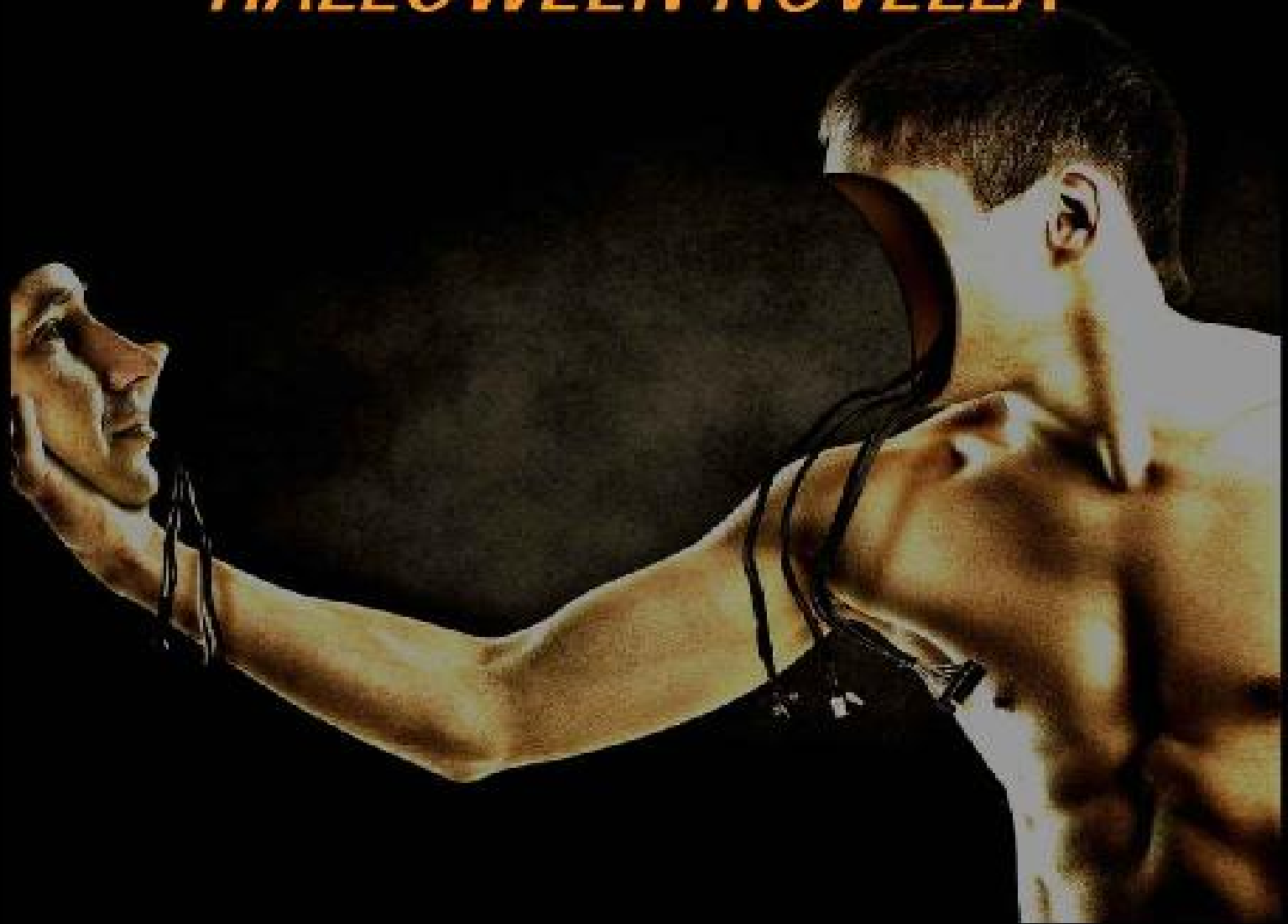


CD Rachels

*The Masks
We Wear*



*AN ARTISTS AND ATHLETES
HALLOWEEN NOVELLA*



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The Masks We Wear
(An Artists and Athletes Halloween Novella)

By CD Rachels



The Masks We Wear

(An Artists and Athletes Halloween Novella)

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(Synopsis)

Every Halloween, we meet at a party.

And every Halloween, we keep the masks on as we give in to the undeniable desires we have for each other in the dark.

He lights up my body up like no one else. His mouth, his hands, and his heart are attuned to mine in ways I could never describe. I don't know his name, I haven't even seen his full face yet, but every year our connection runs deeper. And as the months go by, I cling to the memory of his voice, his scent, and the taste of every inch of his skin.

Is he some Halloween illusion? Is he a dream, making me admit things out loud I've never told anyone else?

Will I ever see him again on any other night? And more importantly, if I do, will he like the man he sees without the mask?

Did you want Jung from "The Moves We Make" to finally get his happy ending? Well, you're in for a treat, not a trick. "The Masks We Wear" is a Halloween-themed novella, capping off the Artists and Athletes series. If you like late-night passion, college costume parties, and happily-ever-afters in M/M romance, this is one novella you'll want to curl up with, for Halloween and every other night of the year.

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To J. My forever Halloween date.



PART 1: JUNG

[OCTOBER, JUNIOR YEAR]

I walk out onto the terrace after letting my friends know I need some fresh air. It's a flimsy pretense considering how much smoke floats around downtown New York City, but I don't care. My friends are too drunk to call me out on it or notice—why would they? We're college students raging hard on Halloween night in a student-rented apartment building. After all, I'm Jung Choo, the life of the party most nights, and my crew and I always have a good time.

Tonight, though, I need a change. Hence why I'm sneaking out through a stairwell leading outside on the third floor of this building. The scent of weed, cigarettes, and candy permeates each room in this multistory den of carefree vice. People are hooking up in half the rooms, and presumably on the rooftop as well, considering it's an unseasonably warm autumn night.

Still, donned in my Black Panther costume, I walk out onto the terrace, seeking a modicum of privacy. My hopes of solitude extinguish when I see another person already hunched over the ledge. He's wearing a hoodie over a Spider-Man costume, and his body language screams relaxed.

“Oh, uh, my bad.” I absent-mindedly wipe my hands on my blue jeans as I hesitate to move forward. “I didn't mean to interrupt you and, uh...I'll go...”

“You didn't interrupt me.” His voice is deep, reverberating to my very core. I detect a slight Southern drawl, and his calves and thighs show me he's a physically active dude. It's been so long since I've had any type of action that the very

presence of a new man has rendered me an anxious mess. “In fact, there’s plenty of room out here on the terrace for both of us, Kitty Cat.”

I chuckle, body frozen in place. “It’s Black Panther.”

“I know.” He points to his face mask, and even without seeing his eyes, it’s clear he’s telling me “Duh.”

“And you’re Spider-Man. So we’re friends.” I cringe at my lame retort. I’m grateful that he can really only see my lips, and not the embarrassment in my eyes.

Masked mystery dude chuckles, and I can tell he’s amused. He turns his body half toward me, and his Spidey costume hugs his pecs in all the right ways. *Get a grip, Jung*. No dude has been interested in you in over a year, so stop projecting.

“I guess we are friends,” he says. His drawl is getting stronger, possibly from being tipsy, and it does nothing to quell my instant attraction to him. “Nice to meet you, Kitty Cat.”

My lips quirk at his nickname for me. “Nice to meet you, Superhero.” I cautiously approach him, pulled in by an unseen thread.

He chuckles again. “I like that.”

“Do you go to the U?” I shake my head at my lame pick-up line. “What am I saying? Of course you do. Unless...you’re some creepo who waltzed in here. If you are, then...”

He laughs. “No, I’m a student. Just transferred here for my junior year.” He flashes his ID badge, with his hands covering his name. The face is faint in the dim light of the night, but his lanyard is updated to include this year. I compile and compartmentalize as many of these clues as I can in order to let my guard down. I wanted to relax on this terrace alone, but Superhero’s presence comforts me.

“Welcome.” I lean on the ledge, then stop, straightening my back. “You could have taken that ID from someone. Plus, I haven’t seen your face. How do I know you’re not gonna murder me? Or push me off the building? Or rob me blind? I’m warning ya, pal, I ain’t got money.”

He laughs once again. “Yer cute. For the record, I can’t see the majority of your face either.”

“Oh.” I touch my chin and try to ground myself. I’m overwhelmed by him calling me cute; two-words and I’m reduced to a frozen, nervous wreck.

“Would it make you feel better if I take off my mask, Kitty Cat?” Before I can protest, he pulls it up to above his nose. “There. Now we’re even.” He grins, and the orange of the streetlights makes the freckles on his lower cheek shine. His skin is light, but dark in certain angles somehow, and his lips are full.

I’ve never been this attracted to a chin.

“I guess we are.”

“Hey, you haven’t shown me your ID either.” He smirks at me, and I lean forward. We’re a few feet away from each other on the ledge. “How do I know you’re not the murderer?”

“If I wanted to, I would’ve done it by now, wouldn’t I? Swatted you with a rolled up newspaper like the spider you are.” I shake my head quickly. “That was a lame joke. I’m sorry.”

“You got a sick sense of humor.”

“I’m sorry, again,” I say while cringing.

“I like it. It’s chill and unique.” He chuckles and my heart rate rises. Before I can freak out further at this super attractive stranger, I whip out my ID and flash it to him. Like Superhero, I blurred out my name. Maybe he saw my face, maybe he didn’t, but he seems satisfied with the quick glimpse at my identity.

“So, Superhero...”

“Is that my name now?”

“Yeah, yes it is.” We both chuckle, and I scooch a few inches closer to him. We look out at the streets below, ambient noise being the regular soundtrack to New York City. “Why transfer to the University?”

He hesitates for a moment, then says, “I’m studying pre-med.”

“Ah.”

His mouth flattens for a moment, then he turns to me. “You?”

“This might make you laugh, but I’m actually a dance major.”

“Why would that make me laugh? I think it’s pretty cool.”

“I hang out with mostly girls. There’s the occasional gay dude, like me, but most guys find it amusing that I’m a dance major.”

“Hey, if they don’t respect your interest, then screw ‘em.” We pause for a beat, gazing out at the streets below. The sounds of the party don’t even register out here. “My old college didn’t have any dance programs. I’ve always wanted to try it.”

“Really? I’m also captain of the competitive ballroom dance team. You should come by if you’re so inclined.”

“Maybe once I get my studies down pat.”

“Well, I hope to see you at a tryout, if not next semester, then next fall.”

“Alright.” His Southern twang once again jolts into my balls. Between his deep voice and the way his longer, muscular neck catches the lights, I find myself having to will my erection down. At least I’m only wearing black costume spandex from the waist up, outlining my performance-arts-made abs. “I’m excited. I’m always down to try new...things.”

Even in the mask, it’s obvious that Superhero eyes me up and down. A shiver goes up my spine, and I pray to every spirit I know that this attractive stranger is single. His eyes could be all mangled for all I care—everyone knows the vibe is way more important than looks. Most importantly, Superhero makes me feel wanted. Our conversation on this terrace has been the most exhilarating connection I’ve made in over a year. The idea of seeing him at a future ballroom dance

tryout is titillating. Maybe he and I can become friends or... more.

I decide to play it coy and clear my throat, looking away. "So pre-med? That's noble."

He huffs, his body deflating as he looks out at the city with me. "Yup."

"Why don't you sound thrilled?"

He sighs and rotates his body. "I'm from a small town in Mississippi. My dad owns a practice there, but we don't make much. It's altruistic work, and the county could use more physicians. I got good grades in high school." His voice trails off and he looks down. "Stop me if you've heard this one before."

I chuckle and nod, letting him continue. "We always knew there was a need for a new generation of doctors down there. So, it was implied that I'd become a private practice MD like my pa."

He huffs a self-deprecating sound, then looks back up at the night sky. "Then I'd get married to a small-town girl, have small-town babies, and bring money and success to the rest of Mississippi."

The idea of him dating a girl doesn't sit right with me, and it's not only the jealousy. Sure, I'd like to kiss his pretty lips, rip both our masks off, and sixty-nine on the floor until the cows come home, but it's more than that. Superhero seems so dejected, and I want to help him.

"Is that...what you want, Superhero? To become a doctor and marry a...girl?"

He laughs a defeated breath again, then leans on his right arm. His whole body is turned to me, and I try not to ogle at his trim waist in the full-body spandex suit. "I get to ask you a question now, Kitty Cat."

I snicker. "Are we taking turns?"

"Obviously."

"Alright," I reply with a grin.

“Why aren’t you in there partying with all yer friends?”

I shrug and lean on my left elbow, mirroring him.

“I needed some air.”

“That’s bullshit,” he says with a snort. “Air is everywhere. That’s code for something pushing you outta there. Aren’t they your friends?”

“Yeah, but...” I take a deep breath in and out. “They all treat me like I’m a clown. And okay, yes, I go out of my way to make people laugh. I’m kind of a ball of energy in that way. But sometimes, man...” I stare at the stars as the truth threatens to spill out of me. “Sometimes I just want someone to emotionally support me through the quiet times. Times I can be chill. Times I don’t have to be ‘that dancer guy’ who’s always trying to entertain people.”

I look down to see Superhero already nodding. “I get that.”

My eyes dart down to the gravel floor. “My ex said I was fun, but that I got too moody when we weren’t at a party. I don’t hate him for breaking up with me, because I wasn’t feeling the relationship anyway, but still...”

“The parties have to stop sometimes, even for dancers,” Superhero says.

My head snaps up. “Exactly!”

He nods and looks back out at the city. “You want someone to support all of you. Every part of you. The shining moments and the quiet times, too.”

My breath hitches in my throat. “That’s... exactly right.” Am I hallucinating? Did someone spike my drink? Because Superhero is acting like a sexy confidante, and I’ve never experienced this much romance in my life. And we’re strangers who haven’t even touched. “How did you know that, Superhero?”

“Yer story sounds like my story.” He turns to me, and I have no doubt his eyes are locked on mine. “But you’re not alone, Kitty Cat. And you deserve the real deal.”

I look back down. “Well, I also miss that intimacy, too. I dance a lot, touching my partners, but it’s not the same. I love my friends, but they’re all platonic to me. I want someone who gets me, but also...”

“Wants you,” he says, finishing my sentence. My eyes once again bolt up to see him staring at me. We stand like that, silent for the longest ten seconds of my life. I’m not even breathing as the tension between us builds to a crescendo.

“It’s yer turn to ask me a question now.”

“I suppose it is,” I reply.

“There’s only one question I want you to ask me, Kitty Cat.”

I gulp. “And that is...?”

“Ask me if I want you.”

PART 2: JAMAL

I DON'T KNOW who moved first. I don't even know who I am right now. There's no way I'm Jamal Dawes from Laurel, Mississippi. I can't be that shy, light-skinned black kid who moved to the big city to finish pre-med credits. That dude would never kiss a masked stranger, let alone another guy.

Yet, here I am, kissing Kitty Cat, like my life depends on it. He's the air I need in my lungs, and I'm a drowning man. I've spent years repressing what I want with guys. Those tenuous kisses and hook-ups in darkened rooms back home were never enough. But now, at my first big city university party, a man is kissing me.

And boy does he know how. Seeing Kitty Cat walk onto this terrace awoke something in me. Gone was the Jamal who stuck to his books—this new Jamal plays the game and takes what he wants.

I don't know his name. I don't even know what the bridge of his nose looks like. All I know is him; he speaks like he wants so much more out of life. Like I do. Maybe he's lying, maybe I'm reading too much into it, or maybe one of the watered down beers I had earlier was stronger than I thought. Still, Kitty Cat feels so real.

And he tastes damn good.

His tongue meets mine as his mouth massages my lips. He cradles my face, pulling at the fabric of my dumb Spider-Man costume, and our masks brush against each other. I pull him closer, gripping the waist of his jeans, and my hands won't stop moving. The ambient noise of New York City is drowned

out by my heart jackhammering in my ears. I hear my soul say, “*It’s finally happening!*”

But a lot more is happening as Kitty Cat moves closer to me. His denim-swaddled bulge rubs against mine, and it’s evident we’re both sporting wood. His kisses taste so good, and I never want him to stop. I want more, but I don’t want to blow my load so soon.

I got over twenty years of repressed sexuality, Southern style, locked in my chamber, and this guy has me ready to pull the trigger.

My sexy stranger kisses down my neck, and I grab the ledge. “Oh hell, darlin’,” I mutter.

“Oh fuck, your accent is something else,” he rasps. He kisses down to where the costume neck-line is, and I kick myself for not having a tear-away button-down on. I didn’t think I’d actually be getting any action tonight.

I grind closer to his hips, the spandex of my suit giving me delicious friction. My eyes roll back in my mask, and I barely have the lucidity to ask, “What are we doin’ here, Kitty Cat?”

He pulls off, and I immediately miss the contact. “Do you...?” He stares at me, concern pooling in his eyes past his Black Panther mask. “Are you not into it?”

“We just met.” I wipe my mouth, then grin. “And I wanna continue this uh...getting to know you.” We both look around. New York City is huge, and more freaky stuff happens before nine a.m. than two college dudes hooking up in the open.

“Is your dorm here?”

“No,” I reply. It’s the truth, but the idea of Kitty Cat being near my room, where the *real* me exists, bothers me. “The janitor’s closet by the staircase is pretty secluded though.”

He bites his lip as if to mull it over. To sweeten the pot, I grab his hips and pull him in. “Come on, darlin’. I came to the big city to meet cute boys like you.” I lean into his ear, then whisper, “It’s Halloween, Kitty Cat. One night of fun, that’s it. The masks don’t even have to come off.”

He groans, and I know I've hooked him. In an instant, he's back on my mouth. After he kisses me like a starving animal, he pulls off and takes my hand. "Follow me, Superhero."

God, hearing him call me that has my blood moving in all sorts of places.

In a blur, we leave the terrace and end up in that holiest of hallowed rooms for hooking up, the janitor's closet. Pushing aside some mops—and checking to see that the door locks and unlocks both ways—we make our way inside. Once we get settled with enough space, I go back to kissing Kitty Cat. He's taller than me, but slender where I'm built with several pounds of muscle.

While not the first guy I've ever kissed, he's the first guy I've gotten to know in the slightest—ironic since I haven't seen his full face. Our connection might seem shallow, but it's there, and it's enough to stoke the flames of passion for one night. This boy tastes so delicious, and I want us both to have a Halloween to remember.

We kiss and kiss, and I push him against the wall. The scent of cleaning supplies doesn't seem to bother either of us. He grinds back into me, bringing his hands to my ass. His hard-on touches mine, igniting a long dormant flame inside me.

"What do you wanna do?" I ask, gasping between kisses.

"I don't...know...what about you, Superhero?"

He groans as I lick down his neck. Even through his costume, I find his nipples nice and hard. My hands caress the nubs through the fabric, earning me a gasp from above.

"I love doing this right now," I mutter. I kiss his neck and he brings his hands forward. As I caress his perfect chest and suck marks on his neck, he pushes his fingers through the tiny waistband of the spandex suit. Moving his hands forward, he reaches lower and lower, and...

"Fuck," I rasp.

He has my dick in his hand. *Holy fucking Spider senses, he has my dick in his hand.*

Despite the fireworks in my eyelids, I manage to pull back enough to get at his jeans. I'm deft enough to work the button and zipper undone, then push his pants and briefs down. Kitty Cat does the same for my tight trousers and boxers, and soon enough, we're hard cock on hard cock.

"At the risk of...*fuck*...ruining this...I gotta know what this means. Does this mean anything?" He gasps as we stroke each other, and I continue to kiss behind his ear.

"It means..." I move back and kiss him hard. "I reckon this means that you kiss really good, darlin'."

"Oh God, the way you talk is fucking amazing...ugh..." He grunts and kisses me again, and his strokes pick up the pace. I match his speed, loving the heat from his dick in my hand.

"Ugh...give it to me, Kitty Cat." I kiss along his jaw, up to where his mask meets his cheek. "Fucking stroke me."

"Fuck...Superhero." He mutters obscenities as he huffs in my face. It's disappointing to not see his eyes or have his breath warm all of my face. Before I can contemplate ripping off my mask, he bats my hand away and grabs both of us. As he jerks our dicks, perfectly aligned and surprisingly about the same size, trickles of precum slide down.

My eyes roll back, enjoying the grinding of his hips. I grasp his back, up to his shoulders, then have enough clarity to move one hand to his front. Superhero moans the moment I stroke his nipples and chest again.

"Oh fuck, this feels good."

"So good. You feel good to me, darlin'."

"*Fuck, Superhero...*"

"Yes..." I hiss.

His voice trembles, and I know we're both almost at the climax. My hips thrust wantonly, matching his perfect grip on our cocks. All I feel, all I breathe is him—this perfect stranger on some Halloween night in New York City is giving me so much pleasure, but I need more.

I need us both to reach that perfect, satisfying peak.

“I’m almost there, darlin’,” I whisper with a grunt.

“Oh fuck,” he says with a whimper. Our dicks ooze more precum, and the sound of slick jerking motions fill the closet.

“You wanna come with me, darlin’?”

“Yes, *ohmygod*, yes.”

“Then come with me.” I stroke his pecs and kiss his sweet lower lip. “Let it out.”

“Oh fuck,” he says, his voice rising an octave. Our hips tremble and his thrusts get even more frantic.

“I’m coming,” I mutter against his skin. “I’m coming.”

“Ohfuckohfuckohfuck...”

“I’m comin’, darlin’.”

“*Fuck!*”

With us muttering dirty cuss words, we burst in unison. Sparks fly from up my toes and down from my scalp to this one perfectly connected climax. Kitty Cat strokes us thoroughly as I drag my thumb rapidly in circles around both his nipples. The sensations are overwhelming, as shot after shot of hot semen jets onto our lower bellies.

Despite the secrecy, anonymity, and chemical smells of the closet, this was the best dang sex this Southern boy has ever had.

When we finally come down off that high, I kiss him again, hard. Reality is sinking in, so I need one last taste, hoping to memorize Kitty Cat in my daydreams to come. We both have kept so much of ourselves private, so it’s obvious we won’t be discussing this in our everyday lives. We won’t recognize each other on the streets, or in the university buildings. This was a one-time thing, so I need to remember that he was real.

We pull apart and do our best to clean ourselves off using only our shirts. Since it’s Halloween, it’s doubtful anyone will

be lucid enough to notice the semen stains all over our bodies —weirdness is normal here in New York City.

“Um, I uh...” Kitty Cat coughs, letting the awkwardness set in. Oh, hell no.

“That was great, darlin’.”

“Thanks,” he mutters, sounding so damn uncomfortable.

“You should know, that was my first time.”

Even in the darkness of the closet, I sense him tense up. “Really?”

“Well, sorta. The first time with someone I actually like.”

He scoffs. “You don’t know me that well.”

“Doesn’t matter. I believe in the good in people, and I don’t think a lick of you was fake all night.” I bite my lip, trying not to overthink this moment. “Somethin’ tells me you liked opening up to someone who knows nothing about you. Like a church confessional, you let yer secrets out, and so did I, and no one’s ever gonna know. But I enjoyed every moment of tonight. So maybe you can say I don’t know you, but you can’t really say I don’t like you.” It’s a tense ten seconds as he doesn’t move, and silence lays heavy between us. I take that as my cue to make a move. Summoning up every ounce of courage I have, I wipe my hands on my shirt one last time, then gently grab his collar.

Pulling him in, I give him one last lingering kiss. I put everything in that tender meeting of our lips, hoping the memory of me stays with him in the coming months. Because I know the memory of this sexy stranger will stay with me. His mouth is soft, sweet, and he kisses me back, reminding me that I’m not alone in this world.

When we pull apart, I whisper, “Happy Halloween, Kitty Cat.”

He stares at me, letting the words hang in the darkness of this closet. I can’t stand to watch any regret sink into his face, so I bolt out the door. The night is over; I’m not Superhero anymore, I’m just Jamal again.

PART 3: JUNG

[OCTOBER, SENIOR YEAR]

The bass is thumping in one of the lower apartments, drowning out the throngs of chatty college kids. I should be relishing one last “hurrah” with my final Halloween party at university. Instead, I find myself chewing minty gum and checking my clock—Eleven p.m.

Exactly one year ago today I was in this very building. When my friends invited me out to this party, I hopped on without hesitating. They have no idea why I’m here dressed up as Black Panther, yet again, and maintaining my sobriety. As everyone else gossips, dances, or hooks up on couches, I manage to slip away.

I make my way up that same old staircase, and my heart skips a beat when I pass that old janitor’s closet—yes, I open it up to make sure it’s unoccupied. Finally, I reach that familiar terrace from what feels like just yesterday.

I walk out and my heart sinks—no one is here. I’m alone, accompanied only by orange city lights. Twelve months ago I saw that perfect figure hunched over, leaning on the stone ledge, and if I squint my eyes, I can imagine him here again.

I’ve been doing a lot of that this past year—imagining.

I’ve imagined what life would be like if I gave Superhero my phone number. I’ve imagined what my time could be like if we exchanged Fanstagram or some other social media. I’ve

imagined each of my few dates with guys this past year as him—no wonder none of them asked me out a second time.

It's unhealthy to dwell on a sexy stranger, someone you knew for all of half an hour a year ago. But I can't help my fixation. He understood me, he rocked my world, and he even respected my decision to keep the masks on.

Now here I am, in that exact same spot, hoping he'll show up. But no, it was a Cinderella-esque one-time thing. There is no glass slipper, only disappointment sinking in my gut like a rock.

I scratch underneath the mask, feeling so stupid for, among many reasons, wearing the same costume as before. I was foolish enough to believe he'd be here and he'd say something like—

“Penny for yer thoughts, Kitty Cat?”

That voice.

I spin around so fast my head gets dizzy. My breath catches in my throat at the sight—I have no doubt it's Superhero. Gone is the Spider-Man costume; he's wearing jeans, tight green spandex, and a green mask that covers his face like mine.

“Black Panther costume again? I ain't complaining, but you oughta switch things up.”

He moves closer to me and leans on the ledge to my right. My body shifts like a magnet drawn only to him.

“Cat got yer tongue? Well, I guess you are the cat.” He chuckles again. That damn Southern drawl I've been beating off to all year is going to be the death of me. “That was a lame joke, I know.” He turns and looks directly at me. Unlike last year, I can see his eyes—they're deep brown, soulful, and have this uncanny ability to reach into my soul.

“Let me start over—how ya been, Kitty Cat? Is it lame to say I was hoping to find you here?”

My throat is dry but I find my voice. “It would be lame if I wasn't doing the same thing.”

He chuckles and pats me on the back. That simple contact sends shivers cascading through my skin. “Well, that strokes my ego, so thanks.”

I recall stroking both of us off, a memory I’ve latched on to for twelve months. Looking back out at the dark city, he asks, “So, how’s it been?”

I gulp. “I...you’re different, Superhero.”

He turns to me, and I think he’s quirking an eyebrow, but the green mask covers that. I try to memorize the color of his eyes, but the darkness makes that impossible. I point to his face and say, “You’re not Spider-Man anymore.”

He chuckles and his dimples emerge. *Fuck*. “No, I’m not. I wanted to switch things up.” He pulls a small green ring out of his pocket.

“Green Lantern,” I reply.

He grins again. “There weren’t too many African-American superheroes growing up, but John Stewart was my favorite.”

“But you’re wearing the Hal Jordan mask.” He laughs and my insides burst into a hundred butterflies.

“You know yer comics,” he remarks.

“Yeah, well...” I gaze out at the streets again, feeling that familiar comfort. Talking to Superhero feels like talking to my best friend. Maybe it’s the masks or maybe the magic of Halloween night, but I never want to let this feeling go. “There are even less Korean superheroes in comics.”

When I look back up, I find him gazing at me fondly. “I didn’t know you were Korean. But then again, ain’t that what the masks are for?”

I nod and we go back to gazing at the night sky in silence. “How’s college in New York been treating you?”

“Hey, I asked you first, Kitty Cat.”

I snicker. “My year’s been...really good actually.”

“That’s great.”

“I’m only here visiting my friends. I’m actually on sabbatical this semester.”

“Oh really?”

“I’m at a dance internship uptown. Hoping to get a spot in ‘*The Christmas Pictuersque*’ this year.”

He grins at me. “That’s fucking awesome man!” His voice is laced with sincerity. When he lightly punches my arm, I resist the urge to grab his wrist and pull him into me. “Yer making a name for yerself, Kitty Cat.”

“Thanks,” I reply, my cheeks heating up.

“A rich and famous dancer. Pretty soon you’ll forget the likes of me.”

“I could never,” I mutter.

“No? No hot dancer girls or boys throwin’ themselves at you?”

I bark a laugh. “No, no, not...nothing like that.” I shrug. “Well, I mean, there’s this one guy I’m friends with I might like. Every time I ask him to hang out, he makes up some excuse and leaves.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah, but it’s cool. I’m like seventy-five percent sure he’s hung up on some boy he left back in his school.”

“Oh.”

“You ever look in someone’s eyes and see that dreaded, regretful loneliness? That longing, chasing after a memory? I see it when I look in this guy’s eye...er, *eyes*. I recognize it.” *I can relate.*

“Same.”

I pause and take a good look at him. The lights of the city reflect on his perfect jaw. Someone as charming and good-looking as Superhero can’t possibly be single and lonely, can he? “How’s...your year been?”

His shoulders slump a bit. “It’s been...aiiiight.”

I hold my breath for a beat, waiting for him to continue. “I thought coming to New York City would be this grand deal. Don’t get me wrong, I love the city most of the time.”

“That’s good!”

“But school has been hard.”

“Really?”

“Classes ain’t even difficult. They just don’t excite me. I’m doing well, but I don’t feel like medicine is my thing.”

“Then don’t do it.”

He sniggers. “You don’t know what my life is like back home.”

“Your family all expects you to be one thing. But you’re an adult. And you’re here now. You can find the things you want. You can shape the future you want.” Even if that future doesn’t include us taking off our masks and pursuing this connection we have, I want Superhero to be happy.

He shrugs and leans his elbow on the terrace. “Maybe...” After a beat, he looks up at me again. “I’m kinda glad to know that you were on sabbatical this semester.”

My pulse raises. “Why?”

“Because I looked fer you.” At this, my throat goes dry and my cock stiffens. *Superhero looked for me?*

“How...how so?”

He chuckles. “It’s lame, but I’d look into people’s eyes. I don’t know, there’s a feeling I get when I think of you. Yer hands...yer voice. I went on a couple of dates this year, but no guy ever made me feel a fraction of what I had with you. I thought I’d be able to find someone as cool or interesting as you. Then I thought I made you up, like some kind of Halloween illusion.”

He laughs and I can’t even breathe at his confession. “It’s so embarrassing...admitting that I haven’t gotten you out of my head for a whole year.”

A small gasp escapes my lips. Superhero is saying all the words I needed to hear. For months I imagined reuniting with him, but I never thought he cared about me as much as I longed for him. Maybe this connection is in my head, maybe he's lying, but I'm in too deep now.

“Did you mean all that? You're not...seeing anyone right now, Superhero?”

He shakes his head. “Couldn't if I tried.”

If this is a dream, I don't ever want to wake up.

“This is my last Halloween in college.”

“So it is,” he says, voice deep and filled with longing.

“Ask me what I've been waiting for.”

I see him gulp and lick his perfect pink lips.

“What...what have you been waiting for, Kitty Cat?”

I put my hand over his on the ledge. “I've been...waiting to find out if this wasn't a fluke. That I didn't make this up. That you're real. That you want me.”

“No question, Kitty Cat.”

We pause and look at each other, letting an eternity of tension pass. After a whole year, slowly, inevitably, we crash into each other again, rapidly beating hearts kissing in front of the New York City skyline.

PART 4: JAMAL

MY LIPS BARELY part from Kitty Cat's as we drag ourselves into the hallway, kissing the entire time. I savor his sweet lips, slowly basking in his perfect scent as we make our way to the broom closet. It's like we can read each other's minds as he runs his hands up and down my back. We both know what the other person wants—needs—and where this is going.

After the bad luck I've had these past 365 days, I'm thrilled to finally have one night where things are going my way. I found Kitty Cat, he still wants me, this chemistry between us is real, and we're about to head back into that storage room where all my dreams came true last year.

After checking once again that the door is unlockable from the inside and out, I crowd Kitty Cat's space on the nearest wall. We kiss and kiss, our moans filling the silence of Halloween night. He threads his fingers through my hair, a sensation I didn't get last year considering the face mask, while my palms explore his ass. Even over his slacks, his glutes feel firm and toned, and my cock perks at the idea of fucking him.

"What do you...mmph...want to do?" I ask, despite his mouth rarely leaving mine. I could make out with him all night, or have a repeat of last year, I don't even care. This seems to be our special night, and I want Kitty Cat to feel good about what we're doing.

"What do...you want? *Fuck.*" He swears as I kiss down his neck. In answer, I crowd his space and push against him. My hardness grazes his thigh and he stutters out a gasp. His own

cock is poking me, too, and I want to get there. But I need to hear his words, first.

“I want...” I kiss down his neck, then back up to his ear. “I want you in my mouth, stud,” I growl.

He whimpers a sexy pleading sound, and I pull back. His nervous eyes dart between mine, and I fear I overstepped my bounds.

Before I can pull the brakes, his hands find their way to my front. He reaches for my jeans and—

Oh.

Ooohh...

My eyes roll back as he undoes the button and strokes my hardness. My hips jut forward of their own accord and I hiss. Before I can regain lucidity, Kitty Cat drops to his knees. With his strong, wanting hands he pulls my pants and boxers down to below my knees. I lean forward on the wall behind him as I desperately try to maintain my balance. This gorgeous man has my mind lost in euphoria, and I might float away if I don't grab something.

In the darkness, his face leans in, and I feel the undeniable sensations of him tongue-kissing my sack. “Fuck... fuckfuckfuck.” I mutter obscenities as my dick turns to steel. A gasp escapes my lips as I instinctively try to pelvic thrust, but Kitty Cat has me by the hips. I want to protest, telling him it was my idea to suck *him* off, but the part of my brain that forms words is out like a candle in a hurricane.

After paying tender attention to my churning balls, he moves back. Even without the light I can see his pretty eyes looking back at me. He's stunning, just as I imagined all these months, and I stroke his cheek.

“Fuck, I want you, Superhero,” he whispers.

I grin, and my voice is raspy as I reply, “So, take me, darlin’.”

With that, my Halloween date moves forward, and inch by inch, he takes me in.

“Ooh...” My whisper turns into a groan. “Fuck...fuck...” My voice is strangled as he slowly envelopes my manhood with his mouth. Clearly he’s had some experience giving head, because my whole body is electrified at the contact. Using my hips as leverage, he sucks me down and back, from root to tip, maintaining that perfect wetness the entire time.

Kitty Cat doesn’t mess around when it comes to oral sex.

Before I lose control completely, I lean back and pull him off with a pop. He wipes his mouth, and, catching his breath, he asks, “What’s up?”

“Please,” I say, my voice still gravelly. “Can I suck you?”

He stands up, looks me in the eyes, and wipes his lips with the back of his hand. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, please, darlin’.” I don’t miss the way my Southern drawl has him biting his lips. “I been dreamin’ about you.”

I pull his neck toward me and kiss him. As my tongue greets his, my left hand trails down and strokes his nipple through his shirt, earning me a groan. When I pull back, I quickly get on my knees, then look up. “I reckon I can return the favor?”

He nods and breathlessly replies, “Okay, Superhero. I’m yours.”

Jackpot.

He leans back against the wall, and I grin victoriously to myself. When I undo his trousers and bring them down along with his briefs, that perfect rod of flesh springs into view. Not wanting to lose the moment, I dive right in.

Kitty Cat’s cock fits perfectly in my mouth, and I’m able to take him all the way down with little discomfort. His saltiness fills my tastebuds, rendering me harder than before. My hands find their way down to my cock, still wet from his mouth, and I stroke in sync with my sucking him. I’m afraid my rhythm is too little or too much, but considering all the expletives I’m hearing above, I must be doing a good job.

“Oh shit...Superhero...oh shit...” He threads his hands through my hair, and hearing his strangled gasps has me nearly blind with pleasure. I haven’t even been sucking him for two minutes, and already, we’re both on this delicious edge. I speed up my suctioning and jerk even faster. Kitty Cat’s hips start to quiver, and I know he’s right there. He’s at that perfect precipice, and I want to push him over into his climax.

“Superhero...I’m coming ahhh...” Hearing his words lights a powder keg in every cell of my body. We climax in exact harmony, and it’s a perfection I’ve never known. My mouth is filled with his hot fluids just as I unleash myself onto the floor. My eyes roll back in ecstasy—I’ve never had a simultaneous orgasm before.

Fuck. This was next level.

The next few seconds are a blur as he helps me stand and we pull our pants up. “Watch your step,” I say. “I made a mess on the floor.”

We share a laugh and move back out into the hallway. “That poor janitor,” he says.

“It’ll be dry by the morning. Besides, yer just as much to blame as me, darlin’.” We share a smile and walk down the stairs. The sound of the party is still bumping, but fortunately, no one is around this part of the building.

When we make it to the emergency exit, we pause. “So uh...” we both say at the same time. I scratch my head and look away as we both share an awkward laugh.

“Was that weird?” Kitty Cat asks.

“No,” I say. “I liked it.”

“So did I,” he says. “Senior year shenanigans, am I right?”

“Exactly. One final Halloween,” I reply.

One single lightbulb illuminates this part of the hallway, and I try to memorize his features. My fingers itch to take off his mask, or hell, even mine. But no, this was the unspoken part of the deal.

After a few more seconds, my heart can't take the silence. "I don't regret meetin' you, Kitty Cat."

His eyes dart to mine, and his face glows with longing. "I don't regret meeting you either, Superhero."

"I'm glad to hear that, darlin'."

"But I guess..." He bites his lip and looks down. "I just wish I could hold onto a memory. Make this feel real. I know...the anonymity is the appeal, but..."

I frown, not wanting to see him so disappointed. Mustering up whatever courage I can, I lean in and kiss him on the cheek. I then make my way past him, opening up the solid metal door. With one foot out in the cold, I turn back to him.

"Yer as real to me as I am to you, Kitty Cat." I pull off the plastic Green Lantern ring from my finger and hold it out in front of him. When he opens his hand, I drop the toy into his palm. "A little somethin'...so you can remember Superhero."

Before he can say another word, I make my way out to the sidewalk, letting the door slam shut. The real world is waiting for both of us, and the memories of two perfect Halloweens will just have to stay that way—as memories.

PART 5: JAMAL

[MARCH, SENIOR YEAR]

Dozens of my new friends dance around in circles on the gymnasium floor. We're all wearing sweats and casual clothes, and our footwear is a mixture of sneakers, just socks, and fancy dancing shoes. Today is yet another practice day for us, the ballroom dance team, gearing up for our competition in three weeks. How I got so invested in this team in the two semesters I've been on it, I'll never know. Well, actually, it may have something to do with a certain elusive dancer who's rocked my world the last two Halloweens. But he's not even here.

I should be focusing on graduation, but instead, I'm coordinating the logistics of our university competition. Volunteering to be this year's Competition Coordinator seemed like the perfect way to distract me from the dread of going to med school. Instead, I'm basically a handler for a slew of dancing undergrads.

This team has quickly become a group of some of my best friends. Only one of them has gotten on my nerves, and I spy him waltzing—literally—in the center of the gym floor. He's dancing with my friend, Serena, with their arms perfectly locked upward in the appropriate frame. I know we're all practicing, but I have a bone to pick with him.

I charge right up to him. "Jung, we need to talk."

"Can't," he replies, not even bothering to stop dancing. He slowly floats around me with Serena in his arms. "We're

practicing our waltz stamina.”

“But Jung—”

“We need to make every second of practice count.” They spin around, and I notice how he’s not even winded. “This is our last home comp, ever.”

“Yeah, but I need to talk to you.”

“Can it wait, buddy?” he asks.

“I am getting kinda tired,” Serena mentions. As annoyed as I am by Jung, the two of them look great on the floor. The dancing ability of my friends—and Jung—was never in question.

“No, it can’t wait,” I reply with a frown.

“Fine, but I don’t want to stop dancing.” He breaks apart from Serena who wanders off, catching her breath. “So I guess you’ll have to be my partner.”

He stands in front of me, arms still raised in the smooth style positioning. I roll my eyes but oblige him. I put my arms up, and he immediately shifts so he’s in the follower hold; it figures that someone as skilled as him knows how to do the woman’s part as expertly as the man’s part.

I latch onto him and glare as we dance a basic waltz around the floor. After two measures, he grins at me. “You’re good, newbie.”

“I’m not new, I’ve been on the team for over a semester.”

“I wasn’t here last semester,” he says. “I was—”

“It doesn’t matter. Look, Jung, I’m Competition Coordinator this year.”

“Yeah, I know. Serena and Firass filled me in when I came back from—”

“Then you know that I make the schedule. I don’t appreciate you changing the order of dances.”

As we dance, I ignore the prickle of sparks on my skin where I hold him. “I thought all the new folks would like a

few more hours to sleep. I remember being that rank as a freshman, and I hated those nerves so early in the morning,” he says. “I am co-captain, after all.”

“First of all, the schedule is under my jurisdiction, not yours.” I frown at him, and he doesn’t drop his smile. “And second, I kept the schedule like that for a reason. We want silver and gold rank to be judged by the professionals who can’t make it until the afternoon sesh. I love the newcomers, but they don’t need the pros breathing down their necks. But the higher ranked folks—people like you—deserve the attention of high-ranked ballroom dancers.”

His smile finally drops, but he never stops waltzing elegantly in my arms. After a few moments, the song changes, and he breaks from my hold. With a straight face, he says, “Fine. You got me there, newbie. You can change it back, it was...my bad.”

Never one to gloat, I bite back a smile of satisfaction. “Thank you. And it’s Jamal. You’d know that if we ever chatted.”

“Like I tried to tell you, I was away last semester.”

I nod as others dance around us to the new tango song. “I uh...hope everything is alright. From last semester.” I bow my head slightly, not wanting to make eye contact—when he’s not pissing me off, Jung’s pretty eyes totally throw me off balance.

He shrugs. “Yeah. I wasn’t gone because of anything bad. I was at my performance internship uptown.”

My eyes are blown wide as he spins on his heel and saunters away.

No...there’s...there’s no way, right?

I shake my head and push those thoughts out of my head. Kitty Cat is simply a Halloween fever dream, and there’s no way he’s the guy on the ballroom team who annoys the shit out of me. I walk away as my friends dance intermediate tango around me.

None of that matters, because I still have flyers to print out and performers to book—the job of a Competition Coordinator

never stops.

PART 6: JUNG

MY BEST FRIEND Firass shakes his hands as he paces back and forth in front of me. He's well-dressed, with his pristine white button-down, black tie, and matching black suit—it's the typical menswear for the smooth/standard portions of a ballroom dance competition. Getting to know him on the team these past few years has been great, and we've grown together as dancers and as friends.

"It's gonna be fine," I say, as I wrangle together my red necktie. I'm leaning on a metal table in the corner of the designated men's changing room. The hustle and bustle of our university's ballroom competition has taken over the entire gymnasium, with dozens of men's sneakers, hoodies, and haircare products strung about this room alone. Very few dudes are here right now, as most are competing in the newcomer and bronze heats at the moment.

"No, it's not. Serena and I didn't get enough time to practice." He paces in front of me, and I refrain from rolling my eyes. "And the other girls are helping her with her hair, which of course is vital in all competitions." He pats his own gelled-down hair-do which currently suppresses his mass of dark brown curls. "But there are some moves I haven't gotten to cement down."

"Don't sweat it," I remark. I'm done with my outfit, and I stand up straight, smoothing my black jacket over. "We have some time before lunch, then we're up and running after." I smile when he finally stops pacing. "You can go over your super-special-skills then."

“Ugh, I can’t,” my friend whines. “I promised Jamal I’d help him move the luggage from our visiting professional dancers. They’ll be at the train station, lost as hell, and—”

“Look...” I put my hands on his shoulders to shut him up. “Why don’t you go practice with Serena now? I’ll take care of the judges.”

“Are you sure?” He looks at me with big brown eyes of concern. “I know you and Jamal aren’t exactly friends.”

I shrug, knowing he has a point. “I can put aside any annoyance I have with the new guy for a few minutes. It’s for the betterment of you and the ballroom team.”

“Really? You’d do that for me?”

“It’s our last semester. Our last comp.” I smooth his tie and we share a smile. “I, Jung Choo, solemnly swear to help you, Firass Odom, with this simple task. In honor of the end of our ballroom college careers.”

“Aw, thanks, you big professional dancer you.” He hugs me and we share a laugh. I’m gonna miss him and all the teammates when we graduate in a few short weeks. Firass has been a true pal, and, even though he’s gay, I’m glad we never tried to hook up—that would have been an awkward mistake.

Besides, no guy has been able to take my mind off the boy who gave me that little plastic ring that burns in my pocket wherever I go.



Jamal and I stand outside the subway station, waiting for the arrival of the professional ballroom couple. Pigeons flap in the

distance and the scent of cigarette smoke lingers in the air, so it's a typical New York afternoon. We're both changed into our sneakers, with overcoats on to combat the final blast of wintry air of the city. After Firass pawned me off to him, he barely said a word as we walked down five blocks.

Now, however, the tension is awkward. Everyone else on the team seems to love him, and I love the team—therefore I should at least try to befriend him before we all graduate, right?

“That’s awesome that you got this couple to come to our competition.”

“It’s my job. You’ve got yer responsibilities, I’ve got mine,” he mutters. His face is nearly scowling as he stares off in the distance. I want to call him out on being rude, but his accent is throwing me off.

“Uh...are you from around here?”

“Nope. Transferred here from the South.”

Huh. The only other person I know from the South is...
“Where in the South?”

“Why you so interested, Jung?” He turns to look at me, daggers in his eyes. “Black guys from the South can do pre-med in New York City too, ya know.”

I shake my head as I attempt to process all this information. These coincidences are making me dizzy. Jamal reminds me so much of the boy who only lives in my Halloween memories.

“Chill, dude. I wasn’t stereotyping or anything. I’m just trying to get to know you.”

He bristles. “Why now? I’m busy competing and coordinating this comp. Seriously, where the hell is this couple we’re waiting for?” He clenches his jaw in irritation, as if staring at the underground subway station will summon them up faster.

He checks his phone for the time, but I don’t miss that his lock screen is a picture of Black Panther. My eyes widen and

my pulse quickens. *Cool it, Jung, everyone loves Black Panther.*

There's no way that Superhero is on my ballroom team. Even though...he did mention trying out. Staring at Jamal's chin...*oh fuck*—he has that nice lower lip I've been beating off to for over a year.

After a moment, I clear my throat. “Well, we didn't get to hang out much last semester.”

“I reckon it was hard fer us to meet considering yer noticeable absence,” he says curtly. Fuck, that Southern twang just made my dick twitch.

My eyes glare at him as my heart threatens to beat out of my chest. It's now or never, time to get some answers. “I was...at my dance internship uptown at *'The Christmas Picturesque'*.”

“Yeah, well I bet you—” His posture abruptly straightens as his eyebrows jump. The words seem to hit him like lightning up his spine. He slowly turns to me, eyes blown wide open. I have the most vivid sense of *déjà vu*, and my image of Jamal keeps swapping with a guy in a Spider-Man costume.

The blood drains from my face as memories from the past two Halloweens flood my mind. Jamal is the guy I spent two magical nights getting to know? He's the scent I memorized, and the firm body permanently etched into my daydreams? My eyes pour over that perfect jawline and down his body as I recall vividly the taste of his skin below the belt.

I reach into my pocket, and then, hands trembling, take out a plastic green ring. Jamal's eyes are somehow even wider as he stares at it. “S...S-Superhero?” I ask, voice trembling.

“Kitty Cat?” His voice sends chills up my spine. Those two simple words confirm what we both learned in the last two minutes—Jamal is that perfect masked man who bared it all to me these past two Halloweens.

I almost begin to hyperventilate when two figures appear to my left. “*Privyet!*” Jamal and I nearly jump, and I fumble shoving the ring back in my pocket. “You must be Jamal!” A

woman in an animal-fur hat gives us a big wave, and standing next to her is a tall, solid mass of Russian man.

“I am!” We all laugh, and I recognize them from that dancing competition reality show. “Inessa! Vlad! So glad you could make it! How was the train ride?”

The tall couple rolls their eyes and laughs. While Jamal lays on the Southern charm, I come around and help them move their massive boxes, grateful to whomever invented wheeled luggage. The four of us move forward as a unit down the New York City sidewalks, and Inessa tells us all about their trip.

Jamal and I have a lot to talk about, but it seems we’re on the same page as we delay our awkward conversation. It’s not Halloween, the masks are off, and I don’t know if there’s anything I want from Superhero now that he’s right in front of me.

PART 7: JAMAL

THE SOUNDS OF my friends laughing and chatting fill the living room as I sip from my cup. This watered-down beer is weaker than Granny's week-old lemonade, but no one seems to mind. These Yankee college kids are weird.

Still, I smile at this group of dancers who have quickly become some of my best buds. We're at a house in Brooklyn, living it up, celebrating both Serena's birthday and the success of last week's big competition. The music is loud, the liquor is plenty, and the love in the air is palpable—dance nerds know how to party! While we all pitched in to make last week's event a success, Firass and Serena gave me major props for coordinating the whole dang thing;—they gave me a mixed drink in my honor, and I chugged it down to a round of applause. While being the coordinator was more of a hassle than wrestling three ornery pigs, it was a great distraction from the woes of my professional life.

Speaking of distractions, I spy Jung across the living room clapping along as Serena and some others throw back shots. He laughs and his dimples pop in just the way they have in my dreams. Without the mask, Kitty Cat is handsomer than I ever could have imagined.

I groan, then finish my shitty beer. What the fuck are we gonna do? Jung hasn't tried to reach out to me all week; we haven't even exchanged numbers. It's crystal clear that my time as Superhero didn't mean shit to him. It was probably just a good time, some rolling in the proverbial sheets, and he's moved on. I gaze at him as he pats Firass on the back, laughing with almost a dozen other folks from the team. A guy

like Jung is the life of the party—he’s basically a professional dancer for crying out loud. Why would he want to settle for a newly out Southern hick like me?

His gaze meets mine, and I freeze up. I toss out my empty plastic cup and wipe my mouth on my wrist, and by the time I turn around again, Jung is making a beeline for me. *Oh crap, what do I do?* I’ve been annoyed and anxious this whole week since Jung has been avoiding me, but now he wants to talk and I’m about to shit bricks. *What do I say?*

“Hey,” he says, hands in his pockets. His smile is shy, and I can tell he’s as sober as I am—that is to say, too sober for college seniors.

“Hey,” I reply meekly.

“Can we talk?”

No good has ever come from those three words. “Course.” He juts his chin to the backdoor, and I lead the way.

We make our way outside, letting the thumping bass of the music diminish as the door closes behind us. This tiny blue wooden porch feels like our own little tucked-away corner of the world. Buildings of all sizes sprawl out in front of us and the night sky drapes over us, like a big curtain of privacy. As Jung sits down on a step, I join him, never removing my gaze from the sky.

Ten seconds of palpable silence pass, and I can’t take it anymore. “I miss the stars from back home.”

Jung snickers. “Yeah, we don’t get those here.”

“The city lights eclipse ’em.”

“You get maybe a handful on a clear night.”

“In Mississippi, some nights...” I whistle. “It’s like the daylight never left, there’re so many.” I finally look down to see Jung already studying me.

“That sounds heavenly. I’ve only ever lived here, so...” His words trail off, and he looks back down at the dirt.

After a tense five seconds, he clears his throat. “You should know, Jamal, that...” I lean in, my pulse pounding in my ears. “That I think you did a great job coordinating the competition. The rest of the team and I are lucky to have you.”

A big part of my heart deflates. “Uh...thanks, Jung.”

“I’m not just saying that because we...” He points to us, letting our unspoken fantasies drift through the air.

Dang, this is awkward. And it’s exactly what I feared. Without the masks and the veneer of Halloween, Kitty Cat and I don’t know how to talk to each other. I glance to my left and take in his features; in the glow of the porch lights, his eyes look different than I imagined.

But he truly is more handsome than I could have dreamed of these past months. And lovely. I’m honored he’s the first guy I really like whom I went to second and third bases with.

“Penny fer yer thoughts, Kitty Cat?”

A smile grows on the corner of his mouth, but he doesn’t move his eyes. “That accent is gonna kill me.”

I chuckle. “We can’t have that, now darlin’. Not when you and I have been acquainted like two tadpoles in a bog.” We both laugh, and he stares right at me. I take in how perfect he looks when he smiles, and I fight the urge to touch his hand. There are so many things I want to say, so many things I would fight for if we only had more time together.

Or the courage to be ourselves without masks on.

“So uh...what’s yer plan after graduating?”

“I’m right back on that dance internship. Going to be a full-timer.”

“Fuck, that’s awesome. You really makin’ a name for yerself.” We hold a stare for another moment. “I’m proud of you, Kitty Cat.”

“Thanks, Superhero.” He clears his throat and looks down again. “And you?”

My smile drops. “Goin’ back down to live with my folks. Studyin’ fer a year and then applyin’ to med school, who knows where.” I shrug. “New York City has been great, but...”

“It’s a big country, a big world. You’ll find your way,” Jung says.

I nod solemnly, not wanting to think about the uncertain future. The one cricket in all of New York City chirps while we sit in silence for a minute. “It’s too bad we’re uh... graduating in a few short weeks,” Jung says.

Whoop, there it is. I gulp. “Yeah.”

“Maybe we could have...” He scratches his eyebrow, and I desperately wish he’d finish his sentence. “But anyway. The real world awaits, I suppose.”

I nod, fighting the lump in my throat. “Yeah. I reckon our lives are heading in different directions. Kind of par for the course when going to school in a big city.”

“Yeah. But you get to meet all sorts of people.”

“And learn things about yerself,” I say.

“Did I...help you learn things about yourself?”

I look up, and nod. “Yeah. I’d say you did.” Staring back at his precious face, I grin. “So thanks, Jung.” He nods and we share a tenuous smile. “Well I should probably get back in there and mingle with the team. But when it comes to you and I...”

“We can agree to keep it on the down low. We’re friends now, so that’s cool.”

A tiny piece of my heart breaks, but I sweep it under the rug. “Right. We’re both cool.”

I stand up but pause when he shifts. “Oh, and uh, here.” He reaches into his pocket and takes out the green plastic ring.

I snicker. “Oh no, darlin’. That was a gift from Superhero to Kitty Cat.”

He rolls his eyes, fighting a losing battle against a smile. “Again with the accent. Jamal...please, take it.”

He juts his hand toward me and I push it back. “What I gave is yers to keep, darlin’. Besides, you took certain parts of me I can never take back.”

His smile drops, and I don’t miss the way his cheeks turn the cutest shade of pink. After a beat, he puts the ring away and shrugs. “I should head inside to make sure Firass isn’t getting too drunk.”

He nods and power-walks away. I want to let him go, but by some instinct I grab his wrist. He turns to me, and every fiber of my being wants us to be Superhero and Kitty Cat again. I want to push Jung against the wall and beg him to give us a shot.

But no, I gotta be pragmatic. Not only are we awkward as hell without the masks on, but our lives are headed in different directions.

“Jung, you uh...” I gulp and he nods. I’m not even breathing.

“Yeah?”

I lick my lips and my heart jackhammers through my chest. “Yer a helluva a dancer. And handsome as sin. You deserve everything in life you work for.”

His eyes widen and the corner of his mouth quirks up. “Really?”

“Really. Yer special to me. And I don’t regret ever gettin’ involved with Kitty Cat.”

Before he can reply, the sound of people walking through the door pops our little nighttime bubble. I quickly drop his wrist, and we break apart as a cavalcade of horny, drunk kids walks by, paying us no mind. I guess the party is moving outdoors?

As the noise level rises, I give Jung one last tentative smile. He bows his head slightly and it’s the cutest thing.

“We’ll always have Halloween,” I say, my voice nearly being drowned out by music.

“Yeah...we always will.”

PART 8: JUNG

[JUNE, SENIOR YEAR]

The weather is perfect for a graduation party on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Of course, it's not my party, but as a new recipient of an undergraduate degree, I get to partake in the festivities. My friend from the dance internship just graduated, and his hunky boyfriend's family is loaded—hence the inner courtyard party. Their whole crew of queer artists and athletes are gathered here, making for a picture-perfect day. They even invited some surprisingly attractive faculty members, complete with a little kid in tow, playing party games with them. I don't know any of these people, but it's awesome seeing such a vibrant, supportive, queer-friendly community.

My friend Dane finishes slow-dancing with his blond boyfriend and immediately makes a beeline for me. He pulls me to their inner living room, and I cringe, knowing what's to come. Five minutes ago, I left him a morsel of relationship drama, and as besties, he's demanding I pay up the rest—in gay culture, gossip is a valued currency.

He sits me down at a fancy couch with a window view of the inner courtyard, and no one's around. "Okay, okay," Dane says. Rubbing his hands together, his eyebrows bounce. "Now spill."

"Spill what?" I ask coyly. I sip my soda and look away.

Dane makes an exasperated sound. "Jung. You *just now* implied that you're dating someone."

I gently shake the drink in my hand and fixate on the fizzy liquid. “That...I did.”

“So what’s up? I thought you were single.”

I sigh and scratch my eyebrow. “I am...I certainly don’t have a boyfriend, but...”

Dane looks at me with inquisitive eyes and my shoulders slump. I then proceed to tell him the truncated version of all of my events with Superhero, starting with last Halloween. The entire time I gush, Dane doesn’t say a word. Several months ago, our roles were reversed, and I’m glad to be able to call Dane a confidante and a friend.

“...and now we’re graduated. The end.” I sip my drink and look off in the distance.

“That’s it?” Dane asks.

“That’s it. Our story is over.”

“No, no it’s not.” Dane abruptly stands up and I nearly fall back in shock.

“What?”

“Jung, this guy Jamal likes you. Come on, you don’t need vision in both eyes to see that.”

“How can you say that?”

“Because he found you so many times. He gave you a friggin’ toy ring! He Cinderella’d you, and you have the glass slipper?”

“Wait, am I Cinderella in this metaphor?”

“Come on Jung.” He reaches out his hand. “Get up.”

“Why?”

“You’re going to march over to his place and tell him your heart’s all strung up in that Southern boy.”

“But...but I can’t...”

“Why not?” Dane asks, impatiently.

“It’s not fair for either of us to pursue something!” I sigh and look away. “We’re headed in different directions.”

“Maybe. Or maybe fate will lead you back together, I don’t know. But your ass is going to regret it for years to come if you don’t go to his place and at least tell him how you feel.”

I bite my lip and avoid his gaze. “I still don’t know...”

“Jung, you once said I shot myself in the foot with my relationship, and you were right. Dude, you’re doing the same!” He motions with his hand to me on the couch. “Now get up. You’re leaving to find your true love.”

I snicker but take his hand, and he helps me up. “Now let’s not get carried away here. Love? I mean he’s...”

“He’s a guy you have a deep connection with. A newer connection, but a bond nonetheless. Have you felt anything like that with anyone?”

I sigh and remember the way Superhero stared at me. We knew each other for a short period of time, but I told him things I haven’t even told Dane or my other friends. “No...no I haven’t.” I clear my throat, looking back down at Dane. “But still, he probably doesn’t want to see me.”

“Dude you’re jumping to conclusions.” Dane huffs impatiently, then his face softens. He squeezes my shoulder. “What’s holding you back, Jung?”

I take a deep breath and close my eyes. “We always kept the masks on. He liked Kitty Cat, but what if he doesn’t like Jung?”

Dane rubs my arm, then after a beat, says, “I can’t tell the future. Maybe he does, maybe he doesn’t. But you are you, mask or no mask. Did you ever outright lie to him?”

I open my mouth but the truth won’t pop out—I never lied.

“Uh huh.” A small smile grows on Dane’s lips. “You both deserve a shot at the truth. Just be you, no mask. One way or another, you’ll get your closure.”

My smile matches Dane’s as my heart speeds up. Shit, this could be a huge mistake, but walking away from Superhero—

Jamal—will be the biggest regret of my life.

“I think...he’s flying home today.”

“No time like the present,” Dane says and we both share a chuckle.

“Thanks.” I lean in and hug him. “You’re a good friend.”

“Just returning the favor,” he replies. When we pull back, I spot his hunky soccer player boyfriend approaching.

“Everything okay in here?” Landon asks.

“Yup.” Dane goes to put his arm around his man. “I’m giving Jung the same advice he gave me. Go. Get. Your. Man.”

“Jung has a man to catch? *Ooh la la!*” Landon sings, his eyes sparkling with interest.

The three of us chuckle. “I gotta run if I’m gonna catch him. We’ll text later?”

They both say, “Go!” and I dash out of the house. When I whip out my phone, I dial up my buddy.

“Hey, Firass?” I stare at the streets of the Upper East Side as I talk into my phone. “I need a favor.”



Thirty minutes and one ride-share later, I arrive at the apartment complex. It’s a simple brownstone building that’s not too far from campus, and I pray that Firass’s intel was correct. Stepping out of the car, I spot one green door opening, and my prayers are answered.

Jamal—Superhero—is here in front of me, lugging two massive suitcases. He looks so handsome in his leather jacket and blue jeans, and his full lips remind me of how he tastes. As he ambles down the three stone steps, he doesn't spot me until I'm right in front of him.

“Ah!” he yelps in surprise with his deep voice. “Jung?” He looks around, as if others are going to pop out from the bushes. “What are you doing here?”

“Jamal, I...” My words are lost on me when I stare at his beautiful face. All those months wondering what was underneath the masks have led to this. He's so damn handsome, he takes my breath away.

We could have had this for weeks, but I'm the idiot who decided to wait until *literally* the last minute.

After ten seconds of thick silence, I take a deep breath. “I just wanted to say...I never lied as Kitty Cat. Superhero was the realest thing I've ever felt. And I've been a coward for not telling you the truth. I thought that if the masks came off you wouldn't want the real me.”

He gulps and says nothing, so I take a step closer. “But this is the real me. And I wanted to get to know Jamal, not Superhero. I'm sorry it took me this long.”

A car horn beeps, and we both turn to see a cab. “Um...?”

“That's my ride. To the uh...airport.”

“Headed home?” I ask with a scratchy throat.

He nods and stares at me with brown eyes filled with longing.

“Oh,” I reply, not even hiding my disappointment. “Well, have a safe flight.” I turn around and hunch my shoulders as I hear him move his luggage to the cab.

I take two steps forward before I hear “Jung!”

I turn to see Jamal rushing up to me. He puts both hands on my shoulders and says, “I like the real you—the you without the mask, darlin'.”

Before I can form a cohesive thought, he pulls me in and put his lips on mine. Just like that first night, the entire city turns to black and white as I fade into this kiss. Superhero—no, Jamal—is everything. He wipes away every lonely thought I've ever had, every insecurity I've ever held, all in one simple touch.

When he pulls back, we both catch our breath. “Wow...” I whisper.

He smiles, then glances back at the cab, and panic flashes in his eyes. “I uh...don't wanna be late.”

“I know,” I say, nodding at the sidewalk.

“Firass has my number. Um...text me?”

“Okay, yeah.” I nod so hard I'm afraid my head will pop off.

He smiles and pecks me on the cheek quickly, and I just about melt. With that, he's off to his cab and his flight back home.

I don't know whether to cheer or break down and cry. All I know is what we shared on Halloween wasn't an illusion and it wasn't a fluke—just maybe, it might be the beginning of something real.

PART 9: JUNG

[OCTOBER AFTER SENIOR Year].

You'll never feel as old as a fresh college graduate partying with undergrads. I adjust my red jacket with dangling badges—the appropriate last-minute attire since I decided to dress up as a generic prince this Halloween. I'm surrounded by throngs of drunk young adults, all clad in colorful costumes, trying to hook up with each other. Was it really five months ago that I was one of them? If I wasn't still tight with Serena and the other now-seniors, there's no way I would have come here.

Being part of a prestigious dance company has been keeping me busy. I thought I could keep my college days behind me, but when I was invited to the annual Halloween party, I caved immediately. My heart panged with some tenuous hope to relive a memory, so now here I am, sipping some shitty beer in the corner, feeling ancient.

For crying out loud, I'm a performing artist in New York City; I should be content, happy, and not want anything to do with the past. But I still pine for someone I barely know. Jamal and I texted a few times over the summer, but it felt so unnatural and platonic. He's crazy busy studying for his med school exams, and I've been preoccupied getting a new apartment and performing regularly. Even if he did want to visit, then what? A relationship can't be built on a long-distance foundation, it just can't.

It seems Kitty Cat and Superhero will only be a memory.

Because I want to torture myself, I trash my cup and head upstairs. My body is on autopilot as I walk through that top apartment to the terrace I see in my dreams. Opening the door, I'm struck with a vision of Jamal and I kissing with no regard to who's watching. *But wait, why is my hair so long?*

"Oh, uh hey!" Two random freshmen in cowboy and cowgirl costumes break apart and greet me. Oh, this wasn't a memory—two actual people stand before me, red-faced, with swollen lips. It seems I'm not the only one who uses this terrace for some alone time, and I've accidentally interrupted their kiss. "We were just..."

"My bad," I mutter, covering my eyes.

Before I can leave, they brush past, me giggling. The girl is leading the way, and the boy seems star-struck at his date. *Ah, college kids*—the magic of Halloween never disappoints their hormones.

It wasn't that long ago I was in their shoes. Now that I'm alone, I lean on the stone ledge, gazing out at the buildings before me. Tonight was supposed to be fun, but really, it's been a tad depressing. I already feel so far removed from my undergrad party days. Even if missing Jamal was out of the equation, this really isn't my scene anymore. The friends I've made at the dance company are all older.

That's the life I need to focus on. I can't keep dwelling on the past. I turn around with every intention of going downstairs to say goodbye to my friends, but a figure in the doorway stops me. My breath hitches when I spot a man in dark jeans and a Spider-Man mask. *No way...*

"I gotta say, darlin'—" he steps forward—"I miss the Kitty Cat costume."

I can't find the ability to say his name before he puts me out of my misery and rips off the mask. Jamal's perfect grin makes my heart cascade into fireworks. Before I even realize it, I grab his face and crash my mouth onto his. He falters for a moment in shock, then kisses me back, a soothing taste on my tongue.

If this is another Halloween illusion, I don't want to wake up.

When I pull back, I place my forehead on his as we both catch our breaths. He chuckles and says, "I guess you missed me, darlin'?"

I laugh, then sober up and pull away. "Shit, Jamal. I didn't even ask if you had a boyfriend! I bet you're not even single. Now I'm here assaulting you, and...and..."

I stammer and he has the audacity to laugh. "Jung, baby, I ain't datin' anyone!" He leans in and rubs my shoulders. "So you can get yer trousers out of the twist, because it's just us."

My breathing calms down, and I gaze into his eyes. I take in the faint wisps of facial hair and freckles, and I breathe in his perfect scent. "I...didn't know you were coming."

"I wanted it to be a surprise. My bad." He shrugs with an adorable apologetic grin. "I texted Serena to make sure you were here."

"You did?"

"Yeah," he replies, shoving his hands in his pockets. "Guess the cat's out of the bag about me and you."

"Oh really?" I smirk and cross my arms, ready to give him a hard time. "And what about me and you, huh?"

He scoffs and rolls his eyes. "The others know you got me wrapped around your perfect finger. My heart's all torn up about you."

My cheeks burn, but I reach into my pocket and whip out the green ring. "As I recall, you wrapped yourself around my finger."

His smile drops and he gasps quietly. "You still have it..."

"Jamal..." I roll my eyes. "How many Halloweens are we gonna play this game?" We both chuckle, and I lean in closer. "I've tried getting over you, but there's no one else. I want you, darlin'." I give my best impression of a Southern drawl and we both end up in a giggle fit.

Once we calm down, I lean in and kiss him, letting the lights of New York City shine on us like sparkling stars. Pulling back, I catch my breath and hold his trembling hands. The familiar worry creeps up my spine again. “Jamal... tomorrow morning, in the light of day...”

“Hey...hey...” He grabs my face like it’s a lifeline and he’s a drowning man. He looks me square in the eyes. “Jung... I’m real, I promise. I’m here.”

“But for how long?”

His eyes dart with worry, then he kisses me again slowly. We take time tasting each other’s mouths, luxuriating in the perfection of the Halloween night.

An eternity later, he pulls back and says, “I’m staying in a hotel not too far from here. Can we continue this conversation there, darlin’?”

My knees go weak and a hopeful smile spreads across both our faces. He has to know his power over me when he calls me that.



One tension-filled cab ride later, we end up in Jamal’s hotel room. In the dark of the night, we stand before each other, two warm bodies with no masks on. The light of the bathroom is barely enough to see, but I don’t blink as I take Superhero in for the first time in months. The faint glow accentuates a perfect atmosphere, and I feel my guard falling, shattering to the floor.

I’m not Kitty Cat. He’s not Superhero. We’re finally Jung and Jamal, everything familiar and so new at the same time.

I take in a tenuous breath, staring him right in the eye. He seems to be fighting his nerves, and I know I need to take the lead. “This isn’t just...a Halloween thing, right?”

He blinks, then mutters, “No. It hasn’t been fer quite some time, darlin’.”

“You’re not going to disappear in the morning?”

“Not without you,” he replies, a small curve to his lips.

Without thinking, I peel off my shirt. Slowly, he does the same, revealing a landscape of sinewy muscle and perfect skin. We stand for a moment, mirroring each other, mere inches separating our chests. Finally, after waiting an eternity, I put my hands on his hips and lean in.

Jamal and I allow our mouths to meet, kissing at a languid pace. Nothing about this is a hurried rush. We allow ourselves to savor the taste of each other. His hands find my shoulders, neck, and scalp. As we kiss, tongues exploring the other’s mouth, his fingers settle on my jaw. As the room heats up, I manage to pull back enough to ask, “Shower?”

Pulling back, his brown eyes glint in a promising way as he smiles a naughty grin. “Together?”

“Always.”

A minute later, we’re both stripped, and I’ve turned on the showerhead. It’s not a sexy bathroom by any means, but seeing the guy I’m crazy about standing here makes it perfect. He’s an over two-year-old illusion brought back to life. Jamal magically procures condoms and lube, and I bite back my grin.

Tossing open the curtain, I stand under the warm water. I close my eyes and enjoy the perfect temperature. Then, in my boldest move yet, I hike my left leg to the top of the tub. The water isn’t running too hard, so I feel a nice grip on both feet as well as the handlebar rod on my right—how convenient.

Then, I unashamedly prep myself, knowing Jamal is watching me.

“You want me, darlin’?” I turn my head to see his heated stare as he crowds me in the shower. *Too much space.*

“I want you, Jamal.” The water is barely a trickle, as I don’t want him to lose grip anywhere. “Take care of me tonight?”

“I got you, Jung. I got you, baby.” He lines his hard cock up while he grips my shoulder and kisses my neck.

“I’m yours, Jamal.”

“I’m yours too,” he replies, muttering against my neck. I turn my head to kiss him once, a sweet lingering taste, before I shift back around. Bracing myself, Jamal’s chest gets closer, and I feel his cock touch my hole. A moment later, my whole world is thrown upside-down as he slowly but surely enters me.

“Fuck,” I moan. The slight flow of shower water does nothing to drown out our respective groans. He gets nearly all eight glorious inches of his member in before I gasp. Seemingly reading my mind, he pulls out. Between the lube and the shower water, it’s a slick ride, but the burn is fortunately subsiding.

“You good, Jung?” he asks between gasps.

“Yeah...fuck you’re amazing...” I bend forward to get a good grip. “Keep goin’, baby.”

“I got you, darlin’.” Between his drawl and the pressure of him filling me, my cock turns to steel. We’re both burning with passion as he slams into me, water splashing over both of us. All of those months spent pining—imagining what it would be like for Superhero to completely take me—have led to this.

I thought I built Superhero on this imaginary pedestal that he could never live up to. There’s no way sex with him could continue to be good.

But no, the real deal blows all my fantasies out of the water. Jamal kisses all over my back and fills me with such expert passion. His thrusts speed up and slow down at all the right times, pegging that perfect spot until I’m gasping. I’m nearly delirious with pleasure, and that’s before he reaches

around with one hand. His palm grips me in the most delicious way, and I instinctively fuck his fist as he fucks me.

Sex with my Halloween crush is phenomenal, and beyond anything I could have imagined.

“I’m close, darlin’,” he rasps, voice barely audible over the running water.

“Ooh, fuck, me too,” I reply as my eyes roll back. Sensing what I need, his fist tightens around my dick, giving me even more delicious friction.

“Come with me, Kitty Cat.” His hand grips my shoulder and I feel his cock harden inside me. “Come with me, Jung...”

“Ooh yes...yes...” My eyes are screwed shut as I chant, each word punctuated by him slamming deep into me. Hearing him say my name has my heart and body on fire, pushing me closer to that delicious edge. “Fuck, Superhero...fuck me, Jamal.”

His hips accelerate as he huffs into my neck. “Yes, almost...I’m comin’...uhhh...”

Feeling him pulse inside me sends shockwaves through my body. His grip around my manhood tightens, and I cry out. My prostate throbs, and seconds after Jamal, I’m blasting all over the shower wall.

Twenty minutes later, we’re both actually showered and holding each other in bed. The darkness of the night holds us together like a perfect blanket as we face each other. My leg is over his hip and his left arm is draped over my shoulder; it’s like personal space doesn’t exist where Jamal is concerned. I’ve never fit with someone this well before, and I don’t want to try to find anything better.

We exchange fluttery kisses, but I can’t fall asleep as nervousness thrums inside me. “You alright, Jung?”

I bite my lip then whisper, “I’m just thinking...what now?”

He grips my shoulder. “What do ya mean?”

“Jamal...I like you, a lot. But this thing between us...”

“It’s real to me, Jung. I should have said that last year as soon I found out you were Kitty Cat, but I was too damn awkward. Between me graduating and moving back home, I was so overwhelmed with my future that I didn’t know where you fit. It’s a shitty excuse, and I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” I reply. I trace my hand around his abs, just because I can. “I should have said something too. I guess I was just scared.”

“Why?”

“Because Superhero liked the person I was with the mask. I didn’t want him—you—to be disappointed when you found out the real me.”

“I’m not disappointed! What we did in the shower is the opposite of disappointing!”

We share a hearty laugh then calm down. “But you don’t know me that well.”

“Then tell me, darlin’. We got time.”

“Jamal,” I reply, with a defeated breath. “We don’t have time. I’m here in New York, trying to make it as a performing artist. You’re back in Mississippi.”

“About that...” Hope swells in my chest like an ember in a storm, and we both sit up. “I’ve been thinking...I really miss being here.”

“Jamal...”

He turns to me and we lay back against the headboard. “I was miserable this whole summer. And frankly, I have no interest in going to med school, near home or at all.”

“Are you...?”

“But there are osteopathic medicine programs here in New York.”

“Jamal,” I reply, my throat suddenly parched. “I can’t have you upending your life just to follow me.”

“I’m not!” he says quickly. “Well...not entirely. I really do miss living up north. I talked to my family already, and they support me. I have all the prerequisites, and I’m looking to get my own place in the Bronx.”

That’s alarmingly close to my place in Queens, and my heart threatens to bounce right out of my chest. *Jamal is coming back to me?*

“I refuse to be the main reason you change your entire life.”

“Yer not darlin’.” He strokes my cheek. “I didn’t even think you wanted me before I applied to schools here. A superstar dancer like you probably has his pick of the boys in the city. But if I get settled in with my osteopathic program... and if yer still single...” Even in the dark I can see the hopeful grin on his face. “Maybe we can finally do this right? Maybe hook up on a day other than Halloween?”

I all but melt inside. “No masks?”

“You never needed one, Jung.” He puts his hand in mine and squeezes tight, and I know this is the start of something incredible. “So what do you say? Want to give us a real shot?”

I lean forward and gently put my mouth on his. I pour all of my hopes and fears into this kiss, praying Jamal knows that I’m in this for the real deal. Our future might not be clear, but it’s ours to shape. No masks, no secrets, just two hearts ready to take on the world.

EPILOGUE: JAMAL

[SEVEN YEARS LATER]

“Let’s welcome to the dance floor for the first time as husbands, Mr. Dane Poorweisz and Mr. Landee Landon!” The DJ blasts an airhorn and we all applaud. Dane and Landon make their way to the center of the ballroom looking regal as ever. Landon’s wearing a pristine white suit, while Dane is in black, donning wisps of brown facial hair. “Amazing” by Teddy Swims plays, and the violins accent the dimming of the lights. The happy husbands proceed to waltz around the floor, and I’m thoroughly impressed Landon is able to lead Dane’s intricate choreography—allegedly Landon couldn’t quite keep up during their private lessons.

As everyone else watches and films them, I sip my champagne and grin. Before I can tear up, a hand lands on my right knee. Turning my head, Jung and I share a grin. “They really do look amazing,” he says. “Not to sound redundant. The song captured it all.”

My boyfriend looks gorgeous in his dark crimson suit and styled hair. He hasn’t aged a day, and I never take him for granted. “They really do.”

“I’m so happy they made it,” Jung says. “Things were rocky with them once upon a time, but they’re disgustingly perfect for each other.”

“I know, right? Landon is like Dane’s number one fan.” We share a chuckle and go back to watching the slow dance.

I occasionally take peeks to the side to take in Jung. He's as beautiful as ever, and his pocket square has Black Panther patterning on it—a little detail that touches me to the core.

Somehow, somehow, Jung and I managed to beat the odds over the past seven years. Things were difficult as it took time to move back to New York. But as soon as I was settled, I asked him out on a proper date. We had dinner then took a long walk through Central Park where we chatted about everything we could think of. We were both afraid that the chemistry would die out once we dropped our Halloween personas, but I never stopped being charmed by him. Sitting on a rock overlooking one of the lawns of Central Park, I kissed him underneath the lights of New York City, and I knew I was hooked.

After grad school, I got a job in an osteopathic practice, and four months after that, we moved in with each other. My schooling was hard, and being away from my folks was tough as well. But falling in love with Jung Choo? Now that was the easiest thing I ever did.

Everyone applauds as the lights go up. “We now invite the rest of you lovely couples to the dance floor. Let's get those hands on shoulders for a slow dance!” The floor soon becomes filled with a dozen couples—*how many gay male friends does Dane have?!—ready to dance.*

I turn to see Jung already grinning at me. “May I have this dance?”

I give a fake wince and look down. “I don't know, darlin'. I'm not a professional like y'all.”

We chuckle as he leads me to the floor. “Good thing I'm pro enough to lead us both.”

He takes my left hand and places my right on his hip. As we sway, we share a grin, and everything feels right. All of the love in the room moves me in ways I never thought possible. I used to believe I'd be a closeted country boy trapped in an uninspired job for the rest of my life. Jung changed all that, and I'm so damn grateful that he didn't run away from that balcony all those years ago.

“Have you ever thought about marriage?” I ask.

Jung purses his lips in a cute way and looks up in thought. “I don’t know...” We both look around; all these folks—mostly attractive dudes, to be honest—are happily married. “It seems to be working for these people.”

“It does,” I reply as we dance around.

“Maybe...given the right incentive.” He gives me a coy grin, and I roll my eyes.

“You’re cute, you know that, darlin’?”

“So I’ve been told. Mostly by you.” We snicker and share a gentle kiss.

“I love you, Jung,” I mutter.

“I love you more, Jamal.” His smile fades and he looks deep into my eyes. “Thank you...for getting rid of the masks.”

“Like I said once upon a time, you never needed it.” We share a smile and he leans his head on my shoulder. Gazing at all the love in the room, I know everything I’ve ever needed is right here.

I make a mental note to buy a pair of rings soon so I can make an honest man out of Jung. After all, it’s almost October—I think an engagement will be the perfect Halloween treat for both of us.

May your Halloween be filled with the best tricks and treats.

THE END



THANK YOU

DEAR READER,

I love a good, quick, fluffy-and-sexy love story, don't you? Thank you for checking out this Halloween novella! I fell in love with Jung and had to give him his happily-ever-after. Of course, being able to write Dane and Landon again was a gift all on its own.

I hope this story put a smile on your face and made you as happy as it made me. And yes, Jung's college buddy will be getting his own book series, too. Subscribe to my pages to get those updates.

Never stop loving life and never stop reading,

CD Rachels

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Angela for the awesome editing as always.

To all my Chill Discoursians: every time I read a quote of mine that you liked in any way, it breathes new life in me.

Thank you for all the kinds words and cheering me up every night and every day. Dealing with a tumultuous unemployment wasn't so bad because you all cheerleaded me the entire way. I only continue to write to deserve your praise and attention.

OTHER WORKS

BOOKS BY CD

Artists and Athletes Series

1. What happened when Ravi, the soccer star, was forced to take an art class? Check out "[The Lines We Draw](#)" Artists and Athletes book 1.
2. What happened when Landon wanted to turn over a new leaf all while taking a dance class? Check out "[The Moves We Make](#)" Artists and Athletes book 2.
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1. When Damon, the motorsports star, meets his gorgeous male nurse, he discovers he wants more than winning for the first time in his life. He wants Rocky, and damn if that isn't the scariest thing he's ever felt. Read [“Drive to Thrive” \(Formula Q book 1\)](#).

2. When Berto wants to explore what it means to be asexual, Hunter becomes his confidante, his guide, his best friend, and so much more. Read “Drive to Feel Alive” [\(Formula Q book 2\)](#).

3. When old friends Daisuke and Robesy reunite on the racetrack, feelings that never went away reignite. For the big finale, Read “Drive Back to You” [\(Formula Q book 3\)](#).

Single Gamer's Society series

These queer nerds are looking for love. For the sequel to Artists and Athletes, check out “Failing a Bluff Check (Single Gamer's Society book 1).

Other Works

Two workplace enemies end up on a blind date vacation getaway, and tension turns to sparks, igniting a passion that they can't let go of. Get [“Stretch Goals and Sweethearts”](#) part of the Sweetheart Escapes collaborative series.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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CD Rachels has been coming up with stories since he was little.

First it was fanfiction, then YA queer novels, and now he's moved up to the big leagues of adult MM romance. In 2020 during quarantine, he burned through more male/male romance books than he ever had in the previous 29 years combined.

He believes there aren't enough BIPOC MC's in MM romance, and he's on a mission to change that.

He lives in New York City with the love of his life and is a nurse by trade. If you're reading this, he's honored that you took the time to help support him as a self-published author.

Be the first to hear about all his updates and new releases! Sign up for his newsletter [“The Chill Discourse Report”](#)

He has a website! Visit cdrachelsauthor.com

Get all the graphic teasers and wacky reels on Instagram and Tiktok: [@cdrachels](#)

The fastest way to contact him is to DM him on his Facebook group where he hosts polls where YOU can affect

the story: [“CD Rachels’ Chill Discourse Room”](#)

Follow/review his works on [Goodreads](#)

Check him out on [BookBub too](#)