

*M o r g a n P a r k*

BEYOND  
*the*  
SHORELINE



# CHAPTER 1

## BRIELLE

IF HOPE WERE A PHYSICAL thing, something to hold tightly on cold December nights, it would come in the shape of soft tiny fingers, expressive hazelnut eyes, and a little button nose scattered with auburn freckles.

After all of his silence, I wonder if he thinks of Emmalee. I wonder if he ever hears another six-year-old's laugh and looks twice because that subtle, high-pitched giggle reminds him his DNA courses through a small, fragile body somewhere.

I wonder if he cares.

"Brielle?" Her soft voice pierces through my thoughts, bringing me back to the present, a place I'd rather not dwell in right now.

Suddenly aware of Dr. Raleigh's presence, I look up. Her aqua-lined eyes are narrowed, cocoa-colored eyebrows pulled into an indistinguishable straight line. Her lips aren't pursed, they're slightly slack. Open with what, I'm not sure. I don't know why she always looks at me like that when I get lost, but I'm happy her voice is always the road home.

"Mhm," I murmur, hoping it will be enough to allow me to drift away just a little while longer.

In a desperate attempt to avoid her gaze, I focus my attention back out the window. The skyline is full of stark buildings, mountainous spires, and obsidian-colored structures poking through misty shadows. A hazy sheen blankets each peak, the early-morning sky hidden

## MORGAN PARK

beneath the melting sun. Only the Manhattan Bridge grounds me in the fact that I'm not actually floating on a cloud. But that would be a kinder reality—on a cloud with no past, no future, and nothing lived through to require this very conversation.

"Brielle?" Dr. Raleigh's steady voice prompts again.

She pulls her long, dark hair across one shoulder, and I swear I almost see a little patch of buzzed hair beneath those glossy locks. Shifting in her seat, she lays her clipboard and pen on the coffee table between us. Leaning forward just slightly, she unbuttons her tailored suit jacket—there's no way an outfit can wrap around someone like that unless it was made specifically for them—and uncrosses her legs.

"I'm here," I reassure her because that's what she's really worried about: how far I dissociate when the memories flood back like a tsunami taking no prisoners.

"I know you're physically present." She pauses. The comforting smile seems forced onto her lips. "But are you emotionally here right now?"

"Yes," I lie, tucking my sweaty palms into the edge of my open green flannel.

I don't know why I still lie to her. To her, I'm a mirror, ricocheting each dark secret, each hidden thought, right into her perfectly manicured hands. I know she should see through my mistruths. It's her job as my therapist—or psychologist or whatever they're called now—but I'm still not used to the vulnerability of it, the sheer transparency of having all my hopes and dreams and desires and nightmares laid out before another person.

It didn't work so well last time.

I'm questioning more and more why I keep my appointments with Dr. Raleigh, why I pay a babysitter, why I catch one bus just to hop on the subway and sit on the questionably sticky bench and then walk six blocks to this office for a mere hour discussion.

I just want that moment of clarity, that *aha* feeling off in the distance covered by a rolling morning fog. I want the silence that should follow. I want the understanding to seep so deeply into my pores that it bursts through my being with the force of a wrecking ball.

But here I am three months later, willing to have the same conversations all over again with this woman, no closer to understanding where my life is going. I'm no closer to understanding how it takes twenty-one days to break a habit but it's been two years and his words still course through my veins, weighing me down like puddled concrete.

There's just something about Dr. Raleigh. She's calming, like the stillness of evergreen pine needles after a rainstorm. Her voice is the sound of wind off in the distance as it tumbles through miles of wavering aspen. She's the ocean, pushing me just slightly before pulling me back. Even during our first session, I felt comfortable in her presence. When I sit here and we don't talk about much at all, I still feel better.

Maybe if I stopped lying—or withholding, depending on how you look at it—maybe if I finally told her everything, I wouldn't feel so stuck in a past I'd rather run from. Maybe if I stopped holding it all in, I wouldn't be sitting on the same olive-green leather sofa months later, with a lighter wallet, no closer to answering why I can't love a man who should be perfect for me. No, who *is* perfect for me.

"Actually, no," I admit. A puff of air escapes from my lips, and my chest suddenly feels lighter.

Dr. Raleigh looks up at me, her eyes wider than I've ever seen them. She continues to gaze at me, that sweet smile tugging one corner of her mouth sympathetically.

"Okay." She exhales the word, and I can see the relief of my honesty painted across her face. "Can we talk about that?"

"Talk about what?" Frustration weeps through the dewy window and onto my skin, tainting my words before they leave my mouth. "The fact that this is probably our twentieth session and I feel like I'm even further away from where we started? That I'm still with a man I'm too broken to be able to love like he deserves? That nothing has changed? Because at this point, I think I've accepted that this is just how it's going to be. This is what I'm left with." I sigh, once again lost in the vista outside the window, in the potential to be anywhere other than living the life I've been given. "I'm tired of talking about all that."

## MORGAN PARK

Dr. Raleigh keeps her gaze on me for a moment, as if studying how far the fissure cracked this time. Slowly, she looks down into her lap and scribbles something into her notebook. That's honestly the worst part of all this—the fact that all of my tremulous words are written in perfect cursive writing, tucked away to a place any prying eyes can find if they try hard enough, and not released to the wind to disappear in search of a safehold.

“It's been a while”—she smiles, changing the subject—“since you made your last appointment.”

She pulls her hair across the other shoulder, waiting for my chapped lips to explain why. Her navy blazer is tucked beneath her sides, and a white satin blouse peeks between. She uncrosses her legs again, this time leaning just slightly to the left as I look into those striking blue eyes.

“I thought—” I stop talking, unsure if I'm really willing to break down the iron gate between us. But I am. I really am. I'm tired of bearing this all on my own. “I hoped that maybe if I had some distance, everything would fall into place, that maybe if I just got out of my own head, I could love Charles. And I know you're going to say I do love him.” Searching for the best way to describe the feeling within, I continue. “But I don't love him like he deserves. Not without caution, without care.”

I lose my nerve. Abruptly, I'm absorbed into the sound of the cool morning wind beating against the towering windows, my mind completely blank. She sees it. Her expression changes momentarily, a subtle glint of worry flashing by.

“Is that all love is? Devotion without caution or care?” She probes carefully, her voice curious but not accusatory. “What do you think Charles deserves?”

I could have blurted out a thousand adjectives for the type of person Charles deserves. I've never met anyone as genuinely kind as him. He's charismatic—with that gleaming smile and signature blue polo—winning over even my usually weary sister, Joan, within minutes of meeting her. He didn't even complain when she dragged him to see the new *Barbie* comedy with matching pink jumpsuits at the ready.

He's so gentle with Emmalee. He's never raised his voice once, not even when she spilled chocolate milk all over his new suit as soon as he walked through the door. It was five in the morning, and he was already late for a grueling twelve-hour flight filled with nothing but turbulence and screaming newborns. He should have been angry, furious with her too-tiny, uncoordinated hands. Malcolm would have been.

But Charles is nothing like Malcolm. He's so sweet, so patient, so caring, so...so *everything*. He's everything I've ever wanted, everything I wished Malcolm was. Everything Malcolm tricked me into thinking he was when I first met him but instead was an alcoholic man-child masquerading as my husband.

"Charles deserves," I start but quickly recede into the dark corners of my consciousness. Visions of Malcolm flicker so violently in my mind. All I can see are snarling white teeth, sweat beading on his maroon face, and the sound of his gravelly voice screaming in my ears. "*You're not good enough, Brielle. You're lucky I love you.*"

"Brielle." Dr. Raleigh cocks her head to the side, examining me.

His voice fades from my ears and hers inhabits every available space within my head, and I'm so relieved. I take in her posture—her casual yet professional demeanor—her foot, hidden beneath black heels, gently tapping the air as it hangs over her other leg. Locking my gaze with hers, I'm not sure what I see in those oval pools. It should be a solemn pity for the fool sitting in front of her—the fool who allowed a man to completely shatter her before finally walking away.

I'm probably overthinking her movements, her thoughts. Maybe she's just thankful that my last novel sold well enough for me to continue paying her regardless of the progress, or lack of, that I'm making here.

"I'm sorry," I breathe out. I can do this. I can finally drop my shield; it's always been too heavy to carry on my own. "Charles deserves someone who can pull themselves from their bed to make him breakfast on the days he has early mornings, instead of sinking deeper into the sheets as her child sleeps one door over." I stop a moment because the way my voice begins to tremble scares me. "He deserves someone"—I swallow the doubt gurgling in my throat—"who will

## MORGAN PARK

go to him, no matter how far, no matter how foreign the place. He deserves a woman who can open her heart fully. He has so much to give, and it is simply being wasted on me.”

Beneath her intense gaze, I freeze.

No, I’m not frozen. My skin is leaden putty, weighing me down so forcefully, so unforgivingly, I’m certain it will pull me between the cracks and into the marble tile. Maybe I will sink into oblivion if I just succumb to that feeling. Maybe falling would wipe this pain away.

“The fact that I can’t love him as he loves me breaks me every single day.” I wait for her usually comforting reflections, but they don’t come. “Charles is the type of man women dream about.”

“How so?”

“Because he just is.” Shrugging, I don’t know how else to explain it. “He’s so smart and successful. He’s always so soft, like he’s afraid I might crumble beneath his touch. And he’s handsome. Damn, is he handsome.”

Dr. Raleigh smiles at me from across the room, giving me the confidence to continue.

“He’s the type of man”—I stop speaking, realizing the meaning of what will be spoken from my lips next—“the type of man I once dreamed about, everything I once wanted.”

“But not anymore?” Her brows arch toward the cool, white ceiling, and I can’t fight the exasperated sigh leaving my mouth.

Everything seems to finally be falling into place in my life, but I somehow still feel lost. It doesn’t matter that I’ve finally found a good man, one that I wasn’t afraid to tell that I came as a packaged deal. It doesn’t matter that my books are finally doing well, that I have a house with a library. Some days when I wake up to his smile, I feel like I’ve woken up in the wrong reality. I feel empty. In the pit of my stomach, I know something is wrong.

I want to tell her that I’m not even the shell of the person I was then, that I don’t recognize the person I see in the mirror anymore. Every single day, I feel hollow, so empty that I’m afraid a paper cut will disintegrate the very fabric of my being and I’ll dissolve into rain-puddled paper mache.

“No,” I say evenly because even thinking those thoughts requires more strength than I have to muster in one day.

She usually presses further. She usually asks me why, how, who, even though she already knows the answer to all three: Malcolm. Why can’t Charles touch my bare body without shudders rolling off me? Malcolm. Why does Charles’s breath on my neck give me goose bumps so fierce that each are painful needles to my legs? Malcolm. Why do I hold Emmalee so closely, so carefully? Malcolm.

Today she doesn’t. She looks at me—that subtle tilt of her head, that sympathetic pull of her mouth—and doesn’t avert her eyes. I watch her take me in. Suddenly, boiling hot tears are beating against my eyelids. Heat flashes through my entire body, lighting my ears on fire. I don’t have to look to know that anxious sapphire-colored splotches are painted across my chest. As those tears flood my blurry eyes, she watches me break.

Even though she can’t reach across this room and hold me while whispering that everything will be okay, her eyes do. They wrap my heart in a cocoon, one that finally cracks the last fortress I painstakingly built.

I stifle the lava threatening to lurch into my throat, ignoring the burning in my lungs as I open my mouth to breathe. Despite every attempt to push those vagabond tears back to whatever cold, dark corner they crept from, they don’t dissipate.

Reaching across the coffee table for the tissues with outstretched nail-bitten fingers, I pull one from the box and press it forcefully onto my eyes. My vision goes black from the pressure, and starlight consumes everything. Tiny specks of red glitter float along the landscape of my sight.

Gripping the damp tissue in my hands, I take another deep breath. I’ve never cried in front of anyone. Not a single tear. Not for my mother when she passed two Octobers ago. Not when I felt bones break as I hit the floor after Malcolm’s throw. Not in front of Emmalee when the darkness spread too far. No one. Never.

A shudder rolls up my spine, gripping my shoulders. I’m so tired of holding it all in. I can’t do it alone anymore.



## MORGAN PARK

I glance over to where Dr. Raleigh was sitting just moments ago, but the brown leather chair is empty. Then I feel warmth spread across my clenched hand in my lap. Unconsciously, I loosen my grip on the flannel. With one subtle tilt of my head, I meet her gaze.

She's never done that before, never crossed the invisible line in the tile from her place to mine. We haven't so much as shook hands, but this simple little gesture feels like a Band-Aid to my cracking heart.

She keeps her hand on mine as she says, "I know it doesn't seem like you've made progress the last three months, but you have. I'm so proud of you, Brielle." Her voice is so soft, so sweet, that I almost break again at the words.

She looks down at her hand on mine. It's warm compared to the chill radiating from within me. With pursed lips, she looks like she's fighting words she doesn't want to let out, and I'm afraid she won't say anything else.

"The last couple of months," she says hesitantly, "you've talked about Charles as if you don't deserve him." She looks up and meets my tear-stained eyes again. "Brielle, he's been what you've deserved from the very beginning. Just because someone in your past didn't see your worth, it doesn't make you worthless." Her voice slowly trails off, and then her attention is pulled toward the door.

Instinctively, I look at the clock that's usually ticking to identify the session time. It has to have been an hour already. I must have wasted enough of her time. The clock's amber face is dark, turned off at some point between her being in that chair and appearing next to me. How long did I have that tissue pressed against my eyes, and how loud was the static in my ears for me not to have heard any of it?

My gaze lands back on Dr. Raleigh, an invisible game of tug-of-war beneath her stiff expression. I watch as her rosy lips part slightly and then close again. The words are on the tip of her tongue, but for some reason, they're lost to her.

"What Malcolm did," she finally says, hurt seeming to underline each word. "What he did to you, what he put you through, you didn't deserve. Brielle, you didn't deserve any of it. The fact that you are here in my office, that you continue to fight every day for Emmalee, is a

testament to your strength. You lived in his world for so long, you don't remember anything that existed before."

She stops talking, waiting for me to say something, but I'm mute. It's as if I have a dictionary in my pocket, but I'm on a faraway island with no land in sight, only a foreign language ringing in my ears.

"You know me," she continues, despite my distance. "Usually, I would ask you question after question to help you come to this realization on your own, but I just want you to know that you don't live in that world anymore, and you never have to again."

Her words soak into me like August rain drizzling on a warm sidewalk. I still don't want to believe it because if all of that is true, then why did it happen? Why did I have to be so broken, so utterly fragmented, for it all to finally stop?

"If Charles is perfect for you, we'll take baby steps toward healing so you can work toward the life you want. If Charles is perfect, just not perfect for you, we can work with that too. Whatever you want, whatever you think, we'll get through it together."

"Sometimes, it feels like Malcolm was a lifetime ago." I gulp. "But I sometimes wake to his face haunting my dreams, and it feels so real. There are days when I swear I can still taste his whiskey on my lips. I've tried—every session—I've tried to release the grip he has on my life."

"With post-traumatic stress disorder, the need to cope with the past doesn't just stop one day. As we've talked about before, there's no timeline for when you'll feel more like yourself again. You experienced something most people can't even imagine. It's going to take time for you to heal before you fully feel safe with someone again—even when that someone is as special as you describe Charles to be. Even though you don't think you're deserving of it right now, you are worthy of the love others give you." She smiles at me, that soft hand still holding me in place.

And I believe her. I don't think I have ever believed anyone more than I do her right at this very moment.

"Thank you." I place my hand gently over hers, and that's when it clicks that our skin is touching.

## MORGAN PARK

Dr. Raleigh looks down at my touch, her eyes lingering just seconds too long. Then she removes her arm from my space, separating herself by sliding mere inches away. She takes a brief glance at the clock's blank face. She looks back toward me, her shiny hair tucked behind her ears.

"I'm sure our time is up," I say quietly.

"Don't worry about that."

She stands in one motion and swiftly moves around the coffee table, skirting past the overgrown areca palm tree perched on the side to take her usual seat across the whitewashed room. Everything seems normal again with her being in her place of authority, with a direct view to my every fidget and expression.

"Do you want to stay a little while longer?" she asks. "You could tell me about what happened this week."

*Yes.* Yes, I do. I want her to help me deconstruct it all, so it doesn't feel so big—a balloon expanding in my already fracturing chest—but I don't want her to have the onus of listening.

It still doesn't sit well with me that I pay someone to listen to my problems, but the fact is I do. With Emmalee, I've let too many friends go. I had to make sure there was the space and time for her to grow with all the love and attention she could want. So I pay a fantastic therapist to listen to me unload my baggage. She probably goes home and drinks tequila on the rocks while I play Cinderella dress-up, and the relationship works: her over there and me right here on this couch.

"I appreciate the offer, but I have to pick Emmalee up shortly," I say instead. "She has gymnastics in two hours."

The concern etches more deeply across her face. Maybe it was the sight of me finally breaking down after all this time. Maybe that matters in some way. Maybe she sees the splintering of my visage, the crumbling of the armor I always wear. Maybe what I'm not saying is too loud for her to ignore.

"Can we keep our appointment for next week, like before?" I ask.

"Of course, Brielle." She smiles.

And I immediately feel lighter. I feel like one less shadow is looming behind me, one less burden to bear on my own.

After pulling my black tote from its resting place beside my boot-covered feet, I slowly make my way toward the door. My hand grazes the cold bronze knob when Dr. Raleigh's voice stops me.

"Can you wait just one moment?"

I do, hand still on the cold tingle of metal. In somewhat of a haste, she walks across the office to her desk. After pulling out a business card from her acrylic holder, she scribbles something on the back. In a short five steps, she's standing before me in that fitted suit with her hand outstretched.

"I know your office number, Dr. Raleigh."

She shakes her head. "I know you do. This is my cell phone number."

My expression must be pure puzzlement because she jolts back slightly, as if in the middle of a grave mistake. "I've never given my personal number out to anyone before, but if you ever have a day when everything is too much, if you need to work through anything going on, please. No matter what time of day, you can call or text me."

"Dr. Raleigh," I say, ready to apologize for any worry I've caused her, but she just holds the card out further.

"I don't want you disappearing for another month and bottling everything up. I understand if you don't want to come to the office. I understand if you need to cancel an appointment. Just know you can always reach me at this number if you need someone."

Slowly, I take the card, and our warm fingers brush just momentarily. "Thank you."

## CHAPTER 2

### MAEVE

AFTER BRIELLE DISAPPEARS BEYOND THE elevator, I close my office door. Usually, relief washes over me. At any other time, I would finish my notes, lock them in the metal filing cabinet, and tuck away the burdens left to me from each client within them.

Not today.

That woman. That incredibly resilient, hardheaded woman. There's just something about her. Something intriguing. Something terrifying. Something I've never experienced before. Every time I see her, every time I watch those toffee-tinted eyes gloss over, stuck in a past she never should have been subjected to, it seems like the layers of life looming over her become heavier and heavier.

For some reason, it weighs on me. I wish she could unload more, so she could learn to stand just a little taller. I want to tell her it won't be like this forever and have her believe that with every fiber in her fraying being.

I know I crossed a line just now, a line I've never tiptoed over before; there's therapist professionalism and all the legality I live by. We're taught from day one: never share our personal information, and most certainly never, ever, give them your cell phone number. Draw a line in the sand, and always stay on your side. No exceptions.

I don't know what came over me. I took one look into her eyes as those overdue tears filled them and I knew she would fold into herself again. I could see every second-guess flutter across her facade.

I hope she uses it. I hope after the breakthrough we had today, the rawness of her confessions and tears, she knows I'm on her side. I hope she knows not everyone will hurt her, not everyone wants something from her. Not everyone will leave.

My next patient after Brielle is a man with hippopotomonstrosesquippedaliophobia, and I still have a hard time keeping a straight face when discussing his diagnosis. Franklin's phobia is of long words, and hippopotomonstrosesquippedaliophobia is probably one of the longest words I know. That has to be pure irony in the flesh, right?

He works from home as a journalist and pays an assistant to read his research for him in preparation for any longer words that might force him into another six-month facility stay at St. Mary's Rehabilitation Hospital. Apparently, she missed the word *incomprehensibility* last week, and now he's set back in his recovery at least a month.

After a very long one-hour discussion regarding why billboards will most certainly not be the death of him, I see Esmeralda for our weekly virtual session. She locked herself in her Montauk lake house on the day her husband passed and hasn't left since. Yes, I know; there most definitely are worse places to retreat to.

Her husband, Christopher, died from a one-in-a-million lightning strike one winter morning. He was reaching for the red flag on the mailbox after checking for her weekly Publishers Clearing House mailer, and that was it. Since his funeral a year ago, she hasn't stepped outside once, and especially not for the mail. Our conversation today revolves around trying to garden again. As unrelated as that little task sounds, I'm trying to get her to rely less on Uber to deliver her groceries one day. Her grandson turns one next month, and future Esmeralda won't forgive herself for missing his birthday party.

At five in the afternoon, like every Friday, I leave the office. I fight the congestion of the nine-to-fivers pushing their way to the subway and stride toward my brownstone stoop. Opening the door, I can already hear the manic scratching of nails on the granite entryway.

Molly charges at me, her fluffy, speckled coat tossing white-and-gray fur into the air. The long strands of hair float and then cascade down on invisible wings to the gray tile.

## MORGAN PARK

“How’s my girl?” I coo. Molly’s butt wiggles even more. Her tail twirls in helicopter patterns, throwing even more glinting strands of fur into the dry summer air.

I guide her inside, setting my briefcase and water bottle down on the side table as I pass through the entryway. She rushes to the back door, whips around to face me, and nudges her nose toward her only gateway to the great outdoors—all while her tail never stops moving.

I can’t help but smile at her. She’s the epitome of glitter and sunshine wrapped into the cutest little Australian Shepherd there could be.

After I open the door, she flies off the deck, her legs outstretched like Superman. She lands in luscious grass before sniffing her way from the calla lilies to her left, around the towering lilac trees, across to the other side of the yard, and then back to the deck, where she slumps beneath the table.

As I make my way back inside, my tired eyes scope out the couch—the perfect place to plop into the plush cushion and review all of my notes from the day. Just as my backside hovers above my favorite spot in the middle, my cell phone rings from across the room.

*Ugh!*

My mother’s name is bold across the screen. Leaning back on the cushion, I pull the throw blanket from its home on the back of the couch. After tucking it snugly around my thighs, I mentally prepare myself for the “brief conversation” that will soon turn into hours.

“Hey, baby girl.” I hear her beam across the phone, her voice so bright and airy. “How was your week?”

“Uneventful.”

My mother—who, let’s face it, is probably my only friend these days besides Julian—calls every other day like clockwork. Sometimes, if she’s feeling adventurous—or if she’s a few too many martinis in—she calls two days in a row.

Just two decades earlier, Martine Raleigh was the Marilyn Monroe of twentieth-century surfers. She was all legs, bold tan lines, and short dresses with slits up the thigh a mile long. Her twenty-year-old signature shot of her on a carnation-red surfboard—toes hanging off the

edge in a white bikini that was beyond salacious at that time—was on the wall of every teenage boy's room.

That was her moment of fame, and that pinup superseded even her arrogant agent's expectations. It propelled her modeling career forward so quickly, our family got whiplash from the force.

The boys and I—Chaz, my oldest brother, who can be compared to a cotton-candy cloud, and Ezra, the baby and wild child of the household because there always has to be one—spent a lot of time with Dad at the dinner table.

But even then, Mom never missed one single morning of making us bacon and pancakes, and she was at every single sporting or school event we had. Regardless of their time-demanding careers, we always came first; I know most can't say that.

Lately, I don't have much to talk about with her. My days have blended together into an indistinguishable straight line. I've taken on too many clients this year, and my usual nine-to-five office hours have almost doubled in the last couple of months. Overwhelmed tends to be an understatement these days.

After reluctantly pulling myself from bed each morning, I'm at work by eight. I eat lunch while reviewing my afternoon meetings. I finish my appointments, go home to Molly—woman's best friend and the very best snuggler on the planet—and write my case notes while eating cold takeout from the fridge. Typically, I fall asleep to the TV fighting for center stage with the honking of oncoming traffic and screaming pedestrians outside.

If I were counseling someone who said the same, of course I'd say they were practicing avoidance, that they can't work all their time away and not take any of it for the things that make them happy, that it eventually catches up at some point. I would make it very clear that this behavior is not mentally or physically healthy, or sustainable for that matter. But that's different. That's for clients to hear.

"Life is never uneventful, honey," she chimes, and I silently mock her catchphrase: "It's all about perspective."

"Well, my perspective is..." I trail off, thinking about the bitterness on my tongue, "...that maybe it was just a typical week. How was your week, Mom?"



## MORGAN PARK

“It was busy. I had brunch yesterday with Charlene. You know, our old neighbor from Valley View Lane? The one with the red cocker spaniel. You know—Larry, the cocker spaniel? The little one who had voice-box surgery and then sounded like a squeaker toy every time he barked afterward?”

I walk to the kitchen with her voice still chirping in my ears. After moving the kettle over the stove burner, I twist the knob until beautiful amber flames appear. Leaning across the island, I close my eyes as she continues to describe exactly what sound Larry makes now while I’m stuck on the fact that his name makes him sound like a fifty-year-old mechanic.

“Your father and I took the liberty of sending your boards to Danny’s Surf Shop yesterday too. We wanted to make sure they were freshly waxed for you guys next weekend.”

“Thanks, Mom.” She’s probably had the appointment booked since last summer. “That was really thoughtful of you. I’m sure Chaz and Ezra will be hitting those waves as soon as they get to the house.”

“You have your plane ticket, right? Because you know how busy and overbooked those flights are in the summer.”

“Of course. My Uber is scheduled too.”

“You’re staying for the entire week, just like always, right? I know you’re busy, but this is family.” Her voice grows more concerned, weighed down by a guilt-inducing tone only a mother can bear. “I was very disheartened with Ezra for leaving last year in the middle of the week for that silly London tour. He missed out on my famous apple-spice cakes and the bonfire.”

“I know, Mom.” I feign sympathetic disappointment, a smile hidden just beneath. “How dare he?” There’s no skipping out of anything at the Raleigh Family Vacation. “I’ll be there for the whole week. I promise.”

I love that I can feel her smile and absorb her warmth through the phone. For a brief moment, I wish I didn’t move 3,000 miles away. It’d be nice to be close enough to have these conversations in person instead of over static airwaves. On the bad days, I want to fall into her calming embrace as she strokes my hair, instead of frantically calling her number when only a mother’s advice can ground me.

"And don't forget," she says before I even finish my internal thought, "Chazzy's bringing a girl home."

"Wait." I gasp, completely taken aback by the bombshell that just landed in my lap. "What? Mom, you didn't mention that before."

"Really? I didn't mention it? Are you sure?" The pitch of her voice escalates, and I can picture the way she's tapping her finger on her sharp chin on the other end of the phone line. "Oh, well, I guess it's serious."

"It's been two and a half decades and Chaz still thinks that the B+ he got on his senior-year English final is serious; that doesn't say much," I deadpan. "What's her name?"

"Oh, name..." She hums. "I know it's on the tip of my tongue! I think it was Brianna—or was it Belinda?"

"Belinda?" I snort. "How old is she? At least we don't have to worry he's robbing the cradle."

"I don't quite remember her name, but apparently, it is serious. Chazzy hasn't brought a girl home since his junior prom. I can't wait to meet her!"

"Has he talked to you about this mystery woman? What's she like?" I lean against the kitchen counter, spinning a spoon idly. "He didn't mention her last time we talked."

"No." She sighs. "I was hoping you had the scoop. Well, she'll be staying the entire week with us, so I'm sure we'll have plenty of time to get to know her."

"That's brave for a stranger." I smirk. "Crashing *the* Raleigh Family Vacation? She must be a glutton for punishment."

"Or he didn't tell her about our vacation festivities," she mischievously says.

"Either way, she has no clue what's ahead with Ezra and Chaz in the same room."

We laugh for a few more minutes, betting on whether we think this new woman will last the entire week or just a few days. Mom's being optimistic, putting her money on the hope that she'll stay at least through the Farewell to Summer Party. I don't think she'll make it to the hiking trip scheduled the next day.

## MORGAN PARK

Mom hangs up to go make dinner for Dad, who will be approximately forty-five minutes late and potentially two glasses of bourbons deep when he gets there. She'll heat the dinner back up, pull out a slice of homemade chocolate ganache cake, and kiss him on his stubbled cheek when he arrives.

Dad, otherwise known as William Raleigh, powerhouse investment banker, never got the memo about slowing down. As the years progressed, his workload increased instead of decreased. While Mom dreams of his retirement and bakes cookies for her nonexistent grandkids, Dad's still crunching numbers and making deals like his life depends on it. So she spends most of her days cooking and speaking at charity events where each plate costs just as much as a typical American's mortgage payment while he's busy making sure the Raleigh bank account can fund a small moon landing.

I think my father is mostly just concerned about the money. It's not that they don't have enough. They paid for all of our schooling, and even the PhD I finished last year. We never had to ask. They have homes in Dublin and Brema and a massive Mediterranean in Los Altos, where they live now. They call it quaint, but I'm certain it could be classified as a castle with the right person appraising it.

But they didn't always have it all. Dad's childhood was straight out of a Steinbeck novel, with him growing up on a farm that could give Old MacDonald a run for his money. No electricity, just a bunch of animals and endless chores. At the early age of fifteen, he took a Greyhound bus to the city and never looked back. He took the plate of nothing he was handed and filled it as soon as his calloused feet hit the ground. He earned every penny he has, and while everyone knows that, I think there are times he still forgets he's no longer the scrawny child running through wheat fields.

Maybe he doesn't want to retire because he doesn't like having time without a schedule of events to break it up. Maybe he doesn't want to retire because he's afraid his money will disappear just as quickly as those dandelion fields did in the warm June wind. Maybe staying home with mom and her enthusiastic obsession with watching recorded ballet performances every single night has its daunting repercussions.

Maybe he's just not ready yet.

Either way, I'm just happy it's finally August and I can see everyone again. This trip keeps me sane through the year knowing that no matter what happens, no matter how much I overload my life, everything will right itself at the Raleigh Family Vacation. It always does.

The kettle screeches in the distance, pulling me out of my daydream. I lift myself from the cold counter and pour the boiling water over the oolong tea bag sitting in my favorite rainbow ceramic mug. I make my way to the office with my briefcase slung over my shoulder and mug in hand.

Upon opening my notes, I brace myself for the daily grind of compiling session summaries on my computer. If I don't tackle this mountain of paperwork every day, I'll end up buried under a landslide of unfiled documents faster than you can say *administrative nightmare*.

Before I can read any more of Esmeralda's most recent explanation for why it is so much better to just default to paperless billing instead of using the post office, my phone buzzes so fervently, it falls off the corner of the desk.

"Hello?" I answer, still catching my breath from the acrobatic feat of lunging for the device.

"Hey there, sweet cheeks," Julian's charismatic voice purrs through the line. "What's new this week?"

"Other than the loss of sanity"—I smile with the phone against my shoulder, searching for Esmeralda's file in the cabinet beneath me—"due to talking today to yet another man about his erectile dysfunction."

"Oof, honey." His rising tone emphasizes the endearment. "You know I was talking to my Miss Molly. I don't care about your gross old-man problems."

Molly flips her long ears as if listening harder. I can't help but laugh.

I first met Julian five years ago when he showed up at my door for a dog-walking interview dressed like the lost member of a '90s boy band. With his Gucci shoes, neon tank top, and oversized pink sunglasses, he looked like he'd just stepped out of a retro music video.

## MORGAN PARK

It didn't take long for us to find ourselves sitting on the back deck, laughing about our day, with steaming cups of tea in our chilly hands.

I complained about my failed date night with the cute girl from the grocery store. He mentioned he went to the gym once a week, not to work out—he'd run the small chance of ruining his fresh manicure—but so he could grab the numbers of men wearing leggings far too tight for any male figure.

Julian arrives at my brownstone every day at exactly 11:15 a.m. so Molly can stretch her legs through Central Park while I eat my chicken salad and transcribe recorded sessions in the office. He always combs her long, constantly shedding fur after each walk and smothers her with more love than any forty-pound animal could possibly absorb.

The bonus of having such an amazing person to take care of my cherished Molly? He's an adorable box-hair-dye-blond version of John Legend, but so much better because he's absolutely hilarious and—if it wasn't clear yet—gay. I couldn't find another soul better suited to wind down with if I tried.

"Molly misses you already," I say, rubbing her stomach with my bare foot as she sprawls out beneath the desk. "She told me so, twice."

"I know. She loves me more." He sighs dramatically, and it forces an ear-to-ear smile onto my face. "I know you're probably working," he grunts, like he doesn't have a job that takes twelve hours out of his day, "but I just wanted to verify the dates you and Molly will be gallivanting away."

"Ah, let me consult the sacred scroll of my calendar," I say, pretending to pull out an ancient parchment instead of my phone. "The twelfth through the nineteenth."

"Can't you take your grand vacations in the winter like everyone else?" he whines melodramatically. "It kills me that you take not only you away from me in August, of all months, but that you steal away my most favorite client."

"You and Molly will both be okay. Trust me, I'm a therapist."

"At least I know who to book an appointment with when my separation anxiety spirals out of control. There's a friend discount, right?"

"Has anyone ever told you you're a little dramatic?"

“Augh.” He gasps, and I can picture his hand shielding his heart. “Have you been speaking to my mother again?”

“Not this week, Jule. But she did text me to remind you to separate out your whites from your darks when you do laundry.”

He scoffs. “Who even does that anymore? Anyway, don’t forget to have me over before the weekend. I’ll need a moment to say goodbye.”

“We’re not terminally ill, you know.”

“Dammit. Now, how am I going to acquire that adorable little floral love seat you have in the corner of your office, then?”

“Alright, enough with your nonsense,” I say, my seriousness playful. “I have work to do.”

“Okay, fine. Love you. Give Molly a scratch for me. I’ll stop over after work sometime this week.”

“See you then,” I say, and then I add—as if I could forget—“love you too, drama queen.”

# CHAPTER 3

## BRIELLE

THE SCREEN OF MY COMPUTER is illuminated with light, and usually, white is calming—beckoning toward a fresh start, a clean slate. Typically, it wraps me in the silkiness of a cloud, the only symbol of truth, of the pureness that could one day pattern the page.

But right now? That blank white page is a mocking symbol—a testament that I’m a liar, a pathetic excuse for a writer.

As if on cue, a message pops up from my literary agent.

Christina - 3:54 p.m

*Hey there, superstar! Just a friendly reminder, the publisher is breathing down our necks for that manuscript. Can you whip up a few chapters this week? The editors are getting antsy.*

*x Your Partner in Crime, Christina.*

Meanwhile, Emmalee’s belting out Taylor Swift tunes in the background, her innocent melody a stark contrast to my impending meltdown. I shut my laptop with a theatrical slam, as if that will somehow close out my mounting anxiety.

I’m not a failure just because it’s been three months and I’m still staring at the same blank page. I’m sure there are plenty of people who go months without writing, without any thought coming into their head at all. There have to be plenty of authors who’ve published four

books and then suddenly forget how to form words. This is just a part of the journey, right? It can't all be easy; then everyone would do it. *Right?*

"Come here, pumpkin," I call out, smiling as I drop to one knee and hold out my arms in anticipation of a bear hug.

Emmalee doesn't disappoint. She bounds from her spot in the corner of the living room—where moments ago she was perched atop her fluffy, pink blanket, her coloring book flung wide open before her—and lunges at me with full force. She collides into my chest, and I savor the sweet little fingers squeezing around my back.

Her grip on my body is a lifeline.

"I love you so much." I sway her from side to side and breathe in her peach shampoo.

"I love you too, Momma." That little face buries into my chest before looking up with the eyes I know are mine. "When's Charlie coming back?"

She asks the question so quietly, so softly, that my heart muscles strain. She loves Charles so much. Every day he's away for business is a day she wakes up and misses him.

It's been one year with him in our lives, and a few months of him staying in this home when he's back from business. In that short amount of time, he took this scared little girl and guided her toward trust again. And I know it shouldn't, but that terrifies me.

"Well, honey—" I'm in the middle of searching for the words when the door opens with a clashing flourish. On instinct, I jump back, shielding Emmalee behind me.

A tall man stands in the doorway, his grin stretched wide around sparkling white teeth.

"Charles?" I gasp, trying to calm my rising heartbeat. "You scared the bejesus out of me!"

"I'm sorry, love." He walks over to us, his smile radiating the warmth of a Caribbean island. In his tanned hands is a bouquet of roses so large, I'm certain I don't have a vase to contain them all. "I just missed you so much." His voice is so low, so satiny smooth, that a smile effortlessly scrolls across my face.

"I missed you too."



## MORGAN PARK

He leans into me, his hands wrapping around my waist as he lays the flowers on the table behind us. He buries his face in my strawberry-colored hair and audibly inhales. His body is so warm against mine, I want to melt. I want to release every tension and fall into him because he's as sweet as liquid sugar.

But I never can.

I press my face against his sculpted chest, breathing in the mahogany and lavender embedded in the atoms of his shirt. I try to ignore the tingling sensation on the back of my neck, the feeling of how large his hands are on my ribs, how much he looms over me, how tightly he squeezes me. Goose bumps spread beneath my jeans, the needle-pricking pain trailing up my legs.

I can't do it.

"How was your flight?" Pulling away, I pick up the flowers from the counter. Smiling as I hold them to my nose, I take in their fruity yet musky aroma. He probably had to stop at three florists just to find this many salmon-colored roses. "This is so sweet of you, Charles."

"Not even close to what you deserve." He kisses my forehead, his stubble irritating my skin. He swiftly turns around and holds his arms out to Emmalee, who, as always, is patiently waiting for him to notice her presence. "Come here, little one!"

"Charlie!" Her high-pitched squeal sends flutters through my stomach. "I missed you!"

"I missed you too, tater tot. Guess what?"

"What?" She chuckles as he pulls a blonde strand of hair out of her face and safely tucks it away behind her little ear.

"I won't be going away again for a nice long time." He smiles, and it's so big, so genuine. It is impossible for someone to be this kind and soft.

"What do you mean?" I ask, almost at a loss for words, because this is what we do. Our system works.

I stay home and write while taking care of Emmalee. Charles flies across the country to navigate bank investments and acquisitions of Fortune 500 companies. We spend a few days at a time together, and then he's gone again. While he's away, I'm protected by the miles spanning between our voices on the phone.

It works. It allows me the time to decompress from our family time, to sort out the thoughts plaguing my mind, to see Dr. Raleigh. It gives me the space to get my life back together.

“With our upcoming trip to meet my family, I wanted to carve out some time for us,” he explains, and now he’s standing before me, Emmalee’s tiny hand dangling in his, and his aquamarine eyes are so wide. He looks so happy, so utterly thrilled with spending more time with us that I push down every unsettling feeling boiling in my throat.

“You did that for us?” I ask quietly.

“I hated the thought of being away from Emmalee that long when I’ve already been gone for weeks.”

Heat pricks the back of my eyelids. No one has ever done something so sweet for me. No one has ever taken time off work just to spend time with us. That little gesture, that simple choice, means more than anything Malcolm did the entire time I was beneath his grasp.

“Oh, honey.” With a simple movement, he’s swooping me into his embrace. “I’d do anything for you two.”

“I’m sorry,” I whimper, the tears streaming down my face, because apparently, this is what I do now.

He tips my chin up toward him. “For what?”

I pull Emmalee into my leg, and she wraps her arms around my thighs. Charles holds his other hand around me tighter, pulling my body into his until there’s no space left. I look up into his eyes, kindness radiating from them.

*I don’t deserve him.* I truly don’t.

“You are so amazing,” I whisper, afraid that if I speak too loudly, I might shatter this reality. “We are so lucky to have you.”

Charles just smiles in that typical effortless way he has as he leans down to place a gentle kiss on my lips. I can feel Emmalee smiling into my leg, her breath blowing through my jeans. And this moment should feel like everything. So, dammit, why do I feel so unsettled?

“I love you,” he says.

Burying my face back in his chest as I squeeze my eyes closed, I try not to think. I breathe deep, taking in that calming lavender undertone.

"I love you too." I release a breath, and he squeezes me just a little tighter, his one hand dropping to hold Emmalee's shoulder.

I say those three words, and I mean it. I do. I love Charles. I mean, how could I not? This is what paradise is made of, right? This is the very foundation of those silly little fairy tales where the damsel in distress gets the prince. Except I'm no princess in a pink gown. More like the curvy cook in the kitchen who obviously samples one too many tarts and needs a major closet makeover that doesn't include plaid or flannel.

The problem isn't that I don't love Charles. I knew I would love him on the first day I met him. There's no way to not love someone with a heart as big as his. The problem is that after so long together and countless times of saying *I love you*, there's just this feeling in the deepest parts of my chest. I can't explain it. It just doesn't feel right.

After a few more moments of this embrace, my skin gets warm and itchy. I slowly pull away, giving Charles one more peck on the lips before heading to the sink in search of a vase for these beautiful roses.

Charles takes Emmalee back to the living room, where she will run down, with rapid-fire delivery, every single new thing she's built or done in the time since she saw him last. Like always, Charles kneels as if he isn't wearing a thousand-dollar suit and folds himself into a seated position.

He hangs on every word that comes from those little mauve lips. Emmalee, unable to contain her excitement at having a captive audience, paces around the room to show and tell anything she can get her hands on. She starts with the owl she built out of Legos before moving quickly toward the purple construction paper butterfly she cut out last night and taped to the wall.

I watch it all from the kitchen. My eyes are glued to Charles, whose mouth is agape and laughing as Emmalee rushes back and forth with a Dr. Seuss hat on her head, her princess cape flowing behind her. My left hand grips the floral scissors, my right holding the bouquet's stems. I can't hear anything other than the sound of the water crashing into the stainless-steel sink. The sound echoes, filling my head like white noise. It's so loud. So loud. So. Loud. So loud that nothing else registers other than this moment.

This *is* perfect, isn't it? This is what I've always wanted. It's everything. It's love. It's comfort. It's the warmth of everything that the word *home* should mean.

"Can I help you in the kitchen?" Charles asks from the other room, snapping me out of my fog.

"No, thank you. I'll be in shortly."

Forcing that typical smile on my face, I finally cut the end of each flower's stem. After placing the bunch in the crystal-cut vase, I fluff the leaves one last time before placing it on the island's center.

Hesitantly, I pull my phone from my purse and scroll to the contact I've tried not to think too much about. I shouldn't bother her. I should just leave a message on her office phone like always. But I could really use her voice right now, even if I'm imagining it in my head.

Me - 1:36 p.m.

*Good afternoon, Dr. Raleigh. This is Brielle Stone.  
I have to cancel our appointment at 2:30 p.m.  
today, but I wanted to let you know that I'm okay.  
I just had something unexpected come up.*

My finger hovers over the send button before pushing it. It seems weird to text my therapist, as if only the coffee table between our chairs in that office is the right setting in which to converse. I haven't exactly told Charles I'm talking to someone, and a phone call in this two-bedroom house isn't exactly private.

I hit send anyway.

After placing my phone on the cold marble of the counter, I walk toward the living room and get comfortable on the plush sofa. Charles and Emmalee are both now sitting crisscross-applesauce across from each other. Charles has a sheer pink cape wrapped around his broad shoulders and a matching tiara donned on his head, and Emmalee is smitten.

"I'm going pee," she says abruptly, standing from her place on the rug and dropping her fairy wand right there. She rushes down the hall, and only the pitter-patter of feet are left in her wake.

## MORGAN PARK

Charles slides the glittering tiara out of his dirty-blond hair and places the cape for Emmalee to find on her way back out. He stands to his feet, groaning as he stretches his back with a twist here and a crack there.

No one ever tells you how quick your knees and back go once you hit forty.

After one last stretch, he makes his way toward me, and I can't help but smile at the sight of him in a tailored Ralph Lauren navy suit, the one that wraps his biceps and thighs like a custom-made Christmas present. That's absolute swoonworthy material. And that smile? Those pearly-white teeth that I know he meticulously brushes three times a day? That's adult porn to any middle-aged woman.

Well, at least it should be.

He falls into me on the couch, and I'm warming as he presses his body into mine, forcing me flatter across the cushions. His mouth is on mine, tongue grazing my bottom lip, and a guttural moan escapes his throat as his hands trail along my hips.

"I missed you," he says with a baritone so low, so rough, that I should want to come undone at the very sound.

But I don't. I never do.

"I missed you," I say, and I mean it. I do, but this is the part I don't miss.

This is the part when gentle but calloused hands are beneath my shirt, gliding over my curves, reaching toward my bra or sneaking beneath my waistline. This is the part when I should be bucking my groin at him, desperate to feel him press against me after being away for so many days. This is the part that I'm supposed to want, right? This is the best part of having someone so built, so handsome, to call my own. But if it is, then why is it so fucking hard?

His warm hand sneaks beneath my jeans, and my stomach flips, but not in the way it should; it turns upside down, twisting in knots before landing in my chest. I *want* to want this. I want to be *that* woman for him, but everything feels so wrong. The thought lights my skin on fire, and I wish I could crawl out of it, like leaving a hidden cave in the night.

Emmalee darts from around the corner, golden-blond hair flowing behind her, and Charles slowly pulls away from my lips. He rests his head on my chest, and the tension in his body releases. Gently, he slides his hand from where it was just moments ago gripping my hip beneath my jeans and tucks it beneath the pillow I'm leaning on.

Suddenly, I feel the need to get up.

"Emma, honey," I say, pulling myself from beneath him, "are you hungry?"

"No." She groans, turning her attention back to the pile of dress-up clothes before her.

"How about you?" I ask Charles.

He runs his hand through my tangled hair. "Maybe later," he says with a wink.

*Ugh.*

I walk to the kitchen for a glass of water and spot the flashing green notification light on my phone. I didn't actually expect Dr. Raleigh to respond, but there's her name in big bold letters across the screen.

Dr. Raleigh - 2:08 p.m.

*Brielle, it's nice to hear from you. I understand and hope all is well. Thank you for letting me know. Have a good afternoon. - Dr. Raleigh*

I immediately regret canceling my session. I've canceled far too many this month, and she does help. Talking about the thoughts I rarely speak aloud is a burden she lessens. There's just something about looking up at her, the way she sits there with one leg crossed over the other, that just makes me feel so at ease.

"Emmalee, are you ready for dance?" I ask from the kitchen. "We need to leave in ten minutes."

"No," she whines, a tantrum coming on in full force. "Charlie just got back! It's not fair! I'm not done playing."

I can't help my sigh. Because the more he is gone, the harder it is to pry her away from him once he's back. Routines are important. They're necessary, especially for a child who's six going on twenty. They're what keep us going, but Charles's work schedule does not accommodate routines.

## MORGAN PARK

"Listen here, tater tot." He crawls to her spot on the floor. "You're going to have fun with your friends at dance, and I'll be right here when you get back."

"You promise?" Exaggerated tears well in her eyes as backup, if needed.

"I promise." He pulls her into his chest. "And," he continues, a smile still tugging at his lips, "we can build a fort in the living room when you get back."

"What?" She gasps, pulling away and holding his shoulders with her tiny hands.

"A fort," he repeats, as if he can't even believe his own words. "A *big* fort."

"And Mommy can help too?"

"Mommy can be the queen of the fort, and you're the princess. The most beautiful Princess Emmalee this kingdom has ever seen!"

Emmalee smiles widely, nodding as if taking all the information in. She walks toward the door and sits on the tile beside the shoe rack. One by one, she slips on her sneakers.

"What are you doing?" I ask, trying to stifle a giggle as I notice she's wearing completely different shoes and on the wrong feet.

"Mommy, we need to go," she insists, her eyes rolling impatiently, "so I can come back and build a fort with Charlie and be a princess."

I suppress a laugh. "Ah, the royal life is busy indeed." Kneeling down, I remove her shoes and find a pair that at least looks similar. "Did you know that you've always been a princess?"

"Do you want to pick up dinner while you're out?" Charles asks, rounding the corner and pulling a water bottle from the fridge.

"Sure, what are you feeling?" I stand and slip on my jacket from the closet.

"Whatever you want, babe." He reaches for his briefcase on the floor.

"Are you okay to hang out until I get back? I have a few errands to run while I'm out."

"That works perfectly." His face is now illuminated by the laptop screen in front of him, and I try not to notice how tired he looks. "I

have three briefings to review and a short meeting to log into this afternoon before my work day is done.”

“Okay, I’ll see you when I get back.” I place a chaste kiss on his lips, but this time he pulls me into him and almost onto his lap.

“God,” he murmurs in that velvety, low voice. “I can’t wait to get you alone later.”

My heart races, my palms grow sweaty, and I think I might actually faint this time. Everything spins around me as I place my hand on the table to steady myself, to remind myself where I am.

“You okay?” he asks, one hand around my waist.

If I were a few sizes smaller, I’m sure his arms could wrap all the way around me. That should be a comforting thought—to be held so tightly by someone I have so much love for—but it’s not. The idea constricts my blood vessels, and I don’t know why.

“Of course, love,” I lie, pushing down the rattling nerves in my voice. “I’ll be back soon.”



TO CONTINUE READING,  
PLEASE PURCHASE

# BEYOND THE SHORELINE

BY MORGAN PARK

This excerpt is offered by Ylva Publishing.  
Its primary function is the orientation of interested readers.  
Ylva Publishing | [www.ylva-publishing.com](http://www.ylva-publishing.com)