settled, Eva walked up to the large dance floor and turned on a wireless microphone. She held a commanding presence in the room (courtesy of her job as Superintendent I’m sure) and it didn’t take long for the murmur and chatter to die down.

“Ladies and Gentlemen. Friends and family. My Dad and Mom are humbled by your presence here tonight as we celebrate their forty years of marriage. It takes a very special couple to last four decades through the trials and tribulations of life, but I know that they both had grown as individuals and as a married couple throughout these years. Many people assume that their parents love each other, but I was fortunate to know for sure. My Dad and Mom are not perfect people — none of us are —” She paused so the audience could give a polite laugh and then continued “— but I have no doubt in my mind or in my heart that they are perfect for each other. So without further adieu, may I present Mr. and Mrs. Carl and Kaye Michaels!”

The entire audience rose and clapped as Carl and Kaye walked arm in arm through the tables and to the microphone. Carl was dressed in a black suit much like Elliott’s but Kaye was wearing a long, grey evening dress with a matching cloth wrap around her shoulders. Eva kissed her father and mother on the cheek and then returned to our table.

We sat back down and Carl waited for everyone to get settled once again. He adjusted his thick, black rimmed glasses and pulled out a folded piece of paper.

“Thank you Eva for that lovely introduction.” He said and gestured fondly back towards our table. Carl cleared his throat then took his wife’s hand and kissed it which elicited a few appreciative whoops from the crowd.

“Hey everyone. I just want to say something quick and then we can get this party started. My colleagues and students can attest that my lectures tend to run on the soporific side.”

A few more people chuckled and I looked helplessly at Elliott who mouthed ‘boring’ and I nodded.

“Kaye and I want to thank everyone for being here to help us celebrate the first forty years of our marriage. When I met Kaye, way back in the olden days, I was lost and wandering through life. She helped show me I could do anything. From becoming a humble adjunct professor, to going out in the field with some of the most brilliant minds I know, and now to being a tenured professor at good ol’ ASU, well I couldn’t have done it without Kaye’s encouragement and guidance. She’s put up with so much with her grace, quick wit, and when warranted, her sharp tongue. So instead of praising me let’s raise a toast to Kaye.”

A waitstaff handed both of them a full champaign glass and we all stood up again. Now Carl
turned fully to his wife and held out his glass to her. “To Kaye. The love of my life, mother of my children, and mate of my soul.”

The entire room murmured “To Kaye” and we drank from our glasses as they shared a tender but chaste kiss on the dance floor.

Carl led Kaye off towards a table reserved for them and for two couples who were clapping and beaming. The string quartet began playing a classical piece I had only heard in elevators or while being put on hold by an operator but a few couples joined the dance floor nonetheless.

I leaned towards Elliott and whispered, “Hey your dad might be an overbearing ass sometimes but he can give a helluva speech.”

“That he can.” Elliott agreed. He bristled a little and frowned, but his melancholy was only momentary and then he looked at me. “Would you care to dance Morgan?”

“Of course.” I smiled.

Elliott took my hand and carefully led me through the throngs of people mingling in between their tables and towards the dance floor.

I faced him with a sheepish grin, “So … here’s a lame confession. I’ve never actually danced before.”

“Really?!?”

“Well… I mean, I’ve never danced formally. I’ve danced at clubs and I’ve slow danced at my Prom, but this seems far more…”

I looked around at the other couples who were all managing quite well. “…more sophisticated than I’m use to.”

Elliott took my hands in his. His eyes were warm and patient. “It’s just the waltz. It’s simple to pick up. Here…”

He put my left hand on his shoulder blade, put his right hand on my shoulder, and then he took my right hand in his left. Elliott’s posture was impeccable. His body elongated and he stood to his full height looking more swan-like than human. The poise and confidence he conveyed was both intimidating and captivating.

“Just follow my lead.” He said. “The waltz is a three-step dance. Ready?”

I nodded and we moved together on his count. “One-two-three. One-two-three. One-two-three.”

I looked down at our feet and moved with him, stepping backwards first then to the right, and then towards him. Our movements were jerky and awkward…well … my movements were awkward, and I tripped over our feet and fell into Elliott’s chest.

“Oof. Sorry.”

“Here. Close your eyes.” He said. “Trust me.”

The string quartet’s first song ended and their second song was a far more subdued and slow march.

“Can you feel the music?” He asked me. “Can you feel the beat?”
flushed in frustration, “Um…not really.”

“Listen.” He murmured. “Listen like you do when you’re outside enjoying the natural splendor of the forest. Listen for the pattern.” Then in a soft baritone he sang something which sounded like “bum-da-da…bum-da-da…” and then added while maintaining the same tune “one-two-three… one-two-three.”

“One-two-three.” I repeated softly and mostly to myself. “Okay.”

“Keep your eyes closed. We’ll go slow.”

We moved again and I let Elliott move me wherever he wanted. He’d gently push or pull us in time with the beat as we stepped around the dance floor deliberately. I didn’t feel all that graceful but at least I didn’t trip over my own feet or step on Elliott’s. Once I felt more confident, I opened my eyes and looked up.

“Volla. You’re dancing.” He beamed.

I chuckled and beamed back at him, “I guess I am.”

We danced for the rest of this song and then the next two. As we danced, I couldn’t take my eyes off Elliott.

“You look beautiful Morgan.” He murmured. “The dress brings out your lovely blue eyes.”

“Thank you. Emily loaned it to me. She’s the one with the eye for fashion. I’m not really a dress kind of person. I think the last dress I wore was to Prom.”

“Then I must buy her a drink when we get home to thank her.” Elliott kissed me lightly on the lips. The kiss was chaste and quick but I felt the undertone of our mutual desire.

Elliott pulled away first. His eyes glinted in the glow light. “I want you so badly right now.” He muttered.

A pleasurable shiver ran over my spine and my breath came out as panting, which I could always blame on the dancing. I wanted nothing more than to drag Elliott away from the party and into the nearest bathroom or stairwell and jump him, but I also knew that his parents’ friends and colleagues were probably watching us with eagle-eyed severity just waiting for us to do something inappropriate.

“I can always fake a headache and ask to go back to your parents’ place early.” I suggested.

“We aren’t pulling anything by my father.” Elliott said. “He knows that you were hiding in my room somewhere. He continued his lecture back at the house while you were getting ready.”

We had stopped dancing but we were still standing on the dance floor as couples swirled around us. I casted a dark glance at them. I was sure none of them had to deal with their boyfriend’s father being a major wet blanket when it came to maintaining a healthy sexual relationship with one’s boyfriend.

“How is your dad so…”

“… Anal retentive? Inflexible?…”

“I was going to say overly protective of you.” I said.
Elliott laughed. “He’s not overprotective of me. He’s overprotective of you.”

My mind fuzzed and I looked at him skeptically. I must not have heard him correctly. “Come again?”

Elliott frowned and guided me off the dance floor and towards the table with champaign. Once we were out of earshot he added, “I didn’t have time to explain this to you this morning but my father is afraid of history repeating itself for the third time.”

“What d’you mean?”

“My mother was 17 and my father was 18 when they got pregnant with Eva. She was an accident. My father had a full ride scholarship to ASU and an internship lined up to work in the Social Sciences and Humanities department over the winter and summer breaks. He was a young man with his whole life ahead of him and he was faced with a moral quandary. He could easily leave my mother and go off to college. ASU is a huge school and this was before social media made hiding secrets nigh impossible.”

I looked over at Carl and Kaye as they were chatting with the other two couples at the table. They looked carefree, fun-loving, and happy. Kaye nearly glowed from the vibrance and vitality in her smile while Carl displayed more emotion than I had seen since arriving.

“And so he stayed by your Mom.” I surmised.

“Not at first.” Elliott replied. “The night Mom told him about the pregnancy, he ran away. He packed his bags and spent three months in the East Sapphire Sea island hopping and researching native tribal cultures. When his professor heard that he had left his pregnant girlfriend in the lurch, he drove Dad back to Alexandria and half pushed him across the threshold of my grandmother’s house to beg for my mother’s forgiveness. The way Mom tells it, his professor also threatened to rescind his scholarship as part of the requirement was to attest to a student’s personal and moral character, and to make the matter drive home, he also threatened my father with castration.”

“Yoba. What kind of professor was he?” I asked.

“Biology. He and his partner are sitting on my parents’ right side. He’s wearing the yellow bowtie.”

Sure enough, yellow bowtie professor was grinning happily at Carl and saying something with the help of wild gestures. The whole table roared in laughter at whatever he said.

“So no love lost then?”

“No.” Elliott sighed. “He’s actually one of Dad’s closest friends and he routinely tells everyone that if it wasn’t for Dr. Rylie he’d be a completely different and far worse man.”

“I’m impressed that your mother took him back.”

“Like you said, she’s a saint.” Elliott replied. “But it’s because of Eva that my father is so successful. The fear of disappointing your wife and child, the fear of not providing for your family, and even the fear of not owning up to your past mistakes was a powerful motivator. I honestly think that Eva’s existence made Dad mature faster which then set him apart from his party-loving, undergraduate classmates. Eva gave Dad focus, drive, and a purpose.”

“You were an accident too though.” I said and then I winced at how indelicate that was.
Elliott smiled ruefully but he wasn’t offended. “My case was different. Eva’s entrance into the world was like a nuclear bomb in my parents’ lives. They survived and they grew stronger because of it. When I came along, Eva was finishing her freshman year in college. My birth was far less dramatic.”

“So how does this relate to me?”

Elliott sipped on his champagne and I did the same. The fruity notes and the carbonation tickled my tongue.

“Please don’t repeat this next bit to Eva. This is a wound that is still relatively raw with her.”

“I won’t.” I promised.

Elliott’s eyes took on a melancholic expression. “When I was nine, Eva became pregnant with Stephen. Her first husband was part of our family. Although Marty was technically my brother-in-law, I called him my uncle. He taught me how to ride a bike. We went ice fishing. He stepped in as my surrogate dad when my father was traveling with the Anthropology department on his first sabbatical to the Calico Desert.”

“Eva told Marty the news over dinner one night. I still remember what we were eating: Amaranth and Salmonberry salad. It was summer out. I don’t remember much of the fight other than that it was monumental and horrible. Marty grabbed some clothes and stormed out. He never came back. Eva took whatever he did leave and burned it in the back yard. She stayed outside watching the remains of her relationship smolder until Mom brought her back inside.”

The tone in Elliott’s voice was hollow and I slipped my arm under his and rubbed his back with soothing strokes. “My father was beyond irate. The news made him return from his sabbatical early. But I think he felt guilty. I think Marty leaving reminded him of his greatest shame. He could’ve been Marty. He could’ve been weak.”

“From then on, my father was determined to not allow this to happen again in the Michael’s family, so he turned his attention on me. He became more critical of me and my behavior, especially around women, because I think he was afraid I’d be like him one day or like Marty.”

“But you’re not.” I countered. “And this might sound disparaging to your mom and sister but we are far more careful in terms of protection. My birth control is effective now and we’ve used condoms.”

“I wish this was only about contraception.” Elliott smirked but the expression didn’t meet his eyes. I saw that haunted, hollow look once before when we were both huddled in my bathroom waiting out a summer storm. It was the night he told me about his greatest shame.

“Your father knows about Laura?” I murmured.

He nodded. “It turns out I am my father’s son in a way.”

“That’s not the same.” I countered and I turned fully to face Elliott. “You didn’t leave her in the lurch.”

“Maybe not.” He agreed. “But in my father’s eyes being the party to an affair is close enough. That’s why he’s been so critical about my move to Pelican Town. He knows I did it because of what happened with Laura. I ran away and I never got a chance to make it right…whatever ‘right’ even looks like in a relationship like that. My father is skeptical of us because he thinks it’s only a matter of time before I run out on you too.”
“This is insane!” I exclaimed and a couple people glanced at us with disapproving looks, so I pulled Elliott to a more secluded area of the ballroom and said in a quieter tone, "Sorry. I just feel like I've walked into a soap opera. Now I'm expecting that you'll tell me you have an evil twin or something.”

Elliott chuckled but it was polite and insincere and more for my benefit. I watched Carl and Kaye helping themselves to an assortment of hors d’oeuvres and two more glasses of champaign. Just from looking at them, you couldn’t tell that their marriage had began under rather dire circumstances. Whatever they had endured and overcame, it had brought them closer together.

I then looked at Eva and her kids. Stephen, with all of his unruly dark hair, danced awkwardly and clearly under duress with his sister who looked awkward but adorable in that pre-teen sort of way. Stephen spun Beckah around beneath his arm and caught her hand again before waltzing off into a more steady and graceful half-bouncing beat. Eva was beaming with maternal pride as she filmed the spectacle with her cell phone. To any observer, the three of them looked like your typical happy family.

However, Elliott looked guilty. Unforgivably guilty and ashamed.

“I love you Elliott.” I finally said. “You’re a good man no matter what your father might say or think.”

He sighed.

“— Ah. Don't even think of disagreeing with me.” I interjected. “Look. People make mistakes in relationships all the time, and sometimes, the best course of action is the one that hurts the most. I’m not excusing your father or Marty for what they did but I also understand it too.”

Elliott frowned, “What d’you mean?”

“I left my ex, remember? I literally did what Marty did and packed everything I could carry and the things that were important to me and left Brandon. I stayed with Mom for a month and then I moved to Pelican Town, but I knew I was doing Brandon a disservice. I justified my action, explained it away, just so I could feel like I wasn’t the bad guy in the situation. I don’t know why your father and Marty left but I’m sure the pregnancies were more of a symptom of the problem than the cause of it. The pregnancy gave them an easy excuse.”

“And what was your easy excuse?” Elliott asked.

I thought hard about his question. “My grandpa’s passing.” I said. “His will gave me the opportunity to burn any and all bridges in my past that I never wanted to cross again and I did so without thinking. I never considered how it would feel to receive the burns.”

Now we both sat in discomfort mulling over our mutual past demons.

“Thank you.” Elliott said.

“For what?”

He smiled. It was small but the stormy expression he held melted away to a tentative acceptance. “You are remarkable at putting things into a new perspective.”

I kissed his cheek and I patted his tie gently. “C’mon. Let’s go rejoin your family. If we’re gone any longer, your Dad might jump to conclusions.”
As we rejoined the party, a heavy lump sat in the pit of my stomach. It was one thing to ease Elliott’s fears but it was another to actually find truth in my own words. I realized that I needed to do something. It was something that scared the hell out of me but also made me ache as I confronted my own hidden shame.

As soon as I got home, I needed to meet with Brandon one last time. He needed closure too. I needed to apologize to him.

Damned if my mother wasn’t right.
Cool steam wafted up from Stella’s muzzle as I put hay into her feeder for her breakfast. She might not mind the drop in temperature but I was already missing the lazy heat of summer. I had a small radiator sitting in the corner of the barn but I hadn’t had time to install it (or rather, pay Marnie or Maru install it for me) so the barn wasn’t much warmer than the air outside.

I worked quickly if only to keep my blood pumping so I didn’t feel the cold quite as much. Still the inevitable approach of winter ignited something primal within me, something instinctual, which told me I needed to hoard and stockpile supplies to prepare for winter.

Once Stella was fed, I gave her a gentle pat and a kiss on her forehead. She was only giving milk every other day now and soon her milk supply would dry up. Marnie and I discussed my options and the price of an additional cow was comparable to other smaller farm animals so instead of paying for a stud fee or buying an additional cow, I ordered two goats (a male and a female) from Marnie and they’d be delivered in three weeks.

I let myself out of the paddock, grabbed my ax which was resting against a fence post, and made my way towards the huge wood pile near the cabin. The summer storms knocked down a few trees on the farm, but also, I think the town was worried that I’d not survive my first winter because Marnie, Mayor Lewis, and Sam (who was clearly recruited by his mother Jodi) all dropped off chords of wood. I appreciate their generosity, of course, but now I had an overabundance of logs and branches and only one me to split them all into more manageable pieces, and the pile was almost as tall as I was!

Elliott offered to help but as soon as we got back from his parents’ he received another letter from the publishing house informing him about doing another book tour to take advantage of the upcoming holiday season. He was due to leave sometime today and he’d be gone until the second weekend in November.

So beggars couldn’t be choosers. I needed lumber. I needed firewood. So, I just had to suck it up and bite the bullet. This was my farm now and if I needed to be outside chopping wood all day then that’s what had to happen.

I took my ax over to the tree stump that I was using to use as my makeshift chopping block, took a log round, heaved it on the stump, and got to work. Robin had taught me the finer points of chopping wood after the summer storm dropped a few trees, and I’m thankful that she did, otherwise this arduous task would’ve been nigh impossible.

As I worked, Golden watched me from the porch with her intent amber eyes. She was sitting ‘cat-loaf’ style with her paws hiding under her increasing bulkiness. Adulthood was filling her out, rounding out her features, and changing her from the lithe and gangly kitten I had known into a
sleek and dangerous predator. She was also approaching twenty pounds and most of that was pure muscle.

When I went to pick up another log, a grey blur darted out from beneath the woodpile and across the gravel driveway. Golden shot off the deck, caught the unfortunate creature, tossed it into the air once, and batted it onto the driveway with her white-tipped paw. The field mouse sat dazed on its back as my cat delivered the killing blow. Golden looked up at me with feral intensity as though she was challenging me to try and take away her meal, picked up the dead critter in her mouth, and bounded beneath the deck to eat in privacy.

Elliott came out of the cabin soon afterwards. He had a black duffle bag slung over his shoulders and was carrying dress clothes in a black garment bag. I set my ax against the chopping block, stepped around the split wood I had yet to pick up and stack, and went to him. His brown eyes crinkled in amusement and pride at my flushed and disheveled appearance.

“Do you have everything?” I asked.

He nodded, “I’m all set. I left the number for the hotel in the cabin just in case something happens and you need to get into contact with me and I’m not available to answer my cell phone. The taxi should be here in just a couple of minutes.”

I smiled and I tried to keep the wistfulness from my expression. Elliott’s book tours were important. They gave him a chance to socialize with people of all walks of life, they validated his work and gave him confidence in his craft, and they paid him well enough that he could’ve rented out the beachfront cabin for another year in addition to repaying Mayor Lewis for living there for most of this past year. But watching him leave, sometimes for weeks at a time, was hard.

“Hey.” He murmured softly and gently cupped my cheek. “I’ll be back in a couple weeks. The time will fly by.”

I sighed and captured his hand in my own and planted a kiss on his fingertips. “I know and I know this is important, but I can already feel myself missing you.”

Elliott kissed me. His warmth, his scent, enveloped me and his fingers tucked stray hair behind my ear which pressed the chilled sweat that was leaking from hairline into my skin.

I caught his hand and pulled away, “Sorry that I smell. I’m all sweaty.”

“Why are you sorry, dear? You’ve been working all morning. This is your natural musk, nothing more. You smell fine to me.” And as if to prove it he kissed me again with more heat than before. He tasted like tea and something slightly sweet and it made my heart race.

We heard the telltale crunch of tires on gravel as a taxi drove up the small driveway, made a tight Y-turn in the yard, and honked twice.

Elliott looked at the car with a forlorn expression and kissed my forehead. “I’ll let you know when I get to the hotel.”

I forced myself to step back and let him go. “Be safe. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

November 8th (Fall)
I glared at my cell phone as it sat on the windowsill above the kitchen sink. I had meant to text Brandon two weeks ago to extend an olive branch and to ask to talk with him but I put it off. Now I couldn’t put it off any longer. I just needed to do it otherwise the thought would nag at me until I went insane.

I snatched up the phone and took it into my bedroom. I carefully typed out a text.

Hey. Are you free to meet up sometime soon? Just so you know, I am NOT looking to get back together but I would like to talk some things out and apologize to you.

I chewed on my lip as I considered what else to add.

Could we meet at the Delta Diner again? Dinner is on me.

I re-read the message and then I hit SEND. My stomach tightened into a knot and I fell backward onto the bed and forced myself to take steady, calming breaths. My phone buzzed half a minute later and I opened it to read his response.

Fine. I’ll meet you there tonight at 6.

Tonight? I looked at the alarm clock on my nightstand. It read half past three which meant I only had time to take a quick shower so I could catch the 4:45 bus into the city.

As I got ready, I tried to rehearse what I was going to say but everything I came up with sounded lame. Yoba, how was I going to do this?

After my shower, I didn’t bother with makeup and I just threw my hair into a quick ponytail. This wasn’t a date, and after this, in fact I’d be happy if I never saw him again after this.

“I’ll be back.” I told Golden. Her eyes were half-lidded as she barely awoke from her afternoon nap to pay attention to what I was doing.

I pulled on my jacket, grabbed my purse from the coat rack, and stepped out into the cold autumn evening.

The ride to the diner was uneventful, but by the time the bus pulled off the Interstate and up to the gas station, rest stop, and diner, I had made myself queasy from the anxiety. Thankfully the Delta Diner was far less busy tonight. There were a handful of cars parked near the front, but the rest of the parking lot was deserted. So if this meeting were to blow up like last time, at least I’d only embarrass myself in front of a few patrons rather than a restaurant full of them. Thank Yoba for small favors, I guess.

I climbed up the steps and opened the shiny chrome door. The aroma of grease, salty fries, and burgers made my stomach take notice and the queasiness went from being anxiety-induced to hunger-induced.

“Welcome to the Delta Diner.” A stout, grey-haired woman said. “How many are you expecting?”

“Just two. Please.” I choked out.

The hostess pulled two menus from the holder and brought me to a booth that was tucked away in the back left corner.

“Your waitress will be right with you. Our special tonight is homemade lasagna with garlic bread.” The matronly woman said.
“Um. Thanks.”

She pursed her lips and nodded at me politely. “Whenever your … the second half of your party gets here, I’ll send them on back to you.”

I could sense that she was about to say ‘date’ but stopped herself in time.

“Thanks. His name is Brandon. He’s meeting me at 6.”

“Well you’re a mite early there hon, but I’ll send him back when he gets here.” She replied and then walked away.

I checked my phone and it read 5:30pm. My stomach clenched again, clearly confused as to whether it should be upset due to being hungry or due to being stressed, but thankfully the waitress was attentive … and unfortunately the same one who attended to us back in July.

Her ruby red lips frowned slightly when she saw me but she masked it with a polite smile, “Hello. Welcome to the Delta Diner. Can I get you started with a drink?”

“Water is fine with me.” I said. “But can I put in an order of onion rings? I’m meeting someone but I’m a bit early.”

She nodded and took note of my order while I settled back to wait.

Time passed with agonizing slowness. My knee jiggled under the table. I spun my phone around on the polished countertop several times before an overzealous spin sent it skittering off the table and onto the black and white linoleum floor. The phone wasn’t damaged as I was still in the ‘indestructible brick’ type of phone generation, but I set it off to the side and watched the doorway like a hawk.

The waitress came back promptly and set down a red basket full of golden brown onion rings and a glass of ice water.

“Will your date want an order of spicy pepper poppers like last time?” She asked.

“He’s not my date.” I said a bit sharper than I meant. “But you might as well bring a Joja Cola just to be safe.”

The waitress gave me a worried glance but nodded and went back into the kitchen. I groaned and put my head in my hands wondering if this had all been one huge mistake.

The bell over the door chimed and my eyes shot up. Brandon came in, said something to the host, and then looked back at me. I forced a small, neutral smile to my lips but it probably came off as a grimace.

Brandon came down the aisle towards me. His right hand was tucked behind his back and I realized that it was because he was holding someone’s hand, namely a girl’s hand. A blond girl’s hand who looked like she was barely old enough to drive a car.

Panic, confusion, disgust, and annoyance flashed across my face in a tempest of emotion and Brandon slid into the booth followed by his underage date.

The girl’s round face was lightly freckled, but she was wearing makeup that had been expertly applied to give her a sultry, sexy look of a girl pretending to be much older. A silver stud glinted in the side of her nose and her kohl-lined eyes appraised my casual outfit with judgmental intensity.
Brandon helped himself to an onion ring and leaned against the booth in a relaxed and half-reclining posture which conveyed three parts douchiness and one part self-satisfaction.

I cleared my throat, “Hi. I’m Morgan” and I offered the teenager my hand.

The blond looked at my hand and rolled her eyes. “I know who you are. Can you just say what you have to say so we can go.”

“Charming.” I said flatly and I forced all of my pent up anxiety and burgeoning anger into a glare directed at Brandon.

He smiled, “Morgan this is my girlfriend Kelsey. Kelsey this is my ex-girlfriend Morgan.”

It took all of the self control in me to not flip the damned table over and storm out of the restaurant. He had the nerve to bring his girlfriend to this?

Kelsey must’ve noticed my fury because she looked accusingly at Brandon. “She doesn’t know about me? We’ve been dating for five months!”

I did the mental math in my head. If that was true, then when Brandon’s plea and pathetic assumption that we were getting back together when we last met here happened a month into their so-called relationship. Wonderful.

I sighed and tried to compose myself and project an air of maturity and rationality, “Look. I’m not here to start drama. I have one thing I want to say to you Brandon. After that, you’re free to go. I —”

“— I don’t accept your apology.” Brandon interrupted and he helped himself to another onion ring. Kelsey followed suit and dipped it into a small ramekin full of ranch dressing.

My temper flared. “Then why the Hell did you come? Why did you agree to meet with me? Just to rub my face in the fact that you’re dating a high schooler?” Then I rounded on Kelsey, “You know he’s 26, right? Are you even old enough to drive?”

She flushed, “My age is none of your damn business. And I’m here as moral support. You broke my Brandon’s heart. It was lucky I was there to pick up the pieces when you left him.”

Her hand, nails painted a pale pink, patted Brandon’s arm consolingly just as the waitress came by and placed a Joja cola down on the table.

“I see we have a third guest.” The waitress said as she observed the scene with a wary look. “Um can I get you something to drink?”

“Yeah. I’ll have a chocolate milkshake to-go. Put it on Morgan’s tab. She was gracious enough to treat my boyfriend and me to dinner.” Her stupid youthful kid face flashed a thousand watt smile and I wondered how many times I’d have to bite my tongue before I started to taste blood.

“What can I get for you?” The waitress directed at Brandon.

“The same. A chocolate milkshake sounds wonderful.” He said. “Thank you Morgan.”

“You’re welcome.” I growled.

“And are you still fine with the onion rings?” The waitress asked me.

“Yep. I’m all fine.” I smiled while feeling dead inside. “I’m great.”
“Wonderful.” The waitress said just as cheerlessly. “I’ll get those orders right in for you both.”

Once the waitress left, I looked at Brandon and forced words to come out of my mouth before I spontaneously combusted in anger.

“Look Brandon. I invited you here to clear the air about what happened between us and to apologize for how I broke things off. I was hoping that we’d have a serious and hard talk but get through it like mature adults, but obviously I was wrong. You haven’t learned anything. You are just as uncaring and oblivious as ever.”

“Uh excuse you, but you’re one to talk.” Kelsey butted in. “All you did was criticize him day in and day out acting like you’re Ms. High and Mighty because you work at some dumb office job. My Brandon was struggling with his mental health and you didn’t even care. So it sounds like Brandon dodged a bullet with you.”

“Uh excuse you.” I mimicked her tone and added a more snotty inflection, “But you weren’t even invited here so mind your own fucking business.”

Kelsey huffed and rolled her eyes. “Whatever. We don’t have to listen to this. C’mon babe. We’ll get our shakes at the counter.”

She pulled at Brandon but he didn’t move. Instead he watched me with a superior expression.

“Go on Kelsey. I have one final thing to say and then we’ll leave.”

She pouted, “But I don’t want you to be alone.”

“Go on.” He said with more emphasis. “I’ll be fine.”

She sighed, flipped her straight blonde hair over her shoulder, and stalked away.

“So does her dad know that a twenty-six year old is dating his high schooler?” I snipped. “She’s nineteen. Relax.” He said.

“Oh good.” I drawled sarcastically. “And here I was concerned you’d get thrown in jail for statutory rape or something.”

He scowled at me and scooted closer to the table.

He whispered harshly. “Dammit Morgan, you’ve torn my heart out time and time again and then act like you’re completely in the right. What we had was toxic. I’m starting to see that now.”

“Yes!” I exclaimed. “I’m glad you agree and that’s why I broke up with you. I couldn’t handle it anymore.”

“What’s this ‘it’ Morgan? What was ‘it’ that you couldn’t handle? Because up until the day you left, I had no idea that you were unhappy!”

“How could you not notice Brandon!” I yelled. An elderly couple two booths away gave us reproachful looks and I sighed, “Yoba, we were living paycheck to paycheck. I was working ten and twelve hour shifts damn near every day just so we wouldn’t get evicted. The jobs that you did manage you get never lasted very long and I was just tired of living in filth and in misery. I felt like I was carrying us both through life and … eventually the load became too heavy for me to bare.”
“Then why didn’t you tell me that?” He urged.

“I — I didn’t think I could.” I whispered pathetically. “I didn’t know how to. And so I did the only thing I knew and I ran.”

I thought Brandon would have sympathy. I thought that he’d understand and take his share of the blame, but his face darkened.

“Yeah and you ran into the arms of a Fabio-look alike.” Brandon spat. “I loved you Morgan. I didn’t tell you that enough. And I didn’t pull my own weight all the time, but I loved you and you broke my fucking heart when you left. You have no idea what you did to me. I was evicted from the apartment and thrown out into the street! I slept in a homeless shelter for three days because you couldn’t give me the common fucking courtesy of telling me what the fuck was going on! You just left! And I felt like shit because of it. I — I still feel like shit.”

I opened my mouth and closed it again. Brandon’s eyes blazed and he hastily brushed the back of his hand across his face to catch the tears before they fell.

“I’m sorry.” I whispered.

“Well fuck your apology. I don’t accept it.” He snarled.

Kelsey’s head peeked out from where she was sitting at the counter. I averted my eyes just in case she sensed a challenge and wanted to come back to give her boyfriend some help.

“You’re right.” I said in a shaky breath. “I was a coward. I should’ve talked to you more. I should’ve told you that I was at that boiling point before I actually boiled over. I’m sorry for leaving how I did. I — I didn’t know about the homeless shelter. I … I don’t need you to accept my apology, but I just wanted to tell you that I’m sorry.”

Brandon’s jaw clenched and he brushed his hand through his gelled dirty-blond hair. “Don’t contact me again Morgan. Let’s just be done with all this, okay?”

“Okay.” I murmured.

Then Brandon dug into his pocket and pulled a handful of gold out and slammed it onto the table. “This is for the food.”

He slid out from the booth and I watched him leave. Kelsey was waiting with two large styrofoam cups. He accepted one, took a sip of the milkshake, and kissed her on the forehead. As they left, I felt the rolling, knotting feeling in my stomach switch to horrid emptiness and self-pity.

The waitress came by with an apologetic smile and put the bill on the table.

“Did you want a box?” She gestured at the onion rings.

I shook my head. I felt guilty about the wasted food but my appetite had vanished. I plopped down another 100 gold as a generous tip on top of the pile that Brandon had left and I excused myself from the booth.

As soon as I left the diner, I saw that the bus back to Pelican Town was approaching the stop. The buses ran on 45 minute intervals and I checked my cell phone — 6:15; Yoba, that disaster took all of fifteen minutes to unfold.

I got in line behind several other commuters as the bus arrived, and while I waited, I forced the
memory of that encounter into the dark recesses of my mind. I had to think of something else. I couldn’t dwell on what had happened right now. I couldn’t …

Fat tears slid down my cheeks betraying my feeble attempt at compartmentalizing my feelings. I didn’t make eye contact with the bus driver or the other patrons as I climbed the steep steps into the bus. In fact, I chose the first empty seat I saw and threw myself into it with a petulant plop.

I rested my head against the bus window feeling miserable. I wallowed in the pain. I sifted through the past ten years, from 16 to 26, and catalogued each and every minor sin I had ever committed. Brandon and I had our first fight a month into our relationship. I didn’t remember what it was that we fought about but I gave him the cold shoulder for a week until he apologized. Yoba, I should’ve just talked it out with him. Then there was the time that Brandon crashed his car while partying with some friends. Thank Yoba that he was okay but the subsequent frustration and anger I felt over his irresponsibility and the financial hit I took because I paid for the car insurance ignited our next big fight. The next day, I avoided him and slept in my cubicle hoping that my sudden absence would scare him into caring more. It didn’t. But then again, I never told him how much he had hurt me. I just pretended like everything was okay. Why do I do that?

The pre-winter countryside flew past us as dusk settled outside. Autumn use to be a time of excitement, of high school gridball games, apple picking, pumpkin carving, and campfire parties, but now it was a time of relentless work, anxiety, and insecurity. Hell, I was insecure. I suppose I have always been insecure, but tonight’s meeting reminded me just how insecure I am. I have a hard time asking for help, and I have an even harder time standing up for myself. I’ll go to bat for anyone but when it comes to my needs, my feelings, I’d rather let that fall to the wayside out of fear that I was an inconvenience.

“You okay hon?” A deep alto voice asked in the seat behind me.

I flushed red, wiped at my face, and breathed out, “Yep. I’m okay.”

A thick hand with fingers decorated with several large pieces of costume jewelry extended a travel-sized tissue pack to me.

“Remember that this too will pass.” She said.

I took the pack, pulled a tissue from it, and blew my nose. More tears spilled down my cheeks. I was a mess.

“T-thank you.” I coughed, pocketed the soiled tissue, and I handed the rest back to her.

The woman sat back in her seat and didn’t say anything else but I felt her presence, warm and maternal, pulse out as an invisible wave of support and love and I calmed down a little.

Then my cell phone rang. Night had fully descended and the blue LED screen lit up like an obnoxious beacon. The caller ID said that it was Elliott. I took one more calming breath, and forced a warm smile to my face, and answered it.

“Hello?”

“Hello dear. How are you?” His voice was warm and familiar. It made me miss him even more.

“I’m okay. I’m kinda tired. I think I cut enough wood now to fuel all of Pelican Town.”

“You sound like you’re getting sick again.” He gently rebuked.

“Yeah.” I agreed. “I guess I am feeling under the weather. Don’t worry, I’m gonna go to bed early
tonight.”

The bus pulled into the stop before Pelican Town and the hydraulics woodshed and then hissed as the behemoth crawled to a stop and opened the doors.

“What was that noise? Are you on a bus right now?” Elliott asked.

“Yeah. I — uh — “ Oh Yoba, my feeble resolve wavered and my throat burned a little as the sorrow crept back in. “I went to talk with Brandon today to, you know, apologize and try to resolve our differences and …”

My voice faltered. I exhaled and blinked away more tears, “…and I’d rather change the subject, okay?”

“Are you okay? What happened?” The concern in his voice was palpable. Yoba, he was too good to me.

“Please Elliott. Not now, okay? I promise that I’m fine but I’m on a bus and I can’t — don’t have — I just can’t right now.”

His own frustration and helplessness came out as an exasperated sigh, “I should be there.”

“There’s nothing you can do.” I said. “I just have a lot of stuff going on in my head right now. I’m just overtired and I need to sleep. Don’t worry, okay? So where are you off to next?”

I could tell in his voice that he didn’t want to change the subject but he still answered me anyway. “I’m going out west towards Iridium Bay. There’s a few tourist towns there with small, independent book stores that cater to a more niche clientele than the big box chain bookstores. Then I’m heading back towards Zuzu City before I come home.”

“So you have a week left then?”

“Yes. And I told the publishing house that this is the last book tour I’m doing for the rest of the year. I need some time off from all of the traveling and I want to work some more on my next novel, and you need me.”

“I’m fine.” I insisted.

“Morgan, stop.” He said forcefully. And I caught the next excuse that was about to spill out of my mouth and listened. “You can’t keep doing things alone. You’re independent spirit is one of the many things that I admire about you, but you need help on the farm. Accepting help isn’t a weakness, it’s a strength.”

I sighed, “Okay.”

“Okay.” He agreed.

“So was the publishing house receptive to your decision to call it quits on future book tours?” I asked.

“Well…” I heard the wry smile in his voice, “they were receptive to the idea that I’m working on a second novel, but book tours generate publicity and sales for their investment. Granted, their offer was modest since I’m a relatively unknown author, but I think they have faith that I’m profitable long term. They’ve sold approximately 25,000 books so far which is pretty good for a first novel. I’ll have to go back to meet with my editor in Zuzu City after the New Year, so we are coming to
the natural end of things here anyway.”

I chuckled. I understood very little about the publishing business but the way Elliott talked about his work made him sound so professional that I didn’t bother questioning him or prying further.

“So what’s your book selling for now?”

“They retail for 750 gold, although the cut I get of that check is relatively small.”

The sign for the Pelican Town exit flashed past me and the bus began slowing down.

“Well now I know how much more I owe you for my copy.” I said.

“Absolutely not.” Elliott said firmly. “You don’t owe me a single gold piece. You took a chance on me before anyone else ever did. In fact, I’ll be very insulted if you try and give me anymore money for it.”

“Fine.” I relented.

I rose from my seat and walked down the aisle as the bus pulled into the stop. “I’m proud of you.”

There was a beat of silence and his voice became a little husky, “Thank you, love.”

The bus hissed and I descended the steps. My cheeks stung a little as the salty wind from the ocean blew across my face, so I pulled up my sweatshirt hood from beneath my jacket and hustled back home.

“I just got off the bus.” I told Elliott. “I’m gonna let you go and check on the animals before turning in.”

“Okay.” He replied and then he added, “Morgan I care about you. You know that right?”

I slowed my pace, “Yes. Of course. Why?”

He sighed, “Because sometimes I think you take too much onto yourself. Not just with your work but with other people. No matter what you think you’ve done, you are not responsible for Brandon’s problems.”

“How did you —“

“— We’re a lot a like.” He interjected. “I have spent far too much time hanging onto blame, guilt and shame for things I’ve done in the past, and I had to make a conscious decision to stop casting myself as the villain of my own story. But someone once told me that I should look at myself as a person in search of redemption rather than a villain. Tonight might’ve not gone how you expected but what’s done is done. Morgan you can’t focus on the future, on all of the good you’ll do and accomplish, if you’re stuck in the past?”

“Dammit. You’re making me cry again.”

“I’m sorry.” He said. “But it's still true.”

“I know.” I sniffled. “I love you.”

He sighed wistfully, “I wouldn’t trade your love for 100 iridium bars.”

“What about 1,000?” I teased.
“Well…now wait one second.”

I gasped in mock outrage as I walked back home bartering with Elliott about how many iridium bars it would take to trade me in.

The amount we finally settled on was far more than anyone had in the entire world. And I could deal with that.
Chapter Notes

Shane’s seven heart event is in this scene. This chapter takes a rather dark and realistic turn (not that the game doesn’t handle Shane’s suicidal ideations seriously). Keep in mind that this chapter is narrated by Morgan who hasn’t dealt with mental illness — personally or in her life. I didn’t anticipate for this chapter to get so … real … but here we are. I hope you enjoy. Only two chapters left in this fic!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 24 — The Price of Heroism (Rated T)

December 11th (Winter)

Steam wafted up from my tea carrying the faint aroma of honey and lemon up to my nose. Golden watched me with half-lidded, lazy eyes as I sorted through the several dozen check stubs that I received from Mayor Lewis and Pierre as payment for my sold produce.

I marked each stub down in a thick leather-bound ledger that use to be my Grandfather’s. The book had two columns, one for income and one for expenses, and it was gratifying to see that as the season progressed my income gradually overtook my expenses. Even though I had a rough start, I had made enough money to survive on through this winter and invest into spring crops once the frost melted.

I chewed on the pen tip and considered the things that I wanted to accomplish next year. I had most of my goals marked on the ledger’s inside cover. I’m a goal-oriented person and even if I don’t accomplish them right away, simply writing them down in a place I’ll always see them reminds me to never settle for complacency.

The main goal which I had set in the back of my mind since I stepped off the bus was to revive Grandpa’s orchard in the southeast pasture. Grandpa use to have a sizable orchard of twenty apple trees, and when my birthday fell on a weekend, I’d come up and visit him and help him harvest the apples.

Yoba, I can still remember how they tasted. The kind Grandpa grew were tart but sweet with a firm skin that made a satisfying crunching sound when you bit into it.

Unfortunately, apple saplings were prohibitively expensive even if I went through Joja Mart rather than Pierre’s (which I would never do), and growing apple trees from the seeds in flower pots could take up to three years for the sapling to be ready to transfer into the soil. Next to “re-start Grandpa’s orchard” I wrote “long-term goal” in parenthesis and then I moved on.

My other large goal involved the cabin. Now that Elliott was living with me, we needed a little more space. We managed to squeeze in a bookshelf next to the gently used loveseat I purchased from Caroline to replace the futon, and we put another bookshelf next to his writing desk in the bedroom. Unfortunately the upright piano was impossible to move, let alone fit into a one bedroom cabin, so it remained in the beachfront cabin with Willy’s rowboats.
I knew Elliott wasn’t going to say anything about the temporarily cramped living conditions but I’m sure it weighed on him. To be honest, it was an adjustment for me as well. I was an only child, and Elliott was used to living like he was an only child, so we’ve had to navigate the awkwardness of cohabitation in the middle of the snowiest December on record.

Two snowstorms dumped over sixteen inches of snow across the entire valley and we were scheduled to get another blizzard tonight. The weather made trips to town difficult which meant that Elliott spent most of the day holed up in the bedroom working on his next novel while I kept to the kitchen or the living room keeping the fireplace going and canning what was left of my autumn produce.

The publishing run for *Across the Blue Mountains* turned out well, at least according to Elliott, but I get the sense that he wasn’t satisfied. Like me, he didn’t want to get stuck in complacency either.

I sighed and I closed the ledger. Golden’s head perked up and she launched herself off her perch atop of the bookshelf and ran into the kitchen to wait by her empty food bowl. I yawned and peered at the clock on the mantle. It was only eight-thirty but I was feeling the mental fatigue of number crunching.

“Alright.” I mumbled to the cat. “I’ll feed you. But don’t you just scarf it down and then lie to Elliott so he’ll feed you a second time.”

Golden’s ears twitched indignantly as if to say “I would never!”

I mixed up some canned tuna, some leftover whitefish from the end of the fishing season, and a little wet store-bought cat food and placed it in front of Her Majesty. She sniffed the concoction, determined that everything was up to her standards, and settled down onto her haunches and dug in.

I yawned again. I was about to grab my tea and read a little by the fireplace before bed but then my cell phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Morgan? Oh thank Yoba you’re home.” Marnie said. Her low voice sounded clipped and frantic which was very unlike her. Then I heard Jas crying in the background and my heart stopped.

“Marnie? What’s wrong?”

The woman’s voice broke, “It’s Shane. He — he — Yoba. Morris from Joja Mart left a message on our machine saying that if Shane went one more day without showing up for work, he’d be fired. And when I confronted him about it — Yoba dammit — my temper got the best of me. Now he’s gone. He ran off somewhere. He’s got no coat, no boots, and,” she lowered her voice so Jas would not hear, “and he’s been drinking. The hard stuff…whisky or somethin’ and Yoba knows I don’ keep that in the house. I’m fit to be tied Morgan! He could be dead!”

My mind worked on overdrive as I processed everything that she said. Shane’s drinking habit was well known and his fits of sullenness and anger were kinda part of the package, but this was serious.

“When did he run off?”

“I dunno. A half hour ago, maybe longer. I went outside to look for him but the snow covered his tracks and I had to turn back. I’ve called Caroline so I can do a proper search and I’ve called Robin and Lewis as they’ve both got snowmobiles, but I need all of the manpower…woman power I can get. You fish down in the forest so I thought you’d know the place better than anyone.”
I was already tugging on my winter coat and boots and I cradled the phone in the crook of my neck. “Yes, of course. I’ll be right over Marnie. Sit tight.”

She sighed in relief and replied. “Yoba bless you. Thank you ‘hon. I’ll see you soon.”

She hung up and I wrapped a scarf around my neck and tucked the ends beneath my jacket to create a makeshift balaclava. I pulled on a navy blue knit hat just as Elliott poked his head out of the bedroom. His hair was mussed and his face was drawn tight in a world-weary expression. All he needed was a fedora and a rumpled suit and life would start imitating art.

“What’s going on?”

I quickly explained the details behind Marnie’s call while I threw the first aid kit, some hand warmer packets, my Grandpa’s multi-tool, which included a serrated two-inch knife, and my cell phone into my backpack.

Elliott frowned, “Well let me get dressed real quick and I’ll —“

“—No Elliott.” I winced at how sharp my voice sounded. “Sorry. You just…you’re working on your book and I know how you hate to be pulled away while you’re writing. Besides, Marnie’s house is a bit full at the moment.”

“You’re not pulling me way.” He insisted. “I was in a bit of a lull. Maybe some fresh air would do me good.”

I sighed, “Elliott. You don’t know the forest all that well. It’s dark. There’s a blizzard coming. I’d rather you wait here where I know you’re safe. Besides, it will be nice to come back to a warm house.”

He cocked a russet eyebrow at me clearly displeased. “So am I the house husband now?”

“Yoba Elliott. That’s not what I meant and you know it. Look. I don’t have time. I gotta get to Marnie's. I’ll be back as soon as I can. Okay?”

He frowned. His jaw clenched and I knew he was frustrated. But I didn’t have time to unpack why. Shane needed help.

I clomped over to him in my heavy boots and kissed him. He accepted my kiss but anxiety still crackled through his body. His forearms felt like two twin steel cables and his body felt rigid against my touch.

“I’ll be back.” I promised him and I opened the door and stepped into the cold winter night.

I grabbed my snowshoes from the shed, clipped them to my boots, and took Grandpa’s old ski poles to help me balance. Thanks to the snowshoes, I was able to clamber up the foot tall snow embankment with little trouble. And aside for walking a bit like a duck, I managed to traverse across the untamed pasture with relative ease.

Snow steadily fell in layers as I crunched through the crisp, frozen snow and ice at a slow jog. By the time I reached the narrow path which led to Marnie’s, my scarf had a frosty spot where the condensation from my breathing froze. My cheeks were tinged pink and my eyes watered from the brittle air.

Caroline opened the door when I knocked. Her emerald hair was pulled into a ponytail and she wore a thick bathrobe over pajamas and fur-lined snow boots. Behind her, Jas sat at the kitchen
table staring blankly off into space as two mugs of hot liquid sat untouched.

“Where’s Marnie?” I puffed out.

“She went to search some more.” Caroline replied. “She called me to stay with Jas. Mayor Lewis, Robin, Willy, and Alex are with her and helping her look. Dr. Harvey is riding with Mayor Lewis on his snowmobile as getting an ambulance through this snow is impossible.

At the mention of the word “ambulance” Jas let out a pained whimper and violently pushed herself away from the kitchen table. Brown liquid — most likely hot cocoa — sloshed out of the mugs and over assorted crayon drawings and a coloring book turning the paper into a soggy mess. Jas ran into her bedroom and slammed the door with enough force that one of Marnie’s decorative plates that hung in the hallway fell from the hook and shattered on the wooden floor.

Caroline sighed, “The poor girl. She’s traumatized. Shane was her godfather and he —“

I hated the fact that Caroline was talking about Shane in the past-tense so I interrupted, “— and he’ll be found. Tell Jas that I’m going to help find him.”

The woman nodded and smiled sadly. Then she passed me a small gun. It looked like an old pistol complete with a silver hammer but the barrel was a bright orange color.

“Take this. Willy keeps a stash of flare guns in his boat in case he gets lost at sea. He gave one to Marnie but she left it behind in her hurry to get back out there. If you find him, shoot this into the air and everyone will get to you as soon as they can.”

Jas’s muffled sobbing took on animalistic howls and my heart felt like someone was squeezing it in a vice.

Caroline looked back towards the door, “I gotta go. If they come back to the house, I’ll let them know you’re out there searching.”

I nodded in response and thanked her before she closed the door. Then I trudged back over the embankment and followed Marnie’s large footprints into the dark forest.

After a few hundred yards, Marnie’s footprints grew less and less distinct as the swirling snow swept away any evidence of human or animal travel. Nevertheless, I pressed on. I clicked on my headlight and pushed deeper through the dense trees.

Several possibilities about Shane’s fate ran through my head. He could’ve fallen through the ice in the forest pond. The shock combined with his inebriation could’ve disoriented him enough to slip under the ice and drown. Hell, if Marnie’s timeline was accurate Shane could already be dead and covered by the snowfall and we’d never see him.

Or Shane could’ve gotten lost or passed out someplace near his house. Even if he was right outside Marnie’s house or out in her pasture, we might not find him until tomorrow morning and by then it would be too late.

I shuddered as any and all of the possibilities I thought of ended with Shane as a frozen corpse. I couldn’t think like that. I just had to push on.

“SHANE!” I shouted. “SHANE! WHERE ARE YOU?”

The icy cold air tore at my throat and made me cough. I cursed in frustration, stuffed my face into my scarf now uncomfortably damp from my breathing and yelled again.
Off in the distance to the west, I heard a high-pitched mechanical. Someone, probably Robin, Mayor Lewis, and Dr. Harvey were out on the snowmobiles. Thank Yoba for small favors.

I slowed my pace as the land dipped into a long descent. It went for three or four hundred yards and then the land just ended. The lower part of the forest ended with a thirty foot drop to the ocean below. And all of the kids who lived in Pelican Town had it drilled into them to never go near the cliffs. So if I was a depressive person looking to hurt myself, I might choose that spot to do it.

As I got closer, I heard the ocean waves crashing on the exposed, rocky shoreline below and I felt the bitter wind whipping up from the surf. The salt stung my eyes and the cold wind cut through my clothes and skin chilling me down to the bone.

“SHANE!” I uncovered my face and screamed. “DAMMIT! WHERE ARE YOU SHANE?!”

I thought I heard a groan echo out on the wind and I froze. I cocked my head and tried to focus my hearing and that’s when my headlamp brushed across a lump of blue denim coated with white a mere twenty feet away from the cliffs. Mussed, frozen dark purple hair stuck out of the top of the body and the body weakly groaned.

“Oh Yoba. Shane?!”

“G-g-go Aw-way.” His weak voice stuttered. He wheezed as he spoke and it sounded like he was having trouble breathing.

“Shane!”

I ran over to his form. He was curled up into a fetal position. His skin color matched the snow with the exception of his lips which had turned a purple to match his hair. His hands were stuffed into his armpits, and aside for a denim jacket and the ratty Joja Mart hoodie, he wasn’t wearing any winter clothes. And to top it off, he stank of raw whisky and vomit.

I took out Marnie’s flare gun, took it off safety, cocked the hammer back with my thumb, and shot it into the air. It popped like a loud firecracker and a bolt of brilliant red and yellow fire shot into the air like a golden rocket. Shane opened his eyes at the light and blinked twice.

“M-M-Morg-gan?” He shivered. Recognition colored his voice and he looked at me. His pupils were impossibly small while the white sclera in his eyes looked pale and slightly yellow. If I didn’t know any better, it was the onset of jaundice. Oh Yoba…

“Hey Shane.” I breathed and I masked my panic with a reassuring smile. “We’re gonna get you outta here. Just hang on, okay? More people are on the way.”

Instead of looking relieved, his face fell and he croaked out “No. P-please. Just … le-eave m-me to d-die. I — I wanna die.”

My voice caught in my throat but I pushed the words out anyway. “Why Shane? Why do you want to die?”

He said nothing. He just shivered pathetically like a wet and beaten dog that life had pushed outside in the rain.

Without thinking, I shirked off my coat, wincing at how the wind clawed through my thin long sleeve shirt. I helped Shane sit up and I helped him into my coat. Due to his diet of bar food and alcohol, it was a bit tight on him but thankfully it still zipped. I felt the cold through the material of his coat, but I didn’t care. I didn’t care anymore. I didn’t care if I died. I didn’t care if I fell in the sea. Because I didn’t have the strength anymore to fight off what my mind was telling me to do.
The whine of the snowmobile cut through the howling wind. The calvary was on their way. Thank Yoba someone saw the flare.


He sneered and shivered, “O-oh do I? Wh-what’s the point? I’m useless. I’m f-fucking useless. I can’t t-take co-control of my life. I ca-can’t be a f-father to Jas, I — I can’t hold down a job, I —”

Shane gritted his teeth and crawled onto his hands and knees. That simple act looked like it took monumental effort, so I helped him the rest of the way to his feet. I grabbed him by the shoulders as he swayed like a tree in the breeze. He looked forlornly out into the black ocean and something changed in his expression. I couldn’t put my finger on what it was but his look scared me.

“I should just jump.” He with a voice entirely devoid of emotion.

And I knew that he was serious.

“What!? No Shane! I know life might suck now but you have so many reasons to live.” I stepped in front of him and positioned my body between him and the cliffside.

He looked into the abyss like he was looking through me. His eyes were empty of life. It was as though I was looking at the eyes of a living corpse.

I held him by his shoulders, grabbed his chin with my gloved hand, and forced him to look at me instead of over my shoulder at the sea.

“Think of Jas, Shane. She loves you. Damn does that girl love you.” I said furiously. Hot tears slid down my cheeks turning to cold drops which settled in my scarf. “Do you really want her going through life without you? You’re her godfather!”

“That doesn’t matter.” Shane whispered. “I’m not her real father.”

“The fuck if it doesn’t!” I exclaimed. My heart broke for Shane and my own wounds, the ones I stuff deep inside me, opened like I had just picked at a scab.

“Shane I never met my father, and if it wasn’t for my grandfather, I would’ve been lost in life. Jas lost her parents. You and Marnie are the only ones she has left. Don’t do this. Don’t take yourself out of her life. Please. If you care about nothing else, at least think of her.”

The wind howled around us kicking up snow and throwing it into our faces like mace. I shielded my face with my forearms but my arms felt like thousands of needles were being stabbed into my skin. I huddled against Shane as he was physically larger and nearly six inches taller than me as another strong gust pushed us both forward a couple feet.

“W-we gotta get out of here.” I told him. I couldn’t mask the fact that my teeth were chattering and I was starting to shiver.

Shane looked like he was going to be ill. His lips quivered and his breathing came out in rapid shallow pants punctuated by the occasional sob. He looked down at his hands. His fingertips were a dark red bordering on turning purple.

“I can’t. I don’ feel good.” He said slurred and blinked at me several times. “I’m tired. I’m so t-tired. I won’t jump. But you … you’re cold.”
He was right. I was cold. I was freezing. Shane was wearing my jacket which left me in my long sleeved shirt, long underwear, and heavy bib snowpants. My lower body was okay, but my forearms were completely numb and my face was starting to hurt.

Then a high-pitched whine of a snowmobile’s motor cut through the thick trees. It was closer than ever and I heard someone yell, “ANYONE OUT THERE?”

“WE’RE HERE!” I yelled back while flicking my headlamp on and off in the pattern of the international distress signal. “We’re down near the cliffs.”

I helped Shane walk towards the tree he had curled up beneath. The continuous heavy snowfall made the spot was nearly indistinguishable from the rest of the forest floor and we couldn’t have been gone for more than a few minutes. In fact, I would’ve overlooked it entirely if it weren’t for a bottle of whisky sticking out of the snow next to a pine tree’s trunk.

“How much whisky did you drink Shane?”

He shot me a withered and suffering look while shivering in the too-small winter coat.

“I-its important.” I stuttered. My teeth were chattering. Yoba, we needed to get out of the cold. “H-Harvey is on a snowmobile. He’s going to bring you to the hospital. Be honest. We’re h-here to help you.”

He swayed again and I thought he was about to collapse when an empty pill bottle fell out of his hoodie. I plucked it from the snow. The label on the orange canister noted that it was prescribed to him, but I wasn’t familiar with the medication.

“Shane? What is —“ But as soon as I was about to ask my question, he collapsed into me like a pile of bricks.

Many things happened all at once. Shane and I both fell down together in a heap in the deep snow. He seized against me. His body jerked violently and his flailing limbs struck me in the face and in the chest.

“Yoba! Shane…” I growled as I wrestled the larger man onto his side. Thankfully I did, because ten seconds after seizing, he expelled everything in his stomach coating the snow — and my left arm — in an amber deluge. I saw several round pills among the sick and I had never been happier to have someone vomit on me before.

I knew that he needed some heat if he was going to survive the trip back. So I dug in my small bag and grabbed the pack of 12 hand warmers. I tore them open, cracked them to activate the heating agent inside of them, and unzipped the jacket just enough so I could stuff them down his shirt. I knew that hypothermia set in when the body’s core temperature dropped below a certain threshold. This was my last ditch effort to try and help him, to give him a fighting chance. I had no idea if it would even work, but if Shane’s core temperature could stay high enough thanks to the hand warmers then maybe he wouldn’t die. I prayed he wouldn’t die.

Just as I zipped him back into my coat, two snowmobiles came down the hillside and parked on either side of us. People moved at superhuman speed…or maybe the cold was slowing my own mind down. Someone pulled me away from Shane and wrapped me up in an oversized coat that smelled of woodsmoke and maple syrup. The other snowmobile had two riders and it was pulling a high-backed sled, similar to the kind that sled dogs pulled.

Harvey pulled off his helmet and plopped a neon orange first responder’s bag down next to Shane
and began tending to him. He took in the scene and barked orders with decisive efficiency which
was a far cry from his normally timid and mild-mannered persona.

I stumbled forward and handed Harvey the pill bottle. “This fell out of Shane’s pocket. T-Then h-
he collapsed.”

Harvey held the bottle up to the snowmobile’s headlight and cursed under his breath. “Mayor.
Help me get him into the sled. I need to get him back to the clinic immediately. He needs to have
his stomach pumped.”

I pointed to the pile of now frozen vomit and said, “H-He threw up several of the pills along with
the whiskey. I don’t know how many he took but he … he …”

My breath died in my throat and I looked helplessly at the doctor.

He nodded and his face took on a momentary look of patient understanding, “It’s okay Morgan.
Thank you. Him getting sick like that just might’ve saved his life. There’s nothing you can do for
him now. We wouldn’t have found him without you. Now go on home and get warm.”

A large gloved hand clasped on my shoulder. “C’mon Morgan. I’ll take you home.” Robin’s voice
said from beneath a sleek red helmet.

My head pounded so hard from the cold that my eyes were starting to water. Nevertheless, I
watched to make sure that Mayor Lewis and Harvey loaded Shane into the sled. I waited for them
to take off first. Due to the extra weight, they couldn’t go all that fast and I prayed that Shane
would make it back to the clinic in time.

Once they were out of sight, Robin’s strong and steady hand guided me towards the snowmobile.
She got on first and I climbed onto the seat behind her. I held firmly onto her waist as we took off
into the darkness. Wind whipped past my head and the cold night air gave me such a migraine that
I buried my face into Robin’s back to get shelter from the wind and closed my eyes.

I replayed Shane’s words in my head. I couldn’t fathom the type of pain he felt. What would it take
for someone to try and take their own life? I wasn’t naïve but I also had never experienced that
depth of sorrow before. Sure, I’ve been sad or upset. But to get to the point where death would be
preferable than living in pain … I just couldn’t wrap my mind around it.

The ride back to the cabin took no more than ten minutes. As soon as we pulled up, Elliott stepped
out to greet us. I was stiff and half-frozen so Robin unclipped my snowshoes for me while Elliott
helped me off the snowmobile.

“Morgan? Are you okay?”

I looked at him and I think my expression scared him because he followed his question up with,
“Are you hurt? Is Shane okay?”

I shook my head to answer both questions at once.

“Elliott, get her inside and under some blankets near the fireplace. Don’t let her take a shower until
her body temp is back up. She gave Shane her jacket and I came upon them lying in the snow
together. She’s got some hypothermia but I don’t think it’s too bad. Still….she’s soaked to the bone
and it looks like she’ll have a shiner tomorrow.”

Elliott looked at me sharply. “Shane hit you?” The ice in his voice felt colder than the outside air.
“H-He didn’t mean it.” I chattered. “He went into a seizure. I c-caught his e-elbow, I think.”

Elliott scowled. “Thank you Robin.” Then he helped me climb the stairs to the cabin.

As soon as I crossed the threshold, every atom in my body screamed at me to get warm and to do it quickly. I had the coat that Robin had given me stripped off before Elliott even closed the door. Shane’s vomit was frozen to my long-sleeved shirt and a low sob tore through my chest as the sight reminded me of what had happened…of what could’ve happened.

“Here. Let me help.” Elliott said. His voice was gentle but I knew I wasn’t off the hook yet. Elliott was upset and he was doing a far better job than I was at controlling his emotions.

He unclipped my snow pants and helped me climb out of them. My blue jeans were damp from my sweat and I was starting to feel nauseous looking at the vomit frozen to my arm.

“Get the shirt off me.” I said weakly. “I can’t feel my arms.”

Elliott did and he helped me out of my jeans and sports bra as well. There was nothing erotic about the process. He moved efficiently while an underlying aura of anxiety crackled around him. He was about to strip my underwear off my hips but I shook my head.

“I’ve got my period.” I mumbled. I don’t know why I was embarrassed. Maybe because Brandon always acted like a child when I was “on the rag” as he put it. But all Elliott did was nod and help me over to the fireplace.

“B-blankets?” I shivered.

He nodded mutely and ran off into the bedroom. I heard some fabric rustling and he came back to me carrying four blankets, two that were his and two that were mine. My grandpa’s quilt sat on top of the pile and he set everything onto the couch.

Elliott held open the first blanket for me and wrapped me up in it. It was one of his that he brought from the beachfront cabin. The fabric smelled like him and I closed my eyes and languished in the scent. Then he wrapped me up in my grandpa’s quilt and then he dragged the loveseat across the wooden floor so it sat six feet away from the fireplace.

“Lie down.”

I did as he commanded. As soon as my head hit the small decorative pillow, I felt all of the strength leak out of my bones like melting ice. My eyes slipped out of focus as I watched the fire dance around the charred logs.

I tried to not think about the glassy sheen in Shane’s dark eyes or the eerie, animalistic focus he had when he made up his mind to jump. I tried to bury a lot of what happened down into the recesses of my mind. But there was one thing I couldn’t forget no matter how hard I tried.

Jas’s howling rattled around in my skull like an angry, caged animal. I felt her pain, her anguish, her frustration and fear. She almost lost her surrogate father, and if the rumors about her were to be believed, Jas had lost far too much in her life for one so young. And Shane had tried to leave her.

Hot rage bubbled in my gut and I sat up just as Elliott was walking over with two steaming mugs of tea.

“Morgan? What are you —“
“— I have to go see Shane.” I said growled. “I need to go to Dr. Harvey’s clinic.”

“Absolutely not. I am sure Shane is under plenty of supervision right now, and you need to warm up. I’m not letting you up from this couch Morgan.”

My voice sounded like I had aged several decades. It crackled with strain and emotion and pain… a pain that I didn’t quite understand. “He tried to leave her Elliott. He tried to make Jas an orphan yet again. He needs to know that he messed up!”

“I’m sure he’s got enough guilt on his shoulders right now. Let’s give him this reprieve at least.”

I narrowed my eyes. An anger I didn’t quite understand welled up as more cold tears slid down my face.

“I hate him.” I said quietly. “I hate him for what he did to Jas.”

He sat crosslegged in front of the loveseat and set the tea on the wood floor.

“That’s fair.” He said softly. “But what’s done is done. Shane is with Dr. Harvey now and you and I need to talk.”

I gulped. I knew that phrase ‘we need to talk.’ That was the phrase that precluded every argument that Brandon and I ever had.

“What do we need to talk about?”

You could’ve died out there, Morgan.” He said bluntly.

I blinked twice at what he said. I was going to deny it. I was going to bluster and boast about my intimate knowledge of the forest and how I was the first to find Shane, but I held my tongue. Elliott was right. I took a risk. And it could’ve gone horribly wrong.

Suddenly the anger I felt curdled in my stomach. I could’ve unintentionally abandoned Elliott just as easily as Shane could’ve (or I suppose still could) orphan Jas. And if that had happened, I would be the second of his girlfriends whose death he got to read about in the newspaper. My stomach churned into sour-tasting guilt.

I sighed and I slipped my arm out of the blanket so I could stroke Elliott’s cheek. My hands were still cold but he didn’t jerk away, nor did he lean into my touch. He just sat like a statue staring into the fire.

“I’m sorry. You’re right.” I murmured. I pulled my arm back into the cocoon of warmth noticing that the top of my knuckle was glistening from Elliott’s tears. “I’m so sorry Elliott. I — I just kinda jumped into the role of hero without even thinking.”

He looked away and brushed at his face with a woolen sleeve. “Yeah. You did.”

The fire popped and a few embers skittered across the stone hearth and died; they were snuffed out before they hit the wood floor. My life could’ve ended like that…like a blink of an ember. If Shane pushed passed me too hard and we both went tumbling or if I took one wrong step and slid on the icy embankment, my body could’ve been splattered across the rocks like a smashed pumpkin.

“There’s one thing I don’t understand.” He said throatily. “Why didn’t you want me to come with you? I could’ve helped you. You know I could’ve.”
“Huh?” My mind was still mulling over my stupidity to play hero all by myself.

“Why did you want me to stay here?” He asked slightly punctuating each word with crisp pronunciation.

I blinked dumbly. There wasn’t one exact reason but I didn’t know how to articulate it into a way that wasn’t terribly insulting. Yet, while I mulled over my word choice Elliott was also chewing on his own theories.

“Do you love him?” He asked quietly.

I laughed out loud at that. “Shane? No! Yoba. At this point, I’d pay someone to let me punch him in the face for scaring all of us like that.”

“So nearly freezing to death out in a blizzard while saving him was just the neighborly thing to do?” I caught the sarcasm when he said the word ‘neighborly’ and his tone was wry and disbelieving.

“Yeah it was.” I countered. “And if you’ve forgotten, I saved your ass in the middle of a freaking tornado which was pretty freaking dangerous.”

He shook his head. “That’s not the same Morgan.”

I sighed in frustration, “Where’s this jealous boyfriend thing coming from Elliott? I’ve never given you a reason to be suspicious of me. Why start now?”

He didn’t respond right away. His cheeks twitched and it looked like he was chewing his words before actually saying them aloud.

When he finally spoke, it felt like he was choosing his words carefully. “I see how Shane looks at you even though you’ve turned him down. You rushed to his aid without hesitation that I just figured you acted so quickly because you … did actually love him. And that you were hiding it for my benefit. And when you didn’t want me to go with, I assumed that you didn’t want me to see that I was right.”

My mind reeled at his accusation. And I spoke my words quickly and in a quiet hiss. “I reacted quickly because Marnie and Jas were about to lose a member of their family. I acted like a human who has a shred of decency. And I’m not going to dignify the rest of your bullshit with an answer. Believe me or not. I don’t care. If you think I’m sleeping around behind your back then you can go fuck yourself.”

“Morgan…”

“Leave me alone.” I mumbled.

“Let me at least help you to the bedroom.”

I jerked my cocooned body as soon as his hand touched my arm. I glared into the stupid flower design on the upholstery and sent my hatred into the paisley pink flowers that looked like an artist’s bad interpretation of daisies.

“I’m sleeping out here.”

“Morgan…”
“Elliott Michaels, if you follow those words up with ‘don’t be ridiculous’ I’m going to punch you. I swear to Yoba.”

I rolled over so my back was towards the fire. My shoulders shook from the cold and from my sobs. I don’t know when Elliott went to bed, but the last thing I remember was feeling Elliott draping another blanket over me.

Then I sank into a cold and fitful sleep.

Chapter End Notes

I wonder if Elliott has some baggage as a result of being the ‘other man’ in a relationship. (Answer: Yes. Yes he does. Oh...my self-conscious broody writer).

But in reality...I always found his quote "Do I have reason to be suspicious of you?" interesting as he comes across as one of the more jealous bachelors...even before ConcernedApe added an alternate 10 heart scene which activates if you've romanced every bachelor/bachelorette at the same time.
Chapter 25 - Reconciliations (Rated T)

December 14th (Winter)

The cabin was bathed in darkness when I woke up. Dying embers smoldered in the hearth which did little to add light or heat. My stomach cramped and my bladder ached. I had urgent business to take care of but I didn’t want to leave my warm cocoon.

I opened my cell phone which was lying on the floor next to the couch. The stark blue LED screen hurt my eyes and I squinted to see the time: 4:49am. There were no calls or texts from Marnie or anyone else. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. Dr. Harvey was bound by doctor-patient confidentiality and Marnie was probably getting some much needed rest. I just had to hope that Shane pulled through everything okay.

I stifled a squeal when my bare feet touched the freezing hardwood floors, and I dragged the blankets off the couch as I stood up. My muscles hurt like I had the flu and my stomach cramps turned from a minor annoyance into a heavy dull pain which lived right behind my belly button.

I shuffled to the bathroom, flicked the light switch on, and set the tap to nearly scalding hot. While I waited for the hot water heater to kick on, I opened the medicine cabinet and took three ibuprofen. At this point, I couldn’t get any colder so I pulled the blankets off my shoulders and set them on top of the washer and dryer that was across from the bathroom.

The shower made a slight whistling sound similar to a teakettle which told me that the water heater was finally working. I stripped out of my underwear and saw, to my dismay, that I had bled through my tampon and my pantyliner.

“Dammit!” I hissed. I ripped the sodden material out of my underwear and threw it into the wastebasket. The amount that leaked through was enough for me to fear that I had bled onto the couch as well.

I ran through the kitchen naked as a jay-bird and looked at the couch cushions. Sure enough, a dark spot about the size of a poker chip stood out among the striped floral upholstery.

“Yoba Dammit!” I growled aloud.

Well, nothing could be done about the couch now. I’d have to make a run into town and see if Pierre (or maybe Caroline) had something to remove blood stains. But as I was walking back towards the bathroom, I misjudged the kitchen table’s width in the darkness and kicked one of the table legs with my left little toe. I heard a pop, felt a hot burning pain radiate up into my foot, and I cursed even louder.

“Son of a bitch! Son of a fucking bitch!”

I hopped down the short hallway and clambered back into the bathroom. By now, the humidity from the shower fogged up the mirror and covered everything in a sheen of condensation. With a snarl, I ripped out my tampon and tossed that into the bathroom trash, opened the flimsy shower door, and stepped into the hot water.

The nearly uncomfortable burning from the hot water was just enough of a distraction to take my mind away from my toe and temper the deluge of emotions that were brought about by my
As the water pelted my back I let out a sigh of relief, soaked my hair, and turned towards the shower head to grab for the shampoo. But when the water hit my face, I screamed as though someone had struck me. My face felt tender just above my upper lip and like the idiot I am I decided to touch it.

A bolt of pain shot through my jaw and ears and I remembered Shane’s elbow striking me as he fell to the ground in a seizure. Then I remembered everything else that happened last night, from the howl in Jas’s cries to the fight that Elliott and I had. It was all enough to push me over the edge.

My feelings overwhelmed me. I turned away from the shower head and sat down on the old linoleum shower floor. I saw that my left little toe was a vibrant red and it hurt when I tried to move it. Hot water pelted my back and my hair and trailed off my skin in icy rivulets which made me feel even more pathetic.

I couldn’t hold anything back anymore. The tears came. I drew my knees up to my chest and let the water beat at me. I felt rather composed during the fight that Elliott and I had, but that composure along with my righteous indignation had melted away leaving only cold regret in its place.

The fact that Elliott and I had fought at all disgusted me. Couples fought about petty things, silly things that they would then either agree to disagree about or admit that it was a silly fight and resolve their differences like adults. But this...this felt like a real fight. It felt like a type of fight that Brandon and I would have. I didn’t like that. I didn’t like that at all.

I grabbed the shampoo from the corner ledge near my head and shampooed my hair while I sat in the shower and cried. As I had this emotional breakdown, I tried to rationalize to myself that some of my feelings were being magnified because I was on my period. I also didn’t get enough sleep last night, and the constant snowing was bringing out a bit of cabin fever in everyone. My rational mind could explain this over and over, but my emotional mind just reminded me of all the times I had ever messed up in my life.

“Morgan?”

I lifted my head up from my hands and looked through the frosted shower door. Elliott’s muddled and abstract silhouette shone through the opaque frosted glass.

Oh Yoba, pull yourself together Morgan!

I struggled to my feet and rinsed the last bit of shampoo out of my hair. Some water hit my bruised and swollen face and I cried out.

“Morgan?! Are you okay? Do you need any help?”

“No. I — I’m almost done.” I stuttered. “I’m fine.”

“Are you sure? I heard a commotion in the kitchen. Did you hurt yourself?”

The genuine care and concern in his voice pierced my heart and my lower lip quivered as another round of emotions caught me.

“No. I — I’m fine.” I said hoarsely.
There was a pause and I knew he didn’t believe me. “Would you like a towel? It looks like you forgot to grab one.”

Dammit. He was right.

“Yeah. Fine.” I sighed.

He opened the shower door and I felt a draft of icy air enter my tropical sanctuary and it made me feel Irrationally annoyed. I turned the water off while keeping Elliott on the other side of the frosted glass and, I held out my hand for the towel. He gave it to me and I took it into the shower with me. I gingerly dried my face yet still failed to stifle a small gasp when I accidentally touched the bruised and swollen area. I wrapped the towel around myself, pushed the door open, and carefully stepped out onto the bathroom mat.

Elliott’s hair was still mussed from sleep. He had dark circles beneath his eyes which made him look a little wan and morose. As soon as he looked at my face, I knew it was as bad as it felt.

“Oh…love. Your cheek!”

His hand went to touch it and I knocked it aside with my forearm.

“It’s fine.” I snapped. “I just need to ice it and it will be fine.”

I opened the cabinet beneath the bathroom sink and grabbed a tampon and a pantyliner and then slammed the door shut with more force than I intended.

I heard Elliott sigh. “Morgan. Can we please talk about last night.”

“I have nothing to say.” I huffed. “Now could you please leave so I can take care of some important things?” I held up the sanitary items and raised my eyebrows expectantly.

“I — uh — of course.”

As soon as he left, I unwrapped the towel from my body and took my time drying off. At some point I stopped feeling the cold which made my suffering marginally better, and the medicine seemed to be kicking in finally so maybe I could have a civil conversation with my boyfriend without trying to bite his head off.

I took care of my bathroom needs but realized that I didn’t actually bring a clean pair of panties into the bathroom with me, so I wrapped myself back up in the towel, grabbed the bottle of ibuprofen, and trudged slowly back towards the bedroom.

Elliott was pouring dried cat food into a small tin bowl. Golden’s tail twitched excitedly and she let out excited meow-like squeaks as breakfast was served. I thought I could make it into the bedroom without Elliott turning around, but I was wrong.

“Morgan, are you limping?”

I gritted my teeth to stop myself from responding with a flippant comment.

“Yes. I stubbed my toe on the way to the bathroom this morning. I think it might be jammed or sprained or something.”

“Well let me help.” He made it to my side in a few strides and tried to put his arm around my back but I pushed his arm away.
“Yoba, Elliott. I’m fine.” I seethed. “Can you just leave me alone? I’m freezing. My uterus is trying to murder me. My face and my toe ache and I still can’t decide which one hurts worse, and I’m exhausted. Just leave me alone, okay?”

He deflated, “Okay. But if there’s anything you need…”

The part of me that loved Elliott swooned at how dutiful and caring he was being, but the angry bitch part of me said he was only doing this to get back into my good graces after our fight.

“No…thank you.” I forced out those last two words. “I just need to go to bed. Sunrise isn’t for another three hours and I’m still freezing, so if you were planning to do some writing, maybe take it to the kitchen table for now.”

He nodded sadly. “Uh. Yeah. I’ll do that then.”

“Thank you.” I replied curtly before trading into our bedroom.

He followed after me, collected his writing materials and paper, and left without a word. I gently closed the door as another wave of tears came. I wept as I dressed in my long underwear (along with clean underwear), my heavy flannel pajamas, and my thick robe. The bed was still marginally warm from Elliott’s residual body heat and I climbed in on his side of the bed and gathered the blankets around me in a new cocoon. I laid on my back with my damp hair wrapped up in the towel. But I didn’t have a chance to dwell on anything else; as soon as my head hit the pillow, I was out.

I awoke to warm bright light streaming into the bedroom. Meltwater dripped off the roof in a steady, rapid pulse that echoed my own panicked confusion.

My biological clock told me that it was late and my alarm clock verified that it was indeed well past noon. I had overslept.

I threw the covers off me and dressed in a pair of blue jeans and my high school hoodie. My cramps had lessened but I still felt uncomfortable and my toe ached. I walked through the cold house and grabbed the ibuprofen from the frosted window sill, ate three more, and opened the fridge to make myself something to eat.

A peanut butter and jelly sandwich sat on a plate with a note folded atop of it in Elliott’s neat cursive handwriting.

I’m outside shoveling. I figured you’d be hungry when you awoke. I hope you are feeling better. Love, Elliott

Sure enough, my stomach damn near roared its displeasure upon seeing the delicious sandwich. The tea kettle barely had time to boil before I had finished that sandwich and made myself another. As I ate, I had a moment to think and reflect. Shame and guilt over my recent behavior wasn’t too far behind.

I lashed out. Sure I was still hurting from the night before, but Elliott didn’t deserve that. Nothing that happened this morning was his fault, yet I damn near lynched him for simply trying to take care of me. That wasn’t fair. No matter what, Elliott didn’t deserve that.

I lashed out. Sure I was still hurting from the night before, but Elliott didn’t deserve that. Nothing that happened this morning was his fault, yet I damn near lynched him for simply trying to take care of me. That wasn’t fair. No matter what, Elliott didn’t deserve that.

The buzzer on the dryer interrupted my thoughts and I went to collect the clothes simply out of habit until I realized that I hadn’t actually washed any clothes this morning. Nevertheless, inside the dryer were the blankets I had slept with last night, my snow pants and the clothes that Shane
puked on, and the thick floral couch cover. Hell, I hadn’t even realized our gently used couch courtesy of Caroline even had a cover!

I pulled everything out and brought it into the living room to fold. In the bright winter sunlight, I noticed a faint damp spot on the cushion, but the dark red-brown stain was gone. The faint smell of lemon was the only hint that Elliott had not only washed the couch cover, but he had also somehow managed to remove blood from the couch.

Golden watched me reproachfully from her perch atop the kitchen counter. Her vibrant yellow-amber eyes never wavered from mine. Her expression was a bit unnerving. It was almost as though she was expecting me to go apologize to Elliott.

“I’m going!” I told her as I slipped the cover back over the couch.

She let out a meow that sounded more like a scolding growl. Eerily the meow sounded like she was saying, “Now!”

“Yoba, alright.” I huffed.

I set the blankets and my clothes on the couch and slipped back into my snow pants. I threw my hair up into a scrunchy without bothering to comb the tangles out of it, and I shrugged Robin’s large winter coat as Shane still had mine.

When I stepped out of the cabin, I was taken aback by how different the farm looked down that the blizzard had stopped.

The noonday sun turned the hellish frozen tundra from the night before into a winter wonderland. Tiny jewels sparkled in the thick blanket of snow while icicles that hang from the rain gutter gleamed like priceless crystal.

The porch and the walkway which led to it were both shoveled but Elliott was nowhere to be seen.

“Elliott?” I called out.

There was no response so I followed the immaculately shoveled path towards the barn to check on Stella. The scene I walked into was something else entirely.

Elliott’s winter jacket was draped over some stacked hay bales but his scarf — the blue and silver one that he always wore in the winter — was acting as the rope in an epic tug-of-war game between himself and Stella.

The large bovine stood in the middle of the barn chewing on one end looking content and complacent as ever. The only indication that she was semi-annoyed was that she’d occasionally stamp her rear hoof and jerked her head to the side thereby pulling Elliott forward.

“What the —“

“Morgan! Your damn cow is eating my scarf!” Elliott growled as he tugged back. I heard a slight tearing sound and we both flinched.

“No!” Elliott exclaimed.

“Wait! Stop pulling on it.” I ordered. “I need to see how much she’s got first before we do anything else.”
Stella saw me coming and turned her body sideways so her head was facing the corner of the barn. The small motion pulled Elliott forward a few more steps and the scarf tore even more down the middle.

“Stella…you idiot.” I grumbled.

She mooned a shrill noise in a counterargument and promptly kicked out her back legs in warning that if I were to come any closer, I’d get a hoof in the chest.

“Elliott give me the scarf. I have an idea.”

Elliott passed his end of the scarf to me and I drew in the slack while walking towards the cow while keeping to her left side. She couldn’t see me so she had to turn her body more towards the right. Cows were prey animals and hated it when other animals snuck up on them. If Stella wanted to hide in the corner, then I’d prey on her herd animal instincts to coerce her out.

When I came up to her left flank, I placed my hands on her hindquarter and jumped up so my belly was resting directly behind her shoulder blades. Stella tried to smash me into the wall but I swung my leg up over her back like I was mounting a horse. She hated me being on her back so she let out a long, plaintive moo which was the window I was looking for.

As soon as Stella opened her mouth, I ripped the scarf out and tossed the whole thing behind me towards Elliott. He caught it but watched me warily as Stella backed out of the corner and began bucking me off.

She only tossed me around a few times before I managed to half-slide and half-jump off her back. I stumbled backward and landed on my butt right by Elliott’s feet just as Stella kicked out her legs and tossed her head like a wild bull. I felt my teeth rattle in my skull as her one and a half ton body struck the earth like thunder.

“Thank you Morgan.” Elliott said as he held out his hand to me.

I took it which made him beam and he helped me to my feet.

“It’s probably best if you stuff your scarf into your jacket.” I suggested. “Jas once warned me that Stella liked to eat hair ribbons. I suppose a scarf and a ribbon don’t look too different to a cow. But now I know to add scarves to the ever-growing list of things Stella should not eat.”

Elliott’s expression was equal parts chagrined and bewildered as a thin line of cow drool dripped off the scarf and onto his boots.

“No good deed goes unpunished I suppose.” He murmured darkly.

“Yeah well speaking of that. What were you doing anyway? I didn’t think you liked Stella all that much.”

Elliott shrugged. “I’m ambivalent about most farm animals, that’s true, they still need love and care. After being cooped up in the barn during the blizzard, I knew she’d food and fresh water and that the barn could do with a good cleaning. I didn’t take into account that your cow has a scarf fetish.”

I gaped at him. Why hadn’t I noticed this before? The barn was tidy. Stella’s hay bag was full and her water was clear and fresh. From the laundry to the couch and now this? I didn’t care that Elliott was trying to work his way back into my good graces. I had never had someone chip in this much, help out this much, when I was having a bad day.
“You did all of this for me?” I asked. “Why?”

“Why not? You work tirelessly out in the elements. You just helped save a man’s life. You always think of others before yourself.” He shook his head and raked his fingers through his hair, “You deserve it.”

I looked around the barn once again. Sure enough, everything was still neat and tidy. This wasn’t a dream. Elliott had really done all of this for me, and I damn near bit his head off for no good reason.

“Thank you.” I smiled through guilt-laden tears. Upon realizing that I was crying once again, I brushed at my face and looked down at my feet. “I’m sorry. I’m not usually this emotional. I’m sorry I was such a bitch to you this morning. You didn’t deserve any of that.”

Elliott pulled me into his arms and I let myself melt into his warm body. “All is forgiven, love. Besides, I behaved inappropriately last night and you have every reason to be upset with me.”

“No. You were mostly right. I should’ve been more careful about just running out into a blizzard to go and save someone. People have fallen off those cliffs before and one wrong step could’ve been disastrous for both Shane and myself. I was being too careless.”

“And I was being jealous.” He replied. “I should’ve never accused you. You are a good friend to many of the residents here. I let my own baggage cloud everything.”

“All is forgiven.” I repeated back as I nuzzled into his jacket.

And like that, the pervasive weight that was pressing down on my chest since last night had lifted.

As we walked back to the house, a beat up teal and grey truck pulled into the small driveway. Marnie was sitting in the passenger seat while Mayor Lewis was driving. Both of them looked exhausted and Marnie’s red-rimmed eyes clashed with her otherwise hardened farm woman persona.

“Hey!” I called out loudly so I could be heard over the truck’s loud diesel engine.

Mayor Lewis shut the truck off and slowly unrolled his window. Marnie opened her passenger door, hopped down from the truck cab, and stomped over to me. The hug she gave me was spine-crushing and she nearly took me off my feet.

“Shane’s alive thanks to you, girl. Yoba bless the day you came off that bus. I’d be raising a girl all alone if it hadn’t been for you.”

“So he’s alright?” I wheezed out.

Marnie released me slightly and took a step back. “Well, the doc says he ain’t outta the woods yet, but Dr. Harvey’s assured me that the outcome looks good. He’s gonna be spending some time in the hospital until he can be released back into my care. Shane didn’t take the news all that well, but if you ask me, it’s a better alternative than bein’ dead.”

“I just hope he gets the help he needs.” I replied.

Marnie nodded, “I’m gonna go pick him up on Sunday when they discharge him. Both our doc and the doc in Zuzu City recommended that he give up alcohol, what with it being a depressant, and I just hope Shane finally listens.”
I nodded sympathetically. To be fair, I did feel a little weird hearing all of this from Marnie. It wasn’t all that surprising as the town had a tendency to gossip but I felt like I was nosing into other people’s business.

“Well, if there’s anything else I can help you with Marnie don’t hesitate to ask. Yoba knows I only made it through the Fall harvest because of you and Shane.”

Marnie hugged me again and this time I think I heard my spine crack. “Nonsense. We hardly did anything, and I think Shane liked caring for your hens. He has an affinity for those critters. He’ll snarl at anything that moves unless it has feathers, squawks, and lays eggs.”

Then she pulled herself out of her fear and worry just long enough to notice that Elliott was standing a respectful distance behind me trying to look like he wasn't listening. She sniffed and cleared her throat. “Sorry 'bout my blubbering. You take care of her, ya hear?”

“Yes ma’am.” Elliott replied with a polite nod.

Marnie released me from her crushing hug and sighed wistfully, “Yoba, you two are a pair. It warms my heart to see you doin’ so well Morgan. Your Grandpa would be proud.”

“Thank you.”

Marnie hurried back to the truck brushing away tears from her eyes. The driver’s side window was starting to fog from Mayor Lewis’s body heat but he gave us a parting salute before starting the engine. The snow crunched beneath the tires as they drove away.

Elliott touched my arm and gestured at the house. “C’mom. Let’s go inside. You still look chilled.”

I sighed, “Would it be tacky for me to ask Marnie if Shane still has my jacket? Robin’s is nice and all but the woman is like four inches taller than me and built like a lumberjack. I’m swimming in this thing.”

Elliott seemed to ignore my question and sought to quiet my concern via a distraction. He kissed my hairline, and his bare hand caressed my chin drawing my face towards him. I leaned into the kiss, deepening it and languishing in how he tasted. I was a bit lightheaded when he finally pulled away.

“What was that for?”

Elliott’s eyes glinted in the winter sunlight. “No reason.”

“Uh huh.” I cocked my eyebrow at him.

His smile brightened into something insufferably vague. I rolled my eyes and took his hand into mine. “C’mon let's go inside. I haven’t done any work today yet I’m exhausted. I need another nap.”

“Mmm. May I join you?”

The clear heat behind his words made my heart skip several beats. It wasn’t fair! This man could seduce a paper bag.

I stood up straighter if only to keep my dignity and to prevent myself from melting into a puddle of lust and longing.
“Perhaps.” I responded coyly.

His face fell. “Are you still upset?”

We came into the house which was barely warmer than the outside temperature now that the embers had finally died.

I let his question dangle unanswered in the air as I built up the fire with more dried wood and lit the bunched up newspaper and old Joja Mart flyers they sent far too frequently. I waited until I removed my snow pants, jacket, and hat and hang them all on the coat rack near the door. And for good measure, I even filled the tea kettle with water and set it on the stove to boil.

Elliott waited dutifully near the couch. The back of his legs rested against the plush armrest. I sauntered up to him putting far more sway in my hips than normal (and feeling slightly foolish for doing so) and pulled his hips against mine by his belt loop. I heard his breath hitch and his mischievous glint took on a more hungry, primal need.

“Love?” His adam’s apple bobbed in his throat and I leaned in and bit lightly at the skin there.

“You asked me if I was still upset.” I said in a calm voice. “I’m not. But I do want you to remember one thing.”

“And what’s that?” His breathy voice showed the cracks in his otherwise stoic and composed mask.

I walked my fingers up from his belt buckle and brought them up to his sternum. I flattened my hand there and felt his steady, and slightly fast, heartbeat pulse against my fingers.

“I will never ever cheat on you. For as long as you’ll have me, I am yours. And likewise, you are mine. If you are ever suspicious of me or I of you then we will sit down over tea and talk about it. Between your trust issues and my temper, we can’t let small things build like this. Neither one of us will be happy in a relationship built on poor communication. Heck, I would know.”

Elliott nodded and clasped his hands around mine. “I agree wholeheartedly.”

I sighed in relief and exchanged the stern expression for a lopsided grin. “Now onto the second order of business. How the heck do you remove blood from upholstery? Accidents like that don’t happen often but knowing that secret would’ve saved me a few times throughout my adult life.”

Now it was Elliott’s turn to let me dangle. His voice deepened and grew rougher. “Doll, in my line of work. I’m used to dealing with a bit of blood.”

I couldn’t help it. A wide smile crept across my face. Yoba it felt good to smile.

I slipped my arm over Elliott’s shoulder and closed the remaining distance between us. I batted my eyelashes mimicking the seductive femme fatal from Grandpa’s old movies.

“You know I have ways of making you talk.” I purred.

“A vixen like you? I have no doubt.” Elliott retorted. He feigned disinterest but I felt the truth pressing against my stomach.

I gently nibbled his lower lip before giving him a light kiss. “You keep your secrets then. I may have many faults, but my one virtue is that I’m a patient woman.”
Just then, the tea kettle whistled. I tried to pull away, but Elliott held me firm by my wrist.

“Lemon juice, white vinegar, and baking soda. You let it sit for thirty or forty minutes and most stains will be lightened or gone.”

“Thank you.” I smiled and kissed his cheek. “That wasn’t so hard was it?”

“Morgan…”

“Elliott…” I echoed his exasperated expression.

The tea kettle’s whistle quickly grew irritating and this time Elliott let me pull away to shut the stove off. Then I grabbed his hand and pulled him away from the bedroom.

“Morgan, what —“

“— You’ve been working hard and you kinda smell like Stella slobber and cow manure. I’m going to help you take a shower.”

“What? I don’t…Oh. Oh.”

Elliott stopped complaining as I pushed him into the small bathroom. Neither one of us spoke all that much after that. As the sun dipped below the tree line and plunged the valley back into frigid darkness, Elliott and I thoroughly apologized to each other.
Feast of the Winter Star (Rated T)

Chapter Notes

There’s so much fluff in this chapter and I love it all. I want to thank everyone who has reached out via comments and provided feedback on this story. I try to respond to everyone but I know I’ve forgotten a few people along the way and I’m sorry for that. Writing this story was a fun distraction from my more serious content, but then it wormed into my heart and became a work that I’m rather proud of.

Although this is the end of Year 1 for Morgan and Elliott, I guarantee there will be more to come in a future sequel. Thank you for sticking with this story despite my atrocious publishing schedule. All of the hits, kudos, and comments mean the world to me.

Chapter 26 — Feast of the Winter Star (Rated T)

December 25th (Winter)

I crunched through the frozen top layer of snow and stuck my ski poles slightly ahead of my step to help me balance on Robin’s oversized wooden snowshoes. My breath came out in a thin mist and I was sweating through my winter jacket. I briefly paused and unzipped it before traveling on.

Tonight marked the town’s celebration of The Feast of the Winter Star. The Winter’s Day feast marked the winter solstice, a formal end to the natural year, and it was a time for merriment, great food, and gratitude. And it just also happened to be my grandpa’s birthday.

Although I never got to visit grandpa in the winter because school and mom’s job took up too much of our time, I always called him on December 25th to wish him ‘Happy Birthday’ and ‘Happy Winter’s Day.’ So when I awoke, I decided that I’d take an impromptu trip to visit grandpa in a different way.

The journey to Grandpa’s grave shouldn’t have been difficult but the land west of my garden was still wild, and a journey that should’ve taken a couple of minutes took nearly fifteen as I crawled beneath ancient pine boughs, through rough and dead brambles, and around huge mossy snow-covered boulders. At least the thick blackberry thorns couldn’t cause too much damage what with wearing two layers of clothing beneath bib overall snow pants.

Grandpa’s grave was more like a tomb in its grander and size. Someone carved out a stone slab from a natural rock shelf that protruded out of the steep cliffside. A stone platform about waist high sat buried beneath two feet of snow, so I stuck my ski poles into the snowbank nearby and set to work clearing off Grandpa’s grave.

Once that was complete, I dug out four plain beeswax candles from my jacket pocket and set them on the four stone bowls that protruded from the cliff. I removed my damp mittens and pulled out a small lighter from the same pocket and lit each of the candles while murmuring the customary prayer:

*Yoba. I light these candles in honor and remembrance of my grandfather. Like the North star, his*
guidance has given me hope in the darkest times. His support and protection follow me like the rising and setting sun, and his love surrounds me and those whom he loved like the southern winds. Keep him in your care until the time comes for us to meet again.

I held my bare hands up to the flames to protect them from the elements but the snow flurries that fell from the large pine trees extinguished the flames in short order.

“Darn it” I muttered. I looked down and dug into my coat for the lighter but when I looked up the candles flickered back to life.

The wind picked up and despite the whirlwind of snow that kicked up around me, the candles remained lit like four miniature beacons. They shouldn’t have remained lit though. A child’s sneeze could put any one of these candles out… And then I smelled the spicy and unmistakable aroma of pipe tobacco.

I looked behind me but I saw nobody crawling through the brambles and thick forest that I came through, and the only set of prints in the snow were mine. I sniffed my jacket suspiciously. The pipe tobacco could’ve been from Mayor Lewis; after all, he smoked the same brand as my grandfather, and Marnie had washed my jacket after getting it back from the hospital that they sent Shane to…

No.

Have you ever felt in your guts that you knew something was right? People sometimes call it intuition but this went beyond that. I knew as sure as I knew my own name that my grandpa was in those woods with me. It didn’t matter how. It didn't matter that he was dead. It didn’t matter that up until that moment I considered myself a skeptic about ghosts or even angels. My grandpa was here.

“Grandpa…” I breathed out.

My declaration was answered with another gust of wind which kicked up even more snow. I pulled down the fur-lined bomber hat that once belonged to him and tucked my face into my jacket. The smell of pipe tobacco intensified to the point that I was getting slightly dizzy from the spice it brought. Then the wind died down, the smell vanished, and all was silent and still.

I cautiously poked my head out of my jacket like a turtle emerging from its shell. The candles were extinguished and four thin wisps of smoke rose up to the morning sky. I almost expected to see the blue-white see-through ghost of my grandpa, but I saw nothing except a folded piece of parchment resting on the cleared stone table.

I opened it. The paper felt as real as anything and it was slightly cold against my bare skin, but the neat block lettering was impossible. Nobody except my grandpa had that kind of handwriting. It said:

Morgan. You are not ready to hear from me just yet. There’s much more work that needs to be done. Trials and challenges await you, sweat pea. Don’t be afraid to ask for help. The town will come through just as they did for me. The farm was always meant to be yours. Help it thrive. The land is more than a farm, it is your home. Happy Winter’s Day feast my sweat pea. I love you.

My hands trembled. My legs collapsed beneath me and I plopped into the deep snow. Hot tears welled up and spilled down my cheeks. It felt like my heart was swelling up in my chest and trying to rise out of my body. Grandpa had been here! Yet…nobody would believe me if I told them this. A part of me felt extremely sad about that but another part knew that this moment was special; it
was a private moment between my grandfather and myself. Maybe nobody needed to know.

“I love you grandpa.” I murmured out into the still winter morning.

My fist closed around the parchment only to discover that it had disappeared, but instead of feeling dismayed or disappointed I actually felt relieved. The Feast of the Winter Star was all about remembrance and showing gratitude towards those who have impacted our life this year, and this gift that grandpa had given me was one that I didn’t want to share with anyone else, even Elliott.

I put my mittens back on, zipped up my coat, and grabbed my ski poles to make the trek back to the cabin. Before I left the small clearing, I took one last look back at the shrine and said a silent prayer to Yoba.

“Until we meet again grandpa,” I promised.

That afternoon had the town was abuzz with excitement, energy, and general holiday cheer. I could feel it radiating out towards the bus stop as I waited for the Elliott’s bus to arrive from the Zuzu City train station. Elliott had left three days prior to visit his family for the holidays while I did the same and spent Winter Star’s Eve with Mom and Chuck.

The bus rolled up much slower than normal on account of the recent snowfall. Elliott made his way towards the front of the bus. He gave me a small wave and I beamed up at him. He looked rested and he was wearing a new royal blue crocheted scarf around his neck.

I stood up and waited for the bus driver to open the door. “Have a Happy Holidays!” The driver extolled before Elliott exited.

“You too.” He replied jovially and I helped him maneuver his unwieldy canvas bag down the steps.

When his eyes met mine, my smile grew into a dopey grin. He set his bag down on the metal bench and swept me up in his arms. I wrapped my fingers around his new scarf and drew his face to me.

“Hello.” I giggled.

“Hello to you too, love.” He replied.

His hot breath played across my lips. He smelled like cinnamon and I buried my face into his chest and nuzzled against him.

“Your mom uses different laundry detergent, doesn’t she?”

“Yes?” He chuckled. His dexterous fingers gently swept my hair behind my ears. “Why do you ask?”

“No reason.” I replied. “I like the scent. That’s all.”

Elliott made a sound in his throat that fell somewhere between a purr and a growl. He pulled me against him and kissed me. His tongue swept over mine which sent shudders down my spine. We were both panting a little when he finally rested his forehead against mine.

“How is it that three days away from you feels like a lifetime?” He sighed.

“I don’t know.” I replied and nipped lightly at his jawline. “But the weather has been terrible for
the past couple of days. I’m starting to get cabin fever from being cooped up inside for too long. Let’s drop your bag off at the cabin and head to town to help with the festivities. We’re supposed to have a cloudless night sky tonight. Dr. Harvey heard on his radio that we could expect to see some meteor showers tonight. Maybe we could go stargazing if it isn’t too cold.”

“Or…” He countered. “We could go back to the house and build up a cozy fire and I can show you just how much I’ve missed you.”

I shivered at that and kissed him again. When I pulled away, I cupped his cheek and dragged my fingers along his scalp to finger-comb back his hair.

“Let’s at least help them set up and make a brief appearance. Mayor Lewis has a toast to give, there will be plenty of food, and we can exchange our gifts to our secret gift recipients, and head out early. Besides, I’ve never been to this festival; Mom was always working and Grandpa had his hands full caring for the cattle and pigs in the winter, and I was busy with school.”

He sighed. “Of course, love. You’re right. It would be wrong of us to not make an appearance. Let’s go.”

“And then we can snuggle by the fire.” I promised him with one more kiss.

“I’m holding you to that promise, my dear.” He replied as he took my hand and then pulled his bag over his shoulder. “C’mon. The sooner I can drop my stuff off then the sooner we can get to the feast.”

We arrived in the town square an hour later and it was ‘all hands on deck’ as the entire town was busy setting up the event.

I flagged Mayor Lewis down who was overseeing everything with a keen eye and marking things off a two-page checklist.

“We finally made it Mayor Lewis.” I remarked with a smile. “Elliott’s bus came in at 11 AM. So put us to work. What do you need help with?”

“You can help us with the food.” Robin called out. “We’re carrying out the trays and setting the tables that the boys have organized. And Elliott, you can help my husband with tasks that require vertical talents as you both are the tallest men here.”

“Yes ma’am.” Elliott inclined his head and went with Demetrius.

“C’mon. Follow me into Gus’s kitchen. He’s nearly worked himself to exhaustion with all of the cooking, so it’s the least we can do and carry everything out for him. The poor man probably hasn’t slept in a couple of days.”

And within a matter of a couple hours, the town came together and set up the Winter’s Eve Festival.

Jas and Vincent helped Evylyn, Jodi, and Caroline decorate the ten foot tall conifer that sat in the town square. The kids hung bulbous holiday ornaments in record time while Jodi and Caroline discreetly went behind them and adjusted the ornaments so they were spaced equally apart instead of all clumped at the bottom. Meanwhile, Marnie held the ladder as Mayor Lewis set the gold holiday star at the top of the tree; it’s crystalline and glass shell glinted magnificently in the stark winter sunlight, and when the light hit it just right, it actually looked like it was twinkling.
Alex, Pierre, and Harvey shoveled and salted the walkways. Alex took to the work with youthful enthusiasm saying something about not needing to work out because shoveling was great cardio whereas Pierre and Harvey tried to disguise their fatigue by taking occasional moments to clean the non-existent fog and moisture from their glasses.

Willy, Gunther, and Gus moved picnic tables around the center tree while Emily, Hailey, and Leah decorated the town square with all sorts of festive displays. They wrapped pine garland around light poles, hung strands of holly attached to festive holiday ribbons, and every house in the square was decorated with large multicolored twinkle lights.

In the downtime while people enjoyed hors d’oeuvres and light refreshments courtesy of Evelyn, Jodi, and Caroline, the younger crowd: Sebastian, Sam, and Abigail built an army of “snow goons” next to two other handsome snowmen. They seemed to come up with more outlandish and macabre constructs and soon the park just south of the Saloon looked like a scene out of a low quality zombie movie.

By 3PM the festivities were ready to begin. The men had arranged the tables into a half circle and people sat in order of age starting at the top with Evelyn, her husband, and Mayor Lewis and ending with Jas and Vincent on the left and right sides of the half circle. Elliott and I took our seats next to Leah and Emily who were wearing matching bracelets made out of fresh holly. From across the way, I caught Shane’s eye. I expected him to avert his gaze or busy himself with his drink but instead he simply nodded once in acknowledgement.

The smell that filled the air made my stomach flutter in anticipation. Along with the standard fare of turkey, stuffing, and mashed potatoes with farm fresh butter and homemade gravy, Gus also had some more exotic choices like crab cakes, shrimp coconut soup, and fiddlehead risotto. And for dessert, there were blueberry tarts, fruit salad, and blackberry cobbler.

Mayor Lewis stood up from his picnic table and cleared his throat expectantly. The idle and excited chatter died down almost immediately.

“Ladies and Gentlemen. Another year has come and gone and it’s made me realize a couple important things about myself and about my job as your mayor.” Mayor Lewis paused and took out a pair of discrete reading glasses and unfolded a small piece of paper that clearly had a pre-written speech on it. “Today is a time to be thankful for this year’s good fortune, and we all have a lot for which to be thankful. Each year, I look forward to the Feast of the Winter Star because today marks a day where we reflect on the past year and look forward to the new things that are to come. I am honored to serve as your Mayor and I wish all of you health and happiness in this upcoming year. To you all!”

Mayor Lewis raised his wine glass and toasted everyone and we mimicked his gesture by toasting our own glasses to him. As soon as he sat down, the idle and happy chatter picked up once again and settled into a comfortable hum. Almost immediately, Elliott was caught up in another one of Willy’s fishing stories which left me free to sit back and observe the crowd as I ate.

Vincent and Jas were at the end flinging mashed potatoes at each other with their spoons. Jas’s aim was remarkable as one of her shots hit Vincent square between the eyes, but then Jodi quickly put a stop to their childish mischief and they both settled in to eat their mashed potato ammunition.

Sebastian, Abigail, and Sam finished eating in record time and Sam pulled out his guitar and plucked a few acoustic Christmas tunes while Sebastian and Abigail played cards. Penny and Maru were talking with Dr. Harvey and their faces all held the same look of intellectual curiosity as Maru showed off a couple of technical diagrams while they all ate.
As more and more people finished their meals, the seating order didn’t matter as much and people intermingled with one another. Well…at least everyone mingled except Shane.

I set my empty plate in a dirty dishes bin and went to where Shane was sitting.

“Hey.” I said warmly.

“Hey Morgan.” He didn’t seem brash or rude but there was a hollowness in his voice that made me ache in sympathy.

“Um…mind if I sit for a moment?”

He shrugged. “It’s a free country.”

I took that as an invitation and sat with my back against the picnic table.

“So…uh. How are you doing?”

Shane popped a piece of turkey into his mouth and deliberately chewed and swallowed before answering my question. It looked as though he was giving my question quite a lot of thought.

“I guess I don’t know.” He said. “The doc I’m seeing has me on this medication that’s supposed to help…level me out I guess … but I don’t know if it’s working. I don’t feel bad but I also don’t feel much of anything. I see him twice a week but sometimes I feel like everyone’s scrutinizing me like I’m a disgusting insect.”

I blinked a few times in surprise. His response had been more forthright than I was expecting, and then I began silently panicking as I thought of something I could say that would make him feel better.

I was about to deny his claim that the rest of the town was scrutinizing him to try and ease his fears, but I realized that it probably did feel like that from his perspective. When I looked around, I saw that most of the people were almost acting like he wasn’t even there. He was the social pariah; the proverbial bomb that was about to explode at any second. People tiptoed around him. People were afraid of talking with him, and even I kept my distance after everything that had happened.

“Yeah…that’s pretty shitty. I’m sorry.”

His dark eyes panned up to mine. He scrutinized my expression clearly trying to determine if I was lying or placating his fears just to uphold common courtesy. Yoba, the world must’ve burned Shane badly for him to be this distrustful of people.

“I guess I don’t know.” He said. “The doc I’m seeing has me on this medication that’s supposed to help…level me out I guess … but I don’t know if it’s working. I don’t feel bad but I also don’t feel much of anything. I see him twice a week but sometimes I feel like everyone’s scrutinizing me like I’m a disgusting insect.”

I blinked a few times in surprise. His response had been more forthright than I was expecting, and then I began silently panicking as I thought of something I could say that would make him feel better.

I was about to deny his claim that the rest of the town was scrutinizing him to try and ease his fears, but I realized that it probably did feel like that from his perspective. When I looked around, I saw that most of the people were almost acting like he wasn’t even there. He was the social pariah; the proverbial bomb that was about to explode at any second. People tiptoed around him. People were afraid of talking with him, and even I kept my distance after everything that had happened.

“Yeah…that’s pretty shitty. I’m sorry.”

His dark eyes panned up to mine. He scrutinized my expression clearly trying to determine if I was lying or placating his fears just to uphold common courtesy. Yoba, the world must’ve burned Shane badly for him to be this distrustful of people.

“Yeah well that’s life I guess. I’ve done a lot of this to myself. I guess I have to deal with it one way or the other.”

“What d’you mean?”

Shane shrugged, “I’m not the man I used to be. You might not believe it but I use to play Varsity Gridball in high school. I was good. Okay, maybe not as good as Alex but I was still good. Then one bad knee injury ended my season. My scholarship was revoked, I was dropped from the gridball team, and well, depression and anxiety followed closely behind it. I couldn’t exercise and I couldn’t play a game that I loved so I threw myself down the proverbial bottle. But … I got myself here. I have to somehow get myself back out.”

I started speaking before I really considered what I was saying. “If you’re ever looking for
something to do, I could use an extra pair of hands on the farm. There’s not much to do right now, but once the snow melts I have a ton of lumber and debris that I’m looking to clear so I can start up an orchard like the one my grandpa had. I couldn’t pay you until the summer, once the profit from my spring crops come in, but I’ll have way more work than I can handle. And it is great exercise.”

Shane cocked a dark eyebrow at me. “You’re serious aren’t you?”

“Yes. I actually am.” I replied in surprise at myself.

Shane sighed. “Thanks Morgan. I appreciate the offer. I’ll let you know once my schedule frees up. Marnie pulled some strings for me and found me a job working at the Joja call center for the winter. It’s a temporary job but it’s across the street from the therapy place.”

“Oh? I’m sorry, but why would she think that customer service work would be right for you? It nearly destroyed my soul and I’m not —“ I winced at how that sentence was about to end but Shane gave me a soft smile.

“The word you’re looking for is manic depressant.” He said. “It’s okay. The first step towards recovery is admitting you have a problem, right? And I’m not working in customer service. I’m working in the IT division. Joja is trying to start an online store and Sebastian’s been teaching me the basics of computer coding. Their IT department offers on the job training and I figure it would be a good chance to get my foot in the door so I can finally move out of Marnie’s place and live on my own.”

“Wow! That’s really cool.” I replied. “So did you give your notice at Joja Mart?”

“Nah.” Shane shrugged. “Morris fired me the night that everything happened and I lied to Marnie about it. That was just one of the many things that led to all of … that.”

“Alright folks! It’s time for our secret gift exchange.” Mayor Lewis announced. “Remember that this was a serious gift exchange with a 100 gold limit and not a white elephant gift exchange.”

Mayor Lewis scowled at Sam who had the good sense to look chagrined.

“C’mon.” Shane said. “You’ve heard enough about my problems. It’s the Winter’s Day Feast. Let’s go open our presents.”

The entire town gathered around the giant pine tree, and Maru and Penny helped pass out the wrapped parcels. Elliott caught my eye and I gave him a warm, pleased smile. He and I had agreed to swap presents privately later tonight. And that was only a partial innuendo. I did get Elliott an actual gift in addition to sex.

Once the gifts were passed out, Jas skipped up to me with a mischievous smile on her face.

“Did anyone give you a gift yet?”

“Nope.” I replied. “Maybe I was too naughty this year.”

Jas rolled her eyes. “After saving Uncle Shane, I doubt you were naughty. You could ask for like 100 toys and Father Winter would give them to you, no questions asked.”

I chuckled, “Well I’ll keep that in mind. I do need some new stuff for the farm.”

Jas wiggled impatiently. “So? Did you guess who your secret gift giver is?”
I feigned ignorance, “I dunno. Um…Harvey looks awfully suspicious over there by himself. Maybe it was him.”

“Nooo.” She urged as though she was trying to give me a subtle hint before the excitement got the best of her. “IT WAS ME!”

I jumped back in overblown surprise, “What! That’s crazy! I had no idea!”

Jas beamed and handed me a purple gift bag with pink tissue paper sticking out of it. “Auntie Marnie let me wrap it myself.”

I set the bag down on the picnic table and dug through the tissue paper. A conical object was wrapped up in more pink tissue paper but Jas had taped every inch of the material down so it was impossible to open.

I tried to slice away at it but my nails were clipped too short to make much of a dent.

“Um, I might’ve used too much tape.” Jas said in a small voice. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” I smiled. “I like a challenge. Opening a gift is part of the fun of receiving a gift. You just — “ I tugged at the tape hoping a hole would peel open for me to tear at the flimsy tissue underneath, — “Man, did you dip this thing in glue?”

“Here.” Shane’s voice said from behind me.

I turned to him. He held a box cutter out and I took the tool with a grateful smile. I carefully carved the tape away and peeled the tissue back to reveal a blue seashell.

Jas smiled. “Do you like it? I found it with Ms. Penny and Vincent when we were by the ocean learning about aquatic animals. I kept it all this time because I thought it was pretty, but then when I heard that I had you as my secret gift partner, I thought you’d like it more.”

I gave Shane’s box cutter back to him, knelt down, and pulled Jas into a hug. “This is a great gift. Thank you.”

I stuffed the tissue paper and tape exoskeleton into the gift bag and put the shell in the palm of my hand. The outside of it was a deep cerulean but the inside had an array of iridescent colors swirling in a rainbow pattern. I spent a lot of time down at the beach fishing and I had never found a shell quite like this one. It was beautiful.

“And if you put the seashell to your ear you can hear the ocean!” Jas instructed with childishly innocent enthusiasm.

“Oh really?” I smirked and I put one end of the shell to my ear. Since the shell was in the shape of a lopsided cylinder, it didn’t actually make the same echoing ‘ocean’ sound but I played along.

“Oh yes, I can hear it!”

“Go on and say goodbye to Vincent so we can go home. And don’t forget your hat.” Shane said.

Jas pulled on her purple winter hat and matching mittens and ran through the crowd and out of sight.

“You’re good with her you know.” I told Shane as I put the shell into the bag for safekeeping.

He looked away. Doubt etched his features, “Yeah well …”
“Hey.” I insisted. I placed my hand on his shoulder. “She loves you Shane. Don’t ever doubt that.”

He nodded and then cleared his throat. “So…Marnie let it slip that you were my secret gift exchange person. Don’t feel bad if you didn’t get me a —“

— “Shut up.” I smirked and I handed my gift out to him. “Just be careful, it’s fragile.”

He set the brown gift bag on the picnic table and pulled out two mason jars full of my canned hot peppers.

“Oh…wow. Morgan … these …these are my favorite. How did you know?” He asked.

“Gus.” I smiled. “When I received your name in the mail, I honestly had no idea what you’d like so I asked Gus for some help. Considering everything that’s happened recently, I felt like getting you a six pack of beer would be less than helpful, but I did grow a bunch of peppers in the summer and now you have what remains of that batch. I hope that’s okay. I didn’t really have time to go out and buy something. This winter’s been pretty brutal and …”

My voice died when he looked at me. His dark eyes looked unusually clear — probably thanks to the sobriety — and he bit his bottom lip.

“No..this. It’s great. C — can I give you a hug?” His face flushed just asking the question.

“Sure.” I replied and I pulled him into a chaste side hug.

His denim jacket smelled like woodsmoke and his touch was cautious. When I let go, he looked over at Elliott who was still deep in conversation with Leah and Emily. He was holding a bottle of wine with the Stardrop Saloon label on the side. Clearly Emily had been his secret gift giver.

“Your boyfriend isn’t gonna give you a hard time if I take you up on the offer to help you on the farm?” He asked quietly.

“No.” I said firmly. “He’s not.”

Shane looked at me like I was insane. But then he shrugged, “I — I just get nervous I guess. Call it part of my anxiety or something, but you seem really happy with him and I don’t wanna mess that up. I — I mean —“

I held up a hand to stop him and he looked relieved, “Shane. I appreciate the concern but it’s not necessary. Elliott and I trust each other. Besides, he’s over there talking to two women now and I’m not jealous.”

“Yeah but they’re gay.” He stated.

I was going to argue but stopped, “Okay…fair point. But still, we can be friends. I’d like to be friends. As long as you can deal with the fact that that’s all we are and that’s all we’ll ever be.”

His dark eyes took on a haunted look. He whispered, “I don’t have many friends.”

I nodded, “And now you have one more if you’ll have me.”

“I — I —“ He winced at how awkward he sounded and he took a breath before speaking again. “I’d like that I think.”

I extended my hand to him. “Well then. It’s good to meet you, friend.”
Shane took my hand. His own hand dwarfed over mine. His skin felt warm and his palms were calloused. “It’s nice to meet you, too. And thank you.” His eyes met mine. He worried his upper lip with his bottom teeth and self consciously rubbed his hand along his thick stubble. “Thanks for saving me.”

Before I could respond, Jas came peeling out of the crowd with Vincent hot on her heels. She held out the boy’s hat and taunted him in a sing-song voice. The poor kid hadn’t hit puberty yet so Jas was still a full head taller and her legs were longer than his.

“Viiincenteent! Cooomee and get your haaaaaat!” Jas crowed.

Shane watched the spectacle with an expression of one part chagrin and three parts quiet amusement.

“She’s a Hellraiser alright.” He muttered. “I better go and stop this before she makes Vincent cry again. Happy Holidays Morgan.”

“You too.” I chuckled and watched as he jogged after the duo. I picked up my gift and rejoined Emily, Leah, and Elliott. The ladies were clearly attached at the hip so I didn’t take it personally when they left to go and sample some of Gus’s spiked eggnog.

“All’s well that ends well then?” Elliott asked and he took my hand into his.

“Yeah. Vincent won’t be mad at Jas for too long. I’ll bet you fifty gold they’ll be finishing that snow goon that they started before the feast is done.”

“I’m talking about with Shane.” He said with a smile.

“Oh…yeah I think so.”

I looked into Elliott’s eyes and I think he sensed my uncertainty because he said, “Remember. I trust you, Morgan.”

“Thank you.” I replied. “I love you Elliott.”

He lightly kissed me and I blushed as I felt the heat of several eyes watching us.

Although the kiss was chaste, I felt uncomfortable being watched so I cut the kiss short. “So…ah… what did you get from Emily?”

Elliott held up the bottle. “Emily kept the last of Gus’s autumn ale for me. She apparently pulled it before the Stardew Fair and paid Gus for the lost profits. Somehow she knew that this was my favorite, but I don’t think I ever mentioned that to her.”

I shrugged and feigned innocence, “Who knows. Emily is quite astute.”

Elliott tilted my chin up and gently kissed me once more. “Or a little bird told her about it the night that Sam’s band played at the Saloon.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” I replied cheekily. “C’mon. Let’s go on home. If you kiss me once more, I think the town will start prematurely planning our wedding.”

Just because he could, Elliott gave me one last brief peck and said, “After you my dear.”

We made it back to the cabin just as it became too dark to see. Our timing was perfect since I had left my headlamp behind on accident and tonight was a moonless night. When we got inside, we
kicked off our boots by the door and I tossed a few dry logs on the smoldering embers. Within a couple minutes, the hearth roared to life.

“Shall we exchange our gifts?” Elliott asked.

“Sure. I’ll go first. You gotta close your eyes though.”

Elliott dutifully closed his eyes and waited patiently with his hands outstretched.

I pulled his gift from my purse and set it in his hands. He opened his eyes and glanced at the envelope.

“Brilliant! It’s a letter. Uh…what is it?”

“Open it idiot.” I urged.

Elliott grinned at me, did so, and read the single sheet of paper. His lips murmured silently and his eyes flitted from left to right and then grew wider.

“Morgan! This — this — what? How?”

I chuckled. “Your father got in contact with some of his colleagues and the professor in their English Department sent me a flyer to their writer’s workshop programs. I know how you feel about Alexandria University but it’s a six-week course this spring and they introduce you to several local accomplished writers, and they’ll help you publish, and they can offer you far better advice than I can on what qualifies as good writing. I already sent them your tuition to enroll in the program. I hope that wasn’t too —“

Elliott cut me off with a ferocious kiss that left me both breathless and speechless. He cupped my face and when we broke apart, his voice was thick and slightly rough.

“You talked to my father?”

I nodded. “I called your mother a couple of weeks after I left. I explained to her what I was thinking and asked her if she knew of any writing workshop programs. She then put your dad on the phone and he made the necessary contacts and sent me the information.”

“And he gave you the information just like that? He’s never been supportive of me, Morgan. So —“

“— So maybe he realized that you do have potential.” I interjected. ”And maybe I sent him my copy of your book and explained to him why you need this class to help keep you marketable. And maybe he actually read your book and agreed with me.”

Elliott’s brows furrowed and he shook his head in disbelief. “My father read my book? You sent him the copy I gave you?”

“Uh…I bought that from you.” I chided. “And yes I did. I hope you’re not mad. I know you’ve been struggling with this second book and I just wanted to help you. I’m sorry if I —“

Elliott shook his head. “No Morgan. Do not apologize to me—not for something like this.” He pulled me into him and an emotional shudder made his chest tremble. “Yoba. I’ve never met a more thoughtful person than you. I just — I can’t believe it. Thank you.”

I nuzzled into his chest. “You’re welcome.”
He chuckled and then he cleared his throat. “Uh…this sort of makes your present a little corny, but…”

I pulled away from him. “Nonsense. I’m sure I’ll like it no matter what it is.”

“Alright. Close your eyes then.”

I closed my eyes. I heard Elliott walk into the bedroom and come back out with something that smelled floral. I heard tissue paper rustling, and my heart thundered from the anticipation.

“Can I open my eyes?” I asked.

“Not quite yet.” He said.

“Elliott…” I complained.

“Relax, love. It will be worth the wait, I assure you.” I smelled the cinnamon aroma his clothes gave off as he came closer to me. He cleared his throat again and then I felt a gentle weight settle on top of my sternum. Elliott clasped something around my neck and then took a step back.

“Go ahead and open your eyes.”

I did and I looked down. A small ruby sat encased in a sterling silver circular band. The pendant was about the size of my pinky nail, but despite its modest size, the ruby glinted and sparkled merrily in the candlelight.

“Elliott…this is…” When I looked up, I saw the second gift and my voice died in my throat.

He smiled and held out a beautiful winter bouquet of holly, primrose, crocus, and snowdrop. “Morgan Grace Raymond, will you be my girlfriend?”

I laughed and accepted the bouquet. The subtle, soft aroma of the winter flowers was offset by the assertive pine sprigs that garnished the arrangement. It smelled crisp and heavenly and like the best parts of winter.

“I don’t understand. What’s this all about? Did you not think we were dating or —“

— “Oh no!” Elliott interrupted. His lopsided grin looked mischievously dashing. “I am completely smitten with you my love, but I wanted to make us official in the proper Pelican Town sort of way. So…do you accept my proposal?”

“Of course!” I chuckled. “The bouquet is beautiful. I can’t believe Pierre sells bouquets in the winter. This must’ve cost you a pretty penny.”

“Not at all.” He replied. “Leah helped me gather the flowers and pine boughs and Emily helped me arrange it. Those two certainly have an eye for style. The only thing it cost me was the time and a couple of days of literal cold feet.”

“And the necklace?” I asked.

Elliott smiled and he drew me closer to him. “It belonged to my mother. She gave it to me the morning before you left and told me to never let you go. So this, my love, is my promise to you. I intend to marry you Morgan. Not now, but someday. So I am giving you this as a promise pendant. You mean everything to me, and when I look back at this year, I can honestly say that you’ve made had more of an impact on my life than anyone else that I’ve met. I wouldn’t be
where I am today without you. I love you Morgan.”

Happy tears welled up in my eyes. “I love you too Elliott.”

The fire crackled and popped as we kissed. The cabin’s frosted windows fogged up from the heat, and I thought back to nine months ago when the cabin’s stark emptiness reflected just how big of an impact my grandpa left.

The beauty of life is that life continues even after the people you love pass away. Grandpa’s death rocked me to my core, but his death was also the catalyst I needed to change my life.

Grandpa’s words echoed in my head: The land is more than a farm, it is your home. I left Zuzu City looking to escape. But what really happened was that I came home.

_I am home_, I thought.

I had Elliott and Golden — our little family in the making — and I had never felt more complete and satisfied.

_I am home._

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!