

OLDER

A high-angle, top-down view of a woman swimming underwater. She is positioned in the center of the frame, moving away from the viewer. Her arms are extended forward, and her hands are clasped together. She is wearing a dark, patterned swimsuit. The water is a deep, dark blue with visible ripples and bubbles. A large splash of white water is visible behind her, indicating she has just entered the water. The overall mood is mysterious and serene.

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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By: Jennifer Hartmann

Older

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For Megan.

Fifth-grade laugh attacks and Wonderwall sing-a-longs are never far from my heart.

PROLOGUE



I GRIPPED the edge of the mottled mattress as a leather belt whipped across my bare back.

My punishment was ten lashes and an early bedtime with no supper.

My crime?

Love.

I loved more than I should have. I loved all things, big and small. Today I'd loved a biscuit-colored bunny with an injured leg that had scampered across our driveway. I had loved it enough to carry it into our one-car garage and tend to the wound with a purple Band-Aid I'd snuck from the hall closet while Mom was sound asleep with an empty bottle of gin clutched to her chest.

Father had come home from work thirty minutes early and caught me wallowing in that love, holding the trembling bunny in my arms and humming my favorite song to calm its quivering. Blood had oozed all over the garage floor, the same shade of red as his angry face when he'd discovered the mess.

"In the house. Right now." Violet veins had popped in his neck, meaty fists clenching at his sides. "Meet me in the den."

I'd obeyed.

And now my body jerked with each flog.

Father made me count out loud as the ruddy-brown belt slashed down on me and painted fiery lines across my skin. Tears burned behind my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. He hated emotion. Hated weakness. Crying only made him more furious.

Mom slept through the whole thing.

Not that it mattered—she wouldn't have stopped it, anyway. My mother turned her back on me whenever my back was beaten to every shade of blue.

Maybe it was out of fear. Maybe it was out of unlove.

Father didn't love me; Mom didn't love me enough.

I guess that was why I loved too much. I had a lot of loveless holes to fill.

When the punishment was complete, I lowered my dirt-stained T-shirt and tipped my chin as Father relaced his belt through the belt holes of his worn jeans. "I'm sorry, Father. I'll go clean up the mess now." My feet itched to rush past him toward the garage, but I waited for permission.

Father eyed me, his icy gaze sliding down my bony frame as I folded in my lips to keep them from quivering. "You'll go straight to bed, that's what you'll do."

"But it's only four o'clock. It's too bright and sunny to fall asleep, and—"

"You want to lose supper tomorrow, too?" He thwacked me upside the head with a flat palm. "Do as you're told, you smart-mouthed brat."

"Yes, Father." I slunk past him with defeat as my cotton shirt scratched at the nasty welts blooming on my spine.

"You know what? Think I changed my mind," Father said before I slipped out of the den. "I'll bring a hot plate of supper to your door."

My stomach grumbled with anticipation.

Was he lying?

Father was never kind to me.

Maybe he saw how upset I was. How petrified and sad. There had to be a spark of humanity buried inside his jet-black heart.

Pivoting around, a flicker of hope jumped between my ribs as I stared at him with wide eyes.

Father smirked and latched the belt buckle into place. "I'll leave a nice helping of rabbit outside your room in a few hours. My treat."

It took a minute for his words to sink in.

And when they did, they sunk me.

My bottom lip wobbled as dread pitched in my stomach, overriding the hunger pains. All I wanted to do was throw up. "I'm not hungry."

"You'll eat what I give you and you'll be grateful. Now go to your room."

I spun on my heel with lightning speed, just so he didn't see the waterfall of tears erupt as I choked back a sob.

But he stopped me one more time.

"Oh, and Halley? Don't you go sneaking into the garage to save that pesty rodent. You'll fail. And you'll suffer the consequences for disobeying me."

The back of my neck pricked with icicles. "Yes, Father," I choked out.

"Wouldn't matter, anyway. You've never been good at doing hard things."

He was right, I decided, as I holed up in my bedroom that afternoon and slid beneath the starchy covers, tucking myself into a ball as my body shivered in the aftermath of my beating.

I was a late walker, a late talker, a late learner in so many chapters of my life.

I was never able to earn my father's affection, no matter how desperate I was, how needy and fraught.

I couldn't put my fractured family back together.

I couldn't even save that little bunny.

Father was right...

I wasn't good at doing hard things.

Life is like photography. You need the negatives to develop.
—Ziad K. Abdelnour

CHAPTER 1



June, 1995

"ARE YOU LOST?"

That was the first thing the guy in the Soundgarden T-shirt and leather jacket said to me as my ankles kissed the lake water.

I tilted my head over my shoulder to assess the stranger who was standing just inches from the waterline. "Lost?" Curling my toes into the soggy muck, I gave him a onceover. The man was older than me; probably too old to have come from the house party a few yards away that reverberated with loud grunge music. "Do I look lost?"

Moonlight carved him out of the darkness, outlining a tall, muscled frame and a mop of inky-brown hair, its hue approaching black but not quite reaching the deepest shade.

"A little." He shoved both hands into denim pockets and slanted his head toward the house. "I mean, you're out here all alone, standing in a lake."

"Maybe you're the one who's lost," I volleyed back. "Unless you're here with unsavory intentions. You know...watching a girl standing all alone in a

lake.” My gaze slowly panned down his body like I was checking for weapons. But I knew well enough that a man only needed two capable hands and a sharp tongue to inflict harm. Sometimes less. A single look could do me in.

His brows bent at my implication. “I’m looking for someone.”

“I’m probably not who you’re looking for.”

He peered back over at the house, marinating in the statement before deciding it was true. “Yeah,” he replied, the response just loud enough to carry over the deep bass seeping out through an open window. “Sorry to bother you. Have a good night.”

“You’re not bothering me.” I watched as he faltered mid-swivel. Still wading in the shallow water, I took a small step forward and confessed, “Maybe I am a little lost.”

The man glanced at my chunky heels tipped sideways in the sand, then panned his gaze out to the stretch of water that appeared endless as the surface bled with dark sky. “You don’t live here?”

“I live on the other side of town.” *Live* was a tragic elaboration, but he didn’t need to know that.

He nodded. “I’m Reed.”

“Halley. Like the comet.”

We locked eyes.

He was too far away for me to make out the color, but they looked light. Lighter than my hollow hazel, even through the gloom of nightfall.

“The party was lame, so I came out here to get some air,” I continued. “The person you’re looking for is probably inside doing body shots with Jay Jennings.”

Reed rubbed a hand over his jaw, the other returning to his left pocket. “I really hope not.” He took a step closer to the water. “Do you need me to call you a taxi or something?”

“I don’t need a ride.” I ducked my chin before spinning back around and staring out at the lake. “Unless you have a boat.”

“Fresh out of boats.”

“I suppose I could swim.”

My back was facing him, but his voice sounded closer. “Swim to where?”

“Anywhere.” I shrugged. “Everywhere.”

“Mm,” he mused. “Bad night?”

Bad day. Bad night. Bad life.

“Something like that.” Cool water sloshed at my bare ankles before I plopped down and crossed my legs. “Anyway, I hope you find your person. Maybe they’re the one who’s lost and they’re waiting for you to find them.”

Silence answered for a few breaths before his voice broke through. “What are you doing?”

“Sitting in a lake.” I planted my hands in the sludge and wheeled around on my butt to face him, stretching out my legs. Off his baffled look, I frowned. “What?”

His fingers continued to coast over his stubbled jawline as he studied me. “This is a strange encounter.”

“You’re welcome,” I said, pulling a smile.

“I never thanked you for anything.”

“You might one day.” Leaning back on my palms, I danced my legs up and down, my red-tipped toes peeking out through the water’s surface. “One of my fondest memories is that one time I stumbled across a weird girl sitting fully clothed in a lake in the middle of the night.”

His eyebrows were so furrowed, he was actually scowling. “Really?”

“No.” I smiled again, and the upturn of my lips was foreign but pure. A priceless feeling. “You could join me. We could be weird together.”

“Think I’ll pass. Maybe another time.”

“Liar.” My smile faded, but the zippy feeling inside my chest refused to ebb. It sizzled and churned, crawling up my throat and sparking my tongue with more conversation. “How old are you?”

“Thirty-four.” He took another step forward until the water almost touched the toes of his worn black boots. “You?”

“Twenty-one.”

He was a lot older than me. Aged in that rugged, seasoned way, like he had stories to tell and experiences to share, yet an abundance more still to come.

He was good-looking, too.

Strikingly so.

Even the shadows couldn't veil his angled cheekbones, strong jaw, silken waves of dark hair, and full lips that quirked with the barest smile when he took a seat in the sand.

We faced each other. Stared.

Reed bent his legs at the knees and dangled his hands between them, leather-encased forearms pressed to his thighs. My body was halfway submerged in water, his bone-dry, but the crackling charge in the air upstaged the elements that separated us, while pearly starlight blanketed him in a soft glow.

Sky, water, earth.

Him.

His gaze held with mine, and for a moment, time seemed to suspend as we allowed the silence to breathe, the thump of music from the party serving only as a distant heartbeat.

"So, Halley Like the Comet," Reed finally spoke, his voice a gentle ripple in the summer breeze. "Do you have a story to go along with the name?"

I continued to flick my toes in and out of the water as droplets splashed along my lower legs. "My mom was a stargazer. A dreamer."

"Was? Past tense?"

"Yes. Now she's just an alcoholic."

Too dark. Too deep.

I chomped down on my tongue like I could chew through the spoken words and swallow them back down.

His expression wilted. "Sorry to hear."

"Who were you looking for?"

He tugged his bottom lip between his teeth and made a hissing sound, processing my swift subject change.

I tried not to focus on the action but failed.

“My daughter,” he said.

I blanched at the admission, my bobbing legs ceasing all motion. “You have a daughter?”

“Yes.”

“A daughter old enough to be at a party?”

Shifting across from me, he sighed as the soles of his boots drew imprints in the muted sand. “Thanks for that stone-cold reminder. I’m still getting used to the concept of her having a social life that doesn’t involve Disney movies and bedtime stories.”

Oh, boy.

I was way out of my league with this guy. Something told me I should remove myself from the conversation with dignity before the curious allure of him eclipsed my logical thinking.

Unfortunately for both of us, I ignored the nagging tug of sound judgment.

“Her mom said she’d be here, but this isn’t really her scene,” he added, scratching his jaw. “She likes beachy bonfires and country music, not the grunge scene with rowdy douchebags. Thought she might’ve come outside.”

“Nope. Just me out here.” I dug my toes into the lake floor until they were wholly hidden. “Sorry to disappoint.”

He paused, his eyes returning to mine, twinkling with what looked like pale-green flecks now that he was closer. “I’m not disappointed.”

My smile returned, less foreign this time. I’d smiled more in the last few minutes than the last few years and we’d hardly exchanged more than a handful of sentences. “Well, then. Cheers to random, strange encounters behind Jay’s house.” I lifted my invisible flute in the air.

A half-grin twitched on his mouth as he moved an inch closer to me in the sand, his boots teasing the water. “How do you know him?”

“Through Becky.” Everybody knew a Becky. I didn’t, but he probably did. “She left a little while ago and I don’t know anyone else here.”

“Sure you don’t need a ride?”

Our eyes snagged when my chin tipped up.

I considered his intentions again, wondering what was going through his mind—after all, he was a much-older man. Was this about sex, or was he just being nice? Acts of kindness were a far-fetched concept to me, especially when it came to the opposite gender. It was hard to imagine this man offering me a ride home with no strings attached.

Then again...maybe I wanted strings.

Something to tether me. To anchor my floundering heart.

I envisioned this mysterious stranger taking me home in his car or truck, warm wind whipping through the open window, his scent mingling with the breeze. I wondered what he smelled like. Mint, pine-steeped mountaintops, cheap cologne. He was too far away for me to pinpoint the soap on his skin or the shampoo in his hair, and I found myself instinctually scooting forward in the water to get a whiff of the compelling unknown.

Temptation teased me. An escape.

But I shook my head at the offer.

If Father caught a strange man in our driveway, he'd come barreling out of the house with his shotgun and scare Reed away for good. He'd probably shoot him. "I can walk."

He glanced back down at the sand. "Are you in college?"

I honed in on his strong jawline and the way his throat rolled when he swallowed. Then I stiffened as his words registered and peeled a water-soaked leaf off my ankle. "Not yet. I'm still figuring out what to do with my life."

"I get that. Took me a while to figure it out, too."

"What do you do?"

"I used to be a paramedic. But then I sort of switched gears and got into jiu-jitsu training and made a career out of it. I specialize in self-defense."

My eyes popped.

That was...impressive.

I didn't take Reed with his messy hair, casual clothes, and pretty, probably-green eyes to have such a respectable occupation in both the

medical field and martial arts. “Do you teach locally?”

“I do now. I lived in Charleston for a while and opened up my own studio. Then my daughter and her mom moved back to Illinois. So, after another year passed, I handed the business reins over to one of my employees, then followed them here. I opened up a second studio nearby.” Reed pursed his lips, masking a sheepish smile. “Sorry. That was probably more than you wanted to know.”

I gawked at him, transfixed. “No, that’s amazing. I love the idea of helping people in that way.”

“Yeah, it’s my passion.”

“I bet your daughter is really proud.”

“Hard to say.” He drank in a long breath, scuffing the loose stones near his boot. “Somewhere between her scowling, pouting, and scathing sarcasm, I’m hopeful there’s some pride tucked away.” Chewing on his bottom lip, he glanced back up at me. “What about you? Any grand ambitions?”

Disappointment flattened my lips, then it traveled south, settling in my heart. “I wish I had a grand answer, but my ambitions are kind of scattered and hard to catch. I think the thing I love most doesn’t really have a title. Doesn’t fit into any sort of box, you know?”

He didn’t know, judging from his creased browline.

Or...maybe that was interest.

Reed leaned forward and skimmed his fingers across his lips, his attention fully fixed on me. He was waiting for more. There was a curious glimmer in his eyes that kept me talking.

“I enjoy capturing the intangible,” I explained. “Flashes, flickers, the in-betweens. I want to immortalize them forever. I write in my journal, draw, sometimes I paint. But I’m not very good at any of those things. Far from career-worthy.” An insecure laugh slipped out, and I flicked my foot out of the water, splashing us both.

A spray of droplets danced across our legs. Reed smiled.

Warmth infiltrated my chest, my cheeks, my lungs. “Sorry...that doesn’t make any sense.” Cringing, I wished I could erase my rambling. “I guess I

just love moments.”

“Moments,” he echoed, nodding slowly. Processing. Allowing my words to sink in. “Blips.”

“Yes...exactly.” My response floated over to him like a whispery daydream as an organic smile crested on my mouth. He understood. No one else had ever understood, because nobody bothered to listen. “Life’s fleeting blips. The ones that seem insignificant at the time, but later on, they mean everything. You know, like when you’re watching a movie, and you pause it to grab a snack? You stop it at this random scene, and the frame freezes on someone making a weird face that makes you laugh, or an extra is caught smiling in the background, or a dog is running through the park trying to catch a butterfly with its tail in motion...”

The crease didn’t unfurl from his brows; in fact, it only deepened. He looked contemplative, completely engrossed.

My skin heated, despite the chilly water lapping at my skin. “I’m getting carried away,” I said through a chuckle. “I just love moments like that, but in *real* life. I wish I could solidify them. Prolong them. Make them last forever.”

Reed drank me in, the glimmer in his eyes brightening with tenderness while he seemingly mulled over my long-winded dissertation on blips. “What about journalism?”

I shrugged hopelessly.

That would never happen—I had no money for college and I wasn’t good at doing hard things.

Becoming a journalist would be really damn hard.

“Putting thoughts into words isn’t my strong suit. As I’m sure you’ve noticed.” I shot him a weak smile. “My Nana always wanted me to pursue business, but my heart was never in things like numbers and quotas.”

“Sounds like your heart already knows what it wants. Go with the blips.”

“I wish it were that simple.”

“It is. People always overcomplicate shit.”

“That’s because life is complicated,” I countered, peeking up at him through water-dotted lashes.