

## 27. Out Hog Mountain Road

Out Hog Mountain Road, in 1966, Kya and Chase started their morning together with a modest but meaningful breakfast. This quiet moment, set in the familiar surroundings of their shared life, marked a significant milestone—almost a year of being together. Chase, with an unexpected sense of commitment, shared his future plans with Kya, telling her that he wanted to build a home for her, an idea that made Kya feel both cherished and hopeful for a future she had long desired. Her heart, filled with dreams of family and belonging, found a new sense of security in the vision of this life with Chase, a stark contrast to the solitary existence she had known in the marsh. Yet, despite these feelings of warmth, Kya remained conflicted, uncertain about the differences between their lives. The walls she had built over the years, shaped by isolation, were hard to let down, and she couldn't easily forget how separate they were socially. Chase, sensing her hesitation, assured Kya that his parents would accept her, which helped soothe her fears, but still, she wondered if their love could ever overcome the divisions of their worlds.

As their relationship grew, Kya's life expanded beyond the marsh when Chase invited her to Asheville, offering her a rare opportunity to experience life beyond the familiar confines of the swamp. It was a chance for Kya to step into a new world, one where the busy streets and towering Appalachian Mountains served as a sharp contrast to the serene, natural landscape she had always known. The trip symbolized more than just a physical journey; it represented Kya's emotional growth as she ventured out of her comfort zone and faced the complexities of intimacy with Chase. Yet, while Asheville brought new experiences, it also unveiled truths that Kya wasn't prepared to confront. The bustling town revealed the disconnect between Kya's romantic ideals and the reality of their relationship. The stark difference between the world she had envisioned for herself and the one Chase seemed to inhabit started to take shape as she

processed the interactions and dynamics between them, understanding that love isn't always as simple as it first appears.

During their stay at a motel, Kya's idealistic views on love and intimacy were challenged, as the experience was far from the romanticized connection she had imagined. What should have been a tender moment of closeness between them instead highlighted the discomfort and distance that had begun to grow. The space that once felt safe and familiar now felt foreign to Kya, making her realize that the physical intimacy they shared did not mirror the emotional connection she had once dreamed of. Returning to her shack, Kya was left to wrestle with feelings of doubt and disappointment, not just about their relationship but about her place in it. Chase, though present in her life, continued to keep her at arm's length when it came to his social world, refusing to introduce her to the people who mattered to him. This exclusion weighed heavily on Kya, making her wonder if the promises of a shared future were as empty as her growing loneliness.

The chapter then takes a dramatic turn when Tate, Kya's first love, unexpectedly returns into her life. His reappearance stirs a whirlwind of emotions, rekindling old feelings of hurt, longing, and betrayal. Tate's confrontation with Kya is not only about his regrets but also about exposing the truth behind Chase's infidelity, forcing Kya to grapple with the emotional turmoil of being deceived. This revelation cuts deeply, but it also offers Kya an unexpected path forward. Tate, in his attempt to atone for past mistakes, proposes to help Kya publish her intricate natural studies—a gesture that acknowledges the value of her work and offers her a chance at independence. It's a turning point in Kya's life, one where she is faced with the possibility of leaving behind both the pain of her past relationships and the constraints of the marsh. In this chapter, the themes of love, betrayal, personal growth, and the quest for a sense of belonging are woven together, revealing the complexity of Kya's emotional journey. She must now decide whether to stay tied to a past filled with hurt or embrace a future where she can be recognized for her talents and desires beyond the confines of her relationships and the swamp she calls home.