

April

Chapter 1

You really do see stars, apparently. The exhibit hall was suddenly and dizzyingly awash with them, anywhere I looked. I felt prickles all along the back of my neck and arms, as if those damn stars were falling and slamming into me with their little hook arms. And I was suddenly so tired and *heavy* that lying down felt like the only possible course of action. But who had time to lie down? That said, I also felt like I might be about to barf. I grabbed onto a counter to keep myself upright, with just enough time to let out an “Oh no,” and to hear my sister yell “Tara!”. And then everything went black.

I woke up in all white. Well, almost all—the bedspread over me was that weird grey-green beloved of institutions. And my sister’s sweater, beside the bed, was a pop of scarlet red.

I opened and closed my dry mouth a couple of times, like some ancient turtle, before managing to croak, “Where are we?”

As usual, Callie’s dark eyes were mostly hidden behind her bangs, but what I could see revealed worry. “The General. Emergency department.”

“Oh God—is Dad on shift?”

“Yep,” she said with a kind of grim satisfaction.

“Aargh. Could you not have taken me to the Civic?”

“The paramedics didn’t exactly offer me choices, T.”

“What time is it?” I asked. At least the General was closest to the conference centre, but still a good thirty-minute drive if you were trying to travel the roads without an ambulance siren to clear the way.

“Eleven.”

“Shit, the Logistics team meeting is in half an hour!” I struggled toward sitting, found myself encumbered by a tube taped to my arm and Callie’s surprisingly strong hand against my sternum.

“I moved it to tomorrow.”

“Please tell me you didn’t explain why,” I begged. “It’s so embarrassing.”

“Fucksake, it is not. But no, I didn’t. Because I know you.”

I relaxed a little, looked down at my arm, tensed up again at the sight of a needle and a plastic tube. I had to assume the clear fluid was going *in* and not out, or something way more drastic than fainting had occurred. “What *is* that?”

“Fluids.” As if to reinforce the point, Callie grabbed a plastic bottle off the table and held it out to me. “Dad said you’re so dehydrated you were in danger of organ damage. Drink.”

I tsk’d, but I took it. “Dad is such an exaggerator. I drink all the time.” I took a sip from the straw, wrinkled up my nose. Some sports drink—all orange flavour and sugar.

“Yeah, vats of black coffee. When was the last time you *ate*?”

I did the turtle mouth thing again, but this time could come up with nothing to say. I must have grabbed a muffin or a banana in passing somewhere sometime, but where that somewhere and sometime was, I couldn’t be sure. It was always like this in April, with barely two weeks left until my biggest client’s conference and exhibition.

“I’m going to tell Dad you’re awake.” Callie got to her feet and turned toward the door.

“And can you please tell him I’m fine and ready to leave?”

“No.”

She pushed open the curtain around my bed and left. Nurses in scrubs rushed past. Someone's groans were drowned out by a garbled but urgent-sounding intercom announcement for a Dr. Hum.

I tried to reach for my phone on the small bedside cabinet but was foiled by the tube. You'd think, as the child of a physician, I'd have learned by osmosis how to remove it, but no. So I just lay there, fretting at the ceiling as thoughts roiling through my brain of the *everything that wasn't currently getting done with both Callie and I here* kind.

It seemed an eternity before Callie came back, with Dad behind her. He paused by the curtain to call over his shoulder to someone: "Monitor his pulse? I'm worried about A-fib."

"See?" I said as he entered my cubicle. "There are actual sick people here who need you. Unhook me and have a bed back."

"Generous of you." He pulled up a stool. "But we're keeping you overnight for observation."

"Dude."

"Dude."

"I have too much to do."

"Exactly," he said as he took my hand. "How are you feeling?"

I looked into his eyes, about to insist that I was really fine, but then frowned. His face was as greenish-pale as the sheets, whereas his eyes were a little yellowish. Not a good combo. He looked exhausted in a way beyond his usual "tired after an emergency-department shift" demeanour.

"How are *you* feeling?" I asked. "Are you okay?"

He wagged his head side to side. “Stomach’s been playing up for a couple of days. Probably some iffy sushi.”

“Couple of *days*? Did you get it checked?”

“I’ll be fine,” he said.

Callie tutted as she kicked the back of one boot with the toe of the other, a habit of hers to shift them into position because she’d bought them used, cheap but too big. “Like father, like daughter.”

Dad shot her a smile. “Cal. Could you grab me a Coke out of the vending machine? And top up this one’s sports drink from the fountain?”

I told him, “Coke’s bad for you.”

“Not for my belly, if I let it go flat.”

I couldn’t argue with that.

He reached into his pocket and handed Callie a couple of loonies. She left; I braced as he turned back to me.

“Listen,” he said. “Yes, you are busy, but you have got to take better care of yourself. I only have one Tara.”

“Alas. If only I could split myself into a million of me.”

“You have Callie to help you now. Let her,” he said gently.

Six months ago, my boss had insisted I take on an assistant to help me with conference logistics. Too much for one person, Mike had said. I’d burn out, he’d said. I’d tried not to let him see how much that stung, that he thought I was a failure—also, he didn’t seem to understand that it was just *easier* to do things myself. But I couldn’t really argue, so I’d hired Callie, whose restaurant-server job was doing nothing to pay off her student loan. Except ... I was forever

finding her bent over her sketchbook, instead of replying to my piling-up emails. She liked to doodle booth-design ideas, which she'd show to our graphic design department; they would tell her (again, and always kindly) that it was another gravitationally impossible flight of fancy. It was as if she were designing for a Miyazaki movie about conferences.

It was still easier just to do things myself. But I loved my sister (even when I wanted to kill her). I could neither fire her nor throw her under the bus.

So I just gave Dad a noncommittal "Mm."

"I'm serious," he insisted. "I just read this study. Working more than fifty-five hours a week kills a million people worldwide. You're setting yourself up for ischemic heart disease or a stroke, my friend. Do you want that?"

"No," I admitted.

"So, doctor-to-daughter request: could you slow down a little?"

"In May," I promised.

"I'm seriously concerned you might not make it to May."

"I'm fine, Dad!"

He sighed, swiped a hand over his face. "This feels like *deja vu*," he muttered.

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing," he said, and before I could prod him further, Callie came back, so I turned my energy to getting myself sprung from jail.