

Chapter One

Her dreams and goals were simple and few. As a former army brat, Morgan Albright spent her childhood moving across countries and continents. Her roots, directed by her father's work, grew short and shallow to allow for quick transplanting. From base to base, from house to house, state to state, country to country for her first fourteen years, before her parents divorced.

She'd never had a choice.

For the three years following the divorce, her mother had pulled her from place to place. A small town here, a big city there, looking for . . . Morgan had never been sure.

At seventeen, closing in on eighteen, she'd dug those roots up herself to plant at college. And there she'd explored those goals and dreams and choices.

She studied hard, focused in on a double major. Business and hospitality—choices that led directly to her dream.

Planting herself. Her own home, her own business.

Her own.

She studied maps, neighborhoods, climate, while narrowing her choices on just where to plant those roots once she'd earned those degrees. She wanted neighborhood, maybe old and established, close to shops, restaurants, bars—people.

And one day she'd not only own her own home, but her own bar.

Simple goals.

And with those degrees hot in her hand, she settled on a neighborhood outside of Baltimore, Maryland. Old houses with yards, and as yet to be gentrified, so affordable.

She'd worked her way through college, waiting tables, then tending bar when she'd hit twenty-one. And she'd saved.

Her father—the Colonel—didn't make her graduation. And though she'd graduated with honors, he sent no acknowledgment of her accomplishments.

It hadn't surprised her, as she knew she'd simply ceased to exist for him even before his signature on the divorce papers dried.

Her mother and her maternal grandparents attended. She hadn't known it would be the last time she'd see her grandfather. A robust seventy, an active man, a healthy man, he died the winter after her graduation. He'd slipped off a ladder. One slip. Here, then gone.

Even in her grief, it was a lesson Morgan took to heart.

He left her twenty thousand dollars and memories, as precious, of hiking the Green Mountains of Vermont on summer visits.

With the money, Morgan moved out of her tiny apartment and into a small house. Her house. One that needed work, but had a yard—that needed work.

The three small bedrooms, two tiny baths meant she could take in a housemate to offset the mortgage, help pay for that work.

And she worked two jobs. She tended bar five or six nights a week at a neighborhood bar, a happy place called the Next Round. Considering homeownership, she took a second job as office manager at a family-owned construction firm.

She met her housemate at the local garden center as she puzzled over foundation plants. Nina Ramos worked in the greenhouses and knew her stuff. Handy with a yard that needed help, Nina turned puzzlement into joy, and in that first blooming spring in a house of her own, Nina moved in.

They enjoyed each other's company, and knew when to give the other quiet and space.

At twenty-five, Morgan had achieved her first dream, and by her calculations would reach goal number two before her thirtieth birthday.

Her one splurge sat in her narrow driveway. The Prius would take her a few years to pay off, but it would get her to work and back dependably and economically.

In good weather, she rode her bike to her day job, but when she needed a car, she had one. Nina called the car Morgan's subgoal.

The little house on Newberry Street boasted a pretty yard, fresh white paint, and a new front door she'd painted a soft, happy blue.

Her boss at Greenwald's Builders helped her refinish the old hardwood floors, sold her paint at cost, and guided her along the path of repairs and maintenance.

She'd planted those roots, and felt herself blooming.

It made her smile to see daffodils playing their bright trumpets along her—newly—paved walkway. Late March brought changeable weather, but all those lovely signs of spring. She and Nina had planted a dogwood in the front yard the previous fall, and she could see the buds wanted to burst.

Soon, she thought as she walked her bike to its rack and locked it.

A good neighborhood, but she didn't see the point in tempting anyone.

She unlocked the door, and since Nina's not-very-dependable car sat at the curb, called out.

"It's me, running late." She crossed the living room, and as always, thought about how much more open it would be when she took out the wall that blocked off the kitchen.

She had the money for that project earmarked, so maybe in the fall. Maybe before Christmas. Maybe.

"I'm not running late," Nina called back. "And I've got a date!"

Nina always had a date. But then again, Morgan thought, she was gorgeous and vivacious and only worked one job.

She paused at the open bedroom door.

Several outfits—obviously rejects—littered the bed while Nina modeled another in front of a full-length mirror. Her raven-black hair spilled down the back of a red dress that hugged every curve on her tiny body. Dark eyes sparkled as they met Morgan's in the glass.

"What do you think?"

"I often think I hate you. Okay, where are you going and who are you going with?"

“Sam’s taking me to Fresco’s for dinner.”

“Fancy! Yeah, the red’s a killer.”

Which she envied a little. The only genuine disappointment between the housemates came from the fact that with Morgan’s long, coltish frame and Nina’s petite, curvy one, they couldn’t trade clothes.

“Go for it. Isn’t this nearly three solid weeks of dates exclusively with the hunkified Sam?”

“Almost four.” Nina did a twirl. “So . . .”

“I’ll be very quiet when I get home.”

“I really like him, Morgan.”

“So do I.”

“No, I mean *really*.”

“Oh.” Angling her head, Morgan studied her friend. “I already know he’s in seriously like and more when it comes to you. It’s all over him. If you’re heading there, I’m giving you the full friend approval.”

After flipping that gorgeous hair, Nina let out one of her dreamy sighs. “Pretty sure I’ve already headed there.”

“Full approval. I’ve got to change for work.”

“From work for work. I’ve got to put all this away and clean up this room. I don’t want Sam to think I’m a slob.”

“You’re not a slob.” Chaotic, Morgan thought, but Nina kept her chaos contained to her own space.

Unlike Nina’s cheerful chaos, lavender walls, a vanity top littered with makeup, hair products, and God knew, Morgan’s space was just contained.

She used the third bedroom—closet-sized—as an office, so this was sanctuary. Quiet blue walls, some art she’d bought from street artists in Baltimore, the white duvet and pillows, a small but cozy reading chair.

She took off office manager—gray pants, white shirt, navy blue blazer—put on bartender—black pants, black shirt. In the bathroom, she opened the drawer where she kept her makeup organized for easy choices. And changed day to night.

The short, angled cut of her blond hair worked fine for both jobs, but the bartender went for more drama on the eyes, deeper on the lips.

With years of practice, she finished the transition inside twenty minutes.

Since she wouldn’t be eating fancy at Fresco’s, she dashed to the kitchen, grabbed a yogurt out of the fridge. She ate standing up, imagining the wall gone, new cabinet doors and hardware, some open shelves, some—

“*Amiga mia*, you need to eat food.”

“Yogurt’s food.”

Nina, now in a robe, put her hands on her hips. “Something that requires a knife and fork, and chewing. You’ve got that long, slim build naturally—bitch—but if you don’t eat, it’ll turn to

skinny and gaunt. Seriously, one of us has to learn to cook.” She shot up a coral-tipped finger, then pointed it at Morgan. “I nominate you.”

“Yeah, I’ll take that up in my spare time. Besides, you’re the one with a mother who cooks like a goddess.”

“You’ll come with me for Sunday dinner. Don’t say you’ve got work—your spreadsheets, or whatever. You know Mama and Papa love you. And my brother, Rick, will be there.”

With the yogurt in one, the spoon in the other, Morgan waved her hands as if erasing a board. “I am not dating your brother, no matter how cute he is. That way lies madness. I’m not losing you as a roommate because your brother and I date, have sex, break up.”

Nina held up a gold hoop at one ear, a dangle of three circles at the other. “Which?”

Morgan pointed at the dangles. “Fancier.”

“Good. And maybe you’ll date Rick, have sex, and fall in love.”

“I don’t have time. Give me two years, maybe three, then I’ll have time.”

“I like schedules, too, but not for love. Now you’ve distracted me. You have to eat.”

“I’ll get something at the bar.”

“Dinner Sunday,” Nina insisted when Morgan tossed the container, rinsed the spoon. “I’m telling Mama you’re coming, and once I tell Mama, it’s done.”

“I’d love to go, honestly. Let me get through this week. We’ve been so damn busy at Greenwald’s. Spring makes everybody think of remodeling or painting or building decks.”

She grabbed her purse and kept going. “Have a great time tonight.”

“You can take that to the bank. I’m calling Mama before I get my gorgeous on.”

“Your gorgeous is never off.”

Morgan jogged to the car. Pleased she’d already made up a little time, she drove the five-point-four miles to the town center.

The shops along what the locals called Market Mile (actually one-point-six) would close within the hour. But the restaurants and cafés would keep Market Street lit and busy well into the night.

Most of the buildings—rosy or white-painted brick—kept the retail to street level and held apartments above. The Next Round was no exception and tended to rent to patrons or employees who had no issue living above a bar.

She swung off Market, circled around the back of the bar to the parking lot. With her car secured, she crunched across the gravel to the back kitchen door and stepped into the heat and noise.

The Round ran to burgers, steamers, nachos with sides of fries, onion rings, fried pickles, and three varieties of wings.

When she opened her own tavern, she intended to spread out to a few more, hopefully surprising, choices of bar food.

And she should probably learn how to cook first, because you never knew when you’d have to pitch in.

“Hey, Frankie,” she called out to the woman working the grill as she put her jacket on a peg. “How’s it going?”

“Good enough.” With her poof of ink-black hair tucked under a white cap, Frankie flipped three fat burgers. “Roddy and his brothers are grabbing some dinner before their dart tournament. Be glad you weren’t on for happy hour. We were slammed.”

“I like slammed.”

She exchanged greetings with the two line chefs, the teenage dishwasher, and the waitress who swung in to pick up an order of loaded nachos.

Though she had ten minutes before her shift, she walked through the door and into the bar.

A different kind of noise, she thought. Not the sizzle of meat on a grill, the whack of knives, the clatter of dishes. Here voices filled the big room with its long black bar, its tables and booths. Music pumped from the juke, but not loud enough to overwhelm conversation.

She saw Roddy and his brothers—regulars—at their usual booth near the dartboard, drinking beer and chowing down on bar nuts. Coors for Roddy and his brother Mike, she thought, and Heineken for brother Ted. If their father joined them, he’d order a beer—on tap—and a bump.

She took the pass-through behind the bar where the bartenders worked.

She’d relieve Wayne, currently adding a slice of lime to a bottle of Corona.

“Got a little bit of a lull,” he told her, and gave her his full-wattage smile. “Guy at the end of the bar’s running a tab. He’s on his second vodka tonic, so keep an eye.”

He served the Corona to another stool sitter, exchanged a few words before he slipped back to Morgan.

“Waiting for his date—Match.com—first time. She’s late, he’s nervous.”

Cute, Morgan decided, on the nerdy side. She’d put down money he had a full gaming system in his living room.

“Got it.”

“I’m gonna clock out then. Have a good one.”

As always, she checked her supplies—the ice, the limes and lemons, the olives, the cherries. She filled a couple of orders for tables, and was about to work her way down to Corona when she spotted a woman of about thirty step in, look anxiously around before she approached the guy at the bar.

“Dave? I’m Tandy. I’m so sorry I’m a little late.”

He brightened right up. “Oh, don’t worry about it. It’s nice to meet you. Do you want to get a table?”

“This is fine. Is this fine?” She slid onto the stool beside him.

Morgan shifted down the bar as they smiled at each other with expressions of anxiety and hope.

“Hi. What can I get you tonight?”

“Oh. Um. Could I get a glass of Chardonnay?”

“You sure can. I love your earrings.”

“Oh.” Tandy put one hand up to her left ear. “Thanks.”

“They’re really pretty,” Dave added. “You look great.”

“Thanks. So do you.” She laughed as Morgan poured the wine. “You really just don’t know, do you? I was so nervous, I walked around the block. That’s why I’m a little late.”

“I was so nervous I got here twenty minutes early.”

Ice broken, Morgan thought as she served the wine.

And this, she admitted, was one of the reasons she loved working in a bar. You never knew what might start, might finish, might bloom or break in a friendly neighborhood bar.

By the time Roddy and his brothers plowed through their burgers, the place started filling up. The Match.com couple decided to get a table after all, and a platter of nachos.

Morgan made a mental bet on a second date there.

Vodka Tonic cashed out, left a miserly tip.

Darts thwacked against the board to cheers and catcalls of onlookers.

A man in his early thirties came in. He made her think of an incognito movie star with his dark blond hair, chiseled features, gym-fit body in jeans, boots, and pale blue sweater—looked like cashmere. He slid onto a stool.

She stepped down to him. “Welcome to the Next Round. What’s your pleasure?”

“I’ve got a lot of them.” He grinned at her—easy, charming. “But we’ll start with a beer. Any local beer on tap?”

“Of course.” Though they had lists printed in holders on the bar, she reeled them off.

“Maybe you can pick one for me.”

“What’re you looking for?”

“Another loaded question.”

She shot him a smile. Looking for some conversation, she judged, along with the drink. And that was fine.

“In a beer.”

“Smooth, but not bland. Rich, but not overpowering. Toward the dark side.”

“Let’s try this.” She got a tasting glass, pulled a tap.

As he sampled it, he watched her over the rim. “That’ll do. Good choice.”

“That’s my job.”

Before he could speak again, one of the waitresses came up. “Girl table over there’s stuck in the nineties. Four Cosmos, Morgan.”

She carried the tray of empties into the kitchen while Morgan got to work.

“You know what you’re doing,” the new guy commented as she mixed the drinks.

“I’d better. Are you in town on business?”

“Don’t I look like I belong?”

Close enough, she thought. His clothes said upscale, but not in-your-face. “Haven’t seen you in here before.”

A cheer erupted across the room.

“Dart tourney,” she said.

“So I see. Serious?”

“Oh, in its way. Can I get you anything else? Would you like to see a menu?”

“Is the food any good?”

“It is.” She pulled out a menu, laid it beside him. “Have a look, take your time.”

With the Cosmos ready, she moved down the bar. Took orders, filled orders, chatting with regulars as she did. She worked her way back.

“I’ll try a Market Street Burger, unless you tell me I’m making a mistake.”

“It’s a classic for a reason. If you like a kick, a little heat, go with the spicy fries.”

He lifted his hands. “You’ve never steered me wrong.”

She laughed, plugged his order in the machine.

Roddy, all six-four and two hundred fifty pounds, walked over to the bar. “Another round, sweets. How’s it going?” he said idly to Handsome Guy while Morgan filled the order.

“Cold beer, beautiful bartender, live sports. It’s a good deal.”

“Yeah, it is. I took the lead in the semis. Give me some luck for the finals, Morgan.”

She leaned over, touched her lips to his. “Go get ’em.”

“Damn right.” He took the beers and walked off.

“Boyfriend?”

She looked over at her customer. “Oh, no. Roddy and his brothers—the dart players—are regulars. I actually work with his girlfriend at my other job.”

“Two jobs? Ambitious. What’s the other?”

“Office manager for a construction company. What do you do?”

“I’d like to say as I please, because at least I try. I’m in IT. I’m in the area for a couple of months doing some consulting.”

“Where are you from?”

“I travel a lot. San Francisco originally, but I’m based in New York now, or for the most part. Is this hometown for you?”

“It is now.”

Another waitress came up, rattled off another order.

“Army brat,” she said as she filled it.

“Then you know the traveling life.”

“I do. And I’m happy to have left that behind.”

When his order came out, he gave the plate a long look. “You don’t skimp on portions here.”

“We don’t. Would you like a table?”

He sent her that charming smile. “I like the view right here. I’m Luke,” he added. “Luke Hudson.”

“Morgan. Nice to meet you.”

He ate, ordered a second beer, stayed through the tournament.

He asked questions but didn't seem intrusive. Bar conversation, in Morgan's mind. She asked her own.

He was staying at a local hotel. His company would rent a house for him, but he liked hotels, and enjoyed getting into the local flavor wherever he traveled.

He asked where her father had been stationed, which places she'd lived she liked best. Easy breezy while she mixed drinks, mopped the bar, chattered with other customers.

"I should get along," he said. "I didn't intend to stay so long, but it looks like I've found my local watering hole."

"It's a good one."

"I'll see you again." When he rose, he surprised her by offering a hand to shake. And held hers while he smiled into her eyes. "It's really been great spending time with you, Morgan."

"It's been nice talking to you."

"We'll do it again."

He paid in cash, leaving a very generous tip.

* * *

A couple nights later, Luke wandered in later in her shift. It was trivia night at the Round, and the noise level boomed as various tables and groups shouted out answers.

"Pick another local draft," he told Morgan. "Something . . . adventurous." He glanced behind him at the game players. "No darts tonight?"

"Trivia night. It's a free-for-all, so shout out whenever you want."

"What's the prize?"

"Satisfaction." She offered him a tasting glass.

"Interesting and adventurous," he decided. "Got some dark cherries going. Let's go for it."

As she pulled the tap, she smiled over. "Anything to go with it?"

"Just the beer for now. Had a long day."

"Life in the tech world?"

"Like the beer, it's interesting and adventurous. How are things in your world?"

"Busy, but I like busy."

She filled orders, working her way up and down the bar, but with trivia in full swing, she had a lull.

"What do you do when you're not busy?" Luke asked her.

"I'll let you know if I ever get there."

"Gotta take some downtime. Mind, body, spirit, and all that. Paint me a day off."

"Paint's accurate. My house needs more of that, but it's not quite ready. And with spring coming on, we'll work on planting."

"We?"

"My housemate."

“So he’s handy?”

“She, and she’s terrific when it comes to curb appeal, planting. She works for a garden center. Inside, Nina’s not so much, but I’m not bad.”

“Construction company job.” He pointed at her. “Handy.”

“It helps.”

“A lot of maintenance when you’re a homeowner. I guess that’s why I’ve never gone there. I’m not handy. And there’s the job.” He pointed at her again. “Army brat, so you wanted to plant roots.”

“Exactly right.”

She mixed a whiskey sour, pulled two beers before he caught her attention again.

“What made you pick this area—if you don’t mind me asking.”

“It had what I wanted. Four seasons, close enough to the city without being in it, not a small town, not a big one. Right in the middle.”

She set out a fresh bowl of pretzels for him.

“It’s a nice area, prime for some of the upgrading you seem to be doing with your place. That’s why I’m here. Homeowners and businesses looking to bump up their tech, a couple of developments where people want to option smart homes. Old houses, new buyers looking to flip or just refresh.”

He shrugged. “What I do is part of the infrastructure. Everyone has home offices now, and I can set them up. You must have one.”

“I do. It’s not especially smart, but it works.”

Trivia ended with cheers and boos, and a run on drinks and snacks. As she worked, she noted he chatted up another stool sitter. Baseball. He appeared to know enough to keep that conversation lively.

“Ready for another?”

“Yeah, thanks. How about you, Larry? On me.”

“Don’t mind if I do. How’s Nina’s car running?”

“Barely.”

Larry shook his head, rubbed at his short beard. “She’s gotta bring it in.”

“I tell her. Larry’s the best mechanic from here to Baltimore,” she told Luke. “He’s kept Nina’s car running well beyond its expiration date.”

“I do what I can. You still liking that Prius?”

“It’s perfect.”

She set their drinks in front of them, filled another round for a table of six. Larry’s conversation turned to cars and engines, and Luke appeared to know enough again to hold up his end.

“Gotta get on.” Larry pushed to his feet. “The wife’ll be home or getting there. It’s her book club night, which is a front for drinking wine and gabbing. Nice talking with you, Luke. Thanks for the drink.”

“Anytime.”

“Another round?” Morgan asked him.”

“Two’s the limit. I should get on, I’ve got my own busy day tomorrow.” He paid his tab, tipped more than well. “I’d say don’t work too hard, but pretty sure you will. Nice seeing you again.”

“Good luck in tech world.”

He sent her a grin and strolled out.

* * *

He showed up again on a packed Friday night. She worked with the part-time weekend bartender to handle the crowd. Luke leaned on her end of the bar, as butts filled every stool.

“Surprise me. It’s been a damn good week.”

“Congratulations. Weekend off?”

“Ah, some paperwork and planning tomorrow, but yeah. Any suggestions on how I should spend the rest of it?”

“You could drive into Baltimore. Inner Harbor, aquarium, and it’s opening day for the O’s at Camden Yards.”

“Want to keep me company, show me around?”

She couldn’t say the offer came out of the blue. She knew when a man was interested. She played it light—part of the job.

“Can’t do it. Homeowner’s stuff on Saturday, and I’ll be right here Saturday night. Sunday’s already booked. But I appreciate the offer.”

He sampled the beer she offered. “I’m getting an education on the local brews. It’s nice, draw me one.” He waited until she served him. “Look, if it’s pushy or you’re already involved, just say. No harm, no foul. But would you like to go out to dinner some night? A night when you’re actually not working?”

“No pressure,” he added when she hesitated. “Just a meal and conversation. Do you like pizza?”

For whatever reason, the casual tone relaxed her. “I’m suspect of anyone who doesn’t.” “The pizza at Luigi’s is good.”

“You hit the top of the line around here.”

“So maybe pizza, some wine. I could just meet you there.”

She hadn’t had an actual date in . . . she didn’t want to think about it. Why the hell not?

“I’m free Monday night.”

“Seven o’clock at Luigi’s?”

“Sure. Sounds good.”

“Okay with you if we exchange phone numbers? I’m hoping you don’t change your mind, but in case you do . . .”

She pulled her phone out of her pocket, took his so they could add their contacts.

“If you’re planning on staying awhile and want a seat, the couple three and four stools down should be leaving after they finish their drinks and nachos.”

“Thanks. I’ll hover.”

She shot him a smile, went back to work.

He grabbed a stool, had his two beers, and left just after midnight.

“Monday night,” he said. “Enjoy the weekend.”

“You, too.”

“That is one fine specimen.” Gracie the waitress looked after him. “And he’s got his eyes on you, cutie.”

“Maybe. He seems nice, steady—and he’s only in the area for a few months.”

“Strike while the iron’s sizzling.”

“Maybe,” she said again.”