

## Chapter One

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It was a perfect day for a wedding.

The typically scorching hot June sun was a few degrees cooler, and the sky was peppered with fluffy white clouds that looked like they were out of a children's book. The grass seemed greener, and the bird's chirped a beautiful melody that echoed the church bells as if they knew what was to come. A perfect day for a perfect bride.

Elle Haynes skipped a rock across the water and let out a heavy sigh. She clutched the chiffon fabric of her maid of honor's dress as the stone skimmed the still waters. She wasn't jealous of the bride. The new Mrs. Welch was her best friend, and had been since they sat next to each other in Health their first day of freshman year of high school. Gwen had been there through it all, yet Elle had found a way to slip outside after delivering her brief speech to a room full of familiar faces.

There was a face missing from the crowd. She had looked for him at the church, and when she entered on the arm of the best man, she searched for him in the crowd. He wasn't there. Gwen didn't mention the absence of her brother at her own wedding. She had been stressed about it for weeks leading up to the big day, but she suddenly fell quiet. Elle had expected a meltdown, but her friend offered nothing but wide smiles and teary looks on her wedding day.

Elle wished she had another rock to throw. Maybe it would travel across the world and hit Cole Knight in the face. He deserved it for skipping his sister's wedding. He had been traveling in Europe for three years doing who knows what. Nothing important. He could take a week away from backpacking his worries away to see his little sister get married.

Admittedly, Elle had a few selfish reasons why she wanted Cole to be there. Her school girl crush had transformed into full blown infatuation with her best friend's enigmatic older brother. When Elle and Gwen first met, Cole was entering his first year at Yale. He rarely came home to visit, but Elle was smitten with him from the first time she saw him in the family portrait that hung over the fireplace in their home.

The first time she saw him in person was the next summer when he returned home. She hadn't told her best friend about her silly crush, but when Gwen saw the rose on Elle's cheek and her inability to form words, there were no more secrets between the two girls. Gwen made every effort to tag along with Cole, but he always gruffly brushed his sister away. He was busy interning at their father's law firm, and when he wasn't there he was either tucked away in his room or stalking the streets of their small suburban town.

As their high school years passed, Elle saw less and less of Cole. He seemed angrier each visit home. That is, when he visited. Junior and senior year went by without a single visit from the enigmatic Cole Knight. A warm smile tugged at Elle's lips. Cole *did* return for one weekend. He showed up for graduation, and the next evening, crashed the after party to Gwen's graduation party at the lake house.

He was drunk, dark and brooding. He, too, was a fresh graduate. In a few months he would be entering law school to carry on the Knight legacy and she would be headed in the opposite direction towards The University of Pennsylvania to become a History teacher. Two opposite directions, two opposite paths. But that night Elle was riding the buzz of her newfound freedom, and with the help of a wine cooler, she found him on the deck with his pants rolled up and his feet in the water.

She sat next to him, brushing her fingers against his. And when he turned to look at her, his eyes sparkling with admiration, she fell completely in love with Cole Knight. Even though it was obvious he was inebriated, she didn't bat an eye as he untethered a nearby canoe and kissed her senseless the entire way into the boat. He rowed them to the island in the middle of Lake Banister with her on his lap. Between strokes he would nibble on her neck and whisper how beautiful she was in her ear.

The island in the dead center of Lake Banister was the size of a football field and cluttered with overgrown trees and shrubbery, but it was an island none-the-less. That night, Cole took her virginity under the stars. Afterwards they held hands and talked about their fears and hopes. She fell asleep in his arms on the island, but woke on a couch in the lake house. And she hadn't seen Cole in person since.

He didn't visit Gwen in college or attend graduation. He visited his family only on Thanksgiving and Christmas, leaving as soon as he possibly could. He only lasted at Knight and Blanch Law for a month before quitting and skirting off to Europe the same exact day.

Elle stared at the faint shape of the island in the middle of the lake. What had she expected? For Cole to show up? He couldn't be bothered to visit on the holidays, let alone the celebration of his sister's marriage. She rolled her eyes. Cole was probably deep inside a Norwegian model. Sighing loudly, she bunched her skirt and stomped at the wood beneath her. She had no right to be jealous at the hypothetical situation she planted in her head. She had no claim on Cole, and it wasn't as if she hadn't been with anybody after him. But the thought of his lips on anyone else stabbed at her heart.

"You better be careful; one time I stepped on a fish and fell head first into the water."

A lump found its way to Elle's throat as she turned. She knew the voice. It found its way into her dreams. Hell, it found its way into her nightmares.

Cole was lazily leaning against one of the support beams, his legs crossed in a display of casual arrogance. His indigo dress shirt had one too many buttons undone at the top, giving a peek of the tanned skin below. His dirty blonde hair had grown out since she'd seen him last. It now was shaggy around his face drawing even more attention to his piercing blue eyes. The stubble on his face was a little more than a five o'clock shadow. He looked more rugged and defined, a far cry from the Ivy League student she remembered.

When she didn't say anything, he untucked his legs and pushed off, striding over to her. He stuck out a hand for a greeting, "I'm Cole Knight. Gwen's my little sister. You two must be pretty close for you to be her maid of honor."

Elle bit her lip and tried to mask the hurt from her face. Cole had no idea who she was. She found her voice as she took his hand, "Elle Haynes. So you fell into the water, huh? That must've been a big fish."

She knew it wasn't. She had been there, just feet away as Cole stepped on the almost microscopic fish and flew into the water.

"Huge," He grinned, his eyes not breaking away from hers. "It was at a summer BBQ, too, so I fell in front of everyone. It wasn't one of my finer moments."

“Gwen never mentioned how graceful her brother was,” Elle teased.

He didn’t remember her. If she thought about it for too long, she’d get woozy. The last thing she needed was to throw up on his fancy European clothing. No, she was going to pretend like she had no idea who he was. Like she did so many times in her youth, she was going to pretend like she wasn’t in love with Cole Knight.

“If it’s any consolation, I have since climbed Mount Elbrus and the Matterhorn. Oh! And I’ve paddled down the Bashkaus without dying. I’m a lot more graceful now.”

“Are you trying to impress me with your affinity towards the Russians? Though, the Matterhorn is between Switzerland and Italy. It’s a near perfect peak in the Monte Rosa part of the Pennine Alps.”

Cole’s face lit with amusement, “Impressive. Are *you* trying to woo me with your knowledge of European geography?”

“Hardly. I teach History at Holland Hills High. Tenth grade World History and a gen ed. Geography course.”

“Wow,” He thrummed his chin with his finger. “Dealing with hormonal teenagers all day seems a lot more challenging to me than the shit I do. I’d take jumping out of airplane over that any day of the week.”

“They’re not that bad,” Elle laughed.

“And that makes you a wonderful teacher, Miss Haynes,” Cole’s eyes twinkled as they did the night he took her out on the canoe. Her breath quickened as she stared at him. He must have noticed her obvious shift, as a knowing smile graced his lips and he nodded towards the house. “We should get back. I’m sure Gwen won’t be happy if her maid of honor is missing for too long... and I’d like to dance with you.”

Elle wished she could say no. She wished heat didn’t flood her cheeks and the butterflies never danced in her stomach. Despite all the voices in her head, her heart told her to accept his hand and his offer. So she did.

“I’d like that.”

Cole liked it, too. He had wanted to escape the strangling touches of his family as they welcomed him home. Much to his surprise, standing under the glowing light of lamp by their

dock was an angel. Her honey brown locks cascaded down in loose waves that tipped past her exposed shoulders. Even from his distance, he could tell she was short. She was thin with hips that beckoned to be held. The pale blue dress she wore gave an ethereal glow, especially when paired with the fresh summer tan that warmed her skin.

Her eyes had taken his breath away. Copper pools flecked with green and gold. They had gazed at him with such surprise and recognition. He'd only ever seen one other person with those eyes, and she'd disappeared the next morning leaving only the faintest of memories on his lips. Hell, he was long convinced she was just a dream. A very vivid dream.

Cole shook the memories away as he led Elle up the sloping paved path back to the lake house. He had barely made it to the church in time to hear his sister kiss her new husband and walk down the aisle. He cornered the two before they left for wedding photos, and was only introduced to his new brother-in-law after Gwen issued a slew of slurs and wagged her finger at him for missing the ceremony. It wasn't his fault his flight delayed. At the reception, he had been distracted by relatives, cornered on the deck while the faint sounds of speeches went on inside.

He wanted to leave as soon as he arrived. Lucky for him he didn't, and an incredible woman was delicately holding his hand while they reentered the lake house.

His parents had bought the house when he was ten. Gwen was old enough where they could breathe letting her out of their sights. They spent a lot of their summer days at the house. Lake Bannister was barely twenty miles outside of the Philadelphia suburb of Holland Hills. Even when their father was working long hours at his law firm, their mom would load the two siblings up in her SUV and drive out to the getaway.

It was bigger than they needed it to be- a testimony of the way his father lived. Overdone and unnecessary. It was what pushed Cole to quit the firm and go to Europe. He hadn't even wanted to be a lawyer in the first place.

“Are you alright, Cole?”

He snapped his attention back to Elle, who was staring at him with her head tilted. Her face wore signs of worry. When he smiled and nodded, the lines disappeared leaving nothing but her lightly freckled skin.

“Sorry. I just haven't been here since my sister graduated high school,” He glanced over at the DJ as a slow song began. “Come on; we got here just in time.”

If he would have looked at her before gently tugging her onto the makeshift dancefloor in the sprawling room, he would have noticed how pale she became or the hardness that set in her jaw. Instead, he was blinded by his desire to touch her skin and feel her close to him.

They fell into a gentle sway to the song. Cole was nearly a half foot taller than Elle, but they fit together as if it were a dance they'd done a dozen times before. He didn't want to feel the fabric of her gown. He wanted to feel her skin. Their proximity had only added fuel to the fire that started the moment he saw her under the glow on the dock. Now, it was threatening to spill out of him.

"How did you and Gwen meet?" The words fell out of his mouth as a desperate plea to occupy his brain before he did something stupid.

Her heart shaped lips looked eager to be kissed. Especially when she drew the bottom lip in and graze it with her teeth.

"Actually, Cole-

"Cole! Elle!" Gwen's voice cut through as she and her new husband, Alex, swayed next to the pair. "How great is it that you two are reunited after all these years, right?"

Confusion clogged Cole's mind, "What do you mean, reunited? I just met Elle."

Elle had been shooting daggers at her best friend. Cole and Elle had stopped dancing, and Gwen nudged her husband away to gawk at the two.

"Are you stupid, Cole Bryant Knight?" She hissed, waving her hands in the direction of Elle. "This is Elle Haynes. We have been best friends since freshman year of high school. She was at our house nearly every weekend, and she basically lived with us over the summer. Cole, you have sat across from her at dinner before. You fu-"

"Gwen!" Elle snapped, shaking her head. "Stop. It's okay. I was just his kid sister's friend."

"Maybe if he didn't have his head shoved up his ass he'd remember you," Gwen muttered angrily. "I can't believe you, Cole."

"Hey," Alex warned, wrapping his arm around Gwen. "No fighting on our wedding day, even if it's not with me."

Gwen's eyes wavered, but her expression was still hard as she shook her head and walked away with Alex. Cole's eyes instantly snapped back to Elle, who looked as if she wanted to shrink away.

"Why didn't you tell me?" He barked, drawing only a few questionable stares.

"It was obvious you didn't remember me," Elle shrugged. "I didn't want to embarrass you."

Cole scoffed, "Embarrass me? You don't think I'd be more embarrassed once I found out who you were *after* you lied to me?"

"I didn't lie to you, Cole. I'm Elle Haynes, I'm a History teacher, and I wanted to dance with you."

Any indication that she'd wanted to dance with him were gone. She was cold as ice, her hands crossed in front of her chest as she stared at him.

"I can't," Cole shook his head and tore his gaze away from the swirls of color in her eyes. "I can't. Not with you. I'm sorry, Elle."

There was no way the woman in front of him was the girl that seemed to be permanently attached to his sister's hip when he visited home. No, that girl could definitely not be the sultry goddess with whiskey waves and rosy cheeks. Cole definitely had to get rid of the images of her naked, squirming underneath him out of his mind. He couldn't think about the woman that was Elle Haynes because his mind was too focused on the girl that stuttered every time she tried to pass him the salt at the dinner table.

He was so wrapped up in his thoughts he didn't even hear Elle let out a quivering sigh and stomp away.

Elle wiped the furious tear that betrayed her as she approached the bar that had been set up in the formal dining room. The tables and dance floor were in the other half of the house, where the open floorplan of the living room and great room were combined to a square footage that rivaled most starter homes. In the dining room, the long wooden table had been removed and replaced with a myriad of tall tables for those who wanted to escape the heart of the party. Elle didn't care where she was, as long as it was away from Cole and close to the booze.

She ordered a Manhattan. She needed something strong to make her forget about the arrogant bastard who, despite everything, still made her heart soar. His hands had nearly burned straight through her dress. Throughout the entire dance, his eyes were on her as if he were plotting all the delightfully nasty things he wanted to do to her.

She tipped the bartender and grabbed her glass, carefully moving through the light crowd with her precious cargo. She found a table of her sorority sisters and made a B-line towards them. Gwen and Elle had been in the same sorority in college. Aside from Gwen, Elle's closest friends were her Big and Little from her college days.

"Who was that hunk you were dancing with?" Mae, her Little, pressed with a shrill. The petite redhead stared back as if expecting an immediate answer.

Elle laughed out loud. As if she could ever give a straight answer to that. Who was the hunk? The hell if she knew. Her friends were looking at her as if she were an escaped mental patient. She took a long sip of the mixed drink, thankful for the invention of Bourbon.

"That was Cole Knight."

When her friends gasped, her Big's husband Taron Snow scrunched his nose and asked, "Who is Cole Knight? Is he related to Gwen?"

His wife, Danielle, looked at him as if he had asked who Santa Clause was, "Cole Knight is Gwen's brother who ran off to climb mountains and run with the bulls in Europe. He's also the man who dear Elle has been madly in love with since the time she was fourteen."

"And who took her virginity," Mae chirped.

"Too much information," Taron shook his head. "You've got it bad for him, huh? Is that why none of my boys could ever keep you tied down for longer than a few months?"

Taron had been president of one of the fraternities at Pennsylvania State University. He and Danielle had some secret mission to help Elle find her soul mate, but he was definitely not at Penn State. While they didn't succeed in finding Elle her soul mate, they were instrumental in hooking up Gwen and Alex.

"I've got something," Elle huffed.

"You two looked cozy out there," Mae said.

Elle nodded, “He didn’t remember me. Even after Gwen yelled at him and told him who I was, he looked at me as if he had no memories of me.”

Danielle gasped, “He did not.”

“Maybe he hit his head when he was being adventure man in Europe and he lost all his memories,” Mae offered.

“Or maybe he’s just a tool,” Taron cut in, a brotherly frown resting on his handsome face. “Elle, you shouldn’t be hung up on someone who doesn’t remember you.”

“Exactly,” Danielle nodded furiously. “Now drink up! If you don’t get that scowl off your face, I don’t think Curt Wallace will ever come over here and ask to dance with you.”

“Curt Wallace?” Elle’s eyebrow rose as a devilish grin curled on her face. “I haven’t seen him since graduation. I saw on Facebook he got a job with the University of Pittsburg’s athletic department.”

Taron had already waved the man over, as if he was on standby the entire time.

Curt appeared next to her like magic. He was muscular and tan, like a delicious GQ model. His brown hair was styled perfectly and his chiseled jaw was peppered with the faintest of facial hair. Dark chocolate eyes smiled at her as he greeted her. They had nearly dated in college, but baseball season was right around the corner and he would be preoccupied with the season. Not to say they didn’t engage in a few steamy make out sessions.

Elle met his gaze and threw back the rest of her drink, not caring that it scorched her throat and warmed her belly to an alarming temperature. She took his hand. She was going to dance with the eye candy and hope that Cole saw. She would flirt and drink and dance in a desperate attempt to make him jealous. She was going to make Cole Knight regret not remembering her.

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Cole tore his gaze from his reflection in the mirror above the dresser in his bedroom. Or rather, his old bedroom at the lake house. He hadn’t been inside the room in six years. It was obvious that his mother had been cleaning the room, but otherwise it was a blast from the past.

The walls were still the same dark blue they were when he was younger. The bed was still a measly full sized mattress with a blue and white striped comforter. The walls still held posters of Albert Einstein and *Animal House*. Hell, the same tube television was still on a small television stand with an ancient video game console underneath it. Everything was the same. Except him.

He unpacked his duffel, thankful to get out of the constricting formal attire he had bought for the wedding. He'd worn nothing but jeans and athletic shorts for the past three years, and the constricting chinos left him with a bad attitude. Or was that Elle?

Cole had spent the rest of his evening wearing a scowl as he watched her dance with an overly pretty man beast. He drank a little too much vodka to hide his foul mood, and by the end of the night Gwen had given him a good ribbing about his attitude. Cole could do nothing but watch as pretty boy whispered in Elle's ear as she pressed into him on the dance floor. He had to watch as she threw her head back and laughed with flush cheeks, ignoring the strain in his already too tight pants. But the more he tried to ignore her, the stronger the hum in his chest and his pants grew. Not even his father could tear him away from Elle.

He grabbed his toothbrush and paste from his luggage and headed towards the bathroom. The party had settled and all the guests were gone. His parents had graciously allowed him to stay at the lake house while he considered the offer his father had presented him earlier in the night. Come back and work for the family. Come back and be a Knight again. Cole snorted as he went to tear the bathroom door open. As if he could ever do that.

The door opened before he even touched it. He took a startled step back. Standing in front of him was a very irritated and incredibly undressed Elle Haynes. She stood grasping her own toothbrush in her hand wearing nothing but a white ribbed tank top that rode high exposing part of her taut stomach and tiny pink and blue plaid pajama shorts.

"What are you doing here?" He questioned, his surprise evident.

She crossed her arms as if to cover her braless chest, but it only pulled the tank higher, "Gwen was worried about me getting home safely and said I could stay in the guest room."

"Why didn't you have Pretty Boy take you home?" Cole's lips were thin with distaste.

"Pretty Boy, huh?" She teased lightly, then shook her head. "Curt and I didn't work out in college, and we definitely wouldn't work now. No going home with Pretty Boy for me... no going home with anybody, apparently."

Cole was torn between smug satisfaction at the fact that she didn't go home with him and blinding anger knowing they had been together in the past, "But you have gone home with him in the past?"

Her toothbrush tapped against her shoulder, "Cole, I don't see how it is any of your business. I'm tired and a little drunk still, so I'd appreciate it if I could just go to sleep and not endure your dumb pointless questions any longer."

When he didn't say anything else, Elle brushed past him and stormed into the guest room across the hall from his. He watched her toned legs and swaying hips with a heated glance, swallowing the desire that heated his skin. He may have deemed Elle Haynes off limits, but it didn't mean he couldn't look.