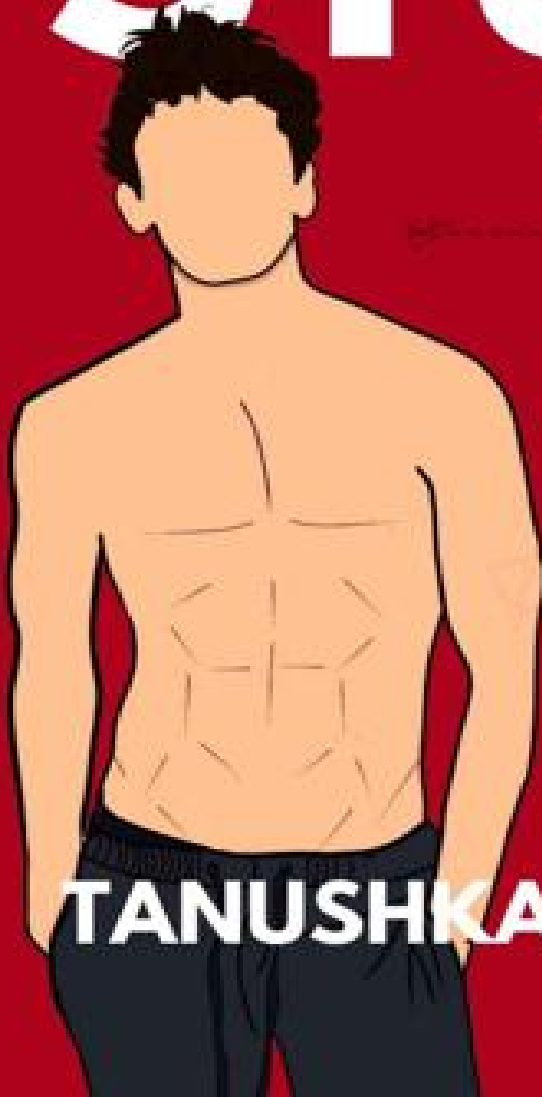


MOORE SISTERS BOOK 1



# THE *Publicity* STUNT

A NOVEL



TANUSHKA BHATNAGAR

# **The Publicity Stunt**

**A novel**

# Tanushka Bhatnagar



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This book is intended for a mature audience.

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# Content Warnings

This is a list of content warnings for The Publicity Stunt:

- Cursing/Vulgar language.
- Death of a parent (mentioned).
- References to suicidal thoughts and self-harm ideation.
- Sexual harassment of one of the main characters.
- Mention of blood and gore.
- Graphic sexual content.

# Playlist

Paper Rings | Taylor Swift

Afterglow | Taylor Swift

People Watching | Conan Gray

Till Forever Falls Apart | Ashe, FINNEAS

Still Into You | Paramore

Scars To Your Beautiful | Alessia Cara

I Like Me Better | Lauv

Cardigan | Taylor Swift

You Belong With Me | Taylor Swift

The Way I Loved You (Taylor's Version) | Taylor Swift

Night Changes | One Direction

Strawberries & Cigarettes | Troye Sivan

Lover | Taylor Swift

Out of The Woods | Taylor Swift

Memories | Conan Gray

You Are In Love | Taylor Swift

Those Eyes | New West

Next To You | New West

Midnight Rain | Taylor Swift

Sweet Nothing | Taylor Swift

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*Never lower your standards  
The right person will rise to meet them*

# Prologue

## April

### Eight Years Earlier

If I'd known I was going to die tonight, I wouldn't have thrown away that last taco.

"Parker! You're leaving me behind!" A rough wind brushes past my hair, tossing some leaves along the trail.

Parker slows mid-jog and circles back to me; not stopping, just moving in place. Hovering like a hummingbird. A shirtless, very tall, ridiculously good-looking hummingbird. "I offered to carry you seven fucking times, April," he says and starts taking small laps around me.

Bending down to hold my knees, I take a deep breath of air, instantly coughing it out. My lungs hurt, my tank top has a big sweaty patch right in the middle, and my face is probably all red and blotchy. I glance up at Parker, who of course looks like he just walked out of the ocean for a cologne ad. Not fair.

In my defense, when he suggested we go to the Hollywood sign to see the sunset, I pictured a nice romantic stroll through the woods with my boyfriend. Not this torturous training-for-the-Olympics hiking marathon.

Parker still runs around me, sometimes pausing to kiss my cheek. Nice try, buddy, but no amount of kissing is going to make up for tricking me into a workout.

"I didn't want you to get a lung attack like I am having right now," I grumble. "Sorry for caring."

“Apology accepted. Now, let’s go, or else we’re going to miss the sunset.” He gets behind me and hooks his arms below my shoulders, pulling me up straight and trying to drag my poor body along the sharply inclined slope. Oh, no, no, no. Not happening. A giraffe birthing a baby tiger is more likely.

I wiggle out of his grasp and quickly make a beeline toward a small boulder a couple of feet away.

“April,” Parker chides.

I shake my head. “This rock is my boyfriend now. My home for the next hundred years.”

At this, he smiles and he finally stops jogging. “Sure you wanna live somewhere with that many ants?” he says, walking toward me. “Our apartment is arguably better.”

My eyes widen and I immediately look down. No ants. Thank God. Just a few fallen leaves and twigs.

Parker crouches to level with me. “So, do I get to carry you now?”

“No, just leave me here. I’ll catch up in time for the sunrise.”

“You’ll likely be dead by then,” he says.

“I’m tougher than you think.”

His hands, rough and cold, slide around my waist and he lifts his gaze to mine. Saying nothing. Just smiling. His brown eyes go all soft and sullen like he’s looking straight into my mind, reading my thoughts. Like if he looks away, even for a second, I’ll disappear. Maybe I will.

Grinning, I lean in to kiss him and he tries to fit his smile against mine. “Fine,” I say around our kiss. “I’ll get on your stupid back.”

“Stupid?” He laughs and the sound makes me feel invincible. I feel like I could fly. Effortlessly lifting me off the boulder, he brings his arms around my back, and I wrap my legs around his hips. “I’ll just carry you like this.”

“You’re going to trip and fall.” I pull myself closer so our noses touch. His bare chest flexes against mine, with nothing but my thin, very sweaty blue tank top as a barrier between us. He leans in again and give my lips a soft peck.

“And I’d rather not break my head tonight,” I mutter.

“Is that your only concern?” He tightens his hold behind my back. “Because I promise you that won’t happen.”

“And if it does?”

“Then I’ll just kiss it better.”

I smile. He smiles wider.

When we finally do reach the Hollywood sign, my lips are tingly and the air smells like dry leaves and tree bark. Parker carefully sets me on the ground feet first. I turn around and oh ... wow.

“You can see everything from here,” I say.

The tapering glow of the distant skyline, the faint white shine of the Getty, the tiny specks of light scattered across the city of Los Angeles like a million fireflies. This is breathtaking. Totally worth the hike. Well, for Parker, at least.

He tugs on my hand, pulling me to the gravelly edge overlooking the city. “We missed the sunset because of your stupid whining.”

I’m too mesmerized by the view to smack his arm, so I use my words instead. “I thought it was the stupid kissing.”

“That too.” He sits down and pulls me onto his lap, wrapping his arms around me in that trademark Parker way. Like he’s shielding me from all the bad in the world. Might not be very practical, but it is where I feel safest. I recline into his chest and smile. Maybe that’s what matters more. The feeling of being safe, rather than the actual state. And with him, I feel truly safe. He’s like my very own superhero. Protecting me from everything, even the things that hurt me from the inside.

Especially those.

Sometimes I wonder what makes Hayden Parker feel safe. He doesn't like talking about stuff like that—you know, stuff that makes him feel vulnerable. And I don't force it out of him. But that doesn't thwart my curiosity. What is his safe place?

It's okay if it isn't me; I'm not intimidating like he is. I can't scare people off with a single look or run up a hill with a girl in my arms.

But I do hope it's something. Everyone deserves a safe place. He does too, more than most.

“Hey.” His voice vibrates against my hair. “I have something for you.”

I tilt my head back. “What?”

Reeling in his right arm, he reaches into the pocket of his sweatpants and fishes out a small package, delicately wrapped in light blue paper, tied together with a red ribbon. The way I snatch it from him, you'd think I've never even seen a present before.

“Whoa, slow down there, Chere.” Parker laughs, nestling his chin into the crook of my neck. “You're going to break what's inside.”

Ignoring his caution, I paw at the paper and quite literally tear it to shreds. He groans.

I feel a heavy, infatuated jab to my heart as I pull off the last piece of wrapping paper. It's a simple necklace with a gold ring as a pendant. The ring has tiny green vines around the top.

Yellow and green.

“What is this?” I ask, holding it up between my fingers.

Parker takes it from my hands and pushes my hair to one side. The click of the clasp is followed by a kiss to the back of my head. “I told you I'd get you a ring eventually.”

“How did you pay—”

He cuts me off. “Do you like it?”

“Like it?” I shift to face him. “I love it.”

“Yeah?”

“Mm-hm. And I love you too.”

A tender expression spreads across his face as he looks down at me, his eye twinkling with tiny mischief. “More than the ant-infested boulder?”

“We’ll see.” Laughing, blissful, I stretch to kiss him again, hoping it tells him all the things I can’t say sometimes.

*I love you more than anything.*

# Chapter One



## Present Day

### APRIL

**F**inding a seat on the New York subway is like taking part in the Hunger Games.

A full-scale war in a car packed with people who all want the same thing and will violate all standards of human behavior to get it.

“This is a Brooklyn-bound 6 train. The next stop is Canal Street.”

With one hand gripping the railing, I use the other to secure my phone and brace myself for the grand finale: on which side will the doors open this time?

The train comes to a screeching halt and the doors open on the left. The station is more crowded than usual today. There are a few people asleep on the bench and the smell of, well, something very unpleasant is ripe in the air.

I scramble out, my four-inch booties clicking against the concrete, and make my way upstairs, squeezing through the metal turnstile, and out the exit on—

Shit.

I quickly take cover under the awning of a nearby Starbucks. Just great. It’s raining. As if this day couldn’t get any worse. Reaching into my purse, I whip out an umbrella.

This is the only romantically cynical bone in my body. Rain is not romantic. And rain in New York is definitely not romantic. My hair gets all frizzy, there are trash-filled puddles

everywhere, and I end up having to balance my umbrella, my purse, and my phone, all with the two hands I possess.

“Oh, shoot!” I swiftly sidestep around someone’s white Lhasa Apso puppy. “Sorry!” I yell and resume my walking.

See? New York rains are the worst.

I pick up the pace and my phone buzzes in my hand. It’s a text from Holly.

*Hol: ETA?*

Without stopping, I quickly type out a response.

*Me: Ten minutes. Order an espresso martini for me? And ask if they can put a little coffee bean on top. I need a little pick-me-up today.*

“A little pick-me-up” is the understatement of the century after the day I’ve had. Look, let me just start by saying I’m normally a very cheerful person. If my life was a romantic comedy, I’d be the girl who radiates sunshine energy.

A hopeful romantic, if you will.

In other words, I’m the idiot who believes in love even if love doesn’t seem to believe in me. And what happened today is proof enough.

Ajax and I met on Tinder. Yup. His name should’ve been red flag number one. Anyway, we agreed to meet in Central Park for our first date. An afternoon picnic. Cute, right?

Nope.

I offered to bring some iced tea and he said he would bring everything else needed.

When I got there, “Ajax” proceeded to pull out an aluminum blanket and a bottle of strawberry lube. The man then giggled and said, “Told you I’d get all that was needed.”

No food. Just some tinfoil and lube. So naturally, I bolted and phoned my sister to meet for some drinks. Some things are weird even by New York standards.

My phone buzzes again.

*Hol: They don't have that here.*

I groan. *Me: What kind of bar doesn't have an espresso martini? And why did you choose that bar?*

*Hol: Because it's across from the hospital and doctors get a discount.*

I can practically hear her disdain through the screen.

*Me: Fine, any martini will do. P.S. Never letting you pick a place again.*

Two years younger, two inches shorter, and two times smarter, Holly and I look nothing alike, which is understandable since I'm adopted, but it's not just our looks. With a personality that could frighten Darth Vader himself, Holly isn't as evil, but her death stares make you want to hide under your blanket and never come out.

If I'm the sunshine girl, then she's my fierce and grumpy counterpart. But when shit goes down, there's no one I'd rather have on my team.

The rain subsides to a light drizzle and I close my umbrella. My phone buzzes again. This time it's a calendar reminder: *Meeting with Zawe tomorrow @9am.*

Nuh-uh. Not today. I stuff my phone into the pocket of my blazer. Out of sight, out of mind. Procrastination at its best.

The pedestrian signal turns white, a ten-second timer for a road that's clearly a twenty-second minimum, and I step off the sidewalk.

It's right about then that my whole world comes to a standstill.

"April?"

The eerily familiar voice pins my feet to the ground. All the blood from my toes rushes up to my face. What ... no. April's a pretty common name. I shake my head and take another step, but the voice speaks again.

"April Moore?"

Fuck.

That voice. I could be lying in a hospital bed, suffering from amnesia and trying to remember my own name, but I could never ever forget that voice. Deep and husky, capable of making my skin tingle. Very slowly I turn around, movie style, and sure enough, it's him.

Brown hair so messy you'd think it's on purpose and razor-sharp cheekbones. My mouth gapes.

Hayden Parker.

# Chapter Two

## Sixteen Years Ago

### HAYDEN

**T**here's a girl with her head in the toilet bowl. Her red hair hides most of her face, but I'm almost sure she's sleeping. Or passed out.

I take a few steps and bend down to nudge her shoulder. "Hello?" All I get is a soft muffled groan. Not a response. I poke again. "You okay?"

Another groan. But this time she sits up, strands of her hair sticking to her face. I recognize her instantly. April Moore. We've been in the same class since first grade, but apart from assignments and the occasional small talk, we haven't really spoken to each other outside of school.

She makes another retching sound. Shit.

"Are you okay?" I take a step forward.

Wiping the corners of her mouth, April squints at me, her makeup in tiny black smudges around her green eyes.

"Do you need me to get someone?" I ask. "A friend?"

She opens her mouth to say something but instead takes a detour back to the toilet bowl. Jesus, how much has she had to drink tonight?

I bend down and hold her hair back. All I wanted to do was lie in bed and read my comic. Instead, here I am, at Tyler Hockman's house, my shirt still soaked from the beer he spilled on me, sitting on a sticky bathroom floor, helping this girl puke her intestines out. Fucking aces.

April coughs into the toilet bowl and I gently rub her back. “Need some water?”

She sits back up and nods. I grab a red plastic cup from the corner of the sink, swirl out the remnants of beer, and fill it with tap water. “Here you go.”

April hurriedly gulps it down in one go. I lean against the wall and watch.

God, she looks horrible. Her makeup is running all over her face, her hair’s all messed up, and if it wasn’t for me, she would probably curl up in a corner and spend the night in this very bathroom.

She sets the empty cup down on the bathroom floor and lifts her gaze to meet mine. “I can’t go home like this.”

“Yeah, probably not a good idea.”

“What do I do?”

Taken aback by her question, I struggle for words. “Uh, you could get some food? That helps—”

She cuts me off. “Food.” She springs to her feet. “Let’s get some food. I would literally die for cheese fries.”

*Let’s?* “There’s pizza downstairs.”

“No, not pizza,” April says. “I don’t like pizza. I want fries.”

I turn on the tap to wash my hands. “You should never say that to anyone else, but all right,” I say. “There’s a diner close by. Pretty sure they’ll provide you with fries without demanding a blood sacrifice.”

April looks at my reflection in the mirror above the sink. “You mean Susie’s?”

I dry my hands on the sides of my pants. “Yup.” The one diner in Cooperstown, New York.

Her eyes flick to the side, then back to me, hesitant. “Will you come with me?”

And the night just keeps getting better.

I turn around and arch an eyebrow. “Why?”

April shifts in her stance a little. “I can’t go by myself.”

My frown deepens and I repeat, “Why?”

“It’s a long walk.”

“It’s three blocks away,” I counter.

“It’s dark out.”

“You were ready to offer up your life for those fries a minute ago.”

April’s shoulders slacken and she takes a step forward. “Look, will you please just come with me? It’s dark and I’m a girl. If something happens to me, you don’t seem like the kind of guy who could live with the guilt. I’m just looking out for you, dude.”

I don’t even hesitate. “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

April widens her eyes, arching her own eyebrow, looking at me with anticipation.

I heave a sigh. “Fine, let’s go.”

\* \* \*

Fifteen minutes later, we’re at Susie’s, seated at a corner booth across from each other.

One of the waitresses comes over to our table, wearing a white apron over her striped blue dress. “Hi. Welcome to Susie’s. What can I get you?” she deadpans.

“Cheese fries for her.” I point at April. “And a vanilla milkshake for me.”

“Oh, can I get a coffee too? And a plate of French toast, chocolate-chip pancakes, and some buffalo wings?”

Damn.

April’s eyes flick between the two of us and she adds a soft, “Please.”



The waitress takes back our menus. “All that for just you?”

She just shrugs and says, “I’m pregnant.”

I choke on my water and the waitress shoots me a wide-eyed look. Jesus fucking Christ. “Oh, um ... I didn’t ...” I stutter. “It’s not mine.”

Sighing audibly, the waitress walks back inside, most likely to spit in our drinks, and I turn back to April. “Are you actually pregnant?” She was throwing up, after all.

“No, just very hungry.” April leans back against the red leather seat. “And I’m sorry for ruining your night.”

“Ruining” is a bit extreme, but I decide to play along. “Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m not normally like this.”

“Like what?”

She fidgets with the sleeves of her blue sweatshirt. “You know, going to parties, puking in bathrooms.”

“Oh? Where do you normally puke, then?”

She gasps with a slight smile. “Nowhere! I just don’t want you to have the wrong impression of me. That’s all.”

“If it makes you feel any better, it was a pretty trash party to begin with. You gave me an excuse to leave.”

“Trash?” Confusion clouds her eyes. “Why were you there, then?”

“My mom forced me to go.”

Our waitress brings us our drinks and April’s face lights up. She grabs her cup of coffee and takes a huge sip. “Did she really force you to come to the party?”

“Took away my book too. She’s a good influence, my mom.”

“You were going to bring a book?”

Heat rises up my neck. “Yeah.”

“What kind of sixteen-year-old brings a book to a party?”

“The same kind that’s going to pay for all the food you just ordered.”

April snickers. “You would’ve gotten beaten up.”

“By who? You?”

Slowly, she places the white coffee mug down and looks up, examining me with those green eyes. “Why not?”

I probably shouldn’t laugh at someone who just hinted they want to beat me up, but I do. And in the process, I spray a bit of vanilla milkshake out my mouth.

“You don’t think a girl can beat a guy up?” She sounds so offended, it only makes me laugh more.

She pauses for a brief second, then says, “I can beat you up, Hayden Parker.”

“Oh, I believe you. But just because you can, doesn’t mean you should.”

“Hmm,” she says dryly. “Diplomatic answer. Who was the girl? The one who beat you up.”

My first thought is, *what?*

My second thought is, *am I that transparent?*

Shaking my head, I let out a soft chuckle. “Summer camp, Gail Swanson. She punched me in the nose because I made fun of her pigtails.”

This time April bursts out laughing, harder than before. “You got beat up by someone named Gail?”

“Hey, girls like it when you’re mean to them.”

She arches an eyebrow. “Of course. As evidenced by Gail Swanson’s upper hook.”

I flip up my middle finger and she laughs some more. “What book?” she asks.

“Huh?”

“What book were you going to bring?”

“You wouldn’t know.”

“That’s presumptuous.”

“Are you using big words to prove that you read?” My question is purely for fun. Of course, she fucking reads. I know that. But I’m a guy and offensive banter is how our kind displays affection.

April folds her arms across her chest and sits up straight, bustling with energy. “Is it working?”

I pause for a second. Okay, so maybe I lied when I’d said I was gonna bring a book. But for all intents and purposes, a comic book is a book. I don’t even know why I lied. It just came out. Now she’s gonna think I’m some fake elitist who thinks liking comic books is “uncool” or whatever.

I glance up and she goes on looking at me expectantly.

Ah, fuck it.

“Spider-Man.”

“Spider-Man?”

I nod and play it cool.

“You’re gonna have to be more specific than that,” she says.

“*The Amazing Spider-Man.*”

Her tiny shoulders hunch forward and she laces her fingers together. “More specific.”

“*The Amazing Spider-Man #92.*”

“So you haven’t reached the part where he and Mary Jane are reunited?”

My jaw is on the floor. “You’ve read the comics?”

She picks up her cup of coffee and takes a slow, proud sip. Our waitress returns with the rest of our order.

“I have.” April nods.

“And you just ruined it for me?”

“Possibly.”

To say I'm impressed would be the understatement of the fucking century. "Great power, zero responsibility." I point an accusatory finger at her. "Aunt May would be very disappointed."

She laughs into her coffee.

It's a nice sound. Sweet and light.

I did that. I want to do it again.

Immediately intrigued by her, I slide my glass to the side and lean forward. "Marvel or DC?"

April gasps. "What kind of girl do you think I am?" she says. "But if we're being honest, I would never tell you if I liked DC. You seem way too judgmental."

"You're probably right," I say. "So, Iron Man or Cap?"

Her answer is instantaneous and equally perfect. "Mutants."

"Okay, Professor X or Magneto?"

"Rogue."

"Rogue?" I frown. "Why, you like her hair?"

April shakes her head. "Just when I thought you were done judging me."

"What can I say? Pretty girls make me presumptuous." As soon as those words make their way out of my mouth I regret it with every bone in my body. "*Pretty girls make me presumptuous?*" *You should've just put your actual foot in your mouth; it would've been less embarrassing.*

"You think I'm pretty?" April asks and I fight the urge to crawl under this table and spend the rest of my life there.

"You're not *not* pretty."

Smiling, she goes back to finishing the rest of the wings and I try changing the topic. "So what else should I know about you?"

"I'm sorry?"

“You like Marvel, you occasionally puke in bathrooms, and you probably fantasize about beating up every guy in our class just for the kick of it. What else?”

April shakes her head and rolls the tip of her tongue against her cheek. She tries to fight back a smile and that’s when I see them. Dimples. April Moore has dimples.

“Not every guy. Just brunettes who think I’m pretty.”

My lips purse into a thin line. Touché.

“Okay, I’ll bite.” She takes out the silverware from the paper napkin on her plate and cuts into the stack of chocolate-chip pancakes. “But you first. What are your weird quirks?”

“Weird quirks?”

“Yeah, weird things about yourself.”

“You want me to list weird things about myself?”

She barely looks up in my direction. “Show me yours, I’ll show you mine.”

“What if I have none?”

Another laugh, though I’m pretty sure I wasn’t joking. “Dude, I can name three weird things about you off the top of my head.” She glances up. “You thinking you’re not a little weirdo is one of them.”

It’s baffling to me how I’m not even a little offended. Almost as if my brain has decided to turn a blind eye to everything that comes out of her mouth, just because we’re part of the same fandom. It’s not much, but it makes me happy.

“Fine,” I say. “I don’t dream.”

April brings the back of her hand over her mouth, trying not to spit out her pancake. “What do you mean, you don’t dream?”

“I just don’t dream.”

“So what, you just close your eyes and lie in bed Count Dracula style?”

“More or less.”

“You haven’t had a single dream? Ever?”

“You’re making me feel like a therapy patient, April.”

Chugging the rest of her coffee, April slides the empty cup across the table and perches her chin on her palm. “That’s because you are.”

I pick up a fry and throw it at her. She laughs and moves sideways to dodge it.

“Your turn,” I say.

“Oh, I dream a lot. Sometimes even when I’m awake.”

“No, you fool. Your weird quirks.”

She smiles. “Fine. *Pride and Prejudice*.”

“*Pride and Prejudice*?” I squint.

“The movie.”

“You think that’s weird?”

“No. I just wanted to throw that out there, in case you thought I’m some comic-book-obsessed, Taylor Swift-listening sap.”

“You don’t listen to Taylor Swift?” I ask.

“Of course I do. My personality has multitudes.”

“You think liking *Pride and Prejudice* and Taylor Swift are two different personality traits?”

She shrugs and picks up a napkin to wipe the corner of her mouth. “I also love, *love* cheesy, sappy romantic comedies with grand gestures. The less sense they make, the better.”

“Shocking.”

“Ooh! Especially the ones where the guy makes a big speech at the end.”

Weird doesn’t even begin to cover this girl. “All right, Taylor Swift, *Pride and Prejudice*, and a kink for speeches. Got it. What else?”

She looks away for a few seconds and then says, “Okay, I don’t think it’s that weird—”

“It probably is. Go on.”

She flings a single chocolate chip at my head. “I don’t like the rain. But it’s not weird. A lot of people don’t like—”

“It is weird. What do you mean, you don’t like the rain? You like *Pride and Prejudice* and don’t like the rain?”

“I just ... I don’t get the appeal. It’s so gross and wet, and there’s mud everywhere. All your makeup gets smudged. And God forbid you wear contacts. I don’t think any kiss in the rain is worth an eye infection.”

“I don’t think that’s how contacts work—”

She cuts me off. “I hate rain.”

“You’re a fraud.”

She gasps and lurches back. “Am not.”

“I can’t believe I’m friends with a comic-book-obsessed, Taylor Swift-listening fraud.”

“Oh, we’re friends now?” She throws another chip at me.

“Stop wasting food.” I laugh, dodging it. “And of course, we’re friends. I’ve seen you puke. That’s first base. Tomorrow we hit second.”

April raises a single eyebrow and the corner of her mouth curves up slightly. “And what’s that?”

“Forcing you to watch *X-Men*, because there’s no way Rogue is better than Magneto.”

“You do realize she’s kicked his ass in the comics several times, right?”

“Incorrect. That happened only once.”

For the next thirty minutes we argue about which Marvel character is superior. I stick to Magneto. April stays adamant on Rogue.

She cuts into her stack of pancakes and I take another sip of my milkshake.

It’s eleven p.m. I’m at Susie’s, sitting opposite this girl who probably goes around throwing Marvel spoilers at anyone

who pisses her off. All the while, I'm wishing she ordered more food. Because for some inexplicable reason, I don't want this night to end.



# Chapter Three

## Present Day

### APRIL

**N**ot quite sure what you say to someone you haven't seen in over eight years, but the monosyllabic sounds coming out of my mouth can't be it.

“April?”

My heart is hammering so hard, I can hear it pulse in my ears. What the fuck is going on right now? How is he here? Why is he here? Is this seriously happening? Am I in some sort of trance? One bad date equals hallucinating an ex-boyfriend.

He takes a step forward and a car horn goes off. His eyes dart toward the sound and he lunges forward, pulling me back onto the sidewalk.

“Shit, are you all right?” he asks. His palms are on my shoulders and I've now turned into a mute moron. So I squint and nod, then I repeat the process like some dashboard bobblehead on an uneven road.

Of course, I'm not all right. What an inane question.

“Wha-what are you ... you're here?” I stutter.

Parker isn't looking at my face anymore. His eyes are perusing every inch of me, from my arms to my legs to my feet. He pales like he's seen a ghost.

Same.

I was one hundred percent not prepared for this today. So much so, that even Ajax and his lube picnic bag are starting to seem less and less bizarre.

“I ... well, yeah.” His grip around me tightens. “I was walking down the street and saw your hair, and—”

“My hair?”

The corner of Parker’s lip twitches up, amused. “Yeah.”

A blaring MTA bus passes us on Canal Street and I free myself from his grasp, taking a step away. “What are you doing here?” I ask.

He doesn’t say a word. No, he just stands there looking at me, trying to figure out what I’m thinking. “Parker?” I ask.

His eyes flicker to mine. “I live here.”

My brain zeroes out into nothingness, unable to compute his statement. He lives here? That makes no sense. I live here. New York is mine. He lives in LA. That’s where he lives.

“I moved to the city a few weeks back,” Parker adds.

I look up, and any sign of his slow-forming smile fades away immediately. “I would’ve called you. I just wasn’t sure you wanted to see me.”

“Oh ... I, um ...”

He cuts me off. “Do you want to get some coffee? I’d love to catch up.”

Catch up? The phrase almost makes me laugh. Almost. I don’t want to get coffee and catch up with Parker. He’s the last person I ever thought I’d have to catch up with. This is—was—my best friend. My favorite person in the entire world. I can’t pretend to make small talk with him on a Sunday afternoon like we’re casual buddies who just “lost touch” after college.

A bitter taste rises in my throat and spreads all over my tongue. “I need to go.”

He laughs. Parker actually laughs. “No.”

“No?” I parrot.

“No,” he repeats. “I’m not going to run into you like this and then let you walk away again. We need to talk, April.”

My stomach squirms. “I have to go. I’m ... I’m already late,” I say and just as I’m about to walk away, he grabs my hand and pulls me toward him, my face only a few inches away from his. I look down at our hands, convinced there’s going to be a burn mark on my skin once he lets go.

“Wait,” he says with a heightened sense of urgency. “Let me look at you for a second, yeah?” His eyes travel down my teal pantsuit, then back to my face.

“I can’t do this right now,” I whisper.

“I thought I’d never see you again. I’m just trying to take it all in.”

I nervously look to the side and nod. “Okay.” Okay?

“It’s not okay,” Parker says. His hand is still gripping mine. “Nothing about this is okay, Chere.”

*Chere.*

It suddenly becomes too much. I can’t do this. I can’t.

I won’t.

Pulling my hand back, I lift it to my chest, rubbing my fingers over my knuckles. “I’m sorry, I really need to go,” I say and Parker’s eyes go dark. “It was, um ... it was good seeing you.”

Before he can make another protest that’ll for sure melt my dwindling resolve, I spin around and scurry in the opposite direction.

To my relief, Parker doesn’t come after me.

\* \* \*

The minute I enter Paddy’s Pub, my eyes widen with shock.

“Holly!”

She looks up from behind the bar, a cocktail shaker in hand, and smiles. Her short blond waves are tied back in a loose bun and she wears a plain white tee with the slogan “My Eyes Are Up Here” sprawled across her boobs.

I approach the bar and pull out a stool, its legs scraping the floor. “You’re behind the bar.”

“And you’re late,” Holly states, her tone cold. She sets the shaker down and snaps her fingers at one of the bartenders—someone who actually works here. “Grab me some coffee beans from the kitchen.”

No “Please.” No “Can you do me a favor?” None of that crap.

Just “Grab me some coffee beans.” Simple and to the point. My confusion only escalates when the bearded man actually complies without any hesitation.

“Are you making me an espresso martini?” My brows squish together.

She shrugs and strains the brown liquid from the shaker into a conical glass. “Didn’t you want one?”

“Yeah ...” I don’t sound very sure of myself.

The man returns with literally two coffee beans and Hol shoots him a dry smile. “Then yes, I’m making you an espresso martini.” She slides the glass toward me.

I immediately reach for it and take a sip. Then another. And another, chugging the drink till there’s nothing left but the tiny coffee beans at the bottom of the glass.

Slowly, Hol takes back the empty glass and hands it to the bartender. “We’re gonna need more coffee beans,” she tells him.

He goes on staring at me like I’ve grown a set of horns.

“She just caught her husband cheating with the nanny,” Holly says and the man forces a sympathetic smile my way. The second he walks back into the kitchen, Hol turns her attention back to me. “Okay, what’s wro—”

“I just ran into Parker.”

At first her expression remains stoic. Her brown eyes narrow into slits and there’s a long, drawn-out pause. “What do you mean, you ran into Parker? Where?”

“Outside. A few blocks away. He spotted me.” Even as I say the words, I’m struggling to believe them. My heartbeat thumps underneath my skin and I reach into my purse, pulling out one of the hundred sample micro perfume bottles I keep stashed inside. Floral Lavender. Perfect.

“Spotted you? Are you sure he wasn’t following you?”

I scoff and spray the liquid on the side of my neck. “For eight years? I don’t think so. No, this was definitely a run-in.”

Hol leans against the case of whiskey bottles, nodding and mulling over my words. “How are you feeling?”

Her question drives a cold wedge between my ribs. How am I feeling? Shocked? Scared? A bit of both? I’ve spent a long time trying to forget him and all that happened. But now he’s back. I’m terrified that I’m not going to be able to stop thinking about him or that stupid scar on his eyebrow or the way he called me “Chere.”

“I don’t know. He seemed pretty shocked to see me too—”

“Oh, fuck my life.”

“It’s not that big of a deal, honestly.” I brush off her remark with a wave of my hand. “This is New York. People run into people all the time—”

She cuts me off abruptly. “No, not you. Just shut up and don’t turn around.”

Of course, I turn around.

“April!” Holly hisses.

With my back still toward her, I squint and scan the area. “I don’t get it. What am I not supposed to be looking at?” All I see are a few crowded tables, a couple of guys arguing over something “football” and—holy mother of God. My mouth gapes.

If Henry Cavill and Tom Hiddleston decided to have a six-foot tall trench coat-wearing baby, this man would be it. Short black hair, just long enough to run your hands through, and cheekbones that could probably cut through steel.

Goddamn.

His blue eyes flick to us and I spin around to face my sister. “Oh my God, who is that?” I’m whispering like his existence is some sort of secret. It should be. The guy’s way too pretty to be real.

Holly just glares at me. “Don’t.”

“Hello, love.” The man’s deep voice splices through the space between us and he takes a seat next to me. Wait ... he knows her?

“This how you plan on paying off your med school loans? Bartending?”

Red heat flushes Holly’s cheeks and she says, “Just on Sundays. On Tuesdays I home-deliver homicides.”

Pretty Boy chuckles and turns his gaze toward me. “You must be the other Moore. The tolerable one.” His thick British accent cuts through the air like a freshly sharpened knife, “Pleased to meet you.” Taking my hand, he plants a very polite, gentlemanly kiss over my knuckles. “I’m Theo Carter.”

My brain doesn’t even process the words coming out of his mouth. It’s too busy picking up my jaw from the floor.

“Have you really got nothing else better to do?” Holly snaps at him.

“Rude.” Smiling, he turns his attention back to her. “I’ll have an old-fashioned, by the way. If you can manage it.” There’s a smoothness in his voice that’s kind of intimidating.

“Suuure.” She leans forward. “Would you like that with or without my spit in it?”

Ugh, Holly. Gross. I cringe.

Theo, however, does no such thing. All the earlier light-heartedness, the fun-and-games aura, disappears. The energy

in the air shifts, giving way to crackling electricity. He hunches forward with his elbows resting on the bar counter, and stares at her. Fierce, brooding, and unwavering. A predator eyeing its prey.

I look at Holly and she hasn't moved an inch. She just stares back. It's more of a death glare, but still.

"You'd be surprised how much I wouldn't hate that, love," Theo replies, his tone calm and collected.

Double gross.

"But for now I'll just take it with orange bitters and rye."

Holly's fingers whiten around the glass in her hand. Oh, no. The heated glare in her eyes increases tenfold and she turns around, grabbing a bottle of Jack Daniel's along with an empty glass.

"Uh ... Hol," I chime in, trying to lighten the tension. "We had that thing, remember? That thing we need to leave for now. Like right now."

She ignores me, obviously, and five minutes later she walks around the bar, and slams the glass in front of him. An old-fashioned with bitters and rye. "Drink," she orders.

A slow, devious grin tugs at Theo's lips and he casually rolls up the sleeves of his black button-down, revealing his toned arms. "So bossy," he says. "Just my type."

"Keep up the sarcasm and you'll be my type too."

At this, his smile widens. "Yeah? And what's that, exactly?"

"A man in pain." Holly reaches for the glass and slides it forward. "Now, drink."

"What do I get in return?" Theo asks.

A normal person would probably be a little grossed out, or at least skeptical of the contents of that glass. But not this guy.

This guy is smiling. Like, actually smiling.



“All my surgeries for the next week,” Holly leans her weight sideways against the bar top.

My eyes bug out and I hold back a gasp. My sister would rather cut off her own arm than offer up her surgeries. Which means she doesn’t expect the guy to actually drink it. Ergo, she must have spit in it. Oh, Holly.

“One of these days, love”—with his eyes locked on hers, Theo lifts the glass to his mouth and downs every last drop —“someone’s really gonna put you in your place.” Holly scoffs and Theo slams the empty glass on the countertop. “Keep up that attitude and it might just be me.”

I gape. Holly’s smug look fades into nothingness.

“The drink wasn’t half bad, by the way.”

“What a shockingly backhanded compliment,” she snaps, while Theo goes on looking at my sister like she’s the Eighth Wonder of the World.

“Well, then, your left thumbnail is a bit chipped,” he tells her.

Her frown deepens. “That’s not a compliment.”

“Or backhanded.”

Cheeks sucked in and nostrils flaring, Holly does not look pleased. Well, duh. Who asked her to bet a week’s worth of surgeries over something like this?

I put my phone inside my purse and stand, fishing out my wallet to get our tab. “Oh, that’s not necessary.” Holly stuffs my hand back in rather aggressively. “Doctor Scumbag here will take care of it.”

“What?” I say, glancing back at Theo.

The weight of his stare is so intense, it pulses through the air. “Sure. A little charity never hurt anyone.”

Right.

After telling him to drop dead, Hol grabs my arm and pulls me to the exit.

I shove my hands into my coat pockets and shout out a quick “Bye” to Theo. He might be a little twisted, but that’s no excuse for bad manners. Plus, I have a feeling we’ll be seeing more of him.

Holly and I start strutting down Canal Street, and somewhere around the third traffic light, she breaks the silence. “So ... Parker?”

I shake my head and hook my arm around hers. “Let’s not talk about it,” I say. “This is a huge city. I’ll probably never run into him again.”

I hope I don’t.

“And I’d rather talk about the little show you put on earlier,” I add. “Please tell me you didn’t make the poor guy drink your spit.”

Holly laughs, a sound that doesn’t leave her mouth very often and says, “He wishes.”

We spend the rest of the journey talking about work and espresso martinis. By the time we get home it’s already dark, and it’s a long, long time before I fall asleep.

# Chapter Four

## Fifteen Years Ago

### HAYDEN

**T**he first time I've had a girl in my room and we're on my bed ... watching *Spider-Man 2*. Could be worse. We could be watching *Spider-Man 3*.

April's cheek rests on my shoulder, her auburn hair barely showing with that unicorn hat covering her entire head. It's green and furry and has long white strands dangling on either side. She shifts closer and wraps her arm around mine, squinting at the laptop screen.

"Not a fan of Maguire?" I ask.

"He's all right." Her nose crinkles in thought and she looks up at me. "But Mary Jane's kinda annoying."

The white fur of her hat covers half her eyes and I push it up. "Yeah, Gwen Stacy's better."

April smiles, agreeing, and goes back to watching the movie. The bright blue unicorn horn pokes into my neck.

She's been wearing the damn thing to school for the past few months. Some idiot at school yanked it off her head and started tossing it around the cafeteria. A bunch of other guys joined in, heckling and mocking her, and she nearly cried. Obviously, I got the stupid hat back and flipped the morons off, but that's not gonna stop them from bullying her tomorrow, and the day after that. I just don't understand why she still insists on wearing the damn thing to school like some badge of honor. Maybe it's kinda brave, standing up to her

bullies in a silent protest, I dunno, but must she be brave every single day?

Mary Jane is walking down the stairs with her astronaut fiancé when April speaks again. “I bet I could play a better MJ.”

That makes me laugh. I readjust my back against the wooden headboard. “You already have the hair for it.”

April snuggles further into me, and a warm sensation spreads tight across my chest. I stare down, my mouth twisted in a frown.

“You don’t like my hair?”

“What?” My gaze lifts to her face.

“My hair,” she repeats. “You don’t like it?”

“Of course, I do.” My neck and ears grow hot. “Why would you say that?”

“You don’t like MJ, but you compared my hair to hers. That’s all.” Her tone is all calm and composed, almost analytical. Like there was a hidden meaning behind my words, one visible only to her. Was there?

“You’re nothing like MJ,” I say.

Her next question is instantaneous. “Am I like Gwen?” She looks up and brushes away a few strands of flyaway hair.

I couldn’t be more on edge if I tried. “Do you want to be like Gwen?”

Her eyes stay trained on my face for a beat too long, brows drawn, like she’s trying to solve a math problem. “No, I don’t think so.” She shakes her head and looks away. “I don’t have the hair for it.”

We keep watching the movie. The lights in my room are switched off so it’s pretty dark, but the faint glow of the laptop screen washes over April’s face, highlighting her dainty little nose. Every ten seconds or so, I catch her glance up at me. The fifth time, I decide to speak up. “What is it?” I ask, mildly annoyed.

“Nothing.”

“You keep looking at me.”

“You said you were gonna show me your comic today.”

Oh ... right.

April gets distracted by Peter Parker having a full-blown emotional breakdown, but that sweet respite lasts about two seconds. “So, where is it?” she asks.

“It’s not ready yet.” A lie.

“I still wanna see it.”

“It’s a blank page. There’s nothing to see.”

“You’re lying.”

My brows arch. What the hell? Does this girl have some sort of X-ray vision for thoughts? Oh, wait ... that’s just telepathy. “I’m not lying.”

“It’s okay if you’re embarrassed. I won’t make fun.”

That does it. “You wanna see a blank piece of paper? Because I can show you a blank piece of paper.” I get up, forgetting that April’s still leaning on my arm. She falls face first into my pillow.

I ignore her muffled cry and rifle through the mess on my desk, trying to find a goddamn blank sheet of paper. Shit, I must’ve used them all up.

“Just so you know,” she says, slowly sitting up against the wall next to my bed, “this is so not fair. You were the one who said you’d show it to me today.”

I shoot her a look. “Well, fuck me. It’s not ready yet, Moore.”

“Why won’t you show me?”

“I told you it’s not done.”

“Bullshit!” she yells. “I promise I won’t say anything bad. I just wanna see it. Pleeese?”

I accidentally knock over a stack of papers and the first two pages of my comic slip out. April must see the momentary alarm on my face, because the next thing I know, she leaps off the bed and lands right on top of the fallen papers. Like Captain America when he jumped on a live grenade.

“April, get up.”

She shakes her head vigorously. “Let me see your comic and no one gets hurt.”

“You have five seconds, and then I’m gonna pick you up myself.”

With her head down, she mumbles, “Walk away, punk.”

Good God. That would probably sound more threatening if it wasn’t for her unicorn hat and its tiny googly eyes staring up at me. I pinch the bridge of my nose in frustration. “Fine, I’ll show it to you.”

April perks up instantly, clutching the fallen stack of papers to her chest tightly. “Really?”

“But only if you give me something in return.” I plonk my ass down next to her.

“What?” She tightens her grip around the sheets. “A pat on the back for a job well done? My unconditional support, no matter how bad it is?”

“Nah, none of that crap.” I narrow my eyes and slowly lean forward, my elbows resting on my knees. The movie goes on playing and I edge closer. “I want you to take off that hat.”

April’s eyes move to my chest and her smile fades. “What?”

Keeping my eyes locked to hers, I point a single finger at her head. “Give it to me.”

She frowns, her confusion slowly dwindling, and brings her hand up to her hat. “You want my hat?”

“Uh-huh.” I lean back and watch her shoulders slacken in response to the restored distance between us.

“Why?”

“You asking questions wasn’t part of the deal. Just give it to me.” My tone is crisp and to the point, but maybe she can’t read my mind after all.

“You wanna ... wear it?”

And now I feel like an asshole. I take a deep breath and sigh heavily. “No, I want you to stop wearing it.”

“What? Why?”

“Because people pick on you.”

“So?”

So? Was that not clear enough? “So I don’t want anyone to fucking pick on you, April. And if you keep wearing that hat, they’re not gonna back off.”

“I can handle myself,” she says softly.

This is when I should probably drop it. She said she can handle herself. Drop it and move on, Parker.

But of course, I don’t.

“You can’t handle shit. I’ve seen you get bullied because of that stupid hat more times than I count.” Judging by the way her eyebrows lower and pull together, I know I’ve said all the wrong things. I always do. And I can’t stop. It’s one of my fatal flaws—not knowing when to shut the fuck up. “It’s just a hat. There are other ways of seeking attention.”

Her eyes go big and round and a little glassy, and she shifts back. “I don’t need you to rescue me.” She throws the stack of papers onto my lap and gets up.

Fuck. “April.” I reach for her hand, but she brushes me off.

“And I don’t think I want to see your comic anymore.”

“I’m sorry.” I get up with her. “I shouldn’t have said it like that. I’m sorry. I don’t know why—”

“It’s okay.” Her voice is softer than usual, layered with a bit of guilt. Like me bitching at her is somehow her fault.

Ignoring the heaviness weighing down my chest, I nudge her foot with mine. “Hey.”



Her eyes slowly flick to mine. Her cheeks pale, and I just want to pull her to my side, give her a hug. She licks her lips and looks down at her shoes, nodding slowly. “I can take care of myself, I promise,” she whispers. “And I don’t ... I don’t wear it for attention.”

Her chest rises in a slow inhale.

Mine collapses in an even deeper one. “I know. I’m so sorry I said that, Moore.”

“It’s okay.”

“You wanna stay over for dinner? My mom’s not home. We can get some pizza.”

April shrugs, making it very clear that all she wants right now is to be away from me. But we’ve been friends for a few months now. I know exactly how to win her over.

“We could watch that X-Men show you like.”

Her face brightens up immediately. “The animated series?”

I laugh. “Yeah.”

“You downloaded it?”

“Uh-huh.”

“All of it?”

I walk around her and kneel next to my bed, pulling my laptop to open the folder containing episodes one through seventy-six.

“Oh my God! Let’s start with ‘Till Death Do Us Part.’ That’s Season Two,” April kneels too, so excited that she ends up bumping into my waist, tucked close to me now. “It’s the one where Gambit recovers from kissing Rogue. Ooh! And Scott Summers gets married to Jean Grey!”

I groan. “Jesus fuck, Moore. What happened to spoiler warnings?”

“Oh ...” April’s face grows small. “Sorry. I thought you’d already watched it.”

“I’ll get back at you, don’t worry.” I give her a smile. “And for your information, Rogue kissed Gambit, not the other way around.”

April gasps. “She did not!”

“I’ve read the comics, missy. She kissed him.”

“I’ve read the comics too, missy,” April retorts. “And you’re wrong. Gambit’s an idiot in love. That’s not her fault. Rogue would never intentionally harm him.”

I stop the scrolling and point to her mouth. “I think you’re getting a bit of drool right ... there ...”

She swats my hand away. “You like Rogue. You’re just saying you don’t to piss me off.”

I swing my head in her direction. “Possibly. But I don’t think anyone likes her as much as you do.”

“Well, they should. She’s freaking badass.”

I scoff. “No, she’s not. Her touch kills people.”

“Uh, details.” April rolls her eyes and turns the other way. “I don’t know, I think it’s pretty cool.” She shrugs. “You don’t wish you could do that too?”

“Kill people?”

“No, turn into someone else.”

I frown. Is that even possible? If I wanted to be someone else, then I’d just do so, and that person would become the new me. In one way or another, I’m always going to be myself. No matter what.

“I dunno. I think I like who I am.” The sudden admission tastes bitter on my tongue.

“That’s fair.” She smiles, almost blushing. “I like you too.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“For now.” She nods, playing with the strings of her hat, balancing her weight on one leg, posing in some weird-awkward “April” manner.

It's cute, I'll give her that. "Well, then you have no business trying to be anyone else either," I say. "Because I like you too, Chere. For now."

"Chere" is what Gambit calls Rogue.

"Chere" is also what makes April smile.

I like making April smile.

By the time our pizza arrives, Scott Summers and Jean Grey are married, and Wolverine's busy fighting some robots in the danger room.

April rests her cheek on my shoulder, and just this once, I don't hate her stupid hat poking into my neck. Maybe because it isn't that uncomfortable, and I was just being a dramatic prick earlier.

Or maybe because April likes me too.

And I don't ever want to mess that up.

# Chapter Five

## Present Day

### APRIL

Coffee in hand, I settle into the red swivel chair across Zawe's desk. She's not here yet, but that's probably because I'm five minutes early.

I lean back against the chair and spin it to face the floor-to-ceiling window overlooking Times Square. Polished white marble tiles and shelves are filled with files and binders, all arranged by color. Zawe has one of those offices that would show up if you entered "chic office aesthetic" on Pinterest.

My cubicle is down the hall, one-third the size and no glass walls. None.

I whip out my phone from my pocket and look at the time. Eight fifty-seven a.m.

These three minutes are going to crawl by. I wish Zawe had specified the reason for this meeting in her email.

*Monday meeting @9am. Don't be late.*

That was it. Nothing more, nothing less.

Sighing, I stare out the window, the tiny wheels of the chair squeaking with my movement, and watch the traffic undulate below. Somewhere in that crowd, there's Parker. Getting coffee, crossing the street, going to work. I frown. What is his work? Ever since we were kids, all he's wanted to do is publish his own comic book. *Fireheart Chronicles*.

*"I thought I'd never see you again. I'm just trying to take it all in."*

I can't believe Parker lives here. Everyone has a troubled past. I'm his. And he is mine.

My phone lights up with a text from Holly.

Hol: If you steal my yogurt one more time, I'm going to move out.

Hol: Don't wait up tonight. Gotta work the night shift. Love you.

I lock my phone and stuff it back into my pocket. My sister still thinks this is too much of a coincidence. Neither one of us is above social media stalking. Parker always knew where I was, as I knew where he was. Did he move here for me?

Right then the door creaks open and heels clap against the marble floor.

I spin around and in waltzes Zawe Cooper. Dressed head to toe in black, sporting a beige Chanel handbag over her shoulder. She shifts her large round sunglasses to the top of her head. "Good, you're here."

Did I have a choice?

Hanging her coat on the back of her chair, she sinks down and opens her laptop. "You've heard of Tony Martin, yes?"

Straight to business, then.

I shift forward in my seat, silently questioning my own outfit: a deep red pantsuit and black stilettos. Not bad, but it's impossible not to feel like a fashion disaster around Zawe. A superpower if there ever was one.

"April?" Zawe's acerbic tone snaps me out of my daze.

"Right, sorry." I clear my throat. "Yeah, I know him."

Tony Martin. Zawe's client.

Casanova, controversial, and cumbersome are only a few of the C words used to describe him in articles from *Buzzfeed* to *Variety*. Notorious for sneaking in a different type of drug every time he attends any formal event, the guy is a PR nightmare. Last year, he smuggled an entire flask of scotch to

an award ceremony at Radio City Music Hall and tried to fight a fellow nominee for his award.

The incessant clicking of her keyboard fills the confines of her glass-walled office. “So you won’t have any problem handling him for the next two weeks?”

I gape, choking for a response. My eyes bug out. “What?”

“I need you to take over Tony Martin for me. My idiot husband booked us on a five-day nonrefundable cruise in the Bahamas. It’s been five years since we got married, and still he doesn’t know I hate surprises.” She doesn’t even look up while dumping this massive information overload on me.

“You want me to handle Tony?”

Zawe is a PR shark, known for her cutthroat tendencies and sharp gaze that screams, “I get what I want, exactly how I want it.” The woman has her initials carved on the sole of her Jimmy Choos, for crying out loud.

“Yes, you, April,” she says. “The shoot only has two weeks left to wrap up, so it won’t take much from your time. Not that you have a lot going on as it is.”

Her words are like a punch to the gut. True, but hurtful.

“Look, April,” Zawe says and this time she does look up, her frigid brown eyes directed right at me. “You’ve been here longer than anyone else. And you’ve done some really good work these past years.”

Self-satisfaction and pride glows in my chest, but her next words put out the warmth like a bucket of ice.

“But I can’t ignore your recent slump,” Zawe says. “You haven’t brought in a single new client in the past six months, and the publicity industry is highly competitive. You know that.”

I swallow a rock-sized lump in my throat.

“I hate saying this, but,”—she huffs and leans back, the legs of her chair creaking—“consider this your last chance. You’re going to handle the final leg of Tony’s PR campaign.

And if you mess it up in any way, then ...” She shrugs. “Well, I’m going to have to let you go.”

My heart bangs against my ribcage and the knots in my stomach tighten. The worst has happened and it’s not even noon. Fired? I’ve never been fired from anything. Sure, there was that one time in fourth grade when Mrs. Wheeler demoted me from being class monitor because I kept favoring Luke Hayes, the sandy-haired boy I had a massive crush on. But I’m almost sure this is worse.

I take a deep breath to calm my nerves and scooch forward. “I won’t let you down.”

“You can’t let me down,” she corrects.

Right.

“I like having you around, April. So please don’t make me fire you,” Zawe says, vaguely irritated, and goes back to her laptop. “I’m emailing you all the details. You can get started on this right away.”

I get up from the chair and straighten the legs of my pantsuit. “Got it, Zawe. Thank you. I won’t disappoint. Shoot, I mean, I can’t—”

She cuts me off with a sharp nod and a flick of her hand. Translation: *we’re done*.

I purse my lips and nod, walking back out toward my cubicle, my heartbeat thumping against my temples.

“Hey, April!”

I look up and—“Oh shit!” I swerve, almost running into Eric, our newest intern, and the cup of coffee in his hand.

“Whoaaa ... that was a close call, huh?” He takes a step back and sets the cup down on the edge of a dull-grey desk. “Is she in a better mood now?” he asks, tilting his head toward Zawe’s glass-walled office.

I lift my arms in a tired shrug. “Only one way to find out, right?”

“Huh. Yeah.” He doesn’t sound convinced at all.



I start to lower my hands when Eric's eyes dart toward my wrist. "You have a tattoo? That's dope. What does it say?"

I quickly force my hands into a guarded fold across my chest. "Oh, just a generic old heart." Lies. "Why don't you get going on that coffee?" I get us back on track, putting a Zawe-shaped stop sign to any follow-up questions he might have and make a direct beeline for my cubicle, shutting the door behind me.

I pull back my sleeve and uncover the tiny "H" on my left wrist. The H that stands for Hayden.

Hayden fucking Parker.

I've contemplated getting it removed loads of times, but apparently tattoo removals hurt way more than getting said tattoo. So, no, thank you. I run my fingers over the black outline of the H. He got an A for April on his right wrist. There wasn't much I couldn't convince him to do. This tattoo was proof.

My chest constricts at the memory. I retract my fingers and pull down my sleeve, shutting him out of my mind.

I can't afford any distractions right now.

# Chapter Six

## Fourteen Years Ago

### HAYDEN

**I**t's a Friday night and we're lying on April's rooftop, looking at the stars. A rough breeze picks up and the tree nearby makes a rustling sound.

"Parker," she says.

"You know I don't like that."

"Like what?"

"When people call me by my last name," I say.

"I'm the only one who does that."

I turn my head to look at her. "It makes me feel douchey."

"You share a last name with an Avenger. That's not douchey. That's badass."

Biting back a smile, I turn my attention to the night sky. She has a point.

"Parker?"

"Yes?"

"Do you think we would've been friends if your mom hadn't forced you to go to that party?"

Where is this coming from? "Yeah," I respond without any hesitation.

"How do you know?" she says.

"I just do."

Another beat of silence later, she speaks up again. “Something happened in school today.”

“You mean the soul-enriching experience of learning?”

“Tyler Hockman asked me to the Spring Social.”

Immediately my forehead scrunches up into a frown. “Isn’t that what you wanted?”

She takes in a deep breath, nodding. “Yeah. Yeah, I did.”

“Okay, then. What’s wrong?”

“The Spring Social is in a week.

“I’m not following.”

She sits up and a simultaneous expression of confusion and guilt paints her face. “I haven’t kissed anyone yet.”

Propping my hand behind my head, I frown. “Still not following.”

“What if he tries to kiss me? Or more?”

Pausing for a second, I gather my thoughts and sit up too. “Do you not want to kiss him?” What a moronic question. Of course, she doesn’t want to kiss him. Why else would she ask me?

“I do.”

Oh. “What’s the problem, then?”

Wincing a little, she slowly covers her face with her hands. “What if I’m bad at it?”

“At kissing?”

April nods, and man, this is straight-up adorable. I grab her hands and pull them down. “You won’t be.”

“How do you know?”

“I just do.”

She rolls her eyes and starts to scoot away, but I pull her back. “You’re not a bad kisser, April Moore.” Fuck it, I’m laughing now.

She punches my shoulder. “Stop making fun of me! This is serious. I’m being very serious right now.”

That only makes me laugh harder. “I’m not making fun.” Putting my arm around her, I cage in her small frame. “And you’re going to be a great kisser. Phenomenal.”

She stops struggling and glances up at me. “You don’t know that.”

I sigh. “Okay, I don’t. But I’m a guy and I know how guys think. Tyler Hockman is going to be over the moon that he got to kiss you at all, bad or not.”

April stares at me for a little while and then moves away, eyes narrowed. “You’re a guy,” she whispers.

“Uh, yeah.” Wow, I do not sound confident at all.

“And you know how guys think.”

I hesitate. “Where are you going with this, Chere?” This time I start to shift away, but April leaps at me, throwing her arms over my shoulders.

“Kiss me.”

“What?”

She walks on her knees and moves closer, her hands clinging onto my shoulders like talons. “I want you to kiss me.”

My jaw falls to the floor and my eyes bug out. I swat her hands away. “No!”

Her face grows glum, like I just tore a brand-new comic book right through the middle. “Why not? How else am I supposed to know if I’m bad or not?”

“By trial and error? Like the rest of the world?”

Kiss her? Is April seriously asking me to kiss her? My palms start to sweat. I want to jump off this roof. Not because I don’t want to kiss her—though I don’t—but because she’s my best friend. My only friend. I’m not kissing my only friend.

“What if I’m horrible, Parker?” She sticks to her nonsense logic. “What if I shove my entire tongue into Tyler’s mouth? What if I bite his tongue off by mistake? He’ll bleed to death. Is that what you want? You want a fellow classmate to die, all because you couldn’t make out with your friend?”

I stumble back. “Whoa, make out? We’re making out now?”

April just stares at me, almost disappointedly. Her shoulders are drooped, her chin is tilted down, and her lips are pressed tight.

Her lips are pressed tight.

Her lips.

No!

I shake the thought out of my head. I don’t want to kiss her.

“What are you so worried about? Embarrassing yourself?” She half laughs. “I’m literally on my knees, begging you to kiss me. As of this moment, I’m the most embarrassed human being on the planet.”

Very subtly, I sneak a peek over the edge of the roof. It’s not that high. If I jump, I’ll probably end up breaking a few bones, but that’s fine. That’s fixable. Kissing April Moore isn’t.

“You don’t even have to kiss me back if you don’t want to. Just let me kiss you. Think of it as a lesson. Practice.”

There are words coming out of her mouth, but none of them makes any sense.

“It doesn’t have to be such a big deal. You’re my best friend. If I’m truly terrible at it, I’d rather hear it from you than from someone else.”

Yeah, I’m gonna jump.

April’s eyes study my face and I hope like hell it doesn’t betray the panic I’m feeling inside. “So? Will you?” she asks, all doe-eyed, as if this isn’t an odd request.

Is it? Do friends just kiss?

“You want me to kiss ... you?”

“For practice,” she says.

“Practice,” I repeat.

She removes her hands and places them on her knees. “Look, today it’s practice for me and tomorrow, maybe in a hundred-odd years or so, it’ll be practice for you. When you’re out in the world, all grown up, giving some girl the best make-out session of her life, I hope you think of me and this night. Everyone wins.”

I frown and she brushes it off with a wave. “Whatever. That came out wrong. Now, will you kiss me or not?”

My voice comes out in a whisper. “Okay.” Okay? Oh, you fucking moron.

“Yeah?”

“I um ... if that’s what you want,” I stutter.

April might talk a big game, but right now she looks like she’s about to flee. Her shoulders tense and I think I’ve ruined my one and only chance at kissing April Moore. But then she comes closer.

“You’re sure?” Her eyes drop to my mouth and I’ve never been more sure about anything in my life.

“Yeah.”

With her eyes locked on my mouth, she lifts her hand and cups my jaw. It’s possible my heart explodes inside my chest. She drags her gaze back to mine, silently asking for permission. I nod, then she leans in, stopping inches away from my lips. For a split second, I stay absolutely still, too scared to move, but soon I start to move my lips against hers. Warm and soft and just ... perfect.

My thoughts are swimming all over the place, but there’s only one at the very center. I’m kissing April Moore. I’m kissing April Moore.

We're supposed to be friends. This is just practice. Yeah, that's all it is. Her hands move to the back of my neck and she pulls me close. God, I never want to stop practicing. I groan and shift back, edging her mouth open. A soft noise catches in the back of her throat and I tug her into my lap. Eagerness courses through my veins. The moment her tongue touches mine, it's as if my whole body is lit on fire. Jesus Christ, this girl is a phenomenal kisser. My hands bunch up in her hair. Her arms go all the way behind my neck, so not only are we making out, but she's hugging me too.

Fuck my life. I should've never fucking agreed to this. How the hell am I supposed to stop now?

Reading my mind, April is the one who pulls back. It's so sudden that neither of us gets a chance to catch our breath. Her lips are all pink and swollen. She's still on my lap and my hands are still around her waist, running up and down over her sweatshirt.

"That was ..." she whispers.

"Good." I rest my forehead against hers.

"Really? I was good?"

"Ten out of ten."

Her face lights up brighter than the entire night sky and I feel so fucking special for being the one to make that happen. "Was I good too?" I ask.

She scoots back, nodding. A second ago there was hardly any space for air to pass between us, and now there's way too much distance. I hate it.

April pulls her knees up, wrapping her arms around them. The baggy sleeves of her sweatshirt brush past her feet. "Thank you for that."

Practice, I remind myself.

"Yeah, of course. Glad to be of service." I cringe at my words and look at something arbitrary in the distance. Did I do something wrong? Was I a bad kisser? Fuck.

"So you're really not coming to the dance?" she asks.



My eyes dart back to her. “Not my thing.”

April nods and rests her chin on her knee, looking at me. And now I can’t look away. “Well, if you change your mind.”

I lean my weight back and force a smile. She nods and looks away. And I just sit there, looking at her. Trying to figure out what the hell just happened.

\* \* \*

It’s been a week since April and I kissed.

And while things haven’t gotten weird between us, they haven’t been great either. We’re still friends, she still comes over, we still talk about comic books and superheroes. Absolutely nothing has changed. Shoving a fistful of popcorn in my mouth, I throw my head back against the couch and groan.

*Ghost Rider’s* on TV, but I really don’t give a shit right now. Not when April’s at the dance with Tyler Hockman. It’s eight p.m. The dance started at six. Which means they’re probably making out near the fucking lockers by now. The mere thought is giving me a rash.

Fuck Tyler Hockman.

I want to kill Tyler Hockman.

I sit up straight, and the bowl of popcorn wobbles on my thigh. My doorbell rings. Great. I wait for my mom to get it but it rings again. Begrudgingly getting up from the couch, I set the popcorn aside and walk toward the door. Another ring.

“Coming!” Jesus. I reach for the doorknob and pull it open.

“Hi,” April says.

Not sure whom I was expecting, but it sure as hell wasn’t her. “What are you ...” My eyes travel down to her outfit. Her red hair is pushed to the side in a braid and her dress—it’s so blue. Like the ocean. God, she looks beautiful. Wait, why is she here?

I clear my throat and revert my attention to her face. “April, why are you—”

“Tyler stood me up,” she blurts. “I waited and waited and he never showed.”

I clock the crusted streaks across her cheek. She’s been crying. My whole chest clenches.

“April ...”

She looks away. I step in front and take her hand in mine. “High school dances are so overrated.”

She gives me the most unconvincing smile possible, and my heart cracks right through the middle. I tug on her hand. “Do you wanna watch *Ghost Rider* with me? I made way, way too much popcorn.”

“Okay,” she mutters.

I hate how sad that “okay” sounds.

What better thing does Tyler Hockman have going on in his life that he couldn’t, at the very least, let her know he won’t be coming tonight? A text, a call. That’s all it takes. Fucking asshole.

“Hey.” I tug on her hand again. “Wait here for me?”

“Why?”

“I’ll be down in a few seconds.” Without waiting for a response, I run upstairs to my room and grab my iPod from under my pillow, along with the hoodie hanging off my chair. I rush back downstairs and see Mom standing next to the door with April.

“Hayden, what are you—”

Ignoring her, I grab April’s hand and drag her out to my front yard. She squeals.

“We’ll be back in a bit!” We take a few more steps to the very center of the lawn and I connect my earphones into the iPod.

“What’s happening?” April frantically asks. I put each of the earphones into our ears. The confusion on her face grows. “Parker, what are you doing?”

I set the volume to the highest level and hit play.

The instrumental beginning of Frankie Valli’s “Can’t Take My Eyes Off You” starts to play and I shove the iPod into my front pocket.

April narrows her eyes. “What are you—”

I put my arms around her waist, shuffle-stepping us to the left and, believe it or not, fucking start singing. “You’re just too good to be true. Can’t take my eyes offa you ...” I twirl her around. Her blue dress foams around her like a whirlpool.

A short burst of laughter leaves April’s lips and it’s the highlight of my night. I twirl her again. Her earphone falls out but, boy, do I keep singing.

“Whatever this is—” she starts to say.

Another twirl.

“I don’t ever want it to stop,” she finishes.

Laughing and giving up on getting the lyrics right, we keep swaying to the music. Mom leans against the doorframe with her hand clutching her chest and a very sappy smile slathered across her face. I roll my eyes and turn us the other way.

April wraps her arms around me in a soft hug and rests her cheek against my chest. “Thank you,” she whispers.

Smiling, I pull her close. “Don’t thank me yet, Chere. We still have to dance to ‘Cha Cha Slide.’”

She laughs again and I rest my chin on the top of her head, whispering the rest of the wrong lyrics into her hair.

“I’m sorry,” she quietly adds.

“For what?” My fingers run over her braid. “I’m having so much fun right now.”

April slowly lifts her head back up, glassy-eyed. “For forcing you to kiss me. Nothing even happened with Tyler.”

My mouth opens but I'm not sure what to say. I hate that she's worried about that right now, and at the same time, a small part of me relishes her sadness. She's thinking about our kiss too. No matter the reason.

"It was still practice." I shrug. "If not for Tyler, for someone else, then."

That makes her smile a little. "You're not mad I stole your first kiss for nothing?"

"No, Chere."

She angles her chin up, looking at me as I hold her in my arms. Ironically enough, the urge to lower my head and brush my lips against hers increases tenfold.

"Are you sure?" she asks again.

I breathe in through my nose, squashing the thought before I do something stupid. "Are you mad I stole your first kiss?"

"Not mad, just a little disappointed."

What? I don't even try to hide the hurt on my face. Disappointed? I prefer mad to fucking disappointment. Was my kiss really that bad?

Seeing my pained expression, April places a hand on my shoulder. "No, not like that," she hurries to add. "I'm disappointed that neither of us are going to have our first kiss with ... I don't know, someone who isn't you or me."

My shock doesn't waver. She makes a clicking sound with her tongue and shrugs. "Not like that, Parker. Didn't you think your first kiss would be with someone who's a possible girlfriend, or at least, a crush?" April starts getting all flustered and it takes everything to not smile. "Plus, I forced you to kiss me. That can't be fun."

My face contorts, trying to keep in a laugh, and she swats my arm. "Don't laugh!"

It's too late. Picking her up in a hug, I twirl us around. April keeps yelling, and I don't stop laughing. After two and half rounds, enough to make both of us a little dizzy, I set her down, my arms still wrapped around her back.

“Very uncalled for.” Her tone is stern, but I see the softness in her eyes.

“So was you wanting to kiss me.”

Gaping, April punches my arm and I feign injury. “You didn’t force me, Moore,” I say. “And not fun? Are you kidding me? That was the funnest kiss of my whole entire life.”

She snickers and rolls her eyes. “You’ve had one.”

“You set the bar pretty high.”

April’s smile widens and she shakes her head, resting it back down against my chest. The song stopped playing a while ago. I set my chin against her head and shut my eyes.

We keep swaying and I pull her closer. This will pass. A few days, months, years—I don’t care when, and I don’t care how, but it’ll pass. It has to. What do I think is even going to fucking happen if I kiss her again? She literally used the word “disappointing.” I cannot kiss her again. I will not.

“Parker?” April says and I pull back to look down, not wanting to let go. Not yet.

“Yeah?”

“Can we not watch *Ghost Rider*?”

They are simple words, yet they make me smile. Magic words.

I step back, grab her hand, and start pulling her back toward my house. “You stole my first kiss, April Moore. That gives me movie-picking rights for life.”

# Chapter Seven

## Present Day

### APRIL

**S**ebastian Kripke.

Tony Martin's manager, and the guy I just almost punched square in the face.

"Shit, I'm so sorry." I clutch my chest and turn around. "But you really shouldn't have crept up behind me like that."

Kripke doesn't move a muscle. His wrinkly face is set in stone.

Clearing my throat, I straighten up and extend my hand. "I'm April from Paramore PR. Zawe must've told you."

With his face pointed right at me, his eyes flick down, then back up.

No handshake.

"Let's head inside, shall we?" he remarks, his voice cold and apathetic, like a modern-day Robocop. It seems fitting. He's already wearing an all-black suit and his peppered hair is combed back with way too much hair gel for a man in his late fifties.

Kripke proceeds to walk through the rusted metal gates toward the set base camp—the place where all the costume and cast trailers reside. "Miss Cooper assured me you know what you're doing."

"I do." I try to catch up in my four-inch stilettos and he spins around, his lifeless grey eyes penetrating through my

bones.

“But I was not assured.” He turns his back on me and starts walking again. “Take notes, Miss Moore. I won’t repeat myself.”

Ideally, publicists and managers should be on somewhat of an equal footing, but since when is my life ideal? If publicists and managers are the divorced couple, then the actor is the eight-year-old wreaking havoc at his *GQ* interview.

“First things first,” Kripke says. “Mr. Martin gets here every morning at ten a.m. You were expected to get here an hour earlier.”

I check my phone. It’s nine thirty. Good job, April.

“Our director, Mr. Markus Brennan, gets here thirty minutes after Mr. Martin.” Then he points toward one of the chalky white trailers to our left. “This is Mr. Martin’s trailer. This is where all your mornings will start.”

“Noted.” Any hopes of using quippy humor to compensate for my jumpiness and stellar punctuality are squashed by Kripke’s heavy sigh.

Walking ahead, he points to another trailer. “This is for all on-set interviews you’ll be scheduling for Mr. Martin. It is your job to do a thorough scan of the trailer and make sure he hasn’t, well ...”

My eyebrows rise. “He hasn’t what?”

Kripke rubs his pasty palms together and looks back at me, and even though it seems like a far, far possibility, I decide to ask. “That he hasn’t stashed drugs in there?”

Kripke just shrugs.

“You’re joking!” I cry.

“I don’t joke,” he says and I instantly go quiet. *Of course, you don’t.*

“Moving on. The next trailer is our—”

“But, like, how does he manage to hide the drugs?” I cut him off. “From what I hear, Tony isn’t the type to be on time.



So how does he manage to sneak in and—”

“Bribes,” he finishes. “We have tons of little rats in our crew. Now if you’re done with the hundred questions about Mr. Martin’s affinity for his pills, can we move on to the next stop?”

Look, I’ve had my fair share of problematic clients. There was the Twitter Debacle of 2019, when NDA-protected client A Tweeted that NDA-protected client B had an eating disorder, and I represented both of them.

Then there was the Hymen Horror of 2017, when another client thought it would be okay to tell the world that he takes his daughter to the gynecologist every month to check if her hymen is “still intact.” We cancelled his account the very next day.

But not once have I come across a client so hell bent on getting high that he laces his trailer with drugs. It’s actually kind of impressive. The guy’s dedicated.

“Next is the makeup trailer, and right afterwards we have the pre-shoot rehearsals.” He turns on his heel and folds his slender fingers across his chest. “Any questions?”

“Not at the moment.”

“Miss Moore, I understand that taking such personal care of a client is not part of your job description,” he says, rolling up the sleeve of his blazer and uncovering a Rolex. “But given the secretive nature of the project and Mr. Martin’s, well, wild nature, it’s the only way.”

Leave it to this human equivalent of a rock to call an action movie a “project.”

“Of course,” I say. “Makes my job all the more interesting.” My attempt to loosen him up fails yet again and a motorcycle rumble pierces the tranquil atmosphere.

I wince.

“At least someone decided to show up on time,” Kripke says.

“That’s one of ours?”

“Yes. The stunt double.”

The metal gates creak and Kripke’s eyes dart over my shoulder. I almost turn around too, but right then my phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out and my screen flashes. Mom.

Ignoring it, I click the red decline icon. When I look back up, believe it or not, Kripke is somewhat smiling at me. I think the phone call was a test. And maybe I passed? Go, April.

“Mr. Martin is running a bit late. But you’re more than welcome to wait in his trailer in the meantime,” Kripke says.

“Sure.” I smile back and he promptly walks off in a vague direction, presumably to recharge in his coffin.

I unlock my phone and start skimming through my inbox. Thirteen new emails. Two are promotional emails from Starbucks. Ooh, pumpkin spice is back in stock. And the rest are from Zawe. A detailed itinerary for Tony’s PR campaign. The LA premiere this weekend, five small interviews, a *GQ* shoot ...

“April?”

My heart jumps to my throat. What the fuck? With a deep frown, I look up, half-expecting that I’ve fully gone crazy, that my mind is playing tricks on me. But unfortunately, that doesn’t seem to be the case. Because as soon as I look up, every ounce of blood drains from my face.

“Parker?”

# Chapter Eight

## Thirteen Years Ago

### HAYDEN

Every year, a week before graduation, the entire senior class of Cooperstown High heads out to Otsego Lake to jump off a cliff in the name of tradition. There's no backstory or any sound logic to it.

"Is this really necessary?" I ask April.

"Yes, it is." She pulls her auburn hair back into a high ponytail and squints her eyes against the harsh summer sun.

I peer down the edge of the rocky cliff, trying to calculate how quick our deaths will be. "April, I'm scared."

She doesn't even laugh at my admission. All she does is reach into her blue backpack and take out a bottle of sunscreen. "It's tradition." She squeezes out a dime-sized amount onto her palms, then hands me the bottle.

"I don't want to do this." I try to rub some of it on the back of my neck.

"Want me to get that for you?" she asks.

"What?"

"Your back."

"Oh. Yeah, sure." I hand her the bottle and crouch to match her height. Everyone else has already jumped in and they're busy splashing and dunking, filling the air with happy shrieks.

April's hands move between my shoulder blades. "It's not a big deal, you know?" she says. "It's just a cliff and some

water. We'll be fine. Everyone here is doing it."

"You sound like a drug pusher."

Her hands move lower. "I did convince you to start drinking beer."

"Unless we're about to cliff dive into a lake of beer, I don't see the point you're trying to make."

She runs her fingers over my waist. "Parker, this happens every year and the worst thing that's happened to anyone is getting bit by an insect."

"Chere, that insect was a huge fucking wasp," I counter. "Ava Nealey ended up in the ER."

April pulls her hands back in and I turn around.

"She ended up in the ER because she was allergic to wasps," April says. "It's not the wasp's fault. And don't wasps, like, die after stinging you? Don't you think that whole experience was more traumatic for the wasp and its family than it was for her, getting a few shots at the hospital?"

"That's scientifically inaccurate."

"We're doing this." She puts her hands on her waist, her loose white T-shirt scrunching below her palms, and shakes her head. "It's a little hypocritical that you read about superheroes all day long and can't jump off a small-ass cliff."

Small-ass cliff? This shit is fifty feet high.

Just then April's eyes flick to a vague point over my shoulder, and she waves.

I glance back and—oh, hell, no.

Tyler fucking Hockman.

"You're coming tonight, right?" April says, prompting me to face her again.

"Tonight?"

"The party at Tyler's house."

I shake my head and look away. "I'm really not in the mood to attend a party. But you have fun."

“Stop that.”

“Stop what?”

“Stop being mad at me,” she says.

“I’m not mad at you.” What an outrageous lie. Of course, I’m mad. But not at her. Just her actions.

“Every time you see Tyler you make that face.”

“You don’t like my face?”

She frowns. “You know what I mean. He apologized ten times, Parker. And he bought me flowers on my birthday.”

As though that’s supposed to be enough.

“I think that’s fair grounds for a second chance,” she says.

A week before her birthday, the jerk came up to me, asking what I was getting April. Suppressing the urge to punch him straight in the face, I told him: a bouquet of super-expensive roses that last a year.

They’re her favorite flower.

But surprise, surprise—and yes, that’s sarcasm—Tyler got her roses too. His bouquet was store bought and looked like it had been sat on. Obviously, I couldn’t give her my gift after that. It would look like I was trying to show him up.

So fuck, no. I don’t think that scumbag deserves a second chance.

“So will you come?” she repeats.

I sigh and run my fingers through my hair. “Fine.”

She smiles, brushing a couple of strands away from her face.

“Although,” I add, “you should know if Tyler Hockman does so much as spill a drink on you, I’m gonna do way more than make a face at him.”

“Sure.” She snickers and takes off her oversized Rolling Stones T-shirt, revealing a bright blue swimsuit underneath.

“I’m serious,” I say. “I’ve been working out. You don’t think I can punch him?”

“Just because you can doesn’t mean you should,” she sings and I flip her off.

April deserves so much more than someone like Tyler Hockman. I just wish she could see that.

“Okay, let’s do this. You ready?”

There’s not much April can’t convince me to do—but this? I should probably draw the line at cannonballing down the edge of a fifty-foot cliff. I wrap my arms around my waist, thinking about all the things waiting in the deeper water—broken glass to cut my feet, rocks and slimy algae to slip on. What if a fish touches my leg in the dark? And alligators ...

“Parker, you good?”

“No, I’m not good. I’m not ready. This is fucked.” I try to take a couple of deep breaths. “Can we at least jump together?”

She stuffs her crumpled T-shirt into her backpack and walks over to my side, slipping her hand into mine. “Hey,” April says.

I tighten my grip around her hand. “Yeah?”

“Do you really not want to do this?”

“That’s an option?”

“Not really, but it’s manners to ask.”

“No ... no, it’s fine.” My heart hammers against my chest. “Let’s do it.”

“Do you want me to count to three?”

“Yeah. Yeah, that might help, I guess.”

She starts. “One ...”

This is happening.

“Two, and—”

Before she can even say the “thr” of three, April yanks my hand and we go hurtling off the fucking cliff, right into the cold waters of Otsego Lake.

I’m going to kill her.

“Oh my God! That was amazing!”

“April Moore!” My voice gurgles as I rise through the surface of the ice-cold water. “You’re dead to me!”

She swims toward me and puts her hands around my neck. “Oh, crap, is that a cut?” she asks, running her fingers over my forehead, sweeping my wet hair aside.

“Hilarious.” I splash some water on her and she starts laughing even more. “I don’t know why we’re friends.”

“Wanna do it again?” April wags her eyebrows and I shove her aside.

“Get away from me,” I say and start swimming ashore. Laughing, she follows me out.

To no one’s surprise, we do it again. Three more times.

What can I say? April Moore’s craziness is goddamn contagious.

\* \* \*

I reach Tyler Hockman’s house around eight p.m.

“You came!” April yells and walks in my direction. Behind her I see Holly, April’s sister, wearing a black dress and her usual resting bitch face. I’m sure even God is terrified of her.

“I told you I would.”

April flings her arms up, pulling me down into a hug.

“Is this a drunk hug?”

“Yo, Parker!”

I glance up and see Tyler approach us. Something I realized way later than I should have. The house party that led me to meet April two years back was at Tyler Hockman’s



house, aka the universe's idea of a sick joke. Still blaring with crappy music and reeking of secondhand smoke, this house is the last place I want to be right now.

“Why does it smell so bad in here?” I let go of April and ask, mainly to piss him off.

Tyler lets out a loud obnoxious laugh-like sound and wraps his arm over April's neck, pulling her close. My muscles tighten into taut strands.

“It's a party, dude!”

“Enlightening,” Holly mutters. “I'm gonna go get something to drink.” She looks at April before walking past me toward the living room, shoving my shoulder in the process.

Yeah, I don't get it either.

“Don't mind her. I'll come with you,” April says, turning her attention to Tyler. “Meet you outside in a sec?”

Tyler grabs her waist and pulls her into a deep kiss, and I grit my teeth. Everything they do just fucking pisses me off.

He lets go and winks at her before walking toward the rest of his douchebag squad. April and I quietly make our way to the kitchen, neither of us saying a word to the other. She gets both of us a can of beer and we just stand there, popping open our drinks.

After the longest minute of my life, she breaks the silence. “Just say it.”

I look up, arching an eyebrow. “It?”

“You hate him.”

“Of course I do.”

“I knew it!” She walks over to my side.

I frown at my can. “Was I not being obvious enough?”

“What did he ever do to you?”

I scoff, taking another sip. “Made you cry.”

“But it happened a year ago. I'm over it.”

“Tough,” I say. “I’m not.”

“You’re being a bit of an asshole right now.”

“Since when has my opinion stopped you from sticking your tongue down his throat?” While I’m not angry, I’m definitely frustrated.

April leans back against the kitchen counter, her shoulder barely touching mine. Nodding, she takes a long sip of her beer.

Fuck. “I’m sorry, that was—I didn’t mean to say it like that, Chere. All I meant was that you shouldn’t let the opinion of others stop you from doing what you want. Or who you want.” I lightly nudge her arm. “Oh, come on, that was funny.”

Her resolve thaws. “Well, if it makes you feel any better. I already did.” She looks up at me. “Two days ago.”

I’m sure April sees the sheer confusion slathered across my face because she immediately hurries to add, “I didn’t know how to tell you. I wanted to. But you hate him and I thought you’d get mad at me ...” She goes on and my frown deepens, realization slowly dawning over me. “Then I got stressed and got a nosebleed.”

Fuck being frustrated. I’m murderous. My blood burns, jealousy coursing through my veins. A dull buzz drones at the back of my skull.

She looks to the side, shifting a little uncomfortably, and I force a smile, masking the sinking feeling in my stomach. “You know your sister hates me, right?”

April smiles, knowing I’m trying to change the topic. “Holly does not hate you.”

“I’m pretty sure she has a dartboard in her room with a picture of my face stuck to it.”

“She doesn’t hate you,” April repeats.

“Chere, I think she hates everyone.”

She whacks my arm and chugs her drink empty. “I’m going to go pee. Meet you out front?”

I nod and she heads toward the bathroom. I grab our drinks and head out of the kitchen and toward the foyer, past the red and green streamers into the living room. The music seems to have subsided a little, replaced with loud hoots coming from the far end of the wobbly dining table. Tyler and a few other guys are huddled in a semicircle next to the wall.

I place our cans on the edge of the table and Bryan, one of Tyler's friends, quickly shoves him in the arm. "Oh, he-hey, Parker. What's up, bro?" Tyler stammers, hiding something behind his back.

Bro? My eyes flick down to the hand pushed aggressively behind him. "What's that?" I point.

"What's what?"

"Behind your back."

"Nothing," he responds, his voice taut.

"Then why the hell are you acting so weird? What's going on?"

"Nothing's going on."

Something's definitely off. Without averting my gaze, I reach my hand out.

"Hey!" Tyler stumbles back. "The fuck's your problem, man?"

A few other people gather around us. Holly casually leans against a wall, scrutinizing the commotion.

"What's behind your back, Tyler?" I ask him.

"It's my phone, dude! The fuck is it to you?"

"Whoa, what's going on?" I look over my shoulder and see April walk over to us.

"Your 'boyfriend' is acting like a crazy person, is what's up," Tyler says, nudging his chin toward me.

"What?" April picks up her beer can from the beer-pong table.

I take another step toward him and lower my voice to a whisper. “Don’t do this in front of her.”

“Do what, dude? The fuck is wrong with you?” Tyler shoves me in the shoulder and I stumble back a little.

“Hey! Tyler! What the hell?” April rushes to my side. “Don’t fucking hit him.”

“Me?” Tyler looks at April with a dark glint in his eyes. “Keep your fucking patsy on a leash, April.”

“Tyler has something to show you.” My voice flattens. I have my suspicions about what he’s hiding on his phone, but I hope it isn’t true.

“What?” She looks up at me, heavy frown lines across her forehead. “What is it?” Her eyes dart between the two of us.

“Don’t listen to him.” Tyler extends his arm toward April and I step between them, blocking it.

Not on my watch, buddy.

“Show her what’s behind your back.”

April steps to my side. “What? What’s behind his back?”

“Nothing,” Tyler blurts out.

“Then why don’t you show it to her?” I repeat. His group of friends starts whispering sheepishly, a few raking April up and down with their eyes.

“Tyler, what’s the big deal? What’s behind your back?” she says.

He scoffs and looks back at his posse. “It’s just my phone.”

“Take it out,” I snap.

“Why the fuck?” He raises his voice.

“Tyler,” April says calmly. “Just take it out. It’s only your phone.” Immediately I see the color drain from his face, and that’s all I need to put two and two together.

“This is ridiculous. April come on—”

I don't even hesitate. One second he's trying to walk toward April, and the next second my fists are bunched up at his collar, pinning him against the wall.

"Parker!" April yells.

"If she asks you to take out your fucking phone," I grit out, "then that's what you do."

With one hand shoving him harder against the wall, I reach for his hand and pry the phone out of his hand myself.

He manages to choke out my name in protest and a few of his friends try pulling me off of him.

Holly comes over to stand next to April. I bring the phone up to my eyes and that's when it happens. My breathing gets choppy and a pang of anger like no other sears through my body. This fucking asshole. He hasn't even bothered to exit the Photos app, much less lock his phone.

"Parker, what is—"

I hand her the phone and look back at Tyler, grinding my teeth. "You fucking asshole. Be grateful she's here right now. It's the only thing holding me back from breaking every single bone in your fucking body."

"Parker, stop it!" April says again.

I shove Tyler harder and he pushes back.

"Get off him." This time Holly chimes in, her voice layered with frost.

I peer over my shoulder. "What?"

Her icy gaze is fixated on Tyler and she repeats, enunciating each word in an equally cold manner, "Get. Off. Him."

Reluctantly, I take a step back, shoving Tyler against the wall one last time before letting him go. He coughs a couple of expletives my way and rubs his throat.

"Holly, what—"

Before I can finish my sentence, Holly marches over and promptly knees Tyler in his crotch.

The fucker falls to the floor.

“What the fuck! You bitch—”

“Ooh, bad choice of words,” she says and knees him again. This time it’s harder and he writhes in pain.

I fight back a smirk. Holly and I might not get along, but if there’s one thing that brings us on the same page, it’s April. Hurt her in any way or manner, and we both see red.

April shoves his phone onto the table and walks to my side. “I want to leave. Can we please leave?” Her voice shakes and her eyes are filled to the brim with tears. I gently place my hand on her back and she flinches at the touch. Oh, hell, no. Tyler Hockman is a dead man.

“Let’s get out of here,” I say, getting an immediate weak nod from her. She doesn’t look up again. Not once.

Holly, April, and I start walking in the opposite direction, but are still within earshot when I hear Tyler scoff and say, “The slut wasn’t even that great.”

That does it.

I don’t waste a single second. Nor do I check on April to see if she heard him.

Because it doesn’t matter. None of it fucking does. It takes all of two seconds for my fist to meet his face.

“What the fuck!” he yells, instantly falling to the ground, his lip split open.

I shake my hand in pain. Goddammit, this shit looks so easy in movies. He looks at up me, gripping his jaw. “Get the fuck out—”

I take his phone and smash it to the ground, kicking it so hard that it visibly and audibly breaks into pieces. “Gladly, you son of a bitch.”

\* \* \*

We didn't walk home.

"Here y'all go!" The waitress comes back with a tray full of April's favorites. "One milkshake, two coffees, and a plate of chocolate-chip pancakes."

Nope. We came to Susie's instead.

Holly sits next to her sister and I slide a cup of coffee toward her. "April?"

She doesn't move a single muscle. Her eyes have been glued to the edge of the table since we got here and it's killing me.

Holly puts her hand around April and she flinches again. Apologizing, she reels it back in.

"I'm an idiot," she whispers.

"What?" I ask, my voice just as soft as hers.

"I-I am an idiot." she repeats. "I can't believe I had sex with that asshole."

"April." I reach for her hand but stop short of holding it. I don't know if she wants me, or anyone for that matter, to touch her right now. Even though every cell in my body wants to be close to her. I curl my fingers back toward in a fist.

"Sis, you're not an idiot."

"I am."

"April, look at me," I say.

She looks up, entire storms unfurling in her eyes.

And it breaks my heart so hard, I almost hear it.

Fuck it. I promptly get up, slide in next to her, and wrap my arms around her, pulling her against me. "You're not an idiot. Do you hear me? Not at all."

She hugs me back and starts to sob into my shoulder.

“You’re the most beautiful person I know, inside and out. And sometimes in life, some assholes treat you badly, but that doesn’t mean it’s your fault. Because there’s a whole other world of people who love and care about you. And those people are right here with you.”

Holly nods, wrapping her arms around April too.

“I feel ... I feel so disgusting and I didn’t even do anything —”

“You’re not disgusting, Chere. You’re still you and I’m still me. And that’s pretty fucking perfect.”

She shakes her head.

“I know the world gets too much at times.” I brush a few strands of her hair away. “But in here”—I point a single finger to the side of my head—“in here, it’s just us. You and me. Forever,” I say, quickly hurrying to add, “And Holly too, if she wants to be.”

“Trust me, I do not want to be in your head.”

A tiny smile sneaks out from between April’s lips.

“I hope I broke the asshole’s dick,” Holly says.

Laughing, April looks to the side, resting her cheek against my chest. “This is a nice hug. The three of us.”

Holly pulls back, motioning for us to move over. “I gotta go use the bathroom so don’t get used to it.”

We pull our legs up and Holly slinks out. As soon as she’s out of sight, April places her hand over mine, threading our fingers together. “I can’t believe you punched him.”

Flipping my hand over, I lace our fingers tightly. “If it makes you feel any better, my hand hurts like shit.”

She laughs, weak and small. “You’re a true superhero, Hayden Parker.”

I smile and rest my head against her shoulder. “Nah, I’m just your sidekick, April Moore.”



# Chapter Nine

## Present Day

### APRIL

**I**n a city of millions, Parker and I have managed to run into each other for the second time in less than a day.

He's wearing a white T-shirt and a pair of jeans. His black leather jacket lies draped over his shoulder.

God, he looks good.

No, April. Focus.

“What are you doing here?” he asks.

My eyes bulge out. “What am I doing here? What are you doing here?”

We go on staring at each other, an unspoken silence hanging between us, sharp and heavy, like a guillotine waiting to drop. How is he here? Why is he here? The silence grows.

“Wait, are you ... are you following me?”

An expression of sheer horror flits across his face. “What? No! Why would you even say that?”

“Yo, Parker!”

I turn around. A short blonde with a pixie cut walks in our direction, balancing a Starbucks tray in her hand. “They need you for shot rehearsal.” Her eyes dart between the two of us.

Shot rehearsal? My brows squish together. What shot rehearsal—oh, no.

Oh, no, no, no, no. This can't be happening. Nausea rolls up my stomach. "You're the stunt double?"

Parker purses his lips and there's a pained expression on his face. It almost looks like he wants to say no but can't.

"Parker," Pixie Blonde chimes in. "Now. Tony's going to be here in ten."

Tony.

I tear my gaze away. "Right, um, I'd better get going too."

Parker takes a step forward. "What? No, wait—"

"I'll see you around," I say, cutting him off. I sprint to the wardrobe trailer, and as soon as I get inside, I start sifting through a rack of jackets.

What the fuck? Hayden Parker is a stunt double?

A stunt double?

I kneel to level with the lower rack. Black leather jacket, black leather jacket, black leather jacket.

Maybe someone's blackmailing him. Holding his mom hostage in a gross moss-covered basement, and being a stunt double is the only way to get her back.

Jacket with medallions, jacket with fringe, jacket with rhinestones.

I should talk to him. Duh, it's not like I have much of a choice, but where to even start? And was he always that tall?

"I think you missed one."

I spin around. Parker smiles down at me. "Hi."

I stand up and his expression softens.

It all happens so fast.

He wraps his arms around my back, holding me—no, lifting me against him. And despite the cyclone of confusing emotions whirring inside my mind, I hug him back.

He's here. Hayden Parker is here and he's hugging me. I tighten my grasp, melting into his firm chest. He's here.

His palms move along my spine, unable to stay still, and he nuzzles his face into the crook of my neck, smiling.

I feel it stretch over my skin.

His hugs were always my favorite place to be.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers. “But I needed to do this before you ran off again.”

I’m pretty sure he didn’t mean it as a joke, but I laugh nonetheless. “Hi,” I say.

His hold relaxes. “I’m going to let go now.”

“Okay.”

“I don’t want to.”

Fighting the heaviness unfurling inside my chest, I let go of him instead, and angle my chin up. “What are you—”

“Do you want to—” Parker says at the same time, and a knowing smile spreads across each of our faces. Taking a step back, he makes a light gesture with his hand. *You first.*

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

His little smirk turns into a full-blown grin. “I should’ve probably gone first.”

I frown. “Why?”

“Because.” He looks me up and down. “Do you want to grab lunch so I can tell you?”

“Lunch?”

“Yeah, lunch.”

I shake my head and step back, my back colliding with the rack of jackets. Shit. “You want to have lunch with me?”

His smile falters. “Is that too much to ask for?”

“No, this is just very unexpected.”

“You think I was expecting to run into you again?”

“I don’t know. Were you?”

“What?” He frowns. “Of course not, Chere.”

There we go with the “Chere” again. “I just don’t have the time to go out for lunch,” I say. “I have a lot of work to do. I need to call journalists, check Tony’s trailer for ... and, um.” I point to the costume rack. “And spandex.”

Parker see right through at me. Of course he does. “Uh-huh.”

“Why are you here, Parker?” I ask again.

He scoffs. “You won’t let me buy you coffee, you won’t let me take you to lunch, yet you seem pretty entitled to answers.”

I bite my lip. Ouch.

He gauges my silence for a second. “I’ll see you around, April,” he says and without waiting for a response, storms out the trailer, slamming the door shut behind him.

Yeah. See you around.

\* \* \*

Whoever said there’s no business like show business obviously never met Tony Martin.

The guy arrived an hour late and just before shooting was set to commence, pulled out a fanny pack full of weed. It wouldn’t have been a big deal, not at all, if I hadn’t already retrieved six cocaine-stuffed plastic baggies from his trailer.

Now it’s eight p.m. and I’m still on set. Standing across from the green screen, waiting for the last of Tony’s scenes to end.

“All right, lock it up, everyone!” Markus yells from his director chair. “We’re rolling in three, two, one ... aaand action!”

The bulb above the steel table flickers thrice and the boom operator lowers the fuzzy microphone.

Tony looks up, leveling a revolver at his co-star’s forehead. “I’m sorry, Jack.”

“Brad, don’t do this. Please,” “Jack” says.

I mean, if you're asking someone not to shoot you in the head, you'd think they would go with more than just "Don't do this" and "Please."

Tony's face grows grim and one of the cameras zooms in as he tightens his grip around the gun. He pulls the trigger. A reverberating bang goes off and "Jack" falls to the floor, clutching his chest, covered in fake blood.

Wasn't the gun pointed at his head?

Tony gets up from his chair, its creaking sound filling the room, and walks over to the body, the dolly following his every move. "We'll meet again, friend."

"Cut!" Markus yells. "Not bad."

Not bad? That was horrible.

"You'll get used to the cheesy dialogue."

Parker's voice startles me. He stands casually to my left, his brown hair as messy as ever.

I shrug, unsure of this wobbly dynamic between us. I feel like I'm stuck in some sort of limbo. Are we talking? Not talking? Friends? Not friends? For the next couple of seconds, I force my eyes to stay focused at the ground. But dammit if they don't dart back to his face. The second I look at him, he looks at me too.

Shit.

He snickers and my ears burn with hot embarrassment. "Wanting to look at me isn't a crime, April."

I frown. That's a little arrogant.

"I've been looking at you all day," he adds.

Ohh ...

"Stop flirting with me." My tone is firm, but it's impossible to hide the smile in my voice.

He laughs, smug. "Stop liking it when I do."

"Parker!" Markus's voice booms through his microphone. "We're gonna shoot your scene next!"

Parker nods and I see an unfamiliar glint in his eyes, reminding me how much I've missed.

"I need to go," he turns to face me.

"Yeah, of course. I'll—"

"See me around?" he finishes and before I can respond to that obvious dig, he runs a hand through his messy waves and backs away toward the rehearsal area.

See? Limbo.

Fifteen minutes later, Hayden Parker is standing on top of a fifty-foot-high crane, wearing nothing but a pair of black sweatpants. Oh, Lord.

"Rolling!" Marcus yells.

Wait, is he going to—

"Aaand ... action!"

—jump?

Before I have a chance to stuff my heart back down my throat, Parker leaps off the edge and free-falls into a pool of water.

I'm pretty sure I squeal.

Water drips down his lean torso as he stands, the drops trickling to the waistband of his pants.

My mouth goes dry.

I make a great effort to not stare at his chiseled abs and toned body baking in the sun. But it's in vain. Hayden Parker is a freaking sight to behold.

Bringing his hand up, he sweeps his wet curls aside.

"Let's go again!" Markus yells.

Shaking some of the water out of his hair, Parker jogs back to the metal ladder, and makes his way up. My insides vibrate with excitement. Yes, again.

"Rolling!"

The cameras point upward and Parker's eyes momentarily flick to mine.

Without thinking, I throw him a smile. Markus calls for action and Parker jumps off the ledge, and in the process scrapes his bicep against one of the metal rods.

Blood. His arm is bleeding.

Fuck.

Grimacing, he glances up at Markus, his fingers clutching the wound. Markus picks up his microphone. "A twenty, everyone! Take a quick twenty!"

Parker starts walking toward his trailer and I instantly follow, my muscles tightening with concern.

Catching up, I open the creaky tin door for him. "I got it."

His eyes widen a smidge, followed by a frown. "What are you doing?"

It's not obvious? "Where's your first-aid kit?" I barge into his trailer.

"April."

It should be in one of these cabinets. I pull open the top drawer.

"April, it's not that bad."

"Not that bad? You're bleeding, Parker ... found it!"

"Do you even know what you're doing?"

Fishing around the kit, I take out a cloth bandage and push him down on his futon. "Of course, I do." No, not really. But that doesn't mean I'm not gonna try. "Move your hand. We need to stop the bleeding."

"Stop the bleeding?" he parrots with distaste. "It's a tiny scratch."

I press the bandage into the cut.

"Ow!" he says, flinching back.



“A tiny scratch that’s bleeding profusely.” I pull his arm toward me, gently dabbing the bandage around the bloody wound. “You might need stitches.”

His muscles go rigid. “What?”

“Stitches,” I repeat and he cuts me off.

“I don’t need stitches.”

Ignoring the curt response, I go on, my attention now on pouring some antiseptic on the bandage. “Does this happen often?” The idea of him getting hurt like this doesn’t sit right with me.

“You really shouldn’t have smiled at me like that,” he whispers. I look up, and his deep amber eyes fill mine. A fluttery sensation courses through my chest.

I press the bandage against the cut, then lighten the pressure, my fingers diligently trying to clean the surplus blood around the wound. “Better?”

“Mm-hm.” He nods, stripped of words.

“I still think you should go to the ER.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“What’s the big deal? Do you not have health insurance or something? Wait, you do have health insurance, right?”

“Yeah, I do. It’s not that.” He whips out the tourniquet and wraps it around his bicep. “I’m just—”

“Oh my God,” I whisper. “How could I forget? Hayden Parker is scared of needles.”

“I’m not scared of needles.”

“Correct. You’re petrified.”

“Am not.”

“You need stitches,” I insist, “or else your infected arm is going to rot till it falls right off.”

“Will you come with me?” he asks.

“Me?”

“Yeah, since you’re partially responsible for my injury.”

That makes me laugh a little. “Fine, I’ll talk to Markus.”

“Markus?”

“You can’t shoot with a cut that big.”

“April, I could lose my left limb and still be expected to finish the scene.”

“I can be very persuasive.”

A grin lifts the corner of his mouth. “Oh, yeah?”

“Guess you don’t know me that well,” I reply with a shrug, and start walking toward the door.

He calls my name.

I turn around.

Slowly, he sits up and leans his head against the wall, smiling so hard that I’m pretty sure his cheeks hurt.

“What is it?” I ask, confused.

“I do know you, April Moore,” he says. “I know you by heart.”

# Chapter Ten

## Thirteen Years Ago

### HAYDEN

**A**fter the third bell ring, April's mom, Lizzie, finally opens the door. "Hayden! So good to see you, sweetie," she says, giving me a hug. "Come in, it's freezing out!"

The blue banner from our "College Acceptance Party" still hangs low and crooked across the living room wall: WE MISS YOU TWO ALREADY.

"So how goes the packing?" Lizzie asks, a proud smile slathered on her face.

"More or less done," I respond. "I hope you don't mind me coming without calling. I have a present for April and wanted to surprise her."

"Oh, not at all. Don't be silly. She's in her room." Lizzie gives me an encouraging nod.

Hanging my coat on the rack, I remove my shoes and tread upstairs in my socked feet. The minute I get to April's room, I'm met with a set of beady googly eyes.

Sitting on the floor and wearing her unicorn hat, April leans against her bed, a map sprawled across her lap and a Sharpie in hand. She brings her hand up to the ends of her hair. Her fingers intertwine between a single thick strand, and I can't look away for some godforsaken reason. All she's doing is playing with her hair, and it's as if I have front-row seats to a damn cabaret. She twirls another strand between her thumbs and something inside me moves. Something warm in the center of my chest, following the movement of her delicate

fingers. Another twirl around her index finger and the heat travels down to the pit of my stomach, sending sparks all over. Sparks that refuse to be ignored.

And for an equally godforsaken reason, it makes me so fucking hard. Makes me distraught. Makes me wish I was a goddamn piece of her hair.

She looks up. “Parker! What are you doing here?”

I walk across the fluffy pink carpet to sit next to her and pull her present from my pocket. “I got you something.”

A blinding smile fills her face and she snatches the box from me, immediately ripping it apart, the pink paper reduced to shreds. The very next second, her excitement snuffs out, replaced by a look of pure disgust.

“What, you don’t like it?”

She takes out the bottle of pepper spray and stares at it blankly. “Am I supposed to?”

“You need to be able to look after yourself when I’m not around, Chere. College parties can get scary.”

Her next question is instantaneous. “Are you dying?”

“What?” I frown. “No, I’m not dying.”

“Then why won’t you be around?”

“What if I’m out socializing?”

April kicks up her feet on my lap. “No one’s gonna be friends with you if this is what you call a gift, Parker.”

“Hey, it’s a brilliant fucking gift, okay? I can’t always be around to punch the creeps away.”

“You’ve punched one guy.”

I grab her ankles and pull myself closer. “And how many have you punched? Zero.”

Smiling, she hugs the pepper spray to her chest and leans forward. “Okay, you’re right. It is a little brilliant. Thank you.”

“So, what’s with the map? You planning on setting sail somewhere?”

“Oh, I’ve been working on a little something the whole day. You see this?” She points to a spot in the center.

Two stick figures holding hands.

“Is that supposed to be us?”

She grins, brightness radiating through her eyes. “Nice, right?”

“A masterpiece.” Sarcasm oozes from my words.

“I’ve been marking a few places for our trip to California.”

I frown. “We’re going to college, April. Not a fucking road trip.”

Rolling her eyes, she brushes me off, and I hear her cute whiny voice go off in my head. *Deeetaaails ...*

“You’re saying this now,” she says, “but when I’m on my way to bungee jump in Red Rock Canyon, you’ll be the first to come with.”

My lips twitch into an almost-smile. “I assure you I’m gonna do no such thing.”

She huffs, straightening out her long bare legs. “Fine, I’ll just make new friends then.”

“New friends?”

“Mm-hm.” She nods and gives me a long once-over. “I’ve been overdue for an upgrade anyway.”

“Oh, really?” I reach across her chest to snatch the Sharpie from her hand, and accidentally brush against her boobs. Neither of us announces the brief touch, but I feel her body go rigid for a second. “And these new friends—you gonna make them wearing that fucking monstrosity on your head?” I point to her unicorn hat, joking, but April doesn’t laugh. Instead her smile fades away, waning like a faulty lightbulb.

Our relationship has always been one pulling the other’s leg. Harmless fun. But right now, her entire demeanor is screaming no more fun, no more games. And it makes me feel so fucking terrible. She stares into my hard gaze and the light inside her eyes dims further. “April?”

She looks away, swallowing a lump in her throat.

“I’m sorry. I was just teasing.”

“My parents bought me this hat when I was four,” she blurts out. It takes me a few seconds to realize she’s talking about her birth parents.

“Oh ... um, I’m sorry, April.” Fuck, I wasn’t expecting her to say that.

“Don’t be. You didn’t know.”

I didn’t. If I did, I would’ve never made fun of her.

“You don’t talk about them a lot.” Come to think of it, she doesn’t talk about them at all.

April’s lips press together in a tight line. “Because I have a good life. Nothing to complain about,” she says with a shrug.

“Wanting to talk about your feelings isn’t complaining, April.” My voice comes out rough. Most of the time our conversations revolve around comic books or pointless school gossip. I’m not good at deep conversations and serious talk. It’s not my forte. More often than not, I end up saying something idiotic or offensive (case in point).

But I don’t want my emotional shortcomings to make her feel like she can’t open up to me.

I place a hand on her knee. “April?”

Her eyes trail down, her shoulders tensing. For a minute, I think I’ve crossed some sort of invisible line. Just as I’m about reel my hand back in, she quickly covers it with hers.

She looks up to meet my gaze and smiles, small and weak. “God, this night is turning into a sob fest. We don’t have to talk about all this stuff.”

“Stop doing that.”

“Doing what?”

“Smiling all the time.” My frown is apparent in my voice.

April shrinks at my words like a wilted flower. “You don’t like my smile?”

“Of course, I do, Chere,” I say. “But I love your authenticity more. Do you know what happens to people who keep stuffing their emotions inside?”

“What?” she whispers, as though I’m about to drop some wise-ass sage advice.

But it’s not so much as advice as the truth. “They get used to feeling nothing at all.” That makes sense. Sort of.

April’s eyes flick down to our hands. She stares at them for a few seconds, then laces our fingers together. “Parker?”

“Yeah?”

“Which movie did you steal that line from?”

Oh, for fuck’s sake.

Irritated, I pull back my hand and stand. “I’m being serious, April.”

“You are?” she teases, wagging her eyebrows in a playful, goofy manner. I can’t make out if she’s trying to change the topic or if I’m reading too much into it. But either way, I get us back on track.

“You can talk to me about anything. I want that from you.”

Taking off her hat, she pats the empty space on the mattress, urging me to sit back down. Once I do, she repositions her hand over mine, lightly running her thumb over my knuckles.

It makes my heart twist in the oddest way.

“Anything?” she asks.

“Yeah, Chere. Anything. Everything. Whatever you want.”

“What if it’s not related to my parents?”

Her words take me by surprise. “What do you mean?”

She avoids my gaze. “What if ... the thing that’s really bothering me isn’t about my birth parents, or adoptive parents, or family in general?”

“What?”



Her thumb is making little circles over my hand now. Jesus Christ, what's with the intense buildup? I feel like I'm in one of those slasher horror movies, minutes away from being ... slashed.

"You said I could tell you anything," she says.

"I did."

"Did you really mean that?"

"Of course," I say.

Another pause. A long one this time.

"Okay, April, you're starting to scare me now."

"I'm gonna ask you this once," she says. "And just so you know, if it doesn't go my way, then we're never going to speak about this again. Ever. Agreed?"

Go her way? What the hell is she talking about?

Before I can get those words out of my mouth, she blurts out, "Do you remember when we kissed for practice?"

My frown deepens. "Yeah."

April's mouth twitches, trying not to smile. "Have you, um, thought about doing it again?"

"Doing ... what again?"

She falters. "Kissing me. Do you think about kissing me again?"

My mouth gapes, my jaw permanently unhinged.

What.

The.

Fuck.

"Parker?"

The air is knocked out of my lungs. Did she just—did she really just ask me that? "Uh ..." I don't know what to say. Of course, I've thought about kissing her again. What am I, stupid? I try not to think about it, but it rarely works. I think about it a lot. What it would feel like. Where I'd put my hands.

How she'd feel in my arms. Her soft, pink lips on mine. Like ice to a flame.

How the hell did we even get here? Weren't we talking about her parents?

My shock manifests itself in the form of a sharp laugh.

"Oh God," she whispers, mortified. "It's fine ... you know, just please forget I said anything." All her earlier confidence seems to have vanished into thin air.

"April."

She shields her face. "No, you agreed we'd never speak of this again. Erase it from existence. This conversation never happened."

"Actually, I agreed to no such thing." My voice is hoarse. My thoughts are strangled. My head is spinning. The next question flies out my mouth like a reflex: "Do you want me to kiss you again?"

A short pause, and she lowers her hands, just a little, uncovering her eyes. "What?"

"Do you want me to kiss you again?" Good God, I sound way too eager.

Setting her palms over the frilly hem of her red cotton shorts, April narrows her eyes and mulls over my words. Or at least, she acts like she does. "Do you ... want me to want you to kiss me again?"

What?

"Do you want to kiss me again?" she clarifies. Her cheeks are flaming red and I can't quite bite back my response.

"Yeah."

April's expression creases with concern. "You do?"

"I do." I do, I do, I do.

"Really?" Her fingers have edged closer to mine, just brushing past the tips. My skin goes tight with adrenaline. My heart hammers against my chest like a fucking drum.

I swallow and wrap my clammy hand around her wrist. Her pulse is racing. Somehow that gives me the courage to go on. I bring her wrist to my chest, and then up toward my neck, basically giving her the green light to pull my mouth down to hers.

She shifts close, then closer, till her forehead is pressed against mine, her hot breath falling against my skin.

Fuck.

She tilts her chin up, and our noses brush past each other. I close my eyes as her hands move toward the back of my head, her fingers scratching against my skin, making me sigh in pleasure.

“April,” I whisper against her mouth.

She doesn’t say a word, just runs her fingertips through my hair.

My hand comes up to her waist and I’m pretty sure I’m not using my brain to think anymore. My palm glides up the side of her neck and hers move down my arms, to my torso. I lightly tug on her hair and her breathing hitches.

Next thing I know, her lips are on mine.

At first, it feels like a dream. A joke. But then I open my mouth and feel her tongue graze past my bottom lip, and I know it isn’t a joke. This is happening. April Moore is kissing me. And I’m fucking kissing her back.

I knot my hands in her hair and I pull her close, groaning into her mouth. She nips on my lip with her teeth, and I pull back for a second to look at her. “What are we doing?” I whisper.

“I’m not sure.”

There’s a moment. A glance. The only thing between us right now is anticipation. Heavy, intense anticipation.

My mouth comes crashing down on hers and I tighten my grip around her waist, urging her onto my lap. Her hands move everywhere—my shoulders, my neck, my hair. She moans into

my mouth, the sound vibrating through my bones, goosebumps sprawling down my arms, all the way to my toes.

My mouth progresses to her jaw, then her neck, kissing every inch of her. Breathing her in. Etching this moment onto my brain. God, her skin is so fucking soft.

Her breathing gets heavier and she moves her hands down my chest toward the edge of my boxers.

Immediately, I'm hit with a jolt of panic that spurs me to break the kiss. Her eyes widen in horror. "Shit, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"No, I'm just ... I'm really close."

Her chest deflates in relief. "Oh."

God, this is so embarrassing.

"Do you want to stop, then?" Her cold fingers graze past my waistband, lazily advancing underneath my shirt.

I shake my head. She presses herself against me and it's a fucking miracle that I don't come right that instant. I grab her butt and pull her closer, instantly overwhelmed by the smell of her shampoo, the heat coming from her body, and the soft sighs of pleasure leaving her throat.

My hand cups her cheek and I lean in for another kiss.

The second my lips part, April slides her tongue inside and a low, growling noise forms in the back of my throat. God. I can't stop kissing her. And she can't stop kissing me. Her tongue slicks over mine and I stroke her cheek. More. I need more. I thread my fingers through her hair and pull her closer. Her breasts are now crushed against my chest, and I can feel the wild hammering of her heart. Her mouth dips down to my neck, and she starts planting a trail of open-mouthed kisses. Oh, sweet fucking hell.

"April ..."

"Want to stop?" she rasps.

"Don't you dare."

She laughs, the sound finding a home in the very center of my chest, then her lips meet mine again.

“Hey, sis—whoa!”

I push April off my body and she falls back, pulling her top down, red in the cheeks.

Holly’s eyes bounce between the two of us a few times, before settling on me. “What the fuck is going on here?”

“Hol—” April says.

“Ew, are you two dating?” Holly says the word like it’s slowly killing her from the inside.

“No!” April shrieks, pausing to look at me. “I mean ... we were just ...”

“Kissing,” I finish for her. “We were just kissing.” My tone is cold.

“Oh, God,” Holly mutters, grimacing. “I need to wash my eyes with bleach.”

“Please don’t tell Mom,” April pleads, and Holly shoots her a look that screams *Really?* and *Gross* simultaneously.

“She’s calling us down for dinner,” Holly says.

A digression. Good.

“Do you want to stay for dinner?” April casually asks me as if we didn’t just have our tongues down each other’s throats.

We were just kissing.

“Actually,” Holly butts in. “We have a ‘no dogs at the dinner table’ policy in this house.”

“Holly!” April chastises, jaw dropped in shock.

Holly just shrugs. It baffles me how the same set of parents raised such different daughters. One’s a fucking sunflower who wears unicorn hats and offers to bring my mom cookies every time she comes over. And the other is a thorny, withering rose who probably drinks demon blood in her free time.

“That’s all right. I need to get back anyway,” I tell April. “It’s already pretty late.”

If she’s even a little disappointed, she doesn’t make it appear so. I get off the bed and pick up my jacket. “Also, word of advice, Hollister?” Holly’s brown eyes narrow to slits. Hollister. She hates that nickname. “Pink’s not your color.” I point to her PJs. “It doesn’t mesh with all the black in your soul.”

Her nostrils flare. “I don’t remember asking for your expert opinion.”

“Yet here you are, still listening.”

Her eyes flick to April. “Downstairs, now,” she says, and after giving me a long, cold once-over, proceeds to walk out.

“You should test out the pepper spray on your sister. Check if it works.” I’m trying to sound unaffected by what just happened, but the slight wobble in my voice betrays me.

“Parker?”

“Yeah?”

She picks up her hat and toys with the tassels, briefly lifting her bold green eyes to my face. For a slight moment I think she’s going to grab my collar, pull my mouth down to hers, and finish what she started. There’s not a single doubt in my mind.

“Are you mad at me?” she asks.

Oh. “No. Why?”

“You seem like it,” she murmurs.

“I’m not mad, April.” But I’m definitely frustrated. I don’t want to *just* kiss her.

“You sure?” she asks.

“Yeah, April. It’s just a kiss. It isn’t something we haven’t done before, right?”

She nods, attempting a smile. “Right.”

Right. “So, it’s no big deal. Shit happens.” The words pour out of me in a stream of bitterness.

“Shit happens?” April repeats.

“We got caught up in the moment. Or, at least, I did.”

Her eyes turn to glass and she looks down. Her red hair falls around her face. I want her to deny it. I want her to tell me this wasn’t a mistake. I want to hold her hand. I want to dance with her in my front yard. I want to buy her that X-Men comic she’s been dying to read for the past week. I want to give her a hug even when she doesn’t need one.

I don’t want to *just kiss* her. I want to make her my girlfriend. I want to date her.

“Just to be clear,” she begins, her voice a lot quieter than before. “We’re still ...”

“Friends,” I say. “We’re still friends, Chere.”

“Okay,” she whispers, still looking at the ground.

*Not okay. I don’t want to be your friend. I want to be with you.* Fighting the stinging in my eyes, I swallow those words. “Can you do me a favor, though?” I say instead.

“What?”

I take a deep breath and look at the ground. “Please don’t ask me to kiss you again.” Without meeting her gaze, I turn around and head out of her room, promptly leaving out the second half of that sentence: *Because I won’t be able to say no.*

I don’t think I know how.

# Chapter Eleven



## Present Day

### APRIL

**T**he glass doors slide open and the smell of antiseptic fills my nostrils.

Parker and I stop at reception and he props his good arm on the white granite countertop. One of the nurses looks up. “Hi, how can I help you?” She looks pretty young, mid-twenties perhaps. Her blond hair is chopped at her shoulders.

“My friend has a huge cut on his arm.” I glance at her name tag. Ivy.

“And how did it happen?”

Parker points to the bloody tourniquet. “My girlfriend got a little wild in bed tonight.”

Ivy’s eyes widen and I immediately kick Parker in the foot. He snickers. A second nurse, wearing teal scrubs and a pair of dark-rimmed glasses, walks toward us. She looks older; mid-forties, maybe. She hands me a clipboard. “Please fill this out and wait down the hall. We’ll let you know once it’s your turn.”

Nodding, I grab the clipboard from her hands and two minutes later, the two of us are seated in the waiting area side by side, basking underneath the harsh fluorescent lighting.

“Okay.” I prop the clipboard up on my lap, my eyes skimming the form. “Describe illness or injury.”

“Tiny scratch on arm,” Parker says.

I write, “Gaping wound on left arm” and move on to the next question. “Cause of accident?”

“You.”

A warm blush climbs up my neck and I turn to face him. With his hand wrapped tightly around the tourniquet, he watches me, scrunching his eyebrows and nose like he’s trying to read my mind.

“Cause of accident, short attention span,” I say aloud as I write and he laughs. Next question. “Emergency contact?”

“April Moore.”

No hesitation. None.

“Parker, no.”

“No?”

“You can’t list me as your emergency contact,” I tell him.

“Why not?” he states in a tone that indicates his answer should have been obvious.

“Because we just met.”

He narrows his eyes and snorts, shaking his head. “No, we didn’t.”

Okay, technically he’s right. We’ve known each other for what feels like forever, and if we’re being really, really specific, it’s been a whopping sixteen years. But that was then and this is now. Time has passed. Things have changed. His eyes might connect with mine like we’ve lost out on centuries—a lifetime, even—but the truth is we aren’t the same people anymore. In Wanda Maximoff’s words, *I can’t feel him*.

Clicking the pen, I sit up straight, resolute. “Not my name. Give me another.”

“Leave it blank,” he says.

“What?”

“You wanted a replacement name. I don’t have one. So leave it blank.”

“Can I put your mom’s name?” I ask.

“Please don’t.”

Filling out an emergency name isn’t that big of a deal. To people like me, it’s akin to answering the “who’s your best friend” question in a high school slam book. But Hayden Parker is a stunt double. High risk and highly likely to land him in the ER. Finally, I shift in my seat and hunch over the form, discreetly filling out my details in the blank space.

A few minutes later, Ivy the nurse enters the waiting room. She directs us to one of the empty ER rooms. As soon as she walks out, the assigned doctor comes in.

My mouth gapes.

Holy shit.

It’s the man from the bar. Oh, did I say man? I meant *god*.

And he’s wearing a lab coat.

Oh, Lord.

“April,” Theo Carter drawls. “What a pleasure.” His eyes, a shocking shade of electric blue, widen with his smile. “How may I be of service today?”

“Uh, yeah. My friend here.” I glance at Parker, who, by the way, doesn’t look as amused. “He needs stitches,” I say, immediately hurrying to add, “or, at least, I think he does. I’m no expert. That’s you.” What am I saying? “But I watch a lot of *Grey’s Anatomy*, if that counts. Not that I’m comparing your job to the show—”

“Have a seat, please.” He puts a stop to my blubbling rant, thank God, and ushers his patient onto the edge of the bed. “Let’s see what we’re working with.”

Parker’s eyes dart between the two of us. “You two know each other?”

“We’re acquainted, yes.” Theo carefully removes the tourniquet from around his bicep, uncovering the bloody gash. Ouch. Somehow it looks worse than before. “I’m going to administer some local anesthetic to numb the pain first. That all right?”

Parker looks at me like *this is all your fault* and then gives Theo the go-ahead.

Theo prepares the numbing agent and I walk across to sit next to Parker, lightly taking his hand in mine.

“This might sting,” Theo flicks the syringe with his fingers and glances at Parker. “Do you want to close your eyes?”

Parker’s gaze, however, continues to hold me in a trap and he shakes his head. “Not really, no.”

My lips tighten in a line and I’m pretty sure I blush.

Theo applies some rubbing alcohol over Parker’s skin and inserts the big needle into a protruding vein. I try not to look.

“So, where’d you two meet?” Parker asks, gripping my hand tightly.

“A bar down the street,” Theo replies.

“A bar?”

“It was the same day I ran into you,” I add, defensive. “Holly introduced us.” A half-smile touches Theo’s mouth as I say her name.

“Whoa, back up.” Parker looks at me. “Holly?”

I nod.

“You know her?” Theo asks him.

Parker scoffs and points a thumb at me. “All good things have a price, man. Mine just happened to be Holly, the she-devil herself.”

Gaping, I shoot him a look. Parker and Holly have never gotten along, so I’m not really surprised at his remark. Quite frankly, it’s the nicest one so far. A solid upgrade from “raging bitch” and “absolute psycho.” But is it necessary to call her a “she-devil” in front of her colleague? But before I can smack Parker’s good arm, Theo asks him about his injury.

“Occupational hazard,” Parker tells him. “I’m a stunt double.”

Theo arches an eyebrow. “Oh, that’s pretty cool. Anything I might’ve seen?”

“I don’t know man, are low-budget action movies your thing?”

“Actually, I’m more into horror,” Theo says.

“Really?” Parker exclaims and glances at me. “April can’t watch a horror movie unless it’s on mute.”

I frown. “That’s not true.”

“You’re right. You can’t watch a horror movie, period.”

“Ah,” Theo muses. “So you two, huh?”

“Are just friends,” I chime in.

“Best friends,” Parker corrects. “We’re best friends.”

Theo chuckles softly.

And I just sigh.

\* \* \*

Fifteen minutes and five painful hand-squeezes later, Parker’s arm is somewhat fixed and we’re finally on our way out.

“Thank you for coming with me,” he says.

I shrug. “I’m your emergency contact. It’s my job.”

He laughs and the sound makes me feel all tingly and warm inside. We exit the ER and head into the parking lot.

“So, drinks tomorrow?” he says.

“Huh?”

“Drinks,” he repeats. “After work, obviously.”

“I’m gonna stop you right there.”

Battling a smirk, he steps in front of me, blocking my way. “I let your little Bar Friend stick needles in my arm. The least you can do is have a drink with me.”

“Okay, first of all, I didn’t let anyone stick needles in your arm. And second of all, he’s not my friend.”

Parker looks unfazed. “Well, then I let a complete stranger stick needles in my arm.”

I look away and fiddle with the sleeves of my coat.

“Come on, Chere. I just want to talk.” He nudges my foot with his, then leans forward to level with my forehead. “Don’t make me beg.”

“Maybe you should,” I quip.

He frowns, and uses his finger to motion the space between us. “Is this ... are we flirting right now?”

I roll my eyes and he moves back, laughing. “Okay, one drink,” he bargains. “That’s it. It doesn’t even have to be alcohol. You can sip water and I’ll just get drunk looking at you.”

I cringe. “Were you always this bad at flirting?”

“Depends. Were you always this easy on the eyes?”

“Ugh, just stop talking.”

He cracks another smile. “So, drinks? Seven p.m.?”

I don’t know whether this is a good idea or not, but Parker isn’t going to back off until I say yes. That much, I do know. Placing one hand on my hip, I take a step back. “One drink.”

He takes a step forward. “One drink.”

“Then we go home.”

“Then we go home,” he parrots.

“Our respective homes.” It’s always better to clarify.

“We’ll see.”

“I’m serious, Parker. We drink, we talk, we go home. This is not a date.”

“Tell you what. I won’t even pick you up. I’ll just text you the address like some Neanderthal.”

“You’re pathetic,” I say flatly.

He chuckles. “C’mon, let me drop you home.”

We walk to his motorcycle parked in the distance. He hands me the spare helmet and gets on the seat.

It’s right about then when I notice something on the front portion of the helmet. My fingers move over something small. Something specific.

Parker looks back as my smile slowly morphs into a tight frown. “April?”

I pulls my gaze up to meet his, a distinct knot in between my eyebrows. “What’s this?”

His eyes skate down to the helmet and I turn it around for him to see. “This,” I repeat. “What’s this?”

A ginormous wave of panic sweeps over his face. “Oh.”

Oh?

I take a single step toward him and push the helmet onto his lap. “AM? Why do you have my initials on your helmet?”

“Chere.” He looks up at me, lifting his head first, then his eyes. I know exactly why he has them on the helmet. I just want him to say it. Confirm it. My fingers scratch the helmet’s surface and everything around us goes quiet at that moment—the background chatter, the beeping of the other cars in the parking lot. Everything.

Parker lifts his hand and points to the front of his own helmet and the HP etched onto it. “You wanted matching helmets,” he says.

“What?”

“In college, you said you wanted matching helmets.”

My mouth opens. No sound comes out. Tears sting the back of my eyes.

“It’s not that big of a deal,” he starts and looks up. It takes all but half a second for him to extend his good arm and pull me into a hug. “No, no, no, no ... please don’t cry.”

“You got us matching helmets.” My voice shakes. “Of course, I’m going to cry, you ass.”

“I never meant for you to find out. And, in hindsight, I should’ve done a much better job at hiding it.”

“You didn’t?”

He starts to pull back, but I tighten my arms around him. This hug ends when I say so. “I got this done for myself,” he says. “To have a little piece of us everywhere I go. I don’t know what I was thinking. It was a stupid thing to do.”

“It’s not stupid.” I can’t believe he did this. And I can’t believe I’m actually crying over it. He got them made solely because I said so? Who does that? He didn’t even expect to run into me. All he knew was that I’d wanted matching helmets.

He digs the tip of his chin into my head. “Does this mean I’ve made it weird?”

With my arms still wrapped around his waist, I tilt my head back to look up. “You are weird.” I nuzzle back into him and he laughs into my hair.

Slowly pulling away, his lingering fingers the last to leave my back, he takes the helmet from me and puts it on my head.

“Well, this belongs to me now. Just so you know,” I say.

He clasps the buckle below my chin, bending down to nudge the top of my helmet with his. “It always did, Chere.”



# Chapter Twelve

## Thirteen Years Ago

### HAYDEN

**S**ome friendships are special enough to withstand anything. The majority only pretend to be that strong.

April and I belong to the minority.

The lecture hall door opens and she slips in like a ninja, dropping noiselessly into the seat next to me, our elbows knocking together. Professor Wells stands at the podium, barely noticing her, and continues droning about game theory for the millionth time.

“That’ll be thirty bucks.” Logan leans in close, sticking out his palm.

I give my sleeve a shake to check my watch and April kicks her feet up on an empty seat in front of her. “What’d I miss?”

I turn a disapproving gaze on her and, without breaking eye contact, pull out three ten-dollar bills from my back pocket and hand my roommate his prize money.

April gapes. “You guys bet on me? Again?”

Logan stuffs the cash in the pocket of his black leather jacket. “A dollar for every minute.”

Wells’s laser pointer draws attention to specifics of the best response graph and April takes out her laptop. It has at least twenty Marvel stickers on it. The one on the far right is wearing off. Cyclops and Emma Frost.

I gnaw at the end of my pen and try not to focus on the awkward silence that ensues between us. It's been three months since we kissed. Between classes, assignments, and college in general, I've been fortunate enough to keep myself distracted. April's been pretty busy too. She took up a part-time job at the campus diner, joined the college newspaper, and, well, we hardly see each other more than once or twice a day. I'm not used to not having her around me at all times. I'm not used to missing her. Our situation isn't ideal, but moving on never is, is it? But how the hell do you move on from someone who was never yours?

Wells starts handing out the grades for last week's assignment, slowly making his way to the top row. I sneak a peek in April's direction. Her shoulders are caved in and her gaze is still trained to her laptop screen. I nudge her arm with my elbow and she lifts her green eyes at me. "My Halloween costume came today," I tell her. "Gambit."

Normally, that sentence alone would've been enough to bring a bright smile to her face. Halloween is like crack for Marvel nerds. And even more so for two Marvel nerds. But since things aren't that great between us, she just gives me a nonchalant smile and says, "Sounds great."

I try not to show my hurt on my face.

"Shit, man," Logan whispers to me. "You can have ten bucks back."

He's making a sad awww face and I fight the urge to hit him. Logan is the only other person who knows about my moronic crush. At the time, we'd just been introduced as roommates and it was only reasonable that I decided to share my deepest, darkest secret with a total stranger. Three days later, I regretted it with every ounce of my being. Because Logan developed an even bigger moronic crush on April's roommate, Shara. He swore he'd never tell her, but who knows how far the guy is willing to go for his lady love.

"Thanks, man." I pry the note from his fingers and flip him off at the same time. He chuckles.

Ten minutes later, Wells dismisses the class and the lecture hall resonates with the sound of laptops shutting and students shuffling to get out of their seats.

“Hey, so listen.” April turns to look at us. “Shara wanted to know what’s a good time to come over tonight.”

Logan pipes up from behind me. “For what?” He straps his backpack over his shoulder. “Actually, it doesn’t matter. She can come over any time she likes. Tonight, tomorrow—now’s good too.”

“So, eight?” April smiles. “She wanted to pregame with you guys before Theta Chi’s Halloween party.”

“Eight’s perfect. What’s she going as? Sexy nurse? Sexy doctor? Oooh, it’s sexy scientist, isn’t it?”

I roll my eyes and April’s lip twitches as she tries not to laugh.

The three of us step into the aisle and start making our way to the door. “Just Shara?” I ask as she walks next to me.

“Hm?” She looks up and the brief moment of distraction causes her to trip over one of the steps.

I grab her arm. April goes stiff, her eyes lowering to the spot where my fingers are wrapped around her wrist. “Thanks,” she says and I let go. The tightness in my chest is almost unbearable.

I’ve spent hours, days, weeks wondering if April could possibly like me the way I liked her. Wishful thinking. In the months following our kiss, I thought about coming clean and just asking her point blank. She must like me back, right? If not always, at least sometimes?

But the fear of rejection always gets the better of me. Right now, our friendship still exists, no matter how strained. If she says she doesn’t like me back—well, I don’t think I’m mature enough to let it slide.

“Is it just Shara, or are you gonna be coming too?” We resume the walking. “I’m only asking so we know how much beer to buy.” Yeah, right.

“Oh.” She hesitates. “It’s just Shara. I’ll meet you guys at the party.”

“Come on, April,” I say, lightly nudging her shoulder with mine. “It’s Halloween. Seems a bit wrong if we don’t spend it together.”

She stifles a laugh. “Don’t be dramatic. You’ll see me at the party.”

“But I don’t even know what you’re going as. What if I don’t recognize you?”

“You’ll probably be the only guy to recognize me.”

I frown, and just as I’m about to ask what that means, someone calls out her name. I turn around and see Ben Johnson climb up the stairs, looking at April, grinning from ear to ear.

“Hey, gorgeous,” he says in a flirty tone. Gorgeous? He holds out an arm, almost as if he’s about to go in for a hug — oh, and then he does. April hugs him back, although her embrace is awkward as fuck.

“We still on for tonight?” Ben adds, sliding his palm over the arm of her sweatshirt as he pulls back. My frown deepens. Tonight? What the fuck is tonight?

April shifts her stance, stealing a quick glance at me. “Yeah,” she tells him. “Eight p.m., right?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He slides his hands into the pockets of his football jacket, acknowledging our presence with a light nod. “Want me to pick you up?”

“Oh, no, that’s okay. It’s just a ten-minute walk. I could use the exercise,” she adds as a joke.

“Nah.” Ben tips his head back, giving her body long, thorough once-over. “You’re pretty perfect as it is.”

I want to murder the guy.

After five whole minutes of the fucker trying to flirt with her and April laughing at shit jokes that aren’t even that

fucking funny, he finally bids her goodbye and proceeds to exit the lecture hall.

Once he's out of sight, April turns to face me, a guilty expression slathered all over her face. "I'm sorry," she says, sounding genuinely apologetic. "I have plans at eight. But I'll meet you guys at the party?"

Most people, I guess, would say, *It's no big deal!* What comes out of my mouth is, "You mean you have a date."

April's brows come together in a frown. "We're just hanging out."

"Where?" My question is instantaneous.

"His place."

His place? The guy lives in a frat house.

"It's not a date," April adds.

Honestly, it shouldn't bother me this much even if it is a date. She can go out with whomever she pleases. It's her fucking life. But the idea of her and Ben Johnson huddled on his frat house couch (or worse, his bed) at eight p.m., drinking and laughing and—well, it bothers me a lot. I scoff. "Sure, whatever you say, gorgeous."

Logan stands behind me and coughs. "Smooth."

April looks at me with narrowed eyes. "Fine, it's a date. Is that a problem?" Her tone gets more aggressive. "Do you have a problem with me going on a date, Parker?"

It's obvious she's pissed. It's also obvious that she's trying to insulate something. I just don't know what.

"Forget it." She throws her hands up in exasperation. "I'll see you guys at the party." And with that curt one-liner, April leaves the hall.

It takes ounces of self-control to not reach for her hand and tug her right back to me.

I don't want her to "hang out" with Ben Johnson. I hate the way he was looking at her. And I know I have no right to be

this jealous. No right at all. But I can't help it. The minute he finds out how amazing she is, I'm fucked.

Because I'm the replaceable guy. The friend. The one who isn't good enough. That person might not be Ben, but eventually she's going to find him. And when that happens, moving on isn't gonna be an option. It's going to be my only choice. You don't get to keep everyone in your life forever. I just thought we were the exception to that rule. I really did. I made one friend in high school and decided she was gonna be it for the rest of my life.

"Dude." Logan places an arm over my shoulder. I look back.

"What?"

"You're a jackass, that's what."

I shove his face aside and he snickers. We start walking toward to our dorm.

Don't I fucking know it?

\* \* \*

Okay, wow.

Holy shit.

I have been to Theta Chi parties before, but this—this is something else entirely.

The house is packed. There are fog machines, straw bales, and paid zombie actors traipsing the party, spooking the guests every now and then. This is so fucking over the top.

Three out of ten on the "fright factor" but ten out of ten for effort.

"What can I get you, m'lady?" Logan asks Shara, flirtatiously toying with the red devil horns on her head.

She rolls her eyes and swats his hand away, but her smile is evident. "A beer, thanks."

Grinning, he turns his attention to me. “And what about you, baby doll?”

A few guys dressed as members of the Justice League walk by, some of them pausing to throw curious stares in Shara’s direction. She fidgets with the hem of her black dress, clearly uncomfortable with all the attention.

I frown. Now does it make sense why I wasn’t thrilled at the prospect of April “hanging out” with Ben at his place? Men are pigs.

“Stay with her,” I tell Logan. “I’ll get us all some beers.”

An automated shriek blasts from the nearby speaker, and Shara jumps up against him. He wraps an arm around her shoulder and lowers his mouth to her ear, whispering something. She smiles and elbows his stomach.

It’s a casual scene. Nothing extraordinary. But the longing it triggers in my chest is exactly that. Fierce and unexpected.

If April was here and if things were good, we’d probably be standing in some unattended corner, judging everyone’s Halloween costumes. Innocently holding hands, acting like it isn’t the most special thing ever. It sounds fucking corny, but I really like holding her hand. The way her thumb strokes my palm and how my fingers squeeze over hers. A secret conversation no one can hear. Sometimes not even us.

Walking toward the kitchen, I grab three plastic cups from the stack on the granite counter and make my way to one of the kegs. Deafening hip-hop blasts from the speaker system, and several warm, sweaty bodies jostle me as I venture deeper into the kitchen. A zombie man walks by, sipping on a drink, and the smell of alcohol fills my nostrils.

I pour the last cup of beer as a familiar voice pipes up from behind me. I instantly turn around and find April leaning against one of the kitchen cabinets, dressed head to toe in yellow-green spandex, a white wig, and a brown leather jacket.

*You’ll probably be the only guy to recognize me.*

Of course.



“Rogue?” I raise a beer cup at her.

She gives my Gambit costume a long once-over. “You look nice too.”

“Not as nice as you.”

A hint of a smile fills April’s mouth before it flatlines again. It hurts more than it should. Like she’s showing me what could be, if either one of us was brave—then taking it all away.

“Are we in a fight?” April asks, her voice meek.

I look down and shake my head. “We don’t fight.”

“We don’t?”

I set the beer cups on the countertop and force a smile. “Gambit loves Rogue too much to stay mad at her.”

She frowns. “Mad at me? Why are you mad at me? What did I even do?”

Okaayy ... I guess we are sort of still in a fight. But of the hundred mature responses I could come up with, I choose the least mature one. “Where’s your little boyfriend tonight?”

“What?” Her frown deepens as slow realization strikes. “Who, Ben? Parker, he’s not my—”

Right that second, the devil himself enters the room, shirtless and in a pair of brown pants. After stopping to talk to a couple of guys, Ben saunters toward the fridge on the other side of the kitchen. He grabs a can of beer and walks over to us. “Hey, babe.” He slides an arm around her waist, pulling her close.

My muscles tighten into taut strands. Babe?

“Hey,” she says, giving him a light pat on his chest and he plants a kiss on her cheek.

Something hot and ugly bursts in my chest. I want to yank the fucker off her and deck him in his stupid pretty-boy face.

April reintroduces us and Ben’s eyes dart between the two of us. “S’up, dude? What are you supposed to be?”

“Gambit.” My response is curt and to the point.

“What the hell is a Gambit?”

My forehead squeezes in a frown, and I look at April with arched eyebrows. Really? This guy?

“He’s one of the X-Men,” she clarifies for him.

“The what?”

Jesus Christ. “The X-Men,” I repeat. “Wolverine, Cyclops? Those names ring any bells for you?”

Ben snickers in a way that does nothing but piss me off. “Whatever, man. We’re gonna go get a drink. Enjoy the party.” He tightens his hold around April and pulls her out to the living room. She doesn’t look back.

The remainder of the night doesn’t get any better. After two more rounds of beers, my frustration seems to have mellowed to a comfortable level. Logan and Shara stand next to me and I go on staring daggers at the “happy couple” who’s now slow dancing smack in the middle of the dance floor. Who the fuck plays Taylor Swift at a Halloween party?

“Geez, relax,” Shara drawls, nudging my arm, happily nursing her third vodka soda. “She doesn’t like him like that.”

Logan chokes on his beer, and I turn to face her. “What are you talking about?”

“April,” she clarifies. “She doesn’t like Ben. He’s not her type. But you already knew that.”

My mouth drops open and I shoot my roommate an icy glare. “You fucking told her?”

Wiping the corner of his mouth, he shakes his head. “No, but you just did.”

Shara dips her head down to take another sip of her drink. “I’m not an idiot. You basically eye-fuck her every time you’re in the same room.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I reply, trying to sound unaffected. “We’re just friends.” That word tastes bitter on my tongue. Friends.

“Suuure,” Shara goes on. “Friends who tease each other and call each other names. You two might be friends, Parker”—this time she places her hand on my arm—“but you’re definitely not just friends. I mean you can’t even say her name without blushing.”

“You’re absolutely right, Shara,” I tell her. “We’re so in love with each other. Must be why she brought that caveman as her date.”

Logan tries not to laugh at my diss and Shara just shrugs. “I never said she wasn’t an idiot. You both are.”

The red ambience dims to a pinkish hue, and Frankie Valli’s “Can’t Take My Eyes Off You” starts to play. Ben twirls April around and the sound of her laughter fills up the room.

They slowly turn around so she’s facing me. She rests her chin against the crook of his shoulder and they start swaying to the music.

She smiles at me.

I smile back.

A few seconds later, Shara and Logan make their way to the dance floor too. April tightens her arms around Ben and even though she’s dancing with him, she goes on looking at me.

A small voice goes off in my head. Telling me, convincing me this is how it should be. Just the two of us, in our own little bubble. Me and my Chere, connected by an invisible string of memories and inside jokes that only we understand.

Just us two. Not some fucking prick who doesn’t know who the X-Men are.

*I’m sorry*, she mouths.

My smile fades into something less and I shrug, unsure what she’s apologizing for. Somewhere around the second half of the song, Ben leans back, his arms curling around her neck. She angles her chin upwards, a small furrow between her brows, and he pulls her into a kiss.

Everything stops.

She runs her fingers through his hair, and the whole visual sends a flash of anger coursing through my veins. If I'm not used to missing April, then I'm sure as hell not used to sharing April.

The song ends.

The dance ends.

April blinks open her eyes for a short and horrifying second, and before I know it, I'm on my way out.

\* \* \*

I'm halfway across the street when the sound of April's voice follows me out. "Parker!"

I don't want to look.

Her footsteps get closer, and I still don't turn around. I'm scared if I do, I'm gonna start crying. Yes, I'm that pathetic.

She pants, trying to catch her breath, and places a hand on my back, over my brown jacket.

I stiffen at the touch. "What is it, April?"

"What is it, April?" she parrots, walking around me so we're facing each other. "What the hell is the matter with you? Why'd you just leave like that?"

"It's a party, isn't it? I came, I got bored, and now I'm leaving." Just as I'm about to walk past her, she shoves me back.

Literally.

April Moore literally lifts both of her tiny fists and shoves me in the chest. Hard.

I look down and frown.

"Don't make me tackle you, Hayden Parker, because I will." Her eyes narrow into scary little slits. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

“You’re gonna have to be much more specific than that.”

This time her glare rivals that of Holly. “Why are you being like this?”

“Like what?”

“A complete asshole!” Her expression flashes with annoyance. “Ever since we got here it’s like, I don’t know—you won’t talk to me, you won’t even touch me—”

“I’m the asshole?” I scoff. “Me? That’s fucking rich.”

“Yes, you!” April yells. “We used to be friends! Best friends! And now you ... you can’t even look at me without making that stupid face.”

“What stupid face?”

“Like you hate me.”

That word. Hate. It makes me wince. I don’t hate her. I could never hate her. But I do hate how she makes me feel. And more than anything, I hate that I don’t have the same effect on her.

It’s not fair.

“You’re the one who ditched me to go ‘hang out’ with your fucking boyfriend,” I shoot back. “And I’m the asshole?”

“For the last time—” She clasps her hands shut right in front of my face to emphasize her point. “He’s. Not. My. Boyfriend.”

“Yeah, right.”

“The guy doesn’t even know the difference between Marvel and DC. You really think I’d date someone that ignorant?”

“That’s what I thought too!” This is nuts. “But then you kissed him and called him ‘babe.’”

She rolls her eyes. “That’s not true. He did both of those things to me.”

“You deserve someone better, April.”

She shakes her head. “You don’t even know him.”

“But I know you,” I blurt, immediately wanting to take back those words. “Does he?”

“What does it matter?” she asks. “We’ve just hooked up a few times. He doesn’t need to know me, just like I don’t need to know him.”

God, she’s so fucking annoying at times. Especially when she’s right. “April, if that’s what you want, then great. If that’s what makes you happy, then who am I to say anything? Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m gonna head back to my dorm—”

A distant noise interrupts me. Both of us look up. With a low rumble of thunder and a quiet tap-tap-tapping, it starts to rain.

Shit.

The rain gets more intense and water drips down my hair. I grab her hand to take her inside, but she pulls me back.

“You’re gonna get sick, Chere.” I tug on her fingers but the girl doesn’t budge. Instead, she steps closer and threads our fingers together. I don’t understand any of this. She hates the rain.

“I don’t like fighting with you,” April says.

With my free hand I pull her into a half hug. “We’re not fighting. I’m just being an asshole. I’m sorry.”

“No, but we are.” She glances up at me. “It took a fight and a rainstorm and some guy in a football jacket for you to call me Chere again.”

I frown. “What do you mean? I call you Chere all the time.”

“Nuh-uh.” She shakes her head. “It’s been three months.”

My frown deepens. Really? I honestly haven’t realized. But then again, April and I haven’t quite been around each other these past few months. I press my nose against the top of her head and whisper an apology.

The rain gets heavier. Even if we did go inside, there’d be no point now. We’re drenched from head to toe.

What is this? What are we? Sometimes we're just friends, and sometimes we're more. One minute she's asking me to kiss her, and the next minute she's off with another guy, wrapped in his arms, slow dancing to our song. Like I mean nothing to her. I'm so confused. *I just want to know what you want.*

"I don't know," April whispers and I realize I just said that last sentence out loud.

Ah, fuck me.

I pull back and she looks up. The white strands of her wig cling to the side of her neck, and the wet spandex clings to her curves. Her next words are barely audible against the furious tapping of the rain. "But what I wanted was you."

My heart flutters. Then stalls. Then flutters again.

What?

My confused gaze zeroes in on her face. "What did you just say?"

Her mouth opens and closes, and she looks away.

There are a billion thoughts running through my brain. "Don't." I step back. "Don't say things you don't mean. I'm not tough when it comes to you, April. Please don't say that again."

"And what if I do mean it?"

"No, you keep doing this ..." My voice trails off. "Asking me to kiss you, then pushing me away, and now this—"

"Pushing you away?" April tightens her grip around my fingers. "I never pushed you away." The hurt in her voice cuts into me like a knife. "I asked you to kiss me."

"Yeah, for practice."

For a moment, nothing happens, and after a beat, her eyes bug out and she shoves me in the chest again. "What kind of a moron are you?"

A confused one?

“I asked you to kiss me because I wanted you, you jackass!”

A few more seconds pass and I don't say anything.

“What kind of friends kiss for practice?” she goes on.

“How the hell am I supposed to know?” I yell back.  
“You're my only friend!”

“Oh my God, you're such an idiot.”

“Wait, you really did want me?”

“Yes,” April sighs defeatedly, running a hand over her face. “You just didn't want me back.”

I don't mean to. I really don't. But as soon as she says those words, I laugh.

I fucking laugh.

“Are you fucking kidding me? I didn't want you?” I laugh again. The words are in my throat. I want to say them. But I shouldn't. I can't.

I can't.

I can't.

I won't.

I ... am.

“I've wanted you for as long as I can remember. I've wanted you every time you spoke to me, every time you looked at me, every time you smiled at me.” I hold her hands against my chest. “Goddammit, April, I wanted you three years ago in that stupid diner as much as I want you right now. If not more.”

Her chest rises and falls. Slowly. Mulling over every single ounce of truth that just slipped out my mouth. “Why ...” She shakes her head, tiny beads of water dripping down the bridge of her nose. “What ... why didn't you tell me then?”

“Me? I could ask you the same question!”

She scoffs. “Well, forgive me for assuming you have more than one functioning brain cell.”



Silence.

Her mouth twists into a scowl and she pushes past me, starting to head back toward the party.

But I grab her hand and pull her right fucking back. My fingers are wrapped around her wrists and I hold them below her chin. “I’m telling you now.”

I lean down carefully. Breathing and not breathing; hearts beating, and not. She’s so fucking close. Our mouths are inches apart.

“I am ... telling you.” I nudge the side of her nose with mine. “Now.”

I can’t feel the cold wetness of the rain anymore. All I feel is April, everywhere, filling up my senses.

“God, of course, I wanted you, Chere. You’re everything to me. Everything. My favorite person, and currently a huge pain in my ass.”

She laughs.

“But you’re also my best fucking friend. I didn’t want to lose what we already had. Do you have any idea how hard it is to be near you and not want to kiss you?”

She tilts her head up and smiles.

“That’s not supposed to make you happy.”

“You want to kiss me?” she whispers.

I nod. “God, yes.”

The rain picks up and her voice comes out so soft, I have to lean in close to hear her. “Okay, so it’s settled, then,” she says.

“Settled?”

“Mm-hm, you like me, I like you—”

“You do.” My grin is unmatched.

“I officially give you permission to kiss me.”

“Yeah?” I bring my forehead to hers, fighting the zoo of butterflies in my stomach.

“Will you?”

My lips brush against her temple. “You need to break up with your little boyfriend first.”

April makes a frustrated noise. “He’s not my boyfriend.”

“Whatever he is,” I cut her off. “You and me? We’re special. And I don’t want to fuck it up. If we’re going to do this, then we’re going to do it right. I don’t want any other guy thinking he has a shot with you.”

Her beautiful green eyes move over my face. “Jealous, much?” she teases, a coy smile tugging at her lips.

“You’re my person. And it just hurts when I see someone else trying to make you their person too.” A lock of her red hair peeps out from her wig and I gently tuck it back in.

She pales a little and I think I’ve royally fucked up somehow. “What if it doesn’t work out?” she asks. “What happens then? Will we still be friends?”

Oh, thank God.

“April, I like you—like, really fucking like you.” I plant a soft assuring kiss on her forehead. “Those are mere words and it’s up to you to accept them at face value or not. But when I tell you we’re never going to stop being friends, you’d better fucking believe me. Because being your friend is the best thing that’s ever happened to me. No one gets me like you do. No one geeks out with me like you do. And you’re the only one who laughs at my jokes, even though we both know I’m not funny. There’s no way I’m fucking around with that.”

Her lips inch up in a smile.

“So yes, we’ll always be friends,” I say. “No matter what happens, where you are, who you’re with, you’ll always, always, be my best friend. And that’s a fucking promise—”

She puts her hand over my mouth, clamping it shut.

Um, what the fuck? “Apmhp?” April?

Standing on her toes, she plants a kiss over the knuckles of her yellow gloves. My frown deepens. The second she lowers her hand, my question pours out. “The hell was that?”

“You know what happens when I touch somebody,” she says with a slight smile in her voice. “You wanna end up in the hospital?”

I can’t fight it. I’m smiling way harder. Rogue says that to Gambit. *X-Men: The Animated Series*. The nerd in me is screaming.

My instinct is to grab on to this magnificent, magnificent girl and never ever let go. But instead, I push a few wet strands off her cheeks, tuck them behind her ear, and parrot Gambit’s trademark response. “Maybe it’s worth it, no?”

Then the sky melts down entirely.

# Chapter Thirteen

## Present Day

### APRIL

I got to Barricade Bar ten minutes early.

After making a direct beeline toward the bathroom to wash my face, which I thought would soothe my nerves, or give me the strength to climb out the bathroom window (spoiler: it didn't), I fixed my smudged mascara, reapplied some lip gloss, and put on my big girl pants to get through this night.

Parker looks up from the menu and smiles at me. It's the sixth one so far. I've been counting. Every three smiles, I smile back.

"You look beautiful," he says.

I've paired my blue pencil skirt with a blue blazer and my shortest heels. Having been a publicist for the past few years, I knew I wasn't going to get the time to go home and change for our "not-date." Hollywood doesn't believe in the nine-to-five. So instead, I woke up an hour early and ravaged my closet for something that screams formal, yet sexy.

Again, this is not a date.

"Thanks. You look nice too." He's wearing a navy-blue dress jacket and a white cotton T-shirt with the Superman logo on it. Out of all the things that have happened in the past two days, of course, that's the one that makes my brain go *what the fuck*.

"You're staring again," he says.

“Why are you wearing that?”

This makes him laugh and an equally exasperated smile quirks my mouth. “Give me some credit, Chere,” he says. “I’ve matured. I’m not the snob who cares about the whole Marvel versus DC thing anymore.”

There’s not a single cell in my body that believes that bullshit statement.

“Also, I like telling you not to stare at me.” He shrugs, giving me Smile Number Eight.

Heat flashes across my neck. The glowing neon-blue MILLER LITE sign hanging to our left transforms his mussed-up brown hair into jet black, and I prop my head on my hand. “How’s your arm?”

“It’s been better,” he says, nodding slowly. “How was work?”

“Hectic.” I pick up the glass of water in front of me and take a huge sip.

Parker’s leg bumps into mine under the table and I look up. With his hazel gaze trickling down my face like warm honey, he says, “Thanks for agreeing to this tonight.”

*This.* I chew on that word for a bit. We’re not strangers. We’re a little less than friends. I guess “this” is an accurate description of us at the moment.

“Of course. I wanted to see you too.”

I see the exact moment those words reach his ears. A roll of his tongue against the inside of his cheek as he suppresses his ninth smile. The soft rise and fall of his chest. A normal person wouldn’t notice these things about Parker. But I do. I always have.

Only now I wish I didn’t, because all it does is remind me of how close we used to be. How much we’ve seen of each other. How much of me I let him see. The happy, the sad, the messy. The heartbreak. He was there for all of it.

“April?” Parker says.

I raise my eyebrows. “Mm-hm?”

His eyes sweep over my face as he leans forward, and he rests his elbows on the edge of the table. “I mean it. Thank you for coming. I know this isn’t easy.”

He’s right. It isn’t easy. But I never expected it to be. “Meeting an ex-boyfriend never is.”

“Is that what I am?” Parker leans forward, his hand resting on the edge of table. I can’t help but notice the faint bruising over his knuckles. “An ex-boyfriend?”

“Aren’t you?” My voice is thick and there’s a heaviness in the center of my stomach. A paperweight, holding it down. Deep down, I’m well aware that Parker is more than just an ex-boyfriend. He’s my best friend, my soulmate, and probably everything in between.

“Chere, I know we haven’t seen each other in a while, but don’t insult me like that.” Smile Number Ten tugs at the corner of his mouth and he says, “I’m the ex-boyfriend.”

I roll my eyes, relieved he still has the same cocky sense of humor I used to love so much. The paperweight starts to disintegrate. I pick up the menu and drag my eyes down to the cocktail section. “Have you decided on a drink?” I ask.

“Nah, not yet,” he says. “You?”

“Same.”

“They don’t have your usual?” Parker perks up. “Twenty shots of tequila with a side of bad decisions?”

“Not what I meant. These drinks have no descriptions. How am I supposed to know what a Corpse Reviver is? Or a ... Betty’s Ecstasy?”

“Get both.”

I shoot him a look.

“I know, I know.” He lifts both his big palms on either side of his face. “One drink, we talk, then go home. Our respective homes.” There’s a sour emphasis on *respective*. “What I meant was, get both and I’ll have the one you deem unfit.”

The bitch inside my brain goes awww. Our waitress approaches our table, wearing a black top and jeans, and she pulls an electronic tablet from her apron. “Hi! Have you decided on what you’d like? Or do you need a few more minutes?”

Parker orders a Heineken and I quickly run my eyes over the beer section on the bottom right. A Blue Moon, I tell her, and hand over the menu.

Just as she’s about to head inside, Parker speaks up. “Could we also get one Corpse Reviver and one Betty’s Ecstasy?” He isn’t even looking at the waitress. His eyes are set on me. Dark and unrelenting.

Carrie Underwood’s “Blown Away” replaces Hank Williams’s hokey country-western accent, and the second our waitress heads back inside, Parker attacks me with his next question. “So, how do you wanna do this?”

“I’m sorry?”

“As in, where do we start?” he clarifies. “It’s been eight years. I have a list of questions for you, Chere, as I’m sure you do too.”

“A list?” I repeat, baffled out of my mind. He has a list of questions?

“Not literally, April.” He laughs, obviously reading the sheer panic on my face. “Quite frankly, I just have the one.”

Somehow that doesn’t help with my elevated blood pressure. Just the one? Hell, I have more than just the one.

*Why are you here?*

*Why are you a stunt double?*

*What happened to your Fireheart Chronicles?*

*Do you have a girlfriend?*

*Do you have a girlfriend?*

“What is it?” My voice is meek and soft.

He is a mind reader. “Do you have a boyfriend?”



My eyes widen. “That’s your question?”

“That’s my only question, Chere.”

“Only question?”

He tilts his head and slowly brings a hand up, his broad fingers rifling through his thick brown waves. “Because it’s the only one that matters to me. If I’m going to win you back, I need to know whom or what I’m up against.”

The shock on my face is clearly palpable. I blink rapidly. “Win me back?”

“Too corny?”

“You’re not winning me back.”

Parker shrugs, still smirking. “We’ll see.”

He picks up the glass bottle and I don’t even realize I’ve gone back to staring at him. “Please don’t make me regret coming here.” I force my eyes elsewhere.

“I’m not forcing you to be with me, April,” he says. “But if you think I’m not even going to try to make you believe we still belong together, then you have another thing coming.”

“Parker, you said you just wanted to talk.”

“We’re talking.”

“I don’t want to talk about this.”

His smile fades. “Okay, what do you want to talk about, then?” he says stiffly.

I look down at the table and twist the hem of my skirt in my lap. Parker has always been direct with his words. Not one to beat around the bush. But his brutal persona has never been directed at me before. The Hayden Parker I knew had to be bribed with two Marvel Funko Pops just to ride Space Mountain with me. What changed between then and now that led him to become a stunt double? Maybe the same thing led him to become this harsh toward me.

My eyes peruse the tuft of curls falling over his forehead.

“I’m sorry. That came out wrong.” He reaches forward, and to my disappointment, just as quickly pulls his hand back. “It’s just ... I’ve missed you for a long time, April. And now you’re here, sitting in front of me, and I just—I don’t want to miss you again. Never again,” he says, nearly unblinking. “If you don’t want to talk about us, then that’s fine too. It’s been eight years since I’ve heard your voice, April.” He offers up a defeated smile. “I’ll listen to anything you have to say.”

I half open my mouth but no sound comes out. What do I even say to that? If being together was that easy, I never would’ve left to begin with. We broke up for a very real reason, one that still exists. Thankfully, our waitress chooses that exact moment to return with our drinks, giving me ample time to get it together. She puts the two beers and the neon-colored pink and green drinks smack in the middle of the table and walks over to another set of customers.

I look at Parker, he looks at me, and I know we’re both thinking the same thing.

These drinks look absolutely disgusting.

He picks up the green goblet with a soggy pineapple on the rim. “Nothing this green could ‘revive’ anything. I’m going to say this is the Ecstasy, and the Pepto Bismol is the Reviver.”

As he runs a hand through his hair, messing it up even more, I reach out for what we’re assuming is the Ecstasy. “Are we sure this didn’t come from the CDC labs?” I raise the glass and analyze the thick green liquid from the bottom.

“Cheers?” Parker says.

I look up from my glass. His hand braces the table and he leans forward, clinking the edge of my glass with his. The sound sends a tingling vibration down my spine and I feel it slip into my bloodstream, warm and electric. My body reacts as though he just touched me.

Parker sips on his drink and I sip on mine, all the while not breaking eye contact with each other and trying our very best not to laugh. I’m about to put my glass down, but he widens

his eyes and starts chugging the drink, prompting me to do the same with his other hand. And I don't even hesitate.

I bring the glass back to my lips because apparently, we've entered ourselves into a college drinking tournament, using glasses instead of red plastic cups because you know, we're thirty and hence sophisticated.

After five seconds, both of us slam the empty glasses back down on the wooden surface, hard enough to make a point but not hard enough to break them.

"That was disgusting!" He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I feel very ecstatized."

"Ecstatized?"

"Mm-hm," I nod. "Ecstatized."

"That's not a word." Wincing like my verbiage physically hurts him, he slides the glass away and reaches for the sweaty beer bottle.

"What are you, the word police? All words are made up, Parker."

He lifts the pint of Heineken to his lips and takes a swig. "Fair point. Ecstatized it is." His broad fingers curl around the neck of the bottle, his lips wrap perfectly over the opening, and the outline of his throat bobs with each sip. I am hypnotized. Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Want To Have Fun" starts to play and the introductory beat knocks me out of my trance.

"Jesus, April," he says, putting the beer down.

"What?" I bite my cheek and sink into my seat.

"You really need to stop looking at me like that."

A prickling sensation forms along the nape of my neck and the backdrop chatter of other customers gets louder. "Like what?"

He casts a sideways glance at me. “Like you want me to spread you out on the table and use this mouth elsewhere.”

My mouth falls open and I’m sure my face is on fire. “Oh. My. God. You can’t just say stuff like that to me, Parker!”

“Was I off base?”

I scoff and scoot my chair back. “I wasn’t looking at you.” Lies. “I was staring at a vague spot and you just happened to be there. In the way.”

“Uh-huh.”

The mocking confidence in his voice chips away at the shell of tolerance around me. “Okay, if we’re going to be friends—”

He snorts. “We’re going to be much more than friends.” I shoot him a glare. “Fine, go on.”

“If we’re going to be friends, then I think some ground rules are in order.”

“Ground rules?” He lifts a single dark eyebrow. “You’re on your second drink of the night, already breaking your one-drink rule. What makes you think we’re going to stick to the rest?”

“Because we are.”

A brief pause, then he eases into a smile. “I’m sold.”

I know he’s not. “Rule number one, no flirting.”

“April.” Judging by his despondent tone, you’d think I just asked him to be my accomplice in a murder. “You can’t ask me to do that.”

I ignore him. “Rule number two, no winning me back.”

“That’s not a rule. You can’t turn the inevitable into a rule.”

“Okay, that’s flirting.” I think. “And rule number three, no bad-mouthing my sister.”

Parker leans forward, face serious, voice low. “What the hell does Holly have to do with this?”

“Nothing, but she’s my sister and I can’t have you calling her a she-devil in front of her colleague. We aren’t kids anymore and anything you say to Theo is one more thing he can use against her.”

“Use against her?” He laughs. “They’re doctors, Chere, not tributes at The Hunger Games. Plus, I only did it that one time.”

“And then proceeded to ask for his number.”

“So? He’s a cool guy,” he counters.

“You’re only saying that because he hates Holly as much as you do,” I parry.

“Like-mindedness is a good quality in budding friendships.”

I point a single stern finger at him and repeat, “No bad-mouthing my sister.”

“Fine.” Amusement shimmers through his eyes and it sends a zing down my back. “Is that all?”

My jaw tightens as I nod. “Yes.”

“Great, because I have a few rules of my own.” He pats the table as if to prove a point.

“Unnecessary, but go on.”

“Rule number one, you can’t smile at me.”

I frown. “How am I supposed to control that?”

“One smile equals one flirt,” he says. “Fair is fair.”

“You’re turning this into a game.”

“Flirting with you is in my DNA, April. I can’t help it. If this is going to be hard for me, I’m going to make it equally difficult for you.”

“Fine, I won’t smile at you,” I say and mutter a soft “ridiculous” under my breath. “What else?”

He pulls away to get a better look at me. The neon sign flickers for a brief second, making his brown eyes appear like

pools of honey. “The second you start falling back in love with me, you have to let me know.”

I’m unsure how to respond to that. Not because I don’t think I’m up for the task, but because I don’t think I ever fell out of it to begin with. “Sure, Parker. I’ll do that.” I grab my beer bottle and take a swig.

The rest of the night is spent partaking in an exchange of phone numbers and life-changing information. He tells me he hasn’t dated anyone since me. I try to sound unaffected and tell him I’ve had three semi-serious relationships. He tells me his mom sold their house in Cooperstown and used the money to get an RV. He jokes about it being a mid-life crisis, but my heart aches a little. We shared countless memories in that house. I like to believe that we might’ve fallen in love in that house too.

He tells me he’s a proud father of a six-month-old kitten named Dog. Obviously, he’s the only one who finds this funny, and I respond with, “I killed four succulents in two weeks.”

The entire time he’s relaying all this information, I feel like a little girl peeping through a glass window, unwittingly trying to find my place amidst his new life. The memories we shared come back in tiny flashbacks every now and then, and I wonder if he sees my smile flicker at a particularly heartbreaking one.

We order some food—grilled chicken burger for him, and a house salad for me—and continue making small talk. Monochromatic and outlined.

Neither one of us is brave enough to bring up what happened that one night, eight years ago. Not yet.

# Chapter Fourteen

## Twelve Years Ago

### HAYDEN

“**T**he Getty? Three p.m.?” April asks.

I look up from my comic. She’s sunbathing on the blue beach mat next to mine, where I’m sitting in my shorts.

Every Sunday for the past two years, we’ve come up to the campus hill in our swimsuits. She scrolls through something on her phone. I read a comic. She occasionally clicks ugly photos of me. I promptly snatch the phone from her and delete them. She whines about it for exactly three seconds and goes back to her scrolling. I go back to my reading.

It’s tradition.

The only thing different about this year is that I can’t seem to focus on Wolverine and Cyclops. Not when my girlfriend is lying right next to me. God, I can’t believe I can actually say that now. I have a girlfriend.

April Moore is my girlfriend.

Fucking unreal.

She’s wearing a tight blue swimsuit. It melts over her skin so perfectly that I want nothing more than to rip it off. Every time I look at her, my eyes inadvertently travel down to her lips, then to the soft plunge of her breasts, and all the blood in my body rushes straight to my dick.

Ever since our kiss at last year’s Halloween party, we’ve done ... other stuff. She’s let me explore her body. And I’ve let



her do the same. But we haven't had sex yet. Which is okay. I don't want to rush her. I'm careful to take things at her pace.

And quite frankly, I'm a little nervous myself. Don't get me wrong; I'm dying to touch her. To be inside her. I want to memorize every inch of her skin and count every little freckle. I want to know her body as well as she does. April has had sex before. I know that. But I can't let my impatience fuck up the first time we have sex.

I cannot fuck it up.

"Parker?"

"Yes, Chere?"

When she realizes I'm shamelessly checking her out, she gives a small smile and turns on her stomach, giving me a perfect view of her ass. "The Getty?" she repeats, fake innocence dripping from her voice. "Three p.m.?"

I slam my book shut and lean on my arm. "Hard pass."

"Oh, you have something better to do?"

"Someone," I correct.

She turns her head and gives me a coy smile, and my dick throbs. Hardening more. "I want to see your comic," she says.

I frown at that abrupt change in conversation. "What?"

"Your comic," April repeats. "I want to see it."

"I'm not showing it to you." My eyes trickle down her face again. Ah, hell, is that fucking lip gloss?

"You have to show it to me now, Parker. Things have changed—"

I prop myself up and smash my lips against hers. A muffled moan escapes her mouth and I slowly trail mine along her jawline, moving to a spot beneath her ear. Her whole body quivers. "You're right," I whisper against her skin. "Things have changed, Chere. I get to do that now." April's cheeks are flushed, her chest heaving, and I run my thumb over her lower lip.

Her palms meet my chest. I pull on her hands and the next thing I know, I'm on my back and she's on top of me, her legs straddling my waist. It's so quiet I think I hear our heartbeats sync up. I run my finger along her spine, feeling the heat sear between her legs. Her palms fall flat over my chest, a shy, mischievous smile flitting across her mouth. With her hips still straddling my waist, she bends forward, gripping the side of my neck. My lips meet hers, and I guide her onto her back. I cup her cheek and edge her lips open.

"Mmm." She breathes out her nose. Her breath hitches as I suck on her bottom lip and then move to her neck.

"Still want to go to the Getty?" I suck on her neck, and her hips shift into me with need.

"Yo, lovebirds!" Logan shouts from across the lawn. My head falls against her forehead, a regretful groan leaving my throat. I'm gonna fucking kill him. April is red in the cheeks and I brush back her hair so I can see her face, and plant a quick kiss on her nose.

Logan reaches us with a beaming Shara by his side. She's holding a picnic basket.

"Awww, did we interrupt something?" she teases and April's face turns into a tomato. My lips lift at the sight.

"Yeah, babe," Logan says, slinging an arm over Shara's shoulders. "Public indecency."

When April flips him the bird, I have a tough time fighting a grin. She sits up against me and leans back against my chest. I wrap my arms around her stomach and kiss the side of her head.

Shara laughs. "God, you two are so sweet, it's giving me a toothache."

Shara and Logan started dating shortly after the two of us. In the span of five months, they've broken up and gotten back together more times than I can count. Mostly, it's always been Shara breaking it off with him. Their longest "break-up" lasted a whopping sixteen hours. But all said and done, I think they're good for each other. Logan has never felt this way

about any other girl, and even though Shara swore April to secrecy, I know Shara feels the same way about him too. Of course, April told me. The phrase “don’t tell anyone” doesn’t apply to best friends. Everyone knows that.

“So, listen, we’re going to the movies at six.” Logan plonks his ass down on a grassy patch next to us and pulls Shara onto his lap. “Wanna come with?”

“Ooh! Which one?” April perks up.

“*Green Lantern.*”

Immediately, Shara smacks him in the chest.

“What the hell was that for?” he cries.

Shara goes on glaring at him. “Logan, you weren’t supposed to tell them that!”

“She asked.” He points a finger at April.

April shakes her head and sinks back into my chest, tucking herself to my body. “Yeah ... we’re not coming,” she says.

There are some things you don’t say to April Moore. Asking her to pay fifteen bucks to watch a DC movie is definitely in the top three.

“That’s why,” Shara tells her boyfriend. “You know how weird these two are with the whole superhero crap.”

April gasps softly. “It’s not crap.”

“And we’re not weird,” I add.

Logan looks between the two of us, frowning, and waves dismissively “So, are you guys coming or not?”

In all honesty, I wouldn’t mind going out with them. It’s been a while since the four of us hung out someplace that wasn’t the college library. Between midterms, catching up on sleep, and finishing my comic, I spend whatever free time I’ve got with April, holed up in her dorm. And we’re definitely not catching up on any sleep in there.

“Fine, but afterwards you’re gonna buy me Pinkberry to compensate for the emotional damage,” April tells him.

“You’re an addict,” I say into her hair and she smacks my arm.

“Great.” Shara gets off Logan’s lap and opens the picnic basket, handing us each a can of non-alcoholic seltzers. “Can we take your truck, April?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll drive,” I quickly chime in. April scowls at me and I just lean forward to kiss it. She melts within seconds. April Moore is a lot of things. My best friend, my girlfriend, my Marvel partner for life. But the one thing she’s not is a good driver.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Logan pops open his can, his eyes fixed to Shara. “What do you mean by ‘we’? Babe, we’re taking my motorcycle.”

“Actually, we’re not.” Shara looks up from the basket, turning to her boyfriend. “I’m not sitting on that thing. It goes way too fast and I don’t trust you with my life just yet.”

Logan’s face clouds with disappointment and April cuts in. “Can I sit on it, instead?”

“Hey!” I exclaim.

“Oh, sorry,” she says. “Do you also have a little sidecar for my boyfriend?”

“Okay, let’s all take a step back from the crazy talk,” I say. “There’s no way I’d fit in a sidecar. I’m way too tall.”

Logan wrinkles his forehead. “I’m sorry to break your little bubble, but only people who make out with me get to sit on my bike,” he says and wraps an arm around Shara, who’s busy rolling her eyes, trying not to smile.

“Maybe I should get one,” April says, head tilting upward, her nose brushing the underside of my jaw.

“What?”

“A bike,” she clarifies. “I think I should get a bike.”

“Please do no such thing.” I tuck a strand of hair behind her ear and bend down to nudge my nose against hers. I let my fingers linger behind her ear a beat longer and start staring at her lips again.

“Why not?” She slides lower until her head is resting on my lap. My fingers make their way to the top of her head and I start playing with her hair. “I’d make such a badass biker chic. Ooh! We can get cute little matching helmets with our initials on them!”

I laugh. “You’re a ridiculous woman, April Moore.”

“Fine, I’ll sit in the sidecar. You can have the bike. As long as we have matching helmets, I don’t really care about the rest.”

“Noted, your highness. I’ll get you your helmets.”

Smiling, she closes her eyes and I go on massaging her head.

*I’ll get you anything you want.*

\* \* \*

We arrive at the theater at five thirty and it’s fucking buzzing. It’s opening night for *Green Lantern* and I honestly can’t figure out why this many people would want to watch it.

Logan and Shara already grabbed our tickets from the stand. April keeps looking around at the dozens of people bumping into each other, trying to get to the concession stand.

“Want me to get you some popcorn?” I lightly tug on her arm.

She shakes her head. “Can you get me a pack of Skittles instead?” she asks, standing on her toes to plant a soft kiss on my cheek.

Smiling, I narrow my eyes. “What was that for?”

“I also want a large Diet Coke.”

I buy April both of those things, along with a Dr Pepper for me. Logan finishes putting butter on his popcorn, Shara grabs a straw from the dispenser, and the four of us head into the theatre. Logan and Shara slide in, April goes next, and I sit on the outside.

I drape my jacket over the armrest and tear open her bag of Skittles.

The lights dim and the screen springs to life. A Coke commercial blares through the speakers right above our heads. Fifteen minutes later, the movie starts to play.

Over in the corner, Logan and Shara are arguing over the best kinds of candy, and I look around the theater. Jeez, it's packed. I'm suddenly quite grateful for our little alcove.

April grabs some napkins and wipes the sticky residue off her fingers. As the minutes pass by, she leans closer.

"Feeling cold?" I brush my mouth against the side of her head. We're sitting right under the air conditioning, so I'm not surprised when she nods. I take my jacket off the armrest and lay it across her lap. My thumb slightly brushes her leg. April fights a smile and goes back to her Skittles.

The opening scene is action packed, with the Guardians of the Universe (Guardians of the Galaxy will always be superior) using the green essence of willpower to create an intergalactic police force called the Green Lantern Corps.

April taps my arm. "I feel like a fraud, Parker."

"Yeah, me too." I steal a few Skittles from her hand and pop them into my mouth. "This can be our deepest, darkest secret."

"Once we're back, let's watch a few episodes of *Fantastic Four* to cleanse our souls."

"Agreed."

A roar of laughter rings out and I feel April reach over the armrest, lightly running her hand up and down my thigh.

"Chere." I lean in next to her ear. "If you don't stop that, we're not going to be watching much of the movie."

She leans back against her seat, a soft, evil giggle slipping from her lips. “We’re not watching it anyway.” Her hand travels up to my crotch so she can feel for herself the effect she’s having on me. Fuck.

I turn to her and see her mischievous smile, with that fucking kissable mouth. My hand creeps under the jacket, coming to rest on her leg. Her breathing hitches as the warmth of my hand shoots up her body. She leans back straight and stares at the screen.

Feeling her smooth skin underneath my hand, I give her leg a light squeeze, waiting to see her reaction. When she doesn’t move a muscle, I panic and withdraw my hand. “What’s wrong?” I ask, my gaze dancing around her body for more signs of discomfort.

“Nothing,” she says so softly that I have to lean down a little to hear. “I just ... I’ve never done this before ... in a movie theatre—”

“We can stop,” I tell her and look at her fingers, still resting on my thigh.

She smiles slowly. “I don’t want to stop. I just ... I don’t want you to think I do this kind of thing—”

“April.”

She bites the bottom of her lip. “Yeah?”

“I want to make you come.”

Then she smiles. Oh, man, that goddamn smile.

“Do you want me to?”

She nods repeatedly. My hand slowly moves up the inside of her leg, sliding underneath her skirt. April leans back and swallows hard. She’s staring straight ahead at the screen, but the vacant expression on her face tells me her mind is occupied elsewhere.

My own heart is racing as my hand reaches the top of her leg, brushing down the front of her panties. She leans back a bit more and looks over at Logan and Shara, who seem to be

intently watching the movie. I nudge her legs apart and slowly start rubbing down over the top of her panties.

My dick strains against my jeans and I slowly massage my fingertips against her dampness. I shuffle in my seat, trying to maneuver my now-hard cock so it isn't pressing against the front of my jeans. "Chere?"

"Mm-hm." She nods, eyes shut.

"Can I put my finger inside you?"

We've done this before, but I always make it a point to ask. She nods, relaxing a little as her shoulders slump down. I slide my middle finger down her clit and gently push it inside, curling it a bit. I scoot closer, our knees bumping. Since we're in the last row, there's no one behind us. My lips find the side of her neck, exploring each inch. Slowly, I dip the tip of my finger into her wetness. She's soaked.

April bites her lip as I push it in deeper. A soft sigh, then a moan. I glance around to see if anyone heard her, but the movie is too loud, drowning out any sound coming out of her mouth. Good.

She traces one hand up my arm that's holding her knee. I pulse inside her a couple of times and continue circling her clit. Gasping, her head falls back and I lean forward to catch her earlobe between my teeth. "Do you like this?" I whisper, genuinely wanting to make sure she's enjoying this as much as I am.

She nods, whimpering. My heart is racing now, and I'm almost certain I can feel her hips arching back against my hand.

Placing a hand over her mouth, I kiss her cheek. "You can make some noise if you want. I got you," I whisper in her ear, then push my finger deep inside her. She shudders at the intrusion, and I feel her clench and spasm. A loud moan escapes behind my hand.

Fuckfuckfuck. I'm so fucking hard. I start fingering her faster and she clamps her eyes shut. I can tell she's close.



Right then, the door to the theater swings open and April jerks up straight. An usher appears in the doorway with a flashlight. I'm about to take back my hand, but April stops me, looking at me, shaking her head.

Jesus fucking Christ. I'm not gonna last long.

A sense of panic comes over me, but the fact that she doesn't want me to stop—fuck, I'm too turned on now. I rub her clit faster as the usher walks down the aisle. April tenses, her muscles clenching around my finger, and I slide it in deeper. As the usher walks back up by us, I keep my head straight and discreetly start pumping my finger harder. Her lap is covered by my jacket, so no part of her is exposed. The usher leaves and exactly two seconds later, I feel April come all over my hand. Her abdomen spasms and her hand whips to my wrist to stop my movements. She bites down on my shoulder to muffle her cries and I kiss the top of her head as she comes.

Her flesh glistens with a light layer of sweat, and I brush back her hair so I can see her face. I slowly slide my hand out from under the jacket as April tries to collect herself.

“Hi,” I whisper.

She smiles. “Hi.” Her breathing is still heavy.

“Was that good?”

She nods. “Can we do it again?” she says and I run my warm fingers over her arm.

“Here?”

There's a tiny gleam in her eyes which tells me she'd like that. But before I can respond with hell, yes, she leans in next to my ear and whispers, “Meet me in the bathroom in five minutes,” and slowly rises from the seat. Shara turns and looks at her.

April gives her the “bathroom break” excuse along with “too much soda.”

Shara smiles and nods, turning back to the movie. I slide up in my seat so she can get by me. I sit, staring at the screen,

waiting for my hard-on to die down, then lean over to Shara and Logan.

“I’m gonna get some more snacks. Be back in a bit. Tell me what I miss.” I probably shouldn’t have said that last bit, because Logan meets my gaze, a knowing smile slathered across his dumb face.

Too excited to be with April, I ignore him and get up and walk up the aisle, pushing through the theater doors. My eyes strain to adjust to the light. The theater is now almost barren. No one around except for a few janitors sweeping up popcorn. I head down the hallway toward the bathrooms and pause outside the door that says *Women*.

Do I really want to do this? This could go very wrong, very fast. I look back to see if anyone notices me, then press an ear to the door. If someone saw me right now—shit. Fuck it. I push the door open and peek in. My shoulders immediately slacken with relief when no woman starts screaming. Three out of the four stalls are vacant, so I whisper-shout April’s name. April unlocks the door and pulls me inside. My heart is racing.

“Hi,” she says, a beaming smile across her lips.

“Hi.” I smile back, tugging her closer, hugging her to my chest. Her heart is speeding too. “So ... here?”

With her arms slung around my lower back, April looks up. “Fewer people.”

She’s not wrong. I lean down and kiss her lips, smiling against her mouth the entire time. My hand roams along the curves and valleys of her waist. Parting her lips with my tongue, I deepen the kiss, drawing a gentle moan from her body. Fuck. I harden.

She glances down, feeling me. Her fingers skim over the waistline of my jeans and the slight bulge below it. “Can I?” she asks.

Too lost in the feeling of her body against mine, it takes me a few seconds to process her question, but when she’s about to drop to her knees, I catch her by the arm and pull her

against my body. “You want to?” I ask. “I mean, there’s no pressure, Chere. Just because I got you off, doesn’t mean you need to return the favor.”

Cupping my cheek, she carefully draws her lips to mine. She kisses me once, then twice, and eventually pulls back. “I really, really want to.”

Christ.

Blood rushes to my dick and her fingers curl around the side of my neck as she leaves a trail of kisses down the nape, her body leaning into me, my breath shallowing.

My dick stirs, and I trail my hand up her arm. My heart is beating so fucking fast, I can barely breathe. She lowers to her knees and fumbles with the buttons of my jeans. I help her and she reaches down, pulling me out.

“Will you tell me when you’re about to ... you know ...?”

I gently hold the back of her head. She’s so fucking adorable. “I won’t come in your mouth.” Luckily, there’s still no one other than the two of us inside the bathroom.

She smiles, excitement flickering in her green eyes, and she takes off her T-shirt, hanging it over the hook. I tighten my fist around the base and pump a few times, bending down to kiss her forehead. “Tell me if you want to stop, okay?”

I palm my erection, and drink in her body and before taking her hand in mine and wrapping it around the base of my shaft. She starts stroking it in front of her face and I stare down her red bra. Reaching behind with my free hand, I unhook the clasp and pull it off her, hanging it over her T-shirt.

She opens her mouth. Tentative. I arch my hips forward and her lips glide up against my hardness, taking me in her mouth and ... “Fuck.” She takes me deeper and Christ, that feels ... oh, God.

My muscles pull taut, just watching my erection fit between her pretty lips.

Fuuuck. My hand tightens on the back of her head. “April,” I groan. One hand holds the back of her neck, and the

other sits on the wall in front. “Fuck ...”

April picks up the pace, her free hand descending underneath her skirt, between her spread knees. She’s touching herself.

Oh, fuckfuckfuck.

My hand leaves her neck and immediately sinks into her hair. “April ...” My hand on the wall turns into a fist. She glances up, my cock still in her mouth. “Stand up, please.”

Her breath comes short and aching. “Not good?”

“So good, but, I just ...” I kneel, grabbing her panties with both hands, and pull them down to her ankles. “I need to taste you.” I drape her leg over my shoulder and kiss the inside of her thigh.

April braces herself against the stall wall, wet and nervous. “Ohh, I ... oh, my God.” She clenches my hair, legs twitching in arousal as I suck her clit. Kissing her heat. She tastes like heaven. I want to drown into her. She bites her lip, trying to stifle her cries, as I push a finger in. She whimpers in want and urges me to get up.

I drop her foot gently and do as I’m told. The second I stand, her lips crash into mine. Parting and skimming. Tension pulls and tugs, and I rest her back against the tiled wall.

She throws her head back, looking at me with apprehension. “Parker?”

I tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. “Yes, Chere?” I rub her thigh, searching her gaze. She swallows once. Hard. My brows furrow with concern. “What’s wrong?”

“I, um, I want to feel you inside me.” She hesitates, then hurries to add, “It doesn’t mean we have to do it here and right now. I’m on birth control and obviously I’ve been tested too. I’m just letting you know that I’d like it ... um, whenever, if you’re ready—”

Fuck. My lips find hers and she gasps into a shudder. Her body trembling against me. “I want to, April,” I whisper. “So badly, you have no idea.”

“Really?” The smile in her voice swells around me.

“I’m a bit nervous, though.” The admission doesn’t feel weird. With April, everything feels completely normal. Like I’m exactly where I’m supposed to be. During the initial months of our relationship, I was obviously inexperienced compared to her. But she never made me feel awkward or weird about not knowing how or where to touch her. And I didn’t want to act like I knew her body better than she did. Having her teach me what she likes was such a fucking turn-on for me.

“We don’t have to do it here,” she replies. “I don’t want your first time to be in a cramped bathroom stall. It should be \_\_\_”

“You gonna get me flowers and a candlelit room, Chere?” I tease. What she’s saying makes sense. “First times” should ideally be on a bed. Maybe no roses, but some music? Quite frankly, I really couldn’t care less. All I want is to be with her.

“If that’s what you want, then yeah.” Her hand drifts to the hem of my T-shirt. “I was just letting you know that I’d like to have sex with you. Whenever you’re ready.”

“Then, let’s.”

Her eyes widen a little. “Now?”

I nod, trailing my fingers up and down her waist. “I don’t care where it happens, or even how it happens, Chere,” I plant a kiss between her eyebrows. “As long as it happens with you.”

“Are you sure?” she asks, glancing up. “I can get you off \_\_\_”

“Can I please fuck you, April?” My words stun us both to silence, but then the corner of her mouth tugs up and she nods once. With my jeans pushed down below my hipbone, I lift her skirt, bunching it up next to her stomach. The next thing I know, her mouth is back on mine and I’m pushing her against the tiled wall. I run my fingers over her soft skin, rolling my thumb over her already hard nipples, to which she elicits a small moan of encouragement. Acting on the encouragement, I

bend down and lightly lick her left nipple, tasting her skin, before moving to the right. April pulls my face firmly to her chest and grinds her hips against me. I slide my hands around and grip her ass to increase the pressure of her grinding.

In seconds I have my arms around her thighs. She gasps when I immediately go for her engorged clit and press my tongue firmly against it. Slowly, I begin to run my fingers through her velvety folds. She moans in relief. I can hear her breathing quicken, so I bring my mouth back to her clit, swirling my tongue around as I slip a finger deep into her.

“Oh, my God,” she whispers breathlessly, pushing back against my hand and mouth. I increase the pressure of my tongue and add a second finger. “Now ... Parker ... please, inside me now ...”

Arousal shoots up my spine. Fuck. I rise off the ground, drinking her in, the most beautiful girl on the fucking planet. And she’s mine. “April.” The nervousness in my voice is palpable.

Her eyes move up to my face and she smiles, bringing a hand forward to cup my cheek, kissing me. “I’ll tell you what I like and you can tell me what you like too. If at any point, you want to stop, just let me know and we’ll stop. Sound okay?”

My heart melts like a stick of butter on a hot pan. I want to wrap my arms around her and never let go. The words are in my throat, and I’m trying not to say them, not because I don’t mean them, but because I don’t want to want to freak her out.

But of course, it’s all in vain. “I love you.”

Her smile fades. Her chin tilts up and her eyes meet mine, teeming with terror or confusion, I can’t fucking tell. Shitshitshit. “You ... um.” April clears her throat. “What did you just say?”

If this is the universe’s way of giving me a do-over, I don’t realize it. I tuck a lock of hair behind her ear and repeat, “I love you, April.”

I wish I could explain the feeling I get when I look into her eyes. How the sound of her voice gives me butterflies. How

the sound of her name makes me smile so hard, sometimes I forget what I'm doing. How everything I've been through and everything I've yet to experience, all of it, is just so I could get to her.

I love her so much. Of course, I do. How could I not?

"You don't have to say it back," I hurry to add and she shuts me up with a kiss.

"I love you too," she whispers around our kiss. "I love you more."

Smiling, I pull back to look at her. "Impossible." My arms tighten around her waist. I smile because simply standing next to her makes me eternally grateful for my existence. Because even though there are books and movies about love—the classics, the contemporaries—in which all the greats compare love to the twinkling of stars, the distance to the moon, or the vastness of the universe. Only now am I realizing how infinitely ordinary it actually is.

It's that little portion of her hair toward the back that's slightly less red than the rest. It's the way she smiles every time she catches me looking at her. Or the way she hugs me even when I'm not sad.

But most of all, I smile because I'm in love with April Moore and it's my sheer dumb luck that she's in love with me too.

"Also, I'm sorry," I say.

April frowns. "Sorry?"

"For being the guy who says 'I love you' during sex."

At this she laughs and kisses my nose. "I love you."

Twice she's said it and I don't think I've processed those words yet.

April Moore loves me.

I break apart her legs with my knees and kiss her cheek. "Tell me if it hurts, okay?" April isn't a virgin, but I've read

that it hurts if you haven't had sex for a long time. The last thing I want to do is cause her pain.

She nods and I raise myself up between her spread legs as she guides me to her entrance. When the head of my dick slips in, I look at her and she bites her lip, nodding. I move my eyes back to where we're connected and slowly push into her. Bit by bit. I'm halfway in and April whimpers. "Too much?" I ask.

She shakes her head and I pull back, only to thrust forward again. Her nails sink into my shoulders, back arching, pushing her stomach into mine until I'm completely enveloped in her warmth. Fuuuck ...

We groan simultaneously, and I slide out of her until just the head of my cock remains, before plunging back inside. "Oh, my God." April's legs wrap around my hips, ankles crossing at the bottom of my back, tightening to keep me there when I'm deep inside her.

My head falls to her shoulder. I press my lips against her collarbone, then up her neck until our mouths are crushed together. Judging by the way her breath hitches every time I push in deeper, I'd say I'm doing a good job. Quite frankly, I'm not completely aware of my own movements; my brain's so overcome with pleasure. She grunts and moans and I grip her legs around my waist, picking up the pace.

This is heaven. It has to be.

She leans back, watching me pump inside her. "That's ... ahh ..." April breathes. "Fuck, keep going ..."

I nod, words lost in my throat, and start thrusting harder. Deeper. Sweat glistens on our skin, and a throaty noise escapes my mouth.

"Yeah, right there," she says.

"Yeah?"

Her breathing gets choppy and I pick up the pace and start fucking her into the wall. April whimpers, clutching onto my bicep. "Oh, God, yes. You're doing so good."



Holy shit. It's a miracle I don't come right that instant.

Leaning forward, I run my tongue along her shoulder to her neck, tasting the salty sheen of sweat on her skin. She moves one of her hands down to cup the space between her legs. Her entire body is trembling, chest heaving, pussy throbbing around me. Her mouth tilts toward me, hips bucking and grinding, eyes fluttered shut. My mouth crashes into hers and the current of pleasure shoots into me hard.

“Fuck,” I groan, placing a kiss on her shoulder, driving myself deeper. I clutch the side of her neck. “Chere, I'm gonna come ...”

She grips me with her legs harder, then pulls me back into a kiss. I push into her, and her body shudders against me. My eyes roll back into my skull. Fuck, this is ... the warmth, her tightness. It's too much. A few more thrusts and I feel her contract around me. I let go too, groaning her name, gripping her hips so tightly, I'm worried it's gonna leave a mark. She hangs onto me as I fill her up.

After a minute of basking in the aftermath of orgasmic glow and catching our breath, her arms flop to her sides and I slide out of her. “That was ...” My breathing is still heavy, my brain still unable to form words. “Fuck ...”

A tired half-laugh leaves April's mouth and I tuck her close in my arms. The low thrumming of her heartbeat over mine brings a smile so big across my face, I'm pretty sure it looks borderline psychotic.

“Was that good?” April asks.

Good? I kiss her nose. “Having sex with you is my new favorite hobby.”

She smiles and my love for her spills out my chest, seeping into my bloodstream. “Yeah?”

“I'm going to chain you to my bed.”

She starts to laugh and whispers, “We should do something.”

“Round two?” I tease.

“No, something to commemorate this day. We should—”

“Commemorate this day?” I parrot. “What do you wanna do, get matching tattoos?” When my joke is not met with a laugh, the nerves in my chest bundle up. April’s eyes snap wide open and she gasps in that familiar way, making it clear that I’m fucking in for it. “April, no.”

“We should totally get matching tattoos!”

“We totally shouldn’t.”

“Why not?” April whines. “You can get an ‘A’ and I can get an ‘H’.”

“I’m not getting a tattoo with you,” I say, trying to sound as stern as one can after having the most mind-shattering orgasm of his life.

Her face falls. “Why not with me?”

“It’s not you, Chere. It’s permanent and it hurts.”

“It doesn’t hurt that much.” She’s still half-naked, latched on to my body like a baby monkey. And we’re still in a public bathroom stall. We just had sex for the first time and this is what we’re talking about.

“How do you know? Do you have one?”

“I will, shortly.”

“April, it hurts. I’m scared of needles and—”

“Fear is a mental game, Parker. Besides, I’ll be right here with you. You can squeeze my hand. Like pregnant ladies giving birth,” she says, with a huge smile on her lips. “I’ll be your rock, I promise.”

“There are a hundred other things we can do instead,” I say. “You like froyo. Let’s go get some froyo. Or let’s just have some more sex.” My fingers skate below the hem of her skirt, careful and slow, and when I brush the sensitive spot over her panties, April lets out an aroused breath. “I promise you, I’ll erase the thought of getting a tattoo from your brain.”

She looks me straight in the eyes and leans forward so that we’re nose to nose. “We are doing this. It’ll be cute.”

Deep down, I know there's no scenario where I emerge victorious. "It will?"

"Very."

"I want the tiniest one possible," I mutter.

"YES!" She pulls me in a tight hug and it almost makes the pain I'm about to endure worth it. Almost. "You're not going to regret this."

"That's a loaded promise."

She laughs into my chest and gives me a peck on the lips. One day. One day, I'll learn how to say no to April Moore.

# Chapter Fifteen

## Present Day

### APRIL

**M**y eyes snap open.

My skin is covered in cold sweat. I look around the room, hands shaking and heart pounding, paranoid that the horror may have followed me back here.

It hasn't. It was just a dream.

Cautiously, I trip out of bed, still shivering, and rub the bridge of my nose. *Just a dream, April.* I tiptoe against the cold tiles, stumble into the bathroom, and turn on the light. Eyes red and face puffy. I look as stressed as I feel.

I lean against the sink and take a deep breath.

I'm home.

In my apartment.

Holly is in the other room. Everything is fine.

Everything is fine.

The distant sirens of a fire truck pull me back to reality and I splash my face with some water. The cold stinging immediately transforms the longing for sleep into a craving for the half-eaten Ben & Jerry's sitting in my freezer.

Normally, I'd pop a sleeping pill, get back into bed, and try to drift off to sleep. But not tonight. Tonight, for the first time in my life, I'm truly scared to fall back asleep.

I grab my satin robe from the door hook, put it on, and head toward the kitchen. Nightmares are a common symptom of PTSD, I'm aware, but thanks to countless hours of therapy and medication, it's one I haven't had to face for years.

Until tonight.

The second I turn on the light, my eyes clock the plates crusted with last night's dinner brimming in the sink. The white marble counter is a topographical map, its landforms made of empty coffee mugs and tiny bread crumbs. I pull open the freezer, and there's nothing in there but a box of Trader Joe's chicken tikka masala and some frozen pizza.

Splendid. Two almost-thirty-year-olds with the collective grocery-buying abilities of a twelve-year-old.

Right then the main door opens. Faint footsteps echo through the otherwise quiet foyer, and I crane my neck to get a better view. "Hol?"

My sister's startled voice replies a second later. "April?" She walks toward the kitchen, the clicking of her shoes against her marble floor coming to a sudden stop. "It's two in the morning."

Even from a distance, I can make out the puffiness below her eyes. "Are you just getting home?" I have to stop myself from doing a double take at her ridiculous ebony outfit. A long-sleeve black turtleneck, skinny leggings, some sort of combat boots and—are those gloves? "Are we ... planning a bank robbery?"

She slips her hands into the back pockets of her leggings, her mouth drawing into a straight line. Her shoulders sag. A short pause, then she angles her body to face me entirely. "Emergency amputation at the ER tonight. My outside scrubs got blood on them," she tells me. "This was the only other change I had."

I wince. "That sounds ... gross?"

"Why are you up?"

Her subtle attempt at changing the topic does not go unnoticed.

“Couldn’t sleep.”

“Obviously.” Holly hoists herself atop the counter. “Bad dream?”

I swallow hard. She’s the only person who knows about this “problem” of mine—for lack of a better word. And, once upon a time, Parker too.

The irony is glaring.

He knew my fears better than anyone. The first time I had a nightmare this traumatic, he hugged me so tightly that it almost hurt. Like he wanted me and my troubles to sink into him. I remember breathing, then not breathing. I remember not needing to. Because for once, somebody breathed for me. Hayden Parker did everything for me. And even though I’d just had a nightmare, I remember being so utterly and completely happy. No one ever held me like that again. No one even came close.

“Midnight cravings,” I lie. “I wanted some ice cream.”

“That’s adorable, only it’s not midnight.” Her face scrunches up in a frown. “And we’re out of ice cream.”

My eyes chance another glance at Holly’s outfit. “Is that my top?”

She frowns, looking down. “What?”

“That’s my top,” I repeat. “You’re wearing my black turtleneck.”

Holly snorts. “No, I’m not.”

“Hol, if there’s one thing I know, it’s my clothes. That’s my top.”

“Sisters are supposed to share,” she says.

“I agree. But they’re not supposed to steal. And that’s not fair, since I don’t even like any of your clothes.”

Holly’s mouth falls open and she faux-gasps. “My clothes are brilliant.”

“Which is why you’re wearing my top,” I parry.

“We’re really arguing about this right now?”

I shrug. “I’ll forgive you on one condition.”

Holly doesn’t look impressed. “I haven’t even apologized.”

“Let’s go get some ice cream.”

“Now?” Her face contorts with confusion. “April, it’s two in the morning. Nothing’s going to be open right now.”

“You don’t know that. How often have you gone out looking for ice cream at two in the morning?”

“Can’t I just promise to never wear your clothes again?” she offers and I shake my head.

“Sadly, that’s not gonna be enough,” I say and head inside to change into a pair of sweatpants.

\* \* \*

Most days, Holly and I don’t see each other until the weekend. She’s too busy with her residency and I’m too busy with drafting up last-minute press releases. Sometimes not even the weekend allows us Moore girls to spend quality one-on-one bonding time. And it’s no one’s fault. Our work is just that demanding. So it’s a nice change of pace to be sitting here on an early Wednesday morning with my sister, enjoying a cup of butter pecan.

A woman with a headscarf flips through the pages of her magazine, snatching glances at other patients occupying the blue plastic chairs. The little girl next to her is clenching a glossy picture book, the cover unopened, looking lost and vulnerable in clothes that billow around her shrunken body.

“And you thought nothing would be open,” I say to Holly, taking another bite of my ice cream.

She sports her trademark death glare and shoves a spoonful of her mint chocolate-chip into her mouth. “You’re lucky I love you enough to not cause you bodily harm right now.”



All right, her crankiness is somewhat understandable. If someone dragged me to my office at two in the morning for pasty vending machine ice cream, I'd be pretty pissed too. Fortunately for me, I don't work at a hospital, and it's not the law for my place of work to remain open twenty-fours a day.

"You can try, but you're the one who's gonna have to fix me too. Hippocratic oath and all." I give her a cheesy smile and she rolls her eyes.

As I take a particularly chunky bite of my butter pecan cup, Holly nudges me with her elbow. "Let me know when you're ready to talk about it."

I frown. "About your abysmal taste in ice cream, or the fact that you made me pay for it?"

"How about the reason why I'm sitting in the hallway of EGH an hour after my shift ended, eating said abysmal ice cream? Let's start there."

"Because you're a good person?"

"April," she chides as if that wasn't a compliment.

"I told you, I couldn't sleep."

"Why not?"

Sighing, I hunch into my ice cream. "Nightmare."

"Was it the same one?" she prods.

The whole point of not going back to sleep and venturing out on this bizarre ice cream mission was so I could take my mind off of it. My lips press together. "I really don't want to talk about it."

"Well, getting what we want is obviously not the theme for tonight. Do you think you're having them again because of Parker?"

And there's that. During the initial few sessions with my therapist, she would tell me how nightmares often reappear when you experience something scary in real life. It could be unrelated, but the scary part saves itself somewhere in your subconscious, waiting for REM sleep to begin. So yes, of

course, I'm having them again because of Parker. Which, in hindsight, isn't a total surprise. With him back in my life, it wasn't a question of if, but rather when. "How does it matter?" I say to Holly. "You're gonna hate him regardless."

She half-gapes. "I don't hate him."

I shoot her a look.

"Okay, fine, I'm not his biggest fan," she concedes. "But that was when we were kids. I was just being a bitch for the sake of being a bitch."

I take another bite of my ice cream. "So you don't hate him?"

At this, Holly hesitates. "I mean, if I see him walking down the street tomorrow, I'm not gonna throw stones at him."

"Why would you throw stones at him?"

"April," she says, as if *duh*, "I just said I wouldn't throw stones at him."

Right.

"And I never hated Parker," Holly adds. "I was just jealous of him."

The wheels inside my brain come to a screeching halt. "Jealous? Of what? His never-ending stash of mint comics?"

Her head stays down and she lets out a heavy sigh. "Do you remember Gracie Ha?" she asks.

My eyebrows squish together. "Gracie Ha? My eighth-grade lab partner?"

"Cute girl," she says.

"Ahh," I tease Holly in a singsong voice. "Cute girl, huh?"

"And that guy we met during summer camp? The one I used to tease you with? Bex?"

"Oh my God!" I clutch her arm. "He totally liked you more than me."

Holly chuckles. "Do you remember any of my friends?"

Her question catches me off guard and I rack my brain, giving her ask a genuine thought. A few seconds pass, then a few more, before my brows draw closer and my lips part in an O. “Shit ...”

Holly places a hand over my thigh, prompting my shocked face to angle toward her. “That’s because I only ever had one friend, April. And I lost her to a boy. Of course, I was jealous.”

My heart twinges. I don’t know what to say.

When I was four, my birth parents died in a car crash. I was in the front seat, sitting on my birth mother’s lap. Calling my survival a miracle has never felt right to me. I have no real memories from my time with them—well, except for a unicorn hat I absolutely refused to part with.

Six months later, I was adopted by the Moores. They were kind and never made me feel like an outsider. But more than anything, they’re the reason I have the most amazing sister in the world.

Two weeks after I moved into my new home, I had my first nightmare. I would wake up shaking, thrashing, and screaming. It got to a point where I became scared of my own bed—scared to fall asleep. I couldn’t figure out why I kept having the same nightmare over and over again. It was like one of those *Groundhog Day* spin-offs, but inside my subconscious. And way scarier. Mom would tell me that kids’ brains are like tiny sponges, soaking in information, memories, and experiences, but only a few actually make it into adulthood. Which is when I realized that my nightmare wasn’t even a nightmare. It was a memory. I was reliving the night my birth parents died. The bridge. The flash of lights. The screaming. The fire.

I was reliving it, frame for frame.

So I started forcing myself to stay awake. I wanted to tire myself, tire my brain, render it incapable of making me relive the scariest night of my life.

Holly would stay up with me. We would sit on my bed, wrapped in our blankets, babbling about nothing important, and eventually fall asleep together, arms around each other. Holly Moore was my first superhero. Hayden Parker was my second. Still is.

They both are.

The nightmares didn't stop, but every time I woke up, Holly would be there. Hugging me, telling me it was all right even though she had no idea what "it" even was. Nor did I. Obviously, I knew what was happening—or, rather, what had happened—but my fear didn't set from the pain of losing my birth parents. The only thing four-year-old April was scared of was being in a car accident. As an adult, the nightmare stayed the same, but the fear morphed into that of abandonment. The fear of being left alone in the blink of an eye. And I had so much more to lose now.

"Hol," I say now and she tightens her hand over my thigh.

"It's all right. It was a long time ago. I'm not the same moody teenager anymore."

"You didn't lose me to anyone," I tell her. She nods. "And Parker wasn't just another friend, you know that. I was in love with him."

"Oh, believe me," she says, her earlier snark making a slow comeback. "Everyone other than the two of you knew that."

I smile. "Maybe one day, you'll fall in love with someone and I'll get a taste of my own medicine."

She grimaces. "Have you met me? What part of me screams 'girlfriend material'?"

"I'm sure we can find at least one."

"Absolutely not," she says. "I don't want to give anyone the power over my happiness. Staying up late wondering if they're thinking about me, waiting for a text back—fuck, no. I have enough problems as it is."

"And what problems are these, exactly?"

The door of one of the ER rooms swings open and a familiar deep voice cuts through the somewhat silent hallway. “Holly?”

My sister groans. “I think you have your answer.”

Theo walks in our direction, one hand in the pocket of his dark-green trench coat, the other holding a—wait a damn second. “Fancy seeing you girls here,” he says.

“Is that—?” I point to the Captain Marvel tumbler in his hand. But before I get a chance to finish my question, he cuts me off.

“First bartending, now scavenging free food.” His attention stays put on Holly. “Is the hospital not paying you enough, Dr. Moore?”

“Oh, we paid for this,” I chime in. Holly shoots me a scathing look, one that says *Really? That’s our comeback?* I sink in my seat.

Theo lowers his chin, trying to contain a smile. “My apologies.”

“Go away,” Holly utters point blank.

He doesn’t. Instead, he leans against the wall across from us, one leg crossed over the other, and slowly brings the tumbler up to his lips. Where have I seen that tumbler? “Love the outfit,” Theo tells her. “Is this what you wear to your weekly coven meetings?”

“I’d tell you, but then I’d have to kill you.”

Theo looks her up and down. “Ravishing.”

“Yours was better than mine,” I butt in. “I went with bank robbery.”

If he’s even a little amused by my sense of humor, he doesn’t make it seem so. “Ah, my next guess.”

“We’re leaving,” Holly says, grabbing my arm.

“Uh-uh.” Theo steps in front of us, closing the distance between us in one long stride. “You’ve got something on your face,” he tells her.

Frowning, Holly brings her fingers to her mouth, trying to find the smushed chocolate-chip on the bottom right. I'm about to help, but right then Theo leans forward and grasps her chin, his thumb landing squarely on her bottom lip.

Holly's breath catches.

The entire time they keep their eyes on each other, Holly scowls, her chest heaving. Theo goes on looking at her with utmost fascination.

Is this ... some sort of twisted foreplay? Am I a third wheel right now?

Holly smacks his hand away. "Touch me again and my scalpel will find a permanent home in your throat."

A shit-eating grin spreads across his face. At this point, I'm not even surprised. It's like the guy has a death wish. Theo tilts his head to the side and says, "Kinky. I like it."

The heat in her eyes increases tenfold. Oh, no. This is not going to end well. I hook my arm around Holly's, tugging her toward the exit. "Good night, Theo—or morning. I don't know how it works with you surgeons."

"You girls need a ride home? I'm sure Hollister here would appreciate seeing the inside of a car for once."

Holly's scowl has now turned into a full-blown glare. "What did you just call me?"

With his eyes trained to Holly, he directs his next words at me. "I hope Parker's arm is doing better, April. We're supposed to go camping next Friday."

Oh ... that's where the Captain Marvel tumbler is from. Wait a second, he's giving him his Marvel merch? I thought Parker didn't even like the guy that much.

"One of these days, Carter," Holly grits through her teeth, "I'm going to make you regret we ever crossed paths."

Theo just smiles. "Looking forward to it, love."

I pull her toward the sliding glass doors before she tackles him to the ground.

Once we're out of earshot, Holly turns to me and says, "I take it back. If I see Hayden Parker walking down the street, I'm definitely going to throw stones at him."

I laugh. "No, you won't. Because deep down, you're a good person. Deep, deep down."

We throw our empty cups in the trash. It's half past three. If I hadn't already put Holly through all this trouble tonight, I would've insisted we accept Theo's offer to drop us home. Regardless of what my sister says, he seems like a nice-ish guy. And if he isn't, well, then I have a mini pepper-spray bottle in my purse as backup.

We're about to step out when Holly tugs me back. "April?" she says. Her earlier snark has transformed into something doleful.

"Yeah?"

"You really think that, don't you?"

I frown. "What?"

"That I'm a good person."

My frown deepens, chest tightening with concern. "Of course, I do."

Holly shakes her head and looks down at the ground, biting her cheek. "Right, I, um." She looks up and there's a heaviness in her eyes. She looks like she's about to cry, but then she takes a deep breath and changes the subject. Everyone does. When something's hurting us, we always change the subject. "Come on, let's get back home."

"Holly, of course, you're a good person." I stop her, gently rubbing my hand over her arm. "And even if you're not, fuck that. Because at the end of the day, you're always going to be *my* person. No matter what. We might not be related by blood, but we are related by stolen turtlenecks. That's the strongest bond. Everyone knows that."

This time her smile is more genuine. It's not often that my sister shows her vulnerable side. She's stubborn, hates being touched, and, quite frankly, doesn't like many people. Her

emotional side hardly ever presents itself, and that's okay. Her life hasn't been the easiest. The icy exterior is an aftermath of all the pain and loss. Unlike me, her scars come from something worse than a simple broken heart. Holly Moore isn't for everyone.

We resume our walking. I turn to adjust the back of my coat and catch Theo looking at us, still standing where we left him. His brows are furrowed and he mouths, "All okay?" Giving him a light smile and a nod, I turn away.

Holly Moore isn't for everyone. But perhaps Theo Carter isn't just anyone.



# Chapter Sixteen

## Present Day

### APRIL

**I**t's six p.m. and I have about twenty press releases to write with approximately ten edits each, and all I've been doing for the past half hour is sitting in one of the many folding chairs on set and staring at Parker.

It's honestly surprising he hasn't caught on yet. I'm really not being as subtle as I'd like. That's not to say I'm not trying to be. Because I am. I'm trying really hard.

It starts off with a glance from the corner of my eye, but after a second or two, I'm facing him completely, head perched on my hand, and—for the lack of a better word—gawking.

He's practicing a fighting drill with the stunt coordinator. A white cloth bandage is draped around his bicep. His sweatpants are low on his hips and the last of the day's rays are deliciously bouncing off his tanned skin.

I perch my chin on my hand. Screw being subtle. A draft picks up, sweeping a few damp strands of curls over his face. He raises his hand to brush them off, and I'm positively obsessed. Josie says something and Parker starts laughing, the sound trickling over my arms like melted chocolate. God, he's hot.

“You might want to close your mouth.”

Immediately I spin around and see Tony leaning his weight on the back of my chair. Shit. The resemblance between Tony and Parker always catches me off guard.

“Wh-what?”

“He’s pretty, huh?” he says.

Unable to stop my frown, I revert my focus to Parker. “Yeah, he is.”

I’ve interacted with Tony a couple of times, but only as his publicist. All of our conversations have always been about what time he’ll be getting to an interview or his latest social media debacle and what I can do to clean up the mess. Not once have we bonded over how pretty his stunt double is.

Which he is. So, so pretty.

“Does he know?” Tony asks and I turn around to face him completely. His eyes are still on Parker.

“Know what?” I pretend it doesn’t bother me.

“That you’ve been sitting here and creepin’ on him for the past thirty minutes?”

My elbow slides off the armrest of my chair and I sit back up, straightening my back a bit more than needed. “I’ve not been *creepin’* on him. Just, um, admiring. From a distance,” I say, paraphrasing the exact definition of creeping.

Tony chuckles and pats my arm. “Just saying, you’d have more of a shot if he knew.”

“It’s not like that. We’re just old friends.” And he knows. That’s not the problem.

“In a platonic sense, or a ‘friends who’ve seen each other naked’ sense?”

I look at Tony with piping-hot ears and clear my throat.

“Tony! Your shot’s ready!”

He gives a thumbs-up to the crew and I, too, get up from my chair. Just as I’m about to head toward the wardrobe trailer, I feel Tony’s hand on my shoulder.

I turn around, eyebrows arched. “Yes?”

“If it makes you feel any better, I’ve seen him creepin’ on you too,” he says, with another one of those shoulder pats.

“Got it.” I nod my head and walk away, biting my cheek to suppress the incoming smile.

\* \* \*

“Cut!” Markus cries.

There are days when I can’t get enough of my job: the glamorous photo shoots, the red carpets, the after-parties.

But not all days are as exciting.

There are some days, like this one, that last as long as ten hours, shooting and re-shooting the same goddamn scene because the camera angle wasn’t what Markus was going for.

“Was that good?” Parker shouts from the pit for the eighth time now. They’ve been shooting this scene for the past hour and a half and by the look on his face, it’s clear that he does not care if it was good or not.

“Could be better!” Markus yells back, his voice booming through the dank and musty air. He picks up his microphone and positions it over his mouth. “All right, guys! Let’s go again!”

Poor Parker.

He pulls himself out of the pit, dusting the front of his sweatpants, and jogs over to the metal ladder, making his way up.

“Roll camera!” The cameras point upward and a second later, I hear the clapper. Parker leaps off the edge and lets himself fall into the pile of rocks. Jeez, that has to hurt.

As he steps out for the millionth time, I bring my hand up to the side of my neck and all of a sudden, his eyes flick to mine. My face heats up.

Fuck.

I don’t even know why I do it, but I instantly look away.

“Chere!” he calls. “Wait for me! I’ll be done in an hour!” Without waiting for a response, he goes back to climbing up

the ladder like it's the most normal thing in the world. To him, it probably is.

At precisely seven, Markus yells out a much-awaited "Wrap!" Parker steps out of the pit and makes a direct beeline toward me, drops of sweat beading down his torso.

"Hey," he says, ruffling the top of his damp hair. "How was that?"

"Hm?"

"The shot," he clarifies. "Was it good? Bad?"

"Oh," I stammer. "Oh, yeah. Quite impressive."

Tilting his head to the side, he smiles, and I feel like I could fly. "The bruises were worth it, then," he says and since I spent the better part of my evening gawking at him, I let the flirty one-liner slide.

"Are you going home any time soon?" he asks.

"Probably. Why?"

"I want to show you something."

"Show me something?"

"Let me grab a change of clothes." He wipes a few wet curls off his forehead. "Meet you out here in ten?"

"What exactly do you have in mind?"

He shrugs and backs away slowly, making a short clicking sound with his tongue. "You'll see."

# Chapter Seventeen

## Present Day

### APRIL

I haven't said a single word since we got up here. Partly because I don't know what to say, and also because no words in the dictionary could ever do this view justice.

"How have you lived here ten years and never done this?" Parker says.

I rest my weight back against the concrete ledge, silently taking in the Manhattan skyline: the tapering glow of Times Square, the bright blue tip of the Empire State Building, and the tiny specks of light reflecting off the Hudson like a million fireflies.

"Venture out to an abandoned rooftop after sunset?" I look at him. "Don't be silly. I do this all the time."

Parker laughs and takes two beer cans from his duffel bag. "Want one?"

I look at him, then at the two cans of Budweiser he's holding, then back at him. "Do you always carry beer in your bag?"

"Not always." Parker pops open one of the cans. "Only when I'm taking pretty girls to abandoned rooftops." As he hands the can to me, the sleeve of his jacket tugs up slightly, uncovering a small portion of his wrist. The A. My fingers come to a halt.

"April?"

The second I look up, he looks down, replacing my gaze with his. “Oh.”

My stomach sinks to the ground. Oh.

I clear my throat and snatch the can from his hand. “If it makes you feel any better, I still have mine.” I don’t know why I say that. I also don’t know how that would make him feel any better about having my initial branded on him.

His eyes are still glued to his wrist and he absently runs a calloused thumb over the outline of my A, careful not to touch the tiny scars around it. “That was an eventful night,” he says.

Lifting the can to my mouth, I pull my hand back. “Do you know what that is?” I point toward the glowing purple speck in the distance.

“Should I?” Parker shifts closer, his knee casually touching mine. A familiar warmth settles between my thighs.

“I’ve lived here for eight years and every time I see those lights, I make a mental note to find out what they are.”

“In that case, it could be whatever you want it to be,” he says. “Maybe it’s a gigantic ultraviolet greenhouse.”

“That’s where your wild imagination took you? Plants?”

“What if they’re growing an entire rooftop’s worth of pot?”

“What if it’s one of those rich-people cults?” I one-up him. “And the purple lights mean they’ve just sacrificed another victim?”

“What if it’s a secret way to contact life on Mars?”

“Oh, my God!” I gasp and place my hand on his thigh. “What if the cult victim they sacrificed was an alien from Mars?”

Clamping his eyes shut, he starts to laugh and I feel the sound in my bones. “You’re so weird.”

“Me?” I retract my hand, the skin beneath my palm tingling. “You’re the one who suggested using fairy lights to contact E.T.”



He buries his face into my shoulder, muffling the sound of his laugh. A tsunami of jitters unfurls up my stomach and right to my heart, making it thump harder and harder against my rib cage. Parker's hair, still a little wet from the stunt, tickles the crook of my neck, making the air a lot thinner than it actually is up here.

His laugh gradually subsides and he sits up straight. "Can I ask you something?"

"Mm-hm." I take another sip of my beer, a big one this time.

He leans forward and winces at my beige heels. "That's gotta hurt, right?"

"Says the stunt double."

"True, but we're talking about you," he says. "Don't your feet hurt?"

I flex my toes. "To quote Christian Dior, high heels are a painful pleasure." Whoa. That came out way more sexual than I intended for.

Parker sets his can down. "May I?"

I narrow my eyes. "May you ... what?"

He leans down and pulls my feet onto his lap. I squeal and rebalance myself against the concrete edge. He delicately slides each shoe off and places them next to his bag. "Wh-what are you doing?" I ask.

"Your feet deserve a picnic, Chere." He starts to massage my ankle. A hundred bolts of electricity shoot up my leg.

Oh, God.

"And before you go off," he says, glancing up at me before reverting his focus to the heel of my left foot, "I'm not breaking any rules. This is not me flirting. I just want to make you feel good." He tugs on my big toe and squeezes the ball of my foot.

I instantly let out a soft moan that I absolutely didn't mean to, suddenly finding myself eternally grateful for the lack of

lights on this rooftop. You know, since my face is now on fire. “Show-off,” I mutter. He laughs and goes back to massaging my feet. “How are you so good at this?”

“I’m not. I just know your body really well.” I glance down and he adds, “Not flirting, Chere. Just stating facts.”

“You know what?” I say.

“Not even a little bit,” Parker says, moving onto my right foot. His fingers graze past my heel and he presses up against the sole.

“I think Tony has a crush on you.”

He frowns. “What?”

“Yeah,” I shrug. “Seems a bit narcissistic, considering how similar you two look.”

That makes him laugh, his breath condensing into tiny misty clouds. “There’s no need to be jealous, Chere.” He tugs lightly on my toes one by one. “I only have eyes for you.”

At some point, he stops massaging my feet and I pull them back toward me, putting on my heels. “I think your feet hate you a little less now,” he tells me and picks up the can of beer.

“Yeah, we should put them in the middle and see who they run toward.” I place my can on the cold surface and wipe the white chalky dust from the concrete on the leg of my pantsuit.

“Parker?”

“Hm?” He turns to look at me, eyes heavy and pupils dilated. I uncross my legs and his eyes momentarily drop, following the motion.

“How is this your life?”

He frowns. “I’m sorry?”

Obviously, the beer has started to chip away my filter. “The whole stunt double thing. How did that happen?”

Parker inspects me for two seconds before bringing his left arm around me, wrapping it around my back and squeezing me close. “It took years of training and crashing into walls.”

“You know what I mean.” I stifle a laugh. “What happened to your comic book? Did you ever publish it?”

“Nah,” he says, looking away.

“Why not?” I go on. “That comic book was basically the other woman in our relationship, Parker. You’d better have a good reason for not going through with it.”

“April.” There’s a hint of frustration in his voice and just like that, I have my answer.

A wave of regret washes over me. “I’m sorry,” I whisper. *I’m an idiot*, is what I want to say.

His thumb scrapes against the green fabric of my blazer. “Don’t apologize.” The words slip out of him so softly, I question if he even meant to say them. Maybe he just meant for them to blend in with the sound of the wind. But then he nudges me in the shoulder and looks me square in the eyes. “I think I sort of owed it to him, you know?”

Another chilly gust of wind rustles past us and I bite back a shudder.

He reels his arm back in and bends over to unzip his duffel bag. A second later, he sits back up, holding with a bright blue sweatshirt.

“For you,” he says and offers it to me.

“What?”

“It’s freezing up here.” He stretches open the blue hoodie and puts it over my head, and I go along with it. The second my head emerges from the neck of the sweatshirt, Parker looks down at me and laughs. My cheeks flush.

“What is happening?” I whisper as I slide my arms through the sleeves.

“Just making sure you don’t wake up with a cold tomorrow.”

My face is blank as a slate and I stare down at the blue hoodie. “This isn’t mine.”

“I know.” He chuckles. “But you’re always cold.”

“So you brought me your sweatshirt?”

“Yeah,” he says.

“Oh.” It’s probably not a big deal. He carries beer in his duffel bag. What’s another sweatshirt? Only, this doesn’t seem like just another sweatshirt. “This fits me,” I say.

“What?”

“This fits me,” I repeat. “This isn’t yours.”

“Oh?”

I sit up straight and look at him. “What is it?”

“What is what?”

“Parker.”

He sighs and runs his hand through his coarse curls. “Promise not to make fun of me?”

I arch an eyebrow. “I’ll try?”

Parker looks to his side. “I bought it for you.”

“You did what?”

“It was a few weeks back, before we even ran into each other. I was walking back home and saw it in the display and the color ... it just reminded me of you.”

“The color?”

“Turquoise blue. It’s the same color as your dress.”

“My dress?” What is he talking about?

“Spring Social,” he says. “It’s the same blue as your dress.”

Oh. My eyes widen and I’m stumped for words. We sit in silence for a few more minutes before he speaks again. “April?”

“Yeah?” I turn to face him. His eyes are zeroed in on me.

“Is it all right if I, um ... I didn’t get a sweatshirt for myself.”

My instinct is to reach for the hem of the one he just gave me, but he instantly covers my hand with his. “No, that’s not what I meant.”

“Then what?” I whisper.

“Can we sit a little closer?” he asks. A fully grown thirty-year-old man acting like a teenager in love. My smile flushes through my face.

I shift closer and hook my arm around his, resting my head on his shoulder. “You think you’re sooo slick, don’t you?”

He laughs into the top of my head. “Very.”

I’m way too comfortable to argue or check the time, but given when we got here, I’d say it’s around eight. This should scare me. Three days ago, I didn’t even know Parker was in the same city as me. And now, here I am, sitting with him on an abandoned rooftop, getting a foot massage, leaning against his shoulder like it’s the most normal thing in the world. It should scare me how easy it feels to just be with him. But it doesn’t. And ironically enough, *that* scares me.

“You know,” Parker begins, “we would’ve ran into each other earlier if you had just given me a call.”

I’m not surprised to hear these words, but I am surprised he chose this moment to say them. “I didn’t know you wanted me to.”

“Chere, I haven’t changed my number in the past eight years, hoping you’d call. Or text. Or ... anything.”

The lightness in the air rises and heavy tension starts to take its place. The night I left was the single most difficult time of my life. Deep down, I know we’ll have to talk about it. But now right now. Not tonight. We continue sitting in silence, looking at the flickering skyline in the distance. Or, at least, pretending to.

Parker’s voice comes out heavy. “I never wanted you to leave.”

“We don’t have to talk about it,” I blurt, a little too sharply than I intended.

What I meant to say was, *I don't want to talk about it right now. All I want to do is sit here with you and look at the skyline, pretending that night never happened, pretending I didn't spill gasoline all over our friendship and set it on fire. And that you didn't give me the match to do so.*

He tightens his hold around my shoulder and pulls me against him. "What are you thinking?"

"Nothing."

Parker frowns and tips his head to a side, analyzing my face for what I'm not saying out loud. "Talk to me, April."

I tilt my head to meet his gaze. "I don't know how to do this with you."

His eyes wander down to my mouth and his lips part just a little. Neither of us turns the other way. "And what is it, exactly"—he lowers his forehead to mine, the tips of our noses barely brushing past each other—"that we're doing?"

I could lean into him.

I could angle my chin up so his bottom lip catches mine.

I know he wants me to.

I know I want to.

"I don't know." The admission leaves my mouth in a whisper.

I feel his rough fingers at the side of my head, brushing past my temple. Even through the thick fleece of the sweatshirt, his touch sends goosebumps down my arms.

"Eight years, April," he rasps, tucking a stray strand of hair behind my ear. "That's how long it's been." I can hear the frustration in his voice. I can feel it. "You don't have to be scared anymore. I'll never let anything hurt you again." His fingers wind into my hair, tilting my chin back.

Something along the lines of *I know* slips out of my mouth, and he leans down, pressing his lips to my ear. "I know you want to make me work for it. But this body here is all yours, Chere." His other hand tightens around my waist and I half

moan at the pressure. “Whatever the hell you want to do with it, I’m just happy to be included.”

I drop my hand to his thigh and his lips crash into mine.

Oh. God.

His hand moves to grip the front of my throat. Rough and passionate, overwhelming and heated, and a whole world of other words my brain can’t even begin to process right now. I scrape my fingers through his hair and pull him closer. A low groan rumbles out his throat.

Loosening his grip, he slides his mouth across my jaw, kissing and sucking my neck, voice as rough as his touch. Slowly and deliberately, he lowers his hand between my legs. Not quite touching. Just scraping over my trousers, a touch so criminally light. His other hand leaves my waist. My breathing slows as he palms me through the sweatshirt, over the curve of my breast, his fingers circling my nipple, the torturous pressure leaving me aching for more.

“Parker, we shouldn’t—”

“Yeah? Tell me to stop, then.”

There’s a split second when I do contemplate doing exactly that. But obviously, I’m not using that part of my brain to think anymore. My lips find his and I kiss him hard.

He slides his hands down my waist, wrapping them around to grip my ass as his tongue gently traces my lower lip. He kisses my neck, and I lean into him. His breath is hot on my neck, and I feel my body heat up in response.

I pull my body flush against his, dying to be as close to him as physically possible. He responds in turn by tightening his grip on my ass, fingers kneading into the firm flesh. I bite his lip and let out a long exhale. The fog clears from my brain as I pull away from him. “We’re on a roof.”

His mouth moves down to my neck, and I feel his hands wander to the waistline of my pants. “Mm-hm.”

“This is a public space.”

“There’s no one else up here, Chere.” His hand is back on my waist.

“But if we get caught—”

“We’re adults. We’ll handle it. And besides.” His right hand cups the back of my neck. The touch sends a shiver running down my spine. His breath falls hot against my lips. He’s so gentle, it’s driving me crazy. “Besides,” he repeats. “I really fucking want you right now.”

Well, shit.

I release a groan of resignation and pull him in for another deep kiss. His mouth is more earnest this time, his lips prying mine apart as he presses his body against mine. I can feel his erection pushing against me through the layers of clothing.

He deftly unbuttons my pants and slides a finger down. A breeze brushes across my skin, and my nipples harden. Parker pulls away slightly to take in the view. His eyes are hazy with desire, and I feel blood rush between my legs as I watch him look at me.

Grabbing my waist assertively, he places his mouth on the side of my neck and begins sucking. I tilt my head back and sigh. His teeth gently graze my flesh, then his tongue traces over the bite.

He traces a hand up my arm and pushes me down so I’m lying on my back. He presses me harder against the rough concrete, whispering my name into my skin. I don’t remember how it happens or when, but the next thing I know, I’m in nothing but my underwear and stilettos. My heart is racing.

Parker’s finger traces up my stomach, continuing along my skin. I gasp, my head falling back, and he leans forward to catch my earlobe between his teeth. “You’re so beautiful, April.” His fingertip travels to the waistband of my underwear and he inches lower, trailing over the lacy fabric. “So goddamn beautiful.”

He gently rubs my wetness through the fabric. The anticipation is torture. “Please ...” I say.



“Please what, Chere?” Placing a hand over my throat, he bends over me. The feather-light pressure of his fingers over my clit is so frustrating that I arch into his hand just to feel more. “Be a good girl and tell me what you want.”

*You.* A soft, incoherent sigh leaves my mouth and he probably takes pity on me. Because the very next second, Parker slides the fabric aside and pushes his long, thick finger deep inside.

“Oh, God ...”

He brings the other hand up to grip my hair and yanks back on it, smiling with satisfaction when I whimper again. “You like this, don’t you? Getting off while everyone down there has no clue what’s going on.” He nods toward the streetlights below. When I don’t answer, he pushes his finger in deeper. “I know you, April.” He withdraws. “I know what turns my girl on.” Then, a hard thrust.

I gasp. Another push. With one hand still palming my breast, his finger plunges into my drenched pussy. A second finger joins the first and I’m sure my knuckles go white as I grip onto the ledge.

Briefly touching the sensitive spot, he pushes back into me, deeper, thrusting harder, and once again, I gasp.

He pinches my taut nipple, drawing a satisfied moan from my lips. He covers my mouth with his, absorbing my cries as one more finger slides into me, deliciously stretching me. The slick, wet noise of his fingers pumping in and out of me is enough to send me free falling into oblivion.

My hips are bucking against his hand, incoherent pleads and moans slipping from my lips. Releasing my breast, he picks up the pace with his fingers while he keeps his thumb right over my clit. I don’t even try to stifle my cries as the orgasm rips through me.

Every bit of me is physically shaking, pleasure spreading through my entire body, until my eyes roll back in my head and my back arches off the concrete surface.

He gently pulls out his fingers and pulls me up, my body falling against his bare chest. “Parker?”

He presses his lips against my damp forehead. “Mm-hm?”

Perhaps, it’s the post-orgasm high, or the rush from doing this on a rooftop, but the lust-fueled fog thickens, giving me all the confidence to say, “I want you inside me.”

He looks at me, eyebrows arched. “What?” When I don’t say anything back, he brushes the hair hanging over my face behind my ears and cups my face in his hands. “I don’t have a condom, sweetheart.” His cheeks are flushed and a lazy smile tugs at his mouth.

“I’m on birth control,” I whisper. “And I ... I, um, haven’t —there’s no one else, so I’m clean.”

His brows pull together, part concern, part surprise. “Shouldn’t we talk about this first?”

What he’s saying technically makes a lot of sense. But the way his fingers are grazing past my spine overpowers any logical part of my brain, and in the end all I do is whimper.

A laugh dies in his throat. “Well, I meant what I said, Chere. I’m all yours.” He gets on his back, lying on the concrete surface. “Go ahead and ruin me.”

The dampness between my legs increases, my body longing to be ravished. I swiftly pull his sweatpants down, just below his hipbone, fully freeing his erection. Parker’s grip my waist as I straddle him, slowly lowering myself onto him. I’m so wet that he easily slips inside me, groaning as I begin to ride him, lifting my body up and down his shaft. He looks at the space between my legs where we’re joining and sighs at the sight. “Fuck, April,” he groans.

He grips my hips and I bite my lip, slowly increasing my speed. Parker’s hips thrust up to meet my riding motion. His hands are firm on my waist, and he’s holding my gaze. I focus on the feeling of his cock inside me and close my eyes.

“You’re so beautiful,” he breathes and tightens his fingers around my ass. “Every single inch of you ...” His voice trails

off, his thrusts growing deeper. His breathing is shallow, and I can tell he's getting close. "Shit ..."

I smile. He groans and his hand reaches around my ass, and I feel him toying with my other entrance. His index finger applies gentle pressure. He applies a bit more pressure and I tilt my head back, opening my eyes to gaze at the night sky. The stars are masked by city light, but the moon shines, white and brilliant.

Suddenly, I'm on my back.

Parker shoves me down, placing a hand behind my head so I don't get hurt, then puts his weight on top of me.

"My turn," he growls. He thrusts his cock into me, and my back arches violently. I claw at his back as he pushes himself deep inside me.

"Oh, God," I moan. In and out, each thrust harder than the last. My eyes drift over to the skyscrapers in the distance.

"I've missed you so much," he says and continues to pound into me as my body contracts. "Can you feel how much?"

A cry of ecstasy falls from my lips as I feel a warmth growing in my stomach.

"Me too." I briefly meet his gaze as I begin to come. His eyes are glossed over with lust. My toes curl and my thighs tighten, gripping his body between my legs. I hear him groan as my pussy contracts around his cock. Over and over.

Another grunt, and I feel him come too. The feeling sends another ripple of pleasure through my body. My heart is pounding violently, and my fingers claw down his back. I don't remember the last time I came this hard.

"Fuck," he whispers and stops thrusting. When I finish, my legs collapse on either side of the ledge and he kisses my cheek.

A couple of minutes pass, but we don't get up right away. He buries his face in my hair, repeatedly whispering my name,

and we lie curled against each other, basking in the aftermath of what just happened.

# Chapter Eighteen

## Twelve Years Ago

### HAYDEN

**I**n order to be a good writer, one must also be a good reader. It doesn't matter if you read science fiction or romance. It doesn't matter if you read nonfiction or comic books. The bottom line is that readers make good writers.

*The Amazing Spider-Man #121* was the first comic I ever read. It's the one that made me want to publish my own comic book one day. Peter Parker vs. Green Goblin. Green Goblin kidnaps Gwen Stacy, and at the end, she falls to her death. Without doubt, it's one of the most heartbreaking storylines in the Marvel Universe. But here's the thing about reading about other people's sadness: you get to experience real sadness without actually experiencing all the anxiety and loss associated with the emotion. It makes you grateful for the short bursts of happiness in your own life. I wanted to create that for other people.

And the one thing I'm most grateful for is standing right in front of me.

April walks through the apartment door, a cardboard box in her hands. It has the words "FRAGILE: X-Men Comics" scribbled across the side in big block letters.

My beautiful, beautiful April, who's moving in with me.

I asked her two weeks ago, right after we graduated. We've been officially dating for over a year now, so I was pretty confident she wouldn't say no.

“Thanks, Logan.” She hands him the box and gives me a small smile as I watch her from across the living room, leaning against the bedroom door.

“It’s the least I can do for the woman who’s replacing me,” Logan tells her.

“Hey, don’t get all pouty,” April says. “You get to replace me too.”

Logan is moving in with April’s roommate—ex-roommate—who also happens to be my ex-roommate’s girlfriend. There’s a tongue twister in there somewhere. Unlike me, he was definitely not confident enough that she’d say yes. But I’m glad she did.

April brings another comic-labeled box in and places it on the rug. It’s the fourth one so far.

“That all?” I’m pretty sure Logan’s being sarcastic.

But April doesn’t pay heed. She hasn’t stopped perusing my—sorry, our—apartment. Yeah, that’s going to take some getting used to. “No, there’s another one in my truck,” she says, now analyzing the raggedy secondhand Craigslist couch. “Can you get it?”

Logan frowns, turning around to shoot me a look. “Remind me again why your boyfriend isn’t helping you.”

“Because,” April says, placing her hands on her hips, “his girlfriend’s roommate isn’t waiting for him downstairs.”

Logan frowns.

Oh, for fuck’s sake. “She means Shara, you dumbass,” I say.

A soft “oh” leaves his mouth and a wide grin spreads across his face. “Why didn’t you say so before?” he asks and rushes outside. Yeah, we’re not getting that box any time soon.

I stand upright and walk toward April. “Welcome home, roomie.”

She smiles. And of course, it’s as gorgeous as she is. “Is it weird that I like that more than ‘Chere’?”

“I’m not gonna stop calling you Chere,” I say.

“Good.”

“So ...” I wrap my arms around her waist and pull her close. “I got you a little housewarming present.”

April narrows her eyes, her smile unwavering. “Don’t think that’s how that works.”

Sidestepping around her, I grab the folder lying atop the dining table, balls of nervous energy rappelling through my stomach.

“What is that?” she asks.

“That ...” I take her hand and place the folder onto her palm, “is a rough first draft of *Fireheart Chronicles*.” April already knows the basic plot, characters, and what happens in the end. But I’ve never really shown it to her. Showing someone a piece of your writing, something you created from scratch, is like giving them a piece of your soul to judge.

It’s scary. Nerve-wracking.

“Open it,” I say.

She eyes me for a few seconds before flipping the file open. “Parker, this is ...” She doesn’t stop. She keeps flipping, each turning page accompanied by a soft smile. I’m still waiting for her to catch on. It’ll happen. “This is ... this is amazing.” When I don’t respond, she angles her chin up. “What?”

“You tell me.”

Her frown deepens.

Okay, maybe I overestimated her capabilities. I plant a soft kiss on her forehead and point at the main character of my comic. The one with the yellow spandex costume, red hair, and green eyes. “That remind you of someone?”

April’s mouth slowly opens in realization and it makes my heart do a damn backflip. “Wait, is this—?”

“Yup,” I say.



She runs her fingers over Fireheart, almost as if she's in disbelief. "Your comic is about ... me?"

"No, Chere." I brush the hair off her face. "It's about my favorite superhero."

Her face falls. "Oh."

"Who just happens to be you."

April glances up. "What?"

"Do you like it?"

The momentary giddiness on her face dissipates into something a bit more serious, and I instantly think I've somehow messed it all up. It hasn't even been a day since she moved in and I've fucking messed it all up. Good fucking job —

But then she stands on her toes and presses her lips against mine. And my whole world melts away. "I love you," she whispers around our kiss.

"I love you too," I say, smiling. "But that's not all."

April pulls back, her arms still draped around my neck. "Another present? I should move in with you more often."

Not wanting to be away from her, I wrap her legs around my waist and walk us to the couch, quickly grabbing the landline from the coffee table. "We're going to make a voicemail."

Her eyes widen and I plonk down on the couch with April straddling my lap. "We are?" The twinge of excitement in her voice makes me want to take her right here, right now.

She snatches the receiver from my hand and hits record. "Hi, this is April and I'm not home right no—"

I snatch it back. "Excuse me? I live here too."

Her shoulders droop. "But my voice is more people-friendly."

"Let's record one together," I tell her, placing the receiver in the space between us.

April's face scrunches up. "That's so cheesy."

"We have matching tattoos, April. I think we're the cheesiest couple alive."

"Fine. But I'll go first." She hits record again. "Hi, this is April—"

"—and this is Parker," I chime in. "Hayden Parker."

April presses delete.

I look at her. "What?"

"What what?"

"People need to know my full name," I say.

"You're not James Bond. Stick to Parker and let's try again."

She hits the record button once again. "Hi, this is April—"

"—and this is Parker, the boyfriend she often bullies."

"Yes, he is. Not that anyone asked. And we live together! Sorry, we can't get to the phone right now because—"

"—we're having sex."

"We are?" Her cheeks flush and she grins. It's fucking adorable.

I slide the strap of her tank top down. The phone is still recording our message. "We're having all the sex." I bend down and kiss the side of her neck. "Leave a message and we'll get back to you when we're done. Which is never."

Laughing, April hits pause and flings the phone to the other end of the couch. My lips trail along her collarbone and her breath grows ragged. "Logan's gonna be back any minute."

"No, he's not." I slip my hand underneath her top. "He's doing the exact same thing in the back seat of your truck."

April jerks back. "Excuse me?"

I really fucking hate my idiotic brain sometimes. "You didn't know?"

“That he’s making out in the back seat of my truck? No.”

“Oh, they’re not making out.” Brilliant. Make it worse.  
“How the fuck don’t you know this? Don’t girls, like, talk?”

April grimaces. “Why are you implying this is a recurring activity?”

“Remember that time he forced Shara to go skydiving with him?”

“Yeah.” She nods. “I tried forcing you too. Oh, my God, they took my truck.”

“Yup.”

“Ew, Parker. *We* even haven’t had sex in my truck.”

“I don’t like where you’re going with this.”

“The mood has been killed,” April says, trying to wiggle off my lap. But I hold her in place, smashing my mouth against hers.

“Let me help with that,” I mumble and she laughs.  
“Roomie.”

# Chapter Nineteen

## Present Day

### APRIL

“That’s a lot of denim,” Holly says.

She isn’t wrong. It is a lot of denim. Denim overalls, a denim crop top, and even a denim bandanna over my head. “I think I pull it off, no?”

“You look like a Levi’s store.”

I roll my eyes and drag my suitcase into the living room. I set my purse down on the couch and walk toward the kitchen to get a bottle of water.

“Oh, my God, what is that?” Holly gasps, her hand clutching her chest.

My eyes widen in shock. “Wh-what?”

“That.” She snatches the bottle from my hand and points a finger right at my mouth. “You’re smiling.”

I smack her hand away and take back the bottle, my mouth twisting into something that isn’t a smile. “Hilarious.”

She leans against the white marble of the kitchen island and teases. “Been spending a lot of time with a certain friend?”

I shoot her a look. After our night on the rooftop, Parker offered to drop me home. The entire ride back, he didn’t utter a single word to me. Not even a “good night.” He just gave me a stiff nod and rode away. Like the whole thing was nothing but a mistake. Was it? It didn’t seem like it last night. For

years, I imagined what it would be like to be with him again. Would it be weird? Would it be like the very first time?

After two hours of restlessness, I fell out of bed around three in the morning and took a quick shower. Didn't help. But, fortunately, I don't have the time to obsess over every single detail from last night. More pressing matters await me. Such as Tony's Los Angeles PR event.

I pull the bottle from Holly's hand and walk back into the living room. "I'm also breathing. Standing. Talking. Might as well get all that out of the way too."

She gives me another teasing smile and follows me out.

When I told Holly about my slip-up, all she did was give me a nonchalant shrug and say, 'Good for you, sis.' Like Parker and I having sex on some abandoned Brooklyn rooftop was not a question of if, but rather when.

"Is Parker coming too?" she asks.

"No, Hol, he isn't."

"Huh. Shame."

"It's a work trip. A *GQ* interview for Tony, couple of meet-and-greets, and—" I take out my phone and open my inbox, scrolling through the freshly arrived fifteen new emails. "A red-carpet premiere for some spy thriller. I should probably watch it on the flight. I need to give Tony a few talking points in case he gets bombarded by the press. What?" I look up at Holly, at the slow, scheming smile creeping across her lips.

"Nothing."

"That smile is not nothing."

"Just that you could've invited Parker along. It's the weekend. I doubt he has any work on set if everyone else is coming with you."

This time my eye roll is more genuine. "Doesn't mean he doesn't have a life of his own."

"Irrelevant." She plonks down on the couch. "As far as Parker's concerned, a life without his darling April should be

nonexistent.”

“Stop it.”

She doesn’t. “You could’ve roomed together in a remotely shady inn that somehow has Only One Bed.”

“Hol, stop. It was a moment of weakness.” I stuff my phone back into my purse. “Also, we’re staying at the Ritz. I’m fairly certain they pride themselves on having beds for all their guests.”

Her brow pinches. “A moment of weakness?”

I plonk down next to her and drop my face into my forearm.

“A kiss is a moment of weakness,” she goes on. “Having sex with an ex-boyfriend in a public space is at least ten moments.”

I dry heave at her words and sit up. Public space. Jeez. “Do you think I’m overthinking it?”

“Isn’t that ... your hobby?”

“I’m serious, Holly. The whole aftermath. God, I’m so embarrassed. I feel like one of those leading ladies in a rom-com who goes on the worst date of her life right before meeting Prince Charming.”

Holly whips her short blond waves behind her shoulder. “Okay, first of all”—she raises a finger—“that would make *me* the side character, which is just absurd. Second of all, I would never star in a rom-com. Unless the subgenre is horror.”

“Thanks, Hol.” I pat her thigh. “That helped a lot.”

“And last of all—”

“Oh, yay. There’s more.”

She grabs my arms and turns me to face her. “You have nothing to be embarrassed about. I’m sure the whole thing freaked him out as much as it did you.”

“But it didn’t freak me out,” I counter. “I was having a great time.”

“Well, in that case, he’s definitely freaked out by how *not* freaked out you were. Trust me.”

Surprisingly, that does make some sense. The turmoil of nerves in my chest mellows and I stand, kissing the side of my sister’s head. “Holly Moore taking Hayden Parker’s side? The world must be coming to an end.”

She rolls her eyes.

“All right, I need to leave before I miss my flight.” I drag my suitcase out, make my way toward the elevators (yes, our rare Manhattan building has one), and press the down-arrow button. “Try to sustain yourself on something other than coffee, please.”

I look back at Hol and she blows me a kiss.

“Have fun with your extra beds.”

\* \* \*

New York’s JFK airport isn’t the biggest in the world. Nor is it the busiest. But what it is, is the gateway to hell. Always crowded and smelling of lox and stale bagels.

Granted, it isn’t all that crowded at five p.m. on a Friday—which ideally would’ve been a plus point, but there was one major flaw holding it back.

A disastrous flaw.

The Starbucks in Terminal C was shut.

Hence, I’m stranded at Gate 25, waiting for Kripke and Tony without any caffeine.

The cherry on top? I texted Kripke on my way here demanding an ETA, only to get left on “read.” If that doesn’t call for a Venti Caramel Macchiato with whipped cream and cinnamon sprinkles, then I don’t know what does.

I unlock my phone to open Instagram for the tenth time in the past fifteen minutes and resume scrolling through the endless puppy videos on my feed. Somewhere around the fifth



one, right when the five-month-old golden retriever is about to trip over into the pool, my eyes drift up and I spot someone very familiar walking toward me. I slam my phone down on the seat next to me. “What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” Parker says and plops down on the seat to my right, a black travel-sized bag hanging from his shoulder.

Is this really happening? Again? How do we keep running into each other like this? I’ve asked him before and I’ll ask him again. “Are you following me?”

This time he doesn’t act surprised. Instead, he just turns to me with narrowed eyes. “Yes, April. That’s precisely what I’m doing,” he says, the twist of his mouth deepening into a semi-sowl.

I don’t even blink.

“No, I’m not following you,” he clarifies. “I’m catching a flight. What are you doing here?”

I’m about to say “Uh, the same thing?” but an ominous realization stops the words in my throat. He’s at the same gate. Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no. “You’re going to LA too?”

He nods. “Marcus wanted to shoot a few extra stunts near one of the canyons.”

My “oh” comes out much more disappointed than I meant it to be.

Parker smiles, at which point all I want to do is grab my handbag and make a run for it, but the last few remnants of self-respect keep me seated. “Well, for what it’s worth, seeing your face at Gate 25 is the best thing to happen to me all morning,” he says.

“That bad, huh?”

He shakes his head and leans back. “I spent all morning trying to look for my airport sweatshirt.” He looks at me like *duh* and I nod, even though I have no freaking clue what he’s talking about. His “airport sweatshirt”? Who is this man?

“After an hour and a half of turning my entire place upside down, I found it stashed at the back of my closet—”

My face contorts. “You didn’t look there first?”

Parker squeezes in a quick “shut up” and carries on with his story. “Then I spent the next two hours looking for my ironing board.”

As one does.

“In the midst of all that chaos, Dog managed to get himself stuck in the sleeve of one of my sweatshirts. In the sleeve. How does one get stuck inside a sleeve? Anyway, long story short—” He takes off his brown jacket, revealing the white T-shirt and lean, muscular arms underneath. His arms. God, he has such great arms.

“I had to rush to the ER to get this cleaned up.”

I clear my throat and look down at his wrist, seeing two decent-sized scratch marks. “Of course, he scratched you, Parker. You named Satan’s favorite animal after God’s favorite.”

“Shut up. He’s adorable.”

“As evidenced by the scratch marks on your wrist,” I say.

“He was stuck in a sleeve, April.” He brings his good arm around my shoulder and everything in me goes limp. “And he saw two huge hands that he doesn’t even know are hands approaching him. Of course, he scratched me.”

“As we all do.”

“Okay, let’s try it.” He reels his arm back in and grabs his jacket, bringing it up to my face. “You two aren’t all that different in size.” He opens up the sleeve and tries shoving it over my head.

I smack his hand away and guffaw. “Get your filthy paws off me!”

Leaning back in laughter, he sets his jacket down on his lap, sweeping a few strands of hair across my face in the process. He brings his hand up to my forehead, pushing the

hair aside gently. A simple gesture. But the little spark that lights up in the pit of my stomach and makes its way right up to my heart, leaving teeny-tiny explosions in its wake, is anything but simple.

I look at him; he looks at me. I laugh, and he smiles a little. There's a colossal four inches between us. Neither of us moves. His eyes dip to my mouth and my throat squeezes, every nerve ending set on fire. My brain goes, *kiss me, kiss me, kiss me*.

Of course, the very next second, Parker backs away.

A heaviness settles in the little space between us. He stretches his neck against the bendy backrest of his seat, then bends over and takes a comic book from his bag. "Do you mind if I read for a bit?"

My stomach hardens. "Depends. Is it DC or Marvel?"

He chuckles. "I wouldn't dare read DC in public, Chere."

"Then, by all means. Go ahead."

Smiling, he flips it open and settles against the back of his seat, legs slightly stretched out, and starts skimming through the pages.

I grab my phone from the seat to my left and reopen Instagram.

Every now and then, he looks over at me. I pretend not to notice.

# Chapter Twenty

## Nine Years Ago

### HAYDEN

“Is everyone’s internet working?” April asks frantically, her alert gaze zeroed in on her laptop screen.

We’re all sitting in our living room: me, my crazy girlfriend, Logan, and Shara. They have their laptops open too, although their enthusiasm is not nearly as high as April’s. “It’s your Wi-Fi,” Shara tells her.

April shoots her a withering glare.

“Yes, April,” Logan replies on Shara’s behalf, “the internet is working.”

Most days, April Moore is nothing but a bucket of fucking sunshine. Smiles and hugs and laughing at all my lame jokes. But not today.

Today you do not want to mess with her.

“Time?” Her question is directed at me.

I check the stopwatch on the top corner of my screen. “T-minus thirty seconds.”

“OhGodohGodohGod ...” she mutters, flexing her fingers, curling and uncurling them.

“It’s gonna be fine, Chere.” I rub her back. “We got this.”

“Hands on the keyboard!”

I flinch back. “Right. Sorry.” Look, it’s not like I’m any less of a Marvel geek. I love made-up superhuman beings just

as much as the next guy. But if I don't get these tickets to the San Diego Comic-Con, I'll live. April won't.

"Okay, guys, ten seconds!" She clasps her hands and takes deep, labored breaths.

"You need to calm down," Shara says and Logan hurries to add a quick, "She didn't mean that."

"It's live!" April screams in a mix of delight and dismay. "Go, go, go, go!"

The sound of vigorous clicking fills the air. "Fuck! My laptop crashed." Goddammit. Every single time.

"Do not stop refreshing!" April reprimands. "Only one of us needs to get in!"

Across from us, Shara keeps hitting a single key. She couldn't look more unenthusiastic if she tried. "I should've poured myself a second glass of wine," she monotones.

"Less talking, more clicking."

"I'm in!" Logan yells.

April flings her own laptop to the side and quite literally pounces on the guy—well, his laptop. "Ow! What the fuck?"

"OhmyGod," she says. "He did it. He actually did it. He's in. He's in the queue!"

"Yippee," Shara drones. "Can I stop refreshing now?"

I give her a nod and she perks up, making a direct beeline toward the kitchen to pour herself a glass of red.

April goes on staring at the screen, her eyes doing that weird twitchy thing. It happens every time she's stressed. She clutches the armrest. "I'm next in line!"

Logan gasps. "Shut the fuck up."

I frown at him. He doesn't even know what SDCC is.

"Okay, let's see ... four tickets. Three-day pass—"

"It's a three-day thing?" Shara calls from the kitchen.

“I know,” April replies. “It’s not enough time. There are so many panels.” She fidgets with the ends of her hair and I walk over to sit on the armrest next to her. Maybe I was playing it cool before because I didn’t think we’d actually get in the queue. But I’m kinda excited now. Maybe April’s excitement is just that contagious.

“Oh. My. God.” April’s hands go still. “We got the ...” She looks up at me, pausing for a brief second. “We got the tickets!”

“We did?”

Squealing, she jumps from her seat and right into my arms. She wraps her legs around my waist and I turn us around. “Wegotthetickets!”

I can’t stop smiling either. But the reason behind mine might be a little different.

“Aww.” Logan throws his head back. “You guys are such sad little nerds.”

“We are,” April says, grinning from ear to ear. “And we’re going to SDCC!” She lets go of me and runs to our room. “I’m sorry! I need to go stare at my costume for five minutes!”

My eyes follow her till she’s out of sight and then I plonk down on the couch, across from Logan and his magic laptop.

“Congrats, bro,” he mocks and I flip him off. “So”—he leans forward—“you gonna ask her tonight?”

I swallow back a smile. “I’m thinking ... now?”

Logan nods, slow and deliberate. “She seems happy enough to say yes.”

Shara walks back with a glass of wine and sits herself down next to Logan. “I can’t believe you’re actually going through with it.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s weird,” Shara says. “Getting married at twenty-two is like leaving a party at nine p.m.”

This isn't something new. I don't expect her to understand. And it's not just her. I don't expect anyone to understand. People don't get married at twenty-two. They just don't. It's not normal to tie yourself down to a single person at that young age.

But most people don't find their soulmate at fifteen. Knowing I want to get married to April doesn't mean the end of the world. And it's not like I'm asking her to marry me today. I'm just asking her to marry me one day. It doesn't matter if it's now or fifty years from now. If I had to choose between April and a million other things I've always wanted, I'd pick her every single time. She's the only one for me. I just want her to know that.

"I might be leaving the party at nine p.m.," I stand up and start making my way to our room, "but at least I'll be leaving with the prettiest girl there."

Shara rolls her eyes and Logan gives me an overenthusiastic thumbs-up.

\* \* \*

Okay, maybe this was a bad idea.

I've been standing at the doorway for the past five minutes while April has been staring daggers into her costume that's spread out on the bed.

I don't know what's going on, but she doesn't look happy.

"Chere?"

"This isn't going to work," she says with her hands on her hips. "Vanessa Carlyle just wears normal clothes. My Halloween costume was more interesting." Her shoulders slump and she finally turns to face me. "I don't think Deadpool is a good look on you either."

I can't stop smiling.

"Maybe we should just reuse our old costumes," she says.

"Sit with me?"



“Huh?”

Taking two long steps, I sit on the edge of the bed and pat the empty space next to me. “Sit with me? Please?”

April eyes me with a narrowed gaze. “What are you smiling about?”

“Lots of things.”

She smiles back and instead of sitting next to me, plonks herself right onto my lap, wrapping her arms around my neck. “I still can’t believe this is happening. The fucking Holy Grail of Comic-Cons.”

My grin widens.

“Do you think I should carry my copy of *Excalibur* to get it signed?”

I love her so much. And more than anything, I love that this is what’s bothering her.

“Maybe I can be Vanessa Carlisle on the third day. The third day’s pretty lame anyway. No one gives a shit—”

“Marry me,” I blurt.

Her hand drops from my shoulder, but her gaze stays fixed to mine. “What?”

“Marry me.”

A hysterical giggle flies out her mouth. “Wh-what are you saying?”

“I love you.”

She looks even more bewildered than before. “I love you too.”

I reach up and stroke her cheek with infinite tenderness. “You’re my best friend.”

“You are too,” she mumbles.

“Then marry me.”

April attempts to frantically scramble off my lap, but my arms tighten around her hips, holding her in place. “I’m not

sure what's happening right now," she says.

"I'm asking you to marry me."

"No, you're not."

"Yes, I am."

April blinks at me. "Why?"

"Because I wanna be with you."

"You are with me," she says.

"I wanna be with you forever, Chere," I clarify. "Through the tough times, happy times, all of it. I wanna fall asleep with you and wake up next to you. I wanna rewatch every Marvel movie with you. I wanna go to Comic-Con with you for the rest of my life. And if today has taught me anything, it's that being with you will always guarantee me a spot at the SDCC. I wanna get drunk with you and go out for two a.m. froyo and make a hundred babies with you," I say, immediately hurrying to add, "Not in that order." I loop my arm around her waist and press my lips against her forehead. "I just ... I want to be with you."

When she finally speaks, her voice comes out low and hesitant. "You're serious."

"I never joke about making babies."

She brings her palms to my chest and pulls back slightly. "We can't get married."

My brows knit together in a frown. "Why not?"

"Because." Her eyes dart around the room. "We just finished college."

"So?"

"We're twenty-two," she emphasizes. "Is that even old enough to get married? I killed a succulent last week, Parker."

"We can always get a new one."

"No one gets married this young."

I shrug. "We could."

“I just got a job. I-I—” Her expression is a peculiar combination of amused and disbelief. “Parker, if this is a joke, I’m going to kick you in the balls so hard.”

I laugh. “It’s not a joke, I promise.”

“It isn’t?”

My hand tangles in her hair to bring her forehead to mine. “April Moore, will you marry me?”

“Does your mom know?”

“Yes, she does.”

“And my parents?”

I nod.

“Holly?”

I asked April’s parents for their permission a few months back. It took a bit of convincing, and reassurance that their daughter wasn’t pregnant. Eventually they agreed. Her mom even teared up a little.

Holly Moore, however, did no such thing. All she did was threaten to cut my dick off if I ever broke April’s heart.

I’d be scared, but Holly’s said that to me so many times, the threat has lost all meaning.

“What, you think I have a death wish? Of course, Holly knows, Chere.”

A breath escapes her lips and she swallows once. “You want to ... marry me?”

“I want to marry you. Do you wanna marry me?”

“Right now?”

“Preferably not. I mean, I still have to get you a ring.”

At this, April’s eyes widen. “A ring?”

“And you still have to say yes.”

“Yes,” she blurts.

“What?”

A faint smile touches April's mouth. "Yes, I'll marry you."

I should be doing fucking cartwheels or backflips or something. Did she just say yes? Did this just happen? Am I breathing? I can't tell.

April's eyes fill with concern. "Parker?"

"You want to marry me?"

"You don't?" she asks.

My mouth opens but no words come out. So I just nod.

April's smile slowly turns into a laugh and she launches herself at me, hugging me so tightly, I think I let out a small squeal. "Then of course, I do, you idiot!"

I think I'm still in shock. "Okay."

She pulls back, her face beaming. "Are we really doing this? We're getting married?"

The word "married" coming from her mouth sets something loose inside my chest and I break out in an equally idiotic grin. "Sort of have to now."

"I'm a fiancée?"

That single word makes my heart swell up like a damn helium balloon. "So am I."

"Why don't I get a ring?"

"You'll get one. I just need to find a job first."

"This is so weird," she says after a long beat.

"I could make you a paper ring in the meantime."

"No, not that." April blinks a few times, her hands trembling. "It's weird that this doesn't feel weird. I don't feel like I just got proposed to."

"You most certainly did," I tell her. "I can ask you again if you like."

"No, as in ... I'm not freaking out. Don't people normally cry? I feel like you just asked me to get McDonald's with you

or something. Why am I not freaking out about this? It doesn't feel real."

The room goes quiet for a minute. Then I reach out for the bedside table and the Sharpie on top of it. "This is as real as it gets, Chere," I grab her left hand and scribble my last name around her ring finger. "But if you compare my proposal to a McDonald's order again, I'm gonna sell your SDCC ticket to a stranger and ask for a divorce."

April shakes her head, trying not to smile. "You're an idiot, Hayden Parker."

"Maybe." I take her face between my hands and start kissing the life out of her. April laughs into my mouth and my pulse soars. "But I'm your idiot, April Moore."

# Chapter Twenty-One

## Present Day

### APRIL

“**W**hat do you mean, there’s no booking for April Moore?” I ask, frantically trying to pull up the reservation. The doe-eyed receptionist looks at Parker for help and he shrugs. Two bellhops in pristine dark-blue uniforms scour the lobby, wheeling the baggage carts, most of which are empty since it’s one in the morning.

“I’m deeply sorry, ma’am,” she says, not sounding deeply sorry at all. “I have the list open on my computer and there’s nothing under that name.”

I look up from my inbox. “How is that even possible? I have the reservation on my phone,” I say, thrusting my phone into her face. She simply goes on staring at my screen for the next three seconds and I let out a sharp exhale. It’s late and I’m too tired to argue further. All said and done, a six-hour flight is exhausting, and sitting next to Parker only worsened the situation. Well, in hindsight, I shouldn’t have insisted on taking the window seat. Every time I got up to go to the bathroom, I had to do so by going over him. My thighs over his hips, throw in a little turbulence, and that equals a raging female boner. And of course, his wasn’t that subtle either. I would’ve switched seats, but he knows I hate the aisle, and my brain wasn’t exactly working at full power to think of an alternate excuse.

“Fine, if you don’t have my room, then just give me another. Anything will do.” I’ll deal with the logistics in the morning.

“Oh, we’re fully booked this weekend. But I can suggest nearby hotels.”

“Not needed.” Parker steps forward and casually grabs the handle of my suitcase. “She’ll stay with me.”

*She* will? I turn to face him and he shoots the receptionist an apologetic smile (totally undeserved) and starts walking toward the elevators. “Parker, you don’t have to do that. I can find another hotel.”

“I never said you can’t.” The elevator doors slide open and he heads inside, prompting me to do the same. “Doesn’t mean you need to.”

The doors open on the twenty-second floor and he grabs my suitcase, dragging it along the carpeted hallway toward our room. We reach the front door and he taps the key card over the reader. He bumps the door open, stepping inside, stopping short immediately.

I walk into his back. “What ...” My voice trails off.

“I swear, I didn’t know about this,” he blurts out while I’m still trying to register the fact that there is a single bed smack in the middle of the room—a single twin bed. The sirens in my brain go off. Neither one of us takes another step inside, both waiting for the other to initiate.

“Okay, I’m going to fix this.” I panic. “I’ll just ... I’ll go down to the front desk and ask that receptionist to suggest a nearby hotel.”

I spin around and Parker grabs my wrist, and a zing of electricity shoots up my spine. “You’re not doing any such thing,” he asserts.

“Parker, there’s one bed.”

He looks at the bed, then back at me, and lets go of my hand. I fight the urge to pull him back. “It’s not the end of the world.”

Really? Sure seems like it.

“I’ll sleep on the couch tonight.” He nudges his head toward the five-foot-something pink suede couch. “And we



can figure out the rest in the morning.” Taking one long stride, he places my bag on the luggage stand and set his own backpack down next to it.

There was a time when sharing a bed wouldn’t have been such a big deal for us, but it is not tonight. Not when all I want him to do right now is pick me up like a sack of potatoes, fling me onto that mattress, and spend the next hour or so with his head between my legs. What is wrong with me?

“No.” I walk inside. “This is my screw-up. I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“April,” he groans, turning around, rubbing his eyes like this is the most tedious conversation he’s ever had. “This isn’t up for discussion. You’re taking the bed.”

I scoff, march to the couch, and place my purse on top of it, looking back at him with my hands on my hips, a triumphant smile across my face.

“What?” he says.

“I’m taking the couch.”

“Actually, you’re not.”

“What is your problem? It’s just for a few hours. I have to be up early anyway.”

“All the more reason you’re not sleeping on the couch.” He turns around and unzips his bag.

“But I’m tiny.”

He stifles back a laugh. “No one is contesting the difference in our sizes, Chere.” He takes out a pair of loose black shorts. “I’ve slept in way more cramped spaces for much more than just five hours,” he tells me. “A couch in a five-star is child’s play.”

My frown—pout? frouf?—deepens. “Can you stop being such a man right now? If it was you who’d messed up, you would offer up the bed to me, and you know it.”

“True, but since it wasn’t your fault, I don’t think you get to play that card,” he says. “And even if the tables were

turned, don't act like you wouldn't have been just as stubborn as you're being now."

I plonk down on the couch and scoff, my palms sinking into the seat cushions.

"Okay, how about this?" Parker takes one step toward me. "Since you get the bed, I get to shower first. How's that for compromise?"

Eyeing him for three seconds, my face softens into a faint smile. "Fine. That sounds fair." Hayden Parker has known me, April Moore, for over half my life. Most of the time he knows exactly what I'm thinking or what's going on in my mind, solely by the glint in my eyes or the sudden change in my tone. It's like in that movie, *Minority Report*. He knows what I'm about to do before I actually do it. But maybe, hopefully, he's starting to lose his touch. Because my left eye just twitched and my smile just widened, and judging by the dumbfounded expression on his face, the poor boy has no fucking clue what evil plans are brewing in my head.

He narrows his eyes and starts walking toward the bathroom, not averting his gaze from mine, presumably trying to figure out why I'm now smiling like the Cheshire Cat. Giving me one last lingering look, he steps inside and shuts the door behind him.

By the time his slow brain catches up, the deed is already done. All the lights have been switched off except for the orange lamp near the TV, and I'm lying on the couch, tucked underneath the throw blanket, with my iPad in hand.

The bathroom door swings open and—fuck me. He's not wearing a shirt.

"April, I swear to God—"

"Ssshh, I'm going through my itinerary. Got lots to plan before tomorrow morning."

"I'm going to count to three," he says. "And if you don't get up and climb onto the bed by three, I'm going to pick you up myself."

No response.

He walks toward me and leans down, placing his hands on the backrest. He's close enough for me to smell the citrusy body wash.

"I will pick you up, April. No jokes."

I put my iPad on my stomach and tilt my chin up. "I'm really comfortable now. Don't make me get up."

"Got it," he says and slides his hands underneath my legs, scooping me into his arms. The blanket's all tangled between us and the iPad is barely balancing on the curve of my stomach.

I squeal. "What is wrong with you? Put me down!"

"You. Bed. Now." Just as he's about to throw me down, I unhook my arms from his neck to grip my iPad and he ends up tumbling onto the bed ... right on top of me.

He looks at me, I look at him, and both of us burst out laughing. There's a slight buzz in the air, a heaviness, and to be honest, I'm a little turned on right now. It doesn't help that all I'm wearing is an oversized Rolling Stones T-shirt and a pair of pink shorts that end right below my ass.

"That was very unnecessary." A tired laugh fizzles through me.

He hasn't moved yet. My hands are on his bare shoulders. Even though they don't need to be.

"You are very predictable," he says. "And not very sneaky." His hands are wrapped around the small of my back. Even though they don't need to be.

His laugh hums through me, leaving a trail of goosebumps down my spine. "I guess not." My voice is low and I brush my foot against the outline of his calf. "You got what you wanted. I'm on the bed now."

"You'd better stay there." His tone is low and warning, a voice that makes my entire chest flop over for some reason.

"Don't tell me what to do." I smile, but his response isn't lighthearted and fun.

“Then don’t make me fight you, Chere. Because I will.” He smooths his hands down the curve of my back and the perverted bitch in my head goes, *Please fight me. Preferably without clothes.*

“Fine,” I say, and tilt my head up to look at the bathroom door behind me. “Is that the shower?” I look back at Parker and his gaze is locked onto a vague spot on my neck, right next to the outline of my T-shirt and the tiny crescent-shaped birthmark on my collarbone. When his hand lowers, briefly touching my thigh, the heat of a thousand shooting stars gathers under my belly. My adrenaline spikes.

His eyes stay down, avoiding my gaze. “I need to back off, right?” His voice is heavy and it almost sounds like a half-hearted plea. A question.

The room has started to pulse. My throat feels full. And before I do something I regret, I spring upright, taking my hands off his shoulders, crossing my legs.

He pulls his hands back and stands up too, rolling his palms into tiny fists next to his thigh. Two bright spots of color burn on his cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” he says, dropping his head, clutching the back of his neck. “I should probably—”

“It’s not going to happen again,” I blurt.

His eyebrow ticks. “It?”

“The night on the rooftop,” I clarify. “We’re ... that’s not going to happen again.”

His hazel eyes search mine. It’s how he used to look at me when we were together. Back in college. Like our gaze was meant for each other and no one else. Something in my chest cracks at the memory. “Is that why you think I asked you to stay with me?” he asks.

A little? Maybe? Shit.

“It is, isn’t it?” He answers his own question. A few seconds pass and Parker takes my silence as a yes. Scoffing,

he walks over to the bathroom, occasionally glancing over his shoulder. “I’m gonna take a shower.”

He sounds irritated.

“Okay,” I mumble, fumbling with the bedspread, trying to free the thick blanket from the tucked-in edges. He steps inside the bathroom and shuts the door behind him.

\* \* \*

I’m on the bridge again. It’s dark and I’m standing on the edge, overlooking the murky river. The sound of screaming is everywhere. There’s a wrecked car smashed into a tree nearby. There’s smoke coming out of it.

But something’s not right. I’m not supposed to be here. I’m supposed to be in there. I’m supposed to be in the car with them. My throat burns and the sight blurs in front of me through a scrim of tears.

I reach forward, needing to hold on to something, to feel something solid and soft against my hand, but everything starts to disappear. I turn my head aside to gasp a breath of fresh air. There’s no air.

No air. No air.

A sound forces my attention to the river below. The flowing water goes still around the car. No air. A scream builds from my belly and scrambles up my throat.

Something touches me.

Something’s touching me.

I try running away, but it doesn’t help. My feet don’t move. Something’s holding me back. I’m trying to scream but no sound comes out. I hate how this feels. My eyes are stinging. My heart is racing. I feel like I’m drowning.

“April,” a distant voice says. I know that voice. “April,” it repeats, this time more urgently, “April, wake up.”

I cover my face. I can sense this isn't real life. Real life is happening somewhere far away and I don't know if I'm going to be stuck here forever. Tears pour out my eyes.

"Chere." A gentle touch pushes my hair away from my face and my eyes snap open at the name.

"Parker," I whisper, still unaware if this is real or in my head. But then he pulls me upright and puts his arms around me, pressing my chest to his, and I know it's real. He's here.

"You were having a nightmare," he says.

"What?" The words jumble, dissolving into soft sobs. He runs his fingers along my spine, winding them into my hair. This room seems like a place I've never been before. It takes me a while, but in slow blinks I come awake, tightening my arms around him, my eyes darting around the room. "I was dreaming?" The words emerge hoarse and hesitant.

"You were," he says.

A spot in my chest goes tight. "I-I'm sorry," I whisper.

He hasn't stopped hugging me. "For what?"

"I woke you up."

"It's fine." He pulls away a little to look at me. "Do you want to talk about it?"

An anxious breath leaves my mouth. Parker waits a few more beats, then nods, understanding that I really, really don't want to talk about it. What I want is to not even have to think about it. "What time do you have to wake up tomorrow?" he asks.

"Six." My voice cracks and Parker pulls away a little more, a concerned knot between his brows.

"Chere, that's in four hours. Are you sure you'll be up?"

I shrug. "There's very little in this world that a hot croissant and an iced latte can't fix." There's an avalanche of emotions swirling through me. Mostly, it's just fear; a nameless one I don't know how to fight. It's been festering inside me for eight long years. "How did you do it?" I ask him.

“What?”

“How did you ...” I look up and sigh. I’m not sure how to phrase my question. *How did you get past everything?* He makes it look so easy. It makes me feel like there’s something wrong with me. Like I’m incapable of moving forward.

I scrunch my eyes shut, at a loss for words. They’re in my throat, but just won’t come up. It’s one thing to tell Parker how strong he is for being able to move on so easily, and it’s a whole other thing to be mad at him for exactly the same. It’s not fair. Before he came back into my life, I was happy. Or, at the very least, okay. I was dealing with my issues one day at a time, going to therapy, not having nightmares. Living.

“April?” he says again, his thumb sweeping against my jaw. When I don’t respond, he pulls me against him, wrapping his arms around the small of my back. “Hey,” he murmurs into my hair. I nod. “Chere, are you crying?” I shake my head and a single tear falls down my cheek. Parker grips the fabric of my T-shirt for a split second, before backing off suddenly.

I frown and wipe my eyes. “What—”

He walks to his bag and when he turns around, my heart stops. He’s holding a unicorn hat. He’s holding my unicorn hat.

Smiling, Parker simply walks back toward me and puts it on my head, tying the white woolly strands into a tiny knot below my chin. “Why does this still fit you? Has your head not grown?” he teases.

“How do you ... what ...” Tears start to blur my vision. “What the hell else do you have in that bag?”

That makes him laugh. “I’ve been carrying it around in case I ever ran into you.”

My chest squeezes at his words and out of all the things I could come up with, I decide on the most idiotic one. “We can both sleep in the bed, Parker,” I whisper. “Set up a pillow barrier?”

“A pillow barrier?”

“Yeah.” I shrug. “I think it could work.”

“I honestly don’t know if you’re serious or making fun of me right now.”

“No, I’m serious.”

He runs his knuckles across my cheek, like I’m the most delicate thing in the world. “Do you need me to? Because I don’t trust you to keep your hands off me.”

A weak laugh whisks out of me and he stands. Bending down, he kisses me on the forehead and pulls the blanket up, making sure none of me is exposed. “Goodnight, Chere,” he whispers into my hair, and walks to the couch to get underneath one of the throw blankets.

My stomach sinks.

I prop my head against the fluffy white pillow. Without saying another word, he turns on his side, facing away, falling asleep. Or pretending to. I don’t know.

The distant sound of the city fills up the otherwise quiet room. The lights are switched off, except for the tiny nightlight on the bedside table next to me. I’m lying on my right side, facing his back. Everything in me hurts, aches. He’s been carrying my hat for eight years? After everything that happened? He got us matching helmets. He bought me a damn sweatshirt—just because. The answer to all those whys is the same: “In case I ever ran into you.”

I don’t know how long I lie there, gripping onto the white threads of my hat below my chin, with my eyes clamped shut. But eventually, I do fall back asleep.

No nightmares for the rest of the night.



# Chapter Twenty-Two

## Present Day

### APRIL

**T**he alarm on my phone blares. I hit snooze for the third time in the past fifteen minutes and slowly squint open my eyes. The room is still dark, with just a little sliver of light creeping in from underneath the curtains. Parker is still fast asleep. His back is toward me.

My perverted mind is suddenly very aware of the fact that he slept without a T-shirt on—and just like that, I’m thinking of running my fingers over the outlines of his shoulder blades. Digging my nails into his skin as he finds the sweet spot between my legs—

*It’s six in the morning, April. Jeez, get it together.* I shake my head and look away.

Rubbing my face, I stumble out of bed. There’s a brief moment when I contemplate waking him up and letting him know he can sleep on the bed now. But he looks so snug, even though his legs are dangling off the couch, that I decide against it.

Parker and I have shared an entire apartment. Granted, it was when we were younger and a little bit obsessed with each other, and the concept of personal space was nonexistent. We need to figure out our sleeping situation for tonight.

I grab my phone and my work outfit—a maroon mid-length pencil dress—and quietly head into the bathroom. I check the cabinet underneath the sink for a spare pair of

slippers, but nothing. Great. I tie my hair up in a tight bun and lean forward against the sink.

I slip out of my T-shirt and shorts and step into the shower. As soon as the hot water trickles down my hair and onto my shoulders, I feel my stress evaporate.

These events don't usually make me this nervous. I actually love them. The traveling, the interviews, the after-parties. It's easily the most glamorous part of my job. But they've never had this much pressure on them. I also usually have Eric or Zawe by my side. Zawe doesn't take away from the stress, but knowing she's there makes me feel a little at ease. Like if something goes wrong, at least you've got help.

I take a deep breath, inhaling the lavender scent of the hotel body wash. It's going to be okay. I'm overthinking it. I turn off the water and step out, a white towel draped over my hair.

Lots of concealer and red lipstick, and twenty minutes later, I'm all dressed and partially powered up to try to tackle the day.

It's seven a.m. and I need to be in Tony's room in twenty minutes. I shoot him a text.

*Me: Hi, Tony, coming over to your room in ten. Need to go over a few talking points for the GQ interview.*

I head to the mirror and run my hands down the front of my dress. At least I look much better than I feel. My hair's still a little frizzy from the shower steam, but what can you do?

My phone buzzes.

*Tony: Sure, honey. The more, the merrier. ;)*

Resisting the urge to type, "Can I bring your mom too?," I slip on a pair of beige pumps and walk to the TV cabinet to grab my purse. It's right about then when I notice something atop the glass surface.

A beat. And another. I go on staring at it, hesitant to reach out. Scared that if I do, it'll disappear. Maybe it will. Maybe I'm hallucinating.

I'm put in my place as soon as my fingers wrap around the cold, wet exterior of the to-go Venti Starbucks cup. The butter croissant lying next to it starts to seem real too.

I turn the cup around and read: *Venti Iced Latte for Chere*. I look up at Parker, who's still fast asleep, being the most perfect human being known to mankind.

When did he even get the time to bring me this? There's a piece of white paper jutting out of the brown Starbucks paper bag.

I pull it out and—oh, my heart.

*An iced latte and a croissant "espresso-ly" for you. Kick some butt today :)*

This. Man.

I reread the note ten times before folding it in a neat square and placing it in my purse. How is he real? I wouldn't even be this cute for myself.

Quickly pulling out my phone, I tap open the camera app and take a selfie with the latte, sporting a puppy-dog face.

*Me: BRB. On my way to kick everyone's butt.*

I drop the picture in our text chain and stuff the phone back inside. Slowly, I tiptoe over to him and plant a soft kiss on the back of his head.

\* \* \*

It's only been ten minutes since I stepped into Tony's room, but I think it's safe to say I will not be kicking anyone's butt today.

"How on Earth does someone lose an entire person?"

Kripke says nothing, seeming annoyingly calm about the whole debacle.

"His interview is in less than six hours," I go on. "What are we going to do?"

Kripke pinches the bridge of his nose and lets out a sigh. “Miss Moore, I’m going to have to ask you to calm down and take a seat.”

I stop my nervous pacing and turn to face him. “Calm down? Are you kidding me? Tony is missing!” I clasp my hand shut right in front of his face to emphasize my point.

He doesn’t flinch at all. Instead, he gets up from his chair and brings his hands up, hovering on either side of my shoulders. Not touching. Just hovering.

I frown at him, then at his hands. “Wha-what are you trying to do?” I ask, my eyes darting between his hands and his face.

“Trying to get you to have a seat.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake. I sit down and look up at him. “There. You can stop with the craziness now.” I put my face into my hands and muffle another loud sigh of frustration. How the hell am I supposed to locate Tony before his interview in a city that’s known for its “party scene”? He could be anywhere. He could’ve very well reached Vegas by now. Fuck. This is it. This is my villain origin story. “Have you tried calling him?” I ask Kripke.

He gives me a blank stare. “Yes. No answer.”

I get up and take out my phone from my purse, wiping my sweaty palms on the side of my dress. “Have you checked his socials?” I open Instagram to do it anyway.

“I don’t have social media.”

*Of course, you don’t.*

I’d kill for Eric to be here right now. I would’ve abused his intern status to the hilt. Sent him running through the entire state of California, scouring every corner for Tony.

I enter “Tony Martin” in the search bar and click on his profile. No stories, no posts, nothing. Shit. I swipe left to see his tagged photos and right then, I get a text from Parker.

It’s a screenshot of his lock screen: the picture I sent him this morning.

*Parker: Get your cute ass back to this room this instant.*

Now I'm sweating and smiling.

"Is it him? Is it Mr. Martin?"

I look up to see Kripke staring at me expectantly. "Um, no. No, it's not Tony." I don't want to tell him it's Parker and get another lecture on how unprofessional I'm being. I don't need that right now.

"All right, we need to sort this out in the next two hours," I tell him with a newfound conviction in my voice. "You're gonna go ask the front desk if they saw anything, or saw him leave. Ask them if we can get access to the security footage. I don't care how, but please get that done.

"I'm going to comb through every bar, pub, and smoke shop in a three-mile radius. We got here last night at one. Even if he left at two, I'm sure he would've started out by going someplace nearby."

"Miss Moore, we'll find him," Kripke assures.

Not sure where he's getting this unlimited supply of optimism, but it's borderline irritating. I put on my black blazer and head toward the elevators. God, I'd kill for another iced latte right now.

I step inside and press for the lobby. I need a quiet place to sit if I'm going to be able to rent a car in the next ten minutes.

The elevator doors open and I step out, iPad in hand. Every step I take, I feel multiple knots form in the pit of my stomach, piling over each other. I have six hours to find Tony, prep him for the interview, and get his hair and makeup done. The knots get tighter and I take a seat on one of the white leather couches in the lobby.

I unlock my iPad and start scrolling through the car rental options displayed on the screen. The Upper East Sider in me refuses to settle for anything that's not an SUV or a Honda Civic. But the rent-paying New Yorker in me needs to suck it up and take anything that's available on short notice if I don't want to get fired. I keep scrolling for another few minutes when I feel a firm hand on my shoulder. I turn around.

Parker gives me a small smile and walks over to sit next to me.

“What’s up? I thought you had the interview with Tony. Was one coffee not enough for Her Highness?” he jokes, tilting his head to the side.

I let out a small laugh. The first one of the day. “You don’t want to know, trust me.”

Parker leans his weight to the side, facing me entirely. I notice his T-shirt is a bit wet.

“I went to the gym. I showered. Evidently, I didn’t dry myself off completely.” He shifts a bit in his seat. “It’s not sweat, if that’s what you were wondering.”

“Oh. No, no. I was just—” I force a weak smile and the knots come undone. “Tony’s missing.”

“Missing?”

“Yup.” I rub the side of my neck.

“Isn’t his interview today?”

“Yup,” I repeat. Christ, how many 1980 Corvettes are there on this website?

“And your plan is to scroll through car rentals till he magically shows up?”

I stop scrolling and turn to him. “I’m renting a car so I can go look for him before his interview. Which is in six—” I push back the sleeve of my blazer to uncover my watch. “Nope, five hours.”

“All right, give me ten minutes. I’ll change into something that’s not wet,” he says, gesturing at his torso. “Meet you back here.” He gets up and starts walking toward the elevators.

“Wait, what?”

He turns around and says with a light shrug of his shoulders, “I’m coming with you.” As if it was that obvious.

“You don’t have to do that. You have work to do too. What about the canyons?”

“I can spare a few hours.”

“Parker, you really don’t have to. I’ll be fine.”

Then he says, “But I want to. Plus, I’m not letting you drive alone in those shoes on the freeways of Los Angeles.”

“My shoes?” I look down at them. “What’s wrong with my shoes?”

“Nothing is wrong with them,” he says. “But the last time I witnessed your driving on these roads, my soul nearly exited my body.”

If that was supposed to be a joke, it doesn’t sit well with me.

“Look for a car and I’ll be down in ten.” He turns right back around without waiting for my response, and enters the elevator.

I resume my scrolling.

\* \* \*

“I refuse to believe there was nothing else available.” Parker puts on his seat belt and I get into the passenger seat.

“Are you calling me a liar?” I cast a sideways glance at him.

“No, I’m calling you a *big* liar. All that scrolling and this is what you found? A fucking Porsche?”

“It’s efficient.” I lie and open Google Maps, propping up my phone against the windshield. I might not be able to afford owning a Porsche, but I can afford renting one.

For two hours.

Parker places his hand on my knee and, with his eyes on the road, gives my leg a light squeeze. We drive out the hotel driveway and onto Sunset Boulevard.

“So what’s the plan again? We check out every bar in the vicinity to see if anyone’s seen Tony around?” His hand is still



on my knee. Warm and oddly reassuring.

“Yup,” I say.

“That’s a lot of bars, Chere.” We stop at a red light.

“Mm-hm.” Deep breaths.

His thumb rubs against the side of my knee and I turn to look at him. “Big fan of the dress, by the way. Very distracting.”

Smiling, I swat his hand away and he threads his fingers through mine. My shoulders deflate. “We’re going to find him, Chere. I promise you.”

My skin warms. “Thank you for the coffee this morning.”

“Of course. That’s what friends are for.”

“Coffee runs and stressful road trips?”

“Precisely,” he says.

Ten minutes and around three red lights later, we arrive at the first destination: The Little Bar. It is pretty little, if that’s what they were going for. The place is dimly lit and there’s not much going on with the decor either other than a few wall hangings and a pool table in the middle of the room. Parker and I walk toward the bar. His hand wrapped around my fingers the entire time.

There’s a single bartender. Parker waves him over with a meek smile.

“What can I get y’all?”

Parker lets go of my hand and I open my phone to show him a picture of Tony. “Have you seen this man anywhere?”

He squints his eyes and comes closer to the screen, leaning his weight against the bar. “Eh, that’s Tony Martin. I’ve seen his movies.”

Great. So that would be a no. Evidently Tony wasn’t here last night, or else he would’ve remembered him from somewhere other than the three movies he’s starred in. Fuck.

We thank him and head back out. As soon as we get into our car I lean back against the seat and shut my eyes. Parker gets into the driver's seat and I hear the door shut.

"It was only the first bar," he starts. "We have a lot more to cover. I'm sure someone must've seen him."

As I open my eyes, Parker puts on his seatbelt and starts the ignition. It's already ten a.m. The interview is at two-thirty. I'm screwed.

"People see celebrities here every day, Parker. Why would anyone bat an eye toward someone who isn't even that big of a star yet?"

"Ouch," Parker says and I shoot him a heated glare. I take out my phone to navigate to the next bar just as I get a call from Kripke.

My heart rate spikes. "Hello? Kripke? Please tell me you have good news."

He clears his throat on the other end. Oh, no. "We were able to access the security footage."

I wait for further information. Nothing.

"And? What did you find? Is he okay?"

"Um, Miss Moore." Another pause. "Mr. Martin is in the hotel."

My brows scrunch up in a frown. "In the hotel? What? Where? We looked everywhere."

"He was in another room. With a woman."

He says the word "woman" like it's slowly killing him. I run my fingers through the ends of my hair. "Well, okay, at least you found him. I'll be back in fifteen minutes. Do not lose him."

"One more thing," he says.

"What?"

Another pause. "Um, the woman ..." Kripke clears his throat. "She, uh, she needs to be paid."

“Paid?” I frown and look at Parker. He arches his eyebrows, silently asking me for details.

“Yes, paid,” Kripke repeats. “Mr. Martin spent the night with her and she needs to be paid five thousand dollars.”

“What?” I yell into the phone, my voice as crisp as a fucking cucumber. “Five thousand dollars?” And it hits me. Tony hooked up with an escort. I pinch the bridge of my nose and let out a low groan.

“Okay,” I say. “Please pay her every cent she is owed, make her sign an NDA, and I’ll put the expense on Paramore’s tab.”

“All right, Miss Moore.”

“When I get back, I don’t want to see anything other than Tony getting his hair and makeup done. In his room. Use restraints if you have to.”

“Understood,” Kripke says. I cut the call and bury my face in my palms.

Parker’s hand runs up and down my back and I turn my head sideways to look up at him. He’s smiling.

“Stop enjoying my suffering.”

“I’m not.” He definitely is. “I’m just glad Tony’s found.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Also, that was the calmest panic I’ve ever seen. Major turn on,” he says sarcastically—I think. Because that was not calm at all.

“Are you making fun of me?” My voice comes out a squeak.

He laughs and leans back with me. “I’m always making fun of you, Chere. It’s literally my favorite thing to do.” His words reach into my chest and give my heart a tiny squeeze.

“Tell you what,” he follows up.

“Tell me what?”

“Finish up your work today and let’s do something fun tonight. Just the two of us.”

I straighten my spine. “Something fun?” Just the two of us?

“My shoot gets done by six. Text me when you get off and I’ll take care of the rest.”

# Chapter Twenty-Three

## Present Day

### APRIL

**S**omething fun.

It's eleven p.m. and here we are. Standing in front of what looks like some sort of underground rave party. Muffled beats of the music pulsate through the walls and people are swarming up to the entrance like bees to honey.

“Why have you brought me to a cult?” I ask him.

He hooks his arm in between mine and pulls me toward the entrance. “Don't be silly, Chere. The venue for that is two blocks down.”

A group of three women, all wearing multicolored suede tassel dresses, rushes past us and toward the keyhole entrance. My gaze follows them until they disappear into the glowing hue of lights.

Oh, don't worry, the two of us are wearing equally ridiculous outfits.

Parker wears a white paisley shirt, unbuttoned halfway down his bare chest. And I'm dressed head to toe in a whimsical fringe dress with much more glitter than is socially acceptable. Parker bought it for me. Even laid it out on the bed, movie-style. Enclosed was a note that said, *Meet me downstairs in ten minutes. P.S. My outfit is worse than yours.*

Arm in arm, we head inside. If I thought the exterior of Boardner's was jam-packed, I had a whole other thing coming.

Because the dimly lit hobnob interior seems to be just as much, if not more.

A particularly unruly group of four men and two women, all seemingly in their early twenties, stumbles into me and Parker tightens his hold around my waist. “I got you.”

Two minutes and three almost-trips later, we reach a square wooden high-top with a steel *Reserved* plate placed on its surface. “We have a reservation here?”

Parker sidesteps me and walks over to the table, sliding the sign aside. “Nothing but the best for April Moore.” He smiles, then follows it up with, “What do you want to drink?”

“I’ll come with you.”

Parker walks to my side and our hands barely graze each other. “Okay, but hurry up. We don’t have much time.”

Time for what? Parker tugs on my hand, pulling me through the swarm of fringe and glitter mixed with the musky notes of sweat, and toward the crummy bar six feet away. I lean against the blunt edge of the countertop and he lifts his arm in an attempt to flag down one of the bartenders who’s dressed as an off-the-rack Bob Dylan.

“Is this place a front?” I ask.

“No.”

“A murder house?”

“It’s just a bar,” Parker says with a soft, sweet smile forming across his lips.

“Where, for whatever reason, everyone seems to be dressed in bell-bottoms and tinted glasses.”

“And fringe,” he adds. “So much fringe.”

I go on staring at him, waiting for further clarification, but get none. Instead, his mouth twists into a smirk and his eyes flicker with a spark I don’t quite recognize. “So, shots?”

My entire lip curls with disgust. “Shots?” I remark. “Ohh, I know what this place is now,” I say mockingly. “A doorway to my twenties!”

Parker is not amused. With an eyebrow arched, he holds my gaze, looking at me with such a strong sense of distinction, it's almost possessive. As if there's a part of me reserved just for him, one only he can see. Maybe there is. "Tequila or vodka?"

Heat trickles down my neck. I turn around to face the bar, suddenly hyper-aware of every inch of space between us. "Tequila," I mumble, looking at him from the corner of my eye.

He snickers and takes a small step back, running his hand through his disheveled hair.

"You're really not going to tell me why we're dressed like this?" I ask.

"Dressed like what?" Parker takes a bigger step back and turns around in his spot, making a show of himself. The bottom flare of his bright red pants expands with the twirl. "I think we look nice."

"We?"

He narrows his eyes in thought and moves next to me, his hip resting against the bar. "I'm sorry. I look nice. You look like a shooting star on steroids."

I faux-gasp and smack his arm. "You picked my outfit!"

"Because I wanted to look better." He tries flagging down the bartender again. "God, it seems impossible to get a drink here."

"May I?"

He glances sideways, brows creased up in a frown. "May you what?"

I unclasp my claw clip and let my hair fall loose across my shoulders. Then I bend down and tug at the hem of my dress, quickly standing up straight to push my boobs out a bit. Just a little bit.

"What are you doing, April?" he asks.



“Getting us some drinks,” I say to him. The red neon lights reflect off the giant disco ball dangling from the ceiling and pour directly into the silver sequins of my dress. I lean my weight on the bar, perching my chin on my right hand.

“How is that going to—”

“Give it a minute.” I mess up my hair slightly. Enough to make it look like I’ve been drinking for the past two hours and am maybe three or four shots away from being the “life of the party.”

I practically hear Parker roll his eyes back into his skull. “April, you can’t be serious. This kind of stuff only works in movies.”

“Can I get you anything, miss?” Thrift Store Elvis Presley stops right in front of me, card machine in hand.

Slowly and even more dramatically, I turn my head to face Parker, who seems to be looking everywhere but at me, his tongue rolling against the inside of his cheek.

I take out my credit card from my purse and hand it to the bartender. “Four tequila shots and a glass of water, please. Thank you.”

“Water?” Parker asks.

“Mm-hm. For the burn?”

I look at him, he looks at me, and we instantly burst out laughing. “I’ll be sure to let down my hair next time I go to a bar without you.”

“It’s the boobs, Parker. That’s what really seals the deal.”

“Hair transplant and plastic surgery. Got it.”

I turn back around and rest my elbows on the sticky surface of the bar. He slides in closer to me, his back against the bar.

“Okay, spill it,” I say. “What are we doing here? What’s the deal?”

“Have some patience, will you?”

I eye him suspiciously. “Why are you being so secretive?”

“I’m not,” he says. “All I want to do is wear flared pants and have a few drinks with my best friend. Not a secret.”

A second later, the bartender comes over with our shots.

“As long as I don’t end up dead in an alley somewhere,” I say and a low laugh rumbles through him. I love making him laugh. It’s like having a superpower when I see the way his nose scrunches up and his face lights up. It might be my only superpower.

We pick up the glasses and clink them together. I remove the wedge of lime from the rim and carefully place it on a napkin, take a deep breath as though I’m about to run a 10K, and gulp my first one down in a single go.

“Keep going, keep going.” Parker winces back the aftertaste and slides another glass my way. I pick it up and chug it, and so does he.

His shoulders droop.

“All right, let’s go.” He grabs my wrist.

“Go where?”

Blondie’s “Heart of Glass” starts to wind down, and a man dressed in nothing but a pair of yellow bell-bottoms and red-tinted glasses occupies the high stage at the front end of the room.

“Just follow me,” Parker says, tightening his grip around my hand.

Like I have a choice? He pulls me away and cuts us a path through the crowd, right to the middle of the dance floor.

“This is looking more and more cultlike,” I say. But he doesn’t respond. He continues to tug on my hand, hauling me through the swarming crowd. “What is going on?” I ask again. “Oh, God, is this a flash mob?”

Right then, Mr. Bell-Bottom’s booming voice cuts me off, filling up the room. “All riiiiight! Are all you dancing queens ready?”

The crowd yells a synchronized “Yeah!” and the lights dim to a low neon blue. The grooves between my eyebrows rise and I look around, trying to pick up what everyone here already seems to be in on.

“Hey, Chere?”

I look back at Parker and he extends his hand toward me.

I glance down at it, then back up at his face. “What?”

“Will you dance with me?” He’s smiling so hard, it looks like he’s in pain.

“Dance? You want to dance with me?”

He tips his chin up and narrows his eyes, mulling over my words like grapes in a barrel. “I can be persuaded,” he says.

“You hate dancing.”

“Not with you.”

And right on cue, as if they were waiting for him to ask me this very question, the music starts to play. The crowd yells some more and the volume spikes up. I feel the beats reverberating through my bones.

ABBA’s “Dancing Queen.”

Parker grabs my hand and twirls me around to the instrumental beginning, singing right into my ear. I burst out laughing. He pulls me into him and I try to keep my balance, his hands on my waist, mine wrapped over his shoulder.

“You brought me to an ABBA disco party?” I shout over the music.

His grin splits open but he makes no effort to answer the question. At least, not in so many words.

“Having the time of your liiife!” He shuffle-steps us to the right, and back to the left, then does it all over again. I throw my head back in squealing laughter and place my arms over his shoulders, moving side to side, trying not to trip as a group of people next to us staggers to the left, knocking me into him.

He wraps his arms around my waist and steadies me.

Maybe it's the sense of false privacy that comes with dimly lit dance floors, or maybe it's the fact that this man who used to hate dancing brought me here to attend an ABBA disco party, but whatever the reason, I let my arms slide around his neck and pull myself a little closer.

He looks down at me, his thumb tracing tiny circles against my hipbone, our foreheads inches apart. I see the shallow rise and fall of his chest and instant heat spreads across my own chest. I glance to the side, hoping like hell the blue lighting doesn't bring out the redness on my face, and curve my lips in a smile.

Parker rests his forehead against my temple and, for some godforsaken reason, laughs. "April Moore," he says, his breath falling against my cheek, "you're fucking adorable when you're flustered."

"I'm not flustered," I say and look at him. His hands tighten slightly on my waist. His thumb is still tracing tiny circles on my hip. Fuck, I *am* flustered. I'm flustered as shit.

"Whatever you say, Chere." Parker spins me around, my back flattening against his chest. "Whatever you say." His voice comes out low.

I swallow and turn myself around, looking to my side, my arms sliding back over his shoulders. We move like that for a few more seconds, pressed up against each other, the heat from his body radiating against mine, the music filling up the space around us, when—to my disappointment—he moves back, his hands finally sliding off me.

"You still like ABBA, right?" he yells.

"Of course!" I yell back.

Gripping my left hand, he pulls me into him, his palm splayed across my lower back. My face becomes hot. Red hot. White hot. Every-color hot? "Good," he says and spins me around one more time, sliding both hands down to my waist. I reflexively bring my palms up to his chest.

The song starts to fade. I look toward the stage and the next song smoothly fades in.

“Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!” Another chorused cheer from the crowd and this time the two of us join in too.

The initial instrumental beats start playing.

“Come on, Chere!” Parker’s waving his arms above his head, not at all in sync with the music. “Don’t leave me hanging!” He looks ridiculous.

I love it.

Laughing and singing—more like scream-singing—he pulls me close, bumping his hip into mine.

I take three small steps away from him and move my hands in the glowing space between us, pulling him toward me with an invisible rope.

And he obliges; skipping toward me, trying very hard not to laugh. Which only makes me laugh more.

He places his hands on my shoulders, I mimic him, and we start jumping to the chorus, “Gimme, gimme, gimme a man after midnight, won’t somebody help me chase the shadows awaaaay!”

He slides his palm behind me, cupping my back, and lowers me in a dip, and I’m pretty sure the sound of my laugh is louder than the music by now. “I need a breather!” he yells.

I take his hand in mine and twirl him around.

“That made me feel so special!” He smiles and we resume our dancing.

*I could stay here forever, I think. Another twirl. I really could. Another dip.*

No matter how sweaty we are, how crowded this place is, or how my hair is most definitely going to be reeking of secondhand smoke tomorrow, as long as Parker is holding my hand, trying to navigate his way around my two left feet, I’m happy. And if not happy-happy, at least something like it.

“Okay!” he yells as the song eventually comes to an end. “Grandpa definitely needs a breather!” Grabbing my hand, he pulls me through the crowd and off the dance floor.

“I think the guy on the stage was onto something when he decided not to wear a shirt tonight,” Parker says, mouth close to my ear.

“Sweating is part of the fun!” I yell, the music still throbbing in my ears.

“Said no one ever!” he shouts back as we reach the bar once again.

The song winds down. “Voulez-Vouz” starts to play.

\* \* \*

It’s around one in the morning when we finally make it out of the club, drenched in sweat and not drunk at all.

“I don’t think I’ve ever had more fun in my whole adult life,” I tell him as we step out onto the sidewalk.

“You’re very welcome,” Parker replies.

“Excuse me?” I elbow him in the arm. “Give me some credit too. I wore a hideous dress for you.”

He loops an arm around my shoulder and kisses the side of my head. It seems like such a natural thing to do, for him to kiss me and for me to like it. “Thank you for not monopolizing the world’s beauty for one night,” he says.

It’s a five-minute walk to the hotel, but given the height of my heels, it’s going to be no less than twenty. I hook my arm around the back of his jacket, bending down to press my fingers around my ankle.

“Do you want to stop for a bit?” Parker asks. “Or I can carry you.”

“No, no, it’s fine.” I stand. “I’ve endured enough of your bullying for the day.”

“Bullying?” He laughs. “All I’ve done is help you live your best life.”

I button up my coat and wince again, looking down at my feet, rotating one ankle to relieve some of the pressure.

“April, let me give you a piggyback ride. You’re quite tiny.”

Instantly I gasp. Not cool. “I get to say that, not you.”

“But your feet hurt—”

A distant noise interrupts him. Both of us look up. With a low rumble, then a quiet tap-tap-tapping, it starts to rain.

It doesn’t take us more than five seconds to burst out laughing. “Did you plan this, Hayden Parker?” My voice comes out a little singsongy.

The water drips down his hair, over his eyes. “Plan the rain? Nah, that’s not one of my superpowers.” He tugs on my fingers, urging me to get back inside the club.

I don’t budge.

“You hate the rain,” he says.

I shrug. “You hated dancing. People change,” I say and step out further onto the sidewalk.

He follows me, running his free hand through his disheveled hair. “Well, we won’t be doing much hating or living if we catch pneumonia.” That’s what he says, but he puts his hand in mine regardless, stepping out onto the sidewalk with me.

I scrunch my nose up with a smile and he lifts his hand to wipe the wet strands of hair clinging to my face. I lean into it and smile wider. Parker smiles back. He always does.

“This is so stupid.” A low laugh sneaks out of him.

I bring my hand up and wrap it around his wrist. The coolness of the rain is replaced with white-hot electricity shooting right through his skin and into my veins.

“Do you remember our first kiss?” I ask. The rain starts to fall harder. The few people that were out on the sidewalk with us are nowhere to be found. It’s just us now.

Just us and some rain.

“Which one?” he answers. “We’ve had quite a few of those.”

I suppose he’s right. “The one in the rain. When we were wearing equally ridiculous outfits.”

Parker gapes. “You take that back right now, April Moore.” I laugh and the sound makes the corner of his mouth hitch up. Like he’s excited over making it happen. “Of course, I remember our first kiss. I remember them all.”

“They were nice,” I say, unsure where I’m planning to go with this. For the next few seconds, we don’t say anything. The rain drums against the sidewalk. “How did you do it, Parker?”

His smile morphs into a frown. “Do what? Kiss you?”

“Get past everything.”

The way the expression on his face hardens, I immediately know I’ve said all the wrong words. The rain starts to pour more heavily. His gaze drops to my mouth, but he doesn’t say anything else. It’s a sensitive subject and I don’t even know why I chose this perfect evening to bring it up.

“Do you regret it?” I go on.

“Regret what?”

“All of it? Some of it?” The night on the rooftop?

When he draws in a short breath, I realize I said the last bit out loud. Fuck me.

“Of course not, April.”

Oh. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to ... I was just, um, confused by ... it seemed like you didn’t like—”

“I fucking loved every second, Chere. Just talking about it is making my dick hard.”

My mouth goes dry. Oh, Lord. *Don’t look down, don’t look down.*

His thumb strokes my cheek, his touch feather light. “I just didn’t want you to think that’s what I meant when I said I



wanted you back.” There’s something sad in his eyes when he tucks my hair behind my ear, and my chest tightens at the touch. “Can I tell you something, April?”

“What?” My voice comes out all weird and raspy.

“That night,” he starts, and I automatically know he’s not talking about the night on the rooftop anymore. “I might’ve been the one to save you, Chere, but I think you saved me too.” He brushes the hair from my face and smiles at me. “You saved me in more ways than one.”

“Don’t ...”

He shakes his head. “No one else makes me feel this strong and vulnerable at the same time. And I’m not letting you go again.” He tips my chin up with one finger. “You’re the love of my life, April Moore. I don’t need us to last a lifetime to know that.”

I don’t know what to say.

I’m looking at him, he’s looking at me, and there’s a glimmer of hope—a hint to a bigger picture. Every time we look at each other, the string connecting us grows stronger. A conversation takes place. Hundreds and hundreds of them. No one else can hear them, but I like it that way. When we look at each other, we form a secret place—a safe haven to go to. When everything around us seems crazy and out of control, his eyes are my safe place.

He is my safe place.

I so badly want to be able to love him. Deep down, I do love him. I love him so, so much. Of course, I do. But there’s an equal amount of guilt associated with that love. And I can’t seem to separate the two. Something as universal as love shouldn’t be this hard. Not with him.

Not with him.

When he presses his lips against mine, the silence around us explodes in colors. He pulls me closer, running his hands up and down my back, into my hair. I somehow convince myself to pull back and his gaze pierces mine. “I love you,” he says.

What I hear is, *I'm not giving up.*

But I'm scared he's going to wake up one day and not love me anymore. I'm scared he's going to get sick of my constant need for reassurance, my craziness, my nightmares, my inability to move on. I'm scared that one day he's going to look at me and not feel safe anymore.

But today is not that day. Today he's looking at me like I'm something special. Like I'm some sort of miracle. So I simply pull his mouth back to mine, praying like hell it says everything I'm too scared to say.

*I love you too, Hayden Parker. Always have.*

# Chapter Twenty-Four

## Present Day

### APRIL

**H**e must've carried me back, after all.

Because I don't remember walking back to our hotel. Nor do I remember the exact second we entered our room—dark, except for the dim glow of the city lights creeping in from below the curtains.

All I remember is feeling Parker's mouth on mine. His fingers threaded in my hair, still soaking wet from the rain. Rough and clumsy, trying to wipe the water off my cheeks. Entering the room. Taking off my coat, him groaning at the sight.

I run my hands up the front of his T-shirt, feeling the rapid rise and fall of his chest through the wet fabric clinging to his body. I slide his jacket off his shoulders and it falls to the ground, pooling next to his feet.

"You're very wet." I slide my hands back down his chest.

He looks down at me, his gaze penetrating through my body. Arching an eyebrow, he tilts his head to the left. "Is that a setup for a bad joke?"

I almost laugh but Parker cuts me off. Oh, God, he cuts me off in the best way possible. He takes my lips with his, kissing me like I'm the answer to all his problems. I close my eyes and grab onto the hem of his T-shirt, trying not to float away.

He slowly works his way down to my chin. To the side of my jaw. It's just a whisper of a kiss. A feather-light brush of

his mouth against my skin. And my mind is speaking a hundred different languages I don't quite understand.

His hand makes its way to the back of my head, knotting in my damp hair, pulling me close like I'm about to slip away. "Put your arms around my neck." He smiles against my mouth and goes back to devouring my lips.

Warmth spreads across my chest and I do as I'm told, sliding my hands up his neck toward the base of his hair, lightly tugging at his bottom lip with my teeth. He groans against my mouth, and I think I might just die tonight.

The taste of his mouth, the feeling of his rough palm cupping my ass, his other hand tugging on my hair. I've had my fair share of kisses but this—this is the only one that matters. Parker doesn't kiss me with an open mouth; he does so with an open heart. He kisses with an intensity so hot, it's burning itself into my memory.

And I know this kiss won't end the moment our lips part. This is the one that will stay with me forever.

At that second, he pulls back. I hear myself panting and his lip twitches up in a smirk. "Look at you." Parker runs his thumb over my lower lip. "Acting like you've never been kissed before."

His hand travels down my arm, lightly brushing past my breast, and settles on my waist. I close my eyes and lean into his chest.

My cheeks warm and I look up at him. "You kiss me with a smile on your mouth."

He brings his hand up to my cheek, caressing it with his thumb, and bends down to rest his forehead against mine. "You smile back, you know?"

I nuzzle into him further. His shirt is still soaking wet from the rain, and I feel his hand move behind my neck, sweeping my hair to one side. My breathing gets heavier.

"Chere?" Parker's hot breath falls against the nape of my neck, sending a trail of goosebumps down my arms.

I tip my chin up. His liquid gaze trickles down my face. “Mm?” My voice comes out a hushed whisper.

His hands tighten around my hips and he kisses the corner of my mouth. “I look forward to fucking you tonight.”

Oh, God.

I close my eyes and a low laugh grates out of him. He lifts me up, wrapping my thighs around his waist, and I suck in a quick breath, tightening my arms around his neck. “So fucking hard,” he repeats, his eyes dark.

He brings his mouth back to mine, pressing his lips against mine, his hand curling around the back of my neck. I thread my fingers through his hair, pulling him further into me. He parts his lips a little, and I mimic his actions. His fingers dig into my skin and his tongue barely grazes past mine. Then a little more, a little deeper, more intent.

One of his hands twists into the sequins of my dress and he catches my bottom lip between his teeth. My chest arches against his and his fingers move to the back of my dress, tugging on the zipper. He draws back, hovering his mouth over mine. “Want this off.”

“Me too.”

He lowers his mouth back to mine, walking us to edge of the bed, and pulls on the zipper of my dress. “Shit, I think it’s stuck.”

“Let me try,” I say and he sets me down on my feet. I bring my hands back, trying to take this stupid fucking glitter dress off. But it really is stuck. I try yanking it harder, but that only seems to make it worse.

“Hey, Chere?” Parker skates his palm up my waist, his eyes following its movement.

I shake my head. “I’m trying, I swear. This is not me freaking out. I really want to do this. You have no idea.”

“You really hate this dress, don’t you?”

I look at him with a light frown between my brows. “What?”

His eyes travel down my neck, to my chest, then lower, all the while moving his hands up and down my waist, unable to keep still. It's almost as if he's analyzing something. "This dress. You hate it."

A statement.

"Uh, I, um ..."

He bends down to my temple and whispers, "Tell me you hate it."

An order. My heart bangs against my rib cage and I swallow a knot. "I-I hate it."

His mouth twists into a smile. His broad hands come up, his fingers sliding into the lace neckline of my dress. "I hate it too."

The ripping sound follows soon after.

My breath catches and I gasp out loud. "Did you just ...?" I glance down at my dress, torn right down the middle. "Rip my dress?"

He slides it off me and throws it to one side of the room, leaving me in nothing but my underwear and heels. His eyes map every inch of me, my whole body, drinking me in. Looking at me like I might disappear any second.

"Get on your back," he orders and backs me against the edge of the bed.

I do as I'm told.

Parker bends over me, little drops of water trickling down his hair and onto my chest.

Bringing my hand up to his forehead, I wipe a few of his damp curls aside and say the first nonsensical thought that comes to mind. "We're going to have sex tonight."

A low chuckle rumbles out of him and he hooks his thumbs around the waistband of my peach lace underwear, yanking them down. "Tonight ...?" He plants a soft kiss in the center of my chest and something collapses in my skull. "Tomorrow ...?" His cold lips touch my bare stomach. "And, if

I have any say in the matter ...” He moves lower, his mouth grazing past my hipbone. “Every day, for the rest of my fucking life.” He settles himself between my thighs.

All the heat from my cheeks rushes down, gathering in a hot liquid pool below my stomach. Partly because of the words that just came out of his mouth, and partly because of where that mouth is right now.

Fuck.

He runs his hands up my thighs. I glance down and all I see is the top of his head, the curve of his shoulders, the unsteady rise and fall of his back as he inhales, exhales.

He rests his forehead against my thighs and groans. “I want to stay here all night. On my knees, between your legs.”

I can barely think, let alone form a coherent response. Instead, I let out an airy sigh, and the next second I feel his fingers at my entrance. Not teasing, not doing anything, just pressing lightly.

One of his fingertips slides up my folds. “And you thought I was wet.” His voice vibrates into me, and his finger slowly dips inside. I suck in a quick breath, and he pushes in further.

“Oh, God ...”

His finger sinks into me entirely, curling inside me. I grip the sheets and fight to hold still. He inserts a second finger and promptly makes me forget my own name.

“Parker ...”

He kisses the crevice above my thigh, increasing the pressure, picking up the pace slightly. His thumb brushes over my clit and I twist my fist into the bedspread. My breathing quickens. I whisper his name out loud. Again, and again, and again, till it’s nothing but a prayer coming out my mouth.

He picks up the pace. I try to climb away from him, but he pins my hips down with his other hand. Thank God.

His thumb starts to rub against me faster and I ... fuck. I suck in an audible breath of air and bite down on my teeth to muffle my moans.



“Shh, relax,” he whispers against my skin. “I want to learn every sound you’re capable of making, April.”

That does it. The way he says my name, his voice low and thick. Just for me. I glance down and he’s looking up at me too. He pushes a third finger in.

I let out a loud moan and my head rolls back onto the mattress.

“Yeah? You like that?” His fingers thrust in and out of me at a deliciously slow pace, his thumb applying an equal amount of pressure above.

If I could form words, I’d tell him exactly how much I like that. Parker picks up the pace and all I do is breathe his name. He seems to get the message, just the same. I arch my back and he plants soft kisses along my thighs, his mouth inching closer and closer to where his fingers are.

“Not yet ...” He pants against my skin, sending shivers up my spine. I look down at him. “You can’t come till I say so.” He pulls his fingers out and pushes them in again, making me gasp out loud. “Not yet, April.”

If he wants me to last longer, he needs to stop saying my name like that. The tip of his nose brushes against my seams and he pulls back—barely. Like he can’t help himself. Like he needs me more than I need him.

His fingers pick up their pace inside me. I’m panting, moaning, swearing, all of it, and I’m so glad I didn’t get the time to ask for a spare bed. Just hearing how wet I am, as his fingers thrust in and out of me effortlessly, is turning me on beyond measure.

With his fingers still buried inside me, he bends over me, resting his damp forehead against mine. “You’re so beautiful.” His other hand skims around my back, arching my chest against his. “So fucking beautiful. So wet and ready for me.” He exhales into my ear and instant fire erupts in my belly.

“Don’t stop,” I manage to get out. My voice doesn’t sound like mine anymore.

“To think we wasted so much time.” He flexes his fingers inside me and pushes in harder. “When we could’ve been doing”—another push—“this, all along.”

I bite my lower lip. He brings his hand up from my waist and pulls my lip out from underneath my teeth, running his finger along its length. “Don’t do that. I love your smile.”

And of course, I smile again, rocking my hips against his hand. My fingers brush past his shoulders, and I realize he’s still fully clothed.

I frown and move my hands toward the hem of his shirt. “Off. Take it off.”

He smiles and kisses the corner of my mouth. “Not yet, sweetheart.” His lips move down to my neck. “I’m going to make you come at least twice first.”

He leans down and takes my bottom lip in his, kissing it, sucking on it, then pulls back. Just enough so his mouth is hovering over mine. “Because once my clothes come off, all I’m going to want to do is fuck you senseless.”

He pushes his fingers inside me and I moan out loud. “God ...”

Pushing a fourth finger in, he brings his mouth next to my ear. “Tell me, did you miss me?” I bite down on my lip and nod. “Where?” His mouth lowers to my neck and his teeth sink into my skin a little, eliciting a tiny squeal from me. “Did you miss me there?” he repeats, moving down to my shoulder. “Or here?”

I go on nodding, unsure if I’m answering his questions or just egging him to keep going.

His fingers pick up their pace inside me and then he places his mouth over my hard nipple, lightly tugging on it with his teeth. “Or maybe you missed me here,” he says while his thumb goes on massaging my swollen clit over and over.

“Parker ...”

He finger fucks me harder and harder till I’m melting into the mattress, seeping to the ground. Every vein in my body is

lit on fire and his name leaves my mouth in a ripping cry.

Slowly, he pulls his fingers out of me and puts them in his mouth, licking them clean, his gaze not leaving mine, not even for a second. I whimper at the sight.

Parker smiles, a little roguish this time, and moves back down between my legs. “Need more.”

I’m still riding the high of my mind-shattering orgasm when I feel his tongue flatten out against my clit. “So much more.” His voice tingles through me.

I tighten my grip on his hair, pretty sure I’m hurting him, but I don’t fucking care. And judging by the sound that just rumbled out of his throat, he doesn’t care either.

He inches his hands closer to my breasts, and his tongue—fuck, his tongue. This is already the best sex of my life, and he hasn’t even been inside me yet.

The tip of his tongue circles around my clit with a pressure that makes me clench and hiss out loud. I’m fighting to stay still, trying to hold on to something so I don’t float away. He squeezes my breast, his fingers gently scraping my hard nipples.

“God, April. You taste fucking divine.” He dips his tongue inside me. I gasp out loud. He drapes his arm over my hipbone, pinning me down as his tongue continues to move inside me in a rhythmic motion, as if he’s lapping water from a bowl. I hook one leg around him, my black heel over his shoulder, and pull him into me further. My hands are in his hair, and I hear him groan into me, his voice slicing me apart like a warm knife into butter.

“Don’t ... stop.”

He glides his tongue up toward my clit and shoves two fingers inside me at the same time. My moans get louder by the second, and I start grinding my hips against his mouth.

He moves and hovers over me. I feel his warm breath against my sweaty forehead, and I gently open my eyes. He shifts down to kiss me and I taste myself on his lips.

With his fingers still in me, he reaches out and takes my right breast, cupping it in his hand. His thumb flicks my nipple. I almost collapse as fireworks in my head exploded.

“Don’t fucking move. I have an idea.” He reaches for our phones thrown on the side of the bed. And since I’ve lost the ability to form coherent words, I don’t question him. He sets my phone to vibrate and uses his to call mine. Then it dawns on me.

Holy Mother of God.

“No, that’s going to be too much, Parker.”

“You work so hard.” He lowers my vibrating phone and rubs the cold steel edge against my nipples, trailing down my stomach. “Let me relieve some of that pressure for you.”

He pushes his fingers in harder, faster, and sets the makeshift vibrator against my needy clit. “Oh, God!”

He doesn’t stop. Instead, he presses harder. My orgasm hits and he keeps going. Rubbing my phone into the spot above my pussy while his fingers draw out another orgasm. And it keeps going on and on and till ... fuck.

“That’s a good girl. Make a mess all over my fingers.”

I whimper out his name and he leans down to my mouth, whispering all sorts of praises and filthy promises into me. I knot my fingers in the back of his hair and pull his mouth to mine, muffling my moans as I come on his fingers again.

“Again,” he demands, picking up the pace further. “I want more.”

If I have another orgasm, I’m going to die. My pants fill the air around us as I hear the sound of his wet palm slapping against me.

“Oh, God ... yes,” I breathe.

He throws the phone to the other end of the bed, quickly replacing the cold metal with his thumb rubbing my clit as he finger-fucks me into oblivion. “The number of times I’ve jacked off to the thought of you bent over my couch. To the thought of fucking you against every wall in my apartment.”

I instantly moan at the picture his words just painted in my head, a little embarrassed by the sound that leaves my mouth.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” he asks.

I nod. I nod vigorously. “Yes.”

“What else?” He looks up at me, making sure I hold his gaze. “What else would you like, Chere?” He pulls my hand down and positions it over my clit.

“Tell me what you like.” He presses my hand down and I gasp out loud. “That’s it.” He lets go of my hand and pushes two of his own fingers inside me. “I know I’m not the only one who thinks about us. I know you,” he says, and I start to rub my clit, matching the pressure of his fingers inside me.

“I’m waiting, April.” His fingers pick up the pace. “Tell me what gets you off, and I’ll do it. I’ll do anything for you.”

“You ...” I sigh.

“What about me?”

“Kissing me ...”

“Keep going.”

Another thrust. “Touching me ...” My voice comes out as breathless as ever.

“Uh-huh.” Harder. “And?”

“Fucking me ...”

He groans and I love the effect I’m having on him. Love what I’m bringing out in him. God, I love what he’s bringing out in me.

“Do you want me to fuck you, sweetheart?”

I increase the pressure on my clit.

“I need words,” he says. He increases his pace too, and I’m struggling to keep quiet. “Do you want me to fuck you?”

Can’t think. No words.

He pushes his fingers inside me with a single hard thrust and I gasp. “Don’t make me ask you again.” His voice comes

out rough and breathless. “I won’t be as gentle.”

“Yes.”

Parker doesn’t waste another second. He pulls out his fingers, standing up straight and running his thumb along the corner of his mouth, slick with my juices. Keeping my legs apart with his knee, he takes off his shirt in one swift motion.

I’ve seen numerous versions of Hayden Parker: the lanky teenager who danced with me in his front yard to the broody college senior who asked me to marry him. I’ve seen it all and I’ve loved every version. But this ... this Hayden Parker is by far my favorite. Not because he doesn’t have his clothes on—although that is a contributing factor—but because of the way his muscles are in a relaxed haze, the way there’s not an iota of hesitation on his face, the way he’s so comfortable around me. His confidence in the reality of us turns me on more than any filthy promise ever will.

My gaze travels downward, trickling over his abs all the way down to the opening of his jeans, and that V—

“Stop looking at me like that,” he says and I look back up. “Or else you’re going to make me come before I’m even inside you.”

His words coax another smile from my lips and I sit up, bending over to take off my heels.

“No,” Parker says. “Leave them on.”

“Leave them on?”

He tilts his head to the side, the heat from his hazel gaze scraping every inch of my body. “That a problem?”

He could ask me to wear those godforsaken heels and run a marathon tonight, and I’d happily oblige. I pull him down, dragging his body against mine, not realizing until now how badly my body ached to feel his chest against mine.

“Spread yourself for me, sweetheart.” He kisses the side of my jaw. Then my neck, then my collarbone, and all way down, his teeth grazing past my nipple.

I run my hands down his chest, down to between our hips, reaching for his pants. He grinds against me and I feel his hard length against my pussy. Fuck. His breathing gets uneven. I flick open the button and reach inside. He groans right into my ear.

I don't know about him, but I might just come again before he's inside me. I push his pants past his hips, and he scrambles to yank them off completely. I slide my fingers lower and wrap my fingers around his hard cock.

Immediately he tenses up. "Fuck ..." He pushes into my hand, his fingers tightening their grip around my hair. "April, stop. I need to ... fuck."

"What you need," I whisper, "is to be inside me right now." I run my hand along him, firmly but slowly. His hands fist into my hair and he buries his face in my neck, his hot breath falling on my wet skin. I start stroking his cock faster. "Do you want to fuck me?"

"Yes ..." he sighs. "Fuck."

I pick up the pace and he groans into my neck. "Then please, Parker, please fuck me."

He reaches down and brings my hand back up, forcefully pinning both my wrists above my head with his left hand. He lowers his mouth to my nipple and licks it slowly. "Say that again."

"What?"

"April." This time his tone is more assertive and the wetness between my legs increases. He tugs on my nipple with his teeth. Hard. "Say. That. Again."

"Fuck me."

"That's not what you said earlier." His teeth graze past my skin. "Use your nice words. Beg for it."

I can feel all the femininity waft out of my body. "Please ... please fuck me."

With a slow smile curling up his lips, he slides his right hand behind my back. "Good girl, April."

That “good girl” has me writing my wedding vows.

I arch against him, and he positions his tip outside my folds. He pushes in just a little, making me inhale my first real breath of the night, then slams into me hard. I moan into his ear, my body losing all strength to bite it back. “God, yes.”

He hardens his grip over my wrists and grunts against my temple, pushing in deeper, settling himself inside me. “Go on. I’m listening.”

He lets go of my wrists and grips my waist, pinning me down to the mattress. Pushing in harder. Deeper. Pounding into me like his life depends on it. Each stroke more possessive than the first. He’s letting me know he wants each and every part of me. With one hand lightly gripping my throat, he pushes in again. And again. “Breathe, sweetheart. I’m just getting started.” Another thrust. I bite my lip.

“Thought I told you not to do that.” He tugs it free with his mouth. Hooking my knees over his arms, he pulls me into him and picks up the pace, fucking me harder and more urgently.

I bunch my hands into his hair. His tongue, hot and soft, moves to the side of my neck, sending shivers up every nerve of my body. I squeeze my eyes shut.

He pushes into me faster. Unapologetic about the way he’s devouring me. “April?”

“Mm-hm?”

“Get on top of me,” he says. Lowering my legs down on the bed, he flips us around, drawing me on top of him. “Your turn.” He grabs my hips and pin them onto him. “I want to watch you fuck me.”

The way Parker is looking at me right now—like I’m the best thing to ever happen to the world. Like if he turns his eyes away, even for a second, his whole life would fall apart.

I’ll do anything for this man.

I place my hands on his chest and start rolling my hips against his, trying to catch my breath.



His calloused palms tighten around my ass. I toss my head back. His fingers dig into my skin and I pick up the pace. We're both moaning now.

He sits up and thrusts into me. Again and again and again. Slow, then deep and hard. I kiss his neck, tasting his sweaty skin.

"Fuck ..." He moves into me, hitting a spot I didn't even know existed, over and over. He gives both my nipples a hard pinch, and I wrap my hands around him, pressing my mouth into his neck to silence my sobs. "You feel so good." Another pinch.

"God!"

"You're doing so well, Chere." He slaps my nipples and I scream again, his words of praise spreading their warmth across my chest.

He flips us back around so my back is flat against the mattress and continues to push inside me. Deeper. Harder. He brings his hand down between my legs, brushing my clit, and I let out another scream.

He bucks his hips faster and his thumb follows suit, moving in strong, circular strokes. I grip his shoulders and squeeze. "Harder. Go harder ..."

"That's my girl." Parker grips the wooden headboard's edge, using it to push himself into me. The bed creaks with each thrust. The sound only seems to turn me on more. "I want to feel you come all over my cock."

His strokes go from slow and deep to hard and fast, sending shivers all the way down to my toes.

"Come for me, sweetheart."

It's his voice. And that "sweetheart" ultimately does it for me. I feel jolts of electricity run up my thighs, my spine, everywhere.

I'm coming undone.

His lips find my mouth again and I sigh into his. He thrusts into me one last time, filling me to the hilt before I feel him

tense. His hand tightens over my wrists, and I feel him come into me.

“Fuck,” he exhales and pulls back to look at me, red splotches across his cheeks.

“I think I just died ... and went to heaven,” I say.

He brings his mouth down to mine, kissing me slowly, and I laugh into it.

“Oh, we’re not done yet,” he says.

“We’re not?”

“April, if you can still form whole sentences by the time I’m done having my way with you ...” He lowers himself between my legs and gives my pussy one long lick, turning my weak protests into a soft sigh. “I obviously haven’t done my job right.”

Then he shows me what heaven really is.

# Chapter Twenty-Five

## Present Day

### APRIL

**R**egardless of the glamorous and alluring picture most people have in mind, attending a Hollywood premiere is quite tedious. We got here an hour ago, and since then, it's been work, work, work.

Well, work for me. Parker was instructed to stay put in a very specific corner and “not move an inch.” Now, ten minutes later, with Tony and Kripke seated inside, I glance over my shoulder and catch Parker looking at me. He waves as discreetly as possible and I walk toward him. “You ready?”

“You look really pretty.”

Blushing, I adjust his bow tie. “You look prettier. I can't believe Tony just had an extra tux in his suitcase. Not that I'm complaining.”

He laughs.

“Okay, we need to walk the red carpet now. Tony's inside. So are Markus and the rest of the crew.”

Parker's eyes dart around the place, taking in the insistent cries and the flashing cameras of the press as various celebrities make their way down the red carpet.

“Hey, you good?” I ask as he toys with the publicist badge snaked around my neck.

“Yeah,” he says. “I'm with you. Of course, I'm good. Might be the post-sex high wearing off.”

“Wanna sneak off to the bathroom and do it on the sink?”

“Don’t tempt me,” he says, hooking his arm around mine, then leans down to plant a kiss over the strap of my dress. “April?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re the prettiest girl I know.”

My lips resolve in a soft line and I smile. “Yeah?”

He slides his hand down and wraps his fingers around mine. My smile creeps out, full power, and he kisses the corner of my mouth. “By a long shot. Wherever that smile goes, I follow.”

We make our way to the center of the red carpet, stopping in front of the countless camera flashes for our picture to be taken. Normally, publicists pose on the red carpet. They arrive, wait in the Publicists’ Pen, then possibly be on the red carpet but with the celebrity they’re escorting, who poses for paparazzi. But ever since Tony’s earlier debacle, he’s been trying extra-hard to suck up to me. Hence the extra pass for the red carpet.

“I don’t know how this works,” Parker admits in a hushed tone. “I’ve never actually posed on the carpet.”

“Just smile and wave.”

Another flash. Then another.

“I’m gonna go blind tonight.” He steps behind me and wrap his arms around my waist, palms resting on the flat of my stomach. “Is this fine?”

“Yeah, if we’re posing for the prom.”

“Here.” I turn around to face him, angling us sideways. “Just look at me and act like I cracked the funniest joke ever.”

He winces.

“Okay, not the response I was going for. But at least we’re going to have that face to look forward to in one of the *Elle* articles tomorrow morning.”

“Hilarious.” He rolls his eyes.

Another series of bright flashes one after the other take place. “God, I hate the paparazzi.”

“Look at you,” I coo. “A true insufferable LA person.”

He tucks a lock of hair behind my ear. “Manhattan is superior for a reason.”

“LA isn’t that bad.”

“It’s like living in a simulation.”

He wraps my arm around my waist and pulls me close. Lifting his chin, he sticks out his leg in some sort of a pose and I smile. Not at the cameras, but at him.

I smile because I love how right it feels to be by his side. I reach down and take his fingers in mine. He looks down at me and twirls me around, settling my hip next to his. “I think I have a crush on you,” he tells me.

“You just made me feel like the main character from a ’90s romcom, Parker.” I stand on my toes to kiss his cheek. “I definitely have a crush on you too.”

A smile brighter than all the flashing cameras combined blooms across his lips. “Main characters are overrated, Chere. You’re the side character who stole the whole show.”

\* \* \*

There are a lot of things in this big, beautiful world that are capable of getting an honest, unfiltered smile from me. Getting to finish a morning Starbucks coffee, a serotonin-inducing trip to Trader Joe’s, watching *Infinity War* for the hundredth time on a Saturday night. It’s a long list.

But nothing—I repeat, nothing—will top this morning, when I woke up with Parker’s arms draped around my stomach. His morning voice and the scratchy “Hey” that grated against my jaw.

After that, the morning was pretty much a blur. We were back where we started, me on top, then him on top, my mouth on his, then his between my legs.

It's a miracle we even made it to the airport, much less caught our flight on time.

"You good?" he asks as the seat belt sign switches off.

"Yeah." I nuzzle close to him, rubbing my cheek against the sleeve of his sweatshirt. "Just a tiny headache. I haven't gotten much sleep this trip."

"My bad," he says, sounding very proud of the fact.

I snicker and look up from his shoulder. "It's a small price to pay for the best sex of my life."

He raises an eyebrow and his smile widens. "Wow, you sure know how to stroke a guy's ego."

"Was that supposed to be a sex joke?"

"Maybe."

"My boyfriend has the dirtiest mind."

He leans down in his seat and lifts his arm to put it around my shoulder, nestling me against the crook of his neck. "Takes one to know one."

"How am I ever going to keep my hands off you?"

He chuckles, bringing his hand up to my temple as he starts to massage it gently. "Does that feel good?"

I purse my lips and try to suppress another little laugh, but he playfully taps my forehead and I give in.

"Get your mind out of the gutter."

Laughing, I close my eyes and lean against him, hoping this isn't some dream I'm going to be awakened from the second the flight touches New York soil.

"Hey." His lips move against the few strands of my hair above my temple.

"Mm-hm?"

“Do you have to go into work tomorrow?”

I lean back a little to look at him. “Yeah. Why? What’s up?”

He’s not exactly smiling, but something like it. “Do you maybe want to come home with me? I can cook us some dinner. You already have your clothes, and I’ll drop you off at the office first thing in the morning, or wherever it is you need to go.”

“Parker—”

“You can meet Dog.”

“Parker.”

I, on the other hand, am making no effort to hide the stupid, lopsided grin on my face. “You don’t need to use your cat to lure me into your apartment.”

“No? Shit, guess I can return him back to the shelter, then.”

I laugh and his smile creeps out and it fills my heart to the brim.

“So you’ll come?”

“In more ways than one, I hope.”

Almost instantly, he taps my forehead again. “My girlfriend has the dirtiest mind.”

I throw my left arm over his torso. “Takes one to know one.”



# Chapter Twenty-Six

## Present Day

### APRIL

**P**arker sets our bags down next to his couch. “Please go easy on me. I’m jet-lagged and emotionally unprepared for whatever you have to say about my apartment.”

“But I love it!” I hang my coat on the coatrack next to his door and peruse the place: a beige couch, an overstuffed chair with a throw blanket folded over the arm, a half-read comic book upside down on the coffee table. It’s like being inside Hayden Parker’s brain.

A tiny squeal-like sound comes from underneath the couch. I promptly bend down to find its source, but Parker beats me to it.

Extending an arm underneath the couch, he stands back up with Dog the cat curled up in his arms. “April, Dog. Dog, April.”

“Can I hold him? Does he need to sniff my hand first? I don’t know how this works.”

Ignoring all my very valid questions, Parker dumps his child in my arms. “You’ll be fine. He likes everyone I like.”

“Smooth.” I scratch the top of his white furry head and Dog closes his eyes, making a light purring sound. “Oh, my God!” I gasp. “He does like me!”

Smiling, Parker takes out his phone. “I’m sorry, this is—I need a new lock screen.”

I hold Dog up next to my face—*Lion King* style—and try to imitate the wide-eyed look on his face.

“Perfect.” He taps on the camera button multiple times, taking at least twenty burst shots.

“This is so weird,” I say, as he changes my lock screen from the pouty Starbucks cup selfie to an equally comical one. “Cats normally hate me.”

Dog purrs away, nestled in my arms, and Parker steps toward me, bending down to kiss the top of his head. “I told you. He likes who I like. And I love you.”

“Huh.” I bite back a smile and put him down atop one of the couch cushions. “That’s weird, because I love you too,” I say and walk out to the fire escape. “You know, when I first moved to the city, I always wanted an apartment with one of these balconies. I really love your place.”

He steps out with me. “It’s just an apartment, April.”

“No, it’s an amazing apartment. It has so much of you in it.”

He wraps his arms around my waist, hugging me from behind. “And now it has all of me in it.”

As I lean back into him, I point to the bed of roses situated on the rusted metal floor in front of us. “You have a rose garden?”

“I do.” He rests his chin on my shoulder.

“You have a cat and plants?” I turn around, wrapping my arms around his neck. “Fucking show-off.”

He laughs and kisses the tip of my nose. “I love you.”

“I know.”

He plants another kiss between my eyes. “Rude.” He moves his mouth down to my jaw, turning my laugh into a soft sigh.

“I’m always rude to you,” I say.

“It’s part of your charm.”

“Really?”

He kisses my neck. “Mm-hm.”

“Is that all?”

He slips his hands up my T-shirt and my breath hitches the second his fingertips reach the seam of my bra. “I love your hair ... and your smile.” He unhooks my bra and palms my breasts. I arch my back, pressing myself into his hands. “Your hands.” He sucks on the side of my neck. “And how they fit so perfectly around my cock.”

Oh, God.

He moves his fingers to my nipples, rolling them between his thumb and index finger. “I also love your impractical shoes.”

A half-laugh, half-moan escapes my lips. “My shoes do it for you?”

“You do it for me.” He kisses my jaw. “And yes, I love your shoes. But I’m sure they’d look better propped up on my shoulders.”

His presses his hand on my hipbone, the other sliding across my back, grinding himself against me. He flicks open the button of my jeans and slides a hand down, running his fingers over the fabric of my underwear. I’m so wet and he hasn’t even started yet.

“You want me inside you, Chere?” he says and I nod.

I nod vigorously.

“Where?” He presses a finger against my slit, and I groan into his neck. “That tight pussy or your greedy little mouth?”

I whimper at his words.

“Tell me or I’ll choose for you,” he says and with his finger still rubbing against my underwear, he catches my lower lip and sucks on it.

“Mouth.”

He doesn't waste a single second. Grabbing me by the shoulders, Parker pushes me to my knees, unbuttoning his pants and reaching down to pull out his cock. "You want me to fuck your mouth, Chere?"

I look up as he stands there holding his cock and nod, leaning in to lick the tip.

He moves back. "Say it, sweetheart."

"I want you to fuck my mouth."

Parker moves his hand out of the way and my lips close around the tip and I slide my mouth down his cock. I glance up at him, my mouth moving up and down.

"I forgot how good you are at this." He strokes my hair, sometimes tugging on the strands like he's resisting the urge to bunch it up and hold me still while he fucks my mouth.

"You have such a fine fucking mouth, Chere." He strokes my hair again as I circle my tongue around the tip of his cock, stroking the shaft at the same time. His hand closes lightly around my ponytail. "Relax your throat, sweetheart." He grasps my hair tighter and pushes in deeper.

I moan.

He thrusts in and out, going further and further into my throat each time. "You like this, don't you?" Parker stares down at me, his cock pumping in and out of my throat. "Getting face fucked by me." He pulls out and the second I manage to get out a soft "yes," he shoves his cock back in my mouth. "You look so beautiful taking me. Such a gorgeous fucking mess." His words are driving me crazy, lighting every nerve ending on fire.

Parker lets out one last groan before pulling out of me again.

"Stand up," he instructs and I immediately comply.

The second I stand, he pushes me up against the brick wall and I suck in a sharp breath. The balcony is pretty narrow, so he lifts my legs, wrapping them around his hips, and my feet rest on the railing behind. "Promise to stay quiet?" Excitement

buzzes through my veins. I nod, eager, and move my lower half against his cock as he presses up against me. He smiles. “We’ll see.”

Parker lifts my T-shirt and bra, and lowers his mouth to my breasts.

He swipes his tongue against my nipple and I regret having made that promise. Oh, God. I bite my lip and he presses my clit. A hard swallow moves down my throat.

“Good girl.” He pulls back to yank my top off completely, throwing it to the side, over the bed of roses. My nipples instantly harden as a gust of cool air blows past us. A distant car horn sounds and my eyes widen, darting around the place, and I have my first logical thought since this began: *I shouldn’t have let him take my top off on his freaking balcony for the world to see.*

But Parker’s lips twitch up in a smile and he arches my back toward him, almost making a show of me, and my pussy throbs with anticipation.

Right next to my ear, he whispers, “Take off the rest yourself.”

Maintaining eye contact with him, I lower my feet from the railing and shimmy out of my jeans and underwear. I’m completely naked; anyone could see me and he knows that. He likes that. And I like that.

He lowers himself in front of me, all the while looking up, holding my gaze. My chest rises with my shallow breathing and I widen my stance. “Lean back. And April?” A slow smile forms across his mouth. “No making any noise.”

That’s all he says before his tongue meets my pussy. A few gentle licks at first, quickly replaced by hard tugs and pulls on my swollen clit. I groan and he dives in deeper, pushing my hips back against the wall. I throw my head back, fisting his hair, whispering his name.

Taking my reaction as encouragement, he pushes two fingers inside me, his tongue circling against my clit. Pumping them slow at first, then curling one in a come-hither motion,

hitting that sweet spot he's memorized. He sucks on my clit and a sharp cry leaves my mouth. "I need ... fuck me, please ..."

"Shhh," he whispers against my skin, lightly biting my thigh. "I have to make sure you're warmed up first." He pushes a third finger in, his teeth grazing past my clit as he starts finger-fucking me with more force. My wetness drips down the inside of my thighs, down his hand and all over his tongue. Jesus fucking Christ.

I offer another soft sigh of pleasure and he gives my clit one sharp pull with his teeth. That's all it takes for me to bring my free hand up to my mouth, muffling my moans as I come all over his tongue.

He stands up, holding me up with one arm over my hips, and wipes the corners of his lips with his thumb. "You're fucking perfect, you know that?" he says and plants a lingering kiss on my lips. "My perfect fucking angel," he whispers and slides a hand down between my thighs, barely dipping the tip of his finger into my pussy. I suck in a quick breath. "Let me show you just how perfect."

He pushes in a second finger while his thumb stays put on my clit. A string of moans leaves my mouth and I arch my chest into him. He lowers his mouth to my neck, kissing, sucking, biting, while pumping two fingers in and out of my cunt.

"Inside ... I want you inside me. Please," I whimper. "Please fuck me."

"I'll give you anything you want, sweetheart." He kisses my cheek, pulls his fingers out, and spins me around. "Hands on the wall."

I glance back, the corner of my lips twitching up in a faint smile, placing my palms flat against the red bricks.

He kneads my ass with one hand.

A soft plea leaves my mouth as he moves his hard length along my wetness. "Please, Parker. Stop making me wait."

He grabs me by the waist and picks up my underwear from the ground. I look back at him standing there with my panties in his hand, and he pauses for a minute before stuffing them in my mouth.

“You’re going to keep quiet while I fuck you as hard as I like,” he whispers into my ear as the footsteps of a few pedestrians down the street echo up to us. “Understand?”

Nodding and shivering as Parker’s cock runs over my clit, I’m barely able to stifle a scream when he pushes forward, thrusting himself into me. He grabs my ass hard and I clench the wall, fighting to not be thrown into it.

Parker leans to his side to watch my breasts sway hard back and forth as he stands on the balls of his feet, his hips extended so he can drive deeper inside. “Look at you.” He runs his hand up the side of my face and pushes my panties into my mouth. I bite down hard on the fabric as Parker runs his finger across my lips, ramming into me with a newfound conviction. Deeper this time. “Sshh ...” He grips my hair and forces my head back up. “Only I get to hear how much you love my cock in that tight little pussy.”

He tightens his grip around my hip and starts fucking me uncontrollably. Desperate and hungry for more. “You like this? Getting fucked in the open for anyone to see?” His hand lifts off my skin, then falls back with a tight slap on my bare ass.

A loud moan leaves my throat.

At this point, I don’t give a fuck who sees us or hears us. His hands bunch in my hair. It almost feels like we’re setting the air around us on fire.

“Do you think they’re watching?” he says, tilting his head at the street.

I bite down on my underwear and nod, and Parker slowly increases his speed. “Do you want them to be?”

I nod again, and he fucks me even harder. We’ve reached a steady pace now, his hands firm on my waist. “Then they’re watching us,” he breathes. “They’re watching me fuck you ...” His voice trails off. He looks down at me, his thrusts growing



deeper. I slide my thumb toward my clit and slowly start rubbing it, faster, harder, matching the pace of his thrusts. A string of whimpers and cries gets lost in the fabric of my panties.

“That’s it, baby,” he says and I increase the pressure over my clit. “Come for me.”

A single cry of pleasure rips through my throat and Parker’s breathing gets heavier as he slides in and out of me with increasing pace. “Your pussy was made for me, wasn’t it?” He brings both hands over my shoulders, pulling me into him again and again, till nothing exists. Nothing but the sound of our panting filling up the cold New York air. Nothing but the muffled sound of his name leaving my lips. Louder and louder each time. My pussy tightens over his cock.

“That’s it. Such a good girl.” He goes on fucking me, drawing out another orgasm, fisting my hair in his fingers. One more frantic thrust and he lets go too, coming inside me. Our bodies melt into each other, my back against his chest.

Both of us are panting, trying to get over the madness we just got caught up in.

He helps me stand straight and flips me around, pushing my back against the uneven surface of the wall. I remove my underwear from my mouth, letting it fall, and Parker’s hand finds the side of my face, running through my sweaty hair. “Was that a lot?”

I close my eyes and sigh. “Whatever that was, I want to do it again. Exactly like that.”

Smiling, he presses his mouth firmly into mine. “Perfect answer.”

\* \* \*

We have sex two more times.

After which I decide I need a shower and he insists on making us dinner.

As soon as I enter Parker's room, I question my life choices.

My own room is a pile of clothes on a chair that I have never used for sitting even once. Clean laundry stays in my hamper for days on end, and if there aren't at least three empty cups lying on my window sill, it's probably because I'm out of town or dead.

His room, on the other hand, is a pristine contrast to mine. The sort of room that would show up on Pinterest if you entered "clean room aesthetic" in the search bar. Oozing with responsibility and navy-blue sheets.

And not a single empty cup in sight. Now, that's impressive.

I make my way toward the bathroom door, my legs still aching from our sex marathon on his balcony, his couch, and on top of his dining table.

I stop in my tracks. I don't have a towel. I was using the hotel towel all this while, and no matter how good the sex is, using another man's damp towel is where I draw the line.

I call out his name, but he doesn't respond. He probably has them in his closet. I throw my clean clothes on his bed and open the closet door. It doesn't take long for me to spot one, since he keeps his closet as organized as I don't.

I reach out for the one on top of the stack of three, and as I do, a couple of papers fall to the floor. Shit. I bend down to pick them up, and that's when it happens.

The kiss in the rain, the blue sweatshirt, the matching helmets—all of it, thrown on a pyre and lit on fire. Instant obliteration.

My heart sinks in my chest and all the remaining butterflies drop dead.

Unsigned divorce papers. Name of spouse: Shara Kendricks.

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

## Eight Years Ago

### HAYDEN

“**W**hat the hell are you wearing?”

Logan doesn't respond. He just stares back at me, hands shoved inside the pocket of his baseball jacket and his brown hair disheveled.

April snickers and gives me a look, to which I nod back. *Yeah, I know, right?* We walk down the stairs and toward her truck. The heat from the parking lot hits me with a heavy, wet slap.

“What?” Logan finally asks.

“Your girlfriend's going to kill you,” I tell him.

He doesn't look fazed in the slightest. “Nothing new with that,” he responds with a shrug. “That's just Shara for ‘I love you.’”

I scoff. April steps in front of me and adjusts my tie for the tenth time. I place my chin on her head. “I don't think she's gonna be very loving when you walk in looking like you just got back from a Yankees game.”

Shara couldn't care less about Logan's fashion sense, but she was very clear—and by that, I mean hellbent—that the three of us show up at her work event in upscale casual. She works for a big fashion line, so the pressure is really on. I couldn't tell you the name of the company even if I wanted to. It's some big French word. Or at least, that's what I think.

“It’s okay, Logan,” April says, turning to him. “You can always sleep on our couch.”

“Hey!” Logan says with more apprehension in his voice this time. “It’s not my fault that you two are dressed like we’re going to the fucking Oscars tonight.” His eyes flick down at April and he points at her blue dress. “You look ridiculous.”

She gasps and I wrap my arms around her, kissing the top of her head. “Don’t listen to him. He’s just jealous. You look beautiful, Chere.”

She tilts her chin up and gives me a smile. “You have to say that.”

I arch an eyebrow. “I do?”

She lifts her left hand, flashing the tiny gold ring. “Yeah, you do,” she says.

It took a while—seven months, to be precise—but after landing a couple of small freelance writing jobs here and there, I managed to save up for an actual engagement ring. And not just any generic ring. This one has green vines on the top. Yellow and green. Rogue colors. She hasn’t taken it off, even for a second.

I kiss her forehead. “Doesn’t make it any less true.”

April wiggles out of my embrace and spins to face me. My eyes unwittingly drop to the thigh-high slit of her dress. Conveniently using the distraction to her advantage, April snags the car keys from my pocket and runs to the driver’s seat. “I’m driving!”

“April,” I chide.

Logan rushes to the truck and yells, “Shotgun!”

I shoot him a look. “Shotgun? What are you, twelve?”

He opens the passenger-side door and slides in. “No time to argue. We’re getting late, dude. My girlfriend’s gonna kill you.”

April shrugs, laughing a little. “Sorry, dude,” she says, “but rules are rules.”

Idiots. Rolling my eyes, I slide into the back seat.

April starts the engine and we pull out to the exit. She puts on some music and for the next ten minutes, Logan and April fight over the aux. He wants Eagles. She wants Taylor Swift. It's a fight I'm happy not to be a part of.

"Get your hands off the cable." She whacks his arm and looks back at me for a brief second. "Parker, please tell this man this car is for Swifties only."

I do as I'm told and Logan slumps back in his seat, muttering a not-so-discreet, "Fucking whipped." April laughs and I kick the back of his seat.

A few more minutes pass and Logan sits up straight. "You guys don't think she'll actually be mad, right?" He means Shara. And yes, unfortunately, I do think she'll be way more than just mad when she sees his outfit. He hesitates to say the next words, but I don't really need them to understand what's bothering him. While I was saving up to buy April an engagement ring, Logan has been saving up to pay his way through stunt school. It's insane, maybe even a little ridiculous, but it's all he's ever wanted to do. Ever since I've known him. Three years.

The adrenaline, the rush; apparently it "speaks" to him.

"You can wear my blazer instead," I tell him. "I look like I'm going to the Oscars anyway."

He nods, still not saying anything, and April turns back, mouthing a silent, "That was sweet."

She's smiling. It's a gorgeous fucking smile. It's like the sun. Bright and warm and a fucking gift to mankind. I love her smile.

I half open my mouth to say those exact words to her, but instead end up yelling a frantic, "April! Watch out!"

She looks out the windshield, but it's too late.

Too bright.

She grips the steering wheel. Tires screech. Horns blast. She swerves left.

There's a blaring sound.  
Someone screams.  
Then silence.  
And darkness.  
More silence. Deafening silence.

\* \* \*

My eyes flutter open. My arms hurt. My legs ... "April ..."

My ears are ringing. Where ... where is she? Smoke rolls in through a hole in the windshield and I gag at its oily stench. "April!" I'm screaming, but the sound is nothing but a sob. I try moving. Pain flares in my thigh. Fuck.

April.

I unbuckle my seat belt and get out of the car, nearly falling over, dizzy.

Limping to her door, I pull it open. There's glass shattered all over her face. I try unbuckling her seat belt but it's stuck. I shake her. "Wake up, Chere."

She doesn't.

Her head looks like it's hurt. Her arms are bent in a weird position. I'm confused by how they got that way, but it doesn't look pretty.

There's blood everywhere.

Nononono.

*April, please wake up.*

The smell of fuel leaking from her car makes my stomach turn. I cover my nose in order to breathe properly and yank on her seat belt.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

I finally get it off.

I pull her out. My hands are wet.

Wet and red.

I don't know whose blood it is. Don't let it be hers.  
Pleasepleaseplease.

A couple of people appear, pulling me back.

Dragging me from the truck.

April is in my arms. Her head is hurt.  
Wakeupwakeupwakeup.

Other voices are lost in the background.

*Chere, please wake up.*

Someone screams again. Where is all this blood coming from? It hurts. Something hurts. I pull her closer to my chest. My eyes fall to her hand. There's blood on her ring. I can't breathe. Everything hurts. "April ..."

Pleasepleasepleaseplease.

A hand settles over my shoulder. I look back. I can't make out who it is. I hear the words "hospital" and "ambulance."

Logan.

Logan.

"My friend ..." I'm not sure who I'm talking to, or if I'm even audible. "He's still in the car ..." It hurts to talk. I don't want to leave April alone. She's not moving. She's not breathing. Tears well up in my eyes. I bury my face into her head.

I'm yelling out her name. Crying. I can barely hear my own voice over all the noise.

Sirens blare in the distance.

Everything is happening in slow motion.

Someone tries prying her out of my arms. *We need to stop the bleeding*, they tell me. Tears trickle down my face. Or maybe it's blood. I don't know anymore.



But I don't let go of her. I can't.

She's not awake yet. I can't leave her alone. She needs to wake up first. I try telling them but no one is listening.

Logan is still in the car.

*April.*

He's still in the front seat.

*April, wake up.*

My whole body is crying.

*April, please wake up.*

I close my eyes.

*Please.*

They stay closed for a while.

A while.

\* \* \*

It's been four hours.

The moment we stepped through the hospital doors, April was set on a stretcher. There was blood all over the white sheets. I tried following them to wherever the fuck they were taking her, but they didn't let me. It took me a while to realize I was bleeding too. But I just needed stitches. Which means all the blood over my shirt was April's.

The doctors said she's going to be fine.

She's going to be fine.

I've been sitting by her bed for four hours.

"Parker," a familiar voice says. I blink sluggishly. The voice repeats, "Parker?"

When I try opening my eyes, everything is out of focus. My vision is blurry. My arms and legs are heavy. There are shadows, dark and light. A bed. The smell of bleach is ripe.

My eyes snap open.

I know that voice.

“April?” I whisper, my own voice raspy.

When she says my name again, instant tears build in my eyes. Her hand goes to her head. The movement pulls on the IV stand. She glances up, confusion slathered all over her face. Her eyes move back to me. “Wh-what ... what happened—”

It takes a single stride for me to close the distance between us and I pull her into a hug. “We got in an accident ... it was ...” I shake my head and tighten my arms around her, not giving a single fuck if I’m hurting her right now. *You’re alive.* “Fuck, April, don’t you ever scare me like that again.”

“My face ...” she mumbles. “I can’t feel it.”

I pull back and take her face in my hands. “The doctor gave you some pain medication.”

Her frown deepens. She looks as overwhelmed as I feel. “I can’t remember what ... I was driving and then ... I don’t ...” she pauses. Her eyes flick up to my forehead. “Wait, are you okay?” She lifts her hand to touch my stitches. “Why are you ... did I do that?” Her face almost breaks. “Oh, my God, I’m so sorry.”

I shake my head. “Don’t say that. I’m fine, Chere. I’m more than fine. And you’re okay too.”

The groove between her eyebrows deepens. I run my thumb over her cheek, careful not to touch her wounds. “Do you need something? Water? Should I call the nurse?”

She’s still not saying anything. Her lips are quivering.

“Wh-what’s wrong, Chere?”

“Are you hurt? I don’t remember what happened.” She bursts out crying.

“No, no, no.” I pull her back into a hug. “Please don’t cry.”

Her hands fist into the back of my T-shirt.

“What did I do?” she asks.

“You did nothing, Chere. I love you.”

“Where’s Logan?”

My throat starts to close up, but I power through. “We’re going to be fine,” I tell her.

“He was in the passenger seat,” April says.

I nod into her hair. “You’re okay.”

“Where is he?” This time it’s barely a murmur. “Is he here? In the hospital? Is he hurt too? I want to see him. I need to apologize.” She tries pulling back but I don’t let her. “Why won’t you tell me?” I can hear the panic in her voice.

I don’t say anything. I don’t know what to say.

She pushes me back and tugs on the tubes stuck on the top of her hand. “I-I need to see him.”

I clasp her wrist. “April, stop. Don’t fucking do that.”

“I need to see him,” she repeats.

“You can’t.”

A pause.

She looks up, her eyes teeming with tears. “Wh-what are you saying? What do you mean, I can’t?”

The monitor next to her bed beeps, the steady pace turning into something more urgent.

“April.”

“What do ... where is he?”

Beepbeepbeepbeep.

My hands slide up her arms and I pull her into my chest. At first she tries pushing me away again. She’s shaking her head. Sobbing. Crying. “Please ... where is he?”

“They couldn’t ...” The lump in my throat grows bigger.

She shakes her head repeatedly. She’s not fighting me anymore. She’s crying. We both are. “The doctor said there was too much internal bleeding.”

“Stop ... stop it. You’re lying.”

“They said they tried their best.”

“No ... no ... no!” She hits my arms. Again. And again.  
And again.

I tighten my grip around her.

She cries harder. So do I.

We cry and we cry and we cry.

And I don’t think we ever stop.

# Chapter Twenty-Eight

## Eight Years Ago

### HAYDEN

**A**t our age, everything is changing. It's hard to notice, but one day you look back and realize everything has changed. People you thought were going to be there forever aren't. People you thought you'd be speaking to are now a distant memory. Nothing makes sense and nothing feels good anymore.

Sometimes, trauma brings out the best in people. No matter what you've faced and lost, you will come out of it strong.

But sometimes, all it does is bring out one's worst.

I'm sitting on our couch, lazily flipping through the channels on the television, when April walks out of our room. She's wearing a short black dress and an overcoat.

She doesn't look at me.

It's been six months since the accident.

Six months since Logan.

Six months since April's looked at me for more than a few seconds.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

Her answer is curt and to the point. "Out." She brushes the hair away from her face and keeps her eyes locked on her shoes. The scars around her eyes are healing. The ones on her wrists aren't. Those came later.

“Out where?”

“To a bar,” she says.

I put the TV on mute and sit up. “With?”

“Friends.”

I frown. We don’t have those anymore. It used to be the two of us. Me and April. Then it became the four of us. Me, April, Shara, and Logan. Now, it’s all a mess.

Shara asked April not to come to his funeral. I remember coming back home to find April in the bathroom. The door was locked and it took me two hard rams before it swung open. She hadn’t done anything. Not yet. She was fully clothed, sitting in a corner with her arms clinging around her legs, and her knees pressed to her chest. Not crying, not talking, just sitting.

Sitting and shivering.

I pulled her into a hug and held her for hours. Eventually we fell asleep right there on the bathroom floor. That was the last time I held April in my arms. She acts like she doesn’t need me, and I act like I don’t need her either. It’s easier that way.

“I need names, April,” I tell her. “And a number I can call.”

This time she looks up. “A number you can call?”

I give her a look that says, *don’t make this harder than it needs to be.*

She scoffs. “Fine.” She starts fishing around inside her purse and my eyes zero in on the ring on her finger. A small reminder of the girl I fell in love with.

She gives me a number and starts to head out.

“When are you going to be back?” I ask.

“I don’t know.” Her hand is on the doorknob but she hesitates to open it.

“April.”

She turns around. “You need to stop treating me like a child.”

“I’m worried about you.”

“I can take care of myself,” she insists.

I stand up. “Like you have in the past?”

Silence.

April shakes her head, running her fingers through her hair. “We’re really gonna have this fight again?”

“I’m not trying to fight with you, April,” I say. “There is no fight here. It’s just you being stubborn as fuck.”

“How am I being stubborn? I just want to go out for a little bit.”

“Oh, yeah? Like you have every night for the past two months? What are you doing to do this time? Get drunk, call me a hundred times, then pass out? Or have one of these new fucking friends drop you home at four in the morning?”

The words are harsh, but they are true.

“You don’t get it,” she says.

“You’re right, I don’t. But I know the person you are. And deep down, that person is still there. I just want her to come back.”

More silence. I just want my fucking April back.

“Have you taken your meds today?” I try changing the subject. When she doesn’t respond, I fucking lose it. My mouth twists in a firm scowl and I walk to the bathroom, grabbing her bottle of pills. “I’ll stop treating you like a child when you stop acting like one.”

April takes a step back. “I’m not taking them.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because I can’t drink if I do.”

My face goes slack. Is she fucking serious right now? “Listen to yourself, April. Take the pill,” I repeat.



“No.”

“April, just have the fucking meds.”

“No. You don’t understand.” April presses a fist to her lips, shaking her head repeatedly. “Those meds put me to sleep, Parker. I’m not having them.”

I almost soften at her words. Since everything happened, April has hardly slept for more than four hours, and even that can’t be considered sleep. Most nights she wakes up screaming and thrashing. She refuses to see a doctor or talk to a therapist, and as much as I want to help her, I don’t know how.

Every day it tears me apart, knowing I can’t help my friend, no matter how much I want to.

I don’t know what to do.

I don’t know what to do other than hold her and hope it fixes her. But she doesn’t let me hold her.

I take a step forward and she takes an even bigger one back.

“I don’t need you,” she says, holding out a hand like I’m the damn plague.

“Don’t say that.”

“I don’t need you,” she repeats.

“April, this is not a damn joke anymore. You might not need me, but you need to take your meds on time. Despite what you think, taking care of you twenty-four-seven is not a fucking fun activity for me either.”

It’s like a fucking dance we’ve been practicing for so long.

She acts like she doesn’t need me.

I act like I don’t need her.

Words turn into harsh sentiments and there’s nothing either of us can do to fucking stop them.

“Then do us both a favor and stop.” April’s crying and I’m trying not to. “I am sick of it. I am sick of you looking at me

like I'm something that needs to be fixed."

"April ..."

The buzzer rings beside the door, cutting me off. I head over to the speaker box and press the button. "Hello?"

"Hi, it's me." Shara.

April inhales sharply, shifting on her feet.

I don't know why Shara's here, but I'm not about to send her away. "Come on up."

April quickly buttons up her coat and walks past me, grabbing the house keys from the basket.

"April, wait." I try holding her hand but she brushes me off. A few seconds later, there's a soft knock at the door. April's face shrinks further. I open the door and Shara walks in.

"Hey," she tells me, giving me a half hug. "I'm sorry to drop in unannounced." She's actively avoiding April's gaze. "I just ... I couldn't sleep and I didn't want to be alone."

"Of course." I force a smile her way. If our interaction bothers April in the slightest, she doesn't let it show. Instead she walks around us, aiming for the door.

"April, stop." I grab her arm. This time she doesn't fight me. Her eyes flick to Shara for a brief second and back to me. She mouths a silent *please*.

"Is something wrong?" Shara whispers loudly as if we aren't all standing at arm's length from each other. "Should I leave?"

April shakes her head, tears welling up in her eyes. "No, don't leave. I'll go." My grip around her arm tightens in desperation. "What do you want from me?" She turns around.

Shara's hand goes to my shoulder. "I'll come by another time."

April's eyes move to the spot where Shara's palm meets my shoulder and when she looks back at me, everything hurts more than it should.

“No,” April says. “Stay. I should be the one leaving.”

I say the first thing I can think of. “No, you’re not.” She’s clearly upset, angry, maybe even confused. “You’re not going anywhere like this. You need to start talking to me, April.”

“Let go of my hand, Parker,” she emphasizes.

I should take April inside. I should talk to her. Hold her. Comfort her. I should tell Shara to go home and that she’s right, this isn’t a good time. I need to be here for April right now.

But maybe that’s the thing about grief and losing someone. You hardly ever react the way you’re supposed to. “Stop being so fucking selfish right now. You’re not the only one who’s going through it. We all are. I still have you, and you still have me.” I point to Shara. “She doesn’t. The only person whose tantrums are excusable are hers. And even she has a better grip on fucking reality than you do right now. Stop making this all about you.”

April’s face twists in hurt.

“Parker,” Shara tries chiming in. I ignore her. I don’t really know why I’m saying all these things to April. What happened, happened to all of us, but that doesn’t mean we’re all going to process it in the same way. I could lose a hundred Logans and Shara could lose a hundred more, and it would still affect April in a way that neither of us can fathom. She lost her parents in a car crash. She might not remember them, but she does remember the crash. This hits hard for her. I know that. Then why am I not being nice to her? Why am I being such a fucking asshole? I’m making it all worse. But I can’t stop. The words won’t stop.

“You keep saying you don’t need me,” I scoff. “Really? You really think you don’t need me, April? Well, guess what, if it wasn’t for me, you wouldn’t even be—”

“Parker, *stop*.” Shara raises her voice.

The whole room is bathed in silence.

Fuck.

“April, I didn’t mean—”

“Finish your sentence,” she whispers. My fingers are still wrapped around her other hand and I draw them in. “If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t even be alive.”

“April ...”

“You think I don’t know that?” Tears fall down her face. “You think I don’t know that? If it wasn’t for me, then maybe Logan would still be alive.”

Before either of us can react to her words, a sharp ringing comes from her purse. Her phone. She takes it out and cuts the call.

It rings again.

She cuts it again.

I’m being a dick right now, and so fucking hypocritical, but I need to get out of here.

I need to get out of here before I say the wrong thing again.

“Pick up the damn call, April. I need some air.” I storm out the door.

Shara follows me.

\* \* \*

By the time I get back home, it’s five in the morning. I spent the night at Shara’s. We just talked. I would never fucking do that to April. No matter what.

As soon as I open the apartment door, something seems off. I head into our room. The bed is a mess. A few things are scattered here and there. April’s unicorn hat is peeking out from underneath her pillow.

My first thought is, *have we been robbed?*

My second thought is, *where is April?*

My stomach drops.

“April!” I rush to the bathroom, only to find it empty. “Chere!” No, no, no. I bolt out and something on the dining table catches my eye.

April’s ring.

Resting on top of a piece of paper.

An envelope.

A letter.

*Dear Parker,*

*It’s three in the morning right now. My eyes hurt from crying and my head feels like someone just threw a bag of bricks at it. I don’t know how to say everything I want to say in a letter, but I’m going to try.*

*I met you at a strange time in my life. I was broken and sad and just exhausted from keeping everything bottled up inside. But that’s every fifteen-year-old, isn’t it? I was nothing special. I was a sad, ordinary girl who thought she wasn’t built for this world. All I wanted to do was disappear. But then I met you and realized I just wanted to be found.*

*You were a little broken too, I could tell. But it was a different kind of broken. A beautiful kind. A lonely kind. Maybe that’s why we clicked so well. Two kinds of broken trying to fix each other. I can’t explain it, but I think that night I fell in love with you. I know, I was just a kid. There’s no way I knew what love even was. But it didn’t matter to me back then. Sometimes you meet someone and you just know that on some level the two of you belong together. As friends or as family, or something entirely different.*

*Imagine my surprise when I found out we read the same kind of comics. It’s rare to find people who understand the things you love. It’s even rarer to find someone who loves the same things you love.*

*I don’t think I’ve ever told you this, but when I first got into X-Men, I didn’t really like Rogue. She was an unsure and insecure teenager, and reminded me too much of myself. I didn’t like that. But slowly, my dislike turned into jealousy.*

*What I would give to steal someone's memories by touch. I hated my own.*

*It's a grim reason to idolize a fictional character, but when something speaks to you, it just speaks to you.*

*The night I asked you to kiss me was the scariest night of my life. It didn't help that you looked just as scared. But that night was everything to me. I had just kissed the boy I loved.*

*I wanted you to be my first kiss. My first everything.*

*I miss those kids.*

*I miss who we used to be.*

*I miss being in love with you.*

*For months now, I've been hoping things would get better between us. But I don't think that's possible anymore. Holding onto a past idea of us has been dragging me down into a sad and dark place, and I miss the sunlight.*

*After you stormed out tonight, I got a call from Holly. Something's happened and I need to go home for a while. I don't know when I'll be back, but in all honesty, I don't think I'm coming back at all. It hurts too much. Every time I look at you, I relive the accident. And I know you do too. I'm scared that one day, you're going to wake up and stop loving me back. Don't give me that look. It's already started. You hardly ever want to be around me. And I don't blame you. I don't want to be around me either.*

*I'm not giving up on us. I'm simply letting go. I need to be there for my sister right now. I need to be around someone who doesn't look at me like I'm something that needs to be fixed. I need to be around someone who doesn't look at me with regret. More than anything, I need to be around someone who doesn't remind me of what I've done. And the people I've hurt.*

*I'm sorry if I'm making this all about me again. I don't mean to. But sometimes, I tend to, and for that I apologize.*

*Being in love with someone and loving someone are two very different things. So, please know that while I still love you*

*—you're my best friend and I'll love you forever—I don't think I'm in love with you anymore. I'm sorry if I'm breaking your heart. I don't know if I am. Mine feels like it's been broken forever. I hope that in time, you'll forgive me.*

*By the time you read this, I'll be on a flight to New York. I've taken all my meds with me. I promise to take them on time. I'm starting to cry again and I still have a lot to do before leaving so I'm going to stop writing now.*

*I don't know how to say goodbye to you. I never thought I would. I'm leaving my ring behind. As much as I'd like to say, "I hope you find someone who deserves it more than I do," I can't. I hope that one day we'll meet again, when we're not so broken. Maybe one day we'll be right for each other. Maybe.*

*But not today. Today we don't work, and as much as I care for you, I can't keep pretending we do.*

*Your friendship has meant the world to me, Hayden Parker. Don't you ever forget that.*

*Thank you for saving me. But more than anything, thank you for always loving me. Please don't think that I take that for granted. You've been so perfect and so patient through all of this. But there's a heaviness in my heart that I can't seem to get rid of.*

*So it's goodbye for now, but maybe one day it won't be.*

*I love you.*

*April.*

# Chapter Twenty-Nine



## Present Day

### APRIL

**D**ivorce papers. Divorce papers? My fingers dig deeper into the edges as I hold on to them, stare into them, trying to make sense of it all.

This is—it can't be true. It isn't true. Of course not. It has to be a joke. A sick one, but a joke nonetheless. It can't be.

Parker can't be married. He would've told me. He would have.

The air seems to get thinner around me.

My eyes scan the sheet of paper over and over again, and it starts to seep in that maybe this isn't a joke.

It can't be. *Please don't be true.*

I run my fingers over her name, then his name, scratching the spot where his signature is supposed to be. What kind of twisted bullshit is this? He's married? To *Shara*?

I'm shaking.

What have I done? The room starts to spin. This doesn't make any sense. All of a sudden, the image of him kneeling on one knee, a ring in his hand, is branded onto my brain. I lean forward, resting my weight on my palms on the stack of towels. I need to breathe.

My head throbs. I close my eyes.

I can't believe this. *Please let it be a joke. Please, please, please.*

I take a deep breath and look at the papers again.

I grab my clothes and walk to the bathroom, stacking the divorce papers back where I found them. I turn on the shower and step into the stall. I run my fingers through my hair, warm water dripping down the bridge of my nose and onto my lips.

I shut my eyes and rest my head against the cold tiles of the bathroom wall and take a few deep breaths. Then I do it again. And again, till nothing works, and before I know it, my back is sliding down the wall. The tears are running down my cheeks. Everything hurts.

I told myself I'd be fine one day. Eight years back, I told myself all this pain would be nothing but a low, throbbing hum underneath my skin.

But maybe that's the thing about life. As you get older, life gets harder and the past gets longer. The pain gets stronger.

\* \* \*

Thirty-five minutes later, I'm back in his living room. Parker's still in the kitchen.

I don't know how to proceed. What do I say? Where do I start? I ruffle the side of my hair with the fucking towel that started it all when I see him lift his hazel eyes to me.

"Hey, Chere. Took you long enough." He smiles and walks toward me. He wraps his arm around my waist and kisses me, his lips scalding every inch of mine.

"I made us tacos."

Did she live here with him?

"Do you want to eat on the couch?"

*I can't do this.*

"We could also sit on the fire escape if you'd like."

Parker is married to Shara. He's her husband.

Husband. The word seeps into my skin, all the way to my bones and I—I can't do this.

“No,” I blurt out.

He pulls back, his hand still hanging on my waist. “What?”

I look down at his hand and immediately take a step back.

“April?” He reaches up to cup my face, but I flinch and he instantly lowers it. “What—what’s wrong?” I can hear the tremble in his voice.

Everything.

“Nothing, I just, um, I need to leave. I—I forgot I have this thing with Holly tomorrow and I haven’t, um—”

“April.”

I look up at his face. His eyes aren't on me anymore. They're on the towel in my hand. “Where did you get that towel?”

“What?” My voice is barely audible.

He steps closer and takes the towel from my hand. “Where did you get this?” he asks, finally looking up to meet my gaze. I can't hold it in any longer. My eyes are hot with tears, and realization detonates all over his face.

He drops the towel and immediately steps toward me, holding my hands. “April, please let me explain.”

I hold on to his hands tighter, afraid there isn't going to be much to hold on to after this conversation. “We're separated. We're not married anymore.”

The word “married” catches me so off guard coming from his mouth that I don't know what to say for a few seconds. Or how to breathe.

I let go of his hands and take a step back, my eyes fixed on the ground beneath our feet.

“I'm sorry,” I whisper.

“W-what?” he stammers.

“I’m—I’m not mad, Parker.” My throat clenches up. “But I am hurt. And more than anything, I’m so, so sorry. I should’ve never left.”

“Sweetheart, why ...” His voice is shaking. “You have nothing to be sorry about. This is my fault. I should’ve told you.”

“Why didn’t you?”

He runs his hands over his face and leans against the wall, his shoulders drooping. “We got married in a courthouse.”

Married. Married. Married.

“Two years after our wedding—”

Wedding. Wedding. Wedding.

I suck in a breath through my nose and look away.

“We moved to New York,” he continues.

“Wait.” I look at him. “Shara is in New York?”

“April,” he begins and now I don’t know if I want to hear this.

“No, I’m sorry, please go on.” I shake my head and try blinking the tears away. He takes a step toward me and reaches out for my hand, but I move away.

He looks at me for a few seconds before looking away, nodding. “It was six years after you left and—we ... it didn’t work out. The court required us to be separated for a year before we could file for divorce, which we did earlier this month.”

Earlier. This. Month.

Part of me wants to hug him, comfort him, because he went through so much and I feel horrible for not being there for him. But I take that part and rip it to shreds with my bare teeth. I’m hurting so much. Logan. Parker. This. All of it.

“How long were you married?”

“Two years.”

Everything fucking hurts. I sit on the couch and bury my face in my palms. “Why haven’t you signed the papers yet?”

“April—”

“Please tell me.”

I hear him sigh. “Just ... please don’t leave.”

I look up. “I won’t,” I say. He doesn’t say anything back and more tears trickle down my face. “But I do need some time to process this.”

The faint glow of the streetlight creeps in, seeping into his tears, bringing them to life. “I didn’t know how else to fill the void you left, April.” His voice is quivering and the tears start trickling down his face. “I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry.” He takes two steps and buries his face into my lap.

I kiss his head. “I’m not mad at you. I promise. You chose to process your grief in a way you saw fit, and that’s okay. I still love you. I will always love you.”

He places his hands my waist, angling his face up at me. He scrunches the hem of my T-shirt. “I should’ve told you. I know that. I made a mistake. I’m sorry. Just, please, let me fix it. Tell me what to do and I’ll do it. I’ll do anything. Just please, don’t go.” He gets up on his knees and lowers his forehead to mine. “I love you.”

“I know.” I clamp my eyes shut and hug his head. *I know you do.*

Tears are streaming down his face and the heat from my own tears stings my cheeks. He brings his lips to mine. “I love you,” he whispers before pressing them against mine. Hard. “I love you,” he repeats, his voice low and filled with pain. He kisses me again, this time with more force.

And I kiss him back. Harder. He tastes like salty tears and regret. This is my least favorite kiss so far.

He brings his hand to the back of my hair, and I hold on to the hem of his T-shirt.

“I. Love. You,” he says.

I bring my hands to his chest and pull myself closer. He goes on repeating the words till they don't make sense anymore. I can't even look at him right now. I can't watch him cry, knowing I'm the reason behind it. "I love you too, Parker. None of this changes that," I say, my lips still tingling. I look at him and see a frown peek between his eyebrows. "But I can't spend the night here."

Disappointment flits across his face for maybe half a second, then he looks away, nodding slowly. All the pain, all the unsaid words—they're all rising up, threatening to spill out of his mouth. I know they are. I can see them.

As I close the distance between us, his hands land back on my waist and I say, "I'm not leaving, Parker." He takes a deep breath, still not meeting my eyes.

For the next few seconds, there's nothing but complete silence in his apartment. Just the distant sound of people walking down his street. He closes his eyes and sighs. A few more minutes pass and he backs away from me, sitting on the edge of the coffee table in front of the couch. Somehow my heart breaks a little bit more.

"How do I trust that?" he whispers. "You left me when I needed you the most."

I don't say anything.

His voice is a low breath. "What happened, happened to both of us, and you just ... you just left me."

"I did."

"Why didn't you come back?" He looks up. "Instead, you just left. Like I meant nothing to you."

"That's not true."

"No, it is." He gets up. "All you had to do was stay with me. I know Holly needed you home, but you could've come back. You broke my heart, April."

"I know."

"And I still loved you. I still love you."

His words are burning through my skin. The truth is burning through my skin. I wipe my eyes. “I know you loved me, Parker. I did, too. But that didn’t make it okay for you to constantly focus on me because your own emotions were too overwhelming. That’s not love.” My words cut through my throat like a knife. “I never wanted to hurt you—”

He cuts me off. “But you did. You did”—his voice breaks —“ and you think it didn’t hurt when you left? You think it didn’t hurt every day when I sat in our apartment and watched how empty your side of the bed was. Everything hurt so much, April,” he sighs. “Because you just left.”

I say nothing. No words. Because it’s all true. It’s all true and it all hurts.

“Logan died. Our friend died and you left.”

Silence. My heart shatters like a ball of glass free falling off a building, and I feel the shards pick me apart. I don’t know which broken piece to follow.

“And Shara,” he says, pain seeping in all over again. “I was going to sign the divorce papers this week and mail them back to the courthouse. I was too scared to lose you again.”

“I understand,” I say and he lifts his gaze to meet mine. “I can’t take back what I did, Parker. And I’m sorry. But it was hard for me too. You did save me, and for that I’m ...” *Eternally grateful* feels like the wrong thing to say. “We were kids. What happened shouldn’t have happened, but it did, and none of us handled it well. I left, and you—you gave up your dream and married Logan’s girlfriend. I went to therapy for years and I’m still having nightmares.”

His eyes go warm and heavy. The back of my nose burns. “Why did you marry her?”

He shakes his head. “I was angry, April. And sad and just fucking confused. I regretted everything I said to you that night. You have no idea. I regretted it so much. I tried calling you but you never picked up and then your number changed. And you never called back.

“I made it my life’s sole purpose to convince myself I didn’t need you.” He keeps going like he’s been waiting for someone to ask him this very question. “That if I enrolled myself at Logan’s stunt school, it would make up for everything. I woke up every day telling myself I was happy. Convincing myself that this was it. Convincing myself I’d somehow fixed everything by marrying Shara. That if we both pretended long enough, it would turn into something real. I kept telling myself she was perfect because she had to be. And that I was happy. Because I had to be.” His voice cracks.

“But I wasn’t. I wasn’t happy, and she wasn’t perfect. She wasn’t you. I went ahead and got married to someone because I wanted to get you out of my head. To fix something I had no control over. That’s some fucked-up shit. You don’t think I regret all of it? I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want you to hate me for everything I already hate myself for. I fucked up, and I’m sorry. I really am. But you have no idea what I went through either. Because you weren’t there.”

My body goes limp.

Parker says nothing. He just watches me as I pick up my bag and my belongings and step out of his door, walking down the first flight of stairs.

I hear his footsteps behind me. “April, please just wait.”

I turn around and look right at him. “Please ... please just give me some time to think about this. I’m not mad at you, but right now the only person I need is me.”

He looks at me and swallows. I don’t know if they were the words he wanted me to say, or the ones I wanted to hear. He takes a step toward me, and I hold my hand out.

“Please don’t,” I say. “If you touch me, I’m not going to be able to walk away.”

He exhales and takes a small step toward me. He puts his palms over my shoulders and kisses my forehead. “Then don’t. I need you to stay,” he whispers. “If you need time to think all of this over, that’s okay. Think with me. If you wake up thrashing and screaming, I want to be there to give you a hug.



We might not have handled it properly back then, but it's different now. We're different now."

Silence encompasses us. I clamp my eyes shut and tighten my grip around my bag. I should probably go inside. Sit down and have a mature conversation about what I'm feeling and work our way through all the baggage. But that's so much easier said than done. I don't even know what it is I'm feeling at the moment: anger, hurt, sadness. I'm not mad that he married Shara. But this incident just hit "play" on a plethora of emotions I've spent years trying not to feel. I'm scared that if I go back inside, I'm going to lash out and say the wrong thing, and make it all worse. This is not a conversation I want to have when I'm this explosive.

"I want to stay," I tell him. "But I don't think I can. And I'm not leaving you, Parker. I just cannot be around you right now. I need you to understand that." Maybe if I hadn't left him in a strikingly similar manner all those years ago, he'd probably still believe me when I say I'm not actually leaving him.

And maybe then I'd believe myself too.

I swallow my tears and walk down the stairs and out the door. As soon as I get onto the street I hear a distant "Fuck!" but I keep walking. I keep walking till his building is no longer in sight. Till his street is no longer in sight.

# Chapter Thirty

## Present Day

### APRIL

People say that in New York, you could strut down Times Square butt-naked and no one would bat an eye. People just don't give a fuck here. And I've never felt more grateful for the sense of privacy that this city offers. Because I spent a better part of the morning crying in a taxi on my way to Paramore. I would've just taken a day off, but considering that Zawe is back in the office, I can't afford to.

The elevator doors open and I step out into the heavily air-conditioned office space.

Emotionally drained, and not enough caffeine in my bloodstream.

I walk toward her office and knock on her door twice.

"Yeah?"

"Morning, Zawe." I open the door and poke my head in. "You asked to see me?"

"Uh-huh, come in," she says in her classic eyes-glued-to-the-laptop-screen posture.

I walk in, the clicking of my pumps echoing in the room.. Just as I'm about to speak, Zawe points her index finger up in a straight, precise manner.

"Before I start, Kripke told me about some screw-up that happened with regard to Tony. Something about him going missing for a couple of hours?"

Oh, great. As if this day couldn't get any worse.

“Zawe, about that—we found him well in time for his interview and made sure the—”

She cuts me off. “I’m going to stop you right there. Because Kripke also told me how well you handled the entire situation. He sounded quite impressed,” she quickly adds, her eyes shifting to me. “Good work. It’s not over yet. You still have a week of PR left with Tony, but I thought I should tell you that despite the vague five thousand dollar charge to Paramore, your desk is safe.”

If this was any other day, I would be ecstatic about getting a pat on the back from Zawe Cooper. She doesn’t really dole them out on a regular basis, as evidenced by the eggshells scattered underneath everyone’s feet at Paramore. But this isn’t any other day.

It’s far from it.

My eyes are still puffy from all the crying, my voice still hoarse from all the silent screaming, and my heart is still trying to recover from all things Hayden Parker.

So instead, the only response I can muster the strength for is a weak smile and a nod.

Zawe narrows her eyes and tilts her head to the side, in a way that shows she knows this isn’t the usual response to a compliment from her. “Have you not had your coffee yet?”

A confused knot forms between my brows. “I had some before leaving.”

“Then why do you look like that? And I’m not talking about the tragic color pairing of your pantsuit and heels,” she says, prompting me to look down at my outfit.

“Have a seat,” she quickly adds before I can process the fact that I decided to wear my red pantsuit with my green pumps. I look like an inside-out Christmas tree.

I slide into the chair across Zawe’s desk and she leans back, still looking at me with her narrowed eyes. “You all right, April?”

I almost laugh. Almost. Because I'm only now realizing she's the first person to ask me that question since the meltdown I had at Parker's apartment. "All right enough to not let it affect my job."

And as soon as that diplomatic lie leaves my mouth, I see something rarer than a four-leaf clover. I see Zawe Cooper smile. It's more of a smirk, but I'm still counting it as a smile.

"You know," she says, "when HR hired you as my assistant, I didn't think you'd last more than a week."

I purse my lips, unsure of where she's going with this. And frankly, a little scared.

"But then on your first day at work, I was forced to change that opinion. There was just something about you that reminded me of myself. I couldn't pin it down at first, but then it came to me." She interlaces her fingers and leans forward, resting her weight on her elbows. "What were you running from when you moved to the city?"

Her question catches me so off guard, I freeze for a good three seconds.

"Don't worry. I won't pry if you don't want to disclose the details. To be honest, I don't really care what drove you to come here, but it was something, wasn't it?"

I rack my brain for anything other than the monosyllabic sounds coming from my mouth. "How, uh, how did you—"

"Oh, please, everyone is running from something or another. You and I were just smart enough to run toward Manhattan. I was in the same boat as you once upon a time. Granted, it might not have been as bad as your situation, or it could've been worse, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that there's only so much you can keep running from. At one point you will have to stop and face whatever it is that's chasing you. And I'm here to tell you that you're strong enough to handle it, or else you wouldn't have lasted more than a week with me."

Her smirk slowly turns into a soft smile. "Take a few days off. Get some rest."

“Oh, no, that’s not necessary, Zawe.”

“April.” Her voice bounces back to its usual acidic tone. “It isn’t up for negotiation. I say, you do. That’s how it works at Paramore. Remember?”

“Right,” I say and get up. I walk toward the door and turn back around, stopping short of opening it. “Thank you, Zawe. For the ...”

Her eyes are glued back to the screen in front of her as she waves her hand at me. (Read: *This little pep talk never happened. You can leave now.*)

A small smile forms on my lips and I give her one last nod before stepping out the door.

\* \* \*

Two hours and one takeout box later, I finally enter my apartment. Maybe it’s because I don’t have to go to work on a Monday or the fact that I’m coming back to my own place after four whole days, but I instantly feel at least twenty percent better.

I walk into my kitchen and set the takeout bag on the island, inhaling the musty scent of my unattended apartment. There’s a tiny part of me that just wants to go back to Parker’s place, smother him with hugs and kisses, and pretend like the divorce papers never happened. And if I focus on that part long enough, I might just follow through with it. But then there’s the other part. A not-so-tiny part. A part that’s fucking terrified. Terrified I’ll just be going back to the very thing that broke me.

I stare at my hands, picking at the corner of my nails. I’m scared Parker’s going to grow to hate me. The longer he stays with me, he’s going to see what he lost to save me, and then he’s going to hate me.

I can’t handle his hate.

Indifference, yes. Not hate.

My therapist says it's an underlying fear of abandonment that started with my parents' car crash.

I leave people before they get a chance to leave me.

She's probably right. But I don't want to be like this. I don't know how to stop. It's like I've lost control of my mind and actions, and nothing makes sense. I'm watching myself on autopilot with little to no control.

I wipe the corner of my eyes and I'm cutting open the packaging of the takeout box when I hear my phone ring. A familiar name flashes across the screen and a cold wave of relief washes over me.

"Has the hospital run out of patients?"

"Ha ha," Holly says. I hear some rustling on her end. It sounds like a bag of chips. "I just have fifteen minutes to kill. Thought I'd check up on you."

"Check up on me? Hol, I'm not a child."

"Of course, you're not," she says. "I don't hate you."

I roll my eyes. "You don't hate children."

"Actually, I hate most of them."

"Well, I'm sure they hate you back." I stab a piece of my harissa chicken.

"Just goes to show how little they have going on in their lives."

"Are you done checking up on me?"

"How's everything with Parker?" she asks and my heart crumples in on itself. "Have you guys made up yet?"

A laugh drenched in self-pity leaves my mouth. "Far from it."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

I wipe my eyes and fall back against the white cushions. "Not really."

"That's all right. I get it," she says. And I know she's the only one who does. "Although can I say one thing, sis?"

“When have you ever needed permission to speak your mind, Hollister?” I hear her gag at the name and I smile. “Is it going to be a little pep talk? I want a pep talk. I need a pep talk.”

“More bumper sticker, less pep talk.”

“I’ll take it.”

“I really don’t like that asshole.”

I frown. “Let me note that down so we can get a fridge magnet made.”

“You didn’t let me finish. I don’t like him because I know how much he means to you,” she says, somehow making even less sense. “That only gives him the power to hurt you.”

“Case in point,” I mumble.

“But you mean a lot to him too. He’s given you the same amount of power.”

“How is this supposed to make me feel better?”

“I don’t know,” she says. “But I just want you to know that kind of love is rare and, honestly, a little gross. I’m sure I caught him drooling once or twice.”

“Okay?”

“That kinda love doesn’t disappear, sis.”

But love is hardly ever enough. And it shouldn’t be either. Because with the right person, love will always be present. It’s what you’re willing to do above and beyond that single emotion that makes or breaks a relationship. It’s forgiveness and compromise and a lot of pain. That’s what makes it worth it. That’s what makes it worth fighting for.

Parker is willing to fight for me. He’s willing to win me back.

I just don’t know if I’m worth all the trouble.

I’m stuck between not wanting to relive that pain and wanting to be loved by him.



“I didn’t know how broken I was till I saw her name on those divorce papers,” I tell Holly.

“Don’t you think he’s trying to keep it all together too?”

“You’re taking his side?”

“You know I’m not. I hope he falls on his face and breaks his dick or something. But he made a mistake. It’s what you do after that mistake that makes all the difference.”

“It’s not that black and white,” I say. “I wish it was, but it isn’t.”

“It is if you let it.”

“I’m just ...” I take a deep breath, trying not to let my broken heart get the better of me. I’m just so scared. “I’m going to be fine, Holly,” I lie.

And she lets me.

*Two Weeks Later*

# Chapter Thirty-One

## Present Day

### APRIL

I haven't seen or heard from Parker in more than two weeks. Honestly, I don't even know what I would say to him if he showed up to set today, but every time I hear someone's voice other than his come from outside, all the wounds seem to open a little more. His absence is clawing at them, prying them open.

I asked Kripke, but apparently all scenes requiring Parker specifically as the stunt double have been shot. So he's not needed to come in if he doesn't want to.

So here I am.

In Tony's trailer, sifting through the walls, searching for any trace of drugs.

Suffering at the hand of karma.

A normal day in the life of April Moore. Only that it's still far from normal. Nothing is normal without Parker.

My fingers come to a halt when I hear someone knock on the trailer door.

"Yeah?" I turn my head around only to realize it's locked from the inside.

I get up, straighten the front of my blue pantsuit, and reach for the doorknob, turning it and pulling it open.

As soon as I do, I wish I hadn't.

The words don't seem to form in my head, much less leave my mouth.

Shara Kendricks, in the flesh.

After five whole seconds, I manage to get her name out of my mouth. "Shara?"

I hope she doesn't see the sour reaction on my face as her name forms on my tongue. If she does, she doesn't make it apparent. She does nothing other than just stand there, not moving an inch, surprise and shock riddled all over her face.

Wait, was she not expecting to run into me on the set of a movie I work on? Why is she even here? And why is she so surprised that I am? Then it hits me all at once.

Parker. Of course.

Against my better judgment, my eyes dart down to her hand. To her fingers. There's no ring. But that doesn't make it any better. Instead, I feel worse.

"Crap," she tries to mutter under her breath but it's not quiet enough. She shakes her head and swallows a visible lump down her throat. "Fuck, I didn't know you'd be here."

"Right."

"I'm sorry. I really didn't know you'd be here. I was looking for—" She stops and I look back up at her face. No one wants to say his name, and that's understandable.

I nod and step outside with her, shutting the trailer door behind me. My brain is still trying to process this fever dream. She looks the same. Poised, elegant, legs for days, blond hair tied back in a bun, wearing one of those oversized T-shirt dresses.

"What are you doing here?"

She takes in a rheumatic breath and looks down at her cream flats. "Parker isn't answering his phone. I have a train to catch. I'm so sorry, this isn't ... um, I didn't plan on running into you. Fuck, I didn't even know you'd be here."

“Shara.” I say her name again, this time with a sense of urgency. “It’s okay. Breathe.”

She purses her lips and nods her head as if she’s only now going through the plethora of emotions I felt when I opened that door.

“I needed to give this back and it didn’t feel right to mail it back in a FedEx box,” she says, turning sideways to look through her purse. “He was supposed to swing by our place and come pick it up earlier today, but never did and now I’m getting late for my train.”

*Our place.*

“This has been planned for weeks. He knew I was leaving for D.C. today. I’ve called him ten times already, but his voicemail is full.”

I suck in a quick breath.

“So I called his agency and they gave me this address, and then some old guy just pointed me in this direction. I’m really sorry for turning up like this.”

I stop listening to her.

And it’s almost as if the universe—or whoever it is that’s in charge of my life—really fucking hates me today. Because all my attention is now focused on her hand, and the ring box that’s in it. I think I’m going to be sick.

“April?”

I look up and realize my mouth’s half open. I shut it and shake my head. “Yeah, no. Um, he’s not here yet but you can leave that in his trailer if you want.”

“I’m not ...” she says, sounding extremely hesitant. “It’s just that it’s my wedding ring and I don’t want to”—*my wedding ring?*—“drop it off someplace I’m not familiar with. Can you give it to him whenever he does get in?”

There’s only so much a person can take, and this is my limit. It has to be.

“April.”

I almost laugh. Then I do. “Please, just stop.” Those words aren’t meant for her. They’re meant for the stabbing pain in my chest. “Just ...” I look back up and expel a deep tired sigh. “I can’t do it. I’m sorry.”

“What?”

“No, no. I’m not touching that box. I’m not.” I step back. “You can leave it in his trailer, and I’ll make sure he gets it, but I’m not touching it.”

Shara looks at me the same way I’ve looked at myself for the past ten years. It’s not exactly pity, and it’s not exactly anger. But something in between.

She looks at me for a few more seconds, waiting for me to stop crying—and believe me, I wish I could—but it’s as if that ring just tapped into a whole new world of sadness in me.

“He didn’t tell you. You found out,” she finally says.

I look up to face her and the sheer accuracy of her words, but she’s not looking at me anymore. She’s looking at the ring box. And I’m not going to lie; it’s starting to piss me off how calm and composed she seems while I’m this blithering mess of emotions.

“April, um, I have a few minutes to spare before I really need to leave.” Her gaze is still pinned on the ring box. “Can we talk?” Then she looks up.

“Wh-what?” I ask shakily.

She smiles faintly, puts the ring back in her purse, and walks past me, sitting down on one of the steps. “Please?” She pats the space next to her.

I walk over to sit beside her at arm’s length.

We don’t look at each other or say anything for the next couple of seconds. I don’t know what is happening right now, but it feels wrong. Like I’m choosing to sit in my own discomfort.

I hear her clear throat softly. Then she says, “I’m sorry.”

I look at her from the corner of my eye, more confused than before. “What?”

“I’m sorry, April,” she repeats, sounding more guilty this time. She turns to face me, the ring box clutched in her palm. “For hurting you, hurting Parker, all of it. I’m sorry for being what kept you two apart all these years.”

My head starts to implode like a black hole. I don’t know what I was expecting her to be sorry for, but it was not that. Not at all. “You don’t have to say—there’s nothing to be sorry about. I’ll give him the ring.”

“No, it’s not about the ring. It’s everything. I’m sorry you found out about him and me, whatever way you did. I, um.” She looks down. “I should have never agreed to marry him, April.” Her words knock the air out of my lungs. “Of course, it was never going to last. We were both trying to cope with our own grief in the only way we knew how. I knew he didn’t love me. At least, not the way I wanted him to.” She looks back up at me. “I saw it in his eyes, heard it in his voice, felt it in the way he touched me. He didn’t love me the way he loved you. God, there was something about the way he looked at you,” she says, and a small laugh bubbles out of her. “Logan used to look at me like that.” Her laugh fades into a pitiful smile.

The shadows under her eyes come to life and she shakes her head. “Parker tried, you know? He really tried to fall in love with me.”

Somehow that makes me smile. Because it’s just so Parker. Never putting himself first. And here I am, always putting myself first.

“Seems like something he would do,” I say.

She nods in agreement.

Then to my surprise, I say, “I’m sorry too.”

Shara lifts her gaze to meet mine. “What do you have to be sorry about?” she asks, almost as a joke. But I answer nonetheless.

“For the part I played in your ...” I shift in my seat uncomfortably.



“You can say the word ‘divorce,’ April.”

“Right,” I quickly say. “Divorce.”

She smiles and pats my knee. “Don’t be. It’s not like I was the perfect wife either.”

A fresh frown forms across my forehead and she seems to catch the reason behind it.

“Oh, he didn’t tell you.” She breathes out a soft laugh and shakes her head. “Of course, he didn’t.”

“Tell me what?”

“I cheated on him. With my personal trainer.” She winces, as if that’s the part she’s most ashamed of.

My frown deepens and I mouth a silent, “Oh.”

“Yeah. Typical, right?” She tries to shrug it off with another laugh and I shift closer. “But the funny part is, that’s not when we filed for divorce. We waited a whole year after that. He wasn’t even mad about it. Not at all. We both married each other for very similar, very fucked-up reasons.”

I don’t really know what to say. This day has been beyond bizarre and it’s only ten in the morning. I close my eyes and take in every piece of new information she just threw my way. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything.” She smiles at me. It’s weak and tired, just like her tone. “He’s a good man. And he’s been through hell and back for you. I’ve seen it. I know how hurt he was when you left. And how that hurt translated into our marriage. I can only imagine what it must’ve been like for you. But he’s been harboring his pain ever since you left. It’s only a matter of time before he gets too used to it.”

I look down at the ring box.

Suddenly I’m transported back to the night I left. I’ve spent eight years trying to find someone to blame for my choices. And I did. I blamed myself. I blamed Parker. And now Shara’s here, accepting part of that blame. Justifying my choices. And it doesn’t feel great. It doesn’t feel like anything.

I've spent so much time making someone out to be the villain of my story. Of our story. And I wish life was that simple, that black and white, so I could pinpoint a single person as the reason behind my reckless actions. But life is anything but simple. People aren't black and white. People aren't perfect. You can blame someone, but only for a while. Then you find someone else, then someone else, and so on.

It's easier to move past something when there's someone to blame. But sometimes, there's no one to blame. Not even yourself.

We sit next to each other for another minute or two, then she gets up. "Well, I should probably leave before I miss my train. And in case Parker decides to show up here. Seems a little too soon for a reunion."

"Shara?"

She looks at me.

I try to say something, form some sort of a coherent response. But it's as if my brain has fallen asleep. I want to apologize. I want to give her a hug. I want to say something. But nothing comes out.

Somehow, reading my silence perfectly, Shara gives me a weak smile and nods. *I know*. "Don't let him go again. You won't be doing yourself any favors."

"It might be too late already," I admit to her for some godforsaken reason.

She sets the ring box down on the empty space next to me and smiles. "Then wait another decade. He'll find his way back to you. He always will."

She gives me a small half-wave and walks toward the gates and onto the street. And she doesn't look back. Not once. She's moved on and there's nothing but awe and respect for her in my heart.

I stare at the box for a few seconds before slowly reaching for it. Getting up, I walk toward his trailer, step inside, and place the ring box in the bottom drawer of his dresser.

\* \* \*

“Venti Espresso Frappe for April! No whip!”

I saunter over to the counter and grab my to-go cup.

Stepping out of the Starbucks and onto 59<sup>th</sup> Street, I look down at my drink and I see it does have whipped cream. It’s a chilly Thursday evening, the fall leaves have finally begun to change color, which calls for general buzzing happiness all around—only I can’t seem to chemically form that emotion anymore.

I don’t give a shit about the weather. I don’t give a shit if it’s summer or winter or fall. And I definitely don’t give a shit if my coffee has whipped cream in it or not. Because even if it didn’t, it wouldn’t change the fact that Parker’s out of my life for good this time. Nothing will.

Waiting underneath his apartment for two whole hours achieved nothing either. I even tried to scale his balcony in hopes of luring out Dog. What if he left him there? What if he’s starving? I’m not a cat person, but no animal should starve to death because of shared trauma between two friends.

I have no idea where Parker is or if he’s coming back. There’s a tangled mess of emotions whirling around my head, eating at me. I can’t seem to make sense of anything anymore.

A cold breeze picks up. I pull the hem of my pink T-shirt down and take half a sip of my coffee.

I keep telling myself I’ll get over it. All I need is time. But he’s everywhere, in everything I do. He’s all I can think of. The sound of his laugh, his voice, the way he sometimes smiled at me for no particular reason. I wipe the tear off my cheek and start heading to my apartment three blocks away. It didn’t hurt this bad the first time. Probably because that time, I was the one who did the leaving. While I ran from my problems, he faced it all. Faced the consequences of it all. He did it all by himself. And he did it for me.

I keep walking, focusing on nothing but the sound of my flats against the concrete sidewalk. If I stop, I'm going to start crying again, and no one on the streets of Manhattan needs to witness that.

I sniffle and take another unenthusiastic sip, reaching my street.

All my life, the one thing I've truly wanted is a perfect love. A love worthy of movie screens. Sparks and butterflies and magic. A love worth fighting entire wars for. But what I have—had—with Parker was anything but that. It was not magical. It definitely was not perfect. I didn't fall in love with him because of the butterflies; I fell in love with him because he made it feel easy. He made me feel like I was home. He gave me a low, pulsating, constant sense of happiness.

He was my hopeful love.

He made me feel okay about believing in magic. He made me feel okay about believing in myself. Like even if I didn't find my happy ending, even if I didn't find my perfect love, I'd be fine.

I turn left toward my building and pick up the pace. Faster, one foot in front of the other. Again and again, till I reach my building.

Then my feet stop working entirely.

My breathing gets a little choppy and even though I was convinced I don't know how to anymore, I feel a smile tug at my lips. At least, something like it. My heart rises to my throat, hot and pulsing, and it's too big for me to swallow. Because here he is. After two whole weeks of nothingness, here he is, standing right in front of my apartment building, wearing a crisp white shirt with his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, formal black pants, and a pair of brown dress shoes. His hair still as messy as the day I first met him.

Hayden Parker.

# Chapter Thirty-Two

## Present Day

### HAYDEN

**A**pril takes a step toward me, wearing a pink T-shirt and a pair of black jeans, holding a Starbucks cup. Gripping onto it for dear life is more like it.

“So, I went back home to Cooperstown,” I say. “Thought if I could isolate myself from everything that happened for a few days, I’d figure out how to win you back.”

Her mouth twists in a quivering frown. “Win me back?”

I take one step toward her. “For all intents and purposes, I’m here to win you back, April Moore.”

She pauses for a second and a half. Then says, “Very corny.”

I breathe out a sigh of relief. Good. That’s good. She’s making jokes. That has to be good, right? Or maybe just an observation. Regardless, I take another step toward her. “I told you, I won’t stop fighting for you.”

A loud screeching car passes by and both of us turn our heads, watching it drive past. I begin to take another step toward her, but April holds her hand out. “Please ... please just stay there,” she says.

I swallow the rock-sized knot in my throat and nod. “I know I can’t just show up like this.” My voice is thick and there’s a heaviness in the center of my stomach. A paperweight holding it down, because I don’t know what the

end result of this conversation is going to be. “I should’ve reached out first. Called you. I know this isn’t ideal.”

She nods and the paperweight gets heavier. I wait for the rest of her words. But she says nothing more. There’s burning at the back of my nose, in my eyes, everywhere. I look down at my shoes and take one sharp breath in before looking back up.

I exhale and take a step back. “I’m sorry.”

She shakes her head and looks away, rubbing the corner of her eye.

“Not for the divorce,” I add and she turns back to me. “I am sorry I didn’t tell you about it sooner. And I’m sorry about how you found out,” I clarify. “But I’m not sorry it happened. Or that I married Shara or any of that. I’m not sorry how I chose to fix what you broke. But April”—I say her name like it’s the world’s best-kept secret—“I’m sorry for not taking you to the school dance in eleventh grade.”

Her brows draw close together.

I keep going.

“I’m sorry for not punching Tyler Hockman more than just once. I’m sorry for ...” My voice trails off. “I don’t believe in love at first sight. You’ve known that about me since day one. I don’t even believe in love at second sight. But the day I set eyes on you, I swear I couldn’t look away. I instantly knew you were going to matter to me in a way no one else would.”

She presses her mouth into a thin line, her green eyes looking as turbulent and pain-ridden as they did on the steps of that frat house.

“And so I’m sorry for not realizing what I lost until I did. But most of all, I’m sorry for doing it all over again.” My voice quivers. “Maybe things would’ve been different if you hadn’t left. I don’t know. All I know is that I’m still in love with you. And maybe you’ve already fallen out of love with me. I hope not. But either way, I don’t care. I’m here anyway. Because I’m still in love with you.”

I see her catch every bit of that sentence.

“I don’t know where I stand with you,” I say. “I don’t know what I mean to you anymore. But every time I think of you, I want to be with you. When I do dream, you’re all I dream of.”

She looks to the side and shakes her head, and somehow I find the strength in my heart to accept that this might just be where it ends for us. But I keep going. I have to at least try.

“You think I want to fix you. I don’t. Not because you’re not broken ...” I swallow my nerves. “I think we’re all a little broken. We all have these tiny cracks inside our hearts that none of us really knows how to fix. When I’m with you, you fill those cracks without making me forget they exist. You fill them up with happiness, with laughter and memories, and, a lot of the time, just straight-up irritation.”

A small burst of laughter leaves her mouth and it’s my favorite sound ever.

“April, you fill those cracks with every inexplicable emotion that exists,” I say and tears start to trickle down my face. “I want to do the same for you. I’m not afraid of how broken you are. Your past is what makes you who you are. And I love who you are.”

She looks at me, eyes teeming with tears. And I stand across from her, not knowing whether this is the last time she’s going to look at me like that.

“But that’s not what I came here to say today,” I continue. “I came here today because I can live without you. I know that. I’ve done it for the past eight years, and even though it didn’t feel like a life worth living, I could do it again.”

I take a step toward her and this time she doesn’t stop me. “I came here to tell you that I don’t want to. I don’t want to live without you, Chere. I don’t want to see what my life could be like without you in it. I don’t want to slow dance in public like a pretentious idiot with anyone who’s not you. I don’t want to bitch about DC to anyone who’s not you. I don’t want to make comic books about anyone who’s not you. I don’t want to pretend I could love someone who’s not you.”



Another step and I take the to-go cup from her hand and set it down on the sidewalk. “Because at the end of the day, what the hell does it matter who I end up with if that person isn’t you?”

She shakes her head and clamps her eyes shut. I hold the tips of her fingers in my hand. In this moment, all I want is to be next to her. Even if she doesn’t want me to be.

“Being with you is the only thing that matters to me. And no number of apologies will ever make up for the fact that I hid my marriage from you, but please ...” I rest my forehead against hers. “Please let me try.”

“Parker ...”

“April, I love you.” As soon as I say the words, her tears start to flow down relentless and wild.

“We probably can’t go back to the kind of people we used to be. The memories we shared, I know I’ve tarnished them all. But I want to make new ones with you. I want to keep making memories with you for the rest of my life. I don’t care if it’s ten years or a millennium. I don’t care how much either of us changes or doesn’t. Because you will always be my best friend. And I want to know you. Whoever you are today or decide to become tomorrow, I want to love every single version of you.”

I lace my fingers in between hers and she sniffs back her tears.

“You’re my person in this world, April. And, at the very least, I need my best friend back.” The words seep out of me. “Because without her, the world is starting to make perfect sense. And I hate it.”

She opens her eyes and I pull back my head to look at her. Nothing. There’s nothing. There’s no trace of a smile or anything even close to it. There’s nothing but tears.

I grip onto her fingers tightly, giving them one last squeeze, and start to take a step back, racking my brain for what to do next. But she tightens her grip on my hand and tugs me back.

I look at her, my heart back in my throat. She takes a shallow breath and lets go of my hand. “You made a speech,” she squeaks.

“I did.”

“You hate speeches.”

“I do.”

“But you made a speech,” she repeats.

I press my lips in a firm line and shrug. “Well, yeah. I just want to see you happy, April. You know that.”

“But what if I want to see you happy? You think you’ll be happy with me but ... but what if you grow to hate me?”

“Hate you? Sweetheart, I could never—”

She cuts me off. “No, you don’t understand. I have so much pain inside me that just doesn’t seem to go away. Every day I wake up and it feels like a task to do something as basic as brushing my teeth. How can you still want me after everything? What if you just love the idea of making me happy? Even if it doesn’t necessarily make you happy? That’s not love and I’m not okay with that.”

“April, I love you and we’re going to be just fine.”

“You don’t know that. I just ... I feel like it’s always sad inside my head. Like a forever winter. Cold and dead.”

She rests her cheek against my chest and I just want to stay like this for a little while more. Her head against my body, my arms around her, hers around me.

“That’s okay, Chere. I’ll warm you up. It’s never cold inside my head. Like a forever spring.”

A soft laugh leaves her mouth. “Spring? Most people would’ve gone with summer.”

“Yeah, well, most people don’t have what I have,” I say.

“Oh? And what do you have?” she asks.

“April in my arms. Forever spring.”

She looks up, meeting my eyes. “That was the corniest thing I’ve ever heard, Parker.”

I wrap my hands around her waist and pull her flat against my chest. I rest my chin on her head and whisper, “I’m the corniest man you’ll ever meet.”

She places her palms on my chest and laughs into my shoulder, and my heart soaks up the sound like a sponge. My hands travel to the center of her back and I draw her in close.

She tightens her grip around me and so do I, feeling her heartbeat under my chest. She wraps her arms around me, burying her face into my chest. And I can’t begin to explain what it feels like. Like she’s answering a question I haven’t even asked yet. Haven’t even formed in my head yet.

I cup the back of her head with my palm. And for the next few minutes, we go on holding each other like that.

But a distant rumble pierces the sound of our shallow breathing, and exactly three seconds later, it starts to pour. It starts to pour like the world is ending. And at the exact second the first few drops tap against the concrete sidewalk. I press my lips to the top of her head, breathing her in. “Can I show you something?”

“What?”

The rain picks up and I run my hand over her hair, fiddling with the wet strands clinging to her neck. “I missed playing with your hair.”

She curls up her nose and the dorkiest smile spreads across her face. “What do you want to show me?”

I pause for a second, then step aside, pointing to the silver oval-shaped table getting drenched in the rain about ten feet away from us.

Her eyes squint in a frown.

I smile and grip her hand, pulling her toward it. “You deserve your very own grand gesture.” I step behind her and kiss the back of her head.

She turns her head back slightly but I tighten my grip on her shoulders and force her to face the table.

“Look underneath.”

“Why?”

“Just do it. Please?”

Very hesitantly, as if she’s about to get *Punk’d*, April bends down and peeks underneath it. “What I’m supposed to be looking for?” I hear her say, the pattering of the rain drowning out most of her voice. “Why am I underneath a table in the middle of a sidewalk right now?”

I bend down to level with her and point to the rusted edge underneath the metallic surface. And our initials carved on it. “That’s why.”

Her hushed, “Oh, my God” makes itself audible over the violent pattering of the rain. Instantly turning to look at me, she bangs her head on the side of the table. “Ow, shit.”

I laugh softly, bringing my palm to the side of her face, and she instinctively leans into it. “A grand gesture is only grand if no one understands it, right?” I say and tears rush back to her eyes with full force. “I’m pretty sure this makes sense to no one but you and me.”

She scrambles to find the words and I pull her up with me. “This is—you stole our table from Susie’s?”

“I didn’t steal it.”

“How did you? You went back for two whole weeks for this? I can’t believe you did this.”

I draw her into a hug and her voice gets snuffed out, weak protests vibrating into my chest. She leans back with my arms draped around her waist and looks up, her eyes filled to the brim with tears. Only this time it makes me smile. “This is so over the top,” she says and I burst out laughing.

“I think that’s the point of a grand gesture?”

“What about Dog?” she asks.

“What about him?”

“Did you take him with you?”

I frown. “No, why would I do that?”

“So, he’s just alone?” The palpable and genuine concern she has for my cat makes me want to push her up against a wall and kiss her till she forgets her own name.

“He’s with Theo,” I tell her. Her confusion doesn’t waver. “Theo the doctor friend? He’s cat-sitting.”

April’s eyes bulge. “Cat-sitting?”

I take a step back and offer her my hand. “Will you dance with me?”

She looks at my hand, then back at me. “What?”

I grab her hand and pull her against me regardless. “You need to spruce up your vocabulary, Chere. That word is getting repetitive.”

The rain starts to fall harder and I place my hands on her hips. She wraps hers around my neck and we sway side to side.

“Why are you dressed like this?” she asks and I rest my forehead against hers.

“You don’t like it? I wanted to look the part.”

She brings her hands down to my shoulders, then back up around my neck, all the while seemingly trying to make sense of everything. “How are we going to carry it up to my place?”

“Your building has an elevator.”

“We’re dancing to no music—”

I cut her off. “April. Can it just not make sense for a little while longer?”

She looks at me and smiles. “You ...” she starts to say, but instead just shakes her head. “You make it so hard to be mad at you sometimes.”

“You falling back in love with me yet?” I pull her closer and smile into her wet hair, swaying side to side as the rain continues to fall relentlessly against the sidewalk.

“Maybe,” she says.

“You can, you know. I’ll catch you.”

She laughs softly. “You can’t catch me if you’re falling too.”

My grin splits open and I hug her tight. “Sweetheart, I fell a long time ago.”

April hugs me tighter.

We still have a lot to talk about. So much to work through. I know she’s still hurting. So am I. But something tells me that it’s okay. It’s supposed to hurt. Moving on is never easy. Grief is never easy. It hits you when you’re least expecting it and there’s nothing you can do. What has happened cannot be made right. Lost people cannot be brought back. But pain doesn’t need a solution. People need people to simply see and acknowledge their grief. To hold their hand and remind them they’re not alone.

This is all easier said than done. But we’ll get past it. We’ve done it before and we can do it again. We make each other strong. And despite everything we lost, we made it back to each other.

I think we always will.

And even if we don’t work out—even though everything would seem a little less, like a toned-down version of all a person could ever feel, because anything else, anyone else, would simply be a step down—it’ll be all right.

Because as someone’s favorite Marvel couple once said, “We’ve said goodbye before, so it only stands to reason that we’ll say hello again.”

I know we will.

*Two Years Later*

# Epilogue



## April

There's a sharp knock on the door of the closet storage I'm hiding in.

The second I open it, Parker slides into the cramped space with me and quickly locks the door behind him. "I'm so sorry," he says, turning back around. His mouth opens in awe. "Holy shit." Parker brings his hand up to his chest, clutching the white fabric of his shirt. "You look ..."

I bite my cheek to suppress a smile, although I'm supposed to be mad at him right now. He was supposed to meet me here fifteen minutes ago. I look down and readjust the white tulle of my wedding dress. "Just so you know, you're not getting out of being late with a few corny compliments."

He hasn't stopped perusing every inch of my dress. "You sure you want to marry me?" He reaches for the tulle skirt, analyzing it like it's his wedding dress. "You look like a fucking dream, Chere. God, this is ..." He drags his gaze up to my face. "You look beautiful."

The reins holding back my smile fall loose and it slips out at full power. "You look really pretty too," I say to him.

"Not as pretty as you." He slides his arms around my waist and pulls me close. "I'm marrying a real-life Disney princess."

The butterflies in my stomach explode into tinier butterflies, invading every nook and corner of my veins. "That would make you a real-life Disney prince." I rest my palm on top of his heart, over the black fabric of his tux. "Only difference being that they were never late."

He rests his forehead against mine. “Well, those princes never had Holly Moore as their sister-in-law.”

“What does Holly have to do with this?”

“Your evil sister is out there terrorizing the whole village. I had to wait a whole fifteen minutes before she finally decided to go to the bathroom, hence freeing up this corridor.”

“Why? What is she doing?”

A loud and commanding voice booms through the corridor on the other side of the door.

“I swear to God, if you don’t find my sister in the next ten minutes, I’m going to make each one of you walk into New York traffic and livestream it!”

Reluctantly I look back at Parker. He arches an eyebrow. “You were saying?”

Shaking my head, I stand on my toes to plant a kiss on his cheek. “Can we get to business now?” I say. “There’s too much dust in this closet and if it ruins my wedding dress, I’ll give Holly a spare key to our apartment.”

“Terrifying,” he teases.

I pull out the tattered piece of paper stuffed between my phone and its casing.

This was wholly and completely Parker’s idea: reciting our wedding vows to each other in a cramped storage closet one hour before the ceremony. He said it was so that neither of us cries when the photographer is busy zooming into our faces. No one wants red, puffy eyes framed on their wall. But I’m sure that wasn’t the only reason. He and I, we share a heart, yes, but we also share the same stupid sentimental brain. He wants this moment to be solely ours, just as much as I do. The twinkle in his eyes or the look on my face the first time we hear each other’s vows, that mental picture in all its glory, tears included, is meant for April and Parker alone.

“You go first,” I tell him.

“Uh, no?” he counters. “What if your vows are better than mine? I need to make mental edits accordingly.”

I roll my eyes and unfold the sheet of paper. “You’re more of a bride than I’ll ever be, Hayden Parker.” My eyes skim over the words staring back at me. The thousands of memories we’ve shared all crammed into this single paragraph.

I tip my chin up to meet his warm hazel eyes. “For as long as I can remember, I’ve wanted a love worthy of movie screens. The way Harry loved Sally, Noah loved Allie, or Jack loved Rose. For the longest time, that’s what I wanted. I wanted someone, anyone, to look at me like I was magic. But as I grew older, I started to realize that maybe it was wrong to expect so much from a life that wasn’t fictional. And I thought maybe I should start lowering my standards to meet those of the real world.” I smile at him. “But then you came into my life. You did everything right without ever meaning to. You did more than just look at me like I was magic. You made me believe in magic. So thank you for never letting me lower my standards. Thank you for rising to meet them. Thank you for trusting me to meet yours. I promise to try my best. But most of all, thank you for giving me my very own love story. Thank you for loving me like Rogue loves Gambit.”

I realize that his hand is still looped around my waist. Squeezing lightly. His eyes are misty and there’s that smile again. That Hayden Parker smile, that only ever comes out for me.

“April ...” he whispers.

My own shaky voice cuts him off. “No. If you say something sappy right now, I’m going to cry and never, ever stop. So just say your stupid vows and let’s get this over with. I have a wedding to get to.”

A laugh bubbles out of him and I can’t wait to make him laugh for the rest of our lives. He kisses the top of my head. “I love you.”

A few tears roll down my cheeks and he wipes them off with his thumb. “Vows, please,” I mumble.

Parker takes out a much more neatly folded piece of paper from the pocket of his blazer. His chest rises and falls, then he

puts the same folded piece back into his pocket. “I don’t need that. I have new vows.”

“What?”

He folds his hands in front of him. “For the longest time, I mocked the existence of the kind of love you believed in. It didn’t mean I didn’t believe in love, I just had my own definition. But in none of those definitions did I ever think I’d meet the love of my life when I was a kid. And I definitely didn’t know the first time I heard you tell me your name that I’d be repeating it for the rest of my life.”

“April, you once asked me if we’d still be friends if my mom hadn’t forced me to go to that party all those years back. At the time I didn’t have much of a reasoning. Just a feeling. A hunch. But today I have a concrete answer for you.”

He lightly holds the tips of my fingers with his and smiles, his eyes sweeping across my face. “I could’ve been living on a whole other continent. A whole other planet. Even a universe apart and I still would’ve come to find you. Sometimes I close my eyes and try to go back in time to find the exact moment I fell in love with you. But I never can. And I think it’s because I was in love with you even before I knew you. Meeting you was just putting a face to the feeling I’d been harboring for you. You’re my person, April Moore. My entire soul.”

He brings his hands up to cradle my face. “And my best friend till the very end. So my place is wherever you are. Lead the way and I’ll go anywhere you want me to.” He presses his lips tenderly against mine, full of promise and conviction. “You’re my sanctuary.”

My heart swells up, threatening to burst out of my chest.

“Plus you’re, like, really fucking pretty,” he adds.

I glance up at him, eyes prickling with nascent tears. “You stupid, gorgeous asshole.”

He wraps his arms around me, pulling me into a half-hug, laughing into my hair.

“I think I’m going to cry at the altar more now,” I say. “Anticipating your stupid sonnet. If I have red puffy eyes in

the wedding pictures, we're getting married again."

The sound of his laugh vibrates through my skull. "I'd marry you every day, forever and ever."

"Oh, my God, stop!" I pull back to look at him. "Turn it off."

A sharp knock at the door interrupts us. Probably for the best, since I'm pretty sure my makeup is fully ruined.

"Were we expecting anyone else?" Parker asks, his arms still wrapped around me.

"Maybe it's Holly." I lower my voice to an ominous level and I swear to God, he shudders. I laugh and the knocking gets more urgent.

Parker lets go of me and twists the bronze knob to pull open the door, revealing the best man on the other side.

"What are you doing here?" Parker asks.

Theo turns his gaze toward me. "Are you all right? I heard someone crying."

"Oh." I glance at Parker. "Yeah, I'm fine. We were just practicing our vows."

His mouth open in realization and he nods. "Well, I suggest you wrap it up quick. The bride's sister is looking for the groom."

"Me?" Parker says, as if "bride's sister" is synonymous with "the plague."

"Don't worry." Theo places a sympathetic hand on my fiancé's shoulder. "She won't touch a hair on your head. Not on my watch."

Parker grins widely. "So protective."

"Possessive," Theo corrects.

I clear my throat. "I'm sorry, do the two of you want to practice your vows?"

"We don't need practice, Chere. Our bond is special."

Theo winks at me. "No offense."

I hate being around these two when they go into bromance mode—a recent development in their friendship.

Don't get me wrong, I love that Parker has another friend, someone who isn't me. And Theo's great. He's been helping Parker with all the last-minute proofreading rush jobs for Fireheart Chronicles. Just in time for release day next month. But is it necessary to flirt with said friend on our wedding day?

“Why is Holly looking for him?” I ask, getting us back on topic.

Theo shrugs. “No clue. But since I'm looking for her too, this works out perfectly.”

“Why are you looking for her?” I ask.

“She forgot something in my car.”

“What was she doing in your car?” Parker questions, sounding as confused as I feel.

“We drove together,” he answers casually. “Three hours of torturous bliss.”

That makes zero sense. There's no way Holly would willingly agree to share a confined space with Theo Carter for that long.

“Shit, man.” Parker pats Theo's arm. “Sounds traumatic.”

He nods, covering Parker's hand with his. “Appreciate it, love.”

Oh, for fuck's sake.

“Theo?”

All three of us turn to the far end of the corridor and the source of that voice.

Holly Moore. Wearing her baby-blue satin maid-of-honor dress.

I look at Theo and he hasn't moved an inch, almost as if Holly's presence has set him into stone somehow. His stare is

so intense, so fierce, that I'm convinced if a meteor hits this very corridor right now, he still wouldn't budge.

Holly walks toward us, her frown deepening with each step, and Theo goes on looking at her like she's the best sight in the world.

"Looking like an actual human being for once," Theo drawls, looking her up and down. His tone is soft and crisp. "You clean up nice, Hollister."

"Call me that one more time and the only thing I'm going to be cleaning up is your blood from this floor," she grits and turns her attention to me. "Where have you been? I sent three guys out looking for you. Mom thinks you forced Parker to elope."

"Elope?" I repeat. "Why would I do that?"

"Same reason you're getting married to him." Holly points to Parker. "Sheer insanity."

Parker snorts and touches his chest in mock hurt. "I'm devastated."

She shoots him a sharp glare. "Go to hell."

"And risk running into you for eternity? Not a chance."

Okayyy, time to butt in again. "Hey, Hol? Apparently you left something in Theo's car?"

Holly looks between all three of us, slightly alarmed, trying to unravel whatever it is she thinks we know. "His car?" she says way too quickly. "I don't know what he's talking about. I haven't been in his car."

"Leave the lying to the experts, love," Theo remarks, amusement shimmering through his voice. He reaches into the inner pocket of his blazer, pulling out every older sister's nightmare.

A pair of red lace underwear.

"And here I thought Satan was allergic to color," Parker says.

I wince. “Oh, Hol. Please don’t tell me you had sex in that dress. And please tell me you’re wearing underwear right now. That dress is going to be in a lot of wedding pictures. I don’t want to associate it with ... his junk all up in you.”

“We did not have sex!” she snaps.

“Not yet,” Theo banters, his grin blinding.

“No. Nope.” Parker groans. “Take this fucking conversation somewhere else. Far from us. There are images starting to form in my head that I need to get rid of.”

I smack his arm. “Stop picturing my sister naked!”

“I’m not picturing her naked!” He smacks me back.

Theo laughs. “Thanks, man. I’m flattered.”

“I’ll show you flattery.” Holly pulls Theo’s arm, dragging him to the far end of the corridor and out the side door toward the altar. They lightly bicker about something the entire way. I turn to look at Parker, who appears visibly disturbed.

I loop my arms around his neck and his make their way around my waist. “Don’t be sad,” I tell him. “He’ll come back to you eventually.”

Laughing, he bends down to kiss the tip of my nose. “Like you did?”

I can’t help but smile a little.

My mind goes back to the night we met. The party, the diner, the constant bickering over who the better X-Men character is. That night I went back home with the biggest smile on my face. I couldn’t sleep, too excited to talk to this boy at school the next day, and thinking about how much I wanted to make him smile again. Perhaps even laugh. I replayed bits and pieces of our conversation, occasionally smiling at something he’d said or done.

I wonder what would’ve happened if Parker hadn’t stumbled upon me in the bathroom that night. Maybe we would’ve become friends regardless, or maybe we would’ve been strangers forever.



That's a scary thought.

Parker tightens his grip around my waist and lifts me against his chest. "Hi."

"Hi."

He brushes his nose against mine. "I love you."

"I love you too."

"More than your precious wedding dress?"

"We'll see." Smiling, I press my lips against his, hoping once again that it tells him all the things I can't say sometimes.

*I love you more than anything.*

*The End*

*...Or is it?*

# Thank You For Reading

If you enjoyed *The Publicity Stunt*, then get ready for [The Night Shift!](#) Book #2 in the Moore Sisters series! Make sure to sign up for my newsletter to receive news and excerpts about this release.

# Acknowledgments

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Love you like Rogue loves Gambit.

# About the Author

Tanushka Bhatnagar is a (self-labelled) author of New Adult romance, full of fluff and spice. Her stories all have HEAs with plenty of banter and swoon sprinkled in.

Besides reading and writing, Tanushka loves dancing, is obsessed with Marvel, and is currently re-heating the same cup of coffee for the tenth time.



# **The Night Shift**

A dark, steamy, enemies-with-benefits romance featuring  
Holly Moore and Theo Carter.

Release date coming soon...