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The Anti-Social Network

Senior Paper

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Chapter 1

Morgan's head swam, groggy and nauseous as she awoke. It took her a second to recognize the buzzing around her as chattering cicadas, and the smell filling her nostrils as freshly tilled dirt. Under the smells of earth and pine clung hot alcohol and grimy morning breath. Her tongue cried for water like a shrunken, dried plum in her mouth. Nearby, firewood popped and settled, leaving no visible light, only that unforgettable smoky smell. Morgan blinked to make sure her eyes were open – and that she was definitely awake – but saw nothing. Twisting her head, she realized there was something over her head, pinched in loosely around her neck, a bag? It was thick, keeping *out* whatever light the world provided and keeping *in* each wave of her hot, stale breath. Her head began to pound and she pushed down the urge to vomit; something went terribly wrong last night. Last time she checked, she was nowhere near the woods. Morgan, now sharply awake, tried to move her legs, her arms, her whole body, with no luck. Every attempt was met with a solid wall of dirt. She was buried.

Heartbeat throbbing in her ears, breath quickening, Morgan fought against the earth constricting around her. She shook her shoulders, doing no more than rustling a nest of loose dirt down her bare neck. She shuttered again and her stomach did flips. The ground held her long body stiff as a plank and compressed her organs. What happened between Friday evening and now? And where were her friends? Morgan knew they had planned to go out for drinks, but couldn't recall any of the specifics. She remembered something she had heard about the effects of "blacking out", that it wasn't a matter of forgetting, but never actually forming the memories

in the first place. Morgan pushed the thought out of her head. A much scarier thought entered: someone did this to her.

The wilderness carried on mindlessly around her: birds chattering from tree to tree, crickets and cicadas competing to be louder, an owl hooted once, far off. No sound hinted at human life except the steady crackle of a fire that she imagined was manmade. It was very likely made by the same person – or persons – who buried her. Who could do this to someone? More importantly, she asked herself, who wanted to do this to her? Did she hook up with the wrong guy, some hazy night? She thought back on all the one-night-stands she had had, analyzing every face, each more nameless than the last. There was that one guy, what was his name, Alex? Ryan? She had made the last-minute decision to give him her number after waking up the morning after to breakfast in bed and feeling instantly overwhelmed, scribbling her number on a notepad as she backed out his door. He texted her for almost a month after, imploring her to get dinner, go see a movie, or anything else that she wanted to do. Was she too rude to him? Did she send him one too many “No thanks, I’m not really interested in anything serious right now”-s and one day, he just snapped? Her friends always told Morgan that her casual sex life would come back to bite her in the ass.

But then again, one of the girls had recently Facebook-stalked him and found that he had a new girlfriend. If that’s true, then Morgan doubted he did this. Morgan’s bare legs began to itch, pressed together by cold, prickly dirt, and she squirmed to relieve it. Her stomach pushed against the hard earth, aching from the pain of a long-overdue need to pee. If not what’s-his-name, then who? Who would do this to her? If she was stuck like this for much longer, she feared she would be swallowed under the ground never to be heard from again. Just then, something scuttled quickly past her head, and Morgan screamed. The high pitched shriek drove

into her throbbing head like a spike and Morgan squeezed her eyes tightly closed. Jaw rigid, eyebrows furrowed, she began to sob silently.

She wasn't sure she even wanted to know who did it. She tried to focus on problem solving, but ultimately decided that regardless of who they were and how they knew her, her situation was the same. Head still covered, she could find no answers beyond the smells and sounds around her. She didn't know how long she had been there, helplessly suffering, or even if it was day or night. It was early spring in Virginia; the days had just started getting longer and the wind, not so biting. Before Morgan and her friends left for the bar, she had eagerly thrown on shorts and sandals, a decision that she now cursed herself for. Her only saving grace against the clammy yet brittle grip of the earth was that she had long sleeves on, to guard her against the walls of her tomb. Even so, every now and then, she turned her head – the sound of a squirrel or tree branch grabbing her attention – and in turn sent a flurry of dirt tumbling further and further down the inside of her shirt.

Still groggy, time moved in and out with each breath that bounced back onto her moist face. Her two friends, Kinsey and Brooke, would be home, passed out asleep now. Or maybe they went home with someone of their own. As far as Morgan knew, they were buried somewhere in the woods; as far as Morgan knew, they were already dead. Shit, she could be dead. No, she reprimanded herself, she couldn't think like that. But still she listened to the relentless murmurs of the forest around her, searching for something more. Something bounded from limb to limb above her, thrashing the brittle sticks and leaves against themselves. Another log popped and settled; the wind changed direction and pungent smoke washed over her head. The smell of burning limbs began to leak into the bag and she coughed. Smoke stung her eyes, causing a fresh spring of tears to stream over her baggy lids and down either side of her long

nose. Cheeks wet, Morgan began to pray for a change of wind again. Or answers. Or, please God, a release from whatever Hell this was.

From somewhere, ahead of her in the darkness, came an answer; the sound of a single crisp page of a book, flipping over. Morgan stopped sniffing, her eyes now bulging open despite the burning smoke. Had she heard right? Or had she only mistaken the sound of her own cries for something more. The silence continued, only interrupted by a few cawing birds who stopped soon after they began. Morgan turned her head, right ear facing the direction the suspected page turn came from. Neck straining, ear outreached, she waited in desperate longing for another sound that hinted at humanity. Face now totally wet, salty and sticky, the black fabric clung to her left cheek as she pushed her right ear further forward. Maybe she *had* only mistaken a snuffle for a flipped page.

Then, almost inaudible, came the slide of a finger between two pages followed by the rustling of a flipped page. The sound struck Morgan so clearly that she could imagine the page, clamped between two fingers, while the other hand cupped the hard spine. Beyond the blackness that engulfed her face, someone was out there. This idea gripped Morgan, who was still straining her neck to hear better, and her eyes began to water out of fear. The earth crawled around her and she felt her whole body turn into gooseflesh. The smell of her cold sweat weaved through the burning wood and fresh dirt and she gulped hard. Now that she knew that she wasn't alone, she turned her head forward again. Who's out there? She wasn't sure she wanted to know.

Another page flipped. Her eyes welled over, her mouth crumpling into her quivering chin. Letting go, confusion and fear turned into silent weeping until one snuffle came out as a sharp, audible, gasp. Oh God, did he hear me, Morgan thought as she bit her lip into subdued silence. She stared ahead into the lining of the dark fabric, intent on gaining some sort of six

sense, x-ray vision. She saw nothing but blackness. The book closed fast, echoing through the trees for a moment, and Morgan jumped in her skin. More than ever she felt the earth close in around her. Then, there came the sound of footsteps, crunching twigs and pressing leaves into the ground; louder and louder, until Morgan thought she could feel each foot fall in the soil around her.

“Are you finally awake?” a man’s voice asked from far above.

Morgan cringed at the sharp sound, too loud and close in comparison to the steady hum of cicadas and the wind in the trees. A presence pinched at the top of her head, pulling the bag off, and she instinctively tried to duck away. Suddenly, cold air rushed to her cheeks, gripping the clammy skin. Light returned to her vision, as she glimpsed the crackling fire. In front of her stood two brown hiking boots, the owner she dared not look at. It was suddenly all too real; it was no longer an abstract nightmare. She suddenly missed the safety of her black bag, now, somewhere out of reach above her. Instead, she squeezed her eyes tightly until her eyelids were black and white static.

“Hey,” the man’s voice said, “Are you going to open your eyes?”

Morgan didn’t move.

“Come on,” he continued. “I’m not going to hurt you. I just want to talk.”

“Then why did you kidnap me and *bury me alive*?” Morgan heard herself ask.

“We needed to get away from outside distractions.” he said. “Will you open your eyes now?”

Morgan’s mind raced. He didn’t sound like a kidnapper; his voice was gentle, almost reassuring, and smooth. She expected the gravelly voice of a monster, or at least a chain-smoker

or something. But no, she thought, this is a trick. This is all some type of game. “If I see you, I’m dead,” she said.

He shifted his stance, the dirt in front of her scraping against the bottom of his shoe.

“Why do you think that?”

“If I see you, I can identify you,” she said, “You’ll kill me.” She relaxed her forehead a bit and added, “I don’t want to die.”

“I don’t want you to die either,” he responded, “Open your eyes, now.”

Morgan opened her eyes enough to look down at the dirt beneath her thin nose; the individual clumps of earth danced in the orange firelight. Her sight returned, she ached for freedom, looking up at the fire. It blazed no more than five yards away, behind the leg of her kidnapper.

“That’s better,” he said, and turned back towards the fire. Unfolded alongside the fire lay a sleeping bag, half unzipped with a book resting on top. There was no car in sight, nothing that hinted at where they were or how they got there. The only other object that she could see was a long, drawstring bag next to the sleeping bag. He walked over and picked up the thin bag without a word. With his back to her, she stole a glance at him for the first time: he was tall and lean, his dark jeans fitted tightly against the backs of his thighs. He wore a dark green vest made out of fleece, with black zippers around his shoulders to suggest there were sleeves that could zip on. Head shaved on the sides, he had a combed yet wavy collection of hair on top. He pulled the drawstring loose and the bag slid off to reveal the shiny metal skeleton of a fold-out chair. Returning to where he once stood in front of her, he opened the chair and slapped the four feet onto the dirt, enthusiastically.

Still speechless, he bent to sit. Stopping mid-squat, he looked down and back at the seat, brushing off what she imagined was dirt. Only then did he sit down, elbows on knees and fingers interlaced. A moment of silence passed between them, and he shifted slightly in his chair. “So,” he said, “Do you ever listen to ‘The Decemberists’?”

A log burst in the fire behind him and her heart skipped a beat. Was this a test? “What do you want from me?” she asked. The dirt beneath her mouth scattered away from her exclamation.

He cracked his knuckles and repeated his question. “Do you ever listen to ‘The Decemberists’? That’s all I asked.”

Her mind raced. If she said yes, would he let her go? Would he bury her all the way? He sat silent, thick eyebrows raised, waiting for her answer. Who were “The Decemberists” again? She had heard the name, knew they were a band. She had a friend in high school who listened to them. The friend gave her a mixed CD with one of their songs in particular, which he would always sing along to with an unnerving, high-pitched voice. “Don’t they have a song about a whale eating people, or something?” she asked, afraid. “Is that them?”

His hands unlaced and flew out to his sides. “Yes! ‘The Mariner’s Revenge’!” he said. “Awesome!”

Her mind buzzed, grasping for her next step: Could she remember any more of their music? Something about the band? What would he want now? This couldn’t be the reason she was here – “What other kind of music are you into?” she said, reaching. The unreal tone of the moment began to return, settling in the wrinkles of her brain and clogging all her thoughts.

He shook his head. “No no, if we want to use our time efficiently,” he said, “I’m going to have to lead the conversation. At least for now.”

At least for now. Morgan wasn't sure what that meant for her, just like she wasn't sure about him. She stared at his interlaced fingers, watched him scratch the top of one thumb with the filed nail of the other thumb. More and more regularly she snuck glances at his face through clumped eyelashes, but looked down when he returned her stare. She didn't want to see, didn't want to know. Didn't want to know what kind of man she was dealing with. "What do you want to talk about, then?"

"I want to help you broaden your perspective. I know," he began, eyes focused downward on his fingers. "I know my methods seem out-there right now. Just follow me. *I* won't hurt you, although *this experience* may hurt you. That's entirely up to you and how much you trust me. You're in control of your own fate. I'm just trying to help you." He emphasized the last line by motioning towards her with open palms, firelight glowing outward from between his spread fingers.

"Then help me by letting me go, please!" she gasped. Her head pounded with desperate adrenaline, headache coming back in full force.

"You gotta know it's going to take more than *that*," he said, raising one round eyebrow.

What *would* it take? Morgan wasn't sure she wanted to know. The further this went, the more she missed the unknown terror of the black bag. She had so many questions but disliked the answers more and more. A breeze dropped from the trees down into the clearing around them, and her dark baby hairs fluttered across her forehead. She looked up at him, squinting. The silence carried on between them, prying at her lips to open and continue the conversation. He looked back at her, his eyes saying something familiar yet far off and hazy. "How do we know each other?" she asked.

"We don't," he replied.

“I recognize you,” she said. “We’ve met before.” After saying it aloud she felt even more confident that they had met before. They had to know each other somehow; they had to have met before. Why else would he have kidnapped her? *How* could he have kidnapped her?

“Who I am isn’t important right now.”

“How could that not be important? You’re the *most* important person, right now.” she said, regretting giving him even the small compliment.

“No,” he said. “You are the most important person right now,” his two pointer fingers gesturing out toward her from the weave of fingers. “Who I am isn’t important right now.”

She remembered how damning the situation was for him; how it would be stupid for him to tell her about himself. Even if they did know each other, he wasn’t giving anything up. She would have to find that answer on her own – and she would. But what was he going to do to her; how was he going to “help her”? “What do you want to talk about?” Morgan asked.

He looked above and past her, into the woods. Something about the wrinkle of his eyes said he was smiling but his straight mouth told her he was dead serious. He cleared his throat and cracked his neck before looking back into her eyes. “I want you to convince me to unbury you,” he said.

“What?” Morgan began, “What do you mean?” Her mind raced as she tried to understand the game that they were playing. Any other time, any other topic, and any other person, she would have had no fear.

“I need you to convince me to dig you up and let you go. Tell me why it’s worth it to save you. Help me, help you,” he said.

His words reverberated in her mind, turning her body to stone and the soil around her to water. Thoughts flew by, too fast to make any sense of. Nothing stuck; the longer she thought,

the faster the thoughts escaped her. Where does someone even start? Silence settled between and around them, waiting for her to breathe words into the air. She thought about being stuck in the ground for an indeterminable amount of time. Her body felt a sickening combination of hot and cold, wet and dry. She told herself to focus, to not panic, to simply do as he said and win him over. He was giving her the ultimate opportunity. Or was it only a game? Just playing with his food? She had seen his face; she could identify him. *What was the point?* She opened her mouth to speak but was cut off by a stiff finger outstretched between them.

“Are you sure you have an answer?” he blurted. “I want you to have a strong argument. You can take some time to think it out. This *is* probably the most important answer you’ll give in your life.” He stood, pulling up the back of his jeans. “I’ll let you think. I think I’ll go for a walk.”

He walked past Morgan, leaving her line of sight, and she panicked. “Where are you going? Are you coming back? You can’t leave me like this!” She tried to force her body to move, to bust out of the dirt; adrenaline gives people super human strength, right?

“Why should I unbury you?” he exclaimed, already a good distance away from her, “Think about it!”

Morgan listened intently to the steady crunch of footstep, until they faded into the nighttime sounds. She stayed like this for an unknown amount of time; silent, waiting, ears focused. The wind rustled, hushing the nocturnal souls around her. The trees swung together, whispering their deliberations about her future. A bird cawed above her and she shrieked out of surprise. She tried not to cry, squeezing her eyes shut. Why was this happening to her? How much longer would she have to endure torture? Had the torture even begun?

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It had been hours, Morgan wasn't sure how many. The night sky persisted – if anything – growing thicker and heavier as time passed. The roaring campfire had likewise darkened, now quietly licking at the jagged black logs. For a while, every squirrel, bird, or other nighttime creature that Morgan heard had her craning her neck to see if he had returned. She could no longer recall the sensation of drinking water, the great wave of life and gratification pouring into her mouth. While her tongue shriveled and clung to the back of her throat, the rest of her body felt coated in slime. Her earth cocoon swaddled and squeezed the sweat from her pores. She finally gave up and relieved herself, the stabbing pain of holding full bladder becoming too much for her diminishing willpower to handle. Hot urine coated her sweaty legs all the way down to her toes, soaking into her lace-trimmed shorts and cork platform sandals. She cried both tears of intense relief and burning shame as she felt her stomach slowly deflate and empty.

Morgan always bragged about her mantra: “anger” is the surface name for the real emotions that we feel; the true root of the feeling is deeper than just “anger.” She told herself this now, trying to understand how she could feel what she felt. She was more than angry, she was furious. She felt threatened. She felt terrified. She felt vengeful. Hot anger boiled her blood and made her heart flutter against her ribcage. The idea of clawing her way to freedom, and then, revenge, bloomed in her mind. Images of sweet, slow and excruciating revenge titillated her, of waiting, watching him return and finding her gone, the fear in his eyes when she attacked *him*, bound *his* wrists and feet and buried *him* in the ground. Then she would ask him the same question and watch his mind break as he tried to understand the irrational. What explanation, what argument, could he possibly give to justify why it was worth it to “save” him? And, above all else, Morgan continued to ask herself: how did they know each other?

○

Morgan had been looking forward to that Friday night all week. Between classes, presentations, papers and research for the National Annual Mass Communications Conference, her need for the release of responsibility and inhibitions had been growing for weeks. During the average semester, Morgan was used to getting laid a couple times a month while dealing with none of the drama and work of having a significant other.

This Friday night was going to be the night that she ended a three month-long dry spell, now that she was finally done editing and formatting her research results. That night she would get a much deserved night of fun and de-stressing, and one week later she would leave for the conference to present her research on “social media” as the defining tool for communication in the next twenty years. Susan Daugherty from the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication had told Morgan at last year’s Conference that she could leave a good impression on anyone and Morgan was intent on doing so, this time, to a crowd of nearly four hundred people.

Morgan carried this determination and excitement throughout the day on Friday, and as she got ready to go out. Her two friends, Brooke and Kinsey, didn’t understand how something as scholarly as research and presentations could give her such a high, but then again, Morgan didn’t associate with them to trade presentation topics. By eight o’clock that Friday night, Brooke was already teasing Morgan about wearing shorts in forty degree weather from where she sat on the bed, texting Kinsey.

“She says she’s leaving right now,” Brooke said, not looking up from her screen.

Morgan strapped on her second platform sandal and stood up from the bed. “Alright, I’m ready – and before you say anything again, yes – I’m wearing the shorts,” Morgan said, “It’s finally warm enough, and you know they’ll do the trick.”

“Fine, whatever,” Brooke sighed, standing up and walking out the bedroom door, “Be cold. I don’t give a shit.”

Morgan groaned at the comment, a fun start to the evening, and contemplated ditching the two girls sooner rather than later. Getting in the car, the two headed towards downtown Roanoke, no more than ten minutes away from Morgan’s apartment. Morgan sat in the passenger seat and checked emails on her phone while Brooke drove, both of them knowing that Brooke would likely be driving home alone, later that night. They parked on the third floor of the parking garage and moaned for each apprehensive step they took down the stairs in heels. Heels would be the death of her, Morgan swore under her breath.

Finding Kinsey in the club was easy enough; they just looked for the girl attracting the attention of the bartender, giving him only enough time to help one other person before calling him back for another drink. Morgan had no idea when Kinsey initially starting drinking alcohol, but though that with how high her tolerance was, she had to have started drinking way before she was twenty one. They slid through the cracks of moving, bobbing bodies until they were at the bar with Kinsey, talking directly into each other’s faces. Kinsey smiled, ivory skin blotchy pink. “Hey it’s about time you chicas got here!”

“You’ve been here like ten minutes!” Morgan said, checking her phone.

Kinsey grabbed a laminated drinks menu and handed it to the girls “Well I’m about to order my third drink,” Kinsey replied, “What are you gonna get?” She swung both her elbows

onto the bar, arching her body halfway over the counter and stared lasers at the back of the bartender's head.

Morgan laughed at her unblinking friend and glanced down at the menu. She knew instantly what she wanted and pulled out the debit card and ID from her bra. Brooke scanned the menu front and back, and then front again, studying the italicized list of ingredients for each drink along with the prices. The bartender turned with an eye roll and walked over to Kinsey.

Kinsey turned to her two friends, excitedly. "Kamikazes? Yeah?" she turned to the bartender. "Three Kamikazes! I'll also take a Vodka Tonic please!"

The bartender nodded and looked at Morgan. "One White Russian!" she said.

Brooke flipped the laminated menu over and pointed at a drink, saying "Can I please have a Pink Lady?"

The bartender nodded, emotionless, taking IDs and cards from all three girls. The Kamikazes came out first, and the three drank to the hopes of decent music and hot man bodies.

The three women danced, pressed close together, on the flashing dance floor. They had started off strong, jumping and busting out all the best and worst dance moves, making regular trips to the bar for more alcohol. Sweat collected along Morgan's scalp, and all three women danced more and more in place, as their heels began to smash and dig into their skin. Morgan bounced up and down, non-committedly, enjoying her growing drunkenness. Upon Kinsey's suggestion, they had each started a tab for drinks; Kinsey always insisted that it was easier for everyone involved. Morgan glanced over at her and Brooke dancing against each other, each with a glass in their hand, swaying and rolling their body to the beat. In her head, Morgan tried to recall how many drinks she had had by this point – five, six, not counting shots – she wasn't sure. She wasn't sure how many Kinsey had had, but could only imagine that it was double her

own count. Taking a few rocking steps to her right, Morgan joined in on her friends' dance. "Are you two doing alright?" she yelled.

Kinsey leaned in between them, Brooke leaning with her. "Yeah, I'm good, but," Kinsey said, "this girl *cannot* handle her liquor!"

"Hey!" Brooke snapped, still dancing in place, "I'm new at this, you're not allowed to say that. I'm hurt." The song changed to something familiar, sped up, to accommodate the club atmosphere and Brooke broke into a renewed dancing vigor, smiling. Morgan and Kinsey laughed, one arm over the other's shoulder, holding their sides. They rallied, all jumping and throwing their arms in the air until the end of the song came – a sweaty release – and they all promptly made way to the bar again. Three more shots were had and Brooke hopped from foot to foot, fussing with the bottom of her silk blouse. "I'm going to go to the bathroom; someone come with me!" she said, turning and walking away before she could get an answer.

"Shit, okay, I got it!" Kinsey said, following quickly behind her.

Drunk friends disappearing into the crowd, Morgan turned back to the bar and pulled out her phone. She placed her drink down on the gleaming bar and took a picture of it with her phone. She knew her posts only got a handful of likes and "pity" comments, but she didn't care. After picking the right color filter and effects for the photo, she posted it and took one of herself, smiling, holding Brooke's drink. "TGIF! <3" she captioned it and posted the photo, then put down her phone.

"Do you want me to take the picture for you?" a man said, over her shoulder.

She turned quickly, too quickly, the world dragging behind in her vision. He stood, holding a whiskey glass in one hand, the other hand in his dark jean pocket. At first glance, she marked him as too neat; the kind of attention to fashion and meticulous hair care that marked

most men she met at the Forest – the gay bar they were at – as a gay man. He had a rectangular face, lined with a dark hair line and defined jaw, and bright eyes. She thought it looked like a very cliché drink for a man, the whiskey on the rocks, swirling in his grasp. He smiled at her and repeated his question, “Do you want me to take the picture for you?”

“No,” Morgan said, “It’s cool, see, it has an inside and outside camera!”

“Well isn’t technology just incredible,” he said, smile dropping on one side.

“It’s the future!” Morgan said, propping the arm with the drink in it on the bar. “Actually, it is, I’m doing this research and huge presentation about it.”

The stool next to her opened up and he took it. They turned towards each other, on their close seats, and their legs bumped. Laughing, they readjusted so that they each had one knee between each other’s thighs.

Morgan took a sip of her drink; she already probably looked like a drunken idiot. “The music is so great tonight, right?” She remembered why she was there, for drinks and a fun night, and her posture changed. She wanted to come off as elegant, as someone who belonged in your bed, wrapped in sheets, not a bar babe.

“Yeah, it’s been a pretty consistent night!” he said, eyes never looking away. “This is my first time here, but it’s leaving a pretty good impression.”

Morgan blushed, overwhelmed by his piercing eyes, and looked down at their legs: one dark pant leg, one bare leg, one dark, one bare. “I’m happy you’re having a good time! I’ve been looking forward to tonight all week,” she said, glancing up at him from her drink.

“I know the feeling,” he said, raising his glass. “A toast to the night?”

“Yes!” Morgan said, turning the “e” into more of an “a,” “T.G.I.F!” They clinked glasses and drank. Morgan finished her drink and looked at the glass, deciding if she should even get

another. She was at the level of drunk that could only get worse, from that point on, she decided. “I actually think I’m going to switch to water, now,” she said, feeling a bit lame. “We’ve been here a while.”

Only then did she remember she came with friends. Scanning the club, she tried to find them without leaving her candidate for the night. Hadn’t they just gone to the bathroom? Maybe they had seen her making her moves and decided to stay gone. After a moment, she saw Brooke’s black pixie hair and Kinsey’s long blonde hair and metallic jacket bobbing up and down by the bathroom door. If they even made it to the bathroom, she never found out.

“Is everything cool?” he asked, bringing her thoughts back to the bar.

“Yeah,” she snapped, regaining her cool composure. “Sorry, I was just checking on the people who I came with.”

“I didn’t mean to take you away from anyone,” he said. “I got us both some waters. I figured you probably had the right idea.”

On the bar next to their glasses sat two plastic cups of water; she looked at the cups for a second, took the one closest to him, and sipped it, smiling. He smiled back at her, eyebrows raised, taking the other cup of water. He held it up, and took a long drink, pointing at his tilted cup as he did so. Finishing the action, he put the water back on the bar and smiled up at her. “Just water.”

She laughed, embarrassed. Her head swam in booze and the promise of sex. This was going to be the guy, tonight, she decided. “Hey, do you want to get out of here?” she asked.

“Sure,” he said, smile widening, “Just let me finish my drink.”

Morgan smiled back. “Take your time.” Biting her lip, she hoped it looked more sexual than like the nervous tick it was. She sent Kinsey and Brooke a text, telling them she was about

to head out with a guy, and would give them his address once she knew where they were going. She put her phone down, the screen leaving a dim light trail in her vision. More than lightheaded, she took another long sip of water, telling herself to get a grip. She admired his thick, textured hair, looking down when he caught her staring. Her head spun and she tried to refocus. She turned back to the bar, to pay her tab, but her legs were stuck – his dark pants, a wall, closing in both of her bare thighs between his.

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It all came back to Morgan in one, hurling wave and she was sure that if she weren't rooted so literally in the ground, she would have collapsed with the weight of memory. The smell of hot piss rose through the dirt around her, and there was a solid layer of crust around her eyes. The back of her eyeballs ached, the solitary fire even too bright for them to bare, now. From the forest behind her came the sound of muted footfall and she knew it was the sound that brought her out of her half-asleep, meditative state. Branches swished and snapped behind her, accompanying the familiar thumping of boots on dirt. Her heart raced with the fear of the unseen and the new knowledge that it was her own agency that carried her away with her captor. She almost feared that it wasn't him, now only a few yards away from where she was buried. Shit, why hadn't she thought of something to tell him? If he was being honest, she *could* argue herself to safety. If he was lying, she wanted to know what was in it for him. Unceremoniously, he passed her and to the dim fire. Throwing a couple logs on, he took his time, prodding them into the right place on top of the old black remains. Seemingly satisfied, he came back to the empty chair, still open, in front of her.

“So!” he said, clapping his hands once, as he said the word. “I just had a handful of wonderful thoughts, what about you? Do you have an answer for me?” He plopped down into the

chair, arms balanced on the thin plastic armrests. There were two plastic water bottles hanging in each of his hands. She imagined drinking both of them at the same time, her moth unhinging, not even tasting the water on her tongue. Did he have more?

“Yes,” he said, her eyes darting from the clear bottle to his face. “One of these is for you. If you have my answer.”

Blood ran cold in her veins and Morgan blurted the first thought she had: “You should let me go so that I can make the world a better place.”

“Bullshit. That’s what anyone would say even if they weren’t in your situation,” he said. “I thought you were ready to talk.”

“I’m serious,” Morgan said. “I’m planning on working in the broadcasting world, researching and reporting the news that people need to know.” His posture remained unchanged, the water bottles dangling miles away from her.

He raised his eyebrow and scuffed, “So you want to be a puppet. Or are you planning on only selling out to “the right interests”? Seriously, what did you think about while I was gone?” he asked, looking at his watch. “That was almost an *hour*.”

Morgan ignored his comments, eyes shifting between his face and the bottles. “We find the truth and spread it to the millions to promote an informed public.”

“And who are you quoting this evening? Please tell us, our viewers are dying to know.” he said, dropping one of the bottles. He used his free hand to open the other and take a deep gulp. Morgan watched the water disappear, his throat bobbing up and down. Her face grew hot but no more sweat came to the surface.

“Face it,” he said. “All you want to be is a mouth piece.”

“That’s such an aged, unoriginal argument,” she said, forcing herself to keep his gaze.

“Okay,” he said, dropping the closed bottle. “Try this one: there are millions of young, photogenic men and women like you, studying to do the same thing, with the same goal. If you spend the rest of your days reporting from this hole, how is that going to stop all those other individuals from reaching that shared goal of yours?” He leaned forward now, hands gripping at the ends of the armrests as if ready to push off. His eyes burned like the renewed blaze behind him.

“I have social connections they don’t,” Morgan said, almost inaudible.

His face caught the line with diffused energy. The fire in his eyes lessened, his round eyebrows drooping back to their normal spot. Mouth barely moving, he repeated, “You have social connections they don’t.” With a tsk, he leaned back into his chair, the fabric straining tight against the push of his backside.

Morgan dared not respond, lest she say the wrong thing again; lest he got thirsty again. She knew what he didn’t want to hear, but couldn’t find a single thought that seemed to agree with him. Her voice came out quiet and hoarse: “A group is made up of individuals; every one counts. You can’t say that’s bullshit.”

“Sweetie,” he said, his eyebrows rising up in the middle, “the only people who believe that communicate through hashtags.” He crossed his arms and leaned back.

She turned it over and over in her mind, trying to find a different angle to come at it from. According to him, her whole college career seemed to be a waste. The water bottles might as have been nonexistent; she didn’t have his answer. What’s more, she didn’t have an answer for herself anymore. “What do you want me to tell you?” she yelled. “I don’t know how you expect me to prove my side when your main argument is ‘bullshit.’” She sniffled a bit, looking down at the flickering metal legs of the chair. “I thought *you* were ready to talk.”

“You can prove your side by telling the truth,” he said. “*Stop lying*. To both of us.”

Morgan blinked, eyes locked on the water bottle on the ground in front of her. Until now she had never doubted her own convictions about her purpose; how could she be lying if it’s what she believed? Questions raced through her brain and took her away from the argument. She thought about her friends, her sister, Jean, her parents. She needed to see them again. She always promised to visit but never did. Monday was one of those occasions, her sister calling with an invitation to come home, and hanging up with disappointment in the form of silence.

○

That Monday, what felt like years before she awoke in her current situation, Morgan made notes in the presentation margins and went to the next slide. Soft instrumental music filled the bedroom and gave a relaxed and upbeat vibe to the otherwise disheveled and plain room. It was never the way she planned for her room to look; plain and disheveled. It was her third year in college and her first year at Virginia Tech and she had quickly let go of any grander design plans for the room after the semester started. The apartment itself was full of decoration and character – patterned carpets, curtains, pillows and blankets everywhere she looked. Patterned towels and bathmats in the bathroom grew even more intricate with the water they collected after each shower. Patterned lampshades changed from cold hues to warm greens and yellows as the sun set and the bulbs turned on. Even the mugs had patterns printed along the outside, Morgan had noticed on her first morning, in search of something to hold her coffee. The two girls she lived with were clearly long-time friends, the type – Morgan imagined – who talked about going to the same college, in high school, and then talked about getting their own place together, freshman year, and then talked about marrying each other’s brothers in order to “actually” be related to each other. In actuality, Morgan only talked to the girls as a formality, when she saw

them, or if she had been drinking and feeling lonely. There was nothing wrong with the girls, as far as she could tell; there was just no reason to get to know them better.

So her room remained unfazed by the dizzying collection of colors and patterns outside her door, instead decorated with piles of things. At the foot of Morgan's bed was a perpetually knee-height pile of clothes – both clean and dirty. Next to that was a pile of recycling, mostly in the form of plastic water bottles, that she always cursed herself for forgetting the second she closed her door. Besides that she had a metal desk found at an end-of-semester yard sale, the desk chair she currently sat in, and a dresser-shelf combo that held the other half of her clothes and books. The closet, as she had been warned beforehand, held all the extra possessions that the two housemates couldn't find a place for in the main spaces. Morgan had pushed the extra boxes to the back of the closet, stacking a few on top of each other and forgetting about them, imagining all the patterned paraphernalia that they likely contained. In front of the boxes now lay a pile of various types of shoes, a pair for every occasion. In front of the whirring laptop now sat Morgan, clicking to the next slide in her presentation.

Morgan watched the rainbow collection of lines spike and drop across the graph she had created, the glow of the computer screen burning her eyes around the edges. The blue line, for Facebook, spiked drastically until three-fourths across the graph when it plateaued. The golden yellow line – specifically “golden yellow,” titled by her younger sister – represented Instagram's growth as a popular media source, and was gaining quickly on Facebook. Morgan had never been particularly good or bad at statistics, so the countless hours that she had poured into all of her graphs, scrunched up on the hard plastic desk chair, butt numb and back aching were more than her usual well of endurance she could handle. More than once this semester, she had woken up in a blur, neck hung over the back of the chair and stiff for days after. She accepted the fact

that beauty needed to be sacrificed for work, as her long dark hair remained up in a ponytail or lazy, half-loose bun until she had a permanently crimped line where the band had constricted around the hair.

Her phone began to buzz on top of the desk, a deep noise carried through the hollow metal. It was her younger sister, Jean. Morgan slid a quick finger across the screen and answered the call, turning on the speakerphone. “Hey you, how’s it going?”

“Good!” Jean said. “Your presentation is next weekend right?”

“Two weekends from now, yeah,” Morgan said, flipping over to Facebook on her laptop.

“Not the one about to happen, the one after.”

“Yeah,” Morgan said, sounding a little exasperated. “What’s up?” This was just the type of distraction that she couldn’t have tonight, with a practice presentation to prepare for and all her other homework to do.

“Since we can’t come to see you present at the conference, I thought that it would be cool if you came home this weekend,” Jean said, “We could all go out to eat and celebrate!”

Morgan stopped scrolling down her Facebook news feed and plucked a nail mindlessly under the space bar. She knew that it took some internal push for Jean to actually call Morgan and ask, and didn’t want to hurt her feelings. She had said no, she couldn’t come home. More than that, she realized she hadn’t even considered going home to celebrate; because she was Morgan Hart and she had one tried and true way to celebrate that did not include family dinners. She told her sister that she had a lot of last minute work to do, slides of her presentation that weren’t quite finished, statistics that still needed unpacking. She scrolled through slides mindlessly as she listened to the slow response from her sister, still in high school and not used

to having serious talks with her college-aged sister. Morgan promised that she'd be back for spring break in a few weeks' time and they'd celebrate then for sure.

“Okay, it's whatever,” Jean responded, on speakerphone. “You're so busy all the time.”

Morgan took her finger off the right arrow key and looked over at the glowing cellphone on her desk. Her sister's face looked back up at her, frozen, scrunched up with a pointed tongue darting out of the middle; a picture they had taken on the last family trip. “I know I am, I'm sorry,” Morgan said, “It'll be better after spring break, and after this conference. We're all running around doing last minute prep right now.”

There was a brief a pause on the other end of the phone and Morgan went back to her computer. Jean sighed into the phone, creating a storm of static feedback. “Well, we'll see you in a few weeks then.” The phone beeped, the screen flashed and the called ended. Morgan set the phone to silent, flipped it over and pulled out a stack of blank flashcards.

○

Morgan was brought back to the flickering clearing by the sound of him clearing his throat, taking another long gulp from his water bottle, his long fingers a cage around the flimsy plastic. The other bottle lay unmoving, at the foot of the metal chair. In a different reality, she would be sleeping down the hall from her younger sister, after an expensive but filling dinner out with the family. In this reality, she was playing a game of logic with a crazed psycho. Morgan looked up at him and let him see the slow tears streaming down her face. They felt warm and pure, like they held the words she was trying to find.

His eyes followed the tears all the way down her cheek to where they dripped onto the dirt. “If tears were my Achilles heel, you wouldn’t be the fourth girl to warm that dirt. Sorry sweetie.”

Morgan inhaled, shuddering, “And what happened to them?” she yelled, feeling the clammy ghosts of the girls passed creep in the dirt around her.

“Will that information help you convince me in any way? I already have all that information; that bores me,” he said.

“That *bore*s you?” Morgan said, raising her voice. Hot anger bunched up behind her bristled brows. “Stop fucking with me if I’m already dead!” The woods around her seemed to grow quiet, waiting to hear what would happen next. He, also, grew quiet. His dark eyes squinted, the crinkled skin around them giving him a worn look. Warped reflections flickered there, between rows of dark eyelashes but his posture remained relaxed. Morgan put all of her remaining energy into staring him down, eyes locked on his, matching his determination. “Have you ever loved anyone?” she asked.

He looked away, “We’re talking about you,” he said with mock confusion.

His sassy retort slapped Morgan across the face and her eyes widened in fueled scorn “No,” she said. “The way conversations work is that I say something, then you say something, and then I say something back, Jackass. You want to talk, let’s talk. *Have you ever loved anyone?*”

He looked away from her and twisting the cap off of his water bottle and downing the rest with his head tilted back in deliberate exaggeration. Cheeks puffed out full of water, he exhaled heavily out of his nose.

Morgan waited, trying to hide her weakening constitution. Outside, her eyes locked onto his face, jaw set with purpose. Inside, her breath came short and the dirt swirled around her. She knew she wouldn't last like this, another day. She needed that water. And then she needed to convince him to let her go. "I've loved people."

"You mean 'social connections?'" he said, still looking away into the woods.

"Social connections *are* people," she said.

"No, connections are connections," he said, "The two concepts of people and connections could be argued to be starkly different."

"How? Everyone is a connection in some way. It doesn't change that I have human feelings for them."

"Of course it does," he said, body folded over onto his elbows again. "If someone is a connection, then they are a means to an end. Cars connect locations. Wires connect electronics. Semicolons connect two ideas." He let a moment pass between them, dropping the empty water bottle on the ground next to the other. "You can't incite greater change in a wire, or grow a relationship with a semicolon."

Morgan looked down at the dirt, trying to force his words out of her head. Connections and loved ones spun around her, twisting everything between her ears into knots. If he said anything to her that made sense – *if he was right and she was wrong* – then that would mean she learned something from him. Him, the monster who kidnapped her, drove her into the middle of nowhere, who was threatening to kill her if she didn't play his stupid games. But was he right? Her sister Jean – she loved her. Morgan always made sure she was doing what she was supposed to in order to be a good big sister. She texted Jean all the time and always got her something pricey for Christmas. She even got an Instagram account when she found out that Jean had one.

She loved her despite rarely seeing her. The people she did see the most were professors, classmates, or important people that she had met through conferences and organizations. *They were the people she needed to be interacting with right now.* Otherwise, the only consistent social connections that she had were Kinsey and Brooke... but there was that word again: “connections.” Not “friends.” Not even “people.” “Oh god,” she said under her breath. Maybe he was right. “No,” she said. “Not my family. I love my family. Please, let me go! For them!”

He nodded his head, loosely. “There we go,” he said, “Okay, how do you know you love your family? If they’re more than just connections.” One hand moved to his face, a thumb stretched out to prop up his chin. His eyes looked questioning, as if the concept of a loving family was foreign.

Morgan stared at the water bottle. She swallowed the little saliva she still had, her throat gone coarse and dry. “I mean, you know,” she started. “They’re *family*. The word means something more than any other relationship. I’ve known them my whole life – I owe who I am to them – and I wouldn’t trade them for anything. They’ve always been there for me, even when I don’t really want them to be, just because they want what’s best for me.”

“So you love them because they are there for you when you need them?” he asked, pausing for her to nod her head. “If you love them for something they can do for you, how are they different from any other connection?”

“They just *are!*” she said.

“Yes, because they popped you out and clothed you, and fed you,” he said in a mock tone, waving a dramatic hand with each point. “And went and talked to the principal when you did something wrong in elementary school, and gave you ice cream when you got your tonsils

out, and didn't throw you on the curb when they found out that you snuck out to go to a party." He looked at her and shrugged, hands open to either side of him, as if to say "So what?"

"No, *no*," Morgan whined, more and more frustrated and desperate. Everything she said he twisted around. Each comeback was a hook that pulled her further into the argument. "I don't love them because they give me stuff, and do things for me."

He cut in, somewhat under his breath, saying, "I never mentioned them giving you –"

"I love them because they taught me lessons, and care about who I am as a person," she said, making sure that every word was loud and clear. "My parents showed me how to be a decent human being and how to help others. They made sure that I had morals and self-drive."

He scratched at the stubble under his jaw, creating a loud, dry scraping noise. *"I care about your morals. I'm trying to make you a better person, right now; does that mean you love me?"*

Morgan's mouth creased downward into what she was sure was an intense-looking scowl, disgust gathering in the deep creases of her nose. "No; what you're doing isn't helpful," she said, adding, "You kidnap women and bury them in the woods for fun. What my parents do, and what *every other normal person does* is better than this, and not, not traumatic! You should let me go so that I can be away from you!"

He stood up fast and took a step towards her. Morgan's eyes blinked shut and a pathetic cry sounded from somewhere in the back of her throat. He paused, and took a few steps towards the trees. His back was mostly to her but she could still see a thin profile of his face, eyes closed. His eyebrows were relaxed, as were his shoulders. His back moved up and down slowly, the green fleece tightening and slacking. He took a long breath and turned back to her. "You're still not getting it," he said, voice changing to be softer. "Body, breath, mind, energy and spirit don't

just become aligned. You have to *intentionally* build a balanced individual from the ground up. It sounds like your parents actually tried that – which isn't nothing, I agree with you – but their ultimate downfall was their own selfish need to submit to social codes instead of codes founded on individual thought and philosophy. Your body, breath, mind, energy and spirit were never aligned internally, but to the order of all the external. If those elements are off,” he said, walking back to the chair, “there is no balance. You have to live deliberately to give all the elements of your life meaning. Right now there is no greater meaning to anything you've done, because all you've done is what society wants you to do. If none of it matters, then what difference would it make if you never left that hole?” He sat back down. “I'm trying to help you.”

Morgan's head swam, trying to follow his logic. She knew there was logic in his words, as much as she would never admit it. There was also a lot of crap in his words. He sounded like a yoga instructor, like someone who had their own wheatgrass smoothie start-up business out of the back of their beat-up VW van. Was this his justification for everything? That he was teaching her how to “live meaningfully”? She lowered her voice and changed her tone, as well, and said “Okay, so if we're talking about making ourselves better, more meaningful, intentional, balanced and so on,” she said, “then I have a question for you.”

His intertwined hands rose up and under his chin. “Oh? Go on.”

“It's the same question; if our roles were reversed, what would be the reason that I should let you free? What difference would it make, for the world?” Her heart beat fast inside her chest and her mind went blank. His eyes focused past her, and then he closed them. Again, his face looked peaceful, shoulders and body relaxed. Crickets or cicadas chirped around her at regular intervals, back and forth to each other. For the first time all night, she felt some power surge through her breath. She had won her turn to talk; all it took was the right question.

Another minute passed and he opened his eyes again. He smiled slightly as he said, "I've considered your question; I have my answer."

Morgan's lungs deflated and she felt her influence already begin to wane. "Oh? Go on." she imitated him.

"What do you think my argument is?"

What?" she asked, confused.

"I've answered this question before but I want to know what you think I will say," he said, his voice as steady as the burning fire behind him.

Not this "you tell me" crap again. What was he doing? He watched and waited. It was her turn to think and speak, again. Already. Then, reflecting on her question, she thought. What was his reason for living? What did he contribute? She knew enough by now to know that they weren't talking about literal, material contributions, but something deeper than that.

"You must know that I have different values than what you consider stereotypical. Come on, think," he said, searching her eyes.

"You think that you help people become better people, like a Messiah or something." she blurted.

"I plainly told you that already. What else?"

Her eyes searched around his for answers. In the dark an owl asked who they were talking about. She looked at him and saw that his posture changed; he sat on the edge of his folding chair, the back legs practically holding no weight. His eyes were wide and moved constantly over her face. He loved this. Morgan knew that the conversation was rolling and she wasn't sure she could stop it, even if she wanted to. "You couldn't stay out here forever

because,” she said, thinking, “you need to leave to bring people back here with you.” She stopped, felt it coming, whatever it was, afraid to keep going.

His fingers wrapped around each other, cracking and bending nervously. “Better. Go on!”

“I don’t know! Tell me yourself!”

“What’s the point of all of this if you’re going to give up!” he said.

Morgan grasped for the thought he was throwing her. “You need to bring people back here with you, to talk, to see ... to learn!” Her mouth opened but words crammed in her throat.

“To learn what?” he said, fiercely. His demeanor had totally changed, some sort of veil or bandage removed. His eyes no longer sought to control the conversation, and his face held traces of nervousness.

“To learn,” she said. “To understand where you’re coming from!” Her heart raced with energy. The whites of his eyes stood out against his shadowed face, urging her to continue. His hands twisted and his body rocked in the chair. The forest was alive around them, every creature a chattering observer. “You need to bring people out here so that they’ll listen. No one will ever understand you while they’re still listening to society. This is the only way to get through, to get deeper.” She felt exhausted by insanity, her chest still heaved but her mind escaped her. She couldn’t think of anything else to say that would be as meaningful as what she had just said, so the words remained, ringing around them.

He took a long, deep breath and sat back in the chair. He ran his fingers up his forehead and through his thick dark hair. He smiled, revealing shiny white teeth, but it disappeared quickly again. A smile pulled the corners of her mouth and she fought the urge to smile back. He reclined, his head indenting the fabric back of the chair. What had just happened? Was it over, and if so, who won?

“What is it about this place though?” Morgan asked herself more than she was asking him. She began to get the awful feeling that she wasn’t the only person here who had been a victim. But so what if he was a victim at some point? Oh, the classic bully stereotype: kid is innocent child who is the brunt of cruel circumstance and becomes the bully he hates. How could she feel anything for him *while she was buried in the ground*? However, if that was the case, then they really could be on the same power level with each other. He got up and walked back to the fire, plopping down onto his sleeping bag. She could tell that even though she had done all the talking, the words had been ripped out of his mouth. He sat with legs crossed, back arched high over his knees, face bright yellow and black from the firelight. Who was this man, and what was he trying to do here? This fucked up stranger; did he even know what he wanted? He leaned back and stretched out across his sleeping bag, picking his book back up. Morgan felt him closing off, ending the conversation, but she wasn’t satisfied. “What are we actually doing here?”

“Living deliberately,” he said, not looking away from the page.

Meeting resistance, Morgan attempted to twist her torso, back growing stiff. “Can I do that, maybe, not underground?”

“It doesn’t feel good being buried?” he said, putting his book down to glance down his nose at her. “Imagine that.”

“Why are you doing this?” Morgan said. He sat up, frustrated. “I thought you said you weren’t going to hurt me?”

“I’m not hurting you,” he said, a hand on each crossed knee. “Your body is growing stiff, constricted, tired, running on empty. You’re dehydrated: your joints are drying out. Normal bodily functions are being decreased to accommodate the lack of water. Maybe if you didn’t drink so much it wouldn’t be so severe right now.” He said the last line with particular spite.

“Yeah, or maybe if you didn’t keep me from drinking water for *I don’t know how long*,” Morgan said, biting him back.

“Regardless,” he said, blowing off the comment. “I’m not hurting you now. You’re hurting yourself.”

His moods seemed to change so fast that it was giving Morgan whiplash. One second they’re agreeing, almost happily, and the next, he’s the monster again. It changed after they talked about him; until then, he was encouraging and civil. *As civil as a crazy kidnapper could be*, she reminded herself. “So are we done talking?”

“No,” he said, smiling down at his stomach.

“Then get over here and let’s fucking talk,” she said. “No offense, but I don’t want to be in this hole until I die.”

His eyes flashed to her, face smoothed by surprise. Wordless, he stood and walked over to his chair and sat back down.

She took a breath and changed to a more relaxed tone. “Okay. Why did you pick me?”

From deep in his mind somewhere came a slight smile of approval, and his ears perked. She was getting somewhere now. He picked up the unopened water bottle then, and all of Moran’s power disappeared like sand between fingers: she needed the water. Deliberately slow to ensure that she was focused on the action, he twisted the cap off. Morgan watched him like a dog begging from the dinner table, unable to hold back her desperate longing. A fear had been steadily growing deep inside her throughout their conversation, seeding every thought with an understood dread that her bodily resources were depleting fast. He took the twist off cap between thumb and finger and stuck it in his pant pocket, pulling out a bendy straw as he withdrew his hand. With the same two fingers he dropped the straw into the water bottle, slowly sinking until

the bent end hung over the lip of the bottle. She began to tremble with anticipation, every fiber of her body longing for the water to wash down her throat. She knew, he knew, she would do anything for the plastic bottle; she didn't care, as long as it gave her the much-needed hydration.

Slowly, he leaned forward and off the chair, getting onto one knee, then the other, wide eyes never leaving her face. She looked from his knees, to the bottle, to his eyes, to the bottle, to his empty and open palm, to the bottle. He slid a cautious knee forward, as if approaching a wild animal he didn't want to scare off, or threaten. He continued towards her in this fashion and she waited in agonizing silence. With no constant emotion for his increasing presence, she ached for the water on its glacial pace towards her. He was only a couple feet away when he stopped.

"Do you want to know why I chose you?" he asked quietly, now so close she could see his tongue paint the words.

"Yes," she responded in a whisper. It was so close. The water bottle. Everything.

He moved a bit closer and reached his free hand towards her face. Morgan forced her eyes to stay open against her fear, watching his clean fingers come forward. His hand dropped under her chin and dug out a small divot in the loose topsoil. He retracted his hand to prop himself up, as the other hand came forward and placed the water bottle neatly into the divot. Morgan could feel the heat come off his hand on the skin of her neck and she froze. Slowly, he lifted the straw off the lip of the bottle and moved it up to her lips.

Her mind raced but no thought was concrete, except *open, water, drink*. She parted her lips slightly and moved forward to grab the straw between her teeth. Automatically, she began filling her mouth, not even feeling the first couple gulps of water hit her tongue. She felt like she had gone crazy, knowing no thoughts, only deep feelings. Pleasure fogged her vision as each

cold wave washed down her throat. Unfathomable relief rose off her skin as the thirst continued to be quenched, over and over, swallow after swallow.

He stayed on the ground by her, legs crossed Indian-style, a few feet away. She continued drinking while he talked, sipping through the straw as much and as quickly as she could. He watched her drink as he spoke. "I knew it as soon as I saw you. Do you remember meeting me?"

Morgan was hesitant to answer, to release the straw from her mouth. More than that, she wasn't sure how damning that information was; if she wanted any hope of getting out alive, she couldn't let him know that she knew anything about him outside this interaction. She knew the bar they met in, and felt certain he used the place more than the one time. She couldn't let him know she knew. She shook her head no; she didn't know anything.

"Really?" He looked at her, skeptical eyes searching hers. She looked down at the water bottle, pretending to be more focused on the water level than him. He seemed to think about this a bit before responding, looking off somewhere in the woods behind her for answers to some unspoken questions. "I knew as soon as I saw you. You were taking pictures of your beer," he said. "And yourself. You had let your friends go off somewhere and leave you, and the second they left, you pulled out your cellphone."

She gave him a look, trying to convey the amount of sarcastic "So what?" that she was thinking. The water bottle began to wobble with her eager sips, getting lighter.

"There was no thought, just an automatic movement towards the cellphone," he said. "You didn't look elsewhere, maybe for a dance partner, someone else to talk to, you didn't even try to sit there alone. Without even understanding that you had other options, you just pulled out your phone and started taking pictures for some social media site."

Sucking up air from the empty bottle, she spit the straw out. She wanted to say “So what?”, but thought about what he was trying to say. She waited to hear more, to understand.

“Do you know why you took out your phone?”

Morgan thought about it. She remembered the moment; she was just uploading pictures of the night to Instagram. In hindsight, she thought, it was a bad decision – not only because of her current situation – but because her sister would see the pictures, and know that she stayed at school this weekend in order to go out partying, instead of coming home. “I don’t know,” she said. “Just to capture the moment, and to share it.”

“Share the moment?” he asked, face twisting to show disapproval. “What is a moment to you, that you are able to share it, *in its entirety*, in some small digital picture on a website where people mindlessly scroll through hundreds of other ‘moments’ a day?”

In disbelief and confusion, Morgan stared at him. “I don’t know,” she fumbled. “It was just a picture, for people who weren’t there.” She thought she understood what he was saying, and debated even arguing. “I still don’t get how that could be enough for you to want to put me through all this.”

He picked up the empty water bottle, stuffing the plastic straw all the way inside. “Think about everything we’ve talked about. About this place, about society, about the internal.”

She knew where he was going; it wasn’t the first time that she had heard the argument against being attached to technology. She knew he was trying to say *you don’t know how to live without technology and you needed to have an experience away from it*. Even more, she knew that he wasn’t wrong. He wasn’t right, and what he was doing was wrong, but he wasn’t wrong. Something deep inside her, beneath the surface, flipped over and clicked into place. She felt stupid – like someone had played a terrible, cruel joke on her at her own expense and watch it

unfold without telling her anything – and she couldn't shake the feeling. She wanted to cover it up, hide it away, like an embarrassing photo deleted right after it was taken. More than that, she wanted to delete it and break the camera so that there could never be any more embarrassing photos again. Only then, was there a chance of escaping this feeling of exposed shame. The reality was that it wasn't a picture and she couldn't delete the feeling; what she was feeling was the jarring sensation of questioning her own worldview. He hadn't even changed her mind drastically; just enough for her to taste the bile flavor of her own obtuseness. Nonetheless it was there, that creeping shame, and she knew that was what he had wanted all along.

If she had drunk in silence until her friends returned, without her phone, or even had gotten up to dance instead, she wouldn't be here. If she had stepped away from her project and from her man-hunt to go spend time with her family instead, she wouldn't be here. The issue is that it was so simple, that it wasn't simple. "I wasn't even thinking."

"No, you weren't."

"But that's your point."

"Yes, it is."

She hated herself for feeling this way, because of him. *He had taught her something.* She looked at the dirty knees of his pants, unable to meet his eyes as she said, "I know why you should let me go."

"And why is that?" he said, quietly.

"Because I can't call you crazy anymore."

He stood up, swiping the dirt off his pants. "Okay," was all he said before walking off past her again.

“Where are you going?” she asked, terrified of being left alone again. She couldn’t last another few hours trapped like this, especially now that she was faced with all these feelings.

“To get a shovel,” he said loudly, walking off into silence. Above them, the sky had begun to lighten, no longer black but now a deep blue. Her body still ached for water, but she didn’t feel thirsty. She felt sick. Something more had changed; she was no longer afraid of being abandoned in the woods. Now, the echoes of their conversation still ringing around them, she didn’t feel alone. Each second longer that she pulled from his energy she felt both stronger and sicker, like drinking water from the ocean. She looked up at the sky then, and she wondered how long she would have to drink sea water before she saw land, again, and if she would ever be the same person as before the shipwreck.

Chapter 2

Neon lights sprayed over the gleaming bodies of men and women to the pulse of throbbing music. Arms and heads thrashed up through the waves of dancing bodies. For almost an hour now, the deep bass of the music knocked on Lee's head, trying to lead him into the energetic crowd that others swam into. Instead, Lee reclined on a low, black leather couch in the corner of the club and tried to focus. He stared at a girl sitting alone at the bar and ignored the shirtless man leaning on him with his hand on Lee's thigh. The guy had come by and sat down only ten to fifteen minutes before now, and Lee had been in similar situations enough to know shirtless blondie would move on soon. Ironically, The Forest, the local gay club and bar, was the best place that Lee knew to pick up girls. More specifically, this seat, located and oriented straight towards the bar across the club, was the best place he found to watch the women that he followed. So that was why, despite having very little interest in the shirtless blondie himself, Lee stayed where he was when the drunk stranger started kissing Lee's neck.

The girl at the bar, Samantha, was looking down at her phone – for the seventh or eighth time – Lee noticed. The last song transitioned into the next, some club remix of a grungy rap song, and there was a collective yell of surprised delight throughout the club. Across the blinking room, through the waving mass of grinding, jumping bodies, the girl looked up from her phone, eyes wide with joy. She stood up off the bar stool, as if to go toward the dance floor but hesitated. After a second of some thought, she started swinging her hips from side to side, standing with her drink, next to the bar. Lee thought that this song sounded the same as the last

ten songs; what about this one did she enjoy so much? How could she tell the difference and what was it that made this song so much better than the last dozen? This was the type of disconnect between him and other people that inevitably pulled him deep into his thoughts. She raised her head and closed her eyes, putting down her phone for the first time since getting there. Body weight moving from foot to foot in perfect time with the beat, chest heaving at half the pace, she stood there. She seemed somewhere far away and erotic. Shirtless blondie seemed to be experiencing something similar to Samantha as he moved his hand down Lee's dark jeans and onto his crotch.

“Alright, alright. Enough of that; go bother someone who wants it.” Lee said, pushing the man's hand away. Lee took a long sip of the whiskey in his hand and finished the glass. The man to his side took the empty glass and dropped it on the ground, resentfully. Lee's heart spiked and he dropped to pick up the pieces. A hand full of glass, Lee looked back at the girl. She had finished her drink and flicked on the phone screen. Lee checked the time on his own phone and saw it was almost eleven.

Was she done waiting? Would her friend come? This was the longest she had waited for her ever-tardy friend, as far as he had seen in his multiple nights watching. Was tonight the night? If he waited much longer, she may leave. If he had gone over to talk to her thirty minutes before, an hour before, she would already be his. Did he have another thirty minutes to spare? Lee looked for the shirtless blondie and saw him making out with another man, sitting only a few steps away. Good riddance. He stood up and looked back at the bar. The girl was gone.

Panic. His eyes flicked quickly, resting on each person for no more than a second. He walked forward towards the sea of people on the dance floor. The beat of the music picked up, winding up for the drop. Lee looked from petite girl to petite girl. Long dark hair to long dark

hair. The beat quickened still, ever higher and faster. He walked the perimeter of the dance floor. Was he too late? Did she leave? This was the night. The beat dropped back into a heavy and slow bass. The crowd melted into each other around him. The lights danced above his head and he looked towards the only source of constant light, the bar. There she was, on the opposite side from where she had previously sat. She had a fresh cocktail and was paying the bartender.

Lee exhaled an anxious breath and breathed in the energetic air stirring around him. “No more fucking around. Do it *now*.” he told himself. He continued past the dancefloor and towards the bar.

The stool next to hers was empty and Lee made a bee line for it. He switched from serious and calculating to a casual and carefree mask; his pace slowed to a light saunter and he relaxed his jaw, allowing space for a smile. He undid the top few buttons of his button up to reveal a glow stick necklace like those of so many other men at the club, and reached the empty stool. The stool, also black leather, spun as he sat down. He stopped it, facing the bar now, and flagged the bartender. The music faded temporarily between songs while Lee ordered another whiskey from the glittery-bearded barman. He waited for the bartender to walk away before turning to the girl and saying, “I wonder if it costs more or less to get my drink with beard glitter mixed in.”

She took a sip of her cocktail and laughed at him. “I’m not sure I want to know.”

He squinted, smiling slightly. “Fair enough, but honestly,” he paused to hold her attention, “the glitter is always free here.”

“Good to know.” she said, smiling and looking at the glow stick necklace around his neck.

The song changed into something with Pitbull and the lights turned red, orange and yellow. A group of girls screamed next to Lee and dispersed onto the dance floor, leaving friends, drinks and purses behind. Lee considered spiking all their drinks just to get them to never make those noises again, but instead focused on the task at hand.

“My name’s Samantha!” she said over the saucy music.

“I’m Todd”

“Are you here alone, Todd?” She swiveled her stool to face the bar in front of him.

“I am now,” Lee said, stopping to take a sip of whiskey.

She looked at him, eyebrow raised in skeptic confusion.

“I came with a date but, honestly, I mostly came with him to get out. He’s probably not coming home with me.” Lee motioned to a random pair of men making out in the corner of the dance floor. The good thing about picking up women at a gay bar was that there were disguises everywhere you looked.

Samantha looked at the two men making out and opened her mouth in disbelief. “One of those guys is your date?” She looked back at Lee and put a hand on his shoulder. “I am so sorry.”

“Oh it’s fine, boo,” he said, gently removing her hand from his shoulder and putting it back on her drink, “I’m over it already. What about you? Come here alone?”

“Well I’m meeting a friend, actually,” Samantha picked up her phone and opened her messages, “but she’s running late. She’s just that type of person, you know?”

Lee watched her type something, then she checked Facebook. “Oh I know the type. That’s the type that you tell to meet you at eight when you actually want to meet at 8:45.” He tapped her phone screen to check the time. “I sure hope you didn’t tell her eight,” Lee said,

shaking his head, "Because it's eleven." She had a message from a girl named Summer, the girl Lee assumed she was the Flake.

Samantha picked up her phone and started to type back. After she finished, she got back on Facebook. Lee felt a vein grow in his forehead, "Hey let me buy you a drink, as an apology from your flaky friend."

"I shouldn't complain. My "date" isn't with me because of her own problems; your date isn't with you because he's feeling up on another guy."

Lee propped his arm up on the bar, hand in the air for the bartender. "C'mon, what are you drinking?"

Samantha looked down at her cup of ice, only a thin leaf of liquor lining the bottom of her glass. "I'm not really sure. I don't know a lot of alcohols." She looked back up at him, big brown eyes apologetic.

Lee rolled his eyes and smiled. "Something fruity? Something heavy on the liquor?" She only shrugged her shoulders. The bartender came over to them then. "Another for both of us, thanks."

Samantha was back on her phone, thumb mindlessly swiping the screen. That phone; attached to her person. She would swipe up, pause, swipe up, pause; not pausing long enough to look at any one thing in particular. She would let videos silently play automatically, watch them for less than a minute and then continue scrolling. Lee felt a vein pulse above his left eyebrow and he restrained his urges to grab the phone and smash it on the bar. He imagined the broken plastic and metal cutting into his palm as he ground the phone out of existence.

Now, Samantha watched a video compilation of cats reacting to cucumbers being placed next to them, pressed the "Like" button, and continued scrolling.

Lee felt his own phone in his jean pocket; the old, bulky flip phone pressing into his hip. Why did he even have it on him? He never got messages or phone calls unless it was from work, Margie telling him about an extra shift that opened up – he knew – because she took every opportunity to have shifts with in common with him. One day the old woman would work up the courage to ask him over for the pot roast she always bragged about. Or, God forbid, it was his mother calling him for something. A Virginia Tech graduate is more than capable of helping out his poor, unemployed mother, she would always say. And then she would ask for \$200, \$300, \$800. Lee didn't answer her phone calls anymore. Just the sight of "Virginia Bowman" on the little digital screen disgusted him. His hoped she would be unable to pay her bills, unable to survive on unemployment checks alone, and be forced out of her hoarders nest of shit to die on the street.

In the pocket that didn't hold his ten year old phone was a little plastic baggie. In it was enough crushed Rophenol to put someone out for at least 8 hours. If they were sober. His eyes glazed over as he watched Samantha switch from Facebook to Instagram. That damn phone. Soon enough, he thought, it would be no more than broken metal and plastic, out of sight amongst the grassy brush slopping away from the dark winding highway.

He fingered the pinched mouth of the little plastic bag and calculated how long she would be out for: this would be her fourth or fifth drink, her petite build weighed no more than 120 pounds. He had almost a day's time after the Rophenol entered her system before she would come to. This was the most nerve-wrenching part of his process – finding a window to slip her the drugs without anyone noticing. In the crowded a hundred eyes could be watching him at any given moment. Dozens of mouths that had the potential to shout out "Hey what are you doing?"

A gross amount of people who didn't understand what was happening, how Lee was trying to help, and what damage they would do if they stopped him.

Out of his thoughts and back to the present, Samantha tapped out a text message to someone. Shit, was it the friend, finally on her way? Shit, now or never. *Now or never*. Hand shaking, Lee pulled the bag out of his pocket and held it open over her drink. His eyes darted from the drink to her to the cascade of white powder, to her phone. His fingers twitched together and the baggie dropped, upside down and open into her drink. The little bag was barely noticeable – as it was – pressed to the side of the glass by ice and liquor. No one was paying attention, especially Samantha. Nevertheless, Lee's eyes bulged as he watched the white powder float between ice cubes. Lee stuck a quick pointer into the drink, swirling the contents. He reassured himself it was almost over, finger doing laps around the inside of the glass, seemingly absentminded. The little plastic bag spun around with the ice, washed out by scoops of liquor. He stopped mixing the drink and stuffed the wet baggie into his pocket. He breathed; it was done. Samantha was still texting, a really long message by the look of it. "Hey," he said, picking up their drinks, "Unplug and toast with me."

Samantha smiled slightly and put down the phone. She took the glass and asked, "What are we toasting to?"

"To loving the ones you're with."

"To loving the ones you're with!" They clinked glasses and both took a swig.

He guessed about 15-30 minutes before she was out. It was done. Now, he just had to wait for her to feel the effects and then he'd suggest he take her home, she'd say she was fine, becoming more and more unable to control her own body. He'd insist she wasn't okay until she

agreed, hopefully before her declining state was too obvious. He took another sip of whiskey and she followed suit.

Her phone buzzed and her expression changed, genuine surprise making her large eyes look two large marbles on her face. “Oh great news! My friend is actually finally on her way! I think you two would be so into each other.” Samantha’s hands waved in exaggerated motions to express the excitement of each word.

Lee’s thoughts halted and his tone dropped. “Oh that’s great.” How long did he have? What did ‘on her way’ mean? Was she just about to leave home, or perhaps walking here from her car parked around the corner?

Samantha’s small forehead crinkled, eyes growing soft and sympathetic, “I’m sure she’s okay with you staying, since your friend-person left you for another person.”

“Okay, thanks.” Lee said, looking at his watch. 11:20. He played the options out in his head. He could either leave now, and be dust in the wind by the time the friend got there, or he could act now, get her to leave the club before her friend ever got there. He hated the idea of aborting entirely. He had been watching her for weeks, learning her schedule, her preferences, her redeemable characteristics and flaws. This was to be the one night that her stupid friend was *just a little too* late and he would move in. He had moved in. He was in. He was finishing this.

“So when is your friend getting here?”

Samantha dropped her empty glass onto the bar, a few cubes of ice left to melt together. “She said 15 minutes. I think I’m gonna take a break drinking; it’s hitting me too much right now.” Her back curved over into even more of a slump than it was.

Lee scooted his stool a bit closer to hers. “Yeah Boo, that’s probably a good idea,” he said, rubbing her back, “You really don’t look too hot.”