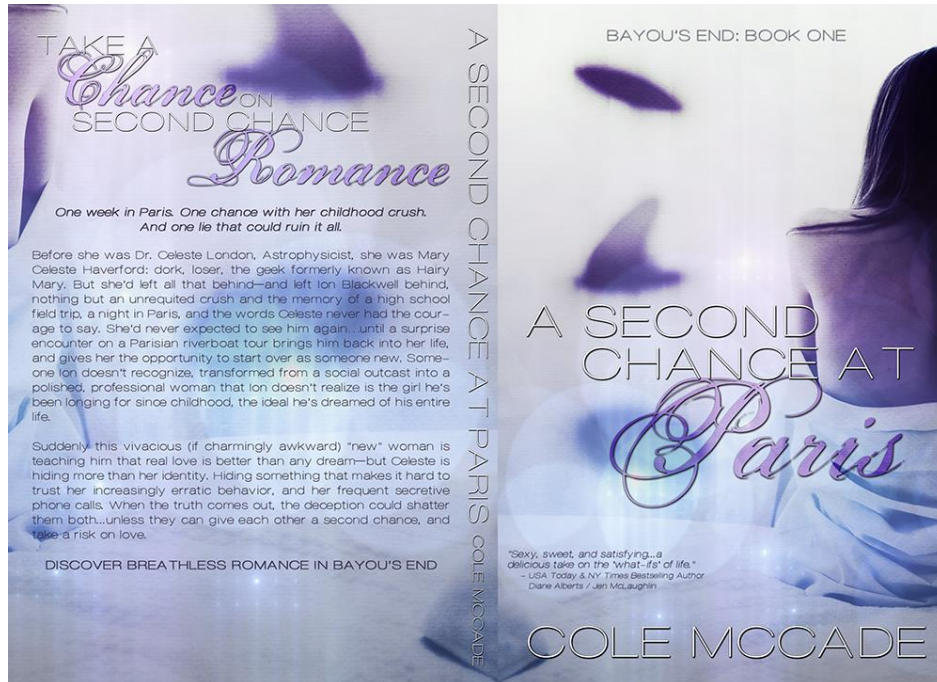


A SECOND CHANCE AT PARIS

DELETED SCENE

Cole McCade



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“Don’t even think about it.”

Ion froze, his hand halfway to his pocket, and glared at the back of Drake’s head. The light from the laptop screen glinted from the mess of Drake’s black hair, lining the edges of each unruly spike in pale blue. In the reflection on the screen, dark eyes watched Ion knowingly. The all-knowing, all-seeing literary agent, with his annoying smug grin and infuriating ability to catch Ion in the act every. Damned. Time.

He scowled and let his hand fall back to his lap, sinking back against the lush, velvety cushions of Drake’s couch—and very pointedly propping his feet on the coffee table. Just because. Just because every inch of Drake’s swanky, stylish New York apartment was organized with perfect precision right down to the micron, and right now he wanted to piss Drake off with a little boot mud on the solid marble slab of the coffee table.

“Watching me on the screen? That’s cheating.”

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“It’s catching you before you ruin the entire thing.”

“There’s nothing *to* ruin if she hates me.”

“She doesn’t hate you.”

“It’s been *four months*, Drake. Four.” Ion clenched his fists against his thighs. “Anyone would tell me to go to hell, then move on and find someone else. She’s probably already seeing someone better. Someone who isn’t a fucking jerk.”

“Anyone. Not Celeste. And you were angry. She lied to you. How were you supposed to react?”

“By listening, at least. By letting her explain.”

With a sigh, Drake spun in his high-backed leather chair and fixed Ion with a coolly exasperated look. His fingers steepled, elbows propped on the arms of the chair, until the man looked like a damned villain in a Bond movie, from his perfectly pressed, meticulously tailored white shirt down to the shining points of his wingtip shoes. He *acted* like a villain, most of the time, and there were days when Ion wondered why he put up with the fucking asshole.

Days like today.

“Stop worrying,” Drake said. “You talk about this woman like she hung the moon. “She remembered you for her entire life, and spent a week *lying* to you just for the chance to be with you. She hasn’t moved on in four months. She won’t move on in eight. She loves you.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do.” Drake arched a sharply pointed brow, his angled, dark brown eyes narrowing. “Not only do I have impeccable gaydar, I have absolutely fan-fucking-tastic love-dar.”

“...love-dar.”

“Shut the fuck up. I never claimed to be a writer. You write the books. I just sell them. And this—” Drake smirked, triumph in every line of his angular, elegant face. “—will sell more books than you have in your entire career. Relax. It’s my job to exploit your emotional turmoil for profit, and I’m very good at that job.”

Yeah. He definitely had this Bond villain thing down pat. That smirk gave Ion chills; it always had, ever since university. “Is that ancient Chinese wisdom, Confucius?”

Drake’s eyes narrowed; his lips thinned. “I told you to stop with the Confucius jokes, or I will kick your fucking gypsy ass.”

“Roma,” Ion growled.

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“Yeah. You get huffy over that, and then you call me Confucius.” Snorting, Drake spun his chair back to face the laptop. “Just trust me. Have I ever led you wrong?” He held up one hand sharply. “Don’t answer that. Get your filthy feet off my table. And stop reaching for your phone.”

Ion froze with his hand halfway in his pocket. “...cheating again.”

“No. I just know you.”

Exhaling heavily, Ion tilted his head back against the couch and stared up at the deep gray patterned ceiling. *Breathe. Breathe.* Only he couldn’t breathe, when the scents of teak wood and patchouli permeating the apartment were making his nose itch. Drake’s spaces—and Drake himself—always smelled like a Moroccan bazaar. “I just...didn’t think it would take this long.”

“Because you’re impatient. Authors always are. This was your idea, so stop bitching, you spoiled, overdramatic, wannabe queen.”

“You’re the soul of flattery.”

“I keep you on your toes.” Drake’s fingers rattled over the keyboard. “Though I’m still not sure about that reporter. Giving her what she wants is like rewarding her for being a pain in my ass.”

“She’s a tool. Use her.”

“She’s a twit.”

Ion skewed a look toward Drake with an amused sound—and let his fingers drift toward his pocket again, where the hard square of his phone pressed demandingly against his hip. “I’m not sure that’s the word you wanted to use.”

“It got the idea acro—put the fucking phone down, Ion.”

Ion pulled his phone from his pocket and swiped the screen, tapping in his passcode. “I’m not calling her.”

“Then what are you doing?”

“Listening to my voicemail.”

Drake rolled his eyes. “Again? Christ, it’s like an addict going into withdrawals.”

“Have a heart, you monster.”

“If I did, I wouldn’t have survived in this business.” Drake flicked his fingers. “Fine. Listen to your fucking voicemail. Sappy idiot.”

“Thank you for your permission, Mistress.”

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Ion dialed into his voicemail and lifted the phone to his ear. The menus took too long to play through, skipping through saved messages from his mother, his sisters, Drake, that damned reporter, until—there.

Ion, it's Cel. Mary. Whatever you want to call me.

He closed his eyes and dragged the fingers of his free hand across his chest. As if he could break through its hard shell; as if he could reach inside and clasp his heart and still its beating, like clutching a bird's frantic wings to its sides and stopping it from flying. He'd listened so many times, over the months. And every time it only made it hurt that much more, that he couldn't reach out and take her hand in his and watch the way those pale silver-violet eyes lit up when she smiled with that shyness at once hesitant and elated.

I'm the same person. And one thing I never told you is... how I feel about you. That was never a lie.

Her absence was a hole inside him, one filled with the grains of sand pouring through the hourglass as each second ticked by, each minute, each day that he didn't tell her *I want you. I need you. I understand, I'm sorry, I love you.* The only way Drake had talked him into this was because it was the best way he knew to show her how *much* he loved her. By making her a part of what was so important to him. By showing her, because after the lies, after the way he'd spoken to her when she'd told him the truth...words just weren't enough.

But everything else was real, her voice whispered in his ear, and he remembered the part of her lips on a smile and the sound of her laughter and the dark, heavy feeling crystallizing in the pit of his stomach like diamond stars when she slid her hand into his and just *leaned* on him.

I swear—everything between us. Every moment. I never faked who I was for a second with you, no matter what name I used. I'm still me. Dorky and awkward and incapable of being anyone else.

"I would never want you to be," he whispered, a painful smile cracking his lips.

"Are you talking to yourself?" Drake asked, and his sharp-edged voice snipped the taut thread of this quiet, private moment, until the knots holding Ion's heart in one piece unraveled and everything fell apart.

"I can't do this." Ion sat up and ended the voicemail call, then tapped through his address book. "I can't, Drake. This—this game, this waiting, just to surprise her, I fucking can't—"

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“*Ion.*” Drake shoved out of his chair—and snatched the phone from Ion’s hand. “Your love life isn’t the only thing in play here.”

Ion lunged to his feet and grabbed for the phone. “Give me that, you—”

“Stop it.”

Drake pulled back, holding the phone out of his reach and twisting away from Ion’s reaching hands. He snared the front of Drake’s shirt and dragged him close, grinding his teeth.

“Now you listen—”

“No, *you* listen.”

Before Ion knew what was happening, Drake’s knee snapped into his gut just hard enough to knock the air from him, dull pain blooming. The other man shoved him back hard against the wall, pinning him with an arm across his chest and glaring up at him flatly, dark eyes cold and reflective as a motionless river. Pebbled stucco dug against his back through his shirt; Ion arched, snarling, but Drake had leverage—and a lifetime of knowing just when to catch Ion off guard.

“Stop being an impulsive idiot,” Drake bit off with cool precision. “I need you thinking smart. Not emotionally. We still have that reporter to deal with. She’s been digging enough that with a few well-fabricated suggestions, she could sink your career. You stepped into this. You dealt with her. You made that bargain. Now we’ve got to hold up our end of the deal, or she. Will. Fuck. You. You don’t get to back out and say ‘damn the consequences’ when you’re not the only one it will affect. There are other people you can hurt besides her. Four more months. Be patient. Celeste will understand, and this will all come together. Everybody happy. Got it?”

Ion worked his jaw, slumping back against the wall. He fucking hated when Drake was right, but he was—and while Ion would gladly throw his career and the Violet Sparks series out the window for Celeste, it wouldn’t just be hurting *his* career. It would be deeply damaging to Drake’s, as well.

And he couldn’t do that. Not even for the woman he loved.

Not to his best friend.

“Yeah,” he rasped. “Sure. Everybody happy.”

“And if I give you this phone back, you’re not going to fuck everything up?”

“I’m not.”

“That’s what you said the last time.”

“I mean it.”

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“Prove it. Because otherwise if you touch this phone again, you will pull back a nub.”

Ion sighed and thumped his head against the wall. “Drake?”

“What?”

“Get. Off. Me. This is not internet fan service.”

Drake let out a harsh bark of cynical laughter, but he eased off. “You wish.” Stepping back, he tossed the phone at Ion in an arcing underhand. “Celeste can pine for you all she wants. I let go of that years ago. Now, you’re just an annoying distraction keeping me from finishing this press release.”

Ion quirked a brow and snatched the phone out of the air. “Nice to know I’ve lost my mystique.”

“Nah.” Drake slung himself back into his chair. “But if I’m going to fall for a lost cause, I’d at least like to get a blow job out of it.”

“Oh, God. I can’t know that.” Ion covered his eyes with one hand. “I can’t *picture* that.”

“Too late.”

“Hate you.”

“And that’s what makes our relationship work.” Drake fell silent a moment, the quiet punctuated only by the clatter of typing, before he added quietly, “Better than my other relationships, anyway.”

Ion sank down on the couch, tossed his phone on the coffee table, and propped his elbows on his thighs as he studied Drake. The man’s back was stiff—almost brittle, this inflexible thing that would shatter at the lightest touch. “Promise me you won’t go back to Luke again.” No answer. Just a twitch of rigid shoulders, and Ion groaned. “Drake. You didn’t.” Still nothing. “Tell me you didn’t.”

Drake shrugged tightly. “Those aren’t my jockeys hanging in the bathroom.”

“You *know* better.” Ion dragged a hand over his face. Luke was worse than a player. He was a user, and he’d been dragging Drake around for enough years that Ion couldn’t understand why such a hardass would put up with it—but he’d come close to putting out a few of Luke’s pretty white teeth more than once, when Drake had called half-drunk and refusing to talk about it. “Am I going to have to kick his ass?”

“I can take care of myself. I’m a big boy.”

“Drake...”

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“Don’t. I don’t need you nannying me,” Drake snapped. “My life is mine. Now let’s get yours sorted, so I can get you out of my hair.”

Ion just stared at him helplessly, words on his tongue—words he could never speak. Because no matter how he worried about his friend, Drake would never accept it. The man had this incessant need to fix other people’s problems, but couldn’t stand anyone meddling in his own. He’d rather jump off a cliff than accept a hand back from the edge.

And Ion was afraid, one day, he’d ruin himself for it.